

Howdy all. With the loss of four days from Thanksgiving on, I had a lot of trouble getting this chapter out. It's only been edited by my looking over it rather than with Grammarly, and Hiryo, if he's gotten it back to me by this point.

Edit: 12/1 - *Hiryo* got this back to me late last night, but I didn't notice until this morning. It has now been edited with his comments and changes taken aboard. He helped get a few of the moves right, and pointed out several name type mistakes. He also gave me feedback on the Mai/Andy scenes, and I ran with it rewriting portions.

The Patron Poll winner for December and the other polls for the month will be up later today.

Chapter 7: Talking Does Not Always Mean a Solution Found

Ranma and Shampoo charged forward to meet the similarly charging Terry and Andy, no further words being exchanged until the first punches began to fly. Andy and Shampoo went for one another, while Ranma and Terry paired off, all four of them punching and striking the moment they could. Ranma and Shampoo began the fight somewhat conservatively, with Shampoo lashing out with her chui, keeping Andy from closing to his own range. Conversely, Ranma ducked in under Terry's attacks, noticing absently, the older man had a few inches reach on him. *He's taller too. I wonder if his muscle's all show, though. Beyond Honda-san, I've only met two or three people whose muscles actually show more strength than me.*

A second later, Terry's elbow caught him in the back of the head, causing Ranma to stumble. Terry lashed out with fast right, then a left, quickly moving into a combo. However, Ranma dodged around the first few blows, and then leaped up over a kick, lightly tapping down his feet onto the top of Terry's leg in turn, lashing out with a kick of his own towards Terry's face that Terry was only barely able to block. He did so though, rolling away. "Ghh.... You're better than the rest of that useless riffraff..." Terry grumbled, shaking his head.

"Heh. Good to know you got eyes." Ranma snickered before charging forward again. He kept on the ground for a moment, wanting to get more of a handle on Terry's style before breaking out his aerial techniques. *This guy's style isn't like Mai's. It's way more in your face, and dirty too. That reverse elbow strike was almost like something from Krav Maga. There's a lot of karate there, but some boxing, which makes sense, given he's American but still.*

The two of them came together, but this time, Terry tried to grapple. His hand opened, and he began to use palm strikes of chops, which quickly segued into grabs. Ranma was easily able to keep away though and then Terry decided to go for a lunge. He skidded forward and down, his shoulder and side suddenly glowing bright red, with a shield of visible ki. "Power Charge!"

This proved to be a mistake. Once more Ranma was able to jump over his attack, and this time, the punch that took Terry in the face landed so hard it nearly broke his nose, sending him sideways. Terry moved with the blow at the last instant, then shifted into another ki attack, to Ranma's surprise, his fist glowing with ki. "Burning Knuckle!"

The yellow gold attack came at Ranma so fast he couldn't dodge entirely in time, flashing out from Terry's feet at near-touching distance. It slammed into his shoulder and side.

More concentrated than any ki attack Ranma had dealt with before, the hit hurt like taking a few dozen shots from Shampoo's chui and Ranma found himself hurled backward on a diagonal. But his durability training was up to the task and he rolled as he slammed into the ground, rolling then coming to his feet. "Well, fuck, that hurt."

The dry, almost taunting tone caused Terry to scowl, although inwardly he was really impressed. *Who the fuck is this guy? That shot would have taken Andy out of the fight, and would have put Mai for a few days. I wasn't holding back at all.* "Better get used to the bruising, bud. You're playing in the big leagues, now," he taunted.

"Oh, is that the reason you've got that idiot cap on? You wanted to be a baseball player and never got over not measuring up?" Ranma shot back, before racing forward. "Or do you honestly think that's some kind of fashion statement? It is, I'll admit that but the homeless baseball player look isn't exactly the height of fashion."

"I don't want to hear comments on my style from a guy who looks like he hopped out of one of those stupid knockoff Bruce Lee vids!"

Once more the two met, but this time, Ranma took to the air almost at once. When Terry tried to use a point-blank ki blast, it missed wildly. A kick caught him in the side of a head, causing him to grunt as the force of it nearly turned Terry entirely around with the force of the blow.

He moved with it, before slamming a fist into the ground. To Ranma's shock, once more this created a ki technique. Ranma was able to watch the ki flash down from Ranma's body down into the ground and then blasting upwards, somehow shaped and formed into an attack that somehow blasted upwards in an expanding fountain of ki. "Power Geyser!"

Ranma was able to once more dodge it, although this time it came so close Ranma had to hiss at the heat from the technique. "God dammit, did everyone know how to use that heat ki thing?!"

"Maybe you're just uneducated?" Terry taunted, trying to move forward at the same time, but Ranma's ability to stay in the air stymied his school to a degree. No takedown could work and no attacking his legs either. He couldn't close to use his forearms, elbows or knees. Ranma was just too damn quick and Terry had never fought someone who could remain in the air as Ranma could.

Wary of using too much ki and tiring himself out, Terry began to try to turn Ranma, ducking under and through many of Ranma's blows, while also turning the fight in a certain direction. When Ranma's back was towards where Terry wanted him to go, he then pushing forward, hoping to pin Ranma in place underneath the roof that covered the porch of the dojo. It didn't work quickly, but Terry ignored Ranma's taunting, backing away and then coming back in once Ranma's back was facing the right direction.

Meanwhile, Shampoo began pushing Andy back, as he seemed momentarily reluctant to take the lead, wanting to get a feel for her style as Ranma had Terry's. He also had swiftly learned to become very wary of her weapons. Even as Terry began his plan, Andy couldn't quite move with all the force of one of the purple-haired girl's blows, and found his forearm flashing with pain, a large bruise already forming. "Fuck! I've fought a few people use those before, but they were all hollow, none of them had the strength to make them hurt like that!"

"It is not my fault that you're used to fighting weaklings, pretty boy," Shampoo shot back, enunciating clearly, so that her accent didn't show up for the moment. All the better to smack talk. I might not be my Airen, but I have to admit to liking to use his patented, "Hmf... Your face is admittedly pretty, but I can't say I approve of such long, silky hair on a boy. If you had some kind of style to it, you would pull off a better girl than Ranma does in his female form."

Seeing that go over her opponent's head, Shampoo sighed internally, admitting to herself that she had gotten too used to training with people who already knew about Ranma's curse. *As Kurumi would put it, that was an epic fail.* That didn't stop her next few blows from almost getting through Andy's defenses, and for several minutes her longer reach and the weight of her chui forced Andy back, several more, albeit smaller bruises forming on his forearms.

But suddenly between one step and the next Shampoo missed a shift in Andy's footwork. The next second instead of shifting backward out of the way of a blow, he sidestepped behind it, grabbing the shaft of her mace, while thrusting out her other his other hand toward her chest. From his hand, a ball of cerulean energy flashed out towards Shampoo. "Hishou Ken!"

Shampoo was hurled off her feet to crash back first onto a few of the unconscious thugs Andy and Terry had been dealing with before she and Ranma arrived, hearing a loud, "ARGH!" and a wheezing whimper under her. Then she was rolling back, coming to her knees, her lower legs pressed into the asphalt on either side of another groaning man's head.

That worthy had one heck of a upskirt shot for a moment before Shampoo stood, meeting Andy's charge as he rushed forward, hoping to capitalize on the fact he had taken away one of her chui. The chui he had grabbed had been tossed over the Shiranui estate's outer wall.

"You think Shampoo a one trick pony!?" Shampoo growled, her second mace disappeared into her weapon space, and out came the simple rope Shampoo had been given by Master Nawa. Faster than Andy could dodge, between one step in the next Shampoo lashed out at his legs and with a heave, he was faceplanted on the ground between two of the unconscious bodies. She leaped through the air, bringing down her heel where his head should've been, but he rolled away over one of those bodies, trying to take out her legs as she landed, only to fail as Shampoo quickly hopped jumped over it, a punch landing in his face sending him flying backward.

The longhaired man shook his head as he pushed to his feet. "You pack a punch for such a little thing."

"LITTLE!?" Shampoo shrieked, annoyed at the condescending tone of the other fighter even after months of dealing with the occasional bout of the Saotome School Make 'em Mad, Make 'em Stupid™ technique. "Who you calling little you, you American gorilla!" With that, she lashed out with her rope weapon again, and when Andy made to grab it, leaped forward going with the pull, a kick crashing into Andy's chest.

Meanwhile, Ranma too had used his rope dart to good effect the instant Terry had thought he'd gained an advantage by pushing the fight underneath the porch's awning. Before Terry could press his advantage, he found one arm tied to the post of the porch behind him.

Several solid blows landed before Terry could blast Ranma away with a desperate Burning Knuckle that should have caved in Ranma's ribs. But once more his durability paid off, and he only flew up and into the roof. There Ranma bounced off, coming back down and landing behind Terry as he tore his way or out of the rope dart tied around the post. "I can grapple too, you know," Ranma said almost conversationally as he locked a chokehold in place.

Terry gurgled for a second, but then his arms came up, grabbing Ranma's arm with powerful force. "Buster Throw!" he shouted, flipping Ranma forward over his head, only to be blasted back off of the porch and back out into the open by a roundhouse kick that took Terry in the center of the chest.

“FUCK, that hurt.” Terry grimaced, as he nearly felt a rib go at that blow, but rolled with it as best he could. He came up from his knees, a fist seeking Ranma’s face, his fist once more covered in ki. “Rising Wolf Upper!”

A split second decision had Ranma punching downward toward Terry. *Time to use some of my own ki attacks.* “Blue Burst Style: Blue Star Strike!” This was Ranma’s attempt to create ki attacks, which were more concentrated and flowed further away from his body, although he hadn’t yet perfected doing so. Still, watching Terry hurl out energy attacks as if they were candy had annoyed him and given Ranma some ideas too. *Shape the energy as it flows out, pushing more into it as the attack passes through---Fuu!!*

Ranma’s thoughts broke off as Terry’s attack overwhelmed Ranma’s in the narrow zone where they hit. Blue Star Strike had still spread out too quickly, diffusing its energy while Terry’s had remained concentrated in a smaller area.

The result was Terry’s shirt and jacket being shredded and burning under the impact, but in return, Terry’s Rising Wolf Upper blasted through to hit Ranma, hurling him up and as he came down again backward as it shredded his shirt. His lower body slammed into the top of the outer wall of the dojo, cracking it noticeably.

He groaned at the impact, and then Terry was charging forward leaping up, only to watch as his punch was dodged at the last second by Ranma. As Ranma pushed off the wall, Terry took a hard blow to his own jaw, before Ranma was back in up in the air, and a series of blows rained down on Terry. “Didn’t think you’d be stupid to try and take to the air like this, but I ain’t complaining!”

Cursing his over confidence, Terry kicked off the wall and down, but still took several blows to his shoulders, neck, and one to the back of the head that had him seeing stars before he had his feet under him again, where he was able to make Ranma flip away. The Geyser attack missed, and Terry watched as Ranma landed on the top of the roof, crouching there, looking much the worse for wear from the ki attack. One shoulder was a nasty green and blue color, while his forearms and side on that side were all equally battered.

“Fucking little jumping ass...” Terry grumbled, spitting out some blood and holding up his fists in front of his face. “You’re good, but I wonder which of us is more durable? If I can pin you in place...”

Terry was honestly bluffing a little, frustrated at how the battle had gone. He’d never faced someone who was at home in the air as Ranma, and that negated around a third of his personal style, which dealt with attacking the lower body, and getting his opponents on the ground or at least upsetting their balance to allow him to take the initiative and shift into a longer series of strikes. Ranma’s durability was also better than he thought. *And... is... are his wounds healing!? FUCK, I didn’t even know that was possible. Durability, speed, sure, using your*

ki to enhance those is basic. But healing? Without that I might outlast him, he doesn't seem to have much ki skills and he's the one looking bruised. But if he can heal himself?

"That's a big 'if' dude," Ranma smirked, landing across from Terry, and taking his normal lackadaisical stance, his hands in his pockets. This and his taunting tone almost goaded Terry forward. Nevertheless, he realized quickly that despite looking as if he was just standing there, Ranma was coiled like a spring, and Ranma had already proven with his rope dart that not being able to see his hands wasn't a good thing at all. That thing came out of his sleeves, who knows what he's got in his pocket?

For his part, Ranma was somewhat pleased with how the battle was going. It was clear he still had a long way to go in terms of ki techniques, or at least purely offensive ones. *I wonder if this guy could survive a full burst attack?* But despite that, he was pleased with how much his durability was holding up. While Terry's attacks had hurt when they landed and from the sheer strength, the purely physical blows Ranma knew this guy was stronger than Ryoga, although maybe not quite as strong as Honda, Ranma was able to stand them.

Still, Terry's certainly faster than anyone else bar maybe Shampoo and Mai that I've fought and those ki attacks are nasty. I can't let him land a full combo on me with that Buster whatever. And his durability is good, but it might not be up to mine.

Nearby, Shampoo and Andy continued to trade blows, and whereas who was winning the fight between Terry and Ranma could be debated, this one was slowly turning against the Amazon. Shampoo wasn't nearly as at home with simply dodging as Ranma was, and didn't have his mastery of the aerial style either. She wasn't Terry's equal in strength and speed, although her more fluid style was giving her a slight edge in how many hits were landing. However, Andy didn't look as if he was getting tired at all, and without her weapons, her blows weren't doing enough damage.

Into this temporary stalemate, Mai arrived with Jubei in tow. The Tendos were still lagging behind, which, at the moment made Mai very happy, as a feeling of embarrassment went through her at the sight in front of her. Mai took in the fight, then looked around at the bodies, a groan coming from her as she slapped a hand over her mouth. "Really, Uncle? Really? You went out to perv on Mrs. Kayamoto when a group of dojo destroyers were here?"

"Bah, I knew that Terry and Andy could handle it, my dear. There are some things that are just as important as martial arts, you know. Besides, both of them asked me to," the older man added after Mai turned to give him a look. "They both have not faced multiple opponents for a few months, and feared they were getting rusty."

Mai sighed as that made sense, even if she didn't want it to. Though, she also didn't want the fight to continue, and that at least she could do something about. Breathing in, which Jubei noted with glee, as it did interesting things to her chest, Mai shouted, "Break it up you

four! That is my dojo you're fighting near, and I count all of you my friends. I don't want any of you to turn one another into a pile of bruises."

"They started it!" four voices shouted as one, with the two brothers pointing to the young couple and vice versa.

"No I didn't, you did!" Terry snorted, pointing at Ranma. "You two attacked us the moment you arrived. What kind of friends of Mai are you?"

"Hey, you're the ones who thought we were here to wreck the dojo and challenged us!" Ranma shot back, pointing at both Wild Wolves.

"Oh yeah? Why the hell did you accept, huh?" Andy interjected. "We'd just knocked out the last of these morons, and up you come, what were we supposed to think?"

Mai groaned again, slapping her forehead, as Shampoo, the only one not to join in the shouting match, snickered to one side. She stopped snickering when Mai reached her, and slapped her lightly upside the head. "Don't giggle like you're not just as that much at fault as they are, Shampoo. I realize that one shouldn't expect higher level thinking from a bunch of meatheads like those guys, but I expected better of you."

Shampoo flushed at that, while Ranma shouted, "OY! Who are you calling a meathead?"

"You!" Mai wagged the figure in Ranma's face, then move that finger over to Terry and Andy, who both backed away as if it was a loaded gun. "Now, I know we're all martial artists, but that doesn't mean that we need to solve every minor conflict with violence! And while you're adrenaline might've been up Andy, Terry, I expect better of you than to simply shout out a challenge the first moment you can, as I'm certain that Ranma and Shampoo didn't instantly start fighting you."

Both brothers looked away, but even as Ranma began to smile smugly, Mai rounded on him, her expression dangerous, causing him to back away quickly. "And I'm equally certain that neither of you, especially you, Ranma, even tried to talk them out of fighting. Just because you're bored, or have become annoyed because of... other things... is no reason to simply charge into a fight then you didn't have to."

"Hey, now! Once they issued the challenge, I couldn't back down. Taking any challenges that come our way is one of the main tenants of Anything Goes," Ranma tried to explain.

"Really? And here I thought you were going to try to make your own style, was I wrong about that?" Mai rejoined tartly.

At that, Ranma sighed, and he and Terry looked at one another, before as one bowing from the waist. "Sorry about that. Mai's right, we should've tried to talk before just challenging you like we did."

"Yeah, I'm sorry too. I suppose I was a little too eager to test myself against someone new. We can continue it later in a spar."

Terry grinned at that, nodding his head. At their level, the difference between a fight and a spar was that a fight normally ended with broken bones and unconsciousness, while a spar ended with only bruises. So that was fine by him. *A shorter fight like that will negate his ki healing, I think. Although, I also think I seriously need to learn that.*

Andy also apologized readily enough, although Shampoo could have done without the added comment of, "And I have to say I was impressed, Miss. I was really surprised by your skills and especially your strength to swing those chui around."

The implication being that he didn't think a woman would be so skilled. The Amazon was prepared to demand they continue their fight, even knowing she had been losing, but her anger faded as Mai moved forward to give Andy a hug, leaping into his arms. This brought Andy's head into her chest, his face and most of his head disappearing into Mai's cleavage. "I missed you, Andy!"

Mmm, yep, that is the way it should be. Take charge of your man, Mai! It's so romantic, Shampoo cooed mentally, her anger gone.

To one side, Ranma watched the two of them closely, and wasn't so certain. *Andy almost looks more like a hunted animal than someone who's enjoying that hug.* Andy's face was welcoming enough, but his body language was stiff, and as Ranma watched, he ended the hug just as quickly as he politely could, saying, "It's good to see you." He seemed almost to twitch away, but couldn't quite get away quickly enough before Mai was nuzzling into his side, her arms around his waist as she turned to make formal introductions.

