

**Howdy all. The dialogue in this chapter did not come easy to me. Combat scenes yes, dialogue, no. I fear I repeat myself several times, but really, that's kind of true to the original when it comes to the whole honor agreement between the Saotomes and Tendos, and what the various parties think about it. Still, I hope you enjoy this, I think it's quite a fun little romp.**

## **Chapter 6: Unwilling Traveling Companions Make for Hard Roads**

"...What exactly am I looking at here?" muttered a young park ranger to his companion, looking around in some shock and quite a bit of concern. "When we got the report of loud noises coming from around here, I did not expect this! Did, did some group of homeless people set up camp here over the winter? And then get into a fight? But then, what the heck happened to that tree? It looks like a bomb hit it or maybe some kind of tank round."

The young park ranger looked at the triangular cabin and the outhouse nearby, shaking his head. "But if there were some homeless people here, and they could do work like this, why were they homeless in the first place? That's some good construction. Heck, our outhouse isn't nearly as well-built as that one."

"Which will be why we'll be taking that outhouse with us on the truck. If we can lift it, anyway." His companion was a far older man, his hair going gray, his beard already there. He had seen quite a lot in his time as a park ranger and knew instinctively what he was looking at now. "As for who was staying here, I suppose you could call them homeless. Just never say that to their face. This was made by martial artists, the traveling sort, and most of those have chosen to travel rather than be forced to."

"Martial artists?" The younger man scoffed. "Next, you'll tell me martial arts mangas and graphic novels are true to life. No human could have done that kind of damage," he said, gesturing to the shattered or cut trees around them. "My own guesses sound way closer to reality."

"Explosions would've left some fire damage behind, and how could anyone have gotten a tank up here in the first place?" The older man asked, shrugging his shoulders. "But believe what you want. I know what caused this, and it's nothing we would be able to do anything about. The martial artists here moved on, as well as whoever attacked them. Let's start cleaning this up. We can leave the cabin in place, I think. It might do for another ranger station eventually."

He looked over to where a significant amount of rope had been left behind after something had torn through a portion of it, shaking his head. "Let's just hope that whatever was in those ropes doesn't come after us."

Genma nodded thoughtfully, high up in the trees above the park rangers. *That old ranger knew his stuff, although I don't particularly like that he's talking about me as if I'm some wild animal.*

Setting that thought aside, Genma frowned a little. The quick but heavy squall that had come through an hour ago had woken him up, and after a few minutes wiggling and chewing, he'd been able to free himself despite the number of ropes his dishonorable son had used to tie him up. After that, Genma barely had time to use his kettle and return to his human form before the park rangers arrived.

Worse, the rain had undoubtedly washed out whatever tracks the boy could have left. *And Soun is nowhere in sight. Did he get cold feet again? Or is he trying to track them down?*

Genma didn't know, but he did know he was alone and Soun had not left any kind of message behind for him. Worse, the boy and his companions had proven to be extremely skilled. *Why the boy's surrounding himself with not just two but four women now, I don't know. I taught him to never let his hormones blind him to the fact women are weaker than men! Yet, while they are undoubtedly weaker than a similarly trained man would be, I can't deny that they're dangerous.*

"No, if I'm to go after him, I'll need some backup," Genma mused aloud as he moved swiftly through the foliage away from the park rangers. "And I have to start paying off Madame Rose for helping us find the boy this last time too. Damn it!"

Yet there was no help for it. Simply chasing after the boy alone was a losing game. Even Genma could see that now. He would have to plan and gather further allies to bring the boy under control again. *And if Soun has gone anywhere, he'll eventually return to Nerima and the dojo. I suppose I can wait for him there, while also contacting Madame Rose about how she wants us to pay off our debt to her.*

Satisfied with his plan and the fact that it would allow him to rest on his laurels once he got to Nerima, Genma nodded and then moved off through the trees, leaving the area well behind.

For now, Ranma and company would no longer have to worry about being trailed by Genma. But he wasn't giving up just yet...

**OOOOOO**

"Are you sure you're alright to keep carrying him? This isn't you backsliding into that whole 'women are weaker than men' thing that your Father tried to shove into your brain, is it?" Mai asked, ending suspiciously, although her look was somewhat concerned as she looked over at Ranma. "Shampoo or I could go a few hours carrying him. And before you say it, I know

you've trained to carry your old man for hours but we've been going for the better part of the day."

Indeed, it was nearly evening now. The group had left the southernmost edge of the park well behind and traveled overland, passing through two small towns and across several farms in that time. Mai didn't know how far they'd come, but martial artists could travel very quickly if they wanted to. They also hadn't stopped even for a bite to eat except when it had rained briefly. They didn't even need to stop to make certain Soun remained unconscious. Their mode of travel and the numerous large branches they travelled through saw to that.

Now though, it was pushing evening, and they were coming up on a city in the distance. Mai could see the skyscrapers starting to form on the horizon.

"I'm fine. And it ain't like I don't think you could do it. I just think it'd look extremely weird if any of you did. I mean, Soun's taller than I am. You're the only woman here who is even close. The others would look very weird if they tried to carry him."

Actually, if that had been the only reason, Ranma would have passed Soun over to Mai, since they hadn't stopped to let Ranma transform back into his male form. Ranma also considered carrying Soun something of a penance for not telling Natsume and Kurumi his concerns about their whole back story. But while he'd gotten better at sharing things and talking about feelings, he still wasn't going to share everything.

"And you don't?" Mai demanded, calling Ranma out immediately on his lie, giving the redhead a look that said she wasn't fooling the taller girl.

"Hey, I was already carrying him," Ranma retorted. Weakly, even to his own mind.

But Mai snorted, exchanging a look with Shampoo, who snorted, indicating she also had seen through Ranma. That made Ranma really uncomfortable, like there was a weakness to his defense he couldn't fix, but Mai simply stated, "Fine. But tomorrow, I'll take a turn carrying Soun."

"Fine, but don't complain ta me if he accidentally gropes ya while he's so out of it. He did that to me when it rained a moment ago," Ranma warned, trying to regain some face. "Heh, he spoke about melons and wanting a squeeze too. Kinda funny, but I doubt ya'd like it." *Though in Mai's case, it'd be cantaloupes or coconuts, no bad mind, don't go there, gah!*

Mai blanched at that, having severe Jubei flashbacks for a second. But then she squared her shoulders and indicated that she would wear a T-shirt and jeans tomorrow instead of her regular kunoichi dress. "That way, I can keep the gropage to a minimum."

"I don't think that's a word, but it works for me," Ranma snickered.

“And I will go after Mai. We’ll split the day between us,” Shampoo added, poking her elbow into Ranma’s side.

The three of them were out in front despite Ranma’s burdens from the two sisters, who then decided to get some time to talk to themselves during the run. While that was hours ago, the two sisters hadn’t tried to catch up to the others, although Shampoo and Mai had slowed occasionally to let the sisters catch up.

“I feel as if one of us should take them as well. Tendo-san is our father, after all,” Natsume said from behind them. If there was any reluctance in her tone to do so, or hesitation about whether or not Soun was really her father, none of the others could detect it and Ranma winced a bit.

“Fine, if you’re so eager, you two can share him on the third day then,” Ranma snarked.

Her timing was rather poor. Just as she spoke, the martial artists passed over and through what looked like a small bus stop for farmers. Several farmers gaped after the group, more than one blushing at the implications that sprang to their minds as they looked at the young girls, particularly the redhead carrying the large, unconscious middle-aged man as Ranma’s words reached them. Several ribald reasons for Ranma’s words came to all of them, but thankfully for their continued existence, none of the martial artists noticed as they continued to race on.

“For now, if the two of you are done talking about whether or not you think this old guy is your dad, let’s analyze the fight more, okay?” Natsume and Kurumi both nodded in eager agreement.

“I was extremely surprised at how well Soun fought,” Shampoo said, still needing to remember the ‘I’ word rather than speak accidentally in the third person, but without much hint of an accent otherwise. “Some of his techniques, although seemingly quite ki-intensive, were amazing. I wonder if we could somehow figure out that technique that allowed him to create images almost.”

“I agree, although I was surprised to discover how much Father’s style required him to stay on the ground,” Natsume said, frowning slightly at that. “Genma’s style is far more like our own in terms of maneuverability. But Soun did recognize all the techniques Kurumi and I used on him. Perhaps the Tendo style shifted into a more land and durability-based one, once Father settled down in this Nerima place.”

“Actually, I’m wondering something myself. To create armor and weapons like Soun did, that use of ki leans heavily into the spiritual side of things than anything I’ve seen you do, Ranma. To create first a battle aura, then manipulate the shape and solidity of it? That’s pretty damn impressive, way more than my copied fans. Does your school have anything like that?”

“No way,” Ranma answered instantly, shaking her head from side to side to Mai’s question. “My Pops never taught me anything like that, and I never saw him do anything either. The closest thing I can think of would be the time... I think I was ten or so I can’t remember. The old fart used his battle aura to scare off someone trying to chase us down. Don’t ask me about the context o’ that. I couldn’t tell you. That’s the only time I ever saw my old man use battle aura.”

“But your father did tell you about ki?” Mai pressed.

Ranma shrugged. “Meh, eventually. After I’d been unconsciously usin’ it ta heal myself faster for years. At that point, he told me a bit about it, how ki allowed me to be stronger and faster than a normal person. I learned more about ki practically from the moment Shampoo and I left Nerima than I ever knew before.”

“And you know that Akane did use anything similar?”

Here Ranma shook her head. “Nope. She didn’t use ki like I do to empower herself beyond the norm. I mean, in strength, Akane was really strong for a girl, more gorilla than girl, really. But nowhere near as strong as any of us. But she occasionally used anger-based ki to create small hammers or maces to hit me with. But she couldn’t summon it on demand or anything.”

Hearing that, Natsume and Kurumi both winced, but Natsume cautioned her sister in an undertone to remember that they were only hearing Ranma’s side of the story. Her faith in Ranma being truthful about his time in Nerima had changed thanks to the revelation that he hadn’t shared his concerns about whether or not Soun was really their Father and had hidden the whole honor agreement too. Natsume was certain Ranma wasn’t altogether lying but equally certain she wasn’t telling the entire truth. Leaving out anything that would paint Ranma in a bad light that Natsume could definitely see their ‘senpai’ do.

“That’s a little strange to me.” Mai’s words returned the sisters’ attention to her, and she went on thoughtfully, “In my school, we are taught about Yin and Yang, the need to balance the two forces. Too much physical ki, too much spiritual ki, leaves you weak in certain areas. Vulnerable to the opposite alignment and not as good as martial artists as you could otherwise have been. Further, too much physical ki without spiritual understanding to balance it out could lead to several different issues: the use of emotional ki, the lack of spiritual ki leaving you open to mental attacks, and so forth.”

Shampoo cut in that, nodding her head firmly in agreement with Mai. “Is true. Only through the use of both the spiritual and physical sides of ki have my clan's elders have been able to keep their combat abilities and live so much longer than normal. My grandmother is at least three hundred years old, and while she looks it in many ways, Grandmother is still far stronger than any young warrior in the tribe. Or any six or seven, really.”

She laughed then, a light little giggle that caused Ranma to grin at her. "Actually, I heard it called differently a time or two. Male and female energy. Grandfather always said that was because women are better at being smarter and men much better at using brute force to solve their problems. While you can favor one over the other, not having any of one can lead to a lot of emotional issues."

Ranma frowned, thinking deeply. That didn't match anything he'd ever heard from his old man, but when comparing Mai to Genma, Ranma knew who he trusted to tell them the truth. *And it matches a lot of what we learned from Master Nawa, although she never mentioned the whole balance thing.* "Do you think he could've done it deliberately? Not mention the spiritual side of ki to me, I mean?"

"Maybe. But if that's the case, going from your description, Soun's done the same thing in reverse. It could be something they agreed to when they split the school," Mai said. "Why I have no idea."

"That makes some sense. But for now, I think you're saying that since we've spent so much time physically training through the toughness training technique, we should switch to ki techniques and the spiritual side of things? Just to balance things out?"

"I really wasn't saying that," Mai sweatdropped. "I was just pointing out something peculiar in how your schools have done things. But sure. I can teach you all a lot about meditation and such. We can start in the morning and continue when we reach my home." She grinned then. "Don't worry, soon all of you will be able to copy throwing stars or whatever. And even maybe have your own booby window," she teased, looking over at Ranma, who groaned theatrically. "That's a technique that is both physical and spiritual."

The fivesome could push through that first city, crossing over the rooftops and pushing on, still heading straight south. Nevertheless, by the time they started to leave the city's lights behind them, night was fully upon them. With the last light from the city and the road they had been paralleling turning away, the group was left in near-total darkness.

"I think the next time we come into an area of tree cover, we should set up camp," Ranma said.

"Or we can double back, follow the road for a bit and find an inn," Mai countered.

"Maybe," Ranma answered, indicating the wave of her hands that she would go with the majority.

The vote was to find a hotel room, and the group twisted around slightly, following the road towards the East, away from their previous route. The group continued traveling through the night, slower than they had before due to the lack of visibility, none of them wanting to draw attention by being so close to the road they could be seen, which put them outside the

range of the lampposts there. Kurumi, Shampoo and Natsume didn't like traveling at night like this through areas they hadn't been before, while Ranma was stoic about it, having done the same thing numerous times while with his old man.

In contrast, Mai enjoyed walking in the dark and regaled them with stories about trips she had taken during the night away from her home. "I mean, what kind of fourteen-year-old would willingly agree to an eight-clock curfew? Seriously! Anyway, Andy and I once went on a walk through the woods near our house, and it's amazing what kind of wildlife you can see at night. We found several raccoon families living in the woods near our house, and even Jubei hadn't spotted a single hint of them before coming out at night. Then, we found this amazing little stream behind our house/during the day, it didn't look all that much, but at night, it was populated by so many fireflies it was amazing looking."

"Actually, that reminds me of a story too. The first time I saw a tree house was at night," Ranma reflected.

"Wait, what!?" Mai exclaimed, with Natsume and Kurumi both joining in. Shampoo had to take a moment to realize what a tree house was.

"It's true. I'd never seen one of those before, not until I was eight or nine. Pops had told me to make myself scarce while he worked a few jobs to get us some money for food. It wasn't something he did a lot, and he slowly stopped doing it as I grew older, but at the time..." Ranma shook his head and took a moment to smack the top of Soun's head against a passing tree hard enough to shake the tree before turning back to the topic at hand. "Anyway, it was the first time I'd been in a treehouse, and it wasn't a new or privately owned one. It was on one of those large-ass towers that park rangers sometimes use as lookout places. It was run down too, but I still thought of it as a cool wooden castle, you know?"

Shampoo and Mai nodded at that, while Kurumi reminisced about a few times she'd thought of herself as a runaway Princess and Natsume her faithful knight.

"That kind of thing, yeah. Anyway, it was just a cool place to have fun during the day, but at night? I didn't realize it, but it became the home of dozens of falcons from all over. They would come in there to purchase night, and hearing them move and rustle above me was awesome. They didn't seem to care I was there and just napped all over the place."

Ranma frowned then, shaking his head. "Wasn't so interesting the next morning when I realized they pooped all over the place too. Including on my stuff."

The girls all laughed, and the trip passed quickly. Soon they were within sight of another town, and Mai and Shampoo pushed on the head of the others to see if they could find a hotel, while Ranma Natsume and Kurumi waited in the outskirts, hidden on the rooftop of a gas station.

Shampoo was soon back with the others, directing them down a few side streets to a three-story hotel with one room to rent for the night. The fact that it was a love hotel went unremarked by any of the other three, who didn't recognize it for what it was until they entered.

As Ranma entered from the balcony he stopped, staring at the one massive bed in the middle of the room shaped like a heart. "What in the heck..."

"Sorry. There aren't many regular hotels in this town. There are just love hotels like this one," Mai apologized. "The look Shampoo and I got from the person out front..."

"Well, whatever. It isn't as if we have to sleep in that abomination."

"C, can we at least turn that wall over there opaque?" Natsume said, her face a rosy blush that made it look like all her blood vessels had congregated there rather than the rest of her body.

The wall in question was the bathroom wall that the main room shared, and it was currently see-through. Why someone would want that took Ranma a moment to realize. When he did, he and Kurumi turned just as red as Natsume, while Mai and Shampoo looked somewhat intrigued.

"I've never been in one of these before, and while I can't say I approve of the decor, far too pink, and that heart-shaped bed is hideous, you can kind of see what they're going for. I don't know about any of you but seeing my lover shower in the morning after a night of passion would..."

"Thank you, yes! You get the idea," Natsume interrupted Shampoo, while Ranma and Kurumi were still a little too shocked at what they were seeing to say anything. She resolutely moved forward, sticking her head inside the bathroom and examining the controls by the doorway, finding a few with sliders. A moment later, she breathed a sigh of relief as the wall turned opaque from the chest area down. You could still see someone's head if you were in the shower stall, which was a separate unit from a large bath, but that was a small price to pay for a warm water bath or shower. "We'll have to put a towel over the entryway, though."

The bathroom didn't have a door. Rather it was simply open to the main room there.

"Why? We're all girls, after all," Mai teased, looking over to where Soun had been led to slumping to one of the corners. "We'd best tie him up too. After that, I don't know about the rest of you but I could do with some sleep."

Kurumi's grumbling stomach drew everyone's attention to the younger girl, and she rubbed the belly with one hand as the other one tucked at her hair sheepishly. "Sorry, but can we get some food first?"



“I didn’t pay for the room service option, but I think we’ve still got some leftover camp food, right?”

