

**Howdy all!** Here is the next installment of *Climbing Together*.

This has been reviewed by myself with Grammarly and by Hiryo. As always give him a thank you for his work, especially this time because he pointed out my need to take multiple versions of Street Fighter Canon into account and made me really think where I wanted to take Ryu and Ken.

### **Chapter 8: Sometimes Prey Come to You, Sometimes Not**

Listening to Andy tell him what had happened the night before with Mai, Terry became a little annoyed at how his brother had handled things with the Shiranui heiress. "You seriously should have been more upfront with her right off the bat, Andy," he growled as the two of them finished cleaning up breakfast. A part of Terry wondered where the others were, but also knew that if any of them were there, it would just create more drama. *And I am not a fan of drama.*

"And I'm not talking just about how you had stopped being attracted to her, but everything else. The instant she started her crazy 'get Andy to react' stuff, you should have shut it down. I know you were worried about hurting her feelings or your friendship or whatever, but as it is, I don't know if you two can salvage your friendship. Damn it, I don't even know if we'll ever be welcome back here again," Terry added under his breath.

"I know, but I still don't understand! Why does Mai want to keep getting stronger in the Art when she has everything that most people who practice the Art on our level want? She's got a dojo, she's an heir to it, she's got her own style," Andy began before getting a look from his brother and subsiding. That sounded all too much like envy to Terry, and Andy knew it. "You know what I mean, bro."

"I know, and I even understand your point. Even Ranma, a guy turned girl, isn't as strong in his female form as he is as a man. That's just fact," Terry said, not commenting on skill level or actual combat aptitude. He might not like it, but Ranma had shown him that a woman could be just as dangerous as a guy. Hell, Terry didn't like it, and Terry still thought that fighting was no place for a woman but he could acknowledge his own chauvinistic thoughts in that area. That didn't mean Terry thought they were wrong, though. "That argument was only half the issue, and you know it. The other half was you just not finding Mai attractive any longer and not fucking telling her, asshole."

For his part, Terry could only kind of understand that. Admittedly, Mai wasn't his type. Terry preferred blondes, legs over tits, and low-maintenance girls. But even so, Terry knew Mai was a rare beauty, with a body that professional models would have committed mass murder for. *Which is just another reason why she shouldn't come with us. Mai'd garner a lot of attention, and I prefer traveling more incognito than that. To say nothing about all the amenities and so forth that she'd want access to.*

Terry hadn't really listened when Mai had explained what she, Ranma, Shampoo and the other two had been up to and didn't know that she had gotten used to roughing it in the

wild, at least the Ranma-style version of roughing it anyway. If he had, Terry might well been surprised how little of modern amenities Mai felt were truly essential any longer.

“How was I supposed to know that was the problem, bro?! I just knew I was uncomfortable, that’s all,” Andy grumbled. “It was only seeing Natsume, traditional, self-effacing, modest, right next to Mai and her... Mai-ness, that made me understand why.”

“Then you need to work on being more self-aware. Just mean’s you’re a dumbass instead of just an ass.” With that final insult, Terry decided to let the subject drop. It was over with, and there was nothing they could do about it anyway.

With a last look around the kitchen, Terry felt they were done cleaning up. He gestured for Andy to pick up his pack as he did the same. “Whatever. If we ever come back here, you and Mai can figure out if you can make up then. Right now, we’ve got a ship to catch. Hawaii, here we come, and then California. A real state, in the reigning world champion of two world wars, baby! You’ll like it there. It’s got enough space to actually spread out in and not everyone looks alike there either.”

That was a deliberate dig at Andy, who had lived for most of his life in Japan, which was one of the most homogenous nations in the world. Andy knew it was a dig to get him moving, but still reacted by scowling and smacked his brother on the shoulder, warning him that he better not make any jokes like that when any of the locals might hear him. Terry replied by giving his brother a noogie, and then he was out the door, with Andy chasing after him angrily, forgetting for a moment his regrets about how his friendship with Mai was probably irreversibly damaged now.

Neither brother noticed as they walked out the door and slung their bags onto their backs, small signs hanging from their bags. One, the one on Andy’s back, said, “Please Help, Uke seeking a Seme.” Terry’s was a simpler, straightforward sign saying “Kick Me.”

Not Ranma’s best work admittedly, but as he walked around the side of the building with Shampoo beside him and stared after the two brothers, Ranma reminded himself that he had been in a bit of a rush. *That, and I don’t have much of a problem with Terry. He’s a bit too much of a... What is that word that I heard used once when I passed through Tokyo, freedom-boo? Something like that, anyway. I don’t honestly think it fits, but whatever. And he’s just as chauvinist as his brother, despite actually being a good guy. Admittedly, so is Andy, but damn if he didn’t mess up big time with Mai.*

Mai had regressed quite a bit after the conversation about their plans going forward had begun to run down. She had left the couple in the dojo and returned to her own room looking unhappy, and both Ranma and Shampoo had been very worried about her. More than that, it had been all Ranma could do to convince Shampoo to not confront Andy, and Shampoo still looked a little annoyed with him now as they watched the two brothers exit the dojo heading out into the street beyond. “Shampoo still think Andy need head examined. And best way of examining head is to open it up, see what is inside, yes?”

"I don't think that's the way it works, Shampoo, and frankly, I really don't want to deal with the drama," Ranma stated, his thoughts similar to Terry's on that score. Come on, let's go check on Mai."

Shampoo frowned a little still, as she stared after the two brothers, then turned away, shaking her head and pointing towards the kitchen, where at least they had cleaned up after themselves. "No. Shampoo make food for Mai to have in bed..." She paused, then very deliberately smacked her cheeks with both hands, shaking her head, then went on in a more normal tone, her accent disappearing again. "Not yet. I'll make Mai some food to have in bed while you check on Jubei. I don't think that Mai is going to be in any kind of mood to deal with his normal... Stuff?"

"I think the word you were looking for there is shenanigans or just perversions. Mind you, I think the guy showed he has a brain in there, so I don't know if he'd actually... Or would he? He might think it would be a way to get Mai to cheer her up or at least not be in a funk any longer. Damn." Sighing, Ranma accepted the point, and the two of them separated for a bit.

Ranma stealthily headed up the stairs to the master bedroom where Jubei slept, opening the door slowly to peek inside, grateful that the old man was still asleep and looked to be completely out of it, if the way he was splayed out on the bed still in the gi he had worn the day before was any indication. He returned downstairs quickly, and the two of them moved around the kitchen, creating a breakfast tray that they would be able to share with Mai.

As they did, Ranma quietly marveled at how... nice it felt doing something so domestic. Ranma had gotten used to working with Shampoo on various projects, but there was something more intimate, maybe about cooking like this, their bodies shifting, moving around one another. There were points where they touched, shoulder to shoulder, or Shampoo's rump slid against his front as they moved around the kitchen that made it almost like flirting. *Is that a thing? Cooking being flirting? Weird. But fun.*

Feeling a little daring, Ranma went with that idea, looking for excuses to touch or brush against Shampoo. She got into it too, and by the time they finished, both of them were smiling widely, with Shampoo actually biting her lip, her body showing clear signs of arousal as Ranma fought his own. When Shampoo turned from putting the top on the last bowl of rice and leaned up expectantly, Ranma met her halfway, kissing her eagerly, their mouths opening and tongues playing against one another for a few moments.

"Mmmm... wo ai ni, Airen," Shampoo murmured, pulling back, her breath coming in gasps, her chest heaving in a rather delightful manner.

"Heh, um, yeah, we, yum, er, um, we need to do this some more," Ranma whispered back, an almost giddy grin on his face. "That's what I call a good way to start the day."

"Mm, much better than watching the two Bogard Bakas. But now, must help friend Mai," Shampoo said before scowling and repeating herself, erasing her accent again.

The two lovers were somewhat surprised when Mai's voice answered them when Ranma knocked gently on her door, thinking that the girl might still be asleep, regardless of how restless that sleep might have been given the events of the night before. When they entered, though, Mai looked just as weepy and disheveled as Shampoo had expected.

Luckily for Ranma, Mai had also changed out of the simply **amazing** outfit she'd worn last night to try to convince Andy to take their relationship to the next level. Instead, she wore a short-sleeved shirt that covered her from the neck down to her waist. It was a little pulled up at the bottom, leaving a strip of her taut, toned stomach on display, but that was all. Yet, thanks to Mai's body type, that shirt was tight against her amazing chest. Below that, she wore a pair of flannel shorts that covered her legs down to her knees.

*And lower legs are just not sexy, even on someone like Mai,* Ranma thought, even though he still found Mai really attractive. She just looked more like the hot girl next-door type rather than the sexy vamp she had been the night before.

Beyond that, though, like Shampoo, Ranma could easily see the signs of Mai's distress. Her typically well-cared-for and brushed hair was sticking out in every direction, the worst case of bedhead Ranma had seen. Her eyes were red-rimmed somewhat bloodshot, and there seemed to be tear streaks down her face, too. *Damn it, Shampoo was right. She really regressed after she left us last night.*

This was all too accurate. Once alone in her room, Mai's sadness at losing what she had long thought was the love of her life had come back to her. Deep Down, Mai had the same insecurities as any woman, and learning that Andy, the man Mai had built up as her ideal and her best friend, did not love her, did not find her attractive, was not a blow that she could get over fast. Without her friends there to encourage her or direct her thoughts differently, Mai had spiraled back into the same hole, which her thoughts had been, when she had wandered out into the woods.

Mai looked down at the tray in Shampoo's hands, smiling wanly. "You shouldn't have, Shampoo. I'm well enough to come down and eat in the kitchen."

"I've read enough manga to know that getting over a breakup is hard, and there are steps to go along with it. Breakfast in bed will help, as will talking to friends more, yes?" Shampoo said, gesturing Mai back towards her bed with a twitch of her head.

The room was still set up for multiple occupants currently, so there was more than enough furniture to sit on. Mai set the tray on her small desk, and all of them took some plates of food, saying nothing for a bit. Ranma sat on one side of the room on a bed made up for one of the Tendo sisters, while Shampoo sat beside Mai, leaning her shoulder against the other girl consolingly as they ate quietly. The two of them talked, with Shampoo saying how sorry she was that Mai's relationship with Andy hadn't gone anywhere, that Andy was all at fault, and had to be blind not to see how gorgeous a girl Mai was.

Ranma just sat there, saying nothing, not even when Shampoo glanced his way. Something about her expression told him that she wanted him to start speaking up, but

Ranma was still not exactly comfortable with this kind of thing, and frankly, he didn't know if everything that had occurred between them was Andy's fault in the first place. Oh, he was very certain that Andy hadn't done anything to really make him and Mai work, but that was a far cry from being the sole reason why the relationship hadn't worked.

Eventually, Shampoo became fed up with Ranma ignoring her nonverbal cues. "Maybe if Andy not react at all to that little number you had on last night, maybe he really is gay like Shampoo said last night! It's not Mai's fault at all, then! Right, Ranma?" she nearly growled, turning to glare at him.

The glare sent Ranma's way with those words would've made many a man quail, but Ranma simply shrugged his shoulders. *Grab the bull by the horns, man. Bluntness can help Mai get over this more, right?* "Honestly? While I kind of agree with Shampoo on the only way he couldn't react to you in that number you wore last night was if he was gay, I'm... also kind of wondering if you were ever in love with him in the first place."

Ranma didn't even bother to dodge the fan to the face that earned him. The end of the folded fan thwacked into his forehead, sending his head crashing into the wall behind him as Mai shouted, "Excuse me?!"

While a part of Mai had wondered the same thing more than once the night before, when she had returned to her room, that idea had flown out the window. Logic and thinking things through like that could not stand against the tumult of emotions that breaking up with her first love and ending a lifelong friendship had brought out in the middle of the night.

"Ranma, you idiot, no can spout something like that!" Shampoo shouted, so loud that in his room, Jubei woke, groaning and very, very hung over.

"Now, hold on!" Ranma held up his hands, a welt appearing on his forehead for a moment before slowly disappearing thanks to his ki healing. *OW! That hurt. And boy, does that say something, given how much durability training I've done. Female fury man, one true fear.* "Hear me out before you gang up on me, okay?"

Mai and Shampoo looked at one another, then nodded, both turning back to Ranma. Their expressions, besides a few tears on Mai's side, looked almost identical, locked into the quintessential 'this better be good' face that had for centuries terrified men the world over.

Taking that as his cue to continue, Ranma patted the air with both hands and went on quickly, hoping to make his points before the two girls tore him a new one. "I've said it before, and I've said it again. I don't really know much about relationships, but love, well, love and all that, that's up here, right?"

He held up a hand above his head as high as he could go. "Getting to know you would be down here at the bottom, where me and Shampoo started in that cave in China. Friendships would be somewhere in the middle but also sort of over to the side. It can lead to a relationship, moving from here," and here, the hand that it indicated where friendship

would be shifted a bit higher, “to here. But it isn’t the same as being in love with someone, right?”

Ranma let his hands fall, adding, “And a lot of teenagers, a lot of people go through a **lot** of relationships right before finding their one person. Shampoo and I aren’t normal like that.”

“Get to the point,” Mai growled, while Shampoo frowned and blushed at the same time, pleased with the fact that Ranma had basically just said she was the one for him and that he loved her without actually saying it, while also annoyed at the implications of what else he was saying.

“I suppose my point is that it sounds as if, and it always has, that you and Andy both went from friend to girlfriend/boyfriend, and you both instantly went into the relationship thinkin’ this is it, this relationship is gonna continue and end up in marriage, and we love each other right? But that’s not how it happens. I mean, I knew I was interested in Shampoo when we shared that kiss back on the rooftop of the Tendo dojo. But it was only after we started to travel with one another and started to actually be in a relationship that er, you know, other emotions came into it. Friendship doesn’t equal love, is what I’m saying. And it feels as if you tried to force it to be. And when Andy stopped trying, you just pushed harder.”

Mai grew angry at that but also thoughtful, and Shampoo hummed, again trying not to smile too widely at what Ron was saying about the relationship right now. This wasn’t the time for that. *Ooh, but that and our earlier flirting. It’s enough to give a girl ideas of taking our relationship further!*

Seeing how his words had staved off the girls’ anger at his earlier bluntness, Ranma went on, hoping to douse that fire further, and Mai felt her lips twitching involuntarily as his earlier bumpkin accent faded quickly now that he wasn’t in danger of being attacked. “That isn’t to say that Andy wasn’t also part of the problem. He thought about it the same way as you did, that the relationship with you would lead to something major, that friendship was the same as being in love with attraction added in. But that began to disappear when Andy’s attraction to you faded. Mind you, I still think he’s a crazy person for that, but still, if he realized that he wasn’t any longer attracted to you, he should have told you then.”

Flushing a bit at the backhanded compliment, Mai nodded at that, as did Shampoo. That last point was simply common sense, after all. Nevertheless, the rest of what Ranma had said was slowly sinking into Mai, reminding her of her own disjointed thoughts on that score the night before in the forest. It wasn’t making her feel better after having the whole night to stew in her own insecurities, but she at least could understand where Ranma was coming from.

Shampoo spoke up before she could. “Ranma looking at this too-too clinically. An outsider’s perspective. Inside, it must be much harder!”

“That’s right!” Mai rallied. “Whether or not I was in love with the idea of being in love with Andy, or really in love with him as a person, doesn’t matter! I thought I was!”

Tears sprang to her eyes again at that, and Shampoo peremptorily gestured Ranma towards the door even as Ranma began to open his mouth to explain that sounded really dumb. "You now on permanent grocery duty now. Go find large tub of ice cream and come back with it."

"And some alcohol. Margaritas, those single margaritas in tins!" Mai shouted, waving her arms before hugging and nuzzling into Shampoo's shoulder. "For once, I think I want to get drunk."

Seeing no point in arguing about and very pointedly not making the observation that Mai seemed to actually agree with some of his points, Ranma headed for the door. *She's right. After all, emotions are tricky things, and I **am** looking at this from an outsider's perspective, just like Shampoo said.*

Outside, he met Jubei, who had been very obviously listening in. The old man patted Ranma on the shoulder, saying, "You did your best, my boy. But men and women, we look at problems very differently. You look for a way to take the pain away or show how silly it is to feel it in the first place. But at the moment, it's better to let the female perspective dominate: complain and moan about the problem until the feelings fade away rather than make the problem go away. There's a big difference there."

Ranma nodded, then asked for directions to the nearest grocery store. Jubei gave it to him and a list of other things to buy, and somewhat astonishing Ranma, also gave him money to use. He was used to martial arts masters being penny pinchers. "And just tell the grocer the margaritas are for me. Ms. Yama might raise her eyebrow at the choice of drink, but they won't bother you much about it. And after you return, once I've gotten rid of this hangover, I'd like to examine that Blue Burst technique of yours that you used yesterday."

That caused Ranma to nod eagerly, and he raced away, setting aside all issues with Mai and Shampoo and the problem with Andy or anything else. There was training to think about!

By the time he returned, Mai and Shampoo had moved down to the TV room, where they had snuggled into the sofa there, and were currently watching some American movie. Judging by the picture on the DVD case, it was probably a romance flick, and Ranma was very thankful that neither girl made any effort to try to get him to watch it with them. He handed over the tub of ice cream 'Death by Chocolate' dutifully, and then headed into the kitchen, coming back with two glasses of ready-made margaritas and setting down the six-pack on a table beside the sofa.

Shampoo thanked him sweetly, then shooed him off, turning back to the movie as Mai took a swig from the Margarita. She watched the film for a few moments, then pointed at it as the scene changed to a part of the city somewhere. "Ughh... America might make good movies, but why would anyone actually move there? Their cities look so dirty! Look, that's a main road, and there is graffiti on that bridge and on that building over there, and trash on the roads! I can't understand why Terry is so proud of it, or why Andy wanted to go there at all."

Mai laughed at that, putting down her Margarita and looking at the girl before hugging her tightly. "Thanks for this, and thanks for last night and, well, everything. I'd hate to be going through this on my own." A part of Mai also wondered if, without the example of Ranma and Shampoo, she would still be pining after Andy. And right now, that looked like an awful idea.

However, that part of her mind and the rest of her shuddered to a halt as Shampoo twisted around in her arms, hugging Mai in turn. This move pressed their chests together, so much so that their breasts began to squish, and both girls became very aware that neither of them was wearing a bra underneath her sleepwear. That sensation and the hug sent a thrill down both of their spines.

Mai was utterly shocked by it. She had always been able to acknowledge that other girls could be good-looking. Indeed, she had known since their time at the Musubime Osoroshi Hotojutsu that Shampoo was an attractive girl. Yet that was a very different thing than feeling this kind of thrill, this kind of reaction from hugging another woman. *What the...*

The moment didn't matter as much to Shampoo. She had known back in her village she was bisexual and simply put it down to an automatic reaction from her body after being with Ranma for so many months, getting used to hugging Ranma and his female form and vice versa. "You're very welcome," she said before pulling away, hoping that Mai didn't notice her burst of arousal.

She didn't notice how Mai's brows furrowed. Nor did Shampoo see how Mai kept on watching Shampoo for a second or two before turning her attention to the ice cream and the movie again, her thoughts even more muddled than they had been when she woke up.

**OOOOOO**

While his girlfriend and their best friend were having a moment, Ranma headed out into the dojo. There, he sparred with Jubei for more than an hour. Both of them bounced around the dojo, Jubei's personal version of the Shiranui style was almost like the Aerial style of Anything Goes but more about shifting around the battlefield than simply staying in the air. Regardless, the two styles were a near match for one another.

As they fought, Jubei kept on asking him questions about the Blue Burst Style and how Ranma had come up with it. The older master could only laugh at how Ranma had basically had to build up his knowledge from bits and pieces of other schools and how he had come up with what might well be a unique type of ki attack blasting out from his entire body all at once as the Blue Burst did.

There were issues with it, of course. It wasn't nearly as refined as a ki attack should be, nor as focused. Nevertheless, like Ranma, Jubei saw some potential there.

After more than an hour of regular sparring, Jubei instructed Ranma to use the Blue Burst on him as he kept on attacking. "After all, the best way to learn about something is to experience it, be it a ki attack or playing with a girl's boobies!"



Despite being annoyed by the lewd joke, Ranma timed his attack perfectly, just as he had against his old man. The moment Jubei's fist connected with his chest as Ranma seemingly let himself wide open, Ranma let loose with the Blue Burst. However Jubei, unlike Genma, had been ready for it and flipped backward almost as soon as Ranma's attack began to blast out of him, showing an increased level of speed that he hadn't shown yet in their sparring.

Even so, he almost got caught, his timing off enough that Ranma paused before following after him, cocking his head to one side as Jubei also paused, staring down at his hand from where he had almost stumbled onto his rear. "What happened? I didn't think I actually hit you that hard with the Blue Burst since you were already moving away. I noticed something happen like that before, when my old man attacked me yesterday."

"I was indeed moving away before you released your ki burst. Or rather, that was the plan." Jubei gazed down at his hand and then at Ranma, his eyes narrowed in thought. "Let's try that again."