While Mai was speaking, Ranma compared how Andy was reacting to that kind of thing to the way he would if Shampoo hugged him like that, and came away shaking his head. *If it was me and Shampoo, I would for damn sure enjoyed that kind of thing, especially after months apart. Mind you, she and I haven't actually parted, but we went through the whole time at Nawa's school not having any romance time, so it's kind of comparable. We were both all over one another after we left there. Now, it could be Andy's got a problem with PDA, which would be fair enough. Maybe not in public, but come on, my face'd be invisible from anyone else's perspective, I bet I could have a little bit of fun there.*

As he thought that, billions of Ranmas across the multiverse shivered in shock and horror for no apparent reason. But this Ranma didn't find having fun like that with his girlfriend anything spectacular. Indeed, he would be interested to see how Shampoo would react to that

kind of thing. *Especially if she was wearing something like Mai's normal outfit. That much skin would definitely open her up for some fun.*

Shaking that thought off, Ranma turned away, holding out his hand to Terry, who took it with a smile, now that they'd gotten the formalities of an apology out of the way. Both of them didn't have any hard feelings towards one another, although both were uncertain where that battle was going. Regardless, hard feelings didn't come into it for two martial artists like them, only a desire to become better for the next time.

With that in mind, Terry asked, "Where did that rope come from? And I noticed that your lady friend here also used that same technique but those weapons weren't the spiritual copies that Mai can produce. Was that a weapons space?"

"That's right. Although I'm surprised you didn't recognize it right off the bat," Ranma answered. "Doesn't Mai use the same kind of technique?"

At that, Terry looked a little awkward, glancing once towards Mai's chest, then away. "Well, yeah, but not only is that technique a secret of her school, but neither Andy nor I are privy to, but well, you know where it's placed on her body, right? I was never even comfortable enough to think about asking, let alone wondering if she could shift her weapons space to someplace else."

Mai, Shampoo and Ranma all laughed at that, but Ranma nodded, and began to explain the basics, growling a little at the end as he looked between the two brothers. "Given how many ki techniques you were throwing around in that fight, you probably will be able to get that technique down pretty quickly."

Nearby, Shampoo and Andy had also shaken hands as Mai turned away, catching a glimpse of the three Tendos arriving. She waved them towards the dojo from where they had paused at the end of the lane. Now they moved among the unconscious bodies, tying them up one to another.

Like Terry, Andy had apologized for issuing the challenge and assuming the two lovers were part of the group they'd just dealt with. "I would never have even tried to fight you if I didn't think you are involved with the group that we had already finished off, but even so, I should never have taken the fight so seriously."

Shampoo's face wrinkled a bit, and she thrust out a finger, which almost stabbed into Andy's sternum, her accent coming back in her returned annoyance with the man's attitude. "Bruises and broken bones part of life. Shampoo will take any kind of punishment she need if it teaches Shampoo still has more to learn. You stronger, faster, yes. But I still surprise you a time or two, especially at start. Imagine if you not block blow to the head from chui, yes? You be singing different tune then."

That seemed to throw Andy off, and Shampoo rolled her eyes a little, reflecting that although pretty, he didn't seem to have the proper attitude towards women warriors. *It does indeed look like Ranma was right, that that is part of the problem. Still, Mai seems to be going about it the right way...* Even now, Mai looked a little torn between annoyed with Andy's words, and simply happy to be with him again, her arm still around his waist.

All three of them turned when Jubei spoke up to Ranma, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "You mentioned being part of the Anything Goes school a moment ago. Do you know anything about your Grand Master? He and I were quite friendly at one point, but I haven't seen old Happy in more than a decade or so."

Whatever reply Ranma would have made was interrupted by a shout from Soun. "Don't say his name!"

The man crossed the intervening distance so fast, it took even Ranma by surprise, and when he was grabbing the other old master by the shoulders shaking him. "Do you not know that you shouldn't summon evil like that! The more you speak of him, the more likely he is to show up and then where would any of us be?!"

Ranma blinked, staring the older Tendo, remembering what he had already learned of Happosai from Master Nawa and rumors. A thought occurred to him then and Ranma smirked, watching as Jubei removed Soun's hands from his shoulders and pushed him back, gently but forcefully. "Hey Tendo, is my old man as frightened of your master as you are?"

Whereas in any under circumstances, Soun would have adhered to the Anything Goes rule of never showing fear or concern, when it came to the Grand Master, that went out the window. He nodded so quickly it was almost as if he had become a bobblehead. "Yes! There is a reason why we had to seal that evil away. He couldn't be killed, only sealed. A demon I tell you, he was a demon!"

"Now that's taking it a bit strongly." Jubei shook his head with a laugh. "I will admit that in looks, Happy certainly could pass for a goblin, or a particularly ancient imp. But I'm certain that his particular fetish is no reason to call him by such names."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "What did Master Nawa say about your school's Grand Master again, Ranma?"

"Something about him being known as a pervert," Ranma supplied, shaking his head. "I suppose I can count myself lucky that I didn't gain any bad habits from Anything Goes like apparently is the norm..." he trailed off as Shampoo collapsed into a fit of giggles, one joined by Natsume and Kurumi, while Mai simply snickered, but kept her eyes on her Uncle.

Under that look, Jubei scoffed, sticking his nose in the air loftily. "It isn't all that unusual my dear for people of advanced ages to shift their attention away from physical acts. Rather, it is a sign of maturity, or skill and..."

"Is he a peeper like you?" Mai interrupted coldly, shaking her head. "And seriously, using our family's Art to sneak around and peep on people is not what I'd call a true test of your skill."

"Bah!" Jubei grumbled, shaking his head before answering Mai's initial question trying to sound erudite as he did. "Happosai wasn't a connoisseur of simply viewing the female form in its natural state as I am. He had only peripheral interests in the female body itself. Rather, he only became interested in the female body once it became encased in its normal accoutrements." *That, and partaking of the female flesh in the form of fondling, but I'm not going to say that aloud to this crowd.*

"Stop saying his name!" A now nearly neurotic with fear Soun was staring wildly all around him, slumping to his knees as he did so.

"I'm almost tempted to do that Beetlejuice trick, say his name three times in a row to see if he really will show up," Terry snickered. "So I gotta assume by what Jubei said a moment ago that this guy was more interested in bras and panties and stuff?"

"Probably. What is it with old martial artists being so weird?" Ranma shook his head.

Shampoo opened her mouth to say that it was only men, then frowned, remembering some of the things that the Elder Council back in her village got up to before shaking her head and deciding to keep her mouth shut. *I would be hard-pressed to call any of them perverts, but normal certainly didn't describe them any better than that would. After all, a normal woman wouldn't nearly cause a blood feud over someone messing up her magazine collection.*

"Still, it's nice to have something to hang over my Old Man's head when he shows up again." As much as Ranma didn't like it, their previous run-ins with his father had shown that something major would need to happen to force Genma to give up any attempt at controlling Ranma's life. So the idea that Ranma would need to deal with him again was a certainty in his mind. "I wonder how far I could get if I threatened to find where you guys apparently buried this old pervert and free him?"

At that, Soun's mind decided it'd had enough. His eyes rolled back, and he fainted dead away, foam actually coming out of his mouth as his body spasmed in overwhelming terror.

"Hehehe, that's a pretty good answer, I suppose," Ranma quipped shaking his head.

"Excuse me, but is there any kind of rule about what we should do with these men? Surely we can't just leave them where they have been knocked out, can we?" Natsume asked, gesturing around and back down the hill, while Kurumi began to poke their father with a stick.

“Surely there is some group you could call to take them away now that they are tied up. The police for instance, or if you don’t want to go the legal route, trash collectors?”

Terry joined Ranma and Shampoo and Mai and laughing at that, while Andy blushed a little, looking away from Natsume, and then down at Soun, hoping that no one else noticed. “So we’ve got one guy who’s a student of an old friend of Jubei, but who are these two, Mai?”

“These are Natsume and Kurumi, two of apparently five Tendo sisters. That one’s their father” Mai gestured down to Soun, shaking her head at Soun’s weakness. *Although unlike with Genma, at least with Soun I can somehow see that a woman might take an interest in him. He’s not all that bad looking for a middle-aged guy, and I’d wager he was much better looking when he was younger. He’s even got the same hairstyle as Andy.*

Andy and Terry greeted the two sisters, while Andy tried hard not to stare at Natsume. The group had stopped at one point to get some new clothing again, and Natsume had discarded her old student outfit, as it Kurumi. But whereas Kurumi had gone in for a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, Natsume had decided to get a skirt and blouse combo. It allowed her a wide range of movement, but looked quite demure in sense of style and cut. This did nothing to hide her long black hair and extremely pretty face though, nor did it hide all of her curves, just the majority, quite unlike what Shampoo and Mai were wearing.

“Be welcome to our home,” Jubei said formally, heading towards the doorway into the house and dojo. Much like the Tendo place, both were part of the same walled property, but here, the dojo and main building were both part of the walls, one opposite from the other. “You’ve come just in time for dinner. We tend to eat early here.”

At that, the three girls looked at one another, and when Mai began to open her mouth, Natsume firmly shook her head. “No. We might be in your home now Mai, but that just means that there’s is more to cook with. Not that you suddenly have to take over cooking. I lost our last match two out of three and by the rules that means it’s my turn.”

Mai scowled a little, then shrugged. “We can both cook, I suppose. But only after I give you guys a tour.”

Waving his hand airily, Jubei grabbed Soun up off of the ground. “You young folk see to that. I will stow this one in the sitting room.” Jubei did not say he would actually wake Soun up, given his histrionics of a moment ago, that did not seem like a good idea.

With Andy and Terry on either side of her, Mai let the others into the property. As they did, Ranma looked around, comparing the place to the Tendo place, and finding that the dojo looked almost like a larger version, but not quite. It looked as if the house portion, which was directly ahead of you as you entered the outer gate along a covered path, was smaller, but the dojo was larger. And instead of being completely enclosed by walls, one wall abutted directly

into the house to one side and the dojo to the other. There was no fourth wall to complete enclosing the area.

Shampoo pointed ahead of them to that, asking, "I can't see any wall back there, is it out of sight because of all those trees? That looks more like a forest than a backyard."

"It is both a forest and a backyard to me," Mai laughed. "We don't have a fourth wall back there, although the family owns quite a lot of that forest. I can't remember a time I didn't treat the entire forest from here up to the top of the mountain like it was my personal property."

Terry bent down to grab a stone from the small stone pathway leading deeper into the compound. "What she isn't telling you is that the entire area back there is heavily trapped. The Shiranui style is about misdirection and using traps just as much as it is about actual combat." With that, Terry hurled the stone through the air into the darkness under the trees. And all of them waited for a moment as it zoomed between a few trees, not slowing down. It was almost out of sight before it hit something, and a large cob of wood suddenly swung down, thumping into the tree opposite with bone punishing force.

"Huh, no wonder you didn't think the forest surrounding rope walk was unusual," Ranma murmured. *Mind you, that also tells me why she could help me set up the toughness training and so forth.*

Mai started the in-depth portion of the tour by heading into the dojo, gesturing around them. It was indeed larger than the Tendo place, split into four different sparring zones, the areas marked out by circles. In two corners, there were weapons racks, one marked 'sharp' the other 'blunted, with most of those weapons being made of wood. A series of weights were also around the area, not put in a rack set to one side.

The number of weapons on display also was different from in the Tendo place, where only a few weapons would ever be shown out in the open, the others in storage in the attic. Although Ranma was surprised to note that this dojo also had a small shrine in a corner and looked at Mai questioningly.

"My parents," she said simply, going over and bowing her head to them murmuring, "I'm home," under her breath.

The new quartet followed suit, while Andy and Terry waited respectfully in silence by the doorway.

However, the weights left out everywhere wasn't the only sign that the dojo was well used, a marked difference to the Tendo place. Standing up once more from where he had been healing, Ranma could spot a few places around the inside that looked as if it needed repair, especially the wood making up the floor and roof. "Since we're going to stay here, do you want

me and Shampoo to take care of any maintenance issues you've got?" Ranma asked, gesturing to one of the floorboards near the door into the dojo and then up to what looked like a small hole in the ceiling. There was water damage to the wood underneath it, and in a few other areas. The smell wasn't all that nice either, but Ranma ignored that for now.

While Terry and Andy looked a little confused, Mai smiled gratefully. "Thank you Ranma, that would be very helpful."

"I noticed that the garden area looked a little overdone too. I think I'll work on that, while Ranma can do all the heavy hammering," Shampoo teased gently, causing both Ranma to laugh and Mai to blush a little in embarrassment, knowing that without her around, Andy and Jubei would've been the only ones to really be keeping up the place.

The Shiranui School did have students, almost year-round in fact. Many came from the nearby cities to learn from Jubei... or Mai, although she knew most of those boys didn't actually come to learn but to ogle. Regardless of their motives, bar Andy and Terry, all of them fell under the self-defense category. They were not the kind of fulltime student a Dojo Master could put to work around the place cleaning or helping with whatever needed fixing without paying them.

After that, the work continued into the house, which was indeed as small as Ranma had expected. The first floor was dominated by three rooms. The sitting room doubled as a dining room such as it would most Japanese houses. The kitchen, was more modern than the Tendo place but smaller. There was no chance any group beyond two could eat in there and be comfortable. Finally, the bathhouse. That bathhouse wasn't built out from the rest of the house as it was at the Tendo place, but it was just as nice inside, with more modern plumbing.

The second floor had three bedrooms, all of good size, and one bathroom, with only one of the bedrooms being a bit larger than the others. This belonged to Jubei, who was the Master of the Dojo and currently the head of the Shiranui clan. Mai would only become so, once she hit twenty-five according to her parent's will.

"We'll have to think of where to put you two for the night," Mai mused. "I'm afraid at least Ranma might have to bed down with Terry out in the dojo. I don't know if we have enough room up your for everyone." Mai's room would do for her and one other, but even if they put Soun in Jubei's room, there wouldn't be enough room for three in the room Andy lived in while here, along with his brother. "Unless you want to bunk in with Jubei and Soun?"

Ranma shook his head quickly, while Andy winced, knowing that Mai was subtly offering to have him sleep with her, but not saying anything. "Nope, the dojo will do for me. I ain't tempting fate by sleeping in the same room as a pervert."

"And there you have the reason why I shifted my bedroom to the furthest one," Mai drawled shaking her head. Andy looked confused at that, but when no one explained, he

turned, leading the group back down to the kitchen, where Terry had stayed, talking quietly to Jubei as he was apparently on the phone with someone.

The older man looked up at them, flashing a thumbs up to Mai, who turned and winked at Natsume saying, "That will be the local police. They'll be coming by momentarily, to pick up the idiots outside. This isn't the first time we dealt with dojo destroyer's or gangs coming by. I understand the police put them to community service a lot."

Nodding at that, Natsume moved forward, looking around and quickly spotting the aprons, she pulled one down from where it hung, putting it on determinedly as she looked around at the messy kitchen, the piles of dirty plates and dozens of beer cans. "In that case, let us get to work preparing dinner."

Andy winced. "I'm sorry, but well, it's only been three bachelors living..." he began, only to stop as Natsume reached the fridge and opened it, staring inside for only a second before rapidly slamming it shut, and leaning against it, her eyes wide. "Yeah... none of us exactly are good at cleaning or cooking er, I mean..."

"Just tell me that nothing in there has evolved intelligence," Shampoo shook her head, her accent gone again.

"I don't think anything in there has reached the tool gathering stage at least," Jubei drawled shaking his head while Mai simply snickered. "We've been making do with takeout for a few weeks, though."

This wasn't the first time she'd been away from home for a while. She routinely left home for at least a few weeks every summer to go on the tournament circuit, so she was used to having to clean up the kitchen once she got home. But then again, I haven't been away from home for this long before I suppose. She shrugged, then opened the door to see what so appalled Natsume, while Shampoo began to write out a list of ingredients, looking through the pantry nearby. Eventually, as Mai started to remonstrate with both brothers and Jubei, she had a list, and Shampoo then rolled up her sleeves and began to help Mai and Natsume clean up the place. Andy quickly volunteered to help as Jubei made themselves scarce.

Looking around and realizing there wasn't enough room for the others to get involved in the cleanup efforts, Ranma took the list of groceries that Shampoo had made up, reading it aloud and then asking the girls if anything else needed to be added. There was a lot more that needed to be added, unfortunately, including just things needed in the kitchen such as paper towels and so forth. When they were done, he and Kurumi looked over at Terry asking if he could show them to the nearest grocery store.

Terry agreed, and the three of them left, heading back outside of the property where they found several policemen loading up a small cart. It was hooked up to a three wheeler of

some kind, and it certainly didn't look comfortable as the large group of gang members were piled inside, but none of them were in a position to argue.

As they went, the group of three martial artists began to talk, with some of Kurumi and Natsume's past first coming out, causing Terry to shake his head in confusion at times, although he had to admit to being somewhat approving of how dedicated they were to the art. He turned though when a sound next to them drew his eye, and watched as Ranma walked along the top of the chain-link fence that marked the edge of a few of the properties leading up to the dojo. "What are you up to?"

"Training. First rule of Anything Goes. Absolutely anything can be training," Ranma quipped as he continued to walk forward as if he was walking on solid ground.

She soon joined him, unmindful of the fact that she was in a skirt, causing Terry to look away hurriedly. He shook his head slightly, not liking the fact that Ranma was showing off like this, or at least that was how Terry saw it anyway. While Terry's own sense of balance was pretty good, it certainly wasn't up to any acrobatics like that.

"That looked really well organized. How often do you guys get gangs coming appear to cause trouble?"

"At least two or three times a year. Most of the time it's the same group of local idiots. Sometimes as out-of-towners, group of dojo enthusiasts students who are angry with me or my brother or occasionally Mai. The agreement with the local police service well in that."

"If you have to fight the same group over and over, do you really think it does? If there are so willing to keep coming back despite spending a night or whatever in jail, maybe you should think of something else."

