

I ain't a lady, nor Japanese.

Hey all. Sorry this is coming out kind of last minute but work on **Stallion** took longer than expected. Alas, **Stallion** won't be out this evening either, it will be pushed back to the Super Bowl. Tomon and I have both had RL get in the way, and since this is the chapter you, my readers will point to and go 'THIS is when the story goes off the canon rails' bar the islands, then we want it to be as good as it can be. In recompense, I will have another Ranma-centric surprise out for the Super Bowl as well.

**ATP** is done and should be up by now. You should also see one of February's two (yes, two) polls up later tonight. see my after chapter notes as to why there are still two polls.

...I also noticed two people who had joined at the beginning of the month cancel today because they thought I wasn't as active as they thought... yeah... gonna take my mom's advice and not say anything at all to that LOL. Another one decided he didn't like the benefits? Again, I have an open door policy folks. If you don't like how I do things or think I should be doing more here, or heck just want to shoot the breeze, I am available via messages. I don't always respond quickly, but I will take any suggestions or concerns under advisement. Don't just go, eh, he's not doing what he should be and then walk away without talking to me. That just seems silly.

Regardless, I hope those of you who stayed enjoy this bit of martial arts style craziness, which has been looked over by Hiryu. You will also notice that I capitalize the FIGHT in Street FIGHT – this is so it sounds more formalized and tournament-like. Not tremendously so, but in this manner there sounds as if there is some kind of overall organization to it.

Now on with the show!

## **Chapter 2: Constructing a Relationship**

With it being so late, Ranma knew that the trains, the fastest means of putting some real distance between them and Nerima wasn't possible just yet. However that was fine. First, Ranma wanted the two of them to move completely unseen and that was tougher in an urban environment than a forest. *Leaving tracks isn't so much of an issue except...*

Pausing in his jumping from one roof to another, he held up a hand to Shampoo, halting her in turn. "Hey, Shampoo, this might sound weird but are you wearing perfume?"

"It do sound weird, but Shampoo wearing perfume," Shampoo said with a chuckle. "I am woman, yes? Maybe Ranma want another example?"

Ranma blushed at the flirting, and Shampoo's smile turned into a giggle, shaking her head. "Why Ranma ask?"

“Because my old man can turn into a panda remember? He’s got a pretty good sense of smell. Every time I tried to turn back to head to the cursed springs and try to find a cure, he’d always sniff me out, and convince me to stop or just knock me out and start heading back towards Japan,” Ranma answered. “And I really, really don’t want him or any of the others to be able to find us.”

Shampoo cocked her head. “Sound like Angry One willing give you up. You certain they all come after you?”

“Yeah, although if you ask me, the reason’s really stupid. I told you about how the whole fiancée thing was because we’re supposed to be uniting the schools. But we’re only one generation thing from the original school of Anything Goes, so there isn’t all that much to unite. But my old man and Soun are really interested in it.”

“Does sound strange when Ranma put like that,” Shampoo mused, even as she fished out a perfume bottle from her ki space. Ranma watched her do it and resolved to talk about the ki space thing with her later. He’d figured it out but he could only make a tiny space, and he refused to think that Shampoo had more ki than him not with everything he knew about how one created ki in the first place.

He took the bottle, and sniffed at it, his eyebrow rising. It was an extremely subtle scent, wild honeysuckle and a hint of something else. “Mmm... nice,” he murmured, and blinked as Shampoo blushed, visible in the lights of a nearby apartment tower. “Er, I mean, um... yeah, I got nothing.” Ranma looked away with his own flushed face. “It, it smells nice, and um I don’t think my old man will have been able to pick it out in the park where we met. We should be good, but if they track us, we might want to change it up.”

“If Ranma so certain Fat Fool come after us, might want lay down false trail,” Shampoo added her own idea. “Head to other side of Honshu, yes. Then head out to sea, double back?”

Ranma agreed with that and buoyed by Shampoo’s words continued to think ahead in a way he had rarely bothered to before. But something about this, running away from the Tendos and his old man, with Shampoo by his side, was really making him want it to work, and if that meant thinking ahead. he could do that. “And we’ll need to think about money...”

“What Ranma have in mind?” Shampoo asked, before scowling. “Shampoo also want learn more Japanese, speak better, yes?”

“Yeah, we can work on that. How did you start learning it anyway?” Ranma questioned.

Moving unseen through Tokyo, the two of them continued to talk, until they were out of the district and into the next one over, heading toward the city center. When Shampoo noticed, she asked why, and Ranma snickered. “I’m gonna show you how to live off the urban environment. One of the things my old man taught me that I’m happy about is hustling

gangsters, and in fact..." Ranma paused, looking down at himself, then smirked as he glanced at Shampoo. "Yeah, I think we could do one better."

Shampoo looked back at him in confusion, but Ranma refused to elaborate, saying it would ruin the joke. "Shampoo like jokes, but not on her," Shampoo intoned darkly, her eyes narrowing.

But Ranma waved that off. "It's not on you, it's honestly more on me. I just want to see your face when I do it, that's all."

"This better not be one of those 'witness me' things Shampoo has heard about," she muttered, shaking her head causing Ranma to guffaw, but he became silent the second later, as Shampoo shushed him.

"Tell me about Mousse," Ranma said instead. "You mentioned him but didn't go into any details."

Shampoo winced a bit, then she began to tell the story about Mousse and her growing up, cursing in annoyance when she had to substitute words in order try to explain different meanings, and switching entirely to Chinese at times. But finally, Ranma understood and shook his head. "Do you all know about laser eye surgery? I've seen commercials and bulletin boards talking about it. You might've thought to send this Mousse to do that, you know? At least then he wouldn't be as blind as bats are supposed to be."