Ranma nodded to Mai’s question, and the three of them quickly began to pull the last of the food they had cooked that morning before the fight with Genma and Soun out of their ki space. The large bed became first a table and then a bed for Natsume Kurumi and Mai, Shampoo and Ranma both refusing to get even get into the abomination, despite Ranma deciding that to at least wink at the idea of decency, she would sleep in her female form for the night.

The two lovers spent that night curled up in the corner opposite where Soun had been left, instead of sharing the love-shaped bed. This proved to be a good thing, as they were woken up several times by mutters from the bed of:

“Mai, remove your hand from my rear!”

“If you can get your sister to remove her foot from between my legs!”

“Why do the sheets here smell of rose and a lot of perfume?”

This comment from Kurumi was followed by a ‘loud’ silence and a mad scramble from Natsume and Mai to exit the bed, pull off the covers, toss them to the floor and pull out their sleeping bags. Kurumi’s continued question of what was going on fell on deaf ears as Shampoo and Ranma stayed silent in their corner, having no wish to join the tumult.

They were nearly asleep when Kurumi’s cry hit them, causing the lovers to snap wide awake along with the younger girl’s bedmates. “Wait, I just got it! Ugh, that’s so disgusting!” Followed by the girl falling out of the bed in her sleeping bag and thumping to the floor.

Luckily, they were able to get several hours of sleep that night before being woken up around nine thirty in the morning by the concierge calling. With Ranma heading back out the balcony after once more knocking Soun out, the other four headed down the stairs, where Mai handed the keys back to the man at the desk, who stared, his face shifting into a smirk.

Mai didn’t let him speak, instead tossing the key at his head and walking past him in a huff. “If anyone thinks that kind of thing is romantic, they need their head examined.”

The man continued to stare after them, taking in the beauty of all four girls and wondering what they got up to that night. Thankfully for his continued health, only Kurumi responded, giving him the stink eye as they left the hotel.

“All those in favor of putting a few miles between us and this place raise her hand,” Kurumi said as soon as the foursome was outside. The loud course of such agreement she got did not surprise her in the slightest, and the four of them screwed around the building up onto

another nearby rooftop, where they found Ranma and the still unconscious Soun waiting for them.

But Natsume couldn't help but notice that Soun had grown yet another bump on his noggin to add to the cornucopia already visible there. "Did Father wake up? And could you please come up with another way of keeping him unconscious? Father mentioned concussions during our talk with him, so I don't think Kurumi or I would be happy to see him gaining more brain trauma."

Ranma snickered at that, then nodded, indicating that Soun had woken up. "I just knocked him out again. I don't think this is the right place for a discussion."

The others all nodded at that, and eager to put the embarrassment foisted upon them by that room well behind them both physically and mentally, the group set off across the rooftops. Soon they were leaping down onto a road leading southward, getting some looks from car drivers as they did, but then they were past them and out into the hilly country beyond.

As they went, Shampoo noticed Mai becoming increasingly silent. Ranma and Kurumi had been dominating the discussion that morning, talking about speed technique training they had done in the past, and in particular, the speed technique that Shampoo had shared with Ranma, the Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire Fist Technique, which Ranma had been modified the training method for. With the emphasis on the Toughness Training during their stay over the winter, they hadn't had much time to devote to anything else, and what they had, was devoted to ki space training, while Kurumi and Natsume training the others in their hot and cold ki manipulation.

But Kurumi was eager to see how quickly she could learn the speed technique. "I mean, I'm already fast, so if I can add that Kachu thing to that speed, I might be fast enough to try the after-image technique you see in so many mangas. It appears in so many stories, there's got to be some fire to that smoke, right?"

Through it all, Natsume participated eagerly, while also wanting to work on incorporating more kicks and lower body attacks into her style but Mai didn't. Instead, Shampoo saw her becoming increasingly melancholy. Finally deciding to broach the subject with the other girl, Shampoo shifted away from Ranma and the others, pulling Mai to one side of the group so they ran a few yards away from the rest of the group. "What's wrong? You look as if you're thinking deep or sad thoughts."

Mai sighed a little, nodding her head. "It's just... I'm uncertain what's going to happen when we reach my house. Jubei will welcome us with open arms. Perhaps a little too enthusiastically," Mai added as an afterthought, accompanied by an eye-roll before going on more seriously. "But my conversations with Andy over the phone haven't gone very well in trying to convince him that the two of us traveling with the two of you would be a great idea.

He doesn't shoot down the idea of traveling but doesn't sound enthusiastic about joining us. Instead, Andy said he already intended to go on a training journey with his brother this spring."

Mai paused then, gesturing down to herself, not realizing that she had spoken as if the idea of going with Shampoo and Ranma was a done deal. "Now I'm all for the two of them being friends with one another and everything there. But if you had a choice to go with your brother on a world trip or with your sexy girlfriend, who would you choose?"

"Sexy girlfriend. Even if in his girl form, Ranma is much better company than stupid Mousse or any other male from back home I could call brother," Shampoo said, smirking slightly over at Ranma, who rolled his eyes.

"Exactly! And when I brought up the idea of me maybe going with the two of them instead, he tried to shut me down so hard, it was like he didn't even want to entertain the idea! Like I was making him uncomfortable asking. I just don't get it!" Mai growled, still stinging from that despite it having occurred almost a week ago.

"Could Andy perhaps be a little intimidated? Not by you personally, but by the idea that you wish to grow stronger. I have heard that men prefer to be a stronger than their womenfolk," Natsume who had heard everything, interjected, understating things dramatically and eager to not keep thinking about her own issues at present. "I have never met a boy who liked the idea that his girlfriend was a better fighter than him. Indeed, that is why no boy has ever approached me when Kurumi and I have been forced to go to school."

"Ugh, I know!" Kurumi grumbled. "I mean, I'm not interested in boys much, but sometimes hearing the names they come up with is horrible. And that one guy who said that you must be a 'butch eater' despite how you look, I never understood what that insult was about."

Natsume and Mai blushed a bit, understanding that Kurumi had not remembered the insult precisely right and knowing what it probably had been instead. Shampoo and Ranma looked confused, not, Mai reflected, that either of them would take that as an insult.

"Now, that's not it. At least, I... don't think so." Mai hesitated, then shook her head firmly. "No, Andy never cared about my training or anything before, so I can't see it bothering him now. Although, if it does turn out to be some kind of machismo thing, I'm going to hit him so hard!"

She looked across at Shampoo, shaking her head. "How the heck do you two do it? Keep your relationship going strong, I mean."

"Shampoo and Ranma just make certain every day that we give enough time to be with one another. It's easy enough when you both agree to put an effort into your relationship. This

isn't the first time I've said this to you, Mai, but it sounds like you're doing all the work in this relationship with Andy. He needs to be willing to do something on his end."

Really to Shampoo, with her experience with Ranma and given the stories she had grown up on back in the Amazon village, it sounded as if Mai was doing all she could to convince Andy to be in a relationship with her. Whatever was going on with Andy was on his end, not hers.

"Shampoo and I kind of did luck out with one another," Ranma admitted. "We first got to know one another as martial artists in circumstances where we were kinda forced to get along."

"More like forced to live together. Ugh, Shampoo still remember how too-too horrible that rain was," Shampoo grumbled, her accent slightly more audible than previously. "Still, that allowed us to realize we shared a lot of similar interests and almost became friends before we realized we were really attracted to one another."

As Shampoo blushed and smiled at the memory of their kiss on the Tendo roof, Ranma spoke again, trying to not remember how he had been attracted to Shampoo physically, while they were in the cave. "Honestly, I don't really know what kind of advice we could give. You've shown him you're really interested in him, that you want your relationship to succeed, and so forth. But if he's not even willing to talk to you about it..."

He clicked his fingers then, grinning suddenly. "I don't suppose you know if there's anything dark or dangerous in his family history, right? No ancient evil or feud that claimed his parents' lives that might come for Andy and his brother? Keeping you at arm's length so you don't get evolved in that kind of thing could be why he's not responding to your flirting any longer."

Mai and Shampoo both laughed at that, as Mai said, "Please! What is this, an anime? I wouldn't put it past Andy to be that selfless, but I would already know about something like that, given how long we've been friends." *And again, if there is such a thing, he could just tell me! I'd still hit him for it, but I would at least know what the problem was then.*

Throughout this conversation, Natsume and Kurumi had remained mostly silent, not knowing enough about Andy or how Mai had gone about trying to grab his interest before this to comment. Mai's relationship with Andy had come up a lot over the winter but she hadn't gone into as much detail with the sisters as she had with Shampoo and Ranma, since neither sister had any romantic experience.

Uninterested in this topic, Kurumi moved ahead of the rest of them, leading the way through the forest, while Natsume frowned thoughtfully, looking at Ranma and Shampoo and wondering again about what they had learned, wondering about the honor arrangement that might force her to pursue a relationship with Ranma. While she wasn't entirely against the idea,

she was against trying to break up Ranma and Shampoo and didn't know how well Shampoo would be willing to share if she tried to take on the mistress role of things.

*After all, while that might run in the family, that certainly doesn't equip me with any knowledge about how to make such a thing work,* she thought, a nasty little snarl on her face as she did so, knowing now that if Soun was her father, and Natsume still thought he was, her mother had certainly been a side mistress rather than his wife. That hurt, even though both she and Kurumi had known it was coming. *And then there is Ranma, who wants nothing to do with the agreement between the two schools. Ugh... drat it, how is this all going to turn out?*

Despite Natsume's inner turmoil, the rest of the day passed uneventfully. The fivesome made good time traveling at a pace that anyone not a martial artist would have thought was impossible, crossing a little over a hundred miles in a day through harsh terrain.

As evening fell, they came upon a small campground built around outdoor activities like archery, running and so forth for camps. The place had several different areas that catered to clubs, baseball, soccer and so forth, over the summer. Although most of them were full, they still had one cabin to rent to the five traveling martial artists, although Ranma had to stop well away from the camp to stash Soun nearby elsewhere as the girls went in to haggle, to keep from answering any awkward questions.

As Ranma was away doing that, the others ran into some trouble. Several young men of high school age lounged around their own cabin as the girls appeared around a corner, heading for the cabin they had rented for the night. As soon as the boys saw the four girls, they began wolf-whistling loudly. Several even sauntered towards the girls calling out, "Hey girls, you up for some fun? Some cross-club interaction, maybe? What club are you all with and from where?"

"No club, no crook cross club interest, no interaction," Shampoo shot back. *I had enough of jocks while on that ferry from China. "To bother someone else flies."*

While Mai might have been a little more diplomatic, Kurumi snickered, waving her hands airily at them, as they were indeed flies. "Yeah, shoe! Go back to swinging your big clubs at little balls as if that's all that interesting."

"Oh, she shouldn't have said that," Mai muttered as the group by the other cabin stood up and began to walk towards them angrily, while the three who had approached them initially glared and began to shout tirades at the young girl.

"We didn't ask for your opinion, little girl!"

"Yeah, none of us were interested in you, only the hotties with you."

"Seriously, shouldn't you be at home with your dollies?"

That caused Kurumi to snarl angrily and take a few steps towards them, her ribbon falling from her wrist to start coiling at her side. "You assholes! I'm only a few years younger than Natsume-neesan! Dollies, I'll teach you dollies!"

One of them made the unfortunate mistake of trying to brush her aside, and Kurumi instantly lashed out with a kick that took the taller boy in the leg, then a mule kick to the head as it came down. The man flew backward, and suddenly what had been an attempt to maybe bully the girls into having some fun became a real fight. Several youths closer to their cabin raced inside, coming back out with baseball bats, charging forward with the others as they closed on Kurumi shouting imprecations. "Fuck you Shortstack!"

"Get him!"

"You'll pay for doing that to Natsu, you bitch!"

Not one to let her sister fight such odds alone, Natsume strode forward, her carpet swatter coming off her back and crashing into the side of the head of one of the attackers, hurling him into several more. "Have you noticed that these boys sound like so many cretins?"

"Bah, Ranma needs to work with you on your smack talk. Say rather that the speed they start to use curses is inversely proportional to their actual combat skill," Shampoo said, trying to sound erudite even as she gleefully charged forwards like a wrecking ball, knocking several of the men off of their feet as their baseball bats shattered on her arms and shoulders and her own chui came out, hammering men around like they were nine pins.

Behind them, Mai sighed, shaking her head. "And here I thought Ranma was the only one hotheaded enough to start a fight for so little reason."

Mai personally didn't think beating up stupid high school jocks was an appropriate use of their martial arts skills and would have left the trio to their fun. But then one of the attackers charged forward out of the scrum and reached for her, waving a bat in one hand and his other making all-too-familiar grasping motions. "Dammit! The others are freakishly strong, but what about you?"

"Freakishly strong, but I had less of an incentive to use it on little fools like you. You just gave me one. Congratulations, you've won a beat down," Mai answered, grabbing his outstretched hand by the wrist, pulling him into a punch to the face that laid him out, sending him comatose to the ground.

The fight, such as it was, didn't last long. By the time Ranma came back, Mai and the others had dumped the bodies of the beaten, groaning members of the baseball club back into their own cabin, taking their bats away from them as well as tying all of their shoelaces together, one to another to another, in several large clumps. Then tying those clumps to the beds in the cabin.

“That way, we figure they might be unable to make any more trouble for us tonight. Although if I hadn’t already paid for the use of the cabin, I’d suggest moving on,” Mai explained as Ranma took in the scene in front of them, Natsume and Shampoo each dragging two baseball club members towards the cabin, while Kurumi moved beside them, tying all of their shoelaces together.

“Man, and you couldn’t wait for me to get back? What’s up with that?” Ranma grumbled, shaking his head.

As they all sat around the campfire, a little over an hour later, Natsume continued to watch Ranma closely. She watched him joke and pal around with Shampoo and Mai, then compliment Mai and Kurumi on the food. The two of them had taken a turn to cook after dealing with the baseball idiots.

As they cleaned up after the meal, Natsume approached Ranma asking, “Could you perhaps help me through a few of the katas the Tendo School and your school have in common? Regardless of Father and what may or may not happen there, I would like to continue to master the basics.”

Something in the other girl’s eyes caused Shampoo’s back to straighten, and she glared at the other girl, but a hand on her thigh from Mai restrained her from doing anything else as Ranma answered. “Eh, sure, your speed could still use some work and your use of kicks isn’t all that great either.”

“She’s just asking for training, not flirting. Or if she is, Natsume’s way more subtle about it than I expected,” Mai said. “And remember what Natsume said. She’s not interested in breaking you and Ranma up. I think Natsume’s just trying to figure out if she is attracted to Ranma at this point thanks to that blasted honor agreement.”

“That still not good,” Shampoo grumbled in an equally low tone as Ranma hopped to his feet and began to walk Natsume through the kata in question. She became much happier when he called Kurumi away from doing the dishes to join them. While the three were busy with that, Shampoo and Mai were relegated to cleaning up, continuing the somewhat distressing discussion. “The fact that she’s willing to go the mistress route makes it more worrisome, not less.”

“You wouldn’t be willing to share even in that case?” Mai asked, looking over at Ranma.

Shampoo paused momentarily in cleaning the wok, as she thought about that. “Shampoo see back in my old village where women occasionally share man. I can only think of one instance offhand where it was because both women were exclusively into the man, though. Most of those I can think of offhand were more relationships between the women, with the man added on as an afterthought or to give the women children. But Shampoo not know if she could share Airen like that.”

Mai was about to mention the idea of artificial insemination, then shook her head, deciding to concentrate on the main thing at hand: keeping the peace between the five of them. *Because I don't know which side of that argument I would. On the one hand, I want to back up Shampoo because she's my friend, the best girlfriend I ever had, frankly.*

Until puberty had, as Shampoo put it once, her Mai with all the force of a pickup truck, Mai had been very much a tomboy. She had been far more likely to be around Andy and go to martial arts dojos or clubs around her home than hanging out with the girls. And while there were other girls interested in martial arts around Hokkaido, none of them were as serious about it as she was. Moreover, most of those who were, had egos in direct contrast to their skills.

*But on the other hand, I understand honor and the honor of the school being paramount. And I can see how desperate Natsume is to grab onto anything that she can use to convince herself that the life she and her sister have led has had a purpose. I don't want to help drive a wedge between her and Shampoo.*

Deciding that taking either side would be a bad idea, she continued to soothe Shampoo. "Trust Ranma. He's not the kind to flirt and is not the type to lead anyone on."

Luckily, Ranma was no fool. He had learned some female body language over the last half a year since getting together with Shampoo, then meeting Mai, their time at Musubime Osoroshi Hotojutsu and over the winter in the den they had created. Now that they were training together again, moving through a kata that he knew as he knew breathing, Ranma could figure out that Natsume's way of looking at him had changed. *She's still being friendly, but I don't know, she's acting more... feminine? She's for sure swinging her hips a little more than she should be doing that kata. And when Natsume looks at me, it's almost like she's more thoughtful, more analytical? Huh, I don't think I've ever used that word for anything outside of martial arts before.*

At that, Ranma chuckled a little internally, yet he didn't say anything or try to confront her. Not at first, anyway. When she tried to scoot back into him as he was directing her arms through another kata, he backed away quickly, shaking his head. "None of that."

Natsume looked at him guilelessly for a few moments as if asking what he meant, but Ranma maintained his distance and went over to help her sister instead. When he did, she sighed and decided to be upfront about it. "I did tell you that I would be willing to become your mistress. You do not need to set aside Shampoo, for my sake. But once I am confirmed as a Tendo, I will need to..."

"That might make sense from your perspective but it doesn't from mine," Ranma interjected hastily. "Remember, I said there were a lot of other reasons that I didn't want to go through with that arrangement, and not just because Akane and I were not able to be friends, let alone anything else."



