Ranma 1/2: My Turn?!

by Dorin

Summary

What is reincarnation really? Is it real or is it a dream? What happens when someone gets pulled out of their world after an accident, and plunged into the chaos of a story they enjoy and have to go living it out? Can we change things, or will we just experience Fate as it happens? Mild Self-Insert influence on the MC's thoughts. A/U setting.

This story is just a muse idea to get back into the habit of writing and find some pleasure in doing so again. Hopefully the readers find it enjoyable and I can work through finding my thoughts again on other projects I have left neglected.
Chapter 1

A/N: This is a just an odd, semi-self insert, semi-OC idea I want to work on as something to write between other projects and get myself back into the habit of trying to write a little bit daily. Rather like, perhaps Ranma: The Second Time Around but from the perspective of someone thrown into the Ranma universe.

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I wish I could say it had been a heroic death, like the stereotype in some of those manga. The protagonist jumps in front of a semi to save a child from injury. Then for his heroism he is sent to a magical world where he can be the hero of his own story. Usually a fantasy setting, and he is reincarnated into that world. Memories intact and all.

I can’t say I was so lucky, wasn’t a heroic act for starters. I was on my weekly grocery run when something fell from high up on a window ledge came hurtling down and smashed right into my head. Must’ve been a heavy something because all I knew was pain for a fraction of a second. Then blackness.

Once heard that a meeting between a pipe and Mama Cass’ skull improved her vocal range. Just an urban legend, but would that I could be so lucky. Something smash me in the head and I just get a headache and a concussion. Nope, I have to be the kind of guy who gets smashed in the skull and dies.

Or maybe I was put into a coma and I dreamed everything as a coping mechanism. Don’t know, just know that one minute I was on my way for the weekly food run, and the next it was dark, then I woke up into … well, I couldn’t call it Hell exactly. But damn weird leading someone else’s life, especially a fictional character’s life.

Still, I’m getting ahead of myself, I think. I’ll just try to start at the … new beginning.

So it was all blackness, then I found myself coming to in a very unfunny way.
“... boy.”

{Oww ... what hit me.}

Definitely aware of pain, almost nothing but pain. Told me I wasn’t dead at least. Although the throbbing ache running through my skull, death might have been preferable at the moment.

“Get up boy!”

Someone was speaking, but it was far off, or maybe just wasn’t reaching through the haze of suffering. Far more interested in soothing the people slapping the drums in my skull than someone who was carrying on.

“Boy, I said get up! You’ve taken worse knocks than that. Quit being lazy and get up.”

{Oh gee, thanks for sounding concerned.} Who the hell is shouting at me anyway? Doesn’t sound terribly worried. Maybe it didn’t look as bad to outside perspective as it felt.

Then a hand slapped across my jaw, when I could only mutter a groan, then came the backhand on the other cheek.

{Ugh, damn bastard. Fine, since you’re so worried about me.} Didn’t know who this guy was, but sweet fried pickles he was an ass. No compassion for a poor person knocked near unconscious across the skull?

Tried to will my eyes open, they fluttered slowly. Light just brought more stabbing pain and the lids were just as quickly closed. Yanked down like the blinds at sunrise. Keep out the soul light of the Sun. It was evil and it burned!

“Ranma, get up and quit lazing about! We’ve still got a long way to go if we’re going to hit those training grounds before midday! Besides, it’s your turn to cook, boy.”
Something about those words began to filter through. Alright, brain processing. Check. Concentrating through the pain? Check.

\textit{(Ranma?! The hell?)}

Slowly, forced my eyes open again. The world began to return to focus but it only did so reluctantly. Someone was in my face, almost so close I could smell the stink of his breath.

\textit{(Woo … hasn’t brushed his teeth yet, has he? Reeks like booze.)}

Finally, the edges of my vision cleared and a face snapped into the viewscreen of my mind. Middle aged, skin was tanned and somewhat weather beaten. Odd, tight wire rimmed glasses on his face, with chords running around his ears. White bandana on his head.

Something in my memory was screaming about the familiarity of the codger before me. Well, that really wasn’t nice, Dad was actually a bit older himself, and I wasn’t a plucky spring chicken either.

Another memory came crashing violently into my musings and quite suddenly I felt my headache come wailing back in with a vengeance. My brain began to argue with itself. Memories that weren’t mine, I think, played around and fought with the memories that were. I … think.

Suddenly it was all so confusing and palms went pressing into my temples to try and squeeze the pressure out. For some reason that always seemed to help when I had a migraine anyway.

Seeing this action the old fellow leaned back and an actual tinge of concern crept into his voice, or maybe I just misinterpreted it was compassion.

“Ranma, are you alright boy? Maybe you hit your head harder than I thought.”

The memories of who I am, or who I was, or ah it was all so confusing. Why did that name sound familiar? It was right on the tip of my tongue, but then something cracked my rambling thoughts over the back of the metaphorical skull with a proverbial bat.

\textit{(Ranma, that’s my name … duh. What am I doing, having amnesia?)}
I was trying to sort it all out, when suddenly, impulsively and perhaps on long born habit my mouth ran on auto for a moment.

“Course I’m not alright, Pops! The hell were you thinkin’ that fall into those rocks could’a killed me!”

The words seemed so natural and right for some reason. Though that really wasn’t my speech pattern, and I wasn’t quite sure what I was talking that way. I never called anyone ‘Pops.’ Sure, I might tease Dad and called him ‘Old Man’ but he’s my old man. If I have kids, one day they’ll do the same thing, I imagine.

Then more memories tumbled from the murky fog of my confusion.

*I had been sleeping peacefully and deeply, heedless of the fact the sun was rising. Then suddenly I was flying through the air. Reflex took over and my body tucked and rolled. Center of gravity regained and eyes popped open.*

The old man was already launching himself off the grass from the campsite to engage in the morning duel. We kept on the same line of fly as we collided. Fists and feet exchanged a short flurry.

*Then the old bastard, in his usual manner, pulled a trick and snatched up my ankle and spun me about before we broke apart. I didn’t manage to catch myself in time and then … oh crap, rocks!*  

*Bam!*

*Darkness.*

That would explain the extreme pain my head and my arms, must’ve shielded myself from the blow. Amazed nothing was broken, and my brains were spilled all over the ground. Thank the kami for the small miracles, ne?

Hrm, that was certainly not my normal mode of thinking. My mind was trying to fight itself still. My own self against myself. One series of impulses and memories against my own sense of identity. It seemed in the mists of pain, the impulses of, I suppose this body, were winning.
“Oh quit whining Ranma and get up. You’ve taken worse shots than that before. You did just as you were trained, tucked your head and let your hands and arms absorb the shock. And it’ll take a lot more than those rocks to break your bones, boy. I trained you to be tougher than that.

“Now get up and start cooking. I’m starving.”

Grumbling, I took stock of my body and ordered it into motion. Perhaps to show off that I was indeed made of sterner stuff, or perhaps on sheer muscle memory I flipped up and regained my feet.

Now, I’m quite certain I could leap up, but certainly not with the ease which I found myself doing so. That fact was an idle wonder, however. Stumbled a bit on the landing, and a fresh stab of pain for my trouble. Yet, I made it over to the fire to start the rice and what meager vegetation we had for eating.

{Old bastard had to too cheap to spring for more supplies. We don’t find civilization soon, or go hunting, we’re going to be out food by tomorrow}

I was momentarily confused by that thought, as I’m sure it came unbidden. How would I know the food supply? I’m pretty sure I was in the middle of my home town, walking on the sidewalk, not in the middle of God’s country … wherever the hell this is?

Concentrating on the cooking stilled my worried rambling, however, and it seemed to quiet the ache in my skull. The internal answer to my query of why the hell I knew that name seemed to be refusing to be forthcoming. The harder I tried to reach for it in my memories, the more my head hurt.

There were far more pressing questions in mind though. Like why the hell was I in this Ranma’s body? How did I get here? Where is ‘here?’ And all the other fun things. No answers seemed to be coming out of the ether so I gave up the search for now.

My stomach, Ranma’s stomach, whatever, it was rumbling and wanting filling. At least the normal functions of the body I was familiar with seemed to all be there. Hunger I could deal with. It was the most basic and primal of all needs, aside from perhaps breathing which the body did just fine on its own without me worrying over it.

Operating on the skills which seem to have been learned on the road and came without my coaxing, I put the two tin lunch boxes by the fire. Filled with a portion of rice and water, and fanned the flames
to they would burn a bit hotter in the extra oxygen. The task was strangely familiar, but at the same time relaxing.

Familiar was good. It wasn’t familiar to ‘me’ but it seemed to be familiar to Ranma. Well, I guess if I was going to be him, better to be relaxed and calm than panicking about this whole situation.

Keep my mind from stressing and eventually this damned headache would go away, I could hope at least. Then I could begin to ponder through this. I’d do much better considering my circumstances with a rational mind than an uncentered one.

The memories for this person seemed to come much more quickly than my own, so I turned myself to what would come rambling forward. Let myself see if I could glean something useful from it.

“Is the food ready yet?”

*Does he think with anything other than his stomach?*

“Geeze, Pops I just started cookin’. Would you let it get at least half way done first? I’m hungry too you know? Fussin’ about it aint gonna make it get done any faster.”

My mouth seemed to enjoy running on its own, or perhaps the words just came out freely since they were the natural tone for this body? Oh well, less trouble to just let it ride for now.

My own memories seemed to only come in random flashes, and the ones of this … life? Seemed to come with comparative ease. Might as well turn myself some questions, if I could draw forth the answers.

*Who am I?*

_Ranma Saotome._

*Well that answer came quick.*
I began to probe for other memories of relevance. Such as who the bald one was? Apparently he was my, err Ranma’s, god this was confusing; he was Genma Saotome, father to this person who I was, or was currently taking up space within.

We were on a very long training trip, running around in China currently. We’d been together for the earliest memories I could piece together. No thoughts came to mind of Ranma’s mother. Although something about all this was still sounding very familiar. I hated that tickling feeling of knowing a piece of information, but it couldn’t come forth when bidden.

I most certainly am not Ranma, but I am certainly occupying his body. His memories are coming up to me without any difficulty pulling them forth. Wasn’t reincarnation supposed to wipe your mind and start over?

For that matter, wasn’t it supposed to restart the whole damn thing and I’m supposed to be put back in a new body. Preferably human and in at least happy conditions, if not the most comfortable.

Ah well, no answers to the why would be coming forth. It seemed so strangely natural in the current situation. Having been on this trip for most of his life, Ranma must have been acceptingly resigned to his travels. Those feelings were dominating my thoughts. Now I had to worry if I was going to lose myself in the whole affair.

Alright, training trip. Now why not try conversation with the only other human being present. Since the natural manner of speech came out so easily, I tried giving voice to thoughts.

“So, Pop, where are you goin’ again?”

The man grunted from where he sat, arms and legs crossed as he looked though he was trying to contain his impatience for food. His stomach began to grumble, which he quickly covered with a cough.

“It’s called Jusenkyo, the place is supposed to be a superb training ground. Just what we need to take your skills to the next level boy.”

My headache flared back up in reply to his answer. A memory was trying to rip itself free from the confines of the mental vault and smack me in the back of the head. It was on the tip of my fingers, i just couldn’t quite get solid purchase on it. One thing I did get was a sense of impending dread. This place we were supposed to be going, must’ve been very bad.
A slow shiver worked its way up my spine, despite my best efforts to keep it contained. Genma raised an eyebrow but made no comment.

\[\text{Gee ‘Dad’ please don’t worry yourself on my account.}\]

For the better he didn’t say anything, probably. When I looked to the man, there wasn’t a whole lot of respect for this man lurking in the periphery of my emotions. Now, I have nothing but respect … okay, that’s a lie. Still, I respect my actual father, from another life. I certainly wouldn’t consider punching him in the face.

Greeting Genma’s cheek with the kiss of my fist was a not an unappealing thought. I suppose being willing to punch your teacher was kind of a given for martial arts. Ranma would certainly have no second thoughts. Memories came along unbidden of many, many moments of … let us call them ‘father-son bonding.’

Where said bonding involved fights over food, bathing supplies, or whatever was in short supply at the time. There were many happy memories of hugging, read grappling, and good natured punches and kicks, meant to leave a last reminder of annoyance.

Yeah, these two fought, a lot. However odd, it was the nature of their relationship as parent and child. I got an odd tingling of affection for the old man. Least there was that. For all his shortcomings, Ranma still loved the fool, if only out of necessity. He was all that my current self seemed to have in the world.

It was very weird being attached to something, and trying to be clinical about it at the same time. With a snort I just shook my head and checked the rice.

“Hey, Buddha, the rice is done.”

That insult came out rather impulsively. I wonder, if I tried to control my manner of speech, would I hurt myself? It was going to take some practice to keep from letting my mouth run loose. I had a habit of trying to be tight lipped, not free flapping. Seems Ranma had no such qualms.

The man to whom the rudeness was paid seemed to give it no mind. I could only blink as he teleported beside the fire. Snatching up the tin box by the lid, he was quick to bunch up his blanket and take hold of it. The lid snapped off and his chopsticks went to work in a hurry.
Even if it was a common sight for Ranma, I could only blink slowly. It took my stomach’s insistent rumble to snatch me back to what I was doing. Letting habit take off, soon I was eating with no better table manners than the old man. Least I could trust this body to function without terribly much prompting.

Once every possible grain had been consumed, Genma called for a quick warm up practice. Thankfully, it wasn’t an all out spar. While it seemed habitual things came easily, I didn’t want to trust those instincts in a real fight.

New body. I haven’t even given it a real test drive. Although, I think this particular vehicle was already well driven, unless we want to call them rigorously tested preinstall features.

What Genma considered a ‘lite’ warm up likely would have killed me, well the other me, whatever. It was a fight to make myself get up and jog a bit to hit my daily thirty minutes. Despite his middling years, Genma was obviously in far better shape than I’d been, or would ever be. Ranma obviously was well, despite the lite sheen of sweat from warming up the muscles, I wasn’t even panting.

Least he was very well exercised, I hope the habits that had shaped this body were easy to stick to. Whether it was forced on me or it came naturally. If I act in this flesh like I did in the old one, I’d break routine very fast.

With the kinks from sleep worked out, the campsite was packed away and we were off at a run. Genma would not slow down, no time to waste. I was again glad he’d forced Ranma into very good shape, because I’m sure I’d be left on the side of the highway after the first quarter mile.

The pace was intense and began to defy common sense. Running cross-country, barefoot no less, and performing hard midair leaps over streams from heavy stone to heavy stone when we found them. It was as much training as it was travel.

If did give me a chance to begin practicing to get familiar with all the bells and whistles. I planted pretty hard a few times in my hesitance. Yet, I learned quickly just to trust the muscle memory and honed instincts that came with this body. It wasn’t quite like learning to walk really, it was learning to walk in someone else’s feet.

Genma barked insults the whole time.
“What’s the matter with you boy? Are you getting sick? Well, I’ll sweat that right out of you!”

{Damn slave driver. I've got a half mind to ...}

Fighting it was pointless. I was just going with the flow by now. For the time being, like or not, facts of my situation were facts. I was a teenager, in the middle of who knew where China. And my legal guardian was this fool. Who had all the papers, money, and knowledge to any bank accounts or otherwise.

Although, when the memory came up of swimming to China, I’m sure it was safe to say we hadn’t gone through very legal channels to get into the country. That being the case, doubtful we’d be leaving through them either. This man was obviously not the sharpest knife in the kitchen. People swimming the English Channel to France was dangerous, but it had been done.

Oh well, in for a penny in for a pound. Seems my situation was going to be permanent. At the very best, I had no understandable means of escape and I had no desire to test death. Wouldn’t be fair to Ranma, if the actual ‘he’ ever returned.

Also the very real fact of what happened if I did die in this body? Go the real Hell? Or was it perpetual reincarnation? All things considered, I think I’m doing just fine for myself here. If only I could recall what was so nagging familiar about all of this.

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It all came back to me. Finally, it all made sense. Well, none of this made sense, but I did know what I was trying to remember now. As soon as I looked out over the valley we were descending to, it all snapped into sharp focus.

I wanted to make my feet stop, but Genma had barked about holding ups and I could enjoy the view later. Wasn’t a sightseeing trip after all, this was serious training business and all that.

I had died, I assume at least, and wound up waking up in the body of a character from an old anime I enjoyed as a kid. Granted, I could be hallucinating the whole thing. Some kind of coma dream or drug-induced delusion. Whatever the case, here I was.

I was going with the death angle as more likely. I mean, if I was going to go dreaming up a scenario
why couldn’t it be a lovely paradise with a beautiful woman? Or I could be the hero of my own epic adventure! I’d been reading and playing games far more recently than the last time I’d read a chapter of, or watched an episode of the titular character whose body I now inhabited.

Would have made for more sense in my mind that if I was going to dream something up, I would be traveling with some version of the Doctor right now. Fighting Daleks and Cybermen, or otherwise bungling up and getting kidnapped but that’s not the point. Other things had left deeper impressions on me than an old manga and anime series I’d liked way back when.

So I was going with definitely dead. I was now trying to claw up every significant detail of the plot I could piece together. My headache was largely gone, for which I was glad. The memories I wanted came through slowly, but I was picking up important plot details.

The problem facing me now would be to tempt fate or not? Should I just let it all play out, or try to change what was to me the established timeline. I was struggling with that question so long I forgot about where I was, and just kept mulling it over.

Before I knew it, I snapped back into focus to the sound of someone speaking in very broken language.

“Oh sirs, you very strange no? This here legendary training ground, ‘Land of Cursed Springs.’ Every pool here carry very tragic story of what drown in spring many long year ago.”

The poor Guide, we’ll just go with that since we didn’t even bother to ask his name, was only halfway into his little spiel when Genma decided to be Genma. My memory of this event was playing out before my eyes.

“Ranma, follow me!”

Leap, fly, land. He assumed a textbook perfect ‘Crane’ stance and waited atop one of the bamboo poles. Even though I knew he could do it, seeing it on a cartoon was one thing, letting it happen before your eyes was something else.

“Wait, sir! You no let me finish my very tragic story.”

The poor Guide was very suddenly alarmed by Genma’s foolishness. Couldn’t blame the guy, he knew the true horrors of this place. It was his job and purpose in the plot after all. To watch over this place and instructor visitors in the nature of the various pools.
My chest locked up with alarm. It was make or break time. I’d been beating myself up for what I should do. Now that the choice was before me I didn’t know what was proper. I was fighting the impulse that would have been to follow, and the preservation instinct not to join in and become Ranma-chan.

Genma stared and a frown creased his lips. “Ranma, what are you stalling for, boy? Not suddenly scared are you? Get up here and let’s get to work.”

Anger flared at that barb, damn this kid let himself get angry easy. Being a teen though, I guess it was only natural to be emotionally unbalanced. My mind fought itself on what it wanted to do and what my sense of preservation wanted to do.

Finally, with mouth screwing up I managed to bark out.

“What is Pops, didn’t you hear this guy? This place is bad news. What if we piss off the ghosts of this place or somethin’?”

Well the die was cast now. No Spring of Drowned Girl for me, or so I thought.

Genma broke into a chuckle, making it sound more derisive than amused. “Ghosts? Don’t make me laugh boy.”

(Too late, idiot.)

“These’s nothing to worry about from ghosts, but you’re going to be worrying about me if you don’t quit being lazy and get up here.”

All three of us stared as a sudden SNAP broke Genma off mid taunt. The pole he was resting on gave a very ominous crack and then the fibers broke completely. The man lost his balance in the shock and went plummeting into the water below with a grand bellyflop.

All I could do was sigh, and so history plays itself out in an unexpected manner. While the Guide reached into a bag he had been carrying and pulled out a sign with various characters on it that were indecipherable to me. I had a good idea what the meaning was though.
“Oh, poor sir, too bad. You fall in ‘Spring of Drown Panda’ very tragic story of panda what drown in spring fifteen hundred year ago. Now whoever fall in spring, take body of panda.”

Figures we’d be repeating almost beat for beat. Except when the panda shot out of the water, I wasn’t very shocked. The great bear, gi hanging open, and glasses dangling from one ear gave a confused sound. Then locked eyes upon me.

“Hey, Pops, I tried to warn you.” A frown crossed my lips, I didn’t like the gleam in his eyes. “Old man, what are you thinkin’? Don’t you dare.”

He shot off the new pole he’d balanced on and hit the ground. One hopped it over to me and soon I was in combat with my father, well in this life anyway, wearing the skin and fur of a very large panda bear.

My ability to trust in Ranma’s reflexes was put to the test, while my brain raced trying to figure out a solution to this problem. Sadly, there was likely a quick way to end this and I’d recall it later. For all the good that did me now though.”

“Cut it out, s’your own fault you moron!”

Never let it be said Genma was actually worse than his son, his level of ‘serious’ could just be wildly inconsistent depending on his mood and purpose. Right now he wasn’t playing about. While I was doing a fair job of blocking or weaving, my moves were still rather clumsy and the those paws just got faster.

In a momentary lapse of concentration a quick backhand caught me to the cheek and I went flying. I yelled, wouldn’t anyone? Part of me was also a bit distant to the affair. Watching it play out in slow motion and giving resigned commentary.

{Figures, looks like trying to fight the regular flow of the plot isn’t going to work so well. I really hope this works better when we get to Shampoo’s place.}

Already trying to plot my next moves and try for better results. Then cold water and the change? Well, really didn’t feel anything at all. Maybe a bit cold for a bath, but I’ve had worse. It really took a minute to notice the obvious alterations in center of gravity and mass change.
“Oh poor sir, you fall in Spring of Drowned Girl. Very tragic story of young woman who drown in spring more than eighteen hundred year ago. Now whoever fall in spring, take body of girl.” The guide chuckled a bit as he said that. Well nice and all he found something funny about this.

The pool was surprisingly shallow. That landing could’ve been very painful if it was must less in depth. As it was, I just sat up with a gasp and moved my hands on my body. A shudder climbed my spine at finding the new front end additions.

Yup, they were there. Fairly heavy and all of it. How did Ranma learn to get comfortable running around without a bra on, exactly? Oh well. More curious I grabbed the loose ponytail the hair had been pulled back to and glanced at it.

Black? Huh, so I guess that was an animator’s choice rather than a real thing. I flicked it back and climbed out of the water. Now dripping wet and with clothing that would in no way fit properly. What’d I lose, five inches in height? Six? It was a significant different to be sure.

Well, I guess I could test my control. Anger would have been the proper response, and I could feel it bubbling to the surface. While I was feeling bit detached. My headache from this morning thumped in my skull as I tried to settle my mind from the two different states.

I still didn’t get how I could be in a new body, part of my emotions feeling one way, and then part of me feeling the other. I was experiencing Ranma’s reaction in a very real, powerful way. It was hard to keep it contained while I tried to reason my next course of action.

The panda leaned back and stared, the fire going out of him as alarm settled in. I let the anger out in a trickle, trying to keep it tightly reigned. I could recall what followed, sort of. There was a certain bandana wearing, fang toothed, perpetually lost fool somewhere around here. I aimed to at least prevent THAT curse from happening. Would save me so much trouble later.

“P-O-P-S … “ Snarling out each syllable with a drawl. “You overgrown thrown rug. This is your fault! All your fault, you stupid, greedy … I’ll kill you for doing this to me!”

The voice became quite shrill as I put in every bit of forced rage I could summon up. Which didn’t prove to be very hard. If I wasn’t careful I’d really lose my reigns, heh reigns while I was in the flesh ‘Wild Horse’ herself.
That cooled some of my fury at a bad joke, kept it easier to hold in grip. I didn’t want to chase the fool across the countryside if I could help it. I had a certain other moron to find and keep from turning into things worse than pandas and girls. If only to prevent that later headache.

Genma turned and quickly darted off, his sense of self-preservation coming into play. Damn bear proved quite adept at getting his bearings on his new body. He was both quick and stunningly agile. In fact, I somehow doubt he lost much of his natural grace at all.

For my part, I forgot about the fact the cuffs of my pants were dragging the ground and promptly planted my face into the grass at the first step. Growling a bit as I quickly shed the burden of their interference.

{So that’s why he was chasing around the panda in just his boxers and gi jacket. Learn something new every day.}

I had another inner chuckle for a moment as I adjusted the top for comfort and took off in the direction the panda had gone. My anger was gone now for the most part. I could laugh it off and now just begin to test this form. Why not make a game of it.

The poor guide was just watched his strange customers ran off. I suppose he was feeling a bit confused by the oddness of us. Or perhaps he was having an inner chuckle? Ah well, he didn’t get to explain his ‘very tragic story’ or the simple facts of our curses to us. We could get back to that later.

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While Ranma-chan was off chasing Genma-panda, a certain dark haired boy, with a certain bandanna, heavy pack, and umbrella crested a hill and glanced down into the valley below. Little did he know what awaited him coming just over the rocks off to his side. Still just out of earshot, but closing fast.

“Jusenkyo, finally. I’ve found you Ranma. This time you won’t get away from our fight.”

How little he realized the chaos that would soon come into his life for one very stupid choice to follow his nemesis to China.

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End of Chapter Rambling: So this is a silly little idea I had while rereading kayemsi’s *Ranma, the Second Time Around* and being I haven't updated any my stories for four years now, I decided to do some writing while I wasn't busy at work or was bored at home and couldn't find something else to do. I'm just trying to write something I hope will be entertaining and put my muse back together in order to get into the swing of writing regularly again. I hope you enjoy the chapter and wish to continue the story. I will not be putting myself in here, as such, but channeling my thoughts on the matter to the character where it seems appropriate.

I will also try to avoid switching voice too often, unless there is some information I think the audience will enjoy to have.

Thanks for reading.

Until next time,

Dorin
"Get back here you old fool! Get back here, I said!" Hollering in that rather rich voice, bouncing along after a panda. Who quickly ambled from stone to stone, rarely even wobbling as he went.

When I got right down to it, this is actually kind of fun. Sure, I've somehow wound up occupying the body of an anime character, of all things. Sure, I picked up his curse and turn into a girl. And damn if jumping around with this chest wasn't uncomfortable.

It hurts!

It hurts a lot!

Despite the manga or the anime, all the flopping flesh was very uncomfortable in this high speed chase. Definitely going to invest in a lot of very good sports bras when I get the chance.

Anyway, with an arm securely holding the bouncy bits in place, best I could manage at least, I kept chasing Genma's retreating form. This was still fun. Even the greatest martial arts masters couldn't pull this kind of junk off in my world. Making leaps of dozens of feet in a bound. Then quickly just taking another soon as the muscles coiled in my legs.

I could probably jump somewhere in a foot and half, with muscles fully coiled and every bit of energy I could use, in my old body. Maybe I could get a bit better than a yard on the horizontal with a good run. I don't really know, I never measured. I do know I suck at basketball, and if I did track and field I'd just embarrass myself.

Jumping across boulders, that certainly can't be good for your feet unless you're using extreme caution. One slip and you're in trouble.

With Ranma's body though, I was making these jumps easy foot to foot and barely losing momentum on the exchange. Maybe it was just the rules in this world were different, because several martial artists that I remember from the anime could perform such feats. It was still fun and rather amazing.

My eyes kept sight of the panda, who was fleeing as if Death was on his heels. Nah, just a shrieking banshee. Who was trying very hard to avoid laughing as she got caught up in the motions. Okay, contrary to my old habits, keeping this body in shape was going to be easy. If I could do this kind of stuff with ease, exercise was going to be an interesting game. Not a chore.

For now though, I gave myself a mental slap. Need to focus. Where, oh where is Ryoga? I don't really have a clue how long the stay with the Guide would be. Could've been days, could be we wound up leaving in the morning. Still, I was after the panda, so I was on the right track.

On an added thought, it was weird how the hip ratio seems to stay about the same for both bodies. Despite the loss in height and weight, I think I'm about the same size either form. Good thing too. Losing the pants had been a necessity. Losing the boxers, that would be bad. Don't really want to go flashing naughty bits at people it I can help it.
Would probably kill the directionally challenged rival I was seeking.

[Ah ha! There you are. Alright 'P-chan' you don't know it, but you owe me for caring enough. Selfish though it may be.]

We had run a circuit of the valley and them up onto the lower surrounding hills. The panda made contact with a human being, and just bounced the poor fellow off without even slowing. An unfortunate boy in faded black clothing, short sleeves and dark pants. Poor kid stumbled and this would normally be where I smashed into his head, using his skull as a springboard.

Then he'd go into tumble down into the valley, and then hello Mr. Bacon. With control that still shocked me, I tucked my legs and rolled. The leap turned into a series of somersaults and landed lightly before the boy. Grabbing his shirt and with surprising ease tossed him further back to a safer part of the cliff face.

He squawked a bit as he slammed face first into a rock, even I had to wince at the impact. Then sank quietly down to the ground. Grinning a bit I just stood there and watched. Slowly, he pulled himself back up and turned around. Wits returning and sporting an angry red across his face, pointed at me and shouted.

"What was that for?"

His blink was both comical and adorable, I couldn't help but laugh as he stared. His eyes swept the length of my body, admittedly short, toes to hair and he blushed. Spinning around he began to stammer softly.

"I mean … that hurt … why?"

"You should stay away from that valley, it's cursed. Fall into one of the pools down there and you'll turn into something other than what you are. The furry truck that just ran you over, the panda? He's my old man."

The boy slowly turned back to face me, blinking slowly. Trying to put sense to the words, I'd imagine. His mouth worked slowly as the information seemed to be running through his brain. I got the scene of gears slowly crunching as the daft suggestion of transformative, water delivered curses was a thing.

"Panda .. curse … wha?"

Between the complete defiance of reality, and his eyes taking in the fact my legs were completely bare, his brain began to check out and force a reboot. I had to cover my mouth and bite the inside of my cheek. His expressions were hilarious. Yet, it would be rude to laugh, out loud anyway.

If I was going to be on this ride for the long haul, damn straight I was going to get every moment of amusement possible out of it. I always enjoyed the comedy, even if it was repetitive. Now I had to make sure I could enjoy it, not from front row seat, but being the central character on the stage.

The boy gulped and finally locked his neck, staring hard into my eyes. Seems somewhere in his brain it started to click. Or perhaps he thought it was too stupid to be a joke, so maybe I was telling the truth.

"That was .. your father? How many pools are there down there?"

Tilting my head a bit, I slide a finger over my lip and shrugged, "I dunno, lots. Might be well over a hundred. I think me and the panda got lucky. All things considered."
The boy's jaw worked slowly as he pointed to me. Curse, panda. Oh, this was so much fun. I could almost read his thoughts in real time. Shame I didn't have telepathy or something, would've made this much funnier.

"What … do you turn … in …to?" He finally got out with a very hesitant pause in his words. As if the words were suddenly a frightening possibility. I could begin to see some kind of recognition slowly beginning to creep onto his face. As if something in his memory were revealing itself slowly to his gaze.

"Me? Oh, you're lookin at it." I kept my arm holding my chest, didn't want to break Ryoga if I could help it, yet anyway. I looked to either side of me, mostly studying my legs. "It's a bit short, but I think this body has some very nice curves. Very pretty skin too, I really like the way my legs are shaped too. Could do a lot worse for body."

That seemed to fry another fuse in his brain. His eyes began to widened and he was slowly beginning to try and piece together the clues.

{Damn Ryoga, how dense are you? Come on, I can't look THAT different can I?}

Finally, it came out as half a question, half an accusation. "Ra...n...ma?"

I almost snorted a laugh, force out every bit of the hiragana why don't you? Instead, I turned up my head and grinned, pointing his direction. "Bingo, hiya Ryoga. Long time no see. Surprised you managed to find this place, and not long after I got here either. It's been what, two years?"

Learning my name seemed to have gotten him the bit of information he needed. Latching onto something quickly familiar, he pointed an accusing finger at my nose and his anger barreled forward.

"You ran out on our fight, you coward! Do you have any idea how hard it was to find this place? I've been all over Asia hunting you down."

Since it seemed difficult to keep the natural impulses in check, my eyes rolled and I snorted. "Gee, nice to see you too, Ryoga. Two years and not even a 'hello' or 'Hey Ranma, you bastard!' Nothing?"

His jaw snapped shut and he became very quiet. Oh well, let him be off balance then. I have no problem running Ranma's mouth, a bit.

"I seem to remember I waited for you, three days was it? How long did it even take … "

I was cut off mid jab as his finger thrust almost into my nose..

"Four! When I got there on the fourth day, you'd run off. If I wasn't for that stupid note I found, then I probably never would have found this place. Do you have any idea how big China is? No, how big this whole continent is? You thought you'd just sneak off with your Dad and go into hiding from me?"

{Okay, this does get annoying quickly. How can one human being have a head denser than cement? Seriously. Of course, this is Ranma's universe ...}

"Oh excuse me, Pops showed up and demanded I grab my things and we go. Was all I could do to write you a letter of apology."

Granted it was 'apology' in typical Ranma fashion, as I recall it from memory. Probably a 'sorry buddy, got to go. Going off to China, some place called Jusenkyo for training. You know I'd be the
one to win anyway, can't wait any longer for you. Train hard in the meantime, so I can kick your butt when I get back to Japan, Ranma.'

"How long am I supposed to wait for a duel anyway? You wasted my whole weekend, you know? Anyway, forget about that for a minute. Ah!" Jamming my finger at him before he could retort with his wounded pride. "How about a 'thank you' for keeping you from picking up a curse too, huh?

"The spring I fell in is way over there." I point off in the distance, roughly where I recalled it. "Doubt you'll have the same luck as at least staying human. Aint careful, you fall down there who knows what might turn into. A pig, a cat, a duck, a monkey?"

I hope I could avoid all that, although dealing with Shampoo was going to be a challenge. Oh well, I'd deal with that head scratcher when we got to it. Which, sadly won't be terribly long from now, if I've got the time line right.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I have a panda to catch to and skin. I'll save you a piece, make you a jacket out of his hide or something." Turning I was about to depart, when he cut in. I paused and turned my head back to glance at him as he began to stammer.

"Wait! Where do you think you're going? We still have a fight to finish! And umm … well I'm not letting you out of my sight till we do. Besides, if I'm with you guys, err … maybe you could, help me get back to Japan?" He went from growling over our unsettled 'fight,' well his unsettled fight I didn't give two farts and a whistle if we ever settled that. Then he was soon nervous again, and jamming his fingers together.

That I was a typical Ryoga behavior when he was nervous. He would pick a fight with Ranma, but then he'd need Ranma's help getting to and from school. Now, this put me in a quandary. He was a headache, but he was also kind of amusing. At the same time, if I kept him in sight, I could keep him from picking up a curse.

For all his bluster and the danger of his temper though, Ryoga was also the one rival in all of the manga who could consistently challenge Ranma. Their feud had pushed both of them to improve continually to try for a leg up on one another. His curse had been a serious part of his anger though. I'm pretty sure I could nurture the current him to being the wall I needed to keep testing myself against without that particular sword hanging over my head.

Then there was problem of 'later' what about when he met Akane? I don't know if I should feel jealous or not. I wasn't even sure how I felt about the whole to be fiancee situation in the first place. He was sort of Ranma's friend, and those 'good buddy' feelings came up to the sight of him.

Taking a slow breath, I let it out with a sigh. Well, I didn't stop the curses on myself and the moron, but I kept Ryoga from his, I hope for good. Keeping an eye on him would be better than letting him roam off into trouble.

"Alright, fine. But we're not fighting here. Curses, remember?" That stilled his protests. "And I guess we're still friends … are friends, right?" My eyes bored into him. Suddenly making him all nervous again. I guess his anger wasn't strong enough to look past my pretty face. Not surprising, I suppose, given his life is now not a 'living hell.' Good. I'd just as soon have a kind of friend I could have fun with, then someone trying to kill me.

"Just keep up, we'll get back to the valley floor fast enough." Turning my back to him, I adjusted my top and cinched it closed. Arm crossing my chest, again, ugh wonder if I get some bras from Shampoo's village? Have to cross that bridge when I came to it.
Then I was quick to start the rock jumping race again. Genma was long gone from my field of vision by now, no big deal. He'd loop back around to the Guide's hut and wait. Could count on some things to be predictable, and it was always a good thing.

Ryoga hollered after me but could keep pace without a problem. His ability to get lost seemed to be more for situational convenience than anything. The boy had a talent for finding places he needed, or wished to find when he had clear head. Least, he never seemed to have a problem finding the bathtub when it suited him.

When I took a moment to study the scenery I had to admit, it was lovely. A bit too rugged for my tastes. I was a spoiled child of modernity; high-speed internet, smartphone, and a different fast-food place on every block. This part of China was still beautiful. Almost exotic and unspoiled by human hands, at least by grip of the 'future.'

Occasionally I shot glances back over my shoulder, and sure enough he was keeping pace. As I thought, he easily maintained pace with me. Getting used to the super powered martial artists was going to take time. The thought of techniques I could learn, or develop on my own from my admittedly vast knowledge base of other anime and games sent an evil little chuckle up my spine. Supposing on what might work and might not.

In this world the limits were not easily foreseeable. I mean dragons, phoenixes, ghosts and otherwise were real creatures here. Cologne had moved to Japan and hauled a huge trunk full of magical trinkets with her. The sky seemed to be the limit.

Hmm, Shampoo and Cologne, what was I going to do about those two? While running across China with death looming over me, then fleeing in terror from a cat-cursed girl was not appealing, Cologne was also vital to Ranma's long term development. I could probably try to duplicate some of the training for the techniques that were iconic parts of the arsenal for myself and Ryoga, but having a wise mentor … who wasn't a fool like Genma, could be beneficial.

I just sighed and let it go, too much to ponder for now. I also discovered that letting my mind ramble off was not a safe thing to do. My foot hit a slick patch of moss and and suddenly my traction went away. I slipped on next rock that was to be my landing pad and suddenly things were looking poorly.

"Crap!"

"Ranma, you idiot, watch where you're going!"

Oh thank you Newton for your laws of universal mechanics, they're very useful most of the time. However, right now there were going to do me any good. My momentum kept me sliding along and almost sent me horizontal. Yeah, I was going to have to take the time to start to practicing for real in this body. I'd taken its natural instinct for granted and let my brain go out for lunch 'to think.'

Ryoga dove suddenly while I had the good sense at least tuck my arms to the sides of her my head. I'd just as soon not take two knocks to the noggin in one day. I was surprised really, the fanged one managed to get right under me. He should really try out for baseball. Then to my shame my elbow met his gut and drove the wind from his lungs.

"Owff … " He burbled in pain as I tried to collect my wits again. Quickly shooting up and slapping my forehead.

"Ah geez, Ryoga I'm sorry, are you okay?"
There came a highly forced wheeze I believe was something to the effect of "Never better." With a shaky thumbs up to try and emphasis his point. Which looked both comical and sad at the same time. I wonder which he was trying to look tough for; not wanting to look weak in front of his rival, or to play tough for a cute girl.

"Damn, I'm sorry, I was spacing out." Fortunately, he was indeed made of something that seemed to be other than human flesh. A few pained breaths and he was soon breathing almost normally. My extended hand was slapped away.

"I'm fine, Ranma. Take more than that hurt me."

My lips twitched, the barbed insult right on the tip of my tongue. I quickly clamped my cheek and used the bit of pain to control the impulse. Fighting it down and viciously beating it to death with the spiked cudgel of my willpower. Pissing him off would just get us in a fight, and this was certainly the last place to be having a battle.

"'S'cuse me for me for concerned then." Giving a soft snort as I turned to begin heading off once more. A hand suddenly clamped down on my shoulder and held it tight. His fingers didn't dig in, like they surely could have, but I found myself unable to fight out of that group without putting up a struggle.

"Ranma." He said in a tight voice, trying to keep ...something from leaking into his tone. I don't know if he was actually containing his anger, or he certainly couldn't be worried about me? Not the horrible Ranma Saotome who'd made a fool of him every day at lunch for a school year?

"What? It's getting late, Ryoga, and I'm getting hungry. Haven't had lunch yet." Fingers drumming on my ribs, while I didn't look at him. A blush crept up on my cheeks and I didn't want him seeing it. More the fact his strength, what I could gauge of it from the power in that arm, was more tremendous that I have him credit for.

Knowing a thing logically, and having the truth of that thing were two very different levels of experience I was quickly learning in my short time occupying this body. Sure he was stupid strong, likely the most powerful of the regular cast outside of one ancient pervert. Still, feeling that power chorded in his muscles was something else altogether.

He gave a cough and while his voice quavered a bit, he kept his nervous tone buried under whatever mix of emotions he was feeling. "Ranma, are you sure you're okay? It's not like you space out like that. Don't get me wrong, I don't really care, but are you sure this curse isn't playing with your head or something?

"When I beat the stuffing out of you and prove who's the better man, I'm not going to let some stupid excuse like your curse was distracting you or something keep me from getting my victory. I want you at your best Ranma, so I can prove I'm just better."

Well, isn't that stupid .. but sweet ... and stupid. If only you knew pork bun, if only you knew.)

A soft cough and I shrugged, "I dunno, maybe I'm just in shock or something and it hasn't hit me yet. I'll pay attention, okay? Now let's get moving before Pops eats everything edible in sight, then steals everything else that isn't nailed down."

Don't worry, 'buddy' I've learned my lesson. I'm just going to have to ponder the consequences of the future as I'm able. Can't space out while I'm around here at least.)

When he was satisfied that I was alert to my surroundings, he tried to takes the lead. All I could do
was roll my eyes as Ryoga pointed himself toward a sharp perpendicular to the direction we needed to go to start heading down into the valley.

A soft cough made him pause, looking at me curiously. "Ryoga, we need to go that way." Pointing to a natural depression in the surrounding mountains that showed a comparatively safe path we could use to descend. He just covered with a laugh and rubbed the back of his head.

"I … I knew that, I was just testing you, to make sure you're paying attention. So umm … lead on."

"Good recovery there." I admitted with a smirk, elbowing him in the ribs as I passed. Okay, little fumble aside, we might just be able to be friends yet. Tense friendship maybe, but still better than nothing.

The Guide's hut wasn't difficult to find once we got back to the main path that lead into the valley proper. Genma-Panda was rooting around in our bags, pulling out whatever consumables he could find. While our host was heating a kettle.

"Oh, young Mister Guest, you come back. We been waiting some time now. I been waiting to explain to honorable Mister Father about tragic Jusenkyo curses, and nature of them. You be wanting this hot water here soon."

The panda was setting down what little bit of rice and other provisions we had for food, and for the first time produced one of his trademark signs. Scribbling down quickly in kanji and the kana for his words.

~What kept you boy? I'm hungry.~

Then the sign quickly flipped over and having not even seen him write on the back.

~Who's that? He looks kind of familiar.~

That's it, even though I know what's coming, I ten yen for every time I see something that I'm just not yet prepared for. There's getting into the logic of a setting and going with the flow of while you're reading something or watching it on television, and then there's just seeing crap before your own eyes that you are truly seeing.

{How does he do that? And the hell did he figure it out so fast?}

I don't know if I would ever be able to actually force the truth out of the old man. So, all I could so was just watch a moment and be confounded. Seemed Ryoga was in shock as well. Perhaps more for the fact a panda was communicating to him in whole sentences, that the fact of how he was communicating.

~Well?~

Shaking my head I grunted, "I kept this guy here from splashing down into the valley, from over there." Pointing to the approximate peak I figured we were near at the time. "Seems a panda had just run him over and he lost his balance."

The bear seemed to actual sweat a bit, which was almost comical as I'm fairly certain bears are not a species with sweat glands. That Genma could actually looked expressively uncomfortable was funny to watch.

~Really?~
"Yup, so I managed to keep him on level ground, and since there's no civilization around here I showed him down here. And would you believe it, he's Ryoga Hibiki, you remember my old pal Ryoga, right?"

The boy was continuing to just stare, while the furry body of my father stared back. I gave the boy a gentle elbow into his side. He looked at me dumbly for a moment before blinking and coughing. Remembering his manners suddenly.

"Umm, hi Mister … Saotome?" Still couldn't believe it? Not that I blamed him on that matter. It was still horribly surreal. I'm surprised I wasn't in alarmed shock myself, even though I knew it was coming.

~Er .. hi .. Ryoga … ~

The sign spun about again, without the marker ever having been seen to move. That was a trick I really wanted to learn.

~So umm...got any food?~

The conversation was suddenly interrupted by the gentle whistle of the tea kettle which the Guide had been tending quite dutifully, paying us little heed as he got the water hot enough. The panda took a hot soak, and we didn't even see the transition. It was like someone had cut the line of film in a movie and grafted on completely new images. The eye simply couldn't notice anything more than the switch had happened.

"Oww, that's hot! … Hey, I'm human again! I'm cured!" The man bounced up and began to dance, hooting with a laugh. "And here you were worried, boy. Learn to trust your father once in awhile. What's being temporarily stuck as … "

"Ah, sorry to be saying Mister Guest, but this not real cure. For example, hot water turn honorable son back into boy."

The kettle splashed over my head and I winced a bit, skin turning a slightly angry shade of red but there were no deep injuries from it, thankfully enough. Ryoga just went wide eyed and pointed, again unable to formulate words.

If he didn't believe me before, well he had the proof standing in front of him now. The short, well curved girl who'd almost planted her foot into his face, was now standing before him carrying the same face as his middle school nemesis. Perhaps taller and more filled out since then, but it had been two years after all, yet he knew me immediately.

"But soon as come in contact with cold water again, you turn back to girl and panda. Is very tragic, sirs. And you say new Mister Guest almost fall from up there?" He glanced over to where I had been and moved his gaze down to the pools in that area.

"Ooo, very lucky young master, many bad pool in that part of valley. Me think if you fall from there, you probably land in 'Spring of Drown Piglet' very tragic story of little black piglet, what drown in spring twelve hundred year ago. Whoever fall in spring take body of black piglet. Very unfortunate you fall in that spring."

Ryoga's lips drew into a tight line and he turned a very ghostly shade of pale. The spirit seemed about to leave his body when he processed this information. I just went over to the old man, pulling out a fresh shirt and pants. These clothes really needed to dry. The Guide politely showed me where his normal drying line was and gave me free use.
"So many visitor today, not see so many people in many months. Least one sir get lucky so far, I suggest honorable Sir please not leave space around hut. No want tempt fate by going on walk. Too many spring in Jusenkyo. Some not so bad, some very frightening. Mister Guests come inside, I prepare famous Cantonese stir fry rice and vegetable for you. I sorry to say, I have no fresh meat in home.

"Need go shopping soon, but I share what I have. Tomorrow I show you to nearby village. Wise womans there can maybe help with curses, and let honorable sirs buy fresh supply."

His work done, the man moved inside his hut. We trailed along behind him. Genma looking to the Guide with a dubious, not yet fallen expression. Not sure yet if he believed the truth of that claim. Ryoga moved in robotic fashion, poor man had suffered too many shocks in too short a period of time. When my workout clothing hung up to dry I just shrugged and followed along.

Lunch sounded wonderful about now, my stomach gurgled in agreement. And at least we were having vegetables and not sweet and sour pork. Count your small blessings as they arrive. At least it demonstrated, so far, some measure of fate could be altered.

Now just hope the repercussions weren't disastrous. Running around the village of Joketsuzoku with Ryoga was going to be a wild card. I could not anticipate how it would play out.

It's times like this I really miss the easy convenience of modern life. I was spoiled from home, where groceries stores were abundant, and there was a fast food place on almost every street corner. The countryside is still beautiful, but it's very hard to appreciate those surroundings when an empty void has moved into your stomach. We'd been trekking for about two days now, and run out of food this morning.

The Guide, for a man of fairly rotund build, seemed to eat like a bird. How he could be that portly and consume as little as he did, compared to the three martial artists he was leading anyway, defied my understanding. He was also in remarkably good shape. Not surprising I suppose, since he didn't have a vehicle so he had to walk everywhere. He also didn't require many breaks to rest, keeping easy pace with the three of us. Man had some stamina indeed.

I was also envying the man right now. Somewhere in my combination of martial arts, being a teenager, and being child to Genma Saotome combined to have my stomach rumbling in anger. The old man and Ryoga were in no better shape.

For about an hour now it had been our walking anthem. One stomach would growl, then the other two could join in time. To make matters all the more fun it had rained earlier in the day. I was introduced to my first experience of 'water magnetitis.' Wasn't a heavy shower, just a quick misting. Leaving one girl and her panda father behind as the sun returned light the heavens.

Least it stilled Genma's complaining, and I was trying to bite mine off. Wouldn't serve any purpose. I had been trying to ponder what to do about a certain Chinese native of the female persuasion and her lawn gnome of a grandmother. Would anyone have guessed how hard it is to think when your body is convinced it's apparently starving?

No thoughts beyond 'food' were coming to mind when Ryoga gave a sharp hiss at me.

"Are we sure this guy knows where he's going? I thought he said this village was close?"

The boy was no less hungry than I was, and his face was strained with the suffering. Trying to put his mind to anything other than his belly. I was too uncomfortable right now to even bother cracking
a grin at the stupid idea of Ryoga worried about someone getting us lost.

"He seems like he's been around here for a long time, Ryoga. Maybe by 'close' he means that in a relative term for him."

His frown softened just a little, but whatever he had been about to offer on retort was cut off by the Guide finally clearing a hill and pointing down to a stretch of plain beyond.

"Here sirs, Joketsuzoku, village of brave warrior womans. They has long history of training in the martial arts, and much learning of magic things. Perhaps they can help you sirs, where humble Guide cannot."

It was quite a sight to take in. The high wall surrounding one of the flatter spaces in the area, with several rows of buildings located beyond. The exterior had many farm houses and plots of land which were actively growing crops of some variety or another. Was a throw back straight to centuries past. Was also beautiful architecture and brilliant colors on the gates and some of the finer homes.

Wish I was more concerned with anything but my body's complaints for food. Also wish I had a camera and more time to explore the place. Every ounce of control had to be exerted and prepared. Another critical moment was upon me. I wasn't prepared and I didn't know how I wanted to handle this.

We simply followed the Guide down into the village proper. Our minds on asking someone for lunch more than anything. I was prepared to work for a meal, I'm sure Ryoga wouldn't complain about some manual labor either. Genma? Oh, I was going to have keep an eye on that panda, speaking of which … oh no.

The clash of weapons and grunts of exertion interrupted my musings of the whereabouts of my father. Still surprised I was just accepting all this for what it was so quickly, no time for that though. The moment was upon me. I had to really quit zoning out.

"Ah, very lucky today sirs, womans is having tournament to determine village champion for the year. To win is very big honor."

"Ryoga help me keep Pops out of … Ryoga?"

{Gah, damnit! Et tu P-chan! Is the stupid just a natural affliction here, or a Fate induced plot device? … And I could've talked to Ryoga before hand, I'm guilty too! GAH!}

They had picked up the scent of food and found the Champion's table with ease. One fanged boy and panda were quickly stuffing their faces with everything they could grab. Quite a spread on the table, I do admit. Looked like the best fruits and crops from the latest harvest. My mouth watered at the scent of fresh steam pork buns and whatever else was there. This was horrible torture, the siren song of food.

{No! I'm getting chased all over China then back to Japan.}

"Guys, I don't think that's a buffet, quit stuffing your faces and let's go find someone we can ask for …"

I had completely tuned the fight out. Shampoo had handled the woman in easy fashion, as was foretold in the pages of the manga. The new village champion had risen. All I could do was watch as a chui came flying out of the air and smashed the bench my two blockheaded companions were occupying. There was no groan I could express that would be satisfactory for the loss of control in
this situation.

I'm fairly certain the girl had intended to miss, but kudos to Pops and Ryoga all the same for dodging the unseen attack without fumbling. They hadn't even dropped food in mouth or hand as they positioned around that heavy mace. Fingers pressed into my temple as I sighed and tried to ward off the tension headache that wanted to begin storming through my brain.

My eyes turned to take in Shampoo, now for the first time. I joined the other two in staring, and in my case my jaw fell open. Alright, she had been 'cute' in the manga, one might even say sexy, but it did not do the sight before my eyes justice. Her hair was black, not lavender, kind of sad I noted in my head. The purple or bluish color was always so .. exotic and quintessentially Shampoo.

I could, without reservation, call this sight before me one of the most beautiful women I had ever had the personal honor of beholding. A lovely face that was complimented by wonderful curves that her clothing hugged just so. Screw Ranma, if I could get that to chase me all over the world, I don't think I'd mind so much.

She was babbling what was incoherent to me, but then I'm sure anything I could have said in Japanese, or my own native English would've been barbarian speak to her. That is, assuming I could have strung together three words to make a half coherent thought.

"Hee … you pretty … "

I don't know if I could've been that articulate. I can see what Mousse was chasing after so vigorously. I don't blame the blind fool.

The Guide, per his duty was translating, and I was having to remind myself to snap back into the world around me. This was becoming a very bad habit.

"...why you eating my prize? She say."

More angry words and her second mace was pointed right at Ryoga's head. "I new champion for village, in fighting tournament what come once a year, and you strangers dare come uninvited and unannounced and desecrate the place of honor everyone in whole village work hard to prepare in celebration of Champion victory.

"How dare you stain my honor?"

Ryoga had a horrified look in his face and was suddenly at a horrid impasse. He was famished, but he also had a very real problem hitting girls. Well all girls except me, but those were special circumstances. However, he seemed to be having an internal war with himself.

Oh he wouldn't? If he fought and beat Shampoo, then she'd turn her affections onto him. This idea did not set well with me for no shortage of reasons. While it might be amusing to not have her hunting my head, and it would reduce the fiancee burden immediately. It would also put Mousse on his case, not mine. How would Cologne react to it? Would she ignore me entirely in favor of training him exclusively?

And now that I've seen Shampoo with my own eyes, well I don't know if it would be so bad to have the girl's affection. That is, weighed on the scale of her more manipulative actions, did her sweet nature and beauty outweigh the headaches it would bring? Damn, now I'm really in a rock and a hard place situation.

I was caught off guard when the panda slapped me in the back and pushed me forward. Producing a sign from behind his back.
"What if Ranma beats you in combat? Won't matter then, will it?~

"Hey! Don't go dragging me in your mess, old man. I aint the one who treated her victory feast like it was a free serve snack bar!"

I had to wheel around as the other weapon she bore pointed under my nose and she growled at me.

"Little girl, what you is to this panda and stupid looking bandanna boy?"

"Hey! I'm not stupid!" Poor Ryoga, least he was completely ignored in this situation, but yeah I think we were all guilty of some level of dumb at the moment.

That snapped retort was both ignored and not translated, the girl just kept her attention on me. Well, now I had her attention, I guess it was just time to face the music. A light went off in my head and that repressed part of my brain, where I'm actually a full on pervert, voiced a very devious idea. In my stress, hunger, and trying to keep the situation going where I wanted it, I agreed.

"Hey, could someone get me some hot tea, please? My throat is so dry." The Guide blinked and spoke my wish allowed. Shampoo growled and narrowed her eyes a bit, but she mumbling something back and one of the villagers darted off into a house.

"I'm Ranma Saotome, and those are my friends." Pointing to the currently ignored balls of idiot that had put me in this situation. "They wounded your honor, fine, if I beat you then no harm, no foul, right?"