"What would you do then? Terry asked.

Ranma shrugged. "Humiliation or taking their money I suppose. Or both." That last had apparently been something that Nabiki always did after her little sister one her morning fights, fleecing some members of the various clubs. Not all of them, just a few, but it certainly had given Nabiki and her little group some money to spend.

"That sounds a little too far. And what would the law say about that kind of thing anyway?"

"If the law can't stop them from coming back, then why would you care? And as for being a little too far, that depends what you do. I've always found it great fun to simply tie people together in strange and unusual ways. Or permanent markers can be your best friend," Ranma answered, causing Terry to snort and Kurumi to laugh aloud.

“Your Japanese is almost perfect by the way. I know my Chinese is horrible, and I’ve got a weird accent when I speak American,” Ranma admitted.

“Hah! Lay it on me, man. Let’s see what you think is a weird accent,” Terry laughed.

Ranma did, switching to American as he described a few other ways he would punish people who were bothering any dojo he was currently staying at. Terry snorted throughout, then when Ranma finished, laughed loudly. “You have a beach bum accent! I haven’t heard that kind of thing since the last time I was in California. And only then when I actually went to the beach one day. Where the heck did you learn that?”

“A group of Marines my old man and I met once and we were passing through South Korea and into China. They had some cool knife techniques,” Ranma reflected, although knowing that his skills and carried him far beyond where those techniques could do him any good any longer was somewhat annoying. It was before the pair of them had entered China, when Genma was still working around in various places to gather enough money for that trip, as well as trying to figure out a way across the border without the South Korean authorities figuring out what he was doing. Without paying through the nose for them to look away, anyway.

“Well, if you ever bring come over to America, you’ll fit right in, I suppose. And as for my Japanese, I hope it’s perfect, I spent enough time in these little islands for that.”

Ranma’s eyes narrowed a bit at that. It sounded a bit condescending to him, but Ranma didn’t want to jump to conclusions. After all, Japan was small in comparison to America. *And he’s lived in Japan to learn about our martial arts styles, I suppose taking jabs at our size is nothing in comparison to that.* So he stayed silent and Terry asked about China and what Ranma had learned there.

Learning about how much liking Ranma had for Wing Chun surprised Terry in turn and he shook his head, waving a hand. “I suppose that kind of school is good enough for you, with how mobile you are, but I think it’s a little too fancy and you lack striking power. Especially with those scrawny arms of yours.”

“Hey! My scrawny arms were big enough to punch you, weren’t they?” Ranma retorted. At that, the two of them got into an argument as to what was most effective in a fight, brute force and ruthlessness, or style and agility. This argument carried them to the store and back while Kurumi simply trotted behind Ranma on the fence there and back, munching on a candy apple that the owner had given her for some reason.

OOOOOO

Back in the Shiranui Dojo’s kitchen, Andy had set to with a will to help the others clean the kitchen from top to bottom. He was grateful for Natsume and Shampoo’s presence, since it

meant that Mai wouldn't do anything too embarrassing. The occasional touches to the side and rear though were still enough to cause his back to stiffen, and when he felt Mai try to move up behind him, he moved away rapidly, getting out of the way, as Mai moved to drop a few more rags into the trash, dirty from the grime and dust.

Trying to cover up the move, he asked about their travels. "You mentioned a few of the martial arts techniques in detail that you were trying to learn, but nothing beyond that, or where you had been."

Mai smiled at that, although the smile faltered a bit around the edges. They had actually spoken several times over the phone about more than that but more than once, those talks ended in arguments about what they would do once Mai was back home. Andy was still very clear on his plans. He wanted to travel with his brother, specifically back to the United States. Andy wanted to incorporate more boxing and European-style wrestling into his repertoire, finding the mix of Judo and karate that was the Shiranui School no longer entirely to his liking since he had bulked up over the past year to be more like his older brother.

Which was fine by Mai. What wasn't, was that Andy had hinted that he wanted to simply go with his brother, making it a bro trip. He had also never really stated with any certainty that he would be coming back. Moreover, at one point he had mentioned that he didn't think a girl would be able to keep up with the pace the Bogard brothers would set once they reached land. Which Mai had taken even more personally than the comments about not wanting to have her along in the first place, the implication being that Andy wanted her to stay home. That was a far cry from Andy's normal shyness or stoicism, which Mai had always thought of as his either playing hard to get or just part of his personality, that she needed to wear him down.

Looking over at Mai, Andy allowed his thoughts to wander to her.

Andy just could not understand it. Why Mai was so serious about the Art when she had already mastered her own School? When she had a good life here, teaching at the dojo and everything? *I know she also wants to come along because we're, well, we're in a relationship, but I...*

To tell the truth, Andy was... well, he wasn't so certain that relationship was going where he wanted it to. *I, I don't know why she's so... so in your face, I really don't.*

In Andy's mind, those two points were the crux of the matter when it came to Mai. The two of them had a lot in common, they'd grown up together after all, liked the same movies, liked the same books, knew a lot about one another and that had formed the basis of their relationship. But Mai tried too hard to show him how serious she was about their relationship in ways he found uncomfortable, and was far too serious about the Arts. *I don't want someone who could fight beside me, but someone I will come home to. And... and she's, she's just too in your face, not just with how she comes onto me all the damn time but her body too!*

That had only really begun to change in the last few years, but now, Mai was so curvy up top it was disturbing to Andy. *She used to be a real Yamato Nadeshiko type like Natsume is. Demure, gentle, a real homebody, a great cook and everything. Now though, while her skills remain, her attitude's changed so much.*

Despite being American by birth, Andy had spent most of his life in Japan, living here with the Shiranui family. Terry in contrast was always wandering off, and had stayed in America for several years as a pre-teen. And during his time with the Shiranuis, Andy had developed a liking for the traditional Japanese concepts of beauty and femininity. *But these days, those curves are just too damn much! If she dressed more modestly that'd be one thing, but look at what she wears around the place?!*

Prior to getting down and dirty with the kitchen disaster, Mai and Shampoo had both retreated to her room to change. Shampoo wore a pair of Chinese pants, the type she had worn since coming from China. By this point they were badly frayed and had holes in several places. Up top, she wore one of Ranma's t-shirts, she had stolen the night before.

The excuse she gave was because she thought the dark purple highlights on the shoulders and around the neck matched her hair. But really Shampoo wondered what her Airen would do if he saw Shampoo wearing his clothing. According to several magazines she and Mai had read the sight of a girl wearing his shirt was a turn-on for some men.

That was fine. But Mai was wearing a pair of short booty shorts she'd ordered special from America, along with a loose-fitting t-shirt that was positively sinful in how much skin it showed when she stretched. Either it showed off her washboard stomach, or her deep, swaying cleavage. Mai was even doing so on occasion to try to grab Andy's attention even as she and the other two girls talked, directing one another through their joint efforts.

God Damn it, why can't she be more modest!?! Just because she's got those curves doesn't mean she has to show off like that. And is that an actual six pack? Ugh. Why would I want to feel that next to me? Having that much definition on a woman is so wrong. I do wonder though how she can have that kind of muscle and still retain those breasts of hers.

When they were younger, Andy had really liked being around Mai. Indeed, there had even been a time when he thought he might love her. She'd always been too serious about the Art, despite learning every time they sparred that Andy was stronger than her, let alone Terry, but he had figured that she would grow out of it as she grew into being a woman. And wasn't it a sign of a good relationship that you changed to suit the person you wanted to be with?

However, Mai hadn't grown out of it. If anything as they grew up, she took the Art more seriously than ever. And her body and attitude had changed too. Gone was the demure, self-contained girl Mai had been. In its place was an in-your face far-too buxom beauty who was so confident in her looks and abilities that it was almost to the point of arrogance. Mai also started, the moment Jubei let her, to leave the dojo challenging other masters, taking part in

tournaments just like Andy. And when she was home, instead of letting Andy set the pace, she pushed. She pushed all the time, not noticing how Andy was uncomfortable with that, with her developing attitude, or anything else.

Damn it, I thought I'd die of embarrassment when she flirted with me at that tournament, and even after at that restaurant they gave us a gift card for. No matter how often I push her away, she comes on stronger. She's just too sexual. And she also wants to be a martial artist? How the hell am I supposed to treat her like a fellow practitioner when she keeps on coming onto me like that!? You can't be both!

It honestly never occurred to Andy to just try to talk with Mai about his issues with how she acted. This wasn't entirely because he was not very good at communicating emotions, but also because Mai flustered him so much he fell back on just pushing away or running off. Most of it was the former, though. That, and Andy had never tried to see things from her side, how frustrated she was getting with his attitude.

And as to telling Mai, her body was sort of a turnoff, that he preferred women with more modest curves? Well, there, at least, Andy knew point-blank that bringing it up would be a disaster. No woman liked to be told there was something wrong with their body, and before tonight Andy had never really internalized why he had become so uncomfortable around Mai.

Watching Natsume and Mai both move around the kitchen though, he could no longer ignore the fact Mai just... didn't have the body type or attitude he preferred in a woman any longer. Whenever both were in his line of sight, Andy found his eyes tracking toward Natsume. In contrast to the other two, she wore a modest pair of sweatpants, loose around her legs, tightened around her waist. She wore a semi-tight blouse, but it didn't have any neckline, and although it did hug her curves, those curves were much more modest than Mai's a high B cup maybe, instead of the double-barreled Ds. It was also clear she was wearing a bra, whereas Andy wasn't certain Mai was given how her breasts bounced around when she moved.

With four of them working on it, the kitchen was soon cleaned. Once the surfaces, fridge and freezer were all cleaned, Mai and Natsume started to prep the few ingredients still on hand. Meanwhile, the foreign girl Andy had fought earlier took to cleaning the utensils and plates, which were piled up in the sink and dishwasher. Andy was relegated to cleaning the cupboard, removing anything out of date or broken. Thankfully that job wasn't all that bad, although the number of dishes Shampoo was dealing with made up for it.

"Honestly, Andy! How in the heck did you three let this all pile up so much?" Mai grumbled, looking over from the table, where she was chopping up some of the few vegetables still usable in the house. There just wasn't any room over on the counters.

"Hey! It's not like me and Terry were around all that often. Out of the months you've been gone we've only been here for about five weeks in total!" Andy protested good naturedly, causing Mai to laugh as Andy went on, cheerfully throwing Jubei under the bus.

This was a routine with them. Mai would always complain about the mess in the kitchen or in their rooms, but Andy would point out it was Jubei's fault more than his. "And we kept the dojo clean. And our room this time."

He nodded over to Natsume and Shampoo. "I imagine that will come in handy if you ladies are staying here for any amount of time. Like we talked about before, Ranma can join Terry and I out in the dojo."

Natsume smiled at him, bowing her head. "Thank you. That will indeed be helpful. While we, my sister and I, should not be here for more than a few days, it will be nice to spend them in an actual bed."

Shampoo wasn't so certain. Something in Andy's tone made her think he was being a little condescending. As if he thought that girls like them wouldn't be able to handle toughing it out in the dojo. Still, she nodded in thanks, reflecting internally that it wasn't as if they had enough rooms for her and Ranma to have a room of their own. Not with Jubei, and Weepy Man, already having one. *And it won't be the first time I share a room with Mai. This might be smaller, but it also doesn't have female Ranma around to share the space with.*

"Not a problem. Might I ask though, are you here to learn from the Shiranui School? You and your father, I mean."

"Not truly, although sparring with both you and your brother will be fascinating. I have sparred with Mai numerous times since we started to travel together, and facing new opponents is always a good thing. As for our aims of being here, we are merely travelling with Ranma and Shampoo for now." Natsume looked over at Shampoo. "And there is still a matter of some... contention between Ranma, our father and us and our father. Two very different issues." Shampoo smiled at that, nodding to indicate she understood the hidden message there. "It will take a good deal of explaining though, and I would prefer to only do so once."

"Bah, it's not difficult," Shampoo snickered. "Weepy Man had an affair, then a few dozen concussions in a short amount of time, making him forget about the woman, let along the kids he left with his mistress. Now he's got one pathetic excuse for an heir at home, and two extremely capable daughters right here he never knew about." She gestured to Natsume who looked away demurely even as she fought the urge to roll her eyes at the other woman's blunt attitude. "But refuses to admit they're his daughters, and is trying to put off any decision on who should be his heir despite his written word."

Andy gaped, then shook his head, sending his silver hair to shimmer as it bounced over his shoulders. "That... that really sounds like a story and a half. But if you don't want to talk about it, that's fine."

"Thank you," Natsume smiled. "I am willing to speak about our training and our school in general, but not anything more personal at present."

“That’s fine. We’ve got time, and I don’t want to pry. If you want to talk though, both my brother and I planned to stay here until the eighteenth. There’s a cargo hauler leaving for Maui at that time Terry’s been talking to the captain of in order to get us a berth.”

Mai stiffened. That was only five days from now. *Good grief but we cut it close. If we had spent more time away, I might have missed seeing Andy for who knows how long!* She was also wondering if Terry and Andy would be willing to change their plans to let her come with them or not.

She fell silent for a moment, working on her task at the table, while Andy asked Natsume a few questions about her training and places she had seen. He also was asking about her plans for the future, where it came out she was hoping to soon become the official heir to the Tendo Dojo, something that interested Andy. “I’ve heard of Nerima a few times. Something about some kendo user there, oh, and a few odd, like really odd styles there. Martial Arts Ice Skating, Martial Arts Takeout and a few others.”

“Martial Arts Takeout is a decent school. Very refined Wing Chun and armed Karate style,” Shampoo interjected. “I’ve been taught some of it by Grandmother. It’s more about fighting while moving across different surfaces than anything else.”

“Like Pencak Silat?” Andy inquired, blinking as Shampoo nodded. “Huh. That sounds pretty cool. Weird, but cool.”

“Anything Goes tends to want to learn a little bit from any style we come across. I personally learned quite a bit from battling with a group of martial artists who fought using unusual tools at one point. They claimed to be Rhythmic Gymnasts, but had no rhythm to speak of, so I cannot say that was the truth,” Natsume mused.

“Ha! Beats me all hollow. The only truly weird style I’ve run into was this guy who used a series of yoyos. And when I say a series, I mean it. The guy knew a version of the spiritual copy technique, and was able to enlarge both his yoyo strings and the yoyo itself. He could use them as a shield, or multiple to try and tie up my blows when I tried to hit him,” Andy laughed. “Couldn’t take a hit though once I got through. I tend to look down on that kind of specialization, it’s too specific to be of any use outside its specialty. Now the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen? That goes to this weird flower I found once when hiking through the Polynesian islands. It was huge. And smelly, and ugly, and... just wrong.”

The group continue to talk for a bit, with the conversation dominated by Natsume and Andy, talking more about things they had seen and that kind of thing than the Art. They all continued their work, with Natsume and Mai finishing just in time to start work on the ingredients Ranma and his group brought back to them. Shampoo had continued her own work though, having filled up the dishwasher already and still having several more plates to go through. Meanwhile, Andy and the other boys were exiled from the kitchen to search around

the property for any sign of mice or worse. Luckily, there at least Jubei and the boys had kept up with things.

When dinner was served, they ate out on the patio, the table being too small for all of them to eat. Soun was still unconscious, but frankly, that was fine by everyone who knew him. With Jubei bracketed between Ranma and Terry, well away from the girls, he couldn't cause trouble either. To Mai's consternation, Andy somehow snagged a seat between the two sisters. This left Mai to sit between Kurumi and Shampoo, as Ranma sat on her other side and Jubei beyond him.

The conversation was somewhat stilted at first, before turning to the journey that Shampoo and Ranma had been on, as well as how they met Mai. Jubei became a bit huffy at that point, but the rope style sounded fascinating to both Bogards. From there, Ranma began to explain about ki space, which he was actually a bit better at (explaining, not using) than Mai. Terry agreed to help Ranma and Shampoo with their ki attacks in return. But then Ranma mentioned the toughness training and why they'd put themselves through it.

"Wait, you met Yokozuna Honda!?" Andy gasped in shock. "OH my god, I am so freaking jealous. Do you have any idea how amazing it would be to meet him? The guy is a legend in the sumo world."

Terry scoffed. "Ugh, I've never seen the point of sumo. I mean, come on, I understand their bulk means they can take a lot of damage, but they move so damn slow. And those muscles aren't much either. Give me some good wrestling any day of the weak."

"Bah, American wrestling's fake," Ranma jeered. "Now, Russian wrestling, that's the real stuff."

"You take that back!" Terry barked, making to stand up before Jubei pulled him back down.

"I wonder, do either of you also have a weapons style?" Natsume interjected, changing the subject and putting off the more awkward conversation about herself, Ranma and her father. "While I prefer to use a carpet beater when I need to resort to our family's ki attacks, that could be called a separate style entirely from my hand to hand skills..."

OOOOOO

At the same time that the young martial artists were all eating a meal and getting to know one another, Nodoka Saotome was arriving in Nerima. She smiled as she looked around, tapping her off hand lightly against the package that rested at her side, held on her shoulder by a simple strap, belying the flower-strewn cover. *My, how nice. It looks like a large majority of the original construction has somehow withstood the test of time here. There aren't nearly as much cars, or large buildings like apartment complexes here. It creates a most interesting dichotomy,*

and I quite like the more rustic, historical look to everything. I would think my son would enjoy it too, but then again, I'm not young, full of manly vigor and a desire to go on a romantic training trip around the world.

