The Autumn Effect

by Jadells

Summary

It's been six years, and things have settled down in Nerima. Akane's been waiting for Ranma to pop the question, but Ranma isn't too sure about settling down. In true Ranma fashion, however, he continues to run from his problems...and straight into more trouble.
It was fall.

The air was pleasantly cool and fresh. That year, summer had been especially sticky, moist with its thick humidity. The light breeze and cool temperature felt like pure bliss after months on end of feeling trapped inside a hot air balloon.

It wasn’t so prominent in the city, but the forest was already freshly dyed with its glorious palette of autumn colour. The leaves swirled overhead in the chilled breeze, flickering like flames. The sun broke through the fire above and dappled the ground, covered in a dusty layer of ashes long fallen from the sky that were crunchy underfoot.

It’d all be so pleasant, if not for the company.

Ryoga didn’t bother to look behind him, for the extra crunching of dead leaves was enough to tell him that he was not alone, for once, walking through the forest. He bit his tongue. He’d already lashed out countless times that day, and it wasn’t getting him anywhere. Although he did get a little lonesome now and then on his expeditions (his gracious term for ‘getting lost’) but when he craved the company of another, a man wasn’t exactly what he had in mind.

Especially not a man like Ranma Saotome.

Not that he was exactly much of a “man”, but that wasn’t the point.

Although, he supposed it wasn’t as bad as he thought it’d be at the start of all this, when Ranma had run after him just as he was leaving the Tendo Dojo. He had his large travel pack on his shoulders, claiming he’d be accompanying Ryoga on his trip. Ryoga had, of course, argued. Ranma, stubborn as always, stood his ground. And so it was that the two were walking through the forest in the mountains, far from the bustling streets of Furinkan.

The trip had so far been—dare Ryoga say it—pleasant. The word sounded ridiculously out of place, especially used to describe the company of Ranma. But if Ryoga had to be honest, it wasn’t nearly as awful as his mind wanted to make it out to be. He supposed that after six years, things would tend to settle down a bit. Strangely enough, there were days that Furinkan seemed as calm and still as a millpond. With that in mind, Ryoga wondered why Ranma had suddenly decided to come along with him. It’s not like he had much to run away from these days.

The hill they had been trekking finally lowered into flat ground, and soon they broke out of the trees and into a bright, open clearing. They came to a stop, looking around the open space.

“Perfect!” Ranma hooted suddenly, causing Ryoga to jump. “Looks like home t’ me!”

Ryoga scoffed, shifting his pack onto one shoulder as he walked out into the clearing. “Then let’s set up camp.”

They threw down their packs in the middle of the clearing and began to pull out supplies. Ryoga
pitched his tent while Ranma set out cookware. Ryoga had set up his tent so many times that it went up in minutes. After he nailed down his last peg he looked up to see Ranma; sitting in front of the fire and ripping open a cup of ramen, while a kettle heated up on a small gas burner beside him.

“Aren’t you going to pitch your tent?” Ryoga asked with a frown. Leave it to Ranma to think of food over shelter.

“Nah,” Ranma replied, ripping the packet of dried toppings open with his teeth, spitting the foil off to the side.

“Why not?”

“Forgot it.”

Suddenly Ryoga was behind him. He punched Ranma so hard on the back of the head he dropped the cup of dried noodles he was pouring packets into.

“You’ve gone on training trips your whole damn life,” Ryoga steamed. “And you forgot your tent?”

Ranma rubbed the back of his head while he looked down forlornly at the fallen cup of ramen. Some of the noodles had broken and had scattered out onto the grass. “That one’s yours, porkchop.”

“How do you forget your tent?” Ryoga seethed, ignoring him.

“I was in a rush, an’ probably assumed it was still in my pack, but Pops musta had it in his. We only got the one, y’know,” Ranma grumbled, picking a dried leaf out of the ramen cup before setting it beside him. He reached into his bag for a second cup. “Y’don’t have to get yourself into such a big damn conniption about it, Ryoga. It’s just a stupid tent.”

“Well, I sure hope you didn’t forget your sleeping bag, too, ‘cause if you think you’re sleeping in my tent, you’re dreaming, Saotome.” Ryoga huffed, plopping down adjacent to Ranma before the fire.

Ranma looked up from his task of opening his own cup of ramen, eyes wide. “You’re gonna make me sleep outside?”

“Hell yeah I am.”

“But it’ll be cold!”

“Well, you should’ve thought of that before you forgot your tent, dumbass.”

“Aww, c’mon, Ryoga…be a pal, would ya?” Ranma made his eyes as big as possible. “We’re friends, ain’t we? You wouldn’t let a friend freeze to death.”

“We’re hardly friends.” Ryoga snapped.

“But you do admit we are at least partially friends.” Ranma countered.

“No!”

“Not even a little?”

Ranma had started to bounce around him, peeking over Ryoga’s shoulders. Ryoga started to quake with bottled fury.

“We are not friends!” he snarled.
“Not even a teensy, weensy bit?”

Ryoga growled in frustration, ruffling his own hair. “If I say yes, will you please shut up?!”

“Well, considering that’s where I was goin’ with all this, sure, I guess so.” Ranma said simply, suddenly sitting back in his own spot.

Ryoga deadpanned. “You are such a jerk, Ranma.”

Ranma grinned. “I get that a lot.”

The kettle started to shriek. Ranma took it off the burner and poured boiling water into the two cups of ramen. Passing Ryoga his (slightly dented) cup, the two sat in silence for a while as they waited for their noodles to cook.

Darkness was slowly slipping over the clearing. Stars began to blink in the twilit sky as the dark trees cloaked the last of the sun’s rays.

Ranma cracked his neck moving his head back and forth, breaking the silence. He bumped his fist off of his shoulder.

“Man, that hike made me sore;” he groused, rubbing his shoulder tenderly.

Suddenly, he perked up, and looked at Ryoga with a grin. “I think there’s a hot spring nearby!” he said cheerfully. “If I’m rememberin’ this forest right. It was just east from the waterfall.”

Ryoga flipped up the lid on his ramen, poking at the noodles with chopsticks. “Is that so…” he said distantly, stirring the noodles around.

“Have a good ol’ soak, catch a few Zs, then up bright an’ early to train!” Ranma crowed. “Sound good?”

“Yeah, except for that bit about you getting up ‘bright and early’…” Ryoga jeered.

Ranma slurped up his noodles haughtily. “Hey, I’m a growing boy. I need my beauty sleep.”

“Ranma, you’re twenty-two. I’m pretty sure you’re done growing.” Ryoga muttered. “Besides, your growths’ been stunted since junior high, considering you’ve only grown about 5cm since then.”

“I have not!” Ranma yelled.

“Hmm, you’re right. Maybe you haven’t grown at all.” Ryoga said simply, staring at him blankly.

“That’s not what I meant!” Ranma bellowed. “I’ve totally grown!”

“Well, we were the same height once, and now I’m taller than you. Explain that one, Saotome.”

Ryoga was smirking now, enjoying Ranma’s torture.

“Well maybe if I walked all over Japan gettin’ lost, I’d grow taller, too!”

“I think it’s hereditary, idiot.” Ryoga muttered. “Walking around doesn’t make you taller. Now, shut up and eat so we can find that hot spring before it gets too dark.”

Ranma glared at Ryoga an extra second, but not one to ignore a waiting meal, went back to his food. It was quiet, save for the sound of noodles being slurped into hungry mouths.
After they’d eaten, Ranma packed both of their toiletries into a small rucksack. They headed into the trees toward the hot spring, which was easy enough to find. Ranma lead them toward the river, which was only a few minutes walk from where they’d set up camp, and they headed upstream in search of the waterfall. Just as the forest was turning darker, they began to hear the rush of the falls. Heading east after crossing the river, sure enough they eventually came across a small hot spring.

“Awright, it was here!” Ranma said excitedly as they passed through the trees.

They walked closer to the spring and Ranma set out their bathing supplies, hanging the rucksack on a tree branch. He tossed a towel to Ryoga and they quickly undressed and washed off, eager to get into the hot water as the evening air of autumn chilled their skin.

“Brrr!” Ranma chattered, rushing toward the hot spring, rubbing his cold arms. “Last one in freezes t’ death!”

Ranma quickly slipped into the spring, letting out a long, loud sigh of relief as he sank deeper into the steaming water. He was already up to his chin as Ryoga walked up to the edge of the spring and joined him. He let out his own sigh of contentment as the water deliciously pierced into his aching muscles.

Ryoga glanced over as Ranma dunked completely under the water. After a moment, he burst through the surface, and ran his hand through his soaked ebony bangs, then shook off the excess water.

Droplets hit Ryoga’s cheeks.

He stared longer than he should have.

“So,” Ryoga’s voice came out like a croak and it bothered him. “Why did you suddenly decide to tag along with me this time, anyways?”

“To train, of course,” Ranma replied simply.

“I know that, you dolt,” Ryoga sighed. “I mean…why now? And why with me?”

“Well, uh…” Ryoga didn’t miss Ranma’s slight hesitation. He quickly slipped into a light, blase tone as he continued. “You know I consider you t’ be my only rival, Ryoga. An’ it’s been a while since I got any decent training in. I’ve just been goin’ on jogs, bustin’ bricks, beating up practice dummies…it’s all so boring!” Ranma leaned back on the rocks with an aggravated sigh.

Ryoga’s face was solemn. “You may be a martial artist, Ranma, but you have duties outside of that in your life, as well.”

Ranma looked at Ryoga with a raised eyebrow and a quirky frown. “Oh, ho? And who’re you t’ start givin’ me life advice, P-chan?”

“Be quiet. I mean you have an obligation to your fiancée,” Ryoga snapped. “You two almost got married when we got back from China. That was six years ago. Don’t you think you’ve ‘postponed’ this marriage long enough?”

“Shut up, man. It ain’t none o’ your business.” Ranma grumbled. He refused to meet his gaze.
“Here you are, relaxing in a hot spring miles away from Akane, while she’s probably at home lying in bed wondering why you haven’t gotten down on one knee and—“

“I said it ain’t none of your business!” Ranma had lurched onto his feet, glaring at Ryoga.

“You’re running away again, aren’t you?” Ryoga said calmly, unaffected by Ranma’s sudden lash out.

Ranma staggered, his eyes wide. Then, he frowned deeply, and flopped back down into the water with a messy splash.

“…It’s just—” Ranma started sharply, paused, and then continued much more quietly. “…complicated, okay?”

Ryoga sighed again. “It’s not complicated,” he said. “You’re just making it out to be that way.”

“What would you know about it?” Ranma snapped.

“Because I was there myself,” Ryoga said quietly. “With Akari.”

Ranma looked up at Ryoga and blinked. “You…? But—“

“I broke up with her a few months ago.”

Ranma’s mouth fell open. “You what?” he gaped. “But, Ryoga! She was…you were…she was in love with you, man!”

“I loved her, too,” Ryoga murmured. He paused for a moment, as if to consider his own statement. Then, he shrugged. “Maybe. At one point. I cared for her, anyways. The same way I did for Akane. I still love them both. But…I’m not in love with them.”

Ranma opened and closed his mouth like a fish, unable to speak.

“I’ve known that for a long time, but I’m a coward and I was never able to admit that to Akari. She always knew something was wrong, however, and knew I’d say it in time. So, when I did, she was sad, but…she didn’t cry. She knew I’d take it back if she cried.” Ryoga was looking up at the sky, remembering.

Ranma frowned. “You idiot. How could you not have loved Akari? She thought the world of you, and you lead her on for six years an’ then dump her?”

Ryoga laughed without humor, still staring up at the sky.

“You’re such a hypocrite, Ranma.”

“Excuse me?”

“Aren’t you doing the exact same thing to Akane?” Ryoga muttered, looking back at Ranma with hard eyes. “At least I didn’t tote Akari around for years with a few bonus fiancées hanging off of me for good measure.”

“Shut up, that whole ‘fiancée’ thing was put t’ bed ages ago.” Ranma retorted strongly.

“Yeah, everyone seemed to find a commonplace after the events in China,” Ryoga said. “But you didn’t.”

“Anyone else with as much chaos as you in their lives would be relishing in all this humdrum,” Ryoga remarked. “Leave it to you to be the exception.”

Ranma pouted. His eyes flickered to Ryoga then away again.

“I know you’ve never been one to settle down,” Ryoga went on. “But that doesn’t mean you can just up and leave town whenever you feel trapped, instead of telling Akane how you feel. If you don’t want to marry her, then stop stringing her along.”

Ranma’s brow furrowed deeply, his eyes far away. The two were quiet for a long time. Ryoga waited, but Ranma wouldn’t meet his gaze, and remained silent.

“We’ve soaked long enough,” Ryoga muttered. “Let’s head back.”

Ryoga couldn’t sleep. Considering the lack of snoring coming from behind him, he knew Ranma was awake, too. Ryoga glared in the darkness at nothing, irritated. Why couldn’t he just sleep, damn it all?

“Ryoga?” Ranma’s voice broke through the silent darkness quietly.

Ryoga sighed loudly. “What?”

“Did you an’ Akari ever have sex?”

Ryoga whirled around and bolted upright, looking incredulously down at Ranma, who was still laying down with his back to him. “Where the hell is this coming from?” he exclaimed hotly.

“I thought guys talk about stuff like this,” Ranma replied calmly. “Are you gonna answer the question?”

“They do…I guess. But you don’t.” Ryoga said awkwardly.

He saw Ranma’s frame shuffle in the dark tent. Ranma shrugged. “First time for everything,” he said. He continued to talk in a low, even voice. “Speaking of first times…”

Ryoga scoffed, looking away. “I told you, I always knew I didn’t truly love her. You think I could do that with someone I didn’t really love?”

Ranma looked at Ryoga over his shoulder, then sat up slowly. “You never did it? You never even thought about it?” he asked, sounding genuinely curious.

“I may have wanted to treat Akari with the respect she deserved, but that doesn’t mean I’m not a man,” Ryoga said impatiently. “Of course I thought about it.”

Ranma stretched out his legs and bent forward, touching his toes under the sleeping bag, and said nothing.

“What about you?” Ryoga said, turning the tables. He looked over at Ranma, who was still stretching.
Ranma held his stretch, and shook his head. “Nope.”

“But you’ve thought about it.” Ryoga said it more like a fact than a question.

“I guess,” Ranma said with a shrug.

“Do you want her?” Ryoga went on.

Ranma paused. “I want to...” he began quietly, slowly. “But not with Akane.”

Ryoga blinked at him, genuinely surprised. He opened his mouth to reply, but no words came forth. He shut his mouth again. Suddenly he was afraid his gaping mouth would act like a megaphone, amplifying the sound of his racing heartbeat.

Ranma released his stretch finally, and sat up straight. The two sat in the tent in silence for a while.

“So, even though you’re not with Akari anymore,” Ranma went on. “Do you think about it still?”

Despite himself, Ryoga laughed lightly. “When you’re alone, you think about it more. There’s just not a face to put to it anymore.”

“Be weird to try an’ picture yourself bangin’ someone with no face.” Ranma quipped lightly.

“Shut up. That’s not what I meant,” Ryoga said, bumping his fist off Ranma’s head. “I meant… there’s not a constant face. The image always changes.”

“But is there a face that’s...” Ranma searched for a moment. “Reoccurring?”

Ryoga looked at him. “Where is this going?”

“Nowhere,” Ranma said. “I’m goin’ to sleep.”

With that he lay back down and flipped over, his back facing Ryoga again. Ryoga remained in place for a while, staring at the back of Ranma’s head. He sighed, and flopped down onto his back. He tried to listen for Ranma’s breathing to become slow and heavy, but before he heard any difference, his eyes fluttered closed and he drifted off.

Chapter End Notes

Ranma, you l’il shit.
His eyes opened to a familiar sight; an empty tent. Ryoga sat up looking down at the crumpled sleeping bag beside his own and gave it a pat. It wasn’t warm. Ryoga crawled out from the tent and was greeted with the piercing chill of the morning fall air, made even more penetrating due to the fact he was barefoot and only clad in sweatpants and a t-shirt. Ryoga stood up and stretched, eager to work out the kinks in his back he never got used to even after years of living in a tent. He sighed softly as his back cracked. His breath floated visibly through the air.

He rubbed his cold, bare arms thinking about his warmer clothes in his pack inside the tent. Just then, he saw Ranma come out from the trees. He was wearing a black puffer vest over a powder blue hoodie, grey cargo pants and sneakers. He had his small shoulder bag strapped to his back, was carrying a tackle box in one hand, and in the other were several sticks with fish hanging off the tips by their mouths. He came over to the bed of coals and ashes where he’d built a fire the other day, and set everything down, shoving the sticks into the soft ashes of the fire pit.

“You’re up awfully early,” Ryoga remarked, as Ranma pulled off his shoulder bag and set it down with the tackle box.

Ranma shuffled out of his vest and set it down on the grass. “Stomach woke me up,” he replied.

Ryoga shivered against the chilly air, and was reminded again about how cold he was. “I’ll go get some dishes,” he announced, and went back into the tent.

The tent was slightly warmer than outside. Ryoga was sure his sleeping bag still retained some body heat, but he tore his eyes away from the enticing sight. He busied himself pulling out some clothes, eagerly pulling on some socks and a jacket to take his mind off the cold. Ranma came into the tent and crawled over to his own bag. He pulled out a bag of instant miso, a large sealed bag full of uncooked rice, a camping rice cooker, and a large bottle of water. Ryoga collected dishes and a pot from his own pack and followed Ranma back outside.

Ranma had gotten a fire started already, and two small fish were sizzling over the flames. Ranma swiftly set about filling the rice cooker with water and rice, and setting it up above the fire next to the grilling fish. Ryoga set up the pot on his gas burner and prepared the instant miso. The two shared easy, comfortable silence as the rice simmered, the fish crackled, the miso bubbled. The sun was a little higher in the sky, casting its glow onto the clearing. With the sun, the fire, and the promise of miso soup to warm his belly, Ryoga already felt a little less cold.

Ranma took it upon himself to fill their bowls. He passed Ryoga his bowl of steaming rice, and Ryoga quickly accepted it, his hunger having grown as the sun had risen. His hands brushed Ranma’s fingers as they took the bowl.

Warm.
Ryoga made onigiri with some of the leftover rice, and left the rest in the cooker for dinner later that evening. They packed Ranma’s shoulder bag with their snacks and plenty of water, then headed out into woods. They hiked through the woods until early afternoon. They stopped beside the river and gulped down water and ate half the onigiri.

“I’m antsy,” Ranma said. “I’m used to practizin’ right off the bat in the morning. Instead I headed right out to go catch those fish.”

“Well, let’s spar.” Ryoga wasn’t offering.

He stood up, walking out to the open space closer to the river, then turned to face Ranma who was still sitting on a large rock by the tree line. The pigtail boy grinned, standing up. He grabbed the bottom of his hoodie and pulled it up and over his head, tossing it back on the rock. Smirking now, he slipped into his loose but alert battle stance. Ryoga followed suit, and they stood still for a beat. Then, Ranma lurched forward.

They began what looked like an intricate dance, the small rocks clicking together as they shifted beneath their swift movements. Ranma flew his fist forward, Ryoga sidestepped to dodge, moving around behind Ranma. Before Ryoga could attack, Ranma swung his torso backward, his hands flying out and planting onto the stones as his leg shot up in a sharp kick. Ryoga grabbed the leg, and mercilessly tossed Ranma right over his head. Ranma recovered with ease, curling his body into a tight ball and flipping forward. He landed on one foot on a rock jutting out from the river.

Ryoga turned around, watching Ranma steady himself on the rock. Ranma looked over at him smugly as he effortlessly balanced on the rock on one foot.

“Heh, you’re gonna hafta do better’n that, P-cha—AAAH!” Ranma yelped loudly as he slipped from the rock and plunged into the river.

Ryoga burst out laughing as Ranma broke out from the water, now a sputtering, coughing, and soaking wet redhead.

“Holy crap, that’s cold!” Ranma cried, standing up and sloshing toward the shore.

“Serves you right for being so cocky,” Ryoga said as Ranma stepped up onto the rocks. She shot him a dirty look as she pulled off her sneakers and poured water out of them.

“Ah, be quiet, bacon-breath. It wasn’t my fault the rock was wet.” she grumbled, walking back toward the tree line, shoes in hand. She sat back down on the rock, and glared down at her soaked clothes.

“Geez, what a pain,” she sighed loudly. She yanked off her drenched tank top, and squeezed it out. She stopped her actions at the sudden cry from Ryoga, who was looking away.

“G-give a guy some warning before you go and take your shirt off, will you?!” Ryoga barked, his face already a harsh crimson.

Ranma deadpanned. “You’re such a frickin’ prude,” she went back to squeezing out her shirt. “Now I know you an’ Akari never did the big deed.”
“Oh, shut up,” Ryoga snapped, whipping his head back to Ranma. He then remembered she was still shirtless, and quickly looked away again. He turned completely around, facing the river.

Ranma scoffed as she pulled off her socks, pants, and boxers. She sat on the rock for a while, watching Ryoga’s back. She got up, and walked along the rocks towards him. The shells of his ears were dark red. She came up behind him, an arms’ length away. Sensing her presence, Ryoga looked over his shoulder. His eyes bulged. He whirled around, forcing himself to keep eye contact with Ranma.

“What…wh-why the hell are you naked?” Ryoga stammered.

“You’d rather I catch my death in soppin’ wet clothes?” Ranma asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Did you have to completely strip down?”

“My boxers were wet, too.” Suddenly, Ranma sneered. “My eyes are up here, porkbutt.”

“I’ve been making eye contact the whole time!” Ryoga yapped.

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure!”

“You’re so pathetic,” Ranma sighed. She grabbed his wrist. “It ain’t like you’ve never seen me naked before.”

She pulled his hand upward, placing his palm flat on her breast. A small squeaking sound came out from Ryoga’s throat. A long shudder ran through him from the soles of his feet to the top of his head, and his body froze. They stood still for a moment. Ranma held Ryoga’s hand in place, but if she were to take her hand away Ryoga wouldn’t have budged; his body was still frozen solid. She slowly took her hand away and let her arm fall to her side. Ryoga seemed to snap out of whatever spell he was under, and his eyes widened as he realized his hand was still holding Ranma’s breast.

“Go on,” Ranma murmured.

Ryoga twitched. “G-go on with what?” he croaked.

“Touch me,” Ranma said quietly. “You want to.”

“I don’t!” Ryoga shouted suddenly. He still hadn’t removed his hand. Ranma looked down at his hand, then up at Ryoga again. She sighed, almost tiredly, and grabbed Ryoga’s other hand and firmly placed it on her other breast.

“What’re you—?” Ryoga began, cutting himself off as Ranma squeezed his hand, tightening his grip on her breast.

“Don’t you want to know?” Ranma asked.

“I’m certainly not desperate enough to use you as some guinea pig,” Ryoga snapped. “Don’t insult me, Ranma.”

“I never said desperate,” Ranma spoke quietly, softly. “And I’m not insulting. I want to know, too.”

Ryoga looked up, his eyes still large with confusion, looking like a frightened child. From the outside looking in, it was a peculiar sight to behold. Though Ryoga now towered over Ranma’s puny
feminine frame, it was the latter that held confident dominance. Under her mesmerizing blue gaze, Ryoga felt diminutive. Even without moving his hand, Ranma’s skin was delightfully velveteen. It was smooth, supple, and incredibly—

Warm.

His fingers seemed to crack out of whatever paralyzing chrysalis they’d been trapped in. Slowly he moved his hands, feeling, probing the soft flesh beneath. His movements were awkward, inexperienced, and unsure.

“How does that…feel?” Ryoga’s voice cracked thickly in his throat.

“Not bad…” Ranma muttered. She paused. “Not good, either.”

Ryoga froze. “Should I stop?”

“You should stop gropin’ me like a schoolboy and do it like a man.” Ranma said flippantly.

Ryoga bristled at the comment. Was that a challenge? He took Ranma’s nipples between his first finger and thumb and squeezed. Ranma jolted sharply and sucked in a breath.

Ryoga blinked. Not the reaction he’d expected. He tried again, slower this time. The soft pink nubs had already been stiff from the chill in the air, but seemed to harden even more under his fingertips. Ryoga watched in awe as Ranma’s chest became tinged slightly pink.

He felt the inside of his mouth water. His lips parted, his tongue flicked across his mouth, as if trying to escape.

What were they doing? Wasn’t this messed up? This was Ranma. He needed to stop.

Ryoga gripped the backs of Ranma’s legs and pulled her up into his arms. Her legs locked around his torso, his hands gripped his shoulders. Ranma held herself away from Ryoga’s body, giving him a fantastic view of hers. Ryoga brought them past the tree line, kissing up Ranma’s petite stomach.

Just past the line of trees was a small alcove of trees and shrubs, with dried leaves covering the dirt on the forest floor. He lowered them both to the ground, Ranma lying down on her back as Ryoga hovered above her. Ranma’s entire body was flushed pink, but Ryoga knew the cold air was only partially to blame. Their breaths were labored and heavy. Ryoga couldn’t keep his hands away from Ranma’s skin. As he ran his hand across her chest, he could feel how hard and fast her heart was beating. Now, Ryoga wasn’t sure what to do.

Ranma reached up and cupped his face in her tiny hands, but she held him firmly in place, and pulled him down with ease. He let her draw him down onto her lips.

Warm.

Their lips parted.

Ranma hummed. “You’re…kind of good at that,” she said breathily.

“Um…thanks,” Ryoga felt his ears burn.

Ranma smirked, pulling him back down. The heat grew between them, their mouths moved with fervent passion. Ranma broke away, kissing up Ryoga’s jaw as she snatched his wrist. She pulled it down between her thighs, and licked the shell of his ear. Ryoga’s eyes flew open.
“Ranma—“

“Touch me,” Ranma whispered huskily into his ear. “You want to.”

Ryoga shivered. Ranma released his wrist, allowing him to continue of his own volition. Ryoga blinked rapidly, then looked up at Ranma.

“You’re, uh, really…wet.”

“Yeah, I know. It feels pretty strange,” Ranma said casually. She tensed as Ryoga’s fingers moved, and her back arched. “But also…pretty…good, too.” She forced out.

Ryoga felt a sudden surge of confidence. He pushed the tips of his fingers inside of Ranma. Ranma gasped. Ryoga halted.

“Does that hurt?” he asked.

“And since when have you ever given a crap about hurting me?” Ranma snapped impatiently. “Keep going.”

Ryoga obliged. Slowly, he pushed in until his first two fingers were fully inside. Ranma let out a long sigh. Ryoga remained still for a moment, before slowly dragging his fingers halfway out. Again, he paused. Then, he thrust them back inside with more force.

“Shit!” Ranma cried, arching her back further than last time. She slumped back down, her mouth hanging open as if in shock.

Ryoga kept his fingers deep inside, and began to curl them toward himself. Ranma’s hands clenched into fists and her breath hitched. He curled them again, several times in a row. Ranma bit her lip, her hips bucked uncontrollably against his hands. Looks like he’d struck gold. Ryoga continued the same motion, making sure to keep a steady pace.

Ranma was thrashing beneath him now, her lips tautly pressed together. Her face was flushed deep red, her legs twitched and quivered against her will. Ryoga couldn’t help but stare as he continued his administrations. He slowed down, pulling almost completely out, and then thrust in sharply. Ranma cried out, unable to hold in her sounds any longer. Ryoga continued his quick, sharp thrusts, going as deep as he could each time. Ranma was now in complete shambles, writhing around in the leaves, convulsing with jerky shivers, moaning and crying out with each thrust of Ryoga’s fingers.

Ryoga came up and pinched Ranma’s nipple between his teeth before sucking on it softly. Ranma groaned, then whimpered as he sucked and pumped his fingers in unison.

“R-Ryoga…” Ranma moaned.

Nobody had ever said his name like that before.

Ryoga fumbled with the waistline of his sweatpants, yanking them down one-handed as he continued to pump his fingers into Ranma with his other. He grabbed the base of his stiffened member, positioning it at Ranma’s entrance. Spreading her with his fingers he entered her slowly, until he was buried completely.

Warm.

“Ranma…”
She shivered at how he growled out her name.

He slowly pulled out with wonderful slowness, both of them relishing in the sensation one last time.

Then all sense of reason completely capsized.

Chapter End Notes

Six years of sexual tension leads to bangin' in the woods.
Spilled water will not return to the bowl

Chapter Summary

Ranma and Ryoga talk about what happened in the woods over dinner. Then they do a lot of no talking.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

3.

Spilled water will not return to the bowl

“Ryoga…”

“Hm…?”

“You’re crushing me.”

Ryoga rolled off of Ranma’s chest and flopped on his back onto the leaves. Ranma sat up; picking leaves out of her hair. Ryoga dusted off a few stuck to her back, as well as some clumps of dirt. Ranma stood, her legs wobbling slightly as she walked back out past the trees. Groggily, Ryoga got to his feet. He fixed his pants before following. Ranma pulled on her hoodie, the only article of dry clothing she had, and sat on the rock.

Ryoga joined her, and they sat in silence watching the river. The colour of everything seemed off somehow, almost hazy like a dream. He blankly assumed he was just still asleep. He looked over at Ranma, his eyes trailing down to her bare legs, pink and covered in goose bumps.

“You’re going to catch cold at this rate,” Ryoga said. “Let’s head back to the camp.”

Ranma nodded. She stood up and slipped on her wet sneakers, grabbing her damp tank top, pants, and boxers. Ryoga grabbed Ranma’s shoulder bag and they headed back for the clearing.
When they made it back Ranma dumped her soaked clothes on the ground, kicked off her shoes and headed into the tent. Ryoga got to work on a fire. He filled the kettle and placed it on the gas burner. He hung Ranma’s discarded clothes on a tree branch.

He’d run out of things to distract himself with. With sudden purpose he turned around and went into the tent. Ranma had pulled on pajama bottoms, the green ones covered in a fishcake pattern. She was pulling some ingredients, bowls, cutlery and a pot out of her pack.

“Thought I’d try to make us curry tonight,” Ranma remarked, closing up her bag.

“Ranma…”

“I haven’t made it too many times, so don’t go complainin’ if it sucks.”

“Ranma,” Ryoga spoke a little louder. “I know you always skip around things, but don’t skip around this.”

Ranma gathered up all the bags of ingredients for the curry into her arms. She looked up at Ryoga slowly, her expression solemn.

“I’m not skippin’ around anything,” she said calmly. “There’s nothin’ to say.”

Ranma ducked out of the tent, Ryoga quickly following behind. She set out all the ingredients by the fire.

“Oh, good. You put the kettle on, too.”

“Ranma, we just had sex.”

Ranma looked over her shoulder, her face bland. “Yes, I’m aware of that, Ryoga.” she muttered.

“I didn’t expect you to be so blasé about losing your virginity to another man,” Ryoga said. “You do know that it still counts, even if you’re in your girl form, right?”

“Of course I do, moron.” Ranma sighed.

“And you’re just fine with that, are you?” Ryoga snapped, starting to feel irritated. “You don’t mind that you just had sex for the very first time, in your girl form, with a man. And not just any man, but me.”

“I told you before,” Ranma murmured. “I wanted to. I didn’t want to with Akane, but…I wanted to.”

“And it didn’t matter who it was, did it?” Ryoga couldn’t keep the tremor out of his voice for some reason. “Anyone would have sufficed?”

“…No,” Ranma frowned deeply. “What the hell do you take me for?”

“Well, whatever. If you just did it to fill some...carnal void of yours, that’s your problem. But I told you before that I can’t do that. I can’t just be with someone out of convenience. Not anymore. Not ever again. If I’m with someone, it’s for love, and nothing less than that.” Ryoga clenched his fists, and stared off at nothing.

“You could have stopped at any time,” Ranma muttered. “If you really feel that way, you wouldn’t have done what you did.”
Ryoga whirled back on Ranma, his eyes hard. “I’d never been with anyone like that before. For a fleeting instant, my body overtook my mind. But it won’t happen again.” Ryoga said strongly. “If you’ve got some void to fill, I’m not going to be the one filling that space.”

“That’s fine,” Ranma said evenly. She hadn’t taken her eyes off him. “I don’t care if it happens again or not. Either way, it was what it was. It didn’t mean anything.”

She set up the large pot over the fire. Ryoga stayed in place, watching her work. After a moment, he walked over and sat down. Ranma poured oil into the pot.

“You’re right,” Ranma said suddenly. “I’m running away. I don’t want to get married. Not just to Akane, but to anybody. The idea of settling down, committing…it sets my teeth on edge.”

Ranma paused for a moment as she started chopping carrots into the pot, and Ryoga waited for her to continue.

“I’ve felt trapped from the minute I found out about the engagement,” Ranma went on finally, chopping the last of the ingredients into the pot. “I don’t want my life decided for me…who I marry, who I’ll be with…I decide those things, not my old man, or anybody else.”

“So you hate the thought of commitment,” Ryoga surmised. “That just drives my point even further home. You may be this…free spirit—not wanting to settle down, to stay in one place…but I do.”

Ranma shrugged, stir-frying the chopped vegetables around in the oil. “Like I said, I don’t care if we do it again or not.” she said. The kettle on the gas burner started to hiss loudly.


Ranma blinked at him in surprise as she took the kettle off the burner, and began to pour it on her head.

“You want to do it again?” Ranma’s voice became deeper halfway through the sentence as he regained his male form again.

“We’re only human. We have our wants, our needs. I may have been able to keep them at bay before, but...that was before. I can’t be so self-righteous and aim to be pure forever until I find someone I can love. I don’t think I could have this with anyone else--this non-committal physicality. With you, it’s somehow different…” Ryoga trailed off as he stared into the fire. Then, he looked up and met Ranma’s eyes. “I…want you, Ranma.”

“Ah, geez,” Ranma said incredulously. “You’re not gonna fall in love with me, are you?”

“Like hell!” Ryoga snapped. He sighed gratingly. “I said you were running away. I think I’ve been running, too. So, I’m really in no position to tell you to stop. But if we’re going to run, we may as well run to someone we trust, someone we can talk to, someone who understands what the other is looking for. We may as well run to each other.”

Ranma stared at Ryoga, and said nothing. Then his face turned determinedly serious all of a sudden. He jabbed his finger at Ryoga.

“No weird stuff. No strings attached.” Ranma said shortly.

“Necessity,” Ranma echoed, nodding back. “So, we’re agreed, then.”

Then, he turned his attention back to the pot. He grabbed a package of curry roux, and mixed it in another bowl with more water. He took the pot off the fire, and added the curry roux to the pot of vegetables.

“Smells good,” Ryoga commented.

“Oh, damn. I better heat that rice back up.” Ranma said absently, grabbing the rice cooker.

Ryoga watched as Ranma busied himself setting the rice cooker back over the fire, then he went back and stirred the steadily thickening roux in with the vegetables.

“Hey…” Ryoga began slowly.

“What’s up?”

“No weird stuff. No strings attached,” Ryoga repeated Ranma’s words. “Which side of you is this applying to?”

Ranma looked up from the curry. “I dunno,” Ryoga caught the dither in Ranma’s voice. “Which side matters?”

Ranma shrugged. “Either way, it’s you,” he said. “I can’t just hide behind a false perception and say what I’m doing is okay because it’s ‘only with your girl side’. Girl or not, you’re still you.”

Ranma had slowly stopped stirring the curry, as he looked at Ryoga unblinking. The spoon slipped from his fingers and sunk slightly into the pot. He broke their gaze, grabbing the spoon before it sunk. He stirred the curry around some more, and then scooped some up to give it a taste. Seeming satisfied, he grabbed the bowls and dished out the reheated rice, then spooned a mound of curry on top of the rice. He stabbed a spoon into the food, and then passed the bowl to Ryoga.

“Curry a la Ranma, huh?” Ryoga announced, taking the bowl. He looked down at the dish. From the looks of it, he’d kept the recipe very simple, a wise decision on his part considering he wasn’t an experienced cook. Ranma wasn’t the type to get passionate and creative in the kitchen, like Akane; whose bold attempts always lead to catastrophic results.

“Curry a la supermarket, more like,” Ranma said with a shrug. “The curry roux is what makes it curry, and it’s store-bought. It’s too complicated to make roux from scratch when you’re out roughin’ it, though.”

“Curry roux is just seasoning and spices. What makes the curry are the ingredients you add yourself.” Ryoga countered.

“In other words, it’s all on me if it sucks, right?” Ranma sneered.

Ryoga smirked. “I guess we’re about to see.”

Now that he thought about it, this was the first time he’d ever tried Ranma’s cooking. He could remember long ago when he was sitting across a fire from Akane, about to try her own attempt at curry. It was his schoolboy crush on her at the time that made him tell her it was good, when it had in fact burned his insides. Ranma’s curry, however, looked far less intimidating. Ranma wasn’t eagerly watching him for his reaction; he was busy dishing out his own bowl.

Ryoga took a bite. Chewed. Swallowed.

Ranma hummed. “I’ve got some stuff to drink in my bag. Be right back.”

He came out with cups and a large bottle of barley tea. Sitting back down he poured Ryoga and himself a cup. Ryoga eagerly took his cup, realizing he was not only starving, but also extremely thirsty. They drank several cups as they finished their bowls of curry.

“Man, I’m full.” Ranma sighed after knocking back another cup of tea.

Ryoga looked at the pot. “Looks like we’ll be having curry again tomorrow, too. Still plenty left.” he remarked.

“It’s better the second time, anyhow.” Ranma said, starting to clean things up.

Ryoga caught himself staring again.

“Is that right…” he muttered absently.

Once Ranma had put everything away, he looked up to see Ryoga staring off into space.

“You okay over there, P-chan? Curry isn’t comin’ back up on ya, is it? Was it that bad?” Ranma jeered.

“I was just wondering,” Ryoga murmured. “What else that philosophy could apply to.”

Ranma looked confused. “Philosophy?”

“It’s better the second time.” Ryoga repeated Ranma’s words yet again.

“Uhh,” Ranma scratched his head, watching Ryoga stand up. If Ryoga was trying to start some deep metaphysical discussion, he was on his own.

Ryoga walked up to Ranma slowly. After finally catching the look in his eyes, Ranma realized Ryoga had no intention of having any theoretical conversations. Or any talking, whatsoever.

Ryoga’s lips came down on Ranma’s own, and he wasn’t sure if his zeal was due to uncertainty or urgency. Perhaps it was a bit of both.

Ranma’s cool supremacy from before was now nonexistent. Ryoga’s fragile naiveté was gone; feral desire taking over all rudimentary senses. He had somehow managed to claw his way into the tent, dragging Ranma inside, all the while ravishing his mouth. Ryoga practically threw Ranma on their sleeping bags, knocking the lantern nearby off into the corner of the tent. He tore off Ranma’s hoodie before pressing himself on top of him, attacking his lips yet again. They broke apart eventually, breathless.

“So,” Ranma huffed. “I’m an even better kisser as a guy, right?”

“It shuts you up, either way.”

Ranma reached up and nipped Ryoga’s bottom lip, yanking off his jacket and t-shirt, casting them aside. He kissed down his jaw; his teeth pinched the skin by Ryoga’s collarbone. Ryoga hissed through his teeth. His body was hot. Ranma could feel Ryoga’s eager member pressed against his thighs.

Ranma snickered. “Piggy’s got a biting fetish.”
Ryoga swooped down and buried his face in Ranma’s neck. He sucked on the soft skin before biting down unforgivingly. Ranma stiffened, then shuddered. Ryoga pulled away, looking smugly gratified.

“You beat me in that department, Saotome.”

“Au contraire, Mr. P… you’d much rather be the one doin’ the biting.” Ranma retorted. He reached up Ryoga’s back, and then dragged his nails down, hard and slow.

Ryoga tensed.

“But you’ve definitely got it bad for that.” Ranma finished huskily.

He was right.

Ryoga snatched Ranma’s lips harshly. He began to grind his aching need against Ranma’s own, and they both sighed simultaneously against each other’s mouths at the sensation. Ryoga rolled his hips again; Ranma leaned his head back and groaned. Ryoga blinked, looking up at Ranma’s flushed face. Realizing quickly that Ryoga had stopped, Ranma opened his eyes and craned his neck to look at him quizzically.

“Somethin’ wrong?”

Ryoga reached down and yanked off Ranma’s pajama pants. He leaned down again, pressing his body against Ranma’s.

“No,” he murmured. “Nothing’s wrong.”

Ryoga broke his gaze away from the tent ceiling to look over at Ranma again, only to once again get a view of the back of his head.

He’d been ignoring him for a solid thirty minutes now.

“Look, I said I was sorry.”

Silence.

Ryoga sighed.

“I told you, you dolt. I told you it’d hurt.” Ryoga grumbled. “You didn’t want to listen.”

Ranma suddenly whipped around, looking exasperated. “You were the one all hot n’ bothered after dinner, practically hurling me inside the tent an’ tearin’ my clothes off…then all of a sudden you say we should stop, when the whole darn point of all this was t’ bust a nut.”

Ryoga wrinkled his nose. “Please don’t call it that.”

“Well, it’s true. You said it yourself. Necessity. I’m pretty sure I don’t got no necessity for half-ass half measures. You started it, you finish it, porkchop.”

Ryoga smirked. “I certainly did.”
“Yeah, an’ now I’m not gonna walk right for a damn week!” Ranma barked, slapping Ryoga on the forehead.

Ryoga just laughed lightly. Seeing the look on Ranma’s face, his laugh grew until his laughter filled the small tent. Slowly Ranma’s deep scowl became a frown, then a pout. His lips twisted, fighting the urge. Then he broke into a smile. His voice was soft, drowned out by Ryoga’s mirth.

“I didn’t know you could laugh like that.”

Chapter End Notes

This will be the last "short" chapter. On my Google Docs this chapter and the other two before it are all about 8-9 pages long. Chapter Four is 14 pages, and all the chapters I have written so far after that one are all about that length. So, next week you can look forward to lengthier chapters!

Also, I promise this isn't just "smut with a plot". They don't just do a "friends with benefits" thing the entire story and pork non-stop. The plot is on the rise, I swear.

Seriously though these guys are like horny teenagers.

What do y'all think of the story so far? I crave your feedback. So please consider leaving me a comment below! And thanks to everyone who has left kudos so far! :)

See you next weekend, folks. Happy reading.
The following day, Ranma and Ryoga were up with the sun. They ate the rest of the fish Ranma had caught the other day with miso and rice. They spent the majority of their time enjoying their breakfast in easy silence, a comfortable quietness already familiar to the two.

“I was thinking,” Ryoga said suddenly. “That we should pack up camp, and go a little higher up into the mountains.”

Ranma looked up from his food, still chewing. “Oh, yeah?” he said through grains of rice. “That’s cool, but what for?”

“Well, the Leonids are tonight.”

Ranma stared at Ryoga like he’d just spoken to him in Chinese.

“The what?”

“You’ve never heard of the Leonids? They’re a meteor shower that peaks in November.” Ryoga explained. “I figure we’ll get a really great view of them tonight if we scale the mountain even higher.”

“Meteor shower, huh? Neat.” Ranma slurped up the last of his miso soup. “Sure, let’s do it.”

After breakfast, they cleaned up and then practised a few katas together before finishing with a sparring match. Afterward they packed everything away, took down the tent, and left the clearing that’d been home for the last two days.
The forest was fresh and golden, the air clean and crisp. They hiked effortlessly through the trail for miles, a trek that would have tired most. Soon they reached a cliff face, and began to scale it. Ryoga reached the top of the cliff first, and reached out a hand when Ranma appeared right behind him. Ranma didn’t need the lift, but he accepted it regardless.

They were a little more than halfway up the mountain. It was late afternoon, and their stomachs were churning. They sat on the cliff edge and had lunch, taking in the city of gold.

“Say, Ranma...?” Ryoga began.

“Hm?”

“When we get back to town, could you take me back to my house?” Ryoga seemed a little sheepish to ask. “I’d like to check in on Shirokuro.”

Ranma leaned back on his hands. “Sure, man.”

“What are you going to do?” Ryoga asked suddenly.

Ranma looked over at him quizzically. “Whataya mean?”

“I mean, once you’re back in town, back at the Tendo’s.” Ryoga paused, then he scoffed. “I mean, you said it yourself. You don’t want to marry Akane. You can’t exactly mooch off her family forever.”

Ranma frowned. “I thought you said you weren’t gonna pester me about it anymore.” he grumbled.

“I said I wouldn’t stop you from running away. So far, you’re just talk. You may be out here to get away from everything, but it’s not exactly running away when you just keep going back. You can’t expect things to change that way.” Ryoga crossed his arms, and looked up at the cloudless sky.

“Well, where the heck am I s’posed to go?”

Ryoga shrugged. “I don’t know. All I’m saying is if you want things to change, you can’t stay there.” Ryoga looked over at Ranma with a firm look in his eye. “And you really need to talk about what you’ve said to me with Akane.”

Ranma picked at the dirt under his fingernails. “Yeah, that’d be one way to get outta their house,” he muttered. “Have her hurl me out the front door.”

“She deserves an explanation.” Ryoga said.

“Maybe,” Ranma shrugged. “But she wouldn’t listen t’ what I’d have to say.”

“You didn’t seriously think that you were going to leave her high and dry after all these years?” Ryoga asked, somewhat incredulously.

“Of course not,” Ranma said tiredly. “Why do you think it’s taken me this long? I can’t come up with the words. I’ve never been good with junk like that.”

“With Akane, it won’t matter what you say or how you say it. You’ll hurt her.” Ryoga sighed. “You’re just going to have to bite the bullet, Ranma.”

Ranma said nothing. Ryoga stared at him, then he sighed and went back to his food. Ranma had his
feet planted firmly in the ground, and no amount of shoving on Ryoga’s part seemed to be swaying
him. They finished their lunch and sat for a while longer before continuing up the mountain once
more, as the sky was turning into wisps of pale orange and burnt pink.

Night had fallen on the mountain.

They had hiked nonstop through the forest for the rest of the afternoon, and now saw moonlight
breaking into the dark thicket of trees. Stepping out into the open, both of them stopped abruptly,
suddenly frozen in place.

“Wow,” Ranma breathed.

Before them was a wide open clearing, filled with a sea of wild chrysanthemums. They seemed to
glow in the dark, white and soft like the moon. It was impossible to tell which was emitting more
light, the petals of the flowers, or the blinking stardust in the black ink sky. It was as if Princess
Kaguya had crafted the vision herself.

“We’ve got the best seats in the house.” Ranma said. He threw down his pack and stretched
gratefully.

“I’ll say,” Ryoga murmured, setting his own pack onto the grass.

“Let’s not pitch the tent tonight,” Ranma offered. “Let’s just set out the sleeping bags.”

They rolled out their sleeping bags and pulled out some snacks. Ranma started a fire, and they sat on
their respective sleeping bags and enjoyed the crackling warmth of the fire, which lit the mountaintop
meadow in a contrasting warm light. They snacked on vanilla-filled biscuits and drank green tea.
After a while they both pulled on an extra sweater as the night air chilled even further.

Suddenly, a short white streak of light flashed through the night sky.

“Oh!” Ranma exclaimed, pointing upwards. “Did you see that?”

“Yeah, that was a big one, too.” Ryoga remarked.

Ranma flopped down onto his back. Ryoga looked at him, then he followed suit.

“Even if there wasn’t a meteor shower t’night, it’s still nice to look at the stars.” Ranma said.
“Y’never see this many stars in the city. Makes you forget how many of ‘em there are up there.”

“Did you ever learn any of the constellations?” Ryoga asked.

“Nah, but sometimes I try an’ make ‘em into pictures, kinda like you would with clouds.” Ranma
replied. “What about you?”

“When you’re out on the road as much as me, especially as far out into the bush as I tend to get, you
have to do something to pass the time. Since all I had most nights was the sky to keep me company, I
tried to learn all the constellations.” Ryoga pointed up into the sky. “The Leonids are named after the
constellation of Leo, since that’s where all the meteors radiate from. That’s Leo right over there. It
sort of looks like a...crooked clothes hanger. Can you see it?”
Ranma followed Ryoga’s finger and squinted. “Oh. Yeah, I see it.” Ranma grinned. “I’m a Leo, y’know.”

“Oh, yeah?” Ryoga laughed suddenly. “Yeah, that makes perfect sense.”

“Why’s that?” Ranma looked over at Ryoga and shot up his fists. “Is it ‘cause I’m as strong and badass as a lion?”

“Well, Leos are known for their egocentric personalities,” Ryoga muttered. “So yeah, it’s right on the money.”

Ranma merely stuck out his tongue in rebuttal. “What about you?”

“Me? I’m a Cancer.” Ryoga replied.

Ranma pouted in thought. “Which one is that one again?” Ranma pondered. “A shellfish?”

“A crab.” Ryoga supplied.

Ranma snorted, then burst out laughing. “That’s perfect!” he could hardly get the words out through his giggles. “A grumpy crustacean that hides in a shell!”

“Sh...shut up!” Ryoga snapped, feeling his ears burn.

Ranma was rolling around on his sleeping bag, clutching his stomach as he convulsed with laughter.

“It’s not that funny, Ranma!”

“An’ here I’ve been... callin’ you ‘piggy’ all this time...!” Ranma giggled.

“You’re such an ass...” Ryoga grated half-heartedly, shaking his head.

Another meteor flashed, disappearing behind the black trees.

“You know,” Ranma said quietly, suddenly calm. “We don’t have to.”

Ryoga felt his heart skip. “We don’t have to what?”

“We don’t have to go back,” Ranma said.

Ryoga continued to watch the sky, his face expressionless.

“We could do the whole nomad thing,” Ranma went on. “I think that sounds pretty badass.”

“You can’t, Ranma.”

“Who says I can’t?” Ranma rolled onto his side and propped himself up on his elbow. “You said you wouldn’t stop me from running away.”

“I did,” Ryoga said. “But I didn’t say I’d let you hurt Akane.”

“I think you just keep changing your damn rules,” Ranma sighed. “Look, man, I know you used to have the hots for Akane, an’ maybe you still do, but--”

“I don’t. I’m just not an inconsiderate asshole like you are.” Ryoga spoke slowly, and darkly.

“I told you before. It’s none of your business.” Ranma snapped.
“Three days ago, it wasn’t my business.” Ryoga shrugged. “But things have changed.”

Ranma stiffened. “What d’you mean?”

“I’m involved now,” Ryoga went on. “I may have been a back-seat driver to your relationship with Akane due to my biased feelings for her at the time, but now I’m a piece of the puzzle. As if things between you and her weren’t complicated enough, what with your stubborn, hotheaded, bullheadedness…”

“Pretty sure those all mean the same thing.” Ranma muttered under his breath.

“Both of your egos incessantly at odds...and your wishy-washy thoughts about marriage--”

“Alright, alright,” Ranma snapped, “Get on with it, Mr. P.”

“Now you’ve tacked on the fact that you’ve never been physical with your fiancee of six years, but you have been physical with another man.” Ryoga finally finished.

Ryoga looked over at Ranma. He could see the whites of the other boy’s eyes even in the dark.

“I’d say that complicates things a tad.” Ryoga added on blandly.

Ranma let out an aggravated huff as he flopped down onto his back, his arm across his eyes.

“I didn’t ask for complicated…!” he sighed irritably. “That was the whole damn point of all this…”

“You and I agreed,” Ryoga said firmly. “No weird stuff, no strings attached. You wanted that. I want that, too. But Akane is a string; a complicated connection that you don’t want anymore, and it’s obvious. You need to tell her that. You don’t have to tell her what you did here...with me. I’d rather she not know about it, anyways. Who you decide to sleep with isn’t her business. But, who you love and don’t is...and you don’t love her. And she needs to know that.”

Ranma was silent and still. After a moment, he slowly moved his arm away from his eyes, just in time to see another meteor streak across the sky.

“Alright, already,” he sighed. “You win, porkbutt. I’ll...tell her.”

“And, hey…” Ryoga mumbled.

Ranma looked over, but Ryoga had his head turned away just enough so that Ranma couldn’t see his face.

“If it goes badly,” Ryoga continued awkwardly. “And they kick your arse to the curb...you could always...stay...at my place.”

Ranma blinked, his eyes wide. Then, he bolted upright suddenly, his face stunned but beaming.

“For real?” he asked incredulously.

“I just said it, didn’t I?”

“Wow, thanks, Ryoga!” Ranma grinned. “I guess you’re a nice guy, after all.”

“The options only on the table if you get kicked out!” Ryoga barked, sitting upright himself. “So don’t get all excited.”
“Heh. Well, thanks for the offer, man.” Ranma said with a warm smile.

“No problem.” Ryoga forced out, looking back up at the sky.

Another meteor zipped by.

“It’s getting colder.” Ranma said suddenly.

“Don’t you start whining. You’re the one who wanted to sleep under the stars.” Ryoga muttered. “Put another sweater on.”

“I already did!” Ranma crowed, gesturing to himself.

Ryoga sighed. “Just go inside your sleeping bag. Or move closer to the fire. Or pitch the goddamn tent.”

“ Aren’t you cold?” Ranma asked, rubbing his arms. He’d chosen to ignore Ryoga’s suggestions.

Ryoga shrugged. “A little, but I’m used to it.”

Ranma huffed, looking back up at the sky with a pout. A breeze rolled through the meadow, rustling the black trees and the white flowers. Ryoga saw Ranma shudder and hold his arms even tighter.

“You’re pathetic,” Ryoga sighed. “Get over here, you sissy.”

“What, so I can hit you?” Ranma groused, still pouting.

“No,” Ryoga said. He unzipped his sleeping bag and crawled inside. He scooched over as far as he could go, and gestured toward Ranma. “So you can stop bitching about how cold you are. C’mere.”

Ranma blinked at Ryoga quizzically, looking at the open spot inside the sleeping bag Ryoga was patting with his hand. He looked back at Ryoga, and raised an eyebrow.

“Dude,” he drawled. “What are we, six years old?”

“It’s an exchange of body heat, and nothing more.” Ryoga snapped.

Ranma looked away. “Think I’d rather brave the elements, if it’s all the same.”

A loud gush of wind ripped through the trees. Ranma tensed.

Ryoga patted the sleeping bag again.

“Aw, hell…” Ranma cursed. He crawled over to Ryoga, and shimmied himself inside the sleeping bag beside him.

Ranma squirmed. “I can barely move in this damn thing,” he complained. “Two grown men were not meant to share a sleeping bag.”

“But you’re warm, aren’t you.”

Ranma was quiet. He shuffled again, trying to find a comfy position.

“This’d be a lot comfier if I were a girl,” Ranma remarked.

“Considering how puny you get, I’d say so.” Ryoga moved his legs around Ranma’s, trying to stretch out. “But do you really want to dump cold water on yourself right now?”
At the thought, Ranma shivered. “Hell no.”

Ryoga tucked one arm under his head, and pushed the other underneath Ranma’s neck. Ranma lifted his head slightly so Ryoga’s arm could stretch underneath him, then he rested his head back down on Ryoga’s arm. Despite having complained about being cold, Ranma’s cheek felt hot against Ryoga’s arm. They had managed to maneuver their legs into a somewhat comfortable position, pretzeled around each other.

Ranma’s eyes were downcast, but nestled against Ryoga’s chest, his face practically buried in the other man’s neck, there was really nowhere else to look but at Ryoga. Moving around only brought him closer. The only solution was to remain perfectly still.

Ranma’s heart was pounding. Ryoga could feel it thumping erratically. He didn’t say anything, knowing he’d probably lose the extra body heat if he made a comment. Ranma’s breathing was taut, almost laboured. There were times he wouldn’t move a muscle, but then suddenly his breath would feather across Ryoga’s neck a few times before stopping again. It was as if he had forgotten how to breathe.

“Still cold?” Ryoga had to force the question out through the lump in his throat.

Ranma shook his head slowly. His hair tickled Ryoga’s mouth, making Ryoga’s nose twitch. They had shared the same shampoo. Somehow it smelled different when Ranma used it. It mingled with his natural scent and created something…Pleasant.

“Shit…” Ryoga sighed.

He pulled Ranma’s head up by his chin, and pressed his lips down firmly. Ranma’s whole frame seem to slacken, and his breathing became even and calm, for a fleeting moment. Then, he clenched his arms around Ryoga’s neck and pulled himself closer, practically grinding his lips against Ryoga’s. He rolled them over until Ranma was lying on top of him. They broke apart, and for a moment they were still. The fire crackled behind them, the wood sizzled and popped. Behind Ranma’s head, Ryoga saw another star shoot by.

“I don’t see how anything is gonna happen when we can barely move in this damn thing,” Ranma said, shuffling uncomfortably.

“We don’t have to, you know.” Ryoga said quietly.

Ranma looked up at him with a quirked eyebrow. “The close confines of this sleeping bag are giving me a different idea,” Ranma muttered. “An’ it’s poking me in the stomach.”

“Oh, shut up. I can’t help being a man.” Ryoga said, feeling his cheeks burn. He hadn’t exactly expected the taste of his lips and the smell of his hair to be so…

“Well, last time I checked I’m a guy, too. An’ I’m not getting all hot and heavy over a little saliva swapping.”

...Never mind, he took it all back.

“Why do you always have to use the grossest terms for things?” Ryoga groaned.

“Doesn’t seem to be bothering you that much,” Ranma sniggered, purposefully gyrating his hips. He sneered as Ryoga’s breath hitched.
“I was going to say,” Ryoga went on tightly. “That it’s not like we have to go all the way.”

“We don’t?” Ranma asked, sounding genuinely confused.

“No, we don’t.”

Ryoga grabbed Ranma’s face and pulled him back down on his lips. Ranma wasn’t hesitant, but moved slowly, as if confused. Ryoga’s sharp canine pinched his bottom lip, and Ranma swore under his breath through the kiss. Ryoga took his now opened mouth as invitation, and slipped his tongue inside to explore. Ranma made a surprised sound that quickly slipped into a low moan. Ryoga pulled away, grazing the tip of his tongue along Ranma’s lip where he’d bitten it, licking it as if in apology. Ranma sighed, capturing Ryoga’s mouth again.

The fire was starting to go dim as the neglected flames died down.

Finally, their lips came apart.

“See?” Ryoga said. “Not so bad.”

Ranma looked disoriented. Then, he seemed to realize the kiss had ended, and snapped himself out of it. He scoffed, rolling off Ryoga’s chest and back onto his shoulder. Ryoga sneered.

“Looks like we match.” he said.

Ranma paused for a moment, before realizing what Ryoga meant.

“Like I said, I’m a guy, too.” Ranma said, surprisingly keeping his composure. “Can’t be helped.”

“Well, I don’t know about that…” Ryoga murmured.

Ranma looked up at him with a quizzical look on his face that quickly changed into shock as Ryoga zipped open the sleeping bag in a fluid motion and pushed it off of them. Before Ranma could ask what in the world Ryoga was doing, Ryoga had yanked down Ranma’s pants and was shuffling himself down. Ranma was about to complain about the cold, but Ryoga suddenly made everything feel quite warm.

“Holy fucking hell…” Ranma breathed, arching his back.

Ryoga pulled away, looking back up at Ranma with an amused look. “Whenever we get into it, you always get a dirty mouth.”

“This coming from the guy with a dick in his.” Ranma said bluntly.

Ryoga said nothing, going back to what he was doing. That was better than any wisecrack comeback he could have come up with, and was honestly much more enjoyable. Ranma’s sarcastic quips had dissolved, the only sound from him now were noises of pleasure, and that was just fine by Ryoga.

He didn’t stop until Ranma kicked him off.

Ryoga sat up, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand as he took in the sight of Ranma, naked from the waist down. His chest heaved sporadically, his arms were crossed over his face, which Ryoga knew was flushed deep red. He crawled back to Ranma’s side and lied down on his back, crossing his arms behind his head. Ranma grumbled tiredly as he pulled his pants back up, then settled back down with a heavy sigh.
“I can’t believe you swallowed it.” he groaned.

Ryoga snorted. “It wasn’t that bad.” he said, shrugging dismissively.

“You weirdo…” Ranma sighed, rolling onto his side, facing Ryoga.

“You could give it a try sometime.” Ryoga said, looking over at him.

Ranma raised an eyebrow at him. “I’m not gonna swallow my own--”

“I meant mine, you peabrain.” Ryoga flicked Ranma on the forehead lightly.

“Oh? You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Ranma murmured sardonically. He snatched Ryoga’s wrist before he could pull his hand away.

He stared at Ryoga for a long moment. Ryoga could have probably pulled his hand away easily, but he didn’t try. He watched as Ranma slowly drew his hand towards his mouth, and captured his middle finger between his lips. He sucked on the very tip of his finger lightly, then pushed the finger slowly inside his mouth, down to the first knuckle. Ryoga’s eyes were glued on Ranma’s mouth, and he couldn’t seem to pry them away. Ranma’s eyes had not left Ryoga’s the entire time.

“Wow…” the word had no trouble leaving Ryoga’s agape mouth.

Ranma’s lips pulled into a wry smirk. With a soft chuckle, he slid down and pulled off Ryoga’s pants. Suddenly, he paused. Ryoga craned his neck and lifted an eyebrow.

“What’s wrong?”

“Which one?” Ranma asked.

“…It’s not like I have two down there.” Ryoga said.

“That’s not what I meant, you dolt.” Ranma sighed. “I meant…boy or girl?”

Ryoga looked even more confused. “You said you weren’t going to splash yourself. It’s too damn cold.”

Ranma was playing with the drawstring on Ryoga’s pants. “If it’s what you want, it wouldn’t be a big deal.”

“You’d catch a cold.” Ryoga said.

“Just answer the question, will you?” Ranma said back quietly.

“I already told you, it doesn’t make a difference.” Ryoga was starting to sound a little impatient, probably due to a sensitive extremity quickly starting to freeze.

“I know… I just thought…”

“Ranma,” Ryoga sat up and grabbed Ranma under the chin. Ryoga stared into his eyes for a long second. A strange, prickling current went up Ryoga’s spine and tingled inside his brain as he stared into Ranma’s eyes. Ranma’s eyes were wide, his mouth slightly parted, his expression slightly dazed and curious. Something seemed to pass between them, and the words tumbled out of Ryoga’s mouth like marbles.

“Just suck my dick already.”
Ranma’s face fell. He scoffed, “Wow. Y’know, I’ve come to expect a higher degree of profoundness from you by now.”

“Maybe if I wasn’t quickly developing a popsicle for a pe--”

“Alright, already, geez…”

Without another word, Ranma went back to Ryoga’s neglected, slightly frozen member. After the sting of the cold air, the warmth of Ranma’s mouth was very enjoyable. In what felt like no time at all, Ryoga was quickly short of breath, and before he knew it his entire body seized up, then fell slack once more against the bedroll.

Ranma sat back on his heels, and wiped the back of his mouth on his hand.

“I can’t believe I swallowed it.” he muttered, mostly to himself.

Ryoga couldn’t reply, his breathing was still too short and sporadic. He busied himself pulling his pants back up while he waited for his breathing to return to normal.

“You sure I’m the only guy you’ve ever slept with…?” Ryoga asked, staring up at the stars.

“I’m pretty damn sure, asshole.” Ranma snapped. Then, he sneered coyly. “Unfortunately for you. I’m just naturally better at it than you, I guess. How long did that take for you, a minute and a half?”

“Oh, shut up…” Ryoga sighed.

Ranma fell back on the sleeping bag beside him. The two watched the stars for a while. They’d both seemed to have forgotten about the cold. Ryoga’s eyes began to flutter closed. He was getting a little drowsy, and idly wondered what time it was.

“It’s so much different as a girl.” Ranma said suddenly.

“Hm?” Ryoga hummed, confused.

“Orgasms.” Ranma said.

Ryoga opened one eye, rolled his head to the side and raised a quizzical eyebrow at Ranma, who was still staring up at the sky.

“It’s like a carnival. As a guy, it’s like a one-ticket ride and then it’s all over. If I wanna go back on, I gotta wait in line. As a girl, it’s like I’ve got a whole armful of tickets and I can go on the ride over and over again.”

Ryoga was staring at Ranma now with both eyes as wide open as they could go without his eyelids tearing.

“And while I’m on the ride, there’s a bunch of exciting points before the real climax, so even once the ride is over, it wasn’t just one drawn-out ride, but a whole bunch of little ones that each felt as long and as good as the ride as a whole…”

Ranma finally sensed Ryoga’s stare, and looked over at him. Seeing the look on Ryoga’s face, Ranma’s lips pulled into a tight, crooked line. He quickly looked away, back up at the stars.

He snorted loudly. “I feel sorry for you,” he said quickly. “Girls have it made. It’s a shame you won’t ever get to experience it firsthand, unlike me.”
“It certainly sounds nice,” Ryoga said, looking away and closing his eyes again. “But, it’s also pretty nice to make a woman feel that way.”

Ranma was quiet for a moment. He nodded slowly. “I guess so…”

Silence fell between the two. Just then, a long, thick meteor shot through the sky, and after it, dozens more followed. Within seconds, it seemed the entire sky was filled with long streaks of light.

“Ryoga,” Ranma gasped. “Ryoga, look.”

Ryoga didn’t respond. Ranma looked beside him, to see Ryoga had completely passed out. He scoffed lightly, a small smile pulling at the corner of his lips. He sat up and grasped the corner of the sleeping bag. He looked over at his own bedroll, then over his shoulder at Ryoga. Then, he decidedly pulled the sleeping bag back over them both, and zipped it up. He lay down and nestled in under the warm covers, and within minutes, he was asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Blowjobs and realtalks aside, this chapter was nothing but a fluff-fest. But we all need a little of that in our lives really. This is about as “fluffy” as it gets between these two, really: not-so-platonic sharing of a sleeping bag in a meadow of flowers. Hella gay.

So, Ryoga's told Ranma to smarten the hell up, grow a pair and tell Akane he wants to call the engagement off. And Ranma is nothing if not a man of his word.

This chapter marks the boys' last night in the mountains. Next chapter, they start heading back to Nerima. So look forward to next week and Chapter Five!

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P.S.

Cancer Sun Sign:
http://www.astrology.com/cancer-sun-sign-zodiac-signs/2-d-d-66919

Leo Sun Sign:
http://www.astrology.com leo-sun-sign-zodiac-signs/2-d-d-66944

If you read up on those, you'll see why I chose those astrology signs for Ranma and Ryoga. They are complete opposites. Fire and Water. Sun and Moon.

Even better, here's the Leo-Cancer Love Compatibility. It's literally PERFECT:
http://www.astrology.com/love-compatibility-cancer-leo/2-d-lvmt-cancer_leo
The cat can't resist stealing the fish

Chapter Summary

It's Ranma and Ryoga's final day in the mountains.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

5.

*The cat can’t resist stealing the fish*

Ryoga’s eyes blinked open, then instantly squinted against the bright sun. Slowly, he forced them open again. The sun had risen slightly above the tops of the trees, the meadow was glowing with a much softer morning light, now that Ryoga’s eyes had adjusted.

As he started to wake up even further, he felt a peculiar weight on his chest, and began to hear faint snoring. He looked down, and nearly got a noseful of black hair. Ranma, still fast asleep, was lying on top of him.

Ryoga grasped Ranma’s shoulder and jostled him. “Ranma…”

Ranma rolled his head around, his eyes still closed. “Hmmm…?”

“You’re crushing me.”

“Mmm…” Ranma rolled his head away again, shuffled around slightly then was still again.

“Ohh, no you don’t,” Ryoga reached over him and grabbed the zipper, and yanked it down. Ranma groaned as Ryoga pulled the sleeping bag off of them, then shoved Ranma off of him.

“Ugh, you *ahole*…” Ranma grumbled, flopping onto his back. He sat up and rubbed his eyes.

“You can get me back later,” Ryoga said getting up and cracking his back. He looked down at Ranma who was letting out a huge yawn. “We ought to fix ourselves a big breakfast before we kill any more daylight. We’ve got a big trek back down the mountain if we want to get to the train station by nightfall.”

Ranma blinked away the tiny tears from his yawn as he looked up at Ryoga. His eyes squinted in the sun. “Train station?”

“You said to me that you told the Tendos you’d be back after the weekend,” Ryoga explained.

Ranma looked away, over at the pile of ashes that had been the campfire last night. “Oh, right…”
“Well, we ate all the fish and I don’t think we’ll find any creeks nearby,” Ryoga said with a short laugh in his voice. “I usually just have ramen in my pack, though.”

Ryoga looked down at Ranma, who was standing up and stretching.

“I just brought ramen, some dried shiitake, and the ingredients for that curry the other night.” Ranma said, his voice strained as he stretched his arms high over his head. “There’s a bit left of the uncooked rice. And there’s still that leftover curry too.”

“That’s right. Well I guess we should finish that curry off, maybe we’ll add some of those shiitake mushrooms to it, once they rehydrate.” Ryoga started pulling supplies from his pack. “That would take a while, but we’d have to cook more rice and reheat the curry anyhow.”

“Sounds good to me. I brought some tea, too. It’s a blend that Shampoo brought from China a while back.” Ranma went over to his own bag and began to search through it.

“Oh, yeah? I’ll put the kettle on, then.” Ryoga said. He brought out the kettle as Ranma came over with the ingredients for their breakfast, and set everything out on a small cloth. Ryoga eyed the bag of tea, which was a metallic burnt orange, with a picture of mountains. It had white lettering on it written in Chinese.

“Did Shampoo say what kind of tea it is?” Ryoga asked, reaching over and taking the bag of tea.

“I remember it had a funny name...” Ranma said absently, as he opened the seal on the bag of rice.

“Oolong?” Ryoga suggested, but Ranma shook his head. “Hmm. What about rooibos?”

Ranma looked over at him with wide eyes. “That’s a tea name?” he said incredulously. Then, he shook his head again. “Nah, doesn’t sound familiar.”

“What about...pu-erh?” Ryoga supplied.

Ranma perked up in recognition. “Yeah! Yeah, that was it.” he said, opening up the bag of dried shiitake next.

“Complex, smooth, and earthy.” Ryoga stated, filling his kettle from a large water bottle.

Ranma looked over as he poured the rice into the rice cooker. “Huh?”

“Pu-erh tea,” Ryoga explained. “That’s what it tastes like.”

Ranma raised an eyebrow. “Man, you really know your tea.” He poured some water in with the rice, and set it up over the campfire. As he got the fire started up, he suddenly chuckled to himself.

“What’s funny?” Ryoga asked, as he poured the curry into one of the pots.

“Complex, smooth, and earthy,” Ranma echoed. The fire began to sizzle and crack, and he sat back and looked over at Ryoga with a smirk. “Just sounds a lot like you.”

Ryoga gawked at him, but Ranma, who didn’t notice or didn’t care, took the pot out of Ryoga’s hands and set it up overtop of the fire. He dumped the dried mushrooms into a bowl, then placed the bowl back on the cloth with the other utensils. He got up, surveying their setup for a moment, seeming satisfied.

“Pour some of that water on the mushrooms once it boils,” Ranma said, pointing to the kettle beside Ryoga. “I’m gonna go get a mornin’ workout in before we eat.”
“Yeah, sure…” Ryoga said distractedly, but Ranma was already walking away, toward the large meadow of chrysanthemums.

Ryoga’s eyes stayed trained on his retreating form, watching as Ranma walked up to the edge of the meadow. He stopped, stretching his arms over his head again, then letting them flop to his sides. He pulled off his sweaters, till he was down to his undershirt. He started doing more advanced stretches, before eventually beginning a kata. He moved with the slow grace of a dancer, but threw kicks and punches at an invisible enemy with the force of a hurricane.

The scream from the kettle snapped Ryoga from his trance. He scrambled to find cups from Ranma’s bag and set them out on the cloth then prepared the tea. Then he doused the shiitake in the boiling water like Ranma had instructed. With the tea brewing and the mushrooms soaking, Ryoga glanced back over at Ranma, whose kata had grown even more complex as he launched even deadlier strikes, and kicks that sent him spinning through the air.

Ryoga scoffed.

It was pretty nice not to be on the receiving end of those attacks for a change.

He looked back over at Ranma’s bag, then back to Ranma, still completely engrossed in his workout and several feet away from him. He peeked over at Ranma’s bag again, and quickly flipped it back open.

Clothes. Toiletries. Snacks. Ramen cups. His well-worn pair of black karate shoes. A volume of some shonen manga Ryoga had never heard of, but it looked right up Ranma’s alley, considering the samurais on the cover. A small paperback book with the cover bent and worn, with faded text that read, “A Thousand Useful Pressure Points and Where to Find Them”.

Ryoga chuckled a little to himself, taking the book completely out of the bag. He could certainly picture Ranma lying on his belly out on the Tendo’s genkan reading a manga about samurais, but it was hard to imagine him with his nose stuffed into a book like this. And, yet, when he thought about it, not.

He opened up the book, turning through the pages at random. The paper had that wonderful, dusty, sweet smell that could only be connected to a book. Holding the book closer to his face as he turned the pages, he picked up on a separate scent that was undeniably Ranma’s. Suddenly, he had the urge to stuff his nose into the cleft between the pages and breathe it in...

“Since you’re going through my bag, you may as well throw me my towel.”

Ryoga jumped, looking over his shoulder at Ranma standing behind him. His hair, already mussed from sleep, was now windswept from his vigorous workout. There was a gleam of sweat near his collarbone, just above where his tank top ended. Ryoga stuffed the book back in the bag, dug through quickly and whipped Ranma’s towel at him, which he caught effortlessly and wrapped around his shoulders before sitting down beside him.

“Hm, smells good over here. Should be ready in a few minutes.” Ranma said casually, stirring around the curry and checking the rice.

Ryoga was staring at his lap, his fingers twiddling at top speed.

“…I shouldn’t have been snooping,” Ryoga mumbled quickly. “Sorry.”

Ranma reached around Ryoga to take one of the cups of tea. “It’s unnatural to hear you apologize to me,” he said, placing his tea beside him. “Cut it out.”
“I wasn’t exactly sympathetic toward your privacy when I was a kid,” Ryoga muttered. “I ought to make up for it, being an adult.”

Ranma shrugged. “It’s not like I’ve got anything to hide, so why should it be private?” he dabbed at his forehead with the corner of the towel while he spoke. “Besides, we’re never private about anything. We eventually tell each other everything. And if privacy wasn’t an issue before, it sure as heck ain’t one now.”

Ryoga picked up his own tea, watching the leaves float around in the dark water. “I guess…” he said weakly.

“You can borrow that book, too, if ya want,” Ranma said, slapping his towel over one shoulder. “I’ve already read it cover-to-cover, I’ve had it forever. I’ve got a few more like it back at the Tendos if you wanted to read those, too.”

“Uh, s-sure…” Ryoga stammered, looking up at Ranma finally. “Thanks.”

Ranma shrugged again, then picked up his cup of tea. “It’d be nice to lend ‘em to someone who’d actually be interested in reading them. Akane borrowed a few once but I don’t think she ever really got into it. She more trains to keep her figure. She’s certainly invested, but I think it’s more because of her obligation as an heir. If she didn’t have the Dojo to think about, martial arts would just be exercise to her.”

“I could certainly never talk to Akari about the art,” Ryoga said. “She was so devoted to her family’s Pig Sumo dojo and farm, it’s practically all she ever talked about. She was domestic as hell, too; always baking and knitting. When she wasn’t doing that, she was with the pigs—feeding the pigs, talking to the pigs…and when she was with me, she’d shower me with gifts then gush about her ‘star athletes’. She’s not interested in the art for herself. What’s worse, I felt like whenever I told her about my own training journey, she was picturing…” Ryoga grimaced suddenly. “…P-chan doing all those things.”

“Well, weather permitting…” Ranma joked.

He looked over at Ryoga with a grin, and he snickered at the other man’s deep scowl.

“It was just a joke…” He poked Ryoga on the forehead. “…crabcake.”

“Can’t you hold down a nice conversation for more than ten seconds?” Ryoga barked incredulously, going red at the new addition to Ranma’s nicknames for him.

“Calm down, will ya? You know I can’t help it when a chance for comedic gold presents itself.” Ranma sighed tragically.

Ryoga rolled his eyes, and went to go take a sip of his tea.

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“Anyway,” Ranma said slowly. “It’s nice to have somebody who thinks about martial arts the same way I do. Who loves it the same way I do.”

Ryoga’s cup paused at his lips, and he glanced sidelong at Ranma. Ranma took a slow sip of his tea, bringing the cup away with an impressed look on his face.

“Wow, that’s pretty good.” Ranma said. “I oughta say thanks to Shamps next time I see her.”

Ryoga looked back at his own tea still hovering by his mouth, and took a sip. It tasted just like he’d said it would. He’d tried pu-erh tea before, but this was the most flavourful one he’d had. There was
a citrusy kick mingled in with the natural flavour of the tea which enhanced it even further.

“It’s delicious,” he remarked, instantly soothed by the warm drink.

It was another gorgeous autumn day, which were always the best kind in Ryoga’s opinion. He loved this time of year; the woodsy smell always lingering in the air, the sparkling reds of maple trees and the dazzling gold of ginko leaves as they flickered through the air and covered the ground. He could remember his old junior high school’s front entrance was lined with ginko trees, similar to Furinkan High’s cherry trees. In his mind’s eye he could still see Ranma, wearing his dark blue gakuran, his hair tied in a low ponytail. His hair always blew in the chilled autumn breeze, dancing with the golden leaves.

“...oga!”

Yeah, he loved this time of year.

“...Ryoga!”

Ryoga blinked, looking over at Ranma. He glanced down at the bowl of curry the other boy was stuffing under his nose. He looked up at Ranma again, and it took him a moment not to picture him with a ponytail and middle school uniform, but messy hair and a tank top. Ranma raised an eyebrow at him curiously.

“Still half-asleep?” he asked.

Ryoga accepted the bowl and quickly looked away. “I guess so.”

They enjoyed their meal in their usual accustomed silence. Ryoga set down his empty bowl and sat back with a sigh. Ranma looked over to see Ryoga smiling to himself.

“You were right,” said Ryoga. “It is better the second time.”

Ranma stared at him for a moment, then looked over at the fire. He downed the last of his tea.

Ryoga stood up and rolled his shoulders. “Well, I’m gonna get my own workout in before we head out.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” Ranma was already gathering up the dishes.

“You don’t mind getting things cleaned up?” Ryoga said, a little sheepish as he watched Ranma pour water into the bowls and the pot. “We’ve already killed quite a bit of daylight sleeping as it is, so I just wanted to head out as soon as possible, but--”

“Dude, it’s fine, you know I’m the last guy alive to keep a fellow martial artist from his training.” Ranma looked up at him with a cheeky smile. “You’re gonna need the warmup for the hike we got ahead of us, anyhow.”

That was persuasive enough for Ryoga, and with that he turned around and headed over to the flowers where Ranma had stood, and began his stretches. He breathed slow and steady, closing his eyes as he tried to delve himself into a particular state of mind. Although he did want to workout for his usual reasons, he also wanted to focus his body and mind on something else other than the man ten feet from him.

It didn’t work.
By high noon, Ryoga had finished his workout and Ranma had packed up camp. The boys changed clothes, grateful to be able to leave off the extra layers. It was so balmy out, it practically still felt like summer, despite it being mid-November. They took advantage of the too-good-to-be-true weather for all it was worth. Ranma had changed into his sneakers, light brown cargo pants and a powder blue t-shirt. Ryoga always seemed to be Ranma’s contrast, for he wore his hiking boots, dark blue pants and a forest green fleece jacket over a black shirt.

“You’re gonna melt,” Ranma remarked, pulling his pack onto his shoulders. “You’re crazy.”

Ryoga shrugged his own pack on. “I’ve dealt with more than a little sun. Besides, I’m not expecting this weather to last, it’ll probably drop down later this afternoon.”

Ranma slouched as they walked into the trees and down the hill the way they’d come the other night. “You’re such a damn pessimist…”

“I’m not a pessimist, I’m a realist.” Ryoga argued, watching the ground for foot placements on the severely slanted earth.

“Says the guy who literally fired his depression ki at me once.” Ranma grumbled. “And a realist ain’t any better, it may even be worse. Either way you’re an antisocial, life-hating bastard who can only see the terrible things about the world.”

“So I guess I’m ‘complex’,” Ryoga said with a shrug. “So...what makes me ‘smooth’ and ‘earthy’, then?”

Ranma stopped in his tracks. Ryoga turned around when he noticed, and looked at him inquisitively. They met eyes, but Ranma merely grasped the straps of his pack and hoisted them, and continued forward with a huff. Ryoga watched him go, then followed.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well, what?” Ranma muttered.

“Well, what makes me so ‘smooth’ and ‘earthy’? You said so yourself,” Ryoga said. “You also said we eventually tell each other everything, and we’ve got a long ways to go, so you may as well spit it out and get it over with.”

Ranma stopped again, even more abruptly than last time. Since Ryoga was now walking behind him, he nearly crashed into him and sent them rolling down the long, steep hill through the forest. Ranma whirled around, his face firm.

“You’re complex because one minute you’re a depressing, masochistic ass who hates the world and his life and all the people in it, and the next you’re telling others how to live theirs. You’re complex because one day you’re this...insufferable buffoon...rough around every damn edge possible, and the next...you’re smooth. You’re smooth because despite feeling so helpless in your own existence you still always try to make everyone else feel better about theirs, or kick ‘em in the ass when they complain about what they’ve got. You’re smooth because underneath your gruff exterior, you’re actually really compassionate, and emotional about every last thing until it’s almost excessive, but...nobody wears a bigger heart on their sleeve, and is more...simple. You’re earthy because of that: because you’re simple. So mundane, so...normal. Maybe that sounds dull, but in my
...ordinary is extraordinary. It’s hard to come by, but it comes to you so naturally. You’re just a regular, down-to-earth guy…” Ranma’s strong tangent began to trail off as he looked away, his face flushed. “…and...you smell like trees. So, there’s that, too.”

Ryoga stared down at Ranma, his mouth hanging open, his eyes wide and blinking rapidly. Ranma looked up at him slowly, and his frown grew deeper and his face grew even more red at Ryoga’s gawking expression.

“Satisfied?” he barked. He twisted around sharply on his heel, and tromped down the hill.

“Exceptionally.” Ryoga said, following suit.

They finally reached the bottom of the steep hill, but there was still quite a ways to go, and the forest was still pretty hilly. There was enough space on the path now, so Ryoga matched Ranma’s pace so they walked side-by-side. They were quiet for a time, as they walked through the peaceful woods. Dirt, wood, and dried leaves crunched and cracked underfoot as they walked, a soft and cool breeze rolled through the thick trunks of the shaded forest.

“What about me?” Ranma asked suddenly.

“What?”

“You seem to know a lot about tea,” Ranma went on. “If I were a tea, which one would I be?”

Ryoga’s lips pursed as he continued to stare ahead through the trees. “That’s an interesting question.” he muttered quietly.

After a pause, he began to laugh, making Ranma look over at him curiously. Ryoga looked over at him, an amused smirk on his face.

“Rooibos.” Ryoga said.

“That one that doesn’t even sound like a tea name?” Ranma balked.

“That’s the one.”

“Why?”

Ryoga looked back down their leaf-strewn path, his smirk still plastered to his lips.

“Because it’s sweet, refreshing, and slightly nutty.”

Ranma twitched, his face going red again. Ryoga looked back at him, and Ranma whipped his head away and stuck his nose in the air.

“That sounds like the worst tea ever.”

“It’s got a lot of variety to it,” Ryoga said calmly. “And variety is the spice of life.”

“This coming from the pessimist.” Ranma quipped.

“Realist,” Ryoga corrected flippantly. “And I never said there was anything wrong with being an optimist. In fact, that’s what makes you so refreshing.”

Ranma looked over slowly, his curiosity shamefully piqued. “Oh...?”
“You’ve always tried to see the best out of any situation. No matter how hard things would get, no matter how helpless things seemed, you’d never give in. And in the end, you’d always prevail. Like when that moxibustion sapped you of all your strength, or that Herb guy locked you in your girl form, as well as Mousse and I when we came to help you—”

“Technically, you idiots did that to yourselves.”

“Be quiet. Anyways, your determination to succeed has always inspired me. And in comparison to my view on the world, you never seemed to resent anything. Things would drive you crazy sometimes, but, you were just crazy enough yourself to deal with it all.”

“Hey!”

“Your zaniness may be somewhat...overwhelming at times...and it’s landed you and I into a lot of trouble--like when your stupid ass pushed me into that cursed spring, for example--”

“Wow, still hung up on that one, are ya?”

“--But, it’s that same zaniness that adds that spice I was talking about. You’re right about me. If I didn’t turn into a pig, if I couldn’t shoot ki from my hands, or smash boulders with the tip of a finger...I’d just be an ordinary guy. My life would be pretty boring without you in it.”

Ranma stared at Ryoga. “What about the last one?” he asked suddenly, remembering. “You didn’t say why I’m...uh, ‘sweet’.”

“--Well...you’re the only person who seemed to know I was alive, back in middle school.” Ryoga said. “You led me to school and back home every single day. You stole my damn bread every day, but the rest made up for it, in it’s own way. After you found out about my curse, you decided all on your own not to tell Akane. You teased and joked around with me all the time, but when it came down to it, I knew if I was in trouble you’d always help me out. You’re a pretty sweet guy, Ranma.”

Ranma blinked quickly, continuing to stare at Ryoga. “Um...thanks.”

“And you smell pretty sweet, too.”

“Huh?”

“It’s masculine, yet also feminine. Which I guess suits you perfectly. It’s sharp, but soothing.” Ryoga went on.

Ranma stopped in place for the third time. Ryoga stopped and turned around again, his eyes half lidded.

“You know, this is going to be a much longer trip if you keep stopping like that.” he muttered.

He walked up and poked Ranma on the forehead, sending the dazed boy’s head rolling backward. Ranma stopped himself from falling backward, swinging himself upright again.

When he came back up, Ryoga captured his lips in a kiss.

Ranma squawked in surprise, and jumped back, clamping his hands over his mouth. The amused smirk was back on Ryoga’s face as he turned around and continued to walk like nothing had happened. Ranma watched him go, hands still clapsed over his mouth. He slowly lowered his hands, the fingertips on his right hand lingering on his lips for an extra second, trailing down slowly.
He snapped out of his trance as he noticed Ryoga’s departing form starting to turn left into the bushes. Ranma growled out loud, and took off in a sprint after him.

“Idiot!” he hollered. “You’re going the wrong way!”

Chapter End Notes

I know this story, especially these last two chapters, have been run by dialogue. That's been intentional. Hopefully I've been portraying these two boys' ease when it comes to conversation. 'Cause you know, when you take away all the bitterness and rivalry, these two have a lot in common and therefore would have a lot to talk about. Obviously the years have emotionally matured them somewhat as well, which would also make being in each other's company more bearable. Hopefully they haven't come off as too OOC to you. Although this is technically an AU and they can behave however the hell I please, it does still have to be believable on some level that given the circumstances of this AU they are within, it is possible for Ranma and Ryoga to be together.

Anyways, the emphasis on Ranma and Ryoga's level of comfort around each other, whether they are holding up conversation or enjoying their meals in silence, has been very much intentional and will show it's significance very soon. Like, next week's chapter kind of soon.

See you next Saturday, folks.
The boys return home from their training trip. Ranma crashes at Ryoga's house. (NSFW)

The weather had taken a turn for the worse.

Thankfully, the rain began after Ranma and Ryoga had boarded their train, and had ended several minutes before their final stop. After departing the train car, Ranma threw his hands up in the air in triumph, and Ryoga was half-expecting him to fall to his knees.

“Lucky!” Ranma exclaimed.

Ryoga let out a yawn.

The two made their way out of the train station. The streets were dark, the pavement wet from the rain and gleaming under the yellow glow of the streetlamps.

“This is close to the neighbourhood where you live, isn’t…” Ranma began to ask, then he stopped himself. “Never mind. You don’t have a clue where we are.”

“Yup.” Ryoga was too tired to fight him on it, as he fought back another yawn.

“Pathetic. You’re lucky I came with you.” Ranma said. “Our old middle school wasn’t far from the train station. If I can get us there, I can get my bearings. Let’s go.”

They set off down the street, Ranma leading the way with confidence. Within a few minutes, they came across the front gates of their old middle school. Ryoga could see the yellow ginko leaves swaying in the breeze, even under the dim streetlamps, and suddenly he didn’t feel so tired as a wave of nostalgia washed over him.

Ranma turned left down the street just past the school, which was a small residential area. After some time, Ryoga recognized his house. The houses in this area were tightly packed together, each with their own cement wall surrounding the perimeter of the house. They came up to the house with a plate bolted into the wall which read Hibiki, with a mail slot underneath. Ryoga pushed open the small gate and they stepped up onto a tiled step. Ryoga walked up to the door, then looked behind
him at Ranma, who was hovering by the still-open gate.

“What’re you doing?” Ryoga asked as he searched through his pants pocket for his housekey.

Ranma seemed confused. “What d’you mean?”

“You’re coming inside, aren’t you?”

“Well...if I go now I could get back to the Tendo Dojo before sunrise, so…” Ranma trailed off, pushing the gate back and forth indecisively.

“It’s almost two in the morning.” Ryoga said. “Just crash here for the night, and head there in the morning. You’ve been walking all day.”

Ranma seemed even more confused. “But, what about all that stuff about, y’know...tellin’ Akane an’ junk.” he mumbled, his eyes downcast.

Ryoga sighed exhaustedly. “I’m sure she’ll still be there tomorrow,” he said. “and your talk with her can wait until then.”

“I guess that makes sense...” Ranma said, strangely meek.

He shut the gate and walked up onto the step. Ryoga opened the door...

...and they were both knocked over by a mound of black and white fur.

“Shirokuro!” Ryoga said in a hissed whisper. “Down, girl!”

Shirokuro made delighted dog sounds while smearing her huge tongue up and down Ranma and Ryoga’s faces.

“Augh! Your tongue went in my mouth!” Ranma cried, spitting and coughing in disgust.

“Be quiet, the both of you!” Ryoga snapped, pushing Shirokuro off of them.

The dog didn’t seem bothered at all, as she pranced happily around their legs as the two boys picked themselves up off the ground. Shirokuro shoved her way between them, almost knocking Ranma over again as she bounded into the house. They followed the dog inside and closed the door. Shirokuro walked up onto the step in the front foyer and turned around to sit on her haunches, her tail wagging speedily as Ranma and Ryoga removed their shoes and replaced them with house slippers. Ryoga set down his pack and knelt down to greet his furry companion properly. He grasped the dog’s face in his hands and lovingly scratched behind her ears.

“Hi, girl. Thanks for looking after the house while I was away.”

Shirokuro awoo’d affectionately.

Ranma set down his own pack and gratefully cracked his neck and rolled his shoulders with a long sigh of relief. Shirokuro pushed past Ryoga and bounced up to Ranma, leaping up on her hind legs and placing her front paws on an unsuspecting Ranma’s chest. He yelped, then looked down at Shirokuro, panting and still incessantly wagging her tail at an insane speed.

“Yeah, I missed you too, mutt.” Ranma said quietly, patting the dog’s head.

Seeming satisfied, Shirokuro pushed herself off Ranma’s chest and scampered back over to Ryoga. Ryoga looked over at Ranma, who was brushing dog hair off of his pants.
“Would you like to take a bath?” Ryoga offered.

“Yes.” Ranma said without hesitation.

Despite being in a sardine-packed residential neighbourhood, the houses in Ryoga’s area including his own were all slightly above average. Ryoga’s parents, the odd times they were home, had decorated the house to their tastes. The house had a traditional undertone, with some modern inspiration from Western culture. It had an eclectic mix of a classic layout for a common Japanese dwelling, with modern furniture and appliances, and decorations and wall hangings that were a mix-matched array of Western and Japanese.

The Hibiki’s bathroom was half the size of the Tendo’s. The bath, shower, toilet and sink were all in the same room, instead of the furo being segregated behind shoji doors from the rest of the washroom like at the Tendo’s. However, unlike the Tendo’s and similar to the rest of the house, the washroom had the same Western-inspired, modern feel.

Ryoga had explained, while Shirokuro led them down the hall towards the washroom, that his father was a businessman who frequently took trips to America, and during his business trips he had picked up on Western culture and design. Ryoga’s mother was a professional home designer and had rejuvenated the entire house herself. The whole house seemed new, and smelled clean and fresh like linen, as if the Hibiki’s had torn it all down and built it back up again.

The bathroom was a mix of light beige tile that looked like pale wood, glass, and stainless steel. The same wooden floors that expanded the rest of the house travelled into half of the bathroom on the right hand side where the sink and toilet stood. On the left, where the floor became beige tile that blended almost seamlessly with the wooden floors, was a shower enclosed with glass doors, and a square furo that was encased in the beige tile, and made out of ceramic that had a marbleized effect.

It was rather obvious Ryoga’s parents had money to spend, and that was to be expected from their respectable jobs. Ryoga never behaved like a spoiled rich boy, however. That was probably due to the fact that although the house was nicely decorated, the Hibiki’s still lived in what was considered a commoner’s dwelling, considering the closely-knit homes.

Ranma assumed that Ryoga’s parents wanted to give their only child a comfortable living environment without spoiling him. They sounded like good people. It was a shame they got even more lost than Ryoga did; they had never been home in all the times Ranma had been by Ryoga’s house over the years taking him to school and back, so Ranma had never met them.

Ryoga must have been lonely. The thought sent a shiver of empathy through Ranma’s chest.

Ranma knew what loneliness felt like.

“This looks like a damn hotel,” Ranma remarked as they stood together in the bathroom. “Or a ritzy bathhouse.”

“Mum did a nice job in here,” Ryoga replied humbly. “I’ll go get a spot made up for you upstairs, and take our bags upstairs. I’ll grab some towels, too.”

Ryoga walked back out into the hall and Shirokuro got up and walked ahead of him. Ranma closed the door behind them, stripped down and threw his clothes in the wicker clothes hamper nearby.
Down to his boxers, he padded across the tile floor and started to investigate. In the shower were small ceramic shelves holding soap bars and shampoos, and even a seat with several bottles of body wash and a loofah sitting on top.

Ranma was too damn sleepy to think about having a bath. He’d probably end up falling asleep and drowning if Ryoga didn’t come back in time to pull his head out of the water. Besides, that fancy shower was calling his name after three days in the mountains and a full day of hiking. Ranma removed his boxers and tossed them into the hamper from where he stood, then stepped inside the shower, turning on the hot water.

He let out a long sigh of relief as the water poured over his head and down his back and chest, and thrummed on his achy shoulders. Steam quickly filled the narrow glass cubicle and fogged the glass. Ranma removed his hair from his braid and stood under the stream for a while longer. He grabbed the shampoo that was more than likely Ryoga’s father’s, and scrubbed at his hair. It smelled tart and citrusy. He liked it--Ryoga’s old man had good taste. Ranma picked up the bottle again and gave it a closer look. Ryoga’s old man had expensive taste, too.

Ranma removed his hair from his braid and stood under the stream for a while longer. He grabbed the shampoo that was more than likely Ryoga’s father’s, and scrubbed at his hair. It smelled tart and citrusy. He liked it--Ryoga’s old man had good taste. Ranma picked up the bottle again and gave it a closer look. Ryoga’s old man had expensive taste, too.

He rinsed his hair and helped himself to the body wash, which looked to be the same brand as the shampoo. He squeezed it out on the loofah and started to scrub away the smell of the mountains and campfire from his skin.

“...How long were you watching me?” he asked shakily.

“Trademe spots,” Ryoga said, not answering him.
Despite himself, Ranma did so, keeping as close to the glass walls as possible so they wouldn’t touch. Ryoga soaked his hair then grabbed the shampoo and began scrubbing. He turned around to see Ranma, who seemed very interested in the rivulets of water travelling down the glass.

“It’s weird seeing you with your hair down.” Ryoga remarked, still scrubbing at his scalp.

Ranma absently pinched a wet strand of his loose hair between his fingers, still looking at the water droplets. “I can’t wash it tied up.” he said quietly.

What was with this dope? How could he stand there with his goofy, sudsy hair and hold up a casual conversation stark naked?

But, they’d bathed together plenty of times before. They’d shared the Tendo’s furo and hold a conversation. How was now any different?

“I’ve usually just had baths with you before,” Ryoga went on, and Ranma was suddenly afraid he could read minds. “and you don’t usually wash your hair then. So I guess I’ve never seen it down like this. It looks…”

“If you say ‘girly’ I’m going to shoot soap in your eyes.” Ranma spat.

“I was going to say ‘sexy’.” Ryoga said slowly.

Ranma blinked. Ryoga had called him many things over the years, but sexy was never one of them. He felt his chest give a weird flutter, and then a squeeze.

He frowned at the sensation.

*What the hell?*

“Want me to get your back for you?” Ryoga asked, rinsing out his hair.

Ranma stiffened. “I think I’ll manage.”

“Yeah, maybe if you’re a contortionist.” Ryoga quipped. He reached over and yanked Ranma closer. “C’mere.”

Ranma yelped. “What the hell’re y--?”

Ryoga grabbed Ranma’s shoulders, switched their spots, then spun him around. He’d stolen the loofah from his hand in the process, with the speed only Ranma’s rival could possess.

He began rubbing the loofah in small circles over Ranma’s back. Ranma sighed in defeat. Getting your back washed for you when you’re a child feels pretty good, but this felt entirely different. The way Ryoga had one of his big, warm hands placed firmly on Ranma’s shoulder, the other working the loofah around in slow, slow circles…

Ranma’s eyes fluttered closed, he couldn’t help it. He gave in to the relaxing feeling of the warm water raining down, the soapy back massage, Ryoga’s warm hands and his soft lips running down his wet neck…

*Wait. Lips?*

Ranma eyes flashed open as Ryoga grabbed his hair and pulled his head back sharply, and his teeth bit down on the hot flesh on Ranma’s neck in one fluid movement. Ranma cried out, partly from surprise, partly from pain, but mostly from pleasure. Ryoga worked his way up Ranma’s neck
quickly, then nipped at his earlobe, sucking it slightly into his mouth.

Ranma couldn’t stop the long moan from escaping.

Goddamn, that was really sensitive.