As the Guide spoke my words allowed, her brow ticked higher and I wasn't sure if she either felt smug, annoyed, or some combination thereof. She definitely had that look in her eyes like I was a punk kid who'd just challenged a professional boxer to a title match or something. Certainly looked as though she were just going to humor me, then teach me a horrible lesson for my stupid pride.

"Pops, save me some hot water, and some food." I growled to the panda, my eyes boring into his own so he got the message. I was up to pinch hit for his stupidity, damn straight I was going get my share. I really needed the hot water though. Otherwise, my evil plans were foiled.

{Okay Ranma ... let's hope this goes well.}

The woman playing referee just shrugged and motioned us to take our positions on the log they had been using a 'ring.' I flexed my muscles a bit, bring some warmth into them. The anticipation seems to be working, I could a good flow of adrenaline beginning to circulate in my system. My body was alert and tuned to the threat. Even my hunger was momentarily stifled so all energy could be put to concentrating on defeating the threat before me. Good.

The ref's hand fell and we were on our way, one round, no time limit, victory only be ring out. I quickly discovered that, until I really got to practicing, I am not in fact as good as Ranma Saotome.

The body had all the training and reflexes, and I could call upon the memories and experience. Yet, I could not do so with the kind of confident battle mind a well honed warrior would possess.

Not to say I was going to get my ass kicked, mind you, but this was one a recreation of the embarrassment that Shampoo would have suffered. Her moves were sharp and quick. I could see them coming, study her movements and pick up the direction she was attacking. This was actually very good practice for the future.

Learning how to mix the innate and sharpened powers of Ranma's training with my own mind to be a more complete fighter. I found my reflexes were up to the task of ducking under or weaving about her movements. All well and good, but this was no open ground. I'd run out of log real fast if I let her
press me too hard.

Time to make a move and go for broke. I had given up territory for the experience of seeing that I could actually do what I set out to. Confident that even in my actual, unpracticed state of using Ranma's body that I was still superior to Shampoo, I made my move. She'd gotten a very confident posture seeing me give ground and not fight back. Her attacks were much more energetic and offensive. Now I was right to the edge of the fighting log, a push and I'd be off and I guess left to her choice of punishment for insulting her status as Champion.

My intuition screamed it was time to counter. She made a hard swing for my head, committing for a one blow victory. She caught air, and I shudder to think it was 'just' caught air. A short fraction delay and my skull would be sporting a new dent. For a moment she was open as I slid forward in a low position.

My leading foot hooked behind Shampoo's own ankle and pulled. The girl gave a yelp as her balance was thrown off. While I swapped my weight into a forward movement and shouldered her open torso. That swept her vertical base away entirely and she tumbled off the log. The whole crowd either went silent or gasped. Shocked their champion had been defeated by an outsider.

I let the ref raise my hand and proclaim my victory. Then quickly bounced my way to Pops, who was pouring a kettle of steaming water over his head. Quickly I snapped it up from his grip. He growled in annoyance, but I wasn't going to take the argument. Didn't have much precious time to waste with him.

Shampoo had regained her feet, and I could see the angered look in her eyes. I knew what she was going to do.

\textit{(Ha, oh we'll be kissing alright, won't be any death for me though, thanks.)}

As she was closed the distance, I quickly dumped the remains of the water on my head. Shampoo recoiled a bit at their very odd behavior. Her eyes went from anger to shock, joined by the entire village, for the second time in the span of a minute. Wide eyed, she looked up to me, and began to pat my chest.

She rattled off more Chinese, and I could already guess the meaning even before the Guide began to interpret.

"Hey, you is no girl, you is man? She ask."

"Yup, one hundred percent boy. Except for this curse, you see, I'm not really a girl. I'm a guy."

She looked to the Guide, exchanging words with him. He didn't bother to translate, must've been asking him directly if what I was saying was true. I got the impression from the tone she either knew the man, or knew enough about him that could be trusted with the information he imparted.

Her look was confused, then moved to pondering. Studying my features in detail. Despite a soft sheen of sweat from her two round fights, whatever soaps she used on her skin and hair, they were divine. This was a girl who took pride in being a warrior, but also in presenting herself proudly as a woman.

She had all those 'soft' feminine qualities that were subtle and unique to the aura of a woman, but let us not forget the fact she could casually install doors in any offending wall that dared bar her path. Still, how could Ranma pass this up? The boy whose life I was now living must really have been repressed.
She arrived to a decision at last, it had seemed like ages. "Ran-ma?" She sounded out my name with a rather quizzical glance. Hands continuing to paw against me.

"Err, yup." Giving her a nod. She smiled in return, oh hell, this was just nuclear grade unfair. I'm afraid I was powerless before her charms. Can't say that's ever happened to me before. Of course, I've had plenty of attractive friends, but none who were this level of just … wow.

She sounded out her name for me, putting a hand on her chest in turn.

"Nice to meet you, Shampoo?"

That seemed to satisfy her enough, and finally, god this was sheer torture waiting for what I knew was coming. Well i was damn well hoping, so I'm thinking with the wrong brain, sue me!

"Wo de airen." Then her hands seized my cheeks and she pulled me full into a kiss. At last! I went a bit weak in the knees and tuned out the world again. While everyone just stared. Ryoga fainted.

{Okay didn't start today thinking this would happen, but not bad for improvisation. Mmm, Ryoga can have Akane. I think.}

I might regret those thoughts later, but for now, who cared. Shampoo was ten different levels of hot and I was too hungry right now to care about much. Probably a bit too aroused too.

The girl finally parted for breath, both of our cheeks were flush. She promptly latched onto my arm and all but dragged me over to the table where the food remained. Pops had continued to greedily stuff his face, and it was only now people began to notice the panda was missing.

As the shock wore off they all took in the celebration of a new village champion, and a new village champion bride-groom. I didn't really care for the party. I was just hungry and caught up in perverted thoughts. Genma just resumed stuffing his mouth. Ryoga looked at me as if I had grown a second head, but it didn't stop him from eating. While Shampoo kept latched onto my arm.

The lunchtime meal was amazing, the villagers had out done themselves. It was also customary to 'share' the bounty with everyone to show the Champion was gracious for the honor of being well respected. I had no complaints there, these people had put a lot of time and effort into making this a special banquet. I had to bean Genma a few times to keep him from stuffing his bag with leftovers, but when his stomach was satisfied it wasn't hard to get him to cooperate. Mostly by the threat of Shampoo's heavy maces.

After much reverie and celebration with the conclusion of the tournament, the afternoon slipped into dusk before I had realised how fast the time passed. The Guide chuckled a bit as Shampoo began to speak to him with some insistence.

"She say, she wish to take you home and let you meet her honorable great-grandmother. They put you and companions up for the night. Is least they can do for new village Champion, and they be honored to have you grace their home."

The man chuckled as he also slapped me on the back, "Congratulations to you, hope you has too too good time tonight." I got the distinct impression what his less than subtle joke meant. Although, I did my best to look clueless. Thanked him for his time, and he was soon on his way to discuss purchasing provisions for his home while there was still daylight.

My now self proclaimed fiancee pulled me along and I didn't bother resisting. I didn't want to fight her anyway. We had a language impasse. I understood not a word of Chinese, and she did not seem
to have picked up any Japanese yet. So, we needed a translator, Cologne would have to be it.

The prospect of more food and a comfortable spot to sleep on, even if it was the floor, quickly brought Genma in line. He didn't seem to care about the clingy amazon, yet at least. No one had mentioned to him what was going on. Why spoil the surprise now? Let him be ignorant a bit longer. Ryoga having nowhere else to go, and no one else he knew just tailed us as well.

I was troubled though, now the plot was off the rails and I had no idea how to predict what would happen going forward. Not that I was going to complain. I was prepared to try and deflect the girl chasing me if I could, but upon review no way on this earth I was going to give Ryoga a chance at catching this fish. Selfish? Sure. I also don't care.

We were greeted by Shampoo’s great-grandmother Cologne, the family matriarch and one of the elders of the village. Now she wasn’t a carbon copy of the concept I was familiar with, but she wasn’t terribly far off either. Where I expected a shriveled gnome that barely knee height to even my girl-form, she was actually about waist height to Shampoo. So taller than I expected, but everything else was about dead on.

Flowing white hair that was longer than she was, unlike my expectation though, there was a long braid at the end. Which she used to fold her hair over and pin securely to her scalp. That kept it from dragging the ground and getting in her way. Her robes were a faded green, long sleeved past her wrists and dropped below her knees, and she was wearing a matching color of pants. Her staff was stouter to support her weight, but she balanced on the thing with all the ease of laying down. Looking any of us right in the eye without so much as a wobble in her perch.

The old woman had introduced herself politely and explained things once we'd gotten past the hellos and where-to-fors. The amazon girl remained clasped to my arm, beaming as if she'd just won her heart's most prized possession. I wasn't sure what the proper reaction should be. Where Ranma would have tried to push her off, no reason came to my mind to complain. Of course, I might've been enjoying the soft flesh she was squeezing against my arm a bit too much to be objective.

We sat down quietly to some tea and snacks. Dinner would be a bit delayed with the addition of three extra people to the table. I'm fairly sure our 'victory' lunch could tide us over for a bit longer. The pleasantries, however, died not long after the truth of what Shampoo’s kiss meant were put forward by Cologne.

"What do you mean 'married?'" Gemna roared across the table. I just sighed, rubbing my temples to keep a headache from coming on. He was taking this well as expected, so much for good manners. It was all down to Cologne's patience that she didn't turn him into a piece of human origami.

"Precisely what it sounds like. Ranma openly accepted the challenge with Shampoo, and defeated her in fair combat. Since she decided to give the 'Kiss of Marriage’, the two are formally engaged to be married by our laws. That's all there is to it. They will get married and I hope bless me with some strong grandchildren to carry on our family line."

Genma slammed his fist on the table and growled, "Nonsense, we're from Japan, not China. So your law means jack all to me, besides Ranma already has a fiancee."

Before I could blurt out any inquiry to that little bit of supposed to be unknown information, Cologne simply kept going. "I don't know if you've realized Mister Saotome but you aren't in Japan right now. You're in our village. We have more than three thousand years of history to consider here, I'm sorry but you'll just have to break the engagement."

"Boy, say something here. This involves you directly. Tell this old hag you're not going to give in to
her whims."

His head promptly slammed into the table when her staff smacked him face first into the wood. Was a very sturdy table to stand up to that rock-hard skull of his and not so much as crack. The old woman gave an annoyed sigh as she glared the sometimes panda down.

Then turned her head over to me and offered a smile, "Come now Son-in-law, certainly it's not all bad, is it? You'll make me proud and accept my granddaughter's proposal?

"And besides, don't you have a perfectly good other son here who can take up the engagement in Ranma's stead?"

Ryoga, who had to this point been trying to look as small as possible and just occupy himself with the tea and snacks we had been served, was brought into the conversation. He almost spit out the mouthful he had been in the process of swallowing. Instead of spraying it all over Cologne, he decided on the proper course and choked.

Hacking a few times and slapping his own chest with a fist until he could breath again. "I'm not that idiot's brother! We're not related at all! He's a coward who walked out on a man to man fight, and I'm just hanging around until I settle the score!"

He was rewarded with her cackle and a grin. "Sorry, sorry, my mistake. So a rival then, hmm? I wonder which of you is better?"

"I am!" He snapped quickly.

"Err, I dunno, he's all kinds of monster strong, but it's been a couple years since we last … played together as kids. We haven't had an all out fight."

Ryoga growled and adopted a grin. "You know I'm better Ranma, just admit don't we settle this right now?"

The old woman's laughter broke up the argument again. She sipped her tea and just shook her head. Glancing between the two of us like we were a pair of arguing brothers or something.

"Ah, to be young and have a friendship with a strong rival. Someone who can keep pushing you to get better, and boys being boys. But come now children, no horseplay in the house. Besides, it's late, and dinner is almost done. You can go outside and play tomorrow."

Ryoga frowned but gave up the battle, for now. With how easily the old woman had cleaned Genma's clock he probably was thinking better of testing her patience, in her own home. A wise move indeed. I just grinned and shrugged.

"Now, son-in-law, to the matter at hand. It's not so bad, being engaged to Shampoo, is it now?" She was going to keep prodding till she got an answer it seemed. Ranma's usual, nervous habits rose up and I let it have freedom. Fingers reached behind my head and playing with the ponytail there.

"Well, I mean … she's very beautiful. Very, very beautiful." Glancing to her and getting nothing but a deep smile in turn. How does a girl fall for someone that fast? I mean I can understand an instant crush, but 'love'? Ah well, who cares, I haven't had the pleasure of a girl's company in a romantic capacity in years. Could do a lot worse for myself.

What about Akane?

I don't know. She's cute and has some endearing qualities. Taking that level of pounding and
misunderstanding to bring those qualities out? I don't know if I was up for that challenge or not. Whatever, I'll worry about her and Ukyo when we get there.

"But, married? I'm only sixteen. Couldn't we, you know, give dating a shot and all that first? I've never really had a girlfriend before."

The woman chuckled to herself, "Oh don't be shy, Sonny boy. If you'll acknowledge the engagement before any other foolishness your father brings up, then the details are no matter to me. When and where you two live and get married is up to you."

"Oh … well then, umm, okay." I turned my head and looked into Shampoo's eyes. She gazed back adoringly, I know it's sappy but I could so drown in those eyes and die happy right now.

"Shampoo, I formally acknowledge our engagement. I hope you won't be offended if I ask you for time to learn about you and we can get comfortable with one another. Umm, don't know the Chinese word for it, but will you be my girlfriend first, and we can get married when we're ready?"

Cologne laughed between translating for my as yet not understanding girlfriend and made comments about my very 'bland' attempt at being romantic, but called it 'cute' anyway.

Shampoo listened and her smile widened, I was afraid she might get mad at me for not saying we should get hitched first thing in the morning, but the idea of a formal courtship seemed to be enough for the time being.

"Airen! Wo ai ni!" Her arms went around my ribs and squeeze them with enough pressure I could feel my chest groan in protest. Okay, yeah she was dangerous strong herself. Her chest crushing into my arm though, well let's just say very nice.

Genma came back around from his nap and growled, "What are you saying boy?! You can't just go getting engaged to this girl. You've got a fiancee waiting for you in Japan!"

He launched himself across the table and grabbed me shirt suddenly. I was suddenly being crushed by the amazon around my ribs, and my brain rattled around by the bald fool shaking me like he was trying to make a smoothly.

Before I could introduce my fist to his head, Shampoo's did it for me. She rattled off something that sounded vaguely insulting before Cologne said something back. Suddenly, the girl became quite demure and almost teleported to my father's side. She then helped Genma sit back up.

My brow arched as she dusted off his gi and straightened his top. Adjusted his glasses and refilled his tea. That girl's mode switch could be scary fast. Really going to have to be careful how I approach her.

"My granddaughter would like to apologize to her father-in-law, she doesn't mean disrespect, but she also wishes you not to offend her. Is she not of worth to you? The girl is an excellent fighter, likely the best in the whole village of her generation. She is fully trained to cook, keep house, and otherwise be a model bride."

Sporting a red mark on his cheek where her punch had impacted, Genma blinked and I could almost see the gears in his head turning. If one thing I could count on, the man was selfish and impulsive. He likely had no desire for a repeat pounding. To say nothing of having the pretty girl fawning on him suddenly turned his mood around.

He adjusted his glasses and fell into what I suppose he considered a 'wise and considerate' form of behavior. His voice became deep and he tried to sound like he was being contemplative. I could be
mean and ruin the effect by just pointing somewhere random and shouting 'look money!.' But for
now I held my peace.

"Well, the boy's happiness is of paramount importance to me…"

(Uh huh, second only to your stomach, greed, and whatever stupid scheme you cook up next.) To
my credit, I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

"But, he's to be engaged to one of the daughter's of an old friend of mine. It's very important to him,
for he has no son to inherit his dojo and carry on his family legacy. This is a matter of our family
honor, and the future of both branches of the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts."

Cologne chuckled a little and nodded.

"Ah, I see, it's a matter of property in addition to honor. Well, I can understand your position then.
Ranma stands to inherit a piece of real estate with, I would assume, a none too small value to it?
However, I haven't even mentioned the fact of Shampoo's dowry yet, have I?"

Genma ever a man to take a short term gain over long term investment, suddenly had to fight his
interest. Schooling his expression and not doing a very good job of it.

"Dowry? Err … how much would be talking? Out of curiosity mind you, I haven't yet agreed to any
of this."

The old woman gave him a level gaze, oh she had hooked the fish already and poor Pops didn't even
know it yet. Though, no doubt he'd try to cheat Shampoo and her great-grandmother out of every
sliver of valuable stuff he could wring from them. Then run off with me and I'd have another angered
fiancée on my tail, and probably wanting my head.

"Well, contrary to how humble our village may look, Mister Saotome, we have long been acquiring
riches and wealth for the services we provide to China. In ancient days we would train the
concubines of the Emperor in martial arts, to better protect his palace. Some of our finest warriors
have actually been brides to the Emperor or his sons. We exchange our learning with scholars from
across Asia, and provide services expected of martial artists. To rid people of ghosts, demons, and
other problems.

"My family is quite wealthy, we simply choose to display in more subtle ways. Shampoo will be
granted a very handsome dowry to begin her new life. When she is finally married." The woman
spoke that with finality.

It seemed to be enough, Genma snapped his focus back to attention and I could see the money signs
behind his eyes. I was hopeful Cologne could see him for what he was. As I recall, my father's
former master Happosai robbed the village long ago in the distant past, when both he and Cologne
were young. Hopefully, she'd be prepared to prevent such a thing happening to her again.

"Well, I wouldn't want to break up a new love before it has a chance to be tested. And Tendo's
daughters are all still young yet. I'll be sure to go talk to him, I'm sure he'll understand. Besides, we
should let Ranma and Shampoo find out if they're compatible or not."

Now what was he plotting? There was no pile of jewelry or the like sitting right in front him. Unlike
with the Kuonjis and their food cart having been the upfront temptation for Genma. I find it very
hard to believe he would try to play the long game, to see who would make a better offer for his
retirement. The man rarely displayed much in the way of strategic thinking, and I doubt he really had
the patience for it.
His long term goals just got swept up in the here and now and it was one of the things that caused us so many problems in the long run. There was also no doubt he was going to try and haul me back to Japan anyway. For now, all I could do as keep an eye out and take it as it came.

I hated being reactive and not proactive, but right now there was no help for it. I'd been lucky … ish, so far. I'd count my positives higher than my negatives at least. Not like I was going to roll with the Tendo engagement anyway. That isn't to say the thought of trying it was bad, I just didn't know how to feel about it at all.

I never had any personal issues with the Akane romance. But I was the one living it now, and I didn't like the thought of walking to someone else's tune if I could help it. Besides, Shampoo … enough said.

The matter seemed settled for now, the two gave a soft shake of hands. A temporary truce on the issue. While Shampoo darted to the kitchen in answer to a call and helped her father pass out dinner for we, their guests.

True to my expectations soon as it was dark Shampoo had said something I couldn't understand. She said it with firm conviction though. My bag and my body were hauled into her bedroom and almost thrown across her bed. I was promptly tackled and hugged again.

Alright, I know this may look bad on my end, but I really don't see much point in complaining. Contrary to what I might have assumed, at no point did she try to get downright touchy feely. She was quite aggressive in her desire for contact, but she was by no means a man eater.

Which was good, she was beautiful but I'd really prefer some time to get to actually know her. I still have my moral standards, damnit. I returned her hug as she slid across my lap. We shared words that went completely past one another, and shared a laugh at how silly it all was.

When I didn't push for anything more intimate, she never gave me a cross look or did anything to try and coax me into getting more 'familiar' with her. This put a warm feeling in my stomach and was relaxing in its own way.

Communication was going to be our first real challenge. I don't want things getting awkward before they can even begin to get into the happy times of dating. She seemed to either be sharing those thoughts, or was comfortable in divining them from me. She was grabby clingy, but I could deal with that.

When she yawned though, my body took on a full blush. Not because she was any kind of sensual in that act. It was because she stood up and began to strip, without reservation or hint of modesty. Girl was comfortable in her flesh, no doubts. And she had no qualms about me seeing any and all of it.

For my part, being someone with ingrained manners I swiftly turned around. Okay, maybe I had some shyness to me. Bite me! I'm not used to a girl I've just met stripping down like we'd been house mates for five years. It was one thing if your sister was walking around in her underwear, not that you'd want to see that but point stands. It's something else entirely when it's a girl you don't even really know yet.

Her eyes watched me, and she giggled a bit. I don't know what she said. It sounded more teasing than anything, but with a very playful jibe to it. I could've left the room there, but something kept my in place. More sounds of cloth, this time what passed for her nightshirt, I guess. Barely covered that wonderful bottom of hers.
She slid into bed, and then rolled onto her back, feet pushing me out to the floor. She pointed to me, her discarded clothes, then the bed. I got the idea even if I continued to fail in following her words. With my body still in a blush I turned my back to her again. Letting my shirt and pants go to the floor. Left me still half dressed in boxers and white tank top.

A few cooling breaths and I turned back to find her with the covers pulled back. She patted the spot beside her and gave me an expectant look. Alright, maybe a little fast but I could adjust very quickly. I didn't complain or stall, even as I was still quite pink I'm sure. Sliding into the bed beside her and got comfortable and with more ease than I suspected I drifted off.

Don't know how much time passed, but I was slowly roused to the feeling of a hand slapping my cheek. Words began to filter through my brain and kept trying to bring me around. Whatever this annoyance was, it tickled my rage nerve rather than my alarm. So I reflexively launched out my fist in the general direction I thought it would be.

There came a solid contact and something hit the floor with a grunt. I then promptly rolled over and curled into the wonderful source of warmth beside me. It has a delightful, soft scent and gave a cute little hum as I pressed closer. Although, sadly my warm pillow was soon muttering.

I was woken when I caught a sudden shriek of "Aiyah!" There was a loud crash and more groaning. My brain slapped to alert at the possibility of an attack. More than once Pops had pulled midnight 'training' exercises by starting me off with a sneak attack. Wouldn't be something that stopped for a long time I'm sure.

I caught sight of Shampoo sitting up in the bed, blanket held close to her body and pointing across the room. She snarled off what sounded to be a vicious series of Chinese curses at whatever had roused her anger.

There on the floor, having crashed through a set of shelves containing several of Shampoo's various belongings was my old man. Her chui was buried in his gut from where she'd hit him dead center mass. Girl had lethal aim.

He was dressed with his travel pack in hand, mine laying nearby. Ah, so he meant to sneak out in the middle of the night. Typical Genma. I could see a conspicuous lack of Ryoga. So that's how it was?

The Lost Boy, gave a loud sneeze from another room and could be heard to shout. "Now where am I? Ranma, this isn't funny! Why am I in the pantry!"

I could only sigh, rubbing on my temples. I was having such wonderful dreams too. I don't remember a damn thing about them, but I know they were good. On very sleepy legs I wobbled my way over and collected the pitiful excuse for a father and hauled him to Shampoo's window.

"The first night I've had to sleep in a bed in months, and you can't let me enjoy it! Save it for in the morning, you moron!" Throwing him out into the night. It wasn't a very good pitch, but then I wasn't concerned for distance. His pack went flying out after into the gloom. When I heard him cry in pain, I knew I had at least hit my mark.

From somewhere else in the house Ryoga could be heard to fuss again, only to mutter something about 'I was looking for the bathroom.' Then footsteps and silence. Those two immediate issues settled, no one else seemed to be coming to bring news or trouble. Good.

Shampoo grabbed my hand and snatched me back into the bed, muttering another string of much softer curses and took a few minutes to calm down. Resigning myself to my oh so horrible fate, I did my duty and wrapped my arms around her. She grinned and settled down, and blessedly resumed
sleeping without any further interruptions that night.

A/N: So here is the second chapter, and it got a lot longer than I intended. Once I got started writing it, just kind of ran away from me. I've actually trimmed about 1500 words off the end and started the next chapter from them. This is rather stream of consciousness writing. I'm just pouring out the ideas as they come to me without actually plotting out the chapters. Hopefully, it remains fun to read. And yes, I guess it's become a Ranma x Shampoo pairing. Just see how it rolls, as I want to try and avoid just repeating other stories I've read where I can help it.

Hopefully you're enjoying reading it anyway. The third chapter will be coming along soon as well, since I've already got bits of it started, and I want to add to them.

Till next time,

Dorin
Chapter 3

Preamble: So another chapter in, about a third of this was previously part of Chapter 2, but I chopped it off for pacing and added in new elements. Then started this chapter fresh. It's a bit late and I'm fairly tired, and likely busy tomorrow with work so I want to go ahead and push this out. It hasn't been as proofread as I might otherwise try, so I apologize in advance for more errors than normal. If I find more errors than I like, I'll edit in a fresh document with corrections some time soon, but I won't let that get in the way of Chapter 4

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Excluding the interruption of Genma's attempted midnight escape, I found myself sleeping remarkably well. Had been way too long since I enjoyed the simple comfort of sleeping next to someone. My slumber was so good I never noticed when she turned or otherwise moved about. I could get used to this very quickly. Which was good, as I'd basically declared her my girlfriend yesterday. Better buck up and adjust fast.

Was also very nice not to wake up to the old man's sneak attacks to begin training. I didn't want to wake up really, this was too nice. Still, had to get on with the day and the usual call to nature was becoming urgent. So I sat up and stretched, giving a long yawn. The girl beside me was quick to come to life herself.

"Airen … " She cooed, catching my cheeks and pulling me into a kiss. A guy could get used to this kind of morning very swiftly. My brain melted and it took an insistent telegram from bladder to brain to remind me of an urgent issue.

The house was coming to life and everyone tended their morning needs. Despite its remote location and anachronistic look, the village did actually have some modern amenities. Things I simply took for granted like running water. I didn't question the source, just enjoyed it for the sake of convenience.

As I was leaving the bathroom I almost crashed into Ryoga, who was rounding the corner of the hallway. He was sipping from a glass of water in his hand, didn't need to be a psychic to see what was coming. He slammed on breaks and the glass tumbled out of his hand and dumped across my head.

Before he could even begin to stammer his apology, what with him trying not to stare at my chest. My shirt now clinging to it thanks to the damp cloth, I just shouldered past and muttered my greeting with a flat tone, slightly annoyed.

"Good morning to you too."

So the universe's rules continued to apply, whether or not I liked it. Guess I was going to have to just get used to it quickly and cope. Least Shampoo did not suddenly get violent as I returned to her room to collect a fresh change of clothing.

She simply gave me a curious look and began to query in Chinese. I could guess what she was asking, I just mumbled 'Ryoga' to her and walked over to my bag. It was then I paused and remembered something I had intended to do. Alright, it was going to be weird asking my girlfriend if
I could borrow her clothes, but oh well. Recalling the previous panda chase, I was reminded I wished not experience those aches again.

My cheeks turned red as I tried to give the indication what I was pondering. Crude hand signs were the best I could manage. I pointed to her dresser, then mimicking putting on a bra, and then pointed to myself. Her brow arched and I didn’t know if this was a good or bad sign. I would have asked Cologne to try and relay my thoughts more succinctly, but on further thought the idea of the old woman laughing herself half to death at my problem was not appealing.

I just looked expectantly to Shampoo, quite certain my ears were going to set my hair on fire, and waited. She finally cracked a grin and seemed to find some humor in my distress. The girl was actually giggling as she dug through her clothes. A satisfied sound left her throat as she found the one she wanted. It had to be one of the sexiest numbers in her collect, almost onyx colored with satin frills. The idea of her wearing it was arousing, the idea of me wearing it was less than funny to me.

She held the thing out expectantly, ignoring my flat look and after a minute put on her cutest pout. With a grunt I submitted and turned my back to her, sliding off my top off and held out my arms. Being Shampoo, she pressed her chest into me tighter than she needed with warm breath tickling my ear. My toes curled as I just managed to control the shudder that wanted to climb my spine. She slide the fabric over my arms and clasped the thing behind my back. I was immediately aware of an issue.

{You have got to be kidding me! I am actually bigger than Shampoo?!}

I didn't feel like I was being constricted around the chest, but the cups runneth over. Thankfully, it wasn't by over much but there was an obvious mismatch. The amazon took her time reaching around me and adjusting everything. I could hear from her barely contained giggles she was enjoying this too much. I turned about and sighed, striking a pose and got a laugh in return. The urge overcame me and I joined her.

If I can't laugh at myself, I've got no business trying to laugh at anything. After a good chuckle she relented and gave me something far more utilitarian. It worked well enough for now, until I could get properly fitted. Never thought I'd be thinking such a thing, this just keeps getting weirder.

After that bit of embarrassment, Shampoo wished to end the game. She was quick to fetch some hot water though and resolve my girlness for now. She also didn't wait for me to leave the room as she dressed, although I did turn my back again and tended my own clothing. Then we were off to breakfast, well she was off to prepare me breakfast. The bra went into my pack, I'd worry with it later. For now, I really needed to put my attention on coming up with repaying my new girlfriend's generous acts.

Cologne basically banished my father from her house for the remaining time we spent in the village. It was quaint and a charming place, but also the best slice of civilization I had enjoyed in weeks. Well Ranma had enjoyed in weeks anyway, my memories simply testified to that fact.

Peaceful too without my old man sticking his nose in and trying to drag me off. He didn't get a repeat attempt. The old woman was on guard, and Shampoo set up some simple but effective alarms to her window and door. The panda never tried again though. So I got to enjoy a few days of Shampoo's cooking, which was exceptional I freely admit, and we started our first very clumsy language lessons.

He was still prepared a plate of food but he had to enjoy his meals outside. Shampoo was particularly forgetful about that task until well after everyone else had eaten. Pops complained only once. In reply his meal was delivered to him even later, and it had been long since cold. That shut up his protests
efficiently for the remainder of our stay.

I still took the time to spar with Pops in the mornings. Ryoga wasn't hard to encourage to exercise either. And Shampoo was a constant fixture at my side through much of it if she wasn't tending something for her grandmother or father. Occasionally she mixed it up with me too. This was very useful practice and I found my control quickly improving. The moves my body wanted to make, the warnings my instincts gave off, and my own rambling mind were beginning to work in real harmony.

Cologne was also kind enough to provide some language primers for myself and Shampoo, with some beginning lessons. We both felt a bit childish, having to begin with what amounted to work every elementary school kid has long since mastered but had to start somewhere. If I couldn't speak with her then advancing to a more serious relationship would be hard.

Shampoo also paid for some properly fitting garments from what passed as the village general store. She frowned when my true dimensions were revealed but didn't make a stink over it. I guess it wasn't fun to have a *boy*friend who had slightly larger breasts than you, but she didn't let it kill her affections.

There had to be some magic to these amazon bras, because they didn't look any different from the regular deal. Yet, I noticed a significant lack of motion hampering my body when I trained as a girl. No wobbly, slap myself in the face moments. No pain. Just everything remaining comfortably in place. Definitely magic. I wasn't complaining, it solved a problem for me.

Now if I could just figure out how Pops pulled that stunt off with making his clothes come and go when he morphed in and out of panda form. Had to be some trick to it, cause none of the other cursed regulars ever accomplished it in the story. Ranma's body was less of an issue as he wore quickly adjustable clothes. The other three though, shrank right down into theirs and left them behind.

I'm sure I could figure it out, was just going to take time to learn. Maybe I could subtly ask Cologne to help me, but later. For now I just trained and got my bearings, studied talking with Shampoo, and otherwise enjoyed spare minutes with her. Also helping her spring a surprise on Pop.

After a few days, Genma's patience had expired and he demanded it was time for us to return to Japan. Since he had to 'explain' the whole situation to his friend Tendo. To his dismay, Shampoo was fully packed. We'd already worked out beforehand she needed to be ready to go at a moment's notice. She happily bid her father and grandmother farewell. The two women shared a longer exchange, and a few glances our way. I don't know what they were plotting, but it certainly seemed to me like they were putting some plan into motion.

Ryoga had managed to remain in the village proper without vanishing, surprising but I was happy enough for that. If he wound up getting lost again no telling when we'd see him again. Then he'd complain about me having abandoned him in China or something, I don't doubt. Thus defeated, Genma just gave up before ever trying to argue the point and lead us out of the village and toward the coast.

As we would discover though, for whatever reason in this world, Jusenkyo victims seem to love water. Whether it was sudden rain. A bridge broke and dumped us into the stream. Or just sheer moments of klutz, Genma and I spent more time as panda and girl, then father and son. Despite Shampoo's persistent efforts for my sake to keep hot water on hand, we only got to enjoy it seldom. You'd be surprised how quickly these flash rain falls seem to pass over China.

I simply bit the bullet and accepted it for what it was. I'm fairly certain the time following acquiring
the curses up to getting back to Japan, the Saotome men had spent most of their time in curse bodies. With a mental shrug I just took it as given and rolled with it. My amazon lady pouted at first, but to my glee she eventually got over it and would share kisses freely no matter my body.

To help pass the time while we were hiking, Shampoo and I took turns continuing teaching one another in our respective native tongues. Well my tongue as native for me now, anyway. I recall trying to learn a foreign language in college. I was terrible at it.

Having a pretty girl to encourage you made it all seem so much easier, at least far more motivating. She would laugh at my very poor baby talk, then correct me. When I got it right, I was rewarded with a kiss. Can't complain about this incentive program. I was learning Chinese and getting a lot of practice in with lip to lip dancing.

We made a game of it and it made the time seem to fly by so much faster. She would point to a thing, say what it was. I repeated, with correction for pronunciation, and we would go again in Japanese. This was very enjoyable way to pass the time between training exercises and meals. Was also a hell of a lot more fun learning to talk to her, than having her chasing us down and trying to kill us.

Ryoga was terribly annoyed by my happiness in the situation. He would shoot us occasional bad looks and mutter about my continuing to be a coward. Putting off our fight to flirt with a girl. I was curious if he was jealous of me, or the fact I now had an ally?

Didn't really matter. Before long I drug him into the game kicking and screaming. I would follow Shampoo in naming an object, and then encourage Ryoga to do the same. He'd growl and complain, but my faultless logic won him over.

"Shut up Ranma, I don't want to learn Chinese. I want you to man up and settle our duel!"

"Oh come on Ryoga, look at it this way, a whole new language you can insult me in. Or, would you rather I have an entire new set of ways to make fun of you?"

I turned to Shampoo and worked out calling him a 'rock.' It likely sounded horrible to her ears, but she giggled all the same and agreed.

"What did you call me?"

Grinning I just crossed my arms, "Want to know? Start learning the language with me and you'll figure it out in no time. Or you too dumb to pick up a second tongue?"

The boy's ire now raised with that wound to his pride he took the bait without a second thought. "Ha, anything you can do, I can do! Better watch out Ranma, would be embarrassing for me to be able to carry on full conversations with your girlfriend before you can!"

"That's the spirit."

And so our lessons continued, now with a third person in the group. This annoyed Genmat to no end, much to my delight. While Ryoga and I argued, a lot, there was no overt hostility. And, to my shame, he did pick up some things faster than I did. I don't know if he was 'friends' with Shampoo exactly, but she did seem delighted to give him little words of phrases to tease me, and then doing the same in reverse.

She also picked up Japanese fairly quickly herself. At least within a few days of this game to the point we could carry on something resembling conversations. Asking someone to pass the rice, or please get some water for more tea, that kind of thing. Contrary to impression, she was not a bimbo. Far from it. She just had a fairly particular accent, and seemed to like playing up being an airhead.
Going on what I could remember from the actual story, and what I was discovering with my own eyes the girl was actually very sharp. When we spoke in straight Japanese, her attention was wholly tuned in, listening, analysing and absorbing. I think she was picking up the language much quicker than she let on.

Pops insisted we continue to train and that part never slowed down. Only, to his horror, he had unwillingly gained two additional students. Ryoga refused to be left alone and let anyone out of his sight for fear he'd roam off and never see us again. A fair concern on his part.

Shampoo also refused to be parted from me for very long. Thus we always had their company when undergoing training. The other two would always involve themselves before long. Being dedicated martial artists themselves, they had to keep up their own practice as well. No better time than while the old man and I were doing ours. To me it was funny watching Pop's training being applied to new people, something he certainly didn't seem to want.

If he tried to make me perform an exercise then Ryoga would take on the burden himself. He was going to prove he was better, even if it put him in great pain to do so. Shampoo would show she was just as tough as any man, and so endured whatever foolish hardships the old man thought up.

Having people share your burden made it so much more the tolerable. I wasn't alone to the miseries of Genma's stupidity, with the occasional flash of insight. The additional sparring partners also helped me begin to focus my abilities much faster. Even in the course of a few days blending together with Ranma's skills and memories under my own control was advancing swiftly.

No one complained about Shampoo's cooking either. She handled the food with dedication and never a word of complaint. I did my level best to thank her every meal, and get her to teach me new words to express my thanks. The cuddling at night wasn't bad either.

She was clingy, but I was getting used to it. If Shampoo stuck to me with anymore tenacity I could call her an additional limb. Though I did get some privacy at least. She also took time for herself on occasion, even if it was just latrine visits.

Bathing? Well I gave up that fight. Cold water was no friend to my male body, those rare times I got to be in it lately, and Ryoga would die of blood loss if I bathed around him. My new amazon buddy stubbornly refused to let me do so alone. When it came time to scrub off the day's dust we simply went in shifts. Alternating days between girls and guys bathing first. Well, one girl and one part-timer.

Shampoo was almost completely uninhibited, which really came as no surprise by this point. She freely shed her clothing and took to cleaning her body off. Whether it was a river, shallow spring or the rare times we got to use a public bath. She set right to the task without a hint of shame to her. She was proud of her body and felt no reason to be embarrassed bathing beside her to-be husband. On the other hand, I blushed often and was slow to grow accustomed to this.

The whole situation was new for me. I had been bathing alone basically my entire life. Not even when I was dating did I share the bathroom with the girl of the time. I was well accustomed to it and I liked it. The first massage Shampoo performed on my hair and then my back, I decided I'd been missing out for too long. This curse didn't seem to bother her over much, although she made it clear she which form she preferred. I couldn't complain with the sights of Heaven visited upon me either.

So, I come to Ranma's life, pick up a curse, save my rival from one, and pick up a Chinese girlfriend. At the current moment, I think I'm doing pretty well for myself. On the plus side, somehow we seem to have missed a certain restaurant owner who served 'Dragon Whisker Soup.' I can't say I will miss that particular headache.
It took almost a month but we finally made it back to the coast. Specifically to Shanghai. Rather than swim back, Genma actually bothered to work a deal so we could catch a boat. Lazy bastard condemned Ryoga and myself as deck hands and Shampoo would be working the galley, but there are far worse ways to book passage on a boat to get somewhere.

I'd have rather flown back myself, but I'm still fairly certain we were not in China legally. The cost of tickets for four people would also not be cheap. Genma never struck me as the kind of person to keep much cash on hand, if only because he couldn't resist spending it on food and booze. How he could be frugal, ie cheap, but so greedy for short term gain was beyond me.

As I was trying to take this like a very extended vacation and take up new experiences as they presented themselves, the time on the boat wasn't that bad. I don't know what kind of cargo we were ferrying and I didn't ask. The impression from the crew was we were better off not knowing.

The fellows were quite shocked to see the odd teenagers casually moving heavy items weighing several hundred pounds. The sight of me doing this is as a female kept most of their flirting to themselves. Well, that and the fact Shampoo had quite forcefully asserted her primary claim to my flesh, regardless of current status.

I was worried she had been about to brain the guy for trying that 'smooth gentle-aggressive' crap where he'd put himself right up in my space, cut off the easy escape route and tried to be charming. Ugh, a proto form of a few people I was going to likely wind up dealing with back in Nerima ward. Not that I wasn't flattered, but I was spoken for at the moment, and she was many magnitudes more attractive.

Yes, I was trying not to let Ranma's pride overwhelm me. This was proving to be a challenge. His memories and personality ticks were very quickly incorporating into my being. I guess it was almost like I was finally melding into one person. In any case, the impulse to practice my flirting technique almost took me over before I could catch myself.

Can you blame the guy for wanting a piece of me? I am very …

[Gah! Damnit, there I go again. I aint worried about Akane right now, but I'm sure Shampoo would appreciate it if I didn't get all touchy-feely with other people, especially men.]

My face must've taken on a rather unpleasant expression as the sailor suddenly began talking in a softer tone. Fighting between being concerned and apologetic. He went with the concerned track.

"Are you alright, miss?"

My Chinese was comfortably progressing to the point I was comfortable carrying on full conversations with Shampoo. Seems I was pretty on picking up the language and understanding it now, even if replies were a bit clipped and lacking refinement.

Before I could just put my fist in his gut, or pull some mean prank about really being a guy, I was rescued by my warrior-princess. Where Akane would have belted me for being a pervert, Ukyo probably would have introduced the guy to her spatula, Shampoo was far more ruthless.

"Ranma! I was hunting for you, it's almost dinner time. I missed you, my love." She added a purr to her voice, speaking louder than need be, she wanted anyone in the hallway to hear.

She slinked right around the guy, cutting him off completely. She didn't pay him a hint of attention as she grabbed my face and yanked me forward. Forced my lips apart and made a point of inserting her tongue to conduct a deep, exploratory mission of my tonsils. I was only vaguely aware of one eyed
glare she fixed the sailor with. My brain had more important things to focus on. Like … I forget, but they were important I'm sure.

Now that the entire crew was alerted to the idea that the pretty girls in their company were spoken for, by each other no less, it killed the flirting. Their gazes still lingered but they didn't try to approach either of us again. Shampoo had sent a clear message and it was received. No complaints on my part.

Back to the point, with me and Ryoga hauling around heavy things and keeping them secure. Or bouncing around cleaning the deck, or whatever else the captain decided to have us to in order to earn our keep. It cowed the men into further submission. We kept trying to outdo each other, and work on our training at the same time. Sadly, I wasn't going to beat Ryoga in raw strength. The boy was just too powerful. And whatever the source of our herculean strength, I had much less of it in this body.

Still funny to watch how eager Ryoga could get. We had been assigned to scrub rust off places below decks. The captain seemed fairly certain that would keep us out of trouble for awhile. He had yet again underestimated us. I worked on developing my speed further. A liberal application of force and shining up the various surfaces was a cinch. Ryoga? Well he more removed unwanted metal from rust. The abrasives made everything squeal when he got too eager to 'get done first.' Fairly certain he was taking off layers of metal at a go.

By the time we were done, the boat was going to need extensive repainting to cover all the metallic shine we had exposed from beneath layers of rust, old paint, and maybe some chrome too … oops. The captain walked his boat unbelieving eyes. We'd done several days worth of work in a few hours, and without the aid of power tools or industrial chemicals. Lacking paint, the man just stuck with making up jobs so we weren't wasting his space.

The whole trip took about four days, only because the captain's boat was quite a bit older and a bit slower. It was a fun experience all the same. Never been on a boat before. Even a small rustbox, well former rustbox after day two, like this one didn't discourage my enjoyment of the time as a whole.

We put into Tokyo bay and I couldn't remotely tell you the port, although I guess it's not really important. It was still just before dawn. As I had been expecting, we had to quickly and quietly slip out past the port authority and made tracks for Nerima. From what information I could gather on the walk, this wasn't going to be more than a fifteen mile walk. Which would take a few hours for most people. The four of us?

A quick trip to the train station and I was introduced to the madness that was 'martial arts rail riding.' Clinging desperately to the top of a train car and letting it do most of the work. This was far from a preferable means of travel in my opinion, but I took is as extreme balance training. The other took to it without much hesitance and I really didn't want to look out of place. After awhile it was alright.

Pops seemed to know the route so I didn't argue when we swapped trains, by flying leap, and in rather short order we were in Nerima ward. Wasn't even past breakfast yet. Granted this was a minor metropolitan area in its own right, so I had no idea where the Tendo residence was. Might be a bit of a walk to get there.

Now I was faced with a problem I had been wrestling with for awhile now. Shampoo and I had plenty of time to reach agreement. We were going to stick with the panda, but we weren't going to allow him to separate us. I couldn't be certain he would try to pull a fast one and ditch my airen, yeah she's got me saying it now, and I wasn't going to afford him the chance.

Would be foolish to think he was just going to give up on the whole engagement mess. If Cologne had smacked him in the face with a bag of gold, he just might have betrayed his old buddy Soun and
broken the whole thing off. Though he was fairly consistently loyal to the man, even in the face of ridiculous wealth like the Kuno family possessed. Yet he didn't, do I was highly dubious he wasn't scheming something.

Sure, some evil part of me deep down kind of liked the idea of a potential harem, and if I was sneaky and patient all sorts of love potions of one form or another would fall into my lap. Tempting, but I do not possess that level of evil about me. I already picked up a serious relationship. My conscience would never let me survive if I tried influencing her emotions to let me have other women, to say nothing of doing the same to Ukyo, Akane, Nabiki, or some combination thereof.

Kodachi? She might be attractive, but she's not the kind of crazy I find sexy. Shampoo could have pulled her tricks, like hypnotizing mushrooms, but she wasn't in the habit of using paralysing poisons in every bit of food she prepared. Yeah, I can do with that bit if insanity.

I was also making steady inroads with Ryoga. Rekindling his old rivalry with Ranma, and building an actual friendship him. Wouldn't that go over well if I actually played the role of Casanova? The fewer reasons he has to hold something against me, the better. Besides, he might just be a good fit for Akane.

I won't try pushing things, just see how it plays out. For now, my issue was whether to take him home or just keep him as around as extra muscle? He never went against Genma, but he never really paid the man much thought either way. I'm sure I could get him to my side without much trouble.

There was also the matter of our unsettled fight, still. He kept grumbling about it, but let the matter go more often than not. Take him home, he might go out for food and not make his way back for two weeks, or longer.

I briefly floated the idea of trying to talk him into playing me, and I would be someone else. Maybe I could just call myself 'Ranko' and pretend to be my own cousin? Actually, that was a stupid idea on all levels. It was dishonest in the extreme for one. Not that such a thing would have bothered Genma, but I doubt I could trust him to perform the task of calling Ryoga his son. It was also cruel to try and deceive the Tendos before we had even met.

If the current pace held true, then they would be a bit peculiar but good people on the whole. I couldn't bring myself to pull such a stunt on them. And if we got caught? Well that would be a right pickle. Akane would probably hate all three of us, and Soun would kick us out on our asses before we could voice an apology. Wasn't like Shampoo and I were going to be able to school our relationship to a comfortable 'sisterhood' either.

And then suppose it worked? What about when Nodoka showed up? Oh yes, Mom. Ryoga play her son and I could watch, and don't know if I would be jealous or not. To say nothing of the fallout when the truth came forward. Just as soon not risk that bit of stupid.

So what to do?

"Hey, Pops, where we goin anyway?"

"We're going to visit an old friend of mine. Haven't we covered that?"

"Oh yeah, the guy with the daughters, and the whole fiancee thing. You better be giving him an apology for things not working out, cause I aint getting engaged. Ow … "

Shampoo's grip on my hand suddenly intensified and my bones cried out in protest of the pressure. She gave me a sweet look, but her eyes had a hard edge to them. Alright, total male moment. We'd
been so happily flirty and getting along I let the fact of our engagement slip my mind. Where I, myself had endorsed the thing to begin with.

{Okay … foot in mouth disease, damnit Ranma your habits are becoming too easy to fail to notice.}

"I've already got a fiancee, and we've been getting on very happily, thanks."

The pressure eased off and I was reward with a sincere smile, and she let her breast press firmly against my arm. This girl was exceptionally dangerous for my self-control. She knew precisely how to coax and pull me along with her body. I might not yet be, but she wasn't going to be very long in getting me completely wrapped about her finger. Not that it was a bad thing on my end.

Genma wheeled around and glared at me. Soon we were nose to nose, even as Shampoo was still leaning into me. "Foolish boy! Don't you realize the entire future of both branches of Anything Goes Martial Arts are on your shoulders? You have to marry one of Soun's daughters and carry on both schools, and inherit the dojo for future generations!"

He just wouldn't learn. Did he really forget the girl right beside me? Who had been learning Japanese under intense instruction for more than a month now? I just looked back to him level a glare.

{And 3 ... 2 ... 1 ... }

*BAM*

He was suddenly a crumpled heap as one of my beautiful lover's chui maces contacted his head. Was difficult to believe how tough that skull was. He didn't faint from the impact, she must not have hit him as hard as I thought. She was exercising some control? Good.

"What you talking, stupid? Ranma engage Shampoo. I no share with other woman. Ranma belong Shampoo!"

She wasn't quite to the level of forming the most complete sentences, but by her tone she was also extremely angry at the moment. So she wasn't trying to complexity, just context. Admittedly my Chinese isn't terribly much better.

"Ranma, forget this fool. Let's go find a bank, I can have Grandmother wire us money and we can find our own place to stay. I don't care if we stay in Japan, just as long as we're together."

I just gave her a sad smile and gave her hand a soft squeeze as we turned to look at one another. Giving her an apologetic shrug.

"He still father mine, Shan Pu. Follow him awhile, see what happens. Yes? He gets too bad, we leave? Promise you. Ranma is for Shan Pu, no other one."

She tilted her head a little and smiled, mollified for the time being with that agreement. The idea of getting a place with her was appealing, but not yet. I wanted to tackle the situation with the Tendos first, then go from there. Just seemed right to try and do this in somewhat straight order.

Now just hope I don't wind up regretting it.

The old man grunted and popped back up after a minute, getting in both our faces. "That hurt!"

"Was supposed to hurt, dumb panda. You want Shampoo hit harder?"
She gave her chui a couple wags for emphasis. Genma recoiled and he swallowed. Self preservation taking hold of his brain for the moment and he just offered a deferential nod.

"You just misunderstand me, Shampoo. I'm sorry, you're right, you and Ranma very happy together, I can see that. We still need to go explain things to Tendo and see if we can't work out a solution with him."

Giving a soft chuckle as he did so, retreating from her hastily without turning his back. The man promptly spun about and resumed playing tour guide. "Right, well let's try to get to the dojo before lunch. We've still a ways to go yet."

Ryoga frowned and turned to me, having been largely silent through the byplay. He had been oddly quiet many times. I don't know what was going through his head, and he wasn't ready to try confiding in me yet. Oh well. At least he seemed to have gotten comfortable with me and Shampoo.

"Ranma, what are you playing at? You're already engaged, you aren't about to go pick up another one are you?"

All I could do was roll my eyes and sigh, "Ryoga, I didn't exactly ask for any engagement with anyone. If you remember, I fought Shampoo to keep the village from skinning a pair of morons alive ..."

He winced at that one. Sure, all three of us had been starving, but he had been the fool to join my father in consuming the first prize banquet. We could have left the panda out to dry and work off the debt, but what was done was done.

"Or would you rather I have let you fight her, and she'd be your fiancee instead?" Arching a brow as he looked to him in challenge. "And besides, I didn't know nothin' about this stupid engagement to the Tendos anyway. Never met 'em."

{Like hell I was going to let you have mine, sorry buddy.}

His face turned brilliant red and he looked like something might explode in his head. Pointing and stammering, "I haven't seen you do much complaining Ranma!"

I just grinned and slipped an arm around Shampoo's waist, leaning my head against her own. "What's there to complain about? I can understand you're jealous, but them's the breaks Ryoga. Don't worry, you'll find a girl some day. Who knows, maybe one of the Tendo girls is just your type?"

"I'm not jealous! ... You ... you really think so? One of them might ... might like me?"

It was still weird to watch how his moods could turn rapidly on a dime. His anger could flag so quickly to depression or embarrassment. Could be hard not to pity him sometimes, well I was going to aim him right for Akane. Hopefully, it stuck. Although, in the story it had been entirely one sided on his end. She had never thought of him as more than a friend. I guess I could introduce him to Akari quicker ... oh well, a thought for a later time.

Shampoo just giggled, "Ryoga is cute." He turned pink at the praise. Damn he was going to need a long exposure to a girl to get him to loosen up. Was actually worse than I thought it might be. Of course, I did a lot of blushing myself where it came to mine, so I guess I don't have much room to talk.

"Hey, what about me?" I fussed with a grin on my face. She elbowed me in reply.

"Ranma is Shampoo airen, no be jealous." I stuck out my tongue in reply and made a face at her. She
punched me in the arm for it, not too hard thankfully. Still hurt, but I'd live. "Ryoga is cute. Can be kind. Will find own airen, Shampoo no doubt."

Any further teasing was stifled Genma's call for us to hurry along. No point in trying to delay any longer. Least I wasn't single handedly fighting a panda across half the ward trying to escape the situation.

My luck didn't hold though. A fire hydrant decided to spontaneously explode in our faces as we were walking along toward the right street. So much for going in body, reality again decided it was more appropriate that we do this the 'proper' way. Sadly, to my own shame, I had no prepared for this and prepped a thermos of hot water. At least I wasn't slung over Genma's shoulder.

Wasn't midmorning by the time we found the dojo. With the tight clusters of buildings and rather small homes compared to what I was used to, the Tendo compound may as well be a mansion. I grew up on a much larger property, but where I live there was plenty of land for sale. Our home, not so much. It was probably more comfortable than most Japanese homes but didn't compare to the place before me.

Genma went right through the gate without even bother to knock, shout … well I guess as a panda he was rather restricted. I took up the measure for our party.

"Hello! We're the Saotomes, here to visit Mister Tendo!"

The door was answered as I expected. A pretty girl with the expected pageboy style haircut. She wasn't in a kimono though, just a well fitting sleeveless blouse and her white cutoff shorts. As was holding true, her hair was actually very dark, not brown. Though it was a slightly lighter shade than her father. Who stood over her shoulder, dressed in his faded brown gi. Long hair, full mustache.

There was no failing to identify both Nabiki and Soun Tendo. They didn't know what to make of us. A panda, a young boy, and two girls, both in Chinese clothing at that. Soun took a sweeping glance of us and his eyes locked on Ryoga. The poor boy was grabbed by the shoulders, tears slowly streaming down Soun's eyes.

"Ranma, you've come. But, where is your father? And who are these girls? They don't look related …"

Nabiki for her part seemed to be quite pleased as she gazed Ryoga up and down. Sizing him with up a curious glance that seemed to be one part inspection of the quality of a gemstone, the other the quality of a slab of meat.

"Ooo, he is cute. Nice muscles too." She cooed, saying it just loud enough for Ryoga's brain to enter an early onset seizure. A girl paying him that compliment seemed to be too much for him. He checked out with a stupid chuckle as Soun tried to hug the life out of him.

What feeble protests he did manage were too soft to really be heard, and were simply ignored by Soun in his moment of happiness. That kind of happy where you're crying, I never really understood that. Ah well, maybe one day it would happen to me and then I'd have an epiphany.

"Oh, son, you have no idea how happy I am to see you. But please, come in, come in. All of you. We have so much to talk about." He was already ushering Ryoga into the house, who just moved along on reflex more than will.

I quirked my lips to the side, biting my cheek again so I didn't burst into laughter. They'd already made their assumptions, contrary to me having aborted that idea before it got out of the planning
phase. Shampoo shot me a curious look, seeming to wonder why I wasn't setting the record straight. I waved her off.

When we finally got into the room and settled, Nabiki rejoining her other two sisters. Who I could now take stock of. Dark hair all, although Kasumi's was the lightest, a very dark brown. Nabiki was just tinge off black. While Akane was raven haired, but it did have an almost cobalt sheen to it in the right light.