It took four more tries before Jubei was satisfied, by which point, Ranma was quite tired. The Blue Burst took a lot out of him. Yet his exercises had not been in vain because Jubei had discerned something about the Blue Burst that Ranma hadn't. "You're not just using your own Ki. As you build up your burst, you're actually pulling a bit from the world around you. Just a bit, but when I come in contact with you, you also draw my own ki in, which has the upshot of actually causing me to almost stick to you for a bit. If I can't overcome it, I won't be able to break away."

"... That feels as if that's two different techniques that I've accidentally combined into one, or maybe even three," Ranma admitted ruefully, even as the implications and the possibilities wove through his head. "It sounds really effective, but also as if it could be made to be a lot better, a lot more varied."

"Oh, undoubtedly." Jubei chortled, shaking his head. "What you have essentially done is re-create a lost Chinese martial art, one I have only ever heard of in passing when reading old Chinese martial arts scrolls, the type that mentions how the style of that school is based off an even older version. It's a style that has been lost to time for quite a while, so if you could re-create it, that would be amazing. I am afraid, though, that I will probably be more help to you in helping you to build your energy reserves than anything else."

Jubei paused before going on. "I also think that your particular style leans far more heavily into the physical side of ki than the mystical when it comes to combat. I realize that you had wanted to try to see if you could add some of the Shiranui style's mystical components to your own, but I don't think it would do you much good. Remove any weakness, certainly, but play to your strengths," the older man advised. "If you try to mix in too much, you will simply muddle your style."

Ranma frowned at that, but it was true that over the months, Mai had tried to teach him the mystical side of ki, the ability to use ki to create shadow copies or even outright copies, let alone add elemental attacks to his strikes, he hadn't really done all that well. He

could pick out fake from real weapons now, but he couldn't produce them himself. Jubei had also commented on how little ability he seemed to have in that area before when he had explained the Shiranui-style visualization meditation techniques that built into that. Whereas Shampoo had shown marked progress in both areas since the two had left Master Nawa's school.

Looking at Ranma's hangdog face, Jubei patted him on the shoulder. "Don't feel discouraged that you aren't able to use the spiritual side of life energy. All men find that side of ki hard to learn. Men are naturally more in tune with the Yang, the physical energy of themselves and the physical world around them. And women are more in tune with the mystical, the inner soul, or Yin. That's just the way it is."

Watching Ranma's expression change into one of interest, Jubei went on, explaining a very profound thing as simply as he could. "Men can learn more with enough effort and... well, at a lack of Yang energy. That is, if a man concentrates so much on the Yin energy that they completely disregard the Yang they can become powerful on the spiritual side. In doing that, men can often reach a higher level of spiritual power than women, although women will always have more of a natural flare for it. But I am talking about someone who becomes a pure aesthete a monk who has devoted his entire life to meditation and the spirit, disdaining all worldly pleasures. I don't think you have it in you to do that, do you?"

The wicked eyebrow movements from Jubei made Ranma snort, feeling a little better. "Probably not. Er, not with a girlfriend like Shampoo, anyway. I'm dense, I ain't an idiot."

Jubei laughed. "I thought not."

"Can women become stronger in the Yang? Or do they face the same problems?" Ranma asked. "And what are their limitations?"

"I wouldn't call it limitations when Mai or your Shampoo are around," Jubei pointed out wryly, making Ranma cringe a bit. "But they do face certain challenges. A woman will need to put in a lot more effort to reach the same physical strength or even speed as a man. Agility is a different thing, obviously, as women can be more flexible than men. And just like a man must make sacrifices, must cut himself off from the Yang energy to push into the higher realms of Yin, so too would a woman."

Jubei grimaced. "I haven't heard of any woman doing so, but... I think there was a tale of some ninja clan who specialized in kunoichi that did that? To the point where their beauty and femininity faded... Red Hot... something? I remember having a drink with a man once, and he was talking about female horrors, like they had turned into oni or ghouls."

Jubei shuddered. "Taking anything to extremes like that is a bad thing." He waited until Ranma nodded, his face a little green. Wondering if Ranma had just imagined a more masculine Mai or Shampoo, he changed the subject a bit. "Mai will never have as large a ki reserve as you do, and I have to assume that she won't be able to take ki healing to the same level. But she will be able to mold ki more easily and mix the Yang energy with her own Yin."

You've seen her Mystic fire techniques, I would say once she learns how to mix that with more physical ki, then you'd best watch out."

"Yeah... a long-range ki attack that suddenly bursts into fire, or a real ki attack mixed in with the images of others. Ouch," Ranma agreed.

"Even that might be selling Mai short if she continues to grow. A growth I think I have you and your girlfriend for pushing, Ranma. Thank you." Jubei actually bowed from the waist for a brief second to the younger man before straightening. "Mai's growth had stalled out, her effort in the Art fading as she lacked friends who encouraged her on top of the whole... Andy situation. Now she does, and I have seen real progress from when she left home before meeting you two. Thank you."

Looking a little embarrassed, Ranma waved his hand. "Eh, it um, it goes both ways. Shampoo and I have learned a lot from Mai too."

"No doubt." Amused by how the youth seemed to be weak to honest praise, Jubei let that matter drop for now. "When it comes to your study of the Yin, it is better for you to concentrate on more internal matters. Protecting your mind, keeping your mind clear of influences, keeping your body clear of corruption and more aware of the world around you, the natural energy of the world. There are practitioners out there who can use their Ki to influence others, and defending against that kind of thing, or mystical artifacts or traps, all that can be countered by sufficient mastery of the Yang energy, of your own spiritual essence."

Frowning, Ranma cocked his head as he looked at the older man. "Shampoo mentioned how you needed a mastery of both Yin and Yang energy to keep your strength as you age. And the way you speak about that kind of thing, it sounds almost like you've run into outright magic before ya met me."

"I have not, but I did once meet a man who spoke of such things. If you ever meet Dhalsim of India, believe me, you will believe his words as I did, even if you have never seen evidence of what he tells you," Jubei answered firmly, surprising Ranma somewhat by the respect in his voice as he spoke of this Indian mystic. "That conversation did prepare me somewhat for magic... although your actual curse did throw me quite a bit..."

At that moment, Ranma decided that one way or another, he would get to India. *It's a big place, but I have determination. This Dhalsim guy sounds like someone we need to look up.*

"As for a mastery of both to offset the weakness of age, yes, that is a thing. You are well on your way to keeping your body in shape Ranma. Frankly, you are well on your way to mastering using ki through your body. Your ki healing is a sign of this."

Indeed, Jubei's own ki healing wasn't anywhere near as good as Ranma's. He hadn't even known that ki healing could be taken to that extreme. Now that he did, though, Jubei was hoping to gain some insight into how to make his own ki healing work on that level from Ranma as he and Shampoo stayed with them. Jubei was an unrepentant pervert and peeper,

but he was also a martial artist, and no practitioner of the Art could know about Ranma's ability to heal so quickly and not want some of that for himself.

"But you do need to work on the spiritual side more. Don't just get in touch with the physical energy of your body, but the power of your soul," Jubei advised. "I can help somewhat with various meditation techniques for that, but it will still be a very long road for you."

Ranma grunted, looking away, annoyed at once more being reminded of that. Deciding the boy needed a bit more encouragement, he continued on. "But that doesn't mean I can't help you on the physical ki side of things. You've gone a long way on that road, but I have a few tricks you haven't seemed to think of just yet."

With that, Jubei allowed his hands to fall to his side, and almost instantly, with no movement from his hands or even his wrists, several daggers fell from his sleeves. He caught these in his hands until he held up three small stabbing daggers in each hand. "That was a mental command to my ki space to basically open the door there and allow the things within to fall through. Mind you, organizing your ki space takes more energy, but it can make the technique even more useful. I know from some things that Mai has said that you've figured out how to add impetus to something coming out of your ki space, but you can also take that even further and I didn't need a gesture either."

Ranma had known about organizing his ki space before this, but the idea of being able to basically command his ki space to open mentally was astonishing. Yet he also had one other question. "Andy and Terry had no idea about ki space. They thought it was just the boob window before me and Shampoo arrived. Why didn't you tell them about it?"

"Because neither of them are of my school, and they didn't ask," Jubei answered primly. "You already know about it, and frankly, I approve of how much my grandniece has changed since she met you and Shampoo. I don't particularly think highly of Terry; he's a bit too much of a wandering wastrel, and given how he was so blind to the delights in front of him, do you really think that Andy was worthy of my teachings? Now, do you want to learn or not?"

"I want to learn!" Ranma stated eagerly, bouncing in place with eagerness.

"Excellent. In that case, we'll practice the Silent Foot technique today, and then, later this afternoon, we'll go out. I believe one of the local high schools has a high school cheerleader competition going on for the coming year, and hiding your presence is an essential part of the..." Jubei was forced to dodge to the side as the weighted end of Ranma's weapon passed through where he had been standing. "Honestly, you kids! You can't take a joke!"

Shampoo and Mai did not make an appearance in the dojo that day, but they did cook a very nice lunch and even an early dinner, leaving portions out for Jubei and Ranma, before retreating back into the TV room to watch more sappy romance movies. That was enough for Ranma, who was kept hopping by Jubei, who put him through both serious

training and not-at-all-serious training. One hour was spent meditating and examining his ki space, the web of energy he created in his sleeves and the pocket of his pants to expand the space within. The next forty-five minutes were spent in female form chasing after Jubei through the heavily trapped woods behind the Shiranui estate after his meditation had been interrupted by being splashed by cold water.

Then came a few hours of sparring and more meditation on his own. Only to receive a call from the local high school telling someone to go over and help hunt down a pervert, who, as Ranma had known it would be, turned out to be Jubei. Which ended up in a series of running fights that had both of them using weapons for the first time and took them back to the dojo.

Finally, Ranma rounded out the day by first training some more with his Blue Burst technique, slowly bringing up the power and then examining how Jubei's own ki was being caught by his before releasing the technique without actually using it several times. This turned out to be almost as hard as actually using the Blue Burst had been the first time.

By the time the clock hit seven o'clock, Ranma was thoroughly exhausted. As a break from training, he and Jubei talked over dinner about some other small projects around the house that needed doing, along with the need to finish repairing the outer wall. Shampoo had been right when she had mentioned that the garden needed some looking after. Some floorboards along the walkway between the dojo and the house needed replacing, having warped, and others in the roof above had some moss growing on them that needed to be cleared away. During their chase through the woods, Jubei had noted two trees had been badly damaged during Andy and Terry's chase of Ryoga, and something would need to be done before they collapsed and took some of their brethren down with them. There were also a few plumbing issues. Old piping had to be replaced, and some more modernization stuff around the household could also benefit from Ranma's Martial Arts Construction skills.

Ranma made a list of it and headed out to pick up all the material he would need for the various projects, only to come back and realize that Jubei had left again. Soon enough, a few shrieks of "Pervert!" could be heard on the wind, and with a sigh, Ranma was off once more.

By the time he dragged the now badly battered form of Jubei back to the dojo, it was pushing nine o'clock and Ranma was thoroughly done with the day. "One moment he's helpful, one moment he's a pervert. One moment, he's insightful, acting like a dojo master should caring about the dojo and the house. The next, he's off peeping! Sticking in one lane, please, old man!" Ranma grumbled.

His captive snickered, saying through slightly swelled lips, "Now, where would the fun in that be?"

After dumping Jubei on the floor of the kitchen, Ranma headed into the TV room to check on the girls, finding them asleep. The tub of ice cream was empty, and placed within it were all of the cans of ready-made margaritas Ranma had bought the pair.

More importantly, and far more distractingly, the pair of girls were intertwined with one another. Their legs were wrapped around one another, with Shampoo's head pressed into Mai's prodigious chest, and both girls had a good grip on one another's rears.

Ranma stared for several moments, taking in the sight and trying hard not to let his body react to it overmuch, failing miserably. The sight of the two girls like that was enough to give anyone ideas, let alone Ranma, who was somewhat intimately familiar with Shampoo's body. *Well, I'm intimate with her above the waist anyway. While my hands've felt what was below the belt more than once, I haven't actually seen—no, no, stop it, concentrate on the noise they're making, Ranma!*

The noise was the only thing taking away from the eroticism of the sight before him. Shampoo was snoring into Mai's breasts, creating a kind of 'brbrbrbrbr...' sound. For her part, Mai was drooling, her mouth open, an occasional loud snore coming from her as her drool dripped into Shampoo's hair.

Soon, the simple silliness of those sounds were enough to break Ranma out of his hormonally-induced fugue, and he shook himself and headed upstairs. There, he grabbed some blankets for Mai's room, draping them over the two girls. With that done, he headed to the bath for a cold shower, trying to get rid of the image that had been seared into his mind. *You can't think like that, Ranma! Mai just got over a bad breakup, and you're dating Shampoo. Mai's a friend. That's all she is to either of you! That was just two drunk girls falling asleep wherever they were when the drink finally overcame them. Nothing more, nothing less!*

OOOOOOO

The next day, the two girls did not deal with their hangovers nearly as well as Jubei had. Instead of taking a bit of the hair of the dog and taking a homebrewed hangover remedy, the two girls groaned, moaned, and threatened bodily harm on Jubei until he vacated the premises. At which point, the pair basically slumped onto the kitchen table and stayed there for several hours until the pain in their heads finally went away due to at least half again as many painkillers as they should've taken alongside cup ramen, of all things.

Ranma and Jubei let them alone until around midday before Ranma stuck his head in, telling the girls about all the projects he was going to be working on for the day. By that point, Shampoo had recovered enough from her binge to look at Ranma and ask if Jubei was up to start training her.

The pigtailed martial artist grimaced a bit. "Sure. And he's pretty darn effective, too, as we saw that first day we were here. But one on one, he can be a bit of a handful. He likes to, well, kind of intersperse the day with pissing you off with his perversions. I honestly can't tell if he's doing it deliberately to give you a break, or just has control issues."

"That's Jubei for you," Mai mumbled into the top of the table, not lifting her head up from where she had laid it down. She had drunk the lion's share of the margaritas, and although having a higher tolerance for alcohol than Shampoo, who had barely ever drunk

except on special occasions in the village, she was still suffering. "He's good at what he does, but a lot of what he does is perverted."

Shampoo scowled at that but stated that she would be able to handle it. "Shampoo want see if finish duplicate weapon technique. Maybe even add mystic fire attack like Mai?"

Despite being more recovered than Mai, it was very clear that Shampoo's mind wasn't totally online yet, her accent thicker than it had been in months.

"My own plan is to concentrate more on the Blue Burst technique and enlarging my rope weapon," Ranma admitted. Jubei and I talked about it yesterday, and we both decided the spiritual side of using ki just isn't for me. Even as a girl, I'm not able to really access the Yin side of things, you know?"

That made sense to Shampoo, who nodded and headed towards the dojo, passing by Ranma and leaning in to give him a kiss.

For the first time in the relationship, Ranma backed away, hastily waving his hands in front of his face. "I wouldn't normally say no to a kiss from you ever, Shampoo, but I draw the line at a mixture of morning breath and hung-over breath, you know?"

Mai winced at the squeal of embarrassment Shampoo released at that and the subsequent noises of her charging upstairs. Then her head came up off of the table at a roar from outside. "A challenger, a challenger comes!"

Her eyes lighting up with unholy delight, Mai slowly pushed herself to her feet, then headed upstairs after Shampoo, calling over her shoulder to Ranma. "If you could tell the dojo destroyers or whoever is outside wanting to challenge us to wait for a bit, I would appreciate it. I have a lot of aggression to get out, but a girl needs to look her best when meeting strangers."

Ranma had been about to object, not only to the idea of using him as a messenger boy but also because he had also gotten his hopes up when he heard that shout. Mai's last words stifled that, and instead, he nodded, did as he was told, and, after leaving the band of seven martial artists, all of them dressed up in the same kind of outfit and sporting a tiger mark on their shoulders to wait outside for a bit, he reentered the house.

Out of sight, Ranma bowed his head, clapping his hands several times, as he offered a prayer for their souls before resolutely heading out into the woods. Hopefully, far enough away so that he didn't hear the screaming.

By the time the afternoon rolled around, Ranma had practically finished all of the jobs around the place, and Mai had... dealt with the interlopers in a very therapeutic manner. Somewhat annoying Ranma, Shampoo had begun to show progress in duplicating her weapon via Yin energy. Two shadow weapons flashed across the dojo as Ranma watched, a pout on his face, as Shampoo began to hop in place excitedly. "Look! Look! Shampoo do it!"

A far calmer, far more centered Mai nodded her head sagely. The fact she looked as if she had just hopped out of the bathroom, every hair in place, her clothing perfect, even her lipstick perfect despite wailing on the dojo challengers, was somewhat scary, in Ranma's opinion. "That's amazing Shampoo! Well done."

Jubei was also pleased. He was also sporting a few bruises, but Ranma had decided not to look into why that was or why several of the weapons kept on stands nearby were bent and twisted when they hadn't been the day before. "Very good indeed. I think you've gotten that technique down well enough, all you need now is experience. You're mystic fire attack still needs quite a bit of work though. You can create the swirl properly, but you haven't been able to imbue enough energy into the attack to set it aflame. That is something you will need to practice on, but it will also serve to help you grow your ki reserves in general."

He then looked out the window, smiling slightly. "But it is far too nice a day out to stay inside the dojo any longer. What say we all head down to the beach?"

Mai's eyes instantly narrowed. "You just want to perv on the women there."

"Of course! But that doesn't mean it isn't a bad idea. I'll make you a deal, Mai. I won't attempt to sneak into the girls' locker rooms and watch them change, and I will stay well away from the three of you. In return, the three of you handle food and don't call me out on having a pair of binoculars built into my sunglasses. Deal?"

Mai looked over to Shampoo and Ranma, who both nodded equitably. The idea of heading to the beach sounded nice. They hadn't actually had much time at the beach in Wakayama where they met Ranma's mother after all. Having a half-day off of training after all the progress Ranma and Shampoo made wouldn't be that much of a big deal. Moreover, Mai was happy too, having been able to use a speed technique she had learned from Ranma and Shampoo against the dojo challengers.

Preparing to head to the beach took the three teens and Jubei only about thirty minutes. Getting there took about another hour and a half. The beach in question was a large public beach, about half again the size of the one back in Wakayama, and it didn't have nearly as many shops or eateries along the boardwalk. Those that it did have were markedly more crowded, but there were also some jet ski things that Ranma thought looked kind of cool for rent, along with all surfboards. Way out to sea, Ranma could even see a boat pulling along some guy on skis of some kind. "That looks kind of fun. It would probably make for really good balance training."

"You and your training! I wager you're still thinking we should swim to China for training," Mai snorted, shaking her head, noting absently that the three of them were already getting looks from some of the single men and boys around. She separated those into two categories for a simple reason: boys could range from as young as thirteen to into their twenties, and their staring were a thing of blushes and side looks. Men apparently could start at fifteen and go almost as old as her great uncle, and their stares were lascivious and accompanied by words, lewd gestures and so forth. *And isn't that just nightmare fuel?*



*Ugh, I really hope that one guy with a white beard doesn't try to flirt with us. He looks like I could break him in half with my pinky.*

Not, admittedly, that she could honestly blame any of the guys for looking the trio of girls over. Mai was dressed in a simple white one-piece swimsuit with a few red flower marks moving up from one hip to the opposite side's shoulder, but even though the cut of the swimsuit should have been modest, on her, it still looked damn good, and Mai knew it. In contrast, Shampoo had gone for a bikini, a nice little two-piece number that was sporty enough, to keep her chest in check, but whose light purple color worked magnificently with her hair, showing her hips, butt and breasts to good effect.

And, of course, there was Ranma. Ranma had chosen a one-piece as well, one of dark blue, which only served to set off her red hair even more. Its cut was even more conservative than Mai's, but it still showed enough of a figure underneath to garner a lot of attention, if not from quite the same crowd as Mai and Shampoo. She looked a little more innocent and tomboyish than outright beautiful, in Mai's opinion, but she was still prettier than around forty percent of the women around them.

"Swim first, or something else?" Ranma asked, ignoring Mai's statement. After all, it was true. *Honestly, why don't they understand how good exercise swimming to China would be? I don't get it.*

Shampoo looked at him in a way that caused Ranma to look away hastily. "I think Mai was onto something there. Airen **is** still thinking about getting us to swim with him to China." She reached over and pulled Ranma around, grasping his head with both of her hands and pulling her in as if she were going to kiss the redhead, something that drew a lot of whistles from those around her but pausing. "Read Shampoo's lips, Ranma. Not going to happen."

She released a pouting Ranma and turned back to look at Mai, gesturing towards the ocean. "I think we should swim first, yes?"

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. And if we want to take advantage of some of the rental equipment, we should probably wait until near evening, after the rush of the day is past you know?" She then smirked, gesturing towards the same skis that Ranma had commented on being pulled behind the boat. "That way, we won't attract quite so much attention when we start pulling off mad tricks with those. I tried that once, and by the time I got back to the shore, the entire shore was packed with people wanting my autograph or asking me if I was some kind of famous acrobat or something."

Mai didn't mention that she had only been eleven at the time and had yet to achieve her full figure. She didn't know if she would get the same comments about being a gymnast any longer, but any of the three of them would probably draw even more of a crowd.