“Then explain it to me. I understand not liking Akane. From your descriptions of her or Nabiki, I don’t like either of them. But now that I know you have been holding back on me, I have to wonder precisely what you haven’t been telling us,” Natsume shot back, anger and sadness in her tone.

Ranma winced. “Okay, I deserve that. I’ll admit. I probably should have told you about the honor agreement between the Tendos and me, but I wanted to get to know you and your sister without that kind of thing hovering over our heads. Or can you look me in the eye and tell me I was wrong that knowing about that would have changed how you interact with me and Shampoo?”

“Would you even be talking about going mistress route if not get to know Shampoo?” Shampoo asked, her accent showing up again very clearly thanks to her anger.

“... I can’t deny that, I suppose,” Natsume answered as Kurumi stopped her kata, and sat down nearby, watching events but not taking part. This was something between Natsume and Ranma.

*After all, it isn’t as if I’m interested in him or boys at all yet. I’d hate being forced into something like that, even if it did help us convince Father that we’re the better choice to take over the dojo.*

“But I still get the impression that you are very carefully not telling us things that would bring you in a negative light Ranma. And you have yet to explain what other reasons you have for not agreeing to merge the two schools...”

“Well, for one thing, it was supposed to be an honor deal, and I did mention that my Father made a lot of other agreements of a similar type. So if he’s willing to go that far, do you really want to marry into my family?” Ranma began, counting off the points on his fingers. “Two, you say you’re willing to go the mistress route, but that is a major stigma in our society, and I am **not** willing to do that to you. Three, the Tendo School still really doesn’t have anything to offer me. Why bother merging the two schools together if there isn’t anything there? And four, it was Akane who ended the arrangement from the Tendo side, which means the whole arrangement is off!”

“Yet you know now that the Tendo School does have a lot to offer,” Natsume countered angrily. “Indeed, you have been learning from me the temperature control techniques that are a part of it.”

“Which just means that we don’t need to bring in the whole marriage idea in order to unite the schools,” Mai interjected, cutting across Natsume before she could build up steam.

Natsume paused, thinking, trying to find an argument against that but not being able to. Really, she’d learned just as much from Ranma, Mai and Shampoo as they had from her and

Kurumi over the winter. That proved that merging the two schools wasn't necessarily connected to the idea of marriage. *But pushing for that marriage agreement is connected to me being the heir to the school!*

"And besides, while you might be willing to go the mistress route, you seem to only want to do that for the sake of honor, which really is foolish when you come to think of it. Don't make a mistake like that which will haunt you for the rest of your life Natsume," Mai went on. "Could you even look us in the eye and say that you are genuinely interested in being with Ranma, the person, rather than Ranma, the target of filial honor?"

Shampoo looked at Mai, who shrugged her shoulders, saying that sounded better in her head, which Shampoo agreed. Turning back to Natsume, Shampoo was far more direct in warning off Natsume, who was still looking far too... thoughtful for her liking. "While part of Shampoo applaud Natsume for wish to honor family, Shampoo think she missing one more important thing."

With that, she tossed a glass of cold water into Ranma's face, transforming the boy into a girl, who squawked in outrage. "Being with Ranma mean you willing deal with his female body. Natsume willing do so?"

Natsume stumbled back, looking away and shaking her head quickly, all her other arguments going out the door as she stared the strangest part of the arrangement she was seeking in 'her' face. "I, I don't know. I have not found girls attractive in the past. Physically good-looking perhaps, I've even been jealous a time or two of models I've seen in magazines." She looked at Mai and Shampoo indicating without verbalizing it that it wasn't only magazine models that she had been jealous of a time or two. "But being attracted to women is a different story. I..."

"That's nice and all, but it don't matter to me right now," Ranma growled, cracking his knuckles and looking angrily at Shampoo. "Because I could've sworn I told ya as we were travelin' that I wanted to spend as much time as I could as a guy! I spent far too much time in my female form during the winter, and I'd rather not let my time in the female form build up any further again than it already has!"

Shampoo was about to make a comment that visual aids were always important in arguments, but seeing as Ranma didn't look like she was in any mood to listen, hopped to her feet, deciding quickly that this could be both an excuse to get some alone time and cut the conversation with Natsume short. "If Ranma wants to punish his Shampoo, Ranma will have to catch her first," she caroled, taking off away from the fire pit.

To one side, Mai nodded in subtle acknowledgement. *I see horny makes Shampoo cunning.* Meanwhile, Natsume simply sighed and shook her head, wondering how the issues between her, Kurumi and their Father would be solved.

OOOOOOO

Somehow in chasing Shampoo through the woods, Ranma had lost sight of the campsite behind them. They had crossed what looked like a baseball field, then a running track and out the other side, with Shampoo always able to somehow keep ahead of Ranma despite her best efforts. *Since when is she so fast! Fast is supposed to be **my** thing! And her aim is unreal!*

That last thought was brought about by Shampoo hopping up over a small rock and then kicking the rock directly back towards Ranma. At the same time, Shampoo used it as momentum to push herself up into the trees again, while Ranma was forced to dodged one side. Shampoo had done that several times and had forced him to dodge every time.

Ranma leaped up after her, only for Shampoo to twist around again, now launching herself back towards Ranma. Ranma could have dodged, but seeing this, as Shampoo suddenly giving up, decided not to, instead reaching for her. She wasn't expecting Shampoo to grab her outstretched hands, and lean in, giving Ranma a hard kiss on the mouth. "EPPp..." Ranma yelped, and then both of them were falling, and Ranma was in no frame of mind to make that landing.

Neither actually noticed the impact as Ranma's back smacked into the ground, the toughness training having made it so that they could take hits like that without even blinking. Instead, Shampoo, further cushioned by the redhead, concentrated on giving Ranma the best kiss as she possibly could. Her tongue thrust into Ranma's mouth, as she pressed the smaller girl down into the forest floor. A humming noise came from her throat as she slowly methodically, kissed the living daylights out of Ranma, her hands going from holding Ranma's arms above her head as they landed to slowly moving down those arms, and onto Ranma's chest between them.

Ranma's chest wasn't as large as Shampoo's, thankfully, but they were still nice little handful, and Shampoo began to knead them through Ranma's shirt, finding the hardening nipples easily. Flicking them with her finger, Shampoo kissed Ranma all the harder as she heard the redhead moan. Her knee then pushed up between Ranma's legs where she slowly ground it into Ranma's core, imitating several women/women couples she had seen back home.

Whimpering, Ranma pushed that away with one hand, her other hand winding through Shampoo's hair, holding her head still for a second as she rolled them to one side. Now they were both laying side-by-side on the forest floor, still kissing. A second later, Ranma's leg flicked up and down, pulling Shampoo into her, as their hips began to slowly shift against one another.

No clothes came off, and no hands went under those clothes. Still, this was easily the most they'd done in Ranma's female form, and for several minutes, Ranma lost herself in the sensations of his new body. Meanwhile Ranma had learned a good deal about Shampoo's likes and dislikes, and the occasional bum squeeze and hand roving to her chest began to get Shampoo going as well quite nicely.

But neither of them was willing to take it any further, not laying here on the floor of some random forest. That and the need to breathe eventually

“What, was, all, that, about?” Ranma asked, kissing Shampoo’s face and neck between each word, moving down her amazingly soft, smooth neck then back up to her small, all so kissable mouth, then doing it again.

Shampoo did the same, although Shampoo was much more adventuresome with where she put her hands than Ranma was. Ranma preferred to keep one hand in Shampoo’s hair, winding his fingers through it. The other was now clamped on to her rear once more with just enough force to sting a little. Just as Shampoo liked it.

Slowly the taller girl pulled back from her ministrations, leaning her forehead against Ranma’s and looking into Ranma’s eyes, halting Ranma’s movements in turn. In the darkness of the forest there wasn’t much light to see by, yet Shampoo could still make out those sea blue eyes of Ranma’s that so captivated her in either form. “Shampoo notice Ranma still too-too uncomfortable in female form. Figured Shampoo should show form not matter, Ranma still Airen either form.”

Smirking very slightly at how Shampoo’s accent had come back again almost to the point where it had been when they first met thanks to how excited she was, Ranma thought about what she said, and slowly nodded. “I suppose there’s something to that. I don’t think I’ll ever be as comfortable in this body as in my male body, no matter how many months I had to spend in it at ropewalk. But I guess I should like you said to Natsume, realize, you know, that you’ll be involved in both forms, so I should be open to being with you in both forms.”

She paused then, shaking her head. “Just don’t push beyond on the top of the clothing stuff for now, okay? I haven’t... experimented much in that form myself, feeling someone else’s hands on it would be a little too far.”

“Does that mean that Ranma want to start experimenting with it?” Shampoo asked, her accent slowly disappearing as her faculties returned to her fully.

“I didn’t say that!” Ranma yelped. “Don’t make me out to be a pervert or something.” The redhead then looked a bit sheepish. “It’s just, well another way of getting used to that form, you know?”

“Shampoo does not know, but understands.” When she spoke next, her accent had completely disappeared again, including remembering to use the proper noun when speaking about herself. “Still, I’ll follow your rules on that score.”

She then became more serious. She poked Ranma lightly in the ribs, before splaying her hand out on Ranma’s stomach, reveling in the soft butt at the same time toned skin under her hand for a second. Moving that hand up to Ranma’s chest, Shampoo lightly hefted one of

Ranma's breasts, her fingers once again beginning to play with Ranma's nipple through the shirt. "But I noticed that you didn't shut down Natsume by saying you weren't interested in her."

With that, her fingers threatened to tweak Ranma's nipple hard, but Ranma's answer stopped that in mid-motion. "I didn't even think of it actually. I will if you want me to, though."

With that, the redhead pushed her way out of Shampoo's arms and made to stand up, but Shampoo pulled her back down. Ranma landed on top of Shampoo this time, the redhead moaning once more at the feel of their nipples rubbing against one another through their very short sleepwear shirts. The two of them began to make out once again as Ranma's mouth found Shampoo's. Her hands now grabbing at both of Shampoo's breasts kneading and fondling, the shorter girl laid out entirely on top of Shampoo, whose legs wound around Ranma's hips.

But again, the fact this really wasn't the most romantic setting stopped them from going further. For her part, Shampoo knew she'd be doing some 'self-study', but she knew Ranma wasn't ready for anything more. Indeed, she could see fear mixed with the redhead's current arousal, on her face, and that acted like a splash of cold water to the face. *Ironic, that.* So instead of continuing, Shampoo pulled back, pushing Ranma down lightly to let her rest her head on Shampoo's chest.

For a few moments they just rested there, getting their hormones under control once more, although Shampoo wasn't quite there when she broke the silence by asking, "Why you think it not occur to you?"

Ranma mentally noted that once more her accent had come back. *Is that going to be a regular thing then? Kind of hot, frankly.* Ranma would never said it aloud, but Shampoo's accent was kind of sexy, and he wondered now if it was the same way that he English speakers in movies would think of someone with a slight French accent.

Despite that though, Ranma answered the other girl's question seriously, pushing out of Shampoo's chest to look down at her. "I think it has a lot to do with the fact that I've been fought over by girls before. Remember crazy Kodachi and Akane? My own thoughts didn't exactly come into it with either of them, no matter how often I tried to tell Crazy I wasn't into her. You saw that in the restaurant."

Remembering that incident, Shampoo snorted in amusement, then nodded, understanding where Ranma was coming from but wanting to get the point across. "For them that was probably true, but not for me or for Natsume. Shampoo promise to always listen. Not always like what you say, but willing to listen. And Natsume is smart, and seems to be honorable enough, despite her obsession with becoming the Tendo School heir."

"That's well and good, but you just said it yourself, and well, Natsume is in a very **bad** place mentally. I didn't want to pile on an outright rejection, especially one she could see as tied

into the whole Tendo Saotome marriage thing, you know? It might just force her to try to win my affections or something.” Ranma shook his head at that. “That is the last thing I need.”

Shampoo nodded thoughtfully then decided that was enough serious talk for one night. A second later, her finger’s found Ranma’s sides, causing the redhead to yelp and roll off of her then to her feet. Shampoo got to her feet too, and clasping one of Ranma’s hands in her own turned their feet back the way they came.

**OOOOOO**

The next day, the group set off once more, again heading straight south after picking up Soun from the small storage shed they’d dumped him in. They probably would have made better time following the roads or taking public transportation, but with Ranma carrying Soun, that would undoubtedly have brought more attention they didn’t want, which limited how often they could resort to such. They did twice, both times traveling on the top of buses, but that was about all they were willing to chance

At one point as they stopped for lunch, thanks to Kurumi and Ranma’s stomachs going off so loudly it frightened the birds from the trees all around them, Mai commented on that. “I’m wondering if we should wake him up tie him up and force him to walk by himself. We learned a lot from Musubime Osoroshi Hotojutsu, we could tie him up in a way it won’t be noticeable to other people at a casual glance.”

“Tying him up is one thing, keeping him from sobbing and wailing and making a scene as another,” Ranma answered brutally, causing both Kurumi and Natsume to wince and look away. “You saw the guy was getting all emotional and crying when Natsume and Kurumi confronted him.”

“While I agree with that, I still think we shouldn’t knock Father out every time he looks to wake up,” Natsume said reproachfully, having seen Ranma smack Soun’s head against several trees when he started to groan and seemingly start to wake up. “I say again my last. If Father forgot about us do to brain trauma, the last thing we want to do is induce more trauma.”

“Actually, isn’t that a trope in a lot of anime? Hitting someone again in the head makes them remember things?” Shampoo questioned, to which Mai laughingly agreed, before adding that she doubted any real doctor would ever agree with that.

The group pushed on again, hoping to get to Mai’s dojo in Okinawa in less than a week. Despite that plan though, they had to stop twice to help out locals as the Martial Arts Code dictated they should. One was when Kurumi noticed smoke in the distance of a forest fire. That took unfortunately the better part of the day to deal with, but Natsume and Kurumi’s cold-creating ki techniques proved invaluable, stealing away much of the air from the fire allowing the martial artists to help the park rangers put it out quickly.

Then towards evening, Ranma called a halt as he noticed high above them a car that was in danger of falling off the edge of the bridge. "Kurumi, stay with Soun. The rest of us, let's get up there!" Ropes flew from sleeves, pulling Mai, Shampoo and Ranma, with Shampoo carrying Natsume now, up to the side of the bridge like knockoff Spidermen.

"Mai, with me!" Ranma ordered, as Shampoo and Natsume had landed further down the bridge from the car.

Rushing forward, the two of them grabbed the back of the car, joining several other people who had been futilely trying to pull the car, back onto the truck. With the two martial artists there, the car finally began to move, slowly pulled back onto the bridge as the other stared in shock, some of them even letting go of the car such was their surprise. But the car kept on moving backward regardless.

Once the car's four wheels were on solid ground once more, Ranma began to help the family out of the car, pulling the doors open despite how warped they were. The front of it, the engine and hood, had been smashed flat and the sides had crumpled badly, but the family were all in one piece. Smiling cheerily, Mai helped first the parents then the kids, patting the heads of the two young boys who had been in the back seat cooing about how brave they were for not panicking or crying.

This had both boys blushing (and the Father, much to his wife's chagrin), while Ranma stared down the road where Natsume and Shampoo had landed.

They had raced after the idiots who had caused the accident, a speeding moron who had hit the other car so hard it crashed into the balustrade and then kept on going, careening through traffic.

Ranma smiled now as he saw Natsume and Shampoo coming back the way they had come. Natsume dangled a man behind her, while Shampoo was holding a young woman under one arm, cursing her out in Putonghua as they made their way back to the scene of the accident. "We got the idiots!" Natsume shouted, to much cheering from the crowd as police motorcycles began to arrive.

Moments later, the police began to question the martial artists and the others, getting a full picture of what had happened as the two miscreants were handcuffed and led off to the nearby police wagon. "You'll hear from my lawyers about this, my Father's a powerful man and..." the woman began before being pushed into the wagon, while the man was busy whining about how the police couldn't tell his parents about this.

That surprised Ranma a little, since he had thought it would be the other way around. But apparently not. His attention was pulled back to the police officer had been questioning him as he said, "Well, while I know martial artists live by an entirely different set of rules, I wouldn't want you all to get used to taking the law into your own hands. Here you saved four lives, and

apprehended the miscreants involved but don't make a habit of involving yourselves in police actions in the future."

"Got it," Ranma answered, understanding that the policeman wasn't so concerned about them getting involved in the future as getting involved officially. *Which translates to don't let yourself be recorded, and don't stay around until the police arrived like we did this time. Tell me something I don't know.*

He exchanged a glance with Mai, who shrugged her shoulders, indicating he had been right without words. It had been Mai, who had insisted that they wait after capturing the two morons, since she had never done anything like this before.

With that, the four martial artists quickly left the scene by the simple expedient of racing over to one of the bridges pylons and scaling back down into the valley below. Within minutes, they were out of sight from the gawkers above, racing along a river there, then up again on the other side of the valley. In among the trees well hidden from anyone, they came upon Kurumi, who was sitting beside Soun's still unconscious form. "Next time we run into trouble like that, someone else gets to sit with Father. It's boring!"

"Well, I am sorry about that, but you did lose this morning's game of Jan Ken Pon to take over if Ranma wanted a break," Natsume teased lightly as Ranma snorted at the very idea of him getting tired, gesturing the girls to start moving even as he hefted Soun onto his back once more.

Because of the two stops, the group's hope to get to an area where they could catch a train to the southern tip of Honshu that day was scuttled. And worse, they were running out of food.