I freely admit, they were all very pretty. Nabiki was the one's whose figure was the easiest to divine from her clothing, and alright Shampoo would hit me for these thoughts, but it was very nice. I'm spoken for, not blind. With her face, fine I can see why Akane would be the crush of a great many of the school's male students.

Uncute was not a word one could use, she was definitely very attractive. Actually I could compare her favorably to Shampoo. Although, I don't know how I could be objective at all. Fair to say, yes Akane was beautiful, all three of the Tendo girls were in the upper tier of looks. I was still sticking to my amazon though. I was happy with her, and loyalty and honesty have the highest priority in my morals chest.

Soun was about to try and present Ryoga with his fate before I coughed softly. Genma-panda hit my back, making me growl softly, then I coughed louder. That got everyone's attention.

Okay Ryoga, you owe me for breaking up this farce before it gets rolling.

Maybe that wasn't fair to think, but whatever. He needed rescuing before he got buried in a situation he wasn't going to be able to explain himself out of. Even if he was innocent of Soun's assumptions.

"Mister Tendo, I'm afraid there's been a mistake."

He blinked curiously to me, while Nabiki levelled a curious glare on me. Kasumi was as demure and calm, while Akane just looked annoyed. Her eyes flicked between the three humans, curious but still a slow storm of annoyance at the whole thing.

I feel your frustration sister. Shame we couldn't get off on a less troublesome foot.

Maybe we could still be friends, if I salvaged this properly. I could have played the lie straight. 'Hi, I'm Ranma Saotome, I'll be playing the role of a girl this evening.' No, I'll just be upfront and deal with the fallout. They had been shocked by the revelation, but they got over it quickly.

"That's not Ranma, sir. That's my friend."

"Rival!" The boy barked weakly, trying to claw for any sense of emotion that could get him back above water and able to keep his wits about him.

"That's my rival Ryoga Hibiki."

Now all four of the Tendos were very confused and it took a slow moment before the very strange possibilities came over them.

Very careful Soun pointed at me and coughed a bit, "You did say you were the Saotomes, right?"

"Yes sir, I'm very sorry about this, due to some ... complications during our trip in China, ah it'll be easier to demonstrate. Could we have some water, please?"

Ryoga snorted, finally getting his center back in alignment and muttered, "Complications he says."
just ignored the comment, while Kasumi, curious but without question on her part rose and left the
room.

We fell into uncomfortable silence while waiting for her return. Three sets of Tendo eyes looking to
me curiously. Shampoo occupied herself with glancing at the ceiling and studying the walls. I
wondered how much restraint she was having to exercise to not hold my hand? I'd make it up to her
soon. Ryoga was silent and tried to slink into the background. While Genma … just sat there like a
lump, wouldn't be surprised if he fell asleep.

Finally, the eldest sister returned and handed me the kettle, along with a towel. I could see the steam
wafting out of the spout. It was mean, but I really didn't care. This was one of Ranma's behaviors I
took an cruel delight in performing. Since he was contributing nothing to the conversation, I
promptly began to pour some of the water over his head as I resumed my previous statement.

"This is actually my father, Genma."

"Boy that's HOT!"

Soun jumped back to the other side of the low kotatsu table, and his daughters quickly hid behind
him at that shock of seeing the sudden transformation. Well there was really no 'seeing' to it.
Someone might as well have paused the video and then photoshopped the panda out, and replaced
him with Genma in the next frames and just resumed play.

Soun stammered as he recognized the man instantly, pointing but his eyes still no believing. "Sao-
Sao-...Sao-to-me?"

"Yes, Tendo, it's me." While his eyes glared at me for the red skin he sporting thanks to the too hot
water.

Eyes moved between us several times. Processing his use of gender descriptor, and comparing that to
what they already supposedly knew of us before hand. Old friend, bringing his 'son.' Finally, eyes
going all the wider, Soun continued.

"Then you are?"

"Ranma Saotome, sorry about this, sir." Now that it had cooled to a more tolerable level, I poured the
water over my own head and changed shape abruptly. Weird how you didn't even notice the switch.
Even the absence, or gaining depending on the situation, of the female breasts was something I didn't
even really take clue of anymore. Until they went bouncing anyway.

I held up a hand to still questions. "We picked up these … curses, in China." I began to explain,
glaring at the old man while I did so. Filling them in on pertinent details.

"Ryoga here followed us to China to settle an old score, I managed to save him from picking up a
curse. You're welcome by the way."

"How long are you going to keep rubbing that in, Ranma? I already said thank you more than a
dozen times already!"

With a grin I went on with the story, getting to the part with Shampoo, who had continued to be
politely quiet through this exchange. I had only just gotten to her introduction when Soun could no
longer contain himself. Cutting me off before I got to the important bit regarding my Chinese friend.

"Oh, the dangers of being a martial artist." Shedding a few tears as he said this, "You poor boy …
but your situation isn't so bad after all. You can still marry one of my daughters. Come here son,
Kasumi, my oldest daughter, nineteen. She is an excellent homemaker and cook. She already has the makings of a perfect wife."

"Oh father, you're exaggerating." The girl turned pink at the praise, modest as expected.

The man didn't notice the lightning beginning to flash in Shampoo's eyes, and he ignored the flat expressions his daughters gave him. I gently reached over and clasped my actual fiancee's shoulder, holding her down and giving a gentle but firm squeeze. Her mouth became a thin line and her legs tensed but otherwise she kept still and her mouth securely shut. Trusting me to handle the situation, I was thankful for that and owed her later.

Soun kept right on plugging each daughter and her immediate strengths as a bridal candidate.
"Nabiki, my middle girl, seventeen. She is very clever, excellent with money and I believe will have a very promising career in the business world after college.

"Then my youngest, Akane, sixteen. She's just a few months younger than you I believe. She is dedicated to martial arts, and looks to carry on the school for me. She makes good grades herself, and is a very sweet girl."

{Once you get past the violent temper, insecurities, and horrible cooking. I'll grant she can be sweet though, when she wants to be.}

I kept that thought to myself, allowing an inner chuckle to the knowledge of what she was in a story, and wondering if she deviated much in this reality?

"Go ahead son, pick any girl you like, she'll be your fiancee. The two of you will inherit the dojo and carry on the legacy of the Saotome and Tendo branches of Anything Goes Martial Arts."

Before the girls could cue up the band and make a selection among themselves I held up my hand and quickly interrupted. Now I released Shampoo's hand. The girl was about to explode if I let the pressure build any more. Can't blame her, I'd be no better if our situations were reversed. Although in my case it would be straight jealousy. She had that and an entire life dedicated to her tribe.

"Mister Tendo, I'm flattered really, sir. I'm afraid I already have a fiancee though." I quickly took hold of that hand before she snapped and tried to strangle someone. Be it Soun or Genma. Her grip came on like a vice and apart from a slight twitch, I managed to not let the pain show.

{Yes, love, I know. You don't have to crush my hand to get the point across that you're mad ... god if we have a kid I'm going to be crippled.}

"Shampoo is girlfriend and fiancee, we made that official over a month ago while we were still in China."

Soun very suddenly developed an eye twitch and wheeled around on my father. "Sao-to-me ... why didn't you mention this in your card? How exactly did this happen? Our agreement dates back from the time just after Akane was born. I certainly hope you haven't forgotten that."

Pops just began to sweat and held up his hands sliding backward quickly. "Now Tendo, I can explain ... sort of. It all happened so suddenly. You see, the boy beat the girl in a fight."

The Tendo girls looked between the two of us, various expressions on their eyes and I wasn't quite sure what to make of them. Not that I was all that worried about their opinions. They were the daughters of a martial artist, they should at least understand the nature of a fair duel. Whether they agreed with it or not.
"How exactly does that relate to them being engaged?" The Tendo patriarch was beginning to boil over, I could see where Akane got some of her temper from. Although, in Soun's case it was more bravado than anything, if I understood his character properly. Akane was just violent.

"Her village has these weird laws Tendo, the boy was defending my honor and he won in a fair fight, and well … we didn't know the silly way they did things in her village."

I just closed my eyes and said nothing as the girl in question released my hand and soon hefted one of her weapons again. She gave me one look and I nodded, leaning forward to give her a clear line of sight. For the second time this morning a chui smashed into Genma's skull. He went sliding across the floor, out like a light.

No longer capable of controlling her anger she stood up and snarled, directing her fury at the man who had insulted her way of life, a core part of her pride.

"Stupid panda and boy try eat Shampoo prize for winning tournament!"

"I was hungry!" His weak protest was quickly silenced and he slid behind Soun himself as she locked a glare on him. The human shield trembled under the force of that stare and quickly tried to climb behind Ryogo in turn. The two fighting for shelter until they both slid behind Akane for security.

The other girls remained quiet, but rather unflustered by Shampoo's belligerence. With further interruption quelled, she pointed back to Genma.

"Think village food just buffet? Was place of honor for Champion and you steal prize! You think law stupid, no should come to village! Or should keep out trouble and find someone can answer questions!"


In her frustration she snapped at me rather harshly while trying to thinking something else to call my old man besides 'stupid.' I didn't take offense. Instead I just spoke in a flat tone without a hint of respect to it.

"Lazy, moronic, greedy bag of flesh without two brain cells in his empty, cement lined skull that he can rub together for a spark of a thought?"

Shampoo looked back at me, blinking a couple times, then broke into a giggle. Her anger rushing out of her as she had to piece together all I'd said. Having to slow down and think seemed to have killed the fires of her rage and she finally got to laugh. Letting it go and returned to my side.

"R-r-r-res..pect … your ...father … bo..y."

His ability to cling to some semblance of life after taking a blow to the skull that could likely have killed ANYONE in my world, probably could've killed a bull by some of her blows, continued to amaze me. I just ignored the man as he slumped into darkness again after spending his last bit of energy.

I now summoned up all my will and threw Ranma's half of my personality down a flight of stairs and locked it in the basement. Right now, I needed to keep myself diplomatic and polite. Press up my ideals not allow Ranma's brash, quick mouth to get me in trouble.

"Anyway. I'm sorry Mister Tendo, but I'm engaged. It wouldn't be fair to Shampoo, me, or your
daughters to pretend otherwise. I understand your intentions sir, and if we were in our thirties and not having any luck finding someone to marry, I could understand. If my father had a lot of money, I could understand. But as it is, I'm sure your girls can work this out for themselves just fine.

"Beside, what about what they want? I won't presume whether they have boyfriends or not, but if they do, what then? Should I ask one of them to break up because it's a matter they weren't even involved in? What if they don't want to continue the school, or want to do something else with the dojo?

"Have you even talked to them about this?"

His face was falling even more as I spoke, and tears were soon beginning to pour from his eyes in great amounts. Well, not like I've had things set up all that different than I expected them to. Of course he hadn't asked them. He'd just told them this morning, and asked them to consider who'd be getting hitched to me. The boy none of them had even met before.

"It's 1990 sir, not 1590. I can understand you want to keep your family legacy secure, and for your daughters to be comfortable and marry well. That's up to them though, not me.

"So, again I'm sorry, but the answer is NO."

He began to openly wail now, wobbling back and forth. "But … the schools … my dojo … oh Dear … where did I go wrong? … Waaaaahh!" He turned about, I presume in whatever direction the family shrine was. He looked about to go run to cry to the spirit of his dead wife, before he simply gave up and fainted.

Nabiki sighed, "Well said, but I can't be a little disappointed. You sure you don't want to get married?"

I must've hit a special chord with her in that all spiel. One of us didn't take the joke well. I had to restrain Shampoo again, she looked about ready to launch herself across the table and begin a catfight with Nabiki.

The middle sister held up her hands and just waved them slowly. "Now, now, just joking. He is cute, but I'm afraid the curse is a little … much for me. Since you're both already engaged, I guess there's nothing for us to do."

Kasumi just sighed and rose, going out of the room. "Oh Father, you really should think these things out more carefully before you act on them. Really, if you'd just found out about Ranma first we could have avoided all this." She returned with a blanket, covering the man up and making sure he was comfortable.

Akane was giving me a very thoughtful look. I couldn't tell what was going through her mind. She seemed to having an internal war with herself. Not that she could be blamed exactly, her experience with boys so far was less than good. Things had been holding true to form so far, so it wouldn't be a stretch to assume she got to enjoy a brawling every morning at school with every member of each athletic club. All of them trying to 'beat her into a date.' Had Kuno somewhere read about the amazon village and their rather peculiar laws?

Whatever the case, she had a very poor image of boys her age. And here I had just spoke like a man of much greater age and open mind about the world. Well, I was, or had been anyway. Still held my ideals in very high regard.

Very tentatively she put a smile on her face and extended a hand. "Umm, hi, I'm Akane. Hopefully,
the three of us can be … friends?” Glancing from me to Shampoo and then to Ryoga. Who blushed a bit and gave a nervous laugh.

"Umm, I'm Ryoga Hibiki. I don't really have many friends, I'd love to be … umm, if that's okay with you … Akane?"

She flashed him a bigger smile, which just made him blush all the more. What was it about him that instantly seemed to disarm the anger alarm in her brain? She was still fairly tentative with me, but she seemed to fairly quickly put Ryoga right past her barriers and into a comfortable spot of trust.

Shampoo eyed her, "You no try steal airen No interest in Ranma at all?"

Akane turned pink and stammered, "What? No! I just hope we can all be friends … I mean you came all this way, and you're our guests … it would be good if we could get along …"

She was very disarmed as Shampoo's suspicion instantly turned into a bright smile and she shook Akane's hand. "Is Okay then, happy be Akane friend."

How much control did this girl have over her emotions and how much was a forced act? Well, not control over her emotions I guess, but control over her displays of what one assumed to be her emotions. I got the feeling she was a very good person deep down, she just had some odd little cultural ticks to how she approached things.

It made Akane just go blank faced a moment as she shook my fiancee's hand. Didn't blame Akane in the least. It was rather off putting until you got used to it.

Turning back to me, I took her hand in turn and nodded. "Nice to meet you, Akane. I'm Ranma." Grinning, giving formal introductions now.

{Well, this wasn't how I pictured it going, but okay, fortune is still in my favor ..}

Whatever Akane might have been about to say to us next went uncaught by my ears. I was hit by a sudden wave of mental fatigue like nothing I had felt before. Either in my own life, or in this one. The world went dead around me, darkness closed in on me and I became the third person to collapse this hour.

I couldn't hear Shampoo's shriek, Akane's concerned shout, or Ryoga's … whatever he did.

I just slipped into the void of dark and the world went away.

A/N: So another chapter in and didn't go exactly as I thought it would, this becoming a norm so far. Yet, I find than when an impulse hits me that feels to work better, I stick with it. I'm hoping the Shampoo flirty level is not a problem, but it feels right for her behavior. I'm afraid that since this is, there will be no smut, just implied smutiness. I'm pondering a redo lemon spoof to write as something to put on another website, but that will be something to worry about later.

Shampoo's anime style 'bimbo' talk will be going away as the chapters come. I never quite got why she continued to talk like an airhead through the anime, while Mousse was never even given an accent. Unless it was just an act to keep people thinking she was dumb, which I don't think anyone would buy, but anyway. Not something I would put past her character, but that's just speculative. Her speaking will improve, as will Ranma's 'Chinese' as it goes along. Only natural they could continue to improve.

Thanks to everyone who has reviewed the story, and thanks to everyone who had read and enjoyed
thus far. I have no idea how many chapters will come, and I take the plot threads as they move along. I have some beginning ideas for the Hentai Hoard and Kuno, but as with everything so far, subject to change if I feel a better idea come along.

Hope you enjoyed, and continue to enjoy the chapter to come.

Thanks for reading.

Until next time,

Dorin
I was aware. I knew that much. Although, it was certainly not the awareness of being awake, or alive? I felt all ephemeral, with no solid form. There were no regular sensations of being in flesh. No breathing. No heartbeat. Just, awareness that in some form, I was. Simple existence without anything substantial to it.

Everything else was void and darkness. I got the distinct feeling something was … wrong. Well of course something was wrong! I’m floating in an empty void where I was, what was I doing last?

I forced myself to concentrate, and though it was like trying to push my brain through a pool of syrup, I found and clutched the most recent memories. Oh yes, I had pulled a serious drag chute on the whole ‘fiancee’ thing and thrown the plot off the rails to a new tangent.

Sure, I’d turned some stuff upside down to point. No curse for Ryoga, so no ‘my life has been hell!’ Shampoo was now actively my fiancee, and no curse as punishment for her. And now I’d turned down the Tendo arrangement, and hard. Although, I tried to do that diplomatically as possible.

Then I recall blacking out. Okay, so that answered my question on what I’d been doing, so…

“Where the hell am I? And why!?"

I don’t know if I really heard my voice or just imagined it. I knew that voice, knew it well. I’d been listening to it for over a month now. Ranma’s voice. Well no real surprise there.

Was this a dream?

Some kind of purgatory?

“Oh come on, someone?”

“Oh yes, where and why indeed, Ranma Saotome. Very important questions and we’ll try to get to them quickly, I’m afraid it’s all I could do to get this much time clear from my schedule so we could talk, and I could rectify your situation.”
I wheeled around suddenly and found myself face to face with the, well I don’t know how I could properly describe it. Even the potential madness of the life I had assumed paled to what I looked upon. At least things had some semblance in a grounded, highly exaggerated reality in my current life. Most of the people were still human, there were just magical creatures and what nots.

He, the voice sounded male anyway, sat behind a cluttered writing desk. A large, blue feather quill rested in an inkwell set into a recess on one corner. All kinds of weird baubles and knick-knacks sat across the top. Like that coworker in the office who didn’t believe in having ‘empty space’ on his desk.

Dumbfounded was a proper description, but inadequate to my mental confusion. I suppose this was Death? Or perhaps Deaths’ secretary? Except, he wasn’t a bare skull, nor a ghostly human, or whatever I was expecting. He was a ..rabbit. Yes, a cute little white bunny, just slightly more anthropomorphic, like something out of a cartoon with talking animals.

{Okay, now it’s Ranma in Wonderland?}

This was not Mr Rabbit in a small suit vest with a pocket watch, however. This bunny’s ensemble was completely with what might as well have been an off the rack Death robe. Faded black color. Frayed hem at the base. Floppy hood sitting against his back so his face was exposed. It even came complete with a hemp rope knotted about his waist serving an impromptu belt.

Mister Death Bunny gave me a level look, before putting his face down below the top of his desk and was nose deep in the paperwork sitting there on the angled surface which held I don’t know what kind of documents. He was muttering to himself as he kept moving through it.

“Mmm … no … I had it right here! … “

If it wasn’t already, this was quickly getting surreal. Was I suffering some kind of hunger induced delusion? Or had I taken a blow to the head and not realised it? If I was going to be dreaming, I’d rather be having much more satisfying lapses in reality than this.

“Don’t mind my appearance, Mr. Saotome, I try to adopt forms that are as far from frightening as possible. This one seems to work very well, especially with children. Anyway, ah ha, here it is.
“You recently took a severe blow to the head, which jarred memories of your previous life back into your mind, with full clarity. Since then you have been acting increasingly out of character. Yes, that sums that up.”

My eyes just went wide, so I was dead then? Or the body I remembered being in recently was dead. Well, least it answered that. Didn’t tell me why the hell I was in Ranma’s body of all things, and then I suddenly was struck by a thought.

“Wait a minute, so you’re saying, I haven’t replaced Ranma? It’s my spirit, just a new body?”

The Bunny looked at me as though he were tolerating questions from a small child and just offered a patronizing grin. “Yes, Mr Saotome, two souls cannot occupy the same body. One will always expel the other. Your memories of everything you have experienced, up to now, are very much your own, and your previous life, all that happened too. I’m afraid I don’t have time to give you a lesson in metaphysics and the nature of the afterlife.

“In brief, it seems you are another prank brought about by the god of Chaos. Somehow, when you went through the cycle of reincarnation, a kernel of your past memories remained behind when you should have been washed clean and delivered up for a new life. They will cause you a problem, as you are one soul, but two identities in the same mind.”

“I’ve been getting on just fine up to now. Thanks. I think I’ve been doing very well for myself all things considered. A little measure of control over my life.”

The rabbit sighed and shook his head, “We don’t know what kind of long term trauma this may cause you, or the world about you. We need to exorcise those memories and let your mind run properly based on what it should know, not with a cheat sheet from another life. Now, if you will please, hold still and let me administer ‘treatment’ for your condition.”

“Hey, what do you mean .. “ The rabbit suddenly hefted a polearm. Not a scythe, as one might expect, but a ridiculously long mallet that resembled over an oversized pico-pico hammer. Complete with brilliant red color on both ends, and the flared, accordion heads. Although it was easily over seven feet long on the haft, and the strikers were larger in diameter than my shoulders were in width.

“Treatment … “

“This will force the memories out of your head, and let you resume just being you, now, this won’t
hurt … much!” There was a disturbing grin upon his face as he spoke that line, and began a great downward arc toward my skull.

Now, in neither my past life, or in Ranma’s was I one who had a problem with locking up in sight of stress. I recall only a few moments of real paralysis with the onset of fear. Most of those were this life, and involved … well, I shudder to the horrible thoughts of those foul demons. So, when I saw the hammer descending, I did the practical thing every instinct in my mind was screaming.

**RUN!**

“Waaaaaaa! Can’t we discuss this?!”

The memory-eraser-mallet hit where I had been with a resounding thud. Like dropping a heavy item from great height. Dare I say it sounded far louder than it should have. I don’t know if I was moving under power of thought, or my own muscles, it didn’t really matter. I was moving.

“Hold still, we don’t have much time left, and if I don’t fix this, it will be my head!” The rabbit hefted his hammer with far more ease than I was comfortable watching. Then gave chase … by hopping after me. Oh good grief, I was expecting enough crap like this in my current, real life, now I was being chased around in … I don’t know where, and someone was trying to hit me with a large, blunt object. As if I wasn’t going to get enough of that in the real world, I was being tormented in my dreams too, or where ever I was.

I was quick, but the rabbit was fast himself. For all my speed, he ate up great swaths of distance and actually managed to get ahead of me on the fourth bound. The hammer twirling and then swinging for me again. Only some mix of reflex and panic sharpened mental command caused me to dive to the side and avert another impact that I’m sure would have crushed my soul … mind … whatever this shape was, rather than just ‘knock some stuff loose.’

“Heeya!”

I only vaguely noticed another body as it came shooting out of the void and gloom about me. Another familiar shape. Ranma-chan landed a perfect kick on the rabbit’s weapon hand and sent the hammer spinning. It flew high in the air, tumbling about and then whatever passed for gravity caused it to begin twirling back to earth.

She wasted no time in hitting the ground and leaping back to me. Snatching me up and hauling me
bodily away from the creature which had been intent on giving my head a contact lobotomy. I was too in shock at the moment to care.

Poor Mr Rabbit looked from us back to his hammer, to only just see it in time as a head slammed into his form. There was a great crash and a puff of smoke as the death bunny vanished underneath the crushing force of the striker.

“Damnit, Ranma Saotome! Just you wait till I can clear my schedule! I’ll get you next time!”

A voice wailed impotently as white particles floated out from under the hammer and then burst like so many soap bubbles. The hammer itself soon vanished with an audible pop and was gone as well.

Female me, and male … me .. we just stood together. Looking at the spot where the weird reaper, or whatever it was, had vanished from. Panting, or some mental or spiritual equivalent. I couldn’t actually feel any breath rattling in my lungs, or my heart thumping from the effort. I did feel tired though, strangely exhausted.

When it seemed the threat was no longer going to return, we glanced to one another. Both only further confused and not sure what to do.

“So .. umm … why are you here?” I finally managed through the tired state and confusion.

“Gee, what’s it look like, stupid? I’m saving my own ass.” She glared at me, crossing arms under her chest and looking like I’d just called water wet. “Oh, and thanks for that earlier, completely locking me out and denying who I am.”

It’s one thing to mentally argue with yourself because of some stupid act, or mistake. Belittling yourself for it. I think it’s safe to say we all do that at some point. It’s something else entirely to actually be having an argument with yourself. As in truly, for what else could I call this?

Alright, over ninety nine percent of all people don’t have a second physical form to shout at themselves with, but the strange train just kept on rolling to new sights. So here I was, tired and still going in loops of lost and confused, and my curse was staring at me and looking ready to chew horseshoes and spit nails.

“Would an apology help?”
“Yeah, sure, apologise to myself, that don’t sound stupid at all.”

I just rubbed on my temple and sighed, “Look … I’m still trying to sort all this out. Okay? I wanted to diffuse what would be a long running, troublesome situation, alright? And I didn’t want my mouth to get in the way.”

“Yeah, tried to lock who I am away and look what it gets me. This curse came in handy though, weren’t for this body, I’d never have been able to rescue myself from that …whatever it was.”

I just palmed my forehead, god this was getting even more confusing. “Alright, look .. fine .. I won’t try to deny who you .. who I am … “

“Damn straight I won’t, dumbass. I AM Ranma Saotome. Whoever I might have been in another life, this is my life now. Got it? I can’t deny who I am. It knocked me unconscious once, if I do it again, I don’t know what will happen.”

I rubbed on my nose and sighed, this was getting me all the more confused and felt like I was arguing in circles, with myself of all people. Trying to process the words coming out of my own mouth, I worked to make sense of them. Sort of made sense, in a fashion, but it was also confusing as well.

Tick .

Suddenly, I felt like I heard something.

Tick.

Yes, I most certainly heard that. The sounds of a mechanical clock at work, likely a pendulum swinging back and forth. I knew that sound very well. It was familiar and comforting. A warm memory of my grandmother, from another life entirely. She had two such things in her home. One in the bedroom I, or one of my many cousins would nap in. And the large, longcase clock by the front door. Happy times.

My female alter ego sighed, looking wistful and almost happy for a moment. She must have been
sharing in that memory suddenly.

“I won’t deny, these memories of my other life are … comforting. My childhood was happy, and my adult life seems to have been pretty good. No cat fist, no getting robbed of food and treats by my greedy old man, just a normal life.

“But that was then, this is now. I want to keep these memories, they make me happy. But, I can’t live in that past anymore. I have to move forward with what I have, okay?”

I nodded quietly. Alright, I think I get .. my own meaning, now. Whether it’s some subconscious smack to the head to deliver a message, or whatever the case.

I felt the darkness fading, the void was suddenly filling with brilliance. The clock’s rhythmic clicking became a constant sound. I concentrated on it and light was filtering into my vision. Finally, this weird dream went away and I opened my eyes to the world again.

The familiar pain of early morning sunlight hit my eyes as I worked them open. It was a bit diffuse, streaming in through the paper walls of the room I was occupying. My brain began to feed information through on my body and situation. I was hot. A heavy blanket pulled up to my chin while I was laid out on my back. Weird, normally I slept flopping all over the place. Something cool and wet was on my forehead.

{Oh yeah, I fainted. Damn, what time is it?}

My eyes traced the wall before me and finally found the clock hanging up on a crossbeam that supported the structure of one of the rice-paper walls. It was just a quarter past seven. I blinked slowly, that meant I had slept at least an entire day. Damn, must’ve fainted hard.

Slowly, I shoved the blanket off my body. I felt like I was going to cook in my own sweat at this rate. I’d been undressed down to my boxers, and a bowl was sitting beside the futon with a rag on it. Someone must’ve been dedicatedly cleaning away the sweat. Had I run a fever?

Soft snoring, a very familiar sound indeed, brought some comfort to the room. It knew that sound quite distinctly from the rumble of a certain panda, or Ryoga’s weird mumbling snorts. I lowered the damp cloth on my head and glanced over to see another futon beside me. Something was huddled
under it, and the blanket rose and fell slightly with the person’s soft breathing.

All I could do was smile, Shampoo must’ve been taking care of me this entire time. Or at least
assumed much of the duty. I imagine Kasumi would have fought with her on occasion to get the girl
to eat and rest on her own. My eyes took in the room. It was pretty small, and no dresser occupied
any space. Okay, wasn’t the bedroom I would have otherwise been sharing with Pop.

My bag and my girlfriend’s rested against the wall the clock was hanging upon. The outline of the
door in that wall was smaller than the other two. One on the opposite wall, and the one my right.
Maybe it was a closet? No matter, I took stock of my body. Felt good enough, no pain or aches. My
skin was flush, but cooling nicely without the blanket trapping all my body heat.

The bowl was moved to the side, carefully. I didn’t want breasts at the moment, thanks. Plenty of
time for life to toss me a change of form later in the day. Slinking over, I decided since I was the one
awake, it was my turn to pull this maneuver. Lifting up the blanket and looking to a back. There she
was, dressed in that long, heavy shirt that she normally slept in.

Her hair was down and flopped in a messy river behind her. I took a few minutes to study her. Oh
she was so pretty, and kind of cute with the line of drool that was exiting her mouth and flowing onto
the pillow. She was either making up for being very tired, or was just sleeping very well. Seeing her
so blissfully slumbering, I suddenly didn’t want to wake her.

Gently as I could, the blanket was lowered back down and I slid away. If she’d kept close eye on my
yesterday, she deserved to sleep in a little longer. I was about to plunder my bag for a fresh change of
clothes when the peace of my morning was crushed under stamping feet.

Too long denied the ability to make an ass of himself, Genma came to begin the day for a fresh
serving of pain. The hallside shoji slammed open, almost rattling off the track and there stood bald
and stupid himself. Roaring like he was a drill-sergeant come to wake the barracks.

“Ranma, get up boy, you’ve had a whole day to sleep. It’s time to train. I’ll work that fever right out
of you.”

The idea of being politely quiet in someone else’s home didn’t seem to be an issue for him to ponder.
All his tone did was earn a tired stare from me, and a grunt from the other futon. Grumbling as she
sat up and looked around with still heavy eyes. We had been sleeping head to the door my father
entered, feet toward the closet. So she sat up with her back to him initially.
“Airen?” She mumbled, rubbing on a cheek while blinking to clear her vision. A second call for me to get moving caused her to frown. Anger swiftly replaced the post-sleep fog and she spun around, eyes locking on the thing which had interrupted her comfortable repose.

“Stupid panda! What time of morning you think it is? What if Shampoo changing?! Ooo, you pervert! Moron! I kill!” She quickly snatched up one of her maces. Being a proud warrior, she never was far from those things. She launched one, which Genma ducked.

“Ha, you ten years too early to hit me, girl! OOO!”

She didn’t miss with the second. Planting it right into his face and sending him flying through the open hallway doors and into the yard beyond. She rose and snatched the door closed with an angry ‘hmph.’ Spinning on her heel with a final snort and walked over to me. Promptly dropping down on her knees and began to coo.

Mood change on a dime, girl was spooky like that.

She didn’t bother with any more Japanese, I don’t know if she just found it easier to not have to concentrate so hard on what she was saying, or just didn’t want anyone else in the house to easily know what her words.

<"How do you feel? You gave me quite a fright yesterday. You were burning up with a fever and I was worried you might be very sick.”>

<"Feel much better. Thank you, taking care of me.”>

Her forehead pressed into my own and she gave me an intense investigation across the face. Checking my eyes and mouth for any signs of an infection or lingering sickness. When she was satisfied I felt better, she smiled and claimed her morning kiss. Holding it for a long minute. Submitting to the affection I wrapped my arms around her held her close.

So, I had come down with intense fever. Was it a consequence of my actions? Or that … whatever it had been in my dreams? Had his arranging our meeting caused me to slip into a state he could ‘speak’ with me as such? Or was it just a hallucination born of sickness?
My musings were not helped when I heard people from beyond the other shoji in the room. We must have been close to, if not directly beside the family room as I could hear the sounds of life beginning there. Kasumi sounded as though she was moving about, and giving soft greetings on the day to people.

The one that caught my attention was a certain Lost Boy.

“Good morning Ryoga … oh my, you are so red, are you feeling okay?”

He gave a soft laugh, trying to deny it, but his voice sounded strained. “I’m fine, Miss Kasumi … just a little warm.”

“Oh goodness, you’re burning up. You need to go back to bed and get some rest. You look just like Ranma did yesterday.”

He made sounds of protest, but Kasumi was not one to be denied when she demanded something of you. Her gentle will and soft being had a steel behind them more powerful than any martial artist in this house, I’m fairly sure. She kept insisting he go along, and it sounded like she was even pushing him a bit. Their voices getting more distance and soon out of easy earshot.

Well, this threw a spanner in the works of my ability to figure that weird dream out. It was probably just a horrible delusion brought on by a fever, but I couldn’t rule out something in it being real. I must’ve looked distressed or something like that, because Shampoo’s hand caught me and pulled my face back to her own. Another soft kiss and she smiled.

“Airen, come take bath.” A playful growl in her voice as she said. Although, it was a tease, we were still dedicatedly chaste in such things. If anything, it was just something we were comfortable doing now.

“Only if you rub my shoulders for me. I’m kind of stiff from yesterday.” Grinning back, skin still blushing a little as I wiggled my eyebrows at her. That earned me a giggle in turn. Oh ha ha me, but I could use a nice massage

“Alright, but Ranma give Shampoo massage too, she to to worried about airen yesterday.” Giving me a bump with her hip. Well it was fair enough, she’d been taking good care of me. Time I started returning the favor.
We grabbed fresh clothing and she gently walked me out to the hallway. Genma was still laying on his back out on the lawn, sporting a fresh welt on his head from the chui clocking his skull. She had made a serious pitch this time. Wonder when he was going to wake up?

She pulled me off to the right and toward the back of the house where the wash and bathrooms rested. A good scrub sounded wonderful about now. Then breakfast. And then I could sort out my day.

Once we were bathed, massaged, and dressed the pair of us joined everyone else as they were already just sitting down to breakfast. Soun, Nabiki, Genma, and Kasumi. My father, his head sporting a bandage, was just stuffing his face and purposefully avoiding looking to us. Guess she’d wounded his pride with that shot. Or he was wanting to avoid a second knock to the skull. Wise either way.

“Good morning you two. Did you sleep well? Ranma, are you feeling better today?”

Shampoo grinned and plopped down at an open space at the table, putting herself close to Kasumi. Who was only just started passing out the bowls of food. Shampoo began to assist.

“I sleep fine, thank you. Let help, yes?”

“Right as rain, thanks, Kasumi. Guess it was a quick thing, whatever it was.” I offered with a shrugging smile, sitting beside Shampoo and helping pass portions around to the other two, who had been denied by Genma just stuffing himself soon as a bowl of rice was in hand.

“Good to hear that son. Always the sign of a fit body, just like an external attacker, your insides quickly defeat an illness.” Soun spoke from between polite bites of his food. I just smiled, bemused but I got his sentiment.

“Thank you sir.”

Footsteps came up the hall and then Akane stepped into the room. She was still in a pair of track shorts and tank top, with a towel thrown over her neck. A sheen of sweat still on her brow as she walking in. The girl gently dropped in beside Nabiki and swept a look at the collection of faces at the table, noticing someone missing.
“Where’s Ryoga?”

“Oh, I’m afraid he’s not feeling well, Akane. I think he must have picked up the same bug that got Ranma yesterday. He’s burning up with a fever. Right now he’s resting, I’ll go check on him after breakfast.”

“That’s okay Kasumi, I’ll go up and check on him. You shouldn’t have to keep an eye on everyone.” There was a soft blush on her cheeks as she said that.

{Hmm, curious. Did she and Ryoga hit it off well yesterday? What exactly did I miss while I was passed out?}

Still, good to see the girl’s soft and compassionate side was out. I’d rather avoid her fury if I could help it. Although, something tells me I was going to find a way to have it directed at me at some point in the near future.

“Shampoo, Mr Saotome, I think you should take care of yourselves for the next few days, in case you get whatever Ranma had, too. If you start to feel ill, please go lie down.”

Shampoo nodded and smiled, leaning on me a bit. “Airen take care Shampoo, she get sick, yes?” It wasn’t a question, so much as a subtle ‘darling do’ command.

“Of course, you took such good care of me, it’s only right I’d do the same for you.” I gave her a soft smile and a careful nudge.

I’d asked her that we turn the romantic stuff down a couple notches if we weren’t alone. She hadn’t liked the idea of toning anything down, but we were not in her village anymore. There were quite a few social taboos about open affection in this country. To say nothing of the fact we were guests in a house with three single daughters, and widower. Just seemed like common decency not to go rubbing our relationship right in everyone’s nose.

Especially not with the, I guess for now ‘on hold’ Saotome-Tendo engagement plans still hovering in all our collective memory. She was still going to push the boundaries, I guess, but oh well. She had been free to express almost anything she wanted back home. Now she was adjusting to a new culture and a new situation. Still, no doubt she would cope and not want to be rude. If only for what myself and her grandmother might think.
With that flirt out of the way, she went back to eating and no one shot us any dirty looks, that I had noticed anyway. Glancing to the clock on the wall, it was getting on about ten to eight, and two of the people were not yet dressed for school. Nabiki hadn’t even yet bothered to change out of her pajamas.

This seemed fairly off, I was certain it was Monday. Then I came to a realization. The entire time since just before Jusenkyo, when that rough skull to rock meeting had somehow returned this old set of memories, be they past life or not, I had yet to actually bother thinking about the date. I had been on Genma’s time table. Letting him haul me about at what pace he felt like moving. Never seemed important to know the time of year. I only knew what day of the week it was because the men on the cargo ship had mentioned it.

Rather than sound like a twit by asking what the date was, I let my eyes sweep the room. I found a calendar by the tv. 1990-March-26. Alright, Japanese school years usually began in April, so it must’ve been at least a week out from the start of the new school year. Alright, my timeline was a bit off. If things had held to course, they would already be well into the Spring term.

We ate in comfortable silence for a long moment. Occasionally sharing banter, but everyone more concerned with breaking fast. Especially me, I had actually gone without eating an entire day. My stomach had very angrily reminded me of that a few times this morning. Shampoo had been the only one to hear and tease me for it though.

After he had satisfied himself, Genma bothered to cough and look at Soun. “Say. Tendo, aren’t your girls about to begin their new school year?”

{And here we go.}

“Why yes, Nabiki is in her second year now, at Furinkan. And Akane will be starting her first year.” The man’s eyes began to tear up, reminded of the fact his girls were all in their later teens now.

“Oh, my babies are all going to be women soon. Oh girls, please don’t forget your poor father when you go off to college … Akane, please, don’t forget me … “

“Dad … “ She winced, making a face as her father began to blubber over the reminder his children so close to being fully grown up. Shampoo and I just stared. Even expecting this, it was still just weird to see.
“Honestly, Daddy, quit crying. I already promised I was going to stay in Tokyo when I went off to school. If it’s affordable I’ll just take the train. Otherwise, if I stay on the dorms or get an apartment with friends, I’ll only a few a few hours away at most by train ride.” Nabiki didn’t spare poor Soun a look, still enjoying her food.

I now had to ponder, if the year had not started yet, that would mean there was not yet a Hentai Hoard out for battle and Akane’s hand in dating. This could work to my advantage. If I found the proper way to make use of it. Could we diffuse the situation before it began? I needed more data to process first, but this presented an interesting opportunity.

Akane brightened a bit as she smiled, changing the subject back to school. “Yes, sir. I’ll be in my first year at high school. I’m looking forward to it. The same high school both my sisters attended and they have some good sports clubs. I don’t know if I’m going to try out for one or not, but they have a big athletics program.”

Genma pondered for a long moment, and I could already see where this was going. Still, better to let him roll the snowball downhill first. “You know, boy. It’s about time you got back into your studies.”

“Mhmm, I haven’t been enrolled in school for well over a year now and who’s fault is that?”

That set him to sputtering and anger, “Now see here boy, I was only thinking of your training. Now it’s time to focus on your future.” He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Besides, we’ll be staying here awhile, so you might as well take advantage of it while you can. If you don’t do well in high school, you’ll never be able to go on to college.”

I tilted my head a bit and glanced to him curiously. “Another thought, Pops, where are you going to get the money to pay for this anyway? That was always your excuse for never letting me attend primary school, and for pulling me out of junior high. It ‘cost too much.’

“And funny you should mention college, I thought you said that was for suits and suckers?” I did my best imitation of his voice, “Ranma m’boy, your old man never went to college, and I turned out just fine. So don’t you worry any about that, plenty of people make it in the world without fancy pieces of paper hanging on their walls. By the time I’m doing training you as a proper martial artist, you won’t need worry for how to make a life.

“Why look at the sky, son. It will be your roof. The forest can be your pantry, fully stocked and
never empty. If you need money, you’ll have all kinds of skills you can use to get it. There is never a shortage of people who need someone with a strong back or quick hands. You’ll be more prepared for life than anything you can learn from an egghead professor in a classroom.”

Then Tendos all collectively starred, glancing between the two of us. Whether they thought I was being mean, or my father was stupid enough to actually say such a thing I didn’t know. They were stunned into silence all the same. While Genma went red faced and began to angrily point toward me.

“Ranma, I’m your father!”

“Don’t remind me.”

He began to sputter again, sounded like the engine of his brain was starting to misfire a bit. Face turned a fiery shade of red. His fingers squeezed down onto the table until they turned white and only after a fierce battle of control did he manage to lower his voice.

“Ranma, you’re going to school whether you like it or not, and that’s final. Don’t you worry about how I’m going to pay for everything. That’s my concern, not yours. So you better get one of Soun’s girls to show you down to Furinkan in the next couple days and get the paperwork to register.”

Rather than protest I just smiled, “Okay then.” He reeled back as if he’d just seen a wasp or something buzz past his head. I turned my gaze to Shampoo and smiled, “I was going to go job hunting today, so we can help pay for our stay here, but I guess we can do that later. Shampoo, would you like to go see if we can both get into high school together?”

My girlfriend had been curiously silent during the byplay, I guess processing the information before she voiced some objection or the like. “Shampoo be happy go to school with Airen. Never attend big school before with many students. Only have small school in village, where all children go. Only have few teachers, and classes much small. Be nice see what big school like. Try make many friends.”

“What are you talking about? I can’t afford to pay for two people.” Genma suddenly shouted. His look was suddenly horrified. I got the impression he was angry about more than just the thought of spending more money he didn’t have.

{Uh huh, trying to get us apart and push Akane onto me, aren’t you?}
Soun suddenly coughed and had a look rather similar to my father’s. By his suddenly pallid expression, I was now confident of where the funds were coming from for me to go to school so suddenly.

There was also a glance toward Genma and they shared a panicked look they didn’t hide very well. Now I knew they were both guilty of trying to pull a plot on me. Weren’t going to take no for an easy answer. Where I was settled on the matter of no engagement, they still planned to fight.

{I see, so that’s how it is? Not going to give up without a battle, hmm? Well, bring it on gentlemen, I’m more than up to the challenge.}

“Now son, you can’t go taxing your father’s resources. I know Shampoo is your … umm … girlfriend, but there’s the whole matter with immigration papers, and all kinds of red tape. To say nothing of the entrance exams, and the funding … “

Shampoo just grinned, “I use phone, please? No worries, I pay for call. Need contact great grandmother. She handle help Shampoo with things.”

When Soun just gave a slow nod, the girl bounced up and roamed off to front hallway and the waiting phone. Her conversation was muffled, but she was with the operator a moment. Then she was speaking to someone in Chinese. From what I could pick up, sounded like she was trying to get hold of someone at the Chinese Embassy.

Somehow, whatever the actual legal restrictions and hurdles she was expected to jump through, I expected Cologne would get things straightened out in very short order. There was more logic in this world than just ‘happens cause the plot says so.’ I’m confident that logic is somehow bent by giving the various players stronger hands to see things done.

Don’t know what kind of pull the amazons might have with the Chinese government, but it just seemed rather settled that this would not be a fairly difficult matter to sort out. The fathers shared another look that was full of concern they didn’t hide very well. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from chuckling.

When it seemed we were all finished, I helped Kasumi clean the dishes and put them in the sink to wash. While Nabiki sauntered off, I presume to sleep in since she had the option. Akane got the thermometer and ice pack then bolted up the steps to check on Ryoga. Peace settled over the house for long moment.
I helped Kasumi do dishes. The girl then made a porridge for Ryoga, to put something on his stomach and help break his fever. I took the steaming bowl up the stairs for her. Stealing a kiss on Shampoo’s neck as I passed her, still on the phone with whoever it was aiding in her business. She carefully squeezed my arm as I went past her and up the stairs.

Here we were on the second floor, the guest room right past the stairs. There was some soft chatter as I approached, a smile crossing my face. Seems they were hitting it off well. Good. It reaffirmed my confidence in the decision to pass on the engagement and see if these two would go well together.

“Knock knock.” As I slid the door open carefully.

Akane glanced at me and I looked expectantly at her. I moved my hand, as if gesturing her to give me the proper reply. Instead, she ruined the joke by laughing. It was such a stupid set up, pulling a ‘knock knock’ joke, I guess it was funny in how lame it was. Ryoga managed a chuckle, but otherwise looked worn out.

“Heh, your jokes always sucked anyway, Ranma. She probably spared us something so stupid it would hurt.”

“Well, good to see you too.” I picked the tray back up and stepped into the room. It was arrayed as much as I recalled from the anime. A dresser against one wall, a small privacy screen beside it, and a low desk beside the window. Closet on the opposite wall. Ryoga and Genma’s packs were here, so they’d been thrown together while I was rooming with Shampoo. Wonder how that argument must’ve gone? Ah well, not worth the speculation.

“Your timing is horrible Akane, you laugh at the punchline, not before the joke itself.” The girl softly punched me in the arm after I got the tray set down. Giving me a grin and crossed her arms.

“Oh ha ha, anyway, here Ryoga, Kasumi made you some rice porridge and tea. And here’s some ibuprofen to help with your fever.”

If his skin wasn’t already so flush from the fever, he might well have blushed. Being a forced loner so much of his life, guess it wasn’t a surprise. He wasn’t used to being waited on. Most certainly not by his rival, or the kind people who has just let him into their home the day before.

“Umm, thanks.” He sat up carefully while Akane shook a couple of the pills out of the bottle. Letting
the boy swallow them with a sip of tea, then we were relative silence as Ryoga ate his breakfast.

“So, Ryoga.” Getting a curious glance, he continued to stuff his mouth. “Pops is trying to get me to go enroll in the same high school as Akane.” He coughed suddenly, which prompted the girl in question to pat his back.

“Careful Ryoga, you’ve already got a fever you don’t need to choke too.” He took a hard gulp of tea and took a breath.

“And what’s your point Ranma?” Beginning to growl at me, like I was leading him into some evil prank. Or did he think I was gloating?

“Shampoo is going to try and get her grandmother to help her get enrolled too. So, I was thinkin’, since we’re all housemates for a while, when you’re feeling better why don’t we see if we can get you enrolled? Sometime in the next few days we can swing by your house and leave your parents a note or somethin’ and let them know you’re okay?”

The boy gave me a long and thoughtful look. Taking the last bites of his porridge and then put the bowl down. The tea vanishing after that. “Umm … let me think about it. I haven’t been to school in awhile, but … it would be good to go home and see if my parents are okay.”

“Well, get better and we’ll take care of that.” I collected the tray from him and began to back out of the room. Akane helped him get comfortable again and put the ice back over his head. She was quick to follow me out of the room so the boy could get some sleep.

“Ranma, what did you mean, show Ryoga back home and see his parents? Wasn’t he on the same training trip with you?” Tilting her head curiously as she followed me down stairs again.

“Ah, heheh, we kind of picked him up at Jusenkyo. He followed us there after we had to abort a fight from middle school.” One of her brows arched up curiously as I explained the short of it. I tried to make it sound as much like a simple ‘boys being boys’ thing as possible.

“You can’t be serious, it took him four days to get behind his own house?” Following me to the kitchen as I cleaned out the bowl and cup, Akane reflexively dried them and put them away. She help the same look of disbelief the entire time.
“Akane, yesterday you watched a panda and a girl turn into me and Pop. Is it really that hard to believe that someone can be that confused about directions?” Her lips drew into a line, conceding that point. “I dunno if it’s just tunnel vision, some kind of subconscious thingy, or who knows what. Both his parents are like that too, Ms Hibiki heads out to do the shopping and won’t be home for four or five days. I’ve only met Mr Hibiki once.

“When he REALLY focuses, he can get somewhere no problem. Or if he’s familiar with the place, he didn’t seem to have any issues. I’ve never seen him get lost in his own house, but once he’s outside, he’ll lap Tokyo twice before he finds his goal. I figure if we all went to school together, he wouldn’t get lonely and he’d avoid getting lost for a month.”

She still didn’t look like she quite believed me, but nodded and offered me a smile. She was cute, but I still don’t regret my choice. “That’s sweet of you Ranma. Maybe not all boys are jerks.”

“Well, I can’t promise you I’m not a jerk, sometimes. I am workin’ on it though.”

No sooner were we leaving the kitchen than a familiar battle cry came from the hallway and I was crushed in an iron grip.

“Airen! Shampoo so happy, grandma say she have everything ready in three day at most. Shampoo go school with Ranma, and new friends.” My ribs got a familiar ache from the intense squeeze she applied and buried her face in my chest. Err, so much for trying to tone it down a bit.

Akane watched us a moment her cheeks taking on a soft blush at the display. She quickly wheeled around and made to depart. “I keep forgetting I need to get some clothes and take a bath. I want to wash this sweat off.” Vanishing up the stairs like something was more urgent than just going to get fresh clothing.

Shampoo barely seemed to notice, just adding a soft mumble. “Why she jealous?”

“Umm, maybe just not used to seeing people flirt a lot … like us?”

“Oh … Japanese girl too … Airen word? Repress? So sad. Ranma get shoes, we go see town. Maybe go to date?”

I just chuckled a bit and shook my head, “Repressed? Maybe?” Giving her a shrug, “It’s just always
kind of been that way here, I think. That stuff is private, and it’s only slowly catching on to make it public. But sure, I’d love to get out and do something different for a change. We spent the last month hiking and camping, let’s enjoy some civilization, although I aint got much money.”

The girl just smiled and almost bodily hauled me to the front room where we could get our shoes and head out of the house.

“Is okay, Shampoo just happy to finally be out with Airen. Alone. ” She put a special emphasis on that last one, and a shiver ran up my spine. Fair point, we’d always been in close company to Genma and Ryoga, and now sharing the house of four other people. We never really did get much space.

Would be nice to see the neighborhood and worry about nothing but ourselves for awhile. Akane was trotting down the stairs as we were getting finishing getting on shoes and about to go. She called to us, carrying some casual clothes.

“You two going out?” She paused a minute as she glanced to Shampoo. Then her face fell a bit at the frown the Chinese girl was expressing.

“Ah yeah, we’re going to go see what’s around the dojo and stuff. We’ll be back in time for lunch, why don’t we all go out together later? Nabiki too if she wants to come. You can show us the way to school, and we can see about registering and stuff … “

Both girls glanced to me and I was suddenly shivering a bit. Did I just walk into a dangerous situation? I think Akane just wanted to make friends. Shampoo, well I’m sure she wouldn’t mind that either … but she’d also not had to share my attention with other females till now. I might have just stepped into it up to my knees without even thinking about it.

Typical ‘derp’ move, wouldn’t be out place for me as Ranma. Wouldn’t have been anything new in a past life.

Shampoo eyed me a long minute while she was processing what I’d said. Seeming to be measuring up if I was trying to be sneaky from the looks of it. How she just looked long and hard into my eyes. Then, she finally spread on a slow smile which filled her eyes. Safe to think we’ve still got a way to go yet with our trust.

“I mean, we need to know the way to school anyways, and you know .. I don’t really know what’s in town.” I frowned a bit, “And you know, bag, books, uniform, all that kind of thing.”
Akane slowly cheered up as Shampoo seemed to warm to the idea, and the simple facts of our situation. If I took a guess, the panda would probably just have snatched Kasumi’s old book bag. Not a bad idea, really. Kasumi’s dress would work fine on Shampoo, actually. Might be a bit longer because of their slight height difference, but would still work.

I don’t know why I was bringing up the uniform thing at all, but then Ranma had worn one in junior high, so not like it was going to be that weird. And if we couldn’t afford it, we just couldn’t afford it. That assuming the Furinkan High of this world was as lax as the one I was expecting.

“Sure, I’ll be happy to show you guys around this afternoon. And, maybe Ryoga will be feeling better. I can show you some of my favorite places to visit.” She smiled and then turned back toward the hallway. “You two stay out of trouble in the meantime.”

“Thanks, we’ll try .. hey, Shampoo!” As Akane bid us a safe goodbye, I was almost hauled out the door by the amazon.

“Akane have good bath. We see you later, bye bye now!” And under the great power of her glomp and moving feet, we were quickly outside the property and Shampoo just picked a direction. Dragging me down the street and off to explore. I got the feeling she was in a hurry to get me out of earshot and castigate me for being thoughtless.
I didn’t know some of the rules in effect in this world, but I quickly learned to hate them. Not ten minutes out of the house and we were passing a yard where children were playing. It was a warm day so they were messing around with the water hose.

Wasn’t hard to guess who took a shot full in the face. Several inches shorter and mass shifted in various places, I didn’t even notice the switch. It was still weird to not immediately sense it until I really paid attention.

We made an about face to the dojo and gathering hot water and a small bag with a change of clothes, just in case, and a towel. Then Shampoo and I were off to investigate this portion of Nerima. Avoiding that same house, just in case.

Didn’t help.

As we passed one of the newer apartment complexes in the neighborhood, someone spilled water from the top of their balcony. I guess they were watering plants. Whatever the case, I was wet and female again.

A thermos of hot water and a dry shirt later and we were off again, although this time I took one minor precaution and slipped on one of the sports tops I had purchased in China. Hey, don’t judge, you had those boobs you’d want some support every now and then too. We peacefully explored the neighborhood awhile until we found a cinema playing movies even this early. Didn’t have much money between us, but we had enough. Our first real date as a couple, why not?

Who knew that soda fountains could spontaneously spring a leak in one of their feeding lines? Wasn’t a surprise by this point. I was hit with carbonated water that was cold enough. The poor kid behind the snack counter apologised profusely and then just stared at me in confusion. Somehow, he didn’t faint, but he kept looking between me and the drink dispenser in wide eyed wonder.

Did he think such a thing might happen be some freak occurrence, or the gods might bless such a thing to happen again? Well, my pity if he gets it in his head that he might somehow transform other jock looking boys into pretty girls. The legend of the Mystical Girl Making Fountain will probably become a workplace legend that sticks with the place for years to come.

At least we got our drinks and popcorn free as an apology for the ‘accident.’ I blame no one, but
what kami, spirit, or simple universal force find this amusing. I didn’t bother changing back, to Shampoo’s minor frustration. I had no desire to spend any more of the morning damp, nor stain or ruin my shirts. I just went to the girl’s restroom, oh shut up where else should I go? I adjusted my bra comfortably and then sat down to our movie.

It was some kind of low budget, Z-grade Chinese martial arts comedy. Was still pretty funny. The best part was the horrible job the studio had done on the subtitles. Not many people were in the room with us, so we didn’t spare much effort to tone our laughter down at jokes no one else in the audience seemed to get. Some things just didn’t translate well. We would whisper to one another in Chinese, giggling some and made it through the whole flick.