"Oh, now you want to swim?" Ranma snarked but didn't object, and the three of them headed down to the shoreline, then dove in without any preamble. Mai had most of their stuff in her booby window, so there was no need to set up a small area for themselves. In addition, Jubei had disappeared the moment they reached the boardwalk.

The rest of the day, the three of them swam, mock-fought in the water, smacked volleyballs around and generally had a good time. They attracted attention but did nothing to either ward it off or encourage it. There would be time enough for that later after they had gotten something to eat and needed to refill their ready cash. Mai was very certain that there would be targets like that, commenting as they were smacking a beach volleyball between them well away from the shoreline, their legs kicking hard underneath them to keep them above the water. "This is one of the most famous spots on the island, there's sure to be at least five or six, maybe as many as ten guys here that might be a little too pushy. I doubt we'll run into any actual gang bangers, but in my opinion, if the guy thinks he's going to get lucky just by following a woman behind a rock or tries to ambush a woman after seeing her go behind one, then he deserves to lose a little bit of money."

Ranma was a little more selective in his targets, though, treating this pretty much as an extension of Anything Goes Living Off The Land. "Actually, there are at least three guys on the beach that might be gang bangers or at least rich assholes. That one heavily tanned old guy, not the one with the beard, the other one? The one with the mustache that looks like something out of France in the World War 2 era? He's been looking at Shampoo like a piece of meat since we hit the beach. He's also got at least six or seven bodyguards scattered around the crowd. They've all got the same kind of sunglasses, the same kind of build, the same kind of hair, and haven't done anything but lay out on chairs."

Both other girls twitched their eyes that way, making Shampoo miss the ball, which smacked into her head. This caused her to flounder a bit in the water before she grabbed the ball and tossed it towards Ranma. But both of them had been able to see what Ranma was talking about, and Shampoo even went so far as to try to pick out one of the other two targets that Ranma had noted. "That guy with all the tattoos, isn't that a mark of a yakuza? He looks tough enough."

"Actually, I think he's here with his family," Mai giggled, having seen a little boy around seven run up to the man moments before. Now the girls watched as the tattooed man smiled and leaned down to pick him up, causing Shampoo's eyes to widen a bit in surprise. "Even criminals go on vacation sometimes. I am thinking, though, the guy at that bar over there, the one with a gold chain around his neck, he's flirting, or at least his body language says he's flirting, with one of the women there?"

"Nope. Oh, That guy's probably rich too, but also seems to have a type, and none of us fit it," Ranma remarked, pointing out that the woman he was flirting with was a good deal older than the man in question.

The other two girls kept on trying to pick out the two possible targets that Ranma had, and it was only as they began to head back towards the beach that Shampoo noticed out of the corner of her eye a glint of something, sunlight glancing off of something bright to one side of the beach. She looked in that direction quickly, only for the thing to move away just as quickly. "Some pervert with a pair of binoculars?"

She said the Chinese version of the word binocular, but Mai got it anyway and nodded. "I saw it too. And that guy looks all around like a perv, although maybe not a target for us."

"Nice. Yep, conspicuous bag beside him, binoculars and well away from most of the people. But that still makes for one more you two haven't spotted," Ranma teased, and then they were in among the rest of the crowd of beachgoers, moving through them and heading towards the nearest restaurant. There, the three girls drew the eye of many of the men who were already drinking some beer at the place despite it being only three in the afternoon. Thankfully, none of them actually flirted outside of whistling or making comments about how they could come and sit with this or that man.

After that, the trio went out on jet skis, racing around the ocean beyond the area marked out for swimmers before returning and deciding to have some time just lying out in the sun. This, of course, allowed one of the targets Ranma had noted, along with a few other men, to come over and flirt with them.

Not that the other guy they were interested in rolling for cash actually did that. Instead, he sent over one of his bodyguards, who produced a card for Shampoo, saying that his employer would like to speak to her about a modeling opportunity as if it was in her best interest. The fact that many of the other guy's bodyguards had already moved around them showed that if Shampoo decided to decline the invitation, it might turn into a demand quickly.

Mai and Ranma exchanged a glance, then nodded to Shampoo. The Joketsuzoku girl took the card, read it and hopped to her feet, grinning. "You two don't have to be jealous. I'll put in a good word with this guy. It's not your fault a talent scout knows real beauty when he sees one and wants to talk to me first."

With that, she turned and followed the man back to his employer. That man had left the beach area and headed towards a nearby parking lot, where there was a large limousine. Ranma kept an eye on that behind her sunglasses, watching as Shampoo approached, and then her hand flashed up, touching the bodyguard for a second before she entered the limousine after the older man.

Seconds later, the limo suddenly rocked violently, and Ranma nodded to Mai. Instantly, the pair was up and moving, hands and feet fleshing out, crashing into the bodyguards that had still surrounded them. Only the man who had given Shampoo the card had gone with her back to the limousine. Each bodyguard, be they sitting down or standing up and talking, fell to single precise blows from hand or foot, not being able to even reach for whatever weapon they might have hidden under their swimming trunks or even throw a punch. "Well, that was easy." Ranma shook his head. "Way too easy, really. How much do you want to bet these guys had zero training and were just chosen because they looked big and intimidating but just normal enough to blend in?"

“No bet. That and this one, at least, has a gun on him,” Mai answered, kicking the side of one of her victims, causing a clang. “They probably would look more intimidating with guns out and dressed in more than Hawaiian shirts and swim trunks.”

Ignoring the crowd that gaped or shouted at the sudden outburst of violence, Mai gestured towards where Shampoo disappeared into the limousine in the distance, barely visible through the crowd and the stores along the beachfront. “Shall we?”

As Ranma had seen, Shampoo must’ve done something to the last bodyguard, though what it was, Ranma didn’t know. When Ranma and Mai finished with his fellows and reached the limo, he was still standing by the door leading into the back of the limousine, frozen in place. Mai nodded, gesturing to the guy’s throat. “Excellent use of a pressure point, that. I taught her that when we were at Master Nawa’s school.”

“Why haven’t either of you used pressure points in our spars? Ranma asked, pouting.

“Because hitting a moving target is hard, and pressure points are small,” Mai answered easily, shrugging her shoulders. “If I tried to use the ends of my fans, say, you’d be able to dodge them enough to make the hit miss its mark even if I was able to tag your body.”

“True,” Ranma nodded, mollified and trying not to notice, not for the first time, how good Mai made her swimsuit look. *The swimsuit’s not exactly plain, but the body underneath, damn... I can kind of forgive most of the guys on the beach for flirting with her or Shampoo, they are so gorgeous. Me, not so much.*

Mai noticed Ranma looking and tried hard not to preen a little, but at that point, Shampoo rolled down the window of the limousine, sticking out her head just in time to hear the compliment from Mai, thanking her in Chinese before gesturing back into the limo with a jerk of her head. “I think in many ways we hit the motherload, but also think we need to do more for this guy than just take his money.”

She pulled back her head, allowing Ranma to stick her own head inside. He looked thoughtfully, not realizing what he was looking at with the small package of white stuff that had been taken out of a secret compartment somewhere. He did note the needle with the bent needle portion on the floor near Shampoo’s foot. “What is that gunk? And let me guess, the guy tried to use that needle on ya, and your toughness training meant it couldn’t penetrate?”

Behind Ranma, Mai had found herself staring at the shorter girl’s rear for a second, the memory of the day before, that moment with Shampoo, flashing through her head before shaking her head as she registered Ranma’s words. “Let me have a look.”

Pulling back, Ranma let Mai stick her own head inside. The Shiranui heiress took a single glance, before she hissed, nodding her head firmly to Shampoo. “That does indeed look like some kind of drug. Maybe cocaine? I’m not exactly an expert on what it looks like, but I’ve heard a lot about it.”

With that, Mai opened the door and entered the limousine. This left Ranma behind, and trying not to let his eyes lock on Mai's swaying breasts as she stepped into the limo, Ranma looked over at the guard, patting the larger man on the shoulder. "It's not just not your day, my dude. But hey, you're just following the guy's orders. Some kind of drug dealer or something? But if you and your friends aren't here in a while, the police are going to be way more busy with him than wondering where his bodyguards went, yeah? That pressure point of Shampoo's is bound to wear off eventually."

The man's eyes twitched towards Ranma, visible from the side of the sunglasses, but frozen as his body was, he couldn't do more than that, and Ranma quickly frisked the man, finding the keys and getting into the front of the limousine. "Mai, I don't suppose you know how to drive, do you? Only, a lot of those beachgoers saw us coming this way after we beat up on those bodyguards. And this place doesn't seem the kind of place where that type of thing will be ignored."

"If we wanted a beach that was more acquainted with martial arts, we should've gone to one closer to my house but it's always really crowded with kids. That, and Jubei is banned from it anyway," Mai answered quickly, understanding the problem. She crawled over the chair, causing Ranma to blush and back away quickly as this move not only gave him a view down the top of her swimsuit that he had been trying to avoid looking at over the past few hours but also threatened to press her chest and head into Ranma's own shoulder and head as she passed by. "Now, I've never driven one of these before, but I do have a driver's license so... OH, good, it's automatic. Yes, I can drive this."

With that, she began to start the car up, and within seconds, they were driving it away from the beach, ignoring the crowd of people who had been approaching the limo or were looking after the bodyguards on the beach, wondering what they had been about. About twenty minutes later, they pulled into the parking area of a nature park. The limousine looked badly out of place there, but no one commented, and Ranma and Mai joined Shampoo in the backseat again with the old guy that she had knocked out.

As they had been driving, Mai had been instructing Shampoo on where to look for anything hidden, as she was a major lover of mystery and action flicks, which had given her a broad idea of how someone could hide stuff around a car. In turn, Shampoo had come up with quite a few things. More needles filled with some kind of substance that matched the one the man had tried to use on her were laid out in a small, previously locked alcove in the back of one of the chairs. Several more packets of drugs had been hidden in the upholstery, not as easy to get to as the first, but similarly filled with the same white powder. There had also been a very well hidden set of handcuffs, a bottle of ethanol in the door, and several thick bricks of cash. "This guy is very, very bad scum."

"Which means we're going to not only take him for all he's worth in terms of cash but also drop him off to the police, like Ranma said," Mai announced, nodding her head and glaring angrily at the needles and the bottle of ethanol. "And maybe, I don't know, removing his man bits?"

“Toss him in a trash compacter!” Ranma was even more bloodthirsty. The idea of drugs in general horrified him, especially the type called LSD. The idea of being out of control like that was just... horrifying, on many levels. Not only because of how much damage Ranma knew she could do if she even got drunk but also because of what else might happen. There was also how well-stocked the guy was for trying to kidnap or whatever girls he convinced to enter his limo. Who knew how many girls had already been taken advantage of?

Eventually, they decided to drive the limousine to the nearest police station, then draw up a sign shouting “Unconscious drug dealer” and stick it on the side of the limo. Hopefully, that and everything found on the man would be enough at least to get the police to investigate him.

However, as Mai had said, they decided to take the wads of cash that Shampoo had also found. Counting it up, Mai was very, very happy. There was enough there to get them a hotel somewhere for at least a week or two and to purchase three plane tickets to Hong Kong in China with money left over. She said so aloud, grinning at Shampoo and Ranma. “All in all, a very profitable day. In fact, we got so much cash here, along with what else we had when we arrived at my house that we might want to look into getting us all a bank account instead of just stowing our cash in our ki spaces.”

Ranma gestured to herself, smirking a little. “I wouldn’t want to get a bank account for just my female half. That sounds like it would be kind of troublesome in the long-run. And does my male face look like the face of someone who would be able to get a bank to take him seriously? Heck, I don’t think I even have enough paperwork for one. I’ve got my passport, but that’s it.”

“You could pose as a couple trying to get married. That, and the amount of cash we have on hand, would probably get the bank to agree,” Mai teased back, then shook her head. “But you don’t have to do that. Remember, I have a bank account already. At MAB.” Both of them looked blank, and she giggled. “Martial Arts Bank. I don’t know what the public thinks it actually stands for, but that’s the bank’s real name.”

Ranma’s brows furled as Shampoo laughed, then reached out and chopped the old man in the back of the head again, having seen him starting to twitch. “Any martial artists on the payroll? Or do they just cater to martial artists?”

“They’re actually the World Center for Martial Arts Book Balancing,” Mai answered authoritatively.

“... You know what, I think that’s one of the few styles I don’t want to learn,” Ranma said, shivering a little at the very idea of trying to work with all those numbers, causing the two girls to laugh.

**OOOOOOO**

As Shampoo, Ranma and Mai got moving again to drop the old man off at the nearest police station, Nodoka was also visiting a police station. In this case, it was to see her

husband, who remained locked and chained within, this particular station being used to dealing with martial artist types.

It had taken the Saotome Matriarch several days in order to truly get over the shock of everything she had learned about Ranma and her husband, about magic being real, about the curses. Moreover, just as importantly, for her to get over the harsh words that Jubei had said to her about the original agreement that Nodoka had made Ranma and Genma sign before Genma took Ranma on the training journey. That had stung quite a bit, and she still didn't think she had been wrong to force the two of them to sign that agreement or even to threaten to uphold the agreements to Ranma. Yet Jubei at least convinced her that doing so without knowing all of the facts at least would be bad.

And there was the fact, that, as she had said at the time, Ranma was at least manly enough to have a girlfriend. Even if she was a foreigner. That was a step in the right direction at least, and Nodoka felt that maybe that and the curse could sort of balance one another out.

Nodoka also decided to call the prison where her husband was being kept and ask them to do a background check on the man. That took the better part of the day, but they were ready to give it to her now, and she decided to go by the prison and meet with Genma to check with that file on hand, as she did. On top of worries and bitter thoughts about Ranma's curse and the honor agreement, Nodoka had been some more, even more bitter, thinking about Genma and their relationship. And she had come to several unpleasant conclusions. Now, it was only a matter of time before such thoughts were confirmed or disproved.

Arriving at the prison, she noted how it was built almost like something from the Middle Ages at the back with a heavily reinforced prison. Inside, each prison cell came complete with long chains and heavily weighted metal balls.

Genma stared through the bars at his wife and, for just a moment, saw his life flash through his mind. A very unpleasant sight, to be sure. But a second later, his self-preservation skills came to his aid, making him start talking fast and furious. "Nodoka! There you are! Have you come to get me out of here? I doubt that our foolish boy will stay long with the Shiranuis, so we'll have to pick up the trail quickly. Don't worry, between the two of us, I'm sure we can make him a man among men eventually, one who will take his obligations seriously and—"

"Genma, shut up!" Nodoka nearly shouted, thrusting the tip of her thankfully sheathed family through the bars, impacting Genma's forehead with punishing force. Although she was no real practitioner of the caliber of Ranma and Genma, she was still a practitioner of the Art, and given her body type, could put a lot more power behind such a thrust than most would think.

The larger man's head rocked back, and he fell silent, staring at her in overdone surprise and carefully hidden worry. "I am not here to help you out of your cell! Frankly, you look all too at home in there. I came here to demand some answers!"

She looked over at the policeman, who had escorted her to Genma's cell, and he resolutely turned around. He did not turn back around when he heard the sound of cloth being unfolded or a sword coming out of the sheath. These were martial artist matters, and the police had learned long ago that a certain amount of discretion was advised when dealing with even cleaning up after such things. So long as the woman didn't actually kill the prisoner, anything else was fair game.

Genma gulped as the tip of the Saotome family honor blade slid back through the bars, backing away hastily. However, the cell wasn't big enough to let him move around much, and he found his back smacking into the wall, the point of the sword directly against his chest. "Now, you're going to answer my questions truthfully, husband. Or else. Simple one. Why didn't you tell Ranma about me? When I first met him, he had no idea he had a mother at all! Let alone, the fact that you married into my family instead of the other way around. What agreements have you reached, like the Tendos, in our family's name? Acting as if you were the head of the family is one thing, but your attempts to hide from me have me greatly concerned, as do our son's words on you."

Tossing out any idea of trying to talk Nodoka around, Genma quailed and tried to stammer out, "Now Nodoka, calm down, it was all to make Ranma a manly man, remember? You would have softened him too much—YOW!"

His words were interrupted by a yelp as Natalie quickly flicked her blade to the side, putting a little bit into Genma's chest. Just enough to make him bleed, the equivalent of a paper cut, but also just as painful. "Try again."

"That's the truth, blast it!" Genma squeaked. "By that point, I had seen what being married to Kimiko had done for Soun, and though I'd been able to avoid that, I knew that my boy would be more susceptible! I had to get him away from that influence."

"And carried that to the point where you didn't even tell him about me? Surely, a phone call or two every month would have been possible. But no, after five years of being the dutiful wife, of keeping you fed, of cleaning up after you, having Ranma, then looking after him for the first four years of his life, what do I get from both of you? Nearly thirteen years of complete silence on your part! And I know that Ranma wasn't the cause of that!" Nodoka snarled.

Genma's eyes wandered, trying hard to think of an answer that wouldn't infuriate the woman in front of him even more. He yelped as she cut his chest again with that blasted sword of hers, going right back over the same territory that had already been cut, opening up the skin again after it healed with his ki healing. "Life is hard on the road! After a few years, it was all I could do to keep us moving, to keep food in our mouths."

"You seem to have done well enough in that area," Nodoka interjected bitingly, glancing down at her husband's paunch. "I'm still waiting for an actual explanation... Or is it that you just don't have one? That instead of malice, simple forgetfulness is the reason?"



Genma's silence was his answer, and she sighed, suddenly feeling quite weary about everything. "I see. I didn't even matter enough for you to remember, did I? Last night, I thought about our relationship, I thought hard and long about it. And I suppose that a maid being forgotten makes far more sense than someone forgetting his actual wife does. After all, if I had been a wife to you rather than a maid or a means to an end, surely you would have given me some romance at some point after Ranma was born. A kiss on the cheek, on the forehead even, a hug, cuddles at night."

Nodoka sighed again. "Nothing. I cannot remember a single moment of such. At least there, Ranma has fallen very far from your tree, Genma. He actually seems to hold some affection for his girlfriend."

The chains rattled as Genma shifted this way and that, shaking his head. "Romance is a weakness in pursuit of the art! Time enough for that when the boy has taken his rightful place in the Tendo dojo, and—"

"And you can rest on your laurels or whatever. What a grand plan, practicing the Art for your entire life, then passing it onto your son, only so you can live in indolence. What a keeper my family found for me," Nodoka's tone was practically biting and how sarcastic it was.

A second later, her sword came back up, the tip once more pressing into Genma's chest, this time closer to his stomach than his throat, but that was not exactly any better, in his opinion. "Now, tell me more about the training trip, about what you put our son through. And while you tell me, realize that the police here have prepared a full dossier on you for me, as much as can be publicly determined. I will know if you have lied to me."

The policeman, still looking the other way and now wishing that he had thought to bring along some headphones or something, quickly reached behind him with a folder. Nodoka took it, and then moved over away from the cell, dragging over a chair to sit on as she stared first into the folder, then up at Genma. "Now, let us begin. Why exactly were you nearly arrested for trying to horde cats at one point?"

An hour later, Nodoka was ready to commit murder, and the listening policeman was prepared to let her cross that line if she so wished. Worse, Nodoka knew that Genma was lying about at least some things. Thirteen years apart hadn't made him any better of an actor. He tended to ham it up far too much when trying to sound virtuous. Even worse, Genma **always** tried to sound righteous, no matter how pathetic the attempt might be. Yet Nodoka knew she couldn't actually scare Genma into telling her any more than he already had of what she could corroborate with what the police told her.

That had been enough to lead her down a few rabbit holes, including several wealthy martial art families who apparently Genma had made deals with, selling their son out to these other families in marriages. In a moment of pure, raw embarrassment, Nodoka was forced to call each of them as the name came up and explain what was going on, that Genma had never had the right to make those agreements and that Ranma was already in a relationship.

As much as Nodoka was still somewhat ambivalent about the curse, she at least marginally approved of his being with someone as pretty as Shampoo, even if she was a foreigner. The curse loomed large in her thoughts, but so too did the honor of her family, and that meant these agreements had to be broken now.

Thankfully, Nodoka was able to settle most of those accounts, coming away somewhat amused by how many martial arts families seem to have had girls in this generation. *Then again, if Ranma ever does decide to become a true man among men, there will be quite a lot of practitioner-type ladies around for him to be manly with.*

However, there were several families whose agreements had not just been about marriage, and for those, she simply told them where Genma was currently and that she would be disowning him from the Saotome clan. "At that point, whatever agreements he made with him are with Genma alone. Feel free to work with the police in getting your money's worth out of the man. I do not care at all."

Finishing the last such call, Nodoka stood up, staring through the bars at Genma. "We are through, Genma Goemon. My son seems to be through with you as well, and I can only say more power to him in that area. I..."

Nodoka faltered, turning to glare at the wall for a second, her hands clenching and unclenching on the family blade. Then her eyes came back to Genma, a sneer on her face. "I still do not know where my son and I stand, but I do know where you and I do, as far away as possible. You're no longer a Saotome and I will make that permanent the moment I can get in contact with a judge magistrate. And hopefully, as your past starts catching up to you, you can, in turn, start paying back the various debts that you have accrued. I would wish you good luck on that, but frankly, you don't deserve it."