Although part of her deeply approved of that, Nodoka wasn't certain she approved of who Ranma was traveling with. Not Mai, no. *That girl I quite approve of. She is a woman who seems to know what she wants and is more than willing to show her feminine charms off whenever she wishes.* No, it was Shampoo that Nodoka had a problem with. *And not her attitude nor looks either. It is only her being foreign. Ugh. I know that doesn't mean nearly as much these days, especially not with how much Ranma seemed enthusiastic about what he learned in China during his training trip with Genma. But I can't quite push past it.*

Yet even so, while their reunion had been brief, Nodoka was mostly pleased with how manly a man Ranma had become. Strong, dedicated to the Art, and surrounded by beauties. *In that at least Genma succeeded. But he did not tell Ranma about me, that is enough for me to want to find him and smack some sense into Genma. But there is also the matter of the Tendo Agreement. It isn't very manly to let an honor agreement just fall apart like that. I need to get to the bottom of that. And anyway, I know where the Shiranui School is too, so I can always try to head there despite my son saying they might not be there for long. Yahoo Japan is so good at such things.*

Following the directions of a nice old lady, who seemed to be watering down her doorway a bit too incessantly, Nodoka soon found herself in front of a very nice dojo-house complex. *My word, I do like how traditional the architecture is around here. And the exterior at least looks like it has been kept up.* With a faint smile on her face, Nodoka rang the doorbell.

Inside, Genma looked up from where he had been drinking a saucer of sake, frowning as his sixth senses began to blare at him. *Another dojo destroyer? No, a mere dojo destroyer wouldn't be enough to set off my sixth sense. What is that?*

Next to him, Nabiki groaned, and Akane growled looking up from where she had been playing with P-chan. "If it's another dojo destroyer, I swear this time I will knock him into next week! Not like that, that cheat of a dough man!"

"Being able to just tank your strikes isn't cheating, Akane. It is simply a sign you need to be stronger. Just imagine how often my dishonorable son bounced back whenever you struck him down," Genma answered sententiously, and purposefully. *Akane's only real strength is her anger and the ability to make the Tendo Ki weapons while angry. If I can get her mad enough, she might be able to create a weapon strong enough to help me knock out the foolish boy and drag him back here to do his duty if we can catch him.* "It's why I've told you before we need to take a training journey. You're not learning fast enough here in the dojo."

Akane huffed, but it was Kasumi who spoke next, pushing herself to her feet. "I rather doubt that it is a dojo destroyer. Saotome-san just got rid of the last one barely a few days ago after all. I will go see who it is."

When the door opened, Nodoka's first thought was, *My word, now why could a girl like this not have been the one to take up the honor arrangement between our families? She's quite pretty, in an understated sort of way.* Her next thought had nothing to do with the woman answering it, but rather the small sign that was stuck to one side of the doorway Nodoka had just finished reading, which she gestured to with one hand. "Do you often get rivals or challengers so often that you need a sign, dear?"

The sign read: Tendo residence. Challengers and rivals please use back door.

"Not so much any longer, but there was a time when I thought that sign might prove useful. Unfortunately, it seems as if most of the rivals and challengers we've dealt with ignore doors," the young woman said pleasantly, shaking her head sadly. "They come over the rooftops all the time instead. I honestly think that is rather rude."

Chuckling at that, Nodoka bowed her head formally and introduced herself. "You must be Kasumi. Your father described you quite well." *And I find it appalling that my son didn't mention her at all. Look at those hips! Perfect for childbearing. Honestly, was it simple stubbornness, or the fact that this Akane was a martial artist that simply stuck in everyone's heads that she alone could take on the honor arrangement between our families?* "My name is Nodoka Saotome. Might I come in? I understand you might know the whereabouts of my so-called husband."

"Oh my! I had no idea that Mr. Saotome was married," Kasumi innocently replied, making Nodoka add yet another 'X' alongside Genma's image in her mind even as Kasumi gestured her inside. "Please, come in. You mentioned my father. Does that mean you met with him recently?"

"Indeed I did. He seemed to be doing quite well, as were Natsume and Kurumi," Nodoka replied politely. "I believe he was intending to keep traveling with my son and his friends for a time before turning back in Kyushu."

Kasumi made a polite noise at that while inside the house, Genma had frozen, and Akane and Nabiki looked at one another in surprise, before Nabiki turned sly eyes towards Genma only to stop and stare as he quickly grabbed a cold cup of tea and poured it over his head, shifting into his panda form. Where he got the tire from, she didn't know, nor where his dirty clothing went when he transformed. Both of those mysteries were not worth the brainpower, and now she read the sign that suddenly appeared in his hand, which read, "Don't tell her about me!"

Akane's question of, "What, why?" And Nabiki's response of, "What's it worth to you?" were spoken as one. However, by that point, Kasumi had returned with Nodoka in tow.

Both teens looked at the quite pretty middle-aged woman, who looked at them, then over at the panda in surprise. "My word, you keep a panda here. I did not know that they could be domesticated. And are they not an endangered species?"

Looking between the woman and the panda Nabiki had a choice to make. She could throw Genma under the bus, which would probably provide a lot of amusement for her. Nabiki knew Genma well enough by this point to know that he wouldn't be hiding in his panda form for no reason. His self-preservation instincts being just as powerful a part of his personality as his laziness. Nevertheless, if she did that, Nabiki wouldn't be able to extort any money out of him. And given that this was his wife (apparently, anyway) that he was hiding from, there were probably quite a bit of juicy secrets here.

After a brief internal battle, Nabiki's greed wore out, and she said dryly, "He's a combat panda from China. Apparently, he imprinted on Mr. Saotome at some point, and comes around occasionally to look for him. He's incredibly well trained, if far too much of a glutton."

Akane snickered at that, subsiding, willing to follow her older sister's lead right now. Besides, she already had a lot of questions to ask as it was.

"Does that mean my husband is here?" Nodoka asked smiling. "And you would be Nabiki, and you Akane, correct? While I wasn't told what you all look like, I was at least given your names."

"That's right. I'm Nabiki, this is Akane. And as for Mr. Saotome, I'm afraid you just missed him," Nabiki answered with one hundred percent accuracy while also completely lying, and amusing linguistic feet which caused her smile to turn into her normal smirk. "He just ran out, and I'm afraid he didn't tell us what he was doing."

Nearby, Genma breathe the faint sigh of relief in his panda form, diligently going back to playing with his tire even as he kept a wary eye on Nodoka. *What in the world has brought my wife here! What unlucky stars do I live under that she was able to find me at all?!*

"Are you really married to Mr. Saotome?" Akane practically demanded shaking her head. "I don't see how any woman would... that is... he's so ugh!" She shivered, looking away.

Still, Nodoka got the gist, and laughed. "Yes well, it was an arranged marriage dear, and he wasn't always bald or unattractive. In fact, he was quite handsome at one point." She then smirked, waggling her eyebrows outrageously at all three girls, while both the transformed pig and panda felt shivers go down their spines. "Besides, there is something to be said about a martial artist's stamina. It only takes a few times for them to start getting the hang of things, and then the endurance starts to cross over into other sweaty endeavors."

“Too much information,” Akane and Nabiki stated, shivering while Kasumi’s smile turned a little strained, as even her ability to ignore the world around her developed a tiny crack.

Despite that, Kasumi was still a perfect hostess, and gestured Nodoka to sit at the table with her sisters. She was somewhat confused about why Nabiki was speaking as if Genma wasn’t around, when he was right over there, even if in his cursed form, but kept silent for now. She knew both Saotomes were touchy about their curses, so felt it understandable for now.

Nodoka smiled at her, but cheerfully waved off the offer of tea, commenting on Kasumi’s good manners again, although for some reason the watching Nabiki felt that Nodoka was looking at her older sister’s hips for a moment as she spoke, before turning her attention to Akane, blinking at the site of the pig before addressing Akane. “So, you are Akane, the young lady that was apparently affianced to my son?”

“I was never affianced to that pervert!” Akane shot back, squeezing her pig so hard that he squealed a little, glaring at the older woman now all her earlier questions about what the woman was doing here and her relationship with the older Saotome gone in an instant of blinding, self-righteous anger. “That whole thing was a screw up by our fathers, and the instant that Chinese hussy came along, Ranma tossed the honor agreement aside like it wasn’t even worth it anyway so why should I care!”

“Part of that matches up with my son told me,” Nodoka mused, causing Genma to start, as it sounded as if Nodoka had already met with Ranma. Her next words confirmed that, as she went on to explain how she had randomly bumped into Soun, and thereby been introduced to Ranma and his other travel companions.

Learning that Ranma was traveling not only with Shampoo, but with several other good-looking young women caused Akane to once more squeeze pig boy to the point where he squealed and tried desperately to get out of her arms. *Ranma, you will pay for this!*

“See! He doesn’t really care about the Art or anything, he’s just out there with those other girls being a pervert!” Akane growled, standing up and moving to stomp away, before Nodoka’s next words froze her in place.

“Actually, it didn’t seem as if there was anything going on with most of them. Shampoo and Ranma certainly are in a relationship, and that is manly indeed, but I hope that I was able to open his eyes to other possibilities like getting involved with one of your other two sisters who were traveling with them,” Nodoka sighed shaking her head. “Natsume in particular seemed somewhat interested in him, and was both refined and apparently a good martial artist. But tell me more about how you and my son acted towards one another when he was here. I realize that it did not work out but does not mean that you cannot learn from mistakes.”

Although I am amused by how much jealousy she is still showing. Still, if she was the type to become jealous like that after simply hearing that my son is traveling with a few girls, that is

a certain sign that she would never be able to reconcile that jealousy with a manly man's need to be manly. "Further, I have to admit to being somewhat annoyed by how, while you and he might not have worked out, it is not as if Soun did not have other daughters like you Nabiki, or you Kasumi, let alone Natsume and Kurumi."

While Akane stewed for a moment at the very idea that anything that had gone between her and Ranma had been her fault, Nabiki twitched at the very idea of being saddled with Ranma. Yet the middle Tendo kept her thoughts on the most important thing that Nodoka had just mentioned. "I'm sorry, but Natsume and Kurumi? Who are they? You called them our sisters."

"Oh my, that is quite right. There has only ever been the three of us, Akane, Nabiki and myself. Father might have taken on new students while he was on the road, although even that would be very unusual, as he hasn't taught anyone anything since our mother died years ago," Kasumi said innocently, while also throwing Soun under the bus so hard he might well have created a crater.

Nodoka frowned, her brows furling and confusion. "How odd. I'm quite positive that Natsume and Kurumi called themselves Soun's daughters, and he didn't indicate otherwise. My son even endorsed the idea." Her face cleared, and she smiled. "Oh, but of course. Your father might well have had a mistress on the side. That isn't unusual, although I would have hoped that he would be willing to raise you all together."

At that, Kasumi's bland expression seemed to fade, and a dangerous aura began to appear around her and Nabiki, while Akane's fiery aura made an appearance as well. "Tell us more about these two please," Kasumi began, sliding into a position on the other side of the table even as a full-blown battle aura began to appear around her. "And why you think that my father would be so dishonorable as to cheat on my mother?"

Nodoka blinked, waving her hand in the air, either not seeing the auras around the three Tendo sisters or simply uncaring of them. Since their aura had Ryoga frozen in fear and Genma quailing, using his tire as if it was a shield, Genma thought it was more the former rather than the latter.

"Oh nothing of the sort, my dear. I'm certain your mother knew about the arrangement beforehand," she answered blithely. "But I'm afraid I can't tell you much information about Natsume and Kurumi beyond their looks. My son, your father and their companions had to catch a ferry over to Kochi barely a few hours after we met. He had apparently made an appointment to meet with a martial arts master down there, and another one in Hong Kong a few days after, so was on a bit of a tight schedule. I'm afraid you will have to ask Soun about your two half-sisters when you meet him."

Although all three sisters subsided slightly at that, Genma was thinking hard about the fact Soun was now traveling with the boy. *That sounds like a great sign, but it also means he*

hasn't been able to convince the boy to come back here. I have no idea about these two new girls either, although I remember them fighting Soun while I was fighting the boy. Hmm... to Kochi? Kyushu, then. I wonder why.

Genma didn't notice how Nodoka steered the conversation back to Ranma's time staying with the Tendos and how he and Akane had been paired together. He didn't notice how his wife frowned at hearing from Nabiki how Akane had been chosen simply because neither of the older girls wanted to put up with having a fiancé.

Thankfully, when Genma tuned back into the discussion, they seemed to leave the curse out of it entirely. On Nabiki's part that was deliberate, knowing that magic like that had to be seen to be believed. Kasumi did not take part in the conversation at all, having left the table to head into the kitchen to putter around a bit, her eyes still narrowed dangerously at the idea that her father might have cheated on her mother, something that had apparently gotten through her normal gentle disposition.

Akane just didn't think about it, thanks to several pointed questions aimed Akane's way about her and Ranma's relationship. Nodoka was interested in how they interacted with one another, how they treated one another both in private and in public. Moreover, Nodoka did not like what she was hearing. Her son, according to Akane at least, came off as quite boorish, always calling her names, taunting and teasing her all the time about her looks and also always flirting with other girls. The name Kodachi was mentioned several times.

Yet at the same time, Ranma was apparently willing to defend her against several other suitors, and according to Nabiki at least was normally around Akane for long periods of the day. Right up until Shampoo arrived on the scene, at least. At that point, it was clear her son had left for greener pastures. *Which is admittedly not the most honorable thing, but I cannot altogether blame Ranma for that. Beyond that, I have to say it sounds as if Ranma was simply not used to being around girls, particularly one he might be interested in. He seems to have tried to treat her as he would a male friend, teasing and trash-talking, I believe it's called. And then comes along Shampoo, who makes her femininity very clear right off the bat. Good for her! She might be foreign, but at least she knows how to treat a young man like my son, which Akane does not seem to.*

Despite that thought. Nodoka felt the way Ranma couldn't really talk about his emotions or act correctly around Akane was another issue she would have to lay at Genma's feet. *While becoming a manly man and striving to become the greatest martial artist he can be, there are other things in life.*

However, Akane did not come off any better in her opinion. The young woman constantly mentioned how she would have to pound Ranma into the ground for a variety of reasons, and seemed proud of it too. The idea of somehow containing or interacting with Ranma in any manner beyond violence simply didn't seem to have occurred to Akane, which was quite disturbing in Nodoka's opinion. *Good grief, I know she hasn't had a mother figure in*

her life, but surely, her friends or even TV should have shown Akane that there are better ways to influence a boy than hitting him over the side of the head. If not, I do not want to know her preferred reading material.

Yet Akane's status as a martial artist, which she seemed again **very** proud of, also brought up one other matter, which she was once quite curious about: Why Ranma had been so dismissive of the Tendo Dojo, and the agreement between the Aerial and Earth Style of Anything Goes. "You speak about fighting my son often Akane, does that mean you are as strong a martial artist as he is?"

Nabiki's snorting laughter overrode Akane's firm 'yes' at that, and Akane turned to her sister shouting, "Nabiki! You know I'm the strongest woman in Nerima! If Ranma didn't keep on cheating every time we sparred, I'd have beaten him flat."

"Sure sis, whatever you say to sleep at night," Nabiki waved her hand airily. "Never mind the fact he's so fast you couldn't hit him unless he didn't see it coming, or how he survived every time you did looking none the worse for wear after at most an hour's rest. Of the fact that he never--"

"What kind of training do you do dear?" Nodoka interrupted, hoping to avoid a sisterly spat. *My, but the middle sister seems a little... Mean-spirited. I do not think I would approve of her taking on the Tendo agreement even if she is quite attractive, in a modern sort of way. No, the decision I think it comes down to Kasumi or Natsume, and given his relationship with Shampoo and some of the comments he made about how much he enjoyed traveling with her, it seems as if my dear son has a type, which does rule out Kasumi, sadly.* "And what kind of lessons has your father taught you?"

At that, Akane wilted a little, shaking her head. "Daddy hasn't taught me anything since I was around twelve. I took over my own training at that point. At this point, I'm a black belt in karate, and a heck of a lot stronger than I look. I go through all the same things I did at that point, I run every day, and I smash bricks, as well as sparring with a lot of people at school."

That caused Nodoka to wince internally for many reasons. For one thing, the idea that Soun had not trained his heir was worrisome. *And did they not say that Natsume and Kurumi had been on a training journey for years? That would explain why his other daughters don't know about them in a way I suppose, but why would Soun not train his heir? Unless he was intending all along to have Natsume take over?*

"Could you show me what you can do, dear?" she asked, while Nabiki frowned, wondering where this conversation was going, and why Nodoka seemed so interested.

Meanwhile, Genma had finished thinking about things. *It looks as if I might have to take a chance if I'm going to get the boy back. And once I do, maybe I can use the fact Nodoka*

doesn't know about his curse yet as a way to control him... He became aware of what was going on when Nodoka and Akane moved past him, with the little pig following it Akane's heels.

He watched as Akane showed Nodoka into the dojo, and then listened as Akane went through her daily brick breaking exercises. *Bah, as if she needs any real skill. All she needs is the ability to pass on the Tendo affinity with Ki weapons. That will be more than enough to make the Saotome School famous in later generations. Although, I have to admit, Kasumi would be a far better prospect if she had shown any ability with ki weapons. The girl's cooking leaves much to be desired.*

Soon, the two were back, with Akane smiling and a little sweaty, but pleased with herself, while Nodoka's face was stoic, having taken in all she had seen inside the dojo. The signs of disuse, the lack of training equipment, and worse, the lack of elegance in Akane's style.

No, Nodoka concluded, it was very clear that Akane would not do for Ranma. Untrained, a temper, a body that has yet to develop, and blind arrogance all in one. No, definitely not for my son. While he is certainly not blameless about how their so-called relationship fell apart, I do not believe I can blame my son for it, if he was both being pressured into something he did not want, and not growing in the Art at the same time. It truly looks as if the Tendo School really has fallen on hard times. I will need to see both Soun and his other two daughters in action to see if there really is any point to uniting the schools.

As they entered, the sitting room, Akane asked a question that pulled Nodoka out of her musings. "By the way, you seem awfully happy about Ranma being so strong and what did you call it, a man amongst men? Why is that? I mean why do you keep using that one phrase all the time?"