We returned home hand in hand and cracking jokes the whole way. Despite the setbacks of my curse, I had fun. Shampoo was smiling and looked happy with the affair. I stopped her just inside the frontgate. Giving her hand a gentle squeeze and looked into her eyes.

I watched her expectantly a moment, and she just grinned.

<"Pervert girl, Airen.”>

The kiss was like a lightning bolt down my spine and curled my toes. I’ll never get tired of this. I’m also happy that she has gotten past my curse body and we can do this without reservation, except for decorum.

I only just caught the gasp from the door and only dimly turned to catch Akane watching us. Her cheeks were burning and that blush went right up into her hairline. This is where my expectations and reality broke with one another.

My imagining of her reaction was simple.

*She screams “Pervert! You’re both girls!” Slaps me hard enough to turn my body full around, and then probably gets into a fight with Shampoo.*

Instead she looked like she was about to transform into a human tomato. Was that longing in her eyes? Now, I won’t call myself an expert, but it certainly seemed like it.

Not an ‘ooo, I want him’ kind of way, but that kind of ‘I wish I had what they have.’ The idea of
romance was not yet ruined for her, good. We just kind of stared at one another for a long minute before she seemed to recall herself.

“Umm, lunch is almost ready, I need to go carry Ryoga’s up to him.” She blurted all that out in a rush and then quickly turned and vanished in a blur of her pink skirt and dark hair. Her feet could be heard pounding up the stairs so rapidly they might have been heartbeats.

Shampoo just kept looking at the empty front door and shook her head, “Poor Akane need get boyfriend quick.” Her elbow hit my ribs before I could say anything, stupid or otherwise. Damn she was getting good at predicting me. “Hope she and Ryoga hit off good, both too too shy. Need get catching up.”

“Yeah.” Was all I could mutter as we went inside to go enjoy something to eat besides junk food and popcorn.

Akane showed us the route to school and we fetched the needed paperwork for transfers and whatever else. I was beginning to see how Pops was so ready to throw me into school without any problems. The requirements for getting into Furinkan were surprisingly low. There was even a waiver for the entrance exams.

Long as a *member of standing* in the community signed off it was basically guaranteed entry. Now I hadn’t asked directly, but if Soun was on the City Council, that effectively qualifies, I believe. No wonder the panda thought his odds were good to get me tossed into school so soon. I hope I’ve sufficiently punished him by taking an extra couple folks to bring along.

I was tempted to try and test Akane’s skills. Was she ‘good’ or better? Or possibly even worse? My expectations were more often met than not, but I was being introduced to some surprises here and there I never would have foreseen. So far it was fairly subtle things, but I was getting the feeling something big might wind up breaking. Upturning my happy little apple cart before long.

Never got the chance to see her talent though, today at least. Nabiki proved to be the wrench in that idea. She had coaxed Shampoo and Akane into some ‘girl talk.’ I guess trying to be friendly, but also trying to get any kind information of potential worth to the middle daughter’s own personal interests. I kind of imagined it was probably more to try and tease the saucy details of our steamy romance out of my girlfriend.
Shampoo would likely hold back little. Both from her simple comfort with her own sexuality and keeping our relationship moving forward at quite a pace. She probably also would take no small bit of pride in being able to brag about having experiences poor Akane didn’t have at all. I have no idea what kind of dating and romance Nabiki had in her life.

Ah well, gave me a chance to go to the dojo alone and begin trying to formulate some plans for what I wished to do in the coming weeks as I had the time. I had a rather expansive knowledge of otherwise useless techniques from various anime and manga. However, as it stood in this world? I imagine many of them were far from useless. I just had to figure out how to make them work.

I was going to have to rely on this life’s experiences and innate talents to even have a hope of accomplishing that. I knew a bit of some Shotokan karate from college. Still chuckle at the words from my instructor: “Hardest hitting of the non-contact forms.” So, not going to teach you to hit people, but if you ever have to, you’ll be hitting them hard. That and a little kenpo as a way to make myself work out during the week while I was working, was the extent of my practical knowledge.

Ranma though? As I poured through memories, I couldn’t count the number of teachers Pop and I had studied under. More than a dozen different styles from across Asia learned from the ground up. Then refined to keep what worked for us. It galls me to admit, but Genma is a good teacher. Even if his methods are insane.

With all that knowledge to call upon, I was just going to have to break down what I knew of outside ideas and try to piece together something that would make them work. First, I was going to have to know my exact limits and where to improve them.

Gotten the integration of my mind and body together pretty well. Like having to relearn to walk, I guess. In even intense spars with Pop, Shampoo, and Ryoga I was now very confident in my ability to react and think tactically. No more moving on sheer instinct and autopilot. Pretty sure now I can really start to push myself.

Why not start with that staple of the Chestnut Fist and go from there? Of course I don’t think Soun or his daughters would appreciate me starting a fire anywhere. A fish tank and whatever items I could get my hands on that wouldn’t float, and no one would miss, would probably be a good substitute.

I had no reasonable expectations of what I was looking for. Then vacillated on whether I wanted raw numbers and data, or just some kind of reasonable marker to measure how well I was working toward my goal. Finally, being a mix of lazy and not wanting to needlessly waste time trying to dissect every little nuance, I settled on just trying to find high bars I could use to push myself toward a goal.
Lacking said fishbowl and not wanting to get curious questions by playing in the koi pond or the bath, I settled on trying to get a feel for the current limits of my abilities and go from there. A striking post behind the dojo was the target I abused for a full minute. Getting a feel for my muscles moving with the most speed they could manage.

As it was my hand was moving at speeds I couldn’t really believe even though I was experiencing all of it directly. The blows weren’t particularly hard, just incredibly fast. Had to be at least double what I might expect from my other life. If this was ‘slow’ then how fast was the technique I was going to try teaching myself?

My workout did not go unnoticed, to my annoyance. Any further exploration was killed by a certain bald idiot in a white gi coming to investigate, and probably ready to try and vent from his lingering anger over the morning face bash he had endured. The knot on his temple was mostly gone, that was good. Genma was stubbornly tough and healed quickly. Body conditioning must be capable of going to ridiculous extremes in this world. Or he had a skull made from mysteriously dense substance not of simple bone.

“Good, you’re training boy, but you need a serious workout. You’ve had a whole day to mess around and rest. It’s time I put you through your paces.”

Seeing as I wasn’t going to get any more time to myself, and I couldn’t very well volunteer information of what I was trying to do, I just let my anger bubble up and flow out. Beginning to crack my knuckles and the usual, confident grin spread on my face. I could feel it stretching my cheeks pretty wide. It was perhaps wrong, but there is always something so satisfying about the thought of slapping Genma around.

“Okay Dad, if you insist. I could use a pre-dinner workout. Help my appetite. Just hope you’re up for it, cause I aint gonna take old age as an excuse for going easy on you.”

“Watch your mouth, Ranma. There’s still plenty I haven’t taught you yet.” He frowned, a growl on his throat as he jammed a finger almost to my nose. “You may be good, son, but you’re still nowhere near ready for me to call you a master of our style.

“Now stop stalling and let’s get to it.”

Any further discourse was ended. His call for action punctuated by a fist aimed for my floating ribs and we were on. It’s still galling to me, but the old man … no, I’ll be polite, my father is still good. Genma was stocky, but it was well maintained muscle. For all the man’s laziness he still found time to keep himself in fighting shape. He also possessed superb control of those muscles.
He was the **master** of the Saotome School of *Musabetsu Kakuto Ryu*. I knew the man was holding out at least two powerful sets of techniques, that he had designed himself. One counter to the other. In the forms of the Umisenken and the Yamisenken. What other knowledge was floating around in that head of his that the man was too lazy to use? Or maybe he was just holding out to keep himself needed for my training?

Right then, it didn’t matter much. He had very refined coordination of his power. It was how we kept from actually causing each other serious harm. How he had taught Ranma from a fairly young age. Drilling practical combat situations into my memories without actually causing too serious an injury during practice. Then using more powerful strikes as my physical conditioning improved.

Perhaps, it was one of the things that made these sessions so enjoyable. We were both able to fight seriously without too much worry of causing a maiming wound. Not that we were holding back *that* much. If I made a mistake and he tagged me, it was going to hurt like hell.

We moved back and forth in the yard beside the dojo. Blocking or turning aside blows with sharp cracks of flesh striking flesh. This was a mixture of fun and physically appealing. Something about working the muscles and keeping up the coordination between tactical thinking and simply acting was extremely satisfying.

A sweat began to build up and we were both soon working through controlled panting to keep our muscles fueled with air. He really did want to push my limits today. Fine with me. It had to be a mark of pride for Genma that he could keep pace fairly easily with a person less than half his age. Still, he was Genma Saotome and it was time I wrapped this up. I had my own training I wanted to do, without tipping the old man off something was ‘strange’ about his son.

A hand quickly dove into my pocket and I sent a handful of metallic objects flying. Pop’s eyes lit up at the sight of tumbling hundred and five hundred yen coins flying toward his face. How the man could be a master with that level of easy distraction still puzzled me. Yet, my evil trick had worked. ‘Anything Goes’ after all.

His guard opened as his hand lashed out to grab the change swiftly. Without a pause I jumped into his face and ran my knuckles across his cheek. A soft dusting, I didn’t want to actually hurt him. We don’t get to pick our parents in life, and Genma was still my Pop. Want him or not, he was what I owed a significant portion of my life to. Affection burned deep in my heart, even if the rose colored glasses of childhood had long since been broken off.

“Game over, Dad.” I quickly seized his arm with a grin and performed a quick and basic over shoulder throw. Now, I know the man has plenty left to teach. I know he’s full of dirty tricks and
sneaky methods. I was still surprised that somehow found the leverage to tuck his body with the throw.

Rather than plant him on his back, I found him landing on the balls of his feet and his rump. His hands quickly grabbed my collar and I noticed him grinning.

“Almost, son, almost.” With shear strength alone I was hauled over his head and found myself slamming onto my back instead. I blew out a breath quickly and tightened muscles in my limbs, getting them in position quick as I could. The worst of the landing was taken by my legs. My head was actually shielded by his lap and my ass absorbed the bump rather than my torso.

I lay there, view of the old man inverted. He adjusted his glasses a bit and gave a triumphant snort. Giving my cheek a firm but not really painful slap. It was louder than it was stinging. Just a demonstration I was momentarily at his mercy.

“Not bad, Ranma. You’ve still got a long way to go, though. Don’t get flashy in a fight, boy. When you have a chance to end your opponent, end him. That was also a dirty trick.”

He tried to sound angry, but his face cracked into a manic grin and soon he bounced up. The yen signs already in his eyes as his normal greed reasserted itself. “And this change is mine. Hahaha!” He opened his palm to show my failed distraction and then bounced over the perimeter wall. His laughter carrying far off into the distance as he fled with the remains of my allowance for the week.

I didn’t bother to give chase. Instead, my arms crossed and I lay there a minute, frowning. Pride wounded but contemplating. Alright, so he did still have a rung or two advantage on the ladder over me. I was going to take the lesson to heart and not repeat the mistake again.

When I finally sat up and glanced around I took comfort in the fact no one was around to share my humiliation. Sure, Shampoo and Ryoga had seen the panda put me ass over teakettle a few times. He’d done the same to them. They’d never seen me try a strategy and have it backfire though. Defeat was an experience best not shared sometimes.

I bounced up and went back to work on my training exercises. The panda had run off, probably to buy a beer or a quick shot of sake. He wasn’t going to get much with my leftover change. I hadn’t more than a couple thousand yen in various bits of coinage. If it bought him something to eat and beer, fine with me though. Would keep him occupied and out of my hair for a bit so I could keep organizing my thoughts on how I wanted to test my skills and develop new techniques.
About dinnertime, Kasumi called upon me to perform a service.

“Ranma, would you please go check on Ryoga? If he’s feeling well enough, he should come join us at the table.”

“Sure thing Kasumi.” I hadn’t been doing anything in particular just thumbing through some of Akane’s manga. I was curious to see if he was feeling alright anyway. This weird illness the two of us seemed to have picked up now cast that whole ... dream I had experienced into doubt. I had no way of knowing if it was some fever caused weirdness or a real spiritual experience.

{Probably best to play it safe and be on guard in the future, just in case.}

It had been so real, I couldn’t rule out the possibility that at least some bit of it had true meaning. I’ve had serious fevers before, both in this life and the previous, and I don’t remember any dreams of the like of significance from any of them.

My thoughts were set aside as I crested the stairs and slid open the door to the guest room. Ryoga was turned onto his side and snoring peacefully. I hated to be a bother, really. Never liked having my sleep interrupted, I felt bad about bothering others’ in turn. The shaft of light from the hallway though seemed to be enough to intrude on his slumber. That, and his stomach made a loud growl.

Had he been awake enough, no doubt the boy would be blushing and stammering in embarrassment. The rumble was loud enough to wake him up in any means.

“Nnn?” Sitting up slowly and rubbing on his eyes to clear the gunk and take stock of his surroundings. “Ranma?”

“Yeah, it’s me, buddy.” He didn’t recoil at the idea of us being friends. That was a sign in the right direction. I popped down beside him and glanced about. Finding the thermometer still there along with the medicine, I promptly cleaned it off.

“How you feeling? Open.” I commanded, treating him like he was my little brother and not my self-declared rival. Popping the thing under his tongue and letting him just glower at me.
“Beyyah’” He mumbled around the offending object, best he could with his tongue holding it flat. His belly began to go a rumble again and his cheeks pinkened as I expected. “Almos’ ‘inner ‘ime?”

“Yeah, Kasumi sent me up here to check on you and collect you for our evening meal if you feel good enough.”

I glanced at the rising liquid in the glass tube and when it seemed to have settled I removed his from his mouth. Passing him some fresh water in turn.

“Hmm, 37.1. Looks like your fever is gone. Let’s see if you can stand up.” I wiped off the glass again and bounced up. Keeping him in my peripheral vision as the boy tossed off the futon and stood. Moving gingerly at first but he never seemed to lose his balance.

“My legs are still a little rubbery but I think I’m okay.” He quickly turned to his pack and fished out some pants and a clean shirt. I let him dress in peace as I collected the medicine and what not from this morning. Stepping out the door quietly.

“Glad to hear it pal. If you need any help … “

“I don’t need any help, Ranma. I’m fine.” He growled at my retreating back.

“Happy to know you’re back to your old self, but if you do feel off balance or something, let me know. Don’t need you breakin’ the steps or somethin’ while you’re tryin’ to get to the table.”

“Ranma, you jerk, I’m fine!” He snarled again and just prompted me to laugh as I left the room completely. Having to pause as the youngest Tendo child was rounding the corner from the hallway where the sisters’ rooms were located.

“Is he feeling better?” Akane glanced over my shoulder to the door and caught sight of Ryoga behind me. I assumed now dressed as I took note of her gaze tracking movement.

“Hmm, sounds okay to me, but you should ask him yourself, Akane.” I grinned to her and quickly turned on my toes and took a two step bounce backward toward the stairs. Contrary to my prediction, his hand did not lash out to try and pull me into silence.
Instead the boy was standing there, blushing. I tried to school my expression and put the smile off my lips. It wasn’t working through. Neither of them seemed to notice, for the better. I had to look really weird with my lips trying to fight the tug of the muscles pulling them into an open sign I was pleased with something.

His hand scratched the back of his head and he gave one of his forced, nervous laughs. “Yeah, I’m feeling great, Akane. Thanks for asking. You don’t have to worry about me though, I’m healthy as a .. “

“Wild boar?” I offered helpfully. Sure it was a very inside joke, with only me knowing the context at all.

“Oh shut up, you jerk.” His anger snatching his focus back to me.

Akane glanced between us and just laughed. It was a very pretty laugh, fit her very well. This complete package was more attractive than I ever would have imagined, and I did kick myself a bit for not letting it have a chance to go anywhere. Still, no point crying over the ‘shoulda, woulda, coulda.’

“I don’t get ‘guy’ friendships, but you two get along so well.” She giggled, glancing between us and smiled.

“We .. we do not! Tell her Ranma! We’re not friends, we’re bitter rivals and enemies!” I don’t know what prompted that bit of embarrassment from him. Maybe it was just Ryoga’s natural pessimism about everything in the world.

“Ryoga, you wound me, man. Don’t be afraid to embrace our bromance. Don’t you and I have too few friends as it is?”

“Wha .. that… but … we’re enemies … damn it.” He looked like he was going to pout now. His voice dropped to a whisper and his anger fled him. Akane just giggled all the more and shook her head.

“He’s right, Ryoga. Would your enemy really worry so much to actually help bring you breakfast and check on you when you’re sick?
“And come on Ranma, stop teasing. He’s only just started feeling better.” Punching me softly in the arm as a reprimand.

“Okay, okay, I’ll let up.”

Ryoga was spared any further embarrassment from either of us as Kasumi’s call for dinner sounded from the kitchen below. That brought Shampoo and Nabiki from the latter’s room and they joined us on the way down the stairs. Forming a rough line with me in lead.

I returned to the medicine to the proper cabinet. Then assisted joined Akane and Shampoo in helping Kasumi with bringing the meal to the table. It was quickly obvious that me that one, or several of us were going to have to hunt work. Feeding teenagers required a lot of food as it was. Supplying proper caloric intake for four extremely active teens that were also martial artists AND my father required substantial portions of food.

Kasumi seemed well prepared for this. Of course, she now had five meals of experience notched into her apron for her new house guests. So the amount of food we were bearing to the table was not a surprise. It would also not be a shock if the Tendo bankroll could not long sustain this level of consumption. I was betting on it being a very safe conclusion.

If Ryoga was in good enough health tomorrow we should go by his house, and I suppose it would be a good idea to find Doctor Tofu and ask him about work. Or maybe Shampoo and I could go find a cafe and play waitress. The thought wasn’t particularly appealing, but if I could use the curse to benefit, why not?

Although, I was going to have to work hard on keeping certain behaviors under control. Something in my nature found the flirting a bit too easy, and somehow amusing. Without a whole life of other experience to call upon, I would have been otherwise petrified of intimate encounters with the opposite sex. Yet, the exaggerated ‘girly’ behavior came a bit too easily. Push came to shove, I could always just use Shampoo as my model for the right mix where it came to waiting tables.

The fanged wanderer seemed to be capable of moving without much trouble or wobbling. Very good to see. So we set down the food and assisted with portions and serving, and slid into what was becoming the regular seating order. Mr Tendo and Pop on one side, Kasumi and Nabiki on the other. Akane and Ryoga both blushing as they were stuck together, since Shampoo refused to yield the space beside me. It also gave her a perfect place to help Kasumi with service and I could pass around food to our fathers, mostly I did this out of respect for Mr. Tendo as he was putting us up in his home without asking for anything in return.
Once everyone was served, there was momentary silence as we ate and conversation was something of a minimum during the initial inhalation of nutrients. Shampoo and I tried to be polite so we didn’t just cram our mouths full. Ryoga was fighting the call of his stomach and I guess not trying to embarrass Akane. Genma didn’t care to be polite so just stuff everything in reach down his throat hole.

The chaos eased off after a moment and Tendo took up the beginning of discussion. “So, Ryoga, you seem to be feeling better, son.”

“Yes, sir, thank you. A good night’s sleep and I’ll ready to beat Ranma up first thing in the morning.”

“That’s the spirit, son.” Soun just laughed and tried to ignore the fact a pair of chopsticks were sneaking below his bowl of rice trying to grab a piece of fish off his plate. One of his eyebrows twitching slightly at my father’s audacity. I stole Genma’s fish in turn, flipping it onto Tendo’s plate following Genma’s theft. The man had been repaid with interest.

“Hey … “ The weak protest was quickly cut off as he saw his best friend’s frown. Ever the weasel, the bald man coughed and changed tracks swiftly. “So, Ranma, did you take care of the paperwork for school? We need to get it all set up and out of the way quickly as possible.”

“Sure did, Pop. Akane showed us the way there, we got all the papers and stuff. Mr. Tendo was even kind enough to sign, for all three of us.” I just grinned a bit. The poor patriarch had succumbed without much fuss on the issue. Akane was very persuasive with her father. Big, doe eyes and all, asking for her father to let ‘all of her friends’ get into school together. I’m sure the unspoken threat of her anger had nothing to do with his swift cooperation.

“Thanks by the way, Mr T.” The man frowned a bit at that name but quickly chuckled and rubbed the back of his head.

“Think nothing of it, Ranma. Education is important and all of you shouldn’t neglect it. Besides, we’re practically family in all but name.” Laughing a bit as he spoke.

Were they still planning something? Or was he just clinging to a fool’s hope? Guess it really didn’t matter. I’d deal with whatever stupid plans these two chuckle-heads came up with to try and leash me to one of the girls.
And if I failed to deal with it, well I’m not going to put a lot of effort into trying to restrain the anger of Akane and the mace-wielding Chinese lady’s fury. Much safer to be on the sidelines and out of the potential fires from that one. Those two were would be far less likely to show mercy or control upon anyone they vented such frustrations upon.

“We’re gonna swing by Ryoga’s place tomorrow and see if we can’t get hold of his mom or somethin’. Let them know he’s okay and maybe they can help with gettin’ stuff taken care of for money and junk. And … err .. Granny, is gonna wire money for Shampoo.”

Genma already had the look in his eyes with the thoughts of cash. Now I doubt he’d be foolish enough to try stealing anything substantial. Any pocket change or the like, that I wouldn’t put past him. I subtly rose up a bit on one leg and gave a quick shove to one of his knees. It worked and he suddenly spun sideways on the tatami. Finding himself looking out the open doors at the pond.

Our eyes met and he glared, looking very strange as he was now back to Soun and facing outward. I just smirked and gave him a hard look. Mouthing at him.

‘Don’t even think about it. Stealing from me is one thing, but not my friends.’

Kasumi just blinked, “Oh, Mr Saotome, is there something outside? You moved so quickly.”

“Oh, just admiring the scenery, Kasumi dear. Your father keeps such a lovely yard, and the rising evening. It’s very beautiful to look at. Almost calming.”

“That’s nice.” She said in that typical, naive and gentle ‘Kasumi way.’ Giggling a bit and serving seconds of rice to many of us.

The evening continued peacefully enough without the old man trying anything stupid, for now. After dinner, Shampoo and I helped Kasumi clean away the table and the dishes. We were going to make ourselves as useful as possible until we can start paying the Tendos back. Although, somehow I got the feeling there was going to wind up being a Neko Hanten in this universe as well. I can’t see Cologne staying away long. Besides, I really wanted to start training under one of the best martial arts masters in this world.

Not that Pop was bad, but I can’t be sure what advanced techniques he really knows. Training under someone more sensible, relatively speaking, was be a nice break of pace from my lifetime routine. I was also pondering if, in our little adventure we should try and find a certain Nodoka Saotome. That
thought has me leery for so many reasons. Can’t be sure what my mother will be like.

The group of myself, Shampoo, and Ryoga were pulled out to the dojo by Akane. We didn’t do any sparring or the like, however. Instead, since it was a large room with plenty of space we went about doing things that ‘friends’ do. Talking and playing games. She had pulled out three or four games she had played with her sisters in the past and some cards.

Thus, we killed the evening getting to know one another better. Or more to the point, we welcomed Akane into our little circle. Turning the informal trio into a quartet. It was nice to see Akane smiling and laughing at my occasional bad jokes. Seems we were off to much better starting position than the violent squabbling we might otherwise have had.

She and Shampoo were coming along nicely as friends as well. Of course, when there wasn’t a boy to fight over, seemed only natural. We all had in common martial arts and being around the same age. They could discuss ‘girl’ issues together. While Ryoga and I could share various tales from the road and our strange encounters.

Akane and Shampoo still found it very difficult to believe that the Lost Boy had roamed the Japanese islands at least twice, and probably had found his way into Mongolia and Russia as well if some of his descriptions of China were to be bought. I didn’t doubt it.

It was a nice evening all around. Pretty sure we were going to get on just fine through the whole mess. Now if I can work out a solution to our fathers and the engagement that will be satisfactory. That particular issue would require time to solve. Not that I was lacking in that particular resource.

We goofed around till we were all yawning messes. I yielded the bath to the girls, gently soothing Shampoo before she could raise a protest. We’d been bathing together for well over a month now, if only out of convenience and not wanting to break Ryoga at the sight of bare, female flesh.

Might not have been wise to be up so late given that school was back in session in roughly a week. The time had just run away from us in our fooling about. I settled for a quick scrub down and rinse. Though the furo and all that wonderful steam promised a soothing, hot soak. I’d probably get too comfortable and pass out.

No, just get clean enough to avoid waking to morning funk and I returned to the small room I was sharing with the misses. She was running a brush through her hair giving it delicate attention from roots to tips. I could never find that level of dedication. Was quite a ritual for her, especially given how she wore her hair down to her hips.
We shared some mumbled sweet nothings and I assisted her brushing out the full length of her dark tresses. I’m fairly certain it was mixture of desire for pampering and her own subtle form of seduction. By now she had a full catalogue of scents that I appreciated and to what degree I liked them.

Tonight it was one she didn’t use as often, but I enjoyed the most. A strange mixture of floral scents, most of which I couldn’t identify. Whatever it was--maybe some secret Amazon recipe, or just an expensive brand of soap and conditioner--it stroked the parts of my brain she wanted stimulated.

I was probably spending more time nuzzling her hair and taking in the scent than I was actually brushing it out. Occasionally she’d giggle when my breath tickled her. Never complained though, I think she was enjoying the attention. I was quite happy to give it to her in any amount she desired.

I lost track of the timeline as it followed. At some point we were in liplock and making out. As you do. How long that lasted to the point we fell asleep, I have no clue. Nor did I care to have it all pinned down. It was enjoyable and overwhelmingly delightful. I’m very confident in my choice.

At some point we curled up and passed out, too exhausted to continue further linguistic practice. By mutual agreement, anything else was on hold till later time. I don’t know how long that would last, but for now we were comfortable with behaving.

I held Shampoo close and enjoyed her warmth and scent. It made sleep’s arrival easy and last comfortably through the night.

“Ranma, are you sure my house is this way? I’m positive it’s that way.” Ryoga pointed off down a side street that ran tangent to our current course.

I just bit my cheek to keep from letting out a soft growl that wanted to escape my throat. Between Akane and myself, the district map we had in hand, and getting directions from either police officers or the locals we’d gotten the course pretty well nailed down. Would figure we’d have to go the near opposite end of Nerima, but once we got the middle school located it wasn’t that hard to pick up the route from.

“Ryoga, you trusted me to walk you to and from school almost every day for year. Is it really that hard to trust us to make sure we’ve got the way to your house right?”
I was rewarded with a frown and a snort, “Fine, but I still think we’re going the wrong way.”

My eyes just rolled, but I managed to keep my peace. Was likely going to wind up tearing a chunk of flesh off my own cheek at this rate though. We’d been at this most of the morning. Getting a proper map and using Ryoga’s address to give ourselves the best path we could figure on. Then a lot of walking and making sure we were on the correct heading.

Akane didn’t know this portion of Nerima very well, given its distance from her home. Had been months since I’d been this way, and my memory was fuzzy on some details. And for all the help Ryoga’s sense of direction was doing us. We were still making good progress though. The older residents were very polite and happy to point us on our way. At last we found a street that looked familiar enough. Some of the buildings looked to have been remodelled but we were on the right block.

“Alright, we should be close, any of this look familiar, Ryoga?” I was confident that at least he’d have the proper path in mind. Usually if he had familiarized himself with the path and wasn’t distracted he could find his way about. That wasn’t the most reliable thing, as experience had taught me. His mind roamed a lot, and he was the most pessimistic sort I’ve ever known—in either lifetime. So, he’d get lost most often than not.

“Yeah, I think we’re going the right way. Hey … is that Checkers?” His eyes squinting as he glanced down the street to a small form.

Shampoo tilted her head curiously, “Who? Is very strange name for friend, yes?”

Akane was also curious but she seemed to get the idea it was a pet name of some sort. No human being could possibly be called ‘Checkers’ unless it was very off nickname. We all glanced down the road and took in the growing point that was moving in our general direction.

Indeed, it looked like a four-legged, furry creature. Too large to be one of those foul, demonic … ah dammit, I loved cats too. A shiver tried to climb my spine at the memory that came along, unbidden and unwanted. That was quickly banished back into the void. My attention returning to the approaching shape.

Fairly large, sturdy built canine. The fur was long and the breed fairly indeterminate. That hair color was unmistakable though. One half was a golden blonde and the other was a soft chocolate. She was like a mismatched Oreo cookie. By the slight roundness of shape, either the dog was getting fat or
she was carrying a liter.

“Hey, it is! Checkers! Come ‘ere girl!” Ryoga cupped his hands over his mouth and gave a quick holler and whistled. That got the intended target’s attention and she broke into a trot. Soon almost barreling Ryoga over as she bounced up onto her hind legs and immediately began to sniff his face and lick along his throat.

Ryoga just laughed and rubbed behind her ears. “Stop it, that tickles … down girl, come on, down. I missed you too.” After she was satisfied her affections had been conveyed the animal dropped back to all fours and began to circle around Ryoga. She was a tall dog, just shy of his hips, causing even the stout Lost Boy to struggle for his balance.

“Oh, is this your dog Ryoga?” Akane grinned kneeling down and holding out her hand slowly.

“She so pretty, Shampoo never see one like this before.”

This got the animal curious to the strangers and she eagerly broke from Ryoga to be ‘polite.’ Now, silly as that might sound, I knew from experience this dog was sharp. Sometimes you’d swear she was as smart as a person. Certainly was the most capable member of the Hibiki family, if you ask me. Capable of fully taking care of herself alone, and when she caught scent or sound of a family member she’d quickly drag them back home. Unlike the parents or the son, she didn’t get lost.

She sniffed the girls’ hands and walked closer to them, presenting her side for petting and attention. Tongue hanging out of her mouth and panting a bit while her tail wagged. Head raised and cocked at an angle almost like she was trying to strut. Or maybe she was presenting the look of a ‘proud’ canine. Checkers always was a little silly.

“Hey there, Checkers. Remember me?” I finally got in the act and gently stroked her under the chin. The animal quickly tried to pounce upon me and lick my face as well. And like everyone else, I couldn’t help but laugh. An affectionate pet was always a happy thing. “Yeah, it’s nice to see you too.”

My hand ran along her side and I gave her a curious look, “Are you carrying a litter of puppies?” She was wide enough it was an easy guess. I was remembering not just this dog, but in the not too far off future she had made it to a tv station asking the news to broadcast a message to summon Ryoga home to see her puppies after they were born.
Checkers began to sway on her feet and barked once, tail becoming even more animated. Her head even bobbed in a mimic of a nod. Dog was too clever, I tell you.

Ryoga blinked a bit and then laughed softly. “You must’ve gone and gotten real lonely, I’m sorry girl. I didn’t mean to be gone for so long.” Scratching his loyal companion behind her ears and finding just the right spot she liked having touched.

“Oh, puppies? Ryoga, you think I can have one? If Daddy will let me keep it anyway.” Akane suddenly looked hopeful at the Lost Boy.

As per his norm, he broke into a blush. “I don’t see why not Akane. I know Checkers would like her babies to go a good home.”

A thought ran through my mind and I grinned, “Well it looks like it’ll still be awhile till they’re born, and then they need to be weaned. Hey, Ryoga old buddy … “

Ryoga’s expression fell a bit into a look of guarded distrust. The boy leaning back as if I were about to present something disgusting to him and dare him to eat it or the like. He was really too easy to tease. “What, Ranma?”

“I was thinkin’ … “

“Oh, is that why I was smelling smoke?”

“Hey!”

{Touche! He’s learnin’ yet.}

“Anyway, since we’re all stayin’ with the Tendos, why don’t we bring Checkers home with us for awhile? She can have a house full of people to play with, and we can get the puppies used to us from the time they’re born. If she wants to patrol the neighborhood and keep her ears out for your parents, she can do that too. She’s a sharp pooch.”

The dog in question glanced between us quietly, head tilting while we debated the merits of letting
her move in for a little while. Didn’t see the harm in it myself. She could help keep Ryoga from getting lost when no one was around. And she could pull a small duty of keeping certain, furry and fanged beasts from our doorstep.

“I dunno, Ranma. You think Mr. Tendo would be okay with it?”

Akane’s face was lighting up to the suggestion of being there to meet her future pet. She stroked her chin thoughtfully and seemed to be running the cost-benefit report in her head. Or maybe she was plotting how she was going to pout her father into submission.

Shampoo also seemed to like the idea. I think she was ready to claim a pup for herself as well. The look she shot me told of approval for this suggestion. I would possibly be rewarded later for my bold thinking. Like the rest of us, she was just a sucker for a cute animal too. Good thing she hadn’t picked up her particularly, horrid curse. Although, had she been a cat and been able to bond with a dog from a young age she’d likely have a pet and bodyguard in the future. Better on the whole I spared her that event.

“Why don’t we call home when we get to your house and ask? Worse that happens is he says no. Then we bring her home anyway.” I grinned innocently, whistling as I looked to the sky. “Not our fault if she follows us.”

“Ranma, you’re horrible.” Akane scolded. Punching me in the arm, as was her quickly developing habit. This one actually stung. “Besides, all we have to do is get Kasumi to say ‘yes,’ Dad can’t say anything negative to her.” She winked at me and grinned.

“Good point.” Rubbing my arm a little and shaking my head with a laugh. Slipping my hand into Shampoo’s and lacing our fingers together. That earned a wistful look from Akane and there might have been a flash of longing and jealousy in her eyes. They never rose to look at me, just our joined grip.

{Don’t worry, Akane. I’ll get you hooked up. Whether with blockhead here, or someone else. There’s a boy out there for you.}

Not as though Ryoga was the only option. Maybe they were only capable of being friends. There was always that Shinnosuke guy. He loved Akane, if I recall. That was an adventure long in the future though. For now, friendship and go from there.
“Come on girl, why don’t you show us the way back the house?” Ryoga smiled and rubbed Checker’s behind the ears. Her teeth softly took hold of his sleeve and she began to ‘guide’ the boy in the proper direction. We couldn’t hold in our laughter as he protested but gave up. So we were off to find the Hibiki household to tend to our matters.

Well, luck of luck, we caught BOTH of Ryoga’s parents at his home. They are a sweet pair of folks. Hard to see how he can be so easily depressed while his parents tend to be so positive even in the midst of their roaming lot in life. He was who he was though, and no help for it right now.

His mother was happy he was around friends, and somewhere safe. They both promised to visit when they found themselves in the area. Assuming they could find the dojo in a timely fashion, at least. They did have the phone number, so there was that. And getting Ryoga set up for school wasn’t going to be terribly difficult. I don’t know what his parents do for money, but they had enough to afford him a uniform and books.

Akane phoned ahead to report our success to Kasumi, and our new four-legged houseguest. Ms Hibiki even made us all lunch, and she was quite a master of the domestic craft. Poor Akane had another high bar to set herself against. If she and Ryoga became an item anyway. Although, that’s going on the idea she’s to meet my expectations. So far, she had been nothing but polite and friendly. Maybe her cooking isn’t totally inedible?

Errr … I think we’ll avoid that particular bridge till we’re forced to the crossing. I’ve no desire to test it at the moment. The deviations I was experiencing weren’t quite that far off the mark, after all.

With matters settled and the hour approaching evening, Ryoga parted with his parents none too happily. Can’t blame the guy, really. Saw his folks a few times a year if he was lucky. I would reason that to be the largest source of his depression, constantly being alone. He did surprisingly well for himself, all things considered. Still couldn’t be fun.

For all his flaws, least I had Pop. Annoying as he was, he’d always been there.

The return home had been a bit somber, but Akane and Checkers managed to cheer him up. While we conversed about nothing in particular during the trip. Mostly I was quiet, letting them grill Akane on the class and her friends, and whatever else came to mind. My silent musing went unnoticed by two, but Shampoo was no one to be so lax in her attention. Just taking hold of my arm and cuddling in close. Making sure to press some soft, frontal attachments in just a bit more firmly than needed.
My self control was going to wear away quickly with this girl. She wasn’t annoying aggressive, but certainly worked on keeping some portion of my attention focused upon her. Resistance steadily being sheared off as I just accepted and got used to each new action she performed. Making it to marriage was seeming like a long shot. If she would even want to be patient enough to wait a few years for that.

It was getting dark by the time we returned to the dojo. Kasumi was sweeping off the front walkway as we were coming in. She smiled in her normal ‘Kasumi’ manner, and welcomed us home. Then locked eyes upon Checkers and actually got a few watts brighter.

“Oh, hello there. You must be Checkers?” Kneeling down and almost immediately smothering the dog with affection. Which was taken to immediately. Happily nuzzling into the Tendo homemaker and getting properly introduced.

“Yup, this is Ryoga’s family dog. Checkers. This is Kasumi.” I knelt down, smiling and playing introductions. “Kasumi, this is Checkers, probably the smartest dog we will ever meet … outside of someone falling in a Spring of Drowned Chow Chow or something at Jusenkyo … “ I added with a little quip.

The canine lifted up a paw, placed it immediately into Kasumi’s hand and waited. The oldest sister blinked a moment and finally returned the ‘shake’ properly. Checkers seemed to grin, if that’s possible for a dog, and then proudly stood back up and waited politely at the door.

“Oh my, she is smart and so well behaved.” Sliding the door open and admitting herself, the new family pet, and the rest of us.

“We’re home.” Came the round house call as shoes were shed and we moved off to the family room.

“Welcome back everyone.” Soun called from the family room. Then a fairly audible ‘clack’ which was followed by, “Ha, got you on the ropes now Saotome.”

“What? Do over Tendo? … “ The pleading in my father’s voice was just sad. Well, mock pleading I guess. He was stalling for some way to cheat, no doubt.

And an ever curious Checkers began moving around the house. Sniffing everything and mapping the layout of her new surroundings. Identifying things of interest and perhaps seeking territorial rivals, or getting familiar with the scents of the local ‘pack’ living in this ‘den.’
She had darted off into the family room likely to make her proper introductions to our parental units. And promptly provided just the distraction my father required.

“Sorry Saotome, but, oh hello … you must be the pet Kasumi spoke of?”

*Clack* “Oh ho, would you look at that Tendo, seems things aren’t so bad after all?”

Poor Soun quickly whipped his head back to the board, “What? … I’m sure I was close to check …” He frowned, knew full well my father had cheated, but didn’t say anything. Those two were quite an odd pair.

Genma’s laughter proved short lived, however, as Checkers was promptly in his face. Sniffing and then giving him a long lick. “What the … Ranma! Who let this dog in the house … wait, you seem familiar …”

*Click, clack*

If his head had jerked any faster from me, to the dog, to the board I’m sure an eye would have popped out of socket, or perhaps he’d snatch a muscle.

“All I could do was roll my eyes. Leave it to Pop to be the first to cheat, the most often to do so, then be the first to blame someone else for doing the same. It’s only cheating when you do it, not when I do.

Soun just rolled something about in his mouth, giving a noncommittal grunt. Slowly beginning to sweat under the intensity of the glare he was being fixed with from across the board. He was quite obviously guilty, red as he was turning. To say nothing of the fact he was doing a poor job of hiding the fact he’d promptly shoved two of the pieces into his mouth in the brief moment of inattention caused by the canine.

“Oh Mr Saotome, it seems Checkers likes you.” Kasumi giggled, kneeling down and holding out her hand. From somewhere she’d fetched up a couple leftover rice balls. I’ll not try to guess where she
had hidden them. My father would have inhaled them without thought if they were there otherwise, of course I could be said to be guilty of the same thing … but hey, I’m a growing boy!

It got Checkers suddenly interested in Kasumi once more, but also pulled Genma’s eyes with it. His stomach suddenly decided it was in dire need of nutritious contents. Glad I ate with the others while we were coming back, I might have embarrassed myself in the same way. Dinner probably wouldn’t be far away, but I was sated for the time being.

For his part, Mr Tendo was quick to pass the tiles in his mouth to his palm and then quickly under his thigh. Still don’t know how competent a fighter he is, but he’d probably give my old man a run for his money in sneaky hand sleights. I almost missed the movement it was so quick. Very well disguised as a yawn, then the pieces were in the pinch between his hamstring and calf.

Akane finally turned on the big eyes and smiled to her father with a coy expression. Good grief she was laying it on thick. She seemed to be rushing headlong into the position of being able to have her puppy, and it wouldn’t be here for weeks yet, and several weeks more till the pup was weaned and ready for heavy play.

“Dad, Checker’s looks like she’s pregnant. If she is, do you think I could have one of the puppies?”

Soun looked to his daughter and melted under the intensity of the “cute brights” she turned on him. Just blushing a little and rubbed the back of his head. “Well, you’re a responsible girl, Akane. As long as Ryoga doesn’t mind, I don’t see why we couldn’t keep a dog around the house. Just make sure you house train the puppy well.

“It takes a lot of patience to care for a pet, sweetheart.” Sweat slowly began to form on his forehead as he tried to tiptoe around one of Akane’s biggest faults, which I had yet to see demonstrated first hand. By his reaction, I got the impression that the baby Tendo was a hothead in true form.

Her face fell a bit as a tick developed in her brow. Guess one of the sparks for her fuse was mentioning that particular flaw. Soun looked ready to bolt for safety in case of the eruption of Mount Akane, his sole bead of sweat becoming a slow trickle of perspiration. Then the girl remember her goal, and to whom she was speaking, and caught herself.

“I know, Dad, I promise I’ll take good care of the puppy. By the time I’m done, it’ll be the most well behaved animal in the neighborhood.” The strain of her control could be heard in her voice. Then her pride manifested in one of those “I’ll show you patience!” forms and her eagerness to demonstrate her skills as a care provider took over. By the time she was done speaking, she was almost glowing with anticipation of proving herself, and pumped her fist to whatever dreams she was imagining.
already being successful.

A slow breath escaped her father’s throat as he felt the tremor pass without danger to his house, or himself. “Well, that’s taken care of then … ah I suppose it would be a good idea to perhaps visit the animal shelter in your free time and ask about training a dog.”

Akane’s beam turned from pride to one glowing in worship at the wisdom received from another. “That’s a great idea Dad! Thanks.” She beamed and hugged him, latching on tight. I winced as I almost heard his bones creak under the vice she had placed upon him. The poor man turned an interesting shade of blue under her intense affections.

{Lack of control while at any emotional extreme … check. Note to self, stay away from Akane when she is in any kind of strong mood … far away.}

“No … prob...lem … dea..r … “ Soun just managed to croak out began fairly savage breaths. He looked torn somewhere between pride at his baby’s intense power and panic of his chest being shrunk about three feet in diameter.

Three of us watched in shock at the byplay. Genma recoiled in horror, probably at the thought of that being him in Soun’s place. So stunned he couldn’t work up the nerve to try and cheat the game. Kasumi just clapped her hands and laughed. Sweet, unflappable Kasumi. Naively seeing it as nothing more than sweet, the bond between her sister and father.

She did, however unintentionally, diffuse the situation quickly. “Well, dinner will be in about an hour. Akane, would you mind helping Shampoo clean the bathroom before then? I got so busy shopping this afternoon I forgot to do it.”

Almost immediately the girl released her old man and gave a happy chirp as she bounced up. Her mood too good to be even dented by late evening chores. “Sure thing Kasumi. Let’s go do this Shampoo.”

So fired up in anticipation and happiness she didn’t even stop to really consider her assistance in matters of cleaning. Just shooting out of the room and bounding up the stairs to her room. I assume to change into something she didn’t mind getting soap or water on.

“Ranma, you come too, keep Shampoo safe? Think Akane might not know own strength right now.” She whispered into her my ear, looking up at the ceiling in the approximate direction of the
baby Tendo’s room.

“Uh, sure, it’ll go quicker with three people. Ryoga, you think can help Kasumi in the kitchen, without getting lost in the pantry?”

“Hey!” Snapped said offended fangboy. “Umm, yeah, I can help Kasumi just fine. Try not to spend too much time getting distracted by your girlfriend.” He barked back, blowing his tongue at me while quickly jumping up to his feet. “Kasumi, wait!” If he lost her in the hallway, he might well wind up lapping the ground floor until dinner was on the table.

Rubbing on my temples I just groaned, “Okay, let’s go change into something else and get started.” Shampoo happily hauling me from my feet and into the bedroom we were using.

“Airen keep his Shampoo safe from Monster Girl.”

“Ranma, I said I was sorry.”

Akane whined for the, I forget what number we were on. Dinner conversation had been going on like this for awhile now.

“I said s’ok, ‘kane.” I mumbled around a mouthful of noodles. Holding all emotion out of my voice. And that was, I don’t know how manyeth time I’d said it. I wasn’t really mad about our cleaning _adventure_. Kind of figured, since I attracted moisture like bees to flowers.

Her demure submission and almost begging for her apology to be accepted was kind of getting annoying. The fact we now had no furo, and the repair bill was going to be a likely high amount, was a source of bitterness though.

Everyone else was a bit tense themselves, and trying not to blame Akane, but her own self blame was killing everyone’s mood on the whole. Silence reigned over the table as a result.

So I sat and ate. Still damp. Female. Slowly putting food to mouth and looking on with a flat expression. Shampoo was doing a very good job of imitating me, perhaps without thought but there
she was. Her hair tight up in a bun, frizzy and still drying. Both of us in clothing appropriated from Akane, as there was not a dry article of our own between us. That was all hanging on the line, catching the late breeze.

Shampoo had brought the collection of our dirty things to wash. Which was almost every bit of clothing we owned. Neglected it a bit too long, so performing laundry duty was a necessity. Since we were cleaning the bathroom anyway it had seemed a good idea to get it out of the way at the same time.

That proved to be unwise. With almost everything in the wash, we then joined Akane in cleaning the bathroom. Her fervor continued unabated and in what I estimate to be fairly typical fashion she had gotten too eager in her work without mind to certain facts. Such as she was not simply a hundred pound woman, but a very physically powerful martial artist.

Having forgotten a need to keep her strength in mind while polishing the faucets, and gotten carried away in her zealous burning of energy quickly broken it. Not that big a deal, sure water sprayed everywhere, but we were in the bathroom. It was built with a drain and almost tile everything.

We quickly went from two girls and a boy with simply damp hands, to three girls in drenched clothing. All I could do was give a flat expression, shrug and continue cleaning the grout with a stiff brush. Shampoo yelped. “Aiyah! Akane turn off water, turn off!”

“Wah, I can fix this!” She panicked and rational thought fled her mind. She tried to stymie the flow or even pinch off the pipe so it couldn’t leak any further. There was no traction to be found on wet, smooth steel and she wound up just sliding off.

She argued with herself, with the faucet, and even with us while trying to apologize and say it was all under control.

Then she began to grow angry.

Then things began to break as she became more zealous, and more careless in her efforts to contain the initial mess.

I really didn’t pay attention to how it all played it out. That was all background noise as she and Shampoo stumbled over one another and then started arguing. Insults or whatnot were drowned out, as was the following smashing of the lip of the bath itself.
With a resigned sigh I just found my way out of the room, dripping like I’d come fresh out of a pool. Located the master knob for the room and twisted it off. The flow of water stopped and we were spared further problems on that front.

Everyone in the house coming to investigate the ruckus, though. Well there was a new headache altogether. Soun collapsed when he took stock of the situation, weeping openly over his poor home. Genma tried blaming me, as expected. Ryoga never found his way out of the kitchen.

“My, my ladies. What possibly triggered this catfight?” *click, click, click* Her favorite camera snapping shots as evidence, and probable future ‘for sale’ material when school was back in session. She promptly wandered off to get a contractor out soon as possible for repairs.

Kasumi checked herself, looking very disappointed and sad but never raising her voice at us. That somehow made it sting more. Even though neither Shampoo or I had anything to really do with it there was no good mood to be salvaged from it.

Seemed like forever to get the mess cleaned up. Then no dry clothes to wear, so we had to raid Akane’s closet. Nabiki offered, but half her things had been pilfered from her younger sister’s stock, and her ‘modest fees’ were too much of a headache to deal with.

Now we ate dinner in comparative silence. No good mood in the house. Even Checkers was a bit subdued by the worry and seemed to think it wise to let this pass rather than force the ice to break. She simply sat with her head in Ryoga’s lap after eating the portion Kasumi had given her.

I’m sure Akane’s mood was not aided by the fact Shampoo and I both would occasionally fidget and give a tug on the shirts we were wearing, or have to play with the straps of the borrowed bras. Extra insult on top of her humiliation and shame. We weren’t trying to be mean, but it was simply an objective fact. Akane’s tops were too tight, and it was fairly uncomfortable.

Not my fault our genes expressed themselves the way they did.

“Wuugghh.” I was so happy to be free of the accursed chest binder. Dinner done, our clothes off the line and finally, FREEDOM!
Her shirt hadn’t been too bad, but if I’d gone without the bra. Well I’m sure Ryoga would have made a second mess on the table and the tatami. I didn’t feel like cleaning up blood following the small pond we had just cleared from the bathroom.

Shampoo gave a similar sigh of relief behind me. I turned after a minute to glance at her. She was sorting through our belongings and neatly folding up clothes into separate piles.

“Shampoo I can get … woah … “ I quickly snapped back around, almost giving myself a wonderful case of pulled muscle with the speed. It shouldn’t have bothered me, her sitting there topless, almost naked but for her panties. Her bare flesh was nothing new to me, not after several streamside baths while in China.

Something about being in someone else’s house and the whole idea of privacy just reinforced decades old habits in my brain. I always turned my back when she was changing, and normally she was polite enough to inform me when she was or wasn’t decent. Respect for my own modesty I guess.

A patient sigh escaped her lips as she dropped a pile beside me. I then heard her moving through the closet and putting things away. Her voice in Mandarin, she found it much more useful for expression since I could understand most of her meaning now.

<Airen, does it still shame you to see my body?>

A blush crept across my cheek as I sighed, <"No, Xian Pu … just habit. Try do I, but still … “>

Soon I was just blushing even harder. Feeling so flustered I was having a hard time even getting out coherent wording. Probably wouldn’t have sounded my better in my native tongue. Eyes looked at my knees and I began to squirm around on my thighs.

Arms slid around her sides and a pair of soft, wonderful things pressed into my back. Hot breath tickled my ear as she whispered and her scent crashed in around me. Enveloping me in its intoxicating warmth. I was addicted to that feeling and it caught me off guard and swept away my willpower with it.

<"You’ve seen many times, I guess it’s time we tried something … different.”> She cooed into my ear, yanking me down and under the covers of our futon.
I had no power to resist, and the fact I was wearing a girl’s body didn’t seem to be a bother for her. At some point in the kisses, my top went flying, and I got an even more direct feel of fleshy contact.

The day had been good, the evening had been a bit tense, but it all flew away in the swirling storm of hormones, kisses and cuddling. She was controlled aggression, expressing herself without ever crossing that line we were both carefully toeing so far. Not that it stopped her from getting touchy in place, very touchy.

Still, all in all, it was a very nice night. I remember that much, and whenever it was I fell asleep I had a stupid grin on my face, ear to ear. And I hadn’t even gone all the way yet.

*Damn is this girl amazing.*

We slept very well, whenever we did fall asleep. Many more interesting nerve clusters and various ‘manipulation’ techniques in mind I would need to try out at a later time. Hopefully, with less people around, or in a place where noise wasn’t going to be a worry.
Have you ever felt that impending sense of dread?

The lingering tremor of knowing something was just wrong?

I had slept very well. I was warm and comfortable. Shampoo gave a murmuring coo as she turned over, then glomped on tight when her body felt mine. Reminding me we were both topless. It should have been a perfect morning and I’d just continue sleeping, until the panda decided to begin making an ass of himself at least.

Yet, my eye cracked open and I scanned the bedroom slowly. Nothing in here was out of place, so why was I feeling sudden worry? I couldn’t explain it but my danger alarms were going off. Something was about to happen. Something very bad.

My ears finally told me what my eyes were failing to:

“Oh Akane, that’s sweet of you, but it’s alright … “

“No, I insist Kasumi. You go sit down and enjoy some tea, I’ll take care of breakfast.”

There was a moment of silence, and even the normally serene voice of the Tendo homemaker carried a deepening level of strain. “Akane, are you sure … I mean … you really don’t have to force an apology to Shampoo and ..”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with Ranma!” She didn’t growl it out, but her voice, already tense was building up anger as she spoke.

{Is she still upset about last night? …Wait a minute … Akane? Breakfast …?}

My worries suddenly manifested themselves with startling clarity. The thing of the utmost dread. Akane’s cooking. The universe had been playing itself close enough to form that this was an ominous sign. My imagination was inventing horrors and making a panicked tremor run up my spine.
“Akane, it’s very nice of you want to cook for us all, but it’s alright … “

Kasumi was beginning to sound desperate to contain her sister’s intended kindness upon us all. I tuned the conversation out. There was very little time to take a course of action. Flight seemed reasonable in this instance. I gave Shampoo gentle shake. Which just earned me a grumble and she clung tighter.

“Sham Pu, get up, we need to get out house awhile.”

She gave an annoyed grunt as she was rudely pulled from sleep. Rubbing on her lids and cracking them open. Bleary eyes and an expression bordering on anger greeted me. Her voice broke a bit before she coughed a couple times, swallowed and forced her throat clear.

“Airen, too early, let me sleep.”

Her face promptly buried itself back into my chest and she snatched the covers over her head once more. Her breath tickled and sent a shiver up my spine. How I wish I could let her sleep a bit more. Just hold her and enjoy this close contact. Still there as a potentially bad situation developing and I needed her up if we were going to escape.

My eyes rolled and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from grunting in reply. Being roused from a good sleep I imagine set her on the edge of a bad mood, know I would be if the roles were reversed. Wouldn’t do myself any favors by giving her a reason to fall into it though, so no sounds of annoyance lest I rouse her wrath.

Now how was I going to get her up, and us out of here before we were trapped? The sounds from the kitchen were soon telling. There was no gentle thumping of a knife working a cutting board. No soft scraping of a whisk across a bowl, or even the sudden clatter of pans being shifted through.

The domain of Kasumi Tendo had suddenly become Battle Ground Tendo. Where Akane meant to attack everything about the concept of breakfast like she was going to weed a garden. I could only wince at the thought of what she was trying to make. She did, however, solve my problem for me.

“No, Akane, not that much oil!”
There was a sudden and loud WHOOMF! Screaming and a loud bang as something hit the floor, then the smoke alarm going off. Then two clamouring women trying to stop the mess that sounded as though it had become an outright fire fight.

“Owww! Water water …“

“No Akane, the extinguisher!”

“I can stop this, I can stop this!”

Shampoo snapped awake in alarm. Her head whipping back and forth as if she were expecting an attack. I didn’t waste time with words, quickly bouncing out of the futon and snatching clothes. I almost jumped into my pants, and tossed whatever I could find at her. She blinked in confusion but didn’t let it stall her. One thing I can say for her, among many, she took action swiftly when needed.

A pair of running shorts quickly glided up her legs and she yanked on a sports bra. Seeing that, I was reminded of my own shirtless, and frontal female problem. Thank kami for sport tops. We bolted out the side door and around the hall. We were the only ones to arrive to partake the chaos in the kitchen. I cannot begin to figure how the mess could possibly have gotten as bad as it did. Was the girl cooking with vegetable oil or gasoline?