With that, Nodoka turned and gently tapped the waiting policeman on the shoulder, amused somewhat that the man had stayed rigid the entire time she and Genma had been talking. *Poor boy's legs must be feeling it at this point. "I'm done here."*

Outside, she was unsurprised to find that it was almost nighttime now, and scowled a bit, shaking her head. *What a waste of a good day. And now, now I need to know how much more there is to this training trip than the police could discover. There must be more than they found for Ranma to just walk away not only from Genma, but also try to create his own school to further distance himself from the man. I think I'm going to need to go back over there route from start to finish. Especially the early years. Perhaps even find this Kuonji girl. The police were unable to find a cell phone or address for her, but maybe a private investigator might? That way, I could make one more bad deal right. There are a few others of similar type, too, and if I find a solution to Kuonji, then I might be able to do the same for others.*

Nodoka scowled. *And he never did answer my questions about the hoarding cats thing, come to think of it. Just said it was part of a training technique and changed the subject. But if so, why was there an unsubstantiated rumor of child abuse connected to*

*someone looking like Genma at the time? I should've called him on it then, but he switched the tale to the Kuonji incident, and I got too hot about that debacle.*

*... I also need to do some serious thinking, specifically about Ranma. Ranma's attitude, his unmanly desire to keep his curse a secret from me, my own thoughts on the contract, how he reacted... Nodoka shook her head, wondering about Ranma's character, wondering if she could influence him in some way or if her anger towards the curse had shut the door on that. And if she wanted it to be closed or not. How much she would have to change her opinion on what she wanted for her son in order to reopen that line of communication. Am I able to?*

With another sigh, Nodoka went on her way, her thoughts still just as burdened as they had been when she arrived at the police precinct.

OOOOOOO

*Back in the jail, Genma breathed a faint sigh of relief. Well, that was a trial and a half, but frankly, I'm well rid of the woman, she did her part birthing my heir, and that was enough. And judging by how the boy's been ignoring my best efforts to get him to obey me, I will wager that she'll have no better luck getting him to change his ways. And unlike me, I doubt she can resort to direct violence either. Heck, I almost hope she will. The boy will fight far harder against that than against the soft touch, or else that Amazon whore wouldn't have him wrapped around her little finger.*

*Blast the boy! All this could've been avoided if you'd just done what you were told, been happy with Tendo's youngest, or either of the other two. I'm not picky! If he had shown any interest in either, I would have been willing to think about changing who his fiancée was, Genma thought, not remembering how often he and Soun had tried to push Akane and Ranma together rather than let nature take their course. Or how frequently he had simply ignored the older two Tendo daughters, treating one like he treated Nodoka, and the other like a complete stranger. It wasn't as if their own father was any better, after all.*

*As it is, trying to pick up the boy's trail after he undoubtedly leaves the Shiranui estate and I break out of here is going to be troublesome. Soun will certainly have done so by this point with his family and will undoubtedly need someone around to help him figure out what those other two hussies are about. Maybe they are his daughters? If so, then could one of them can entice Ranma back? From what I remember of the fighting, they certainly seemed friendly enough.*

Night fell, and Genma was not surprised to not be given any dinner by the guards. Evidently, they were just as soft as most people were, unable to see the price that had to be paid for the Art and taking it out on him. Genma ignored his grumbling stomach with the ease of long practice and began to work at his chains, shifting this way and that, raising his legs with the weights on them. He looked around at what he could see of the prison, which was precious little, even with his head mashed against the bars.

Leaning back and letting the chains go as slack as they ever did, Genma craned his head up towards a nearby window, thinking. Trying to work out the angles. It might be time to break out one of his sealed techniques. *If I can just send a Yama-Sen-Ken strike there, then it will free my arm and make breaking out through the wall easier. It will be loud. That's part of why it's named that way, but--*

Genma's thoughts came to a halt as he heard a thump in the distance. Most people would not have realized what that sound was, but Genma had been around for a long, long while, and could easily tell that sounded been the sound of the body hitting the floor. It was followed by a second, then a third. Soon, a new sound reached his ears: the click-clack of high heels on stone coming towards his cell.

*What is this? It can't be Nodoka. She doesn't wear high heels and would never be able to deal with so many policemen so silently. Could it be someone trying to break someone else out of here? I didn't hear any voices earlier when Nodoka was here, but surely there are other prisoners. Maybe even other practitioners of the Art.*

However, that proved to be wishful thinking, and a second later, as the owner of the high heels in question came into sight, Genma cursed volubly in his head. *Fucking blast all the luck! Boy, this is all your fault!*

Outside of the jail cell where Genma was currently chained, a woman stood. She was a gorgeous woman; even Genma, who had about as much interest in the opposite sex as a rock, could acknowledge that.

She was a tall woman with long, purple hair, almost like the Amazon whore, who had suborned the boy, which fell down to her shoulders and beyond save for a large, zigzag forelock that seemed determined to fight gravity if the way it stood upright was any indication. To go with the purple hair, the woman had violet eyes, a complexion that looked Italian or Spanish and a small mouth whose lips were lined with red lipstick. Along with the red high heels that had been making the click-clack noises earlier, the woman wore an evening gown with a thick belt and large gold buttons. Matching her eyes, a violet top over the dress matched the stockings under her gown. To complete the look, the woman wore a large, golden scarf that wound around her shoulders and arms. Currently, it was flicking to one side of her, gleaming with a varicolored energy.

More than her appearance, it was her identity that made Genma curse volubly in his head. Because he knew her. This was Madame Rose, the mystic that he and Soun had gone to not once but twice in order to discover where his son was, to get on his trail once more. At the time, Madame Rose had not demanded much in the way of money, which was part of the reason why the two had decided to go to her.

That, and Soun knew her from before. Soun had told Genma that Rose was the reason why Happosai had never bothered Kimiko. She had given the other woman something, and it had somehow kept the Dreadful Master at bay. That had been more than enough for Genma when they wondered about how to find the boy's trail.

The woman had merely stated that she would have them work for her or do her small favors in the future in recompense for actual payment. At the time, Genma and Soun had agreed, believing that they could foist that off on the boy. Or, barring that, it wouldn't be anything truly dangerous. Now though, Genma was very much not certain about that score.

"Genma. You seem to have gotten yourself into a spot of bother," Madame Rose's voice was low and throaty, with a hint of a Spanish accent as she spoke Japanese. It was the kind of voice that turned heads in dance clubs the world over, although the full effect, of course, was lost on Genma. "A part of me is almost interested enough to ask you how you have come to be here like this. But the majority does not care. I have come to collect on what I am owed Genma. There is a darkness stirring elsewhere in this world, and with my apprentice currently unavailable, you will help me deal with it."

Something about the woman's tone, as well as the power she was giving off, caused Genma to quail a bit, shifting backward against the outer wall as much as possible. "The, the boy, we haven't actually been able to bring him back home."

"Whatever your family troubles does not matter to me. You and Soun came to me for help in finding your wayward Wild Horse. I did so not once but twice. There is a debt owed, and it is not from young Ranma. It is from you and Soun. Soun, however, is next to useless, and pulling him away from his current family drama would take far too much effort. You, on the other hand, are here, served up to me like a present. You will take on the full measure of the debt owed." She held up a hand, which began to glow, a large ki attacking of some kind building up at the end of her scarf, which suddenly became pointed as if it had suddenly turned into metal. "One way or the other. Choose."

"It doesn't look as if I've got any choice. I agree," Genma said, grumbling and looking a little angry but, inside somewhat gleeful. *If she's trying to spirit me away, she'll need to remove these handcuffs. I need just a moment of inattention and then I can escape!*

Even as he finished thinking that, the magical attack in the woman's hand faded, and the scarf flowed through the bars on his door. It grasped Genma's arm, and a pulse of energy came out from the woman down the scarf into Genma's arm.

"FFDSSSSFUCCCKKk..." Genma hissed in pain. A moment later, the attack faded, and the scarf pulled back, leaving a tattoo there of a rose.

"You are marked now, Genma. Wherever you go, I will know. And if you disobey me..."

Her hand glowed, and an instant later, pain ratcheted through Genma suddenly. He gasped, shivered and twitched for several moments before the pain ended. "That mark will only be removed when you have done sufficient to pay me back for my efforts in trying to help you find your estranged son. Until then, you are mine."

*Magic users! Tricky and damnably hard to work with, the lot of them,* Genma grumbled, willfully forgetting that he had hoped to betray the woman the moment he was

freed. A thought process that showed that this wasn't actually any kind of insult, just a move that showed a certain understanding of his basic character. "The thought never crossed my mind."

With a snap of her fingers, the scarf flashed forward once more. A moment later, the chains holding Genma were crushed by the scarf as if the thing had turned into a giant's grip, allowing him to stumble free of them. As it pulled back, the scarf grabbed the jail cell's door and tore it off its hinges, and she gestured with a finger. "Hmmm. We are heading to a place in the north of China, one near the border with South Korea. I will know more once we get closer, but until then, I trust you know enough of the local language to help us along? You did mention that you had traveled extensively through China."

"Not a bit of it," Genma said, slightly more cheerful as he escaped his cell. *After all, China is a big country. Maybe I can find someone there willing to free me from this tattoo, or maybe whatever trouble she needs my help with is deep enough to drop her in without her dragging me down with her.* "I can use a few curses, and I know the words to ask for directions, but that's about it."

At that, Madame Rose sweatdropped, shaking her head as Genma moved ahead of her, heading towards the exit to the prison. "Of course. I wanted you around as a hammer. Foolish of me to assume you would be anything else. Still, beggars cannot be choosers."

OOOOOO

That night, Mai was pleasantly surprised to learn that Ranma did actually have a passport as he had said. On the other hand, Shampoo didn't. That was a bit of a problem because there was really no way to hide on an airplane, and the CCP was way more stringent about who came into the country via planes than on ships. Shampoo would not, she informed the other girl, be able to get away with just being cute as she had when she came to Japan. "We'll even have trouble on this end since you're technically in the country as an illegal immigrant. And I'm sorry to say, but the customs guys at airports are about as asexual as you can find. You won't be able to fool them."

Shampoo pouted at that and even gave Mai her equivalent of the dreaded Puppy Dog Eyes Attack, which was almost effective enough to make Mai reconsider. But she didn't. "Look, I know it's a bother, and I know us martial arts types don't really care one way or the other about that kind of thing, but look at Ranma. He's got one."

Both girls paused at that, then turned as one to look over at Ranma as Mai asked. "Actually, why do you have a passport? It doesn't seem like something you would want to have, or even think of having the first place."

"Nope, I wouldn't," Ranma answered cheerfully, completely unconcerned as to whether Mai's words were a dig at him or not. "But my old man decided to take part in a card game once, and for once... like seriously, it was so amazing that I marked on the calendar... he actually won too. The guy whose money he wanted to take didn't actually have enough money to pay off his debt. So instead, because he worked in whatever the

passport bureau thing is, he got us passports really easily. I've never actually ever used it before this thanks to how my old man and I entered the different countries we've visited. In and out of South Korea to China, we went way the hell out into the boonies, and from Japan, we swam in and out."

Luckily for Shampoo, MAB didn't just help martial artists open bank accounts. Mai made a hasty call, and the next morning, Mai took them both over. Soon, the group had a joint account and bankcards, and Shampoo had her picture taken. They had to wait two days, but by midday of the second day, Shampoo had her passport. By that point, Shampoo started to really get the Shadow Weapon technique down and was up to three copies. Ranma and Mai had also progressed somewhat with their own training. This meant speed training for Mai and using ki to enlarge his rope weapon for Ranma.

This allowed Mai to plan their trip, and there, the group had a spot of luck. There was a flight for Hong Kong leaving late at around three at night, the very next night that had three seats available.

Ranma did not care at all for the entire process of traveling by plane from the start. Checking in at the airport was okay, but since none of them had any kind of bags, why the heck did they have to wait in line to get them searched? In his and Shampoo's opinion, having a single line for everyone rather than having one line for people who didn't have bags and one for people who did was stupid.

Then there was the hurry up and waiting. The trio got to the airport with two hours to spare, meaning Ranma was up one o'clock in the morning, and that was annoying in and of itself. Staying up that late was irritating as if there was one thing Ranma and his old man agreed on, it was the need for sleep. The glares Ranma got from various other male and female passengers were also somewhat annoying.

"The guys glaring at me, I get. I'm sitting with the two most beautiful women in the place," Ranma muttered, unaware that both girls in question preened a little at his words. "But why are the women glaring at me?"

"They probably think you're some kind of playboy," Mai answered with a shrug. "I would've thought you would be used to people glaring at you."

"Sure, but most of the time, I know why. I'm near Akane. I just beat up the rest of their gang. They're my rivals or want to be that kind of thing. Ugh, no wonder these glares were kind of making me think of Akane." Ranma pouted a bit at that, leaned back, then nudged his shoulder against Mai. "So, is there any place we could exercise or something around here? I mean, we've got nothing better to do."

"Sorry, no. Most **normal** people," Mai emphasized, "when they're going on a plane trip bring up along the books or something. I brought a deck of cards with me, we could play something? And I've got a book for myself."

Ranma mock-glared at the girl, who knew perfectly well after the time they'd spent in the forest how horrible Ranma was at bluffing or keeping anything from showing on his face

at all when it came to cards. It never ceased to amuse Mai since Ranma could bluff like the best of them when it came to what he was doing during a spar, but outside of one? His ability to lie was about as akin to Shampoo's ability to not turn heads when she walked by someone.

When she said this aloud, it brought a happy flush to Shampoo's face, while Ranma just nodded sagely. After a millisecond, Mai blinked, suddenly realizing that could have been taken as flirting, and hastily decided to push on quickly before either of her listeners could comment. "We could also buy a book of crossword puzzles or just do simple things like push-ups and sit-ups."

That last won Ranma's approval, while Shampoo was more interested in the crosswords. She'd become quite good at reading Japanese, and crossword puzzles were a nice way of trying to expand her vocabulary. The two girls agreed to do up crossword puzzle, while Ranma decided to meditate in a thoroughly Ranma manner. In this case, that meant heading over to a nearby blank wall, flipping up onto his hands, and starting to do Ranma-style push-ups.

He first lifted his entire body off of the ground, holding his body parallel with the ground, even the toes of the ground. Once in position, Ranma pushed himself up by his arms before flipping his body up ninety degrees as if he was doing a handstand before lowering his body and doing the same thing again and again.

Thanks to it being one in the morning, most people were too tired to care, too busy with their own issues or watching their kids. He still did draw a bit of a crowd from a few kids and unattached teenage girls who decided to look past the fact he had arrived with two girls to ogle, but that was nothing to the crowd he might have gathered during the day. And looking over, Shampoo only saw two people take video recordings.

At around three in the morning, they were called to the plane, at which point they all piled in. Mai had been able to get them seats next to one another, although she and Shampoo had a bit of an argument about who should get the window seat as they moved down the aisle. By the time that was settled, they'd been forced to shift into their seats, and all three of them had to squish against one another in order for Mai and Shampoo to switch positions.

Not wanting to tempt fate, Ranma sat down with his hands behind his head as the two girls worked it out, trying to flip places without getting in the way of the other passengers. This didn't really help matters much from his point of view, considering the sight of the two girls pressed their bodies against one another and how each basically had almost to sit in his lap as they shifted around.

Eventually, though, all three of them were sitting down, with Mai smiling and waving two fingers in the air. It had been her playing scissors in a game of rock paper scissors that had gotten her the window seat. Shampoo tried to get some of her own back by stretching her legs out into the aisle, looking at Mai with a challenging expression. Mai simply laughed back, and Shampoo began to giggle too, knowing exactly how silly their little argument



about the window seat had been while between them, Ranma let his hands fall to his lap, lips quirked as he watched the two girls have fun.

Deciding to catch up on some sleep, all three of them closed their eyes soon after everyone had been loaded aboard, ignoring the safety procedure call, having already buckled in and everything else. However, almost as soon as the plane was in the air, their attempts to sleep began to be interrupted, first by the calls of the pilot announcing their destination and second by the wailing of more than one baby somewhere aboard the plane.

“Uggh, I never understand that. I can realize if parents don’t have someone to leave the baby with, no family members or good friends, then they don’t really have a choice. But I see far too many parents bringing along babies and little toddlers who just can’t handle the whole plane thing on trips where they really aren’t going to have any fun once they arrive, either,” Mai grumbled.

“Since this is Shampoo’s first plane trip, she will have to take your word for it,” Shampoo grumbled, a bit of accent apparent, as she had been just about to nod off to sleep. Like her Airen, Shampoo had begun to master the skill of falling asleep on a dime and had been eagerly looking forward to practicing it on this trip.

“Me too, although I guess I’m a little more sympathetic to the parents. It isn’t their fault that they don’t have any way to leave the kids behind or just want them along for the family trip. Maybe planes should design a special area for parents and young kids.”

“That would take up too much space, and more space equals fewer tickets, which equals less profit. So that’s a no,” Mai drawled before looking at Ranma quizzically, leaning sideways to smack her shoulder against his. “I’m surprised. I didn’t think you’d be the kind to have any sympathy for parents or kids in general.”

“Ehh, blame that on my own shitty upbringing. I’ve got an entire book series on what not to do as a parent, and I know how hard any regular parent would have found trying to keep up with me when I was younger. By the time I was eight or nine, I had so much energy I made most adults look slow. I can’t imagine any normal parent trying to keep up with me, you know?”

Both the girls snorted at that, with Shampoo going on to say that that was the understatement of a lifetime, before looking at Ranma quizzically. “But what about kids yourself, Airen? Do you see any time in the future where you’d want to settle down and have children?”

Ranma gulped, realizing that this conversation had suddenly ventured into **very** dangerous ground. “Well, maybe in the distant future? We’re martial artists, so it’s not like people like us would need to worry about the normal issues about having kids when you’re older,” he began obliquely before shrugging his shoulders at the glare that Shampoo was giving him, indicating without words that that wasn’t enough. “I don’t know. Maybe, like I said, forty-fifty years old is not going to matter as much from a health or energy standpoint. Beyond that, I don’t know. I’ve never thought of it before.”

“At least Ranma not say no. That means Shampoo can work on you,” Shampoo stated cheekily, but then, seeing Ranma’s horrified expression, went on hurriedly. “But I agree, children should be very, very far in the future.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Ranma muttered, then very deliberately closed his eyes, leaned back, and tried to get to sleep, ignoring how the girls began to laugh a bit at his expense.

In this, he had the most luck of the three. Being used to his father’s snores helped Ranma’s ability to fall asleep despite the background noise far more than Shampoo or Mai. Afterward, all of them agreed that was the last time they would be flying on a plane.

“I mean, come on! Those seats look like they’re supposed to be comfortable, but they’re not. There should be room for your legs, but there isn’t. I mean, even in my guy form, I’m not all that big, but even so, there wasn’t enough space,” Ranma grumbled.

“Damn straight! I thought being in the window seat would be nicer, but it only meant that there was more noise coming from the actual plane rather than the other people. And I’m sorry, but laughing loudly at a movie you’re watching is more obnoxious than a baby crying because the person laughing should be really able to control their volume,” Mai added her own issues.

“People see Shampoo stick legs out, still kick them or knock into them, or try to touch! And why be woken up hour before our actual landing to put our chairs up? Ranma right, they too-too uncomfortable!” Shampoo nearly growled.

“So are all agreed, despite it taking a lot longer, going by ship is the way to go?”

Mai and Shampoo both nodded at Ranma’s question. Mai hummed for a moment as Ranma and Shampoo stretched before thinking aloud, “Actually, I wonder if we could maybe look into buying our own ship. Some small ship that has just enough room for the three of us to spread out comfortably and has enough legs to get us to where worry we want to go.”

Shampoo and Ranma shrugged in ignorance at that. Shampoo might’ve traveled by ship to Japan, but that didn’t mean she knew much about boats in general. Ranma had never traveled by ship except the Robo kind, but after a second, he suddenly grinned. “You know, if we do get a room ship, we’ll probably look like sitting ducks for pirates.” Pirates were an issue in Asia south of Taiwan and further out in the ocean. “That could be both fun and profitable.”

The two girls grinned viciously at that, their expressions making many in the crowd around them shift away warily as they waited for their own time to go through customs. When they did, Shampoo’s new passport was up to snuff. This process was helped along by the fact that she had ordered the other two to start speaking Chinese. As they passed through, they switched entirely to her native language.

Having escaped the clutches of the airport, Mai had Shampoo wave down a taxi for them and give the man the address. While her own Chinese was much better now than it

had been when they first met, she still had a good deal of trouble with the various pronunciations, as evidenced by the good-natured ribbing Shampoo had been giving her as they walked through the massive Hong Kong Airport.

When they got to the hotel, which was one of the better ones in Hong Kong, Ranma stared up at it. The hotel Mai had booked a room in for them was one of the better hotels in the city, a huge sky rise. He looked over at Mai, an eyebrow rising. "Really? Really? And how much further could our cash go if you hadn't booked us in a place like this?"

"We're probably going to be roughing it to the moment we leave Hong Kong, wherever we're going afterward. Excuse me for wanting a lot of comfort before we do, Ranma," Mai answered primly. "Even if we try to follow up on my plan of getting us a ship, it's probably going to be small and cheap. Besides, thanks to that old drug dealer or whatever, we've still got cash to spare."