Ryoga practically growled right in his ear, jerking Ranma’s head around to seize his lips. Ranma twisted around, not breaking the kiss, running a hand down Ryoga’s chest to check on the status of his groin. Unsurprisingly, Ryoga was hard as stone.

“You don’t waste any time...” Ranma breathed between their kisses.

Ryoga dragged his lips along Ranma’s jawline. “No, I don’t.”

With that he grasped Ranma’s shoulders and whirled him around again, only now he faced one of the glass walls. Ryoga placed a hand down flat against his back, bending Ranma over.

Ranma had a pretty good guess where his other hand was.

Ryoga went in much easier than last time, but Ranma still cried out regardless, his voice echoing and bouncing around inside the glass walls. His own pleasure-ridden voice embarrassed him, and he bit down on his bottom lip to keep his sounds at bay.

It didn’t work.

Ryoga’s inept temperance from several days before had completely vanished. This was the same Ryoga who’d thrown him down in the tent and taken him in his male body for the first time.

The virtue of virginity had dissolved, and reformed and rapidly grew into something boisterous, fiery; and like fire it latched on and intensified, searing everything in it’s wake. It was as delirious and perverse as a deviant, as bewitching and luscious as a siren.

Ranma’s hands reached out, steadying himself against the glass. It was slippery, and with each thrust he nearly lost his grip. Ryoga pulled out, then walked backward and sat down on the ceramic seat, pulling Ranma over to him by his wrist and sitting him on his lap. This gave Ranma the reins of control, which made him feel much better. He reached back and grabbed the base of Ryoga’s shaft, positioning it by his entrance and lowering himself down quickly.

They both groaned in pleasure at the all-new angle. Ranma stayed still for a moment, before slowly moving again, eventually picking up speed.

Within a few minutes, Ranma could feel Ryoga spasm, and they both moaned in their throats as Ryoga released inside of him. The sensation drove Ranma over the edge, and he came onto Ryoga’s stomach, but the water quickly washed it away. Ranma slumped against Ryoga’s chest, resting his forehead on his shoulder as they both heaved for breath. Ryoga kissed Ranma’s hair.

After a few minutes of coming down from their mutual highs, Ryoga reached back and stopped the flow of the water as Ranma gingerly got off Ryoga’s lap and onto his feet. His legs wobbled a little, but he stayed upright. They both exited the shower, picking up towels which Ryoga had placed on the edge of the tub. They dried off, and headed out into the hall, leaving their clothes in the hamper.

Shirokuro was lying down outside the door, and sprung to her feet when they exited the bathroom. She followed them down the hall and up the stairs. Ryoga changed into a t-shirt and boxers, while Ranma fished through his bag for his pajamas. He pulled out his pajama bottoms, and frowned. He pressed them to his nose.
“Smells like campfire.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” Ryoga said, sitting on the edge of his futon.

“I just washed all the campfire off of me. Putting these on would kinda defeat the purpose.”

He put the bottoms back in his bag, but pulled out the matching shirt and a pair of boxers and stood up straight to change. Ryoga raised an eyebrow at him. The fishcake pattern pajamas were still huge on him, and he’d had them for years (which was only further proof he hadn’t done much growing). The shirt was so long it went down past his boxers, so Ranma was all big shirt, loose damp hair, and legs.

“Shit…” Ryoga breathed.

Ranma looked up. “You say something?”

“Uh...I forgot to set up a bed for you,” Ryoga said quickly. He glanced over at the digital clock on his desk. “and it’s already past three in the morning.”

Ranma yawned. “It’s cool, I’ll just use my sleeping bag.”

“It probably smells like campfire smoke.” Ryoga told him.

Ranma paused, then bent down and pressed his nose on the rolled up sleeping bag on his pack. He drew away with a scowl.

“Son of a bitch...”

“Sharing a bed won’t be as crowded as sharing a sleeping bag,” Ryoga said, getting under the cover of his futon. “I’m too tired to set up a bed for you and besides, this will be better than sleeping on the floor anyways.”

Ranma nodded slowly while he twisted his hair into it’s trademark braid. “That’s true…”

He shut off the light as Ryoga scooched over on the futon, and Ranma slid in beside him. It was certainly much comfier than the sleeping bag from the night before. Ranma flopped over and drew the covers over his shoulder as he yawned again.

“Well, g’night.” he muttered into the sheets.

“Yeah, ni--”

Both boys let out a loud ‘Oof!’ as Shirokuro jumped onto the bed and landed on top of them. Ranma groaned, and Ryoga tried in vain to push the dog off the bed, but instead she wedged herself in between them, and rested her head on her paws. Ryoga sighed, falling back on the pillows.

“Just leave ‘er,” Ranma mumbled. “She missed you.”

Ryoga scratched his pet’s soft ears, and the dog’s eyes squinted in pleasure.

“Sleep tight, you two.” Ryoga said through a yawn.

Ranma hummed sleepily, and Shirokuro sighed.

Within a few minutes, Ranma and Shirokuro were snoring in unison. If Ryoga wasn’t exhausted from his adventures on the mountains and the shower, he’d have had a lot of trouble falling asleep.
But he fell asleep a few minutes later, and didn’t wake up again until Shirokuro had kicked him in the gut the same time Ranma rolled over and hit his face with the back of his hand.

The following day, Ryoga crawled over a still-sleeping Ranma and walked down to the kitchen, with his trusty furry companion leading the way as always. He put on the kettle, then stood idly in the middle of the kitchen, unsure of what to do with himself. Should he bother making breakfast, or would Ranma head out as soon as he woke up? Then, he froze up, and looked warily at the fridge. It had been a while since he’d been home. What if all the food had gone bad?

Ryoga walked over to the fridge and peeked inside. There was no ungodly smell, no mold growing out from any strange orifices. Ryoga spotted a note taped to a carton of orange juice in the fridge. It was from his mother:

*Found my way home, and dropped off some groceries. Love and miss you.*

It was dated three days ago.

Drat! Looks like he’d just missed her. He was going up to the mountains with Ranma when his mother had found her way home. He hoped she was okay.

He looked through the rest of the fridge, which sure enough had been freshly stocked. He took out a package of mackerel, and a carton of eggs. He got out some cookware and other utensils, and got to work. It’d been a while since he really cooked anything. He was pretty accustomed to pouring boiled water over ramen noodles for breakfast, lunch and dinner. He was certainly no Kasumi, but he liked to hope he wasn’t an Akane, either.

The morning sun was beaming in through the kitchen window once he was finished cooking. He’d prepared grilled mackerel, rolled omelettes, miso soup, rice, and pickled vegetables. He stood back, admiring his work displayed on the small dining table. He walked back to the sink, and put all the dishes in some soapy water. He heard the kitchen door open, and Shirokuro’s claws clicked on the tile floor as she walked over to greet their houseguest.

“Morning,” Ryoga greeted, scrubbing out the pot he’d grilled the mackerel in.

“Mornin’,” Ranma said. He looked over at the table and raised his eyebrows. “Wow. You did all this?”

“No unless Shirokuro miraculously grew opposable thumbs,” Ryoga joked, drying off his hands. “Hope you like mackerel.”

“Love mackerel.” Ranma corrected, sitting down.

Ryoga joined him at the table, and poured them both tea. Ranma thanked him under his breath, and then they dug in. They both fed Shirokuro a few pickles while they ate. Ranma rarely shared food with anyone, but Shirokuro was an exception. He laughed as he made her spin around and jump in the air for the treats.
“Thanks a lot for breakfast,” Ranma said when they had finished. Ryoga started to gather up their dishes. “You didn’t have to do all that. Knowing Kasumi she’s been saving my portions of every meal they’ve had since I left in the fridge.”

Ryoga laughed as he dried the dishes from earlier to make room for the new dishes. “I wouldn’t doubt it,” he said. “But I figured I owed you one, after doing all our cooking during the trip. I never eat that well when I travel alone.”

Ranma traced the rim of his cup of tea with his finger. “Wasn’t anythin’ special…” he mumbled.

“Well, I still wanted to say thanks.”

“For what?”

“For being good company,” Ryoga said, looking around at him. “It ended up being a fun trip. We should go again soon sometime, y’know...maybe after all the stuff with the Tendos is...dealt with.”

Ranma stared at Ryoga for an extra beat, breaking their gaze to look back down at his tea. “Yeah...that’d be nice.”

The silence that fell between them then was, for the first time, awkward.

Ranma stood up suddenly, and headed toward the kitchen door.

“Well, I guess I better get going,” he said slowly. “Thanks again for breakfast.”

“What about your pack?” Ryoga asked.

“I put it over by the front door before I came in here.”

Ryoga raised an eyebrow. “...You...you know you’re still wearing your pajama shirt and boxers, right?”

Ranma looked down at himself to find that he indeed was still in nothing but his pajama shirt and underwear, and went bright red.

“...So I am.” he said tightly.

Then he ducked out of the kitchen and bolted up the stairs, Shirokuro chasing after him barking, excited by Ranma’s antics.

Ryoga waited over in the living room, until eventually Ranma tromped back down the stairs, Shirokuro on his heels. Ryoga got up when he saw Ranma zip past the entrance to the living room and toward the front door. He was wearing a faded red pullover hoodie and jeans, his sleep-squished hair now freshly brushed. Seeing him in red reminded Ryoga of Ranma’s many red Chinese shirts, which he still wore fairly often. As of late Ranma had grown a liking for button-up shirts, with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows--Ryoga assumed it was because it had a similar feel to his Chinese shirts. Although Ranma had always suited his trademark Chinese clothes, Ryoga had to admit the modern clothes weren’t a bad change...

He caught himself staring and shook it off, trying to appear nonchalant as Ranma slid on his karate shoes and pulled his pack onto his shoulders.

“Thanks for lettin’ me crash here.” Ranma said.

“No problem.” Ryoga said.
Silence fell again. This one seemed even more awkward than the last. Ranma looked down and counted all the scuffs on his shoes.

“Uh, I guess... gimme a call or something once you, um, you know... with Akane,” Ryoga was finding it more and more difficult to speak. “Lemme know how it goes.”

“Um, sure.” Ranma said, looking up from his shoes.

“I’ll be staying around here, at least for a few days. Keep Shirokuro company, see if either of my parents make it home. So I’ll... be around.” Ryoga went on, speaking tighter and faster with each word.

Ranma nodded slowly. “Okay…”

“Good luck,” Ryoga choked out. “With Akane, I mean.”

“Yeah... I’m gonna need it,” Ranma murmured, scratching the base of his pigtail.

Ranma turned around and headed for the front door, opening it. He looked over his shoulder and gave Ryoga and short, two-fingered wave.

“See ya,” he said, and then walked out the door.

Ryoga’s hand hovered in the air in a weak little wave. “See you…”

The door closed, and Ryoga felt a weird sensation deep in the pit of his stomach. But it wasn’t unfamiliar to him.

He knew what loneliness felt like.

Chapter End Notes

The rose-coloured glasses are gone, and Ranma and Ryoga have both been dealt a stone cold helping of reality. The dream is over, boys. Time to wake up.

Here’s where the plot starts to kick off, now that the honeymoon phase is over. With Ranma back in Nerima, he’s forced to look his responsibility in the face, and it isn’t pretty. What will happen next? Will Ranma really tell Akane the engagement is off? Will Ranma and Ryoga continue their... affair?

Well, I know all those answers ’cause I’m writing this fucking thing, but you’ll all have to wait till next Saturday to find out. See ya then, folks.
He didn’t take a shortcut. He’d stopped in a convenience store to grab a drink. And the store he went to caused him to take a detour from his route, so really he was taking a long way back. He’d even stopped halfway back toward his route to grab a snack out of his bag, even though he wasn’t really snacky after just eating breakfast. Then he’d idled in front of every three store windows, even if he had no interest for the content inside. All of that, and he still made it back to the Tendo Dojo in record time.

He would have procrastinated a little bit longer, but after his walk (and shower) from yesterday his legs and back were stiff and sore. Ranma sighed, his shoulders slumping dejectedly as he opened the large front gates. He took long, slow steps down the pathway toward the front door. He opened the door, and it took him a moment before he could open his mouth and call out:

“I’m home!”

As always, the eldest Tendo daughter was there in a flash. Her beacon of a smile eased Ranma’s trepidation, if only for a moment.

“Welcome back!” Kasumi said in her honeyed voice. “Did you have a fun vacation with Ryoga-kun?”

It wasn’t a vacation, it was a training trip. Although, even though they’d sparred a few times, did some exercises and hiked a lot it also didn’t really feel right to call it a training trip, either. But Ranma had never been able to correct Kasumi when she was wrong before, and that certainly hadn’t changed. It’d be like kicking a dog after it brought you the paper.

Ranma laughed, a little too heartily. “Yeah, it was alright.”

“You must be so tired from your trip. Drop off your bag and I’ll go make some tea.” Kasumi didn’t wait for his agreement, just walked back toward the kitchen.

Ranma slipped off his shoes and headed toward the stairs when Kasumi poked her head back out
“By the way, Akane is out running a few errands for me, but she should be back soon.” Kasumi said.

“Uh, okay.” Ranma mumbled.

He went upstairs and into his room, throwing down his bag with a sigh of relief. He’d been spared the Wrath of Akane, for now. He’d cherish his final peaceful moments before she came home, and then the jig would be up. He’d promised Ryoga he’d talk to her. As a martial artist, he couldn’t go back on a man-to-man promise.

He caught himself frowning deeply. He plopped down on the floor and started unpacking his bag while his mind wandered.

The last few days had passed by in a complete blur. The entire time, he’d felt a peculiar mix of clarity, yet confusion. He’d said it himself that he didn’t want to marry Akane. That was still true. He’d said he did want to be physical with someone, but not Akane. That was true, too. He’d been sitting on this for years, which left him an awful lot of time to think about it. No matter which way he sliced it, he just couldn’t wrap his head around the idea of sex with Akane without feeling embarrassed.

It’d taken him a very long time to decipher that his embarrassment about it wasn’t due to some beguiling, boyish crush. He got embarrassed because whenever he thought about sleeping with Akane, it was like he was thinking about sleeping with family. It’d be like sleeping with Ukyo, who was like a sister to him. At the thought alone, he shook his head frantically.

No. No way.

So, why was Ryoga any different?

Hell, he’d known Ryoga before he’d even known Akane. If it was an issue of history, that certainly wasn’t it. So, why was it different? Years ago, he’d been put into a fit of rage when that Mikado Sanzenin guy had stolen his first kiss.

Ranma’s deep frown softened just slightly.

Had he been infuriated that a guy had stolen his first kiss, or that a guy he didn’t like had stolen his first kiss?

He could remember when after that incident with Mikado, he and Akane had almost kissed. He’d had a chance to make up for his stolen kiss by kissing someone he wanted to, on his own terms. But, he’d stopped himself...

Shouldn’t you kinda, like, save this stuff? For, y’know, the people that you really like?

Ranma sat around in the clothes and belongings he’d been pulling out and throwing helter-skelter around himself while lost in his wandering thoughts. He snapped out of his reverie when he finally noticed the mess he’d made, and scrambled to gather up his clutter and store it away properly.

“Ranma-kun!” Kasumi called up the stairs. “The tea is ready!”

“C-coming!”

He swore under his breath at his cracking voice, throwing his bag in a nearby corner of the room from the kitchen.
before heading back downstairs.

Genma, Soun, and Kasumi were all sitting at the kotatsu when Ranma entered the room. Kasumi was pouring both the men cups of tea while they ate crackers and watched the news. Kasumi greeted Ranma with a smile as he took a seat across from the older men.

“Have a productive trip, boy?” Genma asked instantly.

Ranma wanted to say something like, “Yeah, nice to see you too,” but he was so used to his father’s attitude toward his training by now he just went along with it.

“It was fine.” he replied, thanking Kasumi as she slid him his cup of tea.

“That Ryoga boy better have been hard on you.” Genma said, crunching on another cracker.

Ranma only got a few choice words out of that phrase and the result made him nearly spit tea out his nose. He put his cup down with a little more force than necessary so that the noise could drown out him quickly clearing his throat.

“He’s almost as strong as I am, so he’s a good sparring partner.” he said, trying to be haughty.

“It was so nice of Ryoga-kun to invite you on his trip,” Kasumi said. “you two are such good friends.”

Ranma wanted to correct her again, to say something like, “We’re not friends, we’re rivals”, but again he couldn’t bring himself to do so.

Would he have denied it if anyone else said it like Kasumi, though? Or was he only telling himself he wouldn’t correct her just because it was Kasumi? Besides, why would he deny something he’d said himself to be true.

_We’re friends, ain’t we_?

The thoughts swirled around in his mind with all the others, like the leaves floating around at the bottom of his cup.

“Tell me about your trip, Ranma-kun,” Kasumi said excitedly, leaning her chin on her hands like a child waiting to hear a story. “Martial artists must go on exciting adventures.”

“Uh, we just did a lot of hiking and sparring in the mountains. It wasn’t anything too special.” Ranma explained. He paused for a moment. “We did find this cool place on the mountain, though. There were all these white flowers blooming in one spot, and there was a meteor shower for the Leo constellation.”

“Oh my, you watched the Leonids?” Kasumi’s eyes twinkled. “I watched for those myself the other night, but you must have gotten a great view of them from the mountains. Did you see a lot? I only saw a few before I had to go to bed.”

“Yeah, it was awesome!” Ranma exclaimed, getting into the story. He and Kasumi never really had casual, one-on-one conversation like this. It was extremely pleasant, but that didn’t shock Ranma at
all. This was Kasumi, after all. “At first, one would flash by every few minutes. But then, a whole swarm of ‘em came all at once!”

“Oh, a meteor storm!” Kasumi sang. “How wonderful you got a chance to see that; I wish I’d been able to stay awake longer. It sounds so romantic.”

Ranma twitched at the word, and it took every morsel of his being not to glance over at his father. Not that he needed to. He didn’t have to look to know Genma’s eyes were drilling a hole into his head.

He’d gotten so caught up in his talking to Kasumi, he didn’t realize how unmanly it probably sounded, gushing about shooting stars like a girl in a shojo manga.

Ranma snatched up his cup, deciding it best to busy his mouth with something safer than gabbing his gums right in front of his father about his “training trip”.

“I’m back!”

Ranma choked on his tea again.

“Ah, welcome back, Akane-chan!” Kasumi said. “Look who’s finally back! He made it home after you went out on errands.”

Akane stood by the entrance to the family room, bags in both hands. Her eyes had been fixed on Ranma while Kasumi had spoken.

“Y-yo,” Ranma waved weakly. He mentally swore at himself for letting his voice crack yet again. “I'll, uh...lend ya a hand with those bags, Akane.”

Ranma quickly leapt up and grabbed the bags from Akane’s left hand. He decided to ignore the elated sounds his father and Soun weren’t trying very hard to be inconspicuous about, and headed for the kitchen.

Akane followed close behind as he entered the kitchen, placed the bags on the counter and started unloading them. Akane came up beside him and started on her own bags.

“How was your trip?” Akane asked.

Ranma held back a groan. Why did everyone have to keep asking him about that?

“It was fine.”

“You were gone for three days. I’m sure you can do better than that.” Akane said, and Ranma could feel her sidelong stare as she continued unloading groceries onto the counter.

Ranma gathered up some frozen food and scurried to the fridge. “There’s nothin’ to say,” Liar. “It’d just bore ya t’ tears.”

“Well, I wanna know anyways!” Akane snapped loudly.

Ranma’s eye twitched. There she goes again, so quick to temper…

“We hiked, we trained.” Ranma said shortly. “Y’ happy now?”

Ranma stored the frozen food away in the freezer, feeling Akane burning holes into the back of his head the entire time. He turned around, joining in on her intense staredown. Like always, it became a
battle of who would break the gaze first. Akane gave in a lot sooner than she normally did, looking away with an irritated scoff. She jerkily yanked the rest of the groceries out and slapped them down on the counter. Ranma kept his distance while she stormed around the kitchen and put things away.

When she’d finished her task, she had nothing left to busy her hands with. Clenching her hands into fists at her sides, she whirled around and looked at Ranma firmly.

“You seemed to be a real chatterbox with Kasumi,” she said bitterly. “What were you talking to her about that you can’t say to me?”

Ranma frowned. Leave it to Akane to spoil the one pleasant moment he’d had since he’d come back to the Tendos, by making him feel guilty for talking to Kasumi of all people.

What the hell was she getting mad about? He’d known Kasumi as long as he’d known Akane; he lived under the same roof as her. She’d cooked all his meals, always made sure he was comfortable, and shown him nothing but kindness. What gave her the right to get pissed if he decided to talk to the only person in his life who’d never given him grief?

Maybe because she’s supposed to be your fiancee?

“What’s it to you?” Ranma grumbled, half toward the voice in his head.

His inner voice face-palmed. Foot, meet mouth.

Akane’s face went red, her eyes glittered with the threat of angry tears. Without a word and without looking back at Ranma, she walked out of the kitchen.

Ranma visibly deflated.

He may as well take his promise to Ryoga and shoot it in the face. Being a jerk to Akane wasn’t going to make this any easier. He highly doubted that she’d want to speak to him now, but a promise was a promise.

You’re just going to have to bite the bullet, Ranma.

“Oh, shut up, porkbutt.”

Ranma stared at the little wooden duck with her name on it before he finally gathered the nerve to knock tentatively on Akane’s door. To his great surprise, the door actually opened. She didn’t look happy to see him, however.

“You always come in through the window,” she muttered. “I wasn’t expecting it to be you.”

“Well, I didn’t want to get a barbell to the face instead of getting a chance to talk like adults.” Ranma retorted.

“And what’s stopping me from going and grabbing a barbell right now?” Akane snapped back, her cheeks going pink at being accused of acting childish.

“Absolutely nothing,” Ranma said. “so can I come in?”
“In what world did that give you the impression I’d let you come in my room?” Akane exclaimed hotly.

“Akane, are you gonna let me say sorry or not?” Ranma sighed.

“Oh, this was all leading up to an apology, was it? As usual, Ranma, you’re doing a fantastic job of being terrible at saying sorry.”

He could feel his own temper starting to flare. He counted down from five in his head, and remembered his cold aura training when he was learning the Hiryu Shoten Ha. Cold, cold, cold…

“Well, let me come in and I’ll make it up to you.”

Akane’s cheeks went even more pink all of a sudden. “…What?” her voice came out as a squeak.

“I’ll make it up to you,” Ranma said again, taking a step forward. “just let me in.”

Akane didn’t back away, she didn’t slam the door in his face. She just kept staring at him with wide eyes. Her face was red and her eyes were glittering again, but from something else entirely.

She opened the door wider, and stepped aside. “Come in…”

Ranma stepped through the threshold, Akane backing away to let him in and then closing the door behind him. He made a face as he heard the door click shut that she didn’t see. She walked past him and sat down on her bed. He hovered in the middle of her room, suddenly awkward. He didn’t expect to get this far, and his cold air had faded away.

Akane pat the bed. “Sit down.” she said.

Ranma glanced at the empty spot on Akane’s bed, and up again at her face. The glitter hadn’t left, it’d only intensified. Her aura was hot, but not from the anger Ranma had felt from her before.

Ranma sat down slowly. He stared at the carpet for a while before looking up at Akane.

“Listen, uh…that wasn’t how I wanted our first talk since I got back to go,” Ranma said. “I’m sorry for bein’ a jerk.”

“Th-that’s okay…” Akane murmured. “I…lost my temper. Instead of welcoming you home I just badgered you. I-I’m sure you were just tired from your long trip home…and…and…and I…”

“Aw, Akane…” Ranma sighed. “What the heck’re you cryin’ for?”

“I just…missed you.” Akane sniffled, wiping at her fallen tears.

“I was only gone a few days,” Ranma said nervously. He always lost his cool when girls cried. “I-I’ve gone on a bunch of training trips way longer than this one.”

“You dummy!” Akane cried wetly. She fell against his shoulder, sobbing. “I’m trying to say welcome home properly.”

Ranma wrapped his arm loosely around her as she clung to him, her crying slowly fading into wet sniffles. Ryoga’s voice floated through his head again.

She knew I’d take it back if she cried.

Ranma patted her shoulder, and scooched away. “Uh, well…I think I’m gonna, um…” Damn. He
should of come up with an excuse to leave before opening his mouth.

“...M-make it up to me?” Akane said softly, her cheeks red from a mixture of crying and...something else. “Right?"

Ranma blanched. “Uhh…”

Finally, it clicked.

Her flushed face, her glittering eyes. The heat that wasn’t friendly warmth but rather…

She was leaning in closer, her eyes soft and half-lidded.

Expectation.

“A date!” Ranma practically hollered.

Akane blinked. “What?”

“A date,” Ranma said, much quieter now. “I-I’ll...take you out on a date.”

Akane’s eyes went wide. The glitter, which had faded for a moment, was back again. “R-Really?”

“I-I mean...I kinda spent the last of my money on the train trip back here,” Ranma said quickly. “So, uh...i-it wouldn’t be anythin’ fancy, or nothin’.”

“That’s okay,” Akane said brightly. “we could just pack a picnic, and go to the park!”

“I-isn’t that somethin’ you’d do in spring?” Ranma mumbled. “Y’know, when the cherry blossoms have bloomed.”

Akane slumped. “I guess that’s true…”

Ranma sighed in relief. A picnic in the park was way too romantic. “Uh, why don’t we just...get a coffee, and maybe see a movie?”

Akane perked up. “That...sounds nice.”

“Okay. Uh, then…” Ranma stood up and walked over to the door. “If that’s all…”

He opened the door with a flourish, and his father and Soun fell flat on the floor, Soun letting out a wheeze of pain as Genma fell right on top of him.

“...you can stop eavesdropping!” Ranma finished loudly.

Genma rolled off of Soun, and Soun bounced to his feet instantly and grasped Ranma’s hands, his eyes already full of tears.

“R-Ranma-kun, y-you be sure to show my Akane a g-good time!” he blubbered happily.

“Uh, yeah…” Ranma mumbled.

He was released of Soun’s grasp as the two fathers embraced, laughing heartily with triumph. Ranma squeezed passed them and sneaked down the hall unspotted through all the commotion. He could hear Akane yelling at the two men from down the hall.

“Will you two please stop crying all over my carpet?!!”
Ranma hurried inside his room, slamming the door shut and pressing his back against it. He was heaving for breath as if he’d been running. He slid down to the floor, and rested his head on his knees.

“Shit…”

Chapter End Notes

I said it once and I'll say it again: Ranma, you li'l shit. Your foot-in-mouth syndrome is always your biggest downfall.

Well folks, the shitstorm has only just begun. Stay tuned for next week, and Chapter 8! See y'all then.
It didn’t take long for the rut he’d climbed out of several days ago to drag him back in with a vengeance.

Ranma got up in the morning for a jog and then a workout in the dojo. He made sure to take a different route every day on his run so Akane would never figure out that he was purposefully avoiding her regular route and catch him on his. He got out of the house even earlier so he could be back at the dojo and starting his workout before she got home. She usually went inside to change into her gi before coming out to the dojo, too, which bought him some time. By the time she was in the dojo setting up bricks to smash, he was walking out the door, chugging a water bottle so they wouldn’t have to speak.

If she’d noticed he was ignoring her, then she had decided to kill him with kindness. Akane’s bridal training was in full force, and the rest of the family was ecstatic. When she was finished her workout she’d come inside and get a bath, coming back downstairs with hair fluffed and cheeked rosied. She and Kasumi would spend the rest of the morning in the kitchen, cooking everything under the sun. Ranma, of course, was always the guinea pig.

The first half of the afternoon would be spent with Ranma outrunning an apron-clad Akane carrying some kind of dish, which either gave off a pungent odor, dark smoke, or both. Sometimes he’d get cornered and forced to test the dish, and other times he’d manage to escape. The second half of the afternoon would either be spent in his room feeling sick to his stomach, or walking aimlessly around town trying to kill time before dinner. He’d usually grab something to eat so that when he got home, he could say he was too full to try any of Akane’s “concoction” after eating supper.

Akane always just brushed it off, but Ranma was quickly discovering that was even worse. Instead of beating him up, Akane always just went back to the drawing board the very next day with some new failed attempt. Akane had been getting better at cooking, but she only did well when she didn’t think so hard. She was so desperate to create something that tasted good, her brain shut off and she rushed things. If she wasn’t trying so hard to impress him, she’d actually succeed.

Even so, he couldn’t get her hopes up, even if she did make anything that wasn’t life-risking to consume. Doing anything that would make that glowing expression light up her face only screamed danger. Akane was waiting for him, you’d have to be dead not to notice it. The expectation in her eyes that Ranma had seen back then had rattled him. She was so ready for him, and he’d realized years ago he’d never be ready for her. And he still didn’t have the guts to tell her.

He was such an asshole.
He knew he'd brought all of this on himself though, considering he'd promised to take her out on a date, even if it was because he'd been backed into a corner. He knew what she was thinking; she thought that during their “date” he was going to get down on one knee and propose to her. That was why she’d gotten back on the bridal-training kick all of sudden.

She hadn’t asked about their date since, probably because she was waiting for him to spring it on her. He was certain she was getting curious, however. It’d been several weeks since he’d gotten back, and she was getting antsy every day. It showed in her cooking--it kept getting worse. Her loving of surprises had bought him some time, but it was running out. Not that he’d exactly been relaxing on his “time off”. He could barely get to sleep at night, his brain and his guilt refused to let him.

He was starting to flicker out. He didn’t even bother running anymore; he was too tired, anyways. He choked down Akane’s experiments, which made his stomach do back-flips the rest of the day but at least she left him alone. However, she started getting so triumphant she’d start making him two meals a day. He was pretty sure this was going to be the death of him.

He would say he’d lived a good life, but he wouldn’t have believed himself.

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Ranma woke up one morning feeling worse than he had in the weeks since he’d come back to the Tendo dojo. He sat up groggily on his futon, and a roll of dizziness ran over him so brutally he nearly fell backward on the sheets. He groaned, holding his head in both hands.

This was it, he decided. He was finally succumbing to the food poisoning. He could hardly believe he’d lasted even this long.

The dizzying feeling came back again, only worse. His stomach dropped, curled into a ball, and then died. Then, it came back to life and grumbled like a volcano. Hot acid rose up his chest, his throat burned like he was about to breath fire.

Oh, crap.

He jumped up, tore open the door and took off in a dead run down the stairs, through the halls. He burst through the bathroom door and collapsed on his knees in front of the toilet, and heaved.

He groaned in agony, resting his cheek on the cold ceramic as he flushed, his eyes still closed, not risking a glance. He was sure Akane’s cooking didn’t look any better coming back up than it did on the plate.

He heard a tentative tap on the door through the rush of his sick being whisked away.

“Ranma-kun?” Kasumi’s voice called through the door, sounding concerned. “Are you alright in there?”

He felt half-dead, but he didn’t want to worry Kasumi. Shakily, he got to his feet and stumbled over to the sink. “I’m fine.”

He filled a cup with water, swished it around and spat. He filled every bristle on his toothbrush with paste and scrubbed maliciously at his teeth, tongue, gums, the back of his throat. He rinsed his mouth out twice more before he was satisfied. He got a glance of himself in the mirror. He had dark circles under his eyes from lack of proper sleep, his hair was gangly and stuck to his hot, slick forehead.
“Can I get you anything?” Kasumi called.

“No, thanks,” Ranma replied, his voice a thick croak. “I’m going to get a shower.”

He heard Kasumi’s slippers scuff along as she walked away. Ranma undressed, practically peeling his t-shirt off his skin, there was so much sweat. He walked into the furo and over to the shower, turning on the cold water full blast. He stepped underneath the downpour, not even jumping at the cold on his hot skin. His body changed instantly, but after all these years Ranma paid it no mind.

Ranma sighed in relief as the freezing cold water washed away the sweat. Her head felt lighter, her nausea slowly dissolved. She spent several minutes just standing under the water before deciding to wash up. She wrapped herself in a towel, leaving her sweaty clothes in the hamper and going upstairs to change into something fresh.

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Ranma came down to the kitchen several minutes later, in navy jogging pants cinched tight to her now puny waist and a white t-shirt.

“How are you feeling?” Kasumi asked, looking up as Ranma walked over to the fridge.

“Much better.” Ranma said.

It was like she’d never been sick. Her nausea had completely disappeared. She found it odd, considering the obvious bout of food poisoning she’d acquired from Akane’s cooking. She should still be curled up in a ball on the floor in the furo, clutching her stomach. Instead she was pouring herself a glass of orange juice. She wasn’t going to question good fortune, however. She knocked back her juice with vigor.

“Lunch is ready.” Kasumi announced.

Ranma looked over at her with wide eyes. “Lunch?”

“You’ve been sleeping all morning,” Kasumi told her. “I went to check on you when you didn’t wake up for your usual workout. You were in such a deep sleep I didn’t want to wake you.”

Ranma blinked rapidly in disbelief.

“You must be starving,” Kasumi said. “why don’t you go out and wait with the others? I’ll bring everything out soon.”

Ranma left the kitchen and joined her father, Soun, and Akane in the living room. Akane was in the middle of talking to the fathers.

“...So she calls me only to tell me about the ‘killing’ she’s making at the university, selling pictures of me to all the boys in her classes and dorm. She says she’ll probably pay off her entire tuition from the sales alone. Can you believe that? My own sister! Honestly...oh, Ranma!” Akane instantly perked up as Ranma walked into the room and sat down beside her. She deflated just as quick when she noticed Ranma was currently female. “Why are you a girl right now?”
“I had a cold shower.” Ranma explained simply.

“Well, why couldn’t you have switched on the hot water before getting out?” Akane asked suspiciously.

Clearly she wasn’t happy that Ranma hadn’t woken up in time for her “breakfast”, and that when she did finally show up, she wasn’t even a male.

“That woulda defeated the purpose of a cold shower.” Ranma said sarcastically.

Akane decided to drop it, grabbing her tea and taking a curt sip.

Just then, Kasumi walked out with a tray with the rest of the lunch, and sat down in the seat adjacent to Ranma and beside the rice cooker.

“What’s for lunch today, Kasumi, dear?” Soun asked, looking very relieved that Akane had not participated today.

“It’s unadon today.” Kasumi replied, dishing rice into everyone’s bowls, and laying several fillets of barbequed eel on top. She handed the first bowl to Soun, who accepted it gratefully.

Kasumi placed Ranma’s bowl under her nose. She stared at the dish while everyone thanked Kasumi and dug in. Ranma’s nose scrunched up, her eyes narrowed into slits as they zeroed in on the steaming eel on the fluffy bed of white rice.

“Is everything alright, Ranma-kun?” Kasumi asked. “You look as if you just saw your worst enemy.”

“I think I hate eel.” Ranma said without hesitation.

Everyone had stopped eating, all eyes were on Ranma.

Kasumi blinked a few times, looking quite confused. Then, she giggled a little under her breath.

“But...eel is food,” Kasumi said softly. “and you love food. You eat anything and everything.”

“Yeah, and you’ve had eel plenty of times before.” Akane added.

“I...I know,” Ranma stammered. “I just...all of a sudden...really don’t like eel.”

Her nausea had returned. Just the smell of the eel was making her stomach churn again. She’d indeed had eel before, but now just the thought of the smooth, chewy texture was bringing her dangerously close to making a dash for the bathroom again.

Kasumi’s hand suddenly pushed away Ranma’s bangs and pressed onto her forehead. Ranma looked up, but Kasumi was looking up at the ceiling, her other hand feeling her own forehead.

“You’ve got a fever!” Kasumi exclaimed. She pulled away, touching her cheek in relief. “Thank goodness.”

Ranma gaped at Kasumi as she smiled brightly.

“You must be awfully sick, if you’re unable to eat food.” she said.

Ranma grabbed her stomach, as if in defense. “It’s not that I can’t eat, I just don’t want to eat eel.”
“Well, at least you’re not just turning down my food now…” Akane grumbled under her breath. But Ranma wasn’t deaf.

“If you don’t want yours, I can take it off your hands, boy.” Genma said, already picking the eel out of Ranma’s bowl with chopsticks.

“Oh, dear. But that will only leave Ranma-kun with rice.” Kasumi said dreadfully.

“It’s fine.” Ranma said tersely, picking up her bowl and shovelling rice into her mouth.

She didn’t want to risk eating too heavy, not if the food poisoning Akane had given her decided to come back later on. She’d better play it safe for now, until she was certain that her episode in the bathroom had just been a fluke.

After her rather pathetic lunch, Ranma walked over to the dojo. She’d missed her morning workout, which always made her restless. Maybe she’d stay here straight until dinner? It wasn’t like she had anything better to do, and a good long workout was sounding very nice after her rough wake-up call. Workout sweat would feel like ocean mist compared to the sticky, feverish sweat she’d felt earlier. Feeling motivated, Ranma began a warm-up kata to loosen up, and slipped into a more advanced exercise within a few minutes. When that was done, she was slightly winded.

She frowned.

It wasn’t like her to get tired so quickly. But it seemed as though she’d had to put more effort into the simple exercise than normal, for her limbs felt heavy and lethargic. She cursed the food poisoning once again.

Then again, it wasn’t like her to get so worn out over something as measly as food poisoning. She shrugged it off, setting up several blocks. Taking a few steadying breaths, she crashed her fist through the bricks effortlessly. Ranma wiped the sweat already beginning to bead at her brow.

She went outside and set up a practise dummy, noticing the braided straw at the back of the dummy’s head. Ranma scoffed at the makeshift pigtail Akane had obviously put there, but attacked the Ranma-dummy anyways and busted it off its post within minutes. She watched it soar across the backyard.

Stars blurred her vision. Ranma staggered, clutching her swimming head. For a moment, she thought she was about to faint. She stumbled over to the wall, steadying herself with one hand while she held her head in the other, willing herself not to pass out. Then, a familiar sensation rumbled through her stomach again, and the hot acid started to rise up into her mouth.

Ranma threw up on the grass, pressing both hands on the wall to keep herself upright. Her legs wobbled as wave after wave of nausea struck her like a train. When she’d expelled what little she’d had for lunch, every wave after that was nothing but stomach acid and dry heaving. After what felt like eons, she finally stopped. She had crumpled lower down the wall, now crouching right above her sick. Weak, small sounds like a sick dog’s whimpers kept escaping her mouth. Sick as a dog was putting it lightly.

The lovely sweat she’d worked up from her exercise had been usurped by awful, clammy fever sweats. She pushed herself off the wall weakly, and glared down at her puddle of sick. Trudging
slowly over to the small outdoor washing station, she filled a bucket with water. Her arm trembled as she carried the bucket back to the wall, the water inside nearly spilling all over. Ranma washed away the evidence, then walked back into the house as she began to shiver violently. The clammy fever had suddenly turned into chills, and her teeth were chattering by the time she’d reached the bathroom.

She undressed and walked into the inner bath, and filled the furo. Sitting on the unpleasingly cold bathroom floor, Ranma closed her eyes and swirled her hand through the hot water while she waited for the bath to fill up. Like last time, the nausea had left as quick as it came. Now she was physically depleted, and just wanted a long, hot soak.

Finally, the bath was full. Ranma slowly sank into the water with a sigh and rested her head against the edge of the tub, submerging her entire body up to her neck in the water. She hadn’t even washed off before she’d entered the bath, but at this point she could really care less. Ranma reached up and ran her wet, warm hands down her face, over her eyes. Her fingertips ran down her cheeks, and then her eyes popped open.

Wait.

Ranma sat up quickly, sloshing around the water roughly.

“What the hell…?”

She should have turned back by now.

She was completely submerged in the water. She splashed herself, feeling panic beginning to swell in her chest. She splashed more frantically, her breathing becoming short and ragged. She jumped up and clambered out of the bath, twisting on the hot water in the shower full blast. She stood under the steaming water, her heart racing.

This isn’t happening.

“This isn’t happening!” Ranma yelled, twisting the water off.

She dashed out of the furo, grabbed her t-shirt and dragged it on her still dripping-wet body as she ran out the door and down the hall. She burst into the first room she came across.

Kasumi whirled around from the dishes she was washing, looking at a soaking wet Ranma in a see-through t-shirt.

“I’m not changing back!” Ranma cried. “I can’t change back!”

“Ranma-kun, calm down!” Kasumi exclaimed, rushing around the island and flitting to Ranma’s side. She grabbed Ranma’s shoulders, which were shaking uncontrollably.

“I was in the bath,” Ranma could barely talk, her breathing was so ragged. “I wasn’t changing so I--I tried the shower, but--but...it--”

“Shhh,” Kasumi soothed softly. Her grip on Ranma’s shoulders was firm, but comforting. “calm down, now.”

“B-But...but--”

“Onee-chan!” Akane called, entering the kitchen. “What’s going on?”
Akane gaped at the sight before her, of her eldest sister holding a dripping wet Ranma in nothing but a t-shirt that didn’t conceal a thing.

“Wh-what in the world is going on in here?” she exclaimed incredulously.

“Ranma-kun isn’t changing back into a boy.” Kasumi explained.

“He’s--what?”

“Oh my, that reminds me,” Kasumi said, as if she hadn’t heard Akane. “I still have to return those books I borrowed from Tofu-sensei.”

Kasumi looked over at Ranma, who was staring at her dumbfoundedly along with Akane. She smiled sweetly.

“Would you like to accompany me, Ranma-kun?” Kasumi offered. “I borrowed an awful lot of books, and I’d like to return them all at once if I could. It would be rather difficult to carry them all myself, though.”

Ranma could only slowly nod.

Twenty minutes later, Ranma was in a dry pair of clothes and was walking down the street alongside Kasumi. They carried three books between the pair of them. Ranma hadn’t spoken much as they walked, she was still too shaken up about what was going on. Kasumi filled the silence talking about the books she’d borrowed, but Ranma was only half-listening, lost in her thoughts.

They reached Tofu’s clinic, and went inside. Kasumi handed the book she carried to Ranma, who looked up at her and blinked questioningly.

“Could you take those to Tofu-sensei?” Kasumi asked. “He gets a little...animated when I’m around. I’m afraid he may tear out some of the pages if I gave them to him myself. He’s done it before.”

“Um, sure…” Ranma said distantly.

Kasumi smiled. “While we’re here, why don’t you ask Tofu-sensei if he can figure out why you aren’t changing back?”

Ranma stared at Kasumi, and then down at the books in her arms. She was starting to get a sneaking suspicion that Kasumi hadn’t asked her along just to carry some books.

“I guess it’s worth a shot.” she said.

“I’ll just wait out here.” Kasumi said, sitting down in the waiting room and picking up a magazine.

Dr. Tofu walked out into the waiting room, standing aside to let an older woman shuffle by on a cane. He looked up, noticing Ranma. Ranma looked down at Kasumi, who had her nose stuffed into the magazine, her face conveniently hidden from the doctor.

“Oh, hello, Ranma-kun!” Tofu called, waving. “Hold on for just a moment.”

Dr. Tofu saw the old woman to the door. He turned back to Ranma, and looked her up and down,
checking for any obvious damage.

“Nice to see you. What brings you by? It doesn’t look like you have any new injuries.” Tofu observed.

Ranma shook her head. “Not exactly. It’s a little more complicated than that.”

Dr. Tofu pat Ranma on the back, leading her into the back room. “With you, Ranma-kun, I can’t say I’m too surprised.”

Dr. Tofu closed the door behind them, and Ranma sat down on the edge of the patient’s bed. Tofu grabbed a chair and sat down.

“So, what seems to be the trouble?” Tofu asked kindly.

“I can’t change back into a guy,” Ranma explained. “I had a bath earlier, an’ even though I was submerged in the hot water, I wasn’t changing back. It was like when that Herb guy locked me in my girl form. And I haven’t exactly run into him recently, or any magic water ladles…”

Tofu chuckled. “You sound a little disappointed about that,” he joked. “that sounds very peculiar, indeed. Can you describe anything else to me?”

“Well, I think I’ve got food poisoning,” Ranma went on. “Akane’s been forcin’ me t’ eat all her damn attempts at ‘cooking’ lately. My stomachs been cramping up for days, I threw up earlier today, an’ after my workout. An’ I was so exhausted I nearly fainted during my workout. I even slept in till lunchtime, which I haven’t done since I was a teenager on the weekends. But, food poisoning wouldn’t have anythin’ t’ do with my curse.”

Dr. Tofu hummed in thought. “That’s true.”

“I bounced right back after I was sick earlier today, though. I could eat no problem after that, even though I was sick a little later. I couldn’t eat eel, though. It made me feel like I was gonna be sick again.”

“You don’t like eel?” Tofu asked.

“I love eel,” Ranma corrected. “But I hate it now.”

Dr. Tofu rubbed his chin. “Hm. Well, that’s something…”

Ranma watched the doctor, confused. Suddenly, the doctor patted his own knee, and leaned forward intently.

“I’ve got a hunch,” Tofu said. “but I’m going to have to ask a small favour of you, Ranma-kun.”

“What do I gotta do?” Ranma asked, instantly curious.

She watched the doctor stand up and walk over to his desk, and pull something out. He tossed it to Ranma, who caught it effortlessly. Ranma looked down to see she held a small, clear capsule with an orange lid.

“Tofu raised a hand. “Like I said, it’s just a hunch. You know where the bathroom is, right?”
Ranma looked back down at the cup with dread.

When was this day going to end?

Ranma waited impatiently on the edge of the bed, her legs jittering. Dr. Tofu had gone off several minutes ago, and Ranma was quickly getting anxious. What was a urinalysis going to tell the doctor about why she wasn’t changing back into a boy? Why couldn’t he just press on a pressure point to cure her?

Finally, the door opened and Dr. Tofu entered. Ranma jumped off from the bed as the doctor closed the door behind him.

“Well, that did the trick.” Dr. Tofu muttered.

Ranma’s hands clenched into fists. “What’s going on with me, doc?” Ranma asked quickly.

Ranma’s eyes met the doctor’s. His eyes were soft, but his face was solemn.

“I think you’d better sit back down.” Tofu said quietly.

Ranma’s chest pinched. A strange smile that didn’t meet her eyes tugged at her lips.

“What’s with the melodramatic bit?” she laughed nervously. “C’mon, just say it already, I can take it.”

“Ranma,” Dr. Tofu sighed. “you’re pregnant.”

A loud hush fell over the office. Ranma stood motionless, staring at the doctor. For a moment, her vision clouded, and she thought she might actually faint this time as her legs wobbled underneath her. Her legs collapsed, and she sat back down on the edge of the bed as her body went completely numb and everything around her became static and white noise.
Are you as shocked as poor Ranma is, or did you know it from the start and were laughing to yourself when Ranma thought it was just food poisoning?

You'd think he'd know by now his life is never that easy. I promised you a plot, after all. Well, it has finally begun. Shit, meet fan.

See y'all next Saturday, folks.
She could see his lips move, but no sound was coming out. She was deafened by the ringing in her ears. Dr. Tofu sounded like he was speaking to her from underwater, his voice was muffled and garbled. Ever so slowly, sound began to return. Then, some more of the fog lifted, and it sounded like he was speaking inside a tunnel. His voice echoed, resounded off the walls, but was clear.

“Do you know who the father is?”

Dr. Tofu watched Ranma worriedly. She was staring off into space, her eyes wide. She finally glanced at him for a brief moment when he spoke, and then seemed to phase right back out again. She looked down at her lap, her mouth slightly parted, her eyes blinking slowly.

The doctor watched as Ranma’s face began to flush red. Her brows furrowed deeply, her lips pressed into a tight, crooked frown. She suddenly took in a huge, seething breath of air through her nose, her nostrils flaring.

Then, she screamed at the top of her lungs.

“RYYY-OOO-GAAA!”

Ranma bolted out of the office like lightning, slamming the door behind her. She stormed through the waiting room and out the door, looking like she was out for blood. Kasumi looked up from her magazine in time to see the front door to the clinic get viciously swung open and closed with a forceful bang.

Back in his office, Dr. Tofu stood staring at the door the angry redhead had just left through, his brows raised. Then he looked away, taking off his glasses and cleaning them on his shirt.

Back in the waiting room, Kasumi sat back in her chair and flipped back open the magazine she’d been reading. Then she muttered the same words that Dr. Tofu did, unbeknownst to each other, at the exact same time.

“I knew it.”

Ryoga couldn’t remember the last time he’d been home for so long.
It was strange not to go out on his routine training trips, but it was also nice to take it easy at home for a while, too. He kept up on chores and took Shirokuro on walks, and worked out in the mornings in the backyard. He’d slipped into a completely different routine, but he didn’t mind it at all. It was nice not to be lost, for a change. Neither of his parents had returned in the weeks that he’d been home, but that wasn’t unusual. He had Shirokuro for company, at least, and she wasn’t complaining at all about his prolonged visit.

He would say that he’d distracted himself enough not to wait around for the phone to ring, if that wouldn’t be an outright lie.

It’d been three weeks since Ranma had left his house, promising to call him as soon as he’d spoken to Akane. Ryoga assumed he just hadn’t gotten the nerve or the chance to speak to her about it yet. It was certainly taking him a long time, though.

Ryoga was upstairs vacuuming when he heard the sound of the front door opening and closing. He shut down the vacuum, surprised. Was one of his parents home at last? Shirokuro was already rushing down the stairs excitedly, and Ryoga followed close behind.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he was surprised all over again to see not either of his parents, but instead a four-foot-something tall redhead trying to shove away his dog that was the same size when she jumped up on her hind legs to greet their guest.

“Ranma?” Ryoga said in awe. “What are you--?”

“You. fucking. prick!” Ranma hollered, pushing Shirokuro away and storming up to Ryoga. “This is all your fault!”

“Wh-what’re you--?” Ryoga cut himself off as he clued in. He’d done it. He’d finally talked to Akane. “...I guess the talk didn’t go over well, huh?”

“Shut up, you moron!” Ranma snapped. “I can’t believe you!”

Okay, now he was confused again. “Why are you so mad at me for? I mean I--”

“The one time that we did when I was a--UGH! This is not happening! This is absolutely, completely not happening!”

“Ranma, shut up for a second, will you?” Ryoga barked, grabbing Ranma’s shoulders. “You’re not making any sense!”

Ranma knocked his hands away, breaking out of his grip and backing away. “Get offa me! That’s how this whole mess started in the first damn place!”

“What are you talking about?” Ryoga asked, dumbfounded. “What the hell did I do?”

Ranma was seething with rage now. “You knocked me up, you asshole!” Ranma yelled, swinging her fist at him.

Ryoga caught her fist before it collided with his face. “I--I what?”

Ranma started speaking very fast. “I was throwing up all day an’ I couldn’t eat eel, I couldn’t even work out without feelin’ like I was gonna faint, an’ then I puked again, then I went to get a bath an’ I wouldn’t change back into a guy so then I went to Tofu-sensei’s clinic and he--”

“Wait, hold on,” Ryoga cut her off. “You can’t change back into a guy?”
“Yeah, all ‘cause your stupid ass went an’ got me pregnant!” Ranma shouted hotly, struggling to free her fist from Ryoga’s grasp. She swung her other fist at him, but he caught it without even looking.

Ryoga stared at her, unblinking. Then, he suddenly frowned deeply.

“You...you got yourself pregnant!” he cried, exasperated.

Ranma’s eyes bulged. “Ex-cuse me?”

“You heard me! You were the one who told me to touch you! You told me that you wanted to sleep with someone! You wanted this!”

“I never wanted this!” Ranma cried, breaking her hands out of Ryoga’s grip roughly. “I never wanted to...to...”

She backed away, her anger suddenly dissolving. Ryoga watched her curiously as Ranma’s eyes began to widen with fear, as if she’d just seen a cat.

“I can’t do this,” she whispered. “I can’t. This isn’t what I wanted. This isn’t how it was supposed to be.”

“What did you expect, Ranma?” Ryoga barked, his fists clenched tightly. “What were you hoping to come out from all of this?”

Ranma blinked at him, confused by the question. “I... was gonna tell Akane that I didn’t want t’ be with her. An’ then...”

“And, what? Spend the rest of your life on the road, running away from the world and all your problems? And you called me the pessimist?”

Ranma looked up, her eyes huge. “I...thought you were gonna let me stay here at your place?” she asked quietly.

“For the rest of your life?” Ryoga asked incredulously. “Sure, you could live here for a while, and have your way. But what happens later? What if I found someone? What if me and this person started to live together, what then? If I was dating someone, all of...this, would have to stop. And then what? You’d just be a freeloader, like at the Tendos. Where do you go from there? Would you go and live with your mother when you’re almost thirty?”

Ryoga kept taking steps forward as he spoke, until he was towering over Ranma. She craned her neck, staring up at him, her face stunned.

“Did you really think you could just get away with whatever you wanted to do for the rest of your life? Never be an adult, never take responsibility for anything--”

“Ryoga--”

“You treat everything like it’s a battle. You just go with your gut and do the first thing that comes to your mind without ever thinking it through. You just want to do what’s easy instead of what’s right, and you’re terrified of facing up to the consequences--”

“Ryoga--”

“And you come in here, all piss and vinegar, and tell me that this is all my fault?” Ryoga boomed.
“When are you going to, just once, take some goddamn responsibility for your own actions!?”

Ranma’s expression of shock melted into cold anger. “You want me to take responsibility?” she said darkly. “Fine. I’ll take responsibility. If this is my punishment for not owning up, then I’ll own up to this. I’ll do this all by myself.”

Ryoga’s frowned lifted slightly. “What do you mean?”

“I’ll be a father and a mother,” Ranma said quietly. “How’s that for responsible, eh? I won’t need anybody else to take care of it. I’ll do it all on my own.”

Ranma turned around and walked toward the door.

“Sorry for ripping your head off. But at least now ya know it’s yours,” Ranma said lightly. “Well, see you.”

“Ranma, wait.” Ryoga snatched Ranma’s wrist before she could open the door. “Stop it.”

“Stop what? I’m just doin’ what you said I should.” Ranma muttered.

Ryoga twisted Ranma around. “Well, what about me? Am I just not included in this now because all of a sudden you want to make a statement? You just want to kick me out of my child’s life because of what, your pride?”

Ranma looked up at Ryoga, her eyes flickering with an array of different emotions. “I just...I mean...”

“Spit it out!”

“You...you can either stick around or not,” she mumbled, looking away. “I don’t want you to go an’ think that this was some way for me to...trap you. Like I said, I can be a father and a mother, so...you don’t have to stay.”

“Are you an idiot?” Ryoga snapped. “Of course I’m staying!”

Ranma stared at Ryoga, dumbstruck. “...You are?”

“It’s my kid, isn’t it?” Ryoga said. “You don’t just walk away from that, you can’t expect me to just quietly stay away. And there’s no way in hell I’m going to let you use some innocent child to...prove a point. If you’re doing this, then...I’m doing this, too. I’m just as much the father as you are. We’re in this fifty-fifty.”

Ryoga slowly let go of Ranma’s wrist. Her hand lowered to her side. She stared down at the floor for a long time before looking up at Ryoga.

“We’re really doing this?” she whispered.

“I mean...there’s always, you know...” Ryoga began to look sheepish. “The...alternative.”

Ranma shook her head instantly. “No. No way.”

“You’re sure?” Ryoga asked. “I mean, I don’t really like the thought of it, either, but...if you really can’t take this--”

“It’s a life,” Ranma looked down, placing a hand on her stomach. “it’s...barely even a cell yet, but...it’s there.”
“Ranma…”

“I’m a martial artist, Ryoga.” Ranma said strongly. “It’s my duty. I can’t take a life, even if it’s not even a life yet.”

Ryoga leaned back and sighed. “Alright.” he agreed, nodding slowly.

They went quiet for a while as they both processed the entire thing.

“So, what happens now?” Ryoga asked.

Ranma sighed. “I...gotta talk to Akane.”

“Hello, I’m home!”

“Kasumi-oneechan!” Akane called, hurrying out into the front hall. She came to a halt, her face suddenly crestfallen at seeing only her sister at the entrance slipping off her shoes. “Why is Ranma not with you?”

Kasumi stuck her feet into house slippers and walked past Akane toward the kitchen. Akane whirled around and followed her, watching as her sister dropped grocery bags onto the counter.

“I picked up a few things for dinner tonight.” Kasumi announced.

“Is Ranma still at Tofu-sensei’s clinic?” Akane asked, entirely uninterested in that night’s dinner plans.

“Oh no, he went off somewhere after our visit,” Kasumi explained. “Could you get a pot of water boiling for me, please?”

“Did he say where he was going?” Akane pressed, while walking over and grabbing a pot from the cupboard and taking it to the sink.

“He didn’t say, but he was in quite a hurry.” Kasumi said. “I’m sure he’ll be home soon. He wouldn’t want to miss supper. I’m making beef sukiyaki tonight. I was going to make mochi for dessert, as well. I’ve already got the red bean paste in the freezer, so--”

“Did Tofu-sensei know why Ranma isn’t changing back into a boy?” Akane asked.

“Why, yes, I believe he did.” Kasumi said.

“He did?” Akane exclaimed, whirling around from the stove. “Well, what did he say?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know. I was in the waiting room, reading this fascinating article about last year’s Azalea Festival…”

“Kas--”

“Akane-chan, the water…”

Akane spun around. The water had barely begun to bubble. Akane looked back around at Kasumi,
who had her back to her as she swiftly chopped onions.

“T’m back!”

Akane abandoned the pot of water, rushing out into the hall again.

“Ranma!” Akane ran up to the redhead standing by the front door, kicking off her shoes. “What did Tofu-sensei tell you?”

Ranma looked up, then quickly back down at the floor again. “Um…”

“Akane-chan, could you put the noodles in the water for me?” Kasumi asked, walking out into the hallway.

Akane turned around, looking severely torn. “Uh, okay…”

Akane walked back over to Kasumi, glancing back over her shoulder several times before ducking back inside the kitchen. Kasumi looked over at Ranma, gave her one of her trademark sweet smiles, then followed Akane back inside the kitchen.

A while later, the family was sitting at the kotatsu with bowls of beef sukiyaki steaming in front of them. Ranma sat in front of her bowl, still untouched.

“Oh dear,” Kasumi murmured. “Don’t tell me you hate beef now, too?”

Ranma looked up at Kasumi and shook her head quickly. “No! No…” she looked back down at the bowl. “I like beef.”

“Then...perhaps the tofu?”

“No…”

“Mushrooms?”

“Uhh, no--”

“Maybe just sukiyaki as a dish?”

“Um…”

“Are going to tell us what’s going on, or not?” Akane yelled, slapping her chopsticks down on the tabletop harshly, making the kotatsu jitter. Ranma looked up sharply from her bowl, looking at Akane wide-eyed.

Genma and Soun stopped eating and looked at Akane, who was still staring at Ranma with hard eyes.

“Akane!” Soun said chastisingly. “What--”

“You’re hiding something, aren’t you?” Akane cut her father off, still glaring at Ranma.

Ranma looked away. Under the kotatsu, her fists clenched. “I…”

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“Aren’t you?”

“I can’t marry you!” Ranma blurted.

The room felt dead quiet after the sound of Ranma’s outburst had finished bouncing off the walls. The faint ticking of the clock was the only sound in the room, as the seconds of silence passed by.

“I…” Ranma’s mouth was dry. “I don’t want to marry you.”

Akane looked like she was seconds away from being struck by a train.

Soun slapped his palms down flat on the table.

“And why,” Soun bellowed. “would that be?”

Ranma looked up at Akane. She stared straight at her while she spoke. “Because I don’t love her.”

“Whether you love her or not is irrelevant, boy!” Genma bellowed. “How many times do we have to spell this out for you? Tendo and I arranged this engagement before you were even born, so that you could carry on the dojo and bear children to take over the school after you. Love has nothing to do with it.”

Ranma scoffed, looking up at the ceiling and laughing bitterly.

“Yeah, well, I think who bears the children might…” Ranma muttered under her breath.

Akane’s fist pounded down on the table again as she lunged forward, her right leg swinging outward and slamming into the tatami like a sumo wrestler.

“And what the hell is that supposed to mean?” she snarled.

Ranma looked down at her untouched sukiyaki.

“It means I’m pregnant.”

Silence dropped again like a bomb.

Akane’s mouth fell open. Soun’s eyes bulged out of his head. Genma dropped his chopsticks onto the floor. Suddenly Genma flew around the table, seized Ranma by the collar of her shirt and hoisted her upright, pushing her into the wall. Ranma’s face was blank as she stared unwaveringly at her father as he shoved his face in her’s.

“You’re WHAT?” he roared. “How is this possible?”

“Well…”

“Wait, stop. I mean...who--who is the father?”

Ranma looked around Genma’s head. Everyone was on their feet now, watching the tense scene. Akane’s hands were curled into fists, a deep scowl on her face. Ranma looked back at her father.

“It’s Ryoga’s.”

Genma’s hands went slack, and Ranma’s feet found the floor again. Her father backed away, the colour sucked out of his face. Soun looked like he was about to faint. Akane made a noise like a kicked dog, and ran out of the room. Ranma instantly went after her, pushing past Genma and out
into the hallway.

“Akane,” Ranma called. “Akane, wait!”

Ranma caught up to Akane just as they reached the staircase, grabbing the other girl’s arm. Akane whirled around and struck Ranma across the face, sending the redhead reeling into the railing with the force of her blow.

Akane burst into messy tears, and took off up the stairs. Ranma could hear her crying all the way down the upstairs hallway, and even after she’d slammed the door to her room on the opposite end of the house.

Ranma stood still with one hand on the railing and the other on her hot, stinging cheek. After a moment, her arm fell slack at her side. Sighing in defeat, she numbly trudged her way up the stairs and into her room. She started to move automatically, her brain frozen.

She folded up her futon and put it off to the side with the extra blankets, then grabbed her bag from the corner and threw it down in the middle of the room. She went to the dresser and raided all the drawers, pulling out every last thing that wasn’t her father’s and threw it over her shoulder in the general direction of her bag.

She walked over and sat down, with a sigh as if she were sinking into a hot bath. One of the many things that Ranma had always enjoyed about training trips was leaving for them, and the preparation that came with. It was as therapeutic as a steaming bath or meditation to sit down and pack her bag.

The door slid open slowly, and Ranma looked up, feeling her shoulders seize up. She instantly relaxed when she saw that it was only Kasumi’s face peeking around the shoji screen tentatively.

“It would probably be easier to do that with the light on, wouldn’t it?”

Ranma hadn’t even noticed she’d been working in the dark. Kasumi walked into the room, tiptoeing carefully over Ranma’s belongings strewn all over the floor, and pulled the string dangling from the wall to turn on the light.

“Would you like some help?” Kasumi asked, looking around at the mess.

“No thanks,” Ranma sighed. “this is somethin’ I gotta do on my own.”

Kasumi tucked her skirt behind her legs as she knelt down in front of Ranma. “Not entirely.” she said softly.

She held out a small bottle, which Ranma took curiously. She looked at the label which read “folic acid”. Ranma looked up at Kasumi and raised an eyebrow.

Kasumi smiled. “It’s very important to take prenatal vitamins,” she explained. “especially folic acid. I bought those as an iron supplement for myself, but you’ll need it more than I will. You already eat well, but, it’s always good to start a habit if it’s a good one. Especially if it means a healthy, happy baby.”

Ranma gawked at Kasumi, then down at the bottle of vitamins again, which now felt ten pounds heavier. She could feel her face start to burn with embarrassment, her chest clench with anxiety.

It felt so strange to hear people say words like child and baby. More so when they said it so easily, like this was all nothing. Ranma was realizing more and more with each passing second that all of this was very far from “nothing”. This was confusing. This was terrifying. She was still waiting for
the part where she screamed and woke herself up.

Kasumi pat Ranma on the shoulder tenderly. “I know this all must be very difficult to process right now,” she said. “but, I can tell you’ve already decided you’re going through with it. So, for the benefit of the baby’s health and your own, try to relax. You’re not alone. Ryoga-kun is a very nice boy, and he’s been a good friend to you. And I’ll be here to support you, too. So, I just wanted to let you know that you’re not alone.”

Ranma was touched, there was no other way to say it. It wasn’t news to anyone that Kasumi was a darling, but after the day she’d had Kasumi’s kindness was like the the warm air of home after a long walk in winter.

“Thank you, Kasumi-san.” Ranma whispered.

Kasumi smiled, and the sight of it soothed the anxiety clenching at Ranma’s chest slightly. Kasumi stood up, and made her way to the door.

“I’ll leave you to your packing.” she said, opening the door. She looked back over her shoulder. “Oh, and…try not to feel too badly about Akane. She’s a sweet girl. I’m sure she’ll understand, in her own time.”

Just like that, Ranna’s anxiety was back again. She looked down at the bottle of vitamins still in her hand, and gave it a squeeze.

“Yeah…” she muttered weakly.

Kasumi flashed another soft smile, then left the room and closed the door behind her.

Ranma sighed.

“…Maybe in a couple thousand years.” she finished under her breath.

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Shirokuro had long given up on following him around the room, since he was just going around in a circle. She watched from the sidelines, her head resting on her outstretched paws, her fluffy tail and large eyes following Ryoga to-and-fro as he incessantly paced the living room floor.

Finally, there was a knock at the door.

Shirokuro clattered to her feet and rushed for the door, Ryoga close behind her. He slowed his pace as he approached the door, willing his heart to stop racing. He took a steadying breath to compose himself and tried not to swing open the door.

Ranma gave him a meek wave and a crooked half-smile, standing on his front step with her stuffed travel pack on her puny shoulders, and a huge dog bouncing around at her feet. Ryoga ushered Shirokuro back inside and Ranma passed through the threshold, Ryoga closing the door behind her. Ranma slipped off her shoes and Ryoga hurriedly brushed past her to stand in front of her.

“Guess I’d better go an’ unpack,” Ranma mumbled. “Y’know…get settled.”

“I’ll take your bag upstairs for now,” Ryoga offered instead. “You go sit in the living room.”
“But…”

“You look exhausted.” Ryoga said firmly. He paused for a moment, and his eyes flickered across Ranma’s face. “And you’ll need some ice on that cheek.”

Ranma unconsciously brushed her fingertips across the cheek Akane had slapped, which she hadn’t realized until now still felt a little sore. Ryoga held out his hand expectantly.

“Give it here, then.” he said, nodding his head at her bag. “Go wait in the living room and I’ll bring you some ice.”

Ranma numbly pulled her pack off her shoulders and passed it over to Ryoga, who grasped it one-handed and took it up the stairs, Shirokuro following behind him. Ranma watched him go, then walked over into the living room and sat down slowly on the small couch. She looked around the room, taking in the view for the first time.

The living room had cream-coloured carpeted floors unlike the rest of the house. There was a patterned area rug underneath a glass-top coffee table, which had miscellaneous magazines and books underneath the pane of shiny glass. Adjacent to him was a small recliner chair the same colour as the pillows on the couch, and on the far end of the room was a china cabinet and a television. Ranma peered through the glass on the china cabinet’s doors to see an array of knick-knacks and picture frames.

Curiosity peaked, Ranma got up and walked over to the china cabinet. There was no doubt those were Ryoga’s parents in the photographs. Ranma’s eyes came across their wedding photo. Both had the undeniable Hibiki family trait: fangs. Apparently Ryoga was his father’s spitting image; he had his strong jaw, long nose, dark brown hair. He’d gotten his hazel eyes and smile from his mother, it seemed. Ranma realized suddenly she’d never asked Ryoga the names of his parents.

Her eyes fell upon a smaller picture frame that had a picture of a baby boy curled up in pale green bedsheets. He was fast asleep and twenty-two years younger, but the resemblance was uncanny. The grumpy look on his face was a dead giveaway. It was Ryoga, probably only about a month old.

Ranma thought again about how she didn’t even know the names of the parent’s of the guy she’d known for over six years, who had also knocked her up. Ranma scoffed.

They had nine months to really get to know each other now, she supposed.

“You’re things are up in my room.” Ranma heard Ryoga announce suddenly as he entered the living room, and Ranma turned around from the china cabinet. “You can get yourself settled whenever you want. For now, though, let’s get that face of yours looked after.”

Ryoga walked over to the couch and sat down. Ranma walked back over and sat down beside him, turning around to fully face him when Ryoga did the same. With his free hand, Ryoga grasped Ranma’s chin and turned her face so her abused cheek was towards him. He tsked under his breath.

“Yup, that’s Akane, alright.” he muttered. “It’s even bruised.”

Ranma sighed, closing her eyes. She could still see Akane’s livid, tear-soaked face in her mind’s eye, which projected the scene over and over on the backs of her eyelids every time she’d blink since she’d gotten slapped. She jumped slightly at the sudden chill from the ice pack and the sting of something touching her swollen cheek.

Ranma waited for Ryoga to continue to press her about Akane, but was surprised when he didn’t. He didn’t ask for details; not who’d said what or how pissed Akane had been. He just moved the ice
slowly around her cheek, pressing down with a gentle pressure on her cheekbone where the skin was especially swollen and red. Ranma opened her eyes slowly, peeking at Ryoga in her peripheral vision. He seemed focused on his task, for he didn’t notice her watching him. His eyes were trained on her abused cheek, his mouth pressed in a line of concentration. No suppressed curiosity, no flickering eye movements that screamed he had a million things he wanted to say.

Ranma knew that if he wasn’t going to say anything now, then he wasn’t going to at all.

Ranma felt her eyes slip back closed, and this time she didn’t see Akane’s face quite so vividly.

Chapter End Notes

I guess even Ryoga knows when it's time to shut the hell up.
Those few seconds right before everything officially wakes up were always the most peaceful. Those fleeting, wonderful moments before you know who you are, or where you are.

Ranma didn’t get that luxury anymore.

Instead, her body always awoke her with a sudden jolt and before she had a second to wake herself up she was flying out of the bed and making a mad dash for the bathroom. She was starting to see eating dinner, or eating in general, as pointless. Which was borderline sacrilegious for her, but what was the point when any meal she had just came back up in the morning?

Ranma didn’t do well with rude wake up calls, especially when they involved spending her mornings with her face stuffed in a cold toilet bowl instead of nestled in cozy, warm bed sheets. She’d never minded sleeping on the floor back at the Tendo’s, but Ryoga’s Western-style futon was extremely comfortable. The only time Ranma felt comfortable these days was when she was out cold, fast asleep between it’s lovely sheets. The rest of the time, she felt groggy from her forced awakening, mouth wretchedly dry and bitter from nausea.

So far, pregnancy was everything Ranma had always thought it was: terrible.

What person in their right mind would ever willingly put themselves through this?

“Hey,” Ryoga called through the bathroom door for what felt like the hundredth time since Ranma had moved in. “Are you okay in there?”

Ranma could only reply with a drawn out, despairing groan.

“Can I...come in?” Ryoga said after a long pause.

No. “Sure...” Ranma sighed, resting her head on the toilet seat. She’d stopped caring about hygiene a long time ago. She reached up weakly and flushed the toilet as the bathroom door opened.

Ryoga stepped into the bathroom and hovered awkwardly by the threshold as he took in the pathetic
sight of Ranma leaning against the toilet bowl. There was still a lingering smell of sick in the room, despite Ranma having flushed away whatever her impregnated stomach had brought back up. Ryoga walked over and kneeled down, and nudged Ranma’s shoulder. Ranma rolled her head around slowly with a thick grunt. Her face was ghostly pale, so unlike her usual flushed, healthy luster. Her eyes were half-lidded and dark, and Ryoga could swear they looked at him accusingly.

Ryoga held up a small glass of water. “Drink.” it was an order, not a suggestion.

Ranma begrudgingly accepted the glass, pushing herself upright off the toilet bowl with effort. She took a curt sip of water.

“All of it.” Ryoga demanded, gesturing to the glass.

Ranma sighed, then knocked back the rest of the water. She coughed slightly, wiping her mouth on the back of her arm. Ryoga stood up straight, and held out his hand to her. Ranma stared at the hand for a moment. She pushed the empty glass back into Ryoga’s hand and stood up on her own, brushing past him to head toward the sink. She turned on the tap and began brushing her teeth.

“Think you can manage breakfast?” Ryoga asked.

“Maybe.” Ranma said through a mouthful of toothpaste foam. She spat loudly into the drain.

“I’ll be down in the kitchen,” Ryoga said, heading out the door.

Ranma finished washing out her mouth, then splashed her face over and over with cold water. She shut off the tap and leaned her hands against the sink, looking up at her reflection. Colour was slowly returning to her face. Water droplets ran down and dripped from the end of her nose, the edges of her jaw and tip of her chin. Hazy blue eyes stared back at her, striking red hair framed her pale face. She might’ve been pretty, if she didn’t look so miserable. Ranma didn’t know this girl. Ranma didn’t want to know this girl.

She couldn’t look anymore. She patted her face dry, and left the bathroom.

A few minutes later Ranma walked into the kitchen where Ryoga was busy at the counter preparing food. She made a beeline for the fridge and grabbed the carton of orange juice, which was already running quite low since she’d “moved in”. Pouring herself a glass, she looked over to see what Ryoga was making for breakfast. He was pan-frying rice, chicken and vegetables.

“I thought omelette rice would be light on your stomach.” Ryoga explained.

“Oh.” Ranma murmured, bringing the cup to her lips. She felt the need to say something more, but instead she took an awkward sip, unsure of what else to do.

She still wasn’t used to him being so nice. She knew damn well she’d been nothing short of a miserable sack of shit since she got here, and Ryoga hadn’t ripped her head off once. Which was highly out of character for him. She’d been expecting him to lose his patience at least once on her, but he hadn’t. Ryoga being civil towards her was one thing, it was another for him to be considerate.

“How about I make lunch today?” Ranma offered suddenly.
Ryoga looked at her, surprised. “Yeah?”

Ranma shrugged. “Well, you’ve done all the cookin’ since I got here.” she mumbled.

Ryoga raised an eyebrow. “Well, we can’t really live on just instant ramen,” he said. He looked back to the stove, where he was now frying some egg. “I’m not sure what we’re going to do about groceries, though.”

Ranma looked over at the orange juice carton, which probably had about a quarter left of it now, then at the glass in her hands. She considered all the meals Ryoga had made over the last few days. They had to be running low on food. Ranma suddenly had a whole new level of respect for Kasumi, who frequently bought groceries for all the family. And here they were struggling with just two mouths to feed.

A solid clump of dread began to weigh down Ranma’s chest as she considered that soon enough they’d have to keep up with her growing appetite as she accommodated the eventual third mouth they’d be feeding.

“My parents send me money, though,” Ryoga said, seeing Ranma’s throat bob nervously out of the corner of his eye. “So, that’ll help. I mean it usually went towards travel, but... I won’t be doing any of that now...hopefully…”

Ranma knew she’d told Ryoga several days ago that she could have handled this without him, but the more time went on the more she was starting to think she might have been, just maybe, kidding herself. The thought of Ryoga getting lost and being gone for who-knows how long made her heart start to palpitate. She felt her chest contract, like a worried elephant was pacing across her ribcage.

“That’s unlikely to happen, though. I’ve got Shirokuro here, and you, of course. I don’t think I’d get far.” Ryoga tried to laugh, but it came out choked, caught somewhere down in his throat.

Ranma nodded several times, her eyelids fluttering. “Right.” she managed, tightly.

“This should be ready soon.” Ryoga announced.

“...Right,” Ranma said again, dumbly. She hovered awkwardly for a moment, then she stuffed the near-empty orange juice back in the fridge, and took her glass to the table. “Can I...uh, do anything?”

“How about you boil some water for tea, and maybe set the table?”

“Sure.” Ranma immediately went into action, suddenly quite eager to be useful.

She flitted around the kitchen, setting up the table as immaculately as she could. She removed the tablecloth and wiped down the table, put on an entirely new tablecloth and then set out everything on top with the meticulousness of a perfectionist. She zipped over to the kettle and filled it with fresh water, and then switched it on. With nothing left to busy herself, Ranma drummed her fingers on the counter incessantly while she mulled over what she could do to continue to keep busy while she lived here.

She’d grown accustomed to a “mooch” lifestyle with all her years living at the Tendo’s. Kasumi had taken care of all the chores, all Ranma had ever been responsible for was the more-than-occasional patch-up jobs to the roof and walls that became quite necessary after she’d started living there. Ranma only ever cleaned the dojo because Akane bent her ear; she’d never prepared dinner, or done any of the household chores. She’d been called a freeloader to the point she openly admitted to being one, but nobody had ever really complained or made her feel inclined to start doing more. Kasumi seemed well off to manage it all on her own. That whole house would have crumbled to the ground...
even still, she started to feel guilty, thinking that Kasumi was always the one doing everything. She
couldn’t let it be like that while she stayed here; she couldn’t let Ryoga do all the work. She couldn’t
just be a “mooch” here. Technically, she wasn’t a freeloader here, but more like
Ryoga’s...roommate. Ranma had to contribute, even in just the slightest way.

She had always been handy with the patch-ups to the Tendo’s house, so she supposed if anything
needed fixing she could do that. Although, she supposed, Ryoga’s house wasn’t like the Tendo’s. It
wasn’t as old, for one, and Ryoga’s parents had newly renovated practically everything. Nothing
would be breaking down any time soon, and it wasn’t like anything would get damaged with how
calm things were in town nowadays (a fact she found strangely sad for some reason). Ranma’s
fingers began to drum the counter faster.

She could take Shirokuro for walks? That’d help her get out of the house, and get some exercise in.
The bigger she’d get, the less she’d be able to do physically. The thought bugged her immensely, but
if she was still able to exercise even slightly, she supposed she’d be alright. Maybe she could clean,
too? And do all the laundry. She and Ryoga could take turns on several things, to make things fair, to
divvy the responsibilities up…

“Coming to eat?” Ryoga’s voice pulled her from her thoughts.

Ranma turned around to see that Ryoga had brought their food to the table, and was watching her
expectantly. Ranma looked back at the kettle, which was billowing with steam.

“Oh, right, yeah...” she walked over to the table, her head down as she pulled out her chair and went
to seat herself.

“The water should be ready,” Ryoga said slowly. “for the tea?”

Ranma paused, then looked back over at the steaming kettle she’d abandoned on the counter. “R-
Right.” She really needed to stop saying that word.

Ranma went back to the counter hurriedly. Ryoga watched as she grabbed cups, pressed the button
on the kettle to dispense some water, and prepared their teas. She came back to the table, and Ryoga
thanked her under his breath as she placed his cup next to him before finally plopping down in her
chair.

“Itadakimasu,” Ranma blurted, grabbing her chopsticks and promptly stuffing her mouth. Her rushed
chewing slowed after a moment, and she hummed as she swallowed her bite. “It’s delicious.” she
murmured.

“Thanks,” Ryoga said. “My Mum made it all the time for me when I was a kid. It was one of her
specialties. She always liked adding a little saffron to the rice for an extra kick.”

Ranma nodded while she chewed on another bite. “Yeah, I can taste the saffron, now that ya
mention it,” she remarked. She took a sip of tea. “My old man wasn’t exactly much of a cook, an’ I
was too young to remember Ma’s food. So I dunno if she had any ‘specialities’...”

Ranma paused for a moment, then barked with laughter suddenly. Ryoga looked up curiously, and
Ranma shook her head.

“Croquettes,” Ranma remembered. “Ma taught me how to make ‘em once, back when she still
thought I was ‘Ranko’.”
“They were her specialty?”

Ranma shook her head. “Nah, she just thought it’d be an easy starter dish for me, an’ I’m good with a knife so I’d be fast at dicin’ up all the potatoes and meat and stuff. She said they turned out real good, though.”

Ranma blanched suddenly as she remembered her mother telling her she’d make a “wonderful wife” someday. She decided not to say that bit out loud. Mostly because she was scared she’d puke again right after saying it.

“She said they were the ‘best croquettes’ she’d ever tasted,” Ranma remarked instead. “But she was probably just bein’ nice.”

“Really?” said Ryoga. “Why don’t you make that for lunch today, then?”

Ranma looked up, and blinked. She thought again about their grocery situation, and tried to recall her mother’s recipe off the top of her head. She had a good memory when it came to food so it wasn’t difficult.

“Yeah,” she said finally, checking the last thing off her mental grocery list. “I guess I could.”

“I’ve actually never had croquettes,” Ryoga admitted. “You should show me how you make them.”

Ranma found herself grinning for the first time in a long time. “An’ give away the Saotome Secret Technique? In your dreams.”

“That good, are they?”

“I don’t think ya can make deep-fried meat n’ potatoes taste bad.”

“Well, unless you’re Akane.” Ryoga joked. Then his face quickly fell, and he looked at Ranma sheepishly. Ranma didn’t miss how his eyes flickered to her cheek, despite it being healed now.

Ranma managed a small chuckle, going back to her food. “Yeah, they’d be lumps of mushy coal when she was done with ‘em.” she murmured.

Ryoga didn’t respond, only slowly went back to his own plate of food. It was quiet between them, but it was actually for the first time since they’d begun eating, Ranma noticed. Ranma had assumed that their mealtimes were a time for peace and quiet, where they could just enjoy the food without having to force conversation about the damn weather, or something.

They weren’t forcing a conversation, though. In fact, it came as easy as ever. Ranma wasn’t sure when just talking to Ryoga had become so easy, it’d happened gradually and yet so abruptly that she didn’t even notice it. Ryoga used to be so infuriating. He was so wrapped up in revenge over Ranma running from their duel, and then his jealousy over Ranma's engagement to Akane, that there was hardly any room for the two to converse like normal teenaged boys, let alone like friends.

Ranma always settled on the fact that they’d just grown up. Which was true, in the factual sense. Ranma was twenty-two, but most days she still felt like a kid with no idea what she was doing. She’d always assumed she’d have somewhat of a “life” going for herself at this point. Back when she was still sweet on Akane, she’d often think about being in her twenties and probably being married and looking after the dojo while Akane went off and did some college thing for a few years. The idea had enticed the part of Ranma that had feelings for Akane, but no other part of her craved that life. In fact, it scared the absolute shit out of her.
That’s when her feelings for Akane became less romantic, and more familial, brotherly. That’s when she’d started thinking that she didn’t really want a plan at all. Ranma had always just gone with the flow, and was pretty content to do so for the rest of her life and then retire in old age as some legendary martial arts master living somewhere badass like on the top of a mountain, or something.

The elephant stopped its pacing to flat out sit right on top of Ranma’s chest, crushing her lungs and her spirits with them. Those fantasies were already far behind her. She wouldn’t be able to travel around Japan on some life-long training journey with a bun in the oven. And the idea of repeating her own father’s parenting techniques did not appeal in the slightest.

Ranma was certain that even if she hadn’t done that decade-long training trip, martial arts would have always been her true calling. Ranma could have told her father at any time that she didn’t want to be a martial artist if she truly didn’t want to. She never did any of this out of fear of her father’s rejection, or because of some duty to the Tendo dojo. She did it for herself. She loved it; she was good at it. Martial arts was her one truest passion, it was for her own self-entitlement and enjoyment, not to shove down someone else’s throat.

But, Ranma thought suddenly, with two martial artists as parents, something would be bound to rub off...

The image of an infant swaddled in a karate gi instead of soft blankets entered her head. The elephant started to lift off of her chest, ever so slightly...

“Everything okay?” Ryoga said. “Your stomach isn’t turning on you, is it?”

Ranma looked up. “Uh, no…” she mumbled, looking quickly back down at her omelette rice. She felt her face getting hot and tingly, and for some reason she couldn’t look Ryoga in the eye.

Ranma finished the rest of her food quickly before it got any colder. Then she put away her dishes and went over to one of the cupboards. She took out the bottle of folic acid that Kasumi had given her, which she’d already taken several tablets from now. Ranma wasn’t used to taking vitamins, but was trying to get into the habit of taking them every morning after she ate. She popped a tablet into her mouth and downed the last of her tea. Ryoga went over and put his own dishes into the sink. Ranma put away the bottle and went over to the sink and began to fill it with water.

“Oh, I can get these…” Ryoga said, looking genuinely surprised to see Ranma put herself to work without being asked.

“No, it’s fine. I...want to,” Ranma forced out, scrubbing away at the egg-ridden pans. “I mean...I oughta pitch in if I’m gonna be livin’ here, right?”

“I guess so…” Ryoga murmured, still watching Ranma and blinking slowly.

“I gotta admit, though, there’s somethin’ about doin’ dishes that I hate. I dunno how Kasumi sings to herself while she does it.” Ranma grumbled.

Ryoga couldn’t stop the short laugh that bursted out of his throat. “I don’t think anybody likes doing dishes. Even Kasumi. Singing probably just makes the work feel lighter.”

Ranma hummed thoughtfully. “I guess. Still, I was thinkin’ that, to be fair, we could split on dish duty. Other than that, I don’t really mind housework. I’m good with tools, an’ I can do laundry and basic cleanin’ stuff...y’know like, vacuuming an’ wiping things off an’...that kinda thing…”

Ryoga held up his hands as if in surrender. “Look, you really don’t have to…”
“I want to,” Ranma said firmly. “I want to.”

Ryoga let his arms drop. He sighed. “Alright, then. I just wouldn’t want you to, you know, exert yourself.”

Ranma stopped her washing and looked over at Ryoga with a dark expression. “I swear if you start treating me like some helpless, fragile little *housewife*, Ryoga, I’ll--”

“Calm down, tough guy.” Ryoga’s hands flew right back up again. “Trust me, I’ll be the last guy to get on your bad side. Especially when you start getting mood swings.”

Ranma paled. “You mean, it gets *worse*?”

Ryoga shrugged. “Honestly, I have no idea. I’m just going off what little I’ve seen about it on T.V.”

Ranma sighed as she dried off a plate. “I guess I’m gonna have to go see Tofu-sensei for more answers. Neither of us know what the hell we’re doin’.”

“He’s a chiropractor,” Ryoga remarked. “I don’t think Tofu-sensei can be your...*doctor*-doctor for something like this. You’ll need a physician.”

Ranma whirled around to Ryoga again. “But, he’s the one that told me I was knocked up!” she cried. “An’ I don’t know any other doctors. An’ I like Tofu-sensei.”

“I know, but, I don’t think he can do it,” Ryoga said regretfully. “You’re going to have to go to an actual hospital, not some chiropractic clinic. Especially on the, well...*big day*.”

The elephant plopped its rump back down on Ranma’s lungs again, cutting off her air sharply. She hadn’t even begun to mentally prepare herself to think that far ahead.

“B-but...” Ranma was starting to feel panic welling up inside her. “Tofu-sensei knows about my curse. How am I supposed to explain to some doctor I don’t even know that I’m actually a guy? What if they start runnin’ weird tests on me, or...or put me in the paper? What if I’m some kinda...scientific *miracle*? What if--”

“Ranma, Ranma, slow down,” Ryoga said quickly, grabbing Ranma’s shoulders. “You’re starting to freak out.”

“Of *course* I’m freaking out!” Ranma cried, breaking out of Ryoga’s grip. “I don’t want a bunch of doctors all over me! I don’t want everybody in Japan to know that I’m pregnant. Hell, I still haven’t even told my own mother. I didn’t even want any of this in the first place, I mean--”

“You know,” Ryoga cut her off abruptly. “I don’t think it’s too late yet to... call it off.”

Ranma froze. The consideration strangely made her head stop whirling, and she was able to focus again. She took a deep breath.

“No,” she said solidly, shaking her head. “I told you already. I can’t do that.”

“Well then, you don’t have any other choice,” Ryoga said with finality. “You need to find a doctor.”

Ranma’s lips were pressed together so tight her lips were white, but she nodded slowly in agreement.
A while later, Ranma and Ryoga had changed clothes and were getting ready to head out and find a clinic. Ryoga found Ranma in the kitchen, standing in front of the telephone on the wall. Ranma glanced over, saw Ryoga’s questioning look, then looked back at the phone.

“I was thinking about calling Ma,” she explained quietly.

“Oh,” Ryoga said, not sure what else to say.

“She’s the only one who doesn’t know yet,” Ranma went on. “Unless Pops already went an’ told her. But I doubt it.”

“If it’s any consolation, it’s not like she knows where I live,” Ryoga said. “So even if she did want to stab you, she wouldn’t be able to find you.”

Despite herself, Ranma chuckled. “Y’know, that actually did kinda help,” she muttered. Then, she sighed softly.

“You already got through this once before,” Ryoga said. “You can do it.”

Ranma nodded. If she didn’t do it now, she’d lose her nerve.

She picked up the phone, and punched in the number quickly before her brain shut down. Her heart fluttered faster with every ring on the other end. Her heart stopped completely when the ringing stopped with a click.

“Hello?”

“Hi, okaa-san,” Ranma forced out, gripping the receiver tightly. Her eyes flicked over to Ryoga again, who was leaning on the doorframe waiting.

“Oh, Ranma! How nice of you to call. It’s been so long since you came to visit.” Nodoka said happily. There was a short pause. “Your voice, um...are you a girl right now?”


“You sound upset. Did something happen?” Nodoka’s voice instantly became worried. “What’s wrong, dear?”

Ranma bit her lip, and looked over at Ryoga again. Their eyes met this time, and hers were begging him for help. He simply nodded his head once at her, his expression firm.

Just get it over with.

Ranma shut her eyes tightly. “I’m pregnant.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. Ranma waited, not breathing. Ranma cracked open one eye, peeking at Ryoga who was watching her intently.

“Oh!” Nodoka suddenly cried, making Ranma jump. “You and Akane-chan are pregnant? Oh, Ranma, I’m...oh my goodness, it is still a little early I’d say, and you haven’t even gotten married yet, but I guess this means that—”

“No, no, okaa-san,” Ranma said quickly. “Akane’s not pregnant.”
Nodoka went quiet again. “...Oh?”

“Yeah.”

“Then...what...”

“I’m pregnant, okaa-san,” Ranma said. She paused for a moment, thinking it over. She may as well get everything off the table while she had Nodoka on the phone. “And...I’m not marrying Akane. I called off the engagement. And I moved outta the Tendos.”

Wow. Was she trying to give her mother a heart attack? She was literally the worst son ever.

The line was completely silent.

“Okaa-san?”

“Oh...” Nodoka whispered finally, so soft Ranma strained to hear her. “Oh...”

“Okaa-san, I--”

“Who?”

“...Sorry?”

“The father. Who is the father.” Her voice didn’t say it like a question.

Ranma suppressed a groan. Why was that always everyone’s first question? Ranma suddenly realized that Ryoga had never met her mother. Her mother would have no clue who Ryoga was. Ranma felt like groaning again. This was just getting worse and worse.

“Uh...you’ve...never met him.” Ranma said stiffly. She looked at Ryoga again, who was beginning to look just as nervous as she was. "His name is Hibiki. Ryoga Hibiki."

“Oh,” Nodoka said yet again. “Is...is he...is he manly?”

Ranma almost dropped the receiver. “...Excuse me?”

“Is he strong? Handsome? Smart?” Nodoka began spitting out questions in rapid succession. Her voice pitched higher with each word, but the flattened inflection in her voice had vanished. She sound slightly anxious, but more so...excited.

“I...I mean, well--”

“Please, dear, this is very important.” Nodoka said quickly.

“Um...”

“I mean, these aren’t exactly ideal circumstances. And this certainly wasn’t how I expected to get a grandchild. But you already proved to me your prowess as a young man, dear. You were manly even in the body of a woman, and that’s why I was able to accept your circumstances. So...I can accept this, too, but...I must know if the...other father of my grandchild is as much of a man as you are.”

Ranma wasn’t exactly sure what to do with herself. She wanted to faint and burst out laughing all at once. She opened and closed her mouth several times, words stuck in her throat.
“Ranma?”

Finally, it dawned on her she’d have to convince her mother that Ryoga was *good husband material*, with Ryoga standing *right beside her*.

Her whirling, confused emotions settled decidedly on embarrassment.

“He’s...uh...” Ranma cleared her throat. “Um…”

“Yes?” Nodoka pressed eagerly.

“He’s...strong. Very strong.” Ranma began, swallowing a thick lump of clay down her throat. “He can break a boulder apart with just the tip of his finger.”

“Goodness, that is strong,” Nodoka breathed. “Go on.”

Ranma strained her brain. “Well, he’s pretty smart, I guess. He, uh...knows all of the constellations?” Dumb. Dumb. That was *so* dumb.

“Oh, my, that’s quite a feat.” Nodoka said. “Well, is he handsome?”

“Uh, y-yeah, sure...” Ranma mumbled, peeking at Ryoga again through her bangs as if she had to make sure. “Good...good genes, I’m sure.”

“Oh, wonderful.” Nodoka sighed, obviously contented. “I’m so excited for you, dear.”

“Uh, yeah...” Ranma said, blinking rapidly. She could hardly believe how well this had all went.

“So, have you registered yet?”

“Eh?”

“Have you not been to see a gynecologist yet?”

“A gyne--what now?”

“Well, you’ll have to go and register the pregnancy with the ward, first and foremost. After that you’ll get a *Mother and Child* handbook, your pregnancy badge--I still have mine around somewhere, you know how sentimental I am--you also get a coupon book to use at your appointments, and--”


“Well, in a sense. You bring the coupon book to your appointments at the hospital, and you get discounts--sometimes the appointments are even free.”

The elephant got off of Ranma’s chest and started doing a happy dance.

Discounts? *Free*?

“That’s...wow, that’s great!” Ranma was grinning again, so wide her cheeks were hurting. “I had no idea about any of that stuff. I was freakin’ out thinkin’ about how I was going to...okaa-san, you’re the best. Really. Thanks so much.”

“Oh, well, of course, dear...” Nodoka said softly, but Ranma could tell she was elated. “Any questions you have, just come to me. I’ve done it all myself before, obviously. And now I get to join
you in your experience. You’ve made me very happy.”

Ranma could feel herself starting to choke up. Her mother was the only one who could so easily yank on her heartstrings like this. “I gotta go now. Looks like I’ve suddenly got a lot of things to do.”

“Oh, yes. Please keep in touch, dear. I love hearing from you, and I’ll need to be kept up to date on all the latest news, of course.” Nodoka said. “I love you, darling.”

“I love you, too, okaa-san. So, so much. I’ll call you later.” Ranma hung up the receiver, and with that all the weight had finally left her body.

The elephant was off somewhere splashing itself happily with water. Ranma felt like all of her problems were being washed away. She looked over at Ryoga, who was staring at her in complete shock. She had the sudden urge to hug him, she was in such a good mood.

The peculiar mental image brought her down slightly from her high, and she restrained herself.

Chapter End Notes

Not a whole lot happening in this chapter, but also a quite a lot at the same time. At least where Ranma's inner monologue is concerned. Ranma has a tendency to overthink things, which will play a pretty significant role as the story progresses. There's just so many ways to land this boy into trouble. Bad for him, fun for me.
Ranma had spent too many afternoons running around town, usually with a few so-called fiancées on her tail. Or she’d be leaping over rooftops hunting down that old geezer Happosai during his daily panty raids. Or from Akane and one of her ruthless beatings after Ranma teased her or said something stupid without thinking. It wasn’t a cakewalk, but it was her life. You spend long enough doing one thing, and it’s bound to become trivial, no matter how ridiculous it appears. The ludicrous had been the mundane to her. Now, the mundane was ludicrous.

She’d been running all over the place that afternoon. First it was the trip to the town hall, signing this and that on so many different forms it made her head spin. She was given an armful of papers and booklets, and was suddenly very regretful about not bringing along a bag. It didn’t help that Ranma could have sworn the clerk had given her a disapproving look for being so ill-prepared. Ryoga helped to carry half of the booklets they’d acquired, while Ranma held on to their newly acquired coupon book, clutching to it like a life reserve.

It certainly didn’t look like any coupon book Kasumi brought home from the department store. It was just a thick, manila-coloured piece of paper with a bunch of boring words on it that may have been written in Chinese for all Ranma knew how to make heads or tails of it. The only reason she even knew that this was the coupon book was because the clerk at town hall had announced each thing as she put them onto the counter and Ranma scrambled to gather them and memorize what each thing was.

The pregnancy badge her mother had mentioned on the phone was like a keychain. It was a plastic white circle with a cutesy cartoon logo of a mother and baby looking smiley and peaceful on a pastel pink background, attached to a small beaded chain. It made Ranma want to barf just looking at the stupidly adorable picture. Since she had nowhere else to put the damn thing, it was hooked around one her jean’s belt loops, completely hidden beneath her t-shirt, which she was swimming in. Out of sight, out of mind.

Ranma still wasn’t thrilled about the idea of having to see a doctor other than Dr. Tofu, but she also didn’t want to cause a huge fuss and go on a wild goose chase all over Tokyo for the “perfect doctor”. Besides, if doctors’ appointments were going to be a regular thing, she didn’t want to waste
time traversing great distances if she could find a clinic near Ryoga’s house. Thankfully, the hospital was close to Ryoga’s neighbourhood, about a twenty-minute walk after they passed their old middle school.

There weren’t a lot of fences in the neighbourhood, just a lot of short cement walls surrounding the houses. When Ranma attempted to walk along one of the walls like she usually did, Ryoga pitched his first fit in days.

“Hey, get down from there!” Ryoga shouted, stopping all forward motion toward their destination to look up at Ranma with an alarmed, irritated expression.

“What’s your problem?” Ranma muttered.

“What the hell is wrong with the sidewalk?” Ryoga said strongly.

“I do this all the time. Ain’t cha heard of balance training?” Ranma said flippantly, raising an eyebrow and planting a hand on her hip.

“I’m aware of the reason, I’m just wondering what gave you the bright idea to jump up on a cement wall and start pretending it’s a damn tightrope.” Ryoga retorted.

“Never waste an opportunity,” Ranma said. “Everythin’ is training.”

“Not everything.”

“That’s not somethin’ I wanna hear from the guy who claims to be my ‘rival’, Ryoga.” Ranma squatted down on the wall, placed her palms at her center and lifted her legs into the air outstretched in a split. Ryoga’s eyes bulged.

“Stop that!” he cried. “Get down from there right now!”

“What’s the big deal, Mister P? You’ve seen me do this all the time, it’s not like I’m gonna fall.” Ranma said the word like it was an absolute impossibility.

“Will you stop being so moronic and get down?!” Ryoga barked. “Or I’ll break that damn wall from under your feet!”