"Yes, we know about it. Mousse refuse. He Insulted the Elder Council when he called their offer a handout," Shampoo answered in Chinese, slowly so Ranma could pick up enough to understand it. "Now if he wants it, Mousse will have to pay for it himself."

"Ouch," Ranma murmured. "As for the rest, yeah, that reminds me of my recent experiences with Kuno and his sister."

Shampoo looked at him inquisitively. "You speak of them before, and how both love one form, hate the other."

Ranma nodded, and then explained some of the other things that too, going into detail on the poisoning that Kodachi had done. He then laughed and explained how Kuno had actually confessed to all three of them, Nabiki, Akane, and Ranma herself due to some fortune seller. "So at least Kodachi's not that delusional."

Moments later Shampoo blinked, staring at Ranma as he dumped the water, she'd picked up from the nearby water drain over now her head. "Okay, Shampoo confused. Could swear you not like you female form."

"I don't really," Ranma confessed. "If not for the fact that I know you don't want to head home so quick, I'd be pushing us to head back and find a cure. This form's been way too much trouble. But that doesn't mean it can't come in handy."

She looked at Shampoo, then around, before shrugging, and pulling off her shirt, switching it with a smaller, far tighter shirt. It rode up her stomach, showing Ranma's bared midriff, and outlined her chest almost like someone had painted it on.

Then, Ranma reached up to her hair and undid the string holding it, letting it flow down to her shoulders in a wavy line. Ranma then tucked the string he'd been using in his hair carefully into his ki pocket, closing the pocket with a button.

At Shampoo's confused look, Ranma shrugged. "You don't want to know about that little misadventure just yet. Maybe when I need you to laugh at something, I'll tell you that story."

"Shampoo already looking forward to it," Shampoo answered cheekily, then gestured with one hand up and down Ranma's body, taking it in with her eyes at the same time. *My God! If Ranma had been with me on that yacht, we couldn't have moved for men flirting with us!* "There is reason for this?"

When Ranma continued to explain, Shampoo burst out into laughter, saying in Chinese, "Oh God! It's like, like calling the herd, you only pick out the idiots. Do you also catch and release, so that there's more later?"

Most of that went right over Ranma's head, not understanding many of the words. The fact that Shampoo was giggling as she spoke made it even harder. But eventually, Ranma understood, and he laughed. "I don't hurt any of them permanently."

"Pity. If it Shampoo, she hurt them so hard their little thing never stand at attention quite right again."

Ranma blushed at that, and Shampoo laughed, before saying, "Ranma wait a minute, Shampoo do her part too."

With that, she looked around, and bounded up onto a nearby balcony, just out of sight of where Ranma was walking. There, she quickly reached into her ki space, pulling out a few things.

When she jumped down back to Ranma, Ranma gulped, her eyes almost bouncing inside their sockets, and not because they were following Shampoo's jump down. Rather, she was staring at the bouncing that accompanied it. Shampoo had switched out from a long sleeve silk shirt to a T-shirt, which, while large on her frame, still couldn't encompass her chest without looking overly tight. That chest also bounced with her movements, much like Ranma knew his

own did. Shampoo had also done something with her hair. Instead of the long amazing looking ponytail, she had doubled it up into a series of ponytails, making her look much younger almost than she had before.

“Your you’re not wearing a bra any longer?” Ranma voice was somewhat strangled as he tried his hardest to keep his eyes on Shampoo’s face.

Smiling flirtatiously Shampoo rolled her shoulders back, thrusting her chest out even more, saying in Chinese, “You’re not the only one can contribute to this act of yours you know. And I wouldn’t feel right with you playing the bait on your own.”

“Okay,” Ranma answered, his voice coming out high-pitched, and Shampoo could see a few signs of arousal on the other girl. The way her legs were rubbing against one another, a hint of nipple poking through her t-shirt. “I understand that. It, it will be doubly effective, I guess. One girl might actually seem suspicious if our target has any brains at all. Two, all giggling and acting tipsy, that’ll fool a lot of people.”

Once Ranma finished describing the word tipsy, Shampoo questioned, “How often are we going to do this tonight?”

“Well, I don’t know about you but I got no money really.” Shampoo agreed with that, she only had enough for a night in a hotel. “So, three or four groups I’d say. We won’t be back this way so it doesn’t matter what the locals think about a rash of gang-morons getting their rears kicked in.”

“And you be no uncomfortable?”

Ranma blinked at her. “What do you mean?”

Going a most of the night without a bra including small fights? Even Shampoo needs more support during fight.”

Ranma shook his head. “Nope, I haven’t needed anything like that yet.”

“Lucky bitch,” Shampoo grumbled good-naturedly. “Great-grandmother say eventually martial artist can become strong enough not need one, but still should wear for propriety. Given some of the lingerie...” she intoned, taking a certain delight in the Japanese word, “Shampoo has seen, propriety seem not mean what she thought it meant.”

She laughed as Ranma’s blush returned, linking her arm with the redhead’s. “No be like that, Shampoo certain Ranma become quite cute in good clothing, yes.”

“I don’t want to be cute in this form,” Ranma protested. “Remember, long term I want to get rid of it.”

Shampoo grimaced. *Well, better sooner than later, I suppose.* “Ranma...Shampoo come clean with something about cursed springs. Cursed springs no really have cure. Least ways, not that Amazons know.”