"I agree. Besides, this place probably has its own gym and swimming pool. Weightlifting and stuff might not do much for us, but it's something, and if we can't hook up with the local Kung Fu scene quickly, having a place to fall back on when it comes to exercise is a good idea. And Ranma I doubt even the most rundown motel would like us to spar in their room," Shampoo backed up Mai quickly. She was having thoughts of a nice long bath or maybe even a spa. After a night spent on a plane, with its annoyingly uncomfortable seats and the noise and everything else, taking the rest of the day easy was an alluring thought.

Ranma snorted but decided that this was one battle he didn't care to fight. Instead, he followed the girls into the hotel leaving them there for a bit to head to the bathroom. Meanwhile, Shampoo looked around and after making certain that Mai would be able to handle checking them in, made a beeline for one of the nearby TVs showing some local news.

As she moved over to the concierge, Mai saw two men there who were also checking in. Both men looked somewhere around Andy's age: early twenties or late teens. They were also very obviously either martial artists or athletes of some kind. She wasn't certain.

One of the men was wearing what looked like an expensive casual suit: good pants, a simple white shirt, and a coat, complete with an expensive-looking pair of sunglasses high up on his forehead and what looked like a gold Rolex on one wrist. If not for the man's build and the poised way he stood, Mai might have thought him just a rich playboy of some kind. Yet the calm, coolly confident look in his eyes and the fact that he was palling around with the other young man, who was very obviously not of his own social circle, spoke against that.

That man somewhat reminded Mai of Ranma for a moment. He was a little thinner in the shoulders than his friend, and whereas the rich boy had the same blonde hair as Terry and the look of an American, this guy looked quintessentially Japanese except for the heavy tan. He also had his hair done short except for a braided ponytail at the back and was wearing a simple pair of jeans and a shirt, almost standing out in the gaudy hotel, someone very much not the kind who could afford to stay in a hotel like this normally.

Mai could relate to that. She and Shampoo were wearing khakis and blouses, while Ranma was in his typical silk pants and shirt combo. But even so, they also didn't quite look like they belonged here.

When Mai reached them, the Japanese man was teasing his friend. "I can't believe your Chinese is that bad! The look that the concierge gave you when you tried to speak, dude. It was like you were a talking animal or had just farted in his face."

"Hah, like yours was any better. You nearly started a fight this morning when you tried to compliment someone but instead ended up insulting the guy," the rich American answered back. "At least I'm trying, you decided to just let me do all the talking from then on."

"You like to talk in the first place. I don't see what the problem is," the brunette answered, and both of them laughed.

Mai smiled at that, wondering how these two had become friends, calmly waiting behind the pair until the concierge came back. They were both giving their keys, with the Japanese man saying he was going to head up and drop off their stuff, while the blonde stated he wanted to pursue some of the general tourist information before heading up himself.

As he turned, the blonde man became aware of Mai and pursed his lips appreciatively as he looked at her, nodding her head to him, moving closer, a flirtatious smile on his face. "Hello there. What is a woman like you doing unescorted in a place like this?"

"Waiting to check in, I would've thought that would be apparent," Mai shot back dryly, amused at the man's attitude but not put off. He was flirting with her, sure, but she never had a problem with people flirting with her, just leering at her, making ribald comments or trying to force the issue. There was a vast difference there.

"And what brings you to Hong Kong?" the blonde persisted, gesturing over to his fellow, who had already left and was heading towards the hotel's elevators, pausing for a moment as Mai glanced in that direction, noting the American's friend and Ranma had just crossed paths.

Ranma paused in his walk back to Mai, staring at the other Japanese man, evaluating him as the man did the same to Ranma. "Martial artist?"

"Heh, yep. Ryu of the Ansatsuken school and if you overreact to the name like those idiots I met in America, I'm going to be kind of annoyed," the other man warned in a joking manner, although he seemed somewhat serious there.

Ranma snorted. "Assassination Fist? Not the worst name I've heard. That'd go to 'The Right and Honorable Way of the Slaughter Fist.'" Ryu laughed at that, and Ranma smirked. "Since that came from an American TV show, I don't see where they can be bothered by Ansatsuken. It's just a fancy name."

Ryu tried to hide a wince at that. He had learned recently that there might be a bit more to why his school was called that than he was honestly comfortable with, and the fact he'd had to learn that from meeting some of his Master's friends rather than the man himself was a bit of a sore point. But he didn't want to get into that with a complete stranger.

Luckily Ranma had missed that, looking Ryu up and down as he cocked his head thoughtfully. "Looking at you, I'd say a derivative of karate and Shotokan, with an emphasis on hapkido... but no weapons? Your hands don't have the right calluses. Single strong strikes, counters and endurance. Oh, and the name's Ranma, by the way, late of Musabetsu Kakutō Ryū, Aerial Style."

"Aerial style, and Anything Goes? Sounds like a made-up style. What's so aerial about it?" The other man mock-scoffed, relief at the conversation moving along making him a bit more jokey than he would normally be. "I'd guess you emphasize dodging, bouncing off things, you look like you're built to keep on the move, constantly shifting into one series of attacks or another. Maybe a major emphasis on balance, like the various Silat styles. Which is all good, considering I doubt you'd be able to take a punch, shrimp."

Ranma snorted at that, seeing Ryu was only two inches taller than he was, although he was wider in the shoulders. The two of them stared challengingly at one another, then held out their hands as one. "We're going to have to get together at some point for a spar. Are you and your friend over there on a training journey?"

"Sounds like a plan. Someplace wide open, I think, so you can't bounce off the walls like a monkey. I had to chase some monkeys out of our garden for weeks before we figured out how to scare them off, and I didn't enjoy it," Ryu answered, causing Ranma to laugh. "And yeah, Ken and I are both from the same school. Don't get him started on how his father found Master Gouken and made him start training Ken, it's not nearly as interesting a story as he thinks it is."

"But it's about him, and thus is super interesting?" Ranma guessed, and Ryu nodded with a grin.

"Got it in one. Anyway, yeah, he and I finished our training with Master Gouken... up to a point, anyway, a year ago. Ken had to take that year to get back in touch with his family and, um, well, basically being a rich heir, while I, er, had to finish high school." Ryu watched Ranma ready to tear into him if he made fun of Ryu for being that far behind where he looked like he should be. Ryu was pushing twenty-two, and knew that only having a high school education would be a major issue with normal people.

But Ranma surprised him, nodding his head sagely. "Honestly, it's a wonder that I was as far along as I was when I decided to leave my old man and all his baggage behind." Ranma wasn't about to go into detail with a complete stranger on the whole Nerima thing but felt sharing that was fair enough. "I was a junior when I left there, and I ain't got any plans to finish. Do you guys know any ki attacks or tricks?"

“Yeah. The Art really doesn’t leave us much time for other things. I can never figure out how Ken can still be out our level and still have gone to college and everything. As for ki attacks, we know a few attacks. You?”

“A few, more tricks than anything else. We’ll have to see what we can learn from one another. Mai, the girl who’s looking this way with your friend, she knows a few tricks too.”

Ryu nodded, and, before the conversation could get too technical for the moment or too awkward, Ranma made his excuses, heading towards the bathroom once more with a promise to find one another later.

“Huh, that went well. And if Ranma’s interested in that guy, maybe he can give me a fight too,” the American murmured, his words drawing Mai’s attention back to him, proving Mai’s earlier analysis of the two of them on the money. “Ah, but where are my manners, Ken Masters, at your service.” The blonde bowed flridly, causing Mai to roll her eyes before he went on seriously, “My friend and I are here to take part in a very niche part of the local tourism. You might not realize it, but the two of us are practitioners of some caliber. I can tell you’re a martial artist too, just like that guy who was just talking to my friend.”

“I am. Shiranui style Ninjutsu,” Mai nodded. “I take it the two of you trained under the same master?”

“Got it in one, pretty lady. Ansatsuken, but don’t let the name fool you. We’re both pretty mellow and wouldn’t dream of taking the term seriously,” Ken joked, although Mai could tell there was something a little serious underneath that. Some hidden frustration maybe, or annoyance? She couldn’t tell. “I don’t suppose I could interest you in going around town with us, could we?”

“Mai Shiranui. And I hate to say it, but while you seem nice enough, I just got out of a relationship, and I’m uninterested in Rebound Rico.” The term, which was a Japanese term for girls who hooked up with foreigners for a fling after breaking up with their boyfriends made Ken laugh.

He also backed off as Mai went on. “Besides, I’ve got my own friends to go around with at the moment, Ryu just talked to one of them. I might be interested in setting up a few spars between us all later, which I’m certain Ranma and our other companion will go for as well, but not right now. We just got here, and none of us are in a particularly good mood. Sorry.”

Ken’s eyes shifted to the side, seeing another good-looking young woman around their age moving towards them now, smiling at Mai before her eyes tracked to Ken. “And I take it the Chinese girl with the purple hair is your other friend? Lucky, you’ve not only got a local guide but a good-looking one. We’re following our Master’s injunction on who to meet first on our own training journey. Although you can keep normal air travel. I got access to my family’s jet last year, and that is just the best way to travel.”

“I just love how you just dropped that comment in there,” Mai snorted. “Don’t try to impress me with your money, it won’t work. And if you thought I was that shallow I will have to hurt you.”

“Maybe I’m into that,” Ken stated, waggling his eyebrows in such an overdone manner that Mai had to laugh. “But no, I wasn’t. Just saying that I will never go back to regular travel. You think you had trouble from Japan to here, just think about what my buddy and I would have had to deal with coming from California.”

Mai winced, and Ken went on. “But back to meeting up again. I would wager Ryu and your companion over there have already talked about it. And even if you’re not looking for anything more, at least gracing me with the ability to look at you and your equally attractive friend is more than enough for me.”

That earned Ken a laugh before he walked off just as Ranma and Shampoo neared them. The two men exchanged smirks, and then Ranma asked what the blonde wanted, and Mai filled him in.

Ranma nodded, pushing down a spurt of annoyance that appeared in him when he saw the handsome American trying to talk to Mai. He put this down to not wanting Mai to try to make a mistake by jumping into another relationship right after breaking up with Andy. He didn’t examine why that was important too closely though, instead jerking a thumb over his shoulder towards where he and Ryu had stood looking at one another. “Ryu also seems like an upfront kind of guy. He and I promised to get together for a spar later this week if nothing else pops up. It should be interesting. I think his style is somewhat like Terry’s, mostly land-based, emphasizing single, powerful blows without the overabundance of grappling or land-based moves that Terry had.”

Mai nodded at that, and then, after getting them all checked in, the three friends headed up to their hotel room. Mai had gotten them a single room with two beds, figuring that the couple was polite enough not to do anything while she was around. The room itself was quite high up, and Ranma headed directly to the window, opening it and staring out at the city avidly.

Behind him, Shampoo moved over to one of the beds. Pushing on it, she found the twin bed surprisingly bouncy, so much so that, with a grin, Shampoo hopped up onto it, bouncing in place for a bit, while Mai began to pull clothing out of her ki space. The bustier girl was the only one of the three who liked to unpack like that.

There was actually a reason for Ranma and Shampoo not to bother doing so. Keeping their ki space running at night drained them, forcing the pair to rebuild the ki space in the morning or keep the flow of ki going at night automatically. One gave them more experience manipulating ki, while the other was basically a very low-key exercise, building up their ki reserves very slowly. Mai couldn’t get anything out of the first any longer, having had her boob window – the first ki space she had created - for more than three years now, and like Shampoo, refused to wear the same outfit to bed as she had during the day. That, and she

claimed keeping the ki space going at night itched, something Ranma had teased her about occasionally.

Seeing her boyfriend had turned his back on her and Mai was busy, Shampoo grabbed one of the pillows. Smiling mischievously, she aimed at the back of Ranma's head.

Alas, for her plans, Ranma could see her in the reflection of the window. He ducked at the last second, reaching up and catching the pillow before it could hit the window, turning and slinging it back right at Shampoo. "Hah, gonna have to do better than that, Shamp-chan!"

Shampoo gaped but smacked the pillow out of the air, redirecting it towards the unsuspecting Mai. Mai squawked indignantly as she found herself hit in the back of the head by the pillow, the momentum of which caught her by surprise enough to send her forward, her head smacking into the wall behind the dresser.

Mai resolutely picked up the pillow from the floor, flicking out another from the bottom drawer of the dresser. Whirling them to either side of her, Mai glared at the couple, uncaring of precisely who had attacked her. "Of course you know that this means war."

"Bring it on!" Shampoo taunted, arming herself, while Ranma jumped up and over her head to the other bed, bouncing there for a second as he flipped up a pillow into his hands by his feet.

It was very lucky that there was no one in the rooms on either side of the trio's room right now, because all three of them took to the air, bouncing off walls, ceiling and floor with abandon, flinging pillows left and right, smashing them into one another like doughy flails or into the pillows their opponents were holding trying to disarm them. Astonishingly, most of their shots missed most of the furniture, bar the beds and the lone chair in the room, mostly hitting the various walls and the ceiling or floor.

Eventually, Shampoo and Mai began to gang up on Ranma since the mobile nature of the conflict and how little room they had to move in played in his favor. Even in a setting like this, Ranma could make moving around seem easy.

It was only after they began to actually sweat that Mai, standing by the TV and having just successfully defended it from a hastily flung pillow from Ranma, which might have smashed the TV off of its stand, decided that was enough. "Alright, kids, I think it's time to wrap this up."

Ranma stared at her from where he had just knocked Shampoo onto her rear between the two beds, Shampoo staring up at him, disarmed and helpless. "Aw, but I was winning."

As Shampoo mock-glared at him, Mai giggled. "Well, it's pushing on to lunchtime, and I think I'm hungry..." she paused on cue as the word lunch caused Ranma's lord and master to grumble in agreement, smirking, "and I figure we all might want a shower before



we head down to the café or whatever.” She glanced at Shampoo, winking. “Now, I’m going ahead in for a shower. Don’t do anything too smelly while I’m gone, kids.”

With that, she turned and headed towards the bathroom, noticing out of the corner of her eye how Shampoo had leaped at the chance literally. The Joketsuzoku came off the ground like a springing cat, tackling the still kneeling Ranma back onto his back on the bed he had been kneeling down on. Not that Ranma really bothered trying to fight back, as within seconds of his back hitting the mattress. Shampoo’s mouth had found his, the sound loud enough to carry to Mai by the door into the bathroom.

*I guess they’re claiming that bed then, Mai mused, giggling as she closed the door behind her before pausing in consternation. “Drat.” Then she shrugged. “Oh well, it won’t be the first time.” And if I get a little thrill out of it, then that’s just a bonus.*

Back in the bedroom, the two lovers began to make out, hands roaming, barely remembering to keep clothing on as they hear the shower start.

It had been a while since the two of them had any proper time together, though, and when Shampoo began to dry hump against Ranma’s waist, Ranma didn’t fight it. Instead, he allowed his hands to move down her back. Soon, he was gripping her ass with both hands for a second, kneading the amazing flesh there, even pulling one hand away to swat her rear, knowing Shampoo surprisingly liked that kind of thing. Then he pushed her back off him for a second, allowing Ranma to scoot back in the bed so that he was pressing his back against the head and Shampoo was sitting upright in his lap.

Then Shampoo began to grind her hips again. In turn, Ranma started to lift his hips slowly, rhythmically. Since he was wearing silk pants, and she was wearing thin khakis, there was quite a bit of sensation there, helped by their roaming hands. And soon, both were starting to forget that they might be interrupted at any point by Mai coming back out of the bathroom. So much so that Shampoo began pulling at Ranma’s shirt with one hand while her other reached between them, palming his crotch. A moan of approval came from her as Shampoo found her Airen hard as a rock, moaning his name. “MMmm.... Ranma...”

In return, Ranma had just taken one of Shampoo’s breasts in his hand while her other gripped her rear even harder. Neither pulled away from the kiss except to breathe in deeply before starting up again, laying kisses on cheek, nose, throat, ear and then lips again. Ranma had learned that Shampoo’s neck was sensitive and soon had her moaning.

He had just worked one hand underneath Shampoo’s blouse when the shower noise cut off. Not quite as worked up as his girlfriend, Ranma reluctantly pulled his hands back, putting his arms around Shampoo in a hug instead of continuing. “Time to calm down, Shamp-chan.”

Murrgh... I don’t like that, and I don’t like that nickname either. Just call Shampoo her name,” Shampoo grumbled, muttering under her breath about how Mai should’ve taken a longer shower.

Nevertheless, she eventually rolled off of him, and Ranma watched her go for a second, wondering if now was the time to tell Shampoo he had looked up what her name, Xian Pu, really meant when translated. *Nah, best to wait for a more romantic moment, I think.*

Both of them looked up automatically at the sound of a door opening, only for both lovers' eyes to widen as Mai came out of the bathroom, not dressed as she had been before or another outfit yet, instead wearing one of the hotel towels. Wrapped tightly around her chest, it barely covered her down to her thighs, hiding her privates from view but little else.

Mai looked at them, watching as their eyes widened, and a blush suffused both of their features. Shampoo couldn't stop herself from looking Mai up and down, shaking her head in approval and amusement, putting down any other feeling to the intense make out session she'd just had with Ranma. She'd seen Mai in something of this sort before but had not gotten over how bustier the other girl was than her.

Whereas when they'd lived together both in the woods and at the Musubime Osoroshi Hotojutsu school, Ranma had very carefully kept from having such moments occur, only messing up occasionally with Natsume and Kurumi since he didn't know them as well. He took one look, his eyes trailing down to Mai's towel-clad chest for just a second before he resolutely turned his head away, staring at the outer wall of the room.

"I had just finished taking all of my clothing out for my ki space when you sneak attacked me Shampoo, and I forgot to grab a change of clothing," Mai said by way of explanation, moving over to pick up her clothing from where it had been first folded neatly and placed on top of the dresser and then she smacked off by one of the air and pillows. Both her explanation and her actions might have seemed innocuous, but inside, a small chibi Mai did a fist pump. *Take that, Andy! It looks as if you're the only man in the world who doesn't think I'm attractive, hah! More fool me for thinking friendship would simply turn into love without a lot of help to push it along, like Ranma said.*

She took a glance over her shoulder and saw that Shampoo had been staring at her rear for a second before looking away rapidly. Ranma's ears were red still as he stared at the outer wall, and very resolutely not the window that was part of it. That gave her a thrill, too, if somewhat more mellow than the one from Ranma's stare a moment before. *And maybe a few women too... huh... why so I...* Shaking her head to remove such strange thoughts, Mai decided she didn't want to look into those thoughts just now. Instead, she concentrated on grabbing up a change of clothing and headed back into the bathroom, coming out quickly dressed in a pair of painted-on jeans and a loose shirt, her hair down her back instead of up in her normal ponytail. "So, what do we all want to do for the rest of the day?"

Given how poorly the plane ride had gone for all of them, the trio decided to put off exploring the city for the day. Instead, they went down to the hotel's restaurant for a late lunch and then checked out the gym and swimming pool. The hotel also had a spa attached to the swimming pool, something that attracted all three of them. But after looking in for a few moments, they decided that they didn't really want to deal with other people in there at

the same time. Which meant they would either have to use it very late at night or very early in the morning.

“Better that than having to deal with old and ugly or young, flabby or just bombastic,” Ranma opined, a phrase that encapsulated a large portion of why the spa didn’t seem like a good idea.

Similarly, the swimming pool was dominated by kids when they visited. Around seventeen of them, running around and shouting or simply playing as their parents or family members watched on. This meant there was no room to swim laps or have fun without going around them. The fact Ranma also got splashed within seconds of stepping out into the pool area was also a mark against it, in his mind.

After holding back Ranma from chasing the squealing kids who had splashed her, they returned to the bedroom, where Shampoo spent a few hours quizzing Ranma and Mai on their Chinese. Mai showed some improvement in her pronunciation, but not much. In contrast, Ranma’s vocabulary was somewhat poor, but her lover’s pronunciation was pretty good. It was his grammar, which was really bad. Like Shampoo before him when studying Japanese, Ranma could not keep the different rules of grammar in mind when he spoke Putonghua.

“It might be a good idea for me to do most of the talking for a few days. Tourists here in China are going to attract a certain type of attention, not bad mostly, but it won’t let us blend in as we want to in order to get in touch with the local Kung Fu scene,” Shampoo advised, wondering internally how Ranma and his father had been able to get around China so well without being able to speak the language or anything else. *I suppose roof hopping counts for a lot. Most people don’t look up, and it’s not like the pair were going around talking to normal after all. And Genma probably at least knows some kind of Grunt-Fu for translation.*

Trying hard to hold back a snicker at that, Shampoo went on. “We should have spent more time practicing when we were at your place, Mai. Still, I bet you’ll get that pronunciation under control after a week. Although, unless you really want to lean into that whole ‘I’m a hick’ thing, you sometimes do Ranma in Putonghua as well, you might want to let me do the talking until you have the grammar down too.”

Ranma snorted, shaking his head. “Does that mean I get to do your share of the punching then?”

“Hell no! It means I get to do more punching,” Shampoo answered instantly, scowling at her boyfriend.