Ranma curled her legs back in, placed them firmly on the wall and stood upright. Taking one final, high-nosed look down at Ryoga, she lifted her hands into the air and front-flipped off the wall. Curled around in mid-air, she heard Ryoga make a loud, angry squawk from the ground below. She landed solidly, not on her feet, but in Ryoga’s arms. Booklets and flyers scattered the ground, loose papers fluttered through the air around them, all abandoned by Ryoga who’d emptied his arms to catch Ranma before she landed. Ranma stared at Ryoga in dumb shock, looking incredulously up at Ryoga’s face which was plastered with a deep frown.

“Put me down!” Ranma bellowed, emphasizing each word sharply as she kicked out her legs like she was swimming backstroke. Ryoga’s grip on her was tight and firm, however, and she couldn’t budge.

“If you’re trying to piss me off,” Ryoga grated. “you’re well on your goddamn way.”

“I’m not doin’ anythin’ that’d piss you off!” Ranma barked back. “What is your deal?”

“My deal is that you’re pregnant and you’re doing front flips off of cement walls like it’s ordinary,” Ryoga said. “Have you ever seen a pregnant woman do front flips?”
“Well, I ain’t ordinary and I sure as heck ain’t a woman!” Ranma started to frantically kick out her legs again even though it was in vain.

“Well, you are pregnant.” Ryoga said tightly.

“Tell me somethin’ I don’t know, why don’t ya?”

“No matter your normal physical abilities, you can’t just go doing cartwheels and tightroping along walls when you’re expecting a child.” Ryoga said. “You could hurt the baby, and yourself.”

“Didn’t I tell you I’d kick your teeth in if you ever started treating me like a helpless maiden?” Ranma snapped. “And besides, it ain’t even the size of a thumb tack yet, an’ it’s not like I’ve got some giant belly yet either, so what’s the--”

Ranma suddenly found it very difficult to speak, for Ryoga had plastered her lips shut with his own. After a moment, he pulled away slowly, seeming to wait for a moment to see if she would speak or lash out again. Ranma could only stare, her eyes huge, her mouth parted.

“You are insufferable.” Ryoga whispered.

Ranma opened her mouth wider, but no words would surface at first. She struggled for a moment, and slowly the words cracked out of her mouth.

“I...I don’t need protecting.” she croaked.

“I know you don’t,” Ryoga said quietly. “But you can’t blame me for wanting to try.”

Ranma felt her chest constrict again. Heart palpitations were a pregnancy symptom, right? Right.

“Put me down already,” she grumbled. “I just wanna get this doctor thing over and done with. Plus you dropped all those damn papers.”

Ryoga obeyed, setting Ranma back down on her feet. Ranma knelt down and began collecting the papers quickly. She stood upright, and glared at the mess in her arms.

“You dolt,” she said irritably. “If you’d just let me jump on my own…”

“Let me see,” Ryoga said, reaching his hand out for the papers. “I’ll try and get them organized.”

Ranma slapped the papers onto Ryoga’s chest. “Knock yourself out.”

Ranma brushed past him and continued down the street. Ryoga sighed, trying to shuffle around the papers into a neat pile as he tried to catch up to Ranma. That was proving to be even more difficult than expected. Ranma was very fast when she wanted to be.

Ryoga spent the rest of the walk to the clinic walking behind Ranma, wondering how someone so much shorter than him could beat his stride.

When they arrived at the clinic, Ranma had to stand at the front desk and awkwardly shuffle through the pile of papers to find the coupon book and *Mother and Child* handbook. Ranma didn’t have a clinic card, so she had to fill out a form with all her personal information and health history, which
took way longer than she had the patience for. Then the receptionist checked the coupon book for the appropriate coupon for their appointment. The receptionist went into a drawer and came back up and placed a small cup on the desk in front of Ranma.

Ranma suppressed a groan as she glared at the small plastic cup with the orange lid, knowing all too well it’s desired purpose. Begrudgingly she snatched the cup and stormed off to the bathroom. She returned to the waiting room and flopped down noisily into the chair beside Ryoga, who was reading one of the many pamphlets they’d been given at the town hall. Ryoga was about to give Ranma a swift kick for jittering her leg wildly while they waited, when the nurse called out her name. They both quickly got to their feet and walked over to the nurse, who brought them into the examination room.

Ryoga sat in a stool away from the action while Ranma had her blood pressure and weight taken. Then they measured around her abdomen, while Ranma looked up at the ceiling and pretended to be somewhere else.

“The doctor will be with you shortly,” said the nurse finally. She turned around to look at Ryoga. “If you’ll come with me, sir, so Saotome-san can change…”

Ryoga raised his eyebrows in surprise, but obligingly rose from his seat. “Uh, sure…”

“Wait a minute,” Ranma called out, a slight waver in her voice. “What do you mean, ‘change’?”

“The doctor will be examining your pelvis,” explained the nurse. She opened a cupboard and walked over to Ranma and handled her a bundle of cloth. “Change into this, and then wait for the doctor. He’ll help you into the stirrups.”

“Stirrups?” Ranma echoed, looking down the bundle in her arms. Now she was even more confused.

The nurse gestured to the setup in the corner of the room. It was a blue chair with mechanical, metal attachments. Ranma stared at the weird chair, and suddenly felt like a prisoner on death row. When she turned back around, the nurse and Ryoga had already left. Ranma looked back down at the bundle in her arms, and opened it up. It was a backless hospital gown.

Ranma didn’t suppress her groan this time.

Ryoga was back out in the waiting room. He’d been told he could go back in after Ranma was finished with the pelvic exam. He busied himself reading through the pamphlets, but he found himself reading only half of the sentences, and some several times over and over. Ryoga sighed, crossing his legs and flicking out the pamphlet with frustration, trying to concentrate.

Suddenly, all concentration flew out the window as a blood-curdling scream nearly shattered all the windows in the building and made Ryoga leap out of his skin. The receptionist jumped to her feet, her face alarmed. Everyone in the waiting room were murmuring among themselves worriedly.

There was another high scream. This scream drew out, and started to grow louder. Then, Ranma burst into the waiting room, screaming bloody murder and still dressed in the hospital gown. Everyone collectively gasped, and the distraught receptionist hurried around the desk toward Ranma. Ryoga jumped to his feet, mouth agape.
The doctor rushed into the waiting room, wide-eyed and gasping for air. Ranma completely ignored the receptionist trying to subdue her and whirled around and jabbed an accusing finger at the doctor.

“STAY AWAY FROM ME!” she hollered.

“Saotome-san, please--!” the receptionist cried.

“You call yourself a doctor? What the hell are you trying to do to me?!” Ranma bellowed, completely ignoring the poor receptionist. “You screwed with the wrong guy, doc!"

“What the hell is going on?” Ryoga exclaimed, hurrying over to Ranma. “What happened in there?”

The doctor looked like he was in a pressure cooker being slowly boiled alive. “I-I was merely trying to perform a simple pelvic exam. I didn’t do anything that--”

“Like hell you didn’t!” Ranma snapped.

“Please, miss, your--um...your gown is…” the receptionist stammered, looking like she was ready to cry.

“Saotome-san, if you’ll just come back to the exam room…” the doctor began.

“I ain’t going back in there with you!” Ranma said incredulously, her eyes wide.

The doctor looked over at Ryoga. “You there. Are you with her?”

“Y-Yes…” Ryoga said sheepishly. Ranma didn’t seem to care that she was standing in the middle of the waiting room, her bare backside facing the rest of the other waiting patients. Ryoga, however, was embarrassed enough for the both of them.

The doctor sighed, with a mix of frustration and relief. “Perhaps if you accompany the young lady, she’ll feel less uncomfortable.”

“Sure. If that’ll help…” Ryoga looked over at Ranma apprehensively. He placed a hand on Ranma’s shoulder. She tensed instantly, but slackened just a little when she realized it was Ryoga who had touched her. “Come on, Ranma.”

Ranma looked over at Ryoga, her eyes squeezed into thin slits as she glared at him in betrayal. Then she scoffed, and smacked his hand off his shoulder.

“Fine,” she grumbled quietly.

The doctor lead the two back down the hall and into the examination room. Ryoga saw the doctor close and lock the door behind them.

Smart man, Ryoga thought. But unlike Ryoga, the doctor didn’t know Ranma could easily shatter that door, locked or not, into splinters.

“Now, Saotome-san, if you’ll please situate yourself back in the chair…” the doctor said.

Ranma looked like she was ready to go on a killing spree, but she got up onto the chair and folded her arms tightly in front of her chest. The doctor walked over and reached for her ankle.

“Alright, let’s get your legs back up…”

Ranma swung up her foot, batting the doctors hand away. “Don’t. I can do it myself.”
She stuck her legs back onto the stirrups one at a time, arms still crossed. The doctor’s brow was as furrowed as it was back in the waiting room. He stood back and let Ranma do things on her own. The doctor washed up, and then sat down on a stool in front of Ranma’s parted legs.

He looked over his shoulder at Ryoga. “Pull up a stool beside Saotome-san.” he instructed.

Ryoga grabbed a stool and put it down beside the stirrup chair. He sat down and looked up at Ranma. Under the bright lights, he could see that her face was flushed dark red from anger and embarrassment. Ryoga really couldn’t blame her, when she was being forced to sit in that awkward chair, her legs hanging up in the air with her nether regions completely exposed to a doctor she wasn’t happy with. Ranma wasn’t looking at Ryoga or the doctor. She was looking up at the ceiling again, her fingers drumming impatiently against her arm.

“How, if you can relax, this will go very easily.” the doctor told her. “I can’t get a proper sample if you tense up. Or run away.”

Ryoga couldn’t help but stare at the strange metal object the doctor picked up. It looked like a pair of tongs. “What is this for, doctor?” Ryoga asked curiously.

“This is a Pap smear. It’s just a rudimentary procedure to screen for cervical cancer or sexually-transmitted diseases.” the doctor explained. “Alright now, Saotome-san, relax…”

“And, what other procedures can we expect today?” Ryoga wanted to be sure he was prepared so there wouldn’t be another outburst.

“After this is a bimanual internal exam,” the doctor went on. “that will determine the size of the uterus and pelvis, and check for anything that might be abnormal.”

“I see,” Ryoga didn’t like the sound of ‘internal’. “And, how is that preformed? With that same tool there?”

“No, it’s manual exam. I’ll be using my hands.” the doctor explained.

He didn’t like the sound of ‘hands’, either. Ryoga glanced worriedly at Ranma. Apparently neither did she. Her jaw was clenched tight, her fingers were drumming even faster on her arm. Down in front of her legs, the doctor shifted, and Ranma winced in time with his movements. Ryoga cringed. He didn’t have to look to know what was going on down there.

“After that’s done, we’ll do an ultrasound.” the doctor removed the weird tongs, and Ryoga saw Ranma’s shoulders lower. He hadn’t even noticed they’d been up by her ears. “We’ll be doing an ultrasound at every appointment after this, so you can expect those in the future. Then we’ll do a blood test. We’ll be doing another blood test at the third trimester, as well. Finally we’ll have some time to discuss any other questions the two of you may have.”

Ryoga nodded slowly. “Alright.”

“Alright, Saotome-san, nearly done. I’ll just measure the size of your uterus and pelvis, then we can move on to the ultrasound.”

Ranma’s shoulders seized back up again while the doctor performed the bimanual internal exam. She’d been flushed this entire time, but now her face was completely beet red. Just when Ranma looked like she was about to fly off the chair and try escaping the room again, and Ryoga was wondering to himself if he’d be able to tackle her down before she did, the doctor announced they were finished.
“Now, you can get your legs down and then you can lie down on the bed over here,” the doctor said, nodding his head toward a bed beside what looked like a large computer.

Ryoga watched on while Ranma lay down on the bed. The doctor asked her to lift her gown, and with a scowl that had yet to leave her face, she obeyed. The doctor laid a towel across Ranma’s hips, so only her belly was exposed. While the doctor got things prepared, Ryoga kept his eyes on Ranma. She still looked uncomfortable even though she wasn’t in the stirrups anymore. Ryoga was starting to recognize this scene from the little amount of television he watched. The doctor turned down the lights. He came back over and squeezed out some thick, bluish goo onto Ranma’s midsection. Ranma’s brows raised, and her face finally softened and her body slackened.

“It’s warm,” she remarked.

The doctor hummed as he smoothed down the gel. “We keep it on a heater,” he explained.

“I thought it was supposed to be cold,” Ranma said. “I was all tensed up for it.”

Ryoga agreed silently. He’d seen many a pregnant women on the TV jump at the contact of this blue gel. The doctor chuckled for the first time all day, and it was just as surprising as hearing Ranma speak so calmly to the man she’d been screaming at only several minutes ago.

The screen on the large contraption beside the bed Ranma was laying in was lit up, and started warbling around as the doctor started to move his instrument around on Ranma’s gel-covered belly. Ryoga stared at the screen, strangely fascinated. Ranma wasn’t looking; she was looking up at the ceiling but she no longer looked like she was trying to pretend she was somewhere else. Her eyes were half-lidded and fluttered every so often.

The ultrasound lasted several minutes. The doctor spoke a few times, but Ryoga wasn’t paying attention. His eyes were beginning to warp the black and white blobs on the screen. All the white blobs merged together into a small ball, the size of a grape. It expanded and became misshapen, until suddenly it was the perfect silhouette of an infant, tucked in on itself and…

Snoring?

Ryoga looked away from the screen over at the bed, where Ranma was fast asleep, her mouth hung open wide as she snored loudly and her head lolled to the side. Ryoga heard the doctor chuckle again, and he looked down to see he was also watching Ranma sleep.

“Well,” the doctor said. “At least she’s finally calm.”

Later, Ranma and Ryoga were finally back at Ryoga’s house. The two both let out a long sigh of relief as they passed through the threshold and Shirokuro began to dance around their feet. Ryoga walked into the living room and flopped onto the couch, tossing all their papers down on the coffee table, happy to finally be rid of them after carrying them around all day. He suddenly became aware of the commotion coming from the kitchen, where Ranma had disappeared into as soon as they’d gotten home. Curious, Ryoga got back up and walked over to the kitchen.

Ranma was a flurry of activity. Ryoga walked over to the counter and looked around at all the ingredients Ranma had laid out. She was pouring flour into a container as she looked up at him.
“What…?” Ryoga began.

“What…?” Ryoga began. “I said I’d make them for lunch.”

“Lunch?” Ryoga looked over at the clock. “We’re a little past due for ‘lunch’.”

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“Yeah, and I’m *starving,*” Ranma explained. She cracked several eggs and separated the yolk from the whites, then poured the yolks into another container.

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“Do you want some help?” Ryoga asked. “We’ve been running around all day, and you’re still going. I’d feel bad if I let you do all this by yourself. It already looks pretty…involved.”

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Ranma shrugged. “It’s fine.”

“Ranma,” Ryoga reached over and touched Ranma’s arm, his fingers brushing onto the cotton pad taped onto the crook of her elbow. Ranma stopped moving and looked down at Ryoga’s hand.

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“Hey, watch it. That still smarts, y’know.”

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Ranma looked up and met Ryoga in the eye. She hadn’t been able to back at the hospital. In fact, she hadn’t looked him directly in the eye since she’d jumped off that wall. She knew she hadn’t been able to look at him at the hospital because she was slowly dying inside of embarrassment that he was watching her get…*felt up* by the doctor. So, why had she been unwilling to do so then?

Because it was the first time they’d kissed again since she’d left?

A jolting chill ran up Ranma’s arm from the tips of Ryoga’s fingers where he was gingerly touching her skin. Her whole body went cold, then numb, and every inch of her skin tingled. The tingling sensation was the most intense where Ryoga’s hand was, but there her skin was perfectly warm. It was relaxing, like the warmth of that ultrasound gel, but in a completely different way. Ryoga’s touch was very unlike the doctors. Ranma didn’t like the doctor’s touch, and Ranma was very certain she’d never enjoyed any other man’s touch, aside from Ryoga’s.

The dull sting in her elbow was gone. Ranma couldn’t feel the pain anymore. Ranma couldn’t feel anything anymore other than that pleasant tingling sensation running up and down her arms, up her back and neck and all over her head. Firecrackers popped inside her mind until she could only see stars.

“Hey,” Ryoga said suddenly. He gripped Ranma’s arm a little tighter. “Are you okay?”

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“What’s going on?” she muttered. “None of this makes any sense.”

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“I mean *look* at us!” Ranma cried suddenly, throwing her arm around gesturing to the kitchen they stood in. “I’m here cooking you dinner like I’m…” Ranma looked like she was about to choke, “…like I’m your *wife* or something. And…you’ve been nice to me. Like *stupidly* nice. The old you would have tried to kill me for causing such an uproar like I did in that waiting room today, but
instead you...you didn’t say or do anything.”

Ranma looked down at her arm, which Ryoga was still holding onto. She tugged her arm out of his grip and looked back up at him with a hard look in her eyes.

“What the hell is all this...domestic shit?”

Ryoga’s arm was still hovering in the air. Slowly, he lowered it to his side and his expression fell with it.

“I mean, just ‘cause you knocked me up doesn’t mean we’ve gotta act like we’re a couple,” Ranma said the word with terror, “I know you said you wanted a part in all this, and...after today...I don’t think I can do this on my own anymore.”

Despite himself, Ryoga’s eyes widened at this confession. It wasn’t like Ranma at all to admit that she needed other people. It’d clearly taken a lot out of Ranma to admit it, too, for she was blushing again.

“But...but just because you want to stick around don’t mean you and I gotta treat each other any different.” Ranma went on quickly, trying to dismiss her embarrassment. “Like I said, we aren’t a couple, so just ‘cause we live together, and eat together, and sleep in the same bed...and...and...”

Ranma slumped, and hung her head.

“Shit...” she mumbled.

A smile tugged at the corner of Ryoga’s lips.

“We’ve both been doing things that are pretty...out of the ordinary for us lately,” Ryoga said. “But...if I found anything wrong with it, I wouldn’t be doing it.”

Ranma lifted her head slowly, and looked up at Ryoga through her cherry-red bangs. Ryoga took a step forward and placed a hand on her shoulder, which was even tinier under his wide hand.

“We’re not acting the way we used to six years ago. We’re not even acting the same way we did a few weeks ago.” Ryoga went on. “Maybe we’re finally just...growing up.”

Ranma wrinkled her nose at that, and Ryoga laughed softly.

“Look, it’s not like either of can exactly...bail right now,” Ryoga awkwardly gestured down at Ranma’s stomach for emphasis, “So, if you can handle it, I can handle it.”

Ranma stared at Ryoga for a long moment. She seemed to catch herself and her eyes flickered away. She switched her weight to her other leg, pressed her hand onto the counter and drummed her fingers out of time. She pressed her lips together, she tugged her bottom lip through her teeth. She opened her mouth after a moment, then closed it again. Ryoga realized he couldn’t stop staring at Ranma’s mouth.

“I, uh...” Ranma began. Her eyes flickered back to Ryoga. “Th...thanks for coming with me today.”

Ryoga raised his eyebrows. He laughed again, and Ranma looked at him curiously.

Ryoga shook his head. “It’s just...you were so freaked out because I’ve been treating you nice, and you’re here thanking me. And meaning it.”

“Of course I mean it,” Ranma said incredulously. She pushed herself off the counter and leaned
“You saw me back there. I was a wreck. And it was just... I dunno, even though it was really goddamn weird havin’ you in that room with me it was also... really nice, too.”

Ryoga smiled. After a moment, Ranma smiled back.

They stared at one another for a while, before they both realized what they were doing. Ryoga cleared his throat.

“So,” Ryoga said, looking over at the array of items scattering the countertop, Ranma following his gaze. “You sure you don’t want any help with these croquettes?”

Ranma reached out and grasped onto Ryoga’s sleeve. “Ryoga...” she said slowly.

Ryoga looked down at Ranma. “Yes?”

Ranma whirled Ryoga around and shoved him towards the door with strength that didn’t surprise Ryoga in the slightest. He stumbled toward the door, then looked back over his shoulder at Ranma, his eyes wide.

She smirked. “I’ll let ya know when it’s ready.”

Ryoga stared at her. “Unbelievable,” he said. “You really don’t want me to know the secret to the recipe, do you?”

“They’re called Saotome Secret Croquettes,” Ranma grinned. “No Hibiki’s allowed.”

“Well, if you end up needing a hand, just--”

“Ryoga,” Ranma’s expression grew serious all of a sudden, and Ryoga fell silent.

Ranma’s next words came out so quietly Ryoga could barely tell what she said.

“Just...just let me do this for you, alright?”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this is late. I was working on a powerpoint all day yesterday, and then cleaning my room today. I didn't have any time to post this chapter!

I had ten chapters pre-written before I started posting this story online. I figured I'd be able to spit out the chapters while I leisurely posted a finished one every Saturday. I shouldn't have overestimated myself like that, because I'm an idiot and there's no way I'd be that productive. I only ended up writing this chapter and next week's chapter in all that time. And I started posting this online back in, what, January? Yeesh.

Let's just say I feel like this right about now:
http://www.michaelbransonsmith.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/spare-track.gif
A gold coin to a cat, a pearl to a pig

Chapter Summary

Ranma has a very confusing day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

12.

A gold coin to a cat, a pearl to a pig

She woke up to a pitch black room. She was lying down on something flat, and stiff. Her legs were laid out, spread apart, her ankles trapped in cold metal clamps. Her body felt heavy, like there was lead in her blood and bones. Maybe she’d just close her eyes and go back to sleep. So tired…

Ranma’s eyes fluttered closed. Then, a strange sensation caused her eyes to pop back open. Something was scratching...inside of her.

Ranma lurched upright, and a slicing heat tore through her like a knife. She cried out, thinking she really had been cut open. She stared down at her stomach, which was flat. She could see something move beneath her shirt, and she gasped at the sight as well as the sensation that went along with it. Ranma sat completely upright now, her hands gripping onto the edge of the table she was shackled to.

Sweat suddenly broke out all over her body, trickled down her face. Her insides were on fire, her stomach continued to lurch grotesquely as whatever was inside her desperately tried to get free. Her entire body was screaming at her to get this thing inside of her out.

She had to push.

Her nails dug into the table, her teeth gnashed together as she moaned coarsely with strain, until her mouth opened wide as she let out a drawn-out screech of agony. She felt like she was being grabbed by the hands and feet and being slowly ripped apart. She watched droplets of sweat and tears fly from her cheeks as she threw her head back and let out a piercing shriek.

Through the incredible burning, tearing sensation she could feel something wet and smooth sliding out of her. She paused for air, her breathing already ragged, her throat raw from screaming. She took a few quick breaths that came out in ragged bursts, bracing herself, then she pushed again. Her eyes rolled back in her head, stars exploded in her vision. Any minute now she’d black out, the pain was too much…

Suddenly, the burning lifted, and the tearing stopped. Her body was miraculously still in one piece and felt incredibly lighter, and she fell back against the table gasping for breath. She stayed like that, relishing in the cool touch of the table pressed against her back through her sweat-soaked shirt.
Ranma opened her eyes after a moment; something was wrong.

It was too quiet.

Slowly, she pushed herself upright again, and peered over her knees down at what she’d pushed from her womb. Her stomach twisted and her heart jumped as soon as her eyes laid sight upon a blood-soaked mound of fur curled up on the table. Ranma watched in horror as the gangly, hairy creature began to move. Then, it let out a strangled yowl that couldn’t belong to a human. It turned it’s head toward Ranma and stared at her with acid yellow, glowing eyes.

Her heart clenched in terror as Ranma finally realized what the blood-matted creature was.

It was a cat.

She burst awake into a room lit by sunbeams, still screaming.

Her cries cut out abruptly when she realized where she was, but her chest still heaved as her breaths came out in short, sporadic puffs. Something grasped onto her shoulder, and she let out a surprised yelp and whirled around. Her eyes quickly met Ryoga’s own.

“Are you alright?” Ryoga asked quickly, his voice wavering with apprehension.

Ranma could only imagine the look on her face, considering the look on Ryoga’s.

“I-I’m fine,” Ranma breathed raggedly. “Just a bad dream.”

Shirokuro, who had been laying in between the two, began to lick the back of Ranma’s hand, as if in comfort.

Maybe dogs really could smell fear, Ranma thought idly.

“You’re trembling,” Ryoga’s hand was still on her shoulder, and squeezed down tighter.

“It just...freaked me out, that’s all.” Ranma muttered. Ryoga’s hand moved down her arm, and then left. Ranma let out another shiver, but it wasn’t from the nightmare.

“You’re soaked in sweat,” Ryoga said. “That must have been a bad dream. Do you...wanna talk about it?”

Ranma quickly shook her head. “N-no...no,” she flipped the sheets off her quivering legs. “I’m gonna go wash up.”

“I...I could fill the bath for you, or...”

“I said I’m fine,” Ranma sighed. She climbed over Shirokuro and Ryoga’s legs and headed toward the door. Shirokuro bounded over Ryoga and off the bed, following Ranma. She opened the door and then paused, hovering in the entryway.

Ryoga sat up further in bed, watching Ranma’s back curiously. For some reason, her back seemed even tinier than normal all of a sudden. She looked over her shoulder, and her eyes looked shameful.
“Actually,” she said slowly, turning the rest of the way around. Her hands grasped the door frame; she traced down the small lines in the wood with her fingernail. “How about we both get a bath?”

Ryoga raised his eyebrows. “You sure?”

“Yeah, why not?” Ranma was still tracing the patterns in the wood, not looking at Ryoga. She shrugged her shoulders slightly. “Stone two birds.”

She didn’t want to be alone, but like hell if she was going to admit that out loud.

She was focusing very hard on not blinking more than she had to. She waited until her eyes stung and tiny tears began to prickle her eyes before she dared to blink. In the millisecond of blackness behind her eyelids she could see that cat’s glowing eyes.

“My bath is smaller than the one at the Tendo’s,” Ryoga said. “It’d be pretty tight with both of us in there.”

Ranma shrugged. “It’s just to soak, anyways. It won’t matter.”

Ryoga nodded vaguely. “That’s true…”

He pulled off the sheets and got out of bed. Shirokuro began to wag her tail rapidly as Ryoga approached. The two walked in silence downstairs and down the hall to the bathroom. Shirokuro obediently laid down outside the bathroom door while Ranma and Ryoga walked inside and closed the door. Ranma, eager to be rid of her sweat-soaked clothes, pulled off her shirt and boxers and tossed them into the hamper. She walked over to where the bathing supplies were laid out on the tiled floor beside the bath.

Ranma was already sitting on a stool and scrubbing mercilessly at her skin when Ryoga walked over. He turned on the tub and then sat down on another stool. Feeling his eyes on her, Ranma looked up and raised an eyebrow at the amused look on Ryoga’s face.

“What?” Ranma said rather snappishly, feeling strangely self-conscious all of a sudden.

“You weren’t sick when you woke up.” Ryoga remarked. “You’ve been sick every morning since you got here.”

Ranma scoffed. “Nightmare must’ve scared all the puke outta me,” she grumbled. “Least it was good for somethin’.”

“Still not going to tell me what your dream was about?” Ryoga asked.

Ranma splashed herself, shaking off her hair before standing up. “It was just a dumb nightmare. Drop it, already.”

Ranma’s eyebrow twitched. Looking down, she was unsurprised and unamused to discover that Ryoga was staring at her again. Her nose wrinkled in annoyance.

“What?”

“Your stomach,” Ryoga said, nodding his chin toward her abdomen.

Ranma’s heart skipped, and she looked down. Her usually perfectly flat, toned belly was beginning to show the tiniest signs of a baby bump. It was barely noticeable; to anyone else she wouldn’t be considered pregnant by any stretch of the imagination. The tiny lump was just starting to peek below
Ranma’s bellybutton, and were she not so muscular the bump probably wouldn’t be prominent at all. Her face twisted up in horror, the colour was drained from her face as if a giant mosquito had come and sucked her dry.

“Hey, what’s...” Ryoga’s eyes went wide at Ranma’s expression of pure terror. “I-it’s not that bad! I only just noticed it now. There’s no need to get upset.”

Ryoga gawked at Ranma, who looked on the edge of hysterics. Was Ranma really getting that worked up over a barely-there baby bump?

Ranma’s knees buckled beneath her, and she began to fall to the floor. Ryoga shot up from his stool and grabbed her shoulders. Ranma’s lashes fluttered rapidly, her eyes far away. They stood still for a moment, then Ranma steadied herself and stood upright. Ranma sighed, brushing away Ryoga’s hands and leaning down to shut off the running water. Ryoga watched as she stepped in and sank down into the water, closing her eyes.

Ryoga hadn’t bathed with Ranma since that first night back from the mountains. Seeing Ranma sink into the steaming hot water and not change back into her male form was surreal. Ryoga realized right at that moment that he hadn’t believed it was true until just now, finally seeing it for himself. Ranma wasn’t changing back. His body had, by some miracle or perhaps freaky Chinese magic, refracted the effects of the curse because it was preparing to carry a child.

Ryoga had been trying to mentally prepare himself for weeks now, and yet the weight of the same thought he’d been repeating over and over to himself finally pressed down on him. He thought his head may split open from the pressure. Ryoga willed the thought away before that could happen.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Ryoga asked.

“No, I’m not,” Ranma replied.

Ryoga waited, but she didn’t say anything more.

She looked over her shoulder. “Aren’t you getting in?”

Ryoga blinked. “I haven’t washed off yet.”

“Well, stop fussing over me and do it, then.”

Ryoga obeyed, sitting down on the stool and scrubbing down his arms and legs. He heard the water slosh as Ranma twisted around in the tub, facing him. She folded her arms on the edge of the tub and rested her chin on them, her eyes half-lidded, her expression finally peaceful.

“It’s December now, isn’t it?” Ranma asked quietly.

Ryoga looked up from his bathing. “That’s right.”

Ranma hummed absently.

Ryoga overturned the washbasin over his head. Ranma watched the soap suds run down his arms and onto the tiled floor, down the drain. Ryoga stood up and began stepping into the tub; Ranma scooted over while Ryoga sat down in the steaming water. Ranma turned herself around again and leaned her back against the tub, sinking lower into the water until the back of her neck was pressed into the curve of the tub’s ledge. The two’s legs kept bumping into each other; there was just enough room for the both of them to sit with their knees up.
“I wonder how far along you are now.” Ryoga said suddenly.

Ranma skimmed the surface of the water with her fingertips. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

“It was, what? Three or four weeks after our trip that you came back here...and now it’s...December 15th?” Ryoga counted off his fingers. “What weekend did we go up there? We came back on the 16th, Sunday night. And we went on that walk in the forest on the Saturday. Do you count from the moment of conception or...when the symptoms start? Or isn’t it when you miss your…” Ryoga finally trailed off and looked over at Ranma. “Do you...do that?”

“Do what?” Ranma asked, glancing at him from the corner of her eye.

“Um...menstruate.” Ryoga mumbled.

Ranma’s head whirled around, her eyes wide. Suddenly she shot up from the water and stared down at Ryoga, her face aghast and bewildered.

“Wha-what’d I say?” Ryoga said nervously, leaning away.

“I can’t believe you just asked me that!” she hollered. Her hands balled tightly into fists.

Ryoga held up his hands, as is to protect himself from an on-coming attack. And considering it was Ranma, it was good to be prepared for one.

“I...It was an honest question!”

“It was a stupid question!” Ranma barked back. Her face had begun to flush red, right up to her ears.

“Alright, relax!” Ryoga cried. “Look, I’m...I’m sorry, okay? Just calm down.”

“I am calm!” Ranma bellowed. She flopped back down into the tub, splashing water all over the place.

The two were silent as the water sloshed around noisily until it finally settled around them and was still.

“I guess it’s been long enough,” Ryoga muttered. “for the mood swings to start.”

Ranma swung her arm down and punched Ryoga on the shoulder, but he only started laughing.

“You’re an asshole,” Ranma grumbled. “I’m gettin’ out.”

“Hey,” Ryoga snatched Ranma’s hand as she stood up again. “Sorry, okay? Really. Come on, sit back down.”

Ranma pouted, but she acquiesced. They sat in silence again. Ryoga watched water droplets run down Ranma’s knees.

“I need to find a job,” Ryoga said finally. “I get some money from my parents in the mail every other week, but it’s usually just enough for some travel expenses and food.”

“Even if y’ found something, how would ya get there? You’d lose the job within a week from bein’ late all the time, and I’m pretty sure the whole ‘it was hard to find the place’ excuse will only work once.”

“Well I can’t just hang around with my thumb up my ass, can I?” Ryoga retorted. “I mean I’ll have a
“baby to support in nine months. I can’t do that on my parent’s allowance.”

“I’m just saying, you can’t find any work when you literally can’t find work.”

Ryoga looked over at Ranma the same time she looked at him, and they stared at each other with blank expressions, slowly blinking.

“So what do you suggest, smart guy?” Ryoga muttered.

“I don’t know,” Ranma said. “I just know that you can’t get lost on me.”

Later, Ranma and Ryoga were in the kitchen. Ranma was making rolled omelets while Ryoga was reading through the classifieds in the newspaper. Suddenly, the phone rang. Ryoga got up and answered the phone while Ranma watched curiously over her shoulder.

“Hello, Hibiki residence.” Ryoga greeted.

He looked over at Ranma suddenly, his face suddenly surprised. Ranma quirked her eyebrows at him.

“...Oh, hello, Kasumi-san.”

Ranma whirled around, and her and Ryoga’s wide eyes met. Ranma gesticulated wildly and Ryoga shrugged.

“I’m fine, thanks. Ranma? Yes, he’s here. Would you like to speak to him?” Ryoga looked up at Ranma held out the phone. Ranma quickly snatched it, mouthing at Ryoga to watch the omelets while she brought the receiver up to her mouth.

“Hey, Kasumi-san.” Ranma greeted, watching Ryoga walk over to the stove.

“Hello, Ranma-kun. Have you settled into Ryoga-kun’s house alright?” Kasumi asked, her voice liquid sugar and soft gossamer as always.

“Y-Yeah, I’m all unpacked and everything. I didn’t know you had Ryoga’s number.”

“Oh, well, I visited your mother the other day, and she gave it to me. She said you called her a while back and that you gave her the Hibiki’s number.”

Ranma blinked. “You visited my Mom?” she said incredulously.

“Did you get everything she told you to? The handbook, the discount booklet, the badge? Did you visit the doctor like she asked?” Kasumi spat out the questions in rapid succession. Ranma started having flashbacks to her conversation with her mother.

“Yeah...all of it, I got it. And I saw the doctor. Not exactly what I’d had in mind but...I survived.” she replied meekly. She hoped Kasumi wouldn’t ask for the details.

“It must be so relieving to have that dealt with. Anyway, Ranma-kun, I was calling to ask if you’d like to come out shopping with me today.”
“Shopping?” Ranma echoed, her voice slightly apprehensive. Her mother used to take her and Akane out shopping when she thought she was really a girl, and it was always an embarrassing scenario.

“Yes, I thought it’d be fun to look around for things for the baby.” Kasumi said happily.

“Uh, sure, I guess so…” It didn’t sound fun at all, but how could she ever say no to Kasumi?

“Wonderful! Well then, why don’t you meet me at...let’s say, eleven o’clock?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Then I’ll meet you at the Pand cafe in the Shopping Plaza at 11.”

Oh man, how long had it been since she’d had ice cream? “Great. See you then.”

“Got plans?” Ryoga asked as Ranma hung up the phone.

“Kasumi wants to go shopping,” Ranma explained. “She wants to meet at the cafe and then go look for...uh, supplies.”

“Oh?” Ryoga said. “I could lend you some cash?”

That would help her buy ice cream, but she tried not to seem eager. “Oh, you don’t have to…”

“Do you have money?” Ryoga asked, looking over at Ranma while he slid their omelets onto a plate.

“Considering my old man probably disowned me and hasn’t sent any care packages since I left,” Ranma muttered darkly. “I’m gonna have to lean toward the negative.”

“Exactly. So while we’ve got at least two unsuspecting parental figures who are fully willing to send us money, you’d best take advantage and buy a bag of diapers or...something else a baby would like.”

Right. Diapers. That’s exactly what she was going to buy with Ryoga’s parent’s money.

Ranma nodded slowly. “Something a baby would like.”

Infants liked ice cream, right? Of course.

Ranma arrived at the cafe several minutes early, and wasn’t surprised to see that Kasumi was already there, sipping on a cup of coffee. She smiled as Ranma walked up to the table where she was seated. They didn’t have a chance to speak, for as soon as Ranma sat down a young man in an apron hurried up to their table. Ranma recognized him; after all, she used to come to this cafe pretty frequently. From the goofy grin on the boy’s face, Ranma could see that he recognized her, too.

The boy set a glass of water with ice down in front of Ranma. “I haven’t seen you around here in a while,” the waiter said cheerfully, as if he were about to overflow with joy that his favourite customer had returned at last.

Ranma, having no shame when it came to the promise of free food, was not above flirting with the
waiter right in front of Kasumi. She put on her practised winning smile and opened her eyes wide, batting her lashes.

“I’ve been a little busy lately,” she said, her voice dripping with honey with the perfect hint of apology.

“I was beginning to worry you’d found some other cafe to visit,” the waiter said cheekily, giving her a flirtatious smile.

Ranma raised her eyebrows. Well, well. This guy had gained some confidence in her absence. He used to be putty in her hands, so easy to manipulate. She’d have to amp up her flirting game.

Ranma gazed at him in mock horror. “Oh, never. This place has the best parfaits in town,” Ranma flickered her lashes prettily. “I don’t go anywhere else.”

“Well, that’s a relief. It’d be a shame to lose such a, uh, loyal customer.” the waiter went on. He actually looked relieved, and Ranma had to fight the urge to snicker.

“No other server would hold a candle to you,” Ranma winked at him, and watched with malicious satisfaction as the boy’s face started to flush pink. Ranma put on her most sultry expression to deliver the final blow. “You always know exactly what I want.”

The waiter’s eyes bulged, and he looked about ready to burst. He cleared his throat awkwardly while he fished out his notepad and a pen.

“Wh-what can I get you, miss?” his voice cracked.

“Hmmm,” Ranma furrowed her brow and poked at her chin, contemplating. Then, her eyes flickered back to the waiter. “Surprise me.”

The waiter gulped. “S-sure.”

The boy dashed away, and as soon as he was out of earshot Ranma snorted and chuckled to herself, looking victorious. She picked up her glass of water and sipped it smugly. She glanced over the rim of her glass to see Kasumi smiling at her. She set down her drink, and her air of arrogance washed off as she began to look sheepish. She’d almost forgotten Kasumi was there, getting so caught up in her act.

“So, how have you been feeling?” Kasumi asked.

Ranma turned her cup around on the table, watching the ice cubes bump into each other. “Well, I wasn’t sick this morning, which is a first.”

“You’ve been sick every morning?” Kasumi asked, her voice pitying.

Ranma nodded. “Yup, without fail. Once in a while I don’t keep dinner down, either.”

“Oh, my. That doesn’t sound pleasant at all.”

“It’s not. An’ the only reason I wasn’t sick this morning was probably ‘cause I had a nightmare instead.” Ranma shuddered just at the thought of it.

“A nightmare?” Kasumi echoed worriedly. “What was it about?”

Ranma continued to stare at her melting ice cubes gloomily. “I can’t even think about it.” she muttered.
“Our dreams have a way of telling us things,” Kasumi said. “I read a book once about dreams and the subconscious mind. It was really fascinating. Dreams are our brain’s way of telling us things we may suppress while we’re awake. Maybe if you told me about the dream, I could help you figure out what your brain is trying to tell you.”

Ranma looked up slowly from her water. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt. If it meant no more nightmares, she’d do anything. Ranma took a deep breath while Kasumi waited.

“I...dreamed that I...that I...” Ranma was choking out the words. Her throat seemed to close tighter and tighter, as if her mind and her mouth were working together to keep her from saying the dreaded c-word.

“That you...?” Kasumi prodded patiently.

“That I...gave birth to a...a c-cat.” Ranma’s hands were quivering by the time she’d uttered the last word, her fingernails tinkling against the glass.

Kasumi’s hand raised up to her mouth in soft surprise, her lips formed a tiny O.

“Here you go, miss.” the waiter announced suddenly, causing Ranma to jump out of her skin.

Before her the waiter had set down a jumbo-sized glass dish filled to the brim with ice cream and fruit. Ranma recognized all of her favourite flavours. Mint chip, strawberry, cookies and cream, green tea, and pistachio. Separating each flavour was a layer of custard. On top of the layers of ice cream and custard were three full bananas, strawberries, kiwis, and mangos. There were three tall mountains of whipped cream, all topped with a perfect, bright red maraschino cherry and a feather-light drizzle of chocolate sauce.

Ranma’s mouth watered with lust.

“I hope I remembered everything,” the waiter said, not hiding his nervousness in the slightest. “This isn’t even on our menu. You once told me what all your favourites here were, so I just sort of...put it all together and invented something completely new. I would have named it after you, but I don’t think you ever told me what your name was...” The boy trailed off, his voice hopeful.

“It’s Ranma,” Ranma said automatically. She didn’t even think to lie about her name. Something made for her that was this beautiful deserved honesty.

“Ranma,” the waiter repeated, his voice laced with unsuppressed adoration as he tested the name on his tongue. “What a pretty name.”

Ranma couldn’t see how a name that meant “chaotic horse” could be called “pretty”, but she didn’t say that out loud. She hadn’t not paid for her ice cream yet.

Ranma tried to look bashful and flattered. “Thanks,” she said sweetly. “So, what’re you going to call this creation of yours, then?”

The waiter seemed to go deep into thought, obviously seriously mulling it over.

“How about...The Ranmalanche?” the boy suggested.

Ranma looked back at the monstrous parfait before her.

“Ranmalanche,” she repeated slowly.
The waiter laughed nervously. “It doesn’t exactly sound very pretty...it doesn’t do you justice. I’m not very creative, though, so…”

Ranma wasn’t listening. She was grinning. Ranmalanche. It sounded awesome.

“It makes you sound like you’re a whale, or something.” the boy went on, rambling now. “Which isn’t the case at all, of course. I mean...I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so beautiful--”

Ranma tuned out the boy as her mind suddenly drew up the mental image of her, carrying a giant, bloated belly. She was hunched over, clutching at her swollen stomach as if her tiny, feeble hands were all that was holding it and her entire body upright. Her skin was a dull, ashy gray, her red hair limp and matted. She groaned with strain, and her voice came out in a weak croak.

Heavy...so heavy...I’m so very tired...I can’t bear to go on...

“M-miss?”

The waiter’s fretful voice broke her from her thoughts, and her mental image vanished. Ranma looked up blearily at the waiter, who looked ready to faint.

“I-I’m sorry...I’m probably being too forward,” he said quickly. “I hope I didn’t upset you, miss. I-I just…”

“It’s fine,” Ranma cut the boy off. “I...I was just so distracted by how great this parfait looks, I completely zoned out.”

She shook off the last of her nerves, throwing back on her cute, flirty face like a mask.

“Silly me!” she cooed. “So, what were you saying?”

The waiter went bright red. “Oh...i-it was nothing. Nothing important. Please, enjoy, miss. Let me know if you need anything else.”

The waiter darted off before Ranma could say a word. She could see his ears going from red to purple as he disappeared into the kitchen.

*Geez, he’s more of a hopeless sap than Ryoga*, Ranma thought to herself.

Unphased, Ranma grabbed her spoon out of the bowl and eyed up her treat. She’d kept The Ranmalanche waiting long enough. She carefully selected her first bite, filling her spoon with the top layer of whipped cream, custard, strawberry ice cream, and a slice of mango. Popping the bite in one go into her mouth, a pleased shiver jittered up her spine.

She began to eat with the ravenous intent of a lion feasting on a gazelle. Within minutes, she’d guzzled the entire treat down and was scraping the bottom of the dish with her spoon to get every last remnant.

Once she was finished, she looked back up and once again realized she was still with Kasumi. She was so quiet it was easy to forget she was there, unlike her youngest sister, who always proclaimed her disgust at how Ranma wolfed down her food.

Ranma looked regretfully at her empty dish. “Sorry, Kasumi-san. I should’ve shared.”

“Oh, that’s alright. I’m more a fan of chocolate myself, anyways.” Kasumi said kindly, and Ranma knew she meant it.
“So, what do you think your dream was telling you?” Kasumi asked, changing the subject suddenly.

Ranma was now even more regretful for eating so quickly. At least she could have drawn out busying her mouth with something other than talking.

“I dunno. It didn’t make any sense,” Ranma muttered. “I was lying in a dark room, on a slab or something, and my feet were shackled down. And my stomach was flat, but something moved inside me, and then when I....pushed it out...I saw that it was…” Ranma trailed off, unable to utter the word again.

“I’ve heard some stories from the mothers who visit Tofu-sensei’s clinic about this sort of thing. They’ve talked before about strange dreams they had during pregnancy. Some of them even mentioned dreaming about giving birth to animals. But none of them mentioned a cat.” Kasumi said.

“What kind of animals did they have?” Ranma asked.

Kasumi thought back for a moment. “I think one of them said they gave birth to a jellyfish.” she said.

Ranma blinked owlishly. “The...stingers,” she murmured.

“Another of them said they had a litter of mice. Hundreds of them.”

“So, what does it mean?” Ranma asked intently.

“Well, I’d say that it’s like a ‘practise’ birth before the real thing,” Kasumi suggested. “Most of the time people have pets before they have children, so the animal in the dream would be a stand-in for the baby. It’s like the body preparing itself for the actual birth.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Ranma muttered, although she didn’t sound too convinced.

“My only question for you would be...why a cat?” Kasumi wondered. Ranma twitched at the sound of the word involuntarily. “Although, I guess you’ve never had a pet that could be a mental stand-in...so perhaps your brain conjured up the first animal it could think of. Cats are rather common, after all.”

“Yeah but, I...have a phobia of them,” Ranma never liked to admit this out loud, even though it was painfully obvious. “So, why would my mind chose my biggest fear?”

“Well, that’s obvious,” Kasumi said plainly. “Because you’re afraid.”

Ranma recoiled as if Kasumi had leaned across the table and spat in her face.

“Afraid?” she repeated in clear disgust.

“That would be the simplest explanation. You’re nervous about giving birth, about being a parent, and so your subconscious mind sensed that fear and...perhaps wanted you to face it. It personified the fear you’re feeling into the form of a cat, your phobia.” Kasumi explained. “Perhaps, it was your mind’s way of telling you that before your body can be ready to give birth to your child, you heart has to first.”

“My heart?” Ranma said softly, her hand rising slowly to touch her chest. She could feel her pulse racing beneath her fingertips. Kasumi’s words were reaching inside and touching her right at the core. It all made so much sense, she felt foolish for not realizing it for herself.

“You mentioned that in your dream, there were shackles around your legs.” Kasumi went on.
“Perhaps the shackles embodied your resentment of being trapped. You’re feeling tied down, and in
the dream you were literally being tied down.”

Ranma’s eyes were wide. She could recall, beneath the chilling fear, a sense of frustration from being
unable to move from the table, to run away from the bloodied cat.

Resentful.

She hadn’t even considered the word before. She knew she’d felt frustrated by her
circumstances...angry, even. But resentful? Towards whom? Towards Ryoga?

Towards the tiny life growing inside her?

Ranma’s hand moved down from her heart and towards her stomach. Her breath hitched when her
fingers felt the tiny bump forming below her belly button, surprised to see it was rock hard beneath
her touch. Not like a muscle, but like granite.

It was wrong to blame this little life in her belly. It was innocent. It wasn’t right to blame Ryoga,
either. He hadn’t meant for this to happen any more than she did. And he’d been the better man since
the beginning of all this. He’d taken her in and showed her nothing but patience and understanding.
He didn’t leave her alone. He’d never planned for this to happen, but he was at least trying to make it
work. He offered her so much, and she never once appreciated it.

If she was resentful towards anyone, it was only herself.

Kasumi rested her hands on Ranma’s suddenly. Ranma looked up, and Kasumi smiled warmly.

“Shall we go now?” Kasumi said gently.

Ranma nodded.

Ranma and Kasumi went to the department store just a few minutes down the road from the cafe in
the Shopping Plaza. They didn’t spend any time wandering around; Kasumi lead them straight to the
baby section. As they walked down the aisle, Ranma felt like the two walls on either side of her
would close in and she would be crushed beneath a pile of baby food jars.

Kasumi’s words from earlier had buzzed around in her brain ever since they’d left the cafe. Those
words continues to swim around as they walked down the aisle, which was starting to stretch and
warp around her. It seemed to expand forward into forever in a never-ending expanse of pastel
colours and strange, sweet plasticy smells.

Kasumi stopped to look at the collection of bibs on display, smiling to herself at the cartoon pictures
and cute phrases on the front of the bibs while Ranma grimaced.

“Oh, this one’s so sweet,” Kasumi said, picking one off the rack.

Ranma wasn’t listening. She felt like she couldn’t breathe. Suddenly she sped out of the aisle and
into turned into the next. Looking up, she was relieved to find nothing but shoes. She hunched over,
her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath.
“Ranma-kun?” Kasumi called out. She rounded the corner into the aisle Ranma stood in. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” Ranma gasped. “It was just...overwhelming.”

Kasumi patted Ranma’s back softly. Just then, a gut-wrenching wave crashed around in Ranma’s stomach, and she gulped. Kasumi leaned down, trying to see Ranma’s face.

“Ranma-kun, what’s wrong?”

“B-bathroom,” she managed to choke out, and started to rush from the aisle. Looking around frantically, she caught sight of the change rooms and, beside it, the bathrooms. She took off at a dead run, praying she’d make it in time.

She bust through the bathroom doors as hot acid built up in her throat. No time. She scurried over to the sink, her hand clasped tightly over her mouth. Collapsing against the sink, she let out a great heave. She groaned in misery. That parfait did not taste as good coming up. Neither was her breakfast, for that matter. She heaved over and over. When she was sick in the mornings, her stomach was usually fairly empty. She’d hurl once or twice and then it would be over. Now, with all the food in her system, her body convulsed again and again until she was gripping onto the edges of the sink dry-heaving. She twisted on the water, washing away the ghastly sight and smell.

“Um…”

Ranma jumped. She was really getting annoyed at how easy she was to scare nowadays.

She looked up to see a man gawking at her from several sinks away, obviously keeping his distance on purpose. Ranma’s heart dropped into her stomach as she finally realized she’d run into, for the way she looked right now, the wrong bathroom.

“Are...you okay?” the man asked tentatively. Ranma could tell that he was trying not to wrinkle his nose, because he was doing a bad job.

“S-sorry...I just ran in here without thinking and I…” Ranma pushed herself shakily up from the sink, and stumbled toward the door.

“Do you need any help? Are you sure you’re alright? You sounded pretty sick just now...I could take you to the hospital.” the man rushed forward and grasped Ranma’s elbow as she stumbled dangerously. “Are you here with...your boyfriend, or anything?”

Ranma looked up at the man incredulously. Was this guy seriously trying to pick her up after she’d just puked in a sink?

Ranma tore her arm out of the man’s grip. Or, at least, tried to. She more just weakly swung her arm, and his grip stayed firm. Ranma felt irritation boiling in her chest. Anger pushed away the swimming cloudiness in her mind. She willed her strength to return to her limbs, and she yanked her arm free.

“No, I’m not.” she said firmly.

“Oh, well, then...let me call us a cab, and I’ll take you to the hospital, okay? I’ll take care of you.” the guy stepped in front of her and took hold of her other arm. He pulled her closer. “You can lean on me if you’re having trouble walking.”

The stranger began to lead himself and Ranma toward the door, his arm around Ranma’s shoulders, holding her to his chest. Ranma’s feet fumbled clumsily on the tile floor as the man practically
dragged her under his arm.

“I’m fine,” Ranma protested. “Let me go.”

“Come on now, it’s all right. I’ll take care of you.”

Ranma did not like how he repeated that phrase again.

“I said no!” Ranma bellowed, breaking out of the man’s arm. She whirled around and shoved both her hands into the man’s chest, pushing him roughly backwards into the wall. He let out a breathless sound of pain as his spine and the back of his head smashed into the corner of the wall. Ranma rushed for the door.

“Fuck! What’s your problem!?” the man cried after her.

Ranma shoved the bathroom door open and took off, as if in fear the man would come after her. She twisted down a random aisle, nearly tripping. She caught herself on the shelving, breathless as if she’d been running for miles. Her throat let out a strange sound, a short sob of relief as she crumpled to the floor. She knocked something astray from the shelf, and looked up through her bangs.

Laying askew on the tile floor were a pair of shoes. They were orange and white, with little yellow stars on the ankles. Ranma stared at the shoes, her eyes unblinking.

“Oh, there you are!” Kasumi’s anxious cry called out. “Are you alright?”

Ranma’s mouth hung open, but no words came forth. She reached out with trembling fingers and touched one of the shoes.

“Did you find something?” Kasumi asked slowly.

Ranma pulled the shoe towards her, and the other followed, the pair tied together by the white laces.

“The tiniest shoes,” she whispered. “I have ever seen.”

Kasumi walked in front of Ranma and cried out. “Oh, how adorable!”

Ranma continued to stare down at the puny shoes. How could something even be that tiny? Had she been this small once? Did her mother still have a pair of shoes from when she was this unbelievably miniature? She stuck a quivering thumb into one of the shoes. A weird, strangled giggle burst out of her throat. She had very small hands as a girl, but even her short little thumb was too big to fit inside the shoe.

“What a nice colour,” Kasumi said. “Would you like to get them?”

Ranma nodded her head slowly.

Kasumi offered out her hand, and Ranma accepted it. Helping her stand, the two headed toward the front of the store, Ranma clutching the shoes in a vice grip against her chest.

The sun was setting and casted a bright red beam through the living room window. Shirokuro lay in the small patch of sun, her eyes half-lidded. Ryoga was on the couch reading the Mother and Child
handbook when he heard the front door open and close.

“I’m back,” Ranma called, walking into the living room.

Shirokuro bounced up and danced over to Ranma, wagging her tail at top speed. Ranma greeted the dog under her breath, brushing past her and setting down a small plastic bag on the coffee table. Ryoga set down the handbook and raised a speculative eyebrow at the bag.

“That doesn’t look like a bag of diapers,” he said.

Ranma shoved her hand inside the bag. “I didn’t get diapers.” she said simply.

Ryoga stared at the little orange shoes Ranma dangled in the air, hanging off her finger by the shoelaces.

“Oh,” was all Ryoga said.

Ranma bit her lip, her excitement evaporating suddenly. “I should have gotten diapers, shouldn’t I? I guess those are more important than…sneakers. Hell, these will probably be too big for who-knows how long, anyways…”

Ryoga looked over at Ranma’s face, which had gone from elated to regretful in seconds. She began putting the shoes back into the bag.

“I can return them tomorrow. I still have the receipt, so…”

Ryoga stood up and grasped her wrists, stopping her. Ranma looked up at him, confused.

“You don’t have to return them,” Ryoga said quietly.

“But what about--”

“We have nine months to worry about buying diapers,” Ryoga cut her off. “Don’t worry about it. Besides…” Ryoga trailed off as he took the shoes out of Ranma’s hand. “These are pretty cute.”

Ranma looked up at Ryoga, watching his eyes soften with warmth as he looked down at the little shoes. It dawned on her suddenly that today had been the first day she’d gone out in public without Ryoga with her, and that she hadn’t realized how much she wanted to be back under this roof until she finally was.

Her words from that morning in the bath wafted into her mind.

_I just know that you can’t get lost on me._

Those words felt more true now than they had earlier that day. After seeing what a day without Ryoga was like, Ranma became gripped with an anxiety greater than all the rest that had been hovering over her head like an ominous raincloud. She’d been so irritated lately, but she was something even more so when she was not in Ryoga’s company. Something about Ryoga’s presence made all of this craziness seem slightly more bearable.

_I guess misery loves company._

Ranma wasn’t sure if that phrase entirely fit. Were they really miserable? Was Ryoga miserable being around her? In the past, Ranma would have answered that instantly with an iron-clad yes. Now, she wasn’t so sure. Ryoga didn’t seem as depressed as he had all those years ago. Ryoga wasn’t the same angry boy she’d met in middle school; Ranma was a little ashamed to have not
realized it sooner. Was she really so clueless, so closed-off to the feelings of the people in her life?

After seeing Kasumi today, Ranma realized that she’d been so engrossed in her own negative feelings that everything around her seemed awful and that everyone in contact with her must feel as terrible as she did. She resented herself for getting herself and everyone else into this mess, and she assumed that Ryoga must resent her, as well. But Ryoga always wore his heart on his sleeve, his emotions were always plain to see. If he really resented her, if he were truly miserable, he would have said so.

Right?

Ranma pushed the thoughts from her head quickly. She was just thinking about all of this too much.

She realized then that she’d been staring at Ryoga while she’d floated off with her reverie. He hadn’t noticed yet, he was still examining the shoes. A tiny smile tugged at the corner of Ryoga’s lips, and Ranma looked down to see him trying to put his thumb into one of the shoes just like she’d done at the store. His hands were much larger than hers; less than half of his thumb went into the shoe before it would go no further. Ryoga chuckled softly, and Ranma felt all her bones turn to slush.

That same urge from several days ago, when she’d gotten off the phone with her mother, washed over her yet again. This time it was even more powerful, so much so that she couldn’t control her body anymore.

Ranma threw her arms around Ryoga’s neck and pulled him into a hug. Ryoga tightened in her arms, and she heard the little shoes tumble onto the carpet. As quickly as the sensation had overwhelmed her senses, it left. Ranma broke away and jumped backward, holding up her hands, her eyes wide.

“Uh, s-sorry!” she blurted.

Ryoga stared at her. His eyes looked like they would pop out of his head.

“It’s just...that I, uh…” Ranma fumbled over her words, tripping over Shirokuro as she backed towards the entryway. “I just wanted you t’ know that I...appreciate...you.”

Ryoga finally blinked. “What?”

“I have been...all over the place ever since I got here. I’m fine, an’ then I’m not. Hot an’ cold. An’ anyone else shoulda beat my head in by now...I know I would have...but you haven’t.” Ranma sighed deeply. “So...thanks for that.”

Ryoga blinked several more times rapidly. “You’re...thanking me for not beating you up?”

“Yes. No! I don’t know,” Ranma groaned, holding her head in her hands. “This day has been so damn confusing. First it was that freaky nightmare, and then I saw myself lookin’ like a whale, my skin all gray with this huge, huge belly. Then Kasumi told me my subconscious is tellin’ me shit, an’ then I threw up in the wrong bathroom and all these guys were hitting on me...an’ this creep tried to take me to the hospital but the way he sounded it was more like he had a dark alleyway in mind, an’ then…” Ranma stared down at the carpet, at the shoes Shirokuro was sniffing at. A crooked smile brushed across her lips as she walked back toward Ryoga. “Then, I find these...teeny, tiny shoes…”

Ranma knelt down and picked up the shoes. “An’ the first thing I thought of was you.”

Ryoga gazed at her. His eyes were large, but held the same warmth as before. His mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. Words stuck in his throat and wouldn’t surface.
“So I got to thinkin’...that I’ve been spending so much time moping around feelin’ sorry for myself, that I never looked up an’ saw what you’ve been doin’ for me all this time. So yeah, thanks for not beatin’ me up. But thanks for beatin’ me up when I deserve it, when I need to get my head busted to understand. Thanks for always sticking around. You kept gettin’ lost but...you’d always find your way back somehow. You’ve always been there for me, even before all of this. So...thanks. Thanks for bein’ my friend.”

“Ranma...” Ryoga murmured, still frozen with shock.

“Sorry I never said all this to ya sooner,” Ranma said. “I’ve been so wrapped up in my own bullshit, I couldn’t appreciate anythin’ you were doin’ for me. But I see it all now, an’ I’m grateful. So...” Ranma’s voice grew smaller as her embarrassment finally caught up to her. “Yeah.”

The two were quiet. Shirokuro looked back and forth between them, looking curious.

“Can you...” Ryoga began suddenly. “Cook dinner again tonight?”


Ryoga shrugged. “Everything you make is...good.” he mumbled.

They both stared at the carpet. Shirokuro looked down and sniffed, wondering what they were looking at.

“Maybe you could...make your croquettes again?” Ryoga suggested.

Ranma raised her eyebrows. “I just made those a few days ago.”

“Well, they were really good,” Ryoga said quietly, twiddling his thumbs. “Delicious, actually.”

“Oh?” Ranma watched Ryoga’s thumbs quicken their little dance.

He’d never done this in front of her before, this open show of embarrassment. But she had seen him do this before. But where?

“Your croquettes are amazing.” Ryoga said. Ranma couldn’t tell whether it was from the light of the sunset outside, or if Ryoga’s face really was as red as it looked.

Ranma suddenly thought back to the waiter in the cafe, and the man in the bathroom.

*What a pretty name.*

*I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so beautiful.*

*I’ll take care of you.*

The words were empty, as void of all meaning as a blank canvas. Their words didn’t stir up anything inside her, except maybe discomfort. She did not want to hear those kinds of things from men like that, who only saw her in the form she was stuck in for the next nine months. They didn’t know her. They only saw her as an object, something *pretty* and to be *taken care of*.

*Your croquettes are amazing.*

Those words made her chest feel as though it were swelling, and then it would suddenly constrict. But the sensation wasn’t painful. Ranma had felt this feeling in her chest several times before, and never knew what it meant. What was it about those simple words that had her breath hitching in her
throat, her heartbeat flickering? When had it become such wonderful news to hear that Ryoga enjoyed her cooking? It's not like they were *engaged*.

It was then that Ranma suddenly remembered when she’d seen Ryoga twiddle his thumbs like that before. Or rather, with whom.

It was every single time he was around Akane.

Ranma twisted around on her heel abruptly, and Ryoga looked up curiously.

“You know,” she said haughtily. “You can flatter me all you want, Hibiki, but I still ain’t tellin’ you how I make my Saotome Special Croquettes.”

Behind her, she heard Ryoga chuckle.

“My heart bleeds,” he said lightly. “You wound me, Saotome.”

Ranma was beginning to think it was the other way around.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for another delayed Sunday update, I went to Toronto yesterday early in the morning to go to ComicCon, and was way too exhausted from walking the convention hall all day to remember to post this week’s chapter. I did buy a pair of Deathly Hallows stud earrings, and a ring with the same symbol, but it didn't fit when I got home. I must have been bloated, or something. Rats!

Anyways, enough about me. With this marks the last chapter I had pre-prepared. From here on it'll be Crunch Time for me, working week-to-week to hopefully have a new chapter for you every Saturday, to stay true to the schedule I've made for this fic. I won't make any bloated promises, I know myself well enough by now to not make that mistake. I'll try my very best to get chapters for you folks but I'm a busy young lady--I go to college, and I'm currently in the midst of looking for a job. And between that I attempt to have a social life. You know, the usual excuses every fic writer gives.

But don't worry! I'm having a lot of fun writing this story and I'll do my best.
Ranma and Ryoga were in the backyard. Although it was early morning and the air was icy cold, the two were dressed in loose workout clothes, their arms bare. Ryoga was doing squats while Ranma lifted weights. As she mindlessly lifted the weights back and forth in each hand, her head moving with Ryoga as he stood up straight and squatted low to the grass with perfect form, a frown painted Ranma’s features.

“My answer is still no.”

“Why not?” she asked irritably.

“Because,” Ryoga said, his voice neither strained by his movements or giving any indication that he was irritated. Rather, he just sounded bored. “I’ve read all the pamphlets and what you are asking of me is strictly forbidden.”

Ranma rolled her eyes at his choice of words. “Be that as it may, I can’t just allow myself to get weak an’ sloppy.” she said. “And neither should you, bein’ my ‘rival’.”

Ryoga went from regular squats into jumping squats. “I told you that it was okay for you to exercise— in fact, it’s excellent. But there are limitations that you’re just going to have to deal with. I even said I’d dial back my own training so you wouldn’t get left in the dust. At least, not completely.”

“Wow, that makes me feel so much better.” Ranma snapped.

“Just suck it up. It’s not the end of the world,” Ryoga said. “You just have to give up your professional career as a monkey for nine months. Poor you.”

Ranma scrunched up her nose. Ever since the whole fiasco with Herb, she couldn’t stand being compared to a monkey. She said nothing however, placing her weights on the ground and standing up straight, stretching her arms.

“It sure is getting cold out here,” Ranma grumbled as she eyed up the cloudy grey sky. “It looks like it might even snow.”

“Wanna head back in?” Ryoga asked. “I’m done if you are.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna go get a shower.”

“I’ll make some tea while you do that, then. Leave the weights, I’ll clean up.”
Ranma headed back inside and walked down the hallway toward the bathroom. She always felt an unnerving sensation whenever she walked into the bathroom these days. She had to remind herself that she’d already visited the dreaded porcelain bowl before her workout earlier. Closing the door behind her, her fingers grazed across the soft shoelaces of the little orange shoes she had tied to the doorknob several days earlier. The sensation across her fingertips was more comforting than unnerving. Which was exactly why she’d decided to put the shoes there.

Every time she’d walk out of this bathroom after cleaning out her mouth, still cursing every god she knew, herself, and Ryoga Hibiki, her eyes would fall upon the little shoes dangling by their laces on the doorknob. And just like that, she’d feel better.

She’d certainly fallen into a pattern again, but it was a pattern she could handle. She’d decidedly called it a ‘pattern’, instead of the bitter name she’d dubbed her ‘rut’ at the Tendo Dojo.

Ever since that day out with Kasumi, the last four days had passed without anything newsworthy. Every morning she’d wake up and be sick. But that was usually the least pleasant part of her day. She’d started working out again, which attributed to her good mood immensely, and she was certain that it had been the absence of this usual activity that had caused her to be so on edge. Ryoga still refused to spar with her but it was still nice to know that after her morning visit with the toilet she’d meet Ryoga out in the backyard, where he was her loyal spotter in place of ruthless sparring partner. After their workout, they’d shower.

Ranma stepped under the delightful stream of hot water, sighing in content as the blazing rivulets ran down her chilled skin.

A few minutes would pass, and she’d check over her shoulder, which she did again today. Ryoga wasn’t there, as always. He was in the kitchen making tea and patiently waiting for his turn in the shower. And Ranma would always turn back around, wondering why she felt so expectant and dejected all at once.

She’d go upstairs to change, and Ryoga would go to the shower. She’d come back downstairs in fresh clothes and a steaming cup of tea would be waiting for her in the kitchen. She’d take her iron pills, drink her tea, then get started on breakfast. By the time Ryoga was done his shower and back in the kitchen in a change of clothes, Ranma would have breakfast waiting on the table and the two would decide what to do with the rest of the day while they ate. If it was Ryoga’s turn for dishes, Ranma would start doing other chores.

Shirokuro followed Ranma around the house a lot more than Ryoga lately, especially when she was doing chores. In fact, the only time the animal would be around Ryoga was if Ranma were in the same room as him, if she was taken on a walk by the both of them, or if Ryoga needed to be lead somewhere in the house. After that was done, Shirokuro would head back to wherever in the house Ranma was. If Ranma had started vacuuming however, Shirokuro would turn right back around and run back to Ryoga. She’d even gone from sleeping right in between them to choosing to sleep curled up just under Ranma’s feet. Ranma had been confused by the dog’s behaviour at first, but had grown accustomed to her clinginess. Ranma usually wasn’t a big animal person but Shirokuro was an exception. Plus, she had to admit seeing Ryoga looking so jealous about his pet’s betrayal amused her.

Regardless, he decided to let Ryoga walk Shirokuro by himself that afternoon while she stayed at home to do some laundry. As she walked down the hall to the backyard with a basket of bedsheets, she heard the phone in the kitchen ring. She headed into the kitchen and rested the large basket against her hip while she picked up the phone.

“Hello, Hibiki residence.”
“Hello, Ranma, dear.”

“Oh, hi, okaa-san!” Ranma perked up, adjusting the basket against her side.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything. You were just on my mind so I thought I’d give you a call. Kasumi-chan told me that you two got together recently.”

Wow, Kasumi and her mother had become regular pen pals, from the sounds of it. “Yeah, we did. It was nice. I’ve never really hung out with Kasumi-san on my own before, but it was...great.” Ranma couldn’t think about that day without picturing that chirpy waiter and the total creep from the bathroom. Ranma shook the unpleasant thoughts away. “I had a good time.”

“Kasumi-chan told me you seemed...troubled.” her mother’s voice was laced with concern. “That you were having bad dreams. Are you sure everything is alright? You know that you can talk to me, don’t you, darling?”

“O-of course, okaa-san,” Ranma said quietly. She held the receiver against her shoulder and grasped the laundry basket with her other hand. “I’m fine, now, honest. I haven’t had a nightmare since that day. I think Kasumi-san really got through to me.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I was worried you and Ryoga-kun might be having a hard time.”

Ranma swallowed roughly. “Um, no. Uh...nothin’ like that. Really.” she croaked. “Ryoga is...Ryoga’s--great.”

“That’s good. Anyway, Ranma, I also wanted to ask if you had any plans for the holidays yet?”

Ranma blinked rapidly. “Holidays?” she repeated, clueless.

“For Christmas, dear. Are you and Ryoga-kun planning anything special?” her mother asked. Her tone was patient, and slightly amused.

Christmas? Ranma glanced at the calendar on the wall beside the dining table. It was December 19th today.

“Christmas,” Ranma said slowly. Her eyelids fluttered. “No...no, I hadn’t even thought about it.”

“Really? Well, then, if you don’t have any plans I was hoping you could come to my house. It’s not anything huge, really, just a humble little dinner. Bring Ryoga-kun, of course. I’m dying to meet him.”

Ranma’s heart rejoiced. Getting to spend Christmas with her mother, eating her mother’s cooking? Ranma could only describe it as pure bliss.

“It won’t be too many people, of course. I haven’t got the space, anyways. It would just be you and Ryoga-kun, Kasumi-chan, and your father and I.”

Ranma’s heart stopped. Never mind. Good feelings were gone.

“Oya--um, otou-san is gonna be there?”

“Of course, dear. He does live here with me, after all. Some of the time, anyway.”

“Uh, I don’t know, Ma--oka-san…” Ranma stammered. “Last time I saw him, I, um…”

“Ranma, it’s Christmas,” her mother said earnestly. “This is a time for family,”
Well, she didn’t have much of one of those, these days.

“Your father loves you, Ranma.” Nodoka said softly. “It may not seem possible to you right now, but...believe me. I know him better than anyone.”

If Ranma didn’t have as much love and respect for her mother as she did, she might’ve said that she’d lived with nobody but her old man for ten long years on the road. Nobody knew her father like she did. Not even his wife. But she bit her tongue.

“I don’t know if he’s gonna get over this one, okaa-san.” Ranma said solemnly.

“I’m back!” Ryoga’s voice called through the house. Ranma’s eyes flickered upward, then back down again.

“Please come, Ranma.” Nodoka said sweetly. “For me. Don’t worry about your father. I’m sure that even if he doesn’t understand now, he will in time. And then maybe everything can go back to normal. But it won’t if you don’t try, darling.”

“Ranma?” Ryoga peeked into the kitchen, stopping in his trail when he saw Ranma on the phone. Ranma sighed. “I know, okaa-san.”

“Please say you’ll come.”

“I’ll come. You know I will. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Thank you, Ranma.” Nodoka sounded elated. “I have to go out and get some things for the party. I ought to go out now before it gets any busier out there. Take care, dear.”

“You too, okaa-san. Bye.”

Ranma shifted the basket back onto her hip and hung up the phone with a deep, long sigh. She hiked up the basket and headed toward the door, where Ryoga still stood. He stepped aside to let her through, and then followed her down the hallway.

“What was that about?” Ryoga asked.

“Ma invited us to her house for Christmas.” Ranma explained.

Ryoga sped up to get ahead of her and opened the back door for her. Ranma brushed past him and walked over the the clothesline, setting the basket down on the grass.

“Oh?” Ryoga’s voice held more questions.

“With her, Kasumi-san, and my old man.”

Ryoga’s expression matched her own from earlier. “Oh,” he said again. “Are you sure that’s--”

“No, I don’t.” Ranma shot out, exasperated. “I think it’s a bad idea and it’ll be awkward as hell for everyone involved.”

Ranma’s shoulders fell slack. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath, grounding herself. Then she looked over at Ryoga and managed to give him an apologetic look.

“But,” she continued, calmly now, “Ma says it’ll be okay. An’ even if it won’t be, I promised her I’d be there.”
Ryoga nodded silently in understanding.

“It’s Christmas,” he said. “I’m sure even your family can cut back the crazy for just one day.”

Ranma laughed bitterly. “They never have before.”

Ryoga walked over and pulled the first bedsheet out of the basket, and started hung it up on the line. “You could always just pop in for a quick visit. Things start getting too hot to handle, just tell your mother we have to go...I dunno, have dinner with my parents, or something.”

Ranma quirked an eyebrow, the thought spurring on her own question. “Your folks gonna make it home for Christmas this year?”

“It’s possible, but unlikely.” Ryoga said. He glanced over at Ranma. “Why? It’s not like we have to actually be going to have dinner with them. It’s a little white lie.”

“No, I know that,” Ranma didn’t like lying to her mother but Ryoga’s idea was very intriguing. “I was just wonderin’ cause, well...I’ve never met ‘em.”

Ryoga watched while Ranma picked up another sheet and hung it on the line, her eyes hidden by her red bangs. “I guess you haven’t.” Ryoga said idly.

Ranma shrugged. “Not like it’s a huge deal, or anythin’. But Ma’s phone call just got me thinkin’, was all. She said she was lookin’ forward t’ meetin’ you. An’...your folks don’t even know I’m livin’ with you.” Then, under her breath, “Not to mention all the other stuff...”

“Well, we can’t really plan to do dinner with them whenever we feel like it,” Ryoga said jokingly as he straightened out another sheet on the line. “But I’ll definitely introduce you once they find their ways home. Eventually.”

Ranma hung the last sheet on the line. She fussed with the hem, making both ends perfectly symmetrical, but it was more to busy her hands.

“Do you think they’ll like me?” she asked quietly. Her eyes were downcast and her fingers still fumbled around with the sheet.

“My folks? They’re pretty laid back.” Ryoga replied, clipping pins to the sheets. “Not quite as...traditional as yours.”

Ranma’s sheepishness lifted slightly. She snorted. “Nobody is as traditional as my family. ‘Cept for maybe the Tendo’s.” she muttered.

“They’ll like you,” Ryoga said. “Everybody likes you.”

Ranma’s head shot up, her eyes aghast. “What planet are you livin’ on, Hibiki? Because I’ve been gettin’ more of a ‘dumb slut who got knocked up’ kinda vibe from people nowadays. An’ it wasn’t really much better than that before all of this, anyways.”

“Well, maybe when you consider the lunatics, yes.” Ryoga said, his tone amused. “But to those who have more than half a brain cell, I’d say you’re generally well-liked. Three out of four of your ex-fiancee’s still like you. Not a bad rap, I’d say.”

Ranma pouted. “I told you already, Kodachi doesn’t count. An’ she’s one of the lunatics you mentioned. Shampoo just flirts with me still ‘cause she thinks I’m good-lookin’—which ain’t a lie, but it’s not like she’s a gal who cares about ‘personality’. I guess Uuchan counts, since we’ve been pals
since we were kids. An’ Kasumi-san likes everybody, so she’d still like me no matter what I did. An’ of course Ma likes me, since I’m her kid.” Ranma slumped. “As for everyone else, I could wind up dead in a ditch tomorrow an’ they probably wouldn’t bat an eye.”

“You forgot about me,” Ryoga said. “And I hopefully don’t qualify as one of the lunatics. And I certainly don’t want you to find you dead in a ditch.”

“So all of that, ‘Prepare to die!’ stuff,” Ranma muttered sardonically, doing a surprisingly good impression of Ryoga. “That was what, exactly?”

“Hot air,” Ryoga murmured. “All of it.”

Ranma blinked. Her mouth popped open, but no words came out.

“I like you, Ranma.” Ryoga said. “You drove me crazy back then--and you still do--but that doesn’t mean I hated you.”

Ranma was finding it very difficult to talk. Or breathe. Or function whatsoever.

“Maybe that isn’t good enough for you,” Ryoga went on. “But you’re not alone. It might feel like you are, but trust me. This isn’t alone.”

Ranma nodded slowly in agreement. This wasn’t alone.

They knew what loneliness felt like.

Ranma was pulled out of her little reverie when she saw Ryoga’s face started to swell. No, not swelling, but growing. Yes, she could swear his face was growing closer, closer to hers…

Shirokuro began to bark incessantly and loudly somewhere in the distance. Ryoga backed away and looked over his shoulder. After a moment, the dog went quiet, and then they heard a muffled thumping coming from the front of the house.

“Someone’s at the door,” Ryoga said. “Maybe it’s my parents.”

Ryoga went back inside, leaving Ranma with the bedsheets flapping in the cold breeze beside her. She stood still for a moment, watching the spot where he’d disappeared from sight, and then she followed. She caught up to Ryoga, making sure the dog’s barking lead him to where he needed to go. Staying a few steps behind him, she watched as he went over and opened the door.

Ranma suddenly found it very hard to breathe again, but for a much different reason.

Ryoga stood motionless, his eyes wide, his mouth slightly parted in shock. It was a few seconds before he could form the name on his lips.

“A...Akari,” he stammered.

Akari stood out on the front step, letting in all the cold air, but her smile was warm and sweet as it always was. She hadn’t changed much in the last six years, much like the rest of the people Ranma knew. She’d grown into her features a little more and her hair was a few inches longer. She still dressed in a conservative but pretty way, much like Kasumi but even more old-fashioned. She was wearing a thickly knit lavender cardigan over a pale blue collared shirt, a long navy skirt, and black knee socks with dark brown buckle shoes. Her cheeks were rosied from the cold and the winter light made her ice-gray eyes glisten.
“Hello, Ryoga.” she greeted, her voice like soft velveteen. Her eyes flickered over Ryoga’s shoulder and caught sight of Ranma. She flashed her a surprised but cheery smile. “Oh, Ranma-kun, hello there!”

“Uh, y-yo…” Ranma mumbled, raising her hand in a weak, awkward wave. Then she cast her eyes down and stared at the floor.

Akari looked between the two, who had both found something interesting on the floor to look at. She blinked, her brows raised, a confused smile smile on her face.

“Um, is this...a bad time?” she asked slowly.

Ryoga suddenly perked up, a goofy grin splitting his face. He began talking very fast and giggling all at the same time. “No, no, not at all! Why don’t you come inside?”

Ranma watched on as the two began to chat among themselves while Akari stepped inside and took off her shoes.

“Sorry for dropping in so suddenly. I just so happened to be in the neighbourhood…”

“No worries at all! It’s a nice surprise, really.”

“I’m glad I was able to catch you while you were home. It’s been months since I’ve seen you last.”

“Let’s go into the kitchen, I’ll put on some tea. It’s so cold out today, you must be freezing!”

The two walked past Ranma and headed toward the kitchen. Ryoga hadn’t managed to stop his strange giggling yet.

“I’m gonna, um,” Ranma mumbled, “Go an’ get changed--”

“It’s so nice to see you again, Ryoga.” Akari giggled.

Ranma stared as they walked down the hallway toward the kitchen, watching their backs grow smaller. Akari was gazing up at Ryoga with complete adoration, like he was a newborn puppy with it’s eyes still closed. The flush in her cheeks hadn’t left and her eyes still glistened. Maybe it wasn’t the winter air, after all. Ryoga looked down at Akari, his lips pulled into a tight, cheeky smile and his eyes as bright as a child’s. They looked sixteen again.

Ranma tore her gaze away, as if it was suddenly improper to be looking.

Her eyes fell upon her outfit, which consisted of her yellow and blue boxers and a baggy t-shirt, which was swimming on her even more than usual considering it was Ryoga’s. She felt something wet and cold brush her hand, and she jumped a little before noticing that Shirokuro was sitting beside her. Ranma squatted down and ruffled the dog’s fur and scratched her ears, and Shirokuro lowered her head and sniffed at Ranma’s belly. Ranma scoffed softly, running her hand down the dog’s back.

“You know what it’s like, huh, girl?”

---

“Ryoga?”
Ryoga looked over at Akari, pulling his gaze away from the kitchen door. She was watching him from the dining table. “Hm?”

“The water’s boiled.”

Ryoga suddenly became aware of the high-pitched whistle coming from behind him, and whirled around to shut off the kettle. He poured tea into two of the three cups he’d set out, pausing on the third. He looked up at the kitchen door again, then back down the empty cup. He set the kettle back down and took the two cups to the table. Ryoga set down their teas, then pulled out the chair on the opposite side and began to lower himself down while Akari blew on her tea.

“So,” Akari said over her cup, “When did Ranma-kun move in?”

Ryoga’s hand slipped, and he fell messily against the chair and the corner of the table. Akari reached out her hand quickly to steady Ryoga’s dangerously shaking teacup. Ryoga adjusted himself, clearing his throat loudly as he sat down as neatly as he could.

“Wh-what would make you think that he and I are living together?” Ryoga stammered through broken chuckling, resting his chin in his hand with his elbow propped unnaturally on the tabletop.

“Well, he was wearing pajamas, so…” Akari mumbled.

Suddenly, she set down her teacup and her hand flew to her mouth as she gasped. Ryoga tensed. Akari’s eyes were wide with horror. “Don’t tell me…”

Ryoga felt a shiver rake up his spine, and he had to hold back a nervous squeak of fright, like a mouse who spotted the neighbourhood cat.

Akari leaned intently across the table, cupping her mouth with her hand and speaking in an overly-hushed whisper. “…That Ranma-kun and Akane-chan had a fight!”

Ryoga blinked, his fear evaporating. His shoulders fell slack, and he looked down at his lap. “Uh…”

Well, she’s half-right.

Akari watched him, her brow furrowed with dread as she bit her lip.

I guess a half-truth is better than nothing.

Ryoga pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers and let out a long, laboured sigh. He looked back up at Akari, hoping that he looked deeply troubled. By the look on her face, he was selling it already.

“The idiot finally said too much this time,” he began darkly. “So she gave him the boot. He would have gone to his mother’s, but his father wouldn’t allow it. He had nowhere else to go, so I decided the best place for him to be was here.”

“That’s terrible,” Akari said uneasily. Her expression suddenly softened. “You’re such a good friend to him, Ryoga, to take him in like that.”

Ryoga scoffed, twisting his cup around on the table. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m mad at him myself for mistreating Akane-san like that. But, he would’ve been put out on the streets, otherwise. I had to set aside my own feelings for his sake. I really had no choice in the matter.” Ryoga took a long sip of his tea, withdrawing with another sigh. He traced the rim of the teacup with his fingernail.
Akari shuffled in her seat, and turned her head just slightly toward the kitchen door before looking back at Ryoga again.

“Do...do you think Akane-chan will forgive him? Maybe they can make up and she’ll take him back.” she whispered.

Ryoga shrugged, and looked at Akari with a sad, hopeless smile. “I don’t know,” he said. “He really messed up this time.”

Just then there was several loud thudding noises that made Ryoga and Akari jump in their seats. Akari’s head whirled around at the giant slamming sound that followed. Confused, she turned back around to give Ryoga a quizzical look.

“What was--?”

She was cut off by the scrape of the chair on the kitchen tiles as Ryoga clattered to his feet. He moved so fast it took Akari a moment to realize he had even left the table, and she twisted around fully in her chair to see him rush past the table and towards the door. She was too stunned by the look on his face to say a word.

When Ryoga found the bottom of the stairs, he also found Shirokuro waiting for him at the landing. When he walked up to the stairwell the dog instantly got up and turned to head up the stairs. Ryoga followed, feeling trepidation build in the pit of his stomach. Was he imagining things, or had the animal looked at him reproachfully?

Shirokuro lead him to his bedroom door, then sat down on her haunches again. Like a spirit guide, she’d brought him where he needed to be and then did no more. Her tail lay flat on the floor and didn’t even twitched; usually she was always wagging her tail. Ryoga looked down at the dog nervously. Shirokuro stared at him with her big eyes, which usually were bright in adoration. If a dog could stare stoically at someone, then that was what Shirokuro was doing now.

Then, the dog’s head flicked to the side, toward the closed door. Ryoga stared at the dog, disbelieving, while he reached out for the doorknob slowly. His worry came back up on him, and he twisted the knob and opened the door quickly.

Ranma was there, her back to him.

“There you are,” he said, exhaling in relief. “Are you okay? I heard a loud noise and I thought you’d fallen down the stairs, or something.”

Ranma didn’t turn to face him. Her shoulders shook as a little, strange laugh burst out of her.

“Yeah, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” she muttered.

Ryoga recoiled at the sound of her voice, laced with barely contained fury that was ice cold, and yet he felt a heat from it as if it had slapped him across the face. “Wh-What are you--?”

“At least you wouldn’t have to deal with me anymore.”

Ryoga lurched forward and snatched Ranma’s shoulder, trying not to get distracted by how tiny her
shoulder was under his palm. It was hardly the size of an orange, he feared it would break if he squeezed any tighter. “Would you just--? Look at me, dammit! What are you talking about?”

Ranma twisted around and knocked Ryoga’s hand off of her shoulder with a brute strength Ryoga found himself shocked to have not have expected. She snagged his wrist and squeezed it fiercely, her nails digging into his skin without mercy.

“Quit actin’ like you give a shit!” she hollered, pushing her whole weight against him with just her hand. Ryoga would have been able to hold her back if he weren’t so shocked. She pushed him into the nearest wall and leaned in close, and Ryoga forgot how small she was compared to him. In that moment, she towered over him, as intense and terrifying as a giant hurdling wave.

“It’s not like I don’t know that I’m a huge fuck-up, okay? I know I ruined your life a thousand times over, so you can drop the bullshit act. You don’t need to pretend like you don’t hate my guts!”

Her mask of fury crumpled into something broken and utterly dejected for just a second before she shut her eyes tightly. She let go of Ryoga’s hand, and it snapped out of her pressurized grip like an elastic band.

Ranma looked away and down at the carpet, her face hidden in her hair except for the crooked line of her mouth, pulled into a deep scowl. Ryoga stared at her, watching her puny shoulders rise and fall deeply as if she’d been running at top speed. He idly became aware on a numb, prickling sting in his hand, and looked down. The outline of Ranma’s fingers was imprinted in red onto his skin, and there were two small cuts on the back of his hand where the nails from her middle and ring finger had broken the flesh and drawn blood. Ryoga looked back up at Ranma.

“I thought I told you,” he said quietly. “That I don’t hate you.”

Ranma looked up, her eyes flashed through her bangs. “You’re a liar.”

“I’m not--”

“Ryoga?” Akari called. “Is everything alright?”

Akari froze in the doorway. Her eyes, large and innocent like a doe, flickered between the two. Shirokuro pushed past Akari’s legs through the doorway, and walked over to Ranma. Ryoga looked at Akari, then followed the dog to where she stopped right in front of Ranma’s legs. She nudged Ranma’s limp fingers with her nose, ignoring the other two in the room completely. Ryoga grimaced, then looked back at Akari.

She looked at him, expectant and nervous. “Ryoga…?”

“I...I’m sorry, Akari-chan, but...” Ryoga let out a rough breath of air, and looked back up at Akari firmly. “I think it’s time for you to go.”

Akari looked on the verge of tears. “I--” she started weakly, but instantly broke herself off, looking down.

“I’ll walk you out.” Ryoga murmured, walking toward the door.

Akari’s eyes were hidden in her hair for a moment, and when she looked back up her face was sad, but she smiling her same warm smile. She turned away and headed for the stairs, Ryoga following behind. When they reached the stairs, Ryoga lengthened his pace so that he passed her. He reached the bottom first and walked over to the door. He waited while Akari silently slipped on her shoes, then he opened the door and let her by. She walked out onto the front step and then turned around,
her lip pinched between her teeth again.

“I, um…” Akari began.

“I’m sorry,” Ryoga said. “Really, I am. This just...this isn’t a good time right now. I want us to be friends, it’s just--”

“I used the bathroom.” Akari blurted.

Ryoga stared at her for a moment, blinking. She’d said it like it was a crime. He wasn’t sure how to respond and it took him several seconds before he could form one. “...Yeah?”

“After you went upstairs, I went to the bathroom, and I…” Akari trailed off, and looked away.

“Well, um…”

Finally, it clicked.

“Oh,” Ryoga murmured softly. Then, a little louder, “Ohh.”

“Yeah…” Akari nodded, staring down at her shoes.

Ryoga swallowed a hard rock in his throat, his heart fluttering while the seconds ticked by.

“They’re a very pretty colour,” Akari said finally. “Orange. It’s...nice.”

Ryoga scratched the back of his head, under his bandana. “Uh, yeah.”

“So,” Akari mumbled, scuffing the pavement with the toe of her shoe. “That’s why he’s here, huh? And...in his girl-form?”

Ryoga nodded sheepishly. “Akari, listen, I--”

“What happened to the ‘-chan’?” Akari asked gently, a tiny smile on her lips. “That didn’t last very long.”

Ryoga balked, but Akari only continued to smile. She reached out and patted him once on the chest.

“I don’t really understand,” she said. “But, congratulations.”

Ryoga stared, saying nothing. Then, he watched his ex-girlfriend turn around and walk past his front gate and down the street. He stayed on the doorstep in the icy air until she turned around the corner and was out of sight. Then he closed the door before the winter air could fill up his whole house.

He turned around, and looked at the stairs with wavering resolve. His eyes trailed up them like they were a huge mountain which would take him hours to scale. His heart skipped a little when he saw Ranma standing at the top of the stairs, looking down at him. Ryoga wondered idly how long she’d been standing there. Then, a thought struck him like a train.

“How much did you hear?” Ryoga blurted quickly.

Ranma seemed to know Ryoga didn’t mean his conversation from just now. “Enough.” she replied.

“I wasn’t lying.” Ryoga said.

Ranma’s face was stone; immovable. “I know you weren’t.”
“I mean, I wasn’t lying to you,” Ryoga said. “I was lying to her.”

Ranma’s eyebrow flickered, but she said and did nothing more.

“And she knows that I did,” Ryoga went on. “She saw the shoes in the bathroom and...put two-and-two together.”

“But you weren’t lying to her,” Ranma muttered, walking down the stairs slowly, one-by-one. “You told her exactly how you really feel. You just left knocking me up out of the confession.”

Ryoga took a step forward roughly, and threw out his hands. “That was just a cover-up! I just told her you and Akane got into a bad fight and you got kicked out. Where the hell would you infer in there that I’ve been lying to you?”

“I know what it was!” Ranma barked back. “I didn’t have to read too deep between the lines t’ figure out what you were really saying, under your little ‘story’.” She stopped in the middle of the stairs, and clenched the railing with a white-knuckled fist. “You blame me for all of this! You resent me, but you weren’t man enough to say it to my face. But as soon as Akari struts back in here, you let it all out.”

“That’s not what that was!” Ryoga cried. “I was just trying to protect her feelings. I thought it’d be easier on her than the full truth.”

Ranma glowered at him. “Is that so?”

“But I should have just been honest with her from the start,” Ryoga said, ignoring Ranma’s bitter sarcasm. “Because she just wound up finding out the truth on her own, anyway. I should have been a man, and said it to her face. But I didn’t and it just made things worse. Not with her, because she can handle it. She’s been through it before and I have, too. I can handle hurting Akari, but I can’t handle hurting you.”

Ranma folded her arms across her chest. “So, you haven’t been pullin’ my leg?” she muttered.

“No,” Ryoga said firmly. “I’ve meant every word I’ve ever said to you. Recently, anyway.”

Ranma quirked an eyebrow suspiciously.

“Hot air, remember?” Ryoga explained. “All those empty threats from when we were younger? They didn’t mean anything. But it’s not like that now. It hasn’t been like that for a long time.”

Ranma stared at him for a long moment in silence. Then, she looked away, suddenly unable to meet his gaze. She pouted at nothing, her eyes narrowed.

Her voice came out in a sheepish grumble. “So, you don’t hate me, or think I’m a big fuck-up?”

Ryoga shook his head. “I like you, Ranma.” Ryoga murmured. “That’s the truth.”

Ranma flicked her eyes back at Ryoga, her tart bravado back in place. “Well, good,” she said curtly, walking the rest of the way down the stairs. “If you were gonna lie to me, I would hope you wouldn’t do me the indecency of bein’ so half-ass.”

She did a little jump from the final stair, turning the corner and heading toward the kitchen, stretching her arms over head head as she went.

“Now that that’s done with, let’s have some lunch.”
Ranma was stopped in her tracks as Ryoga snagged her raised arm and pulled her backward. Ranma yelped as she was spun around and shoved into the wall, pinned by her wrists with her arms on either side of her head. Before she could make any sound of protest, Ryoga’s lips clamped over her own, knocking the air from her lungs.

If there had been any wind in her sails at all there wasn’t any now, and if she’d had any fight in her at all she hadn’t even tried. Ranma let Ryoga grind her body into the wall with his own, let his mouth explore and bruise every inch of hers. He released her wrists and she coiled her arms around his neck, pulling him in tighter, as if they weren’t close enough. Her fingers raked through his hair, gripping, tugging.

They dragged each other down to the floor, still locked in their kiss. It had quickly turned animal; they were fervent, nipping, biting at each other. Ranma snatched Ryoga’s bottom lip between her teeth and Ryoga let out a long, low growl. Ranma made her own sound of pleasure at the sound as Ryoga pulled away and yanked off his shirt, tossing it over his shoulder.

Ryoga placed his palms on the floor on either side of Ranma, and leaned down. Ranma met him halfway, sitting up and catching his lips in hers again. Ryoga reached around her and pulled her shirt up and over her head. He tossed it away carelessly, and it flew through the air and got snagged on the railing. Ryoga pushed Ranma firmly and she fell back against the floor. Without missing a beat, Ryoga grabbed the waistband of Ranma’s boxers and whisked them off. They flew over Ryoga’s head and landed somewhere down the hallway.

Impatient, Ranma sat back up again and started clawing at the button on Ryoga’s pants. Ryoga brushed her hands away and before Ranma could argue against it, Ryoga shoved Ranma back down again and opened her legs wide. He moved down on the floor, lying out on his stomach while he moved Ranma’s legs over his shoulders. Ranma squirmed around, letting Ryoga handle her how he wanted, furiously curious and quickly growing impatient. Just as she was about to ask him what in the world he was up to, he pressed his mouth against her clit and sucked.

Ranma lurched forward and gasped like she’d been shocked by an electric charge. As Ryoga’s tongue began to move, Ranma’s head fell back against the floor and her back curved towards the ceiling, her mouth open wide. With each subtle movement Ryoga made Ranma’s knees shivered, her breath hitched. With each sharp flick of his tongue, she twitched, she gasped. Her hands slapped against the floor, her nails dug into the hardwood but found no purchase.

She reached out and grasped at tufts of Ryoga’s hair, and pulled. He didn’t pause in his movements, instead he only went faster. Ranma cried out, then crumpled into the floor, gasping for air. Her breaths came out in small, quick puffs as she writhed around beneath Ryoga’s mouth. Ryoga came away with a wet smacking sound, connected to her with a small line of saliva that Ranma couldn’t seem to look away from. Ryoga pulled back, adjusting himself, bringing one arm around Ranma’s leg. He pushed his ring and middle finger completely inside her in one go, causing her to shout out and then simper with moans as he curled his fingers deep inside her. He bent down again, relishing her with even more fervor. Ranma sucked in a sharp breath; her legs involuntarily bucked, grinding Ryoga’s fingers in deeper and causing his tongue to swipe across her clitoris without mercy.

The two intense sensations were overwhelming. Ranma’s brain went numb and colours burst across her vision. She could hear her own cries echoing, bouncing off the walls in their volume. Her hips gyrated incessantly, as if her body still hadn’t had enough, even though her vision was hazy and her brain was dizzy from the sensations manifesting on the tip of Ryoga’s tongue and coursing through her body; it seemed to ripple through her veins and tingle at all her nerve endings. Her whole body was a live wire, and the slightest touch of Ryoga’s fingertips, tongue, lips, jolted her and caused her whole body to go into intense, pleasurable hysterics.
Through the haze, she managed to lift her hand and swat at Ryoga’s head. It took a few good smacks before he realized what she was doing, and released her. Unabated, Ryoga sat upright and within seconds had his zipper down and his pants off and thrown carelessly to some other corner of the hallway. He grabbed Ranma’s legs under her knees and yanked her closer. She slid across the floor easily, as limp as a ragdoll. Still bleary, she looked up Ryoga with drunken confusion. Then, Ryoga buried himself hilt-deep inside her, and Ranma felt like she had been shocked with a defibrillator. She swung her legs around Ryoga’s waist, her hands reaching up and gripping onto his shoulders. He pulled out, achingly slow, staring at Ranma the whole time. Her cheeks were flushed deep pink, and with her face inches from his own he could feel the heat radiating from her skin and her warm breath fanning across his face and through his hair. It tickled at his eyelashes.

His lips crushed hers yet again as he thrusted back inside.

“You know, we really ought to do this in a bed sometime.”

His hands cupped her breasts from behind and squeezed.

He kissed the shell of her ear. “Or, if you’d prefer, we can try the couch next,” Ryoga offered in a hushed whisper. “Or the dining table.”

He nipped at her earlobe gently.

“Or the stairs.”

“I just want sleep,” Ranma grumbled into the crook of Ryoga’s arm. “And I’m pretty sure I have splinters in my ass from your floor.”

The two were two sprawled out on the floor in the front hallway. Ranma was lying on Ryoga's outstretched arm, as he spooned her from behind. It looked like it would be an extremely uncomfortable position, but Ryoga had Ranma's warm body pressed against him and Ranma was too tired to care.

Ryoga shuffled slightly; his arm was starting to fall asleep. “What happened to sex being ‘like a carnival’? he teased.

“It still is,” Ranma defended groggily. “I’ve just used all my tickets up.”

Ryoga kissed her hair; Ranma eyelids fluttered. “That’s why you go back and buy more.”