That caused Ranma to pull up short, staring at her companion. “W, what!? But, but there’s a spring of drowned man isn’t there!? I heard about it a few times when going through the area around the springs.”

Shampoo pulled the redhead along, seeing more lights in the distance and hearing voices and music, meaning they were coming up on a busier segment of the city. “Spring of drowned man, spring of drowned pious priest, many different springs. But springs do not cancel.”

“N, not cancel...” Ranma stammered, looking horrified. “What do you mean?”

“The curses don’t cancel, they merge,” Shampoo said in Chinese, before switching to Japanese and saying, “they link, they work together. Best Shampoo can explain.”

“You mean, I’d be both boy and girl!?”

Shampoo nodded, then shrugged her shoulders. “It sound much worse than it is. In fact, it could be interesting.” She winked at Ranma,

Ranma just stared at her deadpan, then smacked Shampoo on the forehead. “Pervert.” Then Ranma winked at the now-pouting Shampoo. “Come on, enough serious shit for one night. Let’s find some idiots and roll them for their cash.”

“Shampoo only understood cash there, but still think she understand enough,” Shampoo mused, her pout disappearing into a snicker.

However, as they walked, Ranma had one last question that he (currently she) needed the answer to a lot more than he had thought a moment ago. “What about you Shampoo? I mean, you just said I can’t get rid of it, but what does that mean if we... that is if this whole thing between us goes someplace. What I mean is, I’m you’re not going to want to kiss...”

“Why Ranma say that? Is not unusual among Amazon sister get together.”

Ranma blinked. “I think I lost something in translation, you’re not really meaning sisters...”

“All Amazons be sisters,” Shampoo answered, before grunting in annoyance and switching to Chinese, “I mean that I know several girls our age who have gotten together with other girls. Heck, I once experimented with a girl. Kissing was fun with her but Mousse ruined it. He nearly hurt her permanently. If Mousse hadn’t been able to explain it away as an accident, I

might've been down one or both of my friends. At the time, anyway," she muttered, looking away. "I lost him as a friend later regardless."

Seeing Shampoo somewhat distressed, Ranma pulled her into a gentle hug, their breasts squishing against one another, before she shook her head. "I'm sorry to hear that, and don't worry, if Mouse ever shows up, I know he's more dangerous than his whole being blind thing would make me think."

"Is good," Shampoo said with a nod, then shook herself before leaning in and very deliberately kissing Ranma on the lips.

Ranma blinked, blushed, and then slowly returned the kiss and found it was very different kissing in this form. Her tongue wasn't quite as long, but her lips were softer, and seemed a little more... tingly. Ranma wasn't certain how to describe it otherwise, but however she described it, the kiss still felt good to Ranma.

After Shampoo finished showing Ranma that his curse form wasn't a problem, the two of them moved down the street, and Shampoo looked at Ranma, bouncing along brightly, looking at the different bars, and shaking her head. She looked a cross between drop dead sexy, inebriated, and cute. It was very strange to Shampoo, but she reflected that was what her own change in attire had been designed to go for, so hopefully it worked.

The two of them continued to talk, letting loose a little giggle or loud drunken laugh as they moved down the streets, until finally they got a bite. A few men began to follow them, not with their eyes, but actually coming up behind them, while a few others disappeared into alleyways before appearing ahead of them. "Shampoo think it working," she said dryly. "We need to worry about guns?"

Ranma waved her hand airily. "Not with punks like this. If you see anyone missing a few fingers, that's a good sign you're playing with someone serious. But in any case, most of them will only use guns as intimidation. If they pull it out at all, it'll already be in close, and in close against the martial artist, a gun is just..."

"Shapeless mace," Shampoo finished for them, grinning cheerfully.

"Just always watch what you're drinking when you're out like this," Ranma went on, her voice low and serious. "One time, my old man and I were in a bar, and I saw this woman get something dunked in her drink. It must've done something to her, because she was all giggly and well, er acting like what we're acting like now. That was one of only a few times I've seen my old man actually step in and interrupt something like that, made me respect him a bit more, for a little while anyway. Until he took money from her purse just like he did the perv who tried to drag her into an alleyway."

Shampoo shook her head at that, although her first thought was that the woman as stupid to not notice she was acting in the way that she shouldn't and deserved to pay in cash for the stupidity. It would be the least way she would pay for that kind of thing.

Then, two men were coming out from behind them, putting her arms around Ranma and Shampoo's shoulders. "Hey ladies, you two looking for a good time?"

Moments later all ten assailants were unconscious, piled up against the wall like blocks of wood. And the two martial artists were several thousand yen richer.

The two of them dealt with four other groups who thought the two of them were easy marks, or as one of them put it, able to be bought. At that point, Ranma shook her head, and gestured up to the rooftops. "I think we've got enough cash, and this is starting to make me feel really dirty."

Shampoo blinked at him in astonishment, and he shook his head quickly. "Not dealing with these idiots like this! You're kicking them in the balls was fine. No, it's knowing they were thinking about us like that."

That caused Shampoo to think, then shudder. A second later the two of them leaped up onto the roof where Ranma pulled a small portable heater out of his pack, lighting it up and putting a mug on top of it. Re-braiding her pigtail with the string from the ki-pocket Ranma poured in some water and the two settled down to wait. Moments later, he was male once more and they spent a few moments counting out their well-earned cash. Among their findings were a few cards, but when Shampoo wondered about them, Ranma shook his head. "If you want to buy anything now, we can use those. But we shouldn't use them too often and leave them somewhere nearby. Credit cards can be easily tracked."