Mai snickered, and Ranma laughed, pulling Shampoo into a sideways hug, breathing in the scent of her perfume for a moment before pulling away. *Mai’s here and kicking her out to wander the hotel would be really bad. Next time, though, we will stay at a less expensive hotel and get our own damn room.*

At that point, the three of them decided they'd had enough language training, and Mai decided to see if there was anything on the TV. She soon found a local news network, the same one that Shampoo had been looking at down in the hotel's foyer. Instead of the weather and commenting on a local politician's latest words, this time, it was showing a celebrity that Shampoo recognized, causing her to gasp, staring at the TV screen and ordering Mai to turn it up.

"In other news, despite recent setbacks due to accidents on his set, national celebrity Wu Fai continues to maintain that the movie *Awakened Knight* will continue forward. Fei Long is best known for playing roles such as... Lin Fin in *Rising Dragon* and the American TV series *Fists of the World* as one of the main male leads. His portrayal of an antihero in *Mu Shu Continent* was particularly applauded, showing both a range of acting and his comedic side, although his role as a villainous enforcer in the American movie *Eyes Up*, while giving him more American accolades, backfired here at home. This is his first foray into actually producing a movie, however, and with the number of accidents the movie has had to deal with, it is up in the air as to whether or not his project will go forward, despite his desire to put all profits made from the movie towards his chosen charity, replacing and renovating the Child First series of orphanages throughout the city."

Ranma whistled at that, nodding his head in approval. "That sounds like a charity I could get behind. Say what you would about my own man, but every time he left me behind, he did come back to me, and I have nothing but sympathy for kids whose parents have passed away, whatever the reason, or worse, just left them. Those fuckers, women and men who have kids but decide they don't want them after going through with having the kid in the first place, those assholes need a firm kicking."

Mai nodded in agreement while Shampoo giggled, pointing at the screen. "I recognize him. Elder Rin Ser has an entire collection of Fei Long's movies. Every few weeks, she and the other elders take up the communal TV to watch them. Grandmother always says he's actually a very good martial artist, but I don't think she or the rest of the elders who like to follow him really watch it to critique his technique. I think it has more to do with the fact that in most of his movies, he goes shirtless at least half the time." *And the less said about Rin Ser's secret doujin horde, the better.* "They even have a subscription that sends them a copy of every movie he makes, along with a few others."

While Ranma gagged at the very idea of some of the elderly Amazons he could remember having seen during his very quick trip through her village still having a libido, Mai snickered. "Communal TV?"

Shampoo nodded solemnly. "It's actually a really big TV, as big as our wall here. It's hooked up to this generator thing that is part of a motorcycle. Every few days, someone is tasked to use it for punishment duty, and this will let the rest of the village watch movies occasionally."

"Hah, and are you sure you don't want to go back to that?" Mai teased. She knew that part of the reason why they were in Hong Kong was, so that Shampoo could send a message back to her people and maybe head back there with Ranma, and now Mai, in order

to explain how everything with Ranma had happened. It was highly unusual, after all, both the fact that the Joketsuzokus had no idea that Ranma was a male in the first place and that Shampoo had decided not to go through with killing female Ranma and was now actually dating male Ranma.

Admittedly, there was the whole kiss of marriage thing, which could be used to soothe troubled waters there. But Shampoo had made it clear several times to Ranma that law was the least of the reasons why she wanted to remain by his side. Even if the kiss of marriage had been why both of them realized that there might be some attraction between them. That was just the start. Everything else they had done together since had formed the foundation of their relationship.

“Not a bit of it! I want to spend tonight writing up a message to send home tonight, but I have no desire to head back there.” Shampoo thought about it for a bit before going on. “I think I could take or leave the Internet, maybe even having access to electricity. Indoor plumbing, though, would be much harder. We only have that in around a fourth of our houses, as building a sewer system up in the mountains is really hard. Where would we send the sewage or whatever that wouldn’t mess something else up?”

She then sent a warm grin Ranma’s way, who smiled back at her. “Which isn’t even saying anything about you, Airen, and the various challenges and styles we’ve run into since I convinced him to leave Nerima with me. I’ve grown more in the Art and had more fun doing it than I can ever remember.”

“That’s not quite how I recall my last night in Nerima going, but whatever it was, the decision to leave Nerima was a pretty easy one to make, admittedly,” Ranma drawled, causing Shampoo to giggle as he went on. “Attractive, serious martial artist-type girl who thinks we might work as a couple on the one hand, or my Pops, local rivals and the Tendos and their various issues on the other. Hmm...”

Leaning in to give Ranma a peck on the cheek, Shampoo thought about it for a minute. “Actually, Fei Long might actually be a good starting for us. I remember watching some of his movies, and I think he does nearly all of his own stunts and is a very good practitioner of Jeet Kune Do. He might not be a match for any of us, but it would certainly be an interesting experiment, and he probably knows a lot of the local masters and so forth, considering how many low-skill martial artists are used in his films as extras.”

That sounded like a plan to the other two, and with no other starting point, they agreed. Then Mai and Ranma began to argue about what to watch, as Shampoo turned her attention to actually writing out that message to her grandmother.

**OOOOOO**

“Boss Yama, Fei Long is still not paying protection money. He threatened to beat me up and nearly put two of my enforcers into the hospital when I went and talked to him personally. I think we either need to cut bait or ramp things up even more.”

The man being talked to frowned thoughtfully, leaning back in his chair, idly throwing a dagger up and down in his large, meaty hand. It was one of many such daggers festooning the room. Where other people might have rows of books, this man had daggers, each of them set to display side on, hundreds of them on both sides walls and the interior wall of his large, expensive looking office. Some had sheaths, others didn't. Some looked brand new, others ancient. Some of the daggers looked like they had been used in the past, and some had signs of more recent use.

The owner of the office stood at six feet four inches, not incredibly tall by any means, but still tall enough, and he had massive shoulders and arms to go with his equally large hands. He had bleached blonde hair for some reason, with the normal dark black eyes habitual in people across Asia. He was actually partly Japanese, but mostly Chinese. Wearing a long, white, fur-lined coat, black shirt and black pants, he looked like a rich eccentric who devoted at least half of every day to weightlifting. That could not be further from the truth.

Ryuji Yamazaki for that was his full name, had been born to a very poor family right here in Hong Kong. Rumor had it that his grandmother had been a Japanese sympathizer, taken by a soldier as his 'wife' during WW2, hence the Japanese name. How that tale ended, no one knew or cared. What was known was that, Ryuji's family was no longer around, grandparents and parents alike. In addition, Ryuji had fought and clawed his way up from nothing to become a member of the triad. In fact, he was one of the highest-ranking members of the Triad within Hong Kong, who controlled the underground of the city with an iron fist.

Yamazaki was, more often than not, that iron fist. He had some respect for the other members of the ruling council of the Triad, but in reality, his voice was the first among equals.

"That's the problem with movie stars. They don't know the game is played like real producers," he mused, sounding more amused than angry. "Ramp up some of the pressure on the various sets, but use some of the regular boys for it instead of our made men. Keep them back for a bit, but urge the regulars to be as destructive as possible. See if we can rattle him with a higher amount of sabotage and brute numbers. Given some of the pressure we're dealing with from other cartels, I don't want to waste our more valuable men on something so minor."

He leaned forward, spearing the other man with his eyes, a small, smile on his face, which caused the lower ranking mobster fight back a shiver. "But if Fei Long thinks he can make a movie in this city without giving us a cut, he's gotta think again. That kind of thinking can't be allowed to spread, you know? So if he keeps on fighting the law of the jungle, that the weaker always pays tribute to the stronger, than I might just have to make an example of him."

**OOOOOO**

It turned out to be relatively simple to figure out where Fei Long was shooting his latest film. Indeed, the local tourism board actually ran some visits that stopped at that day's

set so that the tourists could watch. Fei Long was famous for demanding that any movie he was a part of be open to the public like that. That was especially true here in Hong Kong, his hometown.

In fact, it ironically took the three of them longer to find a courier out to the Joketsuzoku village than it did to book a tour to the set Fei Long would be on that day. The regular postal services didn't go out that far, but there were a few dedicated couriers who did, situated in Hong Kong and a few of the other larger cities. The Courier's initial attempt to charge them for the service made Mai's eyes boggle, but Shampoo took the man to task in no uncertain words. Her Putonghua came out so fast and so fluid that Ranma and Mai couldn't translate fast enough to keep up, but the man's response was more than enough to tell them she was having an impact.

It turned out that she was threatening the man as well as informing him that she was a member of the Joketsuzoku clan in question, something that caused the man's face to go completely white as he looked at her. He then apologized profusely, trying hard to recoup some of his poise, promising that the message would be delivered as fast as possible for the normal amount paid. Eventually, the message was handed over, and the trio headed back to the hotel quickly to meet with the tour.

As they arrived, Ranma looked around, then sighed, snapping his fingers. "I kind of hoped to meet Ryu here or maybe even that American friend of his. Agreeing to a specific time for a spar would give us something more substantial than hoping that Fei Long will want to talk to us or be any kind of real martial artist."

"What, you don't think that I know what a real practitioner of the Art looks like? That I can't pick out stunt acting from real combat?" Shampoo asked, scowling a little. "Or that my elders would be so enamored of his body they would like about it?"

"None of that!" Ranma backpedaled quickly. *Well, maybe on that last bit I guess.* "I'm just saying, the guy's a movie star, right? Don't they tend to be full of themselves?"

"He's got a point, Shampoo. Although I wasn't looking forward to Ken trying to flirt with one of us, which I think he's the type to do about as simple as breathing. Or even Ranma, should a stray bit of cold water find him at the most inopportune moment," Mai teased.

Ranma very maturely answered this by sticking his out tongue at her before turning away. He took one last look around the foyer, then followed the two girls back outside to wait for their tour. Unfortunately for all three, that tour wasn't just going to take them to the current set that Fei Long was using. Instead, it took them all over Hong Kong to many of the local important spots.

Although, this did at least clear up one minor mystery, as in where Ryu and Ken were. The two of them had apparently also booked a series of trips around the city, but it was a personal one, led by an elderly monk. His name was Oro, and Ranma had to stop himself from offering the man the Dragon's whisker on the spot, given how he had barely a few

wisps of black hair left on his head, yet those wisps gleamed with good care on top of his otherwise bald pate, both head and sunglasses gleaming with reflected light. His skin was almost golden with health despite his age, although one arm hung limply to his side, as if it was dead from the shoulder down. He wore a traditional monk's outfit, complete with prayer beads, yet his overall look told the trio that this man had been a martial artist in his youth at least, even if his fighting years were behind him. In other words, the perfect person to show two younger practitioners who wanted to experience the local scene around.

Beyond his looks, there was something about the guy that Ranma couldn't quite place. Not danger, but something that was a bit off about the arm that looked dead. Weird, but nothing he was too concerned about.

With Ryu there to keep things on target and not let Ken get distracted by his attempts to flirt, the group of five young men and women agreed to meet up at the elderly monk's temple that weekend if they could and exchanged phone numbers to keep in touch. Ranma was right: a spar in the hand was better than one in the eye.

At that point, they parted again, with Ken dragging Ryu away, heading back to the hotel where he was going to, in his words, "Force you to get a wardrobe change, or break your legs for arguing about it! I'm not picky about which at this point."

It was a very upbeat threesome that arrived at the set later that afternoon. The set was a part of the port, which had been marked off for the filming. Mai was impressed by the number of cameras, all of them mostly mobile, and how many people had apparently been brought in to act as cannon fodder for the fight scene. There were at least two dozen men there, moving around and getting into prepped positions throughout the huge moving crates that dominated the area.

Also surprisingly, Fei Long actually took time out of talking to some of the other actors and film directors to come over and shake hands with some of the locals who were part of the tour. He didn't seem to want to talk much to the real tourists, who made up a large portion of the group, composed mainly of several families, one elderly couple and three giddy high-school-age girls. Even there, he took time to sign shirts or postcards, though he politely refused to sign one of the girl's bared stomachs.

In person, Mai had to admit that maybe, just maybe, the guy did deserve to have the feminine following he did.

Fei Long was built on the same kind of lines as Ranma, a body made to emphasize speed over power. His hair was cut short, emphasizing the narrowness of his face and his eyes, which were the typical Asian brown but friendly enough. He seemed somewhat formal as he spoke to the other tourists, but answered the questions easily enough and stood poised on his feet almost, Mai thought at first, as if he was ready for trouble, wondering if maybe the guy didn't like to speak publicly without a script.



But then his eyes flicked to a few of the onlookers out beyond the edge of the cordoned-off set that hadn't come with the tour, and her eyes narrowed thoughtfully as they followed that gaze. *Is something going on here?*

Unfortunately, whatever time Fei Long had set aside to talk to the tourists ended before he could exchange any words with Shampoo, Mai or Ranma, who hadn't rushed forward with the real tourists as they tried to get the man's autograph. Although, like Ryu and Ken before him, he noted the trio, realizing what they were.

He nodded formally to them, and with a smirk on his face, Ranma clapped his hands and actually bowed from the waist, while Shampoo and Mai restrained themselves to simply waving. "Yo, Hollywood. You got time to talk shop?" *Finally, another guy around our age who's shorter than me! Ryu and Ken both being taller annoyed the hell out of me. I know they're older, but still.*

Snorting in amusement at the other young man's attitude and nickname, Fei Long shook his head, ignoring as Ranma did the confused looks from the civilians. "Maybe later. I have to get back to work now while the light's perfect for this scene."

With that, he turned away, and the trio watched as the Hong Kong-born native, acting as producer and action director for the movie, went over what was going to happen, pointing to each of the places in the area. All the seemingly new extras nodded and raced to take their positions. One of them took a position near a crate, while another climbed up on top of it, with a knife in his hand, crouching down as if he was going to launch himself forward. Which he did the instant the call to action came.

Fei Long caught the man with both hands, flipping him up and over his body, then twirling around to lash out with a kick that disarmed another extra. As that man fell away, Fei Long bounced up and off the ground with his other foot to throw himself up and over a third attacker, his foot lashing out easily to catch the man in the back of the head.

This brought Fei Long into an opening between four of the large pallets, and several other extras paused, letting one of the mobile cameras circle around Fei Long as he took a stance. Then the 'battle' was on, with all of them charging forward. And while the initial jump from the man up on the crate had been choreographed from start to finish, it was very clear this fight wasn't, instead, it was flowing naturally, the crowd was following a few brought instructions from before.

Mai watched all this avidly, keeping her eyes on Fei Long's moves. Then she began to smile as many of the other tourists turned to Ranma, who had, out of the blue, begun to do a blow-by-blow of the fight like it was a sports match of some kind, made even funnier than usual as he was also trying to speak in Putonghua, with his issues in that language. In Ranma's case, this meant both an accent and not using the right words some of the time.

"And fight has begun creatures," Ranma mock whispered, keeping his voice low enough to not be called on it by their guide, but loud enough for Shampoo and. "How hero come to be here, covered by the forces of evil, is anyone's guess. But he is, and faces danger

now from every angle... or would if Fei Long wasn't trained fighter and facing a group of street mimes. As is, house is taking weddings on how many times he'll get hit, and how hours it take Fei Long to finish them all off."

"I'll take some of that action," Mai snickered, as Shampoo moved to stand beside the pair. Since they were at the back of the crowd, they were out of the range of any of the pickups catching all the sounds of the fight, but many of the tourists could hear Ranma just as well as the action going on in front of them. And as Ranma began to go on, many began to have trouble holding back their laughter.

"Ranma give Fei Long this, beyond the start points of street mimes, this look real. The street mimes swing weapons like know how to use them, and aware of friendly shooting. There's not going to be any of that stupid 'get in another's way' you see in a lot of action theater. There no plan though, no talking! You can see in that one guy with the battery, the not getting in another's way thing only go so far without talking. That guy swing for back of Fei Long's head and Fei Long will dodge."

This happened as the onlookers watched, "And now bat smack into other street mime's hand. That got to hurt, hope they getting paid per bruise. Dodge like that move Fei Long towards one of the other knife swingers. He'll either need to jump up over guy, or roll underneath strike, which open him up to another battery swinger while the first one tries to swing at him again."

Fei Long took to the air and everyone in the crowd who was able to hear Ranma's commentary stared from him to the match, wondering if he was a plant from the movie folks, or could just somehow know what was going on. His accent was a bit too much for that to be true, though, and added a lot to the humor of the situation. The next moment Fei Long kicked out, and Ranma's commentary continued.

"Oh, nice kick, hit guy right in the head fore, although backflip away from blow was a bit much. Give that man slow clap for porking it up. His fellows take job seriously, look at those two knife swingers, they're going straight for Fei Long's legs from behind, nice plan. Pity it not work. Decent roundhouse kick, knock one into the other, but bot still in fight. Fei Long seems to like using kicks too-too much."

Ranma ignored how Shampoo nearly seemed to convulse in laughter at that point, going on smoothly. "Makes sense but look how fast he need pull his legs back in, most of knife swingers seem more than willing to slash at legs when on offer. With sharp knives, even single cut can be debilitating like wild."

A twisting blow from Fei Long's fist sent one knife fighter reeling, but in return, he nearly got tagged by one of the bat wielders, and then had to dodge a knife from one of the dagger wielders. "Ooh, so close, combo nearly worked but...yep," Ranma nodded sagely as both of those attackers fell to precise palm strikes. "None of the others as skilled as those two. This fight just turn from dangerous to farce."

“Great use of the word farce, but good grief,” Shampoo muttered as she recovered from her earlier case of the giggles, “We really need to work on your accent, Ranma. I could make out what you were trying to say, but it was really hard some times. And its ‘street thugs’ not ‘street mimes’ and ‘wielders’ not ‘swingers’. Especially not with the way your accent made that sound like something else entirely. Oh, and at the start its ‘people’ not ‘creatures’, and ‘hamming’ not ‘porking’. I’ve no idea how you came up with either of those. Especially not that last one. It isn’t even a real word!”

At that point, a woman who had been hiding at her starting point for the fight leaped up and over two of the crates to one side, landing across from Fei Long. The last few conscious gangsters, if that was what they were supposed to be, backed away. Ranma looked at her thoughtfully, cocking his head to one side, estimating she was a solid six on the Saotome Attractiveness Scale, something Ranma had come up with over the winter in the woods with Natsume and Kurumi. With Shampoo and Mai as a **solid** ten and nine respectively and Akane a three, this put the woman just behind Natsume in terms of her body. She had her hair chopped thin, and what Ranma could tell was a fake scar on her face going up from just behind her. Her hair was also dyed a purple that was just a bit darker than Shampoo’s, and a chest that was about the same size, shown off in the open biker vest and fishnet undershirt she was wearing to go with her tight leather pants.

She was also wielding two oversized Indian-looking blades, and as she faced off against Fei Long, the woman took a poorly trained version of a familiar stance. “I no know if she’s going for the scary force her look, or the psycho mistress look, but either way it working. Although, way she’s standing... Is it just Ranma, or...?”

“It is not just you,” Shampoo growled, nodding her head. “It seems as if someone either watched a Joketsuzoku fight once, or maybe just stumbled across some of our style somewhere? Whatever the case, I know my grandmother would smack my rear if I took a stance that bad at this age.”

The fight began, and Shampoo sighed shaking her head as the woman used a snap kick, then whirled into an attack with her swords that was so easily blocked it actually hurt her Joketsuzoku soul to watch. “She should have started with a strike from her left, then segued into her right, going back and forth with her blades. Don’t use your legs at all woman,” Shampoo nearly shouted that last, drawing some ire from the tour guide and the director, but not caring as she saw the woman again try to use her legs. “Your main weapons are those swords, use them!”

“Yeah, Ranma sees that. Oh, no, don’t take to the air woman, ugh, this is amateur hour now. She can’t get any speed with those blades of hers while on the ground, why she think it be any different in air?”

Even Mai, who was not a practitioner of the Joketsuzoku Wushu, could tell that the woman was struggling, forcing Fei Long to kind of overact, as if he was taking the threat more seriously than it warranted. “Either she’s not used to those weapons, or she is deliberately trying to make herself look bad, I can’t tell which.”

The three fell silent, watching as the woman twirled around, then actually performed a one two strike, a slice as she came out of the twirl, though Ranma had to point out how that had completely turned her back on her opponent and then moving into a stab. After blocking a blow with the flat of her swords, she lashed out with an overhead strike at Fei Long. The Kung Fu artist cum actor moved backwards slowly, his leg lashing out in such a choreographed manner Ranma winced. This caused the woman to jump up and, instead of using her swords, **again**, she tried to kick in the head with a mule kick. Again, it came in so slow it was sad, forcing Fei Long to dodge to one side just as slowly.

“Whether it is her lack of training or the weight of those swords, the realism of the initial fight is kind of lost here. While before Fei Long was moving at a respectable speed, now he’s having to slow everything down, to make it look as if his opponent is actually dangerous.” Shampoo said shaking her head, her voice rising again. “If that woman is supposed to be a Joketsuzoku or something similar, she is a disgrace!”

At that point, the man who would be showing them around turned and hissed at her, but this time the damage had been done.

“Cut! What part about quiet on the set was vague!?” shouted the director, turning to glare angrily at Shampoo.