Ranma groaned, twisting around and stuffing her face into Ryoga’s shoulder. Ryoga chuckled, amused.

“I thought pregnant people have heightened libidos,” Ryoga muttered, trying to smooth down Ranma’s unruly, sex-mussed hair. “I read it in one of those pamphlets.”

“Fuck your pamphlets,” Ranma quipped.

Ryoga ruffled Ranma’s hair, giving up. It was a lost cause, and she looked much better with her hair all messy in his opinion, anyway. “So, am I gonna have to carry you up to bed? You’re gonna have to stay awake long enough to tell me which way to go.”
There was another long groan, but this time it was more hollow and guttural, not from Ranma's throat, but her stomach. Ranma sat up slowly, suddenly wide awake.

“On second thought…” she mumbled.

Ryoga raised an eyebrow. “Lunch?”

Ranma nodded in agreement. “Lunch.”

Chapter End Notes

Let me tell you a story--a story within a story, if you will--of a very silly girl who cleaned her laptop keyboard with window cleaner.

That's it, that's the whole story. The End.

I am posting this chapter on a Wednesday night, from the computer lab at my college, because my laptop is in for repairs. I was thinking about waiting until Saturday to post this, but I was so damn excited when I finally finished this chapter I simply had to post it right away. I'm already making a bad rep for myself, doing a week-to-week update schedule. Right outta the gate I'm two weeks late, and posting a chapter on a Wednesday. What the hell, self?

I can't even blame college this time. This was all me.

Anyways, hope you enjoyed the angst-turned-into-smut, hot mess of a chapter this was. Hoo boy.

Feels good to be back.
To catch the cub, you must enter the tiger's cave

Chapter Summary

Ranma and Ryoga go to the Christmas party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

14.

To catch the cub, you must enter the tiger’s cave

“Curry ice cream.”

Ryoga looked up, still slurping a spoonful of miso into his mouth. He swallowed, slowly placing his spoon back into the bowl of broth, staring across the table at Ranma all the while.

“Sorry?” he said finally.

Ranma’s face was firm. “I want curry ice cream.”

Ryoga folded his arms on the table. “You want curry ice cream?” he asked, as if he thought he had misheard her.

Ranma nodded sagely. “I want ice cream that is flavoured like curry, yes.” her firm look flickered just slightly with doubt. “Is...that even a thing?”

Ryoga sat back in his chair, and smirked. “Yeah, it is. I once came across a place that had some.”

Ranma perked up. “Did you try any?”

Ryoga nodded. “Yes, since it sounded better than the other flavours,” he chuckled, and scratched his nose while shaking his head as he clearly recalled the memory.

“Like what?” Ranma pressed.

Ryoga scoffed. “Beef tongue, shark fin, miso-ramen, oyster...that one looked particularly awful. It had actual oyster chunks mixed in.”

“Gross!” Ranma exclaimed, although she looked fascinated. “Where was this place?”

“It was called Namja Town,” Ryoga said. “Although it wasn’t a ‘town’ at all. You can imagine how someone like me would get that twisted.”
“The theme park in Sunshine City?” Ranma barked out a laugh. “In the Ikebukuro district? No wonder you got confused! You must have thought you’d stepped into another world.”

“I feel that way pretty often.” Ryoga sighed. He sat up and went back to his breakfast.

Ranma picked up her chopsticks and began slicing her rolled omelette into smaller chunks. She started chuckling around a bite of egg, and Ryoga looked up at her curiously.

“While me an’ Pops were out on the road, we travelled to Yamanouchi, and visited Hell’s Valley. We came across this hot spring that was filled with monkeys. So we get in, and there was a whole group of monkeys just an arm’s length away from me. They didn’t even seem to care we were there. Most of them looked like they were asleep.” Ranma’s grin grew as she recalled the memory. “So then, this little baby monkey comes waddlin’ over to the spring an’ jumps in and swims around. After a while he got out, an’ he found our bath supplies. He goes raidin’ through my bath bucket and he finds my soap, and takes a bite out of it! He spat it out and then ate a bunch of snow t’ wash it out. I was laughin’ so hard I woke Pop an’ all the other monkeys up.”

“I once had a fox steal my lunch,” Ryoga recalled, laughing. “I can laugh at it now but back then I was pretty ticked off. I’d managed to catch a fish after having no luck all day long, and I was grilling it on the fire. I turned my back for two seconds to turn off the burner on my kettle and, whoosh!” Ryoga swept his arm through the air for emphasis. “This orange blur comes flying outta the woods and across my campsite, snatches my damn fish and takes off. Little bastard even knocked my kettle over and it went all down my leg, and put out my fire.”

Ranma’s head flew backward with her laughter as Ryoga continued his story. “So of course I’m so dumb from hunger at this point I go and chase after the fox. I didn’t manage to find it, and it took me until morning to find my camp again. By the time I’d made it back, I saw that my pack had been torn into by more animals. They ripped open all my ramen noodles! The ground was littered with little broken pieces of dried noodles. That fox is lucky I never found him, ‘cause I would’ve skinned him and ate him for dinner!”

Ranma snickered, popping another piece of egg into her mouth. “Me an’ my old man always fought over our food. We kicked up such a ruckus every night we prob’ly scared off any predators,” Ranma poked at the last half of her omelette, a crooked smile on her lips. “It’s been weird not smackin’ his hands away while I try to eat every mornin’...”

A hush fell over the two of them. Ranma set down her chopsticks slowly, staring down at her now-mangled omelette. Ryoga pursed his lips, watching Ranma’s eyes as they followed a piece of tofu floating around her bowl of miso.

“The last time I saw my Dad,” Ryoga said quietly. “Was six months ago. It was right after I’d broken up with Akari.”

Ranma looked up slowly, her face solemn but her eyes betrayed the faintest amount of curiosity.

“I’d found my way home and I was just sitting in the living room,” Ryoga went on. “I guess I hadn’t really processed what I’d just done until I’d gotten home. So I came through the door and sat down and just...stared at the walls. I remember I kept asking myself over and over if I’d made the right choice. A part of me wanted to run out the door and try to find her. The last six years just played over in my head all at once, and I was...just as jaded as I’d been the whole time I was with her, without even realizing that’s how being with her made me feel.”

Ranma watched Ryoga while he stared at nothing, his eyes lost in his memory.
“Then I heard the front door open, and for a moment I thought it was Akari. But Shirokuro left my side; and that’s not unusual because she always goes to the door when someone comes. Except for
with—”

“Akari,” Ranma said softly, remembering.

Shirokuro had been more clingy to Ranma than usual that day Akari had come by, and didn’t come to the door when she came or when she left—she’d stayed close to Ranma’s side. Ranma would have thought nothing more of it, but it had seemed strange since Shirokuro was usually such a loving dog—but when Akari had come over the dog didn’t wag her tail even once.

Ryoga nodded. “I knew it had to be somebody else, so I followed her to the front door. Sure enough, it was my father. We could hardly even believe the other was there. He seemed to tell right away that something wasn’t right. I must’ve been wearing it all over my face. He asked me straight out what was wrong, and after I told him all he said was, ‘At least I get to be here for this.’” Ryoga looked up at the calendar hanging on the wall above the dining table. “We sat right here and talked for hours. It was nice to finally have fatherly advice; I knew after talking with him that I’d done the right thing. He had to leave for Hokkaido a few days later, and I haven’t seen him since.”

Ranma sighed, resting her chin on her hand. “I know what you’re tryin’ t’ say,” she muttered. “That I only got one father, an’ mine doesn’t get lost an’ disappear for over half a year, so I shouldn’t take him for granted or avoid him.”

“No, I wasn’t.” Ryoga said simply. Ranma quirked an eyebrow at him, and he continued. “Your relationship with your family is nothing like the one I have with mine. You’re a grown-up and your own person—only you can decide what kind of relationship you want to have with the people in your life. I know you say a lot against your father, but I know you care about him, too.”

“So y’ want me to give him a chance.” Ranma said shortly.

Ryoga shrugged. “That chance can be as long or short as you want it to be. But if you just never talk to him again, you’ll spend the rest of your life wondering.”

“I’m not sure what I expect to hear,” Ranma muttered. “Or what I even want to hear.”

“What’s the most likely?” Ryoga asked.

“That he’ll just pretend I’m invisible.” Ranma said instantly.

“Would you try to get him to listen regardless?”

Ranma ruffled her hair in thought. “I dunno, maybe? He’s stubborn as all hell, so he could keep it up all day. It’d just be a waste of time.”

“What do you think you’d try and say to him?”

Ranma looked up, her brow deeply furrowed. “Why are you pressin’ this?” she asked irritably.

Ryoga shrugged again. “Figured I’d try to get you ready. Give you a plan of action.”

“Well, don’t! I don’t wanna talk about it.”

They stared each other down for a moment. Ranma’s deep frown began to fade slowly more and more as she watched Ryoga’s unflustered calm gaze. She sighed loudly and stood up. She collected her dishes and stormed over to the sink. She put all her untouched, salvageable food into plastic
containers and stored them in the fridge, and then dumped all the dirty dishes in the sink and twisted
on the water. As she scrubbed away at the dishes, she felt Ryoga come up behind her.

“I thought it was my day to do those.” Ryoga said.

“Well, you can do your own.” Ranma said.

“Sorry, okay?” Ryoga’s voice was right in her ear suddenly. “I shouldn’t have pried. He’s your
father--you’ll know how to deal with him better than anyone.”

Ranma grunted slightly under her breath. She’d been rinsing out the same bowl for a while now, but
she hadn’t noticed.

“We won’t talk about it anymore,” Ryoga murmured. His fingertips started to trail down her hips.
“We can just stop talking altogether, if you’d prefer.”

Ranma finally realized she’d rinsed out her rice bowl thirteen times already, and set it aside noisily
and snatched up another dish. Her breath started to come out in short little spurts as tingles ran up her
back. Ryoga’s fingers had slinked underneath her shirt and were feathering against her bare skin.

“Do whatever you want,” she managed to choke out.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Ryoga whispered.

He pulled his hands away and snagged the bottom of Ranma’s boxers, and yanked them down past
her knees. Ranma dropped the dish she was washing and it clattered into the sink and kicked up
water and soap bubbles, splashing the front of her shirt. Ryoga turned her around and lifted her up
off the floor, causing her boxers to slip down her legs the rest of the way and fall to the floor. Ranma
hooked her legs around Ryoga’s hips as he maneuvered them away from the sink, and sat Ranma on
top of the counter. Ranma spread her legs wide as Ryoga hastily undid his pants.

Things had gone on like this for several days now, ever since that day Akari had come to visit.
Ryoga came to Ranma the way she’d been wanting him to every time she’d showered alone and cast
that one hopeful look over her shoulder. Now the shower seemed dreadfully uncreative--it didn’t
even scratch the surface of the possibilities--but Ryoga was happy to give her plenty of ideas. Ranma
couldn’t seem to go about the usual household chores anymore without Ryoga finding a new place,
catching her in the middle of her work and leaving the chores abandoned.

Ryoga pulled out suddenly, gripped onto Ranma’s hips and pulled her down off the counter. He
turned her around and pressed his hand onto the small of her back with a gentle yet demanding force
that made a small pleased sound purr out of Ranma’s lips as she leaned forward against the
counter. They both let out a long groan as Ryoga went back inside, as if they’d been apart forever.
Ryoga rocked his hips steady and slow, watching Ranma’s hands splay out on the counter and her
nails grip to the tile when he hit the right spot. Ranma moaned, throwing her head back and curving
her spine as Ryoga pressed deep inside her and rotated his hips. Ranma sighed deeply, pressing
backwards into Ryoga’s touch, desperate for more. Ryoga let out a soft growl at the sensation,
gripped the base of Ranma’s braid, and tugged.

Ranma cried out, and her legs nearly gave out beneath her. Ryoga pulled her back until she was off
the counter, and her back was pressed against his chest. He gyrated his hips against her as he brought
his lips down on hers, then trailed sloppy kisses down her jawline and throat. He thrusted inside her
with a sudden burst of force that made Ranma fall back against the counter. Dragging his hands
down Ranma’s small, soft back Ryoga cast aside any willpower and sped up and deepened his
thrusts. Ranma propped her upper-half up with her hands, gasping soundlessly, so enthralled in her
pleasure she could no longer make a sound. Her head fell back just as Ryoga climaxed hard and deep within her, and the jerky pulsing of his member sent her over the edge. She could feel herself clench around Ryoga’s still-pulsing shaft, and they both let out a long, pleased drone.

Panting heavily, Ryoga slowly pulled out and pressed a chaste kiss on Ranma’s shoulder blade. Ranma hummed satisfactorily, pushing herself off the counter and retrieving her boxers. Ryoga shamelessly watched the redhead bend down to pick up the garment while he pulled his pants back up and rebuttoned them. He walked over as Ranma turned around and stepped into her boxers, stooping down as Ranma looked up with half-lidded eyes still dark with lust. He cupped her small face and kissed her, sweet and deeply. He pulled away and gave an amused huff as he watched Ranma’s eyelashes flicker dreamily.

“What was the point of me buying condoms,” Ryoga said. “When I haven’t even cracked open the box yet?”

“What’s the point? I’m already pregnant.” Ranma joked. “If you want to get any use out of the things, maybe you should leave a couple scattered around the house. The kitchen, the laundry room...you know, everywhere but your bedroom.”

“We still haven’t done it in a bed yet, have we?” Ryoga chuckled, snaking his arms around Ranma’s waist and hefting a smug eyebrow at her. “That can easily be fixed.”

“Unhand me, you savage beast!” Ranma laughed, smacking Ryoga in the chest lightly and backing away. “This is the third damn time you’ve had your way with me today, and it’s not even noon.”

“You say it like you haven’t been loving every minute of it.”

“Well, this little bludger is already pressin’ down on my bladder, an’ that can make things pretty confusing. There’s a fine line between bein’ horny an’ havin’ to piss.”

“Gross. That little comment just pushed back round four by about ten minutes.”

“Oh, please, don’t torture yourself.” Ranma quipped.

Ryoga opened his mouth to retort when the phone rang. They looked over at the phone simultaneously, then back at each other. A silent discussion was had, and then Ryoga walked over and picked up the phone.

“Hello, Hibiki residence.”

“Good morning, Ryoga-kun.”

Ryoga looked over at Ranma. “Good morning, Saotome-san. Ranma’s right here if you’d like to speak to him.”

“Oh, that’s alright. I was just calling to let you both know you can come by tonight anytime after 6 o’clock. I went rather overboard, and wound up getting a lot of food and decorations. It’ll take me a while to set up, you see.”

“We can come by earlier to help you get things ready, if you want.” Ryoga offered, watching Ranma turn around and finish the dishes.

“Oh, I wouldn’t have it. Besides, I have all the help I’ll need anyways. But thank you for offering. So I’ll see you both tonight?”
“We’ll be there.”

“Lovely. I’m looking so forward to finally meeting you in person, Ryoga-kun. Bye for now.”

“So what did Ma say?” Ranma asked when Ryoga hung up the phone.

“That she bought so many decorations and food it won’t be until six this evening before she’s ready for us.” Ryoga replied, walking back over to the sink.

Ranma scoffed. “Like I ain’t surprised. What’s she thinkin’, though? There’s only gonna be, what, five people there? I’ll bet she bought enough food to feed the town.”

“She probably doesn’t get to play hostess very often,” Ryoga said. “I’m sure she just wants everyone to have a good time.” Then, he added playfully, “Besides, with the way you eat these days she’ll be glad she bought all that extra food.”

“Oh,” Ranma said, perking up in realization. “Six.”

Ryoga quirked an eyebrow. “Sorry?”

“I counted wrong,” Ranma said simply. “There’s gonna be six people there tonight.”

Ryoga blinked, then his face softened and he chuckled. He reached over and tousled Ranma’s hair. Ranma’s head leaned into the touch slightly as she finished drying the last dish.

“We’ve got six hours before we have to be at your mother’s house,” Ryoga said. “What did you want to do?”

Ranma kept her eyes on Ryoga while she dried off her hands. Ryoga watched her, confused by the strange smirk on her lips and the flicker in her eyes. Then she stepped forward and slithered her arms around his neck and reached up on the tips of her toes and captured Ryoga’s lips in a deep, sensual kiss. After a moment, she pulled away and grasped Ryoga’s hand, giving him a luring expression as she lead him out of the room. Ryoga was eager to follow.

After taking a gratuitous amount of time finding new ways to lay on the living room couch, Ranma and Ryoga lay in a messy, sweaty heap. Ranma was pressed between the back of the couch and Ryoga’s chest, and Ryoga’s left arm and leg were hanging awkwardly off of the cushions. Ranma’s eyes fluttered open and lazily found their way to the glowing blue numbers on the DVD player underneath the television.

She hoisted herself up, pressing her hands onto Ryoga’s chest for support. Either she was weightless as a feather or Ryoga was simply too tired to care, for he didn’t budge. Even with it just draped over her Ryoga’s t-shirt was big enough that it managed to cover most of her tiny frame. It fell away as she sat upright, still looking at the time with a bleary expression. The room was dimly lit now, the only light coming in from a small window on the wall to the left, lighting the room with hues of orange and dark blue.

“Ah shit, it’s past four,” Ranma grumbled to herself. She let out a long sigh, grabbing Ryoga’s shirt as she swung her legs over Ryoga’s and scooched her way off the couch. She stood up slowly and shakily and pulled the shirt over her head. Then she looked around the room in search of her own
As she searched, she started to hear the sounds of Ryoga coming to. He exhaled deeply and turned his head, and his arm flopped onto his chest. He made a displeased grunt when he finally realized Ranma was no longer with him, and sat up creakily on the couch and popped open eyes still hazed from sex-induced sleep. He found Ranma with her back to him, plucking her shirt off from where it had been hanging off of the television, and heard her scoff to herself in disbelief. She turned around, and flashed him a smirk when she saw he was finally awake.

“We’d better go an’ freshen up, we should leave for Ma’s soon.” Ranma said.

Although she was more awake at the moment than Ryoga was, Ranma’s eyes were still dazedly half-lidded. Her hair stuck out every which way, parts of her bangs sticking to her face with the help of dried sweat. Ryoga’s shirt was covered in wrinkles and fit her like a short, baggy dress. It hung off her puny shoulders, the sleeves reached just past her elbow—slightly more so on one side since she’d pulled it on hastily and hadn’t adjusted it, so it sat crooked. With all her other assets covered up by the tee, her legs were the focal point. Ryoga could feel his eyes scouring them up and down, memorizing their curves.

He was so caught up in his own staring, it took him a moment to notice that Ranma was too.

Ryoga had the decency to look sheepish for getting caught. “What?”

Ranma shifted her weight and folded her arms. She eyed up Ryoga for a moment then shook her head slowly. “Well, if you were lookin’ at what I was lookin’ at right now,” she gestured to all of Ryoga for emphasis, “then you’d be thinkin’ twice about goin’ to this party.”

“That’d make two of us,” Ryoga replied.

“Glad we’re on the same page,” Ranma walked back over to the couch, “Sit on up, I’ll try an’ bring him back t’ life.”

“Hold it.” Ryoga reached out and placed a hand on Ranma’s shoulder as she kneeled beside the couch.

Ranma gave him a quizzical look. “Uh, okay, but he’ll probably get the idea a lot quicker if I use my mouth.”

Ryoga held back a groan of torture. “N-no, no...not that,” he forced out. “Look, Ranma, you have to go to this party.”

“We’ll just be fashionably late,” Ranma responded, not missing a beat. “Say the buses took forever, we missed the train, got held up in traffic, you took too long in the shower...”

“Oh, sure, pin the blame on me.”

“Why wouldn’t I? This is all your fault.” Ranma looked like she was about to drool as she looked Ryoga up and down. “All your fault.”

She lifted herself up and swung her leg onto the couch and lowered herself into Ryoga’s bare lap. Ryoga couldn’t stop the soft moan that broke free as he felt how wet Ranma was already right against his base.

“Ranma, come on,” Ryoga pushed her away as gently as possible. “You made a promise, right? Get up.”
Ranma frowned. “You saying you don’t want to?”

“Don’t pout. You’re torturing me enough as it is,” Ryoga sighed.

Ranma shrugged, and got up off the couch. Ryoga had to try very hard not to whimper at the sudden loss he felt. ‘Fine. You comin’ to shower, then?’

“You go on ahead. I should probably take Shirokuro for a walk before we go.” Ryoga said, getting up and pulling his pants out from underneath the coffee table with his foot. “I’ll get one when I get back.”

Ranma simply shrugged again. She grabbed her boxers from off of the arm of the couch, then turned and walked out of the room. Ryoga stood up and pulled on his pants. He gave a short, soft whistle and Shirokuro quickly scampered into the room. She must have heard their conversation, for she already had her leash dangling out of her mouth.

A half and hour later Shirokuro had her fill of walking Ryoga around the streets and led them back to the house. The cool winter air had been refreshing, but he was far from clean. Ryoga hopped in the shower as soon as he got home, trying to be as quick but thorough as possible. He whisked into his bedroom, a towel around his waist, and rifled through his drawers. He couldn’t even remember if he had any nice clothes. Almost everything he owned was overly casual, had holes, or both.

“Dammit,” Ryoga cursed under his breath, and racked his brains. He pulled shirts out and tossed them to the floor, picking them up one by one and examining himself in the mirror by his desk. Each one got tossed back to the floor in rejection.

“Man, and I thought I was the only chick around here.”

Ryoga looked up, where Ranma was leaning against the doorframe, her arms crossed over her chest. She wore a baggy raglan sweater that was such a pale lavender it looked like a soft gray, and black jeans.

“Yeesh, look at the mess you made. There’s clothes everywhere,” Ranma pushed herself off the doorframe and walked into the room, examining the clothes scattered about the floor. “Is that a sweater with a fried-egg pattern on it?”

Ryoga blanched as Ranma bent down and picked up the sweater, laughing the whole time. It was a black pullover with cartoon sunny-side up eggs all over it.

“Oh, you should wear this one, no question.”

“Shut up and help me!”

“I am helping, and I say this one,” Ranma said with a sneer. “It says, ‘I know how to dress sensibly for the weather, but I also have a sense of humor. Also, I want everyone to know that I fuckin’ love eggs’.”

“Give me that!” Ryoga snapped, snatching the sweater out of Ranma’s hands.

“Good choice. It’s probably the only thing you own that doesn’t have tattered hems and holes in it.”
“I’m not wearing this,” Ryoga barked, stuffing the sweater back into the drawer with the rest of his shirts.

“Why are you suddenly so obsessed with what you’re wearing? You’re a guy, just throw on a random shirt and pants and nobody will look at you twice,” Ranma muttered. “That’s what I did.”

“Yeah, and you look amazing,” Ryoga sighed, slumping his shoulders and closing his eyes, missing how Ranma’s eyes popped open and her brows raised. “I don’t have anything here that’ll make your mother think her grandchild’s father isn’t a homeless bum....”

Just then, Ryoga perked up. “Hey, my dad might have nice clothes that will fit me. We’re probably close to the same size now.” Ryoga looked over at Ranma. “Come help me pick out something from his...hey, what’s wrong?”

Ranma blinked, and seemed to snap out of whatever trance she’d suddenly gone under. “Huh? Oh.”

“You alright?” Ryoga asked nervously, stepping closer. “If you’re not feeling well, I could call your mother and...”

“No. No, I’m fine. I just spaced out, that’s all.” Ranma looked away, picking a lint ball off her sweater sleeve. “You wanna wear your dad’s clothes?”

Ryoga nodded. “Yeah, come give me a hand.” He walked toward the door and snatched Ranma’s wrist on his way and pulled her out of the room and down the hall. He slowed to a stop, staring down the hallway and still clutching Ranma’s wrist. Ranma looked up at him, her eyes half-lidded and blinking slowly.

Ryoga looked down at Ranma. “Where’s my parent’s bedroom?” he asked quietly.

“Oh, for pete’s sake,” Ranma sighed. She pulled her hand out of Ryoga’s grasp and jabbed her finger to her left. “It’s right beside you.”

“Ah, yes, of course...” Ryoga murmured as Ranma opened the door and led him into the room.

The Hibiki’s room was very simply furnished. Unlike Ryoga’s room, which was fully carpeted, it had the same hardwood floors as the rest of the house. There was a large four-poster bed on the right-hand with white drapes and bedsheets and satin yellow pillows. There were bedside tables on either side made of stainless steel with mirrors on the drawers, with lamps with white lampshades and bases made of glass on the tops of each one. There were two dressers on different walls of the room, one adjacent to the bed with a vanity mirror, and the other sat beneath a window. Ryoga walked over to the one by the window and opened the top drawer while Ranma turned on the lights. While Ryoga searched through his father’s dresser, Ranma walked over to his mother’s and slid her fingertip across the edge of the vanity mirror.

When she looked at her finger, there wasn’t a speck of dust. Ryoga must come into his parent’s room regularly to make sure the room doesn’t look like it’s barely slept in more than once or twice a year. Ranma looked over at the four-poster bed, and it’s perfectly adjusted pillows and tucked in sheets. When was the last time either of Ryoga’s parents had been home long enough to spend a night in that bed? How many times did Ryoga peek into this room to check if the pillows were slightly askew? Would she ever fret about wondering what to wear when she finally got to meet them?

“How’s this one?”

Ranma quickly swiped her finger across her pant leg as if there had been something there to wipe away and looked up at Ryoga. He was holding up a black dress shirt with gray vertical pinstripes.
Ranma shrugged. “I dunno. Looks awfully formal.”

“It’s a Christmas party. Shouldn’t I be dressed nice? You’re dressed nice.”

“I’m just wearin’ jeans an’ a sweater. It’s cold out. Won’t you be cold in a shirt like that? Don’t look very warm.”

Ryoga looked down at the shirt. “He’s got jackets. I could wear it with one.” he said.

Ranma scrunched up her nose. Ryoga narrowed his eyes at her.

“What’s with the face?” he asked, exasperated.

“You’re gonna look like you’re forty.” she grumbled.

“Well, my dad is fifty-three.” Ryoga snapped back. “He’s got the clothes of a fifty-three-year-old.”

“Well does he have anything that’s not black, brown, or beige?” Ranma retorted. “You know, somethin’ with colour?”

“Which colour?” Ryoga asked.

Ranma thought about it for a moment. “What about green?”

Ryoga blinked. “Green?”

Ranma nodded. “Something green. That preferably doesn’t have a collar or buttons up.”

“Your Chinese shirts have collars and button up.”

“And they’re comfy as shit and I look great in ‘em, so don’t go knockin’ ‘em.”

Ryoga ignored her and went back to searching through the dresser. “Hey, here’s something green.” he announced, pulling it out of the drawer. “How’s this one, does it meet your approval?”

Ranma gave the shirt a once over. It was indeed green--to be exact it was a dark hunter green sweater with a v-neck.

“That’ll do, pig.” Ranma said, smirking at how quickly Ryoga’s face dropped into a scowl. “Now hurry up an’ change.”

It was ten to six by the time they’d gotten a bus to the next district and walked to the Saotome’s house. They stood in front of the door, a small ray of yellow light casted a glow on their faces from a small window on the front door, covered in a sheer curtain from the inside. Ryoga looked down at Ranma out of the corner of his eye. Her feet were set apart, her hands clenched at her sides, her eyes unsure and searching as her mind worked frantically.

“Hey,” Ryoga said.

Ranma said nothing, but he saw her eyebrows raise slightly.
Ryoga looked back at the door. “My parents are still on for dinner with us,” he went on. “If you ever think things are about to go to hell.”

Ranma snorted. “Mom’s the word?” she asked softly. Ryoga didn’t even have to look at her to tell she’d calmed down.

Ryoga nodded. “Mom’s the word.”

Ranma smiled crookedly. Then, she took in a deep breath, raised her hand and knocked on the door. Her hand dropped and she exhaled the breath as slowly as possible. Ryoga patted Ranma in the middle of her back, then rubbed the same spot quickly up and down just as the door opened. Nodoka stood there, dressed in a dark blue kimono with a white and silver pattern on the bottom of the skirt and sleeves that looked like the night sky. She looked ready to burst with jubilation when she saw who was at the door, her entire face brightening with a large smile.

“Hello, my dear. I’m so glad you could make it.” Nodoka beamed, stepping outside and wrapping Ranma in a hug and kissing her twice on the cheek. Ranma seemed to melt into her mother’s embrace, completely calmed by the woman’s presence. Nodoka pulled away but still grasped Ranma’s shoulders tightly.

“Hi, oka-san,” Ranma said, looking at her mother’s elaborate kimono. “Wow, you look beautiful.”

Nodoka blushed, but looked delighted. “Thank you, dear. As do you; look at your skin! Positively radiant. The wonders of pregnancy.”

Ranma went from calm to thoroughly embarrassed in an instant. “Heh, yeah…” she mumbled.

Nodoka put Ranma out of her misery by turning her attention to Ryoga. “You must be Ryoga-kun. We’ve talked several times on the phone so it feels like we’ve already met. Goodness, you’re so tall. It’s so nice to finally meet you face to face.”

Ryoga had seen the family resemblance as soon as Nodoka had opened the door. It was true, Ranma was the spitting image of her mother. Not just in usual facial features but also in the way their eyes popped open when they smiled, and how they made direct eye contact while they talked to a person, their eyes never wandering while the other spoke,

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Saotome-san.” Ryoga greeted, bowing.

“Just as gentlemanly in person,” Nodoka smiled, bowing in return. “No need for such formalities, dear. You’re welcome to call me Nodoka.”

“Um, yes, ma’am.” Ryoga stammered.

“Well, come in, let’s get out of this cold.” Nodoka exclaimed, ushering the two inside. “Just head straight through that doorway there, now that you’re both here we can all eat.”

Ranma and Ryoga walked down the hallway, Nodoka following close behind. They turned right and walked through the entryway to the family room.

“SURPRISE!”

Ranma and Ryoga both leapt out of their skin. Nodoka scurried past them and joined the hoard of people that were crowded into the small room. And hoard was a perfect word to use. Everybody was there, standing all over the room and all eyes on Ranma and Ryoga.
Ranma was speechless. Hadn’t her mother told her it was just going to be a small get-together? Just her parents and Kasumi? This was a far cry from that; practically everyone she knew was here. Ukyo, Konatsu, Shampoo, Mousse…you name it, they were all in this room. She hadn’t even considered her mother to be so cunning and slip one by her like this. She was feeling so many things all at once she didn’t know which emotion to fall on. She felt dizzy trying to register everything and react to it all at once. She was grateful when Ryoga got the ability to speak back first.

“What’s all this?” Ryoga asked in awe.

Ukyo broke away from the throng and rushed up to Ranma and Ryoga, grinning widely and laughing. She swept Ranma up in a fierce hug.

“A Christmas party, of course,” Ukyo giggled when she pulled away from squeezing a still-dazed Ranma. “Not that you knew any of us would be here. Your mom wanted to surprise you.”

She turned to Ryoga and slapped him on the arm. Ryoga wasn’t surprised that it actually stung a little. “Ryoga, you sly dog…congratulations!”

“Th-Thanks, Ukyo.” Ryoga said, rubbing his forearm.

“And Ranma! Gosh, we’ve got so much catching up to do. But you look like you’re about to faint, so I think I’ll give the pregger some air before I bombard you with questions.” Ukyo winked.

Ranma pulled herself out of her trance slightly. “It’s…great to see you, Uuchan.” she mumbled.

Ukyo’s attempt to give Ranma space was apparently an idea nobody else in the room considered, because after Ukyo had pulled away everyone else crowded around. Ukyo easily slipped into “protective best friend” mode however, and blocked Ranma from the eager crowd.

“Hold your horses, people, let the happy couple through! Come on, make way, baby on board! There ya go, Ran-chan, just shove your way through, don’t be shy! Everybody find a seat and stay put, you can all harass the pregnant person after we eat.”

Kasumi appeared, greeting Ranma with a touch on the shoulder while she and Ryoga walked toward the dining table.

“Did you know about this, Kasumi-san?” Ranma asked instantly.

Kasumi smiled. “It was all oba-sama’s idea. But I did help send out the invitations.”

Invitations. Her mother had thought of everything, and had clearly been planning this scheme for a long time. It was also very clear that it wasn’t just the Tendo family and her parents that knew about her pregnancy anymore. Her mother must have blabbed the news to the whole town after their talk on the phone that day. She should have known her mother would have loose lips about all this.

“Unbelievable,” Ranma breathed. “I guess the jig is up.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have been able to hide it for much longer, Ranma-kun,” Kasumi said kindly. “After all, you’re showing already.”

“Ahh, shit,” Ranma groaned, her hand instinctively touching her belly. “Is it really that noticeable? I thought the sweater would cover it better and that I… I dunno, let myself go.”

“Actually, you’re showing much earlier than usual,” Kasumi said. “I guess because you’re so small and thin, the bump is more noticeable.”
“Fantastic,” Ranma droned, sighing heavily.

“You could also have a lot of amniotic fluid,” Ryoga said.

Ranma and Kasumi both looked over at Ryoga and stared.

“Amni-what?” Ranma asked, looking horrified.

“It’s this protective sac filled with fluid that’s in the womb,” Ryoga explained, looking a little sheepish at Ranma and Kasumi’s faces. “It shouldn’t be any cause for concern if Ranma’s fluid amount is a little high, but considering his smaller frame when he’s in this form, it’ll probably mean the baby bump will be pretty big.”

“Oh, won’t that be cute,” Kasumi cooed. “How did you find all this out, Ryoga-kun?”

“Baby pamphlets,” Ryoga answered, in unison with Ranma, who muttered the same words exasperatedly under her breath while rolling her eyes.

“So I am gonna look like a beached whale,” Ranma said morosely, recalling her chilling mental image of herself with ashy gray skin and a giant swollen belly.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Ranma-kun,” Kasumi comforted, patting Ranma on the shoulder. “Pregnancy has positive effects on the body, as well. They say a person who is pregnant has a glow about them, and now I can see why, looking at you.”

Ranma rubbed the back of her neck. “Ma said the same thing,” she mumbled. “I can’t see where any of this is comin’ from. Glowing, radiant, amazing. All I feel like is a tub of lard with a cravin’ for deep-fried ice cream.”

“I thought you wanted curry ice cream?” Ryoga asked.

“I do. But now I want deep-fried curry ice cream.” Ranma said. “With peanut butter drizzled on top.”

Ryoga tried not to look too grossed out. “I’ll try and make that happen before the next craving usurps that one.”

Ranma sat down at the far-end corner of the table, which would hopefully keep from too much interaction during dinner. Ryoga sat down beside her and Kasumi walked out of the room with Nodoka, Ukyo, and Konatsu to help bring in the food. Everyone else found their seats. Mousse sat down across the table from Ranma, which Ranma was grateful for. Out of everyone here, there was only three people she wanted sitting directly in front of her: her mother, Kasumi, or someone who couldn’t see her that well.

“Hey there, Mousse. Long time, no see.” Ryoga greeted.

Mousse was looking in Ranma’s direction and gave a small nod. “Hello, Ryoga.”

“A little to your left, pal.” Ranma said, pointing to Ryoga.

Mousse adjusted his glasses, looking sheepish, then turned his head slightly towards Ryoga. “Right. Yes. Hello, Ryoga.”

“Hey, again, Mousse.” Ryoga said, smirking. “How’s everything at the Nekohanten?”

“As busy as ever. We started getting Konatsu to help us out every weekend with the lunch rush.”

“A compromise was reached. As soon as the lunch rush is over and we enter the quiet hour, Konatsu heads right back to Uuchan’s to help Ukyo set up for the dinner rush.” Mousse explained.

“I’m surprised Konatsu can handle all that extra work. It must get tiring running back and forth between the two stores.” Ryoga said, “On top of working all day for Ukyo throughout the week days, at that.”

Suddenly, Ranma bopped her fist into her open palm in eureka. “Hey, I got an idea. How ‘bout we cut poor ol’ Konatsu a break, an’ the old bag can hire Ryoga?” Ranma chirped.

Ryoga gave her a look, and could tell right away that this wasn’t a typical taunt at his expense. The glint in her eye informed Ryoga that this was Ranma’s patented ‘I’m a genius and this is a great idea’ look.

Mousse rubbed his chin. “I suppose I could ask her to consider. After all, you’ll be needing the income.”

“That’s what I was thinkin’.” said Ranma smugly.

“Wait a minute, you two aren’t actually expecting me to take a bowl of noodles and successfully bring it to a specific table without getting lost, right?” Ryoga stammered nervously.

“As a newbie, you’d be expected to fail. Nobody will judge you too harshly if you bring a dish to the incorrect table. If you do it numerous times in one day, however, I can’t be held accountable for the bruises you will receive from the old woman’s cane.” Mousse muttered.

“I think what Ryoga means t’ say, Mousse, is that he’s worried he’ll take the customers order out the front door an’ all the way to Osaka.” Ranma supplied, “If he was gonna be workin’ for you, he’d have t’ be doin’ somethin’ that didn’t rely on him taking somethin’ from Point A to Point B. For Ryoga, you know that always spells trouble.”

Mousse pursed his lips in thought. “Well, then, what would you suggest?” he asked.

“Well, you already got three waiters, right? You, Shampoo, and Konatsu. Shampoo does deliveries, too, and Konatsu works weekends. Now, if you were normal people I’d be tellin’ the ol’ prune t’ stop bein’ a cheapass and hire some extra hands, but you’re all martial artists and you can keep up with the rushes. But it’d make everythin’ a whole lot smoother if ya had someone help t’ get the food out even faster.” Ranma sat back in her seat and crossed her arms. “How about if Konatsu comes in every other weekend? I mean I’m sure he’ll just use that extra time to wax the floors at Uuchan’s, but still, the sap gets some time to himself.”

Mousse pursed his lips in thought. “Well, then, what would you suggest?” he asked.

“So now we’re down a waiter every other weekend, and Ryoga supposedly can’t fill Konatsu’s shoes,” Mousse frowned. “I don’t see how this helps matters.”

Ranma raised her finger, clearly about to drop her bomb. “Ryoga needs a job that’s high volume, but not with much footwork,” Ranma said. “So I think he should be Granny Cologne’s extra hand in the kitchen, and be a cook.”

Mousse raised his eyebrows. “That would take some pressure off of me. I always have to scramble back into the kitchen to whip up plates when Cologne is too preoccupied.”
“But I’ve never really cooked anything that’s served at Nekohanten,” Ryoga chimed in finally, exasperated at all the talking going on about him that he wasn’t having any say over. “I think I’d be more of a hindrance than a help!”

“You know your way around the kitchen,” Ranma defended. “You got the basic know-how, an’ Granny can teach ya how to cook all the dishes. It’s not like it’s anything too over-complicated. It’s just ramen, dumplings, an’ wonton soup. How hard can it be?”

“I guess so,” Ryoga mumbled, still unsure.

“Considering all this talk going on over here on my behalf, do you boys mind if I cut in?”

The trio looked up to see Cologne hop over to their end of the table on her walking cane. She looked directly at Ryoga and sneered. “You’ve trained with me before, sonny boy. Think you can handle me in the kitchen?” she cackled.

Ryoga’s eyes went wide, and he blinked rapidly to dust the stars out of his vision. Then, he slipped into a cocky smirk. “If it’ll be anything like the Bakusai Tenketsu training,” Ryoga muttered slowly, “I think I can take it.”

Cologne chuckled. “That’s what I was hoping you’d say,” she said. “Well, then, you’d best enjoy the rest of your holidays, my boy, because once the New Year begins I’ll be working you to the bone.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ryoga said, still trying to process what had just transpired. He ducked his head quickly. “Please take care of me.”

“See you after New Years,” Cologne sang, hopping back to her seat.

Ryoga looked over at Ranma, his eyes wide. “I have a job,” he said in awe.

Ranma smirked. “You’re welcome.”

Ryoga was about to say something about ‘thanking Ranma properly’ later on, but stopped himself. Firstly because he remembered where he was, and Mousse was blind, not deaf. Secondly, Nodoka had come back into the room, and brought a feast in tow.

Everyone murmured appreciatively as the food was laid out across the table. Ukyo and Konatsu followed behind Nodoka, both carrying an assortment of dishes expertly on their arms which they laid across the table with speed yet grace. Kasumi was next, bringing out drinks and other refreshments. When she’d filled everyone’s glass, she took a seat next to Ryoga.

Ranma watched her mother flit back across the room toward the entryway, hurriedly speaking under her breath. After some back and forth she relieved someone’s arms of several dishes, containing desserts, and walked back towards the table. She looked over her shoulder and gestured for them to follow her into the room.

Akane walked in, dressed in a cornflower blue cotton dress with a white lace collar. Her arms were pressed to her sides, and her eyes flickered around the room, her lips pulled into a taut line. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she walked, then seemed to change her mind, ruffling it quickly back into place as she found her seat by her sisters.
Ranma’s heart was beating erratically in her chest, which surprised her. She was certain it would have stopped.

Everyone began helping themselves and passing around dishes. Ryoga began to fill his plate, then looked over at Ranma. She was staring at her empty plate, her eyes far away. She didn’t even seem to register that everyone around her had begun to eat.

Ryoga had seen Akane walk into the room. One of Ryoga’s first thoughts when they’d walked into the room was that if everyone else they knew was here, so was Akane. She hadn’t been in the room at the time when everyone shouted surprise; Ryoga assumed she’d been hiding out in the kitchen until it was time to eat, and had been planning to slip into the room behind a pile of food in her arms and then subtly take a seat with her sisters. If Ranma had considered the fact that Akane would also be here tonight, it had been the last thing on her mind, what with everything else going on around her.

He didn’t blame her for shutting down. In fact, he’d been anticipating it since they stood outside the door and waited for Ranma to build up the nerve to knock. Ranma looked ready to run. But the night hadn’t gone to hell, just yet.

Ryoga started grabbing an assortment of foods from different dishes and loading them onto Ranma’s plate. Ranma, seeing food beginning to magically fill her plate, blinked several times and then looked up at Ryoga, who filled the last empty spot on her plate and then went back to his own food without a word.

Ranma quietly grabbed her chopsticks and began to eat.

She had better enjoy the dinner while she could, because she knew as soon as everyone was done eating she wouldn’t get a moment of peace. She visualized the rest of her night in a dizzying haze of socializing and trying not to look like Shirokuro had just gotten hit by a car. She chewed each bite meticulously slow and kept her head down.

Of course, dinner was over before she knew it. Thankfully, her tiny tenant anxiously pressing down on her bladder made her do a bee-line for the washroom as soon as she was finished the Christmas sponge cake. She did her business and walked to the door. She paused, staring at the doorknob, and it’s lack of baby shoes hanging from it. Discomfort swelled through her belly and made her shiver. Was all that time cooped up in Ryoga’s house causing her to become agoraphobic?

She exited the bathroom and walked begrudgingly down the hall, wondering where else she could escape to since no doubt everyone else was getting up and starting to wander. Unfortunately for her, her mother’s house wasn’t very big so the chance of running into people was inevitable. The only safe haven was the bathroom, and she couldn’t stay in there all day. Even if she had the excuse of being pregnant.

She walked back out into the dining area and hoped to find her way back to Ryoga; maybe that way if she did get caught up in conversation with someone, she’d at least have him there to balance it out. She spotted him across the room, talking to Mousse, Cologne, and Shampoo. About his new job, Ranma figured. She watched Ryoga gesture excitedly with his hand and his face beamed with triumph. He must be so relieved to have a job. Ranma found herself smiling; it seemed to calm her to see that at least Ryoga was having a good time. If nothing else came from this night, it didn’t matter now.

“Ranma!”

Ukyo grabbed Ranma by the shoulder and whirled her around. Ranma was, quite literally, ripped out
of her thoughts and jerked back into reality.

“Okay, let me see it.” Ukyo demanded.

“See what?” Ranma blurted.

“Duh, your baby bump!” Ukyo cried, gripping Ranma’s shoulders. “Come on, lemme see, lemme see!”

Ranma started sweating, and could feel her face flush red. “I...I don’t think that…” Ranma sighed. Why was she even bothering to argue with Ukyo of all people. She grabbed the bottom of her shirt, lifted it quickly and stuffed it back down so fast her arms were a blur.

“What was that, I didn’t even see anything!” Ukyo whined. “Lift up that damn sweater, Saotome!”

Ranma groaned. She lifted the sweater as little as possible, just enough to see the bottom of her bump. Thankfully it seemed to be enough for Ukyo, who was instantly crooning.

“Wow, you’re popping out already! Maybe you’re havin’ twins!” Ukyo barked.

Ranma’s face paled. As if one didn’t sound horrifying enough.

“Can I put my shirt down now?” Ranma grumbled. “People are starting to stare.”

“Yeah, better get used to that, Ran-chan. Can I touch your belly?”

“Uhh, I don’t, um--”

Ukyo seemed to think that was a yes, because she placed her palm on Ranma’s little bump and gave it a rub.

“For good luck!” she laughed. “Not that you need any. You’ve got the cutest little baby bump I’ve ever seen, your hair is all shiny...lemme see your nails. Oh, of course, they’re perfect. The magic of pregnancy. And not working in food service for a living. Take a gander at mine, they’re all short and stubby.”

It was like Ukyo had completely forgotten that Ranma was a male, and couldn’t care less about shiny hair and perfectly manicured nails. Ranma finally realized Ukyo had taken her hand away to show off her short nails, and pulled her shirt back down.

“But enough about that,” Ukyo said, waving her hand dismissively. “So you and Ryoga, eh? Geez, I never woulda guessed. You two make a cute li’l twosome, though.”

“Twosome--? We are not--he and I aren’t--” Ranma stammered, waving her hands erratically. “I-It was just...”

“And I thought I was the master of torture around here.”

Ranma turned around. It was Nabiki who’d spoken. The front pieces of her hair now nearly touched her shoulders while the back was cut shorter, and she wore a dark eggplant turtleneck with a very expensive looking brooch pinned near the collar, with a curvy black skirt and heels. She stood there smirking at Ranma, a glass of wine in hand.

“Are you going to leave room for the professionals to get a crack at the poor dope?” Nabiki asked, twirling around her drink. “Or are you going to pass me the torch?”
Ranma looked desperately at Ukyo. “Please don’t leave me alone with her.”

Nabiki placed her hand on her chest with feigned hurt. “How rude. I only come back to visit for the holidays, and this is the welcome I get? Typical, uncouth Saotome.” Nabiki sipped her wine. “So, I guess my sis finally gave up on you ever popping her the question, huh?”

Ranma cringed.

“Hey, can we leave the poor girl out of it, for once, Nabs?” Ukyo chided strongly. “Did ya have to go right in for the kill?”

“Like I said, I’m a professional.”

“Yeah, a professional bi--”

“I’m gonna get a drink!” Ranma blurted loudly, pushing her way through the two women. She set her sights on the snack table and made a break for it, keeping her head down to avoid making eye contact with anyone. In her rush she collided straight into someone, nearly knocking them both down.

“Oh, uh, sorry, I--” Ranma looked up, and choked on her own spit. Of all the people she could have bumped into.

Akane face set into a deep scowl. Without saying a word, she pushed past Ranma and out of the room. Ranma watched her retreat, and sighed, turning back around and continuing toward the snack table at a much slower pace. Could this night get any more awkward?

While she stood at the table filling a plastic cup with orange juice she glowered at Ryoga from across the room, who was still in the middle of a conversation with Mousse. Suddenly someone placed their hand on Ranma’s shoulder and she nearly dropped the juice carton. She set it down quickly and turned to see who was trying to get her attention. It was Genma.

Her father gave her a small nod in greeting. “Boy.”

“Y-yo, oyaji.” Ranma said, trying not to look too obvious about the lump she was swallowing down her throat.

Genma’s eyes flickered to the table. “Um, you’re...blocking the daifuku.”

Ranma looked down at the plate of pink and green mochi. She shuffled aside and Genma plucked two and put them onto his nearly-full plate of snacks.

Ranma watched her father scan the rest of the table, and add a few more snacks to his pile of food. “Oyaji…” she started slowly.

“Hm?” Genma grunted, still picking out food.

“We need to talk,” Ranma muttered. “Y’think we can go find somewhere...a little more private?”

Genma finally looked Ranma in the eye, and nodded.

“Don’t forget your cup,” he said, turning around. They headed for the doorway, and Genma grabbed an empty paper plate and a beer as they walked.

Genma lead them out back. Nodoka’s backyard was even smaller than Ryoga’s yard. There was a small patio and a tiny slice of grass. They sat down on the patio and Genma put his bottle of beer and
plate of food in between them. He grabbed the duplicates of what he’d grabbed at the table and filled the empty plate he’d taken, and dropped it in Ranma’s lap.

“You hardly ate anything at dinner,” Genma explained before Ranma could say a word. “Eat up, boy.”

Ranma picked up some onigiri and took a bite.

“Look, I—”

“Chew that bite first.”

Ranma hastily chewed and swallowed. “About the—”

“Finish it off.” Genma ordered.

Ranma looked down at her onigiri, then back up at her father. He wasn’t even looking at her, he was just sitting there with his arms crossed and looking up at the sky. Ranma kept her eyes on her father while she slowly brought the onigiri up to her lips and took another bite. She finished it off in a few more bites and licked the rice grains off her fingers. She washed it down with a swig of orange juice, and cleared her throat.

“Okay, look,” she said, determined to get her words out this time. “What happened that day, when I told you an’ the Tendo’s the news...that wasn’t how I was wanting it to go. The pressure just built up and I snapped. An’ it was stupid an’ it just made everything ten times worse than it needed t’ be,” Ranma sighed deeply, "I ain’t askin’ ya t’ understand. I hardly understand much of it myself. I’m not even askin’ ya t’ forgive me. I just wanted a chance t’ explain myself t’ somebody for once.”

Genma took a swig of his beer. “Well, I was certainly shocked when you told us,” he said. “And at first, I was upset. But after I talked to your mother, and I saw how excited she seemed to be about all of this...I thought to myself that maybe it wouldn’t be all that bad. After all, this was a woman who was determined to see you become a man among men. And while she may not be holding a sword to the backs of our necks anymore, she still holds to that promise in a...less-deadly way. And if finding out her son got pregnant didn’t make her draw out her blade again then it must not be an issue of manliness.”

Ranma scoffed. “I’m not too sure about that,” she muttered sourly, “I don’t exactly feel too manly these days.”

Genma clapped his hand onto Ranma’s shoulder. “Ranma, my boy, if you can overcome the hardships of pregnancy, you really will be a man among men.”

Ranma gaped at her father. “How is gettin’ myself knocked up by another guy going to make me manlier?” she asked in disbelief.

“Think about it, boy. The months of carrying the weight of a child inside your belly, the physical distress and turmoil, the mental anguish, and then the pain of finally bringing that child into the world. They say that the greatest pain is that of giving birth. If an ordinary person can live through that, then you can, as well. Think of it as the ultimate training experience.”

Ranma’s slumping shoulders rose slowly as her eyes widened. “I’d never thought of it like that before,” she murmured, “Everything is training.”

Genma nodded sagely. “Precisely,” he patted Ranma brusquely on the back and then pulled away and helped himself to one of the daifuku.
“So,” Ranma said slowly, “This means you ain’t disownin’ me?”

Genma chewed thoughtfully. “Well, Ryoga-kun isn’t rich in wealth, but I’m sure he’s rich in health. He’s got good genes, and any children he helps to bear would grow up to be strong.”

Ranma nearly fell off the patio and face-planted into the grass. So both of his parents only cared about having plentiful, healthy grandbabies. She should have known. Then, a thought occurred to her.

“Well, actually, Ryoga’s folks are pretty well off,” Ranma said. “His father’s a businessman, and his mother is some sorta designer. They even remodeled their house all on their own. An’ they send care packages of money and other stuff to Ryoga once every coupla weeks, so—”

Genma twisted around and grasped Ranma’s hands suddenly, his head down. When he looked up, his eyes were swimming with tears.

“Say no more, son,” he hiccupped, “You have my blessing.”

“Gee, thanks, oyaji.” Ranma groused.

“You’ll have to introduce me to Ryoga-kun’s parents, next time they manage to find their way back home.”

“That might not be until next Christmas,” Ranma said with a short laugh.

“Well, even better, then the whole family will be there.” Genma smiled, gesturing to Ranma’s bump.

Ranma felt her face heat up. Ranma was finding it a little hard to speak around the lump in her throat. “Don’t get all soft on me.”

“You’re right. You’re woman enough for the both of us as it is.” Genma jeered, earning him a swift punch on the arm. He merely laughed, and went back to watching the stars. “Finish that plate, boy. You’re eating for two now, after all.”

Ranma grabbed a daifuku and took a hefty bite, leaning back on her hand and joining her father in watching the stars.

“I don’t wanna go back in there,” Ranma sighed, seeing her plate nearly empty.

“It’s your family in there, and we love and accept you no matter what.” Genma said. “On that note, give your poor mother a call now and then. She worries about you, and she wants to stay updated about the baby.”

Ranma shuffled in her seat awkwardly. “Uh, yeah…” Delaying the inevitable was cut even shorter by nature’s insistent call. “Man, this tyke sure made quick work o’ that OJ. I’m gonna head back in. You can take back those snacks, I’m too full from dinner, anyway.”

Genma was already dumping the food back onto his own plate. Ranma snickered under her breath and walked back inside and headed for the bathroom. When she was done she made her way back to the family room; nobody seemed to be wandering far from this room. It was the most spacious one in the house, and was where all the drinks and food was located. In fact, if Ranma was so inclined, she could very easily venture anywhere she wanted in her mother’s house that wasn’t the family room and be perfectly alone. But her father’s words made her feet lead her toward the room buzzing with garbled conversation and laughter.
The sound worked as a repellent to her earlier, but now Ranma couldn’t see herself going anywhere but where they were--where her family was. She passed the threshold with certainty in her steps, liquid courage coursing through her veins. She hadn’t felt it in a long time, and it was like being pumped with air and springing back into life. She walked over to Ukyo and greeted her with a smile she was proud to say was no longer forced.

“Ran-chan, there ya are!” Ukyo cried. “I was beginning to worry if Ryoga Junior was makin’ your dinner come back up on ya.”

Ranma chuckled. “Nah, only in the mornings.” she joked. “Well, every other morning now, actually. But that’ll probably mean more of some other god awful symptom. Anyway, sorry I left for so long, me an’ the old man went an’ got some fresh air.”

“No worries, I was just--” Ukyo looked over her shoulder. “Oh, well, nevermind.”

Ranma cocked her head in confusion. “Were you talkin’ to someone?”

“Yeah, er...Akane,” Ukyo looked at Ranma almost guiltily. “But I guess I don’t blame her for slippin’ away when she caught sight of you.”

“You see where she went?” Ranma craned her neck to try in vain to look through the throng of people. Man, how in the world had her mother crammed all these people into her house.

Then, she spotted her. Akane was standing just outside the groups of party-goers, admiring Nodoka’s wall scroll. Ranma patted Ukyo on the shoulder as she wordlessly brushed by her. Ukyo reached out a hand as Ranma walked through the crowd.

“Wait, Ran-chan--”

Ranma ignored her. She forged her way through until she reached Akane. The wall scroll she looked at nearly stretched from the ceiling to the floor, and read in perfect bold, black kanji, “Seppuku”. Ranma felt herself shiver, not sure if it was from her ex-fiancee or the wall scroll. But she steeled herself. She’d come this far, and a little bit of that liquid courage was still in her system. It was now, or never. Not having the guts to speak to Akane was what got her in this mess in the first place.

“Akane,”

Akane didn’t turn around. “I don’t want to talk to you.” she muttered, barely audible over the hum of the guests.

“I know you don’t,” Ranma said. “An’ you don’t have to. I’m just askin’ you to listen.”

“Why should I? There’s nothing for you to say to me.” Akane said coldly.

Ranma frowned, feeling her fists clench at her sides. Her body seemed to boil from the inside as anger swelled up from within, rising from the tips of her toes, growing in her chest, burning hot in her hands. Her tongue scorched, like she could breathe fire.

“Look at me!”

She could hear the conversations all around her come to a complete halt, and the silence rang in her ears. Ranma’s eyes went wide, and a chill ran down her spine, the searing heat instantly gone. She couldn’t bring herself to look behind her. She didn’t need eyes in the back of her head to know that everyone was now looking right at her and Akane.
Akane had whirled around, and it took a moment for Ranma to realize they’d been staring each other down for a solid twenty seconds. Akane’s eyes were ablaze with rage and shock, her expression bewildered. Ranma saw her nostrils flare, and she braced for it.

“Get on with it then,” Akane growled out between her teeth.

“I--” Ranma’s courage had vanished. Her anger had dissolved as quickly as it had come on. She was an empty husk, she didn’t know what to feel, and she certainly didn’t know what to say. “Uhh…”

“Forget it!” Akane cried, angry tears springing into her eyes. “It wouldn’t change anything anyway!”

Akane turned sharply on her heel and headed toward the threshold. Ranma lurched forward and snagged her shoulder and twisted her around.

“Akane, wait, let me--”

Akane slapped Ranma’s arm away. Her face was twisted into a brutal mask of fury.

“Don’t touch me!” she shrieked. She drew back her arms and lunged them toward Ranma at full speed.

Ranma felt a thick lurch against her chest, and then she was suddenly weightless. It took her a second to recognize the sensation as falling. Sound didn’t reach her ears again until she felt her back collide with the wall, and then heard the horrified shriek of several people in the crowd. Her hand reached up instinctively, finding purchase on the wall scroll, and gripped it tight. Her weight made the thin scroll easily shred, and she fell the rest of the way, taking the scroll with her. She landed hard on her tailbone, squeezing her eyes shut tight at the pain.

Her eyes opened slowly, watching the scroll flutter uselessly to the floor and drape across her legs in a tattered mess. She looked up, and met the eyes of dozens of people at once, but her gaze zeroed in on Akane’s.

Akane’s eyes were wide with horror. They flickered around the room, her teeth pinched and gnawed at her bottom lip. Then she gave a strange choked sound and sprinted out of the room, pushing past people as she went, until she was out of sight.

Another silent second went by, and then the room broke into a frenzy. Several people rushed to Ranma all at once, all talking at the same time. Ranma couldn’t make any sense of it. They were asking her something, she knew they were, but what?

“Let me through!”

The voice was unmistakeable and broke through the others like they were made of rice paper. The crowd moved aside effortlessly and Ryoga burst through and crouched down at Ranma’s side, his eyes so wide Ranma wasn’t sure which emotion she could see in them first. He helped her slowly to her feet, talking quietly under his breath the whole time. He grasped Ranma’s shoulders and squeezed them, slouching down so their eyes were level.

“Are you alright?” his voice came out firm, and yet in a single ragged breath.

Ranma nodded slowly. “I’m fine,” she whispered.

“We should take you to the hospital,” Cologne said, making her way through the crowd.

“I’m fine,” Ranma repeated, sighing heavily.
“No, you’re not,” Ryoga said sternly. “We should--”

“Mom’s the word,” Ranma said, so quietly only Ryoga could possibly hear.

“Ranma--”

“I’m sorry, everybody.” Ranma said in a rush, brushing Ryoga’s hands off her shoulders. “Uh, Merry Christmas, I guess.”

She rushed out of the room and headed straight down the hall toward the front door. She heard footsteps following close behind but they were only from one person, and the only person she wanted following her. She slipped on her shoes and went straight out the door.

Snow was falling on the streets. There was already a thin white layer of frost on the ground. Ranma stood in the chilly night air, holding her arms and looking up at the sky.

Ryoga walked up behind her slowly. “Ranma…”

“Curry ice cream.”

Ryoga stared at the back of Ranma’s head. “What?”

“I want curry ice cream,” Ranma said. “The Ikebukuro district isn’t actually that far, if we get a train. Let’s go to Namja Town.”

Ryoga sighed. “Ranma, I really think we should--”

“I have another doctor’s appointment tomorrow anyway,” Ranma said. “So there’s no point in goin’ now.”

“But what if--”

“Then I’ll let you know right away,” Ranma cut him off. She looked away from the sky finally and over her shoulder at Ryoga. “Just let me run one more time, okay?”

The tension left Ryoga’s shoulders; not completely, but enough.

He sighed, then gave Ranma a crooked smile. “Let’s run.”

Chapter End Notes

I won’t get into all the nitty-gritty details of why this chapter took so long to come out; it’s a long story. One which involves shitty tech support harbouring my poor sweet laptop from me longer than I anticipated, job-hunting and job-finding, going from 0-90 after 6 months of unemployment to working full-time. It also doesn’t help matters that this wound up being the longest chapter I’ve written for this story to date, and a whomping 33 pages. Remember when Chapter 1 was only 9 pages? Things were simpler back then...

I hope you haven’t forgotten about me, that was one hell of an absence. I know I warned
you after I'd finished posting my first pre-written 10 chapters that updates would probably be a little slower. Boy, was that the understatement of the year. I hope you'll forgive my tardiness, and that this chapter will be worth the wait.

My hours at work dropped significantly this week, but I have to finish my online training courses, and work on a present for my dad for Father's Day. But things are bubbling toward the climax now, so I'm looking forward to continuing to write this story, so hopefully the next update won't be months from now.

Till then, enjoy some lovely Autumn Effect fanart (it's part of the reason I was able to crack out this chapter!)

http://gillotto.tumblr.com/post/120559303084/cows-quack-gillotto-cows-quack-been


http://gillotto.tumblr.com/post/121429412774/cows-quack-my-plan-has-backfired-i-was