"How do you know that?" Shampoo asked in Chinese, frowning worriedly. That kind of thinking bordered on the really criminal, rather than just the wandering martial artist taking advantage of criminal's level.

Ranma shrugged his shoulders. "My old man did that occasionally when we rolled yakuza, and at one point, had the police on us really quickly."

That made sense, and Shampoo held up a gold watch. "Same with this?" Ranma nodded and she shrugged, looking back at the jewelry, wondering who decided gold necklaces were in for men who had fake tans and if she could find him and break his legs for that idiocy.

They returned to their original hideout above the train station. There, the two bedded down to sleep, wanting a few hours before they hopped onto the train.

This move was something Shampoo had not done before, but when it came to it, that move was pretty simple. The train hadn't built up any speed yet, when both of them landing on



top of the roof. Shampoo stumbled but Ranma grabbed her arm, holding her steady and then gestured her down, on all fours. They hid among the top of the train for a few moments, and Shampoo giggled somewhat worriedly as they both laid out, their heads near one another so they could talk without shouting over the noise of the rushing wind. "If Ranma wanted kiss Shampoo, all you need do say so."

Ranma smirked, shook his head, seeing Shampoo look over the side worriedly. "Don't worry about the view, you'll get used to it," he said soothingly. "Just don't stand up for now. We'll be out of Tokyo soon, and then we can move around a bit more freely, but I think there's a tunnel on this one."

The two of them stayed there, but soon talking became a bit hard, even with their heads side by side. Ranma decided to get some more sleep, while Shampoo pulled out a Josei manga from her bag, getting through two of them before the train began to slow to a halt in Sendai. There, Ranma roused Shampoo, explaining they needed to get gone before the train entered the station.

Shampoo stared across at the passing rooftops, a sweatdrop appearing. "Shampoo no think she make that."

The Chinese girl then whooped as Ranma picked her up in a princess carry. *Oooh this is just like a scene from the romance manga I just read!* Shampoo squealed internally.

Without even a running start he leaped, clearing both the distance and the height needed to land on the nearby rooftops. There he kept going, leaping away from the train station. "Since it's daytime, there might be people who saw us leap from the train, so it's better to put some distance between us and the station."

Shampoo nodded then leaned her head against Ranma's chest, revealing in the muscles she could feel despite their shirts being in the way. *He might be as thin as Mousse, but Ranma is much more muscley... mmm.... I like.*

A few blocks later, Ranma announced they were far enough away that they could now hopped down to the streets, Shampoo forestalled this by moving her hands up from where they had been clasped around Ranma's shoulder into his hair. "My hero," she said, before leaning up to kiss him.

Ranma returned the kiss, and both of them became quite enthusiastic quickly. They were teenagers after all, and as dedicated to the martial arts as they were, one of them had been reading romance novels actions since she was eleven, and the other was, well, male.

Soon, Ranma's tongue poked out from between his lips, tapping gently against Shampoo's lips. She eagerly opened her mouth, allowing Ranma to twist his tongue around Shampoo's own, the young girl whimpering a little at the sensation. Sensations Ranma was

causing hurt just by kissing. Shampoo had a lot of things from her romance novels she wanted to try, and now she finally had someone that she was willing to try those things with.

But eventually the two of them moved away from one another and with a series of gestures and blushing smiles, Ranma gestured them down to the streets below. They spent the next hour getting to know the area by the simple expedient of picking up brochures about the area. But this, and the lack of empty lots and regular dojos, showed there was nothing in the area that would interest them long.

With that in mind, Ranma decided they could continue the trick they'd used last night before moving on quickly. During the day, pickings were slimmer but eventually they found the city's red-light district. Although nowhere near as busy in the morning as it was in the day, there were still a few morons around.

Here however, they found something new in the wallets of the punks who had attempted to take advantage of two young nubile women: a series of calling cards. One mentioned a Yamazaki Group running an esteemed martial arts get together, and seeing that, Ranma twitched, shaking his head with a scowl, a response Shampoo called him on. "What wrong?"

"It's a kind of code. You put in the word 'group' spelled like that, and they're talking about yakuza. Still, the underground fights could be interesting."

"Shampoo find interesting the fact that underground fights have cards at all," she quipped.

Ranma laughed, shrugged her shoulders. "Here in Japan, there are a lot of formalized things like that hidden under the surface." Ranma pulled out the other card murmuring, "There's this one too."

Shampoo looked over his shoulder, deliberately pressing her breasts into the shorter girl's head. The card read 'Street FIGHT Japan' and Shampoo frowned. "Isn't that just the same thing as the other one?"

"Yeah, but this one, Street FIGHT, I've heard it mentioned before," Ranma explained about the tournament that he and his father had seen upon returning to Japan.

Shampoo's eyes narrowed slightly at how he had bet on this ninja girl. But she reminded herself that the two of them had not been together back then. "Hmm, this sound interesting too. Still wonder about whole card thing but is good anyway. Fighting needed to know how to grow."

Nodding Ranma agreed, pointing out that both sites were to the south. "That could help us throw off my Pops too, shifting to the south after laying out a false trail like you suggested."

Shampoo frowned a bit at that, then shrugged. "So long as stop and learn on way, Shampoo agree. Leaving Japan before learning all we want be a bad idea."

She then switched to Chinese. "I also want to try to find some acupuncturists to learn from along with martial arts. I think a precise style based around acupuncture, needles or pressure points like that would be a good mix between my own weapons-based styles. I already know a lot about pressure points, but not acupuncture. Both can also be used in healing and building up our ki."