Luckily, as they pushed back out of the forests, they came upon another highway. The fivesome began to parallel alongside of it, with Ranma, still more carrying Soun, well away from the others but still within sight of them, who were in turn in sight of the road.

In this formation they came upon a town, and Mai and Shampoo volunteered to head in to buy food. "After all, we'll be the best to try and get a discount if there're single guys," Mai said teasingly gesturing to herself and to Shampoo. While Ranma had been the one to initially come up with Mochi Fu by this point, Shampoo and Mai had long surpassed his meager abilities with it on their trips out of the park to pick up supplies over the winter. A most impressive feat considering how limiting their clothing had to be over the winter.

"I still do not know if that is altogether honorable, but then again, a part of me does think that taking advantage of idiots is some kind of natural selection at work," Natsume mused, causing laughter all around. This had become something of a running gag for the group, with Natsume coming up with new ways to allow for the Mochi Fu technique, while also poking fun at it for being not quite legal.



“Well, if we’re going to have to wait them; Natsume, Kurumi, let’s get some training in,” Ranma announced enthusiastically. “Since we haven’t had much time while we been traveling, we’ll concentrate on sparring. Hand-to-hand first, and then weapons. One on one, and then two versus me.”

When they first met, Natsume would’ve taken that as sheer arrogance and look forward to beating Ranma with her and Kurumi’s teamwork. Now though, she knew that they might well win the weapon fight but it was still going to be a hard run thing.

“That and you three should be on the lookout for some place to stay. Unless you want us to find a hotel room?” Shampoo’s question garnered two yeses to one no, and with Mai also stating she wanted to be in a bed again, the yeses had once more won the day.

“We’re running low on cash though, and we don’t want to rely just on Mai’s credit card,” Ranma protested, then at the looks he was getting gave up. “Fine, but if we’re gonna start spending money on hotel rooms, we’ll need to up our game when it comes to living off the land. Maybe the two of ya can find some idiots and fleece them for all their worth while you’re at it.”

“Again, still not certain that’s altogether honorable,” Natsume murmured, but again made no protest.

It was around nine at night by the time Mai and Shampoo entered the town by walking through its suburbs, not quite time to go hunting in that manner, but that was all right by them. It would let them find a hotel room and get some groceries first.

Finding a hotel was easy. There was apparently a decent hot spring inn here that hadn’t yet updated its website to reflect that its recent renovations had finished, so it was quite happy for the money even for a day for two rooms. The grocery store was next.

Mai sighed as she walked along the street, staring up at the nighttime sky above. With the lights of the town all around them there wasn’t all that much of the night to see, but it was enough to notice that the moon was a mere slit in the sky, and that the stars were bright above them.

Shampoo noticed Mai becoming disconsolate again, and moved over to the other girl, wrapping one arm around her as she leaned her shoulder against the other girls. As she did, Shampoo was forced to once more acknowledge the fact that Mai was taller than she was, although, thankfully not as much as Shampoo was taller than Ranma’s female form. That would’ve been humiliating. “What’s wrong?”

“It was a night like this, with the moon that mere slit and the stars so bright, that I had my last date with Andy before he began to be all anxious and standoffish, no longer reacting to my flirting or flirting with me in turn. It just made me a little depressed as all. What did I do wrong? If I came on too hard, couldn’t he have just told me? I know men are supposed to be

bad at communication, but you and Ranma communicate easily enough! It's not like I'm demanding he needs to pay attention to me all the time, all I want is some romance, some acknowledgement he sees me as his girlfriend!"

"When did you know that you were interested in Andy as boyfriend material rather than as a friend? I had a friend back home, who became interested in me like I've told you before. But I never understood what precisely made him go from friend to wanting me as a lover," Shampoo said, hoping that talking to Mai one-on-one like this would let them find a solution.

"It was gradual, over time, you know? I went from enjoying being around him as a friend and liking to be around him just normally to thinking he was really handsome, then wanting to see how good a kisser he was, to wanting to spend even more time around him. Heck, this past half year, that is by far and away the longest time I've spent not talking to Andy or seeing him on a daily basis since we were preteens," Mai admitted, suddenly realizing that. And at the same time, she realized that, while she did want to see Andy again, it wasn't a burning need inside of her as she had thought it might be. *Weird.*

"So it wasn't one simple thing? That's annoying."

"Not really. The one piece of advice I remember my parents giving me before they passed away was that the best couples start off as the best friends, you know? I'm not saying it was natural or I took it for granted that eventually Andy and I would get together but his being a friend was one of the things that started me down to being attracted to him."

From there she went into a long list of the qualities that Mai liked in Andy: his seriousness when it came to mastering the martial arts, the fact she knew his favorite color, how he liked to dress himself, the way he acted in public versus private, his sense of humor, and so forth. "So when it came down to it, seeing him as a boyfriend wasn't all that big a leap. At least not for me. And if it was for him, why did he go out on dates with me in the first place? Why isn't he telling me?"

Shampoo frowned thinking about it, saying aloud that Mai would make a good Amazon given the stories she had told about how she had tried to get Andy's interest in her. "But perhaps that's just it," she finished slowly, shaking her head. "Were you like you are now towards him when you weren't going out?"

"Of course not. I never tried to flirt with him when we were just friends, and I always gave him space and so forth when he needed it."

"Then maybe that is what you're doing wrong? He might have liked you just the way you were before. Maybe your willingness to flirt with him and so forth so directly is throwing him off?"

Shampoo was also wondering that Mai might not actually be in love with Andy the person, but Andy the ideal. Much like Mousse wasn't really in love with Shampoo, just the idea in his head of what she was like. Shampoo had grown up, changed a lot since her first quickening and had again changed on this journey. But Shampoo doubted that Mousse, blind as he was both mentally and physically, would realize that if they met again.

*It might be the same way with Andy and Mai. Mai seems to have built this idea in her head of what an ideal boyfriend is like and might have thought that Andy would be that ideal boyfriend, but he certainly doesn't sound like he is. And it isn't the fact that he's not responding to her flirting with the issue. The fact that he's not communicating with her, and instead he's just trying to awkwardly run away, put some distance between them when he should be at least trying to tell her what is making him uncomfortable. It reminds me too much about Ranma not wanting to come out right and state that he wasn't interested in Akane when he was in Nerima.*

She didn't say any of that aloud however, instead walking next to Mai as they entered the grocery store. After that, the two of them fleeced several elderly gentleman who tried to convince them to come with them for a night before returning to the others.

"We really need to get you all some cell phones," Mai grumbled shaking her head. "If we had, you'd have been able to come to us instead of forcing us to retrace our steps like this."

"Don't those things let the government track you or something? It's probably not the best idea for martial artists like us, especially Shampoo and me. Remember, our plans have us goin' across a lot of different borders," Ranma warned.

"Don't tell me you're some kind of conspiracy nut," Mai teased. "Yes, some cell phones can track you, but you can turn it off, or even remove the thing that allows them to do it in the first place. You'd have to go to a specialist to do that though."

"I'll stick with just payin' as I go along with a public phone, thanks," Ranma drawled back, gesturing the two girls to lead the way into the town.

Later, Ranma had barely rejoined the girls with his special burden in the in the rooms in the hot spring, when Soun began to come awake, groaning and moaning as he tried to lift himself away from Ranma's back. Luckily, Kurumi had the idea of gagging him a day into their trip and the noise didn't carry very far.

Ranma quickly dumped him on the floor of the room he had been told would be for him and Shampoo, then opened the door that connected his room with that the girls were in, gesturing over his shoulder towards Soun. "Soun's coming awake again. Do you want me to knock him out again, or do you two want to talk to try and talk to him again?"

"We'll talk to him," Natsume said with Kurumi nodding in firm agreement.

By the time he came fully awake, Soun found himself tied into the seiza position. His legs were tied calf to thigh under him, his hands pressed against his stomach and tied there along with his feet being tied together to the back of his shoulders by a Musubime-style special capture technique.

Soun found out what made it special when Ranma twitched his fingers with Mai doing the same on Soun's other side, and one leg started to pull itself up and out to the side, as the arm on the other side also began to pull itself backward towards his ankles behind him. It was quite painful, as if being forced into one of the hardest yoga positions without knowing what yoga was, let alone being in shape to participate. However, the pain subsided as the two stopped moving their fingers, and only as the pain ebbed away did Soun see small thin threads leading from their fingers to the various knots on the ropes surrounding Soun.

"Don't try to get away, yer not gonna find it easy ta break those ropes," Ranma drawled as Natsume and Kurumi stepped forward. The others were to the side, leaving the floor, so to speak, to the two sisters.

Kurumi removed the muzzle that she'd made for Soun, tossing it to one side and instantly, he began to shout, "This is kidnapping! Extortion! You'll never get away..."

"Wow, cliché much?" Ranma shook his head as Natsume covered Soun's mouth with one hand, and Mai made sure he couldn't move his neck to get away by manipulating another series of ropes around his neck and under his armpits. "Would ya've called kidnappin' if you and my old man were able ta knock me out and drag me back to Nerima?"

Soun glared over at Ranma, making mumbling noises under Natsume's hand causing Ranma to try to mimic what he was trying to say. "That wouldn't have been kidnapping, that would've been simply forcing you to do your duty and apologize to my baby girl, then take up your relationship once again! Possibly with a 'oh, whatever did Genma do to you to make you so willful while on the road?' thrown in fer good measure."

His acting won some giggles from most of the girls, but Natsume didn't join in, simply staring down at Soun. "We are in a very nice hot spring inn, and if you behave, we might even allow you to get into one in some fashion. But we would prefer not to have attention drawn to us, so refrain from raising your voice."

Soun scowled under her hand, but nodded his head indicating he understood and Natsume took her hand away. "Did you kidnap me to somehow convince me that you're my daughters? I hate to say it, but that kind of action just shows that you have none of my blood in you!"

"Please, Nabiki is a wannabe yakuza, she might not be up to kidnapping or keeping someone present like this but she's certainly willing to extort people. And she's most definitely your daughter," Ranma interjected again. "And like I said, you and my Pops would've been

perfectly happy to knock me out and carry me back to yer dojo. Not so fun when the shoe's on the other foot, is it?"

"Ranma, shut up," Natsume ordered sharply, before turning back to Soun, holding out a chopstick with some food on it. "We have some left over food here if you're hungry, Father."

Soun opened his mouth to protest again that he was not their Father but he was interrupted by his stomach, which began to gurgle nastily. While his stomach would normally not be nearly as vocal as Ranma or Genma's, he hadn't actually eaten in two days. True he'd not done any exercise, being knocked out for most of that time, but still, he hadn't eaten. "That, that sounds nice. But I repeat again, I would never have cheated on my wife. There is no way you can be my daughters. I'm sorry, you seem like lovely girls, but..."

Kurumi began to feed him, while Natsume pulled out the training manual holding it up. "But you acknowledge this was yours?"

"Yes, as I think I told you, it was one of the first ones I ever used. And that is... is indeed my handwriting on some of the techniques within and the..." he looked at the paper sticking out of the top of the manual. "...the promise."

Realizing how lame that sounded when compared to his vehement denials of cheating on Kimiko, Soun went on hastily. "But I only used that one near the end of my time with the Dreadful Master, and I certainly was not in any relationship with anyone besides my wife at the time. Indeed, as I come to think of it, I believe she was pregnant with Akane around then."

Soun began to tear up, but he kept on munching on the food as Kurumi fed him. "Oh, Akane, I hope you're doing well! Please forgive Daddy that it's taking so long to return your fiancé to you."

Rolling his eyes, Ranma made to comment on that, but Mai flicked one of her fans over towards him, smacking Ranma in the forehead. Ranma flinched, but closed his mouth, letting Natsume and Kurumi talk.

"Let us stop trying to speak about our mother or your wife. We have been taught Anything Goes Tendo Martial Arts Style from this manual, and I remember learning from someone personally, although my memories of that time are also vague. But we believe that someone was you because of the evidence here," Natsume said, tapping the training manual. "And my memories of the man who taught us was tall, with a broad back and long hair. That certainly doesn't match Genma's description. Unless you can look me in the eye and tell me that he too once had long hair?"

Soun surprised everyone there by laughing and shaking his head. "Indeed not! Genma was going bald in his 20s." He shot a sly look over at Ranma. "Hopefully you will have gotten those particular genes from your mother."

That brought up a whole new set of questions for Ranma, who was suddenly wondering if Soun knew the woman who gave birth to him and what had happened to her. Ranma wouldn't put it past his old man to have convinced some hooker to get pregnant, and then to leave her once she had the kid. *All right, he probably would have waited until I was on solid foods but still.*

But the way Soun had just spoken the word 'mother' made it seem as if Ranma might have had a real mom, one he might have actually gotten to know at one point. However, Ranma stayed silent for now. He wasn't all that interested in his old man's wife, and this was time for Natsume and Kurumi to push Soun either to figure out yes, he was their Father and trainer, or at least that second one. *Come to think of it, if he did train them and then promised them, does it matter if they're related? I mean I know it would to the Tendos, but if they have that agreement, and can beat Akane then... hell they beat Soun himself... so do they really need to prove they are related to Soun?*

"But that just means that you are far more likely to be our Father than he is!" Natsume said triumphantly, unaware of Ranma's thoughts. "And you admitted to some memory loss from that time. Could you not have had a similar memory loss earlier in your training with the so-called Dread Master?"

"I know I do," Soun answered before realizing what words were going to come out of his mouth. He then glanced and stated quickly, "But I would have remembered even being close to a girl at the time! Trust me, the training under the Dread Master, it had an impact on you, on how you looked at women, and how women looked at you! A most negative one! I never would have..." He stared as Natsume suddenly flicked the training manual open and pulled out the promise note, showing Soun his own handwriting, causing his voice to start quivering. "I would never... That is... I don't remember..."

Kurumi smiled at her sister, nodding her head. It did indeed look to them as if Soun it simply completely forgotten about them due to his own martial artist training. They weren't prepared to untie him or forgive him utterly for leaving behind, but it was very clear to them that they were at the very least related. *Maybe we won't have to go through with this horror of getting a genetic test done after all.* That was such a dishonorable thing to do that having even a chance to not be forced to do so was a great thing in her mind.

"So long as you cannot tell us definitively that you are not our Father, we will assume that you were indeed are, that you did indeed start our training and left this training manual for us," Natsume said demurely as she knelt to one side of Soun, taking over from Kurumi for a second to let the girl eat some more food herself. She even wiped Soun's face and mouth for him before bringing a sake cup up to his lips. "As such, I will prove to you that my sister and I are far better heirs than my half-sister."

Soun might well have scoffed at that, if not for the amazing sensation of drinking sake after what felt like years of abstinence. Genma had been extremely hard on him to get Soun

back into shape, and had even forgone drinking himself, so Soun had not been able to get away to get a drink over the winter.

“Actually, that reminds me of something. How exactly did you and my old man become masters in Anything Goes? I can’t imagine that we’re such a large school that we have, you know, formal tests or anythin’, or that this Dread Master was all that quick ta hand out titles,” Ranma interjected.

Natsume pulled away the cup from Soun’s lip, and after smacking his lips for a few seconds, Soun replied to this quite openly. “We do not, indeed, while I know the Dread Master took students before us, none of them live in Japan anymore. All of them became masters in their own right in the same manner we did. You must either modify four techniques from Anything Goes or other schools and incorporate them into the Anything Goes style, or you must come up with two entirely new techniques.”

Natsume’s eyes widened at that, understanding that Soun was talking about something well beyond creating a new kata. “You mean ki techniques!”

“Wow! So what we been using, the hot and cold techniques, those were your first tries at such techniques?” Kurumi said enthusiastically, nearly bouncing in place. While she still had reservations about what kind of Father Soun might be, his continued mentions of brain trauma and the fact that he did recognize the training manual and his own handwriting on the promise note pointed to the fact that they were indeed related, which was enough for her. She wasn’t one to think deeply about such things. “I’d wager that whole samurai armor thing is one of your techniques, right?”

“Correct. I did things halfway really. I came up with that technique and a boosted technique of that version. A means of enlarging your battle aura to a certain degree and superimposing your own will into it, so you could act as if your battle aura was your physical body only far larger. It is extremely ki intensive however, and was simply a highly refined version of my first technique, the spiritual armor.” Soun actually smiled faintly as he chewed on another bite of food that to them by Natsume. “I was furious when the Dread Master said that it wasn’t a good enough technique to pass as my second one, it was too much a simple refinement of the first. But then he poked it with his damned pipe, and suddenly I was back in my normal body getting... Well...”

Soun shook his head shoved shivering and looking away, while Shampoo Ranma and Mai exchanged glances mouthing the words ‘Dread Master equals Happosai’ to one another. Master Nawa had mentioned him to them when they first showed up at her school.

“This Dread Master of yours wouldn’t be named Happosai would he?” Mai asked.

The response was immediate. Soun stopped eating and look around wildly, almost thrashing in place so much that strings connecting his rope cage to Mai and Ranma nearly

snapped. Which would have resulted in a lot of pain for Soun thanks to how his Rope Cage was tied together. "Don't say his name! You'll summon him!" Soun shrieked.

When the Dread Master thankfully did not appear before them Soun calmed down a little, looking around him and then breathing a sigh of relief before saying sternly. "Do not say his name like that! You, young lady, especially should not say it."

"Yeah, we got the impression from Master Nawa that he was known as a bit of a pervert and a thief among other martial arts masters. Which probably means Mai and Shampoo would be the equivalent of an all ya can eat buffet," Ranma answered with a shrug, causing both girls to smile and flush at the offhand compliment. "Still, if ya were able to come up with that kind of technique, says something about the training you are put under. What did my Pops do?"