All of these were done by the amazing and talented cows-quack! Thank you for the wonderful art!!

~~~ Go and check out her tumblr here: http://cows-quack.tumblr.com/ ~~~
When Ryoga woke up the next morning, it was to an empty bed. Something he was used to, since most mornings the person he shared his bed with climbed over top of him and made a mad dash for the bathroom. However, it was usually getting crushed by flailing limbs that woke him from his slumber. Today, it was Shirokuro’s soft grumbling. He opened his eyes to find his bed empty, and Shirokuro’s furry face inches from his own, waiting for him to wake up. He got up to use the bathroom, and found it wasn’t occupied by a grumpy, sick redhead groaning into the toilet bowl. Sometimes he also discovered her when she was over by the sink, still half-asleep while she brushed her teeth. But the bathroom was empty.

He went downstairs to the kitchen. Empty again. He walked with Shirokuro and checked the backyard. Nothing. Ryoga walked back toward the kitchen, unease festering in his chest. Shirokuro laid down on the kitchen tile and watched while Ryoga busied himself making breakfast. He sat down at the table, and for a moment, he didn’t touch his food. He stared across the table at the empty chair, and he frowned at the food he’d prepared, which was only enough for one. It was strange not cooking for two. He started feeding Shirokuro half of his food, so it wouldn’t be just him eating. When he was finished his food he did the dishes, and then sat back down at the table, resting his chin on his entwined fingers.

His knee jittered. He forced himself to stop. His hands came down, and his fingers began to drum the table. He leaned back and crossed his arms, as if to pin them down. Stop it, stop it.

Why did he feel so anxious?

He saw Shirokuro’s ears perk up suddenly, and her head darted off to look at the kitchen door, like a deer that heard the distant crack of a gunshot. Her tail swished back and forth expectantly as she shot up to her feet and ran out of the room. Ryoga heard the sound of the front door opening and closing from down the hall, and Shirokuro’s nails clicking against the floor as she pranced around. A flicker
of warmth passed through Ryoga’s chest, then quickly cooled. He got up and headed toward the front hallway.

Ranma was at the front door, trying to take off her coat and shoes while Shirokuro danced around her legs. She saw Ryoga come up to the foyer, her eyes meeting his briefly while she hung up her jacket.

“Where did you go?” Ryoga asked instantly. He was a little annoyed with himself for not being able to take the note of hysteria out of his voice.

Ranma looked over at him, and raised an eyebrow. “The doctor’s office?” she said, as though it were obvious. “I said I had an appointment.”

Ryoga bristled a little. She had said that. He deflated a little, almost a little disappointed she had a perfectly valid excuse, and he was just an idiot for getting so worked up after all.

But damn her if she was gonna get away with making him worry like that.

Ryoga puffed his chest out indignantly. “Well, couldn’t you have said you were leaving?” he asked tartly.

“You were asleep.” Ranma said simply.

“Then wake me up.”

“It was an early appointment, I figured I’d be back before you even noticed I’d gone.” Ranma shrugged passively.

She walked by Ryoga and towards the kitchen. Ryoga twisted around quickly and followed close behind her.

“You couldn’t have left me a note to find?” he asked as they walked into the kitchen.

Ranma turned around, her eyes wide. “Why are we still talking about this? I went to the doctor’s, now I’m back. Unlike you, I know my way to the clinic and back, so it didn’t take me three weeks.”

“A note still would have been nice.” Ryoga muttered, ignoring the jab since it had clearly been a tactic to try and distract him.

A short laugh burst out of Ranma. “I’m freakin’ twenty-two, not ten. An’ you ain’t my mother. So why the hell are we even havin’ this conversation? What, I have to tell you what I do and where I go every time I make a move, now?”

Ryoga frowned. “Look, I get that you’re probably in another one of your moods, but--”

“Y’know, not every little thing I do anymore is because of bein’ pregnant, okay? Maybe I’m my own freakin’ person, an’ I’m pissed off ‘cause I bloody well wanna be pissed off, got it?”

It took a moment before Ryoga could find words. “Well, whether it’s hormones or not, I still don’t get why you’re so upset.”

“Because you just told me I can’t come an’ go as I please, without informing you first, like I’m supposed to be your damn property, or somethin’.” Ranma growled.

“Alright, fine, you’re a grown man, you can go where you please,” Ryoga said dismissively. “But why did you go to the appointment alone?”
Ranma raised an eyebrow at him. “Like I said already, you were still asleep, an’ it was an early appointment. It was easier for me to just go on my own.”

“But we always go to the appointments together,” Ryoga mumbled. “And, well, I figured...what with the other night—”

“I had t’ leave so early t’ get there I skipped out on breakfast!” Ranma said loudly, whirling back around and walking toward the fridge. “I’m starving. Have you eaten yet?”

Ryoga stared at Ranma’s back while she raided the fridge. “...Yeah, uh, I already had something to eat. Sorry.”

“It’s cool, there’s some cutlet sandwiches in here.” Ranma said, pulling the container out of the fridge. She took out a sandwich and leaned against the counter while she ate. She paled through the first sandwich in just four bites. Licking her fingers she went through her pocket with her other hand and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

“By the way,” she started, unfolding the piece of paper. “I found somethin’ for us to go an’ do tonight.”

Ranma held out the paper to Ryoga. He walked forward and took the piece of paper and turned it around. The entire front of the page was midnight blue with a smattering of stars and blooming fireworks bursting in the background. There was yellow text that announced a New Year’s Festival happening that evening.

“There’s gonna be food stands, an’ fireworks,” Ranma said around a bite from a second cutlet sandwich. “It’s gonna be at the park just a short walk from here.”

“I see,” Ryoga said. “We can go if you want.”

“Cool. It’s not for a while, but I’ve got some chores to do anyways, and for lunch I was gonna try making an osechi bento. I hope they have a place to get some soba at the festival.” Ranma stored the sandwich container back in the fridge and walked toward the door. Ryoga twisted around and hurriedly followed Ranma out.

“So, what happened at--”

“Think you can take Shirokuro for a walk?” Ranma asked suddenly. “I’d feel bad leaving her cooped up here tonight while we’re at the festival. I’d come along but I’d better get the chores outta the way. I’ve got a lot of cookin’ to do.”

“Yeah, sure…” Ryoga murmured. Shirokuro went off to fetch her leash having her the word ‘walk’ as Ranma started pulling the vacuum out of the closet. “But before I go, I wanted to ask about--”

Ranma turned the vacuum on, and started making her way up the stairs, running the nozzle on the stairs as she went. Over the roar of the vacuum and the loud clunking it made as Ranma moved it up the stairs, there was no way Ranma could hear him. Shirokuro’s wet nose shoved into Ryoga’s hands insistently, with more force than normal. Now that the vacuum was on, she was very eager to get out of the house. Ryoga sighed, kneeling down to clip on Shirokuro’s collar. He could barely take one last look back up the stairs as he opened the door, for Shirokuro jerked him hastily outside.
When Ryoga returned, the house was immaculate. As soon as he entered the house his nose was filled with a fresh citrus scent and a hint of bleach. The small tiled area right by the front door was shiny and spotless; Ryoga could almost see his reflection. The shoes and slippers on the metal shoe rack had been organized and placed back neatly. Ryoga opened the closet to return his coat to the rack, and found the coats and jackets and other winter accessories had been sorted through and tidied. Ryoga carefully stored his coat back where it’d been before, trying to not disturb the cleanliness. He took off Shirokuro’s leash, and placed it on the empty space on the top level of the shoe rack, which had apparently been left vacant for that very purpose.

“He thought of everything,” Ryoga whispered to himself.

Shirokuro walked down the hallway towards the kitchen, and Ryoga quickly removed his shoes, placed them as neatly as possible on the rack, and followed her. She had to be following the smell. The closer they came to the kitchen, the more the scent overtook the smell of citrusy bleach. Ryoga opened the door to the kitchen, and the scent intensified. Ranma was at the counter, her back to him, engrossed in her work.

“Close the door,” she ordered as soon as Ryoga stepped inside. “I cooked fish and I don’t want the smell to spread all over the house.”

Ryoga obeyed, his eyes fixed on Ranma while he slowly shut the door behind him.

“Wow,” he said in awe. “I was only gone an hour and a half. How in the hell did you manage all of this?”

Ranma’s shoulders shrugged. “Just got kinda into it, I guess. Sit down, it’s almost done.”

Ryoga did so, albeit reluctantly. “The house looks great.”

Ranma began assembling all the food together. “Kasumi-san always went all-out and cleaned the whole house top to bottom on New Year’s Eve. I used t’ clean the dojo. I’d sweep, mop, polish the floors...I’d get a step ladder and dust off the shrine. I’d fix all the holes in the walls an’ roof. I’d never had my own place to clean before livin’ there, but their house was never really my home, y’know. The room me an’ Pops shared never really felt like anywhere but a place I slept at night. The dojo was different, though. That an’ the roof on the house...were my favourite places t’ be,” Ranma’s eyes looked far away as she peeled the skin off an orange. “There was somethin’ about cleanin’ that dojo that made my whole body feel lighter. It felt good to put myself to workin’ on somethin’ that really meant somethin’. By the time I was finished cleaning I’d be too tired to train. I’d shut out all the lights, light incense, sit in the middle of the floor an’ let my mind go blank. It felt like all my blood was bein’ detoxified.”

Ranma turned around, brandishing a large dark bento box with two layers, and walked over to the table. She set it down in the middle of the table and stood back and gestured her arms widely.

“Happy New Year!” she exclaimed. She instantly slumped, wiping sweat from her brow. “Alright, let’s eat.”

Ryoga took in the food in front of them while Ranma went back to the counter to fill cups with tea before seating herself. There were bitter oranges, rolled omelettes, broiled fish cakes, skewered prawns, red sea bream, herring with roe, and black soybeans. It was all displayed in two bento boxes, which both had little miniature bamboo and pine branch decorations sticking out of the middle.

“This looks amazing,” Ryoga said. “I’ve never had a traditional osechi-ryōri before. You...really
Ranma was already munching on a fish cake. “Yeah, an’ I won’t have to for the next seven days after this,” she said around her bite. “It’s bad luck.”

“Oh, well, I don’t think I’d be able to eat all of this in one sitting, anyways. I guess I don’t have to.” Ryoga looked back down at all the food before him, then back up at Ranma. “I never really pegged you as the superstitious type.”

“Not about superstition. Just feels good to have a clean house and a break from cookin’.” Ranma said.

“I see.” Ryoga took a sip of his tea, and started to eat.

The food was delicious, so it was easy to busy his mouth with eating instead of talking. Yet he still felt an itch in the back of his throat; he could feel the words bubble up in his mouth but something held him back. This was the nicest the atmosphere had been all day. In fact, it was the nicest it’d been since the night before.

Even after they arrived to Namja Town, the mood was stagnant. It wasn’t a terrible outing, but it certainly wasn’t pleasant. They barely spoke on the train, or while they walked around the mall, only making brief remarks about the things around them. Even as they were sitting in the ice cream shop eating curry ice cream, Ryoga felt the same then as he did now. Like something was wedged in his throat, blocking off air. The longer it went on, the more breathless he became. But he still couldn’t get the words out; and maybe it was better that way.

It certainly wasn’t perfect, but it wasn’t like they were giving each other the cold shoulder. Ranma was distant, but she’d cooked this meal for him, she’d cleaned his entire house. That was worth something, wasn’t it? He was probably just overthinking things.

What did it matter if they ate in silence? It never bothered him before. Just because they had started having conversations over meals lately didn’t mean it always had to be that way from now on. Some days they might just not have much to say.

*But we do.*

Ryoga pursed his lips. Staring down at his half-eaten sea bream. Then he looked up at Ranma. “Hey, uh…”

Ranma looked up at him and raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“I was just wondering…” Ryoga began, trailing off.

“Oh huh?”

“Do you…want to wear yukata to the festival tonight?”

Ranma blinked. “I don’t own one.” she replied.

Now that he thought about it, Ryoga didn’t have one either. “My…mom might have one you could wear?” he offered. “I could go look for you.”

“It’s winter. It’s a bit cold for yukata, isn’t it?” Ranma muttered.

“Oh. Ah, I guess so.” Ryoga mumbled. “Wouldn’t want you to catch cold.”
“Mhmm.”

Ryoga pulled the bamboo and pine decoration out of the bento and twirled it around between his fingers.

When would he learn to keep his mouth shut?

After packing away all the uneaten food and cleaning the kitchen, the sun was setting. Ryoga and Ranma freshened up separately, and then got ready to walk to the festival. It was a brisk, late December evening. It had snowed all through the previous night. The snow left behind wasn’t enough to last on the sidewalks, but it striped the leafless trees with white and coated every patch of grass in a seamless coat. The sun had vanished quickly behind the snow-peaked mountaintops, and the sky was wisps of deep violet, fuchsia, and a blue so deep it gave promise to a pitch-black sky the moment the last of the sun’s light slipped away into the night.

They walked in silence down the streets, lit only by faint moonlight cloaked by steel-grey clouds, and the harsh orange of the streetlights that cast misshapen, discoloured shadows on the snow. Ryoga looked in his peripheral vision down at Ranma. Her red hair looked like the inside of a blood orange in this light. Ryoga watched her breath flicker out past her lips and rise into the air like smoke. He returned his gaze back down the street before she could catch him staring.

Within a few minutes they reached the park, but they could hear the murmur of the festival-goers from down the street before the park was even in sight. Ryoga’s neighbourhood was small; he knew the name of each of his neighbours down his whole block, and they knew him. He’d even given away a few of Shirokuro’s puppies to the people on his street so they could still be close to their mother. The puppies were all young dogs now, and sometimes Ryoga would come across one of his neighbours out walking them while he was walking Shirokuro. Shirokuro was always excited to see her babies again, so she’d usually spend a few minutes playing with the young pup while Ryoga had a chat with their owner. Half the reason he was able to make it home when he was out on his own was thanks to his neighbours recognizing him on the street when he made it back to the area, and leading him home. They always made sure Shirokuro was looked after while he was away, as well.

Ryoga could recognize a few familiaris among the crowds of bundled up faces; most were there with their families or significant others, huddling close in their tight-knit groups to keep each other in sight and to battle the cold. A group of young girls hustled by them, all three covered with thickly-knit hats and large scarves. Despite how cold they looked, they giggled as they hurried toward the front gates of the park.

“It’s freezing! Let’s get something hot to drink.” said one girl, who was rubbing her arms fervently.

“Let’s go to the temple and get our fortunes!” another chimed in.

“We can do that after midnight, I wanna try the games first!” said the third.

“But my fortune was so crummy last year, I want to see if I get a good one this year.” the second one mumbled back.

“Fukuda-kun and Matsuo-kun both asked you out this year,” the cold one shot back. “How is having the two cutest boys in our class falling all over you unlucky?”
“But I was waiting for Nakama-kun to ask me out, and he never did!” whined the second girl indignantly.

The third girl laughed loudly. “I still think it’s hilarious that you were friend-zoned by a guy whose name is Nakama.”

The cold one, who had been blowing into her hands, snorted loudly and became racked with uncontrollable giggles. Her flustered friend yelled loudly in embarrassment at her two friends, who only started laughing louder. Ryoga could hear the girl’s complaints even after they passed through the front gates and blended into the crowd.

The girls’ noisiness didn’t irritate him. Instead, there was a small part of him in the back of his mind that was laughing warmly at the cute girls and their good-hearted joking. He found himself attracted not to the girls themselves, but to what they represented. Youthful innocence; purity sparkling and pristine as the snow. It wasn’t infatuation he felt, it was a warm fondness he felt deep in his chest. A longing.

Yet he felt that warmth slip away and grow cold, once again, like it had done earlier that day. Ryoga knew the cold night wasn’t to blame, but the icy trepidation that had refused to leave the pit of his stomach since that morning.

He couldn’t allow that warmth to swell inside him. Not when he was so uncertain about what would come next. Up until now, his future seemed laid out before him, straight as an arrow and stretching into the distance like a road. He usually got lost on roads, even straight ones. He’d always find some way to make a wrong turn, even when the path offered no turns to take. But for the first time in his whole life, he could see straight ahead. The road had no discernible end, or a particular place that it was leading to. There was haze in the distance, a blur in the edges of the road when he tried to look down it as far as his eyes would allow. He didn’t know exactly what the future had in store for him, but at least he’d had a pretty good idea of where he was headed. And that, for him, was a first.

He was pulled from his thoughts the same moment he felt Ranma tug on his coat sleeve. Ryoga looked over and down at her small hand grasping his sleeve, and followed her arm upward. She was looking away, and pointing with her other hand toward a little booth nearby. There was an old lady behind the wooden booth, it’s counter was draped in a dark, soft-looking cloth. She was brewing something in a wireless kettle.

“Let’s go get a drink.” Ranma said.

They walked up to the booth, and the old woman looked up and smiled softly.

“Would you two care for some milk tea?” she asked, her voice as textured yet soft as leather.

“Two, please.” Ryoga said, reaching into his coat pocket. “How much?”

“150 yen, dear.” the old woman said, turning away and searching through a large duffel bag on a chair beside her booth while Ryoga rifled through his wallet for change. She placed a carton of milk and large plate of plum jam cookies onto the counter beside the kettle, which was just starting to whistle. The woman turned off the kettle and filled two styrofoam cups with black tea a little more than halfway. Then she filled the cups the rest of the way with the milk.

While Ryoga placed change on the counter, Ranma watched the milk swirl through the black tea in alluring spirals and curves. The two colours blended together in perfect sync into an opaque, creamy tan.
“Here, take these as well,” the woman peeled the plastic wrap off of the plate of cookies, and placed two into separate red napkins, placing them beside the cups of tea. “No charge. Have a Happy New Year.”

“Oh, thank you very much.” Ryoga said graciously, taking the cup and the cookies. “Happy New Year.”

The old woman gave them a sugary smile and bowed as they walked away. Ryoga took a sip of his tea as they walked back into the crowd and toward the rows of booths and games. The tea wasn’t too bitter or too sweet; it was still a little too hot, but he relished the scalding heat in the back of his throat. It bit back at the cold.

And soothed the itch. For a moment.

This was the first time Ryoga had gone to a festival in a long time. He and Akari had gone to a few festivals together in the past, usually in the summertime. He could remember the thick humidity in the air, mixed with the smell of grilling squid, candy apples, and taiyaki. He might have been able to enjoy the sight of Akari in a yukata if her beloved Katsunishiki hadn’t blocked his view.

A festival in winter is rather similar to a summer festival. They definitely had their differences, though. The most obvious was the weather. But the feeling overall was different, as well. A festival was a festival; there were red lanterns hung from the tree branches and lamp posts, just like there were in summer. There were more booths selling lots of meat on sticks and noodles, things that were hot and could keep the cooks and festival-goers warm in the chill. There were still lots of games, except for goldfish scooping and yo-yo balloons. They walked down the main pathway between all the vendors, food and game booths, sipping slowly on their milk tea. Ryoga tried a bite of the plum jam cookie; it was crispy, rich and tart, and complimented the tea perfectly. He finished the first cookie off quickly then wrapped the second up in the napkin and stored it in his pocket, making a mental note to give it to Shirokuro as a New Year’s present.

“I never bought you a Christmas present.” Ryoga said suddenly, realizing. They’d stopped to watch a group of children try and shoot down prizes with toy rifles.

“I didn’t ask for one,” Ranma said simply.

“Well, I still should’ve gotten you something.” Ryoga retorted. “You got me something.”

Ranma gave him a confused look. “I didn’t get you nothin’.”

“You got me a job,” Ryoga supplied, his voice soft and barely audible over the mix of triumphant and defeated cries of the boys at the rifle booth.

Ranma stared at him for a moment, and then looked away. “I didn’t really do anythin’.”

“You said I owe you one, right? Well, I should get you something. It can be a Christmas and a New Years’ present. A thanks for the help with getting me in at the Nekohanten, and for cooking that osechi today. In fact, you can think of it as a thank you for everything you’ve done so far.” Ryoga smiled, and started looking around at the booths for some inspiration. “So, what do you want? It can be anything.”

Ranma was watching the toy rifle boy’s bantering with vague interest.

“Lemme play with it too!”

“You can have your turn when I’m done! I’m the one who shot it down, remember? And you’ve got
your own prize to play with.”

“But you got the cooler one.”

“I’m starving, let’s go get some takoyaki!”

The boys ran off laughing, and Ranma’s gaze followed them before they disappeared into the crowd. “Let’s go get some toshikoshi soba.” she said finally.

Ryoga blinked. “You want soba noodles for a Christmas present?” he asked, dumbfounded. “I said you could have whatever you wanted.”

“And I want soba,” Ranma said back. “It’s tradition.”

Ryoga rubbed the back of his neck, at a loss. “Ah, well, I guess if it’s what you want.” he mumbled. “Have you seen a booth that’s selling soba yet?”

Ranma nodded. “I saw one back there.”

“Well then, lead the way.” Ryoga said, even though Ranma was already turning around and walking back toward the soba booth.

It was a larger booth than most of the other food vendors, with a few stools set up so you could sit and eat right out front. They went up and ordered two bowls, and Ryoga paid. There were some empty stools near the middle of the stand, so they took their seats and waited for their meal. Ryoga noticed a small digital clock on the counter by the cash register. It was nearly eleven o’clock.

“What should we do after we eat?” Ryoga asked.

“Whatever you want to do,” Ranma replied. “I can lead you to whatever booth you want to see, if you tell me what it is.”

Ryoga thought back to the small boys playing at the rifle booth. “Did you want to go back to that booth with the toy guns? Those kids weren’t able to shoot down the best prize. I bet we could win it.”

“You can try if you want,” Ranma said. “What else did you want to do?”

Ryoga stared at Ranma for a moment. Why was it what he wanted to do? He was asking her. “Well...it’ll be midnight soon. Did you want to go to the temple and get your fortune?”

“Sure, that’s fine.” Ranma said. “And after that?”

Ryoga twitched. “I—I don’t know. Isn’t there anything you want to do? Other than eat soba, I mean.”

Ranma rested her chin in her hand. “Not really.”

“But--”

“Two orders of soba.”

Two steaming bowls of noodles with kamaboto fish cake and spring onions sprinkled on top, were slid under their noses. Ryoga thanked the man quickly under his breath and then turned back to Ranma. She’d already snapped her chopsticks and was slurping up the noodles. But something was off about the way she ate. She’d been this way back when they ate the bento lunch, as well.
Ranma loved food. Ranma loved to eat. Hell, the whole basis of their first meeting revolved around Ranma stealing Ryoga’s lunch bread. There were plenty of times after that too when Ryoga would find his way back to Nerima, and run into Ranma on the street. Ranma walking along the green fence near his neighbourhood, a paper bag tucked protectively under his arm and a half-eaten bean bun hanging out his mouth. A skip in his step.

When she climbed over top of him in the dead of night to go downstairs and eat. What, it never mattered; it was always different. Ryoga would always be jostled from his sleep whenever she decided it was time for a three in the morning snack grab--sometimes he’d be too exhausted to care and would slunk right back into a deep sleep, and other times he’d follow her downstairs and find her in the kitchen. She’d lean against the counter and eat a cup of custard pudding, her eyes usually half-lidded or completely closed, as if she were sleep-walking. Or she’d be crouched to the floor, in front of the open fridge, drinking orange juice straight from the carton while she scanned the fridge for food. Or she’d sit at the table, hunkered low over a bowl of cornflakes, groaning something about back pain.

The way she was eating her soba now was not the way Ranma ate noodles. Ranma slurped noodles loudly, with fervor. Her eyes would be popped open and light would bounce off of them. She’d maintain a grin even while stuffing her face. Ryoga could look back and see in his mind’s eye that first night on the mountains, when they’d first arrived at their camp. Sitting in front of a crackling fire with Ranma sitting cross-legged on the grass, knocking back a bowl of instant ramen, making sure he got every last drop. When he lowered the cup, there’d been a tiny piece of onion just above the top of his lip. Ryoga’d had the urge to reach out and brush it away with his thumb, but stopped himself. Eventually, Ranma noticed it on his own and disposed of it with a precise flick of his tongue.

Now, she kept her head down, eating her soba calmly and quietly. No chance of back-splashing and getting onion on her lip.

If there was one thing Ranma never did, it was do anything calmly and quietly. Ranma thrusted himself into everything he did, even something as simple as eating.

Ryoga steeled himself, taking in a deep breath. “Is everything okay?”

Ranma paused, her chopsticks hovering in mid-air. Her noodles slowly slipped off of the sticks and back into the broth.

“I’m fine.” she replied after a moment.

Ryoga frowned. “Ranma, you—”

“You gonna eat your soba?”

Ryoga stood up from his stool suddenly. “You know what? No, I’m not.” he said shortly. He grabbed Ranma by the arm. “And neither are you.”

“Wha--hey! Ryoga!” Ranma cried as Ryoga pulled her off the stool and dragged her away from the soba stand. The cooks and several customers who had been sitting on the other stools looked up and watched them in confusion as Ryoga pulled a very vexed Ranma through the crowds. Ryoga weaved through the throngs of people until they came to the end of the main pathway. The park seemed much darker only illuminated by a few small lamps, now that the red glow of the festival was behind them.

“Will you--hey--Ryoga!” Ranma snapped. Finally, she growled in frustration and dug her heels into
the ground. “You’re gonna wind up draggin’ us to who-knows where an’ gettin’ us lost, lemme go!”

Ryoga came to a sudden stop, and Ranma nearly collided into his back. She was finally able to yank her arm free of Ryoga’s grip. She found herself panting heavily; her legs were much shorter than Ryoga’s and keeping pace with him while he dragged her through the festival at top-speed had left her short of breath.

“What’s your problem, what the hell was that?” Ranma asked loudly, irate.

Ryoga turned around slowly. Unlike Ranma, he was not panting for air. His breathing was steady and even. His mouth was in a tight line and his brow was furrowed deeply. It was a face Ranma was used to seeing on Ryoga, but hadn’t seen in a long time. She always thought he’d eventually get his face stuck that way.

Ryoga took a step forward and grabbed Ranma’s shoulders tightly. “That’s it, Ranma. I’m at my wit’s end.” he said. “No more running away.”

He could feel Ranma bristle under his hands. Her eyes flickered indignantly, and her mouth parted, but then she closed it.

“Ranma...” Ryoga said her name slowly, enunciating every syllable. “I need to know.”

Ranma bit her lip. She looked away, off at nothing.

“I check out,” she said thickly, a weird hilt in her voice as she seemed to hold back a short laugh. “Everything’s fine.”

Ryoga felt the tension ease off his shoulders. His eyes went wide and his mouth parted. His hands eased up on their grip for a moment before clamping back down.

“Are you sure?”

Ranma nodded slowly. “Doc says as long as my abdomen didn’t take a serious blow, then it shouldn’t be anythin’ t’ worry about. I guess there’s enough paddin’ to break the fall.” Ranma laughed breathlessly. She still wasn’t looking at him.

“Well, th-that’s good, isn’t it? That’s great.” Ryoga took his hands away. He grasped Ranma’s chin and pulled her gaze back to him. “Why didn’t you say anything sooner?”

Ranma eyes glazed over. She didn’t turn her head away again, but her eyes cast down to the ground. “Because,” she said quietly. “I...didn’t know how to feel.”

“Ranma, you’ve been driving me crazy all day. I’ve been losing my mind wondering whether or not you and the baby were okay...and the more you shut me out, the more worried I got.” Ryoga grasped the sides of Ranma’s face with both hands now. He had to bend at the knees in order to look her fully in the eye. “So, why? Why couldn’t you tell me as soon as you knew?”

Ranma’s face had sunk into a look of fear. She squeezed her eyes shut tight, and Ryoga could feel her trying to jerk her head away, but he wasn’t going to let her go that easily. She made an impatient, almost pained sound, and tried again to pull away. Ryoga let go of her face, but quickly grabbed her by the forearms.

“Just let me go!” Ranma cried, wriggling beneath his hands.
“Not until you tell me what the hell is going on with you,” Ryoga demanded solidly. “You haven’t been yourself all day, dammit. I want to know why!”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Ranma shook her head violently, shutting her eyes tightly again. “You can’t understand...nobody understands how this feels!”

“Then make me understand!” Ryoga was shouting now. “Tell me why!”

Ranma pushed him away, knocking his hands off of her. When her head shot up and her eyes flew open, her face was twisted into an emotion Ryoga didn’t even have a name for.

“Because I wished something had happened!”

There was a moment of pause, of complete silence between them. Ryoga couldn’t even hear the hum of the festival anymore. Then, there was a rich, deep sound that echoed through the cold air. The temple bell had started to ring.

“You…” Ryoga’s small voice was lost beneath the first gong of the bell.

Ranma was looking back down at the ground again, watching snowflakes flutter onto the pavement as they started to fall from the black and grey sky.

“Once I heard the news, for a moment...not even a second, but...there was a part of me, in the back of my mind that was...disappointed,” Ranma swallowed thickly after getting the single word out, and then continued, “That part of me that...that just wanted for things to go back to the way they were.”

“Did you...really just say,” Ryoga whispered. “That you were hoping that the baby would be dead?”

Ranma’s head darted up. “I--no! Well, I mean…”

“You wished your fall had done something,” Ryoga went on, finding himself unable to stop. “You wanted to lose it.”

“I said it was only for a second,” Ranma said quickly. “It was...it was just--y’know, one of those stupid thoughts you get that you regret even thinkin’ about as soon as you think it. It never became anythin’ more than that, it was just...a thought.”

“A thought is all it takes!” Ryoga barked shrilly. “It doesn’t matter whether this was the first time it entered your mind, or not. You still considered it--and not for the well-being of the baby, but the complete opposite. You wanted that fall to kill it.”

Ranma cringed. “I don’t--not--” Ranma clenched her fists and shook her head wildly. “It’s not like we wanted this to happen! We didn’t expect this, we were just...and then...it was just a mistake! It is a mistake!”

“You were the one who wanted to keep the baby in the first place,” Ryoga said coldly. “You told me that it’s a life, even if it’s a small one. And you were bound by your duty as a martial artist to protect that life. You don’t kill, Ranma.”

“I know that, an’ I am, I want to…” Ranma voice trailed away for a moment as her eyes flickered down to her stomach. “I don’t know why I had that thought when I did, or why I even had it at all. It’s just that...I’m...I am so...terrified.”

Ranma’s eyes went wide at her own words, as if she was finally just coming to the realization herself. Any perhaps she was. She mouthed out the words again in a soft whisper.
“I’m terrified,” And then, louder and with more certainty, “I am scared shitless. I don’t have a clue what I’m doing, or what to do, or how I’m gonna do...anything that I’m gonna hafta just...know how to do all of a sudden, an’--” Ranma choked a little. She sighed shakily, and continued. “An’ before all of this, I...didn’t know what I was doin’ then, either. But it didn’t matter that I didn’t know--an’ I liked not knowing. I just wanted to roll with the punches, go where life takes me, go where I want to go, when I want to and how I want to. Instead I feel like I ran away from one scenario where my life was being handled and decided for me, and wound up running head-first right into the same damn thing. After that, bein’ someone’s husband seemed like the better alternative than becomin’ a parent. An’ the more I thought about it, the more freaked out I thought about it, the more I thought about it, the more freaked out I got.”

Ryoga watched snowflakes fall into Ranma’s hair, thick specks of white that melted translucent and turned her hair darker, first in spots and then all over. He finally noticed she hadn’t worn a hat, like he did.

“I tried not t’ let myself get so worked up by everything. I tried to find ways t’ make it feel better...tried to keep tellin’ myself things would work out fine. An’ for a while, that was good enough.” Ranma brushed snowflakes off of her eyelashes. “But then, I--I fell, an’ then...everything shifted. For an instant, and then it went back again. But...it was enough. Enough to scare the hell out of me all over again. I asked myself why the idea had even crossed my mind...and realized that, despite all my efforts, I was still scared. I still had no idea how I was gonna be a parent, or if I even wanted to be one. I was never given that choice, just like everythin’ else that’s ever happened to me.”

“You did have a choice,” Ryoga said stoically. “You always say it like all this is all my fault. That I’m the one who made the first move. But that was all you. It’s like I said before: you got yourself pregnant,” Ryoga scoffed coldly. “Here I thought we’d both changed after all these weeks. I thought you were finally taking some owness instead of always blaming everyone else around you for what happens in your life. I thought you were actually growing up. I guess I was wrong.”

Ranma snagged her bottom lip between her teeth again. She kept her head bowed, looking up at Ryoga through her lashes. “I...I said that I regretted thinkin’ what I did,” she said quietly. “It was stupid. I took it back.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Ryoga murmured, voice eerily soft. “You still considered it, even if it was for just a second. And you don’t get to take that back.”

Ranma stared at him, eyes wide. She opened her mouth slowly, and then quickly shut it as her face fell.

Ryoga turned away, and leaned his arms against the short metal fence they were standing beside. He bowed his head, and his shoulders shook with a weak, heavy laugh.

“If I’d known you were going to treat this so half-assed,” he muttered darkly, “I never would have bothered.”

There was another long, pounding ring. It echoed out, deep and heavy, and when it went quiet there was no more sound. All one hundred and eight defilements of man had risen out from the world and vanished with the last ring of the bell.

If he’d been purged, it certainly wasn’t of something he’d wanted rid off.

The sound of the festival had grown in crescendo, the sound of hundreds of people saying the same words at once. It was a whole new year.

But if the other side of the leaf is the one that’s been touching the ground, doesn’t that make it dirtier?
It's been awhile since this story has had a Ryoga-heavy chapter, POV wise. It was refreshing to switch up the outlook of the narration for this one, which is why it didn't take near as long for this chapter to come out. Also, this is 15 pages shorter than the last chapter, which also helped matters.

Even though this chapter was so much shorter than the last one I feel like there is more to be seen, above and below the surface of what's been written and said. I went a little crazy with symbolisms and that sort of thing for this one, which I'm a huge sucker for. Google was certainly my friend for this one, from Japanese festival games to the symbolic meaning of red sea bream.

(Look up osechi-ryori on Wikipedia, and see what each food item represents. I do so love a good dose of irony.)

Why am I even still talking? None of y'all are even reading this. You all threw your computers out the window a long time ago. You silly gooses. Those are expensive pieces of technology. Hopefully they will all be repaired in good time; I have a good feeling about Chapter 16...I'm so excited to write it I may even start as soon as I wrap up this A/N and post this one.

I'll try not to leave you dangling on this cliffhanger for too long. I do have a heart. Shocking, I know.

Till next time, folks.
Shirokuro whimpered all night long. It made it very difficult to sleep, if sleep was something that even happened at all. Ranma wasn’t so sure. There were small moments of quiet, where black ink seemed to run down her brain and the backs of her eyelids, and shroud everything in nothing for a little while. She tried her best to cling to that nothingness, but failed every time. Her frustration rose with each hour of restlessness and crying dog.

She considered several things while lying in the darkness. Why couldn’t she just go downstairs and sleep on the couch? That seemed like the best place for her, for more than a few reasons. But she couldn’t bring herself to move. Why couldn’t Ryoga go and sleep in his parent’s room? But then she thought about that perfectly-made bed, and thought better of it. It seemed like neither of them were inclined to escape.

Kicking Shirokuro out wasn’t an option. Ryoga had tried several hours ago, finally whipping the sheets off of himself and mercilessly grabbing the dog by her collar and pulling her out of bed. He pushed her outside and shut the door in her face. She went from whimpers to howls, and eventually started jumping up and scratching at the door. Ranma clasped her hands over her ears and squeezed her eyes shut as tight as they could go. Ryoga swore under his breath as he got up once more, and let his pet back into the bedroom.

He went back to bed, and snapped at her when she tried to jump in beside him. She begrudgingly lied down on the floor, and for a minute or two she merely sighed softly, as if she’d finally gone to sleep. Then she started to whimper again; Ryoga sighed loudly, almost growling. Ranma pulled the sheets up over her shoulders, then put her hands over her ears again. Even after her arms had fallen asleep and her ears had become hot and sore, she didn’t dare move them.

Morning light soon illuminated the room and with a sinister finality, banishing all hope of getting any rest. Sleep-deprived, they both laid in near-silence—Shirokuro wasn’t crying as insistently anymore but every few minutes she’d let out another bout of whimpers. She hadn’t messed the floors through the night; she didn’t need to be let out. If she was hungry, Ryoga always left the door open so she
could go downstairs to her food dish. She didn’t seem to be sickly, or injured, so there was no
helping her crying. They stayed in bed until the sun had risen slightly higher in the sky. The clock on
the desk said it was nearly 11:30 AM. Neither of them ever stayed in bed this late.

The faint chime of the phone ringing from down in the kitchen finally made Ryoga stir. He got out of
bed and, as if someone had pressed a button, Shirokuro stopped crying and got to her feet to lead
Ryoga out of the room and down to the kitchen. Ranma turned onto her back, finally taking her
hands away from her ears, which were ringing and tingled as blood flowed back into them. She
stared at the ceiling, listening to the distant, low mumble of Ryoga’s voice talking on the phone.

After a few minutes he was back upstairs and standing in the threshold to the bedroom.

“That was obaa-san,” Ryoga announced. “She says I can start my first shift at the Nekohanten at one
o’clock today. I’m going to take a shower and then take Shirokuro for a walk.”

Ranma sat up. “I could lead you there.” she offered.

“She told me that Mousse will come by later, so that won’t be necessary.” Ryoga replied.

“Oh. How long she keepin’ you?”

“I don’t know. It sounds like most of it will just be basic training so I can’t imagine I’ll be there very
late.” Ryoga said. “Either way, don’t worry about making dinner or anything. I’ll bring back
something.”

“I guess Mousse will be leading you back here, too.”

“That’s the plan.”

That idea bugged her, for some reason.

“He can’t be expected to bring you back here every time you work,” Ranma said. “I can just come
an’ get you. We could eat there, an’ then I’ll take you home.”

“It’s fine. It’s the first day, so I’m sure it’s no trouble for Mousse.” Ryoga crossed his arms and
leaned against the doorway, and looked off at nothing. “I’ll see how many more shifts obaa-san is
going to give me, and make arrangements from there.”

Ranma only nodded slowly.

“Anyway. It’s nearly noon. I’ll be in the shower.” Ryoga pushed off the doorframe and disappeared
down the hall, Shirokuro following him. Ranma pulled up her legs and hunched down, resting her
chin on her knees. Her stomach ached.

Ranma’s hand mindlessly went to her abdomen. “Yeah,” she whispered. “Me, too.”

She heard a soft clicking sound, and looked up to see Shirokuro coming back into the room. She
walked up and instantly hopped up onto the bed, and sat on her haunches besides Ranma. Her
tongue was sticking out as she panted gently; she looked like she was smiling, yet her eyes seem to
hold something more--like she knew this wasn’t really a time to smile.

Ranma reached out and pulled the dog closer to her, slowly rubbing her large ears. Shirokuro let out
a soft ‘awoo’ that almost seemed to sound sad, and gave Ranma’s hand a small lick. Ranma let out a
sad little laugh.
She pressed her face into the dog’s soft, warm hair.

“Thanks, girl.”

“Shampoo no think he listening, hiba-chan.”

Cologne looked over her shoulder. Ryoga and Shampoo were standing behind her in the kitchen. Cologne had just been discussing the different appliances and utensils and the proper way to use them. But Ryoga was looking straight ahead, off at nothing.

With an irate grunt, Cologne twirled her cane and clocked Ryoga on the side of the head. Ryoga didn’t even cry out in pain; he just blinked his eyes rapidly and looked down at Cologne with a curious expression.

“Pay attention, boy!” Cologne snapped. “I was generous enough to offer you a position working alongside me in my kitchen, and you waste my time slipping off in daydreams.”

Ryoga’s face fell, looking shameful. “Ah...s-sorry, obaa-san.”

Cologne bopped Ryoga on the head again, lighter this time. “And be more respectful to your boss, while you’re at it. Cut the familiarity, boy, you’re in the workplace now.”

Ryoga nodded. “Yes, obaa...-sama.”

Cologne snorted. “That’ll do, I suppose. Now, pay attention this time. The next thing I’ll show you is...”

Ryoga focused on Cologne the best he could, but still found his mind unable to stop wandering. Soon enough his tour of the restaurant and kitchen was finished, and Cologne had him doing things more hands-on, which is what he preferred. It was much easier to shut off his mind when he could keep his hands busy. Although he was thankful for this job for obvious reasons, today it seemed like nothing more than a welcome distraction.

After his shower earlier that day he’d stepped out into the hallway and had been surprised to see that Shirokuro was not waiting for him. That was strange; she usually made her way back to the bathroom once she heard the water stop running. And he’d spent a few extra minutes in the bathroom brushing his teeth, getting his hair dried and changing, but still his pet was nowhere to be seen.

He supposed he shouldn’t rely on the dog to lead him around his own house. He should be able to find his own way, although it might take him a little longer to get where he’s going. Ryoga stepped out into the hall, and tried turning left. Sure enough, that eventually brought him outside the door to the kitchen; the stairs were close by. He whistled loudly, and waited. Nothing. No distant barking, no sound of scampering paws coming down the stairs. He walked the rest of the way down the hall and toward the front foyer, and grabbed Shirokuro’s leash off the shoe rack. He made sure to deliberately rustle the chain so the sound could travel and hopefully rouse his dog into coming to him.

“Shirokuro!” he called through the house. “Let’s go for a walk!”

Silence.
Ryoga pressed his lips together. This was so unlike her.

He opened his mouth to call for her again, but then there was a knock at the door behind him. It was Mousse, coming to take him to work.

Mousse adjusted his glasses, and squinted at the leash in Ryoga’s hands. “Please tell me that is not for you.”

“Aiyah!” Shampoo cried, slapping Ryoga on the arm and snapping him out of his reverie. “You burn chow mein, stupid pig-boy!”

Ryoga yelped, shooting his hand out and turning down the burner. Heart-racing, he looked over at Shampoo, who was glowering at him.

“If Ryoga no had family to support, Shampoo would splash and kick you out back door!” she admonished in her high soprano, hands on her hips.

“I’m sorry!” Ryoga cried. “I really am. I...I told everyone I wasn’t cut out for this, but…”

Shampoo’s glare softened into a small frown. “If think like that, never get any better.” she muttered.

Ryoga blinked. Was Shampoo actually trying to give him advice? “I-I know that, and I really will try harder. It’s just…”

“You distracted,” Shampoo finished, sighing loudly. “Ryoga always have head in clouds. Used to be for tomboy, then pig-girl. Now you thinking about Ranma.”

Ryoga tensed. “I’m not. Why would I think about him while I’m at work?” he said quickly.

Shampoo folded her arms across her apron and shook her head. “You too obvious to lie to Shampoo,” she muttered. “So, what pig-boy thinking about? Can’t stand to be away from the other because you lovebirds, hm?”

Ryoga grimaced. “No…” he grumbled.

“Then what Ryoga think about?” Shampoo asked. “Maybe if Ryoga say out loud, then thoughts will be out of head and can actually focus on work and no burn chow mein noodle.”

Ryoga looked away. “It’s--” he felt something in his chest flutter, as if there was a small bird trapped behind his ribcage. “...complicated, okay?”

His own words entered his mind.

*It’s not complicated. You’re just making it out to be that way.*

And then another voice, different from his own and one he hadn’t heard in weeks.

*What would you know about it?*

“Shampoo, is that chow mein ready yet? I need some for table six.” Mousse entered the room. He froze, and sniffed the air. “Something smells...burnt.”

“New boy keep burning everything,” Shampoo said. “He lost in Ranma Land, and too stubborn to speak.”
“I’ll get it ready; try and keep table six happy until then,” Mousse told her, walking up to the stove.

“Shampoo go. No can give good advice to boy dating another boy. Especially boy like Ranma.”

Shampoo left the kitchen, and Mousse stirred around the noodles with a pair of cooking chopsticks, tsking under his breath.

“You don’t have to say anything, if you don’t want to,” Mousse said after a while. “It’s no business of mine what your relationship is like. However, after all these years I do consider myself to be a friend of yours, Ryoga. If something is indeed troubling you, I can do my best to help.”

Ryoga shook his head slowly. “I don’t even know what my thoughts mean anymore.”

“Anymore?” Mousse repeated. “Meaning you did have an idea of them before.”

Ryoga looked down at the floor. “Maybe,” he said. “It was starting to feel like my life had a place it was headed toward, for the very first time. But now it just feels like it was pulled out of my clutches. I feel...angry. I know what angry feels like. Also hurt, and...betrayed. Like everything up until now has been nothing but a dream, and now I’ve woken up to some harsh reality. Like everything I knew and thought were wrong. So now I can’t even work through my own thoughts. Are these thoughts really mine, or something I fabricated while dreaming? Do they truly mean anything, or was it all just me thinking all these things and nobody else?’

Ryoga sunk into a stool beside the counter and put his head in his hands.

“Now I’m so confused. I still feel the same way as before, and yet it’s layered with this bitterness that I can’t shake--and at the same time I don’t want to shake it because I know I’m not completely irrational. I’m allowed to be in pain. But, how long can this bitterness last? Should I let it fade away and forget about it, or allow it to fester?’” Ryoga ran his fingers through his hair, then back down his face. “Will things really get better with either option, though? Does either choice really fix anything? Do I even want to have it fixed? All of this is spinning around in my head and I can’t make sense of any of it. I don’t know what to do.”

Mousse plucked the stuck-together, crispy noodles out of the wok and flicked them into the nearby trashbin.

“I don’t mind you venting your frustrations, but do you think you could peel some carrots while we talk?” Mousse asked.

Ryoga was about to ask where the bag of carrots and the peeler were, until Mousse extended his arm toward him, and a bag of carrots fell out of the sleeve of his robe and into Ryoga’s lap, followed soon after by a small peeler. Unphased by this, Ryoga wordlessly opened the bag of carrots, stood up, and started whisking the blade of the peeler across the carrot’s skin over the trashbin Mousse was still tossing burnt noodles into.

“I don’t know all the details, and you don’t need to go into them. But it sounds like you took an unrequited step forward.” Mousse said finally.

“I think I took about fifty,” Ryoga sighed. “It seems like I’m always going the wrong way.”

“Perhaps not,” Mousse shrugged.

“Then why do I feel like such an idiot?”

“Because you took a step forward, and he hesitated,” Mousse muttered, “It made you feel like a fool,
so you took a step back. Way back. Now you’ve gone and landed yourself in this awkward situation because, what you probably failed to notice, is that he’d taken that step before you even did.”

The peeler slowed down as Ryoga looked up at Mousse with wide eyes.

“But…?” he let out, softly. The words caught in his throat.

“You thought you were getting closer because you made the first move. But I don’t believe that for a damn second, because you’re about as clumsy with things like that as...well, I am.” Mousse paused for a moment, looking sheepish. He cleared his throat and continued. “This is Ranma Saotome we’re talking about here. Even in uncharted territory, he’s always willing to take that first step and plunge in. If you thought you were getting closer, it was because he made it so.”

Ryoga looked back down, realizing the carrot he held was still half-peeled. He flicked the peeler across it swiftly and set it aside, grabbing another. Mousse turned the stove back on to reheat the noodles and bring them back to life.

“Then, you closed the gap, almost completely,” Mousse went on, “You got practically nose-to-nose, and then you stopped. You waited, hoping he’d take that step you hadn’t seen him already take. And when he didn’t move, you went into panic and preservation mode. But in trying to preserve your own wounded ego, you just wound up hurting the whole damn thing.”

“Because he...hurt me first.” Ryoga said quietly.

Mousse tossed the now-sizzling noodles around on the wok. “And you’re just the firecracker that went off in his face,” Mousse said, sighing so long it was nearly a groan. “You’re a hopeless romantic, Ryoga, I may be damn-near blind but I see that plain as day. You’re also an...aggressive romantic. You put your heart into things with reckless abandon and even a violence. You fall so quickly and without any care and it’s either obvious to you, or you don’t even notice. But you managed to pick yourself back up before. But you can’t do that now...because you’re still falling.”

“So...I came on too strong?” Ryoga balked. “I freaked him out? But--”

“Your head really is in the clouds, Hibiki.” Mousse cut him off, his expression deadpan. “I already told you, he’s the one who stepped up first. If he didn’t want it, he wouldn’t be around. If he hasn’t rejected all your advances up until now, then he won’t. And if something is freaking him out, it sure as hell isn’t you.”

“Mousse!” Shampoo barked over the counter suddenly. “Quit flapping beak and put up chow mein. Shampoo can only flirt with customer so long before get bored.”

“Two orders of chow mein, excluding the burnt bits.” Mousse announced, tossing two plates into the air across the kitchen like they were frisbees. Shampoo caught both in either hand effortlessly, and danced away.

Mousse and Ryoga worked in the kitchen together for through the rest of the lunch rush. The flow of customers were steady, as people were eager to come inside and warm up from the cold with a hot bowl of ramen. Ryoga and Mousse cooked and Cologne and Shampoo delivered the food. Shampoo stepped out several times for deliveries, which brought Mousse out on the floor and Ryoga by himself in the kitchen. But by then he had caught on, and was able to prepare and put out dishes with speed and precision. Eventually it slowed down, until Cologne hopped into the kitchen and told Mousse to start putting up the chairs in the dining room.

Ryoga’s gaze flew to the clock. “It’s closing time?” he asked incredulously.
“The dining room closes at nine, but we do deliveries until midnight.” Cologne explained. “Maybe some time in the future I’ll have you stay until that late, but you’ve already put in a hard day’s work. Good work today; I’m glad you were finally able to focus.”

Ryoga bowed his head quickly. “Thank you. I promise to keep working hard.”

Cologne gave him a crooked grin, and cackled.

Mousse walked back into the kitchen. “I can take you back to your place now, Ryoga. We could get back there faster if we take my bike.”

Ryoga pictured himself sitting on the back of Mousse’s bike, and scrunched up his nose. “No, thanks. Let’s just walk.”

Mousse shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Cologne chuckled. “Won’t your beau be wondering what’s keeping you?” she said cheekily.

Ryoga stiffened. Actually, he thought, it was probably quite the opposite. But Cologne seemed to take his look of unease for something else.

“Still turning down Mousse’s offer?” Cologne said. “Besides, your dinner will get cold if you walk all the way back.”

Shampoo nodded along as she put Ryoga’s dinner into portable containers and stored them in a paper bag. She walked over and pushed the bag into Ryoga’s arms.

“Ryoga hurry home now.” Shampoo said, giving him a wink.

It was late.

Ranma hadn’t left the bed. Her entire body ached; but that was her own fault. Nothing was stopping her from getting out of bed--she simply didn’t want to. She wasn’t going to feel better just lying here, but she stayed under the sheets the entire day.

Shirokuro had started pacing the floor several hours ago. She switched between pacing, and whimpering, sometimes doing both. Thanks to that, Ranma never fell asleep. She just stared up at the ceiling, or turned on either side curled up into a tight ball, pulling the sheets over her head. Perhaps Shirokuro was anxious about Ryoga not being home yet--but she’d dealt with months of separation from him before. And she’d been whimpering like this even when Ryoga was here, so that didn’t explain much. Eventually she’d come back into the bed, lying close to Ranma’s side. Ranma curled up against the animal, stroking her hand down her back as Shirokuro sighed shakily.

“Shh, shh,” Ranma hushed softly. “Easy, now.”

Shirokuro uneased breathing finally became slow and steady. The easy sound of her breathing and the warmth of her body, the softness of her coat, it all made Ranma’s lids begin to flicker. Her eyes became heavy, and she could feel herself slipping into sleep. She let her eyelids slowly close.

Then there was a sudden, sharp stab of pain. Her eyelids shot open, she cried out so suddenly and
loudly she could feel Shirokuro’s body flinch in surprise. She sat upright, clenching her teeth against the piercing ache. It was the same dull ache she’d been feeling all day, only tripled. She curled up her legs, and clutched at the bedsheets. She tried to take deep breaths, sweat started to prickle at her temple.

Shirokuro let out a high-pitched whine, then barked, sharp yet quiet. Panicked.

“I—I’m fine, girl,” Ranma breathed raspily. The pain was going back down to a mild, but dull ache. “I’m okay.”

*I’m okay. I’m okay.*

She wiped the sweat off her brow. She couldn’t seem to pace her breathing. She needed to calm down.

Shirokuro jumped off the bed, and sat on her haunches, watching Ranma anxiously. Ranma pulled the sheets off of her legs and sat on the edge of the bed. Shirokuro licked Ranma’s knee gently.

Ranma let all the air out of her lungs, then slowly inhaled. Her breath hitched harshly as another flash of pain tore through her. Ranma lurched forward with a breathless gasp. She felt a lone bead of sweat roll down the side of her face, tickling at her skin, which had gone clammy. Ranma slid off the bed, hunched over, her legs quivering. When she tried to straighten her back, it felt like she’d been cut by a knife. Ranma seethed sharply through her teeth, biting back a shout.

Walking was agony. She slowly made her way down the hall and to the stairs. She leaned her weight against the railing, gasping for air. She couldn’t breathe in too deeply without wanting to cry out in pain. She looked down the stairs to the floor below, pressing her lips together. As she stood at the top of the stairs, which seemed to warp and shift in her vision, the high spike of pain went slowly down once more. She started her descent, not knowing when another rip of pain would attack.

She managed to limp down the hall to the bathroom. Her face was sheen with a layer of sweat, her breathing was laborious and raspy. With a shaking hand she opened the bathroom door. Shirokuro shoved herself between the doorframe and Ranma’s leg, trying to get inside. Ranma sighed weakly.

“I’ll be in the shower, girl,” she promised. “I won’t be long. Just wait out—”

She was cut off by yet another clenching, searing burst of fire that tore through her whole body. This time she couldn’t bite back the loud cry that came out of her, and she collapsed against the doorframe. Shirokuro whined.

“Just--wait--here,” Ranma gritted through her teeth.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. Every time she moved she felt like a red-hot knife was cutting her, but she managed to get off her shirt and boxers. She pulled out the tie from her hair and pulled her fingers through her wavy locks to loosen the braid while she stepped inside the shower. Through blurry vision she found the knob, and twisted it to the side. The water was ice cold at first, but Ranma sighed in relief as the chilled water washed away the hot, sticky sweat from her face. After a moment, the water grew from chilled, to cool, to lukewarm, then hot. The shower filled with steam; Ranma’s skin burned, but she didn’t care. It took her mind off the gripping pain. She bowed her head, tucking her chin in close towards her chest, closing her eyes against the hot rivulets running through her hair and down her sore back.

The pain faded for a moment. Then, it seemed to swell inside her until she couldn’t get air into her lungs. Ranma’s knees buckled; she braced her hand against the glass as she doubled over and
clenched her eyes shut tight. Then the pain squeezed so fiercely her eyes and mouth flew open, still hunched over in agony.

She saw red.

It ran in rivulets across the bottom of the shower, mixing with the water and vanishing down the drain. Then she noticed dark red streaks on the insides of her legs, intertwined and thin—it was as if her veins were on the outside. The streaks trickled down her legs and into the water. Ranma could hear her own shrill breathing even through the sound of the rushing water.

A thick, guttural choke broke out of her as the clenching bore down, hard and heavy. Her nails scraped against the glass walls of the shower. The pale red rivulets in the water became large, viscous splotches. Then, a sickening slipperiness passed through her body, and clotted blood smacked against the wet floor. The water caught it quickly and whisked it down the drain. The sensation went on for several more seconds; clots of dark red and light pink ran slowly down her legs or dropped out of her and into the water. Soon there was so much that the water couldn’t wash it all away quickly enough, and the entire surface of the shower floor, once white and pristine, was painted red.

Ranma couldn’t fight it any longer. She let out a strangled, quivering shriek.

“No, no...no, no, no, no...” her helpless cries rose in crescendo until she was full-out screaming, “No, no, NO!”

The stream of the shower finally washed the gathering clots that had blocked off the drain. The puddle of blood around Ranma’s feet grew lighter, and Ranma couldn’t seem to look away as it all washed away. Her stomach clenched tightly once again, and then faded out. The shower stream washed the last remnants of blood from Ranma’s inner thighs. The pain faded back into the subtle ache; it had all seemed to last forever, but it was over in mere minutes. But the panic rising in Ranma’s chest had only just begun. Her breath came out in quick, hysterical bursts, her face a mask of horror. She stood under the pounding water, motionless, her arms hanging limp at her sides.

Then, a new sensation came over her. Though it wasn’t new; in fact, it was old and familiar. It was a feeling that usually brought a wave of relief and comfort over her. Now, already rigid with shock, she could hardly believe it was happening.

*This isn’t happening. This isn’t happening.*

The change was usually so quick, so subtle. It was something you got used to, with enough time, that you didn’t even feel it anymore. It became something natural, *normal* even. Now, it was strange and alien. It seemed to happen slowly, yet it only took a second.

Ranma didn’t have to look to know; it was clear what had happened. But, as if in denial, Ranma’s eyes inched downward slowly.

He was back.

*This is not happening.*

“No!” It was the only word he seemed able to say. He flung his hand toward the tap and jerked it the opposite way nearly pulling it right out of the wall. The water went lukewarm, then icy cold. He felt the change wash over him again.

She looked down, and stopped breathing.
Gone.

There wasn’t even a bump anymore.

*Gone.*

It was like it wasn’t even there. Like it hadn’t been real. Not even a memory; only a dream.

She couldn’t look. She gripped the tap and twisted violently. Fire pierced skin like hot daggers. She swung her hands blindly in the steam and thrumming water, and turned off the water.

He gasped, like he’d burst out of the surface after swimming from the very bottom of the ocean. Breathing erratic, his entire body trembling, he turned himself around and weakly pushed at the shower glass. It wouldn’t move. He pressed his quivering hand flat against the glass, and shoved. It was stuck. He let out a cry of frustration. He beat the glass with both fists; the door rattled harshly and flew open so abruptly that Ranma tripped and tumbled out and landed on his hands and knees on the bathroom tile. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t even close his eyes. All he could do was tremble, viciously and uncontrollably.

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The house was dark and silent.

Ryoga stood in the front foyer, his shoulders heavy. He hadn’t taken off his shoes or coat yet; he’d walked inside his house, and it felt no warmer than the outdoors. In fact, it felt even colder. It had stopped him dead in his tracks, and left him unable to move. He shook it off, and kicked off his shoes and headed down the hall and into the kitchen. He placed the paper bag with that night’s dinner inside it on the dining table. There were no lights on in the kitchen; there were no dishes in the sink, not a single crumb on the counter. Ryoga walked over to the kettle he’d filled that morning, and lifted it. It was completely full, the water inside it surely ice-cold. It was as if nobody had set foot in the kitchen all day. Ryoga frowned.

He went to the cabinet, and took out a yellow plastic container, and opened it. Inside were seven little compartments which held prenatal vitamins. Each compartment was labeled with the days of the week. Ranma would usually take the entire week’s worth of vitamins before filling the compartments up again the next Monday morning, to keep track of the day of the week and to remember to take the pills. Ryoga checked the pill box for that day, and found it still had pills in it.

Ryoga *tsk*ed under his breath, and snapped the lid shut on the box, storing it back in the cabinet. He left the kitchen and walked out into the hall. In his peripheral vision, he saw a shadow flicker to his left.

“Shirokuro,” Ryoga said quietly, seeing the one half of the dog’s white fur breaking through the darkness. “Where’s Ranma?”

Shirokuro didn’t move. Ryoga walked towards her, Shirokuro backed up a few steps, then sat down again. Ryoga blinked in confusion. Usually his pet would wag her tail and go off in the direction of the thing or person Ryoga asked to find. But she wouldn’t move.

“C’mon, girl,” Ryoga said, stepping forward. “Where’s--”
He stopped cold at the sound that came out of Shirokuro. It took him a moment before he could even believe it, but it was undeniable. Shirokuro was growling at him; it was low, barely audible, a guttural sound deep in her throat.

Ryoga’s eyes went wide. Shirokuro had never, ever growled at him once in her whole life. But then again, he tried to assure himself, she hadn’t been acting like herself lately. She’d whimpered and cried all night long. Perhaps she really was sick. She was getting on in years, for a dog. Perhaps she was becoming senile.

“*Shhh,*” Ryoga soothed shakily, holding up his hands. “Calm down, girl. It’s okay, it’s okay…”

Ryoga took another small step forward, and jumped when Shirokuro barked sharply.

His heart and mind raced. As he considered what to do, Shirokuro backed up further, and her loud rumbling growl faded off into a low grumble. She snorted, then, and the growling stopped. Then she turned around, and walked down the hall.

Ryoga almost didn’t want to follow her, afraid she’d turn around and attack him if she noticed him, but he stepped forward slow and careful. He stayed a good distance behind her as she lead him around the corner. She stopped, and sat down beside the bathroom door. Ryoga stared at the doorknob for a moment, feeling his heart pounding thickly from all the way up in his throat.

That’s when he finally heard it.

Shrihl sounds of hysteria, muffled behind the door. Ryoga’s eyes went wide, his blood went cold. He snatched the doorknob and threw the door open.

“Ranma!?” Ryoga cried out in panic, dashing into the bathroom. He looked down, and felt his heart flicker, stop, and start up again rapidly.

Ranma looked up, wide eyes looking out at Ryoga through wirey, wet black hair that stuck to his forehead and the sides of his face. His skin was pallid, void of all colour, and yet seemed to drain even further when he saw Ryoga standing there.

“Ry--oga--” Ranma’s dry, raspy voice cracked out of his throat.

Ryoga could barely hear him. His heart was pounding loudly in his ears, thickly as blood. He watched Ranma’s mouth move, forming words he couldn’t decipher. Even if he could hear them, he would have ignored them.

“What did you do?” he whispered.

The light didn’t fade out of Ranma’s eyes, it shut out like someone had flicked a switch. One moment he was on the floor, on his hands and knees. The next, he was on his feet, and lunging forward. The light was back in his eyes, scorching, wild, feral.

He gripped Ryoga’s coat by the collar and shoved him into the doorframe. Ryoga wasn’t used to being able to look Ranma right in the eye, without craning his neck down. He also wasn’t used to this *strength*; even though he could feel Ranma’s arm vibrating, he knew it wasn’t because of strain, but rage. He wasn’t used to Ranma’s hair, stuck to his face like dried india ink. He wasn’t used to his eyes; the shape was the same, but the colour was different. Before, as a female, they were a bright cerulean. The exact shade of blue you see in your mind’s eye when you think of the colour blue; tropical, vibrant.

Ranma’s eyes now were steel blue; the colour of the ocean just after the storm has passed. They
always held the same energy--cool and still, but with the underlying promise to rip tides.

That promise was rolling through Ranma’s irises now. His jaw was tight, his teeth clenched, his
breath seethed out of his nose, nostrils flaring. His mouth opened, slowly, and Ryoga waited.

Ranma’s eyes trailed downwards, and off to the side. The waves stilled, the tide went down. His grip
on Ryoga’s collar lessened, and then he let go altogether. Ryoga watched as Ranma backed away,
the rage slipping off his face. Ryoga stepped away from the wall and looked over his shoulder, down
at where Ranma’s gaze was pointed.

The small orange shoes dangled from the doorknob, slightly askew. One dangled loosely from the
handle, swinging from side to side. Ryoga looked back at Ranma; he could barely see his irises, lost
in the whites of his eyes. His eyes didn’t leave the shoes.

“My…” Ranma’s voice came out in a thick croak, “…my--”

“Ranma,” Ryoga murmured.

Ranma’s fingers dragged up his face and through his damp hair. Ryoga could see his knees buckle,
and give out beneath him. A part of Ryoga wanted to jump forward and catch Ranma before he fell,
but the rest of him wouldn’t move. Ranma dropped to his knees, his hands running down the back of
his head, cupping the back of his neck.

“My...baby,” Ranma whispered. “My baby. My baby.”

He tucked himself inward, wrapping his arms around his stomach, and began rocking back and forth.
His wide, shocked face suddenly crumpled and twisted into a look of pure anguish. Tears gathered in
his glazed-over eyes, spilling over and running down his cheeks. His body rattled as he burst into
loud, racking sobs.

“My baby…!” he sobbed, “My...baby, my baby…!”

He fell onto his side and curled himself into a tight ball, still clutching at his stomach. His sobs jerked
his whole body, and burst out him with a raw verocity Ryoga had never seen. Ryoga had cried
before, but never like this. It was one thing to experience it first-hand, but another to watch the one
person he’d never seen shed so many tears, or look so gutted.

He could remember watching from a distance as Ranma held Akane’s body, seemingly lifeless, and
scream her name out loud. Ranma’s scream then, ripping through the clouds and piercing the skies,
had shaken Ryoga to the core.

Ranma didn’t scream now. He simply lied on the cold bathroom tile and wept. Helpless.

That was the difference. It wasn’t like Ryoga had never seen him cry before. He’d seen him cry tears
of bitterness after having his first kiss stolen. He’d watched him cry in frustration--when Ranma held
Akane’s clothes in his arms, hardened by Saffron’s threads. When the Jusenkyo Guide tried to take
the garments from Ranma’s hands, and he suddenly woke up from his shock and lunged out, only to
miss and crash into a table, breaking it in half. Then he lied there in the wood splinters, head
lowered, shoulders trembling. Ryoga knew then, that he was crying; even through his own tears he
could see that. And he knew they were different from his own tears, which were miserable and grief-
stricken. Ranma’s were brought on by the questions no doubt running through his mind--why did
she sacrifice herself for me? Why did I ever leave Japan? Why wasn’t I fast enough? Why couldn’t I
save her?

When she was rehydrated but didn’t open her eyes, he saw tears of shame and regret. When she
woke up, he saw tears of relief, and joy. Ryoga had witnessed all of these times.

But he’d never seen Ranma, or anyone, cry like this.

And there was nothing he could do but watch.

He wasn’t sure how long he stood there, but eventually Ranma grew quiet. His body shivered occasionally as he took in slow, hitching breaths. Ryoga reached behind him and pulled a towel off of the rack on the back of the bathroom door. He stepped forward, and crouched down, and draped it across Ranma’s body. Ranma’s face was turned toward the floor, his hair covering his eyes.

“What…” Ryoga searched for a moment. He had no idea what to say. “Should…”

Ranma’s voice came out rough and dry. “Just go away.”

Ryoga leaned back, and stood up.

That, at least, he could do.

He’d bothered to heat the kettle up again and make a tea, and it just went untouched and cold anyways.

His fingertips drummed against the sides of the glass. He was trying to stay calm but every noise he heard made him jump or twitch. Finally he could hear the sound of a door closing in the distance, and then the sound of footfalls, slowly growing louder. Ryoga looked up in time to catch a brief glimpse of him walking past the kitchen door. He got up and went out into the hallway, catching Ranma make his way upstairs. Ryoga followed, keeping his distance like before, as if he feared an attack. He went upstairs and found Shirokuro sitting just outside his bedroom. She looked over when he approached, then looked away and walked into the room. Ryoga walked up and peered around the doorframe. Ranma was there, crouched beside his backpack, his back to Ryoga. When he stood up, he was holding his bedroll and a long rectangular fabric bag--his tent, Ryoga realized.

“What’re you…” Ryoga began, and Ranma whirled around, as if he hadn’t sensed Ryoga was there. Perhaps he hadn’t.

Ranma ducked his head quickly and walked hastily toward the door and past Ryoga.

“I’ll sleep in the backyard.” Ranma muttered.

Ryoga swung out his arm and grabbed the back of Ranma’s shirt--which was odd to see actually fit him, for a change--and yanked him backward.

Ranma didn’t fight him. He looked over his shoulder at Ryoga, his expression blank. “Let me go,” he said calmly.

“You’re not sleeping outside.” Ryoga said, his voice hard.

“I am.”

“It’s cold.”
Ranma’s eyes were glistening, and Ryoga wondered for a moment if he was about to cry again.

“Funny,” he murmured, “You didn’t seem to have a problem with that before.”

Ryoga quirked an eyebrow, confused for a moment. Then, he remembered.

*We’re friends, ain’t we?*

*You wouldn’t let a friend freeze to death.*

Ryoga’s fingers loosened their grip on Ranma’s shirt, and his arm fell slack to his side. “That was...before.” he mumbled.

“Before what?” Ranma said.

Ryoga opened his mouth, but no words came out. He shook his head suddenly.

“Still,” he went on, “You’re not sleeping outside.”

“Fine,” Ranma said, walking back into Ryoga’s room. He put away his bedroll and tent, turned around, and walked back out of the room again. “Then I’ll go to the couch.”

Ryoga snatched Ranma’s wrist. “You’re not going there, either!” Ryoga snapped, feeling himself getting frustrated.

Ranma still looked at him blankly. “Then where am I supposed t’ go?”

“You don’t ‘go’ anywhere,” Ryoga sighed loudly. “You stay here. You sleep in that bed.”

Ryoga let go of Ranma’s wrist. Ranma watched him for a moment, then, walked back towards Ryoga’s room again. Ryoga turned around to follow him, but Shirokuro appeared at the doorway and barked at him. Ryoga froze, and stepped back. He looked up at Ranma, who had his eyes on him. Ryoga stared at him, helpless. Ranma walked up to the door, leaned down and grasped Shirokuro’s collar, ushering her inside the bedroom. He stood up straight and looked back up at Ryoga.

“If you’re so insistent on me sleeping in here,” Ranma muttered, “You’ll have to take the couch.”

“What?” Ryoga murmured. “But, Ranma--”

“I--” Ranma nearly let his composure slip. He swallowed roughly and continued. “I can’t.”

Ranma’s hand gripped the side of the door, and he looked away.

“I can’t...right now,” Ranma forced out, pausing where he left out words he couldn’t get out. “I can’t.”

Before Ryoga could say a word, Ranma closed the door. He heard the soft click of the door being locked from the inside. Part of him wanted to pound his fists on the door and scream. The rest of him deflated, then turned and walked away.
It had been another sleepless night.

Ryoga laid on his back on the couch. He turned his head, and checked the time on the DVD player. It was almost six in the morning. He sat up and turned his legs out, placing his feet on the floor and resting his arms on his legs, looking off at nothing. Then, he heard the sound of the floor creaking from upstairs. He stood up and walked out of the living room and into the hallway just in time to see Ranma coming down the stairs. Ryoga opened his mouth to speak, but then he noticed something—hard to miss since it was so large. Ranma had his backpack on his shoulders. Ranma looked up, and stopped in the middle of the staircase, noticing Ryoga standing at the bottom of the stairs.

Ranma looked away. “I...was hoping to leave before you woke up.” he said quietly.

“I never slept.” Ryoga said.

Ranma nodded his head slowly. “Neither did I.” he mumbled.

That was obvious, judging from the dark circles under his eyes. Ranma walked the rest of the way down the stairs and over to the front foyer. He took off his bag and set it to the side with a heavy thud. Then he put on his shoes, and then opened the closet and pulled out his coat.

“Where are you going?” Ryoga asked, as Ranma pulled his arms through the coat sleeves.

Ranma kept his chin down while he buttoned up his coat. “I don’t know yet,” he said simply. “But I can’t stay here.”

He bent down and grabbed his bag, and pulled the straps back onto his shoulders. He turned around and walked towards the door.

“The reason I was staying here doesn’t…isn’t…” Ranma stopped in front of the door. “It’s gone. So, that’s it, I guess.”

“You don’t...you don’t have to leave.” Ryoga forced out.

“Yeah, I do.” Ranma said, “There’s nothing here for me, anymore.”

“But--” Ryoga began.

“There’s something I should tell you,” Ranma said quietly, placing his hand on the doorknob. “Before I go.”

“What?” Ryoga asked, feeling his heart palpitate.

Ranma kept his back to Ryoga while he spoke. “That first night on the mountains...when we first got to that clearing, an’ were settin’ up camp…”

“...What about it?”

“Remember how I said that I forgot my tent?”

Ryoga frowned. “Where...is this going?”

Ranma looked over his shoulder. “I lied,” he said softly, “I didn’t forget my tent. I took it out of my bag before I left. On purpose.”

Ryoga’s eyes bulged. “You--”
This is Ranma Saotome we’re talking about here.

Even in uncharted territory, he’s always willing to take that first step and plunge in.

Ranma smiled crookedly. “Pretty stupid, right?” he said with a broken little laugh. “I mean, what was I expecting t’ happen? An’ that was way before you even told me you’d broken it off with Akari. As far as I knew, you were as taken as I was.”

If you felt like you grew closer, it was because he made it so.

Ranma looked away, and his eyes were glistening again. “An’ then…after all that trouble, an’ findin’ out it was fair game, I lost my damn nerve. I started thinkin’ about you an’ Akari, how long you’d been together. What sorts of things you’d done. An’ stupid virgin me, who hadn’t put a finger on my fiancée of six years. But then, you said you never did it, either…I didn’t even know what t’ do. An’ even though it was right there, right in front of me and all I had to do was—” Ranma threw his arms up, reached and grabbed at nothing, and then threw his arms down. “I still couldn’t just say it straight out.”

I want to…but not with Akane.

“I kept poking and prodding, but I never actually did anything,” Ranma said incredulously.

But is there a face that’s…reoccurring?

“And then…I bailed out. I backed off.” Ranma laughed, quiet and bitter, “If only I’d just done it then...”

He shook his head rapidly, and turned away.

“I gotta go.” he said quickly.

Ranma opened the door and stepped outside. Ryoga took a step forward, as if he was getting ready to sprint. He paused when he saw Ranma stop, his hand resting on the outer doorknob. Ranma looked over his shoulder. His eyes were still glistening.

He raised his hand. Flicked his wrist limply, his hand in the shape of a deflated pistol—a weak version of his signature, two-finger salute.

“See ya,” he said.

Then he closed the door, and was out of sight. Ryoga felt that familiar, lonely sensation envelop him. But lonely didn’t seem like the right word. This didn’t feel quite like loneliness.

He knew what loneliness felt like.

This was something that ran far deeper, and felt much worse.

Ryoga’s legs seemed to move all on their own. He walked up the stairs and into his bedroom. His room was even tidier than it’d been the day before. Ryoga opened a few of the drawers, even though he knew it would only be his clothes in them now. The miscellaneous books, manga, and other knick-knacks he’d kept on the television stand were gone, except for a few of the books. Ryoga walked up and examined the titles, realizing he recognized one. On the cover of the book, it read, “A Thousand Useful Pressure Points and Where To Find Them”. There several other books about martial arts practise and theory; each of them looked battered and worn, clearly loved and read cover-to-cover a dozen times.
It’d be nice to lend ‘em to someone who’d actually be interested in reading them.

There was also a small metallic burnt orange pouch with white lettering written in Chinese on the front. It was the bag of pu-erh tea that they’d drunk in the mountain meadow.

*Complex, smooth, and earthy. Just sounds a lot like you.*

It felt like Ryoga’s throat was swollen. “He thought of everything,” he whispered.

He turned away, head down, and walked towards his bed. He sat down with a sigh, and looked around his room. His room was filled to the brim with souvenirs from all parts of Japan; posters covered the walls, statues and weird musical instruments he never played but liked the look of filled all of the shelves. It made the small room look rather crowded, especially compared to how nice and put-together the rest of the house looked—besides the hodgepodge mix of Western/Japanese style his parents had went with, as if they couldn’t decide which one they preferred.

Ranma didn’t own anything that he couldn’t put in his bag when he had to pack his whole life away at a moment’s notice. Ryoga knew what that was like. But Ranma also didn’t buy these trivial trinkets on his travels. He was certainly someone who preferred practical over aesthetic. If he purchased something it was because he figured he’d find a use for it later. From cold medicine to ramen cups; long term and short term. So long as it was small enough to not take up much room in his pack.

It had been Ranma himself who had brought his presence into this room, not the things he owned. And yet it wasn’t good enough that Ranma had left this space, for he still seemed to hang in the air. The things he did leave behind seemed to counter out all of Ryoga’s belongings. Through everything on his walls and in his shelves, all he could see were that shiny orange pouch and that tattered old book. Ryoga looked over at the pillows, which had been carefully placed side-by-side, not a wrinkle in either of them.

Like nobody had slept in this bed together in a long time.

Ryoga took the left-side pillow—*his* pillow—and brought it close. Did his scent linger on these sheets, or had he been so meticulous in erasing himself that he’d even changed the linen?

Then, Ryoga noticed a flash of colour tumble out from the pillow case. It hit his knee, and then fell to the floor. Ryoga stared in wonder at the little orange shoe, with the tiny blue star on the side, as it sat upright on the carpet. Shirokuro, who had walked back into the room at some point, bent down and sniffed at the shoe, then looked up at Ryoga with sad eyes.

Ryoga put the pillow at his side. Then he leaned down and picked up the shoe, cupping it in his hands like it were a tiny injured bird. He stroked his fingers along the soft canvas, orange as a tangerine.

*Then, I find these...teeny, tiny shoes...an’ the first thing I thought of was you.*

He really had thought of everything.

Ryoga put the pillow on top of his own, and laid down on his back. He held the shoe aloft, turning it around and looking at it from every angle. He could still see it in his mind’s eye; the shoe dangling crookedly from the doorknob, swinging like a slow pendulum, back and forth.

He stuck his thumb into the shoe. It would only go down to the first knuckle. Despite himself, he chuckled. It was quiet and soft, yet it seemed to bust out of him, like the gentlest of sobs. He rolled onto his side, clutching the shoe in his fist and pressing his face into the pillow.
Maybe Ranma hadn't thought of everything.

Was he perceptive enough to understand the poignancy that a simple bag of pu-erh tea meant? Did he even understand that Ryoga didn’t give a damn about pressure points and where to find them? That he only showed interest in the book because Ranma did— he’d loved it, treasured it, carried it with him in his travels for years, read it over and over until the glue holding the pages together had grown weak and the cover was falling off. The only fascination he had for that book was in seeing the passion that Ranma put into everything.

And surely he knew what the shoes meant. Ryoga had been certain they both felt the same thing when they looked at them. Ranma had hung them in the bathroom; a reminder, a promise.

He made the bed look pristine, like nobody had lied in it for years. But he didn’t change the sheets, or the cases on the pillows. Ryoga could still smell his scent, as if it’d been tattooed into the fabric.

Was he trying to be cruel? Or was he simply careless?

On the surface, he had seemingly erased his presence. But beneath that, deep down where Ranma couldn’t see, but where he'd touched. He was there, under Ryoga's skin.

Chapter End Notes

So, do you hate me yet?

It's a double-edged sword. These last two chapters have updated so quickly...but at what cost? Hopefully not my life.

Well, this is it, folks. This chapter marked the ultimate climactic point of the story. But we're not in the end game yet, don't worry.

I've been thinking about trying to get TAE back onto that lovely Saturday Update Schedule. Remember those days? Those were the good days.

So, I might take a "break", from the whole "posting as often as I can" thing, that is. "Break" on my end doesn't mean "stop writing"; it just means a "break" from TAE for you guys. But hear me out...

At the very beginning, when I first started to post chapters for this fic I had 10 chapters pre-written. Bear in mind, the earliest chapters for this fic were VERY short compared to the more recent chapters. Like, a 20-page difference. So writing 10 chapters that were never anything more than, at most, 15 pages, wasn't too bad.

These next few chapters won't require too much wordiness (but with me that's always a possibility) but they'll still be more than 10 pages each. I don't think I'll do anything as strenuous as 10 chapters this time, but I may try and pound out...let's say...5 chapters. Yeah, five is a nice number. That isn't a plan that's in stone, mind you. Not an expectation, but a goal I'll set for myself. Five pre-written chapters to get The Autumn Effect back onto a Saturday Update Schedule. It'll probably be a while before TAE is back, but when it is, you'll have five straight weeks of updates. Holy shit!

I make the occasional Autumn Effect-related post over at my Tumblr >> ( 
https://www.tumblr.com/blog/gillotto ))
So if you'd be interested in progress updates for TAE, that'll be the place to look. I'll be sure to make a big announcement there when I know for sure that The Autumn Effect is coming back. Keep an eye out.

Until then, my darlings, thank you so much for reading and coming this far with me. It's been so much fun. This has honestly been my favourite Ranma fanfiction I've ever done, and it's all thanks to you. I'll try and get those chapters done as quick as I can for you guys.

Till next time,

Jadells
Let flow in the water

Chapter Summary

Ranma goes to Uuchan's Okonomiyaki to ask Ukyo a favour.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

17.

Let flow in the water

He considered knocking, but realized that would look pretty stupid.

Ranma sighed slowly, closing his eyes. He’d had all the time in the world to think about this, and it still wasn’t enough. He’d spent the night in a vacant lot, and he’d thought about just trying that out for a while. It’s what he’d wanted, after all. The life of a nomad. Free to roam.

Lately he hadn’t been so sure.

After over a decade on the road with his father, Ranma had mixed feelings about suddenly settling down at the Tendo’s. Before then, he couldn’t remember a moment in his life that was anything resembling domesticated. He was like a wild dog; living off the land, fighting for every meal, never staying in one place for too long. He hadn’t been miserable, though. He couldn’t really long for something he had no memory of, or any semblance for what he’d been missing. And he didn’t know what he had until he had it.

It was nice, to finally have a real roof over his head. The promise of delicious hot meals, a cozy bed. Not bathing in a public bath or a barrel he had to heat up by himself. For the first time in his life, things were simple.

Yet even with all that, he hadn’t been satisfied. As soon as he was dropped on the Tendo’s doorstep he’d tried to turn right back around and go back to China. It was too late for that, however. He was shackled down, with no hope of escape or a cure in sight. After a while, though, he’d gotten used to it. There were even times he forgot all about finding a cure, until another opportunity presented itself. While he never stopped appreciating Kasumi’s food, or relishing in the delightful ease of sinking into a hot bath, after enough time it all became natural. Just like how he barely felt the change when he got splashed anymore. He’d grown accustomed to it all. He’d been tamed.

The craziness in his life had helped to distract him from that fact. He always came off so bothered by all the chaos, but in truth he welcomed it. He would have grown soft without it. It kept him on his
toes; it kept things interesting.

Everything changed after China. Nobody was so different that Ranma couldn’t recognize them anymore, but nobody was out for blood. No more random attackers falling from the sky. No more suitors. The chaos was over.

Which left him all the time in the world to think.

He still liked to think he was wild. Maybe no longer in practise, but in principle. But it didn’t take him long to figure out that principles were bullshit unless they were put into action.

“Hey, wait up!”

Ryoga stopped and turned around, seeing Ranma running out the Tendo’s front door and down the pathway. Ryoga shifted his pack on his shoulders, and gave Ranma an irritated look that betrayed curiosity.

“What?” Ryoga asked.

“You never said where you were going t’ train.” Ranma said.

“To the mountains,” Ryoga replied, then added on quietly, “If I can manage to get there, that is.”

“Right on.” Ranma said, folding his arms and nodding curiously. He’d flown out of the house at high speed, his face glowing. Was that really all he had to say? Silence passed between the two of them for a moment. Ranma still stood there, giving Ryoga no send off. Ryoga frowned.

“What’s it to you?” he grumbled.

Ranma shrugged passively, scratching his nose. “Y’know, I was thinkin’ that I’ve been kinda slackin’ on my own training lately,” he said. “An’ that maybe you’d have more success findin’ those mountains if you had someone with ya who, well...actually knew how to get t’ them.”

Ryoga bristled at the jab. “I’ll manage fine on my own, thanks.”

“Aww, c’mon. It’s been ages since we had a real sparring match. At this rate I’m gonna lose my edge.” Ranma complained.

“Yeah, that’d be just terrible for me.” Ryoga retorted sarcastically.

“Who’re you supposed to spar with if I go soft, huh?” Ranma pouted.

“Well I’m thinking it’d actually be nice to win for a change, instead of ending in a damn tied match all the time,” Ryoga smirked, “So you go right on ahead and let those muscles get all flabby. Then we’ll see about that spar.”

Ranma’s brow furrowed. “How about you take me like a man, instead of trying to get cheap one-ups on me? Or are you sayin’ you’re too chicken?” Ranma shot back hotly.

“Is that a challenge, Saotome?” Ryoga sneered.
“You bet your ass,” Ranma said. “So, are we on?”

Ryoga scoffed. “You’re not even packed,” he said. “I’m not waiting around for you.”

Ranma puffed out his chest. “Hey, a martial artist is prepared for anything,” he flicked his braid over his shoulder smugly. “I got my pack ready last night.”

Ryoga deadpanned. “So you planned this, is what you’re saying.” he muttered.

“Hey, you want an actual training partner for this trip or are you just gonna punch the bark off a tree and then say, ‘Yep, much stronger than I was twelve seconds ago’.” Ranma queried.

Ryoga’s shoulders slumped. He sighed. “Alright,” he acquiesced, “But you’ve got one minute before I’m taking off without you.”

Ranma beamed. “Gimme thirty seconds.”

He ran back toward the house, but instead of heading in the front door, he leapt up into the air and landed on the roof and began running across it. He flipped down and grabbed onto the eavestrough, and swung his legs into his open bedroom window. His travel pack was in the corner of the room, next to a pile of folded bed linen. It was already fully packed. Ranma crouched down and opened up the pack, pulling out a pullover sweater and setting it aside. Beneath the sweater was a wide fabric case, which held his tent.

Ranma took the tent case out of the bag, examining it for a moment, but he wasn’t hesitating. His mind had been made up before he’d even entered the room. He shook his head, sighing exasperatedly.

“I must be outta my mind.”

Then he lifted one of the folded blankets and shoved the case inside it until it was lost inside the thick sheets.

Ranma quickly tugged on his sweater, closed his pack and hefted it onto his shoulders, and headed back for the window. He propped his foot on the window sill, and grabbed the side with both hands and pulled himself up. He looked back over his shoulder at the pile of linen, just for a moment. Then he jumped out and flipped himself back up onto the roof, flying across the shingles. He leapt off the roof, soaring through the air and landed back at the front gates, right in front of Ryoga.

Ryoga raised his eyebrows. “Even for you, that was fast,” he said, “That was less than thirty seconds.”


Ranma shook his head, knocking the mental playback out of his thoughts. That’s enough of that. Besides, he couldn’t stand here like an idiot forever.

Ranma slid open the shoji door, and a bell tinkled above his head. There was a distant sound of clattering dishes, and then hurried footfalls. Then Konatsu burst out from the back room and dropped to her knees onto the wooden floor, bending into a deep bow.
“Welcome to Uuchan’s Okonomiyaki!” she cried, her voice muffled into the floor.

“Hey, Konatsu.” Ranma said.

Konatsu’s head shot up. Her forehead was red from where she’d knocked it off the floor. “Oh, Ranma-sama! I didn’t realize it was you.” Then, Konatsu’s eyes went even wider and her hand went to her mouth. “But...aren’t you--”

“Konatsu, tell whoever’s there we’re not open yet,” a voice called from the back room, growing louder. “And get back here and finish up these--”

Ukyo froze in the doorway. She looked between Konatsu, who was still kneeling on the floor, and Ranma, who gave Ukyo a weak wave.

“Hey, Uuchan.” he mumbled.

Ukyo flew across the restaurant and up to Ranma, snatching him by the shoulders. “Ran-chan, what-you’re…” she sputtered.

“A guy again, yes.” Ranma sighed.

“How did this happen?” Ukyo asked, her eyes betraying signs of oncoming tears. Ranma grimaced. He couldn’t handle that right now.

“I just...changed back,” Ranma murmured. He couldn’t get into the grimy details now. He wasn’t sure if he ever could. “All this time, I couldn’t change back even completely submerged in hot water. Then the other night I was in the shower, an’ then…”

“W-well, maybe your body only needed to be stuck as a girl for a few weeks, to...get you ready? Then you can switch back and forth...only…” Ukyo’s eyes flickered down, at Ranma’s stomach, for a brief moment. But Ranma saw her look.

Ranma shook his head. “I changed back as soon as it happened, and...nothing.”

Ukyo’s eyes bulged. “Nothing...?”

Ranma nodded. “Gone.”

“Oh, Ran-chan,” Ukyo said sadly, squeezing his arms. “I’m so sorry…”

Ukyo looked over her shoulder at Konatsu. “Could you give us a moment alone?” she asked quietly.

Konatsu nodded slowly. “Yes, Ukyo-sama.”

Konatsu disappeared into the back room again, and Ukyo looked back around at Ranma. She took his hand, and lead him over to one of the red stools in front of the grill. Ranma took off his bag and sat down while Ukyo went around behind the grill and started setting up.

“Listen, Uuchan,” Ranma began slowly, “I came here t’ ask you a big favour…”

Ukyo leaned her palms on the counter. “Yeah, you can stay here.” she said.

Ranma blinked. “I didn’t even say anything.”

“Gimme some credit. Mind-reading comes with the best friend territory, after all. Besides, it was pretty obvious, what with your giant backpack and all.” Ukyo gestured to Ranma’s bag on the floor
with a flick of her chin.

Ranma looked sheepish. “Ah, right…”

Ukyo took a bowl of batter and poured it in a perfect circle on the grill. “So,” she said, looking up at Ranma with a solemn expression, “I guess you and Ryoga split up, huh?”

Ranma stiffened. “What makes you say we ’split up’?” he muttered quickly.

Ukyo raised her eyebrows. “Well, judging by that long look on your face,” she gestured to Ranma’s face with her spatula, “And the fact you look like you’re about to go backpacking across Asia, I’d say you packed up all your stuff in a fever and left Ryoga high and dry.”

Ranma looked away, and Ukyo knew she’d hit the nail on the head.

“Did you guys…get into a fight? I mean, after…” Ukyo trailed off, unable to say the words.

Ranma shrugged, still unable to meet her eyes. “Not...exactly,” he said in a low voice.

Ukyo waited, but Ranma wouldn’t say anything else. She sighed.

“You don’t have to talk about it, Ran-chan,” Ukyo said, flipping the batter over with a loud sizzle. “I know once you’ve made up your mind, there’s no stopping you. I obviously don’t know what exactly went down between the two of you, but you’re my friend, and I’ll support you no matter what you decide. I will admit I’m a little sad you two broke up, though.”

“We didn’t breakup,” Ranma said blankly.

“You didn’t?” Ukyo perked up a little, “So, you’re just…taking a break from each other? I mean, if you think that’s for the best, that’s all you, but in a time like this wouldn’t it be better if--”

“That’s not what I meant,” Ranma sighed, closing his eyes.

“Well, what do you mean?” Ukyo asked, confused. Then, she gasped. “No way, he didn’t kick you out when he found out, did he? Oohh, if he did, I swear I’ll--”

“No! No. I left on my own,” Ranma cried, exasperated.

“Ohh,” Ukyo said in realization, “So, you broke up with him, but he didn’t break up with you. It was one-sided.”

“No!” Ranma exclaimed, frustrated. “I just left, that’s all there is to it.”

“You mean he didn’t even try to stop you?” Ukyo said in disbelief, “That coward!”

“H-he did,” Ranma stammered, “He said I didn’t have to leave. But, I had to.”

“So, it was one-sided,” Ukyo said, “Not a mutual breakup.”

“I just left, Uuchan,” Ranma groaned, resting his forehead on his hands. “The only reason he was even lettin’ me stay there was because he felt responsible. But he doesn’t have any obligation anymore, not to me, not to...it’s over. There was no reason for me to keep stayin’ there, so I left.”

“But you just told me that Ryoga said you didn’t have to leave. He wanted you to stay.” Ukyo rebuttaled.
Ranma shook his head. “If he’d really wanted me to stay, I wouldn’t be here.”

Ukyo scoffed. “Only because he knew your mind was made up,” she said, “And like I said, there’s no stopping you then.”

Ranma rested his chin in his hand. “Well, I always figured he was even more stubborn than I was.” he said quietly.

“Wait. So, you wanted him to chase after you?” Ukyo asked.

“Of course not,” Ranma said quickly, “Why would he, anyway?”

“Because despite everything, he still wanted to be with you. He didn’t want to breakup with you.”

Ranma slapped his palms on the counter suddenly. “Why do you keep saying that?” he snapped loudly, “Breakup, breakup, breakup. How the hell could we have broken up? We were never together!”

It wasn’t until Ranma was finished with his outburst before he realized that Ukyo was no longer looking at him. Confused, he followed her gaze toward the door, and instantly felt his heart drop down into his stomach.

Akane stood in the open door, with dozens of pieces of paper clutched to her chest, her wide eyes gaping at the scene before her. Ranma was still out of his chair, his palms still pressed into the counter. The grill sizzled and hissed quietly in the background, slightly breaking what would have been an extremely awkward silence.

Ukyo looked like she’d just been caught shoplifting. “A-Akane--”

Akane was not looking at Ukyo. Her eyes had been zeroed in on Ranma since she’d walked through the door. Her eyes slowly filled up with tears, and silently fell out of her large eyes and ran down her cheeks. Her trembling hands flew up to cover her face, abandoning the papers in her arms. The papers fell and scattered across the floor around her messily as Akane broke into heavy sobs.

Ranma finally took his hands off the counter and turned to look at Ukyo, but she had already vanished from her spot behind the grill. She practically flew around the counter and dashed to Akane’s side, slowing down as she approached the other girl and gingerly placed her hands on Akane’s shaking shoulders.

“Hey...shh, shh,” Ukyo soothed, “It’s okay. It’s okay, Akane-chan…”

It was no use, Ranma knew. Once Akane decided to cry, there was no getting her to stop. She only stopped when she felt like it, or perhaps when she ran out of tears. Ranma slowly sank back into his seat, and looked away again. Every time he’d seen Akane these last few months, it ended with her in tears. He hated making her cry--and it always seemed like he was the reason she did so. He stared down at his hands, clenched into fists in his lap.

“Come on now, take it easy...I can explain everything,” Ukyo was saying softly.

Akane sniffled. “B-But he...because I…” Akane choked out the words before breaking back down again. “...Because of me!”

Ranma jolted, and looked up. He looked over at Akane, cradled in Ukyo’s arms, her face covered and voice muffled by her hands.
“This is all my fault!” she cried.

“Akane-chan--” Ukyo started, but then cut herself off as she bit her lip, not knowing what to say.

Ranma stood up and walked slowly over to the girls, and Ukyo looked up, her eyes large and questioning.

“Ran-chan…”

He saw Akane flinch, and in the same instance her crying instantly stopped. That, he thought, was a first.

Akane took her hands away from her face and looked up with wet, red eyes. Ukyo released her hold on Akane and backed away slightly, her eyes darting between the two in front of her anxiously.

“It’s not your fault...” Ranma began quietly, then he trailed off. He shook his head slightly, “Well, actually, I don’t know. Maybe it is. But I had a great doc an’ he told me I was okay. But then, the very next day…” Ranma felt his voice hitch and break, and he stopped himself. He steeled himself, then continued, “I don’t know why this happened. Maybe it was the fall, maybe...maybe...the baby got sick, or I...my body just...couldn’t...”

Ranma looked away, and tried to take a deep breath, but it rattled in his throat and came out shaky and broken.

“Whatever it was,” he began again in a low voice, “It doesn’t matter. So don’t blame yourself. It wasn’t anybody’s fault.”

Akane’s eyes were starting to fill with tears again. Ranma grimaced.

“Akane, I--”

Akane leapt forward and smashed herself into his chest, throwing her arms around his neck.

“Oh, Ranma!” she sobbed, clenching her arms tight around him. She buried her face into his shirt and started to cry all over again.

These weren’t the same tears she’d shed before, however. Tears of bitterness, tears of rage, tears of betrayal. That is what Ranma had seen from her the last times. Ranma had seen Akane cry like this before—only then, it wasn’t in front of him, and it hadn’t been about him. It was the same kind of crying he’d seen her do at Dr. Tofu’s office after her hair had gotten cut off.

*There’s nothing like a good cry.*

Ranma stood frozen, shellshocked. He figured he ought to hug her back, but he was too stunned to lift his arms. Ukyo finally came to his rescue, walking over and patting Akane gently on the back. Then, Ranma saw Ukyo’s face shoot up and her eyes go wide with horror. It didn’t take Ranma long to notice why.

“Oh, no!” Ukyo cried, rushing past Ranma and back toward the grill, which was billowing black smoke from the lone, forgotten okonomiyaki. “Shit, shit, shit!”

Akane pulled away from Ranma and looked around him with curiosity, the smell having reached her nose as well. Ranma and Akane watched as Ukyo whirled back behind the counter and shoved a spatula beneath the batter and flipped it over. Ukyo roared in frustration and defeat.
“Nooo!” she bellowed, “It’s ruined!”

“Aw, I’m sorry, Uuchan.” Ranma said meekly.

“I’ve never burnt a single okonomiyaki in my life,” Ukyo mumbled defeatedly, “Not even when I was a kid.”

Ukyo grumbled and swore under her breath as she scraped the burnt batter off the grill and tossed it in the trash bin. Ranma looked back over at Akane, who was now crouched to the floor to gather up the papers she’d dropped.

“Shoot, and I had these all organized and everything, too…” she muttered to herself.

Ranma squatted down and picked up one of the papers. It took him a few moments to read through before he understood what the paper entailed. Then he looked over at Akane, who had paused in trying to organize the rest of the papers she’d picked back up to watch him.

“You’re going to university?” he asked.

Akane clutched her papers to her chest. “Well, uh, I’m trying to, anyway.” she said shyly, tucking a strand of loose hair behind her ear. “I never even bothered with the entrance exams after I graduated from Furinkan, because, well…”

Ranma blushed ashamedly. “Y-Yeah…”

He looked back down at the form in his hands. His grades had been enough to pass high school, by the skin of his teeth. But the thought of spending night after night cramming for entrance exams did not appeal to him in the slightest. So he’d decided to forgo any higher education; it was a decision he was finally able to make for himself, and nobody fought him on it once.

Ranma handed Akane back the piece of paper. “I thought Nabiki paid her way by selling all those racy photos,” Ranma said, with a touch of disgust in his voice.

When he thought about all those sexually-frustrated boys ogling at pictures of so-called “sexy” pictures of him it made his stomach turn. Nabiki had even started selling pictures of his male side to girls (and, so she’d told him and much to his surprise, a few boys had even purchased a few), and those sold out like hot cakes. She said it was something she ‘should have done years ago’. Ranma still wondered to this day how the hell she managed to take all those shots of him without him noticing.

“She did,” Akane sighed, and Ranma knew she was thinking exactly what he was, “In fact, she’s managed to pay her entire way on all the money she’s been squirreling away ever since she was a kid. That’s Nabiki for you; always twenty steps ahead. She was thinking about university before we’d even finished elementary school. My mother apparently put some of her money away for me and my sisters before she passed away, for all of us to use for university. But Nabiki-oneechan hasn’t touched any of it. And Kasumi-oneechan told me to just use what I think I’d need. I’ve also been saving up some of my own money, too, but my mother’s savings will be a huge help.”

“Don’t forget about me,” Ukyo called from the grill, where she now had two new okonomiyaki cooking.

Ranma and Akane stood upright and Ranma gave Ukyo a quizzical look. “What d’you mean, Uuchan?”

Ukyo grinned. “I’m going to university, too!” she announced proudly.
Ranma and Akane walked over to the grill and sat down. Akane set her papers aside on the counter, and looked over at Ranma.

“Actually, me going to university was all Ukyo’s idea,” Akane admitted, smiling. “And we wound up both having the same school in mind.”

“Yep, so if we both get accepted, we were talking about going to live in the dorms together,” Ukyo added, “At first I thought Akane-chan could come live here, but then I figured it would get troublesome trying to commute to the campus every day, plus it’s already pretty crowded here with just Konatsu and I...uh, which I’ll apologize in advance for, Ran-chan.”

Akane looked back and forth between Ranma and Ukyo. “Wait. What do you mean?” she said, confused.

Ukyo bit her lip again. “Uh, well...that is…”

“I came here to ask Ukyo if I could come and stay with her for a while,” Ranma said.

“But...I thought you were living with Ryoga-kun?” Akane asked.

“Not anymore, I’m not.”

“Why?”

Ranma let out an irritated huff. Not all this again. “Isn’t that obvious? Why the hell would I live with him?”

“Well, because...the two of are toge--”

“We were not together!” Ranma cried, throwing his hands up into the air. “It was a...it was a stupid fling, okay?! It didn’t mean anything! Then I got knocked up, so he let me come an’ live with him outta pity. So now that my reason for bein’ there in the first place is gone, I left. It’s just that simple.”

Akane looked over at Ukyo, and the two shared a look that somehow annoyed Ranma even further.

“What?” he snapped out.

“This is what he was going on about when you walked in, Akane-chan,” Ukyo explained dryly, gesturing to Ranma as though he were inanimate.

“You mean...he’s actually being serious?” Akane said in disbelief.

“What is so unbelievable about it?” Ranma blurted.

“The fact that you’re denying the truth so much you’re even starting to believe it yourself,” Ukyo said, flipping over the okonomiyaki while she spoke. She smirked to herself when the other side of the batter appeared a perfectly cooked golden brown.

“I’m not denying anything, I’m stating facts,” Ranma grumbled, “And the fact of the matter is, I was an idiot. He didn’t want me runnin’ off on my own and raisin’ some poor kid just like how my old man raised me--because look how well that worked out. I’m still just a dumb kid who’s terrified of committing to anything that doesn’t have the words “martial arts” in front of it. I’m too fickle to be responsible for anyone, especially not an...infant. And I’m certainly too fickle to be with anyone because...because I don’t wanna end up resentin’ them for tying me down. So, I duck out before that can happen.”
Akane sighed. “Ranma, you mean to tell me that you—the guy who lost himself in a fit of rage when he got his first kiss stolen, the guy who had multitudes of fiancées falling out of the skies but still would rather be alone than be forced to be with someone if it wasn’t true love—would use your best friend for some fling?”

Ranma gaped at Akane soundlessly, and suddenly found it very difficult to look her in the eye. He looked down at the counter, where he now noticed a steaming okonomiyaki was waiting for him. He looked up at Ukyo, whose expression seemed all-knowing, and she gave him a wink. Grateful, Ranma picked up the chopsticks beside the plate and quickly dug in, eager to have an excuse not to talk for a while. Akane didn’t fight him on it, for she was starting in on her own food.

“I’m gonna go see if Konatsu needs help getting prep done,” Ukyo announced, “Be right back.”

It took a lot of willpower for Ranma not to leap out of his seat and block Ukyo from walking into the back and leaving him alone, and before he had the chance to change his mind about abandoning what little dignity he had, Ukyo was out of sight. Ranma looked down at his half-empty plate, and made a conscious effort to slow down his bites to keep his mouth busy. His eyes betrayed him, flickering away from his food and across the table, but he stopped them before they could land on Akane. He stopped halfway, where Akane’s university papers sat on the counter between the two of them. Ranma kept his eyes on the papers while he finished his bite, then swallowed.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a low, but clear voice.

Akane paused, her chopsticks hovering in midair. She kept her eyes on her plate and Ranma did the same.

“For what?” she asked softly.

“If I didn’t keep you waiting all those years, you coulda done so much more with your life so much sooner,” Ranma sighed regretfully, “You could’ve done anything you set your mind too, you’re so damn smart—but you waited on my stupid ass to catch up when all I ever did was slow you down and get in your way.”

Akane set down her chopsticks firmly and twisted around in her stool to look at Ranma directly. “That’s not your fault.” she said solidly.

“How can’t it be?” Ranma murmured, “You were gettin’ on fine before I dropped outta the damn sky and put a crater in your whole world. I was nothin’ but a chaotic mess from the beginning.”

“Akane set down her chopsticks firmly and twisted around in her stool to look at Ranma directly. “That’s not your fault.” she said solidly.

“How can’t it be?” Ranma murmured, “You were gettin’ on fine before I dropped outta the damn sky and put a crater in your whole world. I was nothin’ but a chaotic mess from the beginning.”

“It was my choice to make,” Akane said, “It’s not like you forced me.”

“I constantly put you in danger,” Ranma retorted, “You nearly died a thousand times over. You did die. And you sure as hell didn’t follow me to China, then. Kima dragged you to Jusenkyo by your hair and threw you in a cursed spring.”

“I was glad!” Akane cried, “At least I knew then I was close to you, that I didn’t have to think about where you were or why you hadn’t called; I was with you, by your side like I should have been.”

“You almost got killed!” Ranma snapped, “You were going to sacrifice yourself, for my sake, like an idiot!”

“Who cares about that!” Akane’s eyes were filling with tears again, “I knew you’d save me, and you did!”

“By sheer dumb luck, as always,” Ranma bit back darkly, “I was almost too late. Your eyes were
closed. You weren’t breathing. I failed. It’s a miracle you woke up, Akane.”

“But I did,” Akane whispered, “I did, and it was because of you.”

“And I nearly got myself killed tryin’ to do that, and you saved me!” Ranma said intently, “You threw yourself at Saffron’s giant fire blast, cutting a pathway through the heat so I could land the final blow. If you hadn’t been there, he woulda burned me to a crisp and we woulda both died in those caves, because you got it in your stubborn, thick head to throw your whole life away on a moron like me.”

“You did the same thing for me a million times before that, you dummy!” Akane’s voice was thick with the tears she was holding back just barely, “You were going to let the Yamata No Orochi eat you, you carried my unconscious body back down to safety after I got caught in the Hiryu Shoten Haa...you saved me over and over and over again—”

Ranma’s nostrils flared as he took in a deep breath. “Because you’re worth it!” he hollered.

Akane leaned back, and it was only then Ranma noticed they’d practically been touching noses as they got closer and closer to the other’s face as they shot words back and forth like cannonballs.

Akane’s eyes were wide, and her eyelids fluttered in shock. Ranma watched a rosy stain fill her cheeks, and felt his ears start to burn.

“I--I mean…” he looked down at his lap and fumbled with his hands, “I only made the Orochi go after me ‘cause you went after it first, by yourself. I thought you were stickin’ your neck out for that Shinnosuke guy, and...and so I made the Orochi chase me so you wouldn’t have to. And the only reason you got caught up in the Hiryu Shoten Haa was because you were trying to save the moxibustion chart. If it hadn’t been for you, I would’ve been weak forever. You were the one always savin’ me.”

“Because I was in love with you, stupid.” Akane whispered, and the tears that had been gathering in her eyes finally rolled silently down her flushed cheeks.

Ranma let out a shaky sigh, feeling it hard to breathe around his pounding heart.

“I know,” he mumbled, looking up at her meekly, “And I loved you, too. But I didn’t deserve to.”