Kasumi’s favorite deep pan was sitting in the floor, blazing away like a mini-bonfire. The oil had spread in a large puddle all over the floor and was merrily licking flames at tile and the counters. The girls had been backed away from either door and were in a panic. I didn’t blame them, wouldn’t want to risk setting my clothes on fire either.

I nodded to Shampoo and we just moved, dashing through the room and quickly getting the pair out of trouble. Quickly scooping Kasumi into my arms and getting out the back. My amazon warrior took hold of Akane, and despite her protests followed me outside.

“Shampoo, I’m fine, I’m a martial artist too!”

We just ignored her and went back into the room to control the problem. I wasn’t thinking about it, just doing it, but in hindsight we were quite a team. Almost no words, just glance and action. I snatched the extinguisher while she snatched up pot lids and flung them. This would seem to be a bad idea, but her aim was impeccable and her control refined to a thing of beauty. She rang the burning skillet perfectly. A few others softly glided right ontop of some isolated flames to contain
I just went to work squeezing the trigger on the extinguisher and choking off the largest bits around the room before moving in toward the center. Just a few minutes and a potential disaster was averted. Sinking into a wall, the adrenaline rush finally drained out of my body and I let out a long breath.

Shampoo scooped up the formerly burning pot when it was cool enough and began scraping the bits out into the sink. It mostly broke loose as large chunks of burnt, whatever it had been. Kasumi was quick to take charge of her kitchen again. Shooing away my girlfriend gently, though she did ask for the junk to be put out in the trash.

Nabiki was the only other resident who turned up to behold the after party. Hair in disarray and jammies wrinkled, and looking none too pleased about having been pulled from whatever dreams she had been enjoying. Safe bet it was either large piles of yen, or successful schemes to acquire same.

Half-lidded and blurry eyes swept the room and its condition. Then, without any pithy comment on her part the girl just grunted and ambled her way back toward the stairs. Kasumi gave it no mind, just dedicated to the task of restoring her now scorched cookware to pristine form. Three of us blinked and then shrugged and returned to cleaning.

Akane was quiet through the whole affair, looking ready to pout. Ugh it hit me in the gut. I think I’m even weaker to people’s upset as I am, than I was in a past life. Poor Akane, yeah it hit me hard. We were only just friends of a few days, but I didn’t like seeing her sad.

“Hey, ‘kane, why don’t we go get something to eat in neighborhood? Then maybe hit a bath house?”

Now, how I was going to pay for this, given a certain Panda now had most of the remains of my allowance? I dunno, I was just flying by the seat of my pants.

She shot me a skeptical glance, but it seemed to mollify her a bit.

“No, my treat, for … “ She let it just hang in the air for a minute that the current missing breakfast was missing, and her face fell again.
“Okay!” Grinning and trying to quickly keep her depression from returning in force. Grabbing Shampoo’s hand and pulling her out of the room, and gently pushing Akane along by the narrow of her back. The kitchen was clean enough for now and Kasumi would probably prefer no more trouble.

At thought of her, I paused and glanced back, “‘sumi, anything we can get for you in town?”

She smiled her ever present little expression, then brightened a bit at the question. “Actually, Ranma, if you wouldn’t mind, could you pick up these groceries while you’re out?” Quickly retrieving her shopping list and her change purse. She went down the list and summed up the expectation and dropped it into my hands.

“Sure thing” Carefully folding the money into the list and holding it firmly in hand. Okay, there was a tempting impulse to place it into the bra I was currently wearing, but I shrugged off that thought quickly as it came. God, I really need to start getting a handle on some of these weird things that flit through my head.

“Hey, where’s Ryoga?”

“Oh, he took Checkers out for walk, and they haven’t come back yet. Father and Mr. Saotome went out early as well. They were saying something about a bath, and then ‘training trips.’ They said they would be back by lunch.” She smiled and went back to finishing up restoring her pot.

I palmed my face and grunted, while the other two girls glanced to me a moment. I didn’t even notice as sudden dark worries began to storm through my brain.

{Okay, if I’m lucky, they’re just going to get some sake or beer. If I’m not lucky, they’re plotting something. They did give up the fiancee fight a little too easily.}

“Ranma? Are you okay?”

Akane’s question pulled me back to the hallway and I just offered her the best grin I could. “Yeah, just hoping your dad isn’t influenced by my old man … he can be kinda stupid.”

“Ranma! That’s mean, he’s your dad!” Punching me in the arm and earning a wince.
Shampoo gave a soft sound in her lips as she sucked in a breath. Giving a soft look to the Tendo daughter and shook her head. “Is true Akane, Saotome-Papa is much … err … thick skull. Think up all kinds dumb idea.”

All I could do was nod, giving a sigh while the girl looked between the two of us, and her expression was still radiating disbelief. “He was pretty set on this engagement between me and one of you girls, ‘kane. I think I rattled him out of it, for now, but, just trust me. You’ll see. We need to be ready if they pull somethin’. But you know your dad better’n I do. Just sayin’ trust me.”

All she could do was nod and suck on her bottom lip. “If you say so, I’m going to go get changed. See you girls at the front door.” She darted up stairs with a giggle.

It took a minute before I frowned and hollered after her, “Hey, I ain’t a girl …”

“Ranma, if you no girl, what these?” While Shampoo poked me in the chest a few times. A grin on her lips as she did. Then both hands cupped and bounced the ladies a few times. Giggling as she seemed to be having entirely too much fun. Thinking on the matter, now she’d gotten used to my curse, she did enjoy being able to explore some of her curiosities.

Not many people could say they had the opportunities to test their enjoyment with boys AND girls, and all with the same person. My cheeks got flush despite myself and sighed.

“Alright, you got me there, now let’s go get changed and then something to eat.” My stomach voiced its agreement quite sharply and I blushed all the more. Groaning a bit before I was yanked along by my laughing girlfriend.

Now, I don’t mean to be superstitious, or some kind of kind of doom speaker. However, in my experience trouble always comes in threes, and the third one is always the BIG trouble. I had tried to play it off so far. Akane’s little experiment with fire and oil was just a fluke.

Breakfast was a nice, I took an omelet, bacon, and misou. It was almost a flashback of bliss. How many wonderful mornings I had enjoyed such fair and it was still my favorite breakfast of all time. Apart from a special pancake recipe my grandmother had given me, those were fluffy cloud of delight. I’d have to make them sometime for everyone. It was a nice meal, all the same. The day was looking up.
Till we got to the bath house. I was just in the process of parting from the girls and slipping into the men’s side when the boiler promptly broke. Well more like it just kind of exploded. There was a low THUMFF through the building and the fire alarm promptly went off.

The hostess didn’t give us any reason, just quickly banished the few of us from the building. The trio of us just sighed, so much for a hot soak. And in my case return to proper form. I don’t hate this body, it’s just nice to be in the proper one from time to time. Most of the previous month in China had been spent as a girl.

I will hand it some friends of mine, from the past anyway, being shorter than everyone else, completely sucks. Oh it wasn’t by more than a few inches, and it wasn’t a complete inconvenience but it was still a pain. Still, it hadn’t hurt me so far, I’d get over it.

We were in the midst of deciding what to do, since bathing wasn’t an option now. When my danger senses went off. A terrible tremble climbed up my spine, just like this morning. Couldn’t I have a nice morning in peace?

“Ranma, you okay?” Shampoo queried, seeing my tense posture and leaned her face in close. That drew in Akane’s attention as well. Trying to just wave them off with a forced chuckle, we didn’t notice the instrument of Fate’s fickle challenge to my wish for a nice morning.

“Excuse me, would you ladies happen to know the direction to the Tendo training hall? Wait, did you say Ranma?”

There it was!

A lightning bolt ran up my spine and my ponytail stood immediately on edge. Muscles wanting to arrest at the shock as the three of us turned.

{Oh no no no! Too soon, it’s too soon! Got to be someone else … got to be someone else …}

Standing there was a tall woman in a very lovely, cream kimono. It was fairly plain, without much adornment. The obi was the most intricately decorated part of the whole ensemble. My eyes travelled up. Her hair was dark, the exact same shade as my own, and formed up in a very near bun behind her head.
In her arms was a wrapped bundle, long and thin. The center of all the terror running up my spine. Now, I can’t explain precisely why this panic attack was sweeping over me. I didn’t know this woman, sadly. As much as I should have loved to. Her voice was a stranger’s. Nothing about her was more than the most distantly familiar. A vague ghost of a shadow.

The realization of what she was expected to be like was a far off cloud from another life. The kind of weird eccentricities of just another member of the cast. I had pondered this moment, distantly, but never given it much real thought. So many other things to contend with, it was all in the back of my mind and often just ignored.

Confronted with the reality of it right now, however, Akane might as well have shoved one of those foul, furry demons in my face. The horror was that real, and gripped my heart that tightly. Fear I hadn’t experienced in years squeezed my lungs and made everything just hard.

She looked to us expectantly, a look of worried hope in her eyes. And here I couldn’t find the remote force of will to try and interject myself into the conversation.

Akane bowed formally at the hip, and even laughed a little. “Actually, it’s kind of funny, ma’am. We do know the way. I’m Akane Tendo.”

The woman’s face lit up instantly. “Oh, you’re one of Soun’s daughters? How wonderful to meet you. Akane … Akane.” Testing the name on her memory, “You must be the baby, am I right?”

“You know my father?” Shocked and blinking.

“Oh, it’s been a very long time since I’ve met him. I’m only a loose acquaintance at best. Your father used to be a student under the same master, with my husband. Oh and listen to me just ramble on.”

She giggled, a rich and refined sound. My heart twisted in pain even amidst the fear. Here I hadn’t even done anything yet, and I was ashamed. Distraught over the very fact I was standing here in complete terror of this woman. Deserved or not. Explained or not.

She bowed low to Akane in return of the gesture. ‘I’m Nodoka Saotome.”
That instantly put both girls upon the woman in shock. And she backed up a step at their sudden animated questions.

“You’re Mr. Saotome’s wife?”

“You is Ranma mother?”

“Oh my, yes, I’m Ranma’s mother. You both know my son? Oh, Akane dear, does that mean they’re at the dojo? They must have arrived early.” She clasped her hands together and beamed. The terror lessened, but the pain my heart tightened twice over.

“Yes, they’ve been with us about a week. Although, Mr Saotome was running around with Dad this morning. Ranma though, he’s … umm … “

“Oh, is he home, Akane dear? No wait, I’m being rude, who are these two friends of your’s, Akane?” She smiled and remembering her manners turned to regard us. My brain continued to fight for traction against the sudden onset of unexpected plot developments. Shampoo was not so derailed.

The girl called up her deepest Amazon training and bowed deeply at the hip. She was, for her expectations, standing before her future mother-in-law. A woman deserving of the utmost respect and approval.

She spoke slowly and commanded her best Japanese for the effort of making a good impression. Which had improved by leaps and bounds, she was halting, but making herself speak clearly and not in the quick, pidgin form she usually did. “I am Sham Pu, proud member of the Joketsuzoku tribe of Brave Warrior Women, of China. It is an honor to meet you, respected Matriarch.”

A look was shot to me under the curtain of her hair before she continued. “I am humbled to meet my future Mother, I am Ranma’s fiance.”

A hand rose to her lips and there was a flash of both pride and a bit of curious worry in the woman’s eyes as she hid the smile curling on her lips. “Ranma’s fiance, dear? What about the agreement with the Tendos?”
Akane filled the space with a nervous laugh, “Ah, we kind of, put that to the side. Ms Saotome, I hope you’re not offended. Ranma was really brave standing up to our fathers like he did. He doesn’t want to hurt Shampoo’s honor, or their relationship. And he wants to respect my sisters and me too by not just forcing himself on one of us.”

The mixture of worry and pride magnified all the more and she looked almost like she was going to turn to pink with her blush. Or break into a dance. “Oh, well, it’s not what I was expecting. There is honor at stake, but I think we can work something out between our families. Akane dear. And it’s very nice to meet you, Shampoo.” Sounding out her name carefully.

Finally, she turned her attention to me and now it was make or break time. I had made a solid promise, when I got the chance, I was not to going to lie but be forthright with her. My stomach was turning knots and my heart wanted to jump out of my chest. To tell her the truth, but what if she …

I sighed and forced my body to move. Stiffly. Mechanically I managed a bow. “Umm, I’m … this is going to be really hard to explain. Maybe we should go back to the dojo and I promise I’ll lay out everything.”

Confusion filled her eyes as she nodded, “Alright dear. Oh is my son there? I so hope he is home. It’s been so long since I’ve seen him.”

All I could do was swallow and give a jerky nod. “I promise, ma’am. You’ll meet your son at the dojo.”

She took that for what it was and just smiled, letting Akane lead on while I trailed behind. Getting a nudge in my ribs. Shampoo giving me a concerned look. Quickly she was in whispered Chinese.

“Ranma, what’s wrong? I know your curse will be a shock, but you look like Death is hanging over your head.”

“Sham Pu, trust me, complicated. I explain soon.”

A frown creased her lips, but she took hold of my hand and squeezed it tight. We didn’t let go the whole trip back. Not concerned what anyone around us thought. Her acceptance and comfort was a lifeline right now. I needed it to pull my head together.
The truth, no backing down ... ugh, what if she ... I'll deal with it when we get there.

So, as if I was walking to my execution, which I might well be, I moved along behind the pair as my mother chatted eagerly with Akane for every bit of information she could get. Never knowing her child was hovering right on her heels.

The next hour was going to be hell.

And might be my last.

Kasumi beamed when we arrived, warmly greeting Nodoka and got some some tea started. Although, her unspoken question about our return with bathing supplies in hand and my still being a female just hung in the air unanswered.

Nabiki had dashed off with friends. For the better, I didn’t want her, or the old men complicating this anymore than it had to be. The eldest daughter served drinks and snack cakes and I had to summon up my courage.

“Umm, could I have a few moments alone with ... Ms Saotome? I need to explain myself to her.”

Shampoo and Akane both gave me sympathetic looks. They understood what I wanted. If only they knew how hard this was going to be. And how dangerous. Kasumi probably thought she understood, I’m sure, but with her ever oblivious manner just gave a smile to how wonderful for me to be able to catch up with this woman.

Nodoka was peacefully quiet, though her curiosity was written on her face almost like a big, neon sign. Waiting for me to give up what she wanted, and who I was. I moved around the table and sat before her, bowing slowly. I could hear her worried hum at the odd formality, but otherwise she continued to be patient.

“This is going to seem unreal, I know, but uhh, Ranma and his old man ... I mean, father were roaming around in China continuing their training trip. It was before he met Shampoo. They found this place, Jusenkyo, and picked up some, ah, curses.”
I didn’t look at her, I couldn’t meet her eyes as I went about the story. Surely she was having her chain pulled and about to look offended at the craziness I was telling her. If she pulled out that wrapped item and smacked me with it for the offense, I can’t say I’d blame her. A month ago I’d have thought it was crazy too. If I didn’t know better from the beginning, at least.

“I know it’s like a fairytale, but … I’m Ranma … Mom.” I proceeded to dump my tea over my head. Still warm enough, and sat up. Letting her watch in abject shock. The cute little girl who had been sitting before her was quite absent.

And I almost fell on my ass as she was suddenly in my face. Hands patting across my chest and stomach. There was nothing soft there, I might proudly say. Not a girl’s anything on this body. Just well trained, firm tone. When she was satisfied of that, her hands grabbed my cheeks and pulled me into her eyes.

I was expecting her to faint, but instead she looked me over like she was inspecting an expensive antique for signs of authenticity. To tell the real thing from a fraud. My face she examined in detail, giving a slow nod. Then rolled back my sleeves and my hair, confirming something for herself.

“Ranma … it’s really you.” She whispered, seeing the truth for herself. A few childhood scars she knew about, that I couldn’t even remember getting. To say nothing of the face looking right at her. She seem to be able to pick out the details between herself and Genma almost instantly.

“Yeah, it’s really me, Mom.” I swallowed a bit and took a breath. “Umm, I’m sorry we had to meet this way. I know about .. the agreement you have with me and Pop. I was working out what I’d say and what I’d do, when we met … but oh well. Cats out of the bag now.” Giving a weak laugh.

I slowly bowed to her again, assuming the old man’s Crouch of the Tiger.

“This ain’t how I wanted it to happen, but … if this is somethin’ you know, makes me unmanly … then. I … I’ll accept your judgement … and all of it.” Soon I was trailing off and mumbling. There was silence as the room’s clock just quietly ticked from where it hung over the door. A soft breeze gently caught the good luck charm in the wind chime and caused it to jingle. And I felt like my heart was going to run out of my chest, or I might choke on the tension in the room.

Now, for the uninitiated I need to explain something very serious. My life was literally hanging on a thread, and only the two of us in the room knew it. This was the penultimate example of my father’s impulsive stupidity. Long before I can even remember, to get me out of my mother’s loving arms, he
had us both sign a pact with Mom.

She was less than enthusiastic about letting her only child go, can’t say I blame her. I’d probably have diced the moron into a filet for asking, but that’s me, and I’ve never been in love with an idiot before. So, as a compromise, Genma promised to make his son a ‘man among men’ in his wife’s eyes.

The failure to produce a son who lived up to her expectations was practically Biblical, straight up Old Testament. Certainly hard core ideals of Bushido and Honor.

Death.

Now I was facing mine head on.

“Oh Ranma get real.” I hear some of you say. “The woman wouldn’t do something so insane.” To which I remind you, routine logic doesn’t apply to my current life. And if you can think that, you haven’t encountered Nodoka Saotome before.

She was ready and willing for our entire family to take a quick trip to the afterlife for failing to live up to our bargain. Even if I was an unwilling participant all of two years old, incapable of giving consent to something so stupid ...

But I digress. My stomach was tied in knots and breathing was a forced act of labor. I could probably taste my own heart in my throat if I tried.

Finally, after several aching minutes she spoke, voice no louder a whisper than mine. “Oh sit up, Ranma.”

Carefully I righted myself and stared into her eyes, only to suddenly be greeted with her version of the Amazon glomp attack. Arms pinned to my sides as my mother demonstrated that not every bit of strength I inherited came from the old man. She could probably do Akane proud with the pressure she put on my ribs.

“You were brave enough to tell me the truth, even though you knew about that … that stupid pledge. That’s manly enough for me, sweetheart.”
The breath blasted out of my lungs in relief, although breathing was a bit difficult until she released enough. Her hand moving on my chest and she glanced up into my eyes with a mild frown. “Although, dear, wearing a bra isn’t very manly.”

If she weren’t holding me up, I would have face planted right there.

“Mom, I turn into a girl. And you saw, I’m not exactly lacking for certain talents. Besides it’s a sports top, not a bra.” It was a lame justification, but I had to give her something for her old fashioned sensibilities. “Not easy to fight with all that flopping around.” I groused.

She frowned thoughtfully and stroked on her chin, giving a soft sigh. “Well, I guess I can make some exceptions for you, given the circumstances.”

In that same kind of frightening manner which Shampoo displayed, her mood switched on a dime and she beamed. Pulling me into a smothering hug again and kissed my forehead.

“Oh, my baby has gotten so big and handsome.” She cooed and leaned back to just do as mothers were wont. Speaking of all kind of things which just put a flush in my cheeks and I might as well be a tomato.

“Mom .. “ Was all I could mutter. What person isn’t embarrassed by their mother when she became all mushy and sentimental. However, I didn’t push her off or many any move to stop her. She had her rights in the matter, and we hadn’t seen one another in more than a decade.

Soon I could hear giggles from the door, which turned into full blown laughter. The sounds of female laughter at that. From more than one person.

“Figures, if you’re gonna chuckle, ya might as well do it in here to my face.” I growled at the door. Which slid open and admitted my girlfriend, my would be fiancee, and the homemaker. The first two trying to contain their snickers and failing. While Kasumi was just Kasumi, hiding her smile behind her hand as she tittered some.

“Oh Ranma, I’m so happy for you. Getting to meet your mother again after so long. This calls for a celebration, I should make us something special for lunch. Although, we’ll still need some groceries for dinner.”
“Kasumi dear, that’s a splendid idea. I’ll help. Then Ranma, you can come with me and help pick up something nice for us to make for dinner. It’ll be nice to spend some time catching up.” Kissing my forehead again as she rose smoothly and went to join Kasumi in the kitchen.

All I could do was let out a long breath, banishing the tension like dust. Head sinking to my arms on the low table and sighing in relief. Thank the kami, that had gone so much better than I was afraid it might.

A hand rubbed on my back and then kissed my neck. Shivers rumbling down my spine.

“Shampoo so happy, Airen. Meet honorable mother. Ooo, Shampoo full of energy now.” She squeezed up a fist and raised it into the air. “Show Mother that Shampoo is right girl for Ranma. She give many blessings for marriage.”

Squealing a bit in her thoughts as she gave me another rib crunching hug and then bounced up with a gleeful cry and flew into the room we were using. Tying her hair back and then darting to the kitchen herself.

“Saotome-Mama, Shampoo come help!”

“That’s very nice of you, dear. The more the merrier. Gives us time to talk.”

My head tracked toward the kitchen and a frown creased my lips. “Why do I get the feelin’ that implies some kind of danger in my future … “ I mused to no one, then blinked when I heard a snicker. I had forgotten Akane. Turning my head toward her.

She was smiling, but there was that pained longing behind her eyes again. She could be so happy for others, but things I might take for granted she was without. A fresh tinge of guilt ran through my heart. By changing things so drastically, just what kind of hurts had I caused her? I had a relationship, she didn’t. Where it would otherwise have been with me.

Now this new pain. Both of our mothers had been lost to us from about the same age. However, mine was not dead, just absent thanks to a panda I know. Akane’s was never coming back. Some friend I am.
Reaching over, I gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Hey, why don’t you and I go to the dojo and practice?”

Her face perked up, but there was a skeptical line on her forehead. “You promise you’ll take me seriously?”

“Yes, not much of a friend if I can’t respect you enough to take you seriously and help you push yourself and improve.” She nodded and took my hand, pulling herself up. She dashed off to the stairs for her gi, and went and changed quietly myself.

Well, it was a tense end to the morning, but it hadn’t been the disaster I feared. For now.

Akane was better than I thought. Her basics are sharp and well honed. Now she needs to learn how to avoid telegraphing her movements about a split second before she launches them. Some polish and some tougher training and she could be good. Not to my level, of course, but good.

Ugh, there was that pride flaring up again. I just stroked my ego a little to keep it satisfied and put it aside soon after. Trying to suppress who I was, could be a bad idea. Didn’t mean I couldn’t school my output at least. We were both doing a cooldown lap of the dojo right before lunch.

I tried not to show her up, too badly, or poke at her warrior spirit. Did she like having someone her age better than her? Didn’t seem like it. But after giving her an intense workout and providing diplomatic critique of her form, she was almost glowing. Through a halo of sweat, but still glowing. Guess no one had taken her seriously in a long time, and she was very happy for it to change.

Walking to the backyard quietly and we filled a bucket with some clean water. Then a couple clothes and we were scrubbing off the sweat. I quickly turned my back to her while sliding my top off.

“Ranma, are you always going to walk around with that … athletic top on? You’re a boy right now, there’s nothing to bounce.” Her voice carried a little giggle to it.

“‘kane, by now you know this is just a sensible precaution.”
“Oh come on, it’s not that bad … “

Water came flying out the kitchen window then. It wasn’t much, but it was enough. I just turned my head in her direction while she stared. Blinking in disbelief.

“Okay, point taken.”

“Better getting used to this thing than just running around the house flashing my goods.” I grunted, giving the elastic a soft pop. Not bothering to be discouraged enough to complain. Kasumi’s head popped out the window a second later.

“Oh, Ranma I’m sorry, I didn’t see you there. I was just trying to flush the line of air.” The girl covering her mouth and a blushing red for her accident.

“Don’t worry about it ‘sumi. It happens.”

We had to avoid bath as some contractors were currently at work in the room. Repairing the damage done the previous day. I shall diplomatically call it ‘our’ accident. Many of Akane’s anger kerfluffles would have involved Ranma in some way, shape or form, so might as well accept some kind of indirect culpability. As it was, they were busy replacing tiles, the bricks around the bath, and the broken handle. Hopefully, they would be done before the day was up.

In the meantime, a bucket in the backyard would have to do. Was pretty warm anyway, and it was cleaner than trying to take a dive in the koi pond. Akane didn’t seem to bothered about being seen in her sports bra either. Guess she was loosening up, a little.

“Akane, Ranma, lunch will be done in a moment, why don’t you two get changed?” Kasumi merrily announced from the window again.

Tops back on we headed into the house to change into something else than training gear. I just went with one of my regular shirts. Butting it up quietly before hopping into a pair of pants. The smell of food on the other side of the door was quickly calling my attention. Breakfast had been nice, but now it was time for replenishment.

Shampoo was helping Mom lay out the table and both looked to me, one grinning and the other sighing.
“Ranma dear, does this happen, often?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Old force of habit from the previous life. She was my Mom, going to be polite. “Sometimes there’s no helping but walking around as a girl.”

Shampoo nodded, “Is too too true. Airen sometimes girl all day. Sometimes many day straight.”

Nodoka sighed and shook her head. Finishing setting out plates and sat down at the head quietly. While I sat beside Shampoo. Akane and Kasumi took the other two sides. The others were still gone, so no point in waiting. There were plenty of leftovers anyway.

The peace of the moment was not to last.

“We’re home.”

“Boy, I hope you’re ready to train hard. Girl or not, you’ve slacked off enough today.”

Well, those two had picked the perfect moment to come back. This ought to be interesting. I just continued to eat peacefully while Mom’s face quickly perked up. Her mood seemed to take a very serious, and dread I say frightening glow.

“Wellcome home.” Kasumi called through the shoji, but stayed put at Nodoka’s motion to sit.

“Something smells good, Saotome why don’t you go ahead and sit down for lunch, I’ll put this sake in the fridge.”

“Why thank you Tendo, don’t mind if I do.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, figured. Still, Mom might not take it too well if I went acting out in a ‘disrespectful manner.’ Even though that was par for the course. We all just continued to eat quietly as the door slid open.
“Kasumi dear, what’s for lunch.” The fatman ambled into the room, taking a deep whiff if the aroma and promptly sat himself beside Kasumi. “It smells divine, why it’s almost like my wife’s homemade …”

Realization began to creep across his face when he noticed we had a guest. I bit the inside of my cheek. Keep the laughter down, keep it down. While Soun appeared in the room, laughing merrily as he did so.

“Kasumi dear that smells wonderful. Oh, hello, we have a guest I see.” Without missing a beat he occupied the space beside Akane with a happy smile.

“Hello, Akane, how has your morning been?” The man was in good spirits indeed. And he didn’t stink of spirits, surprising. Whatever they had been out doing, it put him almost on the edge of dancing.

Cordial exchanges of greetings and our well beings before he finally noticed Genma was just staring. His body arrested while staring across the table at the attractive woman in the kimono. Tendo’s face quickly fell to a thoughtful frown as he glanced between the two and then smiled to Mom.

“Well, hello, I am Soun Tendo, this is my home and training hall. I take it you’ve already been introduced to my daughters, and our … house guests.”

[Smooth Mr T. Smooth.] Just grinning at his pause to consider us. Well, in the defense of myself and my betrothed, we actually did housework and other chores. Unlike the panda.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Soun. And yes, I’ve enjoyed a very lovely morning with your family. They’re all so well behaved and helpful. Akane dear even showed me the way here.” Smiling brilliantly to our host.

“No .. do .. ka … “ Came the strangled reply from the old man. His brain was finally getting some traction.

“Oh, Saotome, you know this lovely woman?”

“Yes, he is my husband.” A bolt of shock seemed to down across Tendo’s spine at that revelation, glancing between the three of us in sudden worry.
We didn’t pause in our eating, while Mom bowed her head and spoke in a formal, very polite tone. “I want to thank you for taking such good care of my husband, and my son.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all.” He chuckled nervously, glancing between me and the lady now.

“Don’t worry, Mr Tendo, I told Mom the whole truth this morning. She already knows.” I said with a soft smile, pausing just long enough to relieve his worry and then went back to my lunch.

The man relaxed with a soft sigh and nodded. He certainly didn’t know the whole strain I had been under earlier. That my mother was accepting of my curse seemed to be enough. Meanwhile, you could almost hear the horrid rippling of my father’s tense muscles as his face turned to me.

“Ranma … you told her … everything?”

“Yup, why shouldn’t I? It’s wrong to lie, especially my own mother.” If it was possible, he tensed even more. While I played ignorant of what he was so concerned over. I was biting my cheek particularly hard to keep from laughing aloud at his fright.

“Yes dear, my son told me everything. Genma, you should eat. We need to have a talk later.” Her voice was chipper through the whole exchange. Serving up a portion of the food and passing it down the table to the statue playing the standin for my father.

His eyes moved to the corner of the room and the wrapped bundle standing there. The threat behind her words. It was only with great effort he managed to pick up his chopsticks. Then with the slowest pace I have ever witnessed, he more forced food down his throat than actually tried to eat. As if his last meal and he was dragging it out for as long as possible.

I made the mistake of chuckling only once. Couldn’t help it, watching the old man in such terror was both humorous and fitting. About time someone could put the fear of god in the man, to steal a phrase.

“Ranma, dear, it’s not polite to laugh at your father while he’s having a panic attack.” She sounded so sincere, I couldn’t tell if she was cracking a joke or not. For my own protection I just polite forced it all inside.
“Sorry, Mom.” Taking a deep, cooling breath I preempted her further rebuke. “Pop, try to relax, ma...sir. Isn’t it great, Mom is back in our lives.”

I got a smile of approval for me, admittedly forced, politeness, and a look of utter horror from the person to whom I was apologising. He was still utterly horrified, and I take it clueless that Mom wasn’t going to enforce our pact.

For the time being, at least.

I take it back, partially. This was going to be a headache after all. Not in the, ‘Oh she’s going to be Mom’ kind of way either. Currently three of us occupied the room I was sharing with Shampoo. The two occupants, and my mother.

“Mooommm … this is completely unmanly, right?” My eyes were pinched closed while I fought to keep my voice level and not give into the tick developing in my eye. The two females were fawning all over me.

I had become a life sized dress up doll for their amusement it seemed. Currently wearing one of Shampoo’s longest cheongsams, which meant it actually went about half down my thighs. Which was probably more a result of me being a good four inches shorter than my lover at the moment, then it was a ‘modest’ dress by her standards.

“Ranma, yes it would normally be very unmanly for you to be wearing your fiance's clothes. However, as you have admitted yourself, this body is one you wear frequently. Now, think about this seriously. You want to keep this curse a secret from everyone at school, yes?”

Somehow that didn’t sound like a question, more of a vaguely covered ‘this will embarrass you, your father, me, AND our good family name if it gets out and widely known in the district.’ “If are you going to wind up being a girl, you need to look the part.”

“Mom, I ain’t a girl!” I growled, and quickly snapped my teeth closed with an audible click as she shot me a disapproving look. I could only mutter my apology. “Sorry, but I ain’t.”

She just brushed that aside and began to instead forcefully enunciated: “I am sorry Mother, but I am not a girl.” She bent down into the collection Shampoo’s clothing and was going through her socks
quietly. “You need to look the part, and sound the part dear. A lady doesn’t talk like a country bumpkin.”

My dear, sweet Airen was red in the cheeks. Not in anger, but from fighting so hard in keeping her laughter as soft as possible. My misery was her dose of sunshine today. She did shoot me an occasional, apologetic look, but otherwise was likely rolling on the mental floor in her mind’s eye. Pounding the floorboards as she laughed.

“Oh these are pretty.” She turned and smiled to Shampoo, “You have such lovely tastes, Shampoo, but dear, don’t you think some of these are a bit … immodest?” Motioning her hand to the bright pink dress, more of a long, tight shirt than anything.

Well if it ain’t proper, why the hell am I wearin’ it?! Uggggggg. At least I could storm and fume peacefully in my own mind. Except when it obviously showed on my face, but Nodoka never said anything of it.

“Oh, Shampoo village fairly ah … loose dress code? Summers get very hot, sometime. Leave lots of leg open, fight good and stay cool.” She nodded and blushed a bit. “Mother no like?”

“Oh dear, heavens no, that dress is just beautiful. You and Ranma fill it out so well.”

Simultaneously she stabbed me in the masculine pride and stroked my vanity all at once. That’s a very strange feeling.

Well, I do look good .. Damnit, stop that! … I do have the body for this though.

Shampoo bit on her bottom lip, trying to keep from breaking out into a cackle. She too had just been hit slightly in the gut. The man she was dating looked good in one of her own dresses, but at the same time.

Well, her legs do look good in this too, and how it curves to her butt.

I had to keep myself from drooling at the prospect. I was going to get her to wear this for me someday soon. Mark my words.
Mom wasted no time in promptly helping correct Shampoo’s diction as well. To which the girl went very serious as she concentrated and sounded out the words carefully. Even trying the phrases a few times so they rolled out of her mouth more naturally.

“Well, I suppose stockings will have to wait for another lesson. You can just wear your slippers for now, Ranma. But, while we’re in town, we’ll need to get you fitted for a dress.”

Somewhere inside I felt something crack, my face screwing up as it did. “Dress?” I said in a slow drawl, “Mom … is that a joke? Please tell me that’s a joke.”

Deep chocolate eyes the same color as my own gave me the most level, patient look. As if she was addressing the two year old I had been, not the sixteen year old I was. “Yes, Ranma. A dress. Well, a skirt really. You certainly can’t go to school like that, in a boy’s uniform. Can you?”

If it were possible for me to hyperventilate, I was about to try. Lungs working like a bellows as something deep inside me was trying to rip its way out and send me into a screaming fit. Hormones. Teenager. Rebellion. Yep, all right there ready to break free of the chains I so tightly tried to hold them back with.

The fire in my eyes was quickly extinguished just as quickly by the cool look it met in turn. We’d been reaquainted a whole few hours and my mother had promptly set herself up as family matriarch and to be unchallenged by me, at the moment.

“Ranma, I thought we agreed, you want to keep this curse as much a secret as you can. Switching back and two in a boy’s uniform isn’t going to help you do that. Now, I don’t want to argue, dear. We’ll try it out, just for a couple weeks. If we can’t control it, we’ll figure something else out.”

Oh how I wanted to argue. I could bring up Ukyo! No, she had no idea who what was. The former friend of mine, a girl who dresses like a boy. She’d be along soon enough. I’d give it a month, assuming the timeline was even predictable anymore. But worse, who knows what I’d be risking by spilling some of my early knowledge. Time paradox? Complete collapse of the universe? Just a general pain the ass?

Yeah, scratch that idea. I’d been accepting of having to wear a boy’s outfit anyway, but this was just going too far.

“What about gym? I’m still a guy! Akane would kill me for being a perv, and Shampoo certainly
don’t want me staring at abundant, female flesh.” Fair points all, and the latter gave a firm nod and
shot me a hard look to emphasis I was dead on.

“Oh don’t worry about that, you simply suffer from a rare condition and need to take care when
showering and changing clothes. Problem solved. And, ‘I am still a guy … Shampoo certainly
doesn’t want me … female flesh.’” Calmly correcting my grammar again.

{Damnit, she’s good.} I just hung my head in defeat and sighed. There was no winning with this
woman. I’d almost swear she’d been preparing for these moment for years. Or had she read ahead in
the script somewhere? Even I couldn’t predict where things were going at times!

“I guess you can change out of that, and just wear your usual clothes, for now. We’ll address that
wardrobe problem while we’re shopping.” She scratched her chin while I changed, neither of them
bothering to leave the room. Oh well, we’re all girls right now.

“Now, to the matter of your sleeping arrangements.”

I winced. She was going to have to go there, wasn’t she?

Shampoo sucked in a slow hiss. Her hackles rising, but she kept her mouth pinned shut as she waited
to see what was going to tumble out.

“I understand that both of you have been like this almost since you met. You are also dating, and I
suppose I can accept engaged. However,” She held up her finger and spoke with the weirdest mix of
calm, worry, and authority. “You are both still teenagers, and I know how hormones can be. I was
your age once.

“I would prefer if you wait till you are married, but I won’t delude myself. I know what it’s like to be
young. You get impatient, sucked up in the moment, and then there’s no turning back. In any case,
promise me, when that moment comes, you will take care and use protection.”

Her finger pointing right off the end of my nose, “And Shampoo, you will have to care as well. It
takes two to tango, as they say. I don’t want the two of you getting in a situation you aren’t ready for.
Take all possible precautions, up to and including birth control, I’ll help if I’m able. And plan for
your children before the fact, not after.”
She held our gazes for a long minute, all we could do was nod in tandem as she kept us pinned and demanding our word on the matter. When she was satisfied, she sighed and smiled once more. “Besides, I am still much too young to be a grandmother.”

Giggling to herself as she turned and moved out of the room. “Now, come along dears, we have a lot to do and collect before dinner! Onward, to the market!”

Suddenly fired up, I was just yanked along, riding on my mother’s metaphorical obi. I was elated to have her back, and now dreading what kind of new headaches were going to be waiting for me.

I know I shouldn’t ask the question, but if Mom turned up this early, who was next?

Oh how I wish I didn’t even think it, but my plot railroad had just careened wildly onto another new track and I don’t know where the route winds anymore.
Chapter 7

Another day and another severe test of my patience. Well more a test of my sanity, if anything, not like I didn’t already have enough of those under my belt. I was sure this particular issue would cause me no end of panic and horror. If I didn’t have an entire past life behind him, it just might.

Hadn’t felt all that good when I went to bed. When the horrid rays of the infernal sun came peeking through the shoji and began burning through my eyelids, I knew I was in for a rough day. I could concentrate enough to work through the symptoms and try an amateur diagnosis of what I might have.

Someone had smuggled a full percussion line into my skull and they were doing a warm up session. Hadn’t had a headache this bad in a long time, well over a month. Pretty sure I didn’t get migraines in this life, so it was a bit weird. Didn’t feel hot or flush, so doubt there was a fever. Maybe I had just let myself stress out too much over Mom and was paying for it?

A particularly sharp twinge in my stomach, and not just my usual morning hunger, caused me to groan and other thoughts began to cause me to develop an eye twitch while I performed a slow examination of how I was feeling.

{Cramps? Check. Sore breasts? Check. Wicked headache, double check. Oh you’ve got to be kidding me … yet, somehow I’m not surprised.}

Whether I felt too crappy, was too tired, or just burned out on shock, I didn’t scream like I might otherwise have. Question unasked, now answered in a fashion I really didn’t want. Just one more complication. I’d spent more time than not as a girl since picking up this ‘curse.’ Guess I shouldn’t be all that shocked by the biological functions working to par.

{So it’s going to be one of ‘those’ types of stories. Fine. If every other woman in history can handle this, I can deal.}

Wouldn’t look very manly in front of Mom if her son couldn’t handle something she had dealt with for decades, to say nothing of Shampoo, and the Tendo daughters. So, I could do this, didn’t seem to have much choice. Just breath and relax.

Although, trying to ignore the angry twinge trying to climb through my spine was becoming something of a hard fight. Forcing my movements to be gentle and measured, I slipped carefully out
of Shampoo’s grip. She gave a disapproving moan and grabbed my pillow harder. Mumbling to herself a bit, most of it naughty and not age appropriate.

That gave me something to smile at. Dressing quietly, my twitch threatened to return as my bra was notably uncomfortable. Feeling too small and like it was pinching my chest hard. Was just getting a nice bag of symptoms right now.

I wasn’t ten feet out the door and veering for the bathroom when the voice I least wanted to hear rounded the corner. He growled at me, but seemed to be keeping himself restrained from his usual, post dawn bellowing. I imagine fear of the beast that could be my girlfriend when she was disturbed from her slumber, and Mom’s ever present katana were motivation enough for him to remember his manners.

Today, however, was not the day to come pushing my buttons. I didn’t have the best restraint from hitting my old man at the best of times. With how I was feeling now? Well, exercise was supposed to help with the discomfort, but creating a panda pretzel wasn’t that appealing.

“Ranma, you’ve been slacking too much boy, get dressed right now. I’m going to give you a workout to remember.”

I just grunted and moved past him. “Not in the mood Pop, we can play punt the bear after my bath and breakfast.”

A hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. Not hard for him given my current lack of mass or set up for resistance. It was also the wrong move. The discomfort, wild hormones, and general sour mood all combined into a sudden and intense molotov cocktail and my moronic father, with no sense of self preservation where I was involved had just tossed out the match.

It was all fire and reflex, well drilled muscles moved on only the flash of impulse and I couldn’t have stopped myself if I wanted to. And I didn’t want to. Using the momentum of my spin, my arm pulled back and tensed. Then shot out, corkscrewing as it moved and aimed for the first open target I could see. His throat was on display, so my fingers tensed and went for the mark.

“Mood? There’s no ‘mood’ for training, now stop being stu ... “ He cut off mid rant and clutched his windpipe as the blow struck home. Hadn’t planted my feet so I didn’t manage to get all the power I could have put behind it. That ‘love tap’ still lifted him two feet off the ground and he crashed onto his ass.
He managed a wheezing hack, furious at the surprise attack, but still trying to belt on just in a slightly weaker voice. “What was that for Ranma?”

Fists still clenched, and I can only imagine how ridiculous I had to look. All less than five foot nothing, and hundred pounds of me glaring at my father. Something about my bearing must had struck a chord of worry in him though. His teeth clicked closed and he started scooting back slowly toward the end of the hall. As if sudden movement would provoke another attack.

“Don’t touch me.” It was a seething hiss, and somewhere in my wild anger I managed to get a picture of just how ridiculous I was being. I grabbed the reins, hehe, and yanked hard. Heaving a breath and tried to keep my voice calm. It was still strained with anger I couldn’t keep down.

“Dad, I’m sorry, just … please, not right now. I feel like crap and I need to talk to Mom. Go play with Ryoga or something.” He scooted back a bit quicker as I broke out the rarely used ‘D’ word on him. How rare for me to call him something other than ‘Old Man’ or ‘Pop?’ I should work on that.

Still, message received and he found his footing quickly enough, while still backing up and around the corner. Out of my sight, the safest place for him to be right now. I spun on a heel and resumed my stalk to the bathroom.

Akane was just stepping out, cleaning up from her morning run. She smiled and was about to give greeting, when her mouth made like my father’s. I must’ve looked like a she-demon at the moment, or some psycho murderer. Her expression quickly morphed into something of worry and she eased back a step.

Though she did manage a soft, whispered, “Ranma, what’s wrong?” Trying to make herself look small and not catch my wrath. I was hit by a pang of guilt and managed to force myself to soften a bit. Was almost a hilarious inversion to see the person with the only temper that rivaled Ryoga’s quailing back from me.

“I’m sorry ‘kane … I don’t feel well.” My head spun on a pivot and I shot every corner of the hall a suspicious glare. One pair of ears had retreated but there was another I didn’t want to deal with either. She could take great delight in plotting how to torment me with the information. Yet, it was unlikely Nabiki was even awake yet.

Turning back to Akane I exhaled slowly and whispered gently. Don’t know why I was sharing this particular piece of soul crushing embarrassment, but even after the near couple weeks we’d become friends, somehow I just knew I could trust her.
“It’s this stupid curse, now I’m having … ya know … girl problems.”

Her cheeks did a wonderful impersonation of a neon sign done in hot pink and her hand quickly covered her mouth. Yet, there was no titter nor giggle in her expression. Just genuine shock. While she couldn’t understand what it was like to be of ever shifting sex, the girl still had a deep empathy for others. It was just one of the reasons I knew I could trust her. She might not be able to fully understand how weird this could be for me, but she at least took it seriously.

“Oh, Ranma, I’m so sorry. I … umm, hot bath. You should take a hot bath. Hopefully that’ll take it go away, it solves most of those problems right?” She managed a smile, even if it was thin and a bit strained with the awkward conversation. I imagine it must’ve been hard talking to her sisters about the birds and bees, certainly her father never managed to be brave enough to do that, so sharing with a new person in her life, and a BOY of all things.

“Yeah, quick fix.” I managed a tense smile of my own and she relaxed a little more. “Thanks ‘kane, I’m glad to have one friend who won’t mock my weird suffering.”

The girl just nodded and stepped aside so I could make use of the furo and the wonderful, steamy contents. I stripped quickly and scrubbed even faster. It was more cathartic than cleansing to wipe off the sweat and body soil of the previous night. I just wanted into the water as quickly as possible.

A nice hot soak, and a cure, if only temporary to situation. As I sank down into the bath, a problem with that situation became quickly apparent.

My scream filled the whole house.

Well ‘scream’ was the wrong word. My anger resurfaced, erupted, and I was freely shouting words not fit for polite company. Especially as I was a guest in someone else’s home. But I couldn’t help myself. I went through every piece of filth and vulgar I knew in Japanese, then English, then what random words I’d picked up over the years from other languages.

I wanted to break things, but we were still in debt for the previous bathroom incident. So I managed to console myself by stalking around the bath area, freely shouting obscenities and wildly waving my arms around. Somehow I had the presence of mind to pull on my boxers and top at least.

Akane was the first to break into the bathroom, suddenly in a panic as she looked in on the scene.
Her worry quickly giving way to confusion.

“Ranma! What’s … wrong …?”

Footsteps weren’t far behind and soon the wash room was packed with people. All crowding in and worried over what I was shouting about, then just watching rising confusion and worry as the tiny woman stormed around the room cussing out Life, Fate, the Universe, whatever kami thought this joke was funny, and most of all my father.

“Airen, what’s wrong?”

I was too far into my rant to pay Akane or Shampoo any attention. The fathers just recoiled by the door. Hiding behind Kasumi and Ryoga to keep out of the range of my poisonous tirade. I had to look half insane as I paced a circle in the bathroom but no one was brave enough to approach.

“That stupid idiot, I’ll break every bone in his body. Do this to me just because he’s a moron. Get me stuck like this. I’m going to turn him into a rug. Mom won’t kill him, I WILL.” Knuckles white as I squeezed them so tight my nails threatened to break my skin. My anger was just running wild and I was too lost in the flow of emotion to try and pull it back this time. Getting more and more wound up, if I had an objective hold to grab I’d be worried I just might hurt Pop. Seriously.

It took well over a minute, but finally someone took control of the situation and it wasn’t me. While I was lost in the ever growing circle of wrath, Mom banished everyone from the room and took it upon herself to brave my tantrum and bring me back to something of a semblance of composure.

A hand on my shoulder broke my fuming and I almost turned to put my fist into someone. So out of control was my rage, but I managed to still myself when I took note of who it was. I wouldn’t have flinched to smash Genma through the wall. Thankfully, my temper didn’t have such hold on me I couldn’t recognize people.

“Wha … Mom? I … “ The rage bled out of me and without the fiery fury sweeping through me I was suddenly just cold and drained. I didn’t break into tears, thankfully, I didn’t need to further add to my shame and embarrassment as I realised how I must have looked.

“I’m sorry, Mom … I … “ The hand never left my shoulder while her other gently lifted my chin so our eyes met. Where I expected some stern anger at my foolish, no straight on barbaric behavior, there was just concern.
“Ranma, come upstairs with me, and you can tell me about it.” From her tone, soft as it was, I could easily guess it wasn’t a request. All I could do was nod and follow behind her as she took over the upstairs guest room and left Kasumi to finish breakfast. We had a long talk coming. 

I wasn’t really comfortable having this conversation, but if I couldn’t work my way into trusting my mother with something that was so upsetting then we would never really be able to bridge the gap caused by more than a decade of separation. I needed someone I could talk to, more than just Shampoo. Might as well be the woman who brought me into the world, and I know desperately wanted into my life again.

I still might present her with a panda skin rug.

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I’m was going to run on the hypothesis that my particular curse carried some strange glitch. My female form was running on its own hormonal clock, and whether it paused or not in times when I was male something about it must’ve turned the water mechanism off when it was most inconvenient. It was a ‘curse’ after all, so maybe it was just part of it. I don’t know, can’t pretend I know crap one about magic or the rules there of. I’d have to ask Cologne later.

My running hope was that I’d go back to my normal, bothersome enough routine when my biological torment ran its course. Which likely meant this was going to be an ongoing fight, month to month.

While I was having a talk with my mother. Shampoo had run to the phone and placed another of her long distance call. The fact I was locked as a girl seemed to have disturbed her a bit more than she wanted to let on. At some point Cologne had wanted to talk to me directly.

“Son-in-law, from what I can gather of Shampoo’s hysterical babble, you are currently locked as a girl?”

Seemed unusual for her to address me in Chinese, but my communication skills had improved tremendously since we had last spoken.

“Yes, Elder. I woke up feeling terrible, I am familiar enough with the symptoms. I tried to take a hot bath, but I did not turn back.”
There was a moment of silence as she hummed to herself. “This is unusual, but sadly I cannot say unexpected. The magic of Jysenkyo can be wildly chaotic. From what limited cases I have found in our records this is highly unusual, yet there are a few recorded instances such as what you’re going through. I had hoped you wouldn’t suffer this, but on the bright side you should be able to return to normal after this passes.

“I’m preparing to journey to Japan soon. I need to see this directly to understand more. Until then, I’m sorry Ranma you will just have to bear with it.”

“I know Elder, thank you.”

“I’ll be seeing you in a few weeks. Try not to break anything, or anyone until I arrive. You’re strong enough to get through this.”

All I could do was chuckle in reply. “Thank you again, I look forward to seeing you.”

We said our goodbyes and then I let Shampoo speak with the old women once more. Returning to the guest room and told Mom the news, both good and bad. As Cologne was the closest thing we were going to get to an expert on the matter we just had to hope she was right and this would pass in a few days.

After unburdening my heart to Mom, we had eaten in the bedroom, and I had been all but yanked off into the neighborhood. She decided on some mother-child time. As I explained my dilemma and worries, her face grew tight. Oh she could hide it well, but I could see the strain as the truth of my problems became ever more manifest for her. She was having to deal with a lot of impossible things. She just wanted her son back, and had been given a pile of problems that would have broken most people.

Not Nodoka Saotome, however, she took it in stride. Possibly with the help of medication, but she handled it well. Hid her upset well too. After an hour of letting me just spill my emotions and never offering more than gentle compassion she made me get dressed and we were off on a private shopping excursion.

Given the tense set of her shoulders, it was probably better for Pop’s health that neither of us were in the house. I still wanted to skewer him, and Mom looked even more eager to put the family honor blade to use and turn him into panda fillets.
Shampoo didn’t have terrible symptoms with her cycle, so far as I had observed, bless her. My medicative relief came from Nabiki of all people. For her part the girl didn’t crack even a grin, something in her eyes spoke of empathy more than amusement. The way she held my gaze as she shared her pills with me -- at no charge, that was almost scary -- spoke to me that she had some serious suffering month to month for the trouble of being female.

After the pills kicked in, a rather potent prescription indeed, I was feeling much better physically. My mood, not so much. It wasn’t Mom’s fault. I just didn’t feel like playing dress up today. There was no point in arguing on it though. By matriarchal fiat it had been declared I would be attending school as a girl. My new situation just helped reinforce the notion that Mom was correct in making me do it.

Oh well, my situation could always be far worse, and probably would be several times. No point in complaining over something like this. My masculine identity wailed in protest, but pride can do some incredible mental gymnastics to deal with reality in a ‘positive’ manner. If I was going to be a ‘Man among Men,’ well I was going to be so manly I could destroy this challenge by facing it head on.

Nodoka had grilled the Tendo sisters on their favorite places to shop, both in the district and nearby wards. Fortunately we were sticking to Nerima today. The area around the train station were rife with shops. Mom easily found the ones catering to teenage fashion, female in particular. A shudder ran down my spine at the sight, but I quelled it from showing.

“Mom, are you sure about this?” I kept my tone as level as possible, though it was still spoken through clenched teeth. I wasn’t angry, just tense at the prospect of what I was about to subject myself.

The reply was no less tense and there wasn’t a spark of much happiness there. Just firm determination to show Hell it had no business messing with a Saotome. “Yes, Ranma, we have to do this. Like it not. I am the wife, and you are the son and heir of a martial artist. You will face all kinds of strange challenges in life, this one just happens to be one of the more difficult, in complex ways.”

“Mom, I’m ready to sacrifice a lot for my Art, hell I’m ready to give my life, but my manhood? This isn’t exactly ‘manly.’” The situation wasn’t really that bad, but my hormones were driving me mad, fighting to keep my tone from cracking with the stress I was feeling.

Her hand touched my cheek and stroked softly. Her eyes were heavy with a kind of resigned weariness, I imagine Genma caused her that kind of strain often. Her voice was soft, but there I can hear there was going to be no compromise.
“Sweetheart, I wish these were even remotely more *normal* circumstances. Unfortunately, your father has caused us to be in anything but normal. You’ve already shown me that the trigger for your … condition, comes readily, and now not even hot water helps. Shampoo’s grandmother is the closest thing we have to an expert opinion, and she believes this will pass with your period.”

I winced as she said that word so easily, Mom said nothing of my flinch.

“I want you to have the most normal life possible. Since you’re going to be a girl at least one week out of every month, we don’t have any choice. You’ll just have to get used to being in your female form at school. To make that work you’re going to need to cover all your bases. No doubt you’ll have friends visit you, won’t they think it rather strange you don’t have a full wardrobe?”

My mouth worked slowly to try and come up with a rebuttal but all I could do was sigh and nod. “What about gym? It just wouldn’t be right for me to be in the girl’s locker room, even if I am … like this ya know?”

Her mouth quirked to the side as she pondered that objection for a moment. It seemed to both be a concern, but I was disturbed to see something that looked like a flash of excitement bolt through her eyes. There was a moment of hope that her doubt was overcome her, but whatever process her logic went through cleared the hurdle and she was satisfied with her conclusion.

“You’ve seen Shampoo and yourself naked several times. I believe you are mature enough to behave and not be a pervert. So, you’ll just have to make do, Ranma. I know this isn’t ideal, but it’s the best we’re going to get. You don’t want the whole school knowing about your curse, do you?”

Blowing out a breath, I shrugged, “I guess not.”

“Then we’re both just going to have to learn to adapt. So will your father. Think of this as just another training session, and besides, it would drive Genma insane. You’re strong enough to make this work Ranma, if not for yourself, do it for me?” A desperate plea creeping into her voice.

I held her eyes for a long minute, seeing the resolve and hope I’d see how hard she was trying to come up with a plan for this chaotic situation. I could already see Genma’s face, and it did give me a wicked glee at the prospects.

*Alright, I can do this. Besides, I do look good in this body. Now to make the other girls jealous. Heheheh.*
That spark of feminine pride should have worried me, but I didn’t bother fighting it. I was a girl right now, and there no harm in letting some of my vanity help me fight through this. Mom was right, it was just one more test in my growth as a person. I was going to come out of this stronger, if not weirder for it.

With a breath, I nodded and shoulders set we marched into our waiting doom.

For the next three hours I was touched and prodded by sales reps who went through the whole gamut of displays. Those who were in shock at my figure, admiring of it, jealous of it, and everything in between. In two shops, the sales ladies swooped in smelling blood in the water, so to speak. They would have done Nabiki proud being able to sense a potential, fat commission check at a hundred paces.