"I know he created two techniques, and I know the Grand Master accepted the fact that he was a master in his own right, but I'm afraid beyond the fact that he sealed his techniques away I can't tell you anymore. I know they were extremely dangerous and completely new ki techniques, nothing like what we had previously learned under the Dread Master. Although I remember the Dread Master saying they served the same purpose, even if they were too dangerous."

"So that could mean anything from thieving to actual combat techniques. Great. Still, it does make me respect the Old Man a little more. Then again, I always knew he was a great martial artist, it's Pop's basic character I've always had a problem with," Ranma grumbled.

"Let's get back on target please," Natsume said primly, holding up another bottle of sake to Soun's lips and letting him drink deeply. "You promised us that if we continued our training journey, and were sufficiently strong enough, you would name my sister and I your heirs. I believe that we can consider the fight we won had against you as proof that we are both strong enough to take over the Tendo dojo in your stead."

"And, and I maintain, that, that I still do not know who you are! I might have said that I knew I suffered from concussions, but I also know I would never have cheated on my wife! And I have never taught young girls at all!"

Which was true, Ranma reflected from where he still sat watching this. *Akane never showed any things special, which probably means that Soun never took her past the barest basics.*

"Akane is my heir!" Soun went on, his words paralleling Ranma's in a way. "She has everything I desiring one, drive, will to succeed, strength and..."

That was as far as Soun get before Ranma started to laugh so hard he nearly bust a gut actually rolling on the floor for a second. "Oh please!"



As Soun glared at him, Ranma recovered a bit of self-control and asked, "What does Akane do every morning, Soun?"

Bristling a little at use of his first name, Soun barked back, "You know precisely what she does, she trains in the dojo, she goes on runs and she breaks bricks."

"Riiiiight. Are you listening to yourself? Kurumi, what did we do this morning before we hit the road?"

"Trained for an hour in balance on a chain-link fence. Then as we stopped for lunch, we went over several kata. This evening, we had full on spars, with both weapons and ki techniques," Kurumi answered instantly.

"And that's a light day for us, when we're spending most of the day traveling. Natsume and Kurumi, they practice from dawn until sunset, they've been on the road, they've faced hardships galore and they've come through it strong! Comparing them to Akane's like comparing her to me when I first showed up!" Ranma then smirked, glancing over to Shampoo and Mai. "And even Kurumi is better built to boot."

Both of them cracked up, remembering how Ranma had told them how he and Akane had first met, and then how they had suddenly become hitched thanks to their parents idiocy. "No tables, no tables!" Shampoo snorted out between guffaws.

Even Kurumi and Natsume were smiling, while Soun was fuming, trying to gather enough energy to use his Big Head technique. *If I can scare these young fools, I can escape. Or can I? These ropes are remarkably intricate. What would happen to me if I tried my Big Head technique like this?* Shivering a little, Soun decided against it, fearing that he might actually choke himself if he tried.

"N, nonetheless, Akane is my heir. And will remain so! I have faith in her that she will win through if you try to challenge her to a one on one match. After all, you both tag teamed me." Soun seemed to rally a bit, smirking at the two young girls. "How good is either of you on your own, hmm?"

That nearly set Ranma into laughter again, but he shook his head as Natsume said demurely, "So long as you agree I can fight for what is rightfully mine, I am more than willing to do so."

"Does that mean you will free me? And help me bring Ranma back to Nerima?" Soun asked instantly. If he could get Ranma back in Nerima, he was willing to deal with any confusion these two girls might bring. *And who knows, if Akane can befriend them rather than defeat them, then we will have two strong students to add to the dojo.*

“... Not as yet...” Natsume said slowly, frowning a bit, but thankful Soun wasn’t bringing up the honor agreement by name at least. “We wish to travel with our friend Mai to her home, to learn from her school there. After that... perhaps...”

Natsume very carefully did not look in Ranma or Shampoo’s direction as she said this, unwilling to see the looks of annoyance and anger there. *But surely, if I can string Father along on that, my sister and I are his daughters, and then will not be so angry or dismissive if I defeat Akane or her place as heir to the dojo. It doesn’t mean that I am actually going to pursue Ranma.* Natsume had been somewhat thrown off her initial thoughts in that direction by the conversation about Ranma’s female form, and Ranma had also been right in the fact that becoming a mistress would indeed be a stigma.

“This will also give my sister and I a chance to try and jog your memory. Admittedly, we were children at the time, so our memories are not going to be the best, but perhaps if we describe some of the places we have seen and been, as well as some of the training from the manual, we’ll help you refresh your memory,” Natsume finished.

“Very well, I can wait I suppose,” Soun answered, trying to come off as gracious, but not doing a very good job of it, instead sounding petulant. His mind then turned back to more important matters, as Kurumi held up another bite of food on a chopstick for him.

Despite his pleas, the younger martial artists did not release Soun from his bonds. But after he was done eating did they allow him to go with Ranma to take a bath in the hot springs. Indeed, all of them were also looking forward to trying out the baths. Making your own baths was okay when roughing it, but hot springs were far better.

Luckily for Ranma, the inn was practically empty due to the mistake about not updating their renovation status. This allowed Ranma to first untie Soun save for a tether on one of his arms, which shifted to the other arm as he undressed. Soun didn’t try to fight Ranma just then, considering he would’ve been trying to escape naked, and Ranma had yet to start changing. “If I give you my word I won’t run away, will you stop it with the rope?” the older man muttered, shaking his head. “This is demeaning!”

“Maybe, but it’s best not to tempt fate. Or tempt you, whichever,” Ranma muttered, as he also took a moment to change, doing it so quickly that Soun blinked in surprise.

“Can you tell me where we are at least?”

“I think the town was called Oshiro, or something? I didn’t stop to read it. We’re near Kitakata if that helps,” Ranma answered.

Soun frowned, his eyes narrowed for a moment. “That... Oshi... onsen... double O... something about that is trying to jog my memory. I wonder why?”

Ranma shrugged at that, and having finished changing, lead the way out into the hot springs, Ranma whistled in surprise looking around him. "You know, I didn't expect much since the outside of this inn doesn't look all that well-maintained despite it having just gone through renovations. But I can definitely see where they spent the money instead."

"Indeed, this is magnificent," Soun said, the two men united for once in their opinion of what they were looking at.

The hot springs were beautiful with several dozen small waterfalls around one edge of the men's side, with small glowing lights floating in various areas. On top of the stones, making up these waterfalls, a wooden bamboo wall had been placed separating the men and women side, which Ranma supposed would probably be much the same. The sound of the waterfalls created a very nice background, a gurgling noise that Ranma quite enjoyed.

Taking a bucket apiece the two men sat on opposite sides of the small washing area, a small line of stools set in front of mirrors situated on the walls of the wooden platform leading out to the hot springs. There, the two men began to push themselves down with cold water, the cold triggering Ranma's change, something that Soun tried hard not to notice.

"Must you be so immodest? I might be old enough to be your father Ranma, but I'm still a man! You shouldn't be so comfortable—"

"I'm not comfortable with this at all Old Man! Just don't look over here! There's a reason why I played the rope out so much we could get some distance between us," Ranma interjected, hit her tone low and growling.

While Ranma would probably never have as much body modesty as normal women or even regular female martial artists like Mai or Shampoo, she certainly had more modesty about it then he had when he first got the curse. Part of that was because he knew he would have to live with the curse from now on. Shampoo had told him that there was no cure for the curses, at least none that her people knew about. And considering that her grandmother was one of the leaders of her people, Ranma was prepared to take Shampoo's word for it. So, while Ranma was still willing to use his body to gain an advantage of them in a match if he could, or to mooch food, he wasn't willing to outright flash anyone.

The two martial artists fell into an uncomfortable silence then, until Soun exclaimed, "I remember why the name of this town sounds so familiar. There used to be a martial artist dojo around here, one based off of Ninjutsu I believe. Water manipulation, hiding one's presence and ambushes, I think."

Ranma almost turned to look over at the old man at that, her eyes gleaming with interest. "Now that sounds interesting. Maybe I can convince the others to spend a day looking around for it. Water manipulation sounds like something I'd be really interested in. Especially when coupled with the hot and cold techniques I've been learning from Natsume and Kurumi."

At that, Soun grumbled a little, reaching for a bar of soap to keep washing himself, being very much of two minds over that statement. On the one hand, those techniques were once he had created, pride knowing they were so very useful. But Soun had never followed up on them, preferring instead to hone the land-based style of Anything Goes and the Spirit Armor technique. Moreover, Ranma had learned them not from his own daughters or Soun himself, but from these two other children who according to them were also his daughters. Something he still maintained was nearly impossible.

*If for no other reason than no woman would ever have given me the time of day while I was training with Happosai other than to brain me with whatever weapon came to hand. Well, no normal woman at any rate.* Soun shook his head at one particular memory as he thought that, reflecting whatever else, none of the Saotomes could ever be called normal.

At that point, Soun's musings were interrupted by Ranma announcing he was done and would be getting in first.

Soun thought about making a break for it, but the tightness of the rope on his arm convinced him otherwise. He turned and moved to join Ranma instead. The water was at the perfect temperature and he breathed out in delight, leaning back and letting the hot water sooth his aching bones. While he hadn't been doing any exercise in the past three days or however long it had been since he had been knocked unconscious the first time during the battle with Ranma and his companions, he still bore some of the bruises from that battle since he had lacked the ki reserves that would automatically hasten the healing process as it did for Ranma and Genma.

*I truly did let myself go to seed far too much after my darling Kimiko passed away, Soun mused, feeling tears threatening to start spilling out of his eyes even as they were closed at the memory. However, he pushed through it, determined now. Once he got back to Nerima, Soun would keep going with the training regimen that Genma had created for him. That way, he would get back into shape fast, and would it be able to hopefully help his real daughter put these two upstarts in their place. Well, I'll keep to everything but the diet. A little bit of Sake never hurt anyone. And hopefully, Genma will have made his way back to the dojo as well, where we can regroup and, if Ranma has come with us back to Nerima, force him to do the honorable thing, get back with Akane after our victory. If not, we'll have to get on the road again to see if we can hunt him down once more.*

Once more, Soun's thoughts cut off as both he and Ranma looked up hearing voices from the other side of the bamboo wall. Shampoo and Mai both gasped audibly in delight, while Natsume and Kurumi let loose with a loud, "Wow! This is magnificent!/Wouldja look at that! Nee-chan, this looks so amazing!"

In stark contrast to Ranma and his prisoner, the girls kept on chattering to one another as they went through the process of washing themselves off. At first, this overheard

conversation was about the hot spring and some minor bruises Natsume and Kurumi had gained, but it rapidly went elsewhere.

Shampoo began this process. “Damn Mai, what did you eat when going through puberty!?”

There was a sound of a yelp, and Mai shouted, “Shampoo! Hands off the merchandise!”

“But look! They are so bouncy and soft, yet your back doesn’t pain you? And look they’re even perky! How dare you be able to have the perfect amount of droop!”

“Oh please, as if you have any right to be angry at me! Your own tits are so perky it’s impossible,” Mai retorted, followed by a whine from Shampoo. “And your skin is so soft despite how muscular you are. Ugh, if I didn’t know how much time you put into skincare I’d be really jealous. Just like I am about Natsume’s hair.”

“L, leave me out of this!” Natsume squeaked.

“Nope!” Mai and Shampoo chorused.

There was the sound of a small scuffle, along with Natsume shouting “unhand me!” and a lot of giggles.

“God girl, you don’t spend any time on it. I’ve seen you take those quick baths of yours and you never do anything with your hair at all. But it’s even silkier and softer than mine!”

“Ahh...” Natsume whimpered.

“Is true! It even nicer than Ranma’s, and he gets a pass for being a boy!” Shampoo continued.

“As if either of you have any right to be jealous of another girl’s body!” Natsume retorted.

Kurumi evidently decided to get in on the fun now. “That’s right, give me some of that!”

This was followed by the sound of another scuffle, and then a series of splashes and giggles as the girls apparently fell into the water, the playful rough housing continuing.

Blushing faintly and hoping to drown out his thoughts of what was going on that up the other side of that wall with Shampoo and, to his shame, the others, Ranma shook his head and moved to the farthest side away from the wall separating the male and female sides of the hot springs. Soun didn’t, instead moving to the inner edge of the hot spring leading back into the

washing area. Ranma watched him carefully, then closed his eyes and began to meditate for a bit, trying to drown out the continued sounds of the girls having fun.

Soun watched his captor for a time, using all his Father Instincts™ to drown out the noise from the women's side. Instead, Soun waited, feeling out his ki reserves. *I might have a few seconds of the Big Head technique--*

For the third time since entering the changing area, Soun's thoughts cut off, although this time Soun himself did it, staring at a small line of bubbles. *What is that?*

A second later, his question was answered in a very strange manner as the water of the hot spring erupted where the bubbles had been. "What thAHHH!!" Soun shouted, causing the girls to stop talking as Ranma surged forward in the water towards the explosion.

A fist came out of the still surging water towards Ranma, who dodged it by the skin of his teeth, only to feel a kick land on his knee under the water. This sent Ranma falling forward, but he moved with it, diving into the hot water. The attacker's attempt to push Ranma down into the water failed, and Ranma lashed out behind him with a mule kick, feeling them connect but unable to see through the water. He could still feel the texture of what he struck, though. *Wood?*

A moment later the wooden bucket pulled Ranma's feet to one side, pressing down as another kick caught Ranma in the side. It didn't hurt, but the momentum of the strike pushed Ranma down onto the bottom of the spring.

The heat from the spring was beginning to get to Ranma, but he kept his head pushing up and off the ground, reaching to grapple with the attacker. Nevertheless, the attacker proved to be too slippery, Ranma's hands sliding off the attacker's skin. However, that was enough to let Ranma know where the attacker's body was, and he lashed out with a punch before pushing back and away.

Steam and water was everywhere, as Shampoo and the girls shouted out questions, but Ranma was very grateful he had kept his hair in its traditional ponytail. *Even without the dragon whisker, I would be blind right now, if I had my hair loose.* Nearby, Soun had suffered that fate and now floated on the water, a ladle mark on his face.

"Come out, ya bastard! You're from that school Soun just mentioned aren't ya? Think you're some kind of hot spring ninja?" Ranma taunted, turning this way and that as the water started to settle all around him.

"Hot spring ninja?" Mai muttered from the other side. "Somehow I feel insulted by association."

“Ranma, do you need any help?” Shampoo shouted, while Natsume and Kurumi hopped out of the water and grabbed towels, tossing them to the other girls and putting them on.

“Nope. Not unless this guy can hit a lot harder than he’s shown. Seems that Toughness Training has really begun to pay off. Just be on the lookout for anything weird goin’ on in the wa-!” Ranma was forced to duck then as a bucket flew towards his head from the side, too fast for him to smack it out of the way. The next few though he was ready for, and the girls watched as several buckets flew over the intervening wall. “You’re gonna have to do better than that!”

Another series of buckets flew from another area of the hot spring, the heat of the spring causing so much steam now it was hard to see more than a few feet. But that was enough for Ranma to deflect the incoming attacks. Right up until one of the bucket he struck exploded with the force of a small firecracker. “Gah!”

Flung backward, Ranma’s head cracked into the side of the hot spring, and then his attacker grabbed at his legs, dragging him down into the water. But once more, Ranma’s new toughness came to his rescue. Both the firecracker and the hit to the head had barely been enough to register, and as he was pulled down, Ranma pulled his legs up, at the same time bending from the waist and reaching for the bastard who was attacking him, a blonde man, barely visible through the water.

This time his punch connected stronger than before sending the man upwards and out of the water. Ranma burst out after him, finding the man balancing on one of the buckets as it floated in the water, several towels in hand.

The attacker was a young man, maybe a bit older than Ranma, around Mai’s age or Kasumi’s. He had curly blonde hair cut short, reminding Ranma of statues he had seen slides of in art class. Around his neck was a thin gold chain, and his boy bits were hidden by a swimsuit. His body was decent enough, but in a martial artist, Ranma reflected that was almost a given.

“Wet Towel Torrent!” the man shouted. “You, like all other martial artists who come here before you shall fall before the true Bathhouse Fu!”

“Ugh, another guy who thinks over-specializing makes you special,” Ranma grumbled, pulling his own towel from around his waist, where it had clung throughout the action so far. Whipping it through the air, Ranma pushed a tiny bit of his ki into it, causing the towel to harden as if it was made out of wood, just like the towels the man had hurled toward him. However, by the time Ranma dealt with the last one, the man had disappeared under the water.

“Okay, I’ll give ya that you’re pretty good at hiding,” Ranma taunted, hoping the guy could hear him, wherever he was. “But ya can’t do enough damage and you’re too damn slow to beat me!”

Several dozen more buckets came Ranma's way, some of them exploding as they came, tossing water everywhere, trying once more to blind Ranma. It worked, and the man closed, this time knife hands flashing out toward Ranma, still balancing on the buckets as he came.

This proved to be a very poor decision on the blonde's part. Twirling like a cobra despite the water slowing him, Ranma's hands rose, and deflected every strike coming his way. "Have some Amaguriken!" Ranma growled, hammering his own punches into the man as Ranma jumped up into the air over the hot spring, bringing his feet into play.

The blonde grunted and winced at the punches, but instead of staying close, let the blows drive him back. Two more explosive buckets went off on either side of him, and the man splashed back into the water, flashing away through the water faster than Ranma could follow, his leg drop missing entirely.

The next second, the man flung a soft towel out of the water from behind Ranma. The soft towel wrapped around Ranma's head, blinding and covering his nose and mouth. Several hard punches and kicks followed as Ranma's hands automatically grabbed at the towel, finding it stuck to his skin.