Akane sniffled, wiping away her tears roughly. But her face scrunched up and she shook her head, but there was no fighting it. Her expression shattered and she let out a loud, broken sob. She hung her head, shielding her face in her hair. Ranma lurched out of his chair and yanked Akane out of her seat and into his arms, holding her tightly to his chest and burying his face in her hair as she wept into his shirt.

She held him tighter when she felt wet, warm droplets against the top of her head.

He almost didn’t react at first when he first heard the telephone start to ring. Then he stood up slowly and walked over to the phone, and picked it up halfway through the fifth ring.

“Hello?” his voice sounded dead.
“You actually made it to the phone,” the voice on the other end sounded genuinely relieved, “I guess
that counts for something. How you holding up, sugar?”

It wasn’t until he heard the familiar petname that he finally recognized the voice on the other end.
“Ukyo?”

“Who else would it be, you jackass?”

Definitely Ukyo.

“You’ve never called me. How’d you get this number?”

“I have my ways,” Ukyo said smugly. She paused for a moment, as if waiting for him to demand
more answers. When he said nothing, she sighed, and continued, “I called the Tendo Dojo, got the
number for the Saotome residence, then asked Saotome-san for your number, since she told me at the
Christmas party she’d only ever spoken to you on the phone before then. You might be an eternally
lost idiot, but you can be tracked down with enough sleuthing, Ryoga.”

“Why are you calling me?” Ryoga asked dryly.

“To check in on you like the good friend I am, for starters,” Ukyo said, “And, secondly, I needed to
tell you something.”

Ryoga sighed. “To tell me I’m a huge asshole and that after you hang up you’re never speaking to
me again?” he guessed.

“I called you a jackass, not an asshole,” Ukyo replied simply.

“Just get on with it, Ukyo,” Ryoga muttered, “It can’t be any worse than what I’ve said to myself
already.”

“Just shut up for a second, will ya?” Ukyo groused impatiently, “I called to tell you that Ran-chan
showed up at my restaurant this morning.”

Ryoga felt his heart jolt, but decided to ignore it. “Okay.”

“He asked if he could stay with me for a while, and I told him he could stay as long as he wants. But
I’ve got a feeling he doesn’t intend to stay put for too long.”

“I can’t imagine why he’d give you that impression.” Ryoga muttered sarcastically.

Ukyo ignored him. “I’m really hoping it won’t be the case, but with the way he is right now, Ranma-
honey could just up and leave in the middle of the night without a word.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“So that you can come and get him, you dolt.”

“He left of his own accord. I didn’t kick him out. And I’m not about to drag him back here kicking
and screaming.”

“But--”

“I’m not going to trap him anymore,” Ryoga said firmly, cutting Ukyo off. “He doesn’t want to be
here. He wants to be with you. And when he’s done being with you, then he can go wherever he
wants. He has that freedom now, just like he always wanted.”
“But if you just--”

“Thanks for calling, Ukyo,” Ryoga murmured, “I’m--I’m glad to hear that...that he’s safe, and with a friend. But it’s no business of mine where he chooses to go. It never was.”

“Ryoga--”

“Goodbye, Ukyo.”

The line went dead.

Ukyo scoffed bitterly. “Dense, melodramatic, pigheaded jackass!” she swore under her breath into the phone’s receiver. She hung up the phone harshly, and crossed her arms.

“Ukyo-sama,” Konatsu’s tiny voice called softly from behind her, “Pardon the interruption, mistress, but we have to open up shop in five minutes…”

“I’ll be right out, Konatsu. Go and put out the shop curtain, okay? By the way, how are our little twosome faring out there?”

“They were eating their food while making pleasant conversation when I checked on them, mistress.” Konatsu said happily, clasping her hands together. “It looks like they’ve finally made up!”

Ukyo smiled crookedly. “That’s good.” Then she sighed tiredly.

“What’s the matter, Ukyo-sama?” Konatsu asked worriedly.

“If it’s not one thing, it’s another,” Ukyo muttered, “I sure picked a high maintenance best friend.”

Konatsu still looked confused, but Ukyo waved her hand dismissively. “Anyway. Let’s open up shop.”

“You know you can come and have you old room back, right?”

Ranma nodded as he rolled out his bedroll. “Yeah, I know.”

“I get the point you’re trying to make here and all, but…” Akane looked around the room. “It looks awfully...cramped.”

That was an understatement if Ranma had ever heard one. The lower level of the building housed the dining area, the largest room. In the back was the prep room, with all the essentials for running a food service: cold and dry storage, a three-compartment sink, and prep station. It was the second largest area. To the right of the prep room was a door that lead to a small stairwell. In the stairwell, there was a door directly across from the prep room door which lead to a small room with tatami floors, a tiny kotatsu, a desk with a wheeled chair, and a TV which sat on top of a long bookshelf.
Upstairs, was a single bedroom, which took up the entire upper level. Since Konatsu’s arrival, Ukyo had hung up two large bedsheets to partition the room down the middle, though the sheets usually were pinned to either wall to give access to the entire room. Ukyo and Konatsu already had their futons laid out across the tatami floor, making Ranma’s bedroll look skimpy and diminutive.

There was a large bureau, similar to the one Ranma used back at the Tendo’s, as well as a short vanity mirror with a cushion on the floor, where Ukyo and Konatsu both got ready in the morning, and it was already filled to the brim with bottles of scents and hair gels and all sorts of things Ranma wasn’t entirely sure of the purpose for.

“I can bring you your futon from your old room.” Akane suggested, looking down at Ranma’s sad-looking bedroll.

“Don’t bother,” Ranma said, “This thing was my bed for a decade when I was on the road with Pops. I used to not even fit inside it.” Ranma plucked a loose down feather out of some loose stitching at the corner and flicked it away quickly, but Akane noticed.

“If you say so,” Akane sighed.

Ranma sat on the bedroll, and dragged his backpack in front of him to start unloading some of his necessities. Akane kneeled down on the floor in front of him.

“How long are you going to stay here?” she asked quietly.

Ranma shrugged passively. “Not sure. I know Uuchan doesn’t mind havin’ me, but I don’t wanna be in the way. I’ll earn my keep for a while, then I’ll hit the road, in a few weeks maybe. Go on a training trip.”

“You were just on one.” Akane quipped.

Ranma bristled. “Yeah, well...it wasn’t...it’s not--”

“--not like you actually did any ‘training’, right?” Akane finished, raising her eyebrows.

Ranma went red and his eyes bulged. He started flailing his hands helplessly, growing uneasy under Akane’s stare. “I–I mean...we did train, d-don’t get me wrong, we sparred...uh, like, once or twice?”

Akane somehow managed to raise her eyebrows even higher, and Ranma felt sweat starting to prickle at his brow and his face catch on fire as he panicked.

“An’ we went for a hike...and made food, and watched the Leo-whatevers...will you stop staring at me like that, tomboy!” Ranma cried.

Akane sneered. “Gee, you almost make it sound innocent,” she teased.

Ranma pouted. “And you make me sound like a depraved dog.” he groused.

“You expect me to believe he made the first move?” Akane asked incredulously.

“I think you’re forgettin’ who knocked up who here.” Ranma grumbled.

“And I think you’re stubbornly in denial over the fact that you came onto him, and the whole reason you even went on that ‘training trip’ with him was so you could find an opportunity and seize it.” Akane rebutted.

Ranma gawked at her. Okay, that was way too accurate. Akane either had mind-reading powers
he’d never told her about (or used until just now) or she knew more than what she was letting on.

“What’re you…?” Ranma began, slowly pointing his finger at her.

“After you left for your trip, Kasumi-oneechan asked me to go into your room and bring down the bed linen to be washed…” Akane began.

Ranma’s heart jumped into his throat, and he gulped it back down thickly.

“So I went and gathered up the bedsheets, and when I lifted them up, something tumbled out of the sheets. It was your tent.” Akane said, her voice soft in recollection.

Ranma groaned, putting his head in his hands. If there was a merciful higher being they would strike him down now and put him out of his misery. Then, he perked up, whipping his head back up and gapping at Akane with large eyes.

“Wait a minute!” he exclaimed, “That’d mean you were onto me before I even got back!”

Akane nodded slowly. “I guess you could say I was in denial. I wanted to believe I was just letting my imagination go wild and jumping to conclusions. So, I told myself for those next three days, give him the benefit of the doubt. Give him a chance, for once, to explain himself. Then when you came back home, I couldn’t contain myself any more. I just bombarded you with questions right away, and when I was met with an aloof, clearly guilty response, I knew something had to be up.”

Ranma slouched. “Akane, I--”

“But then, you asked me out on that date, and I thought that maybe I really had been overthinking it. So I tried to let it go for a while. But no matter my efforts you were still out in space constantly, so distant.” Akane looked down at her hands, clenching at her skirt in her lap. “And then, you started exhibiting even more weird behaviour. And the more confused I got, the more upset I became that I had to be in the dark about something. Then, you came back from Tofu-sensei’s clinic, and told us all the news…”

Ranma recalled the tense moment, and looked down at the floor.

“In that moment, all my doubts were finally confirmed...all my fears were realized. I finally knew the truth. It just wasn’t the one I’d wanted.” Akane finished with a soft sigh.

“I’m sorry, Akane.” Ranma mumbled, bowing his head even further.

“I’ve already had a lot of time to myself to be angry and sad and hurt over all of this,” Akane said, “And I don’t want to be angry anymore. We’ve both hurt each other enough. Now, I just want to try and focus on us being friends.”

Ranma nodded slowly.

Then, Akane suddenly laughed. “Although, I have to admit, all of this is going to feel like a total waste if you’re not even with him!”

Ranma balked, and looked up at Akane quickly. “Wh-wha--?”

“Are you ever going to go back and make up with Ryoga-kun?” Akane asked.

Ranma scoffed loudly. “With that jerk? You’ve gotta be kidding.”

Akane frowned. “Did he really...blame you for what happened?” she asked in a quiet voice.
Ranma looked away, off at nothing. “When he found me, the only thing he said was, ‘What did you do?’.”

Akane’s eyes widened. “Oh, Ranma…”

Ranma’s eyes were far away. “Not that he didn’t have every reason on the planet t’ think I would try an’ do somethin’, but…” Ranma shook his head suddenly, “I can’t go back there. With everythin’ that happened, it’d just be awkward.”

Akane stayed silent for a moment, as if waiting on him to say more. When he didn’t, she gathered up the papers beside her and split them in half, handing one of the bundles to Ranma.

“Those are Ukyo’s copies,” she explained, “Tell her to call me when she’s done going through them and filling them out.”

Ranma nodded. “Sure,”

Akane stood up, smoothing out her skirt, which looked a little wrinkled where she’d crumpled it up in her hands. Ranma stood up and watched Akane walk over to the bedroom door. She turned around and gave him a small smile.

“Don’t be a stranger, okay?” she said.

Ranma nodded again. Then Akane turned away and walked out of the room and down the stairs. Ranma sat back down on his bedroll with a long sigh. It felt good to finally be back in Akane’s good graces—it was one less thing he’d have to worry about. Before his mind could wander any further, he continued with unpacking his bag. But that was finished much too quickly.

He set his slightly lighter pack aside and flopped onto his back onto his bedroll.

A peculiar sensation akin to deja vu washed over him like a cold, rolling tide as the simple action caused his imagination to conjure not a detailed daydream, but rather a vivid memory. Lips being crushed and bruised, the sharp sound of the tent’s flap unzipping messily, being thrown mercilessly down onto the tent floor, his only cushion their sleeping bags. His warm weight pressed against him as their lips fought for dominance.

That was one battle Ranma hadn’t cared he’d lost.

“Ranma-honey!” Ukyo’s call made Ranma instinctively jolt and sit up abruptly just as Ukyo walked into the bedroom. Ukyo paused at the doorway, having just caught Ranma flying up from his sleeping bag, and raised a curious eyebrow. She looked around the room, which looked practically no different than it did before. “Looks like you’ve...moved in?”

Ukyo went over to the far wall, and slid open the closet door, “There’s a small room with a toilet and sink and shower head, just beside the TV room downstairs. It doesn’t get used too often for bathing, though. Konatsu and I usually just go to the public bath, since it’s only a short walk down the street from the shop. I’ve got an extra bath bucket in here you can bring with you.”

Ukyo turned around and tossed Ranma a blue bath bucket, which he caught effortlessly.

“You’re free to use the shower downstairs if you want, I just figured you’d rather go someplace to
wash up that wasn’t filled with hungry customers.” Ukyo explained.

“Thanks, Uuchan,” Ranma said.

It had been an eventful last few hours, to put it lightly. He could certainly go for a hot bath.

Chapter End Notes

Happy First Day of Autumn, everybody! To celebrate, have some ex-fiancée's reconciling and mending their friendship. What a time to be alive.

I’m not gonna ramble on too much here, 'cause I'm nursing a coffee with a gratuitous amount of cream and sugar, ready to finish off Chapter 18. Who knows, I might even get Chapter 19 started tonight...lord knows I won't be sleeping anytime soon. The joys of coffee, and no work the following morning.

Hope this chapter was worth the month it took to get here. I wound up breaking my own promise (just like I knew I would) and posted a chapter before I met my quota of 5 pre-written chapters. But, c’mon, how could I resist not bringing back this story on the official first day of autumn? Sentimentality wins over schedules any day, in my book (pun intended?).

Okay, shutting up now. Blame the coffee, it makes me more of a spaz than usual. Back to work!
Adversity makes strange bedfellows

Chapter Summary

Ranma goes to the public bathhouse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

18.

Adversity makes strange bedfellows

It was after having to stop himself from nearly walking into the women’s side of the baths that he knew he was in trouble.

Double checking the kanji above the door as if he hadn’t lived in Japan his entire life, Ranma pursed his lips and entered the men’s bathing area. The locker room was empty, but through the glass partition Ranma could see several bathers. He took his time undressing, feeling a hole of trepidation swelling inside his chest. He could remember back when he’d had to try and get Happosai’s ancient scroll from an all-girl’s hot spring, and his father sent him out in the guise of one of the bathers. The same knee-buckling nervousness he’d felt around all those naked women even while disguised as a girl himself, he now felt standing in the middle of the men’s locker room. And he couldn’t seem to shake it.

Suddenly the door to the locker room opened, and Ranma felt himself jump. A man walked into the locker room and went over to the set of lockers in the middle of the room, where Ranma stood, halfway through removing his sweater. The man looked to be in his early thirties, with somewhat youthful features but a few flecks of grey in his dark hair. It wasn’t until they met eyes when Ranma realized he’d been staring, and Ranma skirted his gaze abruptly, hiding his reddening face behind his shirt as he pulled it over his head.

“Least I won’t be the only one in there who isn’t pushing eighty today,” the man joked suddenly, as he unbuttoned his jacket. “I always come here before nightfall, this place can get pretty crowded then. But, this is typically the Old Man Hour.”

Ranma slowly folded his sweater and stored it in his locker. “Least they’re quiet,” he said in a low voice he had to make a conscious effort to not sound too grumpy. He wasn’t a girl right now. This man wasn’t trying to flirt with him, it was just friendly locker room conversation.

“And they don’t play with bath toys,” the man chuckled.
Ranma instantly pictured Happosai, but didn’t say anything for three very good reasons. The first was because anyone who hadn’t met that old pervert would find any stories about him extremely peculiar, the second was because he wasn’t in any mood to be making jokes about Happosai’s bath toys, and the third was because the man beside him was stripping down to his underwear and Ranma had lost the ability to speak anyway.

“My apartment’s pretty tiny; it’s only got a shower. So usually I’m here every other day. I’ve never seen you around before—you new to the area?” the man asked, tossing his jeans into his locker.

Ranma realized he was still pretty much fully dressed, and took off his undershirt. He stored it in the locker and shook his head. “No, I’ve lived here for years. I just never had t’ use the public baths much, unless the furo broke.”

He didn’t miss the man hefting his eyebrows curiously at the use of the word ‘broke’, but he didn’t say more.

Both of them were down to just underwear now, and Ranma was cursing the fluorescent lights above their heads, knowing all too well that they were exaggerating the embarrassed flush on his face.

“But I’m living, uh, on my own now,” he continued on, “And it’s a pretty tiny space, too. So, I’ll be coming around here a lot more now.”

The man beamed at that. “Ah, well that’s great!” he exclaimed cheerfully, “Don’t get me wrong, some of these old timers have some funny stories, but they’re only funny, you know, the first time you hear them.”

Ranma snorted. “You really do come here a lot.”

The man grinned. “All the more reason to get acquainted with the newcomers. Sounds like we’ll be running into each other here quite a bit now. And I would certainly welcome fresh bathing conversation.”

Ranma couldn’t seem to find a decent response, and remained quiet despite kicking himself mentally. The man held out his hand suddenly, and Ranma looked down at it curiously, as if confused by the man’s obvious intentions.

“I’m Tanaka. Tanaka Hideo.” the man, Hideo, announced.

“S-Saotome,” Ranma said slowly, reaching out and grasping Hideo’s hand. “Saotome Ranma.”

The two shook hands, and Hideo grinned again. “Well, Saotome-kun,” he said, “I think this the start of a great...bathhouse acquaintanceship.”

Hideo laughed at his own joke, and released Ranma’s hand. Ranma pulled back his hand, and managed a crooked smile.

“Well,” Hideo said, “I guess we should get out there then, hm?”

“Ah, right.” Ranma muttered.

Hideo pulled off his boxers and put them inside his locker, closing and locking it. Then he picked up his bath supplies and a small towel, and looked over at Ranma. He raised a questioning eyebrow at Ranma, who was standing completely still and staring at him yet again. Ranma looked away again and hastily removed his boxers and stuffed them in his locker, practically slamming the door shut.
The two walked out into the bathing area. There were two men sitting in the bathing hall, washing themselves, and five others sitting in the baths. Hideo was right about it being Old Man Hour. Ranma had to be the youngest man in the room. Hideo looked over at Ranma and gave him a cheeky ‘I told you so’ look, and they walked over to two empty stools in the bathing hall. They sat down and set down their bathing buckets. Hideo seemed right at home, getting straight to work.

“So, how old are you, Saotome-kun?” Hideo asked lightly as he twisted on the shower head and started washing down his body.

“I turned twenty-two back in August,” Ranma replied, removing his bath supplies from the bucket and filling the bucket from the tap rather than using the shower nozzle.

“Damn!” Hideo cried, shaking his head and laughing, “Although that’s more than what I’d guessed, to be honest. You’re a lot younger than you look. Uh, some people might take offense to that, but...don’t take it the wrong way.”

“It’s fine,” Ranma muttered. He was certainly used to it, after all.

He could recall quite clearly the nosy looks he got from passers by when he went out grocery shopping, and caught older women whispering to each other when they noticed the bump under his shirt.

The bump that wasn’t there anymore.

His chest clenched tightly, and he dumped the bucket of water over his head as if to wash the thought away.

“You clearly take good care of yourself, so it’s no wonder,” Hideo sighed, “With the shape you’re in, I bet you’re training to enter the Olympics.”

“Not quite,” Ranma said, “I am in training, though. I’m a martial artist.”

Hideo’s eyes widened. “Wow, that’s—that’s really cool! So, you can split a piece of wood apart with your forehead, and that sort of thing?”

“Of course,” Ranma responded instantly, nodding. “What about you?”

Hideo barked with laughter. “You kidding? It took me like five minutes to open a jar of pickled radish for breakfast this morning.”

Ranma blinked. “Uh, I meant, how old are you?” he asked quietly.

Hideo perked up, and looked a little flustered. He chuckled nervously. “Oh, I’m thirty. Which just makes being such a weakling compared to you all the more embarrassing.”

Thirty! It was still an eight-year age difference, but Ranma was relieved regardless. He’d thought Hideo was older. But he chose to not voice that out loud; he wouldn’t kick a man while he was down.

Although, Hideo was more down on himself than he deserved. He wasn’t in the condition Ranma was in, but not everyone went out on a decade-long, ruthless training expedition across Japan when they’d only just learned how to crawl. The only word Ranma could think of to describe Hideo was ‘average’. He was a healthy weight, but had little to no muscle definition. Face-wise, he was also quite average. Dark, short hair with the faintest flecks of silvery-grey near his ears. His hair was fluffy and spiked at the top, but pulled back with gel at the sides (Ranma assumed this was in an
attempt to make the grey hairs less noticeable, although it failed). His eyes were dark brown near the iris, then radiated out to a soft gray at the edges. Certainly not bad to look at, but not drop-dead gorgeous, either.

Ranma was trying to tell himself that Hideo’s best feature was his smile. He must have worn braces as a child; his teeth were too perfect to be natural. Since he was always laughing at his own jokes, his smile was frequent, which made it easy to grow an opinion about.

However, since the two men had been completely naked for the majority of their first meeting, it was pretty easy to get an opinion about other aspects, too. His eyes constantly betrayed him while he tried to look busy lathering up, constantly flickering into his peripheral to get a glance.

Hideo wasn’t quite so ‘average’ in every department.

“I’m going in now,” Hideo said.

“Wh-what?” Ranma blurted, feeling his heart skip.

“I’m going into the bath now,” Hideo repeated. “No rush, but don’t leave me with the old timers too long, okay?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure.” Ranma mumbled quickly, keeping his head down as he nodded.

Hideo stood up from his stool and walked over to the closest bath. Ranma grabbed his bucket again and filled it with more warm water. Impatient, he only waited until it was less than half-full before turning it over and dumping it on his body. Which just meant he had to fill it up a second time in order to rinse all the soap suds off.

He was starting to feel unnerved again, and realized he had actually started to calm down, talking to Hideo. It was taking his mind off things. It was putting his mind in places it really, really shouldn’t be, but he was nevertheless grateful for the distraction. And ‘distraction’ was certainly a good word for it.

Ranma washed off the last of the soap and then went over to the bath Hideo sat in. There were two large baths against the back wall, where a giant mural of Mt. Fuji stretched from one end of the steamy room to the other. Ranma stepped into the near-scalding water, hissing through his teeth softly as he sank down into the water.

Hideo sat in the corner of the bath, his arms stretched out across the ceramic tile, his head leaned back and his eyes closed in relaxation. He raised his head and slowly opened his eyes as Ranma sat down beside him and leaned back against the cool tile.


“Nah,” Ranma shook his head.

“Oh? You just went straight into the work world, huh?”

“Nope.”

Hideo blinked. “Oh. So, what do you do?”

“Um, train, I guess.” Ranma mumbled. He had to admit it sounded a little silly when it was said out loud.
“Wow, so you’re like the real deal, huh? I figured nowadays martial arts was just like a hobby, unless you’re an athlete or whatever.” Hideo scratched his chin.

Ranma shrugged. “Martial arts is my whole life. It’s all I’ve ever known.”

Hideo stared. “Man. You’re really...mysterious, Saotome-kun.”

Ranma felt his cheeks burn even through the steam. He looked down into the water, and cleared his throat.

“So, what do you do?” he asked, taking the conversation off of him again.

“I work in the editorial department at this little publishing company,” Hideo laughed, “So, again, compared to you totally boring and typical.”

“Least it pays the bills,” Ranma defended, “Bein’ a martial artist isn’t exactly an executive position. Only thing I could apply for is a spot in the circus.”

Hideo burst out laughing. “That sounds a hell of a lot more fun than pulling an all-nighter trying to get the rough draft of your author’s book to the printer on time!”

Ranma snickered. “What made you become an editor? It sounds pretty stressful.”

“My uncle is the editor-in-chief,” Hideo mumbled. He groaned, throwing his head back. “Ugh, the more I talk, the more typical I get!”

Ranma scoffed. “Typical is a lot better than traditional,” he said, “My old man set me up in an arranged marriage before I was even born.”

Hideo gaped. “Seriously? That’s certainly old-fashioned. So...you’re married?”

“No, uh, the engagement got annulled a few months ago.” Ranma mumbled.

“Oh. Things just didn’t pan out with the two of you?” Hideo asked awkwardly.

Ranma pursed his lips. “I guess that’s one way of puttin’ it.”

Hideo decided not to push the topic. “Well, guess you’re living a bachelor life now, huh? You said you just started to live on your own. Were you staying with the girl’s family?”

Ranma nodded. “For a few years, anyways. I moved in with a friend earlier today.”

“Oh, wasn’t it a little strange staying with her family all those months after annulling the engagement?” Hideo asked.

“Oh, uh, I moved outta there as soon as we broke it off. I moved in with--” Ranma cut himself off. He’d just realized how easily he’d started to tell Hideo all of this, and the only thing that had stopped him just now was realizing he had no idea what to say Ryoga was to him for this story. “My, uh…”

Hideo hadn’t missed Ranma’s obvious hesitation. He pushed off from the tile and leaned toward Ranma intently. Ranma leaned away nervously at the intense look in Hideo’s eyes.

“You totally had an affair, didn’t you?” Hideo asked in awe. “You’re getting more interesting by the minute.”

Ranma blushed. “Wh-what makes you assume that, all of a sudden?” he stammered.
“Because you were totally about to say, ‘I moved in with my lover’!” Hideo said in a hushed voice, like a high school girl spreading gossip during class.

“I was not!” Ranma cried defiantly.

The other bathers went quiet and looked over at the two young men, casting them a mix of confused and perturbed looks. Ranma flushed ashamedly, and flicked his gaze back down to the water.

“I’ve talked to a lot of old timers during my visits to this bathhouse,” Hideo went on, unphased, “And they’ve told me some pretty wild tales. But I’ve never met a martial artist who was set up in an arranged marriage, then went and had a secret affair on his fiancee! Your life sounds like something out of a tv show or manga, or something.”

Ranma sunk lower into the water. “It really wasn’t that big a deal,” he grumbled. “And it ended horribly, so it wasn’t even worth all the drama it caused.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Hideo said apologetically, “Sorry for bringing it up.”

Ranma shrugged.

The two sat in the water in silence for a while. Hideo leaned back on the tile and let out a low, long sigh.

“Man, I’m starving,” he announced, rolling his head back.

Ranma thought back to the okonomiyaki he’d had earlier, and realized that’s all he’d had to eat all day. “Me too,” he said, nodding.

“Wanna get out of here?” Hideo asked lightly, “Kinda hard to focus on a relaxing soak when your stomach is eating itself.”

“Sure,” Ranma said with a shrug. He’d more come to get cleaned up than to soak anyway.

The two got out of the water and dried off, collecting their bath supplies and walking back over to the locker rooms to change.

“So, where do you want to go to eat?” Hideo asked.

Ranma looked over at Hideo curiously while he buttoned up his pants. “Huh?”

“You said you were hungry too, right? So what’re you in the mood for?”

“Oh, I was just gonna head back to, uh, my place,” Ranma said, “I kinda live above a restaurant, and I’m old friends with the owner so, free eats, y’know?”

“I see. Well,” Hideo smirked, “It’ll still be free eats for you if you come get some lunch with me.”

Ranma blinked rapidly. “O-Oh. Oh. Uhh...sure.”

They finished changing and walked out into the hallway and over to the shoe lockers. After retrieving their shoes they walked back out into the main entrance and out the front door. Ranma didn’t miss the fact that the woman at the bandai gave the two a look, knowing they’d entered the bathhouse separately and were now leaving together. He was probably just seeing things, but he could have sworn she’d looked away with a smirk.

Hideo stopped outside the entrance of the bathhouse, and stepped over to a vending machine just
outside the main doors. Ranma watched and waited while Hideo put money in the machine, then
tossed something to Ranma which he caught deftly. Hideo grinned at Ranma reflexes as he put more
money in the machine, and Ranma looked down at what Hideo had given him. It was a can of iced
coffee.

“Thanks,” Ranma said, cracking open the drink and giving it a swig.

Hideo pulled his own can out of the machine and stood upright, cracking open the drink. “I always
have one after leaving the baths. Kind of a silly tradition of mine. So, decided where you want to go
to eat yet?”

“Wherever is fine,” Ranma replied, sipping his drink.

Hideo pondered for a moment. “How about Nekohanten?”

Ranma choked on his coffee. He pulled back the can and coughed, wiping his mouth on the back of
his hand. “No, not there,” he croaked when he was finally able to speak.

Hideo laughed lightly. “I thought you just said wherever is fine?” he joked.

“I did. And we can go anywhere but there.” Ranma said.

Hideo didn’t question him on it. “Alright, well, there’s a place just a ways down the road that had
ramen almost as good as Nekohanten’s. How about that?”

Ranma nodded, and Hideo smiled and started to lead the way. They walked down the chilly street of
the Shopping Plaza, finishing off their iced coffees quickly as they walked and the cold air started to
sink in. Thankfully it was a short walk to the ramen shop Hideo had in mind. The two ducked under
the shop curtain and were greeted cheerfully and loudly by the cooks. They walked down the length
of the bar and sat at the far end, and Hideo ordered for them.

“Two bowls of beef ramen, and a bottle of warm sake, please.” Hideo said neatly, and the bartender
nodded and whisked away.

Ranma opened and closed his mouth helplessly. “Um, I...I’m not much of a drinker…” he mumbled.

“No? Just don’t like it, or because of your training?” Hideo asked.

Ranma shrugged. “I just never really thought about, or have been around a lot of people who do.
Besides my old man, anyway.”

Then, the bartender came back over with a white tokkuri and two sakazuki. The tokkuri was set
before them sitting in a small bowl of water that was billowing a little steam. Hideo thanked the
bartender and grabbed the tokkuri with both hands.

“Take your cup,” Hideo directed, and Ranma grabbed one of the sakazuki and held it out to him.

Hideo poured out a small amount of the rice wine, and then did the same to his own cup. He set
down the tokkuri and picked up his own saucer and held it up to Ranma with a little smile, and
gingerly clinked the edge of his cup to Ranma’s.

“Kanpai!” Hideo toasted, and then took a small sip of his sake. Ranma followed suit.

The last time Ranma had tried hot sake was during that Anything-Goes Three Legged Race. Not that
he remembered much of it, that is, until Akane snapped his out of it by splashing him with cold
water. Warmed sake tasted stronger than it did just at room temperature; it brought out all the flavours and made the drink taste like pure alcohol. They didn’t nurse their first drinks, finishing them in a few sips.

“How was that? Want some more?” Hideo asked, reaching for the tokkuri again.

“Sure,” Ranma nodded, holding out his saucer again. Hideo poured a little bit more into it this time, then did the same with his own.

By the time their ramen arrived at the table, they’d both had four saucers each. Ranma gratefully pulled his bowl towards him and brandished his chopsticks. He could feel the alcohol buzzing around in his head and burning in his chest already; he would like to say this was purely because the sake was hot and therefore the alcohol hit a little harder, but in truth he was just a lightweight. He quickly slurped up his first bite of the steaming noodles, hoping the food would help to drown out the alcohol.

The ramen was good, admittedly not as good as the ramen at the Nekohanten, but nobody could really beat Cologne’s ancient recipe. Regardless it was still tasty and the two of them finished off their bowls in a matter of minutes. Popping the piece of fish cake which he always saved for last into his mouth, Ranma looked over at Hideo, who was filling their saucers with more sake. Ranma picked up his cup once it was full, and knocked it back like a shot.

Hideo let out an amused laugh. “No need to down it so fast.” he said. He held up the tokkuri and wiggled it questioningly anyway.

Ranma extended out his cup, but Hideo held up a waiting finger. He picked up his own saucer and knocked it all back himself, then looked back up at Ranma with a smirk.

“There,” he said, filling Ranma’s cup for the sixth time, “Need to keep things even.”

Ranma looked down at his drink, watching the warm orange lights of the bar flicker inside the clear liquid.

“Y’ seein’ anyone?” Ranma heard himself asking, only his usual drawling slang sounded much more slurred, but he didn’t think too much on it.

Hideo snorted, smiling and shaking his head. “Nahh,” he said, waving his hand around. “Not really good at it.”

“At what?” Ranma asked.

“Dating,” Hideo hummed, “Romance.”

“An’ love?” Ranma pressed.

Hideo gave him a confused look. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

Ranma shook his head. “I don’ think it is,” he muttered, “Two sides of the same coin, maybe. But, diff’rent sides, still. Know what I mean?”

Hideo stared at him for a moment. “Nope.”

Ranma looked down at his untouched drink again. “Romance is like n’ action, but love is...just in yer head? Or maybe it’s the other way aroun’...”
Hideo chortled. “Y’ don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“Romance is jus’ stupid,” Ranma sighed, frustrated he couldn’t explain this right for some reason, “It’s all jus’ hearts n’ flowers.”

Hideo propped his elbow up on the counter and rested his chin in his hand, and offered Ranma an amused, sleepy-looking smile. “And love isn’t?” he joked.


“That mistress of yours must’ve really crushed your heart,” Hideo sighed tragically.

“He was jus’ an asshole.” Ranma groused. Then, suddenly aware of himself again, his head shot up and he stared at Hideo in mute terror. Hideo barked out laughing.

“You should see your face!” he giggled.

“I--I didn’t...I mean--” Ranma stammered, tripping all over his words more than usual. Shit.

Hideo waved his hand around again. “Don’t gotta look so horrified,” he said, “I certainly wouldn’t judge.”

Somehow, Ranma’s face seemed to get even warmer. “Y’ mean...you...you’re--?”

“I--I didn’t...I mean--” Ranma stammered, tripping all over his words more than usual. Shit. Shit.

Hideo waved his hand around again. “Don’t gotta look so horrified,” he said, “I certainly wouldn’t judge.”

Somehow, Ranma’s face seemed to get even warmer. “Y’ mean...you...you’re--?”

“Into guys? Sure,” Hideo smiled, “And ladies. And whatever else in between. Just people, you know? People are interesting.”

Ranma could only stare, gaping like a fish. Hideo snickered at his shell shocked expression.

“You ever just walk down the street and look around and realize that everyone else leads a life just as pointlessly simple yet wonderfully complex as your own?” Hideo asked, his voice suddenly soft.

Ranma had, he just hadn’t been able to put it into words before.

“I thought y’ said your life was boring?” Ranma said quietly. It was easier to keep from slurring when he didn’t raise his voice too high.

Hideo laughed gently. He reached over and poked Ranma in the collarbone.

“It is,” he agreed lightly, “Which is why I fill it with interesting people.”

“Complicated and interesting ain’t the same thing,” Ranma scoffed. He finally noticed he still hadn’t taken a sip of his drink, and did so.

“Life gets complicated for everyone at some point,” Hideo shrugged, “People aren’t interesting because they’re complicated. And I wasn’t saying you were interesting because you had an affair with another man.”

“I guess so. You did call me mysterious earlier.” Ranma said, taking another sip.

“I did. I mean, you’re less so now as I get to know more about you, of course. But, you’re still...enchanting.”

Ranma choked, jerking his cup away from his mouth and nearly spilling the rest of his drink on the floor. Hideo’s eyes were wide in surprise, but he still had that small smile on his face.
“Was that too corny?” Hideo asked humourously.

Ranma shook his head. “I’ve been called a lotta things. Enchanting was never one o’ ‘em.”

“All good things though, I’m sure.” Hideo remarked.

Ranma swigged back what was left of his drink, and Hideo filled his saucer again. “Plenty o’ not-so-good things, but I deserved those. The good things were usually...unwanted.”

*What a pretty name.*

*I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so beautiful.*

*I’ll take care of you.*

“Deserved?” Hideo pressed.

“I’ve made a lotta people miserable,” Ranma mumbled, “all ‘cause I’m a unrelentin’ piece o’ shit.”

“Too damn young to have so many demons,” Hideo said with a sigh.

Ranma simply shrugged, knocking his drink back yet again. It was getting easier to do; he could hardly taste the alcohol anymore.

“It’s a whole new year, Saotome-kun,” Hideo said brightly. He reached over and patted Ranma on the shoulder, and held up the tokkuri again. “How about we drink to that, hm?”

Ranma held out his empty saucer and Hideo filled it right up to the brim. He kept his hand clasped on Ranma’s shoulder as he filled his own cup, and Ranma watched the last small droplets of the drink drip into the full saucer. Hideo set aside the empty tokkuri and held out his cup to Ranma expectantly. This time Ranma touched his own cup to Hideo’s.

“To a new year,” Hideo said.

“To a new year.” Ranma echoed. And they downed the last of their sake in one go.

Hideo pulled back up and smacked his lips satisfactorily. With a grin, he twisted in his stool and called out to the barkeep.

“Two pints of Asahi!” Hideo chirped, tapping the counter.

Before Ranma could process what had just happened, their bartender was back in a flash, setting down two large glasses of frothing liquid gold. He gathered up the tokkuri and the sakazuki and then was gone again. Ranma looked at the pint of beer before him, then at Hideo. Hideo was holding out his own glass to him, smiling and waiting. Ranma sheepishly picked up his glass, which satisfied Hideo enough to take a sip. Ranma followed, watching him over the rim of his glass while they drank. He wasn’t about to come up for air before Hideo did.

Hideo finally pulled away, and Ranma was close behind. He had to make a very conscious effort not to gasp for air. They’d drank for same length of time, but Ranma had taken larger gulps trying to accommodate drinking and breathing at the same time. When they set their glasses down, Ranma’s glass was more foam than beer. Hideo eyed their glasses, and raised an eyebrow.

“What happened to keeping things even?” Hideo muttered, sardonic yet playful all at once.

“Feel free to try and catch up,” Ranma quipped, feeling himself biting back a smirk.
Hideo turned on him and sneered. “Oh, now the badass martial artist shows his true colours, eh? I’m liking you more by the minute.”

Ranma reached for his glass. “Keep yammerin’ and I’m gonna finish before you.” he warned.

Hideo let out an admonishing cry, and slapped Ranma’s hand away. “Hey, now! Let me get my glass first, you rude bastard.”

“I guess it’s only fair to give you a head start,” Ranma jeered.

“I won’t need it.” Hideo assured.

Ranma shrugged passively. “If you insist,” he said, and they took up their glasses in unison.

They cast the other a look over their glasses before tipping their drinks up. This time Ranma kept his eyes focused on the bottom of his glass, trying to take big yet quick gulps. The taste of the beer prickled in his nose and pierced his tongue. When he could finally taste nothing but foam, he pulled away his glass and looked up. He gaped at the sight of Hideo sitting and watching him, his empty glass of beer already sitting on the counter beside him, and a look of smug satisfaction sparkling in his eyes.

“I win,” he said smoothly.

Now Ranma had two battles he didn’t care he had lost.

“As much as I’d love to keep things even,” Hideo said, “I do have to work in the morning. Plus, I wouldn’t want to just let you win.”

“Y’ can’t talk that kinda game an’ then do nothin’ about it.” Ranma groused. He’d happily pay the tab for the next round if he could, but he’d spent his last few yen on the admission to the bathhouse.

“There are other ways to settle the score,” Hideo smirked.

“Such as?” Ranma queried right back.

“That, I’ll leave up to you. How about we discuss it while we walk?” Hideo suggested, “You ready to get out of here?”

Ranma nodded. Hideo called over the bartender and asked for the bill. They waited for a few moments until he returned with the bill. Hideo paid the tab, and then turned away and off his stool, stuffing his wallet back into his jacket pocket. Ranma twisted around and got to his feet. The room spun around a little faster than it’d been before, and then slowed down again as Ranma got his footing. He took a testing step forward, and could see Hideo had been carefully watching him. He wobbled dangerously and stumbled forward, and Hideo lurched out and caught him in his arm.

Ranma snorted, then a goofy giggle bubbled out him. “Wh- oops,” he sang, a laugh in his voice.

Hideo chuckled good naturedly. He pulled Ranma to him and wrapped his arm across his shoulders, and picked up both of their bath buckets where they’d set them on an unattended barstool. He led the way out of the bar, and out onto the street. It was still light outside, but the sun had been covered by pale grey clouds all day, and was now hidden behind the tall buildings, castings the streets in shadow. The air was even cooler now, and after the warmth of the ramen shop it pierced right to the core. Ranma shivered, and instinctively buried himself a little deeper into his companion’s shoulder.

“Where d’ya live?” Ranma asked, completely undisturbed by the looks of passersby as they watched
two grown men walk down the street, huddled together.

Hideo hummed. “How far are we from that restaurant you live above?”

“How far are we from that restaurant you live above?” Hideo asked.

“It’s Uuchan’s Okonomiyaki,” Ranma replied, “Was ‘bout a twenty minute walk t’ the bathhouse. Why?”

“Was wondering which was closer,” Hideo said, casting Ranma a look out of the corner of his eye. “My place or yours.”

“My place s’above a restaurant n’ I’m sleepin’ in a single room with two other people.” Ranma said dryly.

“Well, we’re closer to my place from here, anyway.” Hideo smiled, “You been thinking of how you’re gonna make things even?”

“I have,” Ranma said, and it was true. Hideo stopped at the corner of the street and took his arm off Ranma’s shoulders so he could look him in the eye and give him a curious look. Ranma swayed back and forth without the sturdy warmth of Hideo’s arm to keep him balanced, and he smiled, pressing his lips together as he watched Hideo search his eyes for his answer.

“What is it?” Hideo urged.

“Can’t say it here,” Ranma said hushedly.

“Why’s that?” Hideo chuckled.

“Too indecent,” Ranma admitted, dragging his teeth along his own bottom lip.

Even through his dizziness Ranma didn’t miss the look that flashed through Hideo’s eyes, or the way his gaze was locked onto Ranma’s mouth, watching him pinch his lip between his teeth. Anxious excitement swelled within his chest at how alluringly powerful it made him feel. Ranma had been slowly stepping backwards until his back pressed against the stone corner of the building on the street’s corner, and Hideo had followed his every move. Ranma watched their breaths flow from their parted mouths and entangle in the small amount of air that was between them, and became aware of how close they’d become.

“Y’ said we’re close to your place?” Ranma said, breathlessly somehow.

“Minutes away,” Hideo said softly, “Still need help walking?”

Ranma hummed. He pushed himself away from the wall, and let Hideo snake his arm around him again. This time he felt his hand slide down to the small of his back, and he wrapped his hand snugly around Ranma’s waist. Ranma was having trouble walking, but he was certain now it was not because of alcohol.

They arrived shortly to a small apartment halfway down the street. They travelled rather awkwardly up a flight of metal stairs and chimed like a bell, echoing in the cold air. They walked down the length of the building to the very last door; Hideo fished into his jacket and pulled out a set of keys, opening the door one-handed. He pressed his hand into the small of Ranma’s back, ushering him inside first. Ranma did so, and Hideo followed, turning around to close the door behind them while Ranma surveyed their new surroundings. They stood in a small front foyer with an even tinier genkan. In the tight space, he could hear both of their ragged breathing.

Ranma turned around, watching as Hideo placed their bath buckets on a small table. He turned and
looked at Ranma, and Ranma felt his face start to burn again under the flickering watch of Hideo’s
gaze. Ranma licked his lips, taking deep breaths through his nose while his heart pounded like a deep
drum in his chest. Hideo took a slow step forward, calculating and hesitant. Then, that same flashing
look snapped into his eyes again, and a change passed over him so quickly Ranma felt all the air in
the tiny room change with a breath.

Hideo came towards him, clasping his upper arms and pulling him in close, then twisting them
around and pushing Ranma’s back against the front door, firm yet clumsy. He didn’t have the grace
or coordination of someone like Ranma; his untrained body was messy with the way it moved,
especially with the influence it was under. Ranma couldn’t care less, pressing his palms into the door
behind him, watching Hideo’s face and not breathing. Hideo eyes dragged down his face and looked
down to his own hands, still holding onto Ranma’s upper arms. He slowly slid his hands upwards,
up to his shoulders, across his collarbone, up his neck. He kept his hands there, cupping them around
Ranma’s warm neck, his thumbs just grazing the back shell of Ranma’s ears. Ranma sighed softly at
the sensation, and the sound was all the affirmation Hideo needed.

Their lips came together in a crashing, hungry mess. There was no softness to the kiss, no shy
hesitation. The second their lips touched the unrelenting tension between them ignited like gas
poured into flames. The kiss did nothing to relieve the tension; it only coaxed it, making it grow in
intensity and heat. Hideo’s fingers curled into the hair on the back of Ranma’s head, pushing him
closer and deepening the kiss as he pressed his body against him, pushing him even harder into the
door. Ranma finally took his hands away from the door and reached up and grasped the sleeves of
Hideo’s jacket, gripping them tightly. He felt the tip of Hideo’s tongue flicker out and slide across his
upper lip; he let out a gasping sigh at the contact, and Hideo slipped his tongue further inside. Ranma
could taste the lingering bitterness of alcohol on both of their tongues. It didn’t deter him from
snaking his arms up and around Hideo’s neck and holding him even closer. Hideo pulled away, just
enough so that he could snatch Ranma’s bottom lip in his teeth and pull. Ranma groaned breathily as
Hideo’s teeth dragged across his lip before releasing it. His eyes flickered open to see Hideo giving
him an aroused smirk, his face flushed.

“I really wanted to do that,” Hideo admitted, panting a little for air.

Ranma could feel his own heart pounding in his ears. “Since when?” he asked, finding he was
suddenly very curious for the answer.

Hideo gave a soft, breathless chuckle. He grazed his palms down Ranma’s neck and chest. “Since
you pulled off your shirt up over your head and showed off your stomach,” he said.

Ranma’s breath hitched as Hideo’s fingers curled underneath his sweater and grazed his stomach.
His fingers were cold, but were drawing idle patterns on the skin that caused Ranma to shiver from
something else entirely.

A small, broken voice in the back of his mind was wanting to flinch away from the intimate touches.

Not there , the little voice whispered, anywhere but there .

It was surreal to feel that the skin under Hideo’s fingers was flat and rigid, not smooth and swollen as
it had been just days before. He hadn’t even lost any definition. It was like he’d never been stretched
at all.

Like it never even happened.

Ranma snatched Hideo’s hand and guided it further up his shirt. “What else?” he urged, curving his
back to press his body into the touch.
Yes. That was it. Don’t think.

“Then when we were washing,” Hideo went on, his voice raspy from clearly trying to hold back a groan, “And you dumped the water over yourself and it ran down your arms and chest. Then you did this...little hair-flick thing that was sexy as hell."

Ranma felt that same empowering warmth surge again. He’d been so caught in himself he hadn’t even noticed that Hideo had been watching him, too. He didn’t even remember the ‘hair-flick thing’ Hideo mentioned. But he knew the move well. He’d done it before.

Sinking down into the water of the hot spring, and bursting back out. Slowly, slowly pulling his fingers through his bangs. Then, a quick flicker of his head, back and forth. Sending droplets flying, and watching as a few landed on Ryoga’s cheeks. He knew he was watching, he made sure of it.

Ranma gripped Hideo’s wrist tighter, digging his nails into his skin. Hideo responded by gripping Ranma’s hips with both hands and deeply rubbing his hands across his bare hip bones. Ranma bucked uncontrollably at the sensation, biting back sounds of pleasure.

“Then when we left the bar, and you did that lip bite...which I am very convinced you did on purpose,” Hideo looked at Ranma and raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

Ranma’s lips pulled into a devilish smile. “Maybe.”

“I knew it!” Hideo cried. Then that same light flashed through his eyes again, and Ranma’s heart leaped with anticipation. Hideo yanked him close by his hips and captured his lips again with that same enveloping heat. Ranma sank into the feeling. He was losing his mind.

And that’s how he wanted it.

“Shit,” Hideo sighed, pulling away. Ranma blinked opened his eyes, wondering why in the world he’d stopped. It was getting so good, and his heart was going wild at the thought it could get even better. Hideo was clearly as into it as he was; his face was flushed and his breath was hot. He pulled his hands out from under Ranma’s shirt, practically having to pry them away, clearly fighting his own willpower just as much as Ranma’s grip.

“What?” Ranma had tried to sound simply curious, but his voice came out more like a demand. He grasped impatiently at Hideo’s wrist, pulling it back under his shirt. Hideo didn’t fight him; probably because he knew he couldn’t break out of Ranma’s hold even if he’d used all his strength. His hands were so soft, Ranma thought, he couldn’t feel a single callous on the tips of his fingers. The hands of an average man, delicate and pristine compared to the battered hands of a martial artist.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Hideo said softly, “This is great. You’re great. But...you seem like you’re going through a lot and I don’t want this being another regret for you. You aren’t exactly in the right mind, you had a lot to drink--”

Ranma wasn’t drunk. Not anymore, anyway. He’d always been notorious for fast recoveries. Hideo wouldn’t know that, however. But it was no fun to just tell him so.

Ranma jerked Hideo towards him by his wrist. The other man made a small sound of surprise at the sudden display of strength from Ranma, and it made something roar from deep within him. He was so used to being around people who were used to his prowess, or who even rivaled his strengths. This was all-new territory, and it was thrilling. Ranma shifted his weight and brought out his right leg, moving it between Hideo’s thighs. Then arched upward and pressed his knee into Hideo’s groin, sneering when he felt Hideo jolt at the touch and a gasp for air through his teeth. He tried to bite back
his groan, but it hummed deep in his throat. Ranma hummed in pleasure, not quite sure if it was from Hideo’s response or the fact that he was making him feel like this. Ranma could feel how hard he was, as Hideo ground desperately into his leg. He wanted him. The thought alone sent Ranma over the edge, and that little voice finally went dim. Another voice took over, swirling through his mind and clouding it red. It growled with what could only be lust, but also held a loathing bitterness that Ranma profusely chose to ignore was there.

*That’s right. Forget. Your body knows how. It already proved that.*

“Shut up,” Ranma growled back at the voice.

Hideo groaned, and Ranma realized he’d talked out loud. It worked out in his favour, however, because his words had made Hideo’s hands latch back onto him again and drag him to him. Hideo reached down, grasping the backs of Ranma’s legs, and hoisted him up with a soft grunt of effort. Despite his slight strain he still managed to lift Ranma up off the ground, and Ranma found himself admittedly impressed. He hooked his legs around Hideo’s waist regardless to spare him some of his weight. With Ranma supporting himself with his legs, Hideo was able to move his arms as he pleased. He slid his hands down Ranma’s back, keeping one hand pressed into the curve in the small of his back while the other went further, and squeezed.

Ranma groaned, curling his back and pressing into the touch. It wasn’t enough. He needed more.

“I have just enough willpower left,” Hideo rasped, “To get to the bedroom.”

“Better make it quick, then,” Ranma retorted, rolling his hips.

“I’m so glad this place doesn’t have stairs,” Hideo joked as he turned them around and walked out of the foyer.

Ranma laughed. Actually laughed; it wasn’t a sarcastic snort or a half-hearted chuckle. It was a real laugh, and it shook his shoulders and vibrated in his stomach as Hideo lead them into another room.

“There we go,” Hideo smiled, “I’ve been trying to get you to laugh all day.”

Ranma’s mirth softened, and he blinked and looked at Hideo with large eyes. Hideo was keeping his eyes trained on the floor below them as he attempted to carefully lower them both onto his futon.

“Even your laugh is sexy,” Hideo said, sighing as if in defeat.

Ranma felt his back reach the ground, and he unhooked his legs from Hideo’s waist and lay down fully on his back, keeping his legs apart so Hideo could sit between his thighs, crouched on his knees. Hideo kept his eyes on Ranma’s reclined form, his expression hungry with desire as he pulled off his jacket.

“One last time,” Hideo said quietly, tossing his jacket aside. “You’re absolutely sure you want this, right?”

He would have to spell it right out, it would seem. Ranma reached up and grasped the back of Hideo’s neck and pulled him down onto his lips, kissing him firmly. He pulled away, and when Ranma’s eyes flickered opened they stared into Hideo’s, dark and glistening with need.

“Touch me,” he said huskily, “I want you to.”

*Make me forget. Make me forget my own name.*
Hideo didn’t waste any more time. He yanked off his shirt and tossed it aside, and Ranma leaned down flat onto his back again as Hideo crouched, crawling towards him with a smirk on his lips that made Ranma’s heart flicker in excitement. He sat up just enough so he could grasp the bottom of his sweater and shirt and pull them both up and over his head, tossing them in a tangled ball off to one side. Hideo hummed in approval, leaning down to place warm kisses along Ranma’s hipbone. Ranma sighed, rolling his hips in want. He squirmed beneath Hideo’s mouth, gasping softly as he ran his tongue along his sensitive skin. Ranma groaned impatiently, pushing his hips against Hideo insistently. Hideo chuckled, and reached up to undo Ranma’s pants. Once he had them undone, he pat Ranma’s knee before getting up and walking over to open a drawer in a nearby cabinet.

Ranma took it upon himself to get his pants off the rest of the way as Hideo went through the drawer, and then returned to the futon. Still standing, he unbuckled his belt and undid the button on his jeans, and shucked his legs out of them, kicking them one-legged off to the side. He crouched down onto the futon again in front of Ranma, and brandished a small bottle he’d taken from the drawer. He popped it open and squeezed the bottle contents into his palm. He set the bottle to the side, and slickened his hands in the gel. Ranma spread apart his legs again to let Heido sit between them.

Hideo grasped Ranma’s leg from the back of his knee, and rested it on his shoulder. He turned his head to the side and kissed Ranma’s calf chastely before looking back down at Ranma and smiling. Then, he reached down between his legs and began to work Ranma’s entrance with the tip of his index finger.

He was only rubbing the outside, not even penetrating, but Ranma sighed in pleasure and writhed around on the sheets, closing his eyes and leaning his head back. He was aroused and wanting, and Hideo’s hands were soft and slickened with the sweet-smelling gel; he easily pushed one finger into him and quickly decided Ranma could handle two. Ranma moved his hips gently with Hideo’s fingers, groaning and sighing at the delicious sensations rolling over his whole body. Hideo groaned softly in his throat, watching Ranma’s stomach roll slowly as he moved into his hand, as his arms stretched out and one hand clenched at the sheets and the other grabbed Heido’s arm and squeezed.

“C’mon,” Ranma groaned deeply, clenching his eyes shut.

“Come on, what?” Hideo asked cheekily, adding a third finger to his thrusting.

Ranma couldn’t hold back his cry that time, as Hideo’s fingers stretched him and pushed deep inside. He gasped open-mouthed, and his nails dug into Hideo’s arm. Hideo watched him expectantly, even as his fingers curled inside him. Ranma whined, clutching his fist into the sheets and clenching his teeth. The bastard was doing it on purpose, he thought. And it was incredible. But he still wanted more.

He tried to form words, but whenever he tried to speak Heido would move his hand, pulling his fingers out just slightly and then pushing them back in and curling them again, striking his sweet spot. All he could manage were whimpering gasps and breathy sighs.

“What do you want?” Hideo asked softly, slowly pumping his fingers. “Use your words.” He stopped moving his fingers, and Ranma took his chance.

“Fuck me,” Ranma gasped out at last, “I want you to fuck me.”

He looked up at Heido through hazy eyes, hoping that making eye contact would strengthen his words even further. Heido was stroking his own erection as he gazed down at him, and Ranma felt his fingers curl inside of him one last time before slowly pulling out. He rubbed the gel from his hands onto his fully-erect member, and Ranma couldn’t look away. Hideo’s not-so-average cock
was even more impressive at its full potential. Ranma shivered, squirming impatiently once again while he waited for Hideo to rip open the condom he’d brought over with the lube, and sheath himself.

Hideo lifted Ranma’s other leg onto his other shoulder. He positioned himself at Ranma’s entrance, and slowly pushed inside the first ring of tight muscle until his tip was buried inside. Both let out a low groan of intense pleasure. Hideo carefully pushed inside with an aching slowness that drove Ranma insane. He wanted to take control and move his hips to push him down to the hilt, but it had been a while since he’d been stretched this way, and never with something of Hideo’s considerable size. Hideo was taking it slow for good reason, and had put Ranma’s legs up so the other boy wouldn’t be able to move his hips and push Hideo in the rest of the way before his body could take it. Ranma wished he could appreciate his care, but he didn’t want to take his time. He didn’t want slow. He wanted fast, and hard, and wild.

He tested the word out in his head for a moment, then spoke out loud, “Tanaka-san…”

He arched his back and squeezed his muscles tightly around Hideo’s cock, as if to get his attention further.

Hideo seethed through his nose, and Ranma could tell the combination of his tightening and the use of his name had suddenly made it very difficult for the older man to keep his composure.

Hideo blinked open his eyes after taking a moment to catch his breath. His eyes were dark with lust. “Yeah, baby?” he whispered.

Ranma trembled in arousal. “More,” he choked out.

Hideo smirked. He grasped Ranma’s legs and pushed them off his shoulders, and pushed them inward towards Ranma’s chest. From the glint in his eye, he seemed to be enjoying himself with Ranma’s flexibility. Ranma leaned his head back into the futon and gave a low groan at the new angle. Then, Hideo pushed in the rest of the way, until his hips pressed against him as he buried his cock all the way inside of him.

Ranma let out a short cry, mouth agape. Hideo kissed the back of his knee. “How’s that?” Hideo asked in a low voice, “You like that?”

“Move,” Ranma forced out. Apparently he was only capable of one-syllable words now.

Hideo obeyed, moving his hips backward and pulling out halfway. He stayed still for a moment, giving Ranma a moment to catch a breath. And a breath was all he gave him. Then he shoved himself inside again, hard and deep. Ranma’s eyes shot open and he cried out, his entire body jolting.

“Shit,” Ranma gasped, already blinking sweat out of his eyes as it trickled down his forehead.

Hideo repeated the move again, and Ranma gasped loudly, throwing his head back and baring his neck. Hideo shifted, still buried within him, and moved Ranma’s legs, guiding them to wrap around his waist. Hideo leaned down and kissed Ranma’s neck, pulling almost all the way out, until only the tip was still inside of him. He ran his tongue up Ranma’s neck and kissed his jaw.

“Hold onto me,” Hideo told him. Ranma locked his ankles together and wrapped his arms around Hideo’s neck. Hideo looked up, and the two met eyes. He came down and captured Ranma’s lips in a deep kiss, and then thrusted inside. Ranma made a sound that was muffled by their kiss, and he curled his fingers into Hideo’s hair and pulled. He felt Hideo grunt softly, and he thrust into him yet again with the same speed and hardness. Ranma broke away from the kiss with a gasp.
Then Hideo began to thrust at a steady speed, over and over again. Ranma moaned, tightening his hold around Hideo’s neck and waist as he pounded into him with all of his force.

“Jus’ like that,” Ranma rasped out as his body was shaken.

Hideo’s throaty groans and grunts of exertion filled his ears; he could feel the sweat under his bangs, on his back and chest; he could taste his own hot breath.

And his mind was absolutely, delightfully blank.

Then Hideo slowed his thrusts, and Ranma shivered as he felt a pulsing feeling deep within him as Hideo came. Hideo kissed Ranma’s neck as he moaned, grinding his hips against him as he rode out his high. He could feel Hideo’s fingers run through his hair at the base of his braid. The feel of Hideo’s release, his hot mouth against his throat and his large hands pulling at his hair, drove Ranma over the edge. He came between them, and his entire body spasmed with each pulse, overwhelmed by every sensation.

His entire body seemed to tingle from the stimulated high, as if he were numb. He barely felt as Hideo pulled out of him, but it certainly felt quite empty once he was. He was practically gasping for air, and he couldn’t seem to get his eyes open. He managed to pry one eye open when he heard Hideo chuckle under his breath. The other man was sitting back on his heels, a crooked smile pulling one side of his mouth.

“What’s funny?” Ranma asked between breaths.

Hideo shook his head. “Not a damn thing. I was just beside myself over you for a moment there.”

Ranma’s mind was still reeling too much to form sentences, so he just raised his eyebrow curiously. Hideo snickered.

“If you could see yourself right now,” Hideo said, “You wouldn’t blame me for already being half-hard again.”

Ranma snorted. “Bet I’m a mess.”

“Oh, you are,” Hideo agreed, and his voice was nearly a purr, “A damn fine mess, at that.”

In more ways than one, Ranma agreed to himself.

“As much as I’d love to just sit here and marvel over how fuckable you look right now,” Hideo said with a grin, “I should go and find us both a towel.”

Hideo got up and walked out of the room, returning shortly with a small towel, rubbing it across his own stomach as he walked. Then he knelt down on his knees beside Ranma, who was finally able to lift his heavy body, propping himself somewhat-upright on his elbows. His stomach relaxed at the touch of the towel, which was damp with warm water, and the soothing way Hideo rubbed it across his skin. Satisfied, Hideo set the towel aside and looked up to meet Ranma’s eyes.

"I don't know about you, but after that hot bath, warm food, and...well, the steamy, wonderful thing this was," Hideo gestured around the room as if for emphasis, "I'm about ready for bed."

Considering he was still having trouble keeping his eyes fully open, Ranma had to agree. "Me too."

Hideo suddenly flopped down beside Ranma with a long sigh of relief. "Ah, then I'm not just being an old man."
Ranma joined him, lying down on his back as he chuckled tiredly under his breath. "Thirty ain't old."

"You won't say that once you're thirty," Hideo said with a grunt as he stretched his legs.

"You held your own pretty damn good for thirty," Ranma finally succumbed, and let his eyes close.

"So I'm not too worried."

"You flatter me, but you're confusing experience for skill."

"Skill only comes with experience."

"Hmm, spoken like a true martial artist," Hideo hummed, poking Ranma in the shoulder. Ranma's lips pulled into a wide smile, though he kept his eyes closed. “I’d say you need to enjoy your youth, Saotome-kun. No need to be in a hurry to grow up.”

Ranma’s eyes flickered open and looked at the single square patch of fading daylight that was cast on the ceiling, and watched as feathery shadows began to dance inside of it. It had started to snow.

He watched the snow fall for a very long time, well after Hideo had fallen fast asleep. Eventually the box of light faded, the alluring flicker of the snowflake shadows vanished from the ceiling. Ranma finally let his eyes close again, and let the sound of the other man’s calm breathing lull him to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Well, four months later, and we're finally back with an all-new chapter! This one took even longer to get here than the previous chapter, and I apologize for that. If you also follow my adventures on Tumblr you may have seen some of my text posts recently going into why it's been so bloody long since I've been able to update. For those of you that don't, I'll explain it here. Prepare for a lengthy life update:

Back in the beginning of November, just a little while after I'd posted Chapter 17 with all this vigor of cracking out Chapter 18 and 19 in record time, I suddenly decided on a complete whim to enroll into college again, only a completely different college than the one I've been going to for the last few years. On top of that, I went from wanting to go into the Esthetician program, to then changing my mind and deciding to go into the Medical Lab Assistant/Technician course instead. What's great about this new college is that all the programs are fast tracks, so I'll be graduated by September 2016! Hooray!

However, since it's also fast track, the tuition is much higher than regular colleges which programs can last 2-3 years. What you'd have paid in 3 years at a community college, you're paying in 42 weeks at a career college! And, I gotta pay for this sucker totally out of pocket. Which means working part-time in the evening, going to school 8:30-12:30, and also trying to maintain some semblance of a social life. This leaves a pretty miniscule amount of time, sadly, to do the things I love. This includes working on The Autumn Effect. I don't want to put this story on some infinite hiatus, however. I'm gonna see this through. I'll just need you guys to have faith and patience in me, even if the updates get even further apart than four months from this point forward. I'm about to be a very busy lady, but I promise my love for this story is still strong and I'll try my very best to get new chapters out for you to see whenever I can. Thanks for sticking it out with me; some of you have been here since the very start, and I appreciate that so much.
I'm on Tumblr every day, so if you have one yourself, please don't be shy to send me
and message and say hello or to ask stuff about the story! I'd love to hear from you, it
really makes my day when I get messages, especially so when they're Autumn Effect-
related. :) So until Chapter 19 is up, let's all keep in touch until then!

Hope this chapter was worth the four-month wait.

(I just realized this chapter has no scene-breaks whatsoever, it just blends from one
scene into the next instead of jumping. Interesting.)
When he woke up, he was on the metal table again. Knowing that, he tried to tell himself it was only a dream. But the table was so cold against his bare back. He could feel goosebumps rise on his skin. It all felt too real to be just a dream.

Ranma didn’t get much more time to ponder on his perception of reality, before he heard shrieking. He sat up suddenly, and realized that this time he hadn’t been strapped down. In fact, once he’d sat up, he wasn’t even on the cold table anymore. He was sitting on what he assumed must be the ground, but it was hard to tell. Everything around him was entirely black, he couldn’t tell if where he was had walls or ceilings, or an end at all.

He heard the same piercing shriek again. The sound was gut-wrenching, and he could hardly tell whether it came from a creature or a human. Part of him didn’t want to find out. The rest of him was searching the strange black “room” he was in, looking for the source of the terrible cries. He felt afraid, but it wasn’t for his own life, or of the unknown. He wasn’t scared of monsters. It wasn’t even so much that he was afraid. He was just worried. Though he had no clue who or what was crying somewhere in the blackness, his chest ached with concern—and that concern was amplified by something that deeply confused him.

It was love.

“Hello?” he called out anxiously, getting to his feet and starting to walk forward.

Ranma didn’t have to walk far before he saw something that was breaking the endless sea of black. He broke into a run, although he only seemed to be able to go so fast. It felt like he was trying to run through sand. As he slowly ran, the black around him began to shift. Slowly, as he got closer to where he was trying to reach, the blackness began to phase out and change into a different scene. Hazy and unrecognizable at first, vague and empty blackness faded, until suddenly there was colour.
Soft, warm browns, and vibrant reds. Brilliant oranges, shining yellows. A cool breeze in his hair. He was running through a forest. He lost sight of what he’d been running towards through all the trees. He broke out of the thicket and came upon a stream. He stood still for a moment, looking up and down the river, heart racing.

Then, another scream. It was across the river. Unthinkingly he sprinted forward and jumped into the river, and splashed through the water to the other side of the gravel bed. He barely registered the fact that the water hadn’t changed him, and when he climbed up onto the rocks he was completely dry, like the water had never touched him. He heard the shriek again; it was close. There were more trees and some bushes directly ahead of him, and he scrambled across the rocks and into the bushes. Instantly through the bushes, he already knew, was a thick bed of old leaves and bare dirt. That’s where he found the source of the shrieking. He still didn’t know what had made the sound—a creature or a person. But that was because now he wondered, which one?

It was himself—only he wasn’t him self. It was his girl-side. She was sitting on the forest floor and—to his mute horror—cradling a dead cat in her arms. The cat was caked in so much dried blood Ranma couldn’t tell what colour it’s coat used to be, but that wouldn’t have made a difference anyways. He knew it was the cat from before. The same blood-soaked cat that had come out of his body and looked at him with glowing yellow eyes, and yowled.

The girl Ranma was sobbing wretchedly, her face twisted into an expression of pure agony and grief as she ran her fingers through the cat’s haggard fur. As she stroked her fingers desperately down the cat’s limp body, it’s hair began to fall out. She didn’t seem to notice or care, continuing to stroke the animal while she wept and clumps of matted, bloody hair fell into her lap and on the dried leaves she sat in. Then the cat was entirely hairless; it seemed to become even smaller and skinnier. And with it’s yellow eyes closed in death, it was hard to tell it was even a cat anymore. Maybe it never was.

Ranma came down to his knees in front of his girl-form, and jolted in surprise when he felt his legs sink into something warm and wet. He looked down, and saw that he and his female form were both sitting in a large puddle of thick blood. Ranma looked back up, and went cold at the sight of himself—her self—looking back at him. Her eyes seemed to glow, like she possessed the cat’s spirit. She was no longer crying—her face was now an expression of pure rage.

The trees surrounding them began to warp and crumble, and the puddle of blood grew beneath their legs. The blackness consumed the trees, running down the brilliant leaves like ink until there was nothing left.

They sat together in the blackness again, in a sea of blood. When the female Ranma opened her mouth, her voice came out like a hiss.

“What did you do?”

He sat up with a jolt, flinging himself out of the world of dreams. Ranma heaved for breath as he looked around the unfamiliar room he was in. As he calmed down, he slowly remembered where he was. He looked beside him, but he was alone in the futon. A small blanket had been draped over him through the night, though it only draped across his bare legs now, thanks to his abrupt awakening. Ranma pulled the blanket away and went in search of his clothes.

Once he was dressed, he hovered in the middle of the small room, unsure of himself. What should he
do now? He slowly made his way over to the front foyer as he adjusted the hood on his sweater. He stepped down onto the genkan and stepped into his shoes.

“Don’t you want some coffee?”

Ranma jumped, and looked over his shoulder to see Hideo leaning on the entryway to the room directly beside the one Ranma had just come out of. He was dressed in gray slacks and a white dress shirt, though his sleeves were rolled up and he wore house slippers. He gave Ranma a smile when he saw his sheepish look.

“Unless there’s somewhere you ought to be?” Hideo finished.

“Not...exactly.” Ranma replied, dumbly.

Hideo pushed off the doorframe. “Well, come on then. I just brewed a fresh pot.”

Then he slipped back inside the room, as if there wasn’t a chance that Ranma wouldn’t just finish putting on his shoes and walk out the door. Ranma kicked off his shoes and followed Hideo into the room.

He discovered upon entering that the room was a tiny kitchenette. The smell of coffee filled the small space, which only consisted of a small counter space, a few wooden cupboards, a fridge, and a little dining table against the right wall. Hideo was at the counter, filling two mugs with the coffee.

“How do you like it?” Hideo asked, as Ranma helped himself to a seat at the table.

“Lots o’ cream an’ sugar,” Ranma answered automatically, rubbing at his eyes, which were still bleary from sleep.

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“Coming right up,” Hideo said, a gentle laugh in his voice.

Hideo brought over their coffees, and sat across from Ranma at the table. Ranma took a moment to glance into Hideo’s mug, seeing he hadn’t added anything to it. He idly mulled over the fact that he’d actually slept with someone before knowing how they liked their coffee. Ranma was pulled away from his thoughts when he noticed Hideo’s mischievous gaze as he brought his mug to his lips.


Ranma’s lips pulled into a tired smile. “Least ya treated me t’ lunch first.”

Hideo shrugged. “Well, I’ve never picked up anybody at the bathhouse before,” he joked, “But as for the whole ‘sleeping with someone I just met several hours ago’ part? I’d say I’m well-versed.”

Ranma looked down into his coffee, which was so pale it hardly looked much like coffee anymore. “I see…” he murmured.

Hideo set down his mug without taking a sip, giving Ranma an analyzing look as his brows furrowed slowly with concern.
“Everything okay?” he asked mildly, “You’ve been pretty quiet.”

Ranma shrugged slowly, unsure of what to say. But he looked up in subdued surprise when Hideo’s finger reached over and poked him on the tip of his nose.

Hideo’s eyes squinted in mirth as he smiled playfully. “You haven’t fallen for me already, have you?”

Ranma blinked. “...What?”

Hideo held up his hands as if in surrender. “Hey, don’t look so serious, Saotome-kun. It was just a little joke.”

*You’re not gonna fall in love with me, are you?*

Ranma stared at Hideo with wide eyes. Then, his lips warped into a crooked smile. He started to chuckle as he broke into a grin. His mouth fell open as laughter burst out of him erratically; it shook his body and twisted his stomach into knots, and he doubled over, bending forward in his seat as his hysterics overtook him.

It took a full minute before he could get control of himself. He straightened, wiping little tears from his eyes as he continued to shake on and off with small bursts of giggles. Hideo was giving him such an incredulous look that Ranma almost wanted to laugh again at the sight of it, but he resisted.

Hideo scratched his chin awkwardly. “Uh, just because I said it was a joke doesn’t mean you have to laugh.”

Ranma shook his head. “No, that’s...that’s not it,” he said, still half-laughing through his words. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. But his heart couldn’t stop pounding.

“Are you sure everything’s okay?” Hideo asked, his brow creasing again. “I know you’ve been through a lot, maybe...you’re feeling a little overwhelmed?”

For the first time since they’d met, Hideo’s expression became solemn.

“Maybe this was a mistake,” he said quietly, “You had enough going on as it was, and then you got mixed up with an old dog like me.”

“I don’t have any regrets.” Ranma said instantly.

Hideo looked up at him and blinked, surprised by the solid tone in Ranma’s voice.

“Last night wasn’t a mistake. In fact, I don’t believe in mistakes. We’re all meant t’ live our lives the way we choose, and make decisions on where life takes us. Maybe it don’t always go the way we think it’s gonna go, but...that’s life. It’s all just a part o’ growin’ up.”

After a moment, Hideo smiled sincerely. “You sound like you’ve been giving this a lot of thought.”

Ranma looked back down at his coffee. “I guess I had a lot of stuff I had t’ figure out about myself.”

“And did you come to a conclusion?”

Ranma grinned as he looked back up at Hideo. “I realized that you are everything I thought I used t’ want.”
Ranma stood up suddenly from his chair, and Hideo didn’t seem surprised. In fact, he also got out of his chair, and rounded the small space across the table to stand in front of Ranma.

Hideo snickered. “You’re lucky I don’t do romance, Saotome-kun,” he said softly.

That was fine by Ranma. His years of dealing with suitors were well behind him now, anyway.

Ranma smirked. “No weird stuff. No strings attached.”

Though Hideo gave him a knowing smile, it wasn’t in the same way Ranma did at those words. He almost felt like laughing again, like the whole thing was an inside joke—and it was, in a way. The words were nostalgic but mostly naive and, now that he was done kidding himself, utterly vapid of any intentions of keeping what foolish promise they held.

Necessity. That had been the plan in the beginning. Just necessity. How quickly the definition of the word had changed in his mind. So quickly he hadn’t even noticed it.

“Thanks for everything,” Ranma said.

“Guess this is it, huh?” Hideo sighed a little at his own words.

Ranma hoped the smile he gave him showed his apology, because he wasn’t sure of what to say.

"I can walk you to the restaurant?” Hideo offered.

Ranma sighed. "If Uuchan saw you, she'd have a fit."

Hideo snickered. "Well, at least let me walk you to the door."

He let Ranma lead the way out of the kitchen and into the hallway. Ranma stepped back into his shoes, bumping the toe of his shoe off the floor as he looked up at Hideo, who was watching him from the ledge of the genkan.

"Oh, right," Hideo said, perking up slightly. He reached over to the small table he’d placed their bath buckets on the night before, handing Ranma the blue one.

"Thanks," Ranma said.

"Maybe I'll see you around the bathhouse again sometime," Hideo said, and Ranma could hear the hope in his voice. "That is, I always go during Old Man Hour on weekends, but on weekdays I usually go in the evening after work, so..."

Ranma nodded. "Sure." He didn't want to promise that they would meet again, but he didn't want to dismiss the thought altogether, either.

Hideo smiled. "Then, I'll be seeing you."

Oh, what the hell.

"One last thing," Ranma said slowly.

Hideo watched him curiously, waiting. Ranma took a quick breath, opening his mouth before he could lose his nerve.

"Kiss me."
Hideo kept his face calm, but Ranma didn't miss how his eyebrows raised ever-so slightly.

"Is that what you really want?" Hideo asked after a moment of pause.

Ranma nodded, but then decided Hideo wouldn't agree unless he heard his word for it. "It is."

"I thought I was everything you used to want," Hideo said. His mouth was neutral, but his eyes were smiling. That was better than a smile that didn't reach his eyes, Ranma thought.

"It's a goodbye kiss," Ranma said. "I may as well have the full experience, right?"

"Well, I certainly can't deny you that, can I?" Hideo stepped down onto the genkan to stand in front of Ranma.

Hideo brought his hands up, gently cupping the sides of Ranma's face. Ranma relaxed into the touch; he still couldn't get over how soft Hideo's hands were. His thumb reached across and stroked along just under his bottom lip.

"And I must admit," Hideo said quietly, "That I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been hoping I'd get to do this again."

Neither one went in first; it was entirely mutual. They both looked at each other for another silent moment before both leaning in and letting their eyes slowly close. It wasn’t chaste or rushed, but it wasn’t deep and lustrous either. Mouths stayed closed, but it didn’t feel prude; like they were holding something back. It was Hideo who deepened the kiss first, as Ranma felt him press his lips a little more firmly against his own. Ranma tilted his head slightly to the side to allow him better access, and Hideo ran his hands across his face and through his hair. They stayed that way for a moment more, and then drew apart together and dazedly opened their eyes.

They looked at each other for a moment before they watched the other’s face break its mask of seriousness and crack into goofy grins as they both began to laugh.

When he arrived back at the restaurant, he was surprised to see that the shop curtain hadn't been set out yet. Ranma quirked an eyebrow at the strange sight; Ukyo was never late to open up shop, and it was nearly noon. What could have happened? Then, he answered his own question: You happened, stupid.

Ranma bit his lip, and slowly reached out and tried the door, which opened. Apparently Ukyo wasn't against keeping any potential customers completely at bay; or perhaps the unlocked door had been just for him. When he stepped inside the shop, his guess was solved.

Ukyo was sitting at the bar at a grill that was probably cold to the touch, but probably not as cold as the look on her face. She wasn't even dressed in her chef's uniform; her hair was undone and she was wearing pajamas, sitting on the barstool with one leg crossed over the other and her arms folded across her chest.

"Well, you're alive," Ukyo said, hefting her eyebrows, "I was beginning to suspect you'd shrivelled up and died in the bath water."

Ranma hovered in the entryway, nervous to move any closer. Ukyo looked ready to open a major
can of whoop-ass, and Ranma was not eager to be within her radius when she did. He knew from countless experiences with Akane that a woman's cold, quiet calm always came before her worst storm. Ranma was grateful he only had Ukyo's wrath to face at this moment; if Ukyo was this bad he didn't want to know what fury Akane had to scorn.

"Hey, Akane-chan! He's back!" Ukyo bellowed suddenly, keeping her eyes on Ranma as if to make sure he wouldn't try and take off. And he was honestly considering it at this point.

Akane entered from the kitchen, dressed in her flowy yellow pajamas and a mug of coffee in each hand. She walked up to the bar and set down one of the mugs on the counter near Ukyo, bringing the other up to her lips. Her eyes were on Ranma though she appeared calm; in fact Ranma couldn't detect an ounce of heated, angry aura coming off her. This puzzled him more than it assured him, so he remained distant from the two women and stayed by the entryway. A nervous chuckle he couldn't seem to hold back broke out of him.

“Wh-what's with the PJs? Did you two have a slumber party or somethin’?”

Wow. Dumb. That was so dumb. Why did he always cram his foot in his mouth when women put him under pressure?

Akane set down her coffee mug on the bar counter. Ukyo flicked her leg up and over her knee and slid off of the barstool. Ukyo placed her hands firmly on her hips and puffed out her chest, looking at Ranma with a solidly calm expression.

"Why didn't you come back last night?"

Ranma’s eyebrow twitched. He was starting to sweat under the strain of Ukyo’s commanding presence. Even dressed in pajamas, her forceful aura was one to be reckoned with. But damned if he was going to bow down to it like some coward.

He stuck out his own chest in retaliation and puffed a small burst of air out of his nose. “What's it to you?” he huffed defiantly.

The air in the room instantly changed. Ukyo’s entire expression seem to dim, and for a moment she grew completely cold. Then in an instant she was hot again, even hotter than before. Ranma gulped, instantly regretting his bull–headed move. Why did he have to have so much pride, damn it?

A vein had started to protrude on Ukyo's forehead, and her face was starting to go red. Akane braced her hand on the other girl's shoulder as Ukyo turned another shade of Crimson and began to vibrate.

“Akuo…” Akane warned quietly, “Remember what we talked about.”

“To hell with that!” Ukyo hollered, and Ranma was waiting for steam to start billowing out of her ears. She broke away from Akane’s hand and darted towards Ranma, her eyes flashing.

Before Ranma knew it he was caught by the front of his sweater in Ukyo's fists and was being rattled back and forth.

“You ungrateful jackass, do you have any idea how worried I was?! You were in such an unpredictable funk I couldn’t trust you as far as I could throw you not to do something stupid! And then next thing I know you just leave for hours on end and I don't know where the hell you are or if you're ever coming back!”

“Ukyo, enough already. I can hear his teeth clicking together from here.” Akane admonished
Ukyo ceased her assault, but maintained her grip on Ranma’s sweater.

“Explain yourself, Saotome.” Ukyo barked.

“I met someone.” Ranma said coolly.

Ukyo’s lip twitched, but she remained her composure. “And?”

“I didn’t come back last night,” Ranma said, “Do I need t’ say any more?”

Ukyo’s eyes bulged. “You're telling me you hooked up with someone?”

Ranma felt his cheeks burn a little, and his brave gaze on Ukyo finally faltered. “Well, I mean…”

He looked over Ukyo's shoulder at Akane, and quickly realized that was a mistake. Akane was staring straight at him, but her expression was unreadable. Akane was an open book; she was a very easy person to read, especially when she was angry. But she still hadn't let off a smidge of any kind of negative aura. Her brows were raised just so, her eyes alert and focused but not overly wide, her mouth in a neutral line that wasn't strained in the slightest. An unreadable Akane was even scarier than an angry Akane. Ranma was well experienced with the latter, but he didn't have a clue about how to address the former. It was uncharted territory that was either a barren field with no threat in sight, or filled with buried mines that could go off if he stepped a single toe out of line.

“Oh my god,” Ukyo said in hushed disbelief, “You hooked up with someone.”

“S-Sure, if that's what you wanna call it.” It sure sounded a lot sleazier coming from somebody else.

Ukyo looked over her shoulder and shot Akane, as the other girl was still watching the scene from the sidelines, sipping at her cup of coffee.

“Akane-chan, why aren’t you kicking this boy around? Help me out here!” Ukyo yelped.

“I've been up all night. I'm too tired to kick anybody around.” Akane explained, “Besides, other than not calling last night, he didn't do anything worth being kicked around for.”

“You're supposed to be the angry one!” Ukyo admonished, “Who are you and what have you done with Akane Tendo? You're really telling me that him hooking up with a stranger is suddenly okay somehow?”

“He's not engaged anymore,” Akane said simply, “And he and Ryoga are split up, for the time being anyway. So if he wants to mess around like a playboy for a while, who are we to stop him?”

Ranma bristled a little at the ‘playboy’ remark. “Would you guys stop talkin’ like I ain't here?”

“But don't you think he needs to quit being a stubborn jackass and go and talk things out with Ryoga?” Ukyo asked. She had either decidedly ignored Ranma, or hadn't heard him whatsoever.

“Of course I do, but he needs to do that in his own way, in his own time.” Akane said, “If we just drag him over there kicking and screaming, he's gonna get stumped and wind up doing something stupid and messing everything up.”

Because I wished something had happened!

He’d almost forgotten about that argument. Almost. Maybe not so much forgotten, but suppressed.
Getting so caught up in his revelation had made him lose sight of the fact that he was already too late. He'd already said something stupid. He'd already messed everything up.

What did you do?

Something inside of him deflated like a balloon, like he was being drained of all his energy.

He was too late.

“Well, fess up. Tell us who this mystery paramour is.” Ukyo demanded, and it took Ranma a moment to realize she was talking to him again.

“I hardly think that's any of our business, Ukyo.” Akane rebuked.

“Come off it, Tendo. Don't you tell me you're not itching to know the dirty details.”

“No way!” Akane flushed, “I-I couldn't care less.”

“Suit yourself, but I'm gonna get the goods out of him whether you wanna hear them or not,” Ukyo twisted back around to face Ranma, “So, spill already. What happened?”

Ranma blushed. “I'm with Akane on this one, Uuchan. Ain't none of yer business.”

“You'd keep this kind of a thing a secret from your best friend?” Ukyo cried in disbelief, “I've known you since we were six, Ran-chan. We should be able to tell each other everything.”

Ranma sighed. “Uuchan, you're like a sister to me. I seriously doubt siblings tell each other who they have sex with.”

Foot, meet mouth. Ranma would have slapped himself if he wasn't still being grappled by Ukyo, who was now gawking at him.

“So, you did go all the way!” Ukyo exclaimed, “Who was it? Was it another boy or a girl? Were you a boy or a girl? How old were they? Who made the first move?”

“Ukyo!” Akane cried, “You're going too far!”

“These are perfectly reasonable questions, Akane-chan. Would you lighten up?”

“Lighten up! Those questions are way too invasive.”

“It's fine, Akane,” Ranma said, “If nothing else, Uuchan deserves to know the reason why I didn't come back last night.”

Akane opened her mouth to protest, but quickly gave in, plopping into one of the bar stools. Ukyo finally released her grip on Ranma's hoodie, and joined Akane over by the grill. Ranma followed, placing his bath bucket on the counter while Ukyo rounded around to the other side of the grill. Then, she rested her hands on the counter and watched Ranma expectantly. Being behind the grill was like Ukyo's power seat; she looked even more menacing when in the head of the house.

Akane slid Ukyo's untouched coffee mug across the counter so it was within Ukyo's reach. “You've got massive bags under your eyes, Ukyo. Shouldn't you think about freshening up and setting up shop instead of listening to Ranma talk about his...hook up?”

Ukyo picked up her coffee and took a generous sip, then set it down heavily, her eyes never leaving Ranma.
“Give us the dirt, Saotome.”

“You're a terrible businesswoman,” Akane quipped under her breath.

Ranma leaned forward and rested his arms on the counter, settling in to regale his story. Akane took another long sip of coffee, but watched Ranma intensely under her lashes. Ukyo pressed her hands even more firmly into the counter as she leaned her weight on her arms and waited in silence. There was enough tension in the room it could start dripping down the walls. Ranma shuffled in his seat uncomfortably, and cleared his throat before he began to speak.

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He didn’t even feel the cold anymore.

Ryoga was in his backyard, lying on the ground with his chest heaving. He’d been working out since daybreak, skipping right over his usual warmups and jumping right into round after round of incredibly complex katas that had made his cold, aching joints scream. Now he was covered in a layer of sweat, and the light dusting of snow on the grass beneath him felt good on his hot back. It was a while before he could sit up, and another minute after that before he chanced getting onto his feet. Then he stumbled into the house, where Shirokuro was waiting diligently by the back door. She instantly led him towards the bathroom. The dog came up to the bathroom door, and then lay back down and continued the nap she’d been having while Ryoga had been working out.

Shirokuro did an awful lot of sleeping lately. Ryoga told himself that this was probably due to her age; older dogs did a lot of napping. But Shirokuro had always been a bouncy, excited dog, who only seemed to sleep when Ryoga went to bed. Now she snoozed several times a day, in multiple locations. When she wasn’t snoozing, she’d still choose to lie down fully instead of sitting up, in her typical alert, straight-backed-tail-wagging pose. Now she would lie on her side or belly, and though her eyes would be open she didn’t seem to be quite so alert. Her dedicated manner of leading Ryoga around the house had even changed. Her dutiful, cheerful essence had been replaced with something Ryoga could only describe as lethargic. It wasn’t as if her leading him around had become an annoying chore, but her unusually detached behaviour was hard for Ryoga to ignore.

Instead of entering the bathroom right away, Ryoga kneeled down infront of his pet and scratched gently on her nose. Her eyes blinked open at the content just slightly, staying in a sleepy squint while Ryoga moved up and rubbed her large fluffy ears. Shirokuro’s eyes fluttered back closed, and she let out a long, tired sigh as she went back to sleep. Ryoga took his hand away, letting her go back to her nap without disturbance, albeit with a little reluctance. He creaked upright, already feeling the strain on his legs. He would be very stiff tomorrow, even if he got the hottest shower in history.

Ryoga entered the bathroom with that idea in mind, and weighed his options. Bath, or shower? Keeping his mind occupied with frivolous thoughts like those helped to distract him from the fact he detested being in his own bathroom. He made his way to the tub, trying not to picture a figure curled up in a ball and covered in a towel as he walked across the tile floor.

Suddenly, he heard the telephone ring. For a moment, he considered ignoring it, reaching out and hovering his hand over the tap of the tub. The phone continued to ring. Shirokuro wasn’t barking outside the door. Ryoga put his hand on the tap, and gave it a twist. Then he swore under his breath and stormed out of the bathroom.

“Shirokuro, kitchen,” he ordered, his voice coming out much harsher than his poor dog deserved.
He’d give her a biscuit later, but for now he was too annoyed to feel too badly just yet.

Shirokuro drowsily got to her feet and padded past him down the hallway, and Ryoga followed. The phone was still ringing. Ryoga entered the kitchen and snatched up the phone when it was in the middle of its sixth ring.

“Hibiki residence.” Ryoga muttered brusquely into the receiver.

“Good morning, Ryoga-kun,” A sweet voice sang through the phone.

Ryoga instantly felt horrible for talking so rudely. “Ka...Kasumi-san, hello.”

“Your voice sounds so quiet, are you catching a cold?” Kasumi asked concernedly. “You need to be careful this time of year, Ryoga-kun.”

Even though Kasumi couldn’t possibly know Ryoga had been working out in since the break of dawn in nothing but sweats and a tank top, Ryoga felt a pang of guilt as if she did know and was berating him for just that and not out of general concern. “Y-Yes, I know. I’ll be careful.”

“I’m surprised you answered the phone,” Kasumi said suddenly.

Ryoga bristled. “Sorry?”

“It’s just that Obaa-chan called, concerned that nobody was answering there.” Kasumi explained, “She says she always called Ranma-kun a few times a week and they’d chat on the phone, and that sometimes you’d answer when he was out of the room caught up with chores. She says the both of you are usually so good to answer that she was worried.”

The guilt trip was far from over it seemed. Ryoga squeezed his eyes shut tightly and let his forehead thunk against the wall a few times as Kasumi talked. He hadn’t answered the phone ever since Ukyo had called. He’d assumed they’d all been from her, determinedly trying to call him back to give him hell since he’d so rudely hung up on her. But instead he’d been ignoring Nodoka’s calls all this time. The poor woman was probably much more distraught than Kasumi was letting on in her sugar-coated explanation.

“I’m sorry,” Ryoga forced out finally, his eyes still squeezed shut and his forehead pressed firmly into the wall. Then he started talking as quickly as he could through the building lump in his throat. “I’ve started working at Nekohanten, so I’m gone most of the day. And...Ranma’s not here. Tell Saotome-san I’m sorry for the confusion. She can reach him at Ukyo’s restaurant. I’m sure you have the number. I...left the bath running. Bye, sorry again.”

He hung up before he heard Kasumi say anything else. He’d feel like shit for that later, too. Just add it to the list. He walked out of the kitchen and Shirokuro led him back to the bathroom again without his saying so. When he walked back up to the tub, it wasn’t even close to full. In fact, it wasn’t filling at all. He hadn’t pushed plug down.

“Dammit,” he whispered, reaching down and pushing the plug into place. Now he didn’t even have an excuse for hanging up on Kasumi, and it had been a shitty excuse in the first place. Actually, there was no excuse good enough to hang up on Kasumi Tendo. It simply was not done.

He checked the water with his hand. Worthy of third-degree burns. Perfect.
“And that’s why I didn’t come back last night.” Ranma finished.

“Now for the last time, open up your restaurant, Ukyo.” Akane burst out, as if she’d been holding her breath for the entire time. “I can see people waiting around outside the door.”

“Excuse me!” a voice called from outside, right on cue, “Are you open?”

“Keep your hair on!” Ukyo bellowed to the door, and Akane pinched her nose and grumbled in agitation.

“How you’ve managed to stay in business this long I’ll never…”

“Alright, Ran-chan,” Ukyo said, whirling back around on Ranma again, “You kept me and Akane-chan up all night long waiting for your sorry ass. I’ve got about a dozen hungry customers waiting outside my door, and I should have been open two hours ago. How are you going to make it up to me?”

“I, uh, well…” Ranma stammered.

“Rhetorical question, jackass! I’ll tell you how!” Ukyo barked, and she jabbed her finger at Ranma dramatically. “You’re gonna work!”

Ranma blinked owlishly. He’d worked for Ukyo before, trying to bring in customers when she had a bad cold and waitressing for her out of guilt after that whole fiasco with her secret sauce he’d tampered with. It wasn’t the manual labor that was making him start to sweat, but the bucket of cold water that would help him fit into a kimono.

“I’ve already got a dependable waitress,” Ukyo said as she began to spring into action. She started setting things up and turned on the grill, so she didn't notice the tension leave Ranma's shoulders. But Ranma was certain what she was saying now was just as much for his benefit as it was for her business. “It’s the cooking I’ll need a hand with. We’re in for a packed lunch rush; I’m going to have to make up for lost volume. I haven’t got any batter prepped, and I ain’t trusting you with my recipe. So I’m gonna have to whip up batter like a maniac while you man the grill. You know all the toppings, you’ve tried everything here at least once. Just don’t burn the shit out of the food, and Konatsu will serve them with a smile so precious they won’t dare to not leave a tip.”

Ukyo came around from the counter and grabbed Ranma’s shoulders tightly. Her eyes were glistening. “From here on, please address me as Uuchan-sama.”

Ranma’s eyelid twitched. “Uhh…”

“Go and get changed!” Akane hollered, looking ready to rip her hair out.

Ukyo blinked, and then snapped her fingers as if in eureka. “That’s right. You’re going to need a uniform. Konatsu!”

Konatsu was in the room in a flash. “Yes, Ukyo-sama!” she cried, dropping to her knees and curling into a bow.

“You have a new co-worker. Go and find him a uniform.” Ukyo explained, dragging Ranma out of his stool and shoving him at Konatsu.

Konatsu shot up, looking ready to burst into tears with joy. “Oh, happy day! Yes, Ukyo-sama, right
Konatsu grabbed Ranma’s sleeve and dragged him into the back. Ukyo flew up the stairs two at a time, tying up her hair as she went. Akane sat alone at the empty bar for a moment, drumming her fingers on the table. She cast her coffee a grumpy look, and knocked back the last swig. Then she slid out of her stool and walked over to the stairs. She was so tired, she was certain she could sleep through a hurricane, let alone a rowdy lunch rush.

By the time Ranma and Konatsu reentered the dining area, Ukyo was back behind the grill, only now she had her hair pulled back out of her face with her trademark white bow, and was wearing her navy blue chef’s uniform. Konatsu was her stark contrast in a bright red kimono with a dark pink cherry blossom print, with a dark blue apron with ‘Uuchan’s’ written on it in white lettering that looked like calligraphy paint strokes. Ranma also wore the apron, though Ukyo didn’t—the aprons were a new feature, and Ukyo only owned the two but never wore her own. Other than that and a white headband slightly obscured by his bangs, he was Ukyo’s twin, wearing the same chef’s uniform as her. That included the black “pants”, which were far less pants and much more tights. Ranma had spent enough time wearing leotards to know the difference. Not that he cared much about fashion, but comfort was another story.

He had considered the fact that he would pull off this look just as good as Ukyo (if not better) if he changed form.

But that wasn’t happening.

“Cute boy service!” Ukyo exclaimed when Ranma and Konatsu entered the room. “You look amazing, Ran-chan!” Then she turned to Konatsu, “Go and let in our hungry guests, and say we apologize for the delay. I won’t need to tell you to lay it on thick, since it’s you. Don’t let ‘em in just yet, just keep ‘em occupied for another minute.”

“At once, Ukyo-sama! I will be most penitent!” Konatsu rushed to the door to welcome in the customers. Ukyo quickly ushered Ranma behind the counter while the guests shuffled in and began her manager speech.

“Okay, Ran-chan, Konatsu’s gonna take the orders and then help you get all the toppings you’ll need from the kitchen while I whip up a metric shit ton of batter. After that, she’ll keep the guests happy and hydrated so all you’ve gotta do is keep your head down and focus on frying and flipping. I know you’ve got a flare for presentation so I’m not fussed about you making the toppings and sauce look good. In fact, show off as much as you like. Just don’t one-up me or I’ll fire you. Chat with the customers once you’ve got the swing of things and please, if any cute young girls come in, smile your most charming smile so they’ll tell all their friends and come back.”

Ukyo shoved a spatula into Ranma’s hands and stuck him into place behind the grill.

“This is all just to bring in girl customers?” Ranma quickly muttered to Ukyo before she could dart off and leave him alone.

“Of course it is. Look around you, this place is a sausage fest! Even my waitress has a--”

“Easy,” Ranma quipped. “You an’ I are the last people alive t’ talk about whether someone else is a boy or a girl or otherwise, Ukyo.”
Ukyo knew Ranma’s dropping of the nickname made him dead serious. “Alright. If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s a fuckin’ duck. My staff aside, it’s the clientele that frustrates me! All I get are middle-aged men and high school boys! The only breath of fresh, feminine air to ever walk in here was you when you’d show up for lunch on the off occasion in your girl-form, and Akane-chan.”

Ranma snorted. “Your gay is showing, Uuchan.”

Ukyo tried to conceal her blush by turning up her nose and smacking Ranma on the arm. “Don’t talk to your boss like that. And I told you to call me Uuchan-sama.”

“I’m not tacking ‘chan’ and ‘sama’ onto your name.” Ranma deadpanned.

“You wanna make it up to me or not?” Ukyo volleyed.

Ranma slumped. “I do.”

“Then tough shit.” Ukyo thumped Ranma on the back. “Now get to work.”

Ukyo left his side just as the customers were finally being let into the shop by Konatsu, who was bowing graciously to each of them. Ukyo greeted her customers cheerfully, calling most of them by name. She breezily explained the delay but promised hot and fresh food as quickly as possible, and thanked them dubiously for their patience.

Ukyo wasn’t one to make mistakes. Her loyal customers accepted her explanation without conflict and made their way to the barstools like it was any other day at Uuchan’s. Ranma greeted the customers, then cast Ukyo one more glance. She gave him a flashy grin then disappeared into the kitchen. Konatsu flitted over to the counter and got everyone’s drink orders. Before he knew it, Konatsu had vanished into the kitchen as well to prepare the drinks and Ranma was alone with the customers; he had to quickly slip into a business persona just as seamlessly as Ukyo and Konatsu did and make casual, friendly conversation with hungry strangers.

He thought about Akane, who was upstairs in Ukyo’s futon counting sheep, and felt a deep pang of jealousy. And another feeling, clawing at the back of his mind, he did his best to ignore.

Akane didn’t wake up until the sun was going down. Casted through the small windows in the bedroom, she could see the fading orange light from the sun that was disappearing behind the buildings. She stretched, dragging herself out from the sheets and threw on the change of clothes she’d brought along the night before, then headed downstairs. The restaurant was empty; it was the lull period after the high schooler’s had already stopped in for an after-school snack, and before the late dinner crowd. They may get a few shoppers stopping in, since they were so close to the Shopping Plaza, but most of the time they ate at the restaurants that were primarily located on that street or in the food courts inside the department stores. They only went out of their way if it Uuchan’s Okonomiyaki was what they were particularly craving.

She could hear the clatter of dishes from the back room; no doubt Konatsu. Ukyo was scrubbing down her grill in preparation for dinner, and Ranma was sweeping the floors. Apparently Ukyo wasn’t going to let anyone polish her precious grill unless it was with her practiced, loving touch. Akane made her way over to the bar and took a seat.
“Hey, Sleeping Beauty,” Ukyo greeted, “I can whip you up something once I finish here.”

“How did he do?” Akane asked.

“Well, he doesn’t pour the batter as perfectly as I do, obviously. But he made up for his imperfect circles with gorgeous garnish presentation.” Ukyo said, pouring a small bucket of water onto the grill. “He did great. And the girls that stopped in on their lunch break looked like they were totally checking him out. I expect there’ll be more of them the same time tomorrow.”

“That’s terrific news.” Akane said blandly, resting her chin in her hand.

“Uuchan, you don’t mop ‘til the end of the night, right?” Ranma called.

“What was that, Ranma-honey?” Ukyo said with extra sweetness.

Ranma rolled his eyes. “Uuchan-sama, I don’t need t’ mop ‘till close, right?”

“That’s better,” Ukyo said, “And yes, that’s right. If you’re all done sweeping, could you take out the garbage?”

“Sure,” Ranma replied, making his way over to the back room. Akane slid off her stool as he passed by and fell into step behind him.

“I’ll lend a hand,” Akane said, when she caught the questioning look Ranma cast her over his shoulder.

“Akane-chan, you don’t have to do that!” Ukyo cried, stopping her cleaning.

“Ranma and I are both guests here, aren’t we? Konatsu pays her room and board by working here, and if Ranma’s doing so, I will too.” Akane explained.

“But Konatsu’s a lifer, and Ran-chan is a cretin indebted to me by guilt!” Ukyo rebutted.

“Hey!” Ranma cried.

Ukyo ignored him. “Akane-chan, I invited you over willingly. You’re a welcome guest! Just sit here and relax.”

“I insist,” was Akane’s simple reply.

Ukyo knew better than to argue her on it any further. She sighed. “You’re gonna have to tell me now what you want so it’ll be ready when you’re back.”

“The usual.” Akane responded, then she smiled softly.

Ukyo chuckled. “Why’d I even ask?” she sighed again, “Akane-chan, aren’t you ever going to try all the other wonderful things on the menu?”

Akane shrugged. “I know what I want.”

Ranma blinked at her. Akane turned around and walked past Ranma into the back room, and for a moment Ranma was stuck in place, watching her go. Then he shook it off, and followed her.

Together they collected all the garbages around the restaurant and took all the bags outside to the back alley. The dumpster was located just a few doors down. They walked down the back street, several bags in each hand between the two of them.
“You know you don’t have to do this, right?” Akane muttered, after they’d reached the dumpster.

Ranma knew she wasn’t talking about the garbage. “The garbage?” he said anyway.

“No, moron.” Akane barked back. She dropped down her bags while Ranma tossed in his own. “I mean, you don’t have to work for Ukyo.”

“Of course I do,” Ranma said, hurling his last bag inside the dumpster, then bending down to grab the next bunch. “You heard Uuchan. I’m a ‘cretin indebted to her by guilt’.”

“Well, maybe for today,” Akane agreed quietly, “But what about tomorrow?”

“She said there’d be lots more high school girls here tomorrow, since the ones that did come today got such a great view of my ass in these tights.” Ranma jeered, “Sounds like she’ll have her hands full if I don’t lend a hand.”

Akane sighed. “I wish she wouldn’t instigate you like this…”

Ranma shut the dumpster, then looked at Akane over his shoulder. “Whaddaya mean?”

“She’s just making it easier for you to make excuses.” Akane said, folding her arms, in irritation as well as the cold. Ranma started walking back toward the restaurant so they’d be out of the cold. And he’d get out of this conversation.

“Who’s making excuses? This ain’t just about room an’ board, and guilt. Even if she was gonna let me stay here for free, I woulda insisted on bein’ of some kinda help. Just like you with the garbage just now. Uuchan may be my best friend, but I ain’t gonna take advantage of that for free eats and no rent.”

“That didn’t stop you before.” Akane accused.

“Well I was a stupid kid before, dummy,” Ranma shot back, “Anyway, it’s the least I can do t’ thank her for lettin’ me crash there while I figure stuff out.”

“What is there to figure out?” Akane returned, exasperated.

“I thought you were perfectly fine to let me be a ‘playboy’,;” Ranma quipped, “Now all of a sudden you’re snappin’ your fingers and sayin’ ‘get on with with it!’.”

Akane stopped in her tracks, causing Ranma to join her as she whirled on him and gaped at Ranma with incredulous eyes. “You’re not seriously telling me you’re going to keep on seeing that…whatever his name was, are you?”

“It was Tanaka. And no, I’m not.” Ranma replied calmly.

“Tanaka, whatever. And okay, then what? If you’re not gonna continue a relationship with him, what are you going to do?” Akane demanded.

Ranma squinted at her. “I thought you said that you wanted to let me do things in my own way, in my own time?” he muttered, “That if you forced me into anythin’, I’d just go an’ blow it anyway, so it was better t’ leave me alone.”

Akane stared back at him, her gaze unwavering as it always was even as she stood under his towering frame. “That was before I realized your ‘debt to Ukyo’ or whatever stupid thing you’re trying to call it, is bullcrap.”
“Is it now?” Ranma said as snarkily as possible.

“I would have left you to your own devices if I thought that you really were just trying to show your gratitude to Ukyo,” Akane said, “But you’re just making an excuse to stay in limbo. And she’s your best friend so she knows exactly what you’re thinking. Which is why she made you a cook instead of a waitress. She could have easily manned that grill by herself, but she didn’t. And she knew that you’d jump at the chance for a reason like ‘guilt debt’ to stay around a little longer.”

Ranma looked away off at nothing. “What’s the difference on whether she made me a waitress or a cook? She’s a girl, and she’s the head chef. I could have easily fit into these damn tights much better had I been a girl.”

“Well, right now you fit into tights better than you would a kimono.” Akane said, not missing a beat.

Ranma’s eyelid twitched. “What’s that got t’ do with anythin’?” he grumbled.

Akane sighed. “The point I’m trying to get at is, she knows you’re running away, and she’s letting you do it. She was all talk about wanting you to go and make up with Ryoga-kun. If she really wanted that, she wouldn’t have allowed this so easily. But she’s so wrapped up trying to please everybody she doesn’t know what she really wants.”

Ranma was looking at her again. “And when in the hell did you get so perceptive?”

“You and Ukyo are not hard people to read.” Akane said simply, “For me, anyway. I’ve known the two of you long enough by now.”

“Fair enough. But what’s so terrible about Uuchan lettin’ me stick around? Maybe she’s just doing this when she’d rather drag me back to Ryoga by my ankles.” Ranma queried.

“Like I said, she wants to do both. She wants you and Ryoga to make up but at the same time, she doesn’t want to put you in an uncomfortable position where you’d wind up screwing things up further. But this isn’t the way to handle things. Knowing her she’ll get all caught up in this and wind up taking advantage of you, and because you’re doing all this to buy yourself some time you’ll let her.”

“So what do you suggest?” Ranma asked, putting his hands on his hips.

“Why can’t you just go and talk to Ryoga-kun?” Akane rubbed her arms to fight off the cold.

Ranma turned away and walked back toward the restaurant. Akane made an exasperated sound and hurried to catch up to him.

“Ranma!” she snapped.

“You’re freezing,” Ranma muttered, “Let’s go back in.”

“At least answer me,” Akane said, squeezing her arms around herself as they hurried back to the back door. The sun was completely gone now, and the back alley was cast in dark shadow and moonlight.

Ranma stopped in front of the back door, his hand hovering on the handle. Akane watched his back, waiting expectantly as she shivered in the cold. Ranma hadn’t so much as shuddered even once.

“He’s probably not ready to see me right now.” he said.
He pulled open the back door, and stood aside so Akane could go in first. He looked at her, but his expression was blank. Akane didn’t move. Through the cloud of her breath flicking in the night air, she narrowed her eyes at him.

“In other words,” she muttered, “you’re not ready to face him.”

Ranma’s expression remained blank. “Your lips are turning blue,” he said evenly.

Akane stared at him for a moment longer, then stormed back into the restaurant. Ranma followed, then shut the door behind him. When he turned around, Akane was still there, facing him once more. Her cheeks were red from the cold air.

“Avoiding Ryoga-kun is the same as trying to avoid changing back into a girl, Ranma.” Akane said in a low voice. “You can’t do it forever.”

Chapter End Notes