Nodding eagerly at that, Ranma smiled at her. "That's a great idea. I also think we both might want to learn some aikido. My old man always looked down on it, but it's a really graceful style, and mixed in with traditional Wing Chun and Anything Goes or your own style, it could be something great."

"Ooh, that too too good idea," Shampoo answered. "Way of peaceful fist known to Amazons but not very much."

Heading back to the train station, where they picked up the next train heading to Niigata.

OOOOOOO

That morning, Genma woke up with a migraine. This wasn't anything unusual however, and he reached to one side of his bed, where he routinely left half a bottle of sake to help him get over it. Staring around, he scowled at seeing the empty futon to one side of his own. *Damn, that's right, the brat's not here. The useless boy's gone, sleeping out in the wild, and after acting so last night with that Chinese vixen. That'll need to be fixed, or my cushy future isn't going to be so cushy, but for now...* With no need to get up and push the boy, Genma fell back onto his futon, snuggling in.

This state of affairs did not last long, or at least not long enough for him. His old friend, Soun tapped on his door, saying aloud, "Genma, if you don't get up, you won't get any breakfast. Kasumi didn't buy anything that is for breakfast this morning that can be kept out for long."

Instantly, Genma was on his feet. Lazy he might be, but a glutton Genma certainly was and he knew it. "I'll be right with you, Soun old boy! And then, maybe we can talk about my wayward son and what we have to do to get him back in Akane's good graces."

But Soun nodded, but then cautioned, "But only after you've done a day's work, remember."

Genma grumbled a bit at that, but Soun had been firm on that point the evening before. if Genma was going to stay, he needed to contribute to the house finances.

When the Saotomes first arrived, Soun had been more than happy to have Genma and Ranma staying with them. For one thing, Genma's check from Dr. Tofu was a welcome addition, something he wanted to have continue. But for another, Ranma's presence, his obvious skill and abilities, insured that not only would the Tendo Dojo rise to prominence within Nerima, but that it would remain in their family as it did.

Like Genma, Soun had wanted to live off of Ranma's abilities, which he had seen were phenomenal. Far more than any of his daughters had ever shown, indeed, Ranma showed a greater aptitude for and understanding of the Art than all three combined. Kasumi had never enjoyed the hard style of Anything Goes, nor the mental side. Nabiki saw it only as exercises to keep herself in shape, and Akane, for all that she claimed to be his heir, had no real desire to grow beyond the point she had already reached.

That was good, and it may have made Soun's decision not to train any of them seem all the better. This way, Ranma's abilities and style in the aerial style would be inextricably linked with that of his own school.

"Of course," Genma answered, the two men clapping one another on the shoulder. "I'm just worried that Shampoo's feminine wiles might be enough to make the boy forget she tried to kill his female body for months. We need to keep an eye on him, the boy's young after all."

"True, the foreigner is indeed an issue. But I still maintain that absence will make the heart grow fonder," Soun rejoined. "Leave him out there for a few days on his own out in the cold, and Ranma will be grateful to come back, apologize to my Akane, and the two of them can finally stop dancing around one another. Youth, they are so bad with feelings, aren't they?"

"It's not that cold," Nabiki said dryly as he passed by the two men heading downstairs. "And, if your stories are to be believed Genma, both of you are used to living on the off the land on your own." She shuddered dramatically. "You'd never catch me doing that kind of thing."

"Of course not, you're a weak girl," Genma said unthinkingly, before Akane, who had just come out of her room, smacked him upside the head with a hammer, sending him crashing to the floor below the stairs.

"Still think girls are weak old man?" she taunted, glaring down at Genma as she hopped over his body. "Honestly, you and Ranma both of you spouting off that chauvinistic stuff in this day and age."

"Yes well," Soun muttered, pulling up his friend and guiding him to the table. "Akane, you'll see Ranma at school. If you can figure out where he's been living, we can go and see how he's doing this afternoon."

“Why the hell would I want to talk to that pervert!?” Akane bellowed, glaring at her father as she dropped to the pillow next to the table with all the grace of a bull. “I told you all what I saw, him, and that, that Amazon hussy kissing! On our roof!”

“Oh, I fully agree he needs to apologize to you Akane, but I doubt that girl gave him any choice.” Soun waved that off. “Regardless, I want to make certain he’s properly repenting on his actions. And doing so we can keep Shampoo from sinking her claws into him when he’s vulnerable.”

Akane scoffed, while Genma quickly agreed with his friend. “Too right Soun. Once we know where he is, we can take turns watching over him so the woman doesn’t influence him. Do that and my boy will remember where honor lies.” *And the faster the better. the longer Ranma is left on his own, the more the boy might start to think for himself, and that just won’t do. Especially not with that vixen around.*

Watching this, Kasumi sighed. Somehow, she knew Ranma wouldn’t be returning. The look he had given her the evening before still stuck in her mind for some reason. It had been... closed off, like a chance gone now. But she stayed silent, listening to the rest of her family and Genma talk as she sat there in the background. As she always had been. *And now, an insidious thought whispered, you always will be.*

The youngest Tendo was still angry half an hour later, scowling as she walked with Nabiki to school all, glaring up at the top of the fence as if it had personally offended her.

“Missing him already?” Nabiki teased.

“You wish!” Akane answered instantly, shaking her head. “No, I’m just wondering how tough it would be for me to get up there. It could be at least good training like Ranma always said it was.”

“And now you’re taking his word on something,” Nabiki continued to needle.

“Drop it Nabiki. You saw him, he and Shampoo were all over each other!”