But Ranma still wasn't defenseless. As the man's strikes rained down, Ranma concentrated, gathering his ki. The next time the blonde's fist struck Ranma's body, Ranma bellowed. "Blue Burst!"

This time Ranma let out an uncontrolled blast of ki in every direction, much like he had during his training with Master Nawa, and again in the first fight with Natsume. But this time it was only a light burst, which didn't drain Ranma's ki so disastrously.

It was still enough though. The wave of blue ki blasted up the man's arm and into his body hurling him backwards with all the force of an oncoming freight train. He flew backwards with a cry of agony, smashing into and through the bamboo wall separating the men and women's side of the baths and slamming down into the water there with enough force to send another geyser of water everywhere.

The blonde man was tough though, and although his arm was wrecked – bones weren't quite punching through the skin, but arms should not look like zigzags – he stood up, trying to continue the fight or escape, none of the girls knew.

Shampoo was the closest of the girls, and with her chui raised, she made to finish the man off. He turned in her direction, staring at her and the other girls, whose now drenched towels clung to their bodies. Well, the bodies of Shampoo, Mai and Natsume, anyway. Kurumi didn't have as much modesty, and hadn't bothered to wrap a towel around herself when the action began on the men's side.



Seeing the man's eyes lock on Kurumi's young, budding body, Shampoo flung her chui forward. "Die!" The man was too battered to dodge and the large metal ball of her chui took him right in the face, flinging him backward into the outer wall of the hot spring, where his body imbedded itself in the bamboo there.

Having recovered his senses during the battle, Soun took this moment to gather his ki and lash out with the Big Head Technique. Ranma's battle had broken the rope linking them.

Suddenly the girls and Ranma were faced with the monstrous, demonic-looking transformation of Soun's head, his tongue flicking out like an oni, helped by the horns growing from his forehead and his long hair waving in an unseen wind. "YOOOU WILL Let ME GOooo!!!" the phantom head howled.

All the girls froze in terror, staring at the creature, while Ranma stumbled back falling backward into the water, his skin white with fright. This served to snap Ranma out of his terror, but Soun was already moving, leaping for the top of the waterfalls between the two areas. He was in the air again, leaping for the outer wall when Ranma latched onto his back. "Oh no you don't! You're staying with us until this whole Natsume and Kurumi thing is finished! And no calling my old man to try and shadow us either."

Before Soun could do anything more than flinch, Ranma had, mindful of Natsume's continued remonstrance, locked in a chokehold. The next second, Ranma was falling back to the top of the waterfall, pulling Soun along with him. And Soun had used up too much of his energy. He could only fight back physically, and wasn't strong enough to break Ranma's grip. He tried, but after a few minutes, Soun once more fell into lalaland.

"Well, that didn't end very well," Ranma quipped as he let Soun's unconscious body slumped beside him, releasing his hold around his neck, trying, and failing, to not look towards the girls. *Hormones, I hate you, I really do.* He let none of that inner turmoil show in his voice at least, something he was quite proud about. "But hey, at least I didn't knock him out the old-fashioned way this time so you can complain I'm adding to his brain issues."

Natsume stared through the hole at Ranma, then at her unconscious father as Kurumi and Mai began to poke the unconscious blonde pretty boy. "I, I really want to be surprised, but I think it says something wrong about my life that I can't find it in me to do more than sigh."

**OOOOOO**

In a dark room on a small island situated somewhere near the Polynesian Islands but not part of them one man scowled at the image of another on a large screen in front of him. "Have the fool who let slip our name liquidated, and his daughter as well. Anyone who drops the name of Shadaloo is to be removed with extreme prejudice!"

“I have already tasked a team with that,” the other man answered crisply. He was also a middle-aged man, with medium length black hair tied in a ponytail and a thin goatee, matching his thin, almost elongated face. The top of a purple Chinese changpao was barely visible in the screen and the man also wore a small set of wire sunglasses, despite being inside somewhere. “But I felt it wise to warn you, My Lord. Some of our secrecy is fading. The longer our reach, the more people know of our organization. This time was a random event and a foolish wench who overheard too much from an equally foolish father. But I know the Japanese are starting to pick up hints of our organization’s reach. And if the Japanese are, other governmental agencies are no doubt even closer.”

“They are,” the man who seemed in charge answered with a shrug of armored shoulders. Unlike the man he was speaking to, the man on his island wore what looked like a strange military uniform, a mix of Japanese Imperial Army, Red Army and even hints of Waffen-SS visible in parts. It was as if the man had made his uniform a homage to those militaries. “I have plans for both the American and British investigators. The Interpol one moves around too much at present. However, he does have a weakness, the British and American units looking into the Street FIGHT Tournament and King of Fighters does not have: a family.”

“Ohoh?” the man with sunglasses murmured. “Now isn’t that interesting.”

“Indeed. A family member, a daughter in fact, who is in Hong Kong, working with their police force at present, waiting, so my agents say, for Interpol to finish going through her paperwork.”

“That could make reaching her difficult. You know that the Triad still holds out there against our influence thanks to the strength of Ryuuji Yamazaki and his gang,” the man in glasses murmured.

“True. But I do not doubt you can come up with something. Indeed, it could be time to think of using one problem to dispose of another, if you can manage it,” the man in charge announced. “And while you are at it, look for more information on who these unknown martial artists who captured the loud mouthed brat. We are always on the lookout for... talent, after all, even if they are too old for your normal methods.”

The man in the screen nodded, and ended the conversation quickly, leaving the man in the bizarre military uniform to turn his attention to other matters. Including the picture of an extremely pretty young blonde woman in a military uniform, which he stared at for several minutes before pulling up another file. “The work of a would-be world conqueror is never done...”

**OOOOOO**

The next town that the five martial artists and their unconscious burden reached, thanks to catching the train Ranma had been going for all this time, was the port town of Wakayama

where they would be getting a ferry to Kochi on Shikoku. And at that, Ranma had to be convinced by the others that they couldn't just swim there, which he thought would be relatively easy. "I mean I swam from Japan to China and back, going from Honshu to Shikoku will be easy!"

But when even Shampoo disagreed, he was forced to accede. None of the girls wanted to try to swim while also keeping Soun unconscious and carrying him, and none of them were willing to let Ranma shoulder that burden all on his own. There was also the fact that Soun had woken up twice just that morning before they reached the train, forcing Mai to resort to chloroform. Which she was forced to use several times during the train trip.

"He's growing a durability to being even chloroformed now. That's honestly impressive," Ranma murmured, dumping Soun onto a bench. There was a small picnic area jutting out from the rest of the boardwalk that overlooked a beach near the docks where they would be getting the ferry. Since there were dozens of people already using it, including a few that looked to be napping despite it being only around three in the afternoon, Soun's slumped posture and Ranma's carrying him didn't draw any interest.

"Perhaps, but I think it would be more impressive if he was actually able to fight through being knocked unconscious in the first place," Mai drawled back. She smiled then as Natsume and Kurumi came out of the nearby changing room changed into their bathing suits. While Ranma was more than willing to just keep on pushing to her home, and Mai wanted to get back and see Andy, it wasn't as if they were in any real rush. Moreover, none of the girls was willing to overlook an amazing looking beach like this, and the opportunity to get some food that they didn't need to cook themselves.

The possible Tendo sisters sat down across from their would-be Father, whereupon Kurumi began to vibrate in place as she stared at all of the food stalls lining the boardwalk. "I think you three need to go change before my sister starts vibrating out of her bathing suit, or starts to shake apart the entire pier," Natsume joked.

"I guess food does sound nice, and swimming too, I suppose." While he had gotten better at controlling it, Ranma was still a Saotome, which meant that food would always be a consideration in his mind, although he was more anxious than the others to get the affair between Natsume, Kurumi and Soun over with.

Mind you, the girls were anxious about it as well, but they were just as concerned about how that would eventually end. While Soun seemed to have come around to the idea that he had indeed promised the two they would be his heirs and might well have trained them, that was a far cry from admitting they were his daughters, or giving them more precedence than Akane. All the evidence they had was inconclusive at this point when it came to being evidence of a true familial relationship between them and Soun. And as his actions at the hot spring inn pointed to, that mattered a lot more than any so-called promise that might've been made.

Ranma, Mai and Shampoo went off to change. Ranma was surprised though when Shampoo pulled him to a stop halfway to the dressing rooms, whispering in his ear. He nodded in agreement, blushing a bit, and then headed to go change.

He and Shampoo arrived back at the table quickly, and Natsume was surprised, and secretly pleased, that Ranma hadn't transformed into his female body. She was about to ask why, as she knew that Ranma was prone to getting splashed with water if he tempted fate thus, but before she could a small commotion behind the two lovers grabbed her attention.

Mai had been accosted both going into the changing area and out of the changing area by one of the locals who tried to flirt with her. As Natsume and the others watched, the man, a tall, buff man, with tan skin even went so far as to try to put his arm around her shoulders.

A moment later the man over the heads of most of the crowd to land headfirst into a sandcastle that several young children had been making. "No! Our Sandcastle! Why'd you do that mister?!"

With a huff, Mai sat down at the table, shaking her head. "I feel kind of sorry about that. I was hoping to hit the ocean with that shot."

"You need to wind up a little bit more if you're going to smack someone hard enough to get some real distance. There's an art to it really," Ranma said almost clinically. "You also need to hit them in the stomach rather than the chin. Their flight arc will be better that way since they won't flip and flop so much they lose speed."

"That makes sense. I'll remember that for the next time," Mai said with a sigh, before pulling out her credit card from her boob window and flashing it over to Kurumi. "How about you and Shampoo grab us a spot down on the beach, while Natsume watches Soun for us for a bit, and Kurumi and I get us some food."

The last word had barely left Mai's mouth before Kurumi was across the table, grabbing the Shiranui heiress' arm and yanking her out of her chair, dragging her along behind her as she raced away. "Yes! Food! Let's go, let's go, let's go!"

"I wonder if Kurumi-chan will ever get over that? I mean it is not as if we have been on a starvation diet since we met the three of you," Natsume said, both with honest concern in her voice, and acknowledging at the same time that her and her sisters' lives had changed for the better since meeting Ranma, despite the fact that they still didn't have a real roof over their heads.

Ranma reached over the table and patted Natsume's hand companionably, causing a faint flush to appear on Natsume's face and for Shampoo to grit her teeth angrily before she paused, frowning a little. Ranma had done something similar with Mai several times, commiserating with her about Andy or offering sympathy for when Mai was in pain for

whatever reason during their training. That had never bothered Shampoo, but with Natsume, it definitely did. Shaking her head, Shampoo decided to put that down to the fact that she knew Natsume was still wondering if she should try to push for some kind of relationship with Ranma, despite Ranma's best efforts to convince her not to.

Standing up, Shampoo waited until Ranma was finished telling Natsume that he understood, and that being on the road did make for some strange habits, but that Kurumi would eventually get over it before taking his hand and pulling him upright as well. "Come on. Shampoo, drat it, I want some boyfriend time. Which means we can't go down onto the beach yet. Let's walk the boardwalk for a bit."

Shrugging his shoulders, Ranma moved to stand next to Shampoo putting an arm around her shoulders and the two of them walked off, just as a redheaded woman came out of a nearby restaurant. She paused, looking somewhat wistfully at the loving couple, before frowning in confusion as her gaze washed over the man slumped across from the young teenage girl the young lovers had left behind. He looked awfully familiar for some reason.

Then the middle-aged woman shook her head, and moved over to take the orders of a small family sitting in the café's outdoor seating area. Occasionally as the woman continued her work, she looked over at the very pretty young woman sitting across from the unconscious man, wondering what was wrong with the man and why he looked familiar until she could contain it longer, and walked over, asking politely, "Excuse me young lady, but what seems to be the problem with your father?"

Natsume looked up from where she had been reading a small book that Shampoo had bought her on Chinese. The Amazon girl was determined that even Natsume and Kurumi should learn at least some Chinese, even if they weren't going to stay with Shampoo and Ranma for long. Thinking quickly, she smiled politely at the rather pretty middle-aged, her auburn hair done up in a somewhat severe bun. "Oh, there's nothing really wrong with my Father, he just is suffering a bit of a heat stroke. We gave him enough water that he should be over soon, but we're letting him sleep for now."

"And you're sitting with him rather than going out to have fun. What a dutiful daughter you are," the woman said, causing a Natsume's smile to turn very slightly wooden, although her eyes sparkled at the idea of being such.

"Thank you. I do try," she answers, and if the woman noticed an odd tone to Natsume's words, she gave no response, simply smiling politely, and returning to work.

How long Natsume sat there she didn't know, but she eventually saw Ranma, now in his female form, and Shampoo heading down to the beach. There, she was amused to note that the two of them started to help the kids rebuild the sandcastle wrecked by the body of the pushy flirt, who had apparently woken up and wandered off without her noticing. She was also approached herself by several young boys, and although quite flattered by some of the

attention, she waved them off as well. Thankfully, she only had to do so verbally, as none of these came as pushy as one who had tried to flirt with Mai.

Eventually, Kurumi came back, with Mai and Kurumi both heavily laden with food, which they began to spread out across the table, causing some looks of shock from the crowds around them. "Your sister insisted on trying everything before he came back, sorry about that," Mai apologized.

Natsume shook her head with a chuckle. "I rather thought she might. At least that will have staved off the wild beast that has taken over Kurumi's stomach since we were young."

Kurumi stuck her tongue out at a sister, popping the food trays she was carrying, five of them, two balanced on her arms and another on the top of her head, onto the table. She then looked around for Ranma and Shampoo, spotting them building what amounted to a true fortress of the castle with the kids below, and shouted, "Ranma, Shampoo, foods on!"

The two other martial artists waved their hands at the group. Shampoo instantly moved in their direction, leaping up from the beach up on to the docks, which was about a story above them, landing on the safety railing and then hopping off easily causing another wave of surprise to go through the many beachgoers around them.

Ranma on the other hand took the slow way up. The reason for this was readily apparent, as he joined them minutes later, once more in his male body. "Well, I see you at least brought enough food to go around," Ranma teased Kurumi, bumping his hip against the other young girl, and pulling a plate towards his place across from the three Tendos to one side of Shampoo, who had sat down next to Mai.

The smell of food roused Soun and he stirred, opening his eyes and looking around, raising his head quickly from the table. He was still tied up under his clothing, something Ranma had done with quite a bit of distaste that morning. Thus, Soun quickly discerned that despite the fact, they were at a beach and there were a lot of people around, Soun knew he was still a prisoner.

He made to open his mouth but before he could say anything, Natsume quickly popped a fried octopus ball into it. "Father, if you keep quiet, and don't try to make trouble for us, we'll let you eat some of this food in front of us. We may even release you if you give your word of honor that you won't cause trouble, or try to attack us or run away."

Frowning even as he chewed on the delicious octopus ball, Soun was about to ignore Natsume's warnings, but the feel of the ropes on his skin convinced him otherwise. "Very well. Release my hands so that I can feed myself, and I will promise not to shout for the police or try to escape."

Snorting, Ranma thought that the whole call for police thing was the worst bluff in history. No martial artist would ever call for the police except to maybe cleanup after they'd already dealt with a problem, and Soun would cause just as much trouble for himself as he would for the others if he did that. Still, he hopped over the table, sitting on Soun's other side, and muttered an excuse me as he pushed her hand up his shirt. "Don't mind me, just need to undo a few knots to undo to give you full range of movement for your arms," Ranma said glibly, doing so quickly, coiling the rope that had been around Soun's forearms and stuffing that into his ki space.

Soun felt the ropes around his upper body loosen dramatically, and he could pull his arms up from where they had been resting on the table as if he had been using them as a pillow. He quickly began to pull a plate towards himself, loading it up with various food that Kurumi helpfully pointed out to him.

Natsume allowed her Father to chew for several moments as she worked on her own food before asking, "As we are now all willing to be civil to one another, could I perhaps ask you to tell Kurumi and I something about our half-sisters?"

Soun was about to bellow back at her that they were not her half-sisters once more, but the memory of the promise note in his handwriting, and the training manual stopped him as well as the memory from the discussion before he and Ranma had their small set-to in the hot spring. *Perhaps I really did find these two children and, and train them for some time. Although I still maintain that I did not cheat on my wife!* "Very well, what do you want to know?"

"While we have heard more than enough about Akane from Ranma, perhaps you could tell us something about your other daughters? Kasumi for example. I understand that she is heavily involved in keeping the home, but surely she finished high school, correct? I understand familial ties and staying home to support the family, but education is surely just as important."

"Kasumi my oldest daughter, yes. I'm most proud of her. She did indeed finish high school, although from what I recall, her grades were not all that good because she had to spend so much time at home taking care of Akane and taking over from her mother the duties around the household. Unfortunately, neither of my other daughters has ever shown any aptitude for such, as I know Ranma has probably told you."

"At least we're united in that Mustache. Akane's attempts at cooking should've been labeled a chemical warfare experiment more than anything else. How the heck she can do that to just simple ingredients..." Ranma trailed off, shaking his head.

"Yes, well, if you had perhaps offered your help rather than constantly belittling her efforts, she might have performed better," Soun shot back.

"I tried to help her twice, remember? Once was interrupted by Kodachi, that whole cookie thing. And then when I ate Akane's cookies, they gave me stomach issues for days! As for

the other time, I stopped Akane from putting in an ingredient not on the recipe, and was hammered out of the room and into the air because I was ‘interfering with her creative process,’” Ranma said holding up her hands and making quote marks for the last four words.