Shampoo stared back, huffing and waving her hand towards the woman, who was also looking her way, the fight having brought the pair of combatants closer to the watching crowd. “You can’t expect a **real** Joketsuzoku to stand here and watch that travesty! Honestly, either she’s out of practice, she needs lighter weapons, or she was brought aboard for something other than her skill and acting ability. Even if the weapon is the problem, she should at least be able to remember that weapons are the wielders primary offensive tool!”

“Excuse me?!” the woman, who Mai estimated sotto voce to Ranma looked to be in her mid to late twenties, snarled. She had already been making her way over to them, with Fei Long behind her, a scowl on his face. Now though, she was thoroughly incensed, pointing one of her swords at Shampoo. “Who the hell do you think you are?! I’m Mili Wong, one of the most famous actresses in all of China, and I am that because I know Kung Fu too. This isn’t my first flick, and I won’t stand here and be insulted by some dye jobbed bimbo from out in the boonies!”

“This is my real hair color, unlike you! And a martial artist, don’t make me laugh. Your knowledge of Joketsuzoku style is about that of a toddler back home. Your footwork is just sad, you telegraph your strikes way too much, and you seem to forget style over speed whenever Fei Long tries to hit your upper body or face,” Shampoo taunted, not going over the points she and her friends had already brought up but entirely new ones.

“I wouldn’t expect someone from off the streets to realize this, but a face is an actress’s moneymaker,” Mili shot back arrogantly, moving her from a six to a four on the Saotome Attractiveness scale in a brief second. “I’m not getting paid enough to let someone cave in my face on accident just because we’re going for realism or whatever.”

Shampoo sneered, affronted almost as much by the woman's attitude as she was by her bastardizing the Joketsuzoku style in the first place so badly. "So you're a wallflower, not a real martial artist! And as for being your moneymaker, I suppose it could be, maybe it could make you a few ji yuán. Whereas I would make a bai wàn yuán." That was the equivalent of someone in Japan saying their face was worth a few dollars whereas the speaker's was worth a million. "And I've been struck in the face numerous times in my life, yet I still look better than you. You're a parody, a caricature. Whereas I'm the real thing."

"Have you been teaching Shampoo Anything Goes Smack Talk? Wong's going to need some cream for that burn!" Mai murmured, her eyes twitching back and forth.

Ranma didn't answer, and Mai turned to look at him, but Ranma wasn't listening anymore. Instead, he was looking over to the side, cocking his head thoughtfully.

Fei Long had been following everything, and as Mai turned her attention in the same direction Ranma had, the actor moved to stand between the two women as Shampoo had pushed through the crowd or go nose to nose with the actress. "Wait! Wait a minute. I realize that this young lady's words might seem out of line, but I warned you yesterday that I push for realism in all of my fights, Mili. If I can't target your face, or if you flinch every time I do, that's not realism. You're supposed to be a tough as nails female assassin, a woman born and raised in the pits of the underground fighting tournaments here in Hong Kong! I agreed with your idea that your face should still be good looking despite the scar that links back to your backstory, but still."

"I told you at the time that I wasn't going to let you hit my face," Mili protested. "I've got a TV show lined up after we're done filming this film. There's no way I can start work on that project when my face is damaged! You're just going to have to change your style. If you're as good a martial artist as you're supposed to be, that should be easy for you."

Fei Long scowled at that, standing backwards from the two, examining them, a sudden thought occurring to him. "Or, maybe we could have this young woman step in for you during the combat scenes? Take in your hips a bit with some clever pants work, maybe stuff a bit down her shirt, and the two of you could actually pass for one another with a bit of makeup work on her part, although the scar might be tricky." He smirked suddenly at Shampoo. "I'll have to talk to our wardrobe and costume people about that, but what about it, young lady? Are you ready to put your body where your mouth is?"

Shampoo grinned and nodded eagerly, sneering at the other woman, who protested. "Now hold on a minute! First of all, she's a complete unknown, why the hell are you even listening to her in the first place? For all we know she could be just some young bitch trying to get some screen time without the skill to back it up. And for another, we have a contract! You can't change my contract to give the money for combat scenes or stunt scenes to this girl."

Unfortunately, Shampoo's reply of, "I don't need a single yuan to make certain my people's Art is portrayed properly, you can keep your money. As for if I have the skill you

want, why don't we just have a match to see who's better for the role?" would go unanswered, as there was a crash to one side.

The actors and tourists all turned, and a few of the extras in that area backed away hastily, watching five men who had just pushed over one of the action lights. A sixth man had just been flung backward by a hit to the forehead from a thrown rock, and looking to the side, Shampoo saw Mai and Ranma had both moved to the sides of the gaggle of onlookers and were now ducking under the rope separating the set from the rest of the dockyard.

However, there were other groups of real toughs moving into the area from the other three sides. At least forty men or more, all of them armed with bats and various other weapons, but there the similarity between them and the extras ended. These men were the real thing, scarred, tattooed and itching for a fight.

As Shampoo watched, a man on the other side of the set had his camera stolen out of his arms, and then was kicked in the stomach hard, sending him to the floor as the expensive movie camera was tossed against a cargo container, its sides shattering. "Film's over for the day folks! Get out of here."

The extras all backed away warily. They were tough guys, sure, but they weren't paid brawlers. Yet Fei Long snarled, moving forward, his hands outstretched to either side. "I told your boss the last time he tried this shit! I'm not paying a dime in protection money. And I hope he's ready to pay all of your hospital bills for this."

A second later, the one man who wielded a nail gun of all things yelled aloud in pain as a stone caught him in the elbow, cracking with almost sufficient force to break bone and send the weapon tumbling out of his suddenly nerveless grip.

"And here I was getting bored," Ranma turned to face one segment of the crowd of gangsters that had entered the set. Seeing this, Shampoo hastily hopped over the safety rope, gleefully closing with another group of gangsters as Ranma looked over his shoulder at Fei Long. "Is this a private party, or can anyone join?"

Fei Long glanced at Ranma, then at young woman who was already throwing punches and kicks at the invading gangsters. Meanwhile his former co-lead had rapidly backed away, staring between the four of them and the criminals shaking her head. *Well, if I hadn't already been thinking about replacing her for the combat roles at least, that action would have made that clear.* "Aloud, he said, "If you can keep up sure. But don't get in my way, this is my set they're trying to wreck." With that, he charged forward, leaving Ranma behind to shout about how he would probably down more of the criminals than Fei Long would.

While Ranma had proven to be very observant twice now, he didn't have any idea how criminal organizations thought. Mai did. That was why, while the others were having their fun with the local bully boys, Mai had slipped to the background, moving through the first shocked and now cheering group of onlookers before hopping up onto the top of a tall

series of cargo containers. From there, she began to canvass the area around the movie set. As the screams of the toughs began to echo behind her, Mai saw a man sitting on a motorcycle, his position hidden away between two of the larger cargo crates set elsewhere in the dockyard area.

He was clearly watching events from nearly a block away. While the slaughter below continued, the man reached into his pocket, pulling out a very expensive-looking cell phone.

Mai dropped on him like a hammer from above, her closed fan slamming down into the back of his head with numbing force. The man fell sideways off his bike, the phone skittering along the concrete of the dock, but despite his leg being pinned under the bike as it fell with him, the gangster's hands instantly thrust back into his jacket pocket for something. Mai's fan flicked open, the edge catching his upper arm, slicing through his shirt and skin from his wrist up to the crook of his elbow, causing the man to yelp in pain. Blood began to flow from the wound, and his hand released, sending the gun he had been reaching for to join the phone on its journey across the concrete. The next second, a kick caught the man in the side of the head, knocking him out.

Making certain the wound she'd dealt to the man wasn't lethal, Mai scowled, staring at the gun. While in close, already in hand-to-hand range, a gun really wasn't useful against martial artists of her caliber, that didn't mean that they were useless at mid to long range. If the man had seen her coming, she might well have had the devil of a time dodging his bullets. *And I'm not nearly as good at reinforcing my fans to want to see if I can actually block or deflect real bullets, let alone try to track the trajectory of the bullets. That would be more by I guess and by gosh than anything else. And I am so not willing to test out Shampoo's theory about the toughness training making us bulletproof.*

Picking up the gun, she released the magazine, and then ejected the bullet in the gun before tossing the magazine toward the ocean, which was visible between a few of the cargo container stacks. Then she very deliberately dropped the gun back to the ground and smashed it underneath her foot, the metal shattering under her blow.

The gun dealt with, Mai took a brief second to wrap the man's arm with his own torn sleeve. Then she examined the motorcycle, humming in approval. It looked nice, a Kawasaki of some kind, not flashy, but well maintained and with high-end parts. *Nice.* Mai had gone through a phase where she had really enjoyed motorcycles, and this one was one of the best she had seen this close.

*Now, I wonder...* She looked around thoughtfully, her eyes lighting on a rooftop nearby, the top of a warehouse of some kind, which had a gentle curve and very obviously didn't have any normal rooftop access. *It would still be visible from some of the huge cranes, but it might be the best place to stow it.*

With that, Mai lifted the bike up and leaped up to where she had been previously. There, she stowed the bike away near the top of the curve, then covered it with a random tarp she found nearby, discarded between a few of the crates.

Like Ranma, Mai had a very flexible moral code when it came to stealing. Stealing food was okay if you were starving. Stealing money from crooks was good if they were trying to take advantage of you, as that was a way of just showing you were better than them, like beating an opponent in a spar. And this could also be enlarged to include anything else on their bodies at the time they were overcome. *Motorbikes might be bigger than most things I'd bother taking from a random mook who attempted to fight me, but I do like them, and he pulled a gun on me. That's just not nice.*

For a moment, Mai happily entertained thoughts of her driving while Shampoo or Ranma clung to her back. Then the image shifted a bit, the friendly grip from behind turning into a hug, Ranma and then Shampoo's body pressing into Mai from behind. First one, then the other, as the hugs shifted, their hands moving to different places instead of just around her middle.

A flush appearing on her cheeks, Mai quickly waved the image away, wondering where the hell it came from. Deciding to not think about that right now, Mai jumped down again. Once on the ground, she gathered her victim up over one shoulder before heading back to the others. She arrived just in time to hear Fei Long explain what was going on. Nearby, the tour guide was leading the other tourists away, having convinced them, at the actor's behest that the entire event had been put on for their benefit, a lie all of the regular tourists lapped up.

"...and I refused to pay. I'm not going to pay a dime to any criminal organization, not the Yakuza, not the Mafia, not the Triad. I walked off of sets in Greece and Mexico when the producers just assumed I would be willing to chip in to pay their blood money or not notice that we were giving out way more money than we were actually spending on the movie itself. I'm not going to turn around and pay that price when I'm the producer."

"That's nice and all, but where does that leave us?" Ranma asked, straightening up from where he had just finished tying up their former opponents. He'd made a kind of human daisy chain out of them, tying their clothing together one to another. Even with the bruises and possibly broken bones that many of them had after the one-sided beat down, some would probably be able to escape that pretty easily, but it would serve as a deterrent to the groaning, moaning man-shaped targets for a bit. He and Shampoo had also searched all of them thoroughly, taking their wallets and dumping them into the ocean nearby, along with any phones they'd had on them and their weapons.

The number of phones had been somewhat surprising. When they'd trolled perverts for cash, cell phones had been rare. But apparently, the criminal element here in Hong Kong used throwaway cell phones to regularly communicate with one another. "Feh, technology. You can keep it!"

Mai snickered at that. "Despite his luddite tendencies, Ranma's right. As interesting as this was, we're left with a pile of low-ranking morons, with no idea what to do with them or if slapping them down like we did will be enough to warn off whoever is behind this among the local Triad."



“It probably won’t,” Fei Long admitted, watching with some amusement as Shampoo and his costar got into another argument about who had down the last cretin. Mili had decided to come in and take part in the fight after seeing how easily Shampoo, Fei Long and Ranma were dealing with them. When it came to the last moron, *I’d personally give it to Miss Wong, but that would still leave Shampoo well ahead in their little competition.* “The Triad is immensely powerful here in Hong Kong. There’s a reason why I said we can’t just take this lot to the police. They’ll be out on bail within days...” he smirked. “Well before most of them are well enough to make more trouble, certainly, but still.”

“Are you saying the police are corrupt?” Ranma asked, somewhat stunned at that. He hadn’t really run into organized crime that often with his time with his father or since he had left Nerima with Shampoo. The idea of the authorities being part of the problem was a weird one to him.

Having overheard that, Shampoo muttered about how here in China, everyone was corrupt, a statement that drew some snorts of laughter from the woman she’d been arguing with the first time the two of them seemed to agree on anything. Fei Long also snorted but answered in the affirmative, indicating that, yes, the police were indeed very corrupt. “Some of the inspectors aren’t, and at least a few of the precincts are fighting hard against any corrupt influence, but their higher-ups are extremely corrupt. If we want to do something about the Triad coming after me and my people, we need to do it for ourselves.”

Ranma shrugged. “Fine by me. Although, are you sure that a big-time actor like you can be seen taking part in something like that?”

“This is my set, and it’s my movie. They’re trying to mess up! Obviously, I’m going to be involved in dealing with the problem. My question is, should you three get involved? I thank you for your help, but you’re literal strangers to me, not involved in this at all. Are you sure you want to stick your noses in?”

“Sounds like fun” / “Could be interesting” / Eh, why not? Smacking criminals is always a good pastime, and who knows, maybe they have someone on their payroll who can give one of us a good fight,” were the three answers that Fei Long got back, while his costar simply shook her head. She then took a large step back from where she had been within punching distance of Shampoo, removing herself from the conversation and saying what she thought of Fei Long’s plan

Mai then held up her prisoner, shaking him lightly. “And maybe this guy can tell us where to start? I have to assume that he’s a higher-ranking person in the Triad since he was just watching events from a distance. But I wager threatening to drop him from one of those huge cranes will get him to talk.”

This proved only to be accurate to the point where he had been the man to organize the various toughs. They were simple local street-level gang bangers, the type of people that could be found in practically any city worldwide. They’d been brought together for a job with no real connection to the Triad as a whole. Mai’s prisoner, however, did work directly for one of the mid-tier Triad bosses and knew where he routinely ran his small piece of the pie from.

A local small-time gambling den, which had recently expanded to include nude dancers. That was enough for Fei Long to plan his next move.

Sending everyone else home and making sure that none did so alone took a bit of time. Once everyone was gone and the set had been cleaned up, Fei Long met back up with the trio who had stepped in to help him, asking, "So, what's your story then?"

This proved quite enlightening, but Fei Long was quite amused by the idea of two young lovers going around the world learning Kung Fu and picking fights with other martial artists. It sounded like something out of a fairytale or one of the old Wuxia films. *Mind you, most of those ended in tragedy, I hope this one doesn't. The inclusion of a second girl is also always a bad thing in those, but seems to be working so far here.* "Well, I can certainly get you in touch with the local Kung Fu schools. A few of them are quite good, including one an old monk by the name of Master Oro runs."

"Wait, don't tell me, is he an old guy with like, a few still fighting wisps of hair on his head and goes around dressed like a monk?" Ranma asked, scowling a little.

"That's him. His temple doubles as a dojo, and he does some really good work with the local kids," Fei Long answered, surprised. "You've met him?"

"We saw him in the company of two other martial artists," Mai answered while Ranma scowled at how Ken and Ryu had apparently already gotten in good with one of the local masters. "We didn't realize that he still practiced, though. I thought he was just a monk, one with a bit more than normal spiritual energy, maybe, but nothing amazing."

"He's deceptive like that," Fei Long acknowledged before rubbing his hands together eagerly. While he was not nearly as fight-happy as the pigtailed Japanese man seemed to be, a part of him was actually looking forward to this quite a bit. The role of someone fighting injustice and gangs several times in his career to do it in real life was thrilling. "Now, how should we do this?"

It was decided that the group would go into the club separately. Ranma would go first, followed by Shampoo and Mai, together talking loudly about how going there was a part of it there of some kind. That part was Mai's contribution, and Fei Long had to acknowledge that the woman had some skill in acting to come up with a story on the fly that made so much sense.

Like in many large cities the world over, there were a whole lot of stupid college-age students who would do quite a bit for a dare. So long as the pair of them didn't dress up as they normally did, that is, as two female martial artists with clothing set to accentuate their athletic beauty, Fei Long thought it would pass. The way the two were dressed currently would serve, so long as they added a bit of dirt or a jacket.

Fei Long would be the last to enter. He would be there to meet with the local boss and would talk his way past the toughs, until he was in the presence of the boss, then start the ball right there by taking the man out. The noise of that would be the signal to the others to start wrecking stuff. And people, mostly people, really. Putting a few dozen of the

Triad's made men in the hospital would do Fei Long nicely and might warn them that continuing to mess with him, and his new friends, admittedly, he was now very certain he wanted to offer Shampoo a job, would be more expensive than what they could squeeze him for.

It only took them about an hour to get to the bar in question, which, although it was only six in the evening, was already doing a brisk business judging by the noise coming from the open doorway. This was not a high-end place. It was a hole in the wall that looked to have grown out of a shop on the first floor to take over all three floors of the building it was in, growing upward and to either side over time. There was no bouncer at the door, a small discrete sign, but lots of noise coming from inside, and posters of various gambling games run by scantily clad women and two semi-new-looking posters of female dancers wearing even less dancing around poles outside.

Ranma took in those signs with a groan, muttering to himself in Japanese, "Why do I think I'm going to have to fight to keep myself from getting distracted when I'm in there?" With a sigh, he pushed through the small crowd moving along the streets and into the bar, noting absently that while the exterior didn't have any kind of bouncer, a man was standing by the doorway inside. Well, he had to be a man. Gorillas didn't tend to wear clothing, not even the sleeveless white shirt this one was wearing in order to show off his bulging muscles. *Feh, looks like muscles are the only thing he's got going for him.*

Beyond that man, the first thing that Ranma noticed about the bar was the noise. The constant chatter of people coming from every angle, a crowd of several dozen people, who, here in the first room on the first floor, were taking up far too little space for so many people. He could see that there was more room up top, though. The second and third floors were visible from the ground floor, as there were several small square holes, right above the various gambling tables. From the view of the second floor, he could see from here, Ranma could see gamblers lowering down small buckets with chips along with cash in them, onto various scattered gambling tables of several types of gambling games he'd never seen before. Before that, Ranma realized that the upper floors were for people who had more money to spend than the ground floor, the people up there looking just a little bit better dressed, a little bit more well-kept.

Each game was run by a young woman, who actually knelt on the table, moving around it on all fours to take wagers or move whatever they were manipulating on the table that the people were wagering on. Each woman wore a different fetish outfit, which, to Ranma's disgust, included a Japanese schoolgirl outfit that reminded him far too much of Natsume and a Miko outfit that was in the same colors as Mai's normal outfit.

Also on this floor was a large doorway that led into another building set aside from the bar. And there, Ranma did indeed see several nude dancers. The outline of that area really didn't match his own thinking of what a dance club or even a stripper club should look like: smaller, with more in the way of lighting, but there were a lot of small private booths around the area, separated by hanging cloth doors. Only a few nude dancers were moving around, too, a sign that maybe this place was either new, as the guy they'd interrogated said or just making the best of what little space they had.

For just a second, Ranma stared at the women, but he didn't stare because he was embarrassed or stunned at their nakedness. Rather, after a few seconds, he turned away, revulsion filling him. A few of the girls in there had decent bodies, and one or two of the girls working on the tables were pretty, but there was just something **off** about it. Not just the fact that he was looking at a naked girl that wasn't Shampoo, which on its own was enough to make him feel a little guilty.

No, it was how free the girls were with their bodies, sharing something that should otherwise be precious. *I ain't someone who judges other people's life choices, but still...or is it a choice for some of these girls? Yet another reason to wreck this place.*

Shaking his head at that, Ranma made his way to the stairs leading up. There finally, Ranma hit some actual security. Two lounging men dressed in semi-decent suits, their jackets open to show red undershirts, held up hands as he went to walk past them. "No one allowed on the second or third floors without paying the toll."

Ranma blinked, shrugged, and turned aside, causing the men to grumble about brats wasting their time.

He waited nearby, watching the door until he saw Shampoo and Mai enter. The two of them drew more than one glance from several of the men in the room, including the bouncer by the doorway. Even dressed for a day out on the town as they had been, the two of them were simply cleaner and... Well, Ranma didn't have a word for it, but maybe more respectable looking than many of the women in the crowd. In the main, those women were there to either gamble away their own savings, hanging off of men's arms as they gambled, or, like the strippers, there for work.

Ranma's girlfriend and their best friend were very much not in that mold. And prettier for it, in his opinion.

The two of them moved through the crowd, picking up drinks from the bar and paying for them immediately, with Mai making a point of watching as the drinks were made. Drinks in hand, the pair moved through the crowd until they were on the opposite side of the ground floor from where Ranma was lurking. He smirked to see that both girls took a single glance through the large entryway into the stripper part of the club, the sneers on their faces visible for just a second before they were wiped away.

Ranma moved through the crowd occasionally, making as if to look at some of the gambling games going on, before pulling back and away, scratching at his chin thoughtfully as if he was trying to decide what to do. In reality, he was watching the door the entire time, waiting for the main actor of this play to arrive.