“That’s what you say,” Nabiki answered, changing tact quickly. She loved getting a rise out of her little sister, but it was rather like hitting a low hanging fruit right now. “But when we came up on the roof, they were several feet away from one another, and Ranma at least was glaring at Shampoo. For all we know, she could still want to kill his female form, you know.”

“Hah, there is that,” Akane said with a laugh. “Maybe she’ll kill him the first time he is forced to transform in front of her. Serves the pervert right. And speaking of perverts,” she trailed off, glaring towards the school. “Why exactly, Nabiki, does it look like the Pervert Brigade is out in force? Almost like they know something they shouldn’t?”

“However should I know,” Nabiki answered instantly, crossing her fingers behind her back as she skipped ahead of Akane, putting on a brief turn of speed. “Well, I’ll see you at lunch Akane, have fun!”

Akane glared angrily after her sister, then turned back to the horde of boys. Then she scowled, and began to pick up speed herself, barreling towards the waiting boys like a charging truck. “I hate boys, I hate boys, I hate boys!” she shouted her battlecry. While repetitive, it always worked for her.

As she charged, the voices of the boys reached her in a tumult. “Yes! The information was right.”

“Akane, even without Ranma here, don’t worry! I’ll protect you.”

“No, I will!”

“Date me!”

“With Ranma out of the way, you must date whoever beats you again!”

“God damn it, why does everyone follow that stupid rule!!” Akane shrieked at the top of her lungs as she crashed into the crowd.

Later that day, Nabiki and Akane returned home with the news that Ranma hadn’t shown up for school. With shouts about how the boy was once more dishonoring their good name, Genma and Soun left instantly to search for him, before coming back quickly with the news. Ranma was gone. There was no sign of him anywhere in any of the parks of Nerima.

“I tell you Soun, he’s ensorcelled! It’s the only explanation. That Amazon bimbo shook her ass at him and he runs off!” Genma boomed, slamming his fifth glass of sake down on the table, causing the nearby Kasumi to wince.

Soun scowled shaking said. “Regardless, of why he has left, we need to go and bring him back. Honor demands that he marry Akane!”

“Leave me out of this!” Akane said, shaking her head and making an X symbol with her arms. “I told you, if he wants to be with Shampoo, let him!”

“Which means you’ll have to start dealing with the swordsman and the pervert brigade again and not just today,” Nabiki stated. “Are you okay with that?” Although she teased her sister a lot, she did care about her, in her own way. Not enough to respect her privacy or anything, but still. “And it means that Shampoo’s beaten you in a way. If Ranma finds her more attractive than you, I mean.”

“Urk...” Akane grunted not liking either of those comments.

“We’ll get after the boy this very night Akane, don’t worry!” Genma announced. “Let me change forms, and I’ll be able to pick up their trail.”

“Right! It’s Operation Get the fiancé back!” Soun exclaimed, the two men laughing as Akane protested again that she didn’t want Ranma back. Her words fell on deaf ears, and the two men trooped off, leaving the dojo within minutes. Soon, they were back moving around the park with Genma in his panda form, trying to pick up the trail.

When the twosome was gone, the three sisters sat for a time, watching TV and working on various things. As she finished her homework, Nabiki set it aside, smiling at the other two. “Well, this was actually kind of nice. I’d almost forgotten how nice it was to have a day where crazy stuff doesn’t happen. Maybe with Ranma gone, things at home can become calmer again.”

Both her sisters stared at Nabiki, their eyes wide. “Idiot,” Akane stated firmly.

“What?” Nabiki stared back, incredulously. “What did I say?”

“Even I know not to tempt the fates Nabiki,” Kasumi admonished.

“Besides, you’ve lived here all your life. You should know that, while he might have magnified it, Ranma isn’t the source of the chaos in our lives. It’s been here in Nerima all along,” Akane added

Staring at her sisters, Nabiki held up a finger as if she was going to argue. But after a moment the finger lowered, followed by her head smacking against the book in front of her as she let loose a groan.

This groan was interrupted by a shout of “Dojoyaburi! I come to challenge you for your dojo sign!”

Nabiki raised her head, stared towards the door, then slumped back down, continuing her groaning. But while Nabiki continued to groan, Akane simply stood up, and shouted out, “Wait a second! I need to go get changed.”

There was no reply from the door, so Kasumi decided that whoever was out there was going to be polite enough to wait outside rather than demand to be shown into the dojo first. With that, she picked up the small tea set she had been drinking from and heading back into the kitchen. “Akane is going to work up an appetite, I think I will prepare snacks.”

That seemed to perk Nabiki up, and she stopped groaning. But even so she completely missed a small scarf-covered head poking out from underneath the outdoor patio. Nor did any

of the Tendo sisters see the blur of movement as the individual who had been hiding underneath the house leaped towards the nearby rooftops. The individual was small, shorter than even Akane, his features somewhat mousy, but his eyes gleamed with the joy of a spy uncovering a secret. "The mistress and the master must be told! The rumors are true, Ranma has run off!"

OOOOOOO

Ironically, at the same time that a challenger had appeared in front of the Tendo dojo, Ranma was just finishing a challenge that he had made to a local dojo in Niigata. Landing behind the dojo master, he tapped the back of the head of the dojo master, then when the man turned even so, smoothly shifted around his outthrust hand. Grabbing the older man by the wrist, Ranma flipped him so the older man in the black gi crashed into the floor of the challenge rain back first.

At that, the watching journeyman who had been the referee for the match shouted, "Match over!" in a tone of shock. "The Challenger wins."