Nodoka smiled at that, shaking her head out of her musings. *While I am still unhappy about this whole Tendo agreement and everything to do with it, at least Ranma turned out quite well.* At that point, Nodoka explained about the honor agreement that Genma and Ranma had signed when they were young, causing Nabiki and Akane both to look towards the panda for a moment, suddenly understanding why he had hidden from his wife so quickly. When they did, though, they saw Genma making his way out of the sitting room back out into the garden area.

He was still within hearing range as he disappeared from view though, and was able to hear Nodoka explain, "And while Ranma does not seem to be perfect by any means, Genma at least succeeded in turning him into a martial artist with few peers and a drive to excel. There are **many** other bits about Ranma's education that annoy me, but I am certain that Genma and I can work on those. After I have suitably remonstrated with him of course. Honestly, would a phone call every month have been too much to ask?"

The idea of his wife 'remonstrating' with him bothered Genma almost as much as the sight of the family honor blade still at Nodoka's side even inside. He could recognize it despite it being covered by a cloth bag, and knew without a doubt that his wife would be willing to use it

on him if she thought she had reason to, above and beyond the honor agreement. But it seemed as if the boy had been able to keep his curse a secret, which meant that Genma's head was safe for now.

Soon Nodoka and the others had sat down inside, the doors to the garden still open letting Genma overhear their conversation while still being in a position to leave as soon as possible if he could. To his delight, the conversation turned to where Ranma had been, as well as his companions, with Nabiki asking some very leading questions about Natsume and Kurumi, sprinkling them in with other questions about what Nodoka thought was manly. Nodoka in turn waxed poetically about what Ranma had told her about training, mentioning idly that one of his companions had a boyfriend back home along with some other bits of information about the two supposed Tendo sisters.

I have to wonder if that's real though, Genma mused. No way could Soun find a woman while we were training under the Dread Master, and even if he could, he was totally besotted with his wife. I can't see him cheating on her at all.

He kept on listening, hoping for a clue as to where on Kyushu the boy was going along with Soun, wishing that he and Soun had stolen cell phones for themselves at some point. He had never seen the need for them before this, and was somewhat concerned about being tracked through the damn things. Nevertheless, it certainly would have allowed him to at least contact his friend. *And there is no chance I am going back to Madame Rose for more help in finding the boy. I refuse to be further in debt to that woman, not after she had me assassinate a yakuza boss for her the last time.*

And then, Nabiki, turned the conversation back to the two supposed Tendo sisters. All three real Tendo sisters were very adamant at the fact that they didn't know either girl and were incensed at the very idea that their father could have cheated on their mother, something that Nodoka simply didn't understand.

However, she did have a solution. "Girls while I don't understand your anger on this point, there is a simple way to get to the bottom of this. Simply ask Soun himself. And while I do not know when he will be returning here, I do know where he's going. The young woman who has a boyfriend, Mai Shiranui. They were due to stop at her dojo to meet with the dojo master there. It is a simple enough matter to look up that information, after all."

"You know, tomorrow's Saturday. And given the fact the school is closed on weekends for repairs we could make a weekend trip of it..." Nabiki mused, looking over at Akane who nodded firmly.

"That's right. We need to figure out what these hussies and Ranma are up to, trying to act as if these two girls are daddy's daughters!" In her mind, Akane knew for a fact that Ranma was behind this strange scheme somehow, even if she couldn't figure out why he would want to have his new hussies be acknowledged as Tendos.

“Well then, how about all of us go? I would love to see my son for a bit longer, and if we are fast enough, we might have as many as two or even three days before he is due to be in Hong Kong to meet with another dojo master,” Nodoka said, clapping her hand happily.

This would also give Nodoka more time to get to know these three. Her impressions thus far were not very good, but perhaps with more time around them, she would get to know the girls’ good sides. *It would also allow me to see Natsume and Soun in action, and make a final determination on whether or not there is enough of the Tendo School to really merit the Aerial and Earth styles merging again.*

Outside, Genma heard this, and smiled, thinking of how to convince the others to take their ‘combat panda’ along, or, barring that, how to sneak aboard whatever conveyance they chose to take them to Kyushu. *Just you wait boy, you’ll be back here doing your duty soon enough one way or the other.*

Ryoga too had also overheard everything, and promised himself to never leave Akane’s line of sight until they caught up to the pigtailed fiend. *Just you wait, Ranma, you’ll pay for breaking poor Akane’s heart!*

OOOOOO

After the meal was finished and the story of the Tendos explained to Terry, Andy and Jubei, Ranma lost a game of rock paper scissors and was relegated to cleaning up the plates and everything else again, while also putting away all of the utensils and plates that were being cleaned currently by the washer. Meanwhile, Terry and Andy headed out to the dojo intent on cleaning it and airing it out for the night. Since it was a nice night out, they would only need to put up some bug nets, leaving the windows open, but it did need to be aired out given the smell of sweat that permeated the place.

The girls took over Andy’s room along with Mai’s. Mai spent several minutes making certain that there weren’t any spy holes in Andy’s wall just in case, showing the others how to look for the things for the future.

Watching this, Jubei was somewhat amused, shaking his head as he held out a saucer of sake to Soun. “I must say, that was a most interesting story that your two daughters told, both their own past and everything they’ve gone through since meeting my niece, Shampoo and young Ranma. And don’t try to fool me. I know you’ve been awake for at least a quarter of the meal. You’re far too young to try to get one over on me.”

Soun frowned but opened his eyes and took the saucer readily enough, sipping at it contentedly. He even bowed his head in thanks to the plate of food that Jubei had set aside for him. “I apologize for my earlier breakdown. But you have to understand, that while you might have been friends with the... the Dread Master, that is a far cry from being his student. If he wasn’t beating us up in the name of training or putting us through grueling training exercises,

the Dread Master would first run through town, then force us to do the same thing while he was on our backs, loaded down with purloined...dainties. I would be hard-pressed to count the number of times myself and Genma were beat into a pulp by angry townsfolk."

Jubei chortled. "With training like that it's no wonder you are scared of him I suppose. Although it is a wonder that you are able to find a girl to marry, let alone another girl to have on the side."

At that, Soun gritted his teeth, then shook his head firmly stating once again that he would never ever cheat on his darling Kimiko. "I cannot deny that Natsume and Kurumi know a good deal of the secret Tendo arts, or that they learned it from a training manual I made while still a student myself. But I still have no recollection of ever cheating on my wife, and refuse to think that I did so, no matter how much brain trauma I took back then."

"So Ranma and Shampoo mentioned. Still, if you cannot deny that they have learned your school, then even if they are not your true daughters, would that really matter? If they are well trained enough to carry on your school, I mean, and this Akane girl, isn't?"

Grimace deepening, Soun growled. "I also don't remember asking your opinion, Elder."

"You didn't, but that doesn't mean you're not going to get it." Jubei set his own saucer of alcohol down firmly, pulling out a long thin pipe, one whose shape gave Soun a little bit of start at the sight of it, before puffing on it gently, using the tip to point at the other man. "Say I agree with you. Say that you have indeed did not cheat on your wife, that you have no blood relation to Natsume and Kurumi. They are still of your school. You yourself do not deny that, nor do you deny the fact they learned from a booklet you left with them for whatever reason. And as a martial arts master, you cannot allow yourself to ignore talent. I have not seen either of them in action, but judging by the way that they spoke of this Akane girl, it is clear that Ranma at least believes both of them to be far stronger martial artists than her, and he was able to fight Terry on an even footing. Terry in turn is the strongest of my own youngsters. So if that is indeed the case, then set aside your false pride and admit the truth. Apologize to this Akane girl for not being able to train her appropriately, and embrace the idea of having Natsume as your heir instead."

Still scowling shaking his head. "I will thank you for not butting in where your input is not needed."

Amused but also mildly irritated at the younger man's obstinacy, Jubei allowed him to eat for a few moments in silence, puffing on his pipe and listening to the clink of dishes as they were cleaned and put away. When Soun had finished the food, however, he spoke again. "To choose an unworthy heir of your school will damage it to an appalling degree. Not as much as it would to take on a student who would use your teachings for evil, yet even so. It is not a decision you can make with your heart. Only your head. And further, do not try to use your so-

called honor agreement with Ranma's family to try and force Natsume into the relationship with the boy."

Jubei chortled then. "Hah! I've seen a lot of martial artists and a lot of young men in my time. That one truly is a wild horse, and such can never truly be broken to the bridle against his will. It's always easier to lead such with a carrot than the stirrups."

Still Soun said nothing, turning away and looking out the door watching as Ranma exited the kitchen and headed towards the dojo. Jubei did the same, letting the younger man stew in silence.

Inside the dojo, Andy and Terry had played a game of cleaning the place. Of course, they weren't really doing a deep clean, more just washing things down and airing the place out. And as such, it was no surprise that the two youths decided to have fun with it. Nor was it to be remarked upon that being martial artists, their play more resembled a spar.

It was Terry who first threw a sudsy sponge at his brother, but things had devolved quite quickly from there. Towels had been brought out, snapping at one another in a quick display of makeshift whip combat, and as Ranma entered, Terry was bouncing off one of the outer walls of the dojo, flicking his towel down towards his brother. "Got you!"

"Yeah right, bro!" Andy responded by hurling his full bucket up towards his brother, leaping up after it with his own towel lashing out.

Terry blocked the bucket by smacking it to the side with a blow from the towel that sent it careening towards the doorway, then allowed Andy to wrap his towel around his forearm before pulling him into a headlock. Just as Ranma grunted at the impact of the bucket on top of his head. Both brothers turned to apologize, grins on their faces, only to pause, their jaws going slack as they watched the change happen.

Ranma's body shrank, becoming noticeably feminine and a second later, she now slowly raised a hand to wipe her face clear of water. "Oh that had better have been a clean bucket of soap and water, or else I'm going to have to hurt someone. Stupid freaking water attracting rassa frazza..."

"What, what just... How the..." Andy babbled, while Terry simply stared, then trooped over, and held up his hand above Ranma's head, before raising it to where Ranma had been previously, a look of shock on his face as well. "What the hell?! What just happened!?"

"It's a curse," Ranma grumbled, shaking her head. "Cold water turns me into a girl, hot water back to a guy. I picked it up at a place in China near Shampoo's village. No, my mind doesn't change, I don't suddenly like guys or understand what women are thinking any better than any other man. No, that doesn't mean you can feel me up or whatever. Yes I have a period, yes it is horrible, and if you ask specifics about it I will probably be forced to hurt you even more

than I'm already going to if that was dirty water you just hit me with." *I am seriously missing those little booklets that Nabiki had made up to hand out to people about my curse.*

"A real curse, you mean like magic? Magic exists!?" Terry squawked, backing away quickly. "It isn't contagious or anything, right? And are there, like, secret agencies who are going to be watching us now that we know the secret?"

Ranma blinked at that, then remembered whom he was talking to. "Americans. No, there is no secret organization that follows me around making sure I try to keep magic a secret or erasing your memories with little pen things. In fact, a lot of martial artists seem to understand about magic already, and honestly, I'm not certain why you two are reacting so badly to it. Isn't half the stuff that Mai can do on the mystic side of things anyway? And you know about ki attacks, which I sure as heck didn't when I first got cursed."

"Of course there's a difference! That kind of mystical side to ki is well known and defined! I can understand where it's coming from and it's got limitations. Magic has none of that. And to know you can be cursed, to have magic worked on you, with no control over it?" Terry shook his head with feeling. "I've made a few enemies in my time traveling the world, and I really, **really** don't want to think about what they would do if they discovered magic is really a thing."

While barely in his twenties, Terry had made a name for himself in numerous underground fighting tournaments, particularly in America, the Middle East and Sri Lanka. He had made enemies and rivals on both sides of the law during that time, and a few of his rivals would be more than happy to turn Terry into a girl if they could. The thought of that was enough to cause him to turn green.

Rolling his eyes at that, Ranma repeated his question about whether or not the water had been dirty or not, while Andy simply stared between Ranma's face then down to his bust, then back up above her head for a moment seemingly not processing very well right now. He only broke out of it when Ranma beamed him in the head with the bucket. "OY, long-haired asshole! I'm talking to you. Was that clean or dirty water?"

"C, clean, I've just emptied it a second ago before my brother and I started to fight," Andy stammered, reaching up to touch the mark on his forehead from the bucket.

"Good."

"And you say that form doesn't give you any insight on the female mind?" Andy asked showing that even though he had still been stunned, he had at least heard Ranma a moment ago.

“Nope. Sorry to say I am no help whatsoever in that area. I mean, I think Shampoo and I get along pretty damn well, so I could give you tips if you’re asking about you and Mai but that’s it.”

Andy shook his head quickly at that, causing Ranma to frown a bit. The longhaired man seemed to struggle for second, before beginning to ask more questions about where Ranma had gotten the curse, as well as the physical changes between his male and female body. Both brothers were still looking freaked out by Ranma’s curse and that did not go away as they began to clean up after their little impromptu fight, or when Ranma brought out his own tent and began to set it up in the center of the dojo. Ranma also caught both brothers looking at him occasionally, and sighed. It didn’t look as if either of them was going to have any perverted thoughts, but simply couldn’t get over the curse in general.

Once they were done, Ranma suggested they spar one last time before turning in for the night, but both brothers shook their heads. Andy simply walked out the door, saying, “I’m going to have a bath and try to forget that magic is real for at least the rest of the night.”

Terry just looked extremely reluctant to spar with Ranma at all in his female form. “I can understand why you would obviously keep on training your female body, but surely, with the two to compare, you have to admit that a woman can never be as strong as a guy.”

“When it comes to how much we can lift or how strong you can punch, sure, but that doesn’t mean a female body doesn’t have its own strengths.” Ranma shook his head. “Seriously, I can’t believe you to have that kind of attitude with Mai around.”

“Mai is a prime example of what I’m talking about, though. Yeah, she’s got her own strengths, but they don’t really matter in a head on fight. Neither Andy or myself have ever lost to her,” Terry stated bluntly, before ducking aside as a punch went through where his head was a second ago.

“She might surprise you if you spar again. Mai’s worked on her speed and durability a lot, not to mention added a few new tricks,” Ranma drawled, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “And if you don’t treat me seriously, I’m going to knock your block off.”

Grumbling in annoyance, Terry took up his stance, crouching down, his fist up in front of his face, ready to fight. “Fine, if you want to see whether or not you can fight me as well as you did earlier in your female form, I’m not going to argue.”

The spar did not turn out how Terry thought. Ranma was far more agile and flexible in his female body, and her speed had not decreased at all. If anything, Ranma was a little faster, offsetting the lack of power behind his punches.

After the started to actually sweat though, both of them decided to call it quits. Ranma moved over to the water fountain set against one wall, filling a water bottle there and heating it up in her hands with the heated ki technique she had learned from Natsume and Kurumi.

“Why the heck didn’t you do that before?” Terry asked, rubbing at his jaw where Ranma had landed a few more blows to go with the ones he’d dealt Terry earlier that day. “And how long do you think it would take me to learn that ki healing technique of yours?”

“To consciously use it or unconsciously? Those are two very different things. I was unconsciously using my ki to heal myself for years before I even knew what ki was,” Ranma answered with a shrug, smiling as she felt the change occur. “And as for not changing back earlier, a lot of times when people first see my form, they look down on it like you were. I wanted to make sure that you wouldn’t do so in the future.”

Terry had the grace to look abashed, although Ranma wasn’t certain that he had actually won one for equality of the sexes in Terry’s mind. Rather, he got the impression that Terry was just going to treat him as a guy regardless of his form. *Which on the surface is fine, but I have to say that I’m not exactly happy by how dismissive both these brothers seem to be of women warriors. I can’t imagine Shampoo would be willing to put up with that junk for long.* Still, he was willing to set that aside, and he helped Andy gather up the buckets and cleaning utensils as they exited the dojo heading towards the house for their own turn at the bath. Needless to say, Ranma wasn’t going to bath with either of the boys.

“I’m surprised that Andy didn’t ask me for romance type advice. Or does he come to you for that kind of thing? If so, I gotta say from Mai’s perspective at least, you’re not doing a good job as a wingman,” Ranma quipped shaking his head.

“It’ll take Andy a while to get used to your curse, so don’t be bothered by him looking at you a bit weirdly. Frankly, I’m still little freaked out about magic being real in general.” Terry then frowned a little, reaching under the cap he still wore to scratch at his hair. “Then, and Andy really isn’t all that... interested in Mai any longer. He prefers a slimmer body type. That Natsume girl is more his style really.”

Ranma’s eyes widened and he turned to stare at Terry, who had the grace to look a little sheepish and looked away. “Why hasn’t he just told Mai that?”

“He’s afraid of hurting Mai feelings and losing her friendship. Andy’s also not exactly all that good with his feelings in the first place.” Terry shrugged, although he knew that he wasn’t all that good with love and girls himself. “Frankly, I’m not even certain Andy understands why he’s no longer interested in Mai himself. But judging by the looks he was giving Natsume maybe he’s coming to that realization now...”

Ranma thought about that, about what might happen if Mai realized that Andy was interested in Natsume, and then decided that no matter how he got involved, he would only

make it worse. The only way he could figure out a way to save his friend from a bit of heartache was... Well there was no way frankly. *Mai's in for some heartache regardless. But it's better to let it come from Andy naturally.* "You know what, I don't think I'm going to get involved in that at all. Not until Mai needs a shoulder to cry on anyway."

"Wisdom," Terry nodded. "Why do you think I haven't gotten involved, even to the extent of trying to give my brother advice?"

"Because you got none to give?" Ranma asked mock-innocently, causing the other boy to try to punch him in the head.

Despite that brewing bit of drama, the rest of that night and the next day passed uneventfully bar a small incident at breakfast where Ranma's curse came out when Andy knocked over some water trying to shift away from Mai. The curse fascinated Jubei, but astonishingly, he also seemed to know Ranma was still mentally a man, and respected that. For now, anyway.