Soun winced, and knowing a losing battle when he saw one returned the conversation to Kasumi. He talked glowingly about her, how kind she was, how well she could cook, how well liked she was around the neighborhood. But Natsume noted that Soun didn’t mention anything about her hobbies, what she did in her downtime, or anything really personal about Kasumi. It was as if he didn’t care about her as a person, more an extension of the home.

This was completely different to when he mentioned Akane, which he did often despite ostensibly talking about Kasumi. Soun seemed to know about her likes and dislikes, what friends she had, what she enjoyed doing in her downtime and everything else that a father should know about her daughter.

Nabiki was only mentioned in an offhand manner, as if she too was barely in Soun’s mind. He knew something of her activities and friends, but it was obvious that Akane was the apple of his eye, something that disturbed Natsume greatly. Favoritism like that was never a good thing.

What also disturbed her was how different Soun’s opinion was from Ranma, and how blind he seemed to Akane’s faults beyond her having a temper. So either he simply doesn’t or see them, or Ranma is lying. And despite the fact that he had hidden the whole marriage agreement between the families thing from them, Natsume did not think Ranma would outright lie. Omit the truth yes, and Natsume knew by this point that Ranma certainly hadn’t put his best foot forward when it came to getting to know Akane, either as a girl, or as a fiancé. But that was a far cry from actually lying.

Natsume glanced over at Kurumi, who quickly interpreted the look. She started to ask Soun martial arts questions, which he answered readily enough, pulling Mai into the discussion as well, because Kurumi’s questions were about the armor technique that the older man had used against them in their fight several days ago. Mai was very interested about the visualization tools that Soun had used as well as the mental commands needed for such a spiritual use of ki, wondering if they would help her with the next stage of her own spiritual type use of ki. Mai wanted to copy bombs or something with a larger impact like that instead of just copying her fans or the rope weapon she had been given by Master Nawa.

As they were talking about that, Natsume looked over at Shampoo, speaking in a low tone. “You’re the only other one here who has actually seen Akane and our other half-sisters. Is she really as bad as Ranma makes her out to be? Or is she more innocent as Soun thinks.”

Shampoo wanted to come down on Ranma’s side of this, but she hadn’t seen a lot of Akane, and said so. Not for the first time either, as Natsume had asked her this before. But now with an informed second opinion, her own insight might help a bit more than before. “In the



brief time I saw her, Akane certainly had a temper. Remember, I told you months back how she attacked me, and then attacked Ranma. Thinking back on it now, Akane didn't seem to realize how badly overmatched she was by me or him. It was almost like Akane thought, Ranma wouldn't attack her if she attacked him. That matches the whole idea Ranma told us that his Father and Soun always took her side, right?"

"I suppose." While not quite as damning as her being weak, this was another sign that Soun was certainly not being objective when it came to Akane.

Natsume frowned, then rejoined the discussion, asking politely how much of the meditation techniques Soun had already taught to her half-sister, and if he felt she was ready for it.

Soun reluctantly admitted that he hadn't really taught Akane any advanced techniques. "But she's a natural with them. Even without my instruction, she and her sisters are all able to create weapons out of their ki!" Soun hastened to add.

He sounded quite proud of that until Ranma burst his bottle by saying, "Yeah, Akane can make weapons all right, but not on demand, and only when she's extremely angry. Which is dangerous! Have you even told her about the dangers of that kind of thing? I know my old man didn't tell me, but we don't use much spiritual type techniques. The danger of using emotion-based ki attacks was one of the first things Shampoo and I learned started out on our training trip."

Soun seemed ready to explode at that, pointing angrily at Ranma. "A, a training trip! Is that what you call running off with some foreign..."

"Weepy Man had best keep a civil tongue, or being in public is not going to save him from a thrashing," Shampoo warned, one of her maces appearing in her hand to slam down on the boardwalk beneath them so hard it caused the floor underneath them to groan noticeably. Hearing that and the now unfriendly looks he was getting from the rest of the girls at the table, Soun subsided quickly.

"Just answer the question. We already know your opinion about me and Shampoo running off," Ranma insisted.

"My daughter is perfectly controlled most of the time. It's always you who riles her up, Ranma! If not for that, she would be perfectly able to use that technique as well as anyone could," Soun said with dignity. Or as much dignity as he could muster, having just been cowed by Shampoo.

"If by that ya mean I'm the only one who ever seemed to get on the wrong side of her mallet, then sure. You're right at least that she never seemed to use that technique on normal people," Ranma answered, a scowl on his face.

At that point, the conversation was interrupted by a surprising source. The same woman who had come over to check on Soun earlier came out of the nearby restaurant, no longer in the restaurant's uniform. She walked along the boardwalk for a few seconds, then paused and stared at the man who had previously been dealing with heatstroke. "Soun! It is you!"

Soun turned and his eyes widened in surprise, before a small smile appeared under his mustache. "Nodoka-san? What a coincidence!"

All the young girls at the table looked at one another, then back at Soun, who was cheerfully greeting the woman as if she was an old friend, and vice versa. "And he was saying he wouldn't cheat. But he seems to be a kind of popular with the ladies doesn't he?" Ranma whispered.

"Could it be the long hair? I remember Mousse had several admirers among my Amazon sisters," Shampoo mused, her tone almost clinical. "He most certainly didn't have much else going for him."

"No, no, it's got to be martial artist endurance! That's got to be it," Mai said sagely, causing Shampoo to give her a look.

"With that hair, I don't think she's our mother," Kurumi interjected. "But I suppose that..."

"Enough about that!" Soun hissed, before going on in a louder tone as the woman finished walking towards them.

Dressed in her normal everyday clothing, the woman revealed she preferred more traditional clothing, a kimono with small petals of red and pink scattered over a light pink background. She drew the appreciative glance of men and women alike for her sense of style despite the relatively stern, tight bun she kept her hair in. At her side was a long, thin wrapped package that she was carrying in her offhand.

As she closed, Soun glanced at it, but didn't see anything important there, and he gestured to the rest of the girls at the table. "Girls, Ranma...", he paused as a gasp came from the woman, and Soun's smile shifted into a smirk as he continued on, "be known to Nodoka, Nodoka Saotome."

Ranma's eyes widened, and he stared at the woman in surprise, blinking. "Wait, my old man had a sister?"

Soun laughed at that, while the woman's eyes widened in horror, and she shook her head, crossing the intervening distance quickly and pulling Ranma out of his chair and into a hug. "Oh, Ranma! Has it been so long that you've forgotten your own mother!?! I know that

martial artists have to go on training journey's, but I should never have let your Father convince me to take you away when you were so young!"

Ranma froze in shock, staring down at the woman who had lifted him into the air and was now giving in such a hug around the ribs that he could feel his bones creak despite the toughness training. "Wait, what!? I, I have a mother!? Like, a real one? Since when?!"

"Shampoo think that a silly question," Shampoo said giggling and losing control of her diction once again.

At that, Ranma's mother seemed to realize that they had an audience, and dropped Ranma down onto his chair again, where he breathed heavily, rubbing at his ribs in shock. "I suppose I can forgive you for not remembering what I look like Ranma, but surely your Father told you about me?"

"Er..." At the somewhat disturbed and extremely sad look on the woman's face, Ranma fought down instincts built up in Nerima had told him that the woman's sadness was his fault somehow and responded as best he could blindsided as he was. "Now wait a second, maybe he did when I was younger, but I... I took so many concussions when I was younger my memory is seriously spotty. I'm sorry if I, that is, I never really thought I had a mom at all, I'm..."

While Natsume and Kurumi snorted to one another at the fact that Ranma was using the same excuse Soun was, the woman once more pulled him into a hug. "No Ranma I'm sorry, I should've known that the travails of the road would have worn on your long-term memory. It's not your fault you don't remember what I look like. Although I will put the blame squarely on your Father for not telling you that you had a mother at all. Surely by the time you were able to read and write you both could've written me?"

This hug was shorter than the first and she took a step back, now taking in the other young ladies at the table, as well as Ranma's general physique. "But while he might not have communicated with me as he promised he would, Genma seems to have fulfilled the oath he made. You certainly look like you have kept up your training, and look at all these beauties around you. Tell me, have you been manly with any of them?"

Fighting down a blush at the insinuation Nodoka somehow gave the word manly there, Ranma noticed he wasn't the only one who had read more into that one word than was normally meant by it. Mai was also blushing as was Natsume, while Kurumi was looking very fidgety and uncomfortable.

The only one who wasn't, was Shampoo, who quickly glomped onto Ranma's side, almost glaring at the woman for second. But when she spoke, Shampoo was keeping firm control of her accent. This was after all her future mother-in-law, and it was best to make a good impression. *Especially since in my culture she would be the head of household.* "While I thank

you for the compliment Nodoka-sama, your son is only in a relationship with me, so if he is being manly with any of us, it will be with me.”

“And I have a boyfriend waiting for me at home,” Mai hastened to add.

Nodoka seemed to frown a little a little, contemplating them all before, cocking her head to one side thoughtfully as she looked at Shampoo. “Tell me dear, are you Chinese?”

“Yes! Ranma and I met while he was on a training journey in China. He passed through my people’s lands, and we started to hit it off then, although we did not become a couple at the time,” Shampoo answered, lying and leaving a lot out of the story.

Nodoka frowned at that, and Soun pounced. Before any of the others could say anything, he pointed across the table at Ranma. “That’s right, they didn’t get together until this hussy showed up at my doorstep! Ranma was perfectly happy in a relationship with my little girl Akane, as dictated by the honor agreement between our houses. But Ranma broke up with her to go with this floozy! Say something to your son, Nodoka-san!”

The only thing stopping Shampoo from braining Soun at that point was the fact that she didn’t know what floozy meant and didn’t want to come off as too violent to Nodoka. So she held back, while Natsume frowned. “That doesn’t sound very manly to me, breaking up with your girlfriend? I can understand wanting to sow your wild oats, but surely if you are an established relationship, a little bit of cheating on the side should not have been so enticing for you to break away from your girlfriend like that.”

“Wait, what?” Ranma said, blinking before deciding to set aside the oddity of his mother’s response Soun to deal with the main thing. “I wasn’t in a relationship with Akane. We had been forced to gather by my Father and Soun because of some honor agreement between them to unite the schools. But our personalities were just well, we were clashing a lot! And I wasn’t growing as a martial artist while I was there.” To Ranma’s mind, that second point was just as big as the first, for why he had jumped on the chance to leave Nerima behind with Shampoo.

“Perhaps, but...” To Soun’s disappointment, the woman decided to set that problem aside for now, smiling brightly at her son as she sat down him. “Well, we’ll come back to that in order, I suppose. Tell me about yourself, Ranma. You certainly seem to be taking your training seriously, which is a good thing. And if you are in relationship with this young lady, that certainly implies you are manly enough in that area as well.”

“Forgive me Oba-san, but you seem to be emphasizing the word manly quite a bit. Might I ask is that a personal fillip of yours, or does it have some greater meaning?” Natsume asked politely. Like Shampoo, she wanted to make a good impression here.

“My, aren’t you a polite one, and a martial artist as well?” Natsume nodded at Nodoka’s words, and Nodoka smiled. “Well then Soun, if my son and one of your daughters didn’t seem to work out very well, then perhaps this young lady would be willing to take up that duty? Having one or two wives isn’t a problem after all, it is simply another sign of manliness.”

As several people at the table twitched at that for various reasons, Nodoka went on, reaching inside a bag she had strapped to her side on the other side from the side where she carried the long, thin wrapped package. “And as for why being manly is so important to me, well beyond the fact that Ranma would obviously need to carry on the family legacy, there is this.”

Shampoo was too busy blushing at the idea of carrying on the family legacy, as was Ranma, for them to be the first to read the paper that she gently placed on the table. Mai had that honor, and she gasped, gaped, and stared first at the paper on the table, then up at the woman. “Ma’am, can I ask, what is this? Forgive me, but I’m not so good at interpreting different people’s handwriting.”

“Hahaha!” Nodoka laughed, holding one hand in front of her mouth demurely. “I can understand that. Genma’s handwriting has never been the best. But that is a binding contract between Genma, Ranma and I. You see, I was very against the idea of Genma taking Ranma on a training journey. He was only a toddler at the time, barely able to walk, let alone throw a punch. I felt that Genma should wait until he was at least nine or ten to take him away, if a training journey was needed at all. But Genma was insistent, and kept on pushing. Eventually, he promised that starting the training journey so early would let him make Ranma, not just the best martial artist he could be but the manliest of men.”

That snapped Ranma out of his blushing confusion. “And what does manly mean? I mean I’ll hold my hand up and say I am a great martial artist, easily one of the best in my age group, although I haven’t traveled the world just yet to make certain of that,” he said cockily, gesturing with a hand towards Shampoo. “That’s what Shampoo and I are doing, traveling the world to get stronger, meet new and interesting people and fight them.”

“Well, that sounds quite manly indeed! But as for what that means in general, why, it means being strong, being honorable, and being manly with girls, to carry on the family line by giving me lots of grandbabies!” Nodoka said, ending enthusiastically as she looked at Natsume and Shampoo. “Obviously he’s been able to make one girl very happy, but, Natsume, I am quite certain that my son could be manly with you as well if you wish to take up your family’s honor obligation.”

Seeing a chance to further embed herself as the Tendo, Natsume hesitated, remembering the curse, and before she could say anything, Mai asked, “And what would’ve happened if Ranma wasn’t manly in your eyes?” Mai’s own eyes were locked on to the paper, which Nodoka had once more picked up, moving to put it away.

Nodoka's entire face seemed to shut down as she answered, shaking her head sadly from side to side, one hand resting lightly on the long thing package that she had set to one side of her lap when she sat down. "In that case my dear, both my husband and my son would commit seppuku. It was an honor contract between the two of them and me, and I would hold them to it."

Ranma's eyes widened as he stared at his mother, then over at Mai's equally controlled expression. *You know, I always figured that a woman would have to be crazy to put up with my old man, what with the whole us on the road all the time thing and his general character. "You'd hold me to it, even though I was so young way back then I wasn't even able to sign that thing?"*

"You put your mark on it in the form of little handprints. So I have always seen it as a binding agreement." Nodoka smiled widely. "Thankfully, it's quite obvious that your Father did succeed in his quest, I'm quite pleased. However, tell me more of yourself, and your adventures. Besides this Chinese girl, have there been any others that have caught your eye? I understand that you and this Akane the girl did not apparently get along, but again, how well do you get along with Natsume here? She seems a most pretty girl, and Soun's daughter as well, and since you are on a training journey now with her..." she said leadingly, smiling almost like a perverted old man for a moment.

Soun's eyes had widened, as he came to the same conclusion that Mai had. *The curse!* Whatever else, Nodoka would probably not look favorably on Ranma's curse, however he attempted to explain it. So when Shampoo glared at him, Soun nodded his head, indicating he would keep his mouth shut with a finger to his lips about Ranma's curse, making Shampoo breathe a sigh of relief. Whatever else, Soun didn't want Ranma to die.

And deep down, he was slowly coming around to the idea of making Natsume take up the honor obligation between their families since everyone else was mentioning.

As he realized that, Soun's eyes started to water as he thought of his darling girl's reaction to that, as well as making a mental apology to the ghost of his dead wife. *Akane, I'm so sorry! Poppa will make it up to you, and maybe once we returned Ranma to Nerima, you'll be able to win his affections again. Kimiko, I'm sorry! I know I didn't ever cheat on you, I know it, whatever these girls might think! But these girls are undoubtedly students of the Tendo School, so whatever their delusions, I need to deal with them on that level.*

Sensing much the same thing that the others did, Ranma steered the conversation away from girls in general and his curse, talking about his training under his old man. He didn't mention any of the major disasters he could remember with his time with his Father, the whole Cat Fist technique, and a few other memories of Genma behaving very poorly. Instead, he simply mentioned that at times Genma seemed to take martial arts training to an extreme, and put it above other things such as education.

This caused Nodoka to frown pensively, before she shrugged her shoulders and admitted that some sacrifices probably didn't need to be made to become the best. She always tried to steer the conversation back to girls in general, but Mai, Shampoo and the others all helped Ranma keep the conversation on martial arts instead.

As the conversation continued, Ranma's initial rush of interest in having a mother started to fade away. His mother seemed almost obsessed with the idea of manliness to a terrifying degree. And Ranma had figured out what that package beside her was: a sword, hidden in wrapping as it had to be due to government regulations. His mother kept on touching it whenever Ranma steered the conversation away from girls, and whenever he mentioned something that she did not like about the training journey.

It gave Ranma the willies, and he wasn't the only one. Even Kurumi started to notice as the last of the food on the table disappeared down her throat.

Eventually as the sun began to go down, Mai surreptitiously glanced at a nearby clock. "Ranma," she said interrupting the conversation between mother and son, "we need to get going if we're going to catch the last ferry to Kochi." She stood up, beginning to clean up after themselves quickly.

"Oh? You're not staying? I could certainly put all of you up for the night," Nodoka protested. "I would love more time to get to know you and your girlfriends, Ranma."

"I'd like to mom," Ranma lied, "but we're due at Mai's dojo in a day and a half on Kyushu. I don't think we could make that appointment if we waste time here. And then Shampoo and I are due in Hong Kong a few days after that to meet with another martial arts master there. These guys are really hard to set up meetings with so missing one would be bad."