The martial arts master, a middle-aged man built somewhat like Soun, but with a full beard instead of just a mustache, looked as if he wanted to cry as he stared up at Ranma. "That, that didn't count! I wasn't ready."

"I let you move first, how could you say you weren't ready?" Ranma retorted, shaking his head.

Around them, the man's students stared, some of them muttering to one another, either astonished or appalled at how easily Ranma had beaten their master. But for his part, Ranma was majorly disappointed. The dojo was just a regular Judo dojo, despite the sign outside boasting that it had its own actual style. *Back in Nerima everyone and their mother seemed to have a different martial arts style. I guess we're going to have to be a bit more picky about this kind of thing when we're moving around. How did my old man find all those different martial arts dojos that actually did have their own style? I can't remember us ever stopping at one like this.*

Shaking his head at that, Ranma turned back to the dojo master. "As specified in the challenge, you owe me a forfeit." Traditionally, the dojo Challenger would make a demand in the form of some favor or item, be it money, or something else, like the dojo sign, if he won. If he lost, the Challenger would have to work for the dojo for a time, until the master decided his debt was paid. "But don't worry, I won't take your sign or anything. I just want you to put me and my traveling companion up for the night."

"Ve, very well," the dojo master muttered, getting to his feet, and the two of them bowed to one another. Ranma's bow was noticeably shallower than the Masters, but as the



winner, he could get away with being rude like that. In Ranma's opinion it served the older man right for false advertising.

After he was shown to the room where he and Shampoo would stay for the night, Ranma headed outside, where he found Shampoo. She had gone around to a few markets nearby, and picked up brochures, looking for different martial arts dojos. As Ranma was joining her, she yawned, swaying on her feet a bit. Ranma hesitated, then figured that offering sympathy wasn't going to get him clocked, by Shampoo, as it would Akane and was in fact something that a good boyfriend should do. "Er, are you okay?" he asked hesitantly, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Shampoo looked at him, smiled, and moved into his arm, leaning against his shoulder for a moment, proving Ranma's thoughts on this score correct. "Shampoo just tired. Hadn't really rested since arriving Nerima. Couldn't sleep so well like Ranma on train either."

"Well, I got us a place to stay for the night, so you can head up there if you want now. Did you find any local places that looked interesting?"

"Shampoo found advertisements for several dojos but went to few already. Shampoo not think they worth it. Shampoo also check out a few temples following on Ranma's idea there. Not much help there either," Shampoo said with a shrug.

Ranma scowled a bit, looking at the brochures as Shampoo held them up. "Yeah, I think we're going to have to either rely on word-of-mouth, luck, or be a bit more methodical about this kind of thing. My old man, he seems to've had a knack to find the real martial arts masters that could really train me when I was younger. I didn't really know that there were so many wannabes out there."

Inside the dojo, the martial arts master scowled at the wall, feeling as if someone had just insulted him. Which was more than likely, given how his students were now looking at him, then out the door Ranma had gone through speculatively.

"Ranma right. Still, Shampoo no use if tired. What Ranma do, while Shampoo taking rest?"

"I'll case the area I suppose, like I said, be a bit more methodical about this kind of thing. And then I'll come back later. Do you have anything you want me to pick up foodwise?"

"Shampoo like sweets if that okay?" Shampoo asked hesitantly. She knew that was kind of silly, and very girly, not at all in keeping with the idea of being an Amazon warrior. A lot of her fellows back in the village had teased her about her liking for foreign sweets.

But to her surprise, Ranma simply laughed and she could tell instantly it wasn't a mean one either. "In that case, I think we need to find some cold water and I can show you another

good side of having my female form before ya take your nap. Nabiki introduced me to this one, I think it was the only good thing she ever did for me in the three months I was living with them.”

Shampoo raised an eyebrow at that but she wasn't so tired that she wanted to bow out. A few moments later, the two of them were in an ice cream parlor, and Shampoo watched as Ranma leaned over the counter, giving the young boy on the other side a view down her shirt. “And could we like, have an extra scoop there of the Double Chocolate Delight? It looks sooo good!”

The boy didn't even seem to have any higher brain function left as he nodded like a bobble doll, putting an extra scoop of ice cream on to Shampoo's choice, and then Ranma's Rocky Road Pistachio Nightmare. Then Shampoo got into the act, leaning forward next to Ranma and nudging her in the side as her breasts smooshed against the shorter girl's shoulder. “Silly Ranma, she not remember we not have that much money.”

Ranma pouted, and that was it. The young man was complete putty in their hands, and he squeaked “On the house!”

With that, Ranma stood up, grabbed the two cones of ice cream, handing one to Shampoo, saying cheerfully, “Thanks, mister!”

Walking away, Shampoo teased, “Shampoo think Ranma too too good at flirting in female form. Ranma want tell Shampoo something?”

Ranma rolled her eyes. “Nabiki got me to do that the first time by using the magical words of ‘free eats.’ At first it did kind of make me feel a little dirty, but well...” Ranma shivered a little as she looked down at the double chocolate delight in Shampoo's hand. “Then she introduced me to chocolate.”

Shampoo's brows furrowed. “Ranma not know about chocolate?”

“I'd never tasted it before. And when I tasted it in my girl form it... Well, it was like someone had just exploded a taste bomb in my mouth.”

Shampoo hummed at that, and then, feeling a little daring, winked at Ranma, getting her full attention for a second. With the redhead's eyes on her, Shampoo began to lick at her ice cream cone, darting her tongue in and out rather than taking a bite as she licked at the ice cream.