In the afternoon, Jubei began to explain some of the better Shiranui style meditation techniques to Ranma and Shampoo. Despite the fact that she knew them, Mai wasn't all that good at explaining the mental visualization, having gotten them so easily when she was younger. Similarly, Ranma wasn't exactly a good student when it came to meditation, especially the Shiranui style. Standing still getting in touch with your inner energy, shutting out the outside world and your body in general to concentrate on your inner energy just wasn't natural to Ranma. Still, he was making headway thanks to the work he'd put into meditating before this.

On the other hand, Shampoo seemed much more at home with the so-called spiritual side of things and had even begun to learn the shadow duplication technique. She wasn't a master at it, and was months yet away from using it in a real fight. However, it was amazing progress, and spurred her on to more. The fight she'd had with Andy, and her numerous spars with Mai, had shown Shampoo she was at the point where she needed to develop her own ki attacks.

Meanwhile, Ranma made some progress with his own thanks to sparring with Terry several times throughout the day. Yet at the same time, he wasn't quite happy with his progress in that area. Sure, the ki attacks were flashy, but they seemed a little too straightforward or limited to Ranma. He wasn't certain how to put his annoyance with them into words. But Ranma's mind kept on coming back to his Aura Burst technique, wondering if there could be something more done with it.

Their second day at the Shiranui Dojo, however, was interrupted by a group of guests unlooked for.

Jubei and Soun were the only ones in the house that afternoon. All the youngsters were out in the dojo sparring or training, something he was extremely pleased to see. He fully

expected all of them to come out of this bit of cross training stronger, and was very happy to see Mai had made such good friends in Ranma and the others. *It will help soften the blow when she realizes that Andy is no longer really interested in her either physically or on a romantic level, he thought sadly. Indeed, I think it might already have begun to open her eyes to that possibility, if the way she's always joking and laughing around Ranma and Shampoo is any connection. Hah, and the whole Tendo business looks so soap opera-ish it isn't even funny. Still, I can't wait to see how it resolves itself.*

He looked up as the doorbell rang, frowning in puzzlement. Most of the time dojo destroyers or gangs wouldn't be so polite, instead simply shouting or trying to attack the door. But it wasn't time for any kind of delivery either.

Shrugging his shoulders, Jubei got to his feet, and made his way towards the front door. When he opened it, he was startled to find himself looking at a group of four women, three of them young, looking as if they came from a single-family, while the older woman looked nothing like the trio, although she was still quite attractive. Far more surprising than them was the sight of a giant panda standing on all fours beside them, looking for all the world like he was a guard animal of some kind rather than a wild beast.

"Yes, can I help you?" Jubei asked, cocking an eyebrow, deciding to leave questions about the panda for now.

"Yes, my name is Nodoka Saotome, I am Ranma's mother. I believe he should still be here now? I haven't missed him, have I?"

"You haven't. He's in the dojo now training alongside my niece, and others, but can I ask who..."

"Let me at that pervert!" Akane growled, pushing past Jubei quite rudely in his opinion, charging towards the dojo.

Jubei might well have stopped her, but this looked interesting, and instead, he stepped aside, letting the strange group enter, eyeing the panda thoughtfully, then looking at the other two young girls. "And who are these two?"

"My name is Kasumi, and this is my sister Nabiki. As Ranma is here, does that mean our father and our... our... possible sisters are year as well?" Kasumi asked politely, if with a bit of steel in her tone.

Realizing what was going on here, Jubei grinned to himself, and bowed out of the way, eager to see how this would resolve itself. "He is indeed my dear. He's not currently in the dojo with the others, but is instead trying to find his way through a trap I set him on the shogi board. Should I show you the way? If you wish to see your new son Nodoka, as I already said, he is in the dojo. Please..." There was a crash from the dojo, and he smiled, shifting his attention in that

way. "Actually, I'll show you the dojo, I'm certain that such lovely young girls can find their father on their own."

OOOOOO

Inside the dojo, Ranma and the other teens, or past teens in Terry and Andy's case, had split up into various areas. Ranma had spent most of the morning going around the property with Mai, to note things that needed repairing, and there wasn't anything immediately important. So everyone had decided today would be a good day for training, it looking as if it might rain and many of the problems being with the exterior of the dojo and house, specifically portions of the roof.

Kurumi was currently fighting Mai, having long since pushed past her initial reluctance to learn from the older girl. Now she was following her instructions, correcting her footwork as they fought, which was one of Kurumi's particular problems. In a straight up fight, rather than a running battle she routinely fell back on the first few stances she had learned when the two sisters were younger.

Meanwhile, Natsume was working through a few katas with Terry and Andy. The two Bogard brothers would show Natsume one, while she did the same to them. Both boys were interested in learning more about the Tendo Style advanced techniques, but Natsume wasn't willing to share them.

On the other side of the dojo, Ranma and Shampoo were sparring, moving back and forth across one of the training salles painted on the floor, only tied together, one arm to one arm, by Ranma's rope dart. They'd started the spar like that, to simulate how they would fight if they were tied to an opponent like they had seen in a movie the group had watched last night. But both of them were laughing about it, unable to really get into it.

Soon, Mai finished with Kurumi, leaving her with a few footwork exercises to perform, then moved over to join Natsume Terry and Andy in practicing katas. Her eyes narrowed for a brief second, watching Andy position Natsume's forearm to throw one of the combos the two Bogard brothers had in common. That looked entirely too flirtatious to her, although Natsume didn't seem to notice. *First, he doesn't flirt with me at all last night, now this? Grrrrr...*

Moving with purpose, Mai came up behind her boyfriend, hugging him around the waist feeling him stiffen and try to shift away, as her breasts flattened against his back. *Nope, you're not going anyway, Andy.* Aloud, she cooed, "I'm done working with Kurumi for the moment. Either of you want to spar?"

"Probably not. Unlike Ranma or Shampoo, neither of us have developed ki healing, and we're due to head out tomorrow morning," Terry answered apologetically. "I don't think either of us wants to deal with showing up at the docks tomorrow with bruises. But look at it this way,

at least when we're gone, everyone can at least sleep in the house on a proper bed. If the two lovebirds over there pair up anyway."

While Ranma and Shampoo broke off from their spar, which had devolved into flirting, hence Terry calling them out on it, for a brief moment Mai stiffened in turn, pulling back and then turning Andy around to glare up into his face. "I thought you told us the night before that the cargo ship you two wanted to travel on was leaving in five days!"

"We were wrong. The captain moved up his schedule," Andy held up his hands placatingly, backing away quickly. "We got a call about it this morning, as the captain wants the two of us to act as a security force on board the ship."

"And you didn't tell me that over breakfast? And you said the two of us? I take it that means that there's no room in this plan of yours for me?" Mai asked coldly. "You know I wanted to travel with you!"

"And I've been telling you for week first over the phone and then last night that I wanted to make this trip a simple trip with my brother. Having you along would make everything harder to organize and everything else," Andy shot back, shaking his head. "Besides, just because you're my girlfriend doesn't mean you're my keeper. Both of us have made training trips before, what's the problem?"

"The problem is that considering how much action I haven't gotten lately when we are around one another, I'm not certain I'm your girlfriend either!" Mai nearly growled. "Seriously!? You're going to use that whole training trip thing as an excuse? When I kept on saying you could always come with me on this last one with me and Jubei? Or when I tried to get you to come out and meet me and my new friends several times over the winter!? I'm honestly wondering if you just are trying to avoid me entirely!"

Listening to this, everyone else quickly backed away from the two of them, with Ranma and Terry exchanging a glance. The knowledge that they were about to be at Ground Zero for the implosion both of them had feared might be coming went through their heads, and both were wondering if they should step in. Thankfully, they did not need to make a decision on that point before something else interrupted the growing argument.

A fearsome battle cry erupted from outside, as the door to the dojo shattered into a thousand pieces and Akane charged forwards. She took a second to orient herself, finding Ranma standing nearby, and hefted her Warhammer plus twenty-five against perverts overhead, shouting, "There he is! Standstill and take your punishment pervert! How dare you rope in two random girls and trick Daddy into thinking they're my sisters!"

The trip to Kyushu taken twelve hours, during which Nabiki and Genma had, without meaning to or any conversation between them, kind of tag-teamed Akane. Nabiki had teased and taunted her sister as she always did, about how she was so popular with a certain type of

boy, and yet then pointing out how Ranma had tossed her over the barrel in a mere few hours of interacting with Shampoo. Meanwhile, Genma had found the occasional moments to change back into his male form to speak to Akane, giving his impression of what he thought might be going on.

Of course, Akane had taken his words and bent them to her own worldview. A worldview which was based on the idea that and everything and anything wrong could be blamed on the nearest boy, doubly so if that boy was Ranma. She was also furious at the fact that P-chan had run off the moment the door to the Shiranui estate had opened.

That was a small thing in comparison to the greater anger she was feeling towards Ranma, stoked and fueled by her sister and Genma both, but it was there.

At the moment, elsewhere, Ryoga had been able to follow his nose to the scent of the kitchen, whereupon he had startled Soun, who was there enjoying a cup of tea. As he watched, the little pig leapt up onto the kitchen counter, hit the hot water on the sink, and then splashed himself, turning into his human body.

“Excuse me, which way to the dojo?” Ryoga asked politely.

Still somewhat stunned, Soun pointed past the young man’s shoulder. Whereupon Ryoga turned and then, while Soun still watching, somehow went in the wrong direction, racing up the stairs which were to the side of the door to the kitchen, leading to the second floor of the house rather than out into the garden where Soun had just been pointing. “What an odd young man.”

Back in the dojo, Akane had charged forward, uncaring of who was in her way.

Natsume recognized Akane from the description that Ranma had given her, and broke off from backing away rapidly from the growing confrontation between Andy and Mai to leap over their heads, her carpet beater out and swirling along her side. “How dare you barge in like this into someone else’s dojo?! You’re acting more like a dojo destroyer than an honorable student of the Art!”

Akane was so deep into her own fury that she didn’t even see Natsume until the other girl was right in front of her, thrusting downwards with her carpet beater. Around Natsume swirled a heavy chill wind, pulled together by her movements earlier and her cold ki manipulation. When Akane’s weapon slammed into this weather front, however, it shattered and Akane’s weapon continued on to crash into Natsume’s carpet beater, which exploded into flinders despite the fact that she was pouring some of her ki into the weapon.

The shockwave of the strike hurled Natsume backwards through the air, but she was able to get her feet up behind her. Her feet hit the wall first and she clung there via the Clinging Gecko technique, one of several strange but highly useful techniques Ranma had taught the others over the winter.

Meanwhile, Akane's swing had continued uninterrupted into the ground of the dojo. Hitting the floorboards, the blow created almost a bow wave through the floorboards as they cracked and broke away from the hit, causing the others in the dojo to have trouble with their footing for a second.

"What the hell? No way can that girl be that strong. And that hammer doesn't look anywhere near big enough to cause that kind of an impact," Terry muttered getting into a stance and staring at the new girl and consternation as she pulled her weapon up and charged towards Ranma. "Also, what the hell did you do to her, man? She's sure as fuck got a hate on for you."

Ranma just nodded sagely, ducking underneath Akane's blow like it was moving through quicksand even as he answered Terry's question. *Damn, and I had trouble dodging this kind of thing back when I was living in Nerima?* "I think it's her family's specialty. Ki weapons. Think of them like shadow constructs, only they don't need an initial weapon to copy and are actually solid. I think they're also far more ki intensive, too. And unfortunately, you need to be using emotional ki which as you can see is a problem."

"Standstill and take your punishment like a man!" Akane shouted.

"As if, you uncute tomboy!" Ranma shot back automatically, before leaping up over her next strike, then flipping himself in the air when she pulled back and redirected the blow after him. "You couldn't hit the broadside of Furinkan!"

"What's the problem with emotional ki?" Andy asked, somewhat perplexed. He'd never heard of that before although his brother looked as if he had, and was scratching underneath his baseball cap thoughtfully. "Isn't it just normal ki, but you only access it via a single emotion?"

"Emotional ki is far easier to access than simple ki. Indeed, a lot of people start with emotion-based ki but it's a trap," Mai explained, reflecting that Andy had never really delved into the spiritual side of the Shiranui Style even as he learned it from Jubei. "If you feel enough of a specific mode emotion, it allows you to connect to your ki faster, and you can use it however you wish. But the more you do so, the more that emotion colors your ability to use ki as well as your ability to feel **other** emotions."

"Wait, ahaha, you mean like it's the Dark Side?" Andy laughed, only to break off and stare incredulously as a giant panda charged over the wreckage of the dojo door towards Ranma.

Genma's curse form was followed by Nodoka and the two remaining Tendos, who had not broken off just yet to go in search of their father.

“Oh of course, it couldn’t just be Akane, could it,” Ranma groaned, ducking under a sign that would’ve hit him in the head, reading out the words, ‘Stand still and take your punishment boy!’ written on it.

Nodoka frowned, her eyes narrowing. “My word, why does the attack panda seem to dislike my son?”

“That’s not an attack panda, whatever that is. That’s Genma, your husband,” Mai snorted, having forgotten their concerns about Nodoka learning about Ranma’s curse, as Shampoo charged forward to join the fight.

“Wait, what? Why in the world is the panda named Genma?” Nodoka asked, confused and now very annoyed at Akane’s actions. “Akane! I know your father raised you better than to simply charge in and damage someone else’s dojo like this! Calm down!”

Akane ignored her, while Mai was forced to dodge a sign hurled her way while another sign batted aside a blow from Shampoo, who was currently cursing the fact that she had left her chui in the room she shared with Mai that morning. *Why didn’t I put them in my ki space? Because I’m an idiot, that’s why! UGH! I deserve to do a thousand pushups in recompense.*

“Don’t tell her anything boy!” the first sign read, followed by another, which tried to smack Ranma in the stomach just as he dodged the blow from Akane. “You don’t know what she’ll do to you if she finds out about your curse.”

At that, Ranma hesitated almost long enough for Akane to catch him with a blow. But he dodged around it at the last instant, taking her feet out from under her with a light toe tap to the back of her knee before jumping backwards out of sign range. This forced Genma to jump over Akane to keep up the pressure, which he did. Wielding signs in either hand, he was moving them too fast for Ranma to make out the words on them.

This didn’t matter though, as Kurumi took it upon herself to answer Nodoka’s question. The youngest girl was watching all this with interest, while her older sister had already charged forward again to help against Akane and the panda. Picking up her water bottle, she heated it in her hand. Then Kurumi pulled off the top of the water bottle, and hurled it upwards, so that it splashed down onto Genma where he was fighting both Shampoo and Ranma at the same time, helped by Akane’s wild swings of her dangerous hammer until Natsume reached the other girl again.

The change occurred, and not for the first time the watching Ranma, Akane and Nabiki all found themselves grateful for the fact that somehow, when it came to changing its target into an animal, the curse allowed for clothing to change as well. *Or else we’d all be getting flashed right now, and no one in their right mind wants to see that. Although come to think of it didn’t my mother... Nope, brain bleach, brain bleach for that!* Ranma thought, as his father yelped at the heat of the water.

Although it didn't stop him from smacking Shampoo aside with a sign to the side of the face. "It doesn't have to be that hot girl!"

Kurumi stuck her tongue out, while Nodoka stared. Then her eyes rolled back in her head, and she fainted dead away, only to be caught by Jubei, who was watching all of this with amusement and a little bit of distress at the damage being done to the floors of his dojo.

While Jubei was letting Nodoka down onto the floor, the backmost wall of the dojo exploded inward, sending bits of masonry flying like shrapnel. Dozens of bits hit both Andy and Terry who had been standing between it and the action occurring around Ranma, sending both of them to the floor with groans as a young man appeared in the hole his punch had created. "Ranma! Because of you, I have seen hell! I... Wait, you're actually here, awesome! Good! You'll pay for leaving sweet Akane!"

Ranma barely was able to look in Ryoga's direction given how hard his father was pressing him with Akane. "Really, bacon breath? Really!?"

Thankfully, someone else was more than willing to pick up the challenge. "You asshole! Who do you think is going to pay for that huh?" Mai shouted, tossing a fan straight towards Ryoga, who ducked.

Ryoga took one look at Mai, who was wearing her traditional combat outfit, and had to fight down a nosebleed. "Gah!? Wh, what the hell are you wearing, woman!?"

"It's called a kunoichi dress. Seriously, are you even Japanese if you don't know what this is?" Mai asked incredulously as she charged towards this interloper.

"I, I know that, but why is it so loose, you look like you're trying to drop out of it!?" Ryoga growled, trying hard not to let his eyes wander. *As much as I love her, Akane doesn't have anything like those curves!* He reached up to his bandanna and pulled off several of them at once, one under the other.

As he held them in his hand, they all stiffened, solidifying so much they looked almost like bars of sharpened metal. These, he hurled at Mai and Ranma like shuriken and the woman he recognized as Shampoo from Akane's descriptions, not noticing two men pushing themselves out of the rubble from his entrance. *There can be only so many purple haired trollops, after all.*

Shampoo didn't see the one coming towards her, causing Ranma to grab Genma's arm, twisting it around and bringing one of his ubiquitous signs up to block the strike, which opened Ranma up to a blow from the other hand, lifting him up to slam up into the ceiling.

Mai intercepted the other three coming towards her and the now, quickly getting to their feet Terry and Andy. "Shadow Fan!" From her hand came not one, but several fans, from

her ki space. A dozen more were hurled toward Ryoga, but most of those were Shadow Fans, immaterial copies that only looked like the real thing.

After those fakes though came one real fan that erupted into a fireball as it struck Ryoga, hurling him back out of the hole he had made, where he landed, quickly rolling to put out the fire. "Dammit! Who throws fire around like that, honestly!"