Both statements were lies, of course. But none of the others who knew how haphazard Ranma and Shampoo's plans really were called in on it. It was very clear to all of them that Ranma was just as worried about the whole suicide and his curse thing as any of them. His mother's general attitude to what was manly was also kind of disturbing. *Best to keep her at arm's length as much as possible.*

"Well, far be it from your old mother to get in the way of you becoming as manly as you possibly can be. Just remember son, that even if you are in a relationship with this foreign girl, do not close your eyes to other possibilities," she said, winking heavily over at Natsume, who smiled somewhat wanly back before Nodoka turned stood up and gave her son a hug. "Soun, I expect a report from you about progress on that score and phone calls from you Ranma from now on. I won't demand once every day, you're a teenager after all, and I know how teenagers are. But one call every week would be nice."

"I promise mom," Ranma said, patting her on the back. "Although I might mess up occasionally since we'll be traveling through different time zones."

“And a manly man keeps his promises,” Nodoka answered with approval, giving her son a kiss on the cheek as she pressed a small napkin with her phone number on it into his hand, complete with time of days she was free to talk. She was a single woman after all, and needed to work. “Goodbye for now my son, and do remember, that I live here in Wakayama, and you are welcome home any time.”

Ranma answered he would remember that, gave Nodoka a kiss on the cheek in return, and turned, deliberately hugging Shampoo to him, in order to show his mother a bit of the so-called manly stuff that she was so interested in as he walked towards the loading area for the ferry.

Natsume walked demurely beside them on Ranma’s other side. Kurumi raced off with Mai to grab some more food, but they were all still within hearing range of a loud squeal of “grandbabies!” from behind them as the group of six martial artists left Nodoka there.

They were all silent, even Soun, for a time, as they handed over the tickets to the ferryman, and boarded the ferry, with Soun somewhat surprised at the others had bought him a ticket too. They were still silent as they sat in their chairs and until the ferry began to pull away from the dock. Whereupon Ranma said, “So, was that as disturbing for anyone else as it was for me?”

“Too-too disturbing! And Shampoo not like how dismissive Ranma Matriarch was because Shampoo Chinese!” Shampoo growled, her anger again impacting her accent. “Shampoo know that kind of thing prevalent in Japan, but had hoped martial artists be more open.”

“And that whole thing about grandbabies and carrying on the line and everything else?” Mai shivered. “That was more than a little weird. To say nothing about the seppuku contract.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry it messed up our date before that Shampoo, but I think I’m glad that my curse’s water attraction aspect hit while we were alone, rather than when we were with my mother. That would not have been pretty.” Unknown to the others, he and Shampoo had been hit by water as they walked around. Several boys had been playing with water guns, and Ranma had been hit from several sides, unable to dodge in time.

Soun pulled at his small mustache sheepishly. “Well, Nodoka has always been somewhat strange. While I cannot recall her ever carrying the Saotome honor blade around as she seemingly is now, her ideas of manliness have always been quite... esoteric. The Dread Master quite approved of her and that should tell you something right there.”

Ranma sighed. “Well, I suppose it should be given that any woman willin’ ta sleep with Pops’d be weird. Maybe if I can keep her at arm’s length, she won’t find out about the curse and I won’t have ta start dodging her sword.”



The others all winced, sympathy and concern in their faces. Bar Shampoo, none of the girls there had any real memories of their parents, but all of them knew how important a mother could be to a child, boy or girl. Nodoka's obsession with manliness had disturbed them too, and they all understood why Ranma was willing to forgo any attempted closeness with her. Yet Shampoo could also see that Ranma was deeply hurt, saddened by the necessity and the fact that his mother seemed just as crazy, if in a very different way, than his Father.

She looked over at Soun, then gestured to Mai. "I think that Soun has earned his parole, yes?"

"Yeah," Ranma nodded, moving over to sit next to the older man as Mai and Natsume also stood up, obscuring the eyes of the other ferry passengers for a moment as Ranma went to work. "You did good keeping your mouth shut about the whole curse thing, and I noticed ya think a time or two when we were talkin' about Akane. I think we can trust ya ta not try ta run away or fight us, yeah?"

"Fighting you had never even occurred to me. I know when I am beat. But I still feel your kidnapping of me is a most dishonorable act. Regardless, I don't want you to face seppuku, Ranma, only to take up your obligations."

He then said something that made Ranma want to retighten the ropes he was currently removing from around Soun's upper arms and legs. Looking over at Natsume, Soun said simply, "But if young Natsume is willing to take up the burden of that honor agreement, then I will be satisfied with that."

Inside, Soun was still unwilling to acknowledge these girls as his daughters. But he knew that if he pushed Natsume forward, she would be obliged to try her best to woo Ranma. That would mean trouble for Shampoo and Ranma's relationship, and maybe might even work to convince Ranma to come back to Nerima. Soun wasn't certain.

Natsume beamed, while Ranma and Shampoo groaned and Kurumi smiled widely. "So does that mean that you believe where your daughters now?"

"I, I still do not believe that I have at any time cheated on my wife, not even when I was training with the Dread Master. For many reasons," he muttered, before going on in stronger tone once more. "But I cannot deny your skill in Anything Goes martial arts, or your mastery of some of the techniques of the Tendo style. As such, you were certainly students of that style, and so long as you are willing to take on the Tendo name and use my dojo, I will be satisfied."

Soun's eyes hardened and he is now entirely freed arm in a cutting motion. "I will **not** suffer through the indignity of a paternity test. Such is **highly** dishonorable, and I will not have that. I will accept you as my students. But I will only accept you as my heir if you can prove that you are the most proficient in Anything Goes Tendo Style, and are willing to go through with the honor agreement with Ranma."

Shampoo and Ranma looked at one another, and Ranma sighed in defeat as he leaned back and close his eyes. *Of course, because my getting away from my mother without her discovering my curse was too good to be true*, he thought.

As he thought that, Shampoo and Natsume started to look at one another warily, while Mai sat down besides Ranma murmuring, "Well, I suppose that was bound to happen at some point. It'll be up to you to somehow convince Natsume not to get between you and Ranma."

"Worse," Ranma muttered. Mai looked at her, and Ranma shrugged. "Natsume said she was willing to go the Mistress route. I doubt Soun would be willing to go along with it."

Mai winced at that, then nodded, recognizing the truth in his words, and she watched as Shampoo, Soun, and Natsume began to argue amongst themselves while Kurumi watched on, having pulled the popcorn bag from somewhere.

OOOOOOO

That evening, Nodoka entered her bedroom both happy and concerned. She was ecstatic to meet her son after so long, but there were several things that bothered her. First was the fact he had apparently taken up with a foreign girl, instead of staying with a young Japanese girl. *I know they said that this Akane and Ranma were not very compatible, but still, surely, there was something more Soun or my husband could have done to help the young couple work through their differences? While I can understand wanting to be with someone as cute as Shampoo despite her foreign status, it isn't very manly to let an honor agreement collapse like my son seems to have.*

Second was the fact Ranma hadn't known anything about her. While Nodoka had not made a point of it with Ranma, Soun or the other young martial artists with them, this had utterly infuriated her. *How dare Genma not tell Ranma anything about me! Does he not want me involved in his life?*

A part of Nodoka feared that was indeed the case, but that fear merely fueled her desire to somehow find Genma and wring some answers out of him. Because another thing that bothered her, was the sense she got that Ranma was hiding something about their training journey. Nodoka feared that Genma's desire to put martial arts training over everything had caused trouble for both of them, and perhaps the Saotome name in their travels. She'd not heard anything like that, but still...

"At least all the girls with my son were extremely cute. That Mai girl seems quite mature, very nice childbearing hips on that one. Pity she's apparently in a relationship already," Nodoka lamented. "Then again, I can hope that Natsume is able to grab my son's interest. She seemed willing to do so, although why Soun wasn't more enthusiastic for that I don't know. Ranma's reservations were quite cute, but I'm certain he's manly enough to handle two girls."

Nodoka was about to get into bed when a thought occurred to her. "Tendo Dojo! I can look that up, can't I? Perhaps my husband will be there. Soun said he was on a journey of his own, but perhaps he will return there? And then I can meet this Akane girl, as well as Soun's other daughters. Kurumi is obviously too young, but if Natsume doesn't work, perhaps one of his other daughters might. And I will at least learn what kind of mistakes Akane and Ranma made in their relationship."

She wrote that out, and went to bed smiling, unaware that on the ferry Ranma had just shivered in dread. And in Nerima, Genma, who had just beaten the dojo destroyer who had taken up residence in the Tendo dojo since he and Soun had left, froze halfway into the dining room, eyes wide so wide even Nabiki looked concerned as a feeling of someone walking over his grave came to him.

OOOOOO

With Soun now willing to go along with them until they arrived at the Shiranui Dojo, after that was not so much up in the air as a wall in the distance just waiting for them to smash into it, most might have thought that the bare day it took them to travel across Shikoku to the ferry at Seiyo to Oita on Kyushu and then from the docks to the Shiranui Dojo would have been the easiest segment of the journey for Ranma and his companions. This was not so for Ranma, Natsume, and Shampoo however. Because Ranma's internal prediction about Soun not willing to have the marriage agreement downgraded to his 'daughter' taking the mistress position.

At every opportunity he could, Soun extolled the virtue of the marriage agreement in general, in Ranma being able to settle down, in taking over the dojo, in having a wife like Natsume. That last was particularly annoying to Ranma and the others, since backing Natsume like this was a complete one eighty from what Soun had been doing before. And he didn't really know much about Natsume, beyond the fact she was a decent cook when she could get ingredients, that she was a very good martial artist, and that he had, apparently, promised her that she and her sister could take over the Tendo Dojo.

Which, thankfully, seemed to drive a small wedge between Natsume, Soun and his pushing her to try to push her way into Ranma's mind. Natsume wanted to be declared the heir on her own merits, and when Soun brought up the idea of Ranma being the dojo master pointed this out firmly. "Father, while I would not object to taking up the honor agreement and merging our schools, I believe that if we do so, I would be taking over the dojo, and Ranma would be my assistant. While Ranma is a better martial artist than I am, I do not believe that simply letting him teach the Saotome style in the Tendo dojo would be a good idea. He could instead teach specialized classes for advanced students, while Kurumi and I... and this Akane girl, if she could be trusted not to attack the male students, would teach the more general classes."

She smiled prettily, causing Soun's protest to stumble to a halt for a second. "Taking much of the workload off your shoulders so you could keep coming up with new techniques for the Tendo School."

Soun spluttered, but not finding any logical reason to gainsay that, simply shook his head. "Well, I, I suppose that makes sense, though you really should meet my little girl before you pass judgement as you seem to be."

"Well, Father, considering I am also your little girl, I think that's fair," Natsume shot back.

That served to stop Soun for a while, since he broke out into tears at how, "My daughter is being mean to me!" to which the others just rolled their eyes.

"You know," Mai murmured, as she, Shampoo and Ranma once more left the 'Tendos' to sort themselves out, "I have to wonder if Kurumi and Natsume are really getting a good deal, so to speak, looking to join the Tendo family. I know I've said something similar...numerous times... but I really don't think I'd be willing to put up with Soun, even if I was the heir to the school and could look forward to taking over the family dojo and home."

"Yes, we agree with ya, and yeah, you've said that numerous times," Ranma snorted.

Mai poked him in the shoulder. "That's another thing. Why's your way of speaking changed so much? You sound like way more of a hick than you did when we were out in the woods or even before the sisters joined us."

"Heh. Soun doesn't know that I can shift how I talk like that. And I don't want him to, y'know? If he thinks I'm a hick because of the way I talk, then that's a good thing ta me, you know?" Ranma snickered, winking at Mai and then Shampoo.

Mai and Shampoo both shook their heads, before Ranma put an arm around Shampoo's shoulders. "You know, we could leave them behind right now, if it's bothering you enough. Now that Soun's accepted he might be Kurumi and Natsume's dad, any obligation I had to them as the senior student is gone."

"Maybe, but we still would have promised Mai that we would stop in at her dojo for a while. Help convince Andy that a couples getaway is better than a 'bro trip'," Shampoo snickered now, speaking the term bro trip in Chinese, which she felt sounded better than in Japanese. It also meant something like 'guy only trip' which had interesting connotations. *The only way I can see Andy not being into Mai is if he's gay, so it works. But then, wouldn't he be more in touch with his feelings or whatever?*

Her friends just looked confused, not having heard the term before, and Shampoo sighed. "Philistines."

“Heh, well, your vocabulary is getting better all the time, Shampoo.”

“Seriously though, what is the plan for you two?” Mai questioned, feeling sad that soon her friends would be leaving. *Well, unless I can convince Andy to go with me or... or something, I suppose. I don't want to think about it, but if he doesn't give me some signs soon I...* Pushing that thought to one side, Mai went on. “You both can slip away, I know, but it seems to me that you've got some plan for keeping Soun around rather than sending Natsume and Kurumi off with him.”

“I do. You've noticed how Soun is always saying that Natsume and Kurumi will have to fight Akane, right? Well, I would bet anything that he would try to rig the match somehow, or say it was a team match with him and Akane against them, right? And he's still insisting he isn't related to the sisters.”

Mai and Shampoo both nodded, with Mai frowning a bit. She was still of the opinion that they should get a paternity test, but knew that it was such a stain on family honor to even go through with such a thing regardless of the outcome that she wasn't surprised Natsume and Kurumi had decided to not go through with it just as Soun had refused to.

“Anyway, what I'm hoping is that training at your dojo will give enough time for Soun's act to wear on Natsume's desire to have a Father, ya know? If so, she might be willing to just settle for the dojo.”

“You're thinking that his act will eventually make Natsume challenge him for the dojo entirely, not just the heirship?” Shampoo asked, thinking about it. “I think between them they can handle Soun, but on her own, Natsume would lose.”

“Right now, sure. But in another week or more of training? Who knows? And once we put the idea in her mind, you and me don't need to be here for it. We can let nature take its course,” Ranma snickered.

“You know, you're country bumpkin act that you play up occasionally always annoys me,” Mai murmured. “Especially when you can come up with plans like this. That's why you've been forcing Soun to talk more about Kasumi, right? And Nerima in general too, come to think of it.”

“Yep. Kasumi doesn't deserve to be turfed out on her rear, although a kick to said rear might be a good idea to get her to stop being such a wallflower,” Ranma grumbled. Kasumi's non-participation in everything still rankled him even now, more than half a year since he left Nerima. “Nabiki, well I got no clue how she and the traveling twosome are going to interact. Akane too. Heck, they might even keep Soun around. But if they fight Akane and Soun with the dojo entirely on the line, Natsume and Kurumi will have a roof over their heads, no need to pursue me, and I think it might even be good for the Tendos in general.”

“Devious Airen, very devious. I approve!” Shampoo laughed, shaking his head. “Sounds too good to really come out like that, but by that point, Natsume and Kurumi and Soun will all be out of our hair. If we have to stay here a few extra days, I think it might be well worth it.”

Mai agreed, but then a shriek of shock occurred nearby, down one of the lanes leading back down the mountain they were hiking up. “JUBEI you old bastard! Stop trying to peek on my sisters!”

Groaning, Mai turned in that direction. “Crap. That’s Mr. Ayamo. I’d better go see what’s going on and corral the old pervert. Keep going up this path, you’ll see a sign for the Shiranui Dojo. It looks pretty much like a temple, you can’t miss it.” With that, Mai bounded away, racing towards the sound of the disturbance, a war cry on her lips. “Uncle Jubei, you pervert! What’ve you been doing without me around, huh!?”

Snickering to one another, Shampoo and Ranma turned away, more than willing to let Mai handle Jubei for now. Ranma looked back once, and had to stop himself from concentrating on Mai’s rear as she raced away, instead noting that Soun and the two girls had broken off. From here, Ranma couldn’t tell whose choice it was, but since they were heading toward a small traditional snack hut, figured it was Kurumi. That meant he and Shampoo were on their own.

Ideas for how to use their time came to Ranma’s mind, but he pushed them away. *Time enough to go on a date once we reach the Shiranui temple and Mai’s made introductions and whatever. Still, it says something about how this relationship has changed me that I’m even thinking about that kind of thing. But I do think I need to do something special for Shampoo in thanks for putting up with all the Anything Goes baggage we’ve been dealing with.*

Reaching out, he put an arm around Shampoo’s shoulder, feeling her smile and nuzzles into his side as they continued on up the mountain. And if they stopped and kissed occasionally, there was no one there to notice.

However, the sight they saw when they eventually reached the Shiranui Dojo drove any such thoughts out of their minds. In front of the dojo were dozens of groaning bodies, men who wore different outfits, but who still had the general look of martial artists. In front of them between the crowd and still fighting several of the attackers, were two blonde men, one with almost silvery hair down past his shoulders, which had to be Andy going by the description they’d had of him. The other was older, the age to be out of college rather than just starting like Andy, wearing jeans and traveling clothes along with a cap on his head.

As Ranma and Shampoo walked through the groaning bodies, the two Bogard brothers finished off their last opponents, whereupon Terry, Ranma thought that was his name anyway, turned in their direction. “Damn it, they just keep coming! Are you here to challenge the Wild Wolves too or just here to make trouble for the Shiranui Dojo? If so, you’re gonna have to get through us!”

Both Shampoo and Ranma had wanted to see if Andy was as good as Mai kept on saying he was. Now, seeing this and hearing that challenge, well, neither of them were willing to care too much about what was behind this bit of provocation. Instead, the lovers just glanced at one another, then moved apart as Shampoo's chui appeared in her hands and Ranma began to stretch his neck and arms. "The names're Ranma of the Saotome Style school of Anything Goes, and Shampoo of the Joketsuzoku. And we accept your challenge!"

### **End Chapter**

There you have it guys. There will be one more chapter in Japan, then it's off to Hong Kong, and the plot/ Street FIGHT matches can really start to wind up, as you can see with the little hint I showed here. The romance will also start to heat up in the next few chapters, with dates, revelations and flirting galore. See you next time!