Ranma stared, as Shampoo continued to lick at the ice cream, then at her own lips where a bit of chocolate had gathered before taking a little nibble, then going back to licking. Somehow, Ranma just could not tear her eyes away from the sight, Shampoo's tongue grabbing

his undivided attention. Then she stopped, smirking at him, and Ranma shakily stood back a bit, using her free hand to smack her face. "What was that about?"

"Shampoo just want point out that, while Ranma good at teasing, she or he not so good being teased, yes?" Shampoo laughed, delighted at the response she'd gotten, and happy that this somewhat odd first date was going so well. "But Shampoo demand that next time Ranma take Shampoo on date, he be in male form."

"Wait, what, date?" Ranma blurted, staring between the ice cream and Shampoo. "This counts as a date?"

The honest confusion in his voice kept Shampoo from becoming annoyed, and she nodded. "What else you call it when someone takes someone else out for ice cream like this? It's silly preteen stuff but it still date."

"Huh..." Ranma was suddenly very glad that the times she'd went out with ice cream with the Tendo sisters at least two of them had been there at all times. "I didn't know that. I thought dates were going out to dinner or to the movies something, you know, really planned out."

"They no need to be. Although Shampoo would like that kind of date too," Shampoo announced wistfully.

Ranma looked at her, and then, feeling greatly daring, put her free arm around Shampoo's waist, giving her a sideways hug. "Well, then will have to do something about that won't we?"

"Shampoo like that. Thank you," Shampoo responded by putting an arm around the shorter girl's shoulders, noticing once more with some amusement the difference in height between the two forms of Ranma. *All his height must go to his breasts when he transforms*, she thought with a giggle, which confused Ranma as she refused to tell Ranma what she was giggling at.

The rest of their time out, they switched to Chinese, with Shampoo correcting Ranma's pronunciation and adding to the redhead's vocabulary. When they finish their ice cream, Ranma transformed back to his guy form and they continued to walk around until Shampoo yawned again.

Ranma however paused as they continued walking, heading into a bookstore. When he returned with the bookstore, he had a bag under one arm. "What Ranma buy?" Shampoo asked before adding teasingly. "Shampoo no think they sell martial arts manuals in bookstores."

"Nah, they've got some meditation books and stuff like that, but I'd rather learn by doing rather than by reading anyway. But that is kind of what we'll have to do with languages

so..." she pulled out the book, showing it was a Japanese to Chinese translation book. Shampoo smiled at that, gave her a kiss on the cheek and the two of them went on their way.

With her new book in hand, Ranma led Shampoo back to the dojo he'd defeated the master in, showed her to the room they were staying in and then left her there. It was the room of the dojo master's son, but Ranma figured that Shampoo was more than strong enough to handle herself if the kid, a teenager their age, made any trouble.

With Shampoo taken care of, Ranma used the rest of the evening to go around the city, looking at different dojos and the few temples. He didn't find anything, but when he spoke to a few of the priests at a local Shinto Temple, they informed him of a martial arts style to the south that sounded interesting. "Martial Arts Construction? Huh... I've heard of it, I think."

"They have small branches in several places across Japan. And if you are interested in the more esoteric arts, I believe there is a temple down there that also teaches spiritual awareness, imbued with some martial arts training as well. That however is just a rumor, whereas I know about the Martial Arts Construction, because we asked them to rebuild our Temple a year ago." The elderly monk gestured around them, while watching the young man carefully.

The scattered temples of Japan routinely kept in contact with one another, regardless of their various creeds. And the name Saotome was known in their circles. While these were holy men, and knew better than to visit the sins of the father upon the son, those sins were myriad, and if it appeared as if Ranma was as much at fault, or knowingly complicit...

"It looks good," Ranma said, nodding his head even as he continued to sweep around the area. The old man had requested that of him, when Ranma had asked to read any meditation scrolls they had on hand. He didn't even have a problem with paying ahead of time, considering how little else he'd found in the area of real interest. "I especially like the work they did on the Fox statues."

Like many Shinto temples, this one had twin Fox statues, denoting Inari at the entrance. These statues though, looked particularly mischievous, not being of the Fox sitting upright, but on the prowl, lips peeled back into vulpine grins.

"Yes, everyone who stops by likes to comment on those. Personally though, I believe that their work on the toiletries and plumbing was just as important." He smiled as the young man grinned, before poking some fun at the youngster. "When one reaches for the sky, one should never forget that one's feet are firmly planted on the ground."

"Or that one needs to go to the bathroom, no matter how spiritual a life you have," Ranma laughed. But then, he leaped into the air, bouncing all in the air for a few seconds, using some of the things his father had taught him about the aerial style, before landing again, so

lightly that there wasn't even a thump, before Ranma what went back to using the broom, a lot of the leaves now in small, easy to pick up windrows.

"Indeed. When you are done, come inside. But let me ask, are you traveling on your own? A young man such as yourself? Should you not be in high school?" the priest gently probed.

Ranma shrugged, internally wincing as he could almost feel a lecture coming. "Not really, I mean, I don't really want to, you know become a doctor, a lawyer, or whatever else other people want to get out of going to high school, I guess. All I want to do is learn martial arts and become the best I can. As for traveling alone, you might say that yeah. I used to go around with my old man but he's settled down now."

To his surprise however, the priest simply nodded his head, stroking his long beard sagely. "Often times in this world, one needs to find one's own path, and occasionally, that path is not on the road already made by society or those who have gone before. I would not equate your journey to that of a monk of my order would take but it has much the same overtones. Come inside when you're done with the walkway. I will show you what scrolls we have on