Fei Long entered not around thirty minutes after the three of them had. He marched into the place, his eyes hidden behind a pair of sunglasses, an upturned collar hiding some of his lower face. Making straight for the stairs leading upwards, he pulled his collar down and glared at the two men on watch there, saying something Ranma couldn't hear over the noise of the crowd.

Both of them looked surprised and growled angrily at him. But Fei Long made some hand gestures, which Ranma mentally interpreted as, "I don't speak to the help!"

After a few seconds, the two guards gave way or were told something. One of them had turned his head just enough that Ranma was able to see a small earbud in his ear as if he had seen a few times in action movies. Fei Long was then allowed upstairs, and Ranma grinned to himself, moving through the crowd until he was within jumping range of the upper floor, noticing that both of his ladies were doing the same, with Mai moving over toward the stairs and the two guards there, and Shampoo shifting back towards the entryway as if she was heading to the bar alongside that wall.

**OOOOOOO**

Fei Long had been slightly wrong about what he had told Ranma and the others about local corruption. It was true that a lot of police were on the take, but it was also known by the police force that this was the case, and they had been trying to clean themselves up for several years. While the Triad was somewhat unaware of these efforts just yet, it was getting to the point, where the police were feeling confident enough to take on the Triad itself and try to cut into the corruption prevalent throughout Hong Kong.

One officer involved in this was actually nearby as Fei Long and the three traveling friends entered the club one after another. And as Ranma and the others had known, Fei Long was easy to recognize if you looked hard enough. The man, dressed in plain clothes and almost looking like a vagrant who had been watching the entryway into the gambling den/stripper club, pushed back into an alleyway, hiding behind a large, extremely smelly trash container there before he pulled out his cell phone.

"Inspector Li, I'm on duty watching Wun Phat's, and we might have a situation brewing."

He was answered instantly by a feminine voice from the other end, young sounding full of authority and energy. "What kind of problem? That's one of our prime sting operation points. If anything happens there, it will mess up our whole operation."

The observer's superior officer didn't say what kind of operation it was, but that was part of the course. Just because they were using cell phones didn't mean they couldn't be tapped, after all.

"The actor Fei Long just entered. Don't ask me why, but he looked as if he was gearing up for a fight." *And if he does*, he might run right over our operatives inside, the man observed but didn't say. No word of the undercover agents could be allowed to get out, not after one of their undercover operatives had somehow been discovered. The way the Triad had made an example of the man still gave most of the officers who saw it nightmares.

The thoughts of the woman on the other end followed a similar vein as the watching officer.

*Dammit! We spent weeks trying to get them to ingratiate them into that club, and now this pretty boy actor is going to just bulrush his way in and think he can solve everything with his fists?*

For a moment, the call was silent, the senior officer obviously thinking hard. But before she could answer, there was a loud crash, and a bouncer was hurled out of one of the few second-story windows the bar boasted, slamming into the ground with bone-breaking force. In the next second, the large, very obviously intimidating man, who the police knew to be one of the Triad's enforcers, was sent flying out of the entryway leading into the gambling den. Then, people were beginning to flee, screaming and running out of the bar.

The officer on watch hastily reported this, and Inspector Li cursed. "Dammit! Fine, I'm not going to let two of our own get involved in something like this without stepping in, and if we do, maybe we can find enough evidence around the area to at least roll up some of the Triad's drug distribution. Although, probably not the big boss himself. We'll have to go with plan B on that one..." For a moment, the woman on the other end seemed to falter, then firmed up. "I'm already nearby with our rapid reaction force, just in case. We'll head in now. Remain on station."

The man answered in the affirmative, putting his foot cell phone away and watching as another body was flung out of the second of the two second-story windows the bar boasted, whistling appreciatively. "Say what you will about Fei Long's general intelligence, deciding to just charge him like he did. The guy at least has some strength to back it up."

**OOOOOO**

When the sound of shattering glass and screaming came from above, Ranma and the others reacted instantly. The bouncer by the door had barely a second to start to move deeper into the club before Shampoo was in his face, a smile appearing briefly there before her chui came out of her weapon space and she swung, hammering it into the man's chest like a man with a bat, breaking ribs and hurling him out of the doorway. Similarly, two fans found necks, and the two guards on the stairs leading upward fell, with Mai racing up the stairs an instant later. By the time she arrived on the second floor, though, Ranma had already landed, having leaped up through the central hole, landing lightly on the banister there, before flipping up and over the crowd, lashing out with a kick towards a gambler who had pulled out a gun.

The kick sent the man flying to fall through one of the other holes in the second floor leading back down to one of the gambling tables. That table's manager shrieked as the man landed, barely getting out of the way.

Poising himself on top of one innocent (?) bystander's head, Ranma flung himself forward again towards the third floor. There, a kick lashed out and crashed into one of the actual security guards rather than one of the clientele. The blow broke his shoulder, sending him skidding backward into his fellow, who barely had a second before Ranma grabbed him and pulled him into a punch that laid him out entirely.

A door to one side was flung open by a body smashing into the interior of it, followed by another man rapidly backing away as Fei Long stalked out, fury in his face. Guards who had been about to rush from their positions by that door towards Ranma turned, bringing long daggers, almost short swords, up as they swung at the man. Wu Fei lashed out with both hands, smacking one blade up and the other to the side as he whirled between them. A kick took one man in the center of the chest, hurling that man away, and a hand chop to the other knocked him into Lala Land.

Another doorway leading into what must have been another building backed up against this one burst open on the second and third floors, and more than a dozen more bouncers rushed in. Most looked much like the toughs that the quartet of martial artists had dealt with earlier that day, but five were dressed in slightly better clothing, and they were armed with guns rather than knives, crowbars or baseball bats like the rest.

Worse, none of the men armed with guns were particularly caring about the crowd. It was just luck that allowed the first one to get a shot off through the crowd toward Ranma that actually missed anyone else.

It did not miss Ranma, who had just flung one of the other bouncers out into the air of one of the holes between the various floors. The bullet hit him high up in the pec, flinging him sideways and backward as he grunted in agony.

“OOOOWWWW!!!” That hurt like blazes, and for a moment, Ranma winced, his eyes closing at the pain. When he opened them, he didn’t see any blood and instead saw the bullet had ricocheted down into the floor. His pec felt badly bruised as if he had just taken several palm strikes from Yokozuna Honda in rapid succession, but beyond that, he was fine and furious.

Ranma grabbed one of the locals who had tried to pull out a weapon, figuring that made him fair game, and hurled him towards the shooter, who was staring at him in shock. Both men fell down, and Ranma leaped up and over the rest of the crowd, causing several of the other gunners to fire up at him. Ranma twisted, dodging one of the bullets, letting the other one hit him in the thigh, causing him to grimace again. But once more, the durability training he’d gone through had seemingly allowed him to become, if not quite bulletproof, then at least pistol-proof. This did not make him any happier about being shot, though, and when he landed, the man who had been firing at him was flung through one of the second-story windows with a single blow to the face that shattered jaw and teeth alike. Twisting, Ranma dodged a blow from a hatchet, grabbing the man’s wrist and snapping it, taking the hatchet and hurling it into the chest of one of the other gunners, who went down with a gurgle, the hatchet having caught him across the neck.

Wincing as he realized he might well has just killed the guy, Ranma continued fighting, shrugging mentally. This was most definitely a them or him kind of situation, and he wasn’t going to think about it too hard right now. Luckily, for his repeated bruising, the last two shooters went down to a hurled table from Fei Long.

Down below on the second floor, Mai had come up out of the stairwell near the entryway into whatever back area the bouncers were coming from. This allowed her to ambush two of the gun-using men there, although she was forced to use the body of one of them as a shield against the third. Luckily, a person with a pistol could only fire in one direction at a time, and while these men might have been experienced with their weapons, they weren't so good with situational awareness. A fan that she had flung outwards to the side came back in on a parabola, cracking into the back of the still-upright shooter's skull.

*Just like one of those weird Australian things*, she thought with some amusement before flinging her now quite dead makeshift shield against another bruiser, sending both body and man crushing over one of the protective banisters. A third man was tripped up by a kick before being laid out by another punch from her now free hand as she charged forward, dodging through several more strikes from other bouncers, her fans and feet flying.

Looking upward for a brief second, she could see Fei Long being circled by several men who were wielding their machetes with far more finesse and teamwork than the rest. They all seemed to look alike, and Mai idly wondered if they were brothers or something. But the fact he and Ranma were both on the third floor meant Mai was alone here on the second.

Which was just fine by her. After all, *I missed out on the fight earlier*, she thought. The bright grin on her face served to unnerve and even emasculate the men facing her, several of them flinching or trying to turn and run away from her as they saw that grin.

Down below, Shampoo was also grinning. She was having a much easier time of it than the others were. More of the clientele were armed on this floor, but most were still unwilling to get into outright brawls like this against trained fighters and were fleeing at the door just as fast as she was knocking those who wanted to fight or the guards out. There weren't any gunmen on this floor either, although there were seven more bouncers armed with long daggers in the strip club part of the establishment, who rushed out to try to fight her.

It did not go well for them. Shampoo's *chui* out-reached their daggers easily and on top of her being far stronger and faster. Bodies were flung every which way as she cackled, happy in laying out some destruction to these people.

About five minutes into this carnage, the door to the establishment banged open, and people rushed in rather than rushed out, a woman at their head. She looked a little older than Mai and the rest of them, perhaps around Fei Long's age or maybe Ken and Ryu's. She was powerfully built, with possibly the strongest set of thighs that Shampoo had ever seen on a woman, a chest that was around Shampoo's own size, and, more importantly, she was wearing what was very obviously a police officer's uniform as were the men who charged in after her, all of them making for the stairwell heading up. "Hong Kong Police! Everyone put your hands up!"



She followed this by laying out one of the few conscious men near the doorway with a kick that had Shampoo smile and nod in approval before the woman charged her. "Drop the weapons, or I drop you, girl!"

Now, while Shampoo was not nearly as challenge-happy as Ranma was, there was a certain amount of etiquette to these things. Moreover, she was not one to back down from an obvious challenge like that, especially coming from another woman. "I accept your challenge!" Shampoo answered formally, having a moment to bow before hopping up and over a kick from the woman, her twin maces coming around in a single strike before she used the haft of one to block a second kick and launched a strike from her other mace towards the woman's head.

For a moment, Shampoo thought that the woman was going to make the same mistake Andy had, assuming her maces were hollow instead of solid metal and blocking the blow. But she didn't. Instead, the short-haired woman's hand moved around the head of the mace, only impacting the shaft, directing the blow above her head as she ducked, her other hand coming up in a palm strike, which Shampoo blocked with her forearm, following up by moving into the other woman's guard and lashing out with an elbow to the head. The policewoman ducked out of the way of the hit, spinning into a low thigh strike followed by a high kick.

Blocking the first, Shampoo leaped up and over and while in the air, then blocked the second kick, although the force of the hit sent her flying backward. Shampoo rolled as she flew back, landing on the opposite wall, clinging there for a second with one hand and both of her feet, having lost her grip on one of her weapons from the kick.

The two women stared at one another, with the police officer looking extremely surprised Shampoo was still in one piece and Shampoo wincing at the pain from her forearm. That one kick had felt like a punch from her grandmother, it was that strong. *I can't let any of those kicks land. I'd be dealing with broken bones at best. And that is with my toughness training! Worse, my ki healing isn't as good as my Airen's!*

Their fight was interrupted by another body falling from on high. The man's arms wildly pinwheeled as he fell before he crashed face and chest first into one of the gambling tables between the two women.

While the two women had been exchanging blows, the rest of the police squad, the equivalent of a Japanese SAT team, raced through the area, arresting or detaining anyone they came across or just knocking them flat out if they tried to resist. The first of the group to meet the police beyond Shampoo and her sole opponent, Mai had only begun to resist when one of the police officers made to handcuff her hands behind her back.

At that point, she broke the handcuffs and then introduced the police officer who had tried that to the backside of her fan before calmly letting the fans disappear into her ki space and standing there, her arms crossed as she stared at the policeman, daring them to do more. "Bill me for the broken handcuffs, but don't even try to put another pair on me, or else we will have trouble."

However, one of the policemen who had raced up past Mai proved to be a little too trigger-happy. The moment he burst out of the stairwell, he lined up a shot on Ranma, barely taking a moment to shout freeze in Chinese before firing. Ranma grunted again at the impact of a pistol bullet into his side, grimacing now and hurling the guy he had been fighting towards the policeman. He slammed into him, carrying him back into several of his fellows, the group tumbling back down the stairs.

“Wait, Ranma, those are policemen!” Fei Long shouted.

Ignoring the other martial artist, Ranma had already leaped after them, landing on top of the pile. Swift surgical strikes knocked out every policeman there before he grabbed the guy who had fired at him, holding him up as a shield against the other police, as Mai had done earlier in that fight with one of the bouncers.

“I don’t like getting shot! It hurts like blazes and is just not fun. I’ll come along quietly, so long as you put the guns and the handcuffs away. If you don’t, this is going to get very impolite quickly.”

The guy in his grip groaned, surprisingly conscious despite the earlier blow. “And what is this then?”

“This is a response to you shooting me. Do you want to try for unfriendly?” Ranma growled back.

The man, who was currently being held above Ranma’s head by the back of his neck as if he weighed little more than a child, shook his head frantically, and several of the other officers who had raised guns towards Ranma slowly put them away. Ranma then marched to where he could look down at the ground floor, cocking his head as he stared at the two women who were glaring at one another. He grinned then, almost cheerful now. “So, should your police friends and I just sort of wait for you and Shampoo to finish up or...”

The woman stared from Ranma to Shampoo, who had yet to lower her remaining mace and stood, poised and ready for a fight. Then Fei Long appeared above next to Ranma, looking down at the policewoman and then around at the others. “Did we get in the way of a raid officer, or were the criminals here so certain that you would let them off that they called you in to help deal with us?”

That question seemed to incense a good deal of the policemen in the room, none more so than the woman, who broke off staring between Ranma and Shampoo to glare at Fei Long. Luckily, Ranma shook his head quickly when he noticed Shampoo about to charge forward, eager to take advantage of the woman’s mistake. The Joketsuzoku frowned but subsided with a scowl.

“Mr. Long, we do not like it when our private citizens try to take the law into their own hands. No, we were not called in to help the locals against you, but this...” The woman just looked around. “This is...”

Seeing that there was no fight going on, Ranma dropped the police officer to his feet, patted him on the shoulder, and moved over to the office that Fei Long had been in before he started the fight. Looking inside, Ranma stared around, using his knowledge of Martial Arts Construction for a second, noticing a portion of the wall was fake, with only a thin layer of drywall.

Several of the police had followed him, and behind them, Fei Long and the officer in charge began to argue. Ranma barely registered the argument or the name of the officer, Chun Li, before he flashed a finger forward into the wall, then began to carve into the wall, dragging portions of it away. When he was finished, he gestured to what was revealed inside, which led into another smaller room, whistling appreciatively. "Well, now, I certainly don't think that this place was run by some upstanding citizens or whatever, do you?"

Looking inside, the policeman whistled, staring at the number of drugs in large, thigh-sized packages lining one wall, while on another wall were a few small, extremely detailed maps of different parts of the city. "No, no, I don't think you can say that..." The policeman who shot Ranma said, staring.

**OOOOOOO**

"The fact of the matter is, we had already figured out that that bar had to be either one of the main distribution points. Or a meeting area for the higher-ups of the Triad. We weren't certain which. Finding those drugs and those maps is all well and good, but we need to find where the drugs are being made. We need to find evidence to put the higher-up members of the Triad behind bars in order to wreck their control of the city. Without the higher-ups, including one only called Mad Dragon, the rest of the Triad will collapse into infighting." The speaker, Chun Li, shook her head, looking across her desk at the trio of martial artists.

"While we'll be able to easily put the manager of that bar and his portion of the total operation in jail, I'll wager that even now, everything he knows is being changed, other distribution points being moved, evidence being erased, and any connection with the higher-ups is going to be gone. The Triad will also know that we captured the bar manager alive, and they have... Ways to either silence him before he can speak to us or ways to make certain he never does. We've tried our best to weed out corrupt policemen among our ranks, but I'm not naïve enough to think that we have gotten them all," she finished.

The short-haired young woman was trying to ignore the frosty look on Shampoo's face, the challenging look in the younger woman's eyes. Evidently, she had not taken well to having their match interrupted before a clear winner could be decided. Chun Li could understand that. The fact the other woman had been able to take some of her kicks had astonished Chun Li, not having ever run into anyone who could do that before.

"Not to be rude, but what does that have to do with us?" Fei Long asked politely. "I am hopeful that our little display in the bar gets out, and the Triad comes to the conclusion that continuing to push things with me in the form of trying to mess up my movie is going to make them lose more money in the long run. But that was the only target we had. If you're

going after the rest of the Triad, more power to you. I'm certainly not going to get further involved with the criminal element than I have to in order to make them back off."

"..." The three travelers looked at one another, and Mai said hesitantly, "Well, we might eventually have started to look at the underground fighting pits or maybe even Street FIGHTs if those are a thing here. Which, come to think of it, probably will get us involved with the Triad more one way or another."

"You interrupted a sting operation that was supposed to lead us back to the big boss," Chun Li replied to Fei Long, her tone angry and grim. "The only other link that we can possibly follow straight to is one of those aforementioned underground pits. There is a tournament continually held throughout the city that starts up again tomorrow, and it's known that the winner will get to meet the big bad boss himself, maybe even fight him in the arena if you've impressed him enough. We're not certain on that score. We just don't have enough information. Unfortunately, I'm the only person on the entire police force who is good enough to get involved in that. And..."

"And you've made yourself too many enemies both within the police force and without. They'll know you for a policewoman, and you'll simply be either unable to enter or find yourself ganged up on the moment you try, defeating the purpose," Mai reasoned, trying to imagine how that would go.

"So wait, are you asking us for help? You want us to go undercover for you?" Ranma asked, trying hard not to sound eager. To him, this sounded like a great way to get into the local fight scene and maybe fight with some people who could give them a nice run for their money. While taking on multiple opponents was always interesting, the fights they'd had since arriving in Hong Kong hadn't really amounted to much. *Well, except for learning that I am apparently able to tank pistol shots. That was nice to know, although I am not looking forward to figuring out if that immunity also includes rifles or larger caliber guns.*

"That's precisely what I'm asking. We even reached out to Interpol for more aid, but it won't arrive in time to enter the tournament." Chun Li grumbled, looking away then back at the quartet who had caused her so much trouble. "We seized the video recordings of the fight in the bar, and while a lot of people saw all four of you fighting, I would wager anything that a bit of makeup, some changes of clothing and hairstyle would be enough to make you look like completely different people. I've got the one higher up I know isn't on the take to okay this, so if you agree, everything is legal. You won't even be charged for getting in the way of our undercover operation."

Her gaze grew hot and hard, and she crossed her arms under her somewhat impressive chest, making it clear that the woman had as good a bust as Shampoo. "This hurts my pride, but we really do need someone unrecognizable to go undercover into the street fight scene, figure out who the big bad is, and, hopefully, catch him in the act of doing something illegal. And not a slap on the wrist illegal either, like organizing the local underground fight scene would get him. Unless they are actually ordering the losers to be executed or fight to the death, that really won't be enough to put them away for a long time."

She looked at Fei Long in particular. "As for you, you're too recognizable for this operation. Instead, you will supply whatever makeup or gear these three need." Her lips quirked. "You'll also be signing autographs for around a hundred policemen and their families and paying for our next precinct-wide outing. Do that, and you won't be charged anything either."

Fei Long snorted. "Easy enough. I agree."

The trio of wanderers looked at one another again, with Mai nodding and Ranma grinning, pointing out they could also reach out to Ryu and Ken. "Depending on how famous Masters is on account of just being a rich dude, they both could maybe join us. Having five of us there able to watch one another's backs seems like a good idea."

Shampoo, though, had a stipulation, and she pointed across the deck at the police officer. "Will agree to do this, but I want something in return. After you have raided or arrested whoever is in charge of the Triad here in Hong Kong, and we've done our part, you owe me a match! It can happen wherever you want, but I am not going to leave Hong Kong without knowing which of us is the stronger!"

"Oooh, did you get your own little rival, Shampoo?" Ranma quipped, hugging his girlfriend from the side as Mai smirked. "I'm kind of jealous. She seems both sane and skilled. That puts her several leagues above any rivals of mine."

Rolling her eyes at what she assumed was a joke, Chun Li nodded formally at the Joketsuzoku woman, wondering if she really was a member of the Joketsuzoku, as she had said earlier during their initial police interviews. "I'm fine with that."

"In that case, when do we begin?" Ranma asked, pulling his arms from around Shampoo and leaning forward eagerly.

### **End Chapter**

At this point, the traveling segment of the fic is going to be put on pause, and the first 'tournament' segment will start. I don't know yet if it will be two chapters, less or more, but it will let me play with that type of format, as well as work on the interactions of the larger group. That way, I can figure out how to play Chun Li, Ryu and Ken going forward and show more of Chun Li, as like the other two, here you barely get an introduction to her. I hope to set Ryu up as a friendly but serious rival for Ranma, someone who can match his growth and is even more serious about the Art than he is. However, I didn't think either of them would be the type to get right into it, either fighting or befriending one another, right off the bat, hence the bit of back and forth there.