To my mounting annoyance, I learned things I really didn’t want to know. I was an almost perfect size four, with curves that were out of ratio for my height. No wonder Akane would get get mad if it was rubbed in her face. My chest was bigger, waist thinner, and hips a tad wider. The “Oh my, 32 G, you’re a blessed girl” comment set my eye to a twitch. Really didn’t need a formal number on my bra.

I learned more numbers about every possible dimension related to my female body than I ever wanted to hear, and soon it had my head spinning with every quoted bit of information. Along with the “Oh you’re a lucky girl, I’d kill for a figure like yours.” Mom was stoic through the affair, but there was a gleam of pride she didn’t quite manage to hide behind her eyes. I guess if her son excelled at being gifted with various bits of ideal female proportions, it was somehow manly in its own odd way.

She was evasive on where the money was coming from. I couldn’t tell you silver from shinola where it comes to credit cards and their buying power. Context clues told me Mom may as well having been swinging a bag full of gold coins with how the associates took to scanning her rather benign looking card. It was almost with a kind of religious reverence. They became even more polite and accommodating in behavior when they that holy relic of spending power.

For the life of me I don’t know what in the world is so magical about it. Maybe Mom is just fiscally responsible and has a stupid good credit line, but these people were acting like she owned the shop. As far as I knew, we were just slightly above dirt poor. My father only held down a job only as long as required before he got bored with menial labor. The man certainly never had more than a few yen to his name at any given moment.

When he did have extra cash after taking care of the most bare bones needs he was stuffing his face,
washing it down with sake, and on very rare occasions I my allowance was enough I could buy something for me.

I don’t think Mom had any kind of employment. She had shown no need to hurry anywhere after she had crashed her way into my life. Maybe she had wealthy relatives I didn’t know about? My gentle queries were softly brushed aside. More important things to do, like building up the collection of things to be in my closet.

What I thought would be a meager assembly was quickly turning into a hoard. We weren’t burdened by many bags. Aside from some quick necessities, Mom paid extra to have the store box and ship it … somewhere. I didn’t get to look at the address she put down on the forms.

“Mom, I dun’ mean to be a nag, but the Tendo’s dun’ exactly have the room for everything we’ve bought today.”

{And are still buying .. gez how much is she gonna get? This is two complete wardrobe’s worth. It’d take me a month to wear all this crap.}

“Don’t worry, it won’t be a problem.” Was her hand wave reply. Dismissing my question with no further allowance of follow up.

{You’re hiding something, aren’t you? Mom, please don’t be like that moron you call a husband. What are you planning?}

I could only cock my brow and watch her repeat this process in five shops. Underwear, fine, I submit on that ground. My Spring and Winter school uniforms, another fair surrender. Even a few day ensembles for effect, fine. But this was becoming ridiculous. Woman was shopping for two people named Ranma, and we didn’t buy artifact one for my male persona.

The blouses and slacks, I was tolerating. I almost lost my temper for the third time today when she had me trying on skirts and sundresses. Looking at Mom’s concentrating face quelled my fury. Until we got to the shop to purchase some yukata and kimono.

My twitch returned, but I somehow channeled it into my legs. My calves twitches in rising annoyance at this particular cannard. I was reduced to my skivvies so the little granny who ran the shop could measure me to within every possible millimeter. She was neither subtle, nor gentle in her work. Looking me over, she made no comment on my form, thankfully, but the look in her eyes was
somehow even more annoying.

While I was allowed to get dressed once more, Mom set about looking over bolts of fabric with all manner of patterns on them to pick out for the kimono that would be made for me. My mother was then neither gentle or subtle in her selection. Loud, bright colors with decidedly feminine patterns on them. Before I was able to voice an objection, she had picked out two for summer yukata, and three more for formal dress.

I couldn’t keep myself belted up any longer and now I was going to raise cain. In my building annoyance, my already rough language took on a new level of course.

“Ma, ain’ this nuff … “ I was just as swiftly cut off by a gentle voice that was sharper and stronger than the sword she’d left in Shampoo’s capable hands.

“Ranma, stop fidgeting.” My legs arrested with that command, and I can’t easily say why. Mom was hardly intimidating in her person or aura, but something about her just made he go still and clam up. “Every girl needs a few kimono for formal occasions and festivals. Besides, these patterns will be lovely on you, sweet heart.”

My jaw would surely have dropped open at those words but it didn’t. My eyes did develop a tea saucer size. That my mother could say that wasn’t shocking. It was how she said it. Dripping with saccharin that almost sounded sincere.

“I’ll be just a few more minutes, then we’ll go get lunch, darling.”

The prospect of food banished the rest of my worry. I felt even hungrier than normal, and that with the heavy breakfast I had consume to satiate the fury my situation had put in me. We had spoken as adults for the first time ever, and with nothing more than superficial knowledge of the person I had become, she had a master’s practiced hand at corralling my mood.

And deep down, a horrid fear I couldn’t give more than a ghost of a whisper to. A part of me I didn’t want to acknowledge, but had a louder and louder voice than ever before, was enjoying the clothes shopping. Some of the clothes I had tried on just clicked for me. I haven’t clue one about good fashion as a guy, like hell I can make it work as a girl. Yet, some strange fragment of my pride, which had been steadily morphing into something frightening.

It liked how good I looked as a girl. It liked the prospect of how good some of the outfits had looked
on me. I liked how good I looked. This was just becoming more confusing by the day.

Food. I could focus on food and banish this strange demon, for awhile at least.

When the trails of shopping had been concluded, Mom found a place Nabiki liked to frequent. It was almost like an old style diner. With a pretty large menu of popular foods, both of traditional Japanese, Chinese, and imported American and various European styles. It was most popular as an ice cream parlour.

My mouth watered at the prospect of two of my favorite things. That was food in general, and ice cream in particular.

For an experiment, I tried the spaghetti. Now I like ketchup, but the idea of it being the base of the sauce was just weird to me. However, my ideas were destroyed and a new love was born after I all but inhaled that plate. Doing my level best to keep from slurping it up like a vacuum cleaner.

I couldn’t make up my mind from the sweets menu, so I just picked the best looking parfait from the pictures on the menu. What was delivered to me was lovely enough, but the first spoonful. I almost dropped the spoon as I stared at the treat before me.

{Ice cream has NEVER tasted that good before. Holy crap that was almost … orgasmic. Is this why I liked this stuff so much in the series?}

I’d have to do some testing, but I’m almost convinced that my sense of taste was much sharper as a girl. Or at least my senses for sweet flavors. I was to keep myself under control so Mom wouldn’t think I was losing my mind.

“Wow, that was really good.” I said in a soft tone, trying to keep from moaning allowed as each spoonful followed slowly. Trying to actually savor this rather than inhale it like I did everything else.

“You like sweets too?” Nodoka giggled, “So you did get something from me than just my eyes.”

{Well, hypothetically I do look somewhat like I would if I had been born a female. Mother’s tongue wouldn’t be all that weird.}
I just laughed a bit and shrugged, “Maybe so, all I know is this is delicious. Thanks, Mom, for everything today.” My smile was probably five hundred watts, and I reached over and gave her hand a squeeze. She returned it gently and soon we were full, paid, and just exploring.

The ice cream did wonders for my mood. Short term though it might be, I was feeling significantly better both body and mind. By the time we got home I was all but floating in compare to how my morning had begun.

Shampoo nearly tackled me before I had my shoes off. Mom made no comment, simply smiled and made her way deeper into the house to begin helping Kasumi, or whatever she was going to turn her attention to. Arms too full of Chinese Amazon to even query if she would like any help, I just turned my attention onto the girl whose affections I was about to receive.

My day was looking up.

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How quickly the pendulum can swing too and fro in the course of just twelve hours. This week was just turning into a stupidly long roller coaster. There had been a nagging thought about where Mom was shipping my new clothes, and how evasive she was being on the issue. Hadn’t given it much thought for awhile, but it was slammed forward to an answer when dinner was on the table.

Mom and Kasumi had passed out the portions to everyone and we had settled in to eat. Admittedly the table was fairly packed now. My parents on one side, Shampoo and I sat opposite them, Kasumi sat beside her father, while a blushing Ryoga sat beside Akane. Still mildly funny and cute to see him like that, even though we’d been here for almost a couple weeks now.

No sooner had we offered our thanks and chopsticks up than Mom dropped the bomb she had been keeping to herself all day. Breaking the subject in her soft, almost innocuous manner.

“Soun, I need to thank you for taking in my family for the past few weeks.” Smiling to the man and nodding her head to him in a modest tilt of politeness. Pop paid it no mind, working to put rice to his mouth as quickly as she’d let him get away with.

“Oh there’s no need for that Nodoka, I’m happy to put up my old friend and his son. You’re welcome to stay here as well. Our home hasn’t been so lively in years.” Returning her smile just as wide. He was a good man, almost always soft mannered and polite. Had to be patient and kind to put
up with my father for terribly long, and probably a bit spineless.

My eyes tracked the conversation slowly. Eating with a subdued pace compared to normal. It caught Shampoo’s attention, ever alert for unusual warning signs. No one else seemed to pay it any mind. Still, something was up. Had to be.

“That’s most kind of you, but I can’t ask you to do that for a long period of time. It’s not fair to you or your daughters. To say nothing of the burden it must place you under, having so many extra mouths to accommodate.” That cocked my brow.

[Okay, this is kind of soon, but then so is her showing up. I think I can see where this is going. I just don’t know how to feel about it.]

The man just chuckled a bit and shook his head, “Oh, think nothing of that. It’s not a burden at all.”

It was all I could do not to snort. [Right, no burden at all, just like a hole in the roof is just a skylight.]

Checker’s head popped up from where she had been lazily nappin. Tilting to the side in that way dogs were prone to do when giving something a quizzical glance. Even she could get the sense something was up. Dog was scary smart, I tell you. If you she wasn’t following the conversation word for word, she was at least cueing into the tension settling in.

“Soun, you are too kind.” That earned a chuckle as the man puffed up just a bit. He wasn’t my father, but he still liked his ego to be stroked all the same. “Still, it’s not proper for my family remain under your roof for an extended period of time with no means of repaying you.”

[And Other Shoe meet Drop.] I still held my peace, there no argument to be made. She had a point, and I was still ambivalent at best on how to feel to what I had a feeling was coming.

Everyone had finally zeroed on the conversation now. Eyes all watching Mom as she spoke, Pop and Tendo both beginning to look nervous. They could piece together the puzzle easily from here. A corpse could figure this out by now.

“After we finish the registration for the children to attend school, we will be departing for home.” Chopsticks fell from nerveless fingers of the two men. Shampoo’s shoulders became tense and she
had a sudden worry in her eyes. Ryoga looked confused and lost. Akane? I wasn’t sure what to make of her expression, but I think a slight hint of hurt was forming there.

The old man coughed and covered his mouth. “Dear, what do you mean? The training hall is the best place for so many reasons. It’s closer to the school than our house. The dojo is perfect for the kids to train together and . . .”

Whatever else he had to say turned to a halting silence as he took note of Mom’s soft expression. It was gentle but there was that steel behind it. The sign of the only person on earth who could bend this man to her will like a reed in the wind.

“Genma, all these people under Soun’s roof is not fair to his family. Besides, the house has been empty for so long. We’ve only just come together again, I feel it will be best for our family to be under our own roof. Dear, I want us to be a proper family again.

“I want the last few years of Ranma’s youth to be spent with us before our son goes off to find himself as an adult.” She didn’t try holding the longing in her voice. It may as well have been tattooed on her face. Even I felt a sharp pang at the sight. My ambivalence was driven away by that plea. She’d been alone for so many years. It was only right we enjoy what time we had left together.

Pop’s will was beginning to falter and he couldn’t even find the traction to begin to protest. Shampoo also was getting wound up in his place. Her name had not been dropped yet, and it was causing a tension in both of us, her most visibly. Her fingers were trying to introduce my bones into a new position.

Mom cut both of them off just as swiftly. “You do have a point that the dojo is an excellent place for all of the children to train. I see no reason we can’t put together a schedule for that, and as long as Soun doesn’t mind you all can come over to do that.”

“Yes, of course, you’re all welcome here, always.” Said patriarch of the Tendo family was quick to interject. Quickly accepting the peace offering tossed to him.

“I would also like to spend more private time with my future daughter-in-law and help prepare Shampoo for her eventual married life.” Both father’s suddenly began to crack at that. Seems the matter was settled as far as she was concerned. It also quickly allayed said lover’s concerns. Her worry suddenly became a look of pleased admiration as she listened to Mom’s proposals.
“Well, if that’s how you feel, Nodoka. I understand. You are always welcome here, we should make certain to get our families together and have dinner from time to time.” Soun broke under Mom’s reasoning and her emotion. Unable to bring up an argument to something that had struck close to home for him.

His home had been absent his wife’s presence for many years. The happiness could never be fully regained, but he and his daughters had moved forward as she would have wanted. Mom had tended an empty house for many more years, under protest perhaps, but she had willingly sacrificed the spirit and comfort that made a proper home. Now she wanted to pull it back and grab what memories could be captured in the remaining years left before I was an adult.

There was no argument or logic to deny her something she had one last chance to recapture. Just as the Tendos would give almost anything to have their lost matriarch back. The matter was more or less ended. The mood at the table was somber from there forward as the aftershock moved through us. Checkers moved around the table, sniffing people and finally plopped her head into Ryoga’s lap. Though it was Akane who stroked her behind the ears more vigorously than her owner.

Ryoga had gone beyond shell shocked into completely numb. His chopsticks moved mechanically and no emotion flared in his eyes. Confusion and loss, and I couldn’t quite piece together the full of why. He’d spent a year under shoe in lunchroom fights. Then another two years chasing me halfway around Asia. Then was stuck with my company on the way home. Now he was looking like I was going to just run out of his life?

I wasn’t sure if I should be flattered or annoyed.

His life had been a fairly constant state of loneliness and always lost on the road. On second thought, having us as his companions for the past month had given him something more to look forward to. We’d become something of a normality to him, the parting might hit him harder than I thought.

I wanted to give out some words but nothing came forth. All I could do was just keep eating slowly. Mulling over the matter and unable to formulate any positive reply. We were only moving … actually, I didn’t know how far our house was from the dojo. Couldn’t have been too far, we’d run into Mom pretty early in the day. However, Ryoga would probably never find my house.

Unless, he had a talented guide.

{Heheh, problem solved, just get Akane and Checkers familiar with the way and they can pull Ryoga along every now and then. We can can all study, do homework, train. Here or Mom’s, it’ll be fine.}
The smile didn’t touch my lips, but the thought mollified me. Not as much as I liked, but it would have to be my comfort for now. Even Shampoo was pensive as she took in Mom’s words. She wasn’t being left behind, but she and Akane had become pretty good friends in our time here.

It was just too sharp a change I guess, even after only a few weeks together.

We just ate, cleaned up the dishes, and retired to the dojo. I could at least do my best to help cool worries and ease the shock, even I was still feeling it too.

"You’re just trying to make excuses for trying to run away AGAIN.” A sharp left jab that would have taken my head off if I haven’t been paying attention. I’d suggested some serious sparing and trying to burn out the gloomy energy we were all suffering.

As usual, Ryoga’s aura of perpetual depression had gone through its usual hoops and contortions to spin the logic that somehow this was all my fault. Of course. Now he was mad, but no real target for his aggression just seemed upset things were changing on him again. He was still taking ‘sparring’ to the breaking point.

Fortunately, I was paying attention and just growled in reply. Curling my legs and dropping under the blow. My reach was significantly shorter but several weeks of intense training had allowed me to not only adjust and compensate, but take advantage of my increased speed in this form. His leg curled to try and launch a kick, but just a tick too late. I tagged his ribs with a glancing blow and was back a couple steps out of reach.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. It was Mom’s idea, not mine.”

Duck. Slide back a step. Give ground to his assault. As usual, his frustration was making him sloppy. Unlike Akane, his moves weren’t telegraphed as clearly. Ryoga was also much better at chaining attacks and keeping up an assault. Still getting sloppy.

Like the fairly predictable pattern he fell into in reply to my dodging. He moved to launch another quick snap kick. From which I had retreated four times now after ducking under a punch. However, I had given all the ground I could. Now I was almost back to the wall. No matter.
As his leg came up to make a quick tag toward my calves I changed tactics. Going backward in a quick hop. I got the force and distance right. My feet touched the wall and I managed to coil up my legs. Then shot forward. He was taken off guard and I got far more solid blow against his left rib.

We were pulling blows, but this one was going to sting.

“Ooof!” Was his elegant reply, cutting him off mid rant and sent him backward a few steps. I didn’t wait for him to catch his wits and continued forward the instant my feet were back on solid ground. Launching a quick series of kicks. Low, low, high, low, mid. He just had enough time to get up his guard to prevent solid taps that would have hurt.

“You’d say that, nothing is ever your fault. Dammit Ranma, why are you suddenly leaving? We have a fight to settle, and you think you’re going to pop out on me a second time?”

“Oh for cryin’ out loud! We’re not movin’ that far! Mom says it’s not more than a half hour walk from the dojo. For us four, if we take the quick route, won’t be ten minutes”

My hormones had settled a bit but were still running a bit wild. His moping wasn’t helping my mood any. I let myself get sloppy and he caught my ankle.

“You know I’ll never find your house!”

“Uhgggg!” A sharp yank forward and suddenly I was leaving my feet involuntarily. He seemed intent to turn the grab into a toss. I just reacted quickly, finding my wits enough to lash out. The heel of my back leg smacking his forearm hard enough he yelped and let me go. Dropping to the ground I took the rough thump to my ass. Thankfully, it was well padded.

I swept his legs and dropping him onto his tailbone as well. Wasting no I quickly wrapped his leg and put it in a harsh lock. Twisting his ankle enough to get the point across I wasn’t in the mood for his crap.

“I’ll show you how to get there, doofus. Akane and Checkers too. You’ll just have to ask someone to walk with you, and you’ll be fine, moron. You don’t think I’d just leave my friends behind do you?”
He growled in stubborn resistance but while he had far superior strength I wasn’t going to give him
the time to battle for leverage to use it. Turning his foot at a sharper angle. He let out a pained sound
as he was biting back admitting he was in a vulnerable position.

“You promise? On your honor? We’re going to settle our duel like men? And .. I could use your
help with English, you always were better with that.” His fury dying a bit and I loosened up a bit in
response.

[Oh Ryoga, you silly fool, English will be an easy help.]

“Yes, you dope, we’ll settle our fight. Like men … if that’s even possible with my ‘condition.’ Yes
we’ll all study together, and hang out. We’re all friends, you dummy.”

That penetrated him enough that he nodded and finally tapped the floor a few times. I released his
ankle and bounced up. Panting a bit from the workout we’d been putting each other through.
Grabbing a water bottle and sipped on it.

“I just don’t get ‘guy friendships.’” Akane said from the otherside of the dojo, shaking her head in
complete bemusement. Working through some cool down exercises. Shampoo nodded in agreement.

“Is too true, boys very strange.” Helping Akane stretch her back and be helped in turn like they
might in gym. Holding hands on the floor and one leaning back and tugging a bit to assist the other
in pulling muscles taunt. Unlike Ryoga, who I’d almost had to beat some happiness in to, Akane was
almost glowing.

Her skin was flush from effort and sweat streaked her brow, but she was happy. The kind of look
one got from a sense of accomplishment following hard work. The struggle was tiring, but the effort
paid off in the end. None of her sisters practiced, and her father had given up serious teaching
months ago.

Having not one, but three people her own age who shared her passion for martial arts was a new
spark of delight in her life. While she did lag behind in terms of ability, it wasn’t for lack of talent.
Just she hadn’t had a serious teacher for a long time. I had Pop, and every possible master of esoteric
martial arts we could find in Japan and into China. Mind you, esoteric but still martial art in the
recognizable sense. Not the madness I was going to wind up encountering in the months to come.

Shampoo had her great grandmother, one of the truest and greatest grand masters alive. Ryoga? I
think his father taught him the basics of a fairly general style of kempo, but he had a knack for
finding skilled teachers while on the road. Men and women who shared little secrets and tricks to
help him improve.

Akane had none of that, until now. We’d paired off. Two doing serious training against one another.
While the odd one out helped Akane with something lower tier, but focused on helping her tighten
up and improve. The girl had talent, real skill. I suspect she could be almost good as me, someday …
far off in the future. She just needed people who could help her push herself and improve.

I could see the improvement in short order in just the couple hours we’d been practicing. Rotating
partners after about ten to fifteen minutes of hard work and a five minute rest period. Exposing her to
three different habits and styles of fighting. The last half hour, Shampoo had been showing her some
of the conditioning techniques her tribe used. Not just to build muscle strength, but also to strengthen
the ligaments and tendons. A way to provide more power, but also resistance to injury.

The girl was happy to be taken seriously. She was positively elated that we also wanted her to
improve and get better at the fastest pace we could help with. Her talent had plateaued without more
instruction but now we could help her push past that limitation and rise to the next level.

“What ‘guy’ friendship? I’m the only guy here.” Ryoga quipped, being a guy for certain. Snipping at
me in a good hearted way. The jab got at me, just like he wanted. But the normal needling didn’t
quite sit well with my still moody frame of mind.

“You want to take my PMS for a bit? I’ll happily share.” I snarled, launching a swift kick he hadn’t
been expecting. It tagged his calf and almost sent him right back onto his ass. It got a sharp hiss of
pain and he growled in rising anger.

“What was that for?!”

“You wanna find out?” I snapped back, turning and glaring daggers at him. Something in my
expression must’ve been unsettling because he suddenly looked ready to shrink into himself and hide
under a rock. Bet he would’ve been behind Akane in a second if he could.

Forcing a slow breath, I rubbed on my temples. ‘I’m sorry Ryoga, that was uncalled for. These
mood swings are really messin’ with me, and my cramps are tryin’ to kick me in the gut again.”

He just nodded, still sliding back a bit in case it was a trap and I lashed out again. Akane’s look was
sympathetic, but still had a hard edge of stern rebuke. I needed to work on keeping myself more firmly controlled. Until I got used to his, I could possibly be dangerous. I wasn’t as violent as Akane like this, but my trigger was pretty close to being with a hair touch.

Arms wrapped around me and began to tug me backward. “Airen, come take hot bath. Shampoo give massage that help relax.” Cooing in my ear as she drug me out the room before I could further make a bitch of myself. I submitted without complaint and was soon pulled off to the furo.

A hot soak sounded divine right now.

I didn’t get much time to relax from the torment. Somehow Mom had gotten me an appointment squeezed in with a doctor … a gynecologist. This was a jump I really wasn’t ready to make, but she had insisted and I was in no position to complain. I felt even worse than I had yesterday. If I could get a prescription that would take away the worst of this suffering, I’d bear almost any indignity.

Hitomi Harada was a sweet woman, who looked entirely too young to be a doctor. She also had a figure that was nearly unreal. Even made me feel a tinge of odd jealousy. Her hips were generous, her breasts might as well have been pillows, and to add insult to injury she was tall. The woman had couple inches on Mom, who was not a short woman herself. I think she might actually be taller than me in my male body.

/Wonder if my figure will develop like hers? … / I was giving up trying to contain those weird thoughts. Don’t know where they came from, whether it was hormones or something deeper in my psyche. They kept coming despite my efforts to stop them, so I just let them be.

“So, Ranko ,” I couldn’t hide the wince. That name was going to be a serious part of my identify from now on. “You’re having a rough time with your monthly cycle?” Looking over the chart before turning her large, brown eyes on me. The woman was stunningly beautiful, I felt a weird ping jealousy at such a mature woman, but also a wave of heat and desire.

Rather than let me answer, Mom just did all the speaking for me. “Yes, Dr. Harada. My daughter has been training very seriously in our family martial art. This is her first period, actually, so it seems to be rather intense. Although, personally, mine were quite uncomfortable at her age.”

Without missing a beat, the woman just gave a bright smile and nodded. “So you’re a martial artist,
Ranko? And this is your first cycle?”

Putting down the general bad mood I was in, I put on my best smile. My lips felt so tight they might crack under the strain. “Uh, yeah Doc, been trainin’ my whole life. Pop is all kinds’a serious in makin’ me the best. So, I’ve never had one, a period.” I had to fight to keep my teeth from grinding as I forced out the word. I wasn’t even bleeding yet, this was just the uncomfortable precursor.

Making notations in her chart for a moment, she glanced up and gave what she must’ve assumed was her brightest and most comforting smile. “It’s nothing to worry about. It’s not uncommon for girls who perform intense physical training, like gymnasts for example, to have their puberty delayed until later years.

“And many girls have uncomfortable cycles in their teens. Somewhere up to forty percent, actually, so this is nothing strange. I had the same issue when I was your age. Some months were almost unbearable.” She was sweet and had a good bedside manner. Trying to reassure a ‘girl’ she wasn’t strange. However, poor woman didn’t know she was talking to a part-time female at best.

I still managed to keep the wince down and just nodded. “Yeah, I think I heard that before, back in health class in middle school.”

{Please, just gimme something to help and no exams. Kami no exam! I’ll never survive the embarrassment.}

“Well, I don’t see anything unusual in your symptoms. Discomfort, tender breasts, your moods are erratic. I’m going to prescribe you some higher strength ibuprofen and a trial run of a low dose antidepressant. We’ll see how that works for three months. If you still have problems, we’ll have to consider a contraceptive.” Whether she sensed my tension, or the gods decided to answer my prayers, her words washed over me in relief. Medication I could deal with.

{Uggg, thank you, no exam. Birth control? How many more ironies am I going to go through? Better talk to Cologne about that.} Mom and I shared a look at the last bit, she had to fight down a frown more than I did.

Still, if it would help me get through this madness with a clearer head and less discomfort, I’d suffer the torment Nabiki and my father would deliver onto me. Almost anything to stop feeling so crappy.

“Normally though, after your body adjusts to a regular cycle it should become something you can
control with regular over the counter treatment. Just keep a record of how you feel over the next few months. I’ll schedule you another appointment in a month to see if the medication helps.”

“Thanks, Doc … err Doctor Harada.” Mom was giving me a sharp glance. She was fairly keen on me cleaning up my speech a bit. Especially as I was, by nature, using a firmly masculine form of speech.

“It’s what I’m here for.” She smiled and pulled out her script pad and jotted down a couple of medications. Unlike most doctors I was used to, her handwriting was very neat and controlled. Then jotted down her name and pressed her stamp do it. She passed them to Mom and bowed.

“I hope this helps you and the next time we speak you’ll be feeling much better. I’ll have my receptionist set you up with a meeting next month and you’re free to go. Thank you for coming to see me.”

Mom and I both bowed and thanked for her for her care. After we had been set up to return a month hence we were off to explore the area for awhile. From her movements and posture it wasn’t hard to see Mom was preoccupied with something on her mind.

“Mom, somethin’ on your mind?”

Pausing, she took a slow breath and turned to look into my eyes. For the first time since we’d been reintroduced, I saw Nodoka Saotome as something other than the optimistic matriarch of our family. She looked tired and frustrated. The weight of all the shocks to her expectations of being reunited with her son had met some harsh collisions with reality.

“I’m just a little tired, Ranma, don’t worry sweetheart.” She kissed my forehead and kept on walking. Just browsing windows while we waited on my prescriptions to be filled at the closest pharmacy.

I wasn’t in the best state to be trying to help someone else’s problems. My mood was still a bit foul and I was feeling just a few levels above complete crap, but Mom didn’t have anyone to talk to. Wasn’t fair if she’d listen to me whine and moan and me not to the same for her.

“Come on, Mom, talk to me. I know I might not be able to help much, but talkin helped me feel better. Maybe it’ll help you too?” Putting on my best smile, which was still strained and tight but she returned it in fashion.
“Let’s go get some ice cream and sit down a bit.”

The thought of the sublime confection brought a far more real smile to my face. Even Mom perked up at the thought. So, moods improved we found a treat shop and a quiet place we should talk without worry of prying ears. Eating in relative quiet and not yet breaking the tense mood, despite the satisfaction the sugar was bringing to our taste buds.

“Ranma, are you angry with me for what I’m making you do?” Nodoka finally managed to say in a soft voice. As if she were scared of the answer.

Taking a long breath, I sighed and shook my head. “No, Mom, none of this is your fault. It’s all Pop’s fault. Jusenkyo, this curse, now being stuck as a girl at least a third of the month. Sure it’s kind of stressin’ me out, but I understand why you want me to do the whole be a girl thing.

“Although, don’t see how this is ‘manly.’” I teased with a soft grin while putting a new spoonful of my parfait into my mouth. It got a soft chuckle out of her and some of the stress lines in her face relaxed. Leaking out the tension a bit in her muscles.

“Yes, this isn’t what I had in mind for my son. You don’t have to act feminine, in fact I’d prefer if you didn’t. I’m not ready for that shock, but Ranma … if, if you’re happier as a girl … “

Reaching over I gave her hand a soft squeeze. “Mom, I’m still me, boy or girl. Not gonna jump into a dress, start actin’ girly, and go flirtin’ with boys. My brain chemistry might be a bit funny, but I’m still your son. We’re just gonna have to get use to me being in this body, a lot.” I sighed a bit and shrugged.

Her head just shook as she sighed, “This is going to be a long adjustment, but thank you dear. I can’t imagine how hard this must be on you. When I let your father take you on that trip, I never imagined this kind of madness would take place.”

“Makes two of us. Pop can be short-sighted, and he doesn’t like to think long term, but magical curses?” I just sighed myself and let the sugary delight work away my other concerns. Silence fell between us and we just concentrated on the icecream for a time.

After that was gone, and Mom watched me inhale two other types in short order, she finally coughed and smoothed back her hair. “Your prescription should be filled soon. We need to go take care of
that. Then we have to sort out the little issue with school.”

I was on a sugar high at the moment, and I couldn’t work up the kind of eye twitch I wanted to
develop. That ‘problem’ was the simple matter of discrepancy between the sex under which I was
registered, and the one I was currently in. I don’t know how Mom was going to sort it out, but I just
silently went to see how this was going to play.

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“So you see, Mr. Tanaka, this is just a simple misunderstanding. I thought I made it clear that our
daughter was going to return home after visiting relatives in China and attend high school, while our
son continued his training journey.” Giving an exasperated sigh, Mom was doing a scary good job of
making her ridiculous story sound believable for the the vice principal.

Don’t know how in the world she expected the man to buy it. Now I was playing the role of Ran
ko. That name was just going to stick with me, naturally. Just it was an inversion, rather than fooling
Mom by playing that role, I was going to be fooling the wider world.

Tanaka was a kindly looking man. Someone who would be more at home in a library or research
lab. Thick glasses on his face, the plastic frames long worn with age and oil from his skin where he
gripped them. His hair was thin to the point of balding.

“Well, that is quite a misunderstanding, Mrs. Saotome, but I believe we can correct the issue.” It was
all I could do to keep my mouth clicked shut by locking my jaw. He was buying that pile of horse
crap?

“Yes, do you have Ranko’s birth certificate by chance?” There we go, this ridiculous charade was going
to implode before it even gained any traction.

“I brought it with me, just in case.” Something on my face was going to break at this rate. Without
hesitation Mom produced a proper, legal copy of the proper document. Name, sex, time and place of
birth. The seals from both birth parents, a seal for the attending physician, and a public notary stamp.
It was either authentic, or a near flawless forgery. I couldn’t even guess which.

Taking the document, the vice principal went to work starting a new file for Ranko Saotome. Quietly
and efficiently going through the forms with a well practiced hand. After a few minutes he returned
my alleged birth certificate and dropped a manilla folder into a slot outside his door. I’m guessing for
his secretary to process.

“If I recall, isn’t the young student Ms Xian Pu living with you as well? Are you her guardian?”

Mom just smiled and nodded, “Yes, she’s my goddaughter. It’s a very complicated story, but her father is a friend of my husband. Her family is from a very rural part of China, and her family wants to get a very good education, perhaps even attend university. She’ll be home staying with us until at least graduation.”

My lips quirked tight as I fought to keep in the snort that wanted to escape. Covering my lips quickly I faked a soft cough to keep from being caught. Though neither adult paid me much attention.

{‘Complicated’ she says. She’s got this story down pat, no way she’s thinking of this crap on the fly. How long has she been building this bologna sandwich?}

Tanaka just smiled and nodded, making a notation in Shampoo’s file. When all was said and done, he rose and bowed. We returned the gesture in a formal manner.

“Well, I want to thank you for entrusting both of your daughters to our care and instruction. I’m sorry to hear your son won’t be attention, but my well wishes in his journey. To have such dedication for martial arts in this day and age. It’s admirable.”

Mom beamed that much more for the compliment while the principal turned to me. “I hope you find the school to your liking, and make any friends, Ms Saotome.”

“Uhh, thanks, tea..Mr Tanaka. I’ll be in your care from now on.” Kami catching my verbal tics was becoming harder to do. I’d fallen hard into my personality, and ‘correct’ speech took more and more effort to produce. I wasn’t terribly concerned if I did sound like a country rube. Mom, however, wouldn’t appreciate me not being polite and respectful.

“I’m glad we sorted this out quickly. If you need anything else, please don’t hesitate to call us.” Mom bowed once more and soon we were out of the office and onto the next course of what was proving to be a busy day.

{Least me medication is helping. I don’t feel like crying, or strangling someone.}
When we were at a safe enough distance from the school, I turned and had to ask. “Mom, where did you …?”

“Oh, your birth certificate? Cologne and Nabiki helped, that girl is quite crafty. It’s a shame you won’t be marrying one of the Tendo girls. She’ll make quite a business woman with that head on her shoulders.” A whimsical look crossed her face as she began running ‘what if’ scenarios in her head. “Although, I hear she’s not much for housework or bridal efforts.”

Before I could inquire further, a shiver just ran up my spine at the thought. Sure, Nabiki was attractive. All the Tendo girls were, but of the three, the middle child was the most frightening prospect. She had looks and brains, sure, but also a mercenary streak wider than a canyon. Girl was the only person I knew who just might be more greedy than Pop.

Who knows, maybe she’d be a fox in bed, but I already had a wild kitten for that. Whenever we started. Nabiki, however, too self-serving, lazy and scheming. The vast difference between her and my old man, she was actually very clever and good pulling traps on people.

Mom just kept on her train of thought. “Kasumi would be the ideal bride. So sweet and dedicated. Still, I worry what her family would do without her. Her father in particular, I don’t know if Soun could handle the separation.

“Akane, though I think she would be a perfect match.”

I coughed and cleared my throat, “Ma, I think that issue is already kinda settled, yeah? I got Shampoo, and I don’t need another girl.” I didn’t need Mom running along those lines. I don’t know if she’d go for it, but she’d bought into more than one of my old man’s wild schemes before. The whole training trip for example, and thinking my idiot of a father could be ‘responsible.’

For the most part I turned out alright, sure. But there were some glaring flaws. Like the ‘Cat Fist’ training I had endured. Repeatedly.

Better not to risk her being talked into some kind of stupid, dual marriage thing. I don’t know how that would work, or if it could even happen. Wouldn’t stop the panda from trying, and if Mom was onboard for it, he’d grab that horse and ride into the ground whether or not it could cross the finish line. A lot of feelings would be hurt, and potential problems along the way, no matter the outcome.
Her mind was off galavanting in some kind of fantasy. Only seeming to notice me after the second, louder sound. “Oh, what? I’m sorry dear, don’t mind me. Yes, Shampoo is an excellent girl. She is an excellent cook, can sew, and has all the right skills to be a perfect wife. She also shares your passion for martial arts, and being stronger. You two were almost made for one another.”

Her smile widened and she began to titter a bit. “My grandchildren are going to be so beautiful. A father as handsome as my son, and a mother as divine as Shampoo.”

Turning my head, all I could do was roll my eyes and fight down a groan. [What happened to ‘I’m too young to be a grandma?’ What’s the qualifier, when you turn forty, then it’s a ’ok?’]

Seeing as I wasn’t going to get any more information out of her on the subject of just how she’d been helping cooking up her story, or someone had banged out a forged document, I decided to change the subject.

“Mom, I aint ready for kids. Wayyyy not ready for ‘em. But you know, if I had a little brother or sister, it’d be great practice for when I’m ready.” Letting the suggestion hang in the air as I smeared it on as nonchalantly as possible.

Nodoka Saotome, the ever stable fixture of calm and unflappable matron-hood turned beet red. The blush rising all the way up into her hairline. All of a sudden she looked like an embarrassed teenager, not a woman in her mid-thirties.

Yeah, I’d squeezed it outta Pop. It was only fair I know my mother’s birthday. Hard to get her a present when I didn’t know the proper time. With that came her age. They’d gotten started with the whole family thing early, and popped me out when she was just nineteen. Still funny to see her blushing so much.

“Ranma! You shouldn’t talk about such things to your parents. The very idea of having a child at my age.”

I just gave her a half lidded stare. “Mom, you’re thirty five. The only thing keepin’ you from havin’ a bigger family was a certain panda I know not bein’ around. The only thing to stop you from havin’ another kid or two, is if you and Dad don’t want anymore. And I’m sure Shampoo wouldn’t mind helpin’ care for ‘em as practice for when her time comes.”

She became practically incandescent by this point and could stand in for a cherry on top of a sundae.
However, there was a certain gleam forming in her eyes. Looks like I’d planted a seed there, a thought at least. Now if a certain moron could plant a real one.

Hey, didn’t bother me, I wasn’t gonna be watching. I’m too old to get jealous of a baby in the house. Besides, they were adorable. Causes of a lot of stress, puke, and pop, but still adorable.

It would also give my parents something else to focus on besides me.

“Ranma, I’ll hear no more talk like this. It’s not proper for a son to make such suggestions to his mother. If you were five it could be one thing, but you’re almost an adult.” Her hand swatting at me, but a grin had settled on her lips hiding just behind the hand hiding her embarrassed expression.

“Alright, alright, I’ll quit teasin’. I’m just sayin’. That kinda stuff is all up to you and Pop.”

“Good, now let’s hurry on. We need to get back to the dojo so we can get your things moved.” The grin remained plastered on her face the whole way back. Seems I just might have struck a proper chord with her. Hell, even if all it did was keep the old man out of my hair for awhile, fine by me.

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“And here we are. I know it’s humble compared to the Tendo house, but this is our home.” Mom was beaming as we walked through the fence and into the yard of the Saotome property. Which quickly shattered my expectations.

Well, I don’t really know what I was expecting, but this wasn’t it. Oh sure, it wasn’t the Tendo house by any means. Which was both spacious in itself, and occupied by a comparatively huge yard for a crowded, Tokyo suburb. You could’ve fit four houses like ours into that space. We still had a yard, wasn’t huge, but it big enough.

Our house wasn’t huge, but it was … big enough. I don’t know, I just wasn’t expecting comfortably middle class. That was narrow, but relatively deep, and two story. The furo and kitchen were compact, to make room for my parents’ bedroom and a family space almost the same size as the main main room in the Tendo home.

Shampoo and I were on the second floor, sharing an equally small bathroom, but our bedrooms were only slightly smaller than any of the Tendo girls’. With a third space Mom had set aside for storage. That space was ‘Ranma’s’ room. To keep all my male clothing while I was on my allegedly training journey. Hopefully, in time it’d be a perfect space for a young sibling to be in, but we’d see how that
Sure, the rooms were a bit tighter than my apartment from my old life. Yet, the space was used quite efficiently. Just the fact we owned such a house still blew my mind. It was nothing special in this neighborhood. There were countless dozens of similar construction all around us. Yet, I expected they were all worth many hundreds of thousands of yen. Possible millions more like. All of these houses were signs of comfortable, middle class living.

How under the brilliant rays of Amaterasu-okami’s shining face did my family own a place like this? My mother had no job I knew of outside of ‘house wife.’ And my father? The man who refused to hold down a job out of anything other than necessity, and even then only for a few weeks at most. Never with more than a few thousand yen to his name. Somehow owned a comfortably sized house, with a good sized yard?

Had to be inherited from someone. Had to be. Likely with a trust fund to cover the taxes. Aside from my training, I’d never seen Pop do more work than he had to, or have more money than required to keep us just above starving. I can’t see him sending every other red cent he had to Mom to pay the bills.

Still, I avoided asking questions. All my inquiries into matters financial had been casually deflected and hand waved away. Mom finally told me it wasn’t really my business, point blank. I was be a good son. Become a master of the family Art. Be the best possible student. And honor my parents by being the best man I could be. How I was provided for wasn’t a concern for me to worry over. She all but said it was an insult to ask. So I quit trying.

My father was also too tight lipped to pry any information out of. Either he didn’t know, or more likely he was under pain of skinning for talking about it. All of which just frustrated me to no end. Why shouldn’t I worry about how we were paying for things? I was old enough to get a part-time job and help out with food expenses at least.

When I broached the subject, Mom did everything short of looking offended at the suggestion. If I wanted to work a little and earn money to bolster my allowance, that was my business so long as my grades stayed up. However, she’d hear no talk of me trying to help pay bills. I wasn’t even allowed to publicly repay Soun for putting us up for most of the month.

{Looks like my ego isn’t all Pop. In fact, I’m thinking it isn’t much Pop at all. Most of it seems to come from Mom. Heh, get a huge load of pride from someone I hardly know. Go figure.}

When we finally got settled in, I dropped my bag to the floor and collapsed back into my bed. My
bed. That was still a strange idea. Hadn’t ever had a permanent one before, and rarely ever a real mattress. It felt new and not well broken in. Yet, somehow Mom had gotten the comfort level near to perfect.

Grunting a little and sighing a bit. Both in relief and stress. It was nice to sink back into the wonderful embrace of a real, proper bed, but there was still so much stress. Things had been moving rapidly the past week and I was still trying to adjust to it all. Curse. Shampoo. Tendos. Stuck as a girl. Soon to have a regular period. Now moving into Mom’s house, our house. And in a few days, school.

And this wasn’t even the kind of real craziness I knew as going to be forthcoming. Dropping an arm over my eyes I blew out a long breath. Being stuck as a girl and experiencing the fun roller coaster of menstruation seemed a far distant worry compared to the things I recalled. Both in detail and the vague stuff I only just remembered.

After a moment I began to feel restless. While the bed was wonderful, I wasn’t really feeling a nap right now. Instead I regained my feet and moved around the room. Time to explore my new dwelling in detail. This space was now officially ‘mine.’ Might as well become familiar with the landscape. Such as it was.

The fact it was stunningly similar to Akane’s room almost made me snort with laughter. The bed was set in the corner, opposite the door to the hall on one side, and the closet on the other. I was beside a small writing desk, which sat close to the floor, no room for a chair. The window looked out over the backyard. The dresser beside the closet was probably the largest piece of furniture in the room.

Curiosity getting the better of me, I began to plunder through the drawers. Could one plunder through their own clothes? It certainly felt like I was spying through someone else’s things. My eye twitch tried to return as I looked. Socks in the top, fine enough. The full ensemble of bra and panty sets the next one in. The volume of clothing was about as full as it could get.

“How the hell did Mom get all this put away in the few hours she was over here? And did we really buy this much? I couldn’t wear all these in a month.” Probably an exaggeration, but I was blushing and feeling guilty anyway. I was looking at my own clothes, and I still felt like I was being a pervert. This crap was just hitting me too fast.

Blouses next down, then slacks, then pajamas in my size. Nothing frightening or unexpected, I’d been there when we bought them. Then. Ugh. We had bought swimsuits, hadn’t we? Like all the rest of it, I didn’t have much choice in the matter. It was this or go topless. However, in the mix of one pieces I had swallowed my pride and settled on, there were more than a few bikinis. Mom had been doing some shopping on the side without me it seems. I really was twitching now as I let my curiosity get the better of me.
While I couldn’t get the most accurate assessment with my bra and shirt on, holding the top in place it looked like just the right fit. Another top, however, seemed to be purchased with the thought I’d grow in to it.

“Ugh … Mom … seriously … “ I growled and shoved the drawer closed. “Last thing I need is MORE.” Hefting both, heavy spheres in my hands and letting them drop a bit. Many girls would be plenty jealous of me. Shampoo teasingly was, and I’m pretty sure Akane wasn’t happy how good I looked as a female.

Secretly, I freely admit that if I had to be a girl part of the time, being a sexy one didn’t hurt my pride any. If anything, it just made it worse. The strange flashes of feminine vanity were more frequent and intense as the days wore on. I never managed to stop them, and by now I gave up. They were some of part of who I am, and I’d already had one brutal clash with trying to stop being who I was.

I did kind of enjoy this, even if was strange. Suppose if I didn’t take some pleasure in it my psyche would break and I’d go batty. This was my body, might as well take some pride and delight in it. Even if that wasn’t particularly healthy. Taking some pride and encouragement in how I looked helped me all the same.

Blowing a rude noise to banishment my philosophical rambling, I turned to the closet. It was decently sized. And as expected, Mom had filled it end to end with outfits we’d purchased. My uniforms, a series of skirts and dresses. Some which I had submitted to. Others she had taken it upon herself to buy on her own. Seems we were going to carry this deception to its maximum possible effort.

Pinching the bridge of my nose I just closed the sliding doors with a sigh. An entire false identity filled this room. Something about it just felt so wrong. I was still male in whatever fashion I could claim. The core part of my personality. Who I was. All of it was built around some sense of manliness, even if that concept had a strange meaning in my family.

However, something about it also felt frightening right. This was just proper and to be expected. Maybe I was just normalizing to these changes faster than I thought I would. I just didn’t know anymore.

One last thing to do, I grabbed my travel pack and started to sort through what outfits I owned. It had certain things that were to go into ‘Ranma’s’ room. Mostly boxers and wife-beaters. A girl wouldn’t be wearing those, after all. A few minutes of separation and I carried them down the hall. The room was spartan in compare to mine. No mattress, no desk. ‘Ranma’ wasn’t living here after all.
A futon was packed away in the closet. It was spare of clothing. Mom would take me for a second round of shopping so we could fill it up properly. Hard to properly size clothes for a growing teenage boy when he wasn’t on hand to wear them. Even if I knew what fit me, she had insisted.

*I think she just enjoys having me play dressup and model. Oh well, she hasn’t gotten to do that for over fourteen years. I’ll live.*

So, tucking the underwear and shirts into the top drawer of the small dresser in the room. I gave it a look around, and then departed. I needed to take my mind off all this for awhile.

I knocked on Shampoo’s door, and was promptly snatched into her room. Smothered in kisses and tight hugs. At some point I finally managed to drag her out into the yard to train. Not that I tried hard, for a very long time.

She was just the balm to relax my overtaxed mind and put my attention on other things. Like martial arts, and most importantly. Her.

School. Fights. All that crap could wait till later. Right now I just wanted to unwind and get comfortable in my new home.
“I can’t believe I’m doing this.” My jaw was under intense strain while I tried to keep from grinding my teeth together. The fateful day had come upon me. An all important decision that was to influence my comfort, and hopefully spare me some embarrassment.

A choice I had been putting off and avoiding. Done my level best to not talk to anyone about, even Shampoo.

Yet, it couldn’t be long avoided.

My body simply wouldn’t allow it. Any day now, it would begin.

Still, what guy in his right mind ever wants to be faced with such a horrid set of options?

Pad or tampons?

Doctor Harada had provided me more than enough information than I ever wanted to learn on the subject. In her professional opinion, I was best served by inserts during the day, as I was a highly active martial artist. It would be the safest and most comfortable option to keep me from having trouble while training.

At night, she had exactly the opposite set of advice. It was more sanitary and could handle any potentially heavy flows. All in all, I had no desire to face this moment. It was almost too weird, but every girl in the developed world had to put up with it. What made me any different?

Aside from a curse, being comfortable in my masculine identity, and this being put upon my by the work of a moron?

If they could do it, so could I.

So, doctor’s suggestion, insert it was.
“Airen, hurry and get dressed. I still have to do my hair, and we need to get moving if we’re going to meet up with Akane and Ryoga.”

I was startled out of my reverie by a knock on the bathroom door. One of the private torments of having to share such a space with housemates. Even if she was my girlfriend. I was not going to let her see me do this. Gritting my teeth, I just went to it.

Shuddering as … well it was actually far less weird than I thought it’d be. Now I was feeling stupid for being so freaked out by the idea of putting anything in such a place. Oh well, whatever. Shampoo freely admitted she had to take the same course of action because of her martial training.

Once you got used to it, she claimed, you didn’t notice anymore. It was far better a choice than having to deal with the blood.

Exhaling, I just rushed through getting dressed. Snatching the underwear back into place and making sure everything was adjusted and comfortable. The school uniform was a button down blouse, short sleeves in the warm months, with a slip over skirt. With that done, I unlocked the door for Shampoo.

“Sorry.” Was my curt apology. A blush stole onto my face, even though there was nothing to feel shame over. Millions of girls and women did this across the globe. Right now, I wasn’t any different.

Shampoo made no comment. Gave no tease. Just stood behind me with a huff and grabbed a brush. Beginning to run it through my hair with skilled, long strokes. Smoothing out the lengthy mass and then quickly braided it with well practiced fingers. The pigtail dropped well below my shoulders now. Hard to think it had actually grown that long. All since I’d met this girl.

The first time we’d bathed together she had offered to wash my scalp. Then had proceeded to quite forcefully lay into me for being a fairly typical guy and not taking all that much care of it. I kept it clean, was enough for me. She’d promptly done the work of trimming the split ends off, and showing me the great pains to which she went in order to keep hers so shiny and beautiful.

From that point forward I was on notice. Until I went bald, if she could keep her hair as a lovely as dark silk. There was no excuse for her betrothed to not keep the same commitment. She was going to respect me by keeping up every facet of her looks, I should show her the same respect.

Guess I can’t complain with the results, it had a life and luster to it I’d never seen before. It hadn’t really grown much in the years before, but where it just at my neck beforehand. Now it was well
below. She had a point, there were girls who would kill to have hair like mine. Just one more part to both stab my masculine identity, and stroke my feminine vanity.

“Ranma we have no time to be lazy. Have to get dressed and moving.” Her diction was getting better, if still a bit clipped. I don’t know if she kept speaking like this out of habit, or choice. Perhaps she thought her pidgin Japanese was cute. Though, she would speak with full sentences around Mom. Maybe trying to show how quickly she learned, and how quickly she took up the proper and expected polite tone.

Unlike me, she wore her hair as usual. She had long since mastered her preferred style. Brushing out the full length until it was free of any tangles and knots. Then formed a couple bun shapes on either side, putting in her favorite ribbons. Pulled two long fringes forward of her ear and adjusted her bangs. Even with that, she had hair in excess which cascaded down her back in a black waterfall and fell well below her hips.

She’d doubtless inherited the genes for such fabulous hair from Cologne, who even in her advanced age had a thick, white mass that tumbled down just as long. On Shampoo it was perfect, beautiful and quitisential to who she was.

Without another word she kissed me quickly and snatched me out of the bathroom so we could get on to the dojo and join up with the Tendo sisters and Ryoga and be on our way. My parents had left earlier this morning. Mom to help Kasumi with breakfast. Pop to allegedly work with Soun to begin planning our collective training. More like play shogi and get drunk. The training routine would be an afterthought, but whatever.

My stomach reminded that I had yet to eat. The quicker we were off, the better.

Shoes on, bags in hand, we dashed out of the house and got ourselves moving. The quick way.

We took to fence tops, light posts, building roofs, and whatever else was a handy leaping platform. Something told me I should’ve been mindful of the potential panty flashes I was putting on, but I couldn’t work up the effort to care. If I started worrying over every little bit of feminine nuance I was going to have an aneurysm.

Shampoo didn’t seem to care about it, and Pop would just lampoon me for acting like a ‘shy, spoiled little girl’ if I showed any visible worry over it. Modesty had no place in martial arts, after all. If it came to such trivial concerns or your life. Give up all to survive.
The very thought suddenly had me chortling as I lead the way. Going from a boundary fence of someone’s yard up to the roof of an apartment building, to an electrical-pole and then on to the next platform.

“What you laugh at, Airen?” Shampoo called from just behind me. Easily keeping pace hot on my heels, and her timing just enough not to run over them. Or keeping a parallel line of travel with me. In all cases she was close enough to catch my amusement.

“Ah, nothin’ just a funny thought about my old man.”

Her face scrunched up, but she didn’t inquire. Her preference was to play ‘Bash the Panda’ not laugh at him. Even if both wound up having similar effect. I just kept grinning as we continued on moving. The stupid image of Pop in a schoolgirl’s skirt just helped bolster my mood. Thanks to my medication I was feeling much more level headed and not nearly so uncomfortable. Hopefully, when the bleeding did start, the worst of my suffering would go with it.

Ironically cathartic in a way. Washing away the old pains, in a manner of speaking.

We arrived at the dojo in record time. Just inside of ten minutes. Coming to the genkan and shedding our shoes as we moved inside.

“We’re here.” I called out as I led the way into the family room to gather with everyone else.

“Alright, time to face the music.” Biting on my lip a minute before I took in a deep breath and sighed. Stepping into the room and joining everyone else at the breakfast table. Mom, Kasumi and the fathers were currently the only occupants. The sight of me caused various reactions.

Soun held his peace, just keeping his nose buried in his paper. Cigarette slowly burning in his mouth. Though he was thoughtful enough to be sitting by the door, with a fan blowing out, carrying his exhales that direction. Genma instantly went into arrest, his chopsticks pointing right at me.

“Boy, what are you wearing?!” He suddenly went quiet when he noticed out of the corner of his eye, a thumb sliding across the hilt of the family honor blade. A visible shiver climbed up his spine and he
quickly coughed, amending his language. Mom never failed to keep him quickly inline. “I mean, Son, why are you wearing that uniform?”

“We discussed then, Genma. Our child is wearing that uniform, Dear, because at the current moment, our son has the body of our daughter. You wouldn’t be able to explain that to me, would you? Genma?” And so they went back and forth a minute, emphasising my gender with drawn out language. Mom’s voice never raised in tone, but her fingers did continue to stroke the hilt of that sword. Something about her being so collected and calm, while looking angry, was even scarier than if she had just snapped outright.

“It’s also not polite to point at others with your utensils, Dear.” She just smiled and kissed his cheek. Though the threat hanging over his head didn’t abate until she dismissed him with that show of affection and turned back to me. “Oh you two look lovely.”

“Yes they do, don’t they Auntie …oh I know, let me go get the camera. We need to take a picture of this.” Kasumi almost glowed as she stood to leave the room.

“That’s a splendid idea, Kasumi dear. Get your sisters and darling Ryoga out here, and we’ll take some photos.” Mom clapped her hands and smiled, motioning everyone to stand and move out into the yard. Oh no, she was falling into mushy mode.

Without accepting complaint she ushered us out and soon we were joined by the remaining three teenagers in the house. Ryoga’s eyes quickly shot wide and he pointed, jaw working but never forming much of a coherent statement.

“Ranma … you … skirt … why … ?”

“Oh hello ladies, don’t you look good.” Nabiki had that shark grin. The one which spoke of her scenting possible revenue for her wallet. She began to both metaphorically and literally circle us like prey. Herding Akane in to join Shampoo and myself. Pinning us together with her movement. No doubt she was already counting her yen from photo sales, and who knows what other racket she was running.

“Nabiki.” Akane uttered in weak protest, “It’s just my uniform.”

The middle Tendo finally broke off and put a fresh roll of film into her camera. Picking what would be the best angle before passing it over to Kasumi. Then strolled over to join us. Her grin still wide
and never lost that carnivorous, pleased slant to it.