"Who barges into a dojo by blasting open the wall, honestly?" Terry taunted, cracking his knuckles. His back was feeling quite bruised from all the bits of debris that it hit it, but neither he nor Andy was about to let this guy get away with attacking them like that.

Ryoga growled at them, pulling off still more bandannas, although this time not hurling them forward. Instead, he held them as he channeled some of his ki into them, hardening them into short swords almost in his hand. "I don't know who you or that woman are, but might be business is with Ranma. Get out of my way if you don't want to be hurt!"

"While he seems a little bit of an arrogant so-and-so, I can't say I approve of simply smashing through everything in your path to him, especially when that includes me," Andy drawled, "And that means you've got a beat down coming, brat!"

That caused Terry to roll his eyes a bit. "Careful Andy, you're not that much older than him, you know."

"Oh shut up, bro!" Andy grumbled. "Let's just kick his ass and then deal with the panda-turned man. God, magic is real, so weird..."

As one, the two of them broke off in either direction, circling around Ryoga, who was forced to turn to face one than the other before they charged.

Inside the dojo, Natsume had finally succeeded in pushing Akane away from Genma so that she could be taken out without dealing with him. "Shampoo, target her legs!"

With that, Natsume leapt into the air, bringing down her leg forcing Akane to use the shaft of her weapon to block it. Natsume grimaced at the impact, but kicked off easily, landing, then charging forward, even as Akane came off her guard and made to swing her strange hammer thing towards Natsume. But just then, Shampoo did as directed, targeting Akane's legs with her manriki. The hurled weapon caught Akane around the legs, tying them up and dumping her to the ground, where Natsume landed on her back, pushing her head down into the floor of the dojo.

Having heard all the noise coming from the dojo, Soun had made a point of staying away as long as he could before slowly making his way to the dojo. He now stood in the doorway, watching his baby girl be manhandled by the young woman who thought she was one of his daughters. The sight made him see red, and he made to move forward.

But before he could, he felt a light touch against his throat, and turned to look down at the shorter Jubei, although Soun was hard-pressed to remember the fact that Jubei wasn't all that big at the moment, the anger in the older man's face almost making Soun quail. "Do not even think of getting involved! Things seem to be subsiding now, and I refuse to let you add more fuel to the fire. Look at what your daughter and that strange boy have done to my dojo!"

Soun did look, and grimaced, sighing, his anger leaving him. It was one thing to damage their own dojo while sparring or dealing with interlopers. It was quite another to assault another dojo in such a way. And it was one thing to argue with Ranma or other youngsters rather than an old, respected master such as Jubei. "Tell me the damages, and I will pay for the repairs."

That caused Jubei to remove his fingers from where he had been poking two of them into the side of Soun's neck in preparation for a disabling blow. "That sounds excellent. But for now, let us watch this last bit of madness subside, shall we?"

The bit of madness was of course the fight between Genma and Ranma. While Ranma had surpassed his father in a lot of ways, Genma was still tricky and highly experienced. Plus he still retained his signs, which gave him even more of a reach advantage than normal, since Ranma had let his rope dart behind where he and Shampoo had been sparring before the interlopers arrived. For a few moments, it looked as if the fight would continue for a while with no real winner unless someone else started to join in. Which none of the other martial artists would do now that it was down to a one-on-one fight.

But then Ranma pulled out one of his new tricks. Allowing one punch to sail past his head, Ranma moved in such a way that his father was almost certain to concentrate his next attack on Ranma's shoulder. Concentrating on bringing his ki up to just below the surface of his skin, Ranma waited a second then, when his father punched him again, he sent forth his Blue Burst technique at the same time concentrating at all on his front, right where the blow was sure to hit.

As Genma's blow hit Ranma, for just a moment, Ranma felt as if the blow landed but didn't bounce away. *Wha...* Certainly it didn't hurt at all, but the reaction was really weird. But just as Ranma made that observation, his Blue Burst activated. From Ranma's upper body came an explosion of blue ki, blasting Genma up and off of his feet, sending him flying in a tumble through the air.

He slammed into the ground next to Shampoo, who had left Natsume to watch Akane. Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, the Amazon quickly finished him off with a two-handed hammer blow to the back of the head. "Shampoo always enjoy knocking fat man out! Remember to-to clearly how he interrupt Ranma and Shampoo's match outside cave back in China!"

Ranma snorted that, then looked over at where his mother had fainted, frowning pensively. He moved over in her direction, hoping to check on her, but before he could, Nabiki spoke, shaking his head as she looked between Natsume and Kurumi. A veteran of Nerima, she was easily able to ignore the weird and unusual violence around her to concentrate on what she thought of as more important. "So these are the two so-called Tendos you found, Ranma? I have to say, I'm not sure what you're after trying to pass them off as Tendos but--"

"Get yer head examined Nabs," Ranma interrupted, rolling his eyes as he jerked a thumb towards Soun. "Don't look at me. Look at your father. He's the one that handed off one of his first training manuals to the girls, both of whom think of him as their father, and promised them that one or the other could succeed as heir to the Tendo dojo."

"It is true," Natsume added, before looking down at Akane beneath her. The weapon in her hand had disappeared, and she was looking quite tired at the moment, but Natsume was somewhat appalled by how Akane had charged forward like a bull in a China shop a moment ago, and was taking no chances. "If I let you up, can we at least talk about this in a reasonable manner? I am not unaware of how Ranma treated you, but that is something between the two of you. What we need to discuss between the six of us is Tendo business."

"As if you're a real Tendo!" Akane grumbled, before nodding her head and letting the cheating bitch help her up, rubbing at her head in annoyance before moving over towards her real sisters.

Moving towards the others, Natsume and Kurumi quickly explained about the written promise and the note, as well as how they had always called their trainer back in the day father, and that what little memory they had of him seemed to match Soun's appearance: long hair, a somewhat broad back, and being tall.

Nabiki took both the note and the notebook, looking through it thoroughly, shaking her head before passing it on to Akane, who stared at the notebook eagerly. Nabiki also examined the handwriting on the promise note, and sighed faintly, while Kasumi simply shook her head, and seemed to loom over Soun, staring down at him in disapproval. Soon, Akane and Nabiki joined her, all three Tendo sisters creating on-the-fly an equivalent to Soun's own Demon Head Attack, although their forms enveloped their entire bodies rather than just their faces. "Daddy! How could you!" Akane shouted. "Giving these girls my, our birthright!"

"Yeah dad! If you accidentally got some other woman pregnant while to timing our mom, that's horrible." For once, Nabiki wasn't thinking about herself or money, but rather the idea of leaving two young girls out on the street to fend for themselves. "And why the hell did you leave them with a note like that!"

"Not only that, but how could you dishonor our mother so?" Kasumi growled. For once, her normal air of not quite being all there was gone and she glared down at her father with all the anger of a ki-enhanced giantess.

To this, Soun only had one answer. He stared up at them, his lips quivering, and then he began to weep, massive rainfalls of tears coming from his eyes as he blubbered, "Wah, my daughters! My daughters are unhappy with me!"

"We're not buying it Dad/Father!" came three voices, and Soun quickly began to apologize for his supposed wrongs, banging his head on the floor even as tears continued to flow like tiny rivers from his eyes.

Seeing this, Ranma shook his head looking over to where Natsume was watching her three possible sisters with some approval, and Kurumi was chomping on some popcorn she pulled from somewhere. *Honestly, that girl uses ki space for food more than I do. I might have created a monster there.* "So, do you still want to join this family?"

"You asked me that question before when Soun lost control of his tears, and my hands are still same. I think my sister and I will be quite happy, once we have established our position," Natsume said primly.

"Eh, it's better than being on the road," was Kurumi's much less firm response. "And at least two of these girls look like they could be friends. That's good at least."

Ranma turned as a sound from behind him came, and watched as Terry and Andy walked over the rubble from the whole Ryoga had made in the outer wall.

"Well, that was kind of satisfying. The guys about as strong as you are Ranma, but he wasn't able to take as much of a punishment," Terry reported, cocking a thumb over one shoulder, his shoulders and head wet.

Beside his older brother, Andy scowled in annoyance as he rung out his hair. Behind the two, Ranma could see rain falling in sheets, the sky having finally made good the promise everyone had seen since earlier that day. "Yeah, the guy didn't have much beyond those scarves and a decent amount of strength going for him. But what he was able to do that was somehow disappear as he moved behind a tree try to try to put it between him and me. One moment he was there, the next gone. I've seen Mai try to do that whole disappearing act, but even with the use of flash bangs or smoke bombs, she couldn't do that."

"Yeah, all we saw after that was a little pig running away. Don't know where it came from, or where it was going but I hope it can survive the number of traps out there," Terry began, only to break off as he saw Ranma's suddenly shifty face. "Wait, don't tell me..."

Nodding at that, Ranma didn't reply verbally. Instead, he just turned back to the Tendos, watching as Akane turned away from her father, to point an accusing finger at Natsume. "You! If you think for one moment that you can just claim the position of heir to the Tendo dojo, you've got another think coming! We might be related, but that doesn't mean I'm just going to let you take over my position."

Behind her, Soun suddenly stopped crying, and quickly pushed up from the kowtow position he had assumed under the glares of his daughters, his mouth opening and protest. But before he could say anything, Akane spoke the three words practitioner of Anything Goes could ever take back. "I challenge you! If I win, you leave along with your sister and leave my family alone! You stop this nonsense of being our sisters, let alone the heir to our dojo!"

Both Nabiki and Kasumi frowned at that. While Nabiki was willing to wait until they could get a paternity test done, she also knew the body of current evidence seemed to prove these two were their half-sisters, and was willing to go along with that, if unhappy about the implications. It was clear just from skimming the booklet they'd learned from that Kurumi and Natsume would add a lot to the dojo. Kasumi, on the other hand, was furious at their father, but unwilling to ignore the fact that these two needed a roof over their heads. In her opinion, girls should not live on the road like Ranma seemed to enjoy. She was willing to set aside the whole family issue to give them a home.

"I Accept. And if I win, I take your place as heiress," Natsume answered calmly.

"Now wait just a minute, my Akane is tired from her journey, and..." Soun began only for Jubei to interrupt.

"And Natsume has been training since the morning. I believe they are equally ready for a spar," Jubei rejoined.

The two masters stared at one another, then Jubei gently gestured to either side, indicating the damage to his dojo. "I believe you have been given yet another reason to rethink certain things have you not?"

Soun flinched at that, but then nodded, looking down at Akane sternly reaching out and gently taking the notebook from Nabiki, tucking it away into one of his pockets, his earlier histrionics gone from his. "Regardless of anything else young lady, we're going to have to train you to control that temper of yours. Using the Tendo Style Ki Weapons in conjunction with anger ki is an incredibly dangerous thing to do."

Jubei nodded firmly, while Akane simply huffed, turning away from her father to stare up at Natsume again. "Well, come on, let's get it over with! Unless you're scared? There won't be an Amazon floozy or a pervert to protect you."

Natsume scoffed. "Sacred? Of an out-of-control child like you?" Without another word she turned away, marching towards one of the salles, which was still in one piece, with Jubei and Soun following.

Ranma and the others were about to do the same when Nodoka groaned from where Jubei had placed her on the ground. The older woman pushed herself into a sitting position, frowning as she looked around. "I had the strangest dream. That attack panda of yours Kasumi,

it turned into my husband. I do not know what was in that meal we had aboard the ferry, but I think I'm going to write a complaint."

Before Ranma could think of trying to explain that away, Nabiki, in an incredibly bad mood at the moment decided to spread the pain. "It's not some kind of fever dream. It's real. Genma and Ranma are both cursed. As in magically cursed to change forms."

Ranma glared daggers at the girl, but Nabiki didn't even look in his direction, instead following her sisters and father over to one of the intact sparring areas. Behind her, Nodoka blinked, staring at the unconscious form of her husband, who had been tied up by Mai and Shampoo while the Tendo confrontation was going on. "That, that is indeed my husband who was not here, and, and the attack panda is not in sight. I, I... Magic is real? And, and you have a curse too my son?"

Ranma winced. "Yeah, I've got a curse too." *Please don't ask, please don't ask, please don't ask!*

"What do you turn into? A panda like your father? And whatever is the story behind these curses? I hope the two of you have not done something dishonorable or unmanly such as despoiling a temple or some such..." Nodoka began, pushing yourself to her feet, leaning on the still covered honor blade to help her do so.

Seeing this, Akane stopped and turned, watching as Natsume did the same. A frown was on Natsume's face, while Akane had a look of intrigue on hers, wondering how this would go. With the two girls suddenly halting in their rush to start their match, Jubei and Soun also turned back, with only Jubei in the dark about why Ranma looked so worried all of a sudden.

She fucking asked! Seeing that, there was nothing to do but bite the bullet now, and hope that if Nodoka tried to demand Ranma's life, that the others all around him would back up his desire to not have his head chopped off. "Well, you see..." From there, Ranma explained about the Jusenkyo, and about how it was really all his father's fault that he had gotten cursed in the first place. Not only because Genma had taken them to the Cursed Springs, but because Ranma had been so startled by Genma's transformation into a panda, that when the panda attacked him, he couldn't dodge.

Both of these things caused Nodoka to turn and glare towards the now awake Genma, who flinched in his bonds. He opened his mouth to say something only to realize that Mai and Shampoo had thoughtfully made certain that he couldn't, stuffing his mouth with cloth in a makeshift gag. When he tried to break out of his current bonds, he found the ropes around him were far too tight, not leaving him any leverage to escape.

"I understand. And no onus falls on you for being cursed Ranma, although I would have thought that you at least would've taken the time to learn how to read Chinese," Nodoka

remonstrated, wagging a finger at Ranma. "Honestly, traveling across a country on foot in search of new martial arts techniques and not bothering to learn the local language?"

"Hey, I was having enough trouble just trying to learn how to speak Chinese at the time. It was only after Shampoo and I got together that I started to really learn at a faster pace. I knew enough Chinese to read signs and make out names and distances and I thought that was enough," Ranma defended himself, hunching his shoulders a bit at the gentle rebuke and the fact that if he had indeed known how to read, he would have also known to steer well clear of the cursed Springs. *Or at least kick my old man into one to see if they were real before jumping up on that damn pole myself.*

"Well, at least that is a start. But you have not told me what your cursed form is." Nodoka scowled. "It isn't very honorable to try and keep a secret from your mother Ranma."

Ranma sighed, then held out his hand. From his ki-space he pulled a water bottle, frozen from its time within. He heated it up to the point where the ice was melting, before pouring it over his head. "The old man fell into the spring of drowned panda, but, but I fell into the spring of drowned girl."

For a moment, Nodoka stared, then her eyes twitched over to Genma, then down to the bundle she was holding one hand. Her hands clenched and unclenched, and her face almost turned white, although from what emotion Ranma couldn't say at first. When she spoke though, he couldn't help himself from flinching. "It is only the fact that you are somehow in a relationship with young Shampoo and seem to take your martial arts training so seriously that I am not demanding you and your father both commit seppuku right now!"

"I'm sorry, what?" Jubei interjected, his voice suddenly cold as he stepped forwards, reminding Nodoka and Ranma of his and the others presence. Behind him, Andy and Terry both also looked a little horrified, with Terry going so far as to mutter something about 'stupid Japs' under his breath. "What exactly are you talking about?"

"This is a--" Nodoka began, her face now furious, but Jubei's voice cut through that fury like a knife through butter.

"You are in my dojo, young woman! And while I tend not to take many things seriously, forcing someone to commit ritual suicide is one of them. Now explain."

Nodoka huffed, but did so, and afterwards, Jubei slapped his face with his hand, shaking his head from side to side. "While I can understand the need to try to motivate someone like how Ranma has described his father, using something like that on Ranma when he was but a toddler when he signed it and had no way of knowing what he was doing is entirely another! Such a thing is completely beyond the pale, and should be seen as invalid by anyone with a real understanding of honor."

The crimson haired woman looked as if she would argue with the man, but looking around, she saw that she would get no help here, not even from Kasumi and Nabiki. The look of cold contempt on Jubei's face as well as the sneers from the two as-yet un-introduced boys made her think perhaps that she might be wrong here. "At least tell me that this female form of years has had no impact on your mental faculties Ranma," she said instead of what she was going to say.

"No it doesn't," Ranma answered. He also looking at her coolly now, having made a point of turning back into his male form a second ago. "The only thing it does is make chocolate taste a lot better as a girl, and make me realize what girls go through every month."

Nodoka slowly shook her head, seeming to gather herself before speaking up once more. "Do you have a cell phone number? I gave you mine the last time we met, but you did not reciprocate."

Hesitantly, Ranma nodded. Mai had demanded that he and Shampoo buy one each over the winter. Ranma still wasn't certain that was necessary, but had gone along with not it, unwilling to argue about it.

Nodoka took it, copied out the phone number on to her own cell phone and then calmly turned away. "I need some time to think about this. I will be in contact with you later, Ranma. One way or the other. As for Genma... he too will hear from me."

For a moment, everyone in the dojo watched as she silently stalked out, letting those disconcerting words behind her. A moment later, she heard the distant bang of the front door as she left the Shiranui estate.

As the echoes of that faded, Mai hesitantly moved over to Ranma, placing an arm on his shoulder. "Ranma? Are you okay?"

Ranma shrugged, turning back to her with a faint smile on his face. "Thanks for asking, but actually, I'm okay. I mean I haven't actually known Nodoka existed for all that long, so not having a mother in my life is just fine by me. Does it hurt that she didn't seem able to accept my curse and everything else? A little. But frankly, I like breathing too much to care."

"Well put," Jubei agreed, then clapped his hands, gesturing around them. "Now, I believe that we have a match of honor to get to, and then, I'm afraid I will have to call a construction crew to come in and repair all this damage."

Ranma and Shampoo both held up their hands at that. "Actually, we can repair most of this. We'll have to go out and get some supplies for the outer wall, but that's about it. You got a whole forest out there for ready-made wood, after all."