January Double-Upload Whammy! Wow-za!

Okay. So I was gone for four months, had Chapter 18 finished, like, two (???) months ago? And it's been collecting dust while I've been hacking away at this chapter. And this chapter was slightly-more-than-half done when I posted 18 earlier this month.

But you know what? Life is short. Enjoy the little things. And especially as an adult trying (and mostly failing) to live in this big beautifully ugly world, ya gotta learn to celebrate even the littlest victories.

So, yeah, as you know I was gone for four months. In that time, most of y'all have probably thought I've fallen off the face of the earth and given up on this story. At least that's the impression I got when I didn't get much feedback on Chapter 18, which I was freaking OUT about posting!! Guys, I just put in an OC that was never mentioned before, showed up out of goddamn nowhere and PORKED THE PROTAGONIST. I thought for sure I was going to get TONS of backlash for that chapter, but instead...there was only silence.

And that's way worse!!

Please let me know what you think! And until then, thanks for reading (this chapter, and my dumb author's note)

See ya next time.
Ukyo was always an early riser. One had to be, when they were the owner, manager, and head chef of a popular dining establishment. Her internal clock was so finely tuned to her routine, she didn’t even need an alarm clock. She did, however, stay under her sheets for a few moments after she had woken up. Ukyo twisted around and stuffed her face into the pillows with a long sigh. She had woken up the same time she always did, but she was still a little out of sync no thanks to her all-nighter the other day.

Two minutes, she thought. She could lie here just a little longer.

The smell of Akane’s shampoo had gotten imbedded into her pillow.

She stayed nestled into the pillows for three minutes.

Ukyo sighed again, pushing herself upright. She looked around her now very-crowded bedroom, and let out a short puff of air upwards to blow her messy bangs out of her eyes. Konatsu was contentedly dozing away, curled up in a ball beneath a mountain of thick covers.

She looked over Konatsu to her newest roomie. A slight frown painted Ukyo’s sleepy features as she watched Ranma sleep. She got up and walked over to where Ranma lay, not bothering to tiptoe. Konatsu and Ranma, both hard sleepers, would miss an earthquake in their state. Ukyo stood at the foot of Ranma’s bedroll, hands on her hips.

He wasn’t snoring.

Ranma always snored; or at the very least breathed very deeply. But his breathing was light, almost as if it was laboured. Ukyo frowned.

She stepped over to the side of the sleeping bag and squatted down. As she brushed Ranma’s bangs
out of his eyes, she was not surprised when he didn’t wake. Then she placed the back of her hand on his face, but she already knew he’d be hot. There was a light sheen of sweat on his brow. She merely placed her hand on his forehead to soothe the heat, knowing against his hot skin her hands would be like ice.

His face flickered then, and Ukyo slowly took her hand away. Ranma didn’t wake up; but his eyelids flickered, his lip trembled, and his head rolled to the side towards Ukyo. His lips parted, and a small noise struggled through, as if he was trying to form words.

Ukyo’s face fell. “Oh, Ran-chan…”

She ran her hands through her best friend’s hair soothingly for a moment more. Then she gently unzipped the bedroll half way down to allow in a little air; Ranma’s whole body radiated heat, but he didn’t have a fever—just a bad dream. She knew he wouldn’t like it if he knew she had seen him like this, though she hated to leave him. Ukyo rose to her feet, and made her way downstairs. At the very least, she could make him his favourite for breakfast.

Kasumi played with the telephone cord as she listened to the number of rings on the receiver. The person on the end of the line picked up on the fourth ring.

“Uuchan’s Okonomiyaki, this is Ukyo speaking.”

“Good morning, Ukyo-chan. It’s Kasumi.” Kasumi said, still twirling around the phone cord. “Sorry to call so early in the morning.”

“That’s okay,” Ukyo responded, her voice much lighter now, and also laced with a tinge of nervousness. “Did Akane-chan make it home okay last night?”

Kasumi smiled. “Oh, yes. Thank you for asking.”

“No problem. So, how’s it going, Kasumi-san? Long time no talk; haven’t seen ya since Christmas.”

“I’m quite well, thank you.” Kasumi replied gently. She paused for a moment, then continued. “Akane-chan tells me that Ranma-kun has moved in with you?”

She heard Ukyo sigh a little through the receiver. “I wouldn’t say ‘moved in’ so much as ‘squatting’.”

Kasumi raised her eyebrows. “Oh?”

“He’s hardly taken any of his stuff outta his pack, and he sleeps in a damn sleeping bag,” Ukyo explained.

“I see. Have you got the space for him there, Ukyo-chan? Perhaps it would be easier on you if he moved back here.” Kasumi offered, “I know he’s your friend, but you do have a business to run. I can get Akane-chan to convince him to come and live here again.”

Ukyo scoffed. “Yeah, I have no doubt she could do it. She’d just have to drag him by his hair,” she muttered, “It’s alright anyway, Kasumi-san. I don’t mind havin’ Ran-chan here with me. He could
use a friend or two right now anyhow.”

“Yes, certainly,” Kasumi said, a tinge of sadness in her voice, “How is he?”

“About as good as he can be, I guess,” Ukyo said, “I think he’s got a lot more going on upstairs then he lets on to anyone.”

“You’re a good friend, Ukyo-chan. Thank you for looking after him.” Kasumi said sincerely.

She heard Ukyo chuckle a little with embarrassment. “Aw, well, what’re friends for, right?”

“Have you heard anything from Ryoga-kun recently?” Kasumi asked then.

“Not since I tried to call him a few days ago,” Ukyo said, and a note of agitation had entered her voice, “The guy hung up on me when I told him Ran-chan showed up at my restaurant and that he should come and get him.”

“I'm worried about him,” Kasumi said quietly, “Ranma-kun always tries to handle all his emotions on his own, keeping it all inside and to himself. He’ll even deny that he's feeling anything at all. On the other hand, Ryoga-kun lets it all come out in huge bursts, and it never seems to make him feel any better. He just envelops himself in it until it's all he feels.”

Ukyo chuckled, though it was without humour. “Those two are such polar opposites, it's a wonder they aren't magnetized at the forehead,” then she added on in a mutter, “maybe then they would actually talk to each other.”

Kasumi smiled, but her lips were tight. “That would certainly make things easier.”

“You hit the nail on the head with those two, Kasumi-san. Although I am concerned that jackass Ryoga is gonna do something stupid. Ranma-honey isn’t any better. He’s just stickin’ his fingers in his ears and won’t listen to reason, and he won't confirm or deny to anyone or even himself that he's...he’s not okay,” Ukyo's voice had become soft. She paused for a moment before she continued. “He's my best friend, and I know he's hurting but I don't know how to help him if he won't let me…”

Ukyo went quiet, and let out a shaky breath. Kasumi waited, but Ukyo didn't continue.

“You're already helping him,” Kasumi said.

“...How’s that?”

“You said he came to your restaurant, right? What did he come to see you for?” Kasumi asked.

“To ask me if he could crash here,” Ukyo replied, “I told him he could stay as long as he wants.”

“Has he told you that he went anywhere else? I mean, he clearly didn't go to his mother's, considering she's been calling Ryoga-kun assuming he's still there.”

“Ranma-honey’s got a pretty sensitive relationship with his mom. As much good as it might be for him to have her comfort, I don't think he can face her. And there's no way he'd go askin' for room and board at the Nekohanten, now that Ryoga is likely there every day,” Ukyo sighed deeply and shakily, “So...I was the only place he had to go.”

“I think he would have gone to you first regardless, Ukyo-chan,” Kasumi offered sweetly, “Even though he's so against letting anyone in and voicing his problems, even though he could have easily wandered off on his own, he came right to you. I think you mean more to him than you even know.”
“Aw...well,” Ukyo sniffled slightly, then cleared her throat, “Geez, leave it to Ran-chan to get me all misty-eyed like a schoolgirl again...dammit.”

“Well, I would like to talk more, but I'm sure you'll be opening up shop soon so I should leave you to it.”

“R-Right, okay.” Ukyo croaked.

“Take care now, Ukyo-chan, and stay in touch.”

“Will do. Talk to ya later, Kasumi-san. And...thanks.”


Akane was coming down the stairs as Kasumi was hanging up the phone. She was dressed in bundled-up jogging gear, and watched Kasumi curiously as she stuffed her feet into her well-used running shoes.

“Who was that, Kasumi-oneechan?” Akane asked as she hit the toes of her shoes against the floor to get a snug fit.

“I was just calling Ukyo-chan to check in with her, and to ask her if she had heard from Ryoga-kun.” Kasumi explained.

Akane pursed her lips knowingly. “She was talking to me about it when I stayed over there the other night. I'm worried about Ryoga-kun.”

“I am, too,” Kasumi nodded, “I managed to reach him the other day, but the conversation was short-lived.”

Akane frowned, folding her arms. “Maybe I should try to call him...” she muttered. She seemed to mull that over for a moment, her eyes flickering to the phone as she considered. Then suddenly, her face fell.

“If he wouldn't even talk to you, there's no way I'd have any luck.” Akane sighed. “Not after what I did...”

Kasumi stepped forward and patted her youngest sister’s shoulder. “Ryoga-kun cares very deeply for you, Akane-chan. I'm sure he would be understanding. However, I do think it would be best for all of us not to hassle him.”

“But we can't leave him alone, either!” Akane cried, “You know what he's like, oneechan. At this rate, I don't know who to be more worried for.”

Kasumi smiled, and gave Akane’s shoulder a firm squeeze. “Why don't you first start with yourself?” she said with a gentle laugh in her voice, “You've got your studies to be focusing on, right?”

Akane visibly deflated, and her cheeks flushed as if with shame. “...Right. Sorry, oneechan.”

“Don't be sorry about having a big heart,” Kasumi laughed.

Akane nodded jerkily, her ears going red. “A-anyway, I'm gonna head out.”

“Will you be staying over at Ukyo-chan’s again?” Kasumi asked sweetly.

Akane's blush returned with a vengeance. “It's...it's not like I can just have a slumber party at Ukyo's
every other night, y’know!” Akane blurted. She whirled around and marched towards the front door. “And I’ve got my entrance exams to study for!”

“Oh, so you’ll be back for breakfast then?” Kasumi asked, as Akane yanked open the front door.

Akane paused for a moment, then peeked over her shoulder. “D-don’t wait up, okay?” Akane mumbled, unable to look her sister in the eye all of a sudden, “I’m...trying a different route today, and don’t know how long it’ll take me to come back, so...bye, see you later!”

Kasumi watched her baby sister fly out the door, leaving it ajar in her hurry. Kasumi shook her head while chuckling in amusement, and walked over and shut the door.

“What a funny girl,” she said to herself.

Ukyo was wiping down the bar counter when Konatsu came out from the kitchen carrying two large vats of batter on either shoulder. She set down the giant jugs with practiced ease behind the grill.

“Ran-chan still sleeping?” Ukyo asked, giving the tops of the barstools a quick wipe down for good measure. She was feeling extra dutiful today.

“Yes, Ukyo-sama. Shall I go and wake him?” Konatsu asked.

“No, leave him be.” Ukyo said, leaving the washcloth on the counter and walking over to grab the broom and dustpan. “...How’d he seem?”

When Konatsu didn’t respond right away, Ukyo stopped sweeping under the bar stools to look up at her waitress. Konatsu was looking down at her clasped hands, looking deeply troubled. Ukyo bit her lip.

“Konatsu…?”

“Watching Ranma-sama sleep...it reminded me of myself, all those years ago before I met you,” Konatsu said softly as she squeezed her own hands, “He looked as though he were sleeping on a piece of cardboard in the middle of winter.”

Ukyo twisted the broom around in her hands, and looked down at the floor. “Like he didn't have a home...” she whispered.

“What shall we do, Ukyo-sama?” Konatsu asked fretfully.

“All that we can do,” Ukyo replied, “Be there for him, as his friends. I'm gonna whip up his favourite: Seafood Deluxe with extra squid and secret sauce. Maybe the smell will get Ranma-honey out of bed. Can you put out the shop curtain in about twenty minutes or so?”

Konatsu nodded. “Of course, Ukyo-sama. I'm going to go and sweep out front before then, and I was also thinking I might polish the floors?”

Ukyo grinned. “Already done,” she said proudly.

Konatsu looked amazed. “My, Ukyo-sama, you are most diligent today.” Then Konatsu’s eyes bulged as she heard what she’d said, and she flailed her hands wildly in a panic, “N-n-not that you
aren't diligent every day! I-I meant no offence, I was merely just praising your--”

Ukyo help up her hands. “Hey, hey! It's fine. I know what you meant. Besides, it's about time I put a little extra care into my business. I got so used to pawnin’ all the work off on you and just doing all the cooking--”

“But that's more than sufficient!” Konatsu cried.

“No, it's not!” Ukyo blurted. Konatsu jumped as if Ukyo has shocked her, and Ukyo instantly felt horrible for suddenly yelling.

“This is my restaurant,” Ukyo said in a low voice, gripping the handle of the broom tightly, “When I first started running this business, I was on my own. I strived for success, and achieved it. I wanted everything to be perfect in every way imaginable. The restaurant was always immaculate. And I did all the housework and all the daily tasks for the restaurant by myself. It was hard work, but it was worth it. I was doing what I loved. But then you came around, and I brought you in, and without my noticing it I started to treat you like my lackey. That's the very reason I took you away from that awful step-family of yours. And then I just treated you more like a boss and less like a friend.”

Konatsu looked like she was on the verge of tears. “Oh, Ukyo-sama…”

Ukyo ran her hand across the clean countertop of the bar. “I took you and this restaurant for granted. Took advantage of being the boss lady and let you do all the gruelling work while I focused on doing the fun part and raking in all the profits. I know I started this business when I was basically just a kid, and that's bound to lead to a few blunders. But I never had an issue when I was a one-woman shop. I didn't know how to be a boss to anyone, a fair leader to employees. Treat those who work for me as equals, not underlings.”

“But I don't feel like an underling here,” Konatsu said softly.

Ukyo sighed gratingly. “How would you know? You've never known any different!” she made sure to not shout that time, but it was difficult.

“You saw him up there,” Konatsu said, her voice thick with emotion, “It's easy to tell the difference between a nightmare and a dream.”

Ukyo pressed her forehead into the broom handle, closing her eyes as though she were exhausted. “It's not like you're livin’ in the lap of luxury here, y’know.”

“You don't need luxury if you are with the ones you love.”

Ukyo looked up at Konatsu, her bangs in her eyes. Konatsu could see the slightly pink imprint of the broom on Ukyo’s forehead. Konatsu made her way around the grill, and stood in front of Ukyo. Ukyo didn't move as Konatsu reached over and brushed her bangs out of her eyes, then gently touched the red mark on her forehead, a look of adoration in her eyes. The broom imprint was no longer the only thing on Ukyo's face that was red.

“Ukyo-sama,” Konatsu whispered, “I--”

The clattering sound of the shop door opening made both girls jump. Konatsu whirled around and Ukyo peeked around Konatsu's shoulder to see Akane standing in the entryway. The girl was dressed in running gear, a flushed face, and a thin sheen of sweat. Her blue hair was slightly tousled by the wind, but had been held in place for the most part by a pink sweatband. Still panting slightly, she smiled and waved as she stepped inside and closed the shop door behind her.
“Oh,” Ukyo blinked owlishly, “Good morning.”

“Morning,” Akane said breathlessly, walking over to the two other girls. “Your shop curtain wasn't out, so I know you're still probably opening up, but--”

“Akane-chan, you know you're welcome at Uuchan's twenty-four hours a day!” Ukyo exclaimed, moving around Konatsu. She thumped Akane on the back, then kept her arm around her shoulders as she lead her towards the nearest bar stool. “Have a seat, sugar. I'll go get you some water. Man, did ya sprint the whole way across town? Just couldn't stay away from me, huh?”

Akane bristled. “I--I was...out for a run anyway!” Akane cried, still panting for air.

Ukyo chuckled, patting Akane's shoulders. “I'm just teasin’ ya, hun. So what brings ya by? Oh, hold that thought, lemme get you that drink first, you look ready to pass out.”

Konatsu suddenly reappeared, and Ukyo realized she hadn't even noticed she had vanished in the first place. Konatsu placed two cups of water on the counter.

“Oh, thanks, Konatsu. I could've gotten those.” Ukyo said meekly.

“My pleasure,” Konatsu said, “I'm going to go and see what else I can get prepped before I put out the curtain. Excuse me.”

Konatsu turned away and disappeared into the kitchen. As soon as Konatsu was out of sight Ukyo’s gut felt hollow. The room lulled into a strange silence for a moment, before Ukyo collected herself and walked behind the grill. She started turning things on and opened one of the vats of batter that Konatsu had brought out. She could feel Akane's eyes on her the whole time.

“Drink your water, Akane-chan.” Ukyo said.

“Did I interrupt something?” Akane asked quietly, her eyes flickering towards the kitchen.

“It would have gone the same way whether you had walked through that door or not.” Ukyo said as she stirred the batter around.

“And what's that supposed to mean?” Akane asked.

“It means I'm a huge jackass,” Ukyo retorted, swirling a ladle of the batter onto the grill in a perfect circle.

“Ukyo--” Akane began, her voice raising, but she cut herself off. She leaned back and sighed. “Okay, I won't pry. Doesn't have anything to do with me.”

“For sure.” Ukyo said quickly.

“Anyway, I came by so we could put our heads together over what's going on with Ryoga-kun,” Akane finally grabbed her glass of water, but didn't take a drink. “Where's Ranma? Is he not up yet?”

Ukyo shook her head. “Pretty sure he's still sleeping,” she poked at the circle of batter with her spatula. “I'm hoping the smell of his favourite menu item will get him to come down, though.”

“Seafood Deluxe with extra squid and sauce?” Akane blinked.

“Are we in competition for the Best Friend of the Year award? Yeah, that's the one,” Ukyo looked up at Akane and smirked, “So, what's his favourite colour?”
“Bit much for breakfast, isn’t it?” Akane muttered around her cup, then took a sip. She set down her cup and flicked up her eyes at Ukyo. “And it's *colours*, plural. Red and purple.”

Ukyo laughed lightly. “Okay, show off.”

Akane took another gulp of her water. “So, you were on the phone with my sister this morning I heard. So you know all about how Ryoga-kun hung up on her.”

“Yep. Stubborn mule did the same to me, too, but I never thought he would have the kahones to hang up on Kasumi Tendo, of all deities.”

Akane perked up. “Hang on. You never told me you called him. When did *that* happen?”

“The day Ranma-honey showed up here asking for a place to stay. When I went into the back to ‘help Konatsu with prep’?” Ukyo supplied the finger air quotations for emphasis.

Akane narrowed her eyes. “I knew there was more going on there. Other than you totally getting Ranma and I alone so we could chat. You know, you used to be hellbent on making sure quite the opposite of that happened.”

Ukyo smirked. “Hey, gimme some credit, Akane-chan. I’d like to think I've done a fair bit of growing up these last few years. I have blossomed into a mature young woman.” Ukyo smugly flicked her long hair over her shoulder.

“Then how do you explain that poor little Cinderella drowning her sorrows in chopped cabbage?” Akane quipped.

“You can't even stay in your own lane for two minutes, can you, Tendo?”

Akane said nothing. She simply looked off at nothing and took a curt sip of her water.

Ukyo snorted. She flipped the okonomiyaki over and quickly dispensed the toppings.

“So what did you say to him? How did he seem?” Akane went on.

Ukyo shrugged. “I told him Ran-chan was with me, and that he should come and get his butt over here and get him.”

Akane scoffed. “I'm guessing that didn't go over well.”

“Considering my best friend is currently in a sleeping bag up in my bedroom having fuckin’ nightmares, no.” Ukyo muttered tersely.

Akane’s face became crestfallen at that, but she continued her questioning. “So, how were things left with Ryoga-kun?”

“He said that he was glad Ran-chan was with a friend and that he was safe. But that he wasn't going to ‘trap’ him anymore. Whatever the hell that means.”

“And then he hung up on you.”

“I tried to make him see reason, but he wouldn't even let me get two words in edgewise, the asshole.” Ukyo grumbled, “Then, yeah, he hung up on me.”

“Poor Ryoga-kun,” Akane sighed. “It sounds like he's completely miserable.”
“Poor Ryoga?” Ukyo echoed exasperatedly, “Yeah, I feel real sorry for him. So sorry I'm gonna hafta whoop his ass if I ever see his face again.”

“Ranma isn't the only one who got hurt in this, you know.” Akane said sagely.

“Sorry, sugar, but I have a hard time findin’ any sympathy for this sorta thing,” Ukyo retorted, “That bastard let Ranma-honey walk out on him to go who-knows-where, to sleep in a tent just hours after miscarrying. And now I'm supposed to feel bad because he's decided to isolate himself from all the people who care about him and just want to help?”

“When that ‘bastard’ has also been known to sink into serious bouts of depression and bring harm to himself and everything around him? Yes.” Akane shot back, “He's just as much our friend as Ranma is, Ukyo. And I'm not saying his behaviour is entirely justifiable. I'm saying we forgive him, and help him. That's the only way to help Ranma.”

Ukyo and Akane stared at one another from across the grill for a moment in silence, neither one of them wavering their gaze. Then Ukyo's lips cracked into a crooked smile and she shook her head.

“And when did you get so level-headed and wise?” she chuckled.

“You're not the only one who’s grown up over these last six years.”

“So, what do you suggest we do, if you're so all-knowing now?” Ukyo smirked.

“Nothing,” Akane said simply.

Ukyo blinked. “What?”

Akane shrugged, picking up her glass of water and knocking back the last sip. “Maybe this isn't any of my business, either. And it's none of yours. So, yeah, we do nothing.”

Ukyo gaped at Akane. “You're gonna give me whiplash changin’ your damn mind this way and that,” she said incredulously. “You just got through telling me that we need to help Ryoga if we want to help Ran-chan. How the hell are we going to do that if we do nothing?”

“I said we would do nothing,” Akane corrected, “There's still someone else who can do something.”

“You want Konatsu to play matchmaker now?” Ukyo asked, deeply confused.

Akane rolled her eyes. “I mean Ranma.” she finally supplied.

Ukyo squinted at the other girl suspiciously. “And how is Ran-chan going to help Ryoga when he can't even help himself?”

“That's just it,” Akane said, “Those two are hopeless. They can't help themselves because they can never identify their own issues. But they can read each other like an open book. They can see through each other's weaknesses. If there's anything that can help them, it's themselves.”

She was sleeping soundly now.
Ranma ran his fingers idly through his double’s red hair, which was dampened with either sweat, blood, or both. He wasn’t so sure anymore. They both sat in the endless sea of red, surrounded by blood and pitch black.

The female Ranma had her head in his lap, and he could feel her steady breaths as she slept, curled up in a ball akin to the cat she was still cradling in her arms. Ranma looked down at the hairless cat in his sleeping companion’s arms. He no longer felt any fear for the creature. He was able to look at it without being overwhelmed by the urge to run. In fact, there was something welling up inside him, something that made him desire to hold the creature in his arms like his doppelgänger.

It was love.

Though Ranma couldn't bring himself to take the creature out of the female Ranma's embrace. She was finally looked so peaceful, sleeping serenely with the poor lifeless creature cradled to her chest, as though she were encompassing her own heart. Ranma slowly reached out, and carefully ran the very tips of his fingers along the strange flesh of the creature’s stiff, cold body.

Someone else was here.

Ranma looked out across the blood sea to see a lone figure walking towards them. Though they were walking slowly, they seemed to get halfway across the sea of blood with only a few steps, until they had gotten close enough that Ranma could make out who it was. They walked right up to Ranma, but did not look at him. The figure knelt down and took the limp cat out of the sleeping Ranma's arms. Then, they stood up slowly and walked through Ranma like a ghost.

Ranma felt like he should move, but he couldn't for some reason. He didn't turn around to watch where the figure was going with the dead cat, nor did he seem troubled by the fact someone was taking it away. Then he felt his female copy stir against his legs, then jolt awake when she realized the cat was no longer in her arms. She sat upright in alarm, splashing around the blood that surrounded them with her abrupt movements. Ranma was unaroused by his companion's frantic state as he watched her in awe as she looked about for the creature; somehow the blood she sat in rolled off her skin cleanly like water on a feather. He looked down at his own skin, which was stained in deep red.

“No!” The female Ranma suddenly cried. Ranma looked up, and saw she was looking at something behind them. Ranma looked over his shoulder and followed the other Ranma's gaze far out into the ocean of blood stretching into forever, where off in the distance, the figure continued to walk.

“No!” The hysterical Ranma roared again. Tears had sprung into her eyes and were cascading down her cheeks. “No!”

The female Ranma collapsed into the blood with a thick splash, though it still didn't touch her body. She sobbed wretchedly into her hands, her head curled into her knees. She seemed to be saying something over and over, but her voice was so torn up by the sobs Ranma couldn't make it out at first. When he finally caught a trace of what his counterpart was crying out, something hot spread through his chest, and yet made him shiver.

Ranma stood up and turned around, feeling his heart start to pound erratically in his chest like he'd never felt it before. Perhaps it hadn't even been beating before at all. He could still see the pinprick outline of the figure far across the red sea. He started to run.

The blood seemed to get darker the further he went, and the further he went the deeper the blood got until it was nearly up to his chest. He was completely drenched in it now, as the blood
sloshed and splashed around and onto him as he waded through the thick vastness towards the figure. Though he felt as though the blood should be slowing him down, he caught up to the figure in a matter of seconds. He realized after a moment that it was because the figure was no longer moving. He kept running, and saw the figure turn around to face him, cradling the lifeless cat in its arms. Ranma felt as though his heart would break his ribs from its beating, and tear a hole in his chest. Something in him screamed at him to go faster. He had to go faster. He was going to be too late.

“Ryoga!” he screamed.

Ryoga began to sink into the blood. His eyes never left Ranma's as he was pulled down and disappeared into the depths.

“No, wait!” Ranma cried, reaching the spot where Ryoga had gone under right at the last second. He delved his hands into the viscous blood that was nearly dyed black with it’s depth. He moved his hands underneath the surface, searching around blindly. He was gone.

“RYOGA!”

He was wrenched out of his sleep, gasping for breath as though he'd been holding it underwater. For a moment, he thought he was still drenched in the blood, for he felt a dampness on his forehead where his hair stuck to his skin, and his clothes adhered to his body. Ranma looked down at his himself, his heart beating loudly in panic.

He wasn't drenched in blood, but sweat.

Ranma wiped at his brow, his breath still coming out in ragged spurts. He pulled his shaky legs out from the sleeping bag and pulled his knees to his chest. Resting his head on his knees, he tried to steady his breathing. After a minute or two he could take a breath without shuddering, and finally became aware of the bright sunlight that was filling the small room. What time was it?

Ukyo, a natural early-riser whose eyes popped open with disciplined ease at precisely six in the morning every day, must not have deemed it necessary to have a clock anywhere in the bedroom. Ranma let out an annoyed grunt as he pushed himself to his feet and made his way over to the closet where he kept his travel pack. He pulled out his bag, rummaging through until he came upon what he was searching for: a cheap wristwatch he'd gotten from a *My Neighbour Totoro*-themed vending machine. He never actually wore the damn thing on account of the fact it was ugly as all hell. It didn't help he had been going for a Totoro one (obviously) but had wound up getting *Catbus*. Ugh.

But it was handy on training trips when he was out in the woods, and for the odd occasion he found himself clock-less, such as now. He quickly examined the face of watch, trying his damndest to focus on the little numbers rather than the grotesque image of Catbus grinning up at him.

He quickly shoved the watch down into the deepest recesses of his pack once he had determined it was quarter past eleven. Shit. Ukyo wasn't going to like the fact that he'd slept in so late.

Considering he was already tardy, he didn't rush as he got changed into his uniform and did his best to appear as though he hadn't just woken up; and from a horrific nightmare, to boot. He took a tempted glance at Ukyo's concealer, but *tsk* ed disappointedly when he realized they weren't the same shade. Ukyo's customers would just have to deal with his dark circles and eye bags. He sighed,
getting up and heading downstairs. The smell of cooking okonomiyaki hit his nose as soon as he was out in the stairwell, and he grimaced. Looks like she'd started without him. Preparing himself for an earful, Ranma reached the bottom of the landing and entered the dining area.

Ukyo and Akane both looked up as Ranma walked over to the grill. He might have been attempting to look sheepish, but his face more just contorted into a warped scowl.

“Just in time for breakfast, sugar.” Ukyo said cheerfully, as she slid a plate over to the counter, in the empty spot to Akane’s left. “Have a seat and dig in.

Ranma looked blearily down at the steaming plate, instantly recognizing the dish as the Seafood Deluxe okonomiyaki. There was so much sauce on top, you could hardly tell what the other toppings were, but Ranma could see there was extra squid. Ukyo watched in satisfaction as the exhausted grimace slowly lifted off of her best friend’s face as he took his seat.

“Thanks, Uuchan,” Ranma said as he snapped apart a pair of chopsticks Akane had passed him. Ranma gave Akane a sidelong look. “You’re here rather early.”

“Ukyo promised she and I could help each other study for entrance exams.” Akane explained. “So you came straight here in a dead sprint first thing in the morning?” Ranma surmised, nodding his head toward Akane’s outfit and hair that was still rather tousled from the wind.

Akane bristled. “I was just doing my usual morning jog, and figured I should drop by before Ukyo gets busy with customers,” she retorted in a quick, cool tone. “These exams are important, and I want to be sure Ukyo and I will be prepared for them.”

“Sure, sure.” Ranma muttered, prodding at his okonomiyaki with his chopsticks, searching through the thick dark sauce.

“Hey, what gives, Ran-chan?” Ukyo asked in curious but fretful tone, “Usually you can't get that down your gullet fast enough, but you’re pokin’ away at it like some...picky toddler.”

Ukyo gasped, eyes bulging, and she leaned forward intently.

“You're not--are you seriously…you're picking the toppings off?!?” Ukyo cried in disbelief and horror.

Ranma cringed. “Uh, well, not all of them…” he mumbled.

“Ranma Saotome, under no circumstances is it ever okay to pick off the toppings on my okonomiyaki, under my roof!”

“Sorry, it's just...that, uh--”

“What's so terrible about my cooking--that I made for you with all of the best intentions, out of the kindness of my heart--I slave over a hot griddle and you-- ” Ukyo snatched the plate up and brought it up close to examine the sloppy pile Ranma had been building on the edge of his plate. It took her no time at all to see what was amiss. “...picked all the eel off?”

Ranma shuffled uncomfortably in his seat, as though he were being brutally interrogated by the bad cop.

“...Force of habit,” he said quietly.
“Force of--? Ran-chan, I've known you for sixteen years, and never once have you ever been picky about a single meal, and you sure as hell never said no to eel.”

“But--”

“So why is it that now, at twenty-two, you've degraded into a fussy baby?”

Ranma tried his best not to grimace at that last word, and it had nothing to do with any matter of masculine pride. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Before Ukyo could continue her interrogation, the phone rang. Ukyo shot Ranma one last menacing glance that screamed *This isn't over, Saotome*, before walking over and picking up the receiver.

“Uuchan's Okonomiyaki, this is Ukyo speaking.” Ukyo said in a sugary sweet voice she used with all her customers.

Ranma, although relieved to have gotten an out from that awkward mess of a conversation, still shuddered at Ukyo's ability to easily slip into her customer service persona.

“And you called her a terrible businesswoman.” Ranma said in a hushed voice, prodding Akane gently with his elbow.

“I stand corrected,” Akane muttered, “She's a terrifying businesswoman.”

“Yeah, of course,” Ukyo was saying, now peeking over at the other two out of the corner of her eye. “He's right here.”

Ranma's joking mood vanished the same moment his heart skipped a beat. He gawked at Ukyo in disbelief, looking as though she was about to throw him into volcano. This is what he got for messing with her food. This was her vengeance.

Ukyo rolled her eyes at Ranma's shell-shocked expression, pressing the receiver to her chest so the person on the end of the line couldn't hear her. “It's your mother, you twit.”

Ranma supposed that was the lesser of two evils. But his expression didn't change nor did he get out of his seat in a hurry.

“Did I freakin’ stutter? I said it’s your mother!” Ukyo snapped. She shot out the arm that held the receiver towards Ranma, using her other hand to jab sharply at the phone. “Get your fanny over here and assure your poor, sweet mother that you are not dead this instant.”

Ranma was starting to wonder whether he was acquiring more than one mother. He dragged himself out of his seat and walked over to the phone Ukyo was still holding out to him, being very careful not to look Ukyo directly in the eye as he took the phone and pressed it gingerly to his ear.

“Okaa-san,” Ranma said quietly.

“Ranma, thank heavens,” Nodoka cried in relief, “How are you, my dear?”

“I'm fine, okaa-san, really. I...I'm really sorry about worrying you.” Ranma said ashamedly, “I should have called.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Nodoka said quickly, “Have you gone to the hospital?”

“N-no, why would I...?”
“Well it’s hard to say, darling. It’s a complicated scenario, what with your situation. I mean, what would this kind of thing do to a body that isn’t actually female?”

“Uh, well I--”

“How did you find out the news?” Nodoka was going on, “Did you visit the doctor’s the day after the party…or did you, um…” Nodoka awkwardly paused as she searched for her words. “Did…was there any bleeding, dear?”

Ranma’s mouth opened slightly, his tongue tried to curl and make words but it felt like there was chunk of cement in his throat. He closed his mouth, licked his lips, which had gone very dry suddenly.

“Yes…”

He could see the endless deep red ocean again.

“My stomach just started to hurt, and then…”

“I see. Okay, dear. And where were you when this happened?”

Blood was filling Ranma’s ears until he could hear ringing. “I was in bed, an’ then I went t’ use the shower…” he forced out.

“The shower? You’ve been taking cold showers?” Nodoka pressed on.

“N...no, it was a hot shower. So, after a while, I just...changed back,” Ranma’s voice had grown almost whisper-soft now.

“I see...and have you changed into a female since?”

Ranma bit his lip. “I...I changed right back as soon as soon as I realized, b-but...I changed back to a guy a second later, once...uh--”

“Alright. Alright, dear. That’s alright.” Nodoka said, “Don’t worry, I don’t think that should have been an issue. But, I still think it would be wise to see your doctor about a D&C procedure.”

Ranma’s palms were started to sweat. “A...a what?”

“Dilation and curettage. So you can be sure you don’t get an infection. It’s...hard to say if there’s any remnants, or if it just...when you turned back, I mean. There’s no cervix so I can’t imagine. But if you turn back do the remnants reappear once the cervix also reappears? It’s...hard to determine.” Nodoka sighed heavily, “So, I think the option in your best interests would be to do the procedure, even if it’s just as a preventative precaution. They may not find anything left, but…”

Gone.

“Well, it would just be safe not to chance it, yes?”

Gone.

Like it hadn’t been there at all.

“Ranma? Ranma, dear, are you there? Ranma?” Nodoka’s voice, quickly growing louder with panic, pulled Ranma out of his trance.
“Yes, okaa-san,” Ranma murmured robotically, “You’re right. But, listen, I have to go. The shop will be opening up soon.”

“Well, yes, but...Ranma, you know you can come home, don’t you? I’ve plenty of room for you here. And I think it’s best you be with your family right now, wouldn’t you say so, darling?”

His family?

For many years, his old man had been the only family he’d ever known. His earliest memories of his mother were hazy at best. Then he moved into the Tendo Dojo and over time, the Tendo’s became very much like family to him. Not in the way his father and Soun had wanted him to consider it, he knew. But he thought of Soun as an uncle, and the Tendo sisters as cousins. And for many years, the Tendo Dojo was considered “home”, and the Tendo’s as his “family”.

He thought of his mother’s house, where he’d spent a short period of time when his mother decided he ought to move in with her permanently. And while he loved getting to see and spend quality time with his mother, acting as a true mother and son for first time since he was a baby, he still missed the Tendo Dojo. He missed the large practice hall, he missed the spot on the roof right above Akane’s window, he missed the big furo bath, Kasumi’s delicious food, the warm kotatsu on a winter’s night, or the genkan on a bright summer day. Hell, he even missed the koi pond, despite all the times he’d fallen or been thrown into it.

After spending the better part of his childhood and adolescence in a tent, living out of vacant lots, the Tendo Dojo was like a castle. He’d never known such luxury. He wasn’t completely selfish; when he’d moved in with his mother he did miss Akane and Kasumi as much as he missed the Tendo Dojo in general. But even still, did he miss the Tendo Dojo because it was his home? Or just a house that he had grown accustomed to over the years, a roof over his head that didn’t rattle with the wind or could be ripped open by a predator’s claws? What made a house a home? When he thought of “home”, what did he see? What did he see when he thought of “family”?

He thought of the earliest memories he had of his mother. He thought of Nodoka throwing his arms around him when she finally saw him as a man again, when he had finally truly “met” her. Of the rare occasions his old man would show, in his own eccentric way, he cared about his son. Riding on Genma’s shoulders as they walked across the countryside. Visiting Ukyo’s cart each morning and dragging her away from her work to go and play in the nearby creek. When Akane placed her hand on his shoulder and asked if he wanted to be friends. When Kasumi made his favourite for dinner the first birthday he spent under the Tendo’s roof, and every birthday after that.

Shirokuro chasing her tail all of a sudden when she got bored. Walking her down the street and giving a knowing nod or smile or a friendly wave to passing neighbours. Stopping in the park to play fetch with the best stick he could find. Feeling the dog’s cold, wet nose bump his fingers or her warm head nudge him when she demanded attention and cuddles.

Feeling his anxious gaze as Ranma walked down the stairs with a large basket of laundry. A cup of water waiting for him just outside the bathroom door every morning after he’d finally told him to give him privacy in the loudest, rudest way his nauseated self could fathom. When they sat in the living room watching TV or reading when neither of them had anything better to do, sharing a bag of potato chips. When he let Ranma lay out on the couch and drape his legs across him so he could nap. He wouldn’t say a word, just flick idly through the channels with one hand and mindlessly massage Ranma’s calf with the other...

The little shoes dangling from the doorknob.

“Why don’t you come home, Ranma?”
“I can’t, Ma.” Ranma said, “Uuchan’s set me up with a job here, an’...I think I just gotta...I gotta do this, for now.”

“But, Ranma…”

“I’ll call you, okay? Every day. And I’ll visit sometime. And...I’ll see about that dictation and cuttlefish thing, too, I guess.”

“D...Dilation and curettage.” Nodoka corrected.

“Yeah, that.” Ranma sighed, “Anyway, Uuchan will be opening up shop soon, so…”

“Just one other thing, dear,” Nodoka spoke up, “I tried to reach you the other day by calling Ryoga-kun. He--he didn’t sound well, I’m afraid. And he hung up before I could talk to him any further.”

Ranma’s eyebrows perked. “He hung up on you?” he said, sounding genuinely surprised.

“I’ve not known him for very long, but I’ve grown quite fond of him,” Nodoka sighed softly, “I’m worried about him.”

Ranma tried to find something to say, but his mouth seemed sewed shut. After a moment of pause, his mother sighed again.

“Well, that’s all I wanted to say. Please do be safe, darling. Call when you get the chance, and you’re free to visit whenever you like and stay as long as you want. Take care now.”

Ranma hung up the receiver and went back to his seat. His plate had been replaced with an empty one, and Ukyo was frying another okonomiyaki on the grill. As he was taking his seat Ukyo slid the new okonomiyaki towards him. It was the same as before, Seafood Deluxe with heavy sauce, but this time there was no eel.

Ukyo busied herself with cleaning off the grill, and didn’t meet Ranma’s eyes as he looked up at her. He’d known her long enough by now to know her body language. She didn’t want to hear his thanks, she wanted him to shut up and eat his food. Ranma picked the fresh pair of chopsticks beside the plate, and dug in.

He figured it would do him some good to focus on something as mechanical as chewing to take his mind on the millions of other things running through his head.

It didn’t work.

Ranma and Ukyo worked together for that day’s lunch rush. Konatsu was in the back on dish duty, which left Ranma in charge of helping Ukyo cook and send off orders, sometimes coming out from behind the bar to run plates to tables if they were packed, which they were for most of that weekend afternoon.

Akane had gone to use the shower to free up her stool to incoming customers, and stayed upstairs until the dining area had slowed down. She reappeared dressed in a baggy grey t-shirt and black leggings (borrowed from Ukyo’s closet), her cropped hair clean and brushed. Propping herself back
up into her stool, she looked curiously around the room. Ranma was wiping down the counter and Ukyo was sweeping the floor behind the grill.

“Where's Konatsu?” Akane asked. “Has she really been doing dishes this whole time?”

Ukyo shrugged. “Maybe some prep, too. But we did get pretty swamped, so we were sending back dishes every chance we got.” Ukyo looked up from her chore to smirk smugly at Akane. “As I expected, my new “employee” brought in his fair share of female consumers. And by consumers I mean they were eating him with their eyes.”

“I'm glad that business venture paid off for you.” Akane said blandly, resting her chin in her hand.

The phone chimed through the restaurant, and Ukyo's groan drowned it out.

“I swear if that's another person asking if I do take-out, I'm throwing that phone in the damn garbage.” Ukyo grumbled, storming over to the phone. “Can't these people see I'm busy enough as it is?”

Ukyo snatched up the receiver and whirled around to lean against the wall. “Uuchan’s Okonomiyaki,” she once again greeted in a completely different voice than she'd used three seconds ago.

Akane watched as Ukyo's eyes blinked open, and went to wide in surprise. Instantly curious, Akane listened closely, wondering who could have been on the other end to have made Ukyo make that face.

She had one pretty good guess.

Ukyo’s eyes flickered over to Ranma, who was now wiping down the tables and putting up chairs. Akane followed Ukyo’s gaze, looking over her shoulder. Ranma draped his washcloth over his shoulder and swiftly flipped over the last table’s chairs, placing them on top of the table. He hadn’t noticed that both girls were looking at him.

“He’s right here,” Ukyo said in a low, even voice. But she said it just loud enough that Ranma would be able to hear from where he was, reaching over the counter to grab the broom Ukyo had left behind the grill. Ranma paused, his outstretched arm hovering in mid-air just inches from the broom, and looked up at Ukyo curiously. It was then he finally realized he’d been followed by two intense pairs of eyes this whole time, and his curious expression shifted into something a bit more akin to concern.

“Well, just a second,” Ukyo said into the receiver, her eyes staying trained on Ranma. Then she took the phone away from her ear, and wordlessly stretched out her arm, holding out the phone.

That was no scolding this time. No demanding he get his ‘fanny’ over there to speak to whoever it was on the other end of that phone. Ranma felt his blood pumping thick in his ears as his heart jittered in his chest, as if it couldn’t seem to beat on rhythm. He wasn’t sure where to look, as he made his way slowly toward Ukyo. There was no way he would be able to maintain eye contact with Ukyo, and he tried his best to ignore Akane’s as she followed his every step toward Ukyo. He didn’t look at the phone, and he tried his best not to think about who was on the other end of the line, waiting to speak to him.

It didn’t work.

He took the phone from Ukyo, and she breezed passed him and went over to stand next to Akane,
the two sharing a silent look behind Ranma’s back as he steeled himself to put the phone to his ear.

“...Hello?” he said, forcing himself not to whisper.

“Saotome-kun!” the voice greeted in a light, familiar tone. Ranma’s heart jumped in a peculiar mixture of surprise and relief.

“Tanaka-san,” Ranma said in recognition, his voice airy. Then he suddenly became very aware of the eyes drilling holes into his back. Ranma grasped the phone with both hands, bringing it closer to his mouth as he spoke even quieter. “How...how did you get this number?”

“Well, it’s not too hard to hunt down the phone number of one of Furinkan’s most popular dining establishments,” Tanaka replied amusedly, “I did some sleuthing on my computer at work the other day. Don’t worry, I did it on my lunch break.”

Ranma instantly felt foolish. He pinched the bridge of his nose and screwed his eyes shut, shaking his head a little as though that would clear the cobwebs out. It didn’t, of course. “Right, yeah. Duh. Sorry, it’s uh...it’s been a long day.”

“Yeah, you sound exhausted. Busy weekend rush, I assume?”

“Pretty much sums it up,” Ranma lied.

“Then I won’t keep you long. Just wanted to check in, make sure you made it back to your friend okay...and that she didn’t give ya too much hell,” Hideo laughed, “I hope she was merciful, anyway.”

“Yeah, about as much to be expected. I can still walk, so that's a bonus.”

Crap. His choice of words could not have been any worse. He could literally feel the eyes on his back dig into him even deeper, knowing the little flies on the wall for this conversation were taking his responses way out of context.

Hideo's light laugh broke him out of his panicked thoughts. “Well, that's good.”

Hideo didn't continue, and Ranma couldn't think of anything to say, though he chewed on his lip as he searched for something to break the silence.

“Well, it's getting late, yeah? You're probably in the middle of closing up shop, and you said you were tired, so I'll let you go. I won't call the shop anymore, I'm sure the boss lady wouldn't care for it. We'll always have the water hole, after all.” Hideo laughed at his own analogy.

“Uh, for sure,” Ranma replied meekly. He honestly wanted to keep Hideo on the phone. Hearing his easy, light chuckling was taking his mind off all the things he didn't want on it. And this was already a vast improvement from the conversation he'd endured with his mother several hours ago. But he couldn't very well keep chatting away on the phone with Akane and Ukyo gawking at him, or when he had to help close up. Especially when said chit-chatting was happening with someone who was supposed to be a “one time thing”. At least, to Ukyo and Akane’s knowledge.

Ranma had no qualms about coming across Hideo at the bathhouse again. If they so happened to be there at the same time, he wouldn't mind the company. That's all it had to be, just nice company. Company that Ukyo and Akane didn't have a way to keep tabs on, because they would be none the wiser. But now that Hideo had called him directly, there was no way in hell that they wouldn't suspect his every move.
“Tell the boss I'm sorry for calling at such an hour,” Hideo said, “and you stay out of trouble, yeah?”

“I will...do--uh...both those things,” Holy crap, could those two not give him an ounce of privacy? It was way too hard to watch his words.

Hideo chuckled again. “You have a good rest of your evening.”

“Thanks, you too.” He needed a cell phone. Or money for the pay phone. Knowing Hideo's number would be a good start. Why didn't Ukyo have caller display, dammit? What kind of restaurant phone doesn't have--

“Hey, Saotome-kun...”

Ranma perked up. “Yeah?”

“Good luck with Ryoga-kun.”

Ranma paled. “I...I don't--” he swallowed a sizeable lump down his throat. He didn't recall ever telling Hideo that name. “How do you...?”

Ranma could literally feel Hideo smiling through the phone.

“You talk in your sleep.”

Chapter End Notes

Four months seems to be the Autumn Effect Hiatus, it would seem. Let's hope it never becomes any longer than that.

Once again, thank you all for waiting so long!

I'm pretty excited about where the rest of this is about to go, and have already brainstormed quite a bit for Chapter 21. So here's hoping it doesn't take ANOTHER four months, hoo.

Happy reading, folks! Till next time.
At this rate, he was going to miss the ceremony. Which didn’t actually sound so terrible. He’d much rather be doing anything else other than what he was doing right now; which was trying, and mostly failing, to tie a hakama.

He would have fought tooth and nail to get himself into a suit. He would have, had it not been his mother that wanted to see him in the hakama.

Ranma looked down at himself, having tied what he assumed was the final knot on the garment. Even after being washed, twenty years in storage had tattooed a permanent musky scent to the fabric his mother had purchased when he was still a baby. He felt like an old, smelly curtain. He took a moment to wipe the scowl off his face before turning around to face his mother.

Nodoka clasped her hands together, her eyes glistening with barely contained joy and possibly even tears.

“Is he still getting that thing on?”

Ranma looked over at the now-open door to his bedroom, and groaned at one of the last people on Earth he wanted to see right now.
Nabiki was leaning against the shoji door, smirking amusedly at Ranma. Ranma glared at Nabiki over his mother’s head as Nabiki admired her nails nonchalantly.

“Although I suppose we’d all be waiting around even longer if we’d given you a simple necktie to wear.” Nabiki quipped.

Ranma scoffed, but it came out more like a wheeze as Nodoka tightened something around his waist as tight as a corset. “Yeah, well, ‘least I don’t look like you did last year: like a unicorn barfed all over me.” Ranma shot back.

“Now don’t be so rude, Ranma,” Nodoka chided lightly as she stepped away from her work, finally satisfied.

“Is everyone ready?” Soun asked, walking into the room, dressed nice for a change in dark slacks and a suit jacket. Genma followed closely behind, dressed similarly to Soun, though he hadn’t bothered to tuck in his shirt.

“Yes, we’re all good in here. Is Akane-chan ready?” Nodoka asked excitedly. She instantly frowned upon noticing her husband’s sloppy attire. “Really, dear, at least tuck in your dress shirt…”

Genma weakly resisted as Nodoka stuffed the ends of his shirt unceremoniously down his pants with the same force she’d tied Ranma’s hakama with. Genma yelped as he was jabbed by Nodoka’s hands, and Ranma snickered to himself. At least he wasn’t the only one suffering today.

“It’s not every day your only son celebrates his Seijin no Hi,” Nodoka’s voice came out strained as she struggled to get the rest of the shirt under Genma’s tight waistband, “And you didn’t even put on a tie!”

“Oto-san, she’s ready!” Kasumi called.

Nodoka released her hold on Genma’s shirt, leaving it halfway tucked in as she moved around her husband. She went to the doorway so she could be one of the first to see Akane.

Kasumi entered the room first, walking over to stand near Ranma. She smiled brightly as she admired the hakama. “My, you look so handsome, Ranma-kun.”

Ranma’s eyes flickered away from the doorway he’d been closely watching to look at Kasumi. “Um, thanks,” he mumbled, flushing.

“Oh, Akane-chan, you look so radiant!” Nodoka’s excited cry made Ranma shoot his gaze back toward the doorway.

Akane was dressed in a white furisode, which upon first inspection looked incredibly plain for the usually elaborate design of the kimono worn for this occasion. Though simple, it was no less a beautiful pattern. The creamy white silk gleamed like snow, and as Akane moved the soft, delicate pink of the peony flower design cascading down the long sleeves and the skirt became visible. Her short hair was curled and adorned with small flowers and sparkly pins. Even under the layer of makeup on her face, a deep flush appeared on Akane’s cheeks as everyone in the room stared at her.

Soun, to the surprise of nobody, began to cry. “Oh, Akane, my little girl...today you become a w-woman!”

Genma slapped his old friend on the shoulder. “And my boy Ranma becomes a man!”
The two wrapped their arms around the other’s shoulders, laughing heartily in triumph. Nodoka was dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief as she admired Akane. Nabiki had become interested by something on her mobile phone. Kasumi watched the scene with her usual gentle smile and a small ‘oh my’ under her breath. Ranma’s shoulders sagged as he sighed deeply.

“Nabiki-chan, let’s take some photos! Do you have your camera?”

Nodoka ushered Nabiki over to stand in front of her younger sister to take some pictures. After snapping a few angles of Akane, Nabiki turned around and a flash went off in Ranma’s eyes, blinding him.

“Try not to look so dumbfounded in the next one, huh, Ranma?” Nabiki sneered over her camera. Clearly payback for the ‘unicorn barf’ comment, Ranma noted sourly. “Let’s get one with mother and son together, hmm?”

Nodoka eagerly went to Ranma’s side and gleamed at the camera. Ranma managed a small smile, only because his mother’s was so contagious. Then Genma joined the next picture, after Nodoka had finished tucking in the rest of his shirt. Then Nabiki turned around and took another picture of Akane next to Soun.

Nodoka grabbed Ranma by the shoulders and lead him over to Akane. “Let’s get one of the darling couple!” Nodoka chimed.

She propped Ranma next to Akane, standing back and flicking his unruly bangs out of his eyes. Ranma’s hair instantly fell back into place. Nodoka tsked softly, then stood back next to Nabiki, admiring the scene. Nabiki looked over her camera, raising her eyebrows.

“Wow, sis,” Nabiki sneered, “You look less like you’re turning twenty this year, and more like you’re getting married.”

Akane somehow managed to blush even darker. “Wh-what are you talking about?”

Ranma rolled his eyes. What was she playing so dumb for? It wasn’t exactly subtle, but then again their families weren’t exactly known for subtlety. The pairing of Ranma’s traditional dark hakama with Akane’s strangely unelaborate white furisode was no accident; in fact, tracking down a furisode with such a simplistic pattern would have been quite a feat. They’d gone to great lengths to make them look the part. Ranma wondered idly why they bothered to hunt down a furisode, when they were more than shameless enough to stuff Akane into a wedding kimono. They’d done it before.

Ranma wasn’t silly enough to think that after four years, they’d run out of steam to keep up this stupid farce. In fact, the more time went on, the more they were fuelled. The Marriage Express was full-steam ahead, and Ranma could feel it barrelling towards him. And he was tied down to the tracks with no escape in sight.

“They’re more persistent than roaches,” Ranma grumbled, just loud enough for Akane to hear him, waiting for an agreeable snort from her in response.

“That’s not okaa-san’s old furisode you said you’d wear.” Nabiki pointed out.

“No,” Akane played with her hands bashfully, “I picked this one out myself.”

Ranma looked at Akane, eyes wide. He couldn’t believe his own ears. Their fathers had absolutely no input in the borderline-wedding-kimono Akane was wearing? Akane had willingly chosen it all on her own?
His palms began to sweat. Maybe she didn’t realize, and she had simply picked out that particular furisode because she liked it and nothing more. Or, it was the complete opposite. Ranma tried not to consider the latter.

Akane looked up at him, and he finally realized he was still staring. Her eyes lit up, and her lips pulled into a tiny smile that was meant only for his eyes. Ranma’s wasn’t sure if his heart was racing, or skipping beats. Perhaps a little of both. He looked away quickly, watching Nabiki focus the camera on them. In his peripheral he saw Akane look toward the camera too, but he didn’t miss the peculiar flicker that twisted her features for just a moment.

Then Akane laced her arm through Ranma’s, and he couldn’t stop the little jump he gave at the unexpected contact. Ranma’s shoulders went stiff, and he felt like his feet were being nailed into the floor. Trapped.

He saw the train coming at him again, the bright lights getting bigger and brighter...

Then the camera flash went off and all he could see was white, and then stars.

“You’re giving me a day off?”

Ukyo nodded, smiling brightly. “Yep!”

Ranma stared at Ukyo blankly, blinking slowly. “Am I...getting in the way?” he asked.

Ukyo looked appalled. “Ranma-honey, no! You’ve been such a great help, and you’ve been working so hard lately...I just figured you’d earned it.” she explained, pulling on her wide grin again.

“Okay, well...you’re sure you’ll be okay on your own?”

Ukyo crossed her arms, and gave her best friend a wry smirk. “Ran-chan, I was handlin’ this shop all on my own for years. I think I can manage.”

“Oh, right. So...I guess I can go change,” Ranma said airily as he made his way over to the stairs.

Ukyo nodded eagerly. “Uh-huh. You go ahead, sugar. And don’t you even think of trying to sneak into the back to help Konatsu with dishes. And if I see you trying to chop up any cabbage...well, you best just hope I don’t. Under no circumstances are you to do any manual labour today!”

Ranma hovered over by the stairs, waiting for Ukyo to finish. When it appeared she was done, he nodded lightly. “Sure, no working. Day off. I’ll be back in a minute.”

When Ranma had disappeared up the stairs, Ukyo sighed heavily as her shoulders slumped. Suddenly her bright smile evaporated into a deep scowl that darkened her features.

The faint sound of pen scratching stopped, and Akane looked up from her mound of study notes to give Ukyo a solemn look.

“What’s that going to accomplish?” she asked lowly.

“It’s been a week.” Ukyo bit the words out as if they tasted bitter on her tongue.
“And all he’s done is work,” Akane said, “So what is taking that away going to do? This job you
gave him has been his best distraction. You take that away and all he’s going to do is mope around
here even more than he already has.”

“Well, my options were already pretty thin to begin with,” Ukyo snapped, “And unlike some of us, I
don’t just want to sit around and keep my head down doing nothing while my best friend crumbles
apart.”

Akane twitched. “Ukyo--”

“The hell kind of a stupid idea was that, anyway? Do nothing? And for you of all people to suggest
it,” Ukyo spat, “It’s as if you don’t--”

“Don’t you tell me I don’t care!” Akane’s voice broke with the effort it took to stay quiet. “How
could I possibly ignore it when it’s happening right in front of me?”

Ukyo’s face was stone, all except for her glistening blue eyes, which betrayed her emotions. “You
make it look pretty easy, keepin’ your nose crammed in those textbooks.”

Akane gaped at Ukyo, her lips parting in shock. “I--how could--”

“You act like you know him the best,” Akane retorted tersely, “But you don’t. Not if you think sitting
there doing nothing is going to fix any of this.”

“I never said it would,” Akane replied.departedly, “And I’ve never claimed to know him best. But I
know what’s best for him. And that’s to do this on his own.”

“Well, fat lot of good that’s been doing him. He won’t stop working until I practically have to drag
him up to bed. His nightmares have gotten worse. He’s just...he’s not himself. You saw him just
now. He’s--he’s like a zombie.” Tears filled Ukyo’s eyes, “And you expect me to stand here and do
nothing.”

“You honestly think it’s not killing me to see him like this just as much as you?” Akane’s voice
trembled, “I love him too, Ukyo. He’s my family. But he needs support, and that’s what we’ve been
giving him. He doesn’t need people dragging him back to Ryoga-kun by his hair, if that’s only going
to hurt him more. If...if Ryoga-kun is nothing else than a toxic presence in his mind right now, then I
don’t want to put him through that.”

“But he’s miserable,” Ukyo whispered, “And what if he...?”

“Ukyo,” Akane said firmly, “It’s Ranma. He’s working things out right now. I know he’s struggling,
but I also know that he always bounces back when he’s gotten to his lowest point. And I have faith
in him to do that with this, too...it’s just going to take him some time.” Akane sighed. “I know you
care about him and I know that you’re upset, and frustrated...but taking that out on me isn’t going to
do anyone any good. We all need to stay as positive and strong as we can.”

Ukyo’s shoulders drooped, and her anger subsided. “You’re...yeah. You’re right.” Ukyo looked up
at Akane sheepishly through her lashes, her eyes holding her apology.

Akane reached across the counter, and placed her hand over Ukyo’s, which the other girl just
realized was clenched into a tight fist on the countertop. Akane ran her thumb soothingly along
Ukyo’s hand, until she slowly unfurled her fingers and the colour returned to her knuckles. And
spread elsewhere.

Red painted Ukyo's cheeks as she watched Akane’s thumb rub her hand. Her soft fingers seemed
to coax the anger and frustration out of her, it was like she could feel it being pulled out of her pores with each tickling, warm stroke. Ukyo looked up slowly at Akane, and slowly melted at the gentle smile that spread across Akane’s face and made her hazel eyes flicker with light.

“Cute…”

Akane blinked. “Sorry?”

Ukyo jolted. “...Shoot! I haven't put out the shop curtain yet!”

Ukyo let out a strained laugh and took back her hand, and walked around to the other side of the grill and toward the door.

“Konatsu went out there to do that,” Akane spoke up just as Ukyo went to open the door.

Ukyo paused at the door for a moment before peeking over her shoulder. “Oh?”

“She came through here while you were talking to Ranma.”

“Oh,” Ukyo repeated, slowly. She moved away from the door. “That's good. I guess I'll turn the grill on.”

Ukyo awkwardly made her way back behind the grill, feeling Akane watching her do so. She kept her head down as she went about her work, turning knobs up as slowly as she could.

“Ukyo,” Akane said.

Ukyo couldn't stop her shoulders from jumping. “Akane-chan?”

“You've been giving Konatsu the cold shoulder for a week.” Akane muttered.

Ukyo looked up quickly. Okay, not what she'd been expecting. Not sure if she'd call it a relief, however.

“Sh...she's the one who’s been keeping to herself,” Ukyo defended, “It's not my fault she won't talk to me, or even tell me where she's going or what she's doing.”

Akane sighed, and looked away. “It looks like Ranma's not the only one around here avoiding his problems.”

“Excuse me?”

“Come off it already, Ukyo,” Akane said gratingly, “I'm not an idiot, and I'm not blind. And what's happening between--”

Akane cut herself off when she heard the stairs creaking as Ranma made his way back into the dining area. Instead of coming over to the bar, he walked over to the door that led into the kitchen.

“Hey!” Ukyo barked, “You'd better not be going back there to work!”

“I'm going to give Konatsu some company,” Ranma explained dryly.

“Nice try, sugar. Konatsu isn't even back there right now.” Ukyo sneered and folded her arms in her smugness.

“Then why am I hearing running water back there?” Ranma asked, “Sounds like she's back there to
Ukyo's arms fell, and she blinked rapidly in confusion. "But, she…?"

"She must have let herself in from the back door after she was finished out front." Akane said.

"Oh. Right." Ukyo collected herself, "Ran-chan, don't you even try to--"

"Konatsu wouldn't let me help, anyway." Ranma said. Then he turned around and moved aside the small curtain and was gone again.

Akane instantly looked back over at Ukyo. "You see? She went to the trouble to walk around to the back of the building to get back in! She's going out of her way to not be within five feet of you. And that's not like her at all. Something is really upsetting her."

Ukyo shifted her weight from side to side as though she were uncomfortable. And she was, in a sense. "Well it's not like I can talk to her if she's avoiding me on purpose."

"You two work together and live in the close confines of a one bedroom apartment. This can't go on. You're avoiding Konatsu just as much as she's avoiding you. So be the bigger person here and talk to her."

Ukyo held her arms tightly against herself. "Look, it's not as simple as you're making it out to be. I can't talk to her when I don't even know what to say to her."

"Well you just need to--"

"No, I mean, I can't tell her what I can't...what I don't even know for myself--why I can't--" Ukyo growled in frustration as she raked her fingers through her hair. "Dammit!"

"Why you can't what?" Akane pressed, looking confused.

"Why I…" Ukyo bit her lip for a moment, considering. "Why I can't be with her."

"Because she's a girl?" Akane said. "Or, well, identifies as one, um…"

Ukyo laughed forcefully. "Uh, yeah...no, it's not that," she said, "Her being a girl isn't an issue at all."

"O-oh. Oh," Akane couldn't look Ukyo in the eye suddenly. She played with her pen absentmindedly as she spoke, "Then, is it about...her biological...uhh…"

"Konatsu says she's a girl. And I see her as a girl, no matter what." Ukyo said firmly. "Body parts don't define gender. The...the soul does, or whatever. I guess. Hell, what even is gender, anyway, right? I mean--"

"Okay so it's not an issue with her gender, or her body, or whatever," Akane broke in impatiently before Ukyo could run away on a tangent, "So then, what?"

"I just don't see her like that, okay?" Ukyo blurted, exasperated. "She's--I mean she's my family, and I love her, but I'm not in love with her. Not...not in the way...she is with me."

Ukyo looked up, her eyelids fluttering in awe at her own words. It was the first time she had said it out loud, said it to anyone, even herself. She looked at Akane, who was staring at her with a similar expression.
Ukyo mouthed to words silently to herself, then continued. “I can't return her feelings,” she looked away and shook her head, smiling crookedly and laughing without humour, “But to be honest, I wish I did. I wish I could just...like her back. Things would be a hell of alot easier that way.”

Akane nodded slowly. “Okay, well...seems to me you've just figured it out. There isn't really much else to say to her, just that you don't feel the same way. I know it won't be easy to do, but that will be better than...lying to yourself or...or leading her on.”

Ukyo sighed. “I know. I don't want to hurt Konatsu the same way Ran-chan hurt you.”

Akane looked up at Ukyo in surprise. Ukyo looked at her, her expression solemn.

“While I don't agree with it, I can understand why he did what he did,” Ukyo muttered. “He took the easy way. Ran away from his problems, avoiding having that crucial conversation with you because he didn't want to see the look on your face.”

Akane looked down at her hands, which squeezed the pen she held tightly.

“In fact, Ranma-honey was in the same damn boat I'm in now,” Ukyo said, laughing darkly at the irony of it all. “Having a person who could be so easy to be with. And another person we can’t get out of our heads...”

Akane’s head flew up from staring at her pen. “Wait, what?”

Ukyo blinked in confusion at the shocked look on the other girl’s face. Realization slowly dawned on her as she recalled her own words, and red spread across her cheeks within seconds.

“Ukyo, you--you've got a crush on someone?” Akane had a strange mixture of curious shock on her face. “Who is it? Do I know them?”

Ukyo rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly. “Yeah,” she said lowly, “known ’em for years, in fact.”

Akane’s eyes bulged. “Is...is it...?”

Ukyo nearly fell over. Instead, she slammed her hands down on the counter and a vein popped on her temple.

“I do not have a crush on Shampoo !”
"Excuse me?"

Ukyo and Akane looked up at the front door, where a very confused man stood, looking nervous to come in any further.

"Are you open?"

"Of course, sugar!" Ukyo beamed, jolting upright and slapping on a huge grin. "Welcome to Uuchan's!"

Ukyo refused to meet Akane's eyes while she prepared the man's order. Akane went back to her books shortly after, and soon the morning rush was filing in and taking up all of Ukyo's time. Ukyo wasn't foolish enough to think she was safe, however.

Akane did a lot more playing with her pen than writing study notes.

The ceremonies at city hall had all been dreadfully boring, and it took a lot of willpower (and sharp elbow jabs in the ribcage from Akane) to not to fall asleep standing up.

At last the speeches were over, small gifts were handed out to all the well-dressed young adults whom were twenty that year.

Once that was finally over with, the Tendo and Saotome families all travelled to a nearby shrine, where many of the other gatherers from city hall were visiting next as well. The shrine grounds were crowded as people shuffled closely together, getting fortunes told and buying good luck charms.

Even in the frosty January air, Ranma was sweating under his heavy, itchy, cumbersome hakama. All he wanted was to go home and take this damn thing off; maybe even burn it with the garbage. He didn't even bother to look at the shrine vendors that the group was now weaving through the throng to explore.

"Oh, look!" Akane exclaimed. She tugged on Ranma's sleeve to get his attention. Ranma sighed, finally looking over at the girl he assumed wanted to show him some dumb trinket she thought looked cute.

"What?"

Akane wasn't looking at the trinkets. She was pointing out across the crowd. "Look who it is!" she said excitedly.

Ranma squinted, scanning the faces for someone familiar.

Akane cupped the side of her mouth and waved vigorously with her other hand while she called across the bustling shrine grounds.

"Hey! Over here!" Akane exclaimed, "Akari! Ryoga-kun!"

Ranma finally picked out the faces from the crowd as they turned around to their names being called. Akari led Ryoga through the crowd with the hand she'd already been holding, and she waved
happily at Ranma and Akane as she approached.

It was no wonder Ranma couldn't pick them out right away. Akari looked completely different in a full face of makeup, and all of her hair was pulled away from her face and in an extravagant up-do. Ryoga was dressed in a dark blue suit, and his yellow bandana was out of his hair for a change, and had been fashioned into a bow-tie. Without the familiar headband, traveller’s pack and martial artist clothes, Ryoga looked like a perfectly normal civilian. Like he could have just come from some meeting at some big-rig office, or something.

Paired with Akari’s yellow furisode, the two were matching. Akari linked her arm through Ryoga’s, looking as content as a cat in a sunbeam.

“Hello, Ranma-kun, Akane-chan, it's so good to see you both again,” Akari smiled, “It's been too long!”

Akane laughed. “Try six months too long. Ryoga-kun, it's so unlike you to not drop by the dojo at least every three months, or so.”

Ryoga scratched his neck with his free arm sheepishly, looking down at his dress shoes. “S-Sorry I've not been keeping in touch. Usually I would send a postcard or something even if I can't make it back, but...”

“Ryoga's been living with me on the pig farm,” Akari explained, squeezing Ryoga's arm tightly, “He’s been helping to train the piglets. He's wonderful with them, such a natural!”

Ranma tried to conceal his snort by scrubbing at his nose with his sleeve. Akane gave him a dirty look regardless.

“We're so fortunate to have him there,” Akari went on, looking up at Ryoga as though he were a deity.

“Speaking of fortune,” Akane said, “why don't we all go and get ours?”

“Oh, yes! I'm looking forward to seeing what the world has in store for me this year.” Akari’s fingers clutched the sleeve of Ryoga's suit jacket, crumpling the fabric.

“Not to discredit the Gods, but seems there's more than one match made in Heaven they aren't putting together, Tendo-kun.” Genma muttered to Soun from just behind Ranma.

“Right you are, Saotome-kun. But I'd rather believe it a simple case of cold feet, wouldn't you say?” Soun said back.

Ranma's eyelid twitched.

“I'm sure the Gods have done all they can do at this point. Because from my viewpoint, looks like the fish has leaped quite willingly into the boat.” Soun went on. He wasn't exactly trying to keep his voice down now.

“And now all there's left to do is whack it with the proverbial ore!” Genma cackled.

The two fathers broke into uproarious laughter. Ranma folded his arms tightly across his chest, to keep from cramming the two old men ten feet deep in a rice paddy field.

“You know, Kasumi-oneechan, I think I ought to start a betting pool,” Nabiki said. And Ranma could tell from the tone of her voice her words were not meant for only Kasumi’s ears.
“For what, Nabiki-chan?”

“For which wedding we’ll be going to first.”

“Ranma, are you coming?”

Ranma’s head shot up. Akane, Akari, and Ryoga were all looking at him, and turned to make their way towards the shrine. Akari had her hand clasped around Ryoga’s again. Akane gave him an expectant look.

“You four go on ahead,” Nodoka said, “we’re going to do a little shopping.”

“And we’re going to find the nearest booth selling hot sake,” Genma announced.

“Dear!”

“What? It’s celebratory.”

“We’ll all catch up with you later,” Kasumi said as Nodoka and Genma began to bicker.

“Come on, Ranma! I want to get over there while there’s less of a crowd.” Akane called.

“Alright already…” Ranma sighed, walking over to join the trio as they walked towards the shrine.

This particular shrine sold their o-mikuji from vending machines along the left wall beside the shrine. It took away the traditional ambience of the shrine, but Ranma assumed whatever fortune he’d get couldn’t be too accurate, which was fine by him. Not like Gods could control the will of everyday vending machines. It was purely a silly game of chance.

The girls eagerly fished out change for the vending machines as they waited for their turn. The five machines beside the shrine were all occupied. Ranma watched the young people hurry across the grounds to seal away their fortunes, good or bad, by tying them to the pine trees.

The four walked up to the next available machine, and Akari deposited a five yen coin into the slot. The machine made a whirring sound and then a clicking thunk, then spat out a small tube of paper from the bottom slot. Akari knelt down and plucked her tiny paper from the machine, then stood aside to let Akane go next.

Akari looked over at Ranma and Ryoga while Akane deposited her change into the machine. She held the rolled up paper delicately in her hands, as though afraid she may tear it.

“I’ll wait until everyone’s gotten theirs, and we can all open them together.” Akari said. “It’ll be more fun that way!”

“It’d be more fun if they had something a little more traditional here,” Ryoga said, walking up to the machine for his turn. “This is a newer shrine, but getting your ‘fortune’ from a machine kind of takes the vibe away from the whole thing.”

“I like the ones where you shake that box until a bamboo stick comes out with your lucky number on it,” Ranma found himself saying, despite himself, “then you go to that wall of little drawers and pick the one with your number on it.”

“Figures you’d like the physically demanding method,” he heard Ryoga say and he squatted down to pick out his paper from the machine. “Although I suppose I always enjoyed that one too when I was a kid.”
Ranma's lips went crooked at the word ‘kid’. Was Ryoga making fun of him? Now he remembered why he had been keeping his mouth shut today; seems he wasn't free from the snarky remarks anywhere. Although why he assumed that pigheaded dope Ryoga would be any different was a mystery to him…

“Your turn,” Ryoga's voice broke him away from his wandering thoughts.

His turn to what? Insult him back? He could do that.

“Hurry up, Ranma, there's people waiting and I want to see what all our fortunes are!” Akane chided.

Ranma’s eyes readjusted. Ryoga was standing over with Akari now, and all three were watching him as he stood there dumbly in front of the machine doing nothing.

“Keep your hair on, tomboy,” Ranma scoffed, stepping up to the machine while he fished out some change. He dumped in a five yen coin, then squatted down and waited for the machine to shoot out the randomized paper, snatching it from the slot as soon as it was in sight and jumping back upright. Feigning nonchalance and indifference was a little harder to do when one lacked their usual cool grace, no thanks to the cumbersome effects of a particular bulky hakama. Ranma nearly tripped on the large pant-skirt as he made his way over to the others.

As they walked closer to the side of the courtyard with the pine trees, they began to unroll their papers to reveal their fortunes. They stopped just outside the cluster of pine trees to read their papers.

Akari looked up from her paper first. “What did everyone get?” she asked, looking a little fretful.

“Half-blessing,” Akane read from her paper. “What about you?”

“Curse,” Akari said morosely. “What's your lifestyle section look like?”

“A bit of a hodgepodge,” Akane muttered, frowning at her paper while she read through again. “I got ‘disputes’, ‘a person being waited for’, and ‘studies and learning’. None of those exactly relate to the other.”

“Mine says ‘lost articles’, ‘inauspicious directions’, and ‘illness’.” Akari’s eyes were wide with fear.

“Yikes,” Akane bit her lip, “I'd double-knot that thing to the highest part of the tree you can reach.”

Akari sighed dreadfully. “I'm sure everyone probably got much nicer fortunes than I did.”


Ranma scoffed again, only this time he felt his crooked lips curl upwards, just a little.

“As well as ‘business dealings’, and ‘romantic relationships’.” Ryoga finished. “Awfully random.”

“What does yours say, Ranma?” Akane asked eagerly.

Ranma hadn't even bothered to unroll his paper yet. He did so and quickly scanned through the page.

“Future small blessing,” he read, “And I got…’auspicious directions’, ‘one’s wish or desire’, and… what the hell?”
“How did you get ‘hell’ on such a good fortune?” Akane asked incredulously.

Ranma had gone very pale. “It doesn’t say ‘hell’, it says...uh,” he gulped audibly, “...‘childbirth’.”

The trio stared at him for a long pause, all looking equally dumbfounded. Ranma made the mistake of looking up at Akane, to see she had already turned several different shades of pink. Ranma probably looked blue or perhaps a sickly green in comparison.

“They say you could also tie good fortunes to the pine tree,” Ryoga spoke up, “and I’d suggest you do so. If for no other reason other than to be sure your parents don’t lay eyes on that fortune.”

“I think burning it would have a more successful effect.” Ranma quipped darkly.

Akane’s eyes bulged. “Are you trying to get cursed for life?”

“Childbirth and curses are pretty much the same thing.” Ranma said, “so it really makes no difference to me. Think I’d take any curse over that curse, too.”

“Even the kinds that turn you into a girl, for instance?” Ryoga queried, hefting an eyebrow.

Ranma looked at Ryoga sardonically. “Or how’s about the ones that turn ya into a p--”

“You know, the curse you’ve already got would be what would make things like this one happen,” Ryoga poked Ranma’s paper for emphasis, “so you’re right, they are pretty much the same thing.”

Ranma's pallid face finally filled back in with deep red colour. He gaped at Ryoga for a moment before he shook it off, looking off at nothing and sticking his nose in the air.

“Don't be stupid! For starters, that'd never happen in a million years, and some dumb piece of paper from some cheap vending machine ain’t gonna magically alter my fate. Destiny isn't something that's dropped in your lap, you make it on your own!” Ranma held his paper aloft, pinched between his index and middle finger, and spun around on his heel. “Now I'm gonna decide my own fate, by finding the nearest food stand with an open flame to throw this into.”

With that Ranma stormed away, hoping the speed of his stride would let some of the cool air blow against his hot face.

What in the hell was that moron talking about? What did his Jusenkyo curse and his so-called fortune have to do with each other? Judging by how red in the face Akane had gotten at the idea of bearing children, the prospect was clearly for her to be the one giving birth!

But if that were the case, wouldn't Akane have ‘childbirth’ on her own fortune? Ranma shook out the intrusive thoughts by physically shaking his head, to the confusion of the other shrine-goers. It was just a dumb piece of paper, it didn't mean anything! It was just a scheme for the shrine to make money. He'd said himself that it wasn't like the Gods could enforce their will on some machine. It was a completely randomized system, void of any actual spiritual certainty.

“Stupid!” Ranma spat under his breath.

“Uh, you gonna buy something, kid?”

Ranma looked up. He’d made a beeline for a yakiimo truck and was standing right in front of the vendor’s window. A middle-aged man stood inside the truck, his hands pressed into the counter, watching Ranma with a stern yet curious expression.
“Two, please.”

Ranma looked over to see Ryoga standing beside him. He was rubbing his hands together briskly, blowing warm breath onto his reddening fingers.

“I’m freezing in this monkey suit,” Ryoga remarked.

“I hardly recognized you,” Ranma murmured.

Ryoga looked over at Ranma, who kept his eyes on the yakiimo man. Ryoga looked down, and saw his bow-tie was slightly askew.

“I’ve been waiting for you tell me I look like a dork in this,” Ryoga said, straightening the bow-tie. Ranma shrugged. “Not a dork,” he said quietly. “It’s just...different, I guess.”

Ryoga looked back at Ranma again, his brows raised. The sweet smell of baking yam blew through the cool air.

“Well, other than the lack of teasing from you today,” Ryoga said, “You haven’t changed a bit.” He saw a muscle in Ranma’s cheek twitch, but Ranma still said nothing and kept his eyes forward.

Ryoga stuffed his cold hands in his too-small pockets. “In fact, I recognized you straight away.” Ryoga remarked, “Picked you right out from the crowd when Akane-san called out to us.”

“Because of this, I’m sure,” Ranma said brusquely, gesturing to his hakama. He still refused to meet Ryoga’s eye. What Ranma was lacking in the teasing department today, Ryoga was certainly making up for.

“No, because of this,” Ryoga reached over and flicked Ranma’s braid over his shoulder. Ranma jolted, looking down at his braid now draped across his shoulder, then looking up to meet Ryoga’s eyes. Ranma remembered why he hadn’t been looking at him.

He’d stare too long.

“Here you go,” Both boys looked back to the yakiimo truck, seeing the man leaning out with two large yams, wrapped up in tinfoil and paper. Ryoga dug through his jacket pocket and Ranma went searching through his robes. Ryoga was faster, pulling out the exact change and trading with the yakiimo man. Ryoga turned towards Ranma and held out one of the yakiimo.

“I could’ve gotten mine,” Ranma said, but he accepted the food regardless. The tinfoil was hot under his cool fingers, but it was Ryoga’s fingertips just brushing his knuckles that made him jump.

“You ever wear it in a ponytail anymore?” Ryoga asked suddenly, as they started walking through the small vendor’s market.

Ranma quirked up an eyebrow at the odd question. “Not really. I had to braid it to stop the effects of the Dragon Whisker. It sorta just grew on me, I guess.”

“Pun intended?” Ryoga said with a smirk.

Ranma looked at Ryoga, looking extremely deadpan. “Hardy-har.”
Ryoga chanced a bite of his yakiimo. It was still steaming hot, but it warmed his insides instantly, even if it did burn the roof of his mouth going down.

“Still cold?” Ranma asked.

“The layer of skin I just scorched off my palette is making me forget how cold my fingers are,” Ryoga said.

Ranma snorted. He blew on the yakiimo generously before taking a careful bite.

“What's your favourite season?” Ryoga asked suddenly.

Ranma nearly bit his tongue. He swallowed roughly, before looking at Ryoga incredulously. “What’s with all the weird questions?”

“Figured you’d prefer to talk about something mundane, instead of destiny, or the future,” Ryoga explained, “Sounds like you’ve been getting that more than just today.”

Ranma looked away quickly. “I like summer, I guess.”

“Aren't you a summer baby?” Ryoga inquired.

Ranma nodded. “Yeah, but that's not why I like summer.”

“For the weather?” Ryoga tried.

“Sort of. I don't like the heat so much, but I like...hmm,” Ranma stopped himself, pouting in thought. “I guess I like the idea of cooling down on a hot day. Eating watermelon. Lying out on the genkan to feel the breeze. It's even better when Kasumi is in the yard, watering the grass with the garden hose. I like the smell of it. It's the complete opposite of that smell of cement on an overcast day. Hate that smell; it’s metallic and stale. But that smell of wet grass and sunshine, it’s fresh an’ warm...it's like summer in a single smell...”

Ranma finally realized he was rambling. He made the mistake of peeking over at Ryoga, who was staring openly at him, blinking owlishly. Ranma quickly averted his eyes, and then took a large bite out of his yakiimo to keep his mouth occupied. The hot potato singed his throat.

“I like autumn,” Ryoga went on casually. “The weathers perfect, the air smells nice and crisp. And the gingko trees turn that amazing golden yellow colour...there's gingko trees at our old middle school, remember?”

“Yeah. I think I’d just enrolled around the time of year they woulda changed that colour, too.” Ranma said.

“Remember when we had to sweep up all the leaves one day after school, for disrupting the class?”

Ranma barked in laughter in recollection. “Hey, yeah! They were everywhere! Took us forever to rake them all up. It made about three huge piles.”

“And then after all that you leapt into one of them and sent leaves flying everywhere.” Ryoga recalled.

Ranma remembered, snickering to himself at the mental image of the irate tween Ryoga glaring at him when he popped out of the leaves. “You chased me around with the rake! Then the principal caught us right after I’d tripped you into another pile.”
“So then we had to redo everything, and we got penalized for horsing around so we wound up getting classroom cleaning duty the following day.”

“Is that the time I clapped the erasers onto the back of your school jacket?” Ranma grinned.

“You tried doing that every time we got stuck doing cleaning duty together. That was just the time you were successful.” Ryoga said.

“Come t’ think of it, we always wound up gettin’ put together for stuff.” Ranma noted, “Even after all the times we disrupted the class, or made a mess durin’ cleanin’ duty, they never paired us with anyone else.”

“I guess they were just glad there was finally someone they could pair with me,” Ryoga said, “I missed a lot of school, so I didn’t know any of my classmates very well, let alone become friends with any of them.”

“Huh,” Ranma hummed thoughtfully, “Guess it was like that for me, too. I enrolled so late, I didn’t know anybody. An’ nobody else liked the same things I did; you were the only other martial artist in that school. An’ then I started walkin’ home with ya and meetin’ you at your house every mornin’.”

Ryoga nodded. “I think the teachers knew about that, so they let the antics slide. They knew if we got split up I’d start missing classes, and your grades would take a nose-dive.”

“How d’ya figure that?” Ranma asked haughtily.

“Because when we got paired to do assignments, you’d actually work. That and I tutored you in just about every subject because you just refused to listen during lectures.” Ryoga said plainly. “It’s funny, we always got up to trouble, and yet we brought out the best in each other.”

The last few words reached Ranma deeper than the others, and he felt himself staring openly at Ryoga now, but he couldn’t bring himself to look away this time. Ryoga was looking up at the sky. The cool breeze that blew through the shrine grounds made his dark brown hair flicker against his face. Ryoga’s eyes were hazel, Ranma finally noticed. Just like Akane’s. Unlike her eyes, Ryoga’s were more on the green spectrum of hazel. It was a soft, warm, yellow-green, like the colour of sunlight hitting the backs of summer leaves.

“The moon is out,” Ryoga noted, his voice pulling Ranma out of his own head.

Ranma looked up at the sky, which had turned to a pastel gray, almost lilac colour, a stark contrast to the orange sunset that had painted the clouds only minutes before. Slowly the stars were blinking into place, and the moon hung brightly amid a smattering of thin, navy blue clouds.

“Full moon,” Ryoga remarked quietly as he admired the sight.

“All the crazies are out.” Ranma scoffed.

“What does that make us then?” Ryoga remarked.

Ranma pressed his lips together, frowning a little. “Not as crazy. Not anymore.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“You get used to your life bein’ a certain way,” Ranma said. “Guess I always assumed nothin’ would ever change.”
“Funny. You always seemed like the kind of person who was fine with things constantly changing,” Ryoga said. “You told me that you and your father were never in the same place longer than a couple months. I think that time you spent in middle school with me was the longest you spent in one place, before the Tendo Dojo.”

“You’d know better than anyone how crappy it is livin’ out on the road,” Ranma said brusquely, “I mean sure, when you’ve been doin’ it since you were in diapers it’s just your brand of normal. But those months that I lived in your neighbourhood, it was nice. Sure I still lived in a damn cramped tent with my old man, but...doin’ somethin’ other than what I’d been doin’ all that time, for the very first time...it was nice.”

Ryoga shook his head. “You make no sense,” he murmured.

Ranma looked over at Ryoga bewilderedly. “Huh?”

“Because you just told me you don’t want anything to change, but then you said that change was nice.” Ryoga explained, a bemused laugh in his voice. “So, which one is it? Do you want things to change, or do you want them to stay the same?”

Ranma looked up at the moon. For some reason, his heart was pounding. Then again, maybe it had been pounding this whole time.

“I don’t...know,” Ranma said finally.

Ryoga shrugged. “Guess there’s no stopping it, even if you did know. Time keeps beating on, everything is constantly changing. The things around us, friends, ourselves. It’s as inevitable as...as the phases of the moon, I suppose.”

“The moon always stays the same,” Ranma argued. “I mean, it stays the same shape. It just looks different based on the light. It’s just perspective.”

“But I’m sure the surface changes. Maybe debris hits it and creates another crater, or a man walks across it and leaves his footprints. It’s never the same as it used to be. With every new thing, it alters.” Ryoga supplied back.

“But no matter what, it’s still just the moon.” Ranma said. “It gets bigger an’ smaller, it changes colour, but despite all its different cycles and phases and appearances, it’s the same old moon.”

“Then I guess this must be the same old world,” Ryoga said. “And you’re the same old you. Even when you change the way you tie your hair, or when you change into a female. Or when you turn twenty. You’re still you.”

The wispy purple clouds that had been covering the moon had slowly drifted, exposing the moon’s full luminescence. Ranma could feel his heart beating even faster, the glowing moon and Ryoga’s words stirring something within him.

And just like that, his mind was made up.

“Hey, Konatsu,” Ranma greeted, as he walked into the dish pit in Ukyo’s small, but well-stocked kitchen.
Konatsu paused in her vigorous scrubbing of a grill brush to look up at Ranma.

“Good morning, Ranma-sama...um, can I help you with something?” Konatsu asked gently.

Ranma shook his head. “Just thought I’d come back here an’ keep you company...Uuchan gave me the day off today.”

Konatsu blinked owlishly in surprise. “Oh, well...you don’t have to...I mean, it’s awfully boring just staying back here with me, isn’t it?” Konatsu mumbled, “Wh-why don’t you go sit out front with Akane-sama?”

“She’s busy with her studyin’,” Ranma said, “Besides, her an’ Uuchan have been so chummy lately, I’m starting to feel like a third wheel, y’know?"

Konatsu went back to scrubbing the grill brush. “Yes, I know.” she said.

Ranma hadn’t heard Konatsu sound so terse before. He watched her back as she tossed the grill brush into the next sink of clean water, and picked out more utensils from the soapy water she was hunched over.

“Is everything okay, Konatsu?” Ranma asked, “You seem kinda low.”

“I’m fine, Ranma-sama,” Konatsu said weakly. She paused in her washing again, and looked over her shoulder at Ranma. “In all honesty, it’s you I’m worried about.”

Ranma stuffed his hands into the pocket of his red hoodie. “I’m fine,” he said automatically.

Konatsu’s face fell. “Oh, Ranma-sama,” she said softly, “You’re a much worse liar than even I am.”

“I’m not lying,”

“Your eyes are bloodshot. Did you sleep at all last night, or the night before?” Konatsu asked solemnly, “I haven’t been hearing you talk in your sleep since...maybe Tuesday night. But, Akane-sama told me you snore, and...I don’t hear snoring, either. So, if you’re not dreaming, or snoring, you aren’t asleep at all.”

Ranma looked away. “I...don’t snore,” he lied again.

“Are you forcing yourself not to fall asleep, so you won’t have that nightmare anymore?”

Ranma looked back at Konatsu quickly. “How...do you know it’s just the one?” Ranma forgot the fact he was supposed to lie.

Konatsu gave him a sad, knowing smile. “I get them all the time. Reoccuring dreams. I’ve had a reoccuring dream for many years now. Although, lately the images have shifted, warped themselves so that...it’s not a dream anymore, but a nightmare. Or maybe it hasn’t changed at all, and I’m the one who has changed.”

*Time keeps beating on, everything is constantly changing. The things around us, friends, ourselves. It’s as inevitable as...as the phases of the moon, I suppose.*

“Same old moon…” Ranma whispered.

Konatsu looked at him curiously. “Sorry?”

*It’s never the same as it used to be. With every new thing, it alters.*
“What changed?” Ranma asked airily.

Konatsu looked confused. “Changed?”

“What about you changed so that...your dream became a nightmare?”

Konatsu’s eyes went wide. She stared at Ranma for a long time, and Ranma watched tears fill her eyes.

“I was too late…” Konatsu whispered, the tears spilling down her cheeks now. “I waited too long...I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Of ruining what was already good like it was,” Konatsu wiped her tears away with her sleeve. The tears kept flowing, as her words spilled from her mouth, finally being released. “I was...I was selfish. I wanted more. I was scared...I was so scared of...of--”

“Changing,” Ranma’s voice was nearly mute, he practically mouthed the word silently.

“I was a coward. So I was too late. And now….” Konatsu choked on a sob. She bowed her head, then shook it fiercely. “That’s why...I’m so worried about you!”

Ranma looked down at the wet floor. For a moment, the white tiles flickered, and were soaked in blood. He blinked, and it was gone.

“It’s too late for me, too,” Ranma said, “I already fucked things up. I was scared for a long time, too, but...then, I finally did it. I changed... everything.”

“But weren’t you happy?” Konatsu sniffled.

“Terrified,” Ranma corrected, “Terrified of all that was changing around me, and being powerless to stop it. Terrified of the future, but...not dreading it. Not like I’d been before.”

Ranma looked up at Konatsu. “Yeah. I was happy.”

“Then it’s not too late.” Konatsu said. “Don’t do what I did. Or you’ll miss your chance.”

“I already did.”

“You haven’t! There’s still time for you. It’s over for me because...because her eyes are for someone else. She’ll never see me.” Konatsu jabbed Ranma in the chest with a wet, soapy finger. “But not you. He sees you. And I’m sure he’s hurting like you, misses you just as much...so you can’t wait. He’s alone. He’s hurting…”

His mother’s voice suddenly popped into his head.

_He didn’t sound well, I’m afraid._

“Akane-sama and Ukyo-sama haven’t told you anything because they didn’t want you to hurt even more,” Konatsu explained, “Ukyo-sama called him the other day, and he hung up on her.”

Ranma’s heart jolted. His mother, and even _Kasumi_?

Konatsu was gripping Ranma’s hoodie now, leaving wet patches in the fabric. “Forgive me, I know that none of this is any of my business, but...I tried to call him myself. That time, nobody picked up
at all.”

Ranma’s heart was pounding now. “When was this?” he asked breathlessly.

“Three days ago,” Konatsu said, her eyes filled with fret.

Ranma stared at her, his mouth slightly agape but he found himself unable to form words.

“I...I gotta go,” Ranma finally stuttered out.

Konatsu nodded urgently, letting go of Ranma’s sweater. Ranma spun on his heel and hurried toward the curtained door leading out into the dining room. He paused, and then looked back over his shoulder.

“Hey, Konatsu…”

“Yes?”

“Thanks for telling me.”

The dining room was nearly full with the morning rush. Ranma zipped out from the kitchen and then up the stairs, two at a time. He was back down within a few minutes, now wearing sneakers, and made a beeline for the front door.

“And where are you off to?” Ukyo called.

Ranma looked around at Ukyo sheepishly. “Uh, the bath house.” he fibbed.

“Oh?” Ukyo said, her eyes wide, a cheap little smile on her face. “Well, you have fun!”

Ranma nodded quickly and then was out the door like a shot. The instant he was gone, Ukyo whirled around on Akane. Akane took her gaze off the door and looked up at Ukyo as the girl slapped her hands down on the counter.

“I’m gonna kill him !” Ukyo cried.

“What for?” Akane asked calmly.

“ What for ? You heard what he said, didn’t you?”

“I did. What about it?”

“He’s going to meet up with that--that guy he hooked up with at the bath house!” Ukyo exclaimed hotly. “And I’m gonna meet him there, and beat the ever-lovin’ crap outta him and that dude he banged, then drag him to Ryoga’s doorstep by his hair!”

“He’s not going to the bath house, Ukyo.” Akane said plainly.

“But he said--”

“I know what he said. But did you see him?” Akane rested her chin in her hand, and smiled almost smugly. The hair on the back of Ukyo’s neck stood up; Akane was looking a lot like Nabiki right
now, and it gave her the creeps.

“What about him?” Ukyo spat out.

Akane’s smug smirk broke into a pleased grin. “Well, if he is going to the bath house,” she said, “then he forgot his bath bucket.”

When stepping out of Uuchan’s, the bath house is to the left. Ranma went right, walking stealthily but quickly past the shop, making sure Ukyo wouldn’t see his shadow in the shoji screen. Once he was past the shop, he broke into a run. Ukyo’s shop was just outside the Shopping Plaza, which was already bustling with early morning Saturday shoppers. He wouldn’t get anywhere trying to weave through the crowds.

Ranma leapt up high, and the awed gasps of shoppers on the street below faded as he flew through the air. He landed on a shop sign jutting out from one of the buildings, then bounced on top of the roof from there. High above the busy streets now, he ran freely across the top of the building, and bounded across to the next one, then the next.

_Hey, get down from there!_

It wasn’t like the voice hadn’t invaded his thoughts countless times before, but he gasped out loud at this time. He was still in the air, in the middle of a jump between two buildings.

_Stop that! Get down from there right now!_

Ranma landed hard on his feet, then stumbled forward. He tripped over his feet, and fell onto his hands and knees with a grunt. He was rasping for air, sweat was already beading on his brow even in the cold air.

What the hell _was_ he doing? What about the baby?

Ranma looked up and out across the rooftops that stretched out into the horizon.

“...The baby?” he repeated his own thoughts back to himself in confusion.

He was out of practice, so leaping across rooftops tired him out much more quickly than it normally would. He hadn't walked along another wall or fence, or leaped across buildings, since that day Ryoga had scolded him on their way to their first visit to the doctor’s office.

“Gone,” Ranma said aloud.

That's right. He wasn't pregnant anymore. The baby was gone.

This usually painful thought now brought a strange sense of comforting relief through him. Even though the baby was gone, he could still _feel_ it. It wasn't a matter of it never being anything there at all, but that it had never left. It couldn't. It was a part of him.

He _had_ changed. His body had went through many changes, but it always wound up looking the same again. Externally, he was the same as he always was. But internally, deep within him, he had changed.
Ranma placed a hand on his stomach and held it there for a time, then ran his hand up his chest to his pounding heart.

“Same old moon,” Ranma said warmly, his eyes closing in a strange sense of contentment.

The baby wasn't gone, after all. It was there in a feeling. Of a family that he'd never experienced before.

He used to know what loneliness felt like, and he still did. He felt it even stronger now that he had something to truly miss.

But he was also never truly alone. Because he had a family. It was there in the undying connection he had with the child he'd never meet, and with the man he hoped desperately hadn't done something stupid.

Ranma got to his feet, and broke into a run again. With already aching legs, he leapt onto the next rooftop. His chest was burning, but he couldn't afford to stop. He couldn't wait.

It was nearly noon before he had finally made it. The closer he got, the heavier his legs became. By the time he leapt down onto the familiar street, his knees were ready to buckle with the effort it took to hold up his frame. He was sweating profusely, and practically wheezing for air. Ranma made himself walk right in front of the house before he allowed himself to bend over, resting his palms on quivering knees as he tried to find his breath.

It was almost impossible to stand. He could barely breathe. A heaviness unlike any other was weighing down his whole body, as though it begged him to fall to the ground.

Heaviness?

Despite himself, Ranma’s head shot up to look at the house.

He'd felt this heaviness before. And this was not his own exhaustion he felt.

That's when he finally noticed that the house seemed to be shrouded in a thin dome of black, depressive ki.

Heaviness.

“Oh, shit…”

Chapter End Notes

(Yeah I used a quote from Aang from Legend of Korra in the summary, you wanna fight about it?)

Hey, y'all! Only been, what, five fucking months? Sorry about that--I've been one busy lady, lemme tell you. Actually, no I won't tell you, because it's boring adult stuff.

So I made you wait five months and then ended this bloody thing on a cliffhanger. Well, I had to keep y'all interested somehow, in case I, y'know, disappear for another five months or something.
Ryoga's in the next chapter, I promise. Also, interaction between the boys that isn't in a flashback from two years ago.

See ya next time, folks! Hope you enjoyed and as always, thanks for reading.
Locked.

Ranma snapped out a curse under his breath as he stuffed his hand agitatedly into the back pocket of his jeans.

Empty.

Ranma grimaced in sudden remembrance. The spare key he’d been given was sitting inside the house, inches from his reach. Likely right where he’d left it, beside Shirokuro’s leash on the shoe rack.

A thick bubble of dread crawled down Ranma’s throat and dropped into his stomach as a thought came to him.

Shirokuro.

He cast the front door one last glare, as though it had locked itself of its own accord. Then he stepped away, and weighed his options. Would he have the strength to break the door down? He was rusty, to say the least. It may take a couple of good kicks, but he was nothing if not determined at this rate. Then, the idea was banished as quick as he conjured it. He’d done enough damage to other people’s property over the years.

That meant smashing a window was off the table, too.

Ranma perked up suddenly in eureka. The back door never got locked.

With a new sense of determination, Ranma walked around to the side of the house, and jumped up to grab the top of the wall. It took more effort than he thought to pull himself up, his arms could barely hold up his own weight anymore. He knew it was the pressurizing ki surrounding the house that was making it so hard to move, but he also knew it would be much easier for him if he was on top of his game. He cursed his own weakness as he audibly strained to pull himself up and on top of the wall. Ranma twisted his frame carefully, then let himself slip down. It was much easier to drop than to climb; it was as if the air wanted him to be pushed to the ground. He landed roughly in the soggy grass and snow on his hands and knees.
It was as if he’d crossed a barrier. He found himself unable to rise from his position, as though his hands were nailed down into the cold snow. Ranma grit his teeth, and pushed against the force surrounding him, just enough to lift his head up.

There was exercise equipment strewn about the yard, some even half-covered in recent snow. Ranma frowned. Already not a good sign. His eyes were then drawn to a large mound of snow near the back wall. He squinted, suddenly aware of the haze to his vision now; it had gotten noticeably darker since he’d crossed over the wall.

He stared at the pile of snow for a moment longer, before he noticed it was moving. And, it wasn’t entirely white. On the right side, pressed against the wall so he could hardly see, there was also black.

“Shirokuro,” he meant to shout, but his voice came out instead in a weak gasp.

Shirokuro did not move.

“Sh...Shirokuro!” Ranma called out, desperately. His heart was racing frantically. Please, please move.

To his great relief, he saw the dog’s ears flicker at the sound of his voice. After a slow moment, her eyes opened drowsily.

Ranma still couldn’t bring himself to his feet. The pressure was getting to him the longer he stayed beneath it. He made his way toward the dog slowly, soaking his jeans and hands in freezing, wet snow as he crawled towards her.

Finally he’d crossed the yard and reached Shirokuro’s side. She looked up at him through sleepy, half-lidded eyes. Ranma reached out and touched her head, rubbing the spot between her large ears.

She was warm. She must not have been out here as long as he’d feared. At his touch, her eyes closed in a tired contentment. Her tail twitched; her weak attempt at wagging it.

Ranma looked over his shoulder at the back door. His eyes straining through the haze, he saw that the sliding glass door had been left ajar. Just enough for Shirokuro to squeeze through.

Ranma stroked Shirokuro’s snout gently. “What were you thinking, girl?”

He already knew the answer. She was trying to get as far from this dome of ki as she could. But even pressed against the back wall, she was still within its barrier. Even outside the threshold, the force was still present. And Shirokuro had been exposed to it at full throttle...for how long, Ranma wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“I know you don’t want to, but I need to bring you inside.” Ranma explained to the dog, as if she could understand what he was saying. Somehow, Ranma was certain she could.

Shirokuro looked up at him drearily. She hadn’t even lifted her chin off the ground. All that moved were her eyes as they blinked sluggishly.

“I can’t leave you out here in the snow,” Ranma said, “I promise I’ll make this go away. Somehow. For now, let’s get you inside. It’s worse, but it’s warm.”

Shirokuro let out a shaky, soft sigh. Then, she began to shift. Ranma watched in astonishment as the dog tried to push herself onto her feet. Her legs wobbled, then gave out. Ranma lunged forward to catch her before the force pushed her back down into the snow. It took all his muster to keep her in
“Easy, girl,” Ranma said softly.

Ranma shifted his weight, and tucked his arms more securely beneath Shirokuro. Steeling himself, he began to push against his legs. It felt like he was lifting a car. He hadn’t realized he’d squeezed his eyes shut in strain until he blinked them back open again, looking around to make sure he was fully on his feet. He let out a breath of exertion, and turned around, making his way toward the back door.

Biting down on his lower lip, he balanced his own weight and Shirokuro’s all on one foot as he brought out one leg to shove the glass door open a little further, just enough to fit them both through. Once he’d passed the threshold and both feet touched down on the hardwood floor, the pressure grew even more intense, as though they’d passed through the atmosphere.

Shirokuro groaned in his arms, and Ranma heard himself joining in. His knees felt like they were about to buckle; every second he strained against the heavy pull that threatened to knock him and poor Shirokuro down to the floor. He felt the first bead of sweat start to trickle down his temple as he forced his feet to start to move again. He made for the den, feeling as though the hallway stretched out in front of him for eternity. Somehow, he made it. He dragged his feet across the carpet, feeling only a little guilty for the soggy trail his slushy shoes left. He sank shakily to his knees in front of the couch, and lay Shirokuro down on the plush cushions. Once again he cared very little that the dog’s fur, now wet and cold with melted snow, would stain the fabric. He reached up and pulled the throw blanket on the top of the couch down and draped it over Shirokuro.

Ranma stroked his thumb up and down Shirokuro’s head, and the dog once again closed her eyes, and let out a long, long sigh. Again, Ranma joined her.

Then, Ranma felt the pressure building even further. His body wanted nothing more than to crash into the floor, but he forced himself to stay upright. It was even a strain to keep his eyes open, but he kept his eyes on Shirokuro and his hand on her head, gently rubbing circles between her eyes with his thumb.

The heavy ki was right on top of him now, pounding down.

He knew he was being watched now, but he couldn’t turn his gaze. Mostly because he now felt like he was made of stone, his body was so heavy and immobile. But a force even more powerful was what really kept him from looking.

“Why are you here.”

The voice was so listless, it couldn’t even carry the tone of a question. It didn’t even sound like his voice, but it made Ranma’s breath hitch in his throat regardless.

It took a moment for Ranma to pry his mouth open. “Making sure your dog doesn’t freeze to death.” he said dryly.

No response. Ranma waited for a moment longer, then sighed.

“She was in the backyard,” he explained further, “The front door was locked, so I jumped the wall, and I found her lying in the snow.”

“Why was...is she--”

“She’s weak, but fine.” Ranma cut in, feeling a sharpness creep into his tired, low voice.
There was silence again. Ranma felt something hot flaring in his chest now, sliding up his throat. His fist clenched tightly, his nails scraping through the carpet.

“What in the hell are you doing?” he ground out. His tiredness had suddenly warped into agitation; pushing back against this heavy force no longer drained him, but infuriated him.

“What do you mean.”

“...Can’t you feel it?”

A long pause. “No.”

Then it struck him. Of course he didn’t.

“It’s passing right through you,” Ranma whispered.

That’s it. This dome of energy was created by the ki rising up, but instead of crashing back down, it just remained stagnant in the air. The energy was constantly being fed into, until it amassed into a huge dome. In fact, it wasn’t so much a dome, but a bubble. They weren’t beneath it, they were all inside of it. The only way to not feel the pressure of the heavy ball of ki was to be void of all emotion, so that the heavy ki avoided the empty mass like two negative magnets.

And that’s exactly what the master of this move was. Completely empty of ki. The empty mass protected from the heavy ki by an invisible force.

But he also knew this heavy ki could be fought by ki just as strong.

His nails dug deeper into the carpet with the effort it took, but he was able to push back against the force with one of his own. Not a confident energy like he’d used against this onslaught before. This time, his aura was blazing red. It rose like hot air and shoved back against the black, heavy ki. The air in the room seemed to crackle against it; Ranma could feel each hair on his arm rising.

Then, he rose to his feet, with such ease it was as though the world had been in slow motion before. He walked across the room at a steady pace, but it felt like he was running.

Then a sound like lightning striking a tree broke the silence.

“Snap out of it, you idiot,” Ranma’s voice broke on each word, yet his tone was fierce and rumbled like a roar.

Ryoga looked off at nothing. His right cheek was stained a stinging, bright red.

“I said snap out of it !” Ranma yelled, and he whipped his hand across the other side of Ryoga’s face. Ryoga’s head cocked sharply in the other direction.

Ryoga blinked, and with that tiny flutter of movement his face cracked just barely out of the stony shell.

“What…” his voice was faint, as though he was miles away. He blinked rapidly again, dazedly, as though a magician had released him from a trance. Then he looked up at Ranma. The bleariness left his eyes, and clarity broke through his irises as though a drop of water had touched oil.

“Oh,” Ryoga said, his hushed voice slightly astonished, “You’re home.”

Then his knees buckled, and Ranma caught him roughly by the torso before he landed face-first on the muddy carpet.
Ranma sighed wearily.

There were some things in life, he realized, that definitely were not at all better the second time.

"Almost too late again.”

The first thing he saw when he woke up was stardust. It took him a few moments to realise that it was only regular dust, illuminated by a sunbeam. His eyes flickered over to the window, and he could just see that the sun was beginning to duck behind the blackened silhouettes of neighbouring rooftops. The sky was a delicate orange, the brilliant sunset dulled by the thin overcast of a winter sky. Another few moments passed and he gathered that he was lying in bed, his head was slightly elevated by stacked pillows. He was tucked securely beneath the blanket, which smelled of fabric softener and a hint of lavender detergent. Freshly washed.

Maybe he wasn’t in his room, after all.

His eyes explored. He recognized the posters adorning nearly every wall, which were painted a pale, earthy green. That hadn’t changed. But the floor was spotless where there should have been a blanket of clothes and the odd piece of litter, with a small trail to lead from the bed to the door. He’d almost forgotten his room was carpeted.

No, he thought stubbornly, this can’t be my room.

The bedroom door opened, bringing Ryoga out of his thoughts, and he looked towards the door with a muted curiosity. Shirokuro had learned to turn doorknobs, perhaps.

An image flickered into his mind then, although it was muted by a thick gray haze, as though he was trying to recall an old dream.

Shirokuro, lying on the den couch, exhausted.

She’s weak, but fine.

The voice made him quickly shut his eyes against the hazy image. He didn’t want to see the face attached to it.

He was in bed. So it’d all been a dream.

Funny. He can’t remember the last time he’d slept.

“Awake, are you?”

That voice wasn’t in his head this time.

He kept his eyes closed for a moment more. His lids flickered, testing, then opened slowly. His gaze locked onto the dancing dust, and he was determined to keep it there.

“You need to eat.”

A sound of glass touching down on the wooden bedside table. Then, the left side of the bed sank and shifted.
“...Ryoga.”

The voice saying his name sent uncontrollable sparks through his body, travelling through his veins and then bursting in his brain like a firecracker. Ryoga’s brow quivered, but he kept his eyes on the dust.