Ryoga’s brain tried to cycle between the three of us. Somewhere he found the presence of mind to turn a deep pink and look at his shoes.

“Akane, you look really pretty with your hair like that.”

I could freely admit, she did look nice. While her hair wasn’t nearly as long as Shampoo’s, with the bow holding some of it in a v-pattern. The way it helped frame her face. She was cute in the strongest sense of that word. It was so strange how she could be so different from my lover, but radiated beauty that was no less as captivating. If I hadn’t picked out and settled on Shampoo ...

{Yeah, I would’ve fallen for this girl and hard. But no point dwelling on the would’a and could’a.}

“Oh, thank you Ryoga, you look very nice too.”

“Really? Ah ..he he he … it’s nothing .. I just brushed my hair and gelled it a little.”

I let my eyes swing between the pair. Studying their reactions quietly. Naturally, he was the poor schoolboy focusing on his first crush. Embarrassed out of his gourd to have the mere privilege of speaking to her. Her on the other hand.

{Damn, I know that look, I know that tone of voice. Sorry Ryoga, you’ve been friendzoned already man. Well shoot, so much for that idea. He’s crushing, and she ain’t interested. Maybe with time?}

“Well you do look nice, Akane. I like that look with your hair, it’s very pretty.” The girl suddenly found the top of her slippers very interesting, and turned a bright pink herself.

“You really think so Ranma?” Her voice dropped an octave and soon her eyes were anywhere but in my direction. A certain other girl was also observing, and my ribs took a subtle but stiff blow from her elbow.

{Oh crap, are we going to do this damn game in reverse? Seriously?!”}
I gave Shampoo’s hand a squeeze and slipped our joined grip behind her back. Time for a quick makeup maneuver. Pinching her butt while my fingers were shielded behind her skirt. Thankfully, it worked and she just grinned and punched me softly in the arm.

“Forgiven, this time. And later.” She mouthed at me in Mandarin. Pacified in her fury for now, she gave my hand a squeeze back and we began to form up in a line so Kasumi and Mom could take pictures. How long before some of these photos were on the open Furinkan market, in wallet, poster, and billboard size?

When Mom was satisfied, until she could get us to a professional photographer at least, we returned to breakfast and then five of us dashed out the door. With Nabiki peeling off to go ‘tend some stuff.’ I don’t think I have to work to hard on speculating what that was. I didn’t bother with running on the fence today. Just keeping to the collective group and moving off to the school so we could get to our orientation on time.

What headaches to look forward to, I dare not even speculate on beforehand.

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“And that covers our basic introduction to you. I want to welcome all of our new First Years students formally to Furinkan High. Strive always for excellence in your grades, and to move toward your future with your best efforts. Remember, your teachers, and your administrators are here to provide guidance in any problems you have.

“My door is always open to you, no matter the topic. Club selections will be tomorrow afternoon, so classes will be cancelled early for our exhibition day. We strive to provide you with the best possible sports and activities, so feel free to look at everything.

“Now, before I dismiss everyone to go gather in your classrooms and meet your fellow group mates, and your homeroom teachers, Upperclassman Kuno, would like to address the First Year class.

“Thank you all for coming, and I want to personally wish you a good year.”

As a collective group, everyone gave a loud but polite, “Thank you Mr. Tanaka.”
The whole gym was packed with the freshmen students. Even early it was starting to get crowded. The four of us found free seats where we could, somewhere in the middle of one side of the room. Letting the kindly Mister Tanaka go over the school’s history, goals, expectations and all that. Yadda yadda, welcome, blah blah. I tried not to yawn but I failed.

Even Shampoo looked ready to fall asleep. Although I had met the man a few days ago and he seemed nice if a bit mousy. I hadn’t expect he could speak in such a hypnotic monotone. He had several heads leaning forward on occasion, and not just mine. Somehow he made the routine, academic stuff that I really didn’t care much about even more boring than I would otherwise find it.

I’d casually flipped my way through some of the textbooks in my offtime while we were waiting for the break to end. I could only grin in triumph. “Cheat sheet” the strange apparition in my weird fever dream had said. I recalled almost all of the information in its entirety. I was a sixteen year old heading into high school with a masters level education from a previous life. Oh yeah, I had the academic crap whipped.

More time to focus on my training and developing my skills to prepare for the challenges I know lay ahead. The chaos and all the adventures it entailed were still going to come, I have little doubt.

Then Tanaka said it. The event that would have kick started weeks of frustration and upset for Akane. I was expecting to walk into it well after the fact. Now I was going to see how this madness would play out first hand. Maybe I could spare her much of the grief upfront. She wasn’t alone now. She had three highly talented friends to support her.

“And now one of your upper classmen would like to address you.” Tanaka bowed and proceeded to the side of the stage. While a new speaker stepped forth. The chaos of school was now to begin.

He strode up to the podium with all the arrogance I expected, and then some. Tatewaki Kuno. Dressed in the kendo uniform for our school; a dark colored uwagi coat, tucked into black hakama. His usual attire in almost every appearance I remembered. He was tall, with a full head of dark brown hair. He might have been handsome, if he didn’t look like the smuggest piece of self assured male ego this side of the Pacific.

Sure, I have a huge ego, and I have a big mouth. Habits I just can’t keep down much of the time. They were just part of who Ranma was, who I was. But I wasn’t fool enough to think of myself as the kami’s gift to the world. As if it and all creatures within should praise their fortunes I was in it. Nor did I carry some kind of centuries old illusions to the superiority of my noble blood. Or whatever delusions swirled in that head of his.
“Greeting Freshman, Underclassmen. Fellow students, ladies and gentlemen. I am Tatewaki Kuno, age seventeen. I am known as the ‘Blazing Meteor’ of the grand sport of kendo.” The teachers couldn’t resist the urge to roll their eyes, or drop faces into palms at his utterance. “I am also captain of our fine kendo club. Should any of you wish to join, be you man or woman, then please, feel free to journey to our humble hall and apply.

“I must warn you, however, only the strongest shall be allowed to join our club. For it is not some mere ‘hobby’ but a grand sport, the very spirit of the sword itself, left to us by our noble and honored ancestors. To practice kendo at Furinkan High, one must extol the warrior spirit, and the virtues of Bushido! Should you seek to join, be brave and prepare to cross blades with me. For I shall know from your fighting spirit, if you are true and worthy to practice with me and my fellows.”

No one seemed the least bit eager to join him in the weird fantasy he was weaving of this elegant world of gallantry and chivalry he was stringing together. I believe it was quite obvious to everyone in the crowd, he was a couple hammers short of a full toolbox. Even the girls who had been admiring him a moment beforehand were reeling back in worry as he went on and on.

“What crazy boy talking about, Ran … Ran ko ?” Shampoo whispered to me. Catching herself before she called me by proper name. It was going to take practice to call me by how the school thought I was. Was going to take me awhile to get used to hearing it. Her face contorted in a sour expression. “Remind me of too stupid friend from back home.”

I almost wanted to snort when she mentioned that particular fool, but I contained it. Her ‘friend’ Mousse. Mu Tzu. If he could be called a friend. A moron who was nearly blind, and more like a love crazed stalker than friend, but whatever. She could classify him however she wanted. My answer was quickly drowned out when Kuno unveiled the piece de resistance to his rambling, incoherent babble.

“When, that aside, there is a far more important matter I must address to the entire school. Sasuke!” He called out, and soon there was a whine and the entire PA system was buzzing with his voice. A stage light turned on at the back of the gym, bringing the man to full illumination as the main gym dimmed. A full size studio quality camera rolled forward from the side of the stage.

Men dressed in the full black clothing getup from traditional Japanese theater were working the equipment. The whole ‘we’re the background, making nature move, don’t mind us’ thing. Their faces masked in cloth as dark as their outfits.
How the hell did he arrange all this?

Nevermind, his family was stupidly wealthy and I was in an anime styled universe where that meant his money could buy almost anything without delay or consequence, regular logic didn’t apply in expected fashion.

“To all my brothers in the student body, be you refined and versed in the elegant and courtly fashion of love, or a low hound of base lusts, I say to you this. There are many fair flowers in this garden that you may pursue. However, among the whole of the field, in this new class, there are three who stand above all others. No offense to you other maidens, for not all can shine as the Sun, for t’would render Her majestic glow little more than a speck of light, among a sea of lights.

“Nay, there are those who stand above all in their reflection of beauty, and feminine elegance. This year, there are three who are maidens molded in the divine image of Venus. Behold our elegant goddesses.”

Three large banners unfurled and rolled down, from top of the curtain rod to the floor of the stage. Stunningly high quality images which would cost a fortune to produce. Of course, this fool had the money to spare for their production.

Ryoga’s lungs blasted out his hair, while the three girls beside him; well, two girls and one part timer, all developed ticks in our eyes. We were looking at ourselves. Larger than life and for every eye in the school to see. A few stunned gazes moved from the stage, to us, and back. Doing repeated, slow pan takes.

His spotlight clicked off, repositioned and then highlighted the banner to his right. “Behold, the fair Akane Tendo.. See the brilliant streaks of lightning in her silken tresses, but the tender, sweet concern of a maiden fair. Gentle and soft as the morning breeze, yet fierce and powerful as a hunting tigress. Complete and utter mistress of her domain”

His light moved again to his left. “Behold, the exotic princess of deepest China. The bold warrior maiden Shampoo. Though she be from foreign land, she is a spice of deepest flavor. Molded in the very primordial clay which the gods fashioned Pandora. Beautiful, elegant, cunning. The ideal companion for a man with a warrior’s soul.”

The light shifted once more to the middle banner and he continued on. “Behold, demure and fair. Born from a mother who is indeed the ideal wife to a samurai. She is small, quick, and powerful. The
swift hart in human form. Ranko Saotome, the gentlest purities distilled into essence of a woman.

“Know, they are skilled martial artists all. The Queens of our humble school. With beauty, skill, and talent in excess. Should any man wish to date one of these heavenly constellations, he must first prove himself worthy by conquering her in battle. For only a warrior of true might may claim the right and worth to have the hand of she whom he desires.

“However, my friends, let us remember our honor. Though you may fight for the hand of one, or test yourself against each, be you sincere and loyal in your devotions. For a man may have only one Eve in the garden of his heart! Find the one to whom you would pledge your undying devotion, and seek her to the fullest of your ability!”

There was a flash and rumble as the background crew playing to the stage directions of his ridiculous performance, one toggled the lights quickly and someone was visibly rattling a large sheet of metal.

“So says the Knight Champion of Furinkan High!” A loud slam of a striker on a gong, the hell did they get that? As if to make his pronouncement some kind of final and imperial decree and then the fool bowed.

“Thank you, that is all.” Bowing deeply at the hip, to no applause, only confusion. Without even missing a beat he turned and began to stride away. Moving as I imagine a peacock might, strutting the display of his beautiful tail fan.

The lights returned to normal and the stage crew calmly took up their kit. The banners loosened from their overhead supports, rolled up, and with their cables and equipment calmly proceeded out of the gym as if this were the routine end of a the day’s filming. Our suddenly very tired looking vice-principal came back to the podium.

“Thank you, Mr. Kuno for that … unusual display. Alright, please rise, your home room teachers will be organizing you into your groups. Please look for the signs with your assigned class number and meet in an orderly fashion outside.”

The faculty came forward and began to raise up large cardboard signs with class group numbers on them and called out for students to meet up outside in a few minutes. There was instant clamor as everyone was curious what kind of madness they had just witness. While four of us just sat rooted to our seats. Blinking, angrily twitching, and outright flabbergasted.
“Airen, what just happen?” Shampoo’s lips were a tight line, the color almost squeezed out of them from the tension the were enduring.

Akane’s right eye just pulsed with a rhythmic tick. A couple pulls in the muscle every second. She had no words, just stiffly made herself stand and begin to stomp down the stairs on the bleachers. The heavy thuds announcing her passage. A blue corona began to form around her as she walked, and students promptly fell out of her way.

“Ryoga, why don’t you keep up with her, make sure she doesn’t … you know, break something, or someone.” I muttered, fighting to keep my anger tightly reigned myself. The Lost Boy blinked, looked to me and then just gave a limp nod before tailing behind Akane. Not too close, he’d seen what one of her angry spells could do to stone masonry, and theoretically to a human.

“Shampoo, I think our lives just got really, really annoying.” I growled, lacing my fingers into her own and we both squeezed tight. Mutual sign of frustration and unyielding support through it. People stared but no one dared comment as we followed Akane.

The *Three Queens of Furinkan* were given a horribly wide passage and little interaction. Probably something to do with the ‘martial artist’ reference from Kuno, and the fact three of us were all sporting some form of very venomous aura. Our homeroom teacher, Ms Ichiro didn’t even try to ask. Simply getting us into an ordered pair of lines and walking off to the classroom to begin assigning seats and let us make self introductions.

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“Ugh, I’m exhausted.” Shoulders slumped and half leaning on Shampoo while we made our way home. The school day hadn’t gotten worse after the initial shock of Kuno’s now magnified idiocy. However, our classmates had quickly surrounded and bombarded us with questions. It would figure, the four of us were assigned to a neat little square, toward the middle of the room.

As soon as the teacher gave us leave to socialize it turned into a zoo. They were all intently interested in how the four of us knew one another. The girls swamped Ryoga with curious questions which of the three of us he was dating. His weak protests did little to make them believe him, and the guys just rolled their eyes, as if he were lying outright.

“Sure, Ryoga, three hotties like these, and you aren’t sweet on one of them? I bet.”
Was the general consensus amongst them all. Not used to such attention both he and Akane were rendered to cute, blushing fits. Shampoo was a trained warrior, heir to a respected family Matriarch, and pride of her village. While sometimes the fast speech might get her, she was in her element, playing court.

Me? This was kind of new. Oh sure I had plenty of friends, but we didn’t do the whole maul with twenty people thing. It took a long while to diffuse the situation down to groups of people and ease them off. The torrent of questions and friend chatter was more than I had put up with in a long time. So I was mentally drained by the end of it.

“Me too … what was that?” Ryoga groaned, looking as if he’d just run a full marathon, whilst hauling a five ton boulder on his back. Which coincidentally might be what it would take to drain his stamina sufficiently to so drag his feet.

“First day of high school?” Akane offered with a weak little laugh of her own. Trudging along with the rest of us and looking no less at the end of her mental function for the day. We didn’t feel like talking much, we were out of words. I’ve never had that happen before.

“This better stop soon … Shampoo no want do that again.” She mumbled, leaning her head on mine. “Like be in … err … coop of chicken, yes? All cluck cluck like talking big important thing or something.”

“Close enough.” I muttered and sighed in relief when we were finally in sight of the house. Never in any lifetime had I experienced such a tiring day. Not even my worst day of work left me so bereft of energy. How could socializing burnout your energy reserves? I know it wasn’t true, but I could swear I just lost five pounds through the sheer tedium of handling my homeroom.

As we closed in on the dojo, a dark blotch came flying over the property fence and landed in the middle of the road. It resolved itself into a mass of black and white fur, wielding a wooden sign which it proceeded to use as a weapon.

~Get changed and prepare for some intense training boy!~

The kanji was quite literally being shoved into my face with the clear intent of slapping me around. Instinct took over and adrenaline suddenly surged in my veins. A fist lashing out and punching clean through the sigh. I was in the process of going into a tight spin to put the back of my hand in Genma’s cheek, but I was beaten to the punch, literally.
“Shampoo no in mood, stupid panda!”

Training with my father for the better part of a month, with his random sneak attacks and dirty tricks had put a wariness and swift sense of retaliation in both of my training partners. They snapped into action as soon as they knew what game we were playing.

Pummel the instructor.

Shampoo quickly cracked a sharp kick into the back of his knee, pitching him off balance. To then put his face into intimate contact with Ryoga’s fist. The one-two combo had the desired effect and dropped the old fool like a sack of rice. I didn’t bother to spare him any pity. He’d taken worse beatings from the three of us, and probably far more horrible from his old master.

All he could do was twitch on the ground. A quivering mass of blubber and fur, stunned but not long defeated. With a huff, my hand was snatched and I was pulled ahead by my lover. Who turned up her nose and snorted as she lead us on toward the house. Ryoga just gave Akane a weak shrug and smiled, proceeding on after.

I glanced over my shoulder, and a sly grin spread on my face as I watched Akane. She glanced down to my old man, shook her head, and then followed, and she didn’t bother trying to go around him. She walked right across his back like he was a bear skin rug, adding her own insult to his injuries. Probably wouldn’t do more than pop his spine for him, but she did give her heels a little extra dig and twist as she walked.

Then caught up to us and we were all on our way back to the house. Leaving behind the temporarily dazed body of the old fool. He didn’t stay down long. He never did. Soon he rolled over and sat up. Growling at our backs and waving a new sign. I still don’t know where he hid those things.

~This isn’t over Ranma!~

“Growf, grr!”

Seeing he was getting nowhere with our attention, he promptly flipped the sign about and waved it in wide sweeps, like that would suddenly get us to look.

~Oh come on, it was a joke.~
Flip. ~Respect your elders!~

Flip. ~Send Kasumi with some aspirin … please?~

Our quartet just rounded the property wall and proceeded inside the gate to greet Kasumi and Mom and go get changed to relax for the afternoon. Pop continued to play the pitiable fool for ten minutes before Mom finally collected him. The kettle she was carrying looked particularly hot.

I just grinned with a sadistic glee as he howled in pain when he was doused.

“Owww! Nodoka that’s hottttt!”

I let out a particularly loud grunt this time. The tight ball of tension in my shoulders was being stubborn. Took a bit longer than normal, but skilled fingers soon got it unwound and I cooed in delight following. Shampoo’s digits were a powerful balm for soothing knots and sore spots buried in the muscles.

There was no homework, and we didn’t feel like intense workouts, so we’d shed the uniforms for more comfortable clothing and picked out a nice spot on the lawn to relax. The sun was bright overhead and it was warm, but not muggy like it was bound to be come summer. An occasional, nice breeze slipped through the air just to accentuate how blissfully agreeable the weather was being.

Shampoo and I had taken a swift trip home to collect a change of clothing and returned. Our choices had decidedly turned up the fan service dial a bit, but Ryoga was surviving. Pretty sure we were steadily immunizing him to displays of female flesh. When he ever gets a girlfriend and gets to explore being a man, he might just avoid passing out in a pool of his own blood. On second thought, the moment he sees her body bared, he’ll fall right out no matter his preparations. Like touching a hot stove for the first time, some things just have to be experienced to be understood.

To forgo shutting down Ryoga’s brain I had pulled out the most covering bikini top I had. Had the stupid things, might as well use them. This one covered the most flesh of the collection. I had paired it comfortable shorts rather than more exposing bottoms. Shampoo has no such worries of modesty and was in something that skirted the line of ‘decent,’ but ooo she looked so yummy. Especially with the liberties she was taking of sliding her hips along my back while helping work out the stress.
from today.

We had drug Kasumi along with us, she deserved to relax every now and then too. Startlingly she gave Shampoo a run for her money in their own sunwear. It was hard to think that someone so prim and proper would go for such a flesh displaying two piece. One of those hard to explain, covered everything important, but left none of her incredible figure to the imagination. Her measurements in all areas challenge both myself and Shampoo for top place.

[Those dresses do hide her beauty, damn I never imagined she was so hot.] I didn’t let my eyes linger, however. Shampoo’s hands could just as quickly go from massaging my muscles to pinching them in excruciatingly painful ways.

Poor Akane was pulling the modest act. She was in a soft blue one-piece. The girl did have a very nice figure, but I guess she didn’t feel comfortable in a flesh display competition with us all of us. She looked a tinge envious as her eyes roamed.

Two heavy beach blankets were spread out on the grass and we were soaking up the sun. Shampoo had played devoted wife and had essentially spoiled me with attention. The longer we stayed in the Tendo home, the less she was concerned with what she felt was stuffy, nonsense Japanese decorum. Oh she didn’t try to suck my tonsils out in front of everyone else, but she didn’t care what they thought of her other open displays of affection.

I guess it was some innate possessive instinct. With three females around who were potential fiancee candidates, even if we had burned that notion pretty well, she had no issues continually marking her property.

I couldn’t work up the will to complain. I’d never been so spoiled before. It also was something of a challenge as I had to keep stretching my romantic talents and find ways to show her my appreciation in turn. Really did need to think of something special I could for her soon, I was just having a rough time figuring out what.

“Mmm, Ryoga, a little to the right … down .. ooo there.” Akane sighed as she too was getting a massage from the boy who was trying to work his way into her good graces. In his rather dopey, I suppose cute way. His cheeks were set in a bright blush as he worked on her back carefully. The poor boy couldn’t work up the nerve to pull off his tank top, so there he was the most dressed of the five.

His fingers worked Akane’s back like she was a piece of delicate china and not a highly trained fighter. With his strength, however, it was probably a safer thing. Was doing a fine job from the way
Akane’s eyes had rolled closed and she was giving a happy hum on every breath. That made his blush go from dull to incandescent. If he glowed any brighter planes were going to start landing in the yard.

Shampoo slid off my back to pour some tea, only to frown when she noticed the pitcher empty. The girl bounced up, in more ways than one, almost causing Ryoga to develop a nasal leak. Paying him no mind she vanished inside the house to get more tea and ice. Yeah I was going to have to do something special for her soon.

My romantic planning was quite suddenly halted when a pair of hands grabbed hold of my posterior region and squeezed. It was a full on, unabashed grope from a borderline pervert. From the feel of them, it was easy to take a guess who was helping herself to a thorough examination of my glutes. Hadn’t even heard her sneak up, and the sun was casting shadows in the other direction from where I was laying. She was good, I’ll give her that.

Rather than jump out of my skin or act all indignant I just sighed. “Can I help you Nabiki? I don’t even have back pockets on these shorts, so you’re not going to find any money in there.”

Ever the prepared, sly demoness she was, the girl just leaned in and cooed in her my ear. “You’ve got a great butt for a girl Ranma, with those muscles and these hips, there’s all kinds of potential money here. If you’d be so kind as to go change into a proper bikini, I could make a killing selling the pictures.”

“Uh huh, and I’m sure your photography fee would be only thirty-five percent, and the agent fee would be a modest fifteen?” I could almost hear her pout that I wasn’t getting upset and angrily clucking like a disturbed hen. Or the fact I wasn’t shivering with her breath tickling the fine hairs along the side of my face. Took a lot of effort to keep from showing that reaction. I still managed.

The girl was ever quick to adapt and she just leaned back affecting a hurt voice. “You wound me Saotome. For you? Special deal, total package at forty-five.”

“That’s so kind of you.” I drawled, not bothering to spare her a glance. “You might want to move before Shampoo gets back and finds you playing around with her toys. This butt belongs to her.”

Her sigh was long and suffering, and her fingers kept their exploration despite the threat of an angry warrior-woman girlfriend. “Must be good to be only children, you two should really learn how to share. I mean especially since there are three girls here who are potential fiancees.”
Kasumi took that sentence in stride, shaking her head with a sigh. “Nabiki, I believe we already settled this matter when Ranma first arrived. If any of us are going to be engaged, it’s because we want to be, not because of some old promise. And besides, Ranma and Shampoo are already engaged.”

“Kasumi, do you really think Daddy and Mister Saotome will give up that easily? They’re not ready to sell the farm just yet. I’ve heard them cooking up some stupid ideas, which they forget about as quick as they pop up, but they’re still trying to figure out how to get one of us attached to Ranma.”

The entire time she spoke, her fingers continued to grope my behind. Exploring the entire landscape like she was trying to create a map for herself. My warning growl went entirely unheeded by the girl as she kept entertaining herself, and confirming what I already suspected. Figures the old man wouldn’t give up without being sneaky.

“Well, if you don’t want to put your name in the hat, I can’t see much to complain about here. I mean sure, Ranma’s a girl half the time, but she’s hot, and the boy is pretty sexy too. What do you say Ranma, get hitched to me and we can model together. I look pretty good in a bikini, if I do say so myself. All you have to do is be sexy for the camera, I can handle all the business matters.”

For emphasis the girl leaned forward and a couple soft lumps pressed into my back. I had to grind my teeth together and keep myself from making a sound. The girl wasn’t gifted as Kasumi, Shampoo, or myself, but her chest felt like it was pretty amazing. All the Tendo girls were high on the scale of attractive. Might not have been so bad to be engaged to one of them, but I had Shampoo.

I was about to just get up and move inside when she finally broke off and changed directions. Seeing as I wasn’t going to play to her barbs, she turned on her baby sister.

“Well, Kasumi is out, so that puts me at the top of the list. But I’ll be nice, if you let me rent Ranma out for photo shoots, I’ll let you have him instead Akane. I can verify, this meat is grade a, prime cut.” Her hand smacked one of the cheeks of my butt for emphasis.

“Cut that out … “ I growled, which was a mistake as I sat up, and her hands promptly darted out like a pair of starved leeches. Pressing into and bouncing my chest. She grinned to find they overflowed her palms. My teeth ground all the more. God I wanted to slap her, but despite my hand twitching in want, I restrained myself. While it might be momentarily satisfying, her revenge would be long and cold. To say nothing of how everyone else would react to my loss of control.

“Yup, the produce is high grade Akane. And just think, you can explore everything. How many times can you get yourself a meaty hunk, and a hot babe in one package? I wouldn’t blame you for
Akane had been steadily preparing her boiled lobster impersonation. Skin flushing a deeper shade of pink, which finally turned to red. The girl sputtered and shot bolt upright. Cheeks looking close to catching fire.

“Leave Ranma alone, Nabiki! Yes he’s handsome and it might not be bad if he was my boyfff…. “ Her eyes widened as she realised what was coming out of her mouth. It swung loose on her jaw for a minute before snapping closed. Her cheeks went from red into a very dangerous looking shade of purple.

Just as she turned around I noticed her eyes began to glisten. She then shot back into the house with her feet touching the floor so quickly her steps were soft, not thumping loud. Poor Ryoga suffered a terminal shutdown and systems had to reboot. Between Nabiki’s sexual harassment on my body, then Akane’s near admission of attraction to me, he had gone from embarrassed to heart aching.

Shampoo just rounded the corner from the kitchen, a curious and somewhat worried expression on her eyes as she glanced back the way Akane had run toward her room. Then looked to all of us in concern. Locking eyes with me in open question on what she’d missed. The pitcher of tea and some snack cakes in hand. I just motioned up toward Akane’s room. With only a nod she turned and headed for the stairs.

Nabiki? She was ever the unflappable, distant ice queen. As if the affairs of we mere mortals simply did not concern her. The girl had slid into Akane’s abandoned lounge and taken up some of the lotion to begin rubbing it into her skin. Not the least bit concerned she’d just upset her sister.

Kasumi gave a disappointed frown, as much as Kasumi ever frowned at least, but said nothing. Wouldn’t have helped. Nabiki would just say her jokes had gone misunderstood, or something to that matter. The girl was slippery as an eel soaked in oil. She had a convenient excuse for everything, and would never be held to the emotional cost of her actions.

All I could do was roll my eyes and snort giving her one hard look before leaving myself. She was attractive sure, but girl was top tier cruel in her own way. Her amusement would come before everything, and if people shed tears for her chuckles, oh well. They needed to toughen up, not she needed to quit being mean.

An easy leap took me up to Akane’s window. Where I tapped on it softly a few times. Now was the hard part. How to calm her down without either playing on her hopes, or hurting her feelings more.
She was already in her room, and snatching a pull over dress from her closet. She took one look at me in the window and frowned. The dress snatched over her head and to her hips. She was so upset she didn’t even bother trying to work the wrinkles out. Just turning her rigid body to the window and sliding it open.

“What Ranma? I don’t need your pity!” Her words were tense and she was straining to keep from either bursting into further tears or let her anger run wild.

“Can I come in? I just want to talk.” Voice soft and trying to sound empathetic without being patronizing or talking down to her. I don’t really know how well her mind interprets kindness when she’s in such a huff. Her anger was still a powerful, unbridled force when unleashed. She had a habit of not hearing what people meant when she was mad.

With a grunt she just stepped over and sat on her bed. Arms crossing while she continued to keep her face strained and tense. Moisture was still pooling at the side of her eyes. Nabiki had stabbed her deep with that one. One of these days I was going to have to repay for that. Being a mean sibling was one thing, but this was just cruel.

Pulling out her chair, I sat with it facing the wrong way round. Leaning my arms onto the back rest and faced her. My eyes studied her quietly, and despite having to dab at her eyes she put on a strong front. Looking right back into my eyes even as she cleared away the droplets before they could become tears.

“You want to talk about it?” Keeping my voice soft and neutral as possible. Concerned without leaning one way or the other.

“Talk about what?” She lashed out in a tense voice. “How my sister can be such a bitch? How she likes to embarrass me in front of my friends? How she’s trying to suggest that I … that we .. “ Her voice wavered as the angry tone began to fade. Looking away and biting on her lip.

“Yeah, that, all of those, any of those. Whatever you feel like talkin’ about. Or we could just go out the dojo and you could try and work those frustrations out.”

Taking a slow breath, she finally broke down and actually sniffled. That in itself was more cute than sad. I kept my grin contained though. She didn’t need to see that and misinterpret my amusement.
A hand wiped across her face as she sighed again. “I’m sorry Ranma. It’s not like that, at least I don’t think it is.” Hands falling in her face she let out a long growl of frustration. “I just don’t know. You and Shampoo, you’re so happy together. And. And.” She went silent again, words failing her.

“You see us and want to know what that feels like? To understand what that kind of happiness can be?” This time I did smile, working it out slowly as she nodded. “I’m sorry Akane. We kind of swept into your life and turned everything upside down. You were going to have a fiance forced on to one of you, and said boy actually turns into a sexy girl.”

She blushed a bit at that, which I found curious but didn’t probe. I just continued on. “You’ve grown up your whole life in a dojo, but here I come from a life spent on the road. Trainin’ in martial arts, with a rival and a girlfriend who’ve done the same. All three of us have had dedicated teacher and training, while your Dad is … a nice guy.” Picking my words carefully, she was still pretty sensitive.

“Then my Mom drops back into my life, even if I didn’t really remember her. And you can never have that chance again. And then we’re all swept off again out of the house.” Taking a breath, I closed my eyes. “I have a lot of blessings I do take for granted. I’m sorry if that upsets you.”

She grunted and waved her hands furiously, causing me to look at her once more. “It’s not your fault, it just … I shouldn’t feel that way.”

“But you do.” I didn’t have to see her nod to know the truth of her emotions on the matter. “Not like we can control how we feel ‘bout stuff sometimes. It’s nothin’ for me to get mad ‘bout. Don’t worry ‘kane, you can always talk to me and Shampoo. We’re friends. Talkin’ is what we’re supposed to do.”

Offering her my best smile as she nodded, relaxing a little more. “You know Ryoga’s sweet on you?” Testing that line to see if the bait was even any good for this particular fish.

“Really?” Her face scrunched up as if she couldn’t believe that. “Don’t tease me Ranma.”

“I’m not! He’s really sweet on you. Why not give him a try?” Watching her expression as she continued to refuse to believe that statement. Moving from suspicion of the truth, to just outright denial of the facts. She couldn’t bring herself to believe true.

“Ryoga’s a very sensitive guy. So sweet and kind … but I just can’t see him that way.” Then she goes and drops that bombshell on me. Oh well, scratch that one off the list. So much for trying to the
most conventional, alternate route. Still plenty of other directions to take though.

“Okay, so Ryoga’s a no, but I’m a maybe?” Arching my brow quietly as I looked to her. The blush on her cheeks returned and she suddenly became an astronomer. Eyes looking to the ceiling and keeping anywhere but on my face.

“I don’t know. Yes. Maybe. There’s just something about you that I like, Ranma.” Biting on her lip she lowered her eyes to glance to me. “It wouldn’t be right though. You and Shampoo. I couldn’t get between the two of you. You’d both hate me, and I’d hate myself more.”

“You couldn’t share?”

Her eyes snapped back to me, the fire trying to rekindle. “What?! No! No way I’d share my boyfriend with another girl, not even someone I was friends with.” She spoke that with harsh finality.

I just smirked and nodded, “Shampoo, you got your answer, you can come in now.”

Akane’s eyes went wide at the prospect someone was listening in. Seeming to have forgotten the Chinese girl in question might want to listen in on this. There was a bump behind the door. Must’ve startled her too.

“What .. Shampoo not … ooo, mean Airen.” The door opened and she stepped inside. One last glance down the hall before closing the door behind her. Leaning into the frame and glanced between the two of us.

“Shampoo glad to hear. Akane is a friend. No want Akane to be obstacle. Obstacles is for killing.” She spoke in such a matter of fact tone. Akane looked as though it was a joke at first. Seeing no signs of mirth in my lover’s eyes though, she quickly blanched at the prospect.

“Shampoo, may I?” Glancing to her with an unspoken question. She understood my query even if unspoken. She still wasn’t happy with it. The girl frowned and crossed her arms, turning her back to me and tilting her head in a haught pose. If she didn’t see it, then it didn’t happen.

The chair rolled close to the floor and Akane’s stunned face. I gently touched her cheeks. “Akane, kiss me.” Speaking in a soft voice but so serious.
The girl looked confused. That quickly giving way to panic. “What? That’s not funny Ranma! Shampoo’s right here in the room, and she’s your girlfriend … and and … we’re both girls!” Her voice raising to higher octaves as she tried to recoil from me and the embarrassing thought of what I proposed.

Shy girl was definitely cute, but it gave me enough of an answer.

Before she could smack me I let her face go and rolled back. Grin still wide on my lips as I nodded. “There’s your answer then. Maybe you’re crushing on me a little, but more because you want to have a relationship of your own. You’ve seen Shampoo try to suck my mouth off as a girl. The idea doesn’t sit well with you, does it?”

Her cheeks turned a deep shade somewhere between red and purple as she began to shake her head furiously. “I’m sorry Ranma, but I just couldn’t. Your girl side is pretty, but just … no. Even if it is you, I just couldn’t. I don’t like girls like that.”

Giving her another nod, I smiled and reached out. Giving her shoulder a soft squeeze. “That’s good enough for me. You like who you like, ‘kane. Girls, boys, don’t matter. Least that’s what I think. You like the idea of dating me, more than you’d like to date me.

“Don’t worry, ‘kane. You’ll find the right guy for you. It’s a big school, and it’s a big city. Give it time. You can always come and talk to me and Shampoo. Be happy to help how we can. Advice, feelings, don’t matter. My shoulder is always ready to lean on.

“Just, be gentle with Ryoga. He’s sensitive alright. Down right fragile.” The girl nodded and sighed. She didn’t like the prospect of breaking his heart, but had to let him down before his crush got out of hand. Though I don’t know how well he’ll take it when she does let him know.

“Now, let’s either go relax, or go practice or somethin’?”

“I could go for a session in the dojo. I feel like putting my fists through someone.”

“You’re welcome to try, Tendo. You’re welcome to try.” I grinned wider and stood. Putting the chair back in place. Shampoo and I left Akane to slip into her gi while we went to change into the clothes we’d brought for afternoon training as well.
“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Akane growled. The grip on her bag tightened until the leather creaked in protest. Knuckles going white and then popping under the strain put on them.

“Airen … why boys at this school so stupid?” Shampoo was no less angered and no less exasperated by what she beheld.

“I wish I had an answer for that. All I know right now, it’s going to be hard to keep from tearing them inside out. Especially Kuno.” I was just weary to the whole affair. I knew it was going to be a sight to behold. An annoyance spectacular.

I was not expecting this.

It seemed every single male in the school had turned out. The less physically inclined were flying banners. “Shampoo, you are my goddess!” “Akane, the chem club NEEDS you!” “Ranko, Queen of Furinkan! Most Beautiful Under The Sun!” All manner of such stupidity.

Those that weren’t in the back of the line, or hanging signs out of windows stood before us in three groups. Almost all of them from the various athletic clubs on campus. Didn’t matter the club in question. They were all here. Baseball. Basketball. Judo. Karate. Kendo. Even hockey and sumo. Just how many sports did this blasted school offer?

They formed up three groups standing under various banners. Akane to one side. Shampoo to the other. Mine in the middle. By far the largest collection of idiots by at least a quarter over the other two combined. I didn’t know whether to be flattered, and thereby not murder them. Or doubly angry because I’m neither a girl, not into boys, and was receiving the most attention. It was also something of an unintended insult to both the real girls in my company.

Ryoga just stared. The whole thing was surreal to him. Even our middle school brawls hadn’t equalled this level of outright stupidity. Sure, all the boys had fought tooth and nail in the lunchroom, but that had been fang and claw. Only the strongest could claim the last bread. Hunger was a powerful motivator for boys.

Apparently misplaced affection, or just moronic lust had an even greater lure for the adolescent brain. In this world anyway, lured by the promise of a date with one of us, under the direction of the idiot in
“Ugh, let’s just get to class. I don’t even feel like making it a competition for fun. So not in the mood for this crap. Plow thru, pull no punches, yadda yadda.”

[I’m going to have thank Mom for taking me to the doctor. I’d surely murder someone otherwise. Not sure I still won’t kill one of them now.]

My period had started late yesterday. It had not carried away all of my suffering with it, but my meds were making it manageable. My hormones were normal, as normal as they can be for a teenager anyway. So I wasn’t moody or ready to stab someone for looking at me wrong. I’d still woken up with a wicked headache, and my stomach was cramping something fierce.

Some pain medication, a hot shower, and then a good run to the dojo to pick up Akane and Ryoga and now to school had taken the edge off of it. Walking into this explosion of idiocy did nothing for my mood. I had no sympathy to spare for the hornets’ nest these dim bulbs were rousing.

With a shared nod the three of us just broke into a run. That gave the starting gun for the groups to charge. Giving loud cries of support for their chosen lovers to feel the power of their feelings. As they tried to pummel us into submission on the hopes of winning a date. They were in the for the most painful lesson of their lives.

“Ran ..Ranko, will you be okay with that many?” Akane shot me a worried glance, as I had the most to deal with by far. It was touching, but not needed.

“Psh, won’t even break a sweat. Ninety seconds, tops.” She gave me a skeptical look, still worried I might be biting off more than I could chew. She seemed to want to pull Ryoga in to help me, but I waved him off.

Shampoo said nothing, she knew quite well how easy this was going to be. Seconds later the groups were upon us. Or more, we were upon them. Their numbers might be intimidating to the inexperienced. Hell, if I’d walked into this a month ago I might well have been overwhelmed. When I was a fawn learning how to walk.

Now?
I’d long since not only gotten comfortable with this body, but how to bring my training and instincts to bear. Working with Ryoga, Shampoo, Pop, and even Akane had sharpened me to be just like the Ranma I had been before that blow to the head had woken me to a past life. I knew my reach flawlessly. I knew the limits of my strength as a female, but also my much increased speed.

Breaking into the pack and wailing on them without remorse. My sudden increase in pace startled the frontrunners into immobility. They had no idea what they were dealing with. I had been several feet from them, then just suddenly in their faces. Now in the fray I took this as a test of my muscle memory and tactical analytics.

What was the most efficient path to taking my various opponents out of the fight?

I had studied countless martial arts styles in Japan, Korea, China and beyond. Hell, I’d downright mastered most of them. The school of Indiscriminate Grappling, or Anything Goes Martial Arts took a page of philosophy I vaguely recall similar to the legendary Bruce Lee.

Be like water, you must always adapt or drown. You must always learn more. You must never stop improving. Always study different things. Incorporate it to your style. Keep that which works. Discard that which does not.

Simplify.

Don’t think. Do!

I quickly reached into that deep bag of knowledge and pulled up things which I recalled. What worked in such a situation? Complimented my speed? It all flooded into my brain with a stunning swiftness and even before I was on the lead, unlucky boy, my senses were working to full alert.

A tactical plan of swift action had formed. Tempered with the constant mantra in my head.

{These guys aren’t martial artists. I could kill ‘em if I don’t hold back. I don’t need that on my conscience.}

Keeping that running in my head I got to work. Quick and tight motions. The first kid I put my fist into his solar plexus. His lungs deflated like a balloon and he crashed back into several others. I didn’t feel his bones break. Good. I had the power right to not cause excessive damage. I wasn’t
going to be merciful, but at the same time I didn’t want to put anyone in the hospital if I could help it.

No time to focus on Shampoo or Akane. Just keep my concentration on the fight on front of me. There was a pile up as the first one stumbled back and was almost trampled by the weight of the mob behind. There was a small opening, but it was enough. I plowed in. Using short, tight punches to nerve clusters or ribs.

They weren’t nearly as powerful as I could have delivered, but they were more than sufficient to the task. I kept a stable base on my feet. Draw power up from the earth below me, through my hips and into my arms. Just like Pop had taught me. I only needed an inch with unskilled fools like these.

A jammed blow into a tight muscle grouping was enough to paralyse them with pain. It was momentary, just seconds long, but more than I needed to act. They went down like bowling pins, one right after the other. Most couldn’t even take more than one blow before they collapsed. Clutching at arms, chest or just collapsing outright for want of breath.

I never even had to go airborne to get clear. Just smack a few of them out of my way and take the next opening in the group. They were ever so helpful in assisting me there. The throng was so tight they fell over one another as I knocked their fellows back into them. Collapsing and tripping themselves up to try and surround me.

Finally I broke free to the end of the cluster of morons. Quickly turning and taking a look around. Yet, no one was standing up. A quick assessment seemed to say that had done more damage to each other, than I had caused collectively. Running over one another with cleats. Bashing one another with hockey sticks and kendo bokken in tight spaces didn’t tend to lend well to others in the area.

In my rather hyper acute sense of time it felt like it had been a lot longer than it was. To my prediction I hadn’t even broken a sweat. Hell I wasn’t even panting from exertion. Just the adrenaline rush that was quickly fading. I glanced to the school clock tower.

“Come on, not even a minute? Sheesh, my old man gives me more of a workout in his sleep.” I groused to the groaning pile of bodies. None of the ones flying banners with my name on them were brave enough to step forward.

I turned my attention to the others. The increasingly diminishing number of those still standing. Shampoo had slung her bag across her back and pulled out her chui. From where ever the hell it was she hid those things. I really had to learn that trick.
She just rolled through her group with the efficiency of a bulldozer and grace of a dancer. She didn’t even so much as give a firm swing of her arms. More just alternated left and right, putting the business end to the torsos of anything in front of her. Occasionally she would catch and flip someone behind her to take care of those aiming for her back. Most just went flying into the others and creating a huge gap she casually walked through.

Not fifteen seconds after I had finished, she gently cracked the last one on the head and sent his eyes rolling up in his head. Which then crashed in for a dirt nap. Her hair hadn’t even been mussed as she walked over to join me. Pausing only as a boy suddenly went flying in front of her and hitting a tree.

We both blinked and glanced back in the direction he had been thrown from. Akane had opted to just hold her ground. Welcoming on the hoard and lashed out with every limb. Her father had certainly trained her well, and I could see where our advice had helped her improve. There was almost no wasted movement. Her approach was simple and direct, but brutally effective.

Punch. Kick. Toss. She made use of everything in her arsenal and easily used her momentum to continue chaining together attacks and turning them on the next target. She proved to be far more limber than I had expected. One member of the soccer club had tried to slip into her blind spot and attack her exposed back. Or what he presumed was exposed. He had several inches on her, but she easily launched a reverse high kick that planted her toes in his chin.

They vastly underestimated her strength as well. She might be somewhat inferior to Shampoo and myself in that area, for now, but that was only because she was still learning how to harness her ki. To use her breathing, her full energy to put the utmost into every blow. She was still getting almost the maximum possible output from her muscles. Keeping her center of gravity under control and using her full body to transfer the utmost power into her blows.

Skirt flaring about she moved forward steadily and opened up holes all around her as they kept trying to pile on. Not even half a minute after I had finished she walked up to join both of us. Flipping hair back over her shoulder. Like us, she also wasn’t breathing hard.

“Hmph, nice warmup, but you’re going to have to do way better than that. You didn’t even touch me.” While her face was flush with the bloodrush, she seemed as annoyed as I felt. Her eyes did take on a bit of a worried expression as she looked to me.

“How did I do?” Speaking in a soft voice. Afraid my criticism would be harsh and condescending of her abilities. I don’t know why she worried over my opinion that much, or still seemed to think I would berate her for bad performance. Some things between us still didn’t make much sense to me.

“You did good. Controlled breathing, you were on balance the whole time. You’ve also gotten a lot better at not telegraphing your moves. A few more weeks of refinement and you’re going to be ready
for some serious, advanced training.” I had developed something a ‘teacher’ mode with her. Though I was far nicer than Pop would be.

And as usual, she beamed at being complimented and received constructive criticism with grace rather than wounded pride. “You really mean that Ran ...ko?” Blushing as she caught herself on the name. Hope still daring to burn in her eyes.

“‘Kane, have I lied to you yet about something like that?’

“No, you haven’t. I’m sorry, still just getting used to someone who takes my training seriously as I do.” She mumbled.

Ryoga finally got his brain back in order and darted over to us. While I just smiled and squeezed Akane’s shoulder. “Well I aint used to teachin’ either, so there’s a lot for both of us to get used to.”

The four of us just turned for the front doors when they banged open. The Blazing Rockhead of Furinkan standing there. Filling the entrance with his colossal ego, moronity, and detachment from what the rest of us call the real world.

“Ah, beautifully done, fair maidens. Shame the heart of beasts so unmoved by divine performance you have displayed. Unable to appreciate the subtle grace and power of your skills. But lo, come, I, Tatewaki Kuno invite you to test yourselves against me.

“Come, which would try her hand at the chance to date with my magni…” His doubtlessly long soliloquy was cut thankfully short. Akane’s school bag hit him in the face, bringing him to silence. Then Shampoo performed her trademark mace toss. It was to his fortune Akane’s bag padded him from the worst of the injury. Rather than a broken nose, he simply cracked the front step with his skull.

Akane walked over him, grabbing her discarded pack as she went on inside. Making sure to stomp her feet with extra effort as she went over the threshold. Shampoo followed suit. Her chui made a second contact with his skull as she picked it up. Ryoga just glanced at their departing backs, then me, then proceeded inside.

Standing close to Kuno I just rolled my eyes. “Good thing you’ve got a thick skull. Now, if you’ll excuse me … eeee”
With a recovery that caught me off guard, he popped right back up and knelt before me. He could make Pop jealous with a bounceback that fast.

“Your concern touches me, oh fair Ranko. For your worry, I would allow you to date with … meeeeee.” He plucked a rose from inside his coat and meant to push it into my hand. I promptly caught his arm and performed a full rotation and pitched him up toward the roof.

“How about another time, like never. Besides, there’s a Blazin’ Meteor shower today, you should go see it!” Leaning back I gauged his flight against the horizon. “Ah, shoot, he’s only gonna clear the clock, I was hopin’ to get him to the baseball field at least. Arc was too shallow.”

I watched for a minute longer as the tardy bell began to sound. As predicted, he returned to earth to shallow to go past the building. Instead he crashed back down onto the roof of the clock tower. Shrugging I brushed my skirt off, took up my books, and proceeded on to class.

“This better end soon, I aint lookin’ to make a habit of this crap.”

As per the vice-principal’s words, we had only a half day of classes. Then we were freed to explore the school and get to know the various clubs. I’d just as soon have gone home myself, but that wasn’t an option. Well, I could happily just find a quiet spot to be alone with Shampoo.

That had been the plan anyway.

No sooner had Principal Tanaka given some basics of club enrollment, and where we could find the stalls for all the various groups set up, then the hall had filled with the thunder of feet. Not our classmates letting out and hoarding up to socialize.

Oh no, we couldn’t be that lucky.

I hadn’t even had the chance to stand as the door was yanked open and representatives from every possible female athletic club gazed the room. They knew their targets and their missions. Eyes zeroed in and found the three of us in seconds.
“Akane! Hi, I’m Hana Watanabe, I’m friends with your sister. She told me you’d like to try for the gymnastics club!”

“Ranko. Shampoo. You’ve got to give the judo club a try!”

That kind of thing. The sheer crush of upper class girls trying to encourage us to attend and tryout for various groups spoke to the ridiculous number of such officially recognized activities in the school. We’d never get out of the room at this rate.

I really had no desire to repeat the hoarding we got yesterday. That was just our fellow classmates. Many, many more now filled the hallway outside. Eager to repeat the process. Fortunately the crush of humanity trying to get in, weighed against the students who had been trying to get out created a bottleneck which gave me a short moment to act.

“Ryoga, Shampoo, tactical retreat!”

They didn’t need any further instruction or encouragement from me. Snatching their bags and quickly flying over desks for the window. I took hold of Akane’s hand and pulled her up and then into a bridal carry.

“Ra-Ran-Ranko! Put me down, this is embarrassing!” She managed to squeak over her shock from the whole affair. Cheeks turning pink as I took her up in my arms. Even though she was an easy hundred and twenty, maybe twenty-five pounds with the extra muscle she carried. She was a pillow in my grip.

“Sorry ‘kane, no time to do anything but run. I’ll teach ya how to do this later.” Easily using a desk as a springboard and following my two training partners.

“Teach me whaaa…!” Getting her answer just as we went out the windows on the other end of the class. Jumping from the third floor would be very foolish for most people. A leg shattering, potentially lethal bit of foolishness. Not really a concern for three of us. Akane could learn it quick enough. She just needed to learn how to tuck for a fall, and not be scared to death of jumping from such height.

The windows were open to let in a spring breeze, helping to further facilitate our escape. It was just a quick leap and then let gravity do what gravity did. People were staring at us as we landed. To their eyes we had come plopping out of the blue. Every possible window from the classroom had been
filled with heads glancing down. Staring in shock at what we’d just done.

I touched down just behind Shampoo and Ryoga, who both took the land easily. Knees curled and they regained their feet as if nothing weird had happened. I set Akane gently on her feet once I had my own vertical base secure. A hand squeezed my shoulder and she leaned forward. The other hand pressing over her heart as she fought for breath.

Had startled her way more than I thought. A few settling breaths and she finally had her wits back. The hand on my shoulder suddenly tightened and squeezed right into a nerve. It was easy to forget just how much untapped power this girl had.

“Itai … “ I muttered, gritting my teeth as her grip intensified and she took hold of my other shoulder. Eyes glancing to me with a mixture of both anger and panic. It wasn’t enough to make me more than uncomfortable, but still, ouch!

“Ranma … never do that again.” She growled, voice soft but full of her simmering fury. “What were you thinking pulling a stunt like that? What if you’d been hurt carrying me?”

My head tilted, even as my eyes were watering with the pain my nerves were complaining over. Her concern for my safety over herself was stupid, but also rather endearing. This girl was just too cute. Rather than fight her off or get mad in turn, I just clapped my hands onto both of her shoulders, much softer than I was being held.

“’kane, that really hurts.” And not just her grip. “Do you really think I’d do something that’d put you at risk cause I just don’t wanna deal with that gaggle of girls?” My expression firm as I looked into her eyes.

The spark of anger sputtered out and her grip went slack. Suddenly she was blushing again and she looked down at our toes. What she could see of them anyway. Hell, I couldn’t see them if I didn’t bend over far enough. Stupid curse.

“I’m sorry, that just really scared me. And I don’t want any of you to get hurt. You’re right though, it’s easy to forget just how good you are.”

The smile returned to my face and I just pulled her into a hug. She gasped and blushed again. I didn’t squeeze her tight, I don’t know how she’d take a marshmallow collision. Especially since it’d remind her just how much more ‘gifted’ I was in certain soft, squishy talents.
“Ah, com’ere you. I’m sorry too, didn’t mean to startle ya, just had to make a quick exit. Don’t worry, I promise I’ll show you how to do that. Little bit’a practice and you’ll be making those leaps with us.”

We parted and I looked into her eyes, grin still on my face. “Now, to the matter at hand. We still gotta find somewhere and hide. So let’s go already.”

Her blush was still in place, but she grinned and nodded. I grabbed one of her hands, then Shampoo’s. Akane snatched up Ryoga with her free limb and the four of us dashed off quickly. The poor Lost Boy was more drug in our wake, and he blushed furiously.

He was holding Akane’s hand after all, but he didn’t complain.

“Airen, no can leave school yet, where we hide from pushy sport girls?” Shampoo glanced over, not wanting to deal with this crap either. Also, she was grinning like the rest of us. Sure, it was annoying being bombarded by people we didn’t want to deal with. Together, however, the four of us were having a good time making a chase of it.

“I dunno, I’m flyin’ by the hem of my skirt here. Ryoga, pick a direction.”

“What? What are you trying to pull Ranmmm … Ranko?” Even he was working on that thing with my name. I don’t know if the four of us will ever get used to that. Would’ve just been easier to keep going by Ranma, even if it would have been convoluted and eventually weird.

“Look goof, you have a knack for gettin’ lost in your own house.”

“Hey, I do not!”

“Ryoga, we aint got time ta argue. Shut up, pick a direction, and let’s get lost! It’s just after noon, so we gotta put up with this for another three hours. The longer they can’t find us, the less we gotta put up with it.

“Now pick a direction and start leadin!”
His expression soured at being commanded around, and reminding him of his most embarrassing flaw. Yet, he didn’t bother to argue. By whatever silent consensus we had long since arrived at, I was the unofficial leader of our little quartet. As our friendship had developed, his protests had quieted significantly. I wasn’t the bane of his existence anymore. The thing which caused all his suffering. So he just rolled with it, for the most part.

Taking a turn toward the school fence I just let him pull us along. Wasn’t going to let us wind up off the school grounds and risk getting in trouble with my folks. I’m still confident he could get us hopelessly lost in our own school. Which wasn’t even all that big once you got out of the main building.

Despite his protests to the contrary, I know for a fact Ryoga could easily get lost in his own house. Hell, he could get lost in own bedroom. I remember a day in middle school, one of the few peaceful ones we had. Studying for a test. I was more interested in Ms Hibiki’s amazing onigiri, but that aside. I returned from the bathroom at one point to find Ryoga lost in his own closet.

He performed that ridiculous feat three more times in the space of the afternoon.

If there was one thing I was counting on to avoid another headache, it was Ryoga’s power to run away from his problems. So I let him pull us along, with only minor correction to keep us on school property.

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The escape plan worked almost too well. Following a path I still fail to totally recall, Ryoga had gotten us well lost.

In the gym equipment shed.

Of all the places, this would be the most ironic to wind up. Also the most unexpected. Right under their noses, in their very own storage closet.

We found a quiet corner behind a stack of safety mats no one was using at the moment. Plopped down and just kept ourselves entertained with stories, jokes, and anything else we could think of. Keeping our voices soft to go unheard.
The time flew by quicker than I thought it would. How wonderful the relative experience could be when you weren’t really thinking about it. Seemed we’d just sat down to get comfortable when the bell rang signalling the end of school.

That sound could not have been sweeter. The moment we heard it, we were gone. Abandoning our hiding place full tilt and snatching our regular shoes like bandits. Then gone again and off toward the dojo before the sports clubs knew what hit them.

Doubtless they would try again, but for now we had escaped. I was going to have to wrack my brain for a solution to this mess. If I had to put up with a hoard of perverts every morning, then a gaggle of wanna be recruiters every afternoon, well. I’m not really sure what I’d do.

Certainly snap in some manner.