Jubei blinked at that, and then laughed. "Martial Arts Construction? I haven't met anyone who practiced that school in years. Excellent. In that case, you too may start that, while the rest of us referee the match between these two young ladies." Jubei wasn't about to let Soun get out of that, not after having seen how much damage Akane did already. Leaving her in a position to learn even more martial arts she might misuse was not going to happen if he could help it.

OOOOOO

That match went about as well as could be expected. Natsume didn't try to humiliate Akane, but she did beat her soundly. Akane surprised Ranma a little by being able to use a ki weapon, but she couldn't sustain it for long, having burned through a majority of her ki reserves earlier. In turn, Natsume made a point of not using any of her own ki attacks, simply beating Akane without them so there could be no protests of having cheated or not taking her seriously.

While that was going on, and Jubei was making certain that Soun would honor the agreement made between the two girls, Ranma and Shampoo, with Mai and Andy helping, repaired much of the damage done to the dojo. As night began to fall, the only thing that was left to be repaired was a portion of the outer wall. Ranma had underestimated how much quick cement he would need for the repair. Still, Jubei, Mai and Andy were very happy with the repairs, in particular the ones to the roofs of both the dojo and house.

Meanwhile, Soun, at his daughter's purging, decided they would start the trip back to Nerima that day, not wanting to impose on the Shiranui's hospitality. They had a lot to talk about, although Ranma was pleased to note that Kasumi and Kurumi seemed to be getting along decently and he knew that Kasumi and Natsume would get along just as well once Kasumi forgave the girl for usurping Akane's position as heir. Nabiki too seemed more thoughtful than anything else, while Soun was simply resigned to his fate.

Which was frankly good enough in Ranma's opinion. He honestly didn't want to have anything more to do with that family any longer, and was just happy that Soun hadn't tried to force Natsume to also take on the honor agreement between their families one last time before leaving. *He seemed a little too shellshocked for that. Still, that's the last bit of the Tendo/Nerima nonsense I had to deal with.*

Genma too was gone by the time Mai and Shampoo began dinner. Jubei had done something to the ropes, then knocked Genma out and called the police to collect him just as they had the gangs that Andy and Terry had dealt with two days ago. Ranma was under no illusions that any jail cell would hold his old man for long, but hopefully by the time he broke out, Ranma and Shampoo would be in Hong Kong.

With Natsume and Kurumi gone, that allowed Andy and Terry to once more share Andy's room, as they had done every time Terry lived with the Shiranuis since they were preteens. Shampoo would continue to share Mai's room, while Ranma would still bed down in the dojo.

However, Shampoo announced over the meal that she would bed down in the dojo as well, not wanting Ranma to dwell on what had happened with his mother.

The others were fine with that, although Jubei, who could sense the girl's ulterior motives, did make a point of leering at the young couple, and warning them not to defile his dojo with any nonsense.

Ranma snorted. "Or else what, you old fart? You'll be watching?"

"I just might!" Jubei laughed, causing Ranma to shiver a bit.

Mai snickered at that, then headed up to her room, thankfully noticing that Andy had also headed up to his room, while Terry was taking a turn in the bathroom and Jubei cleaned up after dinner. That was good. That allowed her to put her plan in motion.

While the drama with the Tendos and Ranma and his mother had taken over the day, Mai still remembered Andy telling her that he was going on a trip to America with Terry, and didn't want her along. That she felt, was the next to last straw. *First, he doesn't do anything beyond hug me since I returned and that reluctantly. Heck, he didn't even come up and talk to me last night, and turned away when I tried to talk to him the night before. Then I see him looking at Natsume. And then Andy tells me that he's going on a training trip?! Oh no, Andy, you're not leaving so easily. Not unless you give me a straight answer on where this relationship of ours is going.*

Even thinking that was new for Mai. Before meeting Ranma and Shampoo and seeing how they were around one another, she would have thought that she and Andy were simply having relationship troubles, based on their dual dedication to the Art and Andy always being a little reticent when it came to emotions. That she still loved Andy, and that love would eventually let Mai break down his prudishness.

But now? Now was a different story, on many levels. Now she had seen that even among martial artists a relationship was more than just having similar interests and a shared past. It was about talking about hugs, about a willingness to talk things through.

Now she was wondering if Andy really wanted to be in a relationship with her at all. *And that in turn is making me wonder about a lot more.*

She took a few moments to dress, then pulled a robe over her chosen 'outfit' for the evening, before grabbing a single large sock from her winter clothing. If things went well, that sock would be a symbol to Terry to find someplace else in the house to sleep for the night. When Mai and Andy had first started going out, they had started to use that signal. Of course, only Terry ever really obeyed. Jubei took it as a single to try to peep. But at least the thought was there.

Resolutely, Mai opened her door. Looking out and thankfully not seeing any sign of Jubei, she moved across to Andy's. She knocked, and when he told her to come in, did so, closing and locking the door behind her, smiling as she saw what Andy was wearing, a pair of underwear, and muscle-t, which showed off his bulging muscles and bulging... other things.

From where he was packing Andy looked up only for to first look at Mai in wary confusion. Then his eyes widened as Mai allowed her robe to fall, revealing what she was wearing underneath.

Fishnet stockings covered her legs from her feet up to midcalf, accentuating her powerful legs and womanly thighs, but not really covering much before being attached to a garter belt by lace ties. Her panties were also lace, and tied to either side of her waist with little black bows, the dark red of her panties showing off starkly on her tanned skin. Above that, her washboard abs were bare, while her breasts, those large, pendulous breasts that even covered stopped men's minds, were presented rather than contained in a half bra that ended just above her nipples, made of lace as well.

With her hair down flowing down her back like a river of black silk and the small smile on her face, the overall impact was insanely sensual. Mai practically oozed sexuality to the point where a gay priest would repent and then toss aside his vows. Even Ranma, who'd had months to get used to controlling himself around her, would have been drooling.

Yet Andy simply stared, his jaw agape, and a faint flush suffusing his features, before he shook his head. "Wh, what the hell are you doing Mai!?"

"What does it look like~?" Mai purred sultrily, swaying forward. Andy backed up to the point where he was, his back smacked against the outer wall below the window stood between the two beds that dominated his room. "If you're so set on going away with your brother, then I want at least your full attention on me tonight. That is what a boyfriend and girlfriend should do when they're going to be separated for a while, right?"

Gritting his teeth Andy shook his head. "I, I still need to pack. And my brother will be..."

"I have a sock right here, ready to be put on the doorknob outside. I think you know your brother well enough to know that he won't bother us if we put that up."

"What about Jubei?"

"He'll be out of it soon. I spiked his drink at the table tonight, and you know my uncle can't handle his liquor," Mai answered, smiling and pushing herself up against Andy, reaching up to twine her arms around the back of his head. "Now, that you know that there aren't going to be any interruptions..."

"Dammit, Mai! I'm just not ready for this!" Andy barked, pushing her away.

Mai let him, not just because Andy was stronger than her, but because she had felt his complete lack of reaction to her and was stunned. Stunned, and now growing angry, at that and this utter rejection. "And when are you going to be ready!? Dammit Andy, you and I have been dating for more than two years now. But ever since my curves finished coming in, I've been the one planning all our dates, I've been the one chasing after you, putting in all of the effort in this relationship. I dress up for you, I try to get you to go out with me and you always come up with excuses to even hang out with me."

"Then maybe you should have taken a fucking hint that your dressing up like this was part of the problem!" Andy whisper-yelled back. The loudness of his voice, despite it pitched to not carry, made Mai take a few steps away from him, and he waved his arms wildly. "Seriously! You keep on doing this, when I've done everything I can outside of straight up telling you that I don't like it!"

"Don't like me dressing up like this for you, or don't like me anymore?" Mai said, her voice soft now, and she wilted a bit, looking almost beaten. *Fuck. I, I thought, I thought it was just his shyness but, but this is more than that... is, is he really just not attracted to me!?*

Andy flinched at that, and looked away not replying. "I, I didn't want... we were friends first and foremost Mai. But you've always been too interested in the Art and since puberty hit, you've begun to be too much of a vamp for me. You can't be both treated like one of the boys one moment and a girl the next. I... I also didn't realize it, but I think I prefer, well more demure, less in-your-face girls."

Mai's eyes flashed at that, and she shook her head, scowling. "Well guess what, asshole! Talking it out would have been better than keeping it bottled up. Hurt feelings don't last for very long so long as you're honest about it. And as for my being too interested in the Art, what the hell is your problem?! I'm just as serious about the Art as you are. Not taking me seriously is a slap in the face!"

"And I've never understood that." Andy retorted, before shaking his head, going on in a more conciliatory tone. "You have what Natsume was fighting for earlier already. You have a decent home, a good way of earning a living. You don't have to—"

"Oh my god, you're being a chauvinist!" Mai accused interrupting him and pointing it Andy dramatically. "Is that what this is about? You just don't think a woman can measure up to a man in the martial art so we shouldn't try?"

"I don't think you can measure up without sacrificing a lot more than I would want you to," Andy answered honestly, shaking his head. "You want to be feminine and treated as a woman, but if you follow the Art how can I do that and take you seriously at the same time? You have to be one or the other."

"That's not your decision to make!"

“It should be both of our decisions to make if we were in a relationship. Isn’t part of being a relationship changing to meet the other person halfway? Shouldn’t you listen to me when I tell you I’m uncomfortable, but you never have!” Andy shot back.

“I, I suppose I’ll give you that last point,” Mai wilted, before shaking her head and rallying. “But would you be willing to meet me halfway on my pursuit of the Art if I backed off with the flirting in public but kept on dressing like I do normally?” Andy’s silence was enough of an answer and Mai rolled her eyes. “And whoever told you that changing someone’s fundamental personality was part of being a relationship was an utter idiot. That just says incompatibility to me.”

Turning around and giving Andy a view of her rear that most men would have cheerfully committed murder for, Mai grabbed up her robe. “Well, I doubt a little boy like you could have handled a woman like me anyway!”

She pulled on her robe, and made for the door, but Andy spoke up spot stopping her for a moment, causing her to turn around. “Mai, where does this leave us?”

“There is no **us** anymore Andy.” Mai slumped again, suddenly feeling very tired as she looked down at the floor. *This, this did not go anywhere near the way I wanted it to*, she thought, her mind going over everything since she and Andy had gotten together, wondering where it had gone wrong, and why. “Maybe in the future we can become friends again, but you should have told me when you were slowly starting to fall out of interest with me right from the start. Instead, you let me make a fool of myself for more than a year, making me think it was just you being a prude. I’m not going to forget that anytime soon.”

She now glared at him, letting Andy see her eye glittering with unshed tears. “I’m not going to forget that the man I thought I was in love couldn’t treat me like a woman just because he’s so small-minded as to be uncomfortable with my pursuit of our mutual passion. Or that he didn’t have the balls to tell me didn’t find me attractive since my body became too busty for him to handle.”

With that, Mai left, slamming the door behind her. Andy stared after her, then touched his chest lightly. “Ouch. I’m going to need some burn jell for that one.”

Mai moved back to her room, then leaped out the window, heading towards the woods, not caring what she was wearing at the moment, just wanting to get away from everyone for a bit. She moved through the foliage of the forest for a time, dodging the traps she and Jubei had put up almost unconsciously as her mind went into a spiral, wondering where it had gone wrong, wondering if she really should have just waited for Andy to make the first move rather than convince him to try dating her in the first place.

Also crying. Lots of crying. So much so that if she believed in makeup, she would thoroughly have ruined it, crying for a love that had simply died out without her noticing.

But in the end, Mai decided she couldn't have waited. Mai was who she was, she was proud of her body, and while she didn't really care about other people's opinions, she had enjoyed showing off for Andy, had enjoyed getting reactions out of him in public and in private. Knowing now that he hadn't really been all that attracted to her since her curves had developed so much was a bit of a wrench, but Mai still knew she was attractive. She had seen numerous boys react to her, including Ranma occasionally, and even girls.

No, that particular problem along with Andy's chauvinist tendencies was on him. *Could I have been more understanding of his desire to travel with Terry? Sure. Could I have outright demanded that he put in more effort early on, which could have led to a discussion like this one earlier. Maybe. Should I have seen that Andy was falling out of interest in me, have listened when he told me he was embarrassed rather than thinking he was just playing hard to get? That, that is definitely on me. Should I have realized there needed to be something more than simply growing up together and sharing some of the same interests to a relationship? Yes.*

But I don't want to waste my time running after someone who's not interested in me any longer. Instead, I want to push myself, I want to push myself to the limits of what I can do as a martial artist. So that the next time he and I face one another in a match, spar or tournament, I kick Andy's ass!

With that thought, Mai turned back, heading towards the dojo now. If she wasn't going with Andy and Terry, then Mai knew another pair she wanted to travel with. A pair that had already told her that they would be fine traveling with Mai and Andy, instead of having Mai travel with the two Bogard brothers. A pair that wanted her to travel with them.

In her anger, Mai hadn't realized how much time had elapsed since she had left Andy. It was now deep into the night, Mai having taken several hours to get her head on straight after Andy's revelations.

When she opened the repaired door to the dojo and marched inside, Mai paused instantly as Shampoo and Ranma broke off from an intense make out session. Shampoo rolled away from Ranma grabbing at the covers to their joint sleeping bag only to pause as she realized who had just barged in on them, and letting them drop, showing off her bare chest to the other woman. It wasn't as if Mai hadn't seen her naked before, after all. "Mai not remember to knock?" Shampoo questioned harshly, her accent showing again.

"Sorry," Mai said, looking away but not before taking a good long look at both of them. While Shampoo didn't have as much up top as Mai did, she still had a good handful, and her stomach was as flat as Mai's too. Her sweat streaked hair matting her shoulders and back was surprisingly alluring site as well. As for Ranma, well, he wasn't as muscular as Andy or Terry, nor as tall. But he was even more defined than either, and the way his taut muscles rippled as he sat up from where he had been lying down to look at her more closely caught Mai's attention even more than the muscles Andy had put on over the last few years.

For their part, both Ranma and Shampoo had to admit Mai was looking, well, the phrase, HOT DAMN went through Ranma's mind, while Shampoo was forced to admit the other woman was amazing looking, although it wasn't the first time that thought had gone through her head. But for some reason Mai's robe was open, and underneath she was... her breasts were... her body was... Even for someone who had become very familiar with someone like Shampoo, who was gorgeous enough to make a model weep, Mai's body was incredible, especially with all the lace and silk or whatever else she was wearing. And for a moment, still worked up from what he and Shampoo had been doing, Ranma couldn't look away. The look in his eyes as he looked at her caused Mai to shiver a bit, the shocked desire there for just a moment before Ranma's willpower asserted itself and he wrenched his head away. Still that and Shampoo's look of appraisal gave Mai a nice little ego boost after her confrontation with Andy.

It also reminded her of what she was wearing, and Mai quickly pulled her robe tight. "Sorry," she said again also turning away to look at one of the other walls for a moment. "I kind of forgot how late it was you know? I've been doing a lot of thinking. And I wanted to talk to you."

"Are you okay?" Ranma asked, frowning a little as he took in Mai's tear-streaked face. "Only, the way you are dressed, well I didn't see much before you pulled that rope tight again, but..."

"Oh no! Did Andy suddenly realize that he's gay or something?" Shampoo asked, her accent gone now as she called down, hurrying forward to envelop Mai in a hug, uncaring still of her nakedness.

Mai gratefully returned it, sighing faintly. "No, not gay, just not interested in a girl like me. Or like a girl I turned out to be." She gestured down to herself as Shampoo pulled away. "He finds all of this a little too much, not just my attitude but my body, and my desire to continue to get stronger in the Art. Says I don't need to. When he mentioned not finding me attractive anymore, I decided I was done listening to him. I was done trying to well trying to be in love with him, with the image of Andy I'd built up in my mind, I guess. It'll take me a while to get fully over it, but I wanted to talk to the two of you and ask if that option to travel with you was still on the table."

"Heck yes!" Ranma and Shampoo answered as one, then looked at one another and laughed before Shampoo went on. Neither of them had wanted to say goodbye to their friend, and had hoped for a while that she and Andy – maybe – would agree to travel with them. Indeed, the two of them had been talking about that very thing earlier in the night before turning to other matters. "A friend is always welcome to travel with us, so long as the friend also remembers that when the tent is rocking, she should not come knocking."

“You got that out without a hint of accent! Well done,” Mai enthused, while Ranma snorted and blushed at the same time. “Are you two still thinking about heading to Hong Kong, or was that just a place holder for some other plan?”

“Yep. I figure we should be able to swim it in a day or so--”

“Heck no!” Mai interrupted him, with Shampoo a second behind her with an admonishing, “Bad Ranma!”

Shaking her head, Mai put an arm around Shampoo’s shoulder, and the two of them walked over to where Ranma still sat in the center of their sleeping bag. There Shampoo pulled on her shirt and then laid out in front of and half-on Ranma, hiding his body from Mai’s view in a way that Mai held back a snicker at as she sat down, pulling her knees up to her chest... or as much as a woman built like her could, anyway.

When she spoke, Mai continued the conversation about heading to Hong Kong, wanting to move past both her confrontation with Andy for the night and the slight awkwardness of her companion’s lack of clothing. “If that’s the extent of his plans, then it’s a good thing you’ve got me then isn’t it? Leave it to me. I bet I can find a sub boat traveling to Hong Kong. And after that, well, I suppose the three of us will have to see where the wind takes us.”

End Chapter

Woo, that was a hard chapter to get out. Not least of which being the number of emotional conversations going on. Mai and Andy’s confrontation is not the first such I’ve written, but it is a scene I have always had trouble with. UGH. I hope I did it justice, but I’m afraid I didn’t, so I will be interested to see everyone’s opinions. I wanted it to simply be a personality incompatibility issue, but I’m afraid I might have leaned too much into the ‘woman stay home, man go out’ thing.