Maybe a little ridiculous to think it’d all been a dream, after all. Which made a horrible thought cross his mind once more and curdle the bile in his stomach.

“Shirokuro,” he murmured, “is she alright?”

“She’ll be okay. She needs to get her strength back. Much like you do.”

Something heavy and slightly warm was suddenly placed on his stomach.

“So, eat.”

Ryoga was careful not to peer through his peripheral as he looked away from the dust and down to his stomach. It was a plate full of steaming croquettes.

“Eat.” came the curt command again.

“I’ll wait for them to cool.”

“They’ve already been cooling. Eat.”

Ryoga reached out and took up one of the fluffy croquettes. Sure enough, they were still nicely hot, but easy to handle. He took a small bite, and chewed slowly.

“...How long was I out?” Ryoga asked, the food successfully clearing the cobwebs from his brain and making the hazy images clearer.

“About four hours.”

“It’s...clean.”

“Yeah.”

He waited for the crack about him successfully living in a place worthy to be called a pig’s sty, and how ironic that was. But, it didn’t come. A strange part of him was perturbed by this; the rest of him was trying to persuade him that this wasn’t really the time for jokes, now was it?

“You’re not eating.”

Ryoga picked up another croquette from the pile.

“I can’t eat all of these,” he said.

“Have a few more, then I’ll put them away.”

“How come you made so many?”

“I was trying to use up the food that wasn’t spoiled.”

“I see.”

Thick silence. Ryoga picked up another croquette. He ate several more as the minutes ticked on.
quietly. He managed to put a decent dent in the pile. His stomach wasn’t used to this much food all at once, and felt a little too heavy.

Heavy ...

...Can’t you feel it?

The plate was removed. The left side of the bed shifted again, and rose. The movement stirred the dust particles frantically in the slowly fading sunlight.

“I’ll go and make some tea.”

“Why did you come back?”

The footsteps stopped halfway across the room.

“You weren’t answering the phone,” came the response after a long beat.

“I’m usually at Nekohanten most of the day.”

“You hung up on Kasumi-san. And Ma.”

“...So you came for their sake, then? They asked you to?” Ryoga queried loftily.

A faint sigh. “Nobody asked me to come. Nobody even knows I’m here.”

“You left a few things behind. Came back to collect them, I suppose.” Ryoga went on, “Your bag of pu’erh tea. A few books. Other...odds and ends.”

“I don’t own enough to forget anything when I go. Anything I left behind was yours to keep.”

Footsteps again, and then the sound of the plate being placed somewhere across the room. On the desk, he assumed. Then, the footfalls grew closer, and the weight sunk the bed’s left side again.

“Well, you forgot one thing,” Ryoga said plainly.

“What?”

“Something small, and orange. And likely under these pillows still.”

“You mean this?”

Perhaps it had been a trick for him to look, and if it was, he’d fallen for it. His eyes betrayed him and broke their stubborn gaze on the dancing dust. He skittered past eye contact however, to let his eyes fall upon a pair of hands, which cupped a tiny orange shoe.

“Ever realize there was only one here?”

Ryoga looked up at him without restraint now, and was a little relieved to see his eyes were downcast, hidden as they looked down at the shoe.

“The other one is in my sleeping bag.”

Ryoga couldn’t look at that little shoe, though he’d looked upon it so many times before. He couldn’t look at the hands that held it so gingerly, as though it was a puny glass slipper. Ryoga closed his eyes again.
“So you didn’t forget anything. Then, what is it? What brought you back?”

There was no response. Ryoga kept his eyes closed. The bed shifted again, and he was certain for a moment that he was leaving. Instead, the bed rose, then sunk even lower than before. He listened to creaking bedsprings, the rustle of the clean sheets. Lavender laundry soap. A soft intake of breath, then a sensation so familiar, and--

Warm.

Their lips parted.

Ryoga waited for the soft breath on his face to fade away, for the scent of lavender laundry soap to fill his nose again, before he allowed his eyes to open.

“So, it’s pity.” he surmised.

At last Ryoga allowed his eyes to meet his.

“I wouldn’t be here if it was.” Ranma said.

Ranma stood up, and walked over to the desk to pick up the plate of croquettes again.

“You eyes are bloodshot,” he said, “You should get some more rest.”

He left the room, clicking the door shut quietly behind him. Ryoga listened to his footsteps as he walked away from the door and down the stairs.

“So are yours,” Ryoga said to the empty room.

When he woke up again, the room was still dimly lit. The clouds outside were such a pale, bright gray that they gave the illusion of light. Ryoga sat up, feeling incredibly groggy and sore. He cracked his neck, rubbing his shoulders gingerly. He pulled the sheets off his hot legs, and walked to his bedroom door (this proved a little difficult; it'd been easier to find his way to the door when he had a path through rubbish to show him the way).

After a few minutes of struggle, he managed to get downstairs, and find the kitchen. He was parched, and could go for some more of those croquettes, too…

As Ryoga leaned against the kitchen counter, drinking a large glass of water and eating the leftover croquettes cold, he realized just how hungry he was. Some bleak, hazy part of his memory could recall a lack of meals, although he couldn't recall how long that had lasted. When was the last time he'd eaten a proper meal?

Croquettes, delicious though they were at any temperature, didn't exactly count as a well-balanced meal. And these ones didn't have the same amount of ingredients as usual. Ryoga opened the fridge again, glum to find that it was quite barren. He finished off the rest of the cold croquettes, then finished off his glass of water as he stared forlornly at the now empty plate.

He could hear the distant thumping of the washing machine from down the hall. Ryoga looked down at his clothes, and instantly grimaced. His gray t-shirt had seen far better days; it was wrinkled beyond belief, and now that his nose was turned downwards, he finally discovered that smell he'd
noticed the last few days.

His aching back and shoulders from sleeping like the dead, his limp hair, and smelly clothes all demanded a long, hot bath. Ryoga put his dishes in the sink (it was so clean now!) and then walked out into the hall to try to hunt down the bathroom. Where was Shirokuro, anyway?

Then he remembered. All thoughts of his bath left him and he rushed into the den, heart suddenly pounding. Shirokuro was gone, not lying on the couch under a blanket where he'd last seen her. The blanket had even been neatly folded and placed back on the top of the couch. Strange, Ryoga hadn't seen her anywhere upstairs either. Where could she have gone?

He made his way down the hall again, past the kitchen, following the dull thumping of the washing machine; he knew he would get to the back of the house if he followed the sound. The small storeroom that housed the washer and dryer was ajar, a laundry basket on the floor by the open door that was full of folded clothes, which Ryoga recognized as the ones that had coated his bedroom floor for the longest time. Ryoga turned right, continuing down the hall. Perhaps Shirokuro would be sitting outside the bathroom door.

But just as the thought had come to his mind, Ryoga found Shirokuro in the middle of the hallway, looking out the back door. Relief washing over him, Ryoga rushed to the dog, who looked away from the door as he approached.

"I'm so sorry, girl," Ryoga said instantly, kneeling down and stroking the dog's neck. Shirokuro turned her head to lick Ryoga's wrist as she softly wagged her tail. Ryoga absently scratched his pet's ears as he turned to look out the glass doors into the backyard, curious what Shirokuro had been watching before he arrived.

Ranma was standing in the backyard. His back was to the door; he hadn't noticed Ryoga was there. He wasn't hanging any clothes on the line (it was too cold for that) or anything else, for that matter. He was just standing there, his head turned upward slightly, looking up at the sky.

Ryoga then heard a noise that wasn't from the washing machine, but from outside. The clouds had grown darker and thicker, and now rumbled with thunder. Then there was a hard crack, then a hiss of wind. Droplets of rain began to patter the glass. Ranma still hadn't moved; he was still watching the sky.

Ryoga stood up, and reached out for the door. His hand hovered for a moment, hesitating to show himself for some reason. Another intimidating thunder roll and crack of lightning brought him to his senses, and he yanked the door open.

"Ranma," Ryoga called, finding his throat trying to close around the syllables.

Ranma didn't turn around. "Yeah?"

Ryoga couldn't respond, distracted by the raindrops falling into Ranma's hair.

One of the strands of black turned bright red.

"Come inside," was all Ryoga could manage to get out.

The rain was falling faster now. Between two blinks of his eyes, Ryoga watched Ranma become two heads shorter, slimmer, a shock of red hair replace the black. Ryoga's heart was racing again. Thunder rolled, lightning danced across the dark clouds, creating veins of light that lasted a millisecond, then vanished. The rain was pouring in buckets now.
Ryoga could barely hear her voice over the din when she finally spoke.

“I hate when that tomboy is right.”

“Ranma, come on.” Ryoga said, not even bothering to ask what that had meant.

Ranma finally turned around. The expression on her face was indiscernible, and yet Ryoga's stomach had begun to churn with guilt. Her eyes, the clearest blue, were still bloodshot.

“You—you'll catch cold out there,” Ryoga said, hating how weak his voice sounded.

Ranma watched him for a while longer, then made her way inside without a word. Ryoga stepped back as she passed the threshold, then reached behind her and slid the glass door shut. He kept his hand on the door handle, but had his eyes on Ranma. Her eyes were downcast, her soaking red hair dripping into her face, rolling down her cheeks.

Slowly she looked up as another minute went by and still Ryoga hadn't moved. Her eyes met his, and if it weren't for the striking blue Ryoga could swear it was like seeing his reflection. Their eyes were both heavy, darkened by lack of sleep.

Ryoga’s other arm moved to reach up and cup Ranma’s wet cheek. Then he moved his other hand off the handle and wrapped his arm around her waist. She was soaked to the skin from the downpour, her skin freezing; but it was familiar all the same. And Ryoga drank all of it in, just as parched of it as he'd been of sleep and decent meals.

This was just supposed to be about necessity. A peculiar choice of words they had chosen for their little pact, which had turned on them as quick as they'd made it. But Ryoga wouldn't go back and change any of it now. It wouldn't have changed a damn thing, anyway.

“Fuck it,” Ryoga whispered, running his thumb across Ranma's cheek.

Ryoga pulled Ranma in closer and kissed her. He could feel Ranma reach up and grab onto the front of his shirt, her fingers clutched tightly around the fabric. Her lips were pursed hard against his at first, but as he continued her lips melted into his own and started to move with him in tandem. Her hands released his shirt and coiled around his neck, pulling him in even deeper. He stroked his hand down her cheek, her waist, and around her back. Ryoga snaked both hands behind her legs and hoisted her up; they maintained the kiss as Ranma wrapped her legs around Ryoga’s waist.

Ryoga stepped forward, backing Ranma into the glass door until her back pressed against it. Ranma's gasp at the cold finally broke their kiss, and they stared at each other, breathing heavily.

“Your teeth are chattering,” Ryoga said. “We should get you warm, or you'll catch a cold.”

Still holding her, he turned and walked down the hallway and through the door at the end of the hall. When they passed the threshold, Ranma unhooked her legs, and Ryoga had to bend his knees slightly so her feet could reach the floor.

He stayed bent over to capture her lips again, the only part of her that was warm. Ryoga stepped forward, until Ranma followed his lead and stepped backward until they'd reached the shower. Ryoga reached around and opened the glass door and backed Ranma inside, following her in and closing the door behind them.

Ranma's eyes finally opened and she looked around as though confused, more focused on their kissing to really care where Ryoga had led them. But her eyes were growing wide with a panic that was growing rapidly in her chest as Ryoga reached behind her and turned on the water.
“Ryoga, wai--”

But Ryoga’s lips were all over again, their warm sensation washed away by the hot water pouring over them. Since Ranma couldn't feel his lips they couldn't distract from the hot water pouring down, the glass walls, the white tile floor that kept flashing red.

“Ryoga--” Ranma gasped through the water in his mouth, and Ryoga's lips, “Ryoga.”

Ryoga groaned against his mouth, sighing as he broke away and trailed wet kisses up his jaw and toward his ear. “Ranma, Ranma…” he sighed.

Ranma's clothes were entirely soaked through now, instead of shivering from the cold rain he was trembling in the hot steam of the shower, unable to breathe as Ryoga trailed kisses he couldn't feel down his neck and collarbone. The hot water soaking his clothes made him think of his nightmares; the ocean of blood, wading through its thick depths, his skin and hair and clothes stained red...

Bright red was splashing down onto the white ceramic, splattering the windows and making them look like they were shattered, their cracks running with blood like wounds.

Ranma was gripping onto Ryoga's shirt and hair, but with panic instead of passion; clinging to him like a life preserve in fear of sinking beneath the blood...like Ryoga did in the dream...sinking beneath the red ocean and gone from sight forever...

“Ryoga!” Ranma cried out, pulling Ryoga away from his neck.

He was shaking profusely even beneath the hot water, his eyes wide and panicked like a cornered animal, his breath came out in ragged spurts. Ryoga's face was slightly confused when Ranma first pulled him away, but the instant he saw the state Ranma was in his face fell into a look of deep concern.

Ranma was hyperventilating. Ryoga grabbed both sides of his face, holding him steady.

“Ranma? Ranma, what's wrong?”

“I-I can’t...it's…” Ranma's eyes were unfocused, looking off at nothing.

“Look at me. Just look at me,” Ryoga soothed, though there was pain etched in his voice.

Ranma looked at him, though his breath still hitched and he still trembled between Ryoga's hands.

“Breathe,” Ryoga said slowly, “It’s alright.”

Ranma squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head, though Ryoga knew him well enough to know it wasn't in disagreement to his words, but to shake out the thoughts and images racing in his own mind. Ryoga pulled Ranma into his arms, squeezing him tightly.

“It's alright. I'm here. I'm here now. I wasn't before and...and I'm so sorry, Ranma, I…I'm here now.”

He could feel Ranma nod against his shoulder. They stayed that way until Ranma stopped shivering, until his breathing went back to normal. Then Ryoga reached behind him and shut off the water.

Ryoga pulled away and grabbed Ranma's shoulders, squeezing them tightly. Without words they left the shower, still dripping wet, fully clothed and soaked. Ryoga started removing his wet clothes and throwing them in hamper until he was down to his boxers, which were still dripping but mostly stuck
to his legs. Ranma peeled off his soaking wet jeans, which were feeling incredibly unpleasant. His boxers weren't in any better state, sticking to his thighs and starting to chill now that he was out of the shower. By the time everything was thrown in the hamper he was down to his wet underwear and shivering, now because of the cold again.

Ryoga passed him the towel he'd been drying off with and Ranma scrubbed his hair and legs, desperate to be dry. Even after years of being accidentally splashed, knocked into koi ponds, jumping three stories down into a swimming pool...he really hated being wet.

Then they left the bathroom and walked through the hallway, their damp skin chilled by the air, their hair and boxers still dripping. They reached Ryoga's room and Ryoga went over to his dresser and began to fumble through the clothes, which Ranma could see from over his shoulder had gotten very disorganized.

“I don't think any of this is yours,” said Ryoga, “so you can borrow some of mine.”

“Oh. Sure.” Ranma said, as Ryoga tossed him some sweatpants and a t-shirt, even some fresh boxers. Ranma looked down at the shirt. It was the dark green “Hokkaido” t-shirt he'd worn several times over the last few months. It had become his favourite shirt, and the only comfortable thing to wear once his stomach had started to grow…

Ranma looked up at Ryoga, who was pulling out some more clothes for himself. Ranma let the sweats and boxers drop to the floor and then brought the shirt up and over his head.

It smelled like home.

He paused halfway through pulling the shirt down his chest, and looked at Ryoga's back again. Then he pulled the shirt back off and threw it on the floor.

He walked up to Ryoga and grabbed his arm. Ryoga was just looking over his shoulder questioningly when Ranma yanked him around to face him, grabbed the sides of his face and pulled him down onto his lips.

Ryoga kissed back fervently, dropping the clothes in his hands to the floor and wrapping his arms around Ranma and pulling him close. Ranma's fingers dragged across Ryoga's face to cling to the back of his neck; he gripped at tufts of his hair and brought Ryoga's bottom lip between his teeth. Ryoga groaned, his tongue running across Ranma's upper lip, then breaking away to bend down and nip along his neck.

Ranma pushed them both towards the bed and Ryoga used the same move from before, grabbing Ranma's legs and pulling him upwards as Ranma wrapped his legs around Ryoga’s torso. Ryoga turned around and knelt down, doing something in-between placing Ranma down gently and throwing him carelessly on the bed.

Ranma backed up until he was near the metal frame of the futon bed; Ryoga caught up to him and grabbed the waistband of Ranma's boxers; Ranma was happy to be rid of them for more than the fact they were cold and damp.

Ryoga lay down on top of him and kissed him deeply again, his hand running down Ranma's stomach…

“Wait,” Ranma said suddenly placing his hands against Ryoga's chest.

Ryoga looked up at him, worry etched on his face again. He instantly removed his hand and studied Ranma's face.
“What's wrong?”
Ranma swallowed roughly. “I...I don't want to do anything without telling you. It wouldn't be right.”
Ryoga raised a brow. “What do you mean?”
Despite his calm demeanour, Ranma could feel Ryoga's heart hammering hard against his hand.

“Well, when I was gone...” Ranma began weakly, watching some tiny droplets of water drip out of Ryoga's hair instead of looking him in the eye. He took a deep breath. There wasn't really a delicate way to put it. “I slept with someone.”

He quickly looked up to gauge the reaction, but Ryoga's face was indescernible.

“With who?” was all Ryoga asked.

“You've never met them, and neither had I, until, well...” Ranma explained, clumsily.

“So, a stranger?”
It sounded pretty bad when it was worded like that. “Yeah. Pretty much.” Ranma said, trying not to wince.

“So...this person, and you...you're...?” Ryoga was struggling with the question; he dreaded the possible answer.

“No,” Ranma said without hesitation, but trying not to say it too quickly, “it was a one-time thing.”

“So, you slept with a stranger.” Ryoga said the words slowly as though trying to digest and process them. “And, what? What do you want me to say? Are you asking me to forgive you?”

“No,” Ranma said firmly, “I don't need your forgiveness.”
Ryoga's brows raised in surprise at the response. He said nothing, seeing Ranma's eyes were searching for more words, so he waited.

“You don't need to forgive me,” Ranma went on, “for any of it. For what I said, for what I did, you don't need to forgive me. And you don't need to...to take me back. I didn't want to do this without telling you first. So you could choose.”
Ryoga still didn't speak. He was looking Ranma all over, searching across his skin, trying not to think of the places this faceless, nameless figure had touched.

“We always act first and talk later,” Ranma continued, “and that always comes back around on us. So this time I don't want to just...just shut off my brain and forget about all my problems. I can't keep running away. And I can't keep any more secrets.”

Ranma pushed himself more upright, leaning back on the metal frame of the bed to study Ryoga carefully.

“So if you can't forgive me, that's okay. And if you want me to leave, that's okay, too.” Ranma said, “I would understand.”

“You idiot.” Ryoga muttered.
Ranma didn't cringe, didn't say a word. He waited for Ryoga to continue, ready to accept whatever he was about to say.

But Ryoga didn't say anything more. Ranma blinked and Ryoga had lurched forward and kissed him so hard his head hit the wall behind him. His lips would probably bruise, his head would probably have a bump, but in that moment he couldn't think of the stinging pain in the back of his skull because Ryoga was everywhere, his mouth trailing hard kisses wherever he could reach.

Ryoga pulled him down onto the sheets, ending his flurry of kisses on Ranma’s lips again. This one was the deepest one, and Ryoga reached up to hold both sides of Ranma's face, pushing himself even closer. Finally he pulled away and they were both heaving for breath.

“You idiot,” Ryoga rasped, “I'm the one...I hurt you. I didn't listen. I was too wrapped up in my own problems to see what you were going through and I...I was selfish.”

“But, I--” Ranma began.

Ryoga kissed him again. “Shut up, let me get this out. It doesn't matter what you did or said because I deserve it. I left you alone. You had to go through all that hell all on your own and when I actually was there...I couldn't even help you. I only made the hurt worse. So I deserve this, I--”

“Stop,” Ranma said, putting his fingers on Ryoga's mouth. “Stop saying you deserve this. You don't deserve to suffer; you're suffering because it was your loss, too. It wasn't just my baby, Ryoga. It...it was our baby.”

Ryoga's eyes had welled up with tears. Ranma could feel the drops of water from Ryoga's hair rolling down his cheeks. Ryoga reached over and wiped one of the wet tracks away. Ranma realized then that they were warm; they were his own tears.

“We lost the baby,” Ryoga said quietly, and from the weight of the words Ranma knew it was the first he'd uttered the words out loud, or perhaps even thought them. “I'm not losing you, too.”

Ranma felt his chest clench and then flutter, that sensation that was so familiar to him now. He used to be confused by it, but now he finally understood. And a little voice inside him said that, really, he always had.

Ryoga was kissing him again; kissing the tears on his face, kissing his lips so gently it was as though he feared they'd shatter like glass. The hands on his skin were their familiar roughness, heavily calloused from years of training. Ranma reached down to grab and pull the waistband of Ryoga's boxers down while Ryoga's lips moved over his, and his hands stroked along his arms and down his chest. As Ranma tossed the damp garment across the room carelessly, Ryoga was blindly reaching for the bedside table, stubbornly trying to keep his lips on Ranma as he clumsily found the drawer and yanked it open.

He pulled away to search through the drawer, coming out with a small tube and a carton. Ryoga fumbled for a moment peeling open the box and ripping off the foil package, then tossed the box back into the drawer, and was back to kissing Ranma again.

Ranma plucked the packet out of Ryoga's fingers as they kissed. Then he suddenly grabbed Ryoga's shoulders and flipped him over onto his back, straddling his legs all in one fluid movement.

Ranma tore the foil package open with his teeth and spat the piece off to the side. Oddly enough it reminded Ryoga of their first night in the mountains, when they were setting up camp in the clearing. Ranma was making instant ramen, ripping open the packets of dried toppings open with his teeth.
Ryoga chuckled to himself. He ran his hands up Ranma's stomach, the other watching him with a curious expression at his sudden amusement. Ryoga squeezed Ranma's waist, trying to guide him down. Ranma remained upright however, looking like he was mulling over something.

“What is it?” Ryoga said, rubbing his hands across Ranma's thighs now, “You're thinking of something to say.”

“I just...had an idea,” Ranma said slowly.

“Hm, in my experience that can be a little dangerous,” Ryoga smirked, “What's your idea?”

“Uh, well...what if I...um...” Ranma couldn't look Ryoga in the eye. The flush in his face was darkening and spreading rapidly. He bit his lip hard and then blurted out the rest, “Iwannabeanontopthisetime.”

“I didn't quite get that.” Ryoga said, trying his very best not to laugh. Ranma would close right up if he did. And he wasn't having that.

Ranma steeled himself for a moment, then continued, slower this time, “I want to be on top.”

“You already are on to-- ohhh ,” Ryoga clued in halfway through. Then his face soon matched Ranma's in colour.

“Yeah,” Ranma said, and Ryoga had never heard him sound so meek. “I-If you want--”

“I want to,” Ryoga said quickly.

“Oh. Um, okay. Okay, well...then you should, um...uh, so that I can, y’know?” Ranma was leaving a lot of words out of that sentence, but Ryoga figured he got the general idea.

“Yeah, we kinda learned the hard way this angle isn't the greatest for the first time,” Ryoga said, recalling that night he threw Ranma down in the tent.

Ranma nodded, moving off of Ryoga's legs. Ryoga sat up.

“We’ll take it easy this time,” Ryoga went on, “we're already off to a good start, considering we’ve got the, uh, tools for the job...” he nodded toward the bottle of lube and the opened packet still in Ranma's hand. Then Ryoga looked a bit sheepish. “Sorry we didn't have that for you.”

Ranma shrugged. ‘Didn't tell ya t’ stop, did I?’

“No, but you ignored me for half an hour afterwards.” Ryoga retorted.

“My own fault for following you up to the mountains with the intention to sleep with you but not come prepared.” Ranma said, flippantly.

Ryoga snorted. “Like I said, a mix of good and bad ideas.”

With that he twisted around onto his knees, looking at Ranma over his shoulder. Their talking had relaxed Ranma's shoulders, taken the tension out of his face; but now Ranma looked lost again.

“If you're not sure, you don't have to--” Ryoga began.

“I want to,” Ranma said firmly. He felt a bit odd thinking back on it in this moment, but he remembered the way Hideo had prepped him with his fingers. He didn't have to be nervous, he knew what to do. And this was Ryoga. Not a stranger. Everything about him was home.
“I want to,” Ranma repeated, sitting up onto his knees and pushing Ryoga in the back, guiding him to bend. Ryoga obliged, bending forward and steadying his hands in the pillows.

Ranma took a steadying breath. He reached over and grabbed the lube bottle and popped open the cap, squeezing it out onto his fingers. Crap, that looked like too much. Awkwardly, he closed the cap with his thumb and put it aside, then rubbed the lube into both his hands, thinking about his next move as he did so. When he was fairly certain both hands were generously doused, he reached his left hand around Ryoga and grasped the base of his cock. He saw the muscles in Ryoga's back twitch for a second, then relax. Ranma slowly moved his hand up and down, slowly building up the rhythm. When he heard Ryoga give a long sigh, he moved his right hand to his entrance.

When he was fairly certain both hands were generously doused, he reached his left hand around Ryoga and grasped the base of his cock. He saw the muscles in Ryoga's back twitch for a second, then relax. Ranma slowly moved his hand up and down, slowly building up the rhythm. When he heard Ryoga give a long sigh, he moved his right hand to his entrance.

First, he just ran two fingers down either side, massaging the area in preparation. Ryoga was squirming a little beneath him now. Ranma continued to keep the same rhythm on his member, and a teasing, deep massage around his entrance. He waited until Ryoga let out a soft groan, then the pushed his first finger inside. Ryoga's spine curved, and his groan dragged out and grew louder. At this Ranma sped up, moving both hands at the same pace. He continued on that beat for a while, until Ryoga was pushing back against him. Ranma pushed in another finger. Ryoga gasped slightly; his fingers grasped the sheets. Ranma only did two fingers for a few seconds before going for a third. Ryoga groaned again, still pushing back against him; it was clearly no longer enough. Ranma removed his fingers but kept his other hand wrapped around Ryoga's shaft. He picked the packet backup and managed to slip out the condom one-handed. He was going to need two hands to get this on, however. He was briefly distracted by the fact he'd never done this before. He took his other hand back, and slipped the condom onto himself. It wasn't particularly pleasant, and neither was the smell. He braced his hands on Ryoga's hips and bent forwards.

“I'm gonna...if you're ready--” Ranma began clumsily. He really should have planned something sexier to say.

Suddenly Ryoga's hand had come up and grabbed Ranma's braid and gave it a tug, pulling Ranma's head down. Ryoga's head turned around and his lips caught Ranma's all in the same movement.

“Yes,” was all Ryoga said.

That was all Ranma needed. He positioned himself and then, slowly, started to inch himself inside. There was some resistance now that he didn't feel with his fingers. It was a bit difficult to get himself inside while maintaining a slow pace. When he got all the way inside, he stayed still, letting himself and Ryoga get accustomed to the sensation. He knelt down and kissed the back of Ryoga's shoulder, then began to pull back out. He only went halfway, then pushed back inside, trying to pick up the pace.

Ryoga jolted at the quick thrust, then let out a soft groan. Like before when he was prepping, Ranma began to build up momentum, maintaining a steady pace with each increment. He reached over and grasped Ryoga's cock again, jerking him as he thrusted in and out.

“Ah, fuck,” Ryoga groaned, bowing his head.

Ranma watched the muscles in Ryoga's back contract and twitch, relax and roll. He bit his lip, feeling himself on the edge. It was tight and incredibly warm around his cock, he could feel it twitching; he was moments away. He wanted to fight against it, wanted it to last. Ranma went faster, riding out the last of his high until he was pressing his chest into Ryoga's back, unable to move as he came what felt like over and over again as he spasmed.

“Shit, damn it,” Ranma rasped out, entirely breathless as he gingerly pulled out, “I'm sorry, I couldn't--"
Ryoga whirled around and tackled him down, ravishing his mouth hungrily.

Ranma groaned in protest. “That was so lame, it wasn't even two minutes--”

“Shut up, I don't care,” Ryoga said through his kisses.

“But you didn't even--”

“I'm gonna take care of that,” Ryoga said, pushing himself up and twisting to reach the bedside table for the carton and bottle.

Ryoga ripped off another package and tossed the packet and bottle of lube on the bed then turned back around. Ranma still looked put out by his own performance. Ryoga smiled, brushing Ranma's still-damp bangs off his forehead, which was now hot with a sheen of sweat.

“We finally did it on the bed,” Ryoga announced.

Ranma scoffed through his nose. “We've run out of places we haven't done it, then.”

“I wouldn't know about that. We’ll just have to get creative.” Ryoga said lightly, squeezing some lube out onto his fingers.

“It's like we're going backwards,” Ranma sighed, “Our first time was outdoors in a pile of leaves. And now we've done it on a bed and it was so short-lived I feel like I'm freakin’ sixteen again.”

He had a point; they really were doing this backwards. Maybe if they’d had less insecurities in their youths they could have already been together for years. Already had all their first times. But instead of a slow-burning romance they skipped a bunch of steps, then had to awkwardly backtrack. And again, Ryoga thought, he wouldn't change a single thing.

He bent down and kissed Ranma again, slow and deep. Ranma melted beneath him, sighing softly and relaxing into the kiss.

“If we're doing things backwards,” Ryoga said, suddenly breaking away from their kiss, “Does that mean we should go out on a date? Wait, I guess we never were dating to begin with, huh? So that means I'd have to ask you out first. Or even court you for a bit before building up the nerve, then--”

“Ryoga,” Ranma said, grabbing the sides of Ryoga's face and kissing him sharply to break off his tangent. “Touch me.”

Touch me, you want to.

Looking back, Ryoga almost found the phrase laughable now. Ranma had essentially demanded Ryoga to touch him, but then followed it with ‘you want to’. As though he was trying to cover up the fact that it was something he wanted too. Even though it had been his very intention when he followed Ryoga to the mountains. But then when it came down to it, even when he’d stood before him stripped completely down and grabbed his hand to guide him where to touch, he still said ‘you want to’.

Now, his command was plain. And Ryoga was happy to oblige it.

He kissed Ranma’s cheek chastely, then burrowed himself into his neck. He felt Ranma’s arms snake around him, and Ryoga wrapped his hand around Ranma’s shaft and slowly massaged the head. Despite his slow movements, Ranma was instantly jerking and shivering, still incredibly sensitive.
“Overstimulated already, Saotome?” Ryoga smirked.

“Sh-shu-shuuut up,” Ranma stammered, clearly trying very hard not to moan out of spite.

Ryoga laughed breathily, kissing up Ranma’s neck tenderly as he began to stroke his own member. Although he didn’t require any persuasion. He pulled away to grab the condom packet, keeping his eyes on Ranma. It was as though he feared if he looked away he would vanish again. His eyes searched every inch, as if the places that had been touched by that nameless and faceless figure would reveal themselves so he could erase them.

He wasn’t sure why it didn’t make angry; maybe he was too caught up in the moment and would be upset about it later. Perhaps he considered it his own doing, and therefore couldn’t pass Ranma any blame. He wasn’t even particularly jealous. All he wanted, and all he cared about right now, was Ranma.

Ryoga grasped Ranma’s thighs and swiftly pulled him forwards until his legs were on either side of Ryoga’s. Ryoga leaned down and kissed Ranma’s chest, up to his collarbone, his chin, then his lips. He felt Ranma’s hands come up and hold the back of his neck, silently asking to stay right where he was. Ryoga continued the kiss while he reached down and prepped Ranma. He kept his movements slow, caring more about the smell of Ranma’s skin and hair, his racing heartbeat pressed against him, the taste of his lips, the sounds he made at Ryoga’s touch. As badly as he wanted him, he wanted it to last as long as possible, so he took his time.

Thirty minutes burned by, and Ryoga was still prepping Ranma, though now it was with three fingers. Ranma had started to show signs of impatience after about ten minutes, so justifiably he was in quite a state by this point. Ryoga was no better; his fingers still worked slowly but were maintaining a deep, thrusting pace.

“Ryoga, for fuck’s sake,” Ranma gasped.

Ryoga smiled against Ranma’s neck. He’d be a total liar to say he didn’t find Ranma swearing a turn-on. He reciprocated by nipping at the skin just above his collarbone

“Ryoga!” Ranma admonished, pushing at his shoulders, trying to pry him off. “Enough, I’m ready, just--fuu---mmm--” His words broke away into senseless sounds as Ryoga bit his neck, his shoulder, his chest, all the while still pumping his fingers in and out, his pace finally quickening.

But Ryoga seemed to have received the message. At last he pulled his fingers out. He reached up and kissed Ranma quickly.

“Sorry,” Ryoga breathed against his lips, “Got a bit carried away…”

“I’m...totally not complaining, it’s just--don’t make me wait any longer.”

Ryoga nodded, kissing him again. And again. Would he ever get tired of--?

“Ryogaaaa,” Ranma growled, impatient.

“Yes, yes, sorry,” Ryoga sighed, positioning himself.

He pushed in slowly. Then he felt Ranma throw his legs around his waist and lock his ankles, and pull him forward. Not expecting the move, threw his hands out to steady himself on the mattress while simultaneously groaning as he felt himself push deeper into Ranma. Ranma’s back curled as he moaned, and he snaked his arms around Ryoga’s neck to pull him down for a kiss.
Ranma unlocked his ankles, allowing Ryoga to thrust. He knew better than to go slow this time. He quickly thrust back in, as deep as he could go, grunting at the sensation. Ranma jolted, and cried out, then it melted into a long moan as Ryoga kept up the pattern of the quick, deep thrusts. Ryoga burrowed into Ranma’s neck again as he rode out the pace, his brain tingling and going blank.

After a moment he lifted himself up as he changed his pace. He still went deep, but instead of quick, small thrusts he would thrust hard, pause for a beat buried right down to the base, pull out and repeat. Ranma gasped with each thrust, the rough movement making his whole body jerk. He couldn’t hold himself up anymore, and let go of Ryoga’s neck, letting himself fall back against the pillows. Then Ryoga changed it up again, keeping the hardness and the depth, now adding the speed back in. Ranma’s back curled again, his hands clawed through the sheets then grasped them tightly.

Ryoga leaned down, the roughness fading out from the movements as his body tired, but he kept up the speed and depth. Ranma looked up, and their eyes met. Ranma grasped Ryoga’s face between his hands and pulled him down onto his lips, holding him there. Ranma moaned against Ryoga’s lips as he hit the same spot again and again. He felt Ryoga shudder against him, his breath gasping; his pace lost all depth and changed entirely to speed. Ranma gasped then moaned loudly, kissing Ryoga hard and messily as Ryoga groaned, and he felt him pulse deep within him and release.

Ryoga’s whole body shuddered and jerked, and Ranma jolted as his cock matched the movement. Ranma moaned softly, rolling his hips against him, riding out the last few moments. Then Ryoga lay down on top of him with a long sigh. Ranma finally noticed they were both covered in sweat, but he couldn’t care less. He sighed contentedly, kissing Ryoga’s hair. They stayed that way for a moment, Ranma running his fingers through Ryoga’s hair, as their heartbeats settled back down. Ryoga was a lead weight on top of him, his body completely spent.

“Ryoga,” Ranma said quietly.

“Mmh?” was the muffled response.

“You’re crushing me.”

Another grunt, and then Ryoga rolled off of him and sprawled out on his back beside Ranma. Ranma twisted around, tucking himself into the crook of Ryoga’s shoulder the same way he did that night they shared the sleeping bag in the mountains. Ryoga wrapped his arm around Ranma and gave him a weak squeeze. Ranma smiled to himself sleepily. They were covered in sweat and Ryoga could feel the lube sticking between his thighs, and Ryoga’s arm was likely going to fall asleep a few minutes after he did.

He couldn’t think of anywhere else in the world he would rather be.

Chapter End Notes

At last, here's the newest chapter. I really hope it was worth the wait, sorry for keeping y'all in suspense for so long. I reeeally wanted to be happy with this chapter so I was being picky and making sure I knew for certain it was Finished before bringing it out
into the world. Hope you guys enjoy!

What happens from here? We're definitely reaching "end game" territory here, folks. I think this might have another three chapters left. I never plan this stuff out, I just write the thing until it's story is told and there's nothing more to say. I can never anticipate the amount of chapters. So let's shoot for 25, and then go from there. If these characters still have more to say by then, then I'll keep going.

Thank you so much for reading up until this point. I'm glad there are lots of you here that have watched this story unfold since the beginning. It means a lot!

Stay tuned for Chapter 23!
Two months went by faster than a blink. It was a bright morning in March, although the lingering winter still kissed the air with a slight chill. It had been dreary and rainy the last few days, but the sun had finally graced the sky with its presence, making the day crisp and golden. It almost felt like autumn, were it not for the early buds of the cherry blossoms on many of the trees, creeping out slowly to bloom.

Ranma tucked his scarf a little closer to his neck to keep out the chill. It was the yellow one Akane had knit for him. Although made with love, it was a bit thin and tattered, so it had a hard time fulfilling its job.

“Akane-chan, your teeth are chattering.”

Ranma looked over at Akane, who was walking on his right side, and although she was bundled up in a thick scarf and long tweed jacket, she was hugging her arms close to her chest as she walked. Ukyo, who was walking on Akane’s other side, was eyeing the girl with a furrowed brow.

“Do you want my jacket?” Ukyo offered.

“I'm not cold, it's just nerves,” Akane protested. “I'm so nervous it's giving me goosebumps.”

“Don't worry, Akane-san. It'll be fine.” It was Ryoga who had spoke, as he looked around Ranma to offer Akane an assuring smile.

“Ryoga’s right, Akane. Knowing you, you probably got the top grade.” Ranma thumped Akane on the back, causing the girl to stumble forward a little.

“Yeah, I studied my face off, but I just don't know if it's going to be good enough…” Akane said worriedly.

“They'd be crazy not to accept you. Plus you've already passed the preliminary exams, so you
definitely passed this one no problem.”

“But this is *Musashi* University,” Akane said, “One of the Tokyo Four. I always wanted to go to
Tokyo University, but that one is so prestigious, and the entrance rate is less than fifty percent…”

“Plus Musashi is the only one of the Tokyo Four that isn’t a private institution. And it's located
right here in good ol’ Nerima, as a bonus.” Ukyo said. “So it checked all the boxes.”

“If we get in, that is.” Akane mumbled.

“That's enough outta you,” Ranma said, wrapping an arm around Akane’s shoulder and rubbing
her arm. “You're getting into Musashi University, end of discussion.”

Akane was still pouting, but her cheeks were flushed and it seemed like she was having a hard
time keeping her mouth from pulling into a smile.

“Man, look at that crowd,” Ukyo announced, “looks like we're here.”

Ranma could feel Akane start to tremble under his arm again, and he gave her an assuring
squeeze. The group had arrived at the front gates of Musashi University, which was swarming with
people who were all bundled up for the chilly spring day, and seemed to be all trying to crowd
around a large sign posted outside the campus gates.

“Looks like we weren't as early as we thought,” Ryoga muttered.

“Geez, it’s as if every high school graduate and ronin in this district is here,” Ranma said, up on
his tiptoes trying to get a look at the top of the sign, but he couldn't make out anything from this
distance.

“Looks like we’re gonna hafta fight our way through. That crowds pretty thick.” Ukyo groused.

“Piece of cake,” Ranma said, “Here, Akane, hold on.”

Before she could say a word Ranma had scooped Akane up into his arms and had leapt high into
the air, landing amongst the crowd and disappearing from sight.

Ryoga sighed, scratching his head. Obviously Ranma had missed being able to show off the last
few months. It seemed he was finding any opportunity he could to flaunt his skills these days.

“Well, what are you waiting for, sugar?” Ukyo shot at him, breaking Ryoga from his thoughts.

“Oh, right…” Ryoga said, picking Ukyo up and leaping into the air, following Ranma into the
middle of bustling crowd.

It was a flurry of activity. There were people even lifting up their friends onto their shoulders to
get a better view. Just to their right was a large crowd of boys celebrating wildly. The break in the
crowd the four had created with their aerial entrance was short-lived, it seemed, as the crowd quickly
tightened up again. The group of four all gathered close and started scanning the board, but it was
hard to keep their eyes trained on one place with all the other people moving and jumping around.

A group of excited high school girls had pushed their way through and were blocking Akane’s
view. Ranma grabbed Akane by her coat and dragged her to stand in front of him, keeping a firm
grip on her shoulders. He looked over her head, scouring the board for recognizable kanji.

“Ah! I found mine!” Ukyo cried triumphantly, her voice practically drowned out by the noise of
the crowd.

“Did you get in?!” Akane tore her eyes from the board to look at Ukyo, but Ranma and Ryoga were still hunting down her name.

“I'm not telling until we find yours!” Ukyo shouted back, “Argh! I shoulda brought my spatula, dammit! Someone just stepped on my foot!”

“I found it!” Ryoga called.

“Where, where?!” Ukyo followed Ryoga’s finger as she bounced around on the spot. “Ahh, I see it too!”

Ukyo pushed through and grabbed Akane’s shoulders.

“You got in! You passed!” Ukyo was practically screaming now over the crowd.

Akane screamed right back even though the two were face to face. “Did you?!”

“I did! We passed! We’re going to Musashi!” Ukyo was bouncing up and down again, still screaming. Akane joined her, the girls laughing and screaming, holding onto each other for dear life.

Ranma squeezed himself through the crowd, which somehow seemed to be getting even thicker, standing over near Ryoga where he wouldn't be in the way of flailing limbs.

Akane whirled around, her face beaming. She ran over to Ranma, happy tears brimming her eyes.

“Ranma, I did it, I did it! I passed!” she cried, laughing and crying all at once. She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed the air right out of his lungs.

Although breathless, Ranma laughed so hard it shook his ribs. He grabbed Akane around the waist and hoisted her into the air. She cried out, but laughed and grabbed onto his shoulders for dear life as he spun her around. When he set her down, she stumbled from dizziness, still giggling like crazy.

“Alright, let’s get the hell outta here!” Ukyo cried. “This is a madhouse!”

They left they way they had entered, Ranma and Ryoga picking up the girls and leaping once more into the air.

There was a rush of awe from the crowd at the spectacle as the two martial artists carried the young women through the air and landed lightly down onto the gates of Musashi. Then they jumped again, leaping far across the sea of people until they landed back down on the street, away from the crowd.

“We should all go out and celebrate!” Ryoga announced, as he set Ukyo down on the ground, holding her as though she weighed nothing at all.

“Oh, yes!” Akane said giddily, clapping her hands together once she was back on her feet.

“Where do we want to go?” Ranma asked, adjusting his military cap.

“How about sushi? It’ll be my treat!” Ryoga beamed.

There was a chorus of excited cheers of agreement from the group, then the four friends set off in search of a nearby sushi shop, the chill of the day completely forgotten.
It was fall.

The golden rays of the sun were hidden behind grey clouds. Instead, gold came from the ginkgo trees which were beginning to lose their autumn leaves, fluttering to the ground and painting the streets gold.

The ginkgo trees were on either side of the front walkway that lead to the large double-doors of an all-boys junior high school. The grounds were empty safe for the yellow leaves and two lone boys who pushed open the front doors and walked down the steps. Both wore a typical navy blue gakuran. The one with neatly trimmed, dark brown hair had his school jacket cleanly buttoned all the way up to the collar. The other, with an unruly shock of jet black hair tied into a low ponytail, had his jacket unbuttoned at the collar, and his arms stretched up over his head as he groaned.

“Man, cleaning duty takes forever with just two people.”

The other boy scoffed. “We wouldn’t have been left alone to do it ourselves if you hadn’t disrupted the class, Saotome.”

“You’re the one who disrupted the class. I just asked to borrow a pencil and you gave me hell.” Ranma muttered.

“Because I leant one to you yesterday and you broke it!”

“Don’t ya get tired of bein’ such a hothead, Hibiki?” Ranma sighed, tucking his hands behind his head as they walked along the grounds towards the school’s front gates.

“I am not a hothead!” Ryoga hollered.

“Sure, sure. So, which way do ya live, anyway?” Ranma asked, looking over his shoulder. This was the first time the two boys had ever left school together.

Ever since they’d first met, Ryoga had never looked Ranma straight in the eye. Today was certainly no exception, since Ryoga looked down at his shoes as he replied. “Dunno.”

“You...don’t know?” Ranma said, quirking a brow at the other boy.

Ryoga shrugged.

“Do you live in this neighbourhood?” Ranma asked.

“...I think so,” Ryoga mumbled.

That was an even weirder response. Ranma turned around to fully face Ryoga, giving him a deeply puzzled look.

“Where’s your house?”

Ryoga scuffed the end of his sneaker on the pavement. “I don’t know.”

Was this kid messing with him?
“You don’t know where your own house is?” Ranma asked incredulously.

Ryoga shook his head.

Ranma crossed his arms. Ryoga was a grouch, but now he just looked like a little kid who had been caught with wet bedsheets. He was burning holes into his own shoes, and gripped tightly to the straps of his school bag. Ryoga wasn’t exactly the best liar, so Ranma had a feeling this wasn’t just a prank.

Ranma chewed his lip, wondering what to say next. Talking with this guy was usually like walking through a minefield. If this sense of direction thing was true, then he certainly seemed sensitive about it.

“Well...what about a landmark?” Ranma tried, “Y’know, like...somethin’ that lets you know you’re getting close?”

Ryoga seemed to think on it for a moment. “Well, there's the school. Then...a mailbox. And a bus stop. And a vacant lot with a tent.”

Ranma stared at Ryoga, deadpan. Man, he almost wished Ryoga really was messing with him, because this was just pathetic.

“Dude...none of that was any help at all.”

“I can't help it, okay?!” Ryoga snapped, finally looking up.

Ranma sighed again. There it is, he stepped on one of the mines again. This guy was something else.

“Well do ya wanna find your house or not??”

“I do!”

“Then do you know what it looks like? You've gotta know that at least!”

Ryoga looked up in thought. “It's got a cement wall around it...a black metal gate, and a plaque with our family name on it. All the houses around there are really close together and kinda look the same...which makes it even harder to find.”

Ranma scratched his chin. “Huh. A black gate and a plaque on the wall.” Then his eyes popped open in a sudden eureka. “Hang on. Did you say there was a vacant lot with a tent?”

Ryoga nodded.

“That sounds like my neighbourhood!” Ranma exclaimed, “We may find this place easier than I thought. Come on, we’ll just weave through all the streets in that area until we find the place.”

Before Ryoga could say anything otherwise Ranma had started to walk again, and Ryoga had to jog to catch up to him. The two boys walked around the streets in shared silence, examining the houses for one that matched Ryoga’s description. There wasn't any idle chatter, Ranma only spoke under his breath as they searched.

“There's a mailbox right there...all these houses have concrete walls, though. Guess it's just lookin’ for a black gate and plaque...”

Now that Ryoga thought about it, Ranma had never forced conversation with him. The boys
hardly spoke all day at school even though they were in the same class. If they were paired together for any reason, they stayed focused on getting the task complete as soon as possible.

It was actually kind of refreshing to not have someone try and force themselves to talk to him, Ryoga thought. He peeked over at Ranma out of the corner of his eye. Ranma had his eyes planted straight ahead, zeroed in on their mission.

He was taking this seriously.

Ryoga wasn’t sure why the idea of that made a shiver crawl up his back. He looked away again quickly. The jerk would no doubt pick on him if he caught Ryoga staring.

A cold droplet hit Ryoga’s nose, and made him look up at the sky. The clouds above had grown darker during their search.

“This explains the nasty smell in the air…”

Ranma sped up his pace, now hoping to get this job done as quickly as possible. Ryoga followed close behind. The droplets came down in a light mist, but soon enough the shoulders of his school jacket and the top of his head were wet, and his bangs were dripping.

Then, there was deep roll of thunder that carried across the dark clouds. As it faded, the gentle rush of the raindrops falling suddenly quickened. The rain was now coming down in thick sheets, and Ranma let out a loud curse and the boys took off running. They held their school bags over their heads as they pelted down the soaked street. Ranma ducked into a bus shelter and Ryoga followed suit.

“I hate the rain!” Ranma snapped irritably, flicking his wet bangs out of his face.

Ryoga sat down on the bench inside the bus shelter with a sigh, setting his wet school bag in front of his feet. Ranma stayed standing, holding the strap of his dripping schoolbag and looking out at the downpour.

“Hang on…” he muttered under his breath suddenly, causing Ryoga to look up.

“What is it?” Ryoga asked, watching Ranma squint out at something in the rain.

“I think I see it,” Ranma said, pointing. “Just over there.”

Ryoga followed Ranma’s finger. It was hard to tell in the downpour of rain, but he could just make out a house with a black gate.

“I think that’s it,” he said.

“Then let’s find out,” Ranma said, brandishing his bag over his head. “Come on!”

They took off at a dead sprint through the rain towards the house. When they reached the house, Ryoga spotted the plaque on the front wall, and recognized the kanji as his family name.

“This is it!” he said, rushing over to the gate and cranking it open to get underneath the awning. Digging through his school bag and pulling out house keys, Ryoga looked over his shoulder. Ranma was still standing on the street, holding his bag over his head. He seemed to be contemplating something.
“You know, my place is actually just around the corner,” Ranma said slowly, “If you want, I can come here in the mornings and take you to the school.”

Ryoga looked away, fumbling with the key in the lock. “I don’t need your pity, jerk.” he grumbled.

Ranma rolled his eyes. “It’s not pity, I’m just sayin’ I’ll do you a favour, idiot.” he sighed, “Or are you saying you actually like getting detention, and doing all those make-up tests?”

Ryoga still wouldn’t look at him, staying silent as he turned the key back and forth. “I guess...you can come by.”

“Great, then it’s settled then,” Ranma said, looking pleased it hadn’t taken too much persuasion. “This means you can’t fight me over the bread anymore, too.”

This made Ryoga whirl around. “What?! No way! No deal!”

“I just said I’m doin’ you a favour, aren’t I? So, I scratch your back, you scratch mine. I’m leadin’ your lousy butt back n’ forth every day so the least you can do is let me eat!” Ranma snapped back, “We don’t all got nice big houses full of food, ya know!”

Ryoga frowned at that. “I thought you just said you lived in this neighbourhood,” he muttered.

“I said I live near here,” Ranma said quickly.

“So what, is it an apartment building or something? That's pretty much the same as a house, it’s just less rooms and floors…”

“It’s not an apartment either. Look, I’ll see you tomorrow, okay? You better be ready on time or I’ll leave without you.”

“Wait a minute!” Ryoga called out as Ranma turned on his heel to walk away.

Ranma stopped, looking back at Ryoga. “Now what?”

Ryoga was looking Ranma in the eye for the first time.

“Come inside,” Ryoga said, “You can wait here until the storm passes.”

Now it was Ranma’s turn to look away. “Why bother? I’m already soaked. Besides, my place isn’t far...just around the corner actually.”

Ryoga sighed impatiently. “You can borrow some dry clothes. If you catch a cold who’s gonna take me to school?”

Ranma was silent for a moment, then shrugged passively. “Guess so.”

Ryoga unlocked the door and Ranma followed him inside, then was instantly knocked down onto his back by something large and fluffy.

“Oh, crap. Down, Shirokuro, down!” Ryoga cried, “Off, off, girl!”

Ranma sat up, watching Ryoga drag the dog off of his legs. The dog had the most unique coat Ranma had ever seen. It was like two dogs sewn together, one black and the other white. Ranma instantly understood the name.
“Heh…your name is “Checkers”, huh?” Ranma said, scratching the dog’s large ears.

Shirokuro made an ‘avoo’ type of sound, as if to say ‘yes’. Ranma usually wasn’t much of an animal person. The only dogs he’d met were mostly strays, and they were all skin and bone and dumb as a stump. But Shirokuro had a keen clarity in her eyes, as if she seemed to understand every word you said.

“Do you have any other pets?” Ranma asked suddenly.

“No, only Shirokuro. My mother is allergic to cats.” Ryoga replied.

Ranma jolted a little at the word, but Ryoga didn’t notice as he was kicking off his shoes and walking down the hallway.

“Come on, I’ll make some tea and we can get some dry clothes on.” Ryoga said.

Ranma took off his shoes and followed Ryoga down the hallway, noticing that Shirokuro had taken the lead and was seeming to show Ryoga the way to the kitchen.

Ryoga filled the kettle and put it on the stove, then Shirokuro led the way upstairs to Ryoga’s bedroom. Ryoga put his school bag on the desk and went over to his dresser as Ranma stepped into the room.

Ranma looked around at all the different decorations that adorned almost every corner of Ryoga’s room. There were posters on every wall, and souvenirs on each shelf, that looked like they were from all different parts of the country. Ranma recognized quite a few of them from his own travels. Man, this guy’s sense of direction really got him around.

“Here,” Ryoga said suddenly, and Ranma looked away from the shelf of trinkets he was examining to look down at the bundle of clothes in Ryoga’s hand.

Ranma took the clothes, which was a pair of sweats and a pullover. Ryoga pulled more clothes for himself out of the dresser and then began to unbutton his school jacket. Ranma set down his school bag on the desk and undid the rest of the buttons on his jacket, shucking it off and throwing it on the pile Ryoga had already made on the floor with his own uniform.

“I’ll throw this in the dryer and be back in a second with the tea.” Ryoga paused at the door for a moment before looking around at Ranma, who’d taken a seat on the floor to look at more of the stuff on the shelves. “Are you...uh, hungry at all?”


“I’ll see if we have any snacks, then. Be right back.” Ryoga left the room, Shirokuro on his heels.

Ranma continued to look through the shelves. He felt as though he could walk back into this room and keep finding something new to look at. He couldn’t imagine owning so much stuff. He shuffled across the carpet on his knees over to the television on the large shelf in the middle. It was a big one, like the ones Ranma would see in shop windows.

On the smaller shelf directly below the one that housed the television was a gray box, with two purple accents. Ranma frowned. He didn’t even know what half this stuff was for.

Ryoga walked back into the room with Shirokuro trotting alongside him. He joined Ranma on the floor, setting down a tray. There were two cups of tea, and a wide spread of snacks. A tall stack of hanami dango, and a bowl filled with a mix of taiyaki and melonpan.
Ranma tried very hard not to drool.

“Have as much as you like,” Ryoga said, “As thanks for getting me home today.”

Ranma snatched up two sticks of the hanami dango, and a taiyaki. He had the taiyaki finished off in three large bites, and one of the sticks of the hanami dango cleaned off before Ryoga had even picked up his teacup.

Ranma pointed at the gray-and-purple box with his remaining stick of hanami dango. “So, what is that thing?” he asked through a full mouth, “Some kinda radio?”

Ryoga looked confused, looking at where Ranma was pointing, and back at Ranma again, “You mean the Famicom?”

“The what?”

“It’s called the Super Famicom. You play video games on it.” Ryoga explained. “It came out four years ago. My dad got it for me for my tenth birthday the year it came out.”

“Huh. Never heard of it.” Ranma said, picking up his cup of tea and one of the melonpan.

“For real? You mean you’ve never played Super Mario? Mother 2? Metroid? Rockman X?” Ryoga gawked as Ranma shook his head as he listed each title. “Have you ever been in an arcade before?”

“Nah, those places are too expensive.” Ranma said, sipping his tea.

“Geez, you’re missing out. Here, let me show you.” Ryoga crawled over to the game system, pulling out a game, a second controller, and turning on the television.

He put in Super Mario, and set it to multiplayer. He tossed Ranma the first controller and sat back down. Ranma looked at the controller, then up at the screen. Mario was standing motionless on the screen, as the 8-bit theme song played on in the background.

“You move him with that button under your left thumb. Press the A button to jump. And that’s pretty much it.” Ryoga said. “Give it a try. I set it to multiplayer, so if you die, then I’ll take over.”

Ranma started pressing buttons, and got Mario walking along the screen.

“What’s that brown thing? Looks like a mushroom cap.” Ranma said.

“It’s a Goomba. He’s an enemy, jump on his head to kill him.”

Ranma made Mario jump into the air, land on the Goomba’s head, and it popped out of existence.

“Why am I so tiny?” Ranma asked.

“You need a mushroom to get bigger,” Ryoga said, scratching Shirokuro on the head while he took a bite of taiyaki.

“The Goomba?”

“No, no, a super mushroom,” Ryoga said, pointing to the screen. “Go over to those bricks and hit them. Just jump up and they’ll break.”
Ranma did so. When Mario hit one of the bricks, a yellow-and-red mushroom popped out from the top of the brick and slide down onto the ground. When it reached Mario, Mario suddenly grew larger.

“The super mushrooms give you more life. If you fall down a hole, you’ll die. But if you're big and an enemy hits you, you'll shrink again. If you get hit when you're small you die right away.” Ryoga said, watching Mario jump over a pipe. “Make sense so far?”

“I guess so…” Ranma said, clearly trying to focus. “Can I jump on the turtles, too?”

“Yeah, but be careful. Koopa’s shell will go flying if you hit it again and if it hits you--”

But his warning came too late. Ranma had leapt on the Koopa, causing Mario to double-jump, landing on the shell and then landing on the ground right in the path of the speeding shell.

“Aww man, I'm tiny again! I need another mushroom…”

Ranma and Ryoga traded off as they went through the different levels, until Ranma demanded to see what the other games were like. Ryoga put in Rockman X, which Ranma seemed to enjoy since the enemies took a bit more thinking to destroy rather than just jumping on their heads.

“Hey, the gun isn’t working on these robots!”

“It's just going through their legs, you've gotta jump up and shoot their head.”

Ryoga wasn't sure how much time had passed, but suddenly the sunlight coming through his bedroom window caught his eye. Rather, it was the deep orange glow of sundown. Long shadows were cast through his room. Ryoga wondered idly when the sound of the rain had stopped.

“It’s getting late. Our uniforms are probably dry, too.” Ryoga said.

“Uh-huh,” Ranma mumbled, looking a bit glum.

Ryoga peeked up at Ranma as he gathered up their empty teacups onto the tray. He stood up and set the tray down on his desk, and went into his school bag.

“Heads up,” Ryoga said, tossing something to Ranma.

Ranma caught it effortlessly, then looked down at what it was Ryoga had passed him. It was a plastic gray box of some kind with a small screen, and buttons similar to the Famicom.

“GameBoy?” Ranma said, reading out the logo.

“It lets you play video games whenever you want. You can borrow it for a while. I've got Rockman World V in there now. You liked Rockman X, right?”

Ranma simply nodded slowly.

“It needs to be charged when the battery is low. I can give you the charger, too.” Ryoga said, pulling it from his bag.

Ranma looked at the charging cord Ryoga held. Then he stuck out the GameBoy to Ryoga. “That's okay. You can keep it.”

“That worried you're gonna break it, are you?” Ryoga quipped.
“I don’t have a plug.” Ranma mumbled.

“No plug? Like, to plug the charger into, you mean?” Ryoga asked, holding up the cord.

Ranma nodded again, looking away.

“No even one? But even apartments would have at least one wall outlet per room…” Ryoga frowned, “Where the heck do you live, a shoebox?”

Ranma looked up, his cheeks flushed. “No!” he snapped defensively.

“Well, then where do you live?” Ryoga demanded.

Ranma pouted. “It’s a secret.” he said petulantly.

Ryoga folded his arms. “I won’t put a truce on the bread feud unless you tell me.” he said.

Ranma opened his mouth to protest the ultimatum, then closed it again. He looked down at the GameBoy in his hands.

When he spoke, Ryoga could barely hear him, his voice was so small.

“Just promise you won’t laugh.”

Ryoga plopped down cross-legged on the carpet, his face stern.

“You didn’t laugh at my sense of direction,” he said quietly, “I won’t laugh.”

Ranma fumbled with the GameBoy, turning it over in his hands the same way he turned over the words in his head. He took a steadying breath before he spoke.

“I live in that tent in the vacant lot.”

Ryoga blinked. If he remembered right, that vacant lot was just around the corner, behind his house. The two of them had practically been next door neighbours this entire time. Ryoga had even passed by that tent several times, usually while trying to look for his house. There was usually an older man sitting outside it, dressed in a bandana and a worn-out gi.

“How long have you been there?” Ryoga found himself asking.

Ranma shrugged. “Since I enrolled. It’s actually the longest we’ve stayed in one spot. My old man has been talking about packin’ up again soon, though.”

“Really? Where are you going to go?” Ryoga wasn’t sure why he was bothering to ask the question. It wasn’t like he’d have any clue where it was, anyway. But something inclined him to ask regardless.

“He says it’s a secret this time. But he did say it’s a place called ‘Jusenkyo’.” Ranma said, “I dunno where it is, or when he wants to hit the road. He never has a plan, he just packs up and goes when he feels like it.”

“I see,” Ryoga muttered.

The two sat in silence for a beat. Then Ryoga stood up again.

“You can still borrow that if you want to,” he said, “When the battery dies, just give it back and
I'll charge it for you. Just remember to save your game or you'll lose all your progress."

"Oh...okay," Ranma said, standing up and collecting his bag, stowing the GameBoy inside.

The two went downstairs, and Ryoga collected their uniforms from the dryer, checking the tags to make sure he gave Ranma the correct ones.

"Heh, you actually put your name in the tags?" Ranma sneered, peeking over Ryoga’s shoulder and spying the name written out on the tag behind the collar. "You’re such a geek, Hibiki. I'm surprised you're even into martial arts."

"I'm not a martial artist, I was just kicking your ass because you stole my damn lunch.” Ryoga groused, folding up his laundry curiously and tucking it under his arm.

"Yeah, only geeks get their lunch stolen.” Ranma grinned. Then he quickly dodged a fist launched at his head. “Although, I gotta admit you throw a pretty good punch for someone who doesn't practice kenpō."

Ryoga blushed a little, then huffed tersely and looked away. “Yeah, well, somebody's gotta knock you off your high horse one of these days."

Ranma changed out of the pullover and sweats and back into his dry gakuran, handing the garments back to Ryoga. The two walked towards the front door.

“How are you gonna manage that? The bread feud is called off, remember?” Ranma asked.

“I'll still kick your ass, bread feud or not.” Ryoga bit back.

“Sure, sure,” Ranma said lightly, slipping on his shoes when they'd reached the genkan. “Thanks for lettin’ me wait out the storm. And for the snacks. And the GameBoy."

“Just don't break it, lose it, or play it during class or the teacher will take it away.” Ryoga told him.

“I won't. I'll be here at seven tomorrow morning, so make sure you're ready.” Ranma said.

“Sure,” Ryoga nodded. Then his face flushed a little. “Uh, thanks again for doing this, Saotome.”

“It's no big deal. I'm only around the corner, after all," Ranma said, slipping his school bag straps onto his shoulders, “You can call me Ranma, by the way.”

Ryoga’s cheeks got darker, and he snapped his gaze away quickly. “Sure, whatever.” he scoffed.

Ranma grinned, turning around to open the door and flicking his hand at Ryoga in a two-finger salute. “See ya later, Ryoga.” he said, then he walked out the door.

"H-hey, don't be so damn forward!” Ryoga sputtered, “I never gave you permission to call me by my first name!"

Ranma ignored him, leaping over the gate instead of opening it. He trotted down the street, a little skip in his step. Ryoga dropped his clothes carelessly and ran outside and gripped the black gate tightly, leaning over to shout down the street.

“I'll kick that cocky ass of yours one day, Ranma Saotome!” Ryoga hollered, “You're still a lousy bread thief!”
Ranma simply waved over his shoulder, whistling the Super Mario theme song as he turned the corner and went out of sight.

They'd found a small local sushi shop near the Shopping Plaza, and were sitting around clutching cups of green tea, warming themselves from the cool spring weather. Soon their server came around with hot sake and the first parts of their large order. They all took a saucer of hot sake and clinked them together.

“Kanpai!” They all cheered, then knocked back the saucers.

“So, how are things going with classes at the Dojo, Akane?” Ryoga asked, mixing some wasabi into his soy sauce.

“They're going really well!” Akane said happily, sipping from her miso soup to wash down the bitterness of the sake. “My junior class is a lot of fun, they're all so eager to learn and they treat me like I'm some kind of superhero. It's adorable.” Akane's face flushed with pride.

“Ranma told me you found another job, Ryoga,” Ukyo said as she helped herself to more sake. “Are you leaving the Nekohanten?”

Ryoga shook his head. “No, but I'm only working there part-time now. I found work in construction.” he explained, “My Bakusai Tenketsu technique really comes in handy. I think that's what landed me the job.”

“I gotta admit, business is booming thanks to Ran-chan agreeing to stay on as my assistant chef,” Ukyo grinned triumphantly.

“If that's the case maybe you should give me a raise,” Ranma quipped, grabbing a salmon hand roll from their wide selection of food.

“Isn't the joy of knowing you're to thank for my shop’s success payment enough, Ran-chan?” Ukyo asked sweetly.

“Joy doesn't buy groceries,” Ranma said blandly.

“Otou-san is planning to start paying Ranma for his teaching once I go to university,” Akane chimed in, “I won’t be able to teach my classes anymore, so Ranma will be teaching them all. It'll only be fair to give Ranma a wage for that, especially since the Dojo is seeing success.”

The Tendo family had officially gotten the Dojo open for classes in the last few months. Soun had decided that even though Ranma and Akane had annulled their engagement, it seemed wasteful to leave the Dojo out of use. Soun, Genma, and Nodoka all agreed: Ranma and Akane were both exceptional martial artists and their talents shouldn't be wasted. They could still carry on the Anything-Goes style by teaching students at the Dojo. So Ranma and Akane got to work marketing the Dojo, getting potential students interested in signing up for classes beginning in the spring.

Akane taught a mixed junior class which comprised of young children from six to twelve years old, as well as an all-ages women’s class. Ranma currently taught the all-ages men’s class and a mixed adolescent class for ages thirteen to eighteen.
Classes had begun at the end of February, and the Tendo Dojo had seen a fair bit of popularity, no likely thanks to the eccentricities of the infamous Nerima Wrecking Crew over the years. Ranma Saotome was a name well-known to locals in Nerima, sometimes as a menace and other times as a hero. It was a bit of a toss up. Either way, there were plenty of people who wanted to learn from The Ranma Saotome. What Ranma wasn't earning in money by working at the Tendo Dojo just yet, he certainly made up for in large strokes to his ego.

“I never thought I'd be much of a teacher, but it's actually a lot of fun watching the light go on in people's eyes when they get it, y’know?” Ranma finished off the last bite of his hand roll. “It's been pretty rewarding.”

The four sat around chatting and laughing, eating and drinking their fill. It was late afternoon by the time they were back out in the Shopping Plaza again. The sun was sinking low behind the buildings as they made their way to Ukyo’s restaurant.

“You crashing here again tonight, Akane-chan?” Ukyo asked.

“Sure, I'll just call Kasumi-oneesan to let her know where I'll be,” Akane said. She looked back at the boys and smiled, large and bright.

“Thanks again for treating us all to lunch, Ryoga-kun. That was so nice of you.” Akane said warmly, pulling Ryoga in for a hug.

“You're welcome,” Ryoga said, his cheeks pink. “Congratulations.”

Akane turned to Ranma. “And thank you for bearing with me these last few weeks. I must have called you about a hundred times and talked your ear off for hours…” Akane chuckled at herself, looking sheepish.

Ranma waved his hand dismissively. “Hey, I think after all the time we've spent together I can handle one or two classic Akane meltdowns.” Ranma grinned as Akane quickly socked him hard in the arm.

“Jerk,” she said, but she was smiling.

“Tomboy,” Ranma said back, rubbing his shoulder. Then he pulled her into a hug. “But seriously, Akane. You worked your butt off and it paid off, just like I told ya it would. Congrats.”

Akane squeezed him back tightly. “Thank you, Ranma.”

“Let’s all hang out again soon before Akane-chan and I start school,” Ukyo said, “You boys will need to help move us into the dorm, too!”

“Mistress Ukyo brandishing the whip again,” Ranma sighed.

“Let us know when you'll need us, Ukyo.” Ryoga said kindly.

“Have a good rest of your night, boys. See you next week bright and early, Ran-chan!” Ukyo called, waving as she pulled open her shop door and her and Akane slipped inside.

Ranma and Ryoga waved goodbye to the girls and then turned, continuing down the street of the Plaza. Ranma stretched his arms over his head and let out a long groan.

“Man, I’m full,” Ranma said, patting his belly. “That was nice of you to treat the girls.”
“It was no trouble. Thanks to the Nekohanten and the new construction job, I've got a little extra money coming in. So I figured I could indulge for one night.” Ryoga said, “It was a celebration for everyone. The girls getting into university, me getting the new job, and you and Akane starting classes at the Dojo. A lot has happened in the last few months. I figured we could all use the time to celebrate.”

“It's sure been a crazy couple of months,” Ranma agreed, “it’s funny, crazy used to have a whole other definition when it came to describing our lives.”

Ryoga scoffed. “Don't tell me you're still missing the ‘good old days’ of being hunted down by a troupe of fiancées?”

“Of course not,” Ranma said, giving Ryoga a light shove. “Although I must admit, you didn't pull your punches back then.”

“What do you mean?” Ryoga asked, genuinely confused.

“I've noticed lately that whenever we spar, you’ve been pulling your punches,” Ranma explained, “I thought I was imagining things. But then I let you get a hit in so I could test my hunch. Sure enough, a hit that should've broken my jaw barely left a bruise.”

“Hang on,” Ryoga said, bewildered, “You let me get that hit in?”

“Why are you holding out on me?” Ranma demanded, ignoring him, “Not only did you pull the punch, when you landed the hit you stopped everything, freaked out and flustered over me.”

Ryoga gawked at him. “You're...actually disappointed that I was sorry about punching you in the face?”

“Yeah!” Ranma exclaimed, “What did I tell you about treating me like a damsel, huh? So don't hold back anymore. For cryin’ out loud, I'm not made of glass.”

“I value my life too much to ever accuse you of that,” Ryoga chuckled, “I'm sorry. I guess I have been holding back.”

Ryoga looked out of the corner of his eye at Ranma, who was looking down the street, pouting. On his jawline was a yellowed bruise. Above that, just below his left eye was a tiny white scar. It was the cut he'd given Ranma during their first duel when Ryoga showed up at Furinkan High School to challenge him. Ryoga reached out and rubbed his thumb across the thin scar. Ranma’s pout vanished, his brows raising as he looked at Ryoga curiously.

“It is different now, though, you have to admit,” Ryoga said softly, “I don't exactly want to be held accountable for any marks on your face. Wouldn't make me a very good boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend.” The word still felt incredibly foreign to Ranma, and it still never failed to make his knees turn to jello. Then in the next second, it almost made him laugh.

He had a fiancée up until several months ago, but the idea of dating Ryoga was incredulous to him. He really was going backwards.

Ryoga had been perfectly serious when he'd brought up the idea of “courting” Ranma. Several days after Ranma moved back to Ryoga's house, Ryoga had sprung plans on Ranma out of the blue to take him out on their “first date”. Ranma wanted to think the whole thing was ridiculous and unnecessary, but he actually wound up having a great time. Ryoga tackled every “dating trope” he could think of; it was so cliche that it was adorable, somehow. It had turned into a kind of game at
some point, of who could keep up the act and who would crack…

“Well, here we are.”

Ranma and Ryoga stood outside the black gate to Ryoga’s house. It was an early February evening; light snowflakes were flickering through the air as the two men looked at each other, seeming to hold back crooked smiles.

“Here we are,” Ranma repeated, rolling back and forth on his heels in a faux display of awkwardness.

“It's pretty convenient that we both live in the same building,” Ryoga said, smiling toothily.

“Indeed,” Ranma agreed, “Well, after you.”

“Ah, but what kind of a gentleman would I be if I didn't get the door for you?” Ryoga said, opening up the gate. He walked up to the steps and opened the door, standing aside and gesturing wildly with his arm. “Please, after you.”

Shirokuro came bustling out the door and onto the street, bouncing around Ranma excitedly. It might have been enough to break the illusion, but Ranma wasn't backing down that easily.

Ranma scratched Shirokuro’s ears. “What a cute dog, what's her name?” he asked.

“Shirokuro,” Ryoga replied, “Sorry, she gets excited meeting new people. She seems to like you.”

Ranma looked down at Shirokuro. “Heh...you're name is “Checkers”, huh?” he said, patting her head.

Shirokuro awooed, as if she was playing right along with them. Ranma smirked. He walked up to the door with Shirokuro, bowing politely to Ryoga as he passed.

Ryoga followed him inside, closed the door behind them, then walked up behind Ranma and grasped his shoulders.

“Let me take your coat,” he purred into his ear, pulling off the jacket Ranma had already started to take off.

Ranma shivered as Ryoga pulled the coat away, but it had nothing to do with suddenly being uncovered. He cleared his throat quickly, throwing his composure back on. The game was still on, even though they'd passed the threshold.

“Well, this was a fun night. We should do it again sometime.” Ranma said, turning around and flashing Ryoga his best smile.

Ryoga turned away from the closet where he’d hung both of their coats, looking at Ranma for a long beat. He walked over slowly, his face soft.

“Goodnight, then,” Ryoga said quietly, leaning down.

Ranma pushed at Ryoga’s chest, looking away, feigning bashfulness. “We shouldn’t…”
“Not even a harmless goodnight kiss?” Ryoga asked innocently.

“We should take things slow,” Ranma said, and he wasn’t able to keep the smile off his face at that line.

“I’ll go as slow as you want,” Ryoga said in a low voice, leaning down again, but his movements were not at all slow.

Ranma was faster. He ducked out of the way, and retreated toward the stairs.

“Have a good night...Hibiki-san.” he said, backing up the stairs.

Ryoga’s eyes were flashing, and Ranma knew Ryoga was seeing the same light flickering in his eyes, too. The game was still going, and a dare had been laid out.

You want to court me, Ranma thought, so court me. Pursue me. Chase me.

Ryoga bounded up the steps, and Ranma’s heart jumped in excitement. Ryoga had his arms out ready to snatch him, but Ranma whirled around and bolted up the steps two at a time. Ryoga was right on his heels. Neither of them could help themselves any further from laughing.

It was a new game now. Cat and mouse. Ryoga hunted him through every room on the second floor, Ranma nimbly dodging as Ryoga lunged toward him, hands grabbing. They ran into Ryoga’s parent’s bedroom. Ryoga circled Ranma around the bed, but Ranma vaulted across the mattress and made a dash for the door. Ryoga was right behind him, finally snagging Ranma by the wrist as they came out into the hallway.

He spun Ranma around and pushed him into the nearest wall, pinning both his arms above his head.

“Gotcha,” Ryoga said smugly.

“Awfully persistent, aren’t you?” Ranma said, flicking his bangs out of his eyes.

Ryoga let go of one of Ranma’s wrists to lift up his chin. “I know what I want,” he whispered.

He kissed Ranma, long and softly. As their lips parted, their eyes opened to meet. Then Ryoga slammed his lips against Ranma’s, pushing him hard against the wall. Ranma moaned, muffled between their mouths, as Ryoga slid his hands up his shirt.

“You’re hands are freezing,” Ranma gasped against their lips, his back curling against the wall at the icy touch.

“Then help me warm them,” Ryoga breathed huskily, kissing along Ranma’s jaw.

Ranma sighed as Ryoga kissed down his neck. Ranma reached down to undo Ryoga’s jeans, as Ryoga unbuttoned Ranma’s shirt. Ryoga kissed Ranma’s collarbone, then reached up and captured his lips again. His body jolted and he let out a long groan as Ranma grasped his cock through his boxers and squeezed. Ryoga reached around and hoisted Ranma up. Ranma wrapped his legs around Ryoga’s hips as Ryoga turned them around.

“Walk straight ahead,” Ranma told him.

“I know, I know…” Ryoga said absently, kissing Ranma’s chest and shoulders as he walked through the threshold and kicked the door shut behind them.
They didn't make it to the bed. Ryoga lowered them down onto the carpet, kissing and licking Ranma's abdomen as he pulled off his pants. Then, reaching around half-blind in the darkness, Ryoga reached up to the bedside table, trying to find the handle to the drawer. Something suddenly toppled over on top of the bedside table with a loud noise that sounded like glass.

"Shit, that's cold!" Ranma cursed.

Ranma's voice was now several octaves higher, and Ryoga had been able to feel the change with their bodies pressed together, Ranma had shrunk significantly beneath him.

"I think there was a glass of water on the bedside table," Ryoga said sheepishly, "I'll get you some hot water--"

But Ranma had snaked her arms around Ryoga's neck and jerked him down, pressing her lips firmly onto his. "Just shut up and touch me," she demanded.

"I thought you said my hands were cold," Ryoga said, a laugh in his voice.

She grabbed his wrist and stuck it down between her legs. "Nice an' warm down there," she said, kissing down his neck.

"Among other things," he hummed.

He shoved two fingers deep inside her, and Ranma cried out at the unexpected penetration, the small of her back curling upward.

"Fuck, Ryoga," Ranma gasped, rolling her hips against his fingers.

"What happened to 'Hibiki-san'?'" Ryoga asked, slowly pumping his fingers as he crawled down between Ranma's legs, kissing her inner thighs.

Ranma shivered. "That's an awfully bold move for our first date," she said loftily.

"You're the one being yobisute," Ryoga volleyed.

Then he flicked his tongue chastely against her clit, causing her to gasp and jolt, and he chuckled mischievously. Ranma swung her legs up over Ryoga's shoulders, and pushed him down further as if to say 'quit messing around'. Ryoga didn't plan to.

Within seconds he had Ranma thrashing around beneath him, could feel her legs quivering on his shoulders. He ravished her with his tongue and fingers in tandem until she was in complete shambles, and had to grab tufts of his hair and pry him off of her.

"Get over here," she ordered breathlessly, pulling him up to her mouth.

She could taste herself on his lips, and the sensation was somehow incredibly sexy, and made her kiss him even deeper, running her tongue along his bottom lip. Ranma reached down in between them, pleased to find Ryoga was still hard as a stone.

"I want you inside me," Ranma purred into Ryoga's ear, "Right now."

Ryoga shuddered at her husky voice. He reached around toward the bedside table again, but Ranma knocked his hand away.

"Now," Ranma repeated, biting Ryoga's earlobe roughly.
“But I should--”

But Ranma had gripped Ryoga by the base and did the work for him, positioning his cock at her entrance and pressing herself onto his tip, pushing him all the way inside. Both let out a long groan of pleasure at the delicious sensation.

Ryoga pushed himself upright, squinting a little in the moonlight to see the slight outline of Ranma’s face. She seemed to be looking right back at him. He pulled out slowly, listening to her breath hitch. Then he thrust back in sharply, and she gasped.

He wanted her to be a mess again. Keeping himself buried to the hilt deep inside her, he rolled his hips. He pulled out, slow again, and ran his hand along Ranma’s cheek. Then he reached back and grabbed at the tuft of hair at the base of her braid, and pulled hard the same time he thrust deep within her.

Ranma cried out, then the sound turned into a guttural moan as Ryoga dove down and kissed at her exposed neck.

“Since this is our first time,” Ryoga whispered against her throat, “You should tell me what to do. How do you want it?”

Ranma cupped Ryoga’s face in her hands and pulled him up to look him in the eye. “Don’t be gentle.” she told him, “And don’t stop.”

Ryoga obeyed. It was, after all, a very easy request.

Relentless, he thrusted hard and deep, each movement jerking both of their bodies roughly. Ranma made a moan that was almost a whine.

“Faster,” she begged, grabbing his shoulders tightly.

Ryoga sped up, still maintaining the same roughness and depth. It seemed to be just what Ranma was looking for, as she buried her face into his chest as she cried out again and again, her nails digging into his shoulders and then dragging them across his back. He felt her teeth dig into the flesh just below his collarbone.

Ryoga wrapped his arms tightly around Ranma as he continued to pound deep inside her, burying his face into her neck, kissing and licking and biting at the soft, hot skin.

“Wait, I--” he groaned out, but he could already feel his own release.

Ranma moaned, rolling her hips against Ryoga’s, slow and hard. Ryoga shuddered, his entire body convulsing as he came. Ranma’s fingers raked through his hair, across his face, holding him there while she kissed him over and over, anywhere she could reach.
They came apart, heaving for breath. Ryoga let himself fall into Ranma’s chest, weakly kissing the warm skin as Ranma kissed his hair.

“Sorry,” Ryoga sighed, as if in defeat, “I was trying to pull out, but I--”

“Shhh,” Ranma whispered, stroking down Ryoga’s back, which was starting to burn. He’d no doubt find rivulets of red marks from his shoulders to tailbone later when he looked in the mirror.

“But--” Ryoga started again, but Ranma rolled her hips and Ryoga grunted. He was still buried inside her, spent and overstimulated.

“You’re getting heavy,” Ranma said.

Ryoga pulled out, and Ranma made a soft grunt, half in pleasure at the sensation and half in disappointment at his exit. Ryoga rolled over, flopping onto his back. Then he cursed under his breath.

“Ugh, landed right on the wet spot,” he grumbled.

Ranma lightly smacked his arm. “Don’t act like you don’t like it. Besides, it’s your fault,” she said, her eyes closing sleepily.

“I meant the water spill on the carpet,” Ryoga said with a scoff.

“That’s also your fault,” Ranma said flippantly.

Ryoga sighed, then sat up and got to his feet. Then he scooped Ranma up into his arms, causing her to open her eyes. He lay her down on the bed, then reclined beside her, laying on his side and propping himself up on his elbow.

“So, not a bad first date, huh?” Ryoga chuckled, reaching over to move Ranma’s tangled bangs out of her eyes.

Ranma had her eyes closed again. Her head lolled sleepily to the side and she hummed. “Took you long enough to get the nerve to ask me out,” she mumbled.

Ryoga smirked. Even though she looked ready to fall asleep, she still wasn’t backing down from the game.

“You had so many other suitors, I was worried you’d never give me the time of day,” he said, sighing tragically. “I’ve liked you for so long, I forget when the crush even started.”

That made Ranma open her eyes again, and look at Ryoga curiously. “Oh?” she said, casual but clearly prying.

“Well, of course,” Ryoga said, trailing his fingertips along Ranma’s collarbone and down her shoulders. “What, do you think I followed you to China just because I was pissed about us not having the fight?”

Ranma sat up suddenly. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I thought!” she exclaimed, “You’re tellin’ me there was more to it?”

Whether the game was still on or not she neither knew nor cared. She stared openly at Ryoga, able to see his face slightly better up on the futon, with the moonlight from the window on his face. He looked right back at her, his expression unreadable. But he wasn’t smirking, or laughing.
anything that could give away that this was all some part of the cliche.

“I followed you because you were the only friend I'd ever had,” Ryoga said, “and there wasn't any point trying to find the school, because what did it matter? You weren't there anymore. I was alone again. So I decided if I was going to get lost anyway, I may as well try to find you while I was.”

Ranma stared at him, saying nothing.

“I travelled for months. I'd gotten lost plenty of times before, but I'd never left Japan. All I had to go on was what you had told me: Jusenkyo. I travelled all over the country looking for it, until one day I finally discovered that it wasn’t in Japan at all. As if getting anywhere for me wasn't hard enough, now I had to figure out how to get to another country. It was summer before I finally found the training grounds. And I was there all of five seconds before I was knocked down from the cliff.”

“By me,” Ranma breathed.

She'd fallen into the springs herself, only minutes before. Ranma remembered chasing her father across the cliff, outraged by his foolishness and this all-new mess he'd gotten them into. She'd been so blind with rage, she hadn't even noticed Ryoga standing there on the cliff's edge.

What if Ryoga had wound up on that training ground only minutes before? Before Ranma and his father had leapt up onto those bamboo poles. Before he'd fallen into the cursed spring.

Ranma could imagine it. The Jusenkyo Guide touring him and his father along the training grounds, Ranma about to follow Genma up onto the bamboo when he hears his name being called. Turning to see Ryoga standing there, exhausted, dishevelled, sunburnt.

They would have never fallen in.

“What would you have done?” Ranma asked softly.

“I spent a lot of time thinking about it,” Ryoga said, “But I was never sure what the hell I would do. I mean, how were you supposed to react? I suddenly show up in China almost a year after you'd left, and what? Just say long time no see?”

“Things could have been a hell of a lot different if you had,” Ranma said.

An image of Ryoga running across the grounds of Jusenkyo, dropping down his large backpack and pulling Ranma into a kiss went through Ranma's head, and she nearly laughed out loud at her wild imagination.

“So, hold on a second,” Ranma said, “why were so mad when I reunited with you that day at Furinkan High?”

“I told you before,” Ryoga said, “Hot air.”

“Hot air,” Ranma echoed, hefting an eyebrow speculatively, “Soaring through the air ready to cave my skull in with your parasol is a funny way of dealing with a crush.”

“I spent two years alone with my own thoughts,” Ryoga said, “Asking myself over and over again what it was that I felt for you. And after Jusenkyo, I got even more confused. I wanted to hate you. To resent you for making me waste all that time getting to China, only to fall in that damned spring. I let myself fester in it. It was like a placebo; I told myself I hated your guts like a mantra until I believed it.”
“Hell of a placebo,” Ranma muttered.

“And then I found out that not only did I follow you to China and wound up cursed, but that it was you who had knocked me into the spring. At that moment the placebo wore off completely, and my anger was real. Finally justified.” Ryoga rolled onto his back and leaned onto the pillows. “I held onto that justification, that anger, for a long time, telling myself I had every right to be bitter towards you. That old crush from junior high was a blurry memory, so far in the back of my mind I convinced myself that it was only a figment of my imagination.”

“I see,” Ranma said slowly. They sat there for a moment in silence. Then Ranma scratched her chin and cleared her throat. “Well, uh, since we’re confessing things…”

Ryoga peeked at her out of the corner of his eye, staying quiet.

“I was playing dumb, the day you showed up at Furinkan,” Ranma said.

Ryoga sat up quickly. “You mean, when you didn't remember who I was?”

Ranma nodded. “I recognized you right away. But...Akane was right there so I didn’t know how to react. I pretended not to recognize you so she wouldn't...I dunno, get suspicious, I guess.” Ranma looked sheepish.

“I must admit, I was pretty hurt to think that you didn't recognize me. Even if it had been two years,” Ryoga said, laughing lightly, “It’s a bit of a relief now to know you hadn't forgotten me, after all.”

Ranma tucked her knees into her chest. “Of course I didn’t,” she mumbled, “I waited for you in that vacant lot for three days straight. The only reason I didn't wait longer is because Pops suddenly decided it was time to leave for China. And for weeks after we had left I felt guilty, wondering when you'd finally find your way to that lot, only to see our tent wasn't there anymore.”

Ryoga pat Ranma's knee. “I guess we were both pining for each other, even way back then.” he said, smiling at the thought of it.

Ranma sighed. “It's so cheesy, I almost wish I was making it all up for this hokey ‘date’.” she said.

Ryoga laughed. Then he leaned over and cupped Ranma’s cheek, pulling her up to meet his lips. She instantly relaxed at his touch, allowing herself to be swept away by him all over again.

It had happened slowly, and yet all at once that she hadn’t even noticed when exactly it was that Ryoga Hibiki had become so precious to her.

Ranma pushed Ryoga's shoulders, pinning him back against the pillows as she straddled his lap. Ranma pulled away her shirt, the only article of clothing still covering her, tossing it across the room while she gave Ryoga her best pair of sultry bedroom eyes.

She leaned down and kissed him deeply, breaking away to whisper sexily into his ear, “Ready for me again?”

Ryoga shivered. “Keep doing what you're doing and I sure will be.”

Ranma smirked, licking the shell of Ryoga's ear. She chuckled as she felt his whole body tense up, and with that another game was set in motion.
“Good work, take a rest!”

The students dispersed to either end of the Dojo to their respective backpacks, grabbing bottles of water and snacks. One boy pulled out a full bento, and several of the other students crowded around with a chorus of awe to examine the intricate boxed lunch.

“Ehhh, there's still a half-hour of class left, you'll get a cramp!”

“Yeah, how 'bout you share some of that with us?”

Ranma snickered at the antics of his young students, then walked over to the far back of the Dojo, under the shrine where he kept his own water bottle and a towel. He'd called break a little earlier than usual tonight, but his students didn't seem to notice or care, happily devouring their food and rehydrating.

The drills hadn't been difficult for him, of course, but he was feeling a little out of sorts for some reason. He'd been nursing a headache through most of the day, and he felt lethargic even though he had a good appetite and had gotten plenty of rest the night before. Maybe he'd let breaktime go a little long, too, to see if he could shake this off.

As he was wiping the sweat from his brow, one of his students came up to him. Ranma looked over the water bottle he was taking a swig from and raised a brow questioningly.

The boy quickly bowed in greeting. “Saotome-sensei, I have a question,” the boy asked.

“What's up?” Ranma said.

“I was wonderin’ if you could teach us the Kachū Tenshin Amaguriken technique that you showed us the other day,” the boy asked, “it was really cool!”

“That's a pretty advanced technique,” Ranma said, “it’s over three thousand years old.”

“But I wanna be able to deliver over a hundred punches in a single blow, like sensei can!” the boy exclaimed excitedly.

He could have sworn he was talking to one student, but now it seemed as though two were standing there. Ranma took another quick swig of water. Now there was only the one boy again.

“I guess I was about your age when I learned the technique...” Ranma said, absent-minded.

“So, you'll teach us?” the boy was almost bouncing with excitement.

Us? So there was more than one. That had to be right, because now three or four boys were standing there now. Then two. Then one again. Then five.

“Saotome-sensei?” the boy asked, suddenly concerned.

Ranma blinked stars out of his vision, then took a large gulp of water, finishing off the bottle.

“Are you alright, sensei?”
The water in his throat went down like thick lava, stopped, then seemed to want to come back up again.

“Uh, be right back,” Ranma said all in one breath, then darted past the boy and out of the Dojo.

Every head turned to watch as he streaked out the door like a bullet, but he was beyond caring. Slapping the shoji door shut behind him, he quickly contemplated his next move. There was no time.

He bolted around to the side of the Dojo, and puked.

He stayed there, hunched over, his hands against the wall for a few minutes until the spell of nausea passed. When it was over, his headache had disappeared. He stood up straight, wiping his mouth. Then he looked down at the grass and scrunched up his nose. Ugh, better take care of that.

He walked toward the house where the water pump was, and filled a bucket.

Akane came out of the house, holding a tray of onigiri, stopping when she saw Ranma by the water pump.

“I brought some snacks for your class,” Akane said as she walked up to him, “Don't worry, I didn't make them. I only helped Kasumi-oneesan roll them.”

That was obvious, Ranma thought as he looked at the tray. It was an assorted mix of perfect, smooth onigiri and misshapen, lumpy ones.

“Thanks,” Ranma said, picking up the water bucket. “I already called break time for them though, so they've already eaten. I'm sure they won't pass up Kasumi-san's cookin’, though.”

Akane raised her brows. “You called break already?” she said.

Her and Ranma walked back towards the Dojo.

“Yeah, they did really good today so I figured I'd reward 'em with an early break.” Ranma lied.

“I see,” Akane said slowly.

When the reached the front entrance to the Dojo, Ranma turned right abruptly, walking around to the side, causing Akane to stop in her tracks.

“Where are you going?” she asked incredulously.

"Go ahead, I'll be there in a minute,” Ranma called, disappearing around the side of the building.

Akane sighed gratingly, and walked inside the Dojo.

Ranma dumped the bucket over onto the puddle of sick, then he put the bucket upside down and sat on top of it, cradling his head in his hands. His headache was gone but he still felt a little dizzy.

“Alright, what's going on?”

Ranma looked up quickly. Akane was standing there with one hand on her hip, her other holding a bag.

“I said I'd be there in a minute,” Ranma sighed.

“You threw up, didn't you.” Akane didn't say it like a question.
Ranma’s face flushed. “Maybe a little,” he gulped.

Akane sighed. She walked over to Ranma and grabbed him under the elbow, pulling him to his feet. Ranma was a little bewildered that she was able to do so; he hadn't realized his body was so weak.

“I told the class you weren't feeling well, and that I’d teach the last set,” Akane said.

“You what?” Ranma blurted, “Akane, I'm fine--”

“Oh, honestly, Ranma. You're white as a sheet. Come with me.” Akane dragged him by the arm back toward the house. “The class all agreed you were off tonight.”

Ranma’s face flushed again in shame at that. He'd looked like a weakling in front of all those teenagers. How embarrassing. Maybe next he'd show them all the Hiryuu Shoten Haa, or maybe the Moko Takabisha...he had a reputation to uphold…

While he'd drifted off in his thoughts Akane had brought him into her room. She left him by the door and walked over to her desk, opening one of the drawers and shoving her arm deep into the back. She came back over to him and shoved something into his hands.

“Go home and get yourself some rest. Then use this at some point,” Akane instructed.

Ranma finally looked down at what Akane had given him, and instantly blanched, losing even more colour.

“You...you think that...?” he stammered.

“I don't think, I know.” Akane said.

Ranma looked up at her. “How...how long have you had this?”

“Since we went out for sushi together last week,” Akane said, “Ukyo ordered unagi rolls and you avoided them like the plague.”

Ranma blinked owlishly. “Oh,” he said, stupidly. Then his eyes went even wider. “Ohh.” he said again, realizing.

Akane rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. She held out the bag she'd been carrying, and Ranma finally recognized it as his own.

“You're still in your gi. Change clothes and then head on home.” she told him.

Akane left him in her room to change, and he met her down at the genkan several minutes later.

“Shit,” he gasped suddenly as he was slipping on his shoes.

Akane looked over her shoulder. “What's wrong?”

“I had sushi and alcohol that night!” Ranma cried, “What if--”

Akane put her hand over his mouth to stop him from freaking out.

“If you are--and I know you are--then you're early along. I mean, you're still a guy, after all. It'll be fine.” Akane assured him patiently, “I obviously wouldn't be having Ryoga-kun treat you to anymore sushi dinners, though.”
Ranma nodded, his eyes vacant. “If you say so…”

Akane suddenly pulled him into a tight hug.

“Call me later, okay?” she said softly.

Several minutes later Ranma was walking down the street, his mind racing, his rucksack feeling ten times heavier for the small box it contained inside.

He was alone when he'd arrived back home. Ryoga was working a night shift at Nekohanten, so he had the house to himself.

Perfect.

Ranma took his time. He took Shirokuro out for a walk. When they got home, he put the kettle on. Folded laundry and took it upstairs. Made himself a tea, sitting in the kitchen sipping it slowly and scratching at Shirokuro’s ears. She hadn't left his side, following at his heels as he fluttered around the house.

She rested her head on his lap, and it was only then Ranma realized he'd been jittering his leg anxiously.

He finished his tea. Picked up the carton he'd been staring down this whole time, and walked to the bathroom.

He ran himself a bath. Sat in the water and stared up at the ceiling. It finally dawned on him that this could be the last time in a long time that he might be in this body. Ranma sunk deeper into the water, resting the back of his neck on the edge of the tub, and closed his eyes. He'd soak a little bit longer.

It was a half-hour later before he drained the tub. He stood in the middle of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist, the carton in his hands.

He filled a wash bucket with cold water. Opened the carton. Read the box several times, read the manual inside. Took a deep breath.

He set the contents of the box on the edge of the tub, and picked up the wash bucket. Ranma looked up, and saw himself in the mirror across the room. His reflection smiled back at him.

He turned the bucket over his head, and felt the change.

Ryoga came through the front door, smelling like ramen noodles and potstickers. Shirokuro bounded down the hall, dancing around Ryoga's legs as he kicked off his shoes and hung up his coat.

“I'm home,” Ryoga called through the house.
Ryoga peeked inside the den, but it was empty. Shirokuro bumped her wet nose against his hand. Ryoga looked down at his pet, who wagged her tail at high speed and looked like she was grinning.

Shirokuro turned around and walked down the hallway, looking back at him as if to say, “Follow me!”.

Ryoga did so, following her down the hall. She walked into the kitchen, and Ryoga saw upon entering that Ranma was there, sitting at the dining table.

“Welcome home,” Ranma greeted lightly, sipping a cup of tea.

“Smells good in here,” Ryoga commented, walking into the kitchen and up to the stove.

“I made curry,” Ranma said, “How was work?”

“Busy, but Mousse, Shampoo and I work well together. We've got things down to a fine art.” Ryoga said, “The construction company keeps trying to give me more and more hours, though. It's good money so I can't turn it down, but...I think I won't be able to do the Nekohanten much longer if it keeps up.”

“Mm, I know what you mean. With Akane goin’ to university and me takin’ on her classes at the Dojo, it'll be tight to help out Uuchan, too.” Ranma said. Then, she clicked her tongue and mumbled under her breath, “Actually, I won't be able to...crap...”

“What?” Ryoga asked, as he served himself some curry.

“Nothing,” Ranma said, slurping more tea.

Ryoga made himself a tea, then joined Ranma at the table.

“Might be a bit cold,” Ranma said, “I made it a while ago. You should heat it up.”

“I'm too hungry to care,” Ryoga said, “The rice is nice and hot, anyway.”

Ranma stood up from the table and carried the bowl over to the stove. Filled the bowl with more rice from the rice cooker, then dumped a scoop full of curry into the rice.

Ryoga took a sip of the tea, and his eyebrows raised. “Is this that pu-erh tea you brought to the mountains?” Ryoga asked.

“Sure is,” Ranma said, “I haven't had it in a while, so I figured I'd make a pot of it. How's the curry?”

“It's great. As always,” Ryoga said, “You're having more? Work up an appetite at the Dojo?”

“Something like that,” Ranma said, carrying the bowl back to the table and sitting down.

Ranma sat there for a moment, staring down at the curry. Ryoga looked up from his own bowl, watching Ranma curiously.

“Did you teach the class like that?” Ryoga asked through a full bite, gesturing to Ranma with his spoon.

“Like what?” Ranma asked.

“Like a girl.”
Ranma blinked. “Oh, uh...no. I changed when I got home.”

“Oh,” Ryoga said, as though that cleared everything up, like Ranma had been talking about something as casual as changing clothes. Then he looked back up again, swallowing his bite. “Wait. Like...on purpose?”

Ranma nodded. “Yeah. On purpose.” Ranma said. She poked around at her curry. “That's become a habit of mine lately...”

“You're mumbling again. Who are you talking to other there?” Ryoga smiled up at her, but it faltered at the faraway expression on Ranma's face. Ryoga set down his spoon and looked across the table at Ranma in concern. “Is everything okay?”


Ryoga thought on it for a moment, but only part of it made any sense. “Wet rock? Cup of water?” Ryoga asked, “You forgot your tent on purpose, but...when did a rock and a cup of water happen?”

“When I fell in the river,” Ranma told him, “I slipped on that wet rock, but...I just made it look like I did.”

Ryoga stared at Ranma. “You changed into a girl on purpose?” he asked, “But, you know it wouldn't have mattered to me whether you were a girl or not.”

“I didn't know at the time. When we got back to camp, when I was makin’ that curry and you told me it didn't matter whether I was a boy or a girl, I froze. I couldn't believe it.” Ranma stared into the curry in front of her, recalling. “It made me feel like a bit of an idiot, actually. I thought to myself then, 'dammit, I fell into that freezing cold river for nothing!'. I could have just put the moves on you any time.” Ranma chuckled at herself, shaking her head. “Things mighta went a hell of a lot different for us if I had.”

“I'll say,” Ryoga scoffed, “Okay, well what about the cup of water?”

“Well, that one is recent,” Ranma said, “And up until now, you thought it was your fault.”

Ryoga furrowed his brow, confused for a moment about the weird riddle. Then, his eyes popped open as he suddenly remembered.

“You knocked that glass of water onto yourself!?” Ryoga exclaimed loudly.

“It goes even deeper than that,” Ranma said plainly, “I put the glass of water on the bedside table before you took me out that night.”

Ryoga’s eyes were practically popping out of his head. “You...planted it there.” he said, aghast.

Ranma nodded. “Yup,” she said lightly, “So, like I said. All intentional.”

Ryoga sat back, taking it all in for a minute. Then he leaned forward again, looking at Ranma intently. “Okay. So, you left your tent behind so you and I could share my tent, and you could try to find a way to make a move. You pretended to slip on the rock and fall into the river to change into a girl, because you didn't think you could put moves on me as a guy. But...that doesn't explain why you splashed yourself intentionally with that cup of water.”

Ryoga reached across the table and laid his hand over Ranma’s. “I told you I don't care. You
know I don't. You've...you've been coming to me as a girl a lot lately, actually. I didn't think much of it until now...but why? Why change on purpose?"

Ranma put her other hand over Ryoga's, and squeezed. “It's not like that,” she assured him.

“Then what is it?” Ryoga asked.

Ranma smiled. “Me getting what I want.”

She pulled her hand away and picked up her spoon, digging into her curry. Ryoga looked at her, bewildered. Ranma took a large bite of her curry, letting out a long satisfied sigh of contentment as she chewed.

“I couldn't help myself to another helping. After all,” her eyes flashed up to meet Ryoga's, “It's better the second time.”

Ryoga was still staring. Then, his heart skipped a beat. Then, his jaw fell and his eyes went wide. He sat up so abruptly he knocked his chair over. Ranma looked at him innocently, scooping another bite of curry into her mouth.

“You--you're--are you--?” Ryoga stammered, unable to speak coherent sentences.

Ranma dug into the pocket of her hoodie, and held something aloft in the air, wagging it around.

Ryoga snatched it from her hands, examining it closely.

It was a pregnancy test. There was a tiny screen with a pink positive symbol.

Positive.

“Oh, I peed on that, ya know.” Ranma said.

Ryoga grabbed Ranma and pulled her out of her chair and into his arms, laughing as he spun her through the air. Shirokuro barked excitedly at the sudden antics, dancing around them. Ryoga set her down, kissing her all over desperately.

“H-hang on!” Ranma tried to say through her mouth being crushed by Ryoga's over and over, “Ryoga, Ryoga, wait--”

Ranma pushed him away, breathless from the onslaught of kisses. She looked up at him, her expression firm.

“Ryoga. It might...it may not--” Ranma struggled to find the words as she played with the strings on Ryoga's sweater. “I may not be able to--”

“Stop,” Ryoga said softly, brushing his fingers through her bangs. “It'll be alright. We’ll figure it out.”

“I just...don't want to see you disappointed again.” Ranma said in a low voice.

“And I don't want to see you go through something like that again, either.” Ryoga kneeled down so they could be at eye-level. “Listen, Ranma. No matter what happens, it'll be okay. You gotta believe that.”

Ranma nodded slowly, but she still looked doubtful. “I know. It's just, I'm worried that I...that I'm not--”
“The Ranma I know doesn't stop until he gets what he wants,” Ryoga said firmly, “You've proved that a million times over. I mean, just look at all the stunts you pulled just to get here. You're persistent as hell. You know what you want. So have faith in yourself.” Ryoga kissed Ranma's forehead gently.

“I thought you were a realist,” Ranma sighed, closing her eyes.

“I am. And also trying to be a little optimistic. And you’re being a pessimist for once,” Ryoga said, poking her in the chest. “You should allow yourself to feel excited. Don't be afraid of joy.”

“Of course I'm excited,” Ranma said, “I'm just being cautious.”

“That doesn't sound like the Ranma I know,” Ryoga accused.

“Ryoga…”

Ryoga dropped to his knees and grasped Ranma's hands. Ranma’s pained expression suddenly turned to one of mute shock.

“No, no, no--hold on a minute, Ryoga--”

Ryoga rolled his eyes at Ranma's panic. “Do I look like I'm trying to give you a heart attack? Just shut up and relax, will you?” Ryoga pulled Ranma down onto his lap, and wrapped his arms around her.

Ranma went slack in his embrace, her body feeling warm and light. She wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face into his shoulder.

“You know, I did actually think about doing that, the first time…” Ryoga said quietly, after they'd sat there in silence for a few minutes.

“Do what?” Ranma mumbled.

“Propose to you.”

Ranma shot up, gawking at Ryoga dumbfoundedly. “What??”

“Well, it seemed only right,” Ryoga said quickly, “I mean, I didn't feel right to just..knock you up and do nothing about it. I thought if...maybe I proposed to you, that would prove to you I was committed to it. That I wasn't going to take off on you.”

Ranma couldn't believe what she was hearing. “What stopped you?”

Ryoga scoffed. Then gestured to Ranma as a whole. “This, obviously! I knew you'd freak out if I pulled something like that.”

He wasn't wrong, but Ranma looked off at nothing and pouted anyway. “I...I wouldn't need something like that to know you'd stay.” she mumbled.

“I know you don't. That's also why I didn't do it,” Ryoga sighed, “Although I must admit, I'm a little hurt you nearly died of shock just now thinking I was about to do it.”

“We've only been officially dating for, like, two months, dummy!” Ranma cried, “How the hell did you expect me to react?”

“I figured the Man of A Thousand Fiancées wouldn't think much of one more,” Ryoga joked.
“I don’t have fiancées anymore, and if I had one I sure as heck wouldn’t want it to be for a dumb reason. An arranged marriage, an Amazon rule, a dowry...getting knocked up. I don’t wanna get married for something stupid, I want to get married because I want to share my life with you.”

Ranma suddenly heard the words coming out of her mouth, and went ten shades of red. Ryoga was staring openly at her, which made her face burn even more.

“Are you saying you want to share your life with me?” Ryoga asked.

“I d-didn’t say that,” Ranma blurted, “don't put words in my mouth.”

“You literally just said, ‘I want to get married because I want to spend my life with you’.” Ryoga said, “Those were the words that just came out of your mouth.”

“I meant it hypothetically!”

“So you hypothetically want to spend your life with me?”

“Hypothetically, yes.” Ranma said tightly.

“Well, hypothetically, I want to spend my life with you, too.” Ryoga grinned.

Ranma scrunched up her nose and groaned. Ryoga pulled Ranma into a kiss, soft and a sweet. Ranma quickly lost herself in their kiss, sighing as she wrapped her arms around Ryoga's shoulders.

Shirokuro shoved her way between them, breaking their kiss, licking at Ryoga's face. Ryoga yelped as his dog knocked him down onto the kitchen floor, pinning him down and licking his face, her tail swishing back and forth in a blur.

Ranma laughed as Ryoga tried in vain to get Shirokuro off of him, but it was no use. As she watched them, her wide grin softened to a warm smile, and she placed her hand on her abdomen.

She used to think Ryoga didn't have the ability to laugh. That he was a grouch that was set off by the smallest remark. Sometimes he still was. But this side of Ryoga had shown itself more and more over the years. Now he was always cracking jokes and grinning like an idiot. He could be so cheesy it could make Ranma's eyes roll into the back of her head. At the same time, she wouldn't have it any other way.

They had both known what loneliness felt like. The sensation was a dull ache, prickling in the back of her mind like an old wound, as hazy as an old memory. As she looked at Ryoga, laying on the ground and laughing, the sensation slipped further and further from her mind until she felt only warmth. She knew he could feel it, too.

They would never know loneliness again.

The End
Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much to everyone who has read The Autumn Effect, whether you've been here from the very beginning, or are just binge-reading it now. This story has been such a joy to write; I hope it was equally as fun for you to read.

I've been working on The Autumn Effect since 2015. It's absorbed my life for nearly three years, so you can imagine how bittersweet it is to see it finally complete.

Well, sort of.

As you saw, the story isn't quite over yet. I'll be releasing a "mini series", if you will, based in "The Autumn Effect" universe. It picks up where this story leaves off, and essentially is just snippets that I desperately wanted to write, but couldn't quite fit into the "main" storyline without the whole thing becoming too cluttered. So I've broken all the snippets into three parts: "Summer Solstice", "Winter Solstice", and "Spring Equinox". I'll release them one at a time, "Summer Solstice" coming first. When it'll be released, I don't know for sure. Thankfully, I have the entirety of "Solstice" already planned out. It's just a matter of writing it. Until that time, find peace in the knowledge that the story isn't over yet. I know I will. Who knows, maybe this is my shitty coping mechanism for denial: writing even more.

Eternally your faithful servant for prose,

Jade

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!