Had enough crap to put up with as it was without school adding to it. For now I just held Shampoo’s hand and kept moving with her back to the dojo. Today, we were in for a grueling training routine. Pop felt he had been the right to abuse me for too long, so it was time to set things straight.

Since Ryoga and Shampoo would not be left out, he had no choice but to give them something to do as well. And since we’d taken it upon ourselves to help Akane improve, my old man had one more student to work with.

More time and effort than he would ever want to manifest, but tough crackers. This was becoming an all or none group activity. Then a thought ran through me like a lightning bolt.

{Stupid! Why did I think of this before? Those two patriarchal numbskulls wanna join the schools? Then we combine them, derp. Akane and I master both. Then, we can both teach future students, if we wanna anyway.}

I could slap myself for not having thought that up sooner. I didn’t know if becoming an instructor was anywhere on Akane’s mind, but she was going to have to face a major choice anyway. She was serious as a martial artist, but to become like me or Shampoo. It wasn’t a weekend warrior kind of commitment.

It was a lifestyle.
If she wanted to rise to our level. Then she was going to have to take on that kind of burden and give up a lot of her time being a normal, everyday teenager and walk a hard road. Glancing over to her, I ran that through my head.

{She’s proud as a warrior, and stubborn, but she can take instruction when it’s given to her properly. All the traits she needs. She just needs someone to lite the fire under butt to get her on the road. Ranma Saotome, you’re just the man for the job.}

Thoughts in mind, I grinned and then turned my brain to the problem of our Hentai Hoard. A solution was formulating, and I’m pretty sure everyone would quickly agree to it.

Not like we had any other ideas to run with.
“You want me to what?!”

A sharp right fist followed my father’s bellow. He’d been intent on training, and he was serious about it today. More serious than in the past couple weeks. Fine with me. His reaction to my suggestion for Akane had gone as well as anticipated.

Meaning he was downright against the idea and hoped he could beat the thought out of my brain. I didn’t really want to argue, but seems we weren’t going to come to a compromise on the issue. Too much of Genma’s blood in my veins, and too many years of his company for me to yield anymore than him.

“You heard me!” I turned his hard strike away with a push of my arm and lashed back with a similar punch. The aim was going for his chest, a very predictable attack, and he quickly moved to close the hole in his defense.

“I said, train Akane in the Saotome school!” Opened my fingers and raised my arm just subtly. My feint had worked well enough as I adjusted my aim to skirt his block and move to his collar. My real target all along.

“You wanna join the schools? What better way ‘en lettin’ Akane learn our style?” My fingers caught fabric and I suddenly threw my weight back. While I wasn’t much, barely a hundred pounds if I was lucky, it would be enough if I’d caught him off guard.

Success!

“Ya got three options!” I glared at him as I tucked in tight and was right in his face all of a sudden.
Dope never did quite focus like he should when he was mad. Some things were easy to see coming as clouds. Might have been dirty, but since he liked to use tricks like that, so could I. He pitched forward as I curled into a ball and rolled backward.

“Help me train her. Get out of my way while I train her. Or,” as I hit the apex of my roll I planted my feet into his chest and launched him toward the wall. “I can beat ya senseless and THEN train her! Either way, I’m teachin’ Akane!”

He didn’t hit the wall hard as I would’ve liked. Shame how easy it was to wish my old man harm when he did something to piss me off. Which was often, nearing on always. My period was easing off and not contributing much to my anger. This was all me, and a typical scenario. Ranma furious at Genma.

There was still a satisfying thud as he impacted into the hardwood. Sliding to the floor like a sack of rice, and he lay there wheezing. My plan had been a success, and had been no small part luck. Eventually, he’d repay it in kind, but for now I’d take what I was given.

Bouncing up, I pointed right at his prone form and snarled. “Either help me, or get outta my way Pop. I ain’t havin’ anything to do with your stupid engagement plans. I’ll marry who I want, when I’m good and damn ready to. So will Akane, or not get married at all, that’s all up to her. For the last time, Shampoo. Is. My. Fi-an-ce.”

Taking a slow breath, I tossed out the last of my anger there and eased down from the shrieking I had been doing. Even my own ears were starting to hurt from it, and so was my throat. I didn’t really need to have a raw voice tomorrow for school. Time to turn the boil down to a simmer and then cut off the gas.

“This is the best way to join the damn schools. Ya can help me show Akane how our style works, she and Mr Tendo can show me theirs. Then both of us can develop our own style and perfect how it works. Are ya really gonna insult your friend’s daughter like that?

“She’s good, I know even your blind ass can see it. If she was to compete she’d place top ten in nationals, easy. With some hard trainin’, dependin’ on the style and the rules, top five, hell maybe even top three. I thought you’d wanna help the heir to your friend’s legacy develop herself. But you don’t? Fine.”

He glared at me, eyes burning with building rage as I insulted his so called honor. While also beating his dead horse of a plan into more of a burger than a corpse. Nabiki had let on some of the plots he had been trying to con Soun into. None of them were good, and none would have worked.
They would have had plenty of chance for misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and plain trouble for all involved. I was in no mood for stupidity. Shampoo and Akane didn’t deserve to have to endure it.

“Just tryin’ to be a good son, invitin’ my teacher to help the other heir to the Anything Goes family improve. Fine, don’t need ya for this. I’ll just start Akane on the basics and then Cologne can help us all improve. She’ll be a better teacher anyway.”

With that I proceeded to the door. Eyes were peering around the shoji and it wasn’t hard to guess who. Akane was supposed to be practicing with Shampoo and Ryoga, but the fight with my old man hadn’t been quiet or subtle. I was going to train Akane. It was that simple.

The three of us were willing to take her seriously as a martial artist. She would have to give equal commitment, but she’d promised to be up to the fight. It was going to mean being somewhat cruel. Her father had been very slack in her training for years now. Most of her conditioning was done at her own whim.

To get serious was going to take so much more than lifting weights, breaking blocks, and doing some katas every day. Wasn’t going to be fun, but I know she had the talent in there. Someone just had to bring it out. If it had to be me, and then Cologne, fine. Better she not have to put up with the insanity my father called training anyway.

“Ranma, how dare you disrespect your father like that. I taught you everything you know boy, and there’s still plenty left to teach. You don’t tell me who I will take on as students, and until you are master of the Saotome School of Anything Goes, you don’t decide who learns what of our style.”

His voice did a good job of hiding the hints of pain in his ribs. Anger and wounded pride were probably drowning out his hurt pretty well. Pausing I turned all the way around and crossed my arms under my chest. I’d finally gotten used to the simple fact there was something there I had to account for, well a lot actually, but that was neither here nor there.

“You’re the one who went harpin’ about your damn ‘join the schools’ crap. I know you’re still tryin’ to figure out a way to get me hitched to Akane.” He made a burble of denial before just locking his lips and trying to look impassive to my claim. That tick was enough to confirm what I already knew. Nabiki was a lot of things, but a liar wasn’t one of them … usually.

“I ain’t interested in gettin’ married, none of the Tendo girls are either. I already got a girlfriend. So, you still wanna join the schools and honor your promise to Mr Tendo, we’re kinda at an impasse,
‘ain’t we? Mom already gave Shampoo and me her blessin.’

“So, apart from teachin’ Akane and makin’ her the best she can possibly be, you got any better ideas?’

His mask of indignation cracked as he tried to formulate a protest. His mouth flapped a few times but nothing came forth in opposition to my plan. There was plenty of protest shining in his eyes, though he could find nothing to rebut me. Refusal still flashed behind his gaze as he finally gave me a reply.

“You should still respect your father, especially as your teacher. You come to me and you ask, not demand.” Growling in his sagely, ‘sensei’ tone.

“Alright, fine.” I did something I never thought I would do, and shuddered as it rose up from the depths and flowed out with far too much ease for my liking. “Dad, would you help Akane learn our family style so we can honor the promise to join the schools? Pretty please!” I sauntered over, almost bouncing on my feet.

Looking up to him with big, puppy eyes and added as much forced saccharine to my voice as possible. Turning the ‘girly’ factor up to eleven as I stood up on my tiptoes to get as close to his eyes as possible. I could almost retch as I submitted to this impulse. However, his reaction was worth it.

He suddenly backed up to the wall and looked horrified at my sudden change of demeanor. Whether he was worried I was losing my mind, or succumbing to something else didn’t matter. All the better to just keep him nervous and off balance.

My cute act dropped into a lethal glare, while dropping my voice to a dangerous, hissing octave. Keeping it soft so only he could hear. “Or should I go talk to Mom about some stuff, like the ‘Cat Fist’ training you put me through? Knowin’ her son is terrified of cats, bet she’d find that all kinds of manly, huh?”

Where he was panicked before, now true fear gripped him. Nothing like the terror instilled by his own wife to change his mind in a swift hurry. My father was a thief, liar, cheat, and lazy pile of flesh. He was self-serving and greedy. More than anything though, he was a coward. That trait could be counted upon to win over almost all internal debates he might have.

He whispered back, voice hard but there was no hiding the tinge of fright gripping him. A deep dread of facing my mother’s wrath for his own careless stupidity. “Alright, Ranma, fine. We’ll teach
Akane. But you owe me for this, and don’t you dare breath a word of that training to your mother!”

Trying to put as much authority to his rushed, jerky voice as he could. Still shivering at the prospect of that sword giving his neck a shave it would never forget, and consequently relieving it of the burden of his head. I didn’t back down or soften my voice, but I didn’t bother arguing.

“You keep your end of the deal, I’ll keep my mine. And look, I’m really sorry, I don’t wanna blackmail you or nothin’ but I ain’t marryin’ Akane, I ain’t inheriting a dojo that I got no rights to, and I ain’t gonna get pulled into one of your hair brained schemes to make me do any of the above. Got it?”

He looked hard into my eyes, looking for any sign of weakness or could exploit. Some means of compromise. I didn’t back down or flinch as he tried to glare and look intimidating. Towering over me as he did by near three-quarters of a foot. If there was one thing I had lost a very long time ago, it was fear of my father. Between that and most of my respect, if it weren’t for the sliver of love I had for him, I’d have beaten him half to death and left him behind a long time ago.

Clever on his part, if damn cruel, leaving him as the only constant I’d had in my life to now. He wasn’t abusive, exactly, but I could ask for some much more in a father. When the useless mass of flesh was all there was. The idea of parting from it was harsh and inconceivable. You never understand just how important the familiar was to you, until you thought about giving it up.

And since he wasn’t a complete let down, and not as bad as he could be, I was stuck with him. For better or worse. Didn’t get to chose our parents. I could hope for better, someone like Mr Tendo who actually loved his children, even if the man had no spine. He provided them a stable home and environment. I could always have wound up with far worse, so just count what blessings I did have.

Seeing no sliver he could exploit, a hand wiped across his sun beaten skin and he exhaled. Growling but giving me the rare tone of voice that said he was actually telling me the truth. He was pushed into an unwinnable situation. I could leave his ass behind for Cologne as my master instructor, and if I told Mom even half of what I had endured, at some point none of his excuses would keep her from throwing him out on his ass.

I don’t think Soun would have the heart to throw him out, but without the promise of their planned union or our houses and an furious Akane, don’t know what the tension would do to them both. Normally he might scheme and try some pointless bit of idiocy, but when enough things were held over him, he’d just gave up the fight.

“Fine, boy, but don’t you regret creating this situation for all of us.” Jamming his finger under my
nose as he collected the last shreds of his dignity before storming out of the dojo. With the way he walked, a tremor of fear and a heavy sway of exhaustion, looked like he was off to get schnockered.

Looks like today’s lessons were over. As my old man wobbled his way off to lick his wounded pride, the other three stepped into the room slowly. Looking for all the world like I was a two-headed monster ready to eat them. Was I really that scary when I was upset?

Guess so, given how my own friends kept treading lightly around me.

“So, we’ve got an agreement. We’re gonna train Akane in the Saotome school.” The girl in question blinked in shock a moment. Took a bit before it gave way to that beautiful smile as it devoured her face.

“Now, Akane, givin’ you words ain’t gonna do this justice, but the trainin’ is gonna be hard. Like nothin’ you’ve experienced before. Still, we’re here with you and we’ll all be sharin’ the same burden. So you’re not alone, and you can come to us for advice, or just to talk anytime you need.”

The girl’s determination didn’t falter even as I promised her the kind of hell she was going to be suffering. She had no idea, but I also wasn’t going to let Genma put her through the same madness I had endured. It was going to be rough, but I wouldn’t let her go through anything I don’t think she could handle. Or which was so absurdly stupid it wouldn’t help her, just break something inside which couldn’t be fixed after.

“Now, let’s get to figurin’ out how to handle Kuno’s stupid hentai hoard.”

That change of subject brought looks of anger and determined steel. Knuckles were cracked, necks flexed, and we set ourselves to finding a solution to the worst of that headache. I had a plan.

It was simple.

It was violent and brutal.

Just the kind of thing I believe this situation called for.
Violence doesn’t solve anything, except here in the Furinkan division of Nerima, where it seemed violence was usually the *only* answer for some problems.

“**Oh for cryin out loud.**” I groaned, palm massaging my face as I looked on to our morning crowd at school. It wasn’t that the fools were formed up in a huge knot to once again to face us down. That was expected. No, it was how they had distributed themselves which just caused my head to hurt from the stupid.

“**Tactical geniuses, I tell ya.**” Strategy was apparently an alien, arcane concept to the jocks of our fine learning establishment. I had expected them to change the numbers in the groups, and for most of them to add their strength to one in particular. I had simply gotten the target wrong.

By yesterday’s performance, even if that was a rather shallow data set to go on, Akane was the weakest of our trio. Ere go, if one were to try and overwhelm us again with numbers, and hope to even manage to be the lucky fool to best the target of his unwanted affections when she was likely exhausted; Tendo was the obvious choice.

It was a fairly common, and usually sound stratagem in a military sense. Find. Isolate. Surround. And bring to bear overwhelming force on the weakest threat so it couldn’t join with allies and the threat of an allied whole was consequently lessened as a result.

Though, this wasn’t a war, of armies anyway. Even if they did lean on Akane more heavily, in this case it just kind of ignored a simple mathematical problem. The more who focused on one of us, the less the other two had to deal with, and the quicker could assist the other. If for a second these bozos thought we were going to play by their rules and ignore the plight of another, the were dead wrong.

That was even assuming they could even muster up the mental acuity to account for the fact there were three of us, and that as friends we wouldn’t hesitate to lend some assistance to one another.

Still, I had underestimated their stupidity once again. The girl they hoped to overwhelm en masse, of course, was me.

I don’t know what gave them the remote idea that their only cause of failure was a lack of numbers to throw at me, but oh well. My group had easily swelled by another quarter, if not more. Seemed about half had moved from both Akane and Shampoo to focus on me. Those two collectives
dumb weren’t going to trip over themselves as easily, but I really doubted they had worked out any kind of formations or combined team work.

No, it was going to be another free for all, just this time with less bodies per square foot. Where they would find more room to try and surround Shampoo and Akane, they were also giving the girls more space to keep stable footing and more focus on each particular target. Idiots, the lot of them.

Shaking my head again, I just pulled out the megaphone I had borrowed from Nabiki. The cost was a pittance compared to the use I was going to get out of it. It squealed a little as I turned it on and adjusted the volume. Then shouted to the sea of hormone crazed boys.

“We’re sick of this crap. You didn’t learn yesterday it seems, so fine, you want to do this again? From now on, we’re not holding back. You want to try and prove whose dominate around here?

“Well listen up boys, cause I proved it yesterday, and I’ll prove it again every day until you get the message. As martial artists go, I’m Queen Bitch around here. And Her Majesty is PISSED OFF!”

I let the scream, and the resulting whine of the megaphone echo around the neighborhood. Mom was gonna bite my head off for this, but right now I didn’t care. I’d suffer getting chewed out, grounded, losing my allowance, or whatever suited her anger for a month if it meant putting an end to this farce.

“I know all of you are stupid, but maybe you’re all just masochists too. Fine by me, let’s see how much suffering you really like. The gloves are off kids. To prove how serious we are, you’re going to get hurt, and until you get the hint and quit harassing us you’re gonna keep getting hurt. Every morning, worse and worse, until it stops.

“Today, we dislocate joints. Tomorrow, we start leaving bruises. If you still wanna keep this up come Friday, I start sending people to the hospital. If anyone is brave and stupid enough to try again come Monday, I don’t care if every single team has to forfeit local competition, I WILL make sure you don’t play for the rest of the year. You lookin’ to get a scholarship to college? I will happily murder those plans for you.

“Either you leave me, Akane, and Shampoo alone, or I make the rest of your year a physical hell.”

More and more venom dripped from my voice as I let my threats ring around the yard and sink in, before continuing. Promising to make it worse every successive morning this continued. Mostly I was just bluffing, but I had to make it sound as real as possible. To the point they might just think I
was possibly crazy, potentially psychopathic, and likely possessed. The act looked to be having the
desired effect.

A general ripple of fear began to overtake some, and following herd mentality it was moving along
steadily through the others. They glanced to one another in worry. Tense whispers began to spring
up. Some milled around and nervously looked like they wanted to somewhere else.

Time to make my point sink home. Cracking my knuckles I began to advance. Shampoo twirled her
chui and put on her most demonic glare. Akane took some practice punches at the air and just
looked, well like a typical, angry Akane. It wasn’t a face that took her any acting to put on. She
didn’t like the idea of me threatening them so viciously. When I told her I was trying to play bluff,
and all I needed was for us to look serious, she found enough anger to make it real for them.

“So, boys, any takers today?”

Some were already backing away. Others were nervously eyeing us as we approached. Slowly but
surely, as an increasing number found more important things to tend to, the weight of the group
decreased. With more dashing off it broke the confidence of the rest. They parted around us and
were fleeing to their homerooms, clubs, or just anywhere else in general as quickly as they could
move.

Finally we were left with only one remaining obstacle. The Idiot-In-Chief himself. Standing as
imperious and aloof as ever. Lost in whatever land of delusion consumed most of his waking
thoughts. I suppose he thought himself grand and noble looking. More like bland and stupid.

Fingers ran through his hair as he sniffed from a rose. His bokken rested on his shoulder while he
began to wax lyrical about … I don’t really know, I just tuned him out as I kept on a direct line
approach.

I had no intention of really hurting the fools of the Hentai Hoard, as they were commonly known in
fan-speak. This particular fool, however, I intended to pound senseless to make very clear the threat I
had delivered to them all. Kuno’s sacrifice would not be in vain. His injuries would spare many
dozen boys severe beatings, and save me weeks of stress.

“Ah, fair Ranko, bold and wise. To so threaten your would-be suitors. To test their resolve,
separating the wheat from the chaff. That so many of these boors have not the heart to properly bring
test to your might. However, it had saved us much time and toil.”
He had divined my intentions, almost startling how he had picked up on that. Though naturally his logic was twisted into a shape that wouldn’t be out of place as piece of surrealism art. Oh well, waste of a perfectly good brain tied to the psyche of a man who couldn’t bother to make the commute to reality like the rest of us.

“I shall stand in their stead and prove myself the true champion of your heart. For who other than I, Tatewaki Kuno, is the best man for your affection? Prepare yourself, my love, I strike!”

That pronouncement almost made me wretch. It was so sickening a bit of bile rolled up into my throat. I could put up with being hit on by a guy, the misunderstanding is just unavoidable. Still, even I was a real girl who preferred males. I wouldn’t have taken him as a boyfriend unless my list of options was down to less than five surviving men on the planet.

“Shampoo, please.” My lover gave a hard toss of one of her chui. Her aim was something I could easily trust. My hair ruffled as it flew just past my head. Catching the handle I let the force of the throw carry me forward a bit as I took the heavy mace in hand. It was a bit awkward to use, but I had more than sufficient strength of the task.

Don’t really know who had the upperhand in that regard, whether me or her, might have to test that with an arm wrestling match some time. For now, I had an upperclassman to destroy. Bokken met chui and we both stood our ground in a weapon lock. Testament to his power that he was able to arrest most of the force without completely losing his defense.

His guard did break a little, just enough. With my feet set I shoved hard against his bokken. Forced him to give ground. Proceeding forward as if I was going to smash him right in the chest. While I admit, he’s good, he’s seems only moderately bright to improvisation in a fight. His style was one of attack. To seize the initiative and parry only to move on to the next attack. Doubt he had any real competition to test himself against.

Save his equally deluded and quite possibly even more insane sister.

He was on the back foot only a few seconds, grinning at my attack as he got his balance. Then set forward again.
“Aggressive and true to your nature, oh fair Ranko, but not enough!” His bokken turned itself to come down on me in a slash. Trusting his superior reach to strike me before I could close on him. To any other seasoned fighted I was making an obvious feint, and still he was too dumb to see it. Anyone else I know with training would’ve seen right through that move and not committed so eagerly to an attack.

Ryoga or Shampoo would’ve countered and possibly cleaned my clock if I screwed up my recovery. Not so with this duffus, but then he also didn’t really get my fighting style. One I had to make particular use of in this body. I just launched myself up and clear of his swipe. He’d put too much energy in the move and just stared in surprise as I cleared his attack with feet to spare.

“How she flies. Like an angel … “ he whispered with an almost religious devotion. Gag me with a spoon, ugh! “The fierce but agile merlin.” He was suddenly awestruck and his movements slowed down even more. Pausing to just stare as me as I landed on his sword. Another testament to his strength that my weight didn’t seem to bother him overmuch.

He couldn’t swing the sword freely, but still adjusted his grip on reflex and held it firm. Giving me a fairly stable platform. Glad I’d prepared for this round of idiocy. Rather than lacy, white cotton, if he got a peak of anything it was just the boring shorts I was wearing. Although, they are ‘short’ to be sure, if he was a legman they weren’t going to cover very much. But my modesty was intact enough for my satisfaction.

I brought my weapon firmly down atop his skull. Using both hands to give him the most solid braining I could. Working up the faith and will to do this took up every ounce of courage I could summon. While I had seen Shampoo nail my father on countless occasions, it was quite something else to commit the offense with my own hands.

Yet, the rules of this universe proved inviolable. His skull offered far more resistance than I would ever have believed reasonable, even with experience. Rather than creating catsup out of his greymatter and making me a murderer. His mouth popped open like the drawer of an old time cash register. A line of drool began to trickle out, while his eyes rolled up in his head.

The so called ‘Blazing Meteor’ or ‘Blue Thunder’ or whatever pompous and equally vacuous appellation he gave himself, collapsed to the ground like a felled tree and went limp as a dead fish.

“No thanks, you empty-skulled nimrod, I’m out of your league, martial arts and romance; and I’m already spoken for. Now, whether you’ll pardon us or not, some of us need to get to class on time. Have a nice nap.”
I hopped back as he went slack and gave the ground an eager kiss. Yet, like a true samurai he somehow still had his sword in a deathgrip. Shaking my head, I just tossed Shampoo her mace and we proceeded on to class.

“Ran .. ko, are you sure this going to work?” Akane eyed the body of the fallen kendoist, and the boys who were watching us in nervous silence from spots well scattered across the school’s front lawn.

“I ’unno, it was the only idea I could come up with at the time. I doubt Kuno will give up, he’s too arrogant and divorced from sanity for that. The rest of them, though? I’m pretty sure after that little demo, they’ll think better of pissin’ me off.

“Sides, if it don’t work, we’ll just think of somethin’ else. Three heads’ll be better than one.” I gave Akane a wink as she nodded and just smiled back.

Taking hold of Shampoo’s hand, we continued on as the bell began to ring. Ryoga following behind and shaking his head as we went. I’m sure he was pretty eager to put his fist into Kuno’s nose. I’d certainly be happy to let him do so next time.

Gym.

I was going to hate this class. I knew I was going to hate this class. Though not for the most obvious reason one might assume.

“Ranko, wow, I’m so jealous.”

“What in the world do you feed those things? Is it some kind of special martial arts diet? Share with me!”

“How big are you?”

Oh yes, I knew I was going to hate this from the beginning.
Hate it, not because it was annoying. That would have been to simple. No, I hated this because part of my damned pride was basking in the attention. If I was going to be stuck with a girl’s body, might as well have a smokin bod.

(This curse has to mess with my head. No way in the world I could put up with this otherwise. I do have the best rack in the room though … ughhhhh … )

It was useless trying to fight off those thoughts. They just sprang up and stroked some part of my vanity. Which happily purred in reply. Part of it was probably just a reaction to how I was brought up. Pop’s was never one for praise. More like constantly trying to tear me down. Insults were his solution to most everything.

When he was sufficiently impressed, his encouragement was less than enthusiastic. Almost anything that could be taken as a compliment, even such comments about my female body, was something to savor. However, it wasn’t just that simple. My vanity enjoyed this too much, and I had no easy answer for why.

Ah well, I had given up trying to find one. Given up trying to bury it too. Just was part of who I was.

The comparisons had started the moment shirts were off. The girls had particularly clustered in on Shampoo and me. My girlfriend was used to being such a center of attention. She was one of the best warriors of her generation. The pride of her family. A role model to younger girls in her village.

Having the other girls in our class go on about how slender her legs were, or how it was amazing she could have such trim, defined muscle definition AND a chest any of them would kill for. It was just something she rolled with. Preening and soaking in their words.

This was very new and no small bit uncomfortable for me. Still, part of me enjoyed it all the same. Thankfully, no one got handsy. Having them slightly envious of my looks was tolerable. Even a bit delightful. Having someone other than my lover pawing on me, was not. The poor girl who might be brave enough to try was also likely to pull back broken fingers.

Shampoo had been particularly close to me while we were changing. Partially blocking my view of others in the room. Making sure my eyeful to that side was her. Nothing to complain about there. I could admire her all day. It also marked a subtle, possessive note which seemed to have gone missed.
I kept my eyes forward, or peeking at the pink bra and panty set my girlfriend was wearing. Kami she was lovely. Could make me drool thinking about it. I had to avoid looking too much. Didn’t want to be obvious where my sexual preferences went in a room full of high school girls. And also, I didn’t need to create any evidence of what thinking such thoughts about Shampoo did to me.

Curse or not, this flesh of mine got aroused just as easily as I did as a boy. The signs might not have been as immediately obvious, but in close proximity to so many girls and in my underwear the game would’ve been up quickly.

I wanted to check on a Akane. All the compliments or wishful coveting tossed at us wouldn’t be good for her ego. Still, if I looked that way she might punch me. Trust could only go so far in this situation. I had to prove the good will was earned.

Fortunately, the girls paid her several ego boosting words to. Sure, none of them concerned her chest. But her hair, legs, butt, and abs were all regarded with jealousy. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her blushing as she tugged on her gym shirt and fussied with the bloomers we were required to wear.

Once we were all suitable once more, I spared her a glance. Her bangs had fallen over her face. Hiding some of it from view. Her skin was almost cherry in color, but I could still see the smile on her lips. She had a lot of personal weak points regarding her own self image, but it seemed she could still find some pride above the other girls in our class.

Finally, and blessedly, we had to move out to the gym proper so we could get started with the class. While the weather was good, a second year group had the field. Our teacher went with two simple and direct options, basketball or aerobics. It took advantage of a couple convenient aspects of the gym. The main floor was a proper court, complete with foul lines and retractable baskets. There was also an adjoining room, smaller but still sizeable, dedicated to a workout studio.

The less physically inclined girls quickly flocked that way. They would still be exercising, and also avoiding facing the overpowering threat presented by the three top tier martial artists. Don’t blame them, really. If a sport isn’t your thing, and mixing in the fact who would be playing. No point in joining if you don’t have to.

The number of girls actively participating in the main game quickly thinned down to a more manageable level. Still would be more girls to a team than a regulation game. We worked out seven girls to a team. With four teams in total. We’d play first to thirty points, or fifteen minutes game time and then switch out so the other teams could play.
Grinning, I cracked my knuckles and stretched out every muscle to get them loose. I know it was immature to let my pride grip me so much. Still, I was going to show off. Not just for myself, however. Getting Shampoo on my team was easy. Akane took a little more convincing. However, it was easy to pull off when I pulled in four other girls who she was making fast friends with.

The unofficial quartet who were Akane’s close companions from either storytelling medium. Yuka, Sayuri, Makoto, and Shikako. They were pretty typical girls of their age. Normal, a word which didn’t encompass me in the most generous definition. Didn’t really apply to Shampoo either.

They made friendly with both of us, if only because of mutual association with Akane. They took to Tendo much more quickly though. When she wasn’t upset, Akane had a natural ability to charm people. She was sweet by nature, with a warming smile that just became infectious on people. Sweet with a murderous temper, but we all have our foibles.

“Are you sure about this Ranko? I mean, I’m okay with basketball, but we’re nowhere near as good as you three. We’ll just slow you down.” Sayuri took my invitation as dubious at best.

“Yeah, this is going to be kind of awkward. I can hardly dribble, but if you’re okay playing with us.” Yuka was a bit more enthusiastic.

The other two were neutral at best. Ah well, building morale was never a strong suit of mine. If they could at least give it a half hearted effort it would be enough. They were probably just expecting me to hog the ball for myself and score all the points. I had made something of a slight ass of myself this morning, after all.

{Call yourself ‘Queen Bitch’ of the yard, and I guess everyone comes out with a chapped hide.}

“Airen, are we playing that game where you throw the ball in one of the hoops and score?”

I couldn’t help but smile. Even in the remote, dark depths of China, some form of the game had managed to pass along. Well, it was around a hundred years old, and missionaries had helped spread it throughout the world. Why not some form of it find its way into her village?

I confirmed it for her, and filled in some of the gaps she might have. She wasn’t pleased to hear that the rules prevented intentional contact. There was no such rule in her tribe. Violence and body blows were forbidden, but if a person couldn’t keep their balance when physically checked? It was her own fault.
I couldn’t find enough spark to be even remotely surprised.

“Think of it as an exercise in control. You can’t play bulldozer and run the girls over. And we don’t hog the ball. One of the other girls has to shoot first, then we can assist.” Giving her a firm nod. She looked ready to protest, but quelled her competitive streak a bit.

“Akane, this is gonna be a reflex development exercise for you. I’m gonna pass the ball to you and Shampoo hard and fast. Keep your eyes peeled.” I grinned to her. The girl blinked at me, but seeing as I was going to be showing her the same kind of skill and trust as I would my girlfriend, she smiled back.

Now, while I was going to give the other girls the shots at scoring, didn’t mean I wasn’t going to show off. The other team had the ball first. They started off with a very conservative offense. Not a good idea against me, but then a hard and flashy offense might’ve been even worse.

I moved in and guarded the first girl to receive. She was the tallest girl in our gym class. I think her name was Mika. She was somewhere between five-six to five-seven. Looked about the same height as my old man. Taller than me even as a boy. Compared to me in this body, she may as well have been a giant.

Against another girl my height, her limbs would’ve given her an easy advantage playing keep away, and passing the ball just over my reach. Yet, I wasn’t just any other girl. I’m Ranma Saotome dammit, best martial artist my age!

She kept her back to me and tried to pull a fake. Feinting to her right and then moving left to pass the ball to another girl. Poor thing had a bad tell in her posture though. That side of her body had tensed too soon in expectation of the switch. Not obvious to most, but it was a big, neon sign for me.

I started to follow her false pass, only to quickly dart to her left and intercept. Mika had only just started to throw to a girl in that direction and wound up putting the ball right in my hands. She was momentarily stunned to see me make the steal. Grinning to her as I waved and began my dash across court.

Others moved to get in my path. Poor things had no idea what they were up against. I faked one wide and then easily juked around a second. They were hopelessly inadequate to the task of keeping up with me. I could’ve scored all the goals on my own, and I made it look like that was my intent.
Until I suddenly shot the ball to Akane, and I didn’t hold back on the pass, much. Would’ve risked destroying the ball if I didn’t. That wouldn’t have gone over well with the school.

Akane had been keeping her eyes open, and was set to receive. She winced at the impact but kept control of the ball. Continuing the drive down the court. The other team had been so focused on me, they had lost cohesion and had opened up a wide path to the net. Yet, Akane didn’t take the shot.

Instead she shot to a hard pass to Shampoo. Who took the throw easy and pulled an attempted defense wide open. They quickly tried to improvise a plan. Moving as fast as they could to set up a double team on the three of us. Seeing as we were easily controlling the offense. The odd girl out tried to move and cover the net.

It wasn’t a bad plan. The only flaw was that it just wasn’t going to do the deal though. Shampoo passed back to me and I drew my two guards away. Commiting one direction and then proving I could turn and double back. I shook them without much trouble and then did the unexpected. Passing the ball to Yuka.

Who looked frightened when I threw the ball her way. Then was stunned to find it a lite toss, compared to how I was treating Akane and Shampoo anyway. Her shock was momentary and soon she was moving into the open court. The net guard looked confident she could prevent any possible score. Yuka surely wasn’t a serious threat.

Good guess, but she wasn’t focusing on the score. Instead, she set up Sayuri for a clean throw. Despite her protests, she was a pretty good shooter. Sinking the ball into the net for two points.

The game proceeded like this for the remainder of our time on the court. The action soon had the boys hooting in excitement. Between the three martial artists, we managed to keep the other team totally off balance. At any moment we could’ve made a dash for the net and put it in.

Instead, we played set up for the other four girls. Sayuri was easily the best of them, but that would’ve been too predictable. We let all of them take a shot. Sure, they missed quite a few. Just bouncing them off the backboard, but we could easily get the ball back into our hands and set them up again.

To their credit, they never let a miss discourage them. All four of them did score a point as well. By the time the teacher called the game for time, our score wasn’t all that impressive. Seventeen total points. It was still a total rout, as the other team had a fat goose egg to show for it.
We had controlled the ball for pretty much fourteen and a half minutes of the entire play time. I said the three of us wouldn’t try and get all the points. Not that we wouldn’t swipe the ball when a chance presented itself. Which was basically at any second of our choosing.

When we finished, the seven of us crowded together and I was treated to laughter and high fives. The four non-martial artists were giddy from both our win, and being an instrumental part of it.

“That was fun Ranko, thanks for letting us play too.” Makoto giggled a bit and gave me a hug.

“Would you girls like to hang out this weekend? We should really get to know each other better. And we’ve got so much homework coming up soon. I could use some help with math.” Shikako mumbled.

Others quickly agreed to the idea. Akane gave me a questioning look. There was a plea in her eyes. Making friends and having regular time with them was something she wanted. Hell, I wouldn’t mind doing it myself. There was more to life than just martial arts. As blasphemous as my father would find that statement. Hypocrite.

My teeth ground a little before I put on a strained smile. “Yeah, sure. Let’s go hang out this weekend. I haven’t had the chance to do that in a long time, and I really would like to show Shampoo around.”

The girl in question frowned a bit as she pondered that. Then smiled and chirped up with her agreement. “Shampoo be happy to spend time together, see city, and make new friends.”

It was agreed, and we were pulled in for commitment. Here I was, now one of the girls. Sigh. Oh well, it looked so important to Akane that she have more people along to help ease her into getting comfortable with people she didn’t know very well. It was still surprising to me how easily she had brought trust into Shampoo and me. Given we’d only known each other a little longer than the girls we’d met in school.

Now just how interesting this outing was going to be?

And how much was I going to regret that question?
Thursday morning came way too fast. The previous afternoon had just flown by. Homework and then training together. Akane hadn’t yet broached the subject of where we would be spending our Saturday outing with our classmates. She had been far more focused on the intense routine my father had put us all through.

Punishment maybe for forcing him to take Akane on as a new student. Force by way of the family katana. Cruel but effective.

Was he mad about it? I have no doubt.

Would he seek revenge? Doubly certain.

Was he stupid enough to think Akane would give up after a few days of being beaten down like a dog? Magic eight ball says, ‘You’re joking, right?’

Despite his efforts, and no matter how hard for Akane it was. Seeing three other people suffer through it without complaining, over much, she had tightened her lip and just grunted through it. Seeing Pop’s face as she just stubbornly powered through despite protesting muscles was a treasure.

Yeah, I was proud of Akane for keeping her commitment. And anything which upset the old man’s plans of being lazy was a sweet balm for my own physical pains. I could’ve gladly rolled a boulder up Mount Fuji every day just to watch that reaction.

When we arrived at school, the Hentai Hoard had gathered, to my surprise. My legs were stiff and still pounding from the previous evening’s training regime, but I still could whip them with one arm behind my back. I cracked my knuckles and advanced as I had the previous two days. If they wanted to tip my hand and see if I’d keep my promise. They were in for a lot of pain.

Yet, they didn’t engage in violence. They looked scared and contrite, gulped and parted as we approached. One boy, the captain of the baseball club, stood front and center. Chosen speaker for the collective.

“Miss Ranko, we owe you, and Akane, and Shampoo all an apology. It was stupid to do like Captain Kuno said and attack you. We didn’t respect your skills, and you humbled us for it.
“I speak for everyone here, we won’t attack you again. You proved you’re too good for us. You beat Kuno, the strongest man in this school.” I had to suppress a cough, and gently kick Ryoga when he was about to protest. Kuno might be third strongest amongst the males in this school. But why correct them right now?

He was cut off from further words as a voice shouted from the doors. “Nay! I am not vanquished, just temporarily impaired.” And thus the school’s greatest pervert made his grand entrance from the front doors. The impact it was expected to have was greatly lessened by the neck brace he was locked in. As well as having his skull heavily taped.

{Must’ve konked him harder than I thought … although, wasn’t he almost a mummy when we did this in the anime?}

“I but gave my love the chance to shine. To show her majesty to the lot of you unworthy cowards. See how she had cowed you timid fawns with her power. What mere herd animal can stand against the strength of a tiger? Nay, the lovely Ranko is a dragon among sheep. You saw how she soared.”

He gave a stiff, hard bow. “Forgive me my fair, beautiful flower. I am not able to properly show you the challenge your strength demands. Fear not, however, for once this minor injury passes we shall taste of battle once again! And all of Furinkan shall see that we are destined to be …”

I didn’t wait for any more, just rolling my eyes and just moved on past the boy. He moved to try and stand and continue his soliloquy, but his spine must’ve been injured as well. He seemed to find turning himself back upright very difficult. Not wanting to see him suffer, stuck in that position. I caught his foot and tripped him onto his face.

It was vindictive, but I wasn’t in the mood for charity with this fool. His forehead smacked into the ground and slid. Those abrasions probably didn’t feel good, but it straightened out his back again. To make sure it took, I applied some amateur chiropractic relief. Walking across his vertebrae as I passed.

He grunted as my heels pressed in, but there was series of satisfying pops as I moved. Surely that would assist in his pain relief. Maybe. I’m not a doctor, so I can’t say for sure. I certainly felt better, at least. Still on Kuno’s spine, and making a visible reminder of my declaration of being Queen Bitch around here, I spun on my heel and nodded to the baseball captain.

“Apology accepted. And to save you the heartache. Shampoo is engaged to my brother.” There were words moving through the crowd, and a general groan of dismay at the news. “I’m also spoken for.”
More groans of disappointment.

“Nay I say! No man is worphhhh.” Kuno struggled to stand and speak at my declaration, which was a welcome distraction actually. I was spared having to provide any details about who I was dating. I pressed a foot into Kuno’s head and buried his mouth in the walkway.

“Now, Akane’s single, but I’d suggest askin her out the old fashion way. She’s a lot less likely to put your teeth down your throat if you just ask her with words or a note or somethin’ rather than with a hockey stick. She’s a really sweet girl, so how about treatin her like it?”

The boys got to talking at that, and poor Akane blushed. Seemingly torn between protesting my accusation of violent reaction and my compliment. Ryoga managed a neutral expression on the issue. Don’t think he liked the idea of competition, but he really didn’t have to worry. I think all the boys in the school stood as much chance with Akane right now.

Somewhere between none and zilich.

But who am I to speak of those odds? That’s between Akane and whatever boy, or girl, catches her fancy.

With my morning court held, I turned and proceeded on to class with my entourage in tow. Hell, maybe it was going to be a better day than I expected.

“Class, we have a new transfer student joining our homeroom today.”

*Me and my big, metaphorical mouth.*

Never tempt the Fates by asking the dread question of “What could possibly happen?” Or by putting hope in a situation where things can quickly spiral out of control.

I don’t know where or when the phrase ‘Murphy’s Law’ was coined, or if it even referred to an actual person as its originator. But whoever it was, he or she was an ass.
Mom showed up stupid early. Why not other people showing up out of sequence? Five hundred yen on the candidate. And survey says …

Wasn’t hard to guess who it would be, and the handle of the giant cooking implement sticking over the right shoulder was a dead giveaway. Typical boy’s uniform. A lite charcoal color coat and slacks. However, the bandolier stuffed full of cooking spatulas was not regulation issue.

[Ding ding ding. Tell em what you’ve won, Ranko?]

Even as I knew who it was, the sight turned my stomach upside down with a kind of anxiety that was hard to quantify. The long hair, a shade of dark brown, was wrapped in a long ribbon to make a ponytail that hung down his back. Bangs were arranged around the forehead to make the face look more angular. Still failed to hide the fact the features were softer and more rounded than a male face tended to be.

I was struck by just how attractive the boy was. Entirely different from Shampoo, who was just classically beautiful. My girlfriend was an eleven of ten. With a complete, and total knockout of all female physical assets.

Even different from Akane who, temper aside, had a very welcoming and kind smile. Combined with those large, expressive eyes of hers that just sucked you in and made you want to keep seeing that happiness reflected on her.

This one? Something just stuck me hard in the heart. Like when I had seen Shampoo for the first. It wasn’t quite as intense, or quite the same, but I was stabbed hard by a quick flash of want. God, Ranma you’re a lucky bastard.

The supposed boy duplicated an action I had oft seen performed by Shampoo, but had yet to figure out how to replicate. Although, rather than a pair of huge maces, he swept out a portable grill and dropped it on top of the teacher’s podium.

“Ukyo Kouji’s the name, okonomiyaki’s the game. Remember that name, cause one day it’s gonna be famous all over Japan.” The rough accent was unmistakable, and the rough, course speech wasn’t all that different from my own.

Suddenly batter and toppings were slapped onto the grill with almost blinding speed. The class filled
with the wonderful aroma of my favorite thing in the world -- delicious food. Ukyo had the flame set to perfection for quick, but spot on right cooking.

Once the dishes were done, they were sent flying around the classroom like egg topped UFOs. With flawless aim the Japanese 'pancakes' went swirled about the room, joining up with paper plates. Then skidding to precise landing atop every desk. The class oohed and awed at the performance. Then proceeded to curiously try the offering before them.

Praise went flying around from every corner. Ryoga and Akane, not as surprised by the display of martial skill, were quickly making faces and sounds of delight. Even Shampoo, looking skeptical at first, gave a little moan of satisfaction. Her picking nibble quickly turned into a dainty, but swift consumption of the whole thing.

Curse my Saotome stomach, but at the smell of the dish before me, it growled in annoyance. An ever starved deity demanding a suitable sacrifice to still the bellows of greed. Well, it would be rude to not try it, and I already knew it was going to be excellent.

Which did nothing to prepare me for what I consumed. It was sublime. Even for a fairly basic style, it was a perfection of flavor. The sauce just right, blending with the toppings and the crust in a perfect melange that created a melodious harmony in my mouth. Like a properly written piece for an orchestra, it all worked together to convey delight, with nothing drowning out the accompaniment.

More so than the taste, emotions burst forth I could barely contain. I knew this recipe right down into my soul. It was tied to some of the few, but happiest memories of my childhood. Playing with Ukyo, and eating Mr Kuonji’s wonderful food. I had to force my muscles to lock and remain rooted to my seat.

Otherwise I was going to bounce up and tackle my new classmate. Proclaim our friendship and cause all kinds of awkward questions to follow. Every measure of control was exercised, and I kept my butt parked in the chair. Shampoo and Akane both shot me curious, worried looks at seeing my tension. No time to answer them yet though, this wasn’t the place.

Wasn’t sure I even knew how to answer those questions right now.

Ukyo finished serving the whole class in short order, and wiped down the grill with a final flourish. The assumed boy bowed, a haughty grin twisting on his face. It was certainly a nearly flawless impression of a proud, male smirk.
“Ah, t’weren’t nothin, just my regular recipe. But, you’re right, my okonomiyaki may be the greatest in Japan. Maybe even Asia. Possibly, the world!” His emphasis grew in declaration to the point of becoming manic at the end. Fist raising to the sky in proclamation of his pride in his own work.

“Er … yes, well, welcome to Furinkan, Mr Kuonji. Please finish your clean up and take a seat near … ” Ms. Ichiro scanned her seating chart and then glanced up.

{No, no no! … Not there!}

“The seat beside Ms Saotome is open.”

{Crap!}

“Saotome?” Ukyo frowned and gave me a hard glare. I could see the wheels in her head turning as she dredged up memories of the child I had been. Comparing them to the girl who was currently sitting before her. Ryoga looked on with confusion. Akane with worry. Shampoo … well, she had an aggressive glare which Ukyo either missed or ignored. Eyes locked on me.

She took her seat without any complaint or further action. Continuing to just stare at me. Our teacher took roll and we were into our first class smoothly enough. Math as the beginning class of the day was just harsh. Ms Ichiro was sweet, but she was also a slave driver. Taking simple concepts of algebra and building them into brain busting proportions.

Which was a welcome distraction. Ukyo was concerned enough with class at least, that his nose was buried deep into his composition book, and was taking notes diligently. Not having much time to shoot me another glare.

Unlike everyone else, this was a time I could be fairly relaxed and wind down. In my previous life, I had earned a masters degree in computer science. Calculus was a requirement for my major at the time, and as part of job later in life I had to regularly design software that could perform complex algorithms.

This introductory stuff may as well have been learning how to add. I could just take notes without really giving a lot of focus to the material. How to deal with Ukyo was consuming my thoughts, and despite my best efforts I wasn’t making any progress.
As our next classes moved through, I would occasionally get confused glances from the boy beside me. Still trying to figure me out, just like I was trying to figure out what to do to correct the issues I knew existed between us.

As history was winding down, Ukyo was coiled up tight as a spring. No sooner had the bell rung than he launched out from his desk. Snatching my wrist and yanked me along.

“Saotome, would ya show me around the school? I’m new here, so ya know how it is, I’ll treat ya to some of my okonomiyaki to make it up to ya. Thanks.” We almost created a vortex of wind in the speed of our departure from the class.

I could’ve resisted, but I didn’t. Probably for the best we try and talk anyway. Although, how much was Ukyo going to believe?

Hell, how much was I comfortable saying while at school?

I couldn’t exactly give a demonstration at the moment. Even if I had some hot water, and I wasn’t still currently locked in my female body until my period passed … I hoped at least. No way in hell I was going to risk changing back to my birth gender in these clothes.

In almost record time we were on the roof. Ukyo pulled out one of the many spatulas on his bandolier and shoved it hard into a crack of the doorframe. Then gave it a tug to test that it would hold fast. Once he was certain no one would easily intrude upon us, and after a sweep of the roof to make sure it clear of people, he turned to me.

“Allright, Saotome .” Letting my name come out with a long, pronounced drawl. Then paused, trying to figure out what to say to me. “Be honest with me, do ya know a Ranma Saotome? You … look startlingly like him, but … you’re a girl.” Sweeping a hand up and down before me, as if confirming the obvious.

All I could do was sign, “Yea, I know Ranma. Ucchan look … “

“Hey! Who do ya think ya are, huh? Gettin’ all familiar with me and such.” His pretty face suddenly screwed up as he realised how I had phrased it. “Who are you? Seriously, I get the weirdest sense of deja vu. You are are almost scary like him.”
Blowing out a slow breath, I wiped a hand down my face. “You’re not gonna believe me when I tell you … look, I know Ranma. And I know you got issues with him, and his old man. And I know, you’re a girl.”

His face went from skeptical, to confused, to a brilliant blush in the span of a few seconds. Trying to stammer out protests, questions and denials all at the same time. Seems I had managed to break her brain.

I knew the truth, the memories had been coming on more solidly as I had time to let them bubble up. Ukyo was a girl, an old friend of Ranma’s he had mistaken for a boy when they were children. Couldn’t have been more than six at the most, maybe younger. Her father had tried to engage her to the Saotome heir, and offered up his food cart as a ‘dowry.’

Genma, being the greedy fool he was, took the cart but left the girl behind. She’d been scared by the event, and given up being feminine as a result. Even went to an all boy junior high, while playing the role of a male. Like she was now.

A lot of issues here I need to work out, but any further discussion was interrupted by the untimely arrival of a vengeful valkyrie.

“Airen!” Ukyo looked to the door in annoyance. Then shock as a new, larger access way was installed. One furious swing of her chui had opened a new portal on the roof. Not just knocking it off the hinges. She blew the whole frame right out of the wall.

Shampoo assumed an aggressive stance and was ready to pounce. Seeing me in no danger was the only thing keeping her from going right into the attack. Her posture didn’t relax though.

“It is alright, love. Ukyo just wanted to talk.” I stopped to pick my words carefully. My Chinese sweetheart would take a far more negative reaction to the news I had a potential suitor, than I had some strange rival.

“Ukyo has business with my brother. And a certain, stupid, punching bag of ours.” Her eyes turned to study me slowly. Keeping Ukyo in her field of vision. Slowly, she relaxed, but walked protectively to my side.

Akane and Ryoga soon came running up the stairs, her pulling him along by the wrist. Shampoo must’ve left them in the dust, and they were rushing as fast as Ryoga’s poor sense of direction would allow. They stopped at the stairwell and just watched. Worried but not wanting to interfere. Akane
was tense, looking ready to fly into action. That was touching.

Ryoga also slowly cracked his knuckles as he eyed Ukyo. Eager to get involved himself. He hadn’t gotten to participate in the morning brawls this week. Maybe he was feeling both protective, and left out.

*Heh, don’t want a new rival to steal my attention away, eh Ryoga? How sweet.* I allowed myself a mental chortle. Anything to help break some of the tension in my own head.

“Ukyo, please, just gimme a couple days, I promise Ranma will meet with you. And you … workout your issues.”

For her part, Kuonji took stock of the situation. She was heavily outnumbered, with two dangerous martial artists ready to spring against her. Shampoo’s demonstration had been clear enough.

I can only begin to imagine how confusing everything had to be. My head was spinning trying to work out solutions. Her’s had to be tying itself in knots at all this weirdness in so short a span of time.

“Feh, fine *Saotome*. Tell Ranma to be at this address, tomorrow after school. Tell him to come alone. This is between me and him, if he’s man enough not to run away again.” That barb rattled me more than it should have. Making me chew on the inside of my cheek. “He’ll come and take his just desserts.”

Reaching into her jacket she pulled out a small, rectangular object and flicked it at me. I casually plucked it out of the air and spun it in my fingers.

*Okonomiyaki Ucchan’s. Wednesday to Sunday, 4 to 10 pm. Already has her restaurant set up? How? … I’ll never make sense how easy some things are in this world.*

Any reply I had went unanswered. By the time I looked up, Ukyo had already cleared the fence topping the roof and launched herself back into the classroom.

With a sigh, I just rubbed on my nose while my friends looked on. Ready for me to explain this whole affair.
“Guys, can I have a few days, please? I know this is askin’ a lot, but I need to take are of this myself.” I glanced to each of their eyes slowly, getting a nod in turn. I looked to Shampoo last. Hers filled with protest. “Please?”

Her face screwed up hard, but her answer came in the form of a swift and hard kiss. Grabbing my cheeks and yanking my lips forward. She took charge of them and gave me a searing, facial massage. It conveyed all her emotions. Concern. Anger. Fear.

It also was her way of saying she’d let me do this, and she wasn’t happy about it. Relationships were built on trust though, and ours were going to have tests like this. I hugged her tight in turn.

When she finally let me up for air, I just whispered into her ear. “Thank you.”

We returned to class and our lunches. Ukyo was quiet and didn’t turn another glance our way. Classmates watched and tried to inquire, but we provided on answers. The tension in our little group quickly got silence from the rest of them.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully enough, and by the time class ended, Ukyo fled faster than I could. For the better. I just wanted to go get out homework done and relax. My father might try to make another hellish training session this afternoon, but I could use the distraction.

There was nothing like a hot soak after an intense bout of training. It was one of the simple delights of modern living which I indulged in. Bath or shower, didn’t matter quite so much. I just enjoyed the sensation of the water on my skin. Nothing like letting it sink right down into your bones and ease out stress, or help loosen up tight muscles.

The heat had been particularly wonderful the past week and a half for the pains in my joints, and the severe stomach cramps. My medication had done wonders to take the edge off though, so I was surviving without as much cause for complaint. A hot bath just helped make it that much better.

It was perhaps a testament to my acceptance of the situation, and my brain running in so many other directions about long term thoughts I didn’t even notice the switch. Finally, after eleven days of sinking into a hot bath, and eleven days of coming out female. That i returned to male form.
It was a long minute before I even noticed. When I did, it didn’t bring the level of relief I was hoping for. I still let out a laugh and a sigh. At least Cologne’s prediction had come true. I’d be stuck as a girl a third of the month, and at school … but I could find other times to just be me.

Was going to make confronting Ukyo with the truth easier, but I still didn’t have a clue how I was going to explain it to her. How to resolve anything between us.

Akane and the engagement hadn’t been that hard. This one though, I had a gordian knot on my hands, and no mental sword with which to cut it. So much for my hot bath providing me the comfort I had been seeking.

Sometimes life just refused to allow even the simple luxuries to be enjoyed.

I was just topping the stairs when the door to Shampoo’s room opened. I was running a towel through my hair, which I’d let down from its ponytail. Our eyes met and we just stared at one another. I could just enjoy this view for hours.

She was never one for much in the way of pajamas. Even a standard nightgown was a strange idea to her. Instead it was just long, pull over shirts. Tonight was a soft lavender color. It was slightly sheer for the weather being warm, and left so much of her beautiful legs uncovered. I had to remind myself to shut my mouth so I didn’t drool.

For her part, she looked at me as if I was a ghost. Some almost forgotten friend she hadn’t seen in years. To be fair, she hadn’t seen me in male guise for better than a week. Guess it was a little odd to be looking up into my eyes, rather than the other way around.

Didn’t take long for her eyes to switch to a far more intense expression. Her lips curling into a grin. Thoughts playing in her head which were anything but safe to consider in polite company. She took the few steps from her door to saunter into my path. Adding a little extra sway to her hips as she moved.

“Airen, you aren’t stuck as girl-type.” She cooed, pressing her hip into me and a finger pressed into my chest. Tracing the pectorals and then tapping her way up to my lips. “This makes me so happy …
“We haven’t … cuddled in so long.” It wasn’t an invitation. She grabbed both ends of the towel and hooked it behind my neck. Willing or not, I was pulled into her room and tripped onto the bed. There was a soft click as she turned the latch.

Then she began to tease, strutting her way slowly to her dresser. Sliding open the top and pulling out … a foil package.

“Just to be safe … but Mother helped me get some little, white pills, too.”

I couldn’t formulate any articulate thoughts as she sauntered her way closer. A proud grin burning in her eyes at the power she wielded over me with such ease. All of my attention was on her, and her thoughts on how to end our evening before bed were clear.

{Oh my … oh my … oh yessss} Were the last coherent thoughts I had as she pounced on me. I didn’t get much sleep in the following hours, but I couldn’t find any reason to complain about that. Far more interesting things were going to occupy my mind, and my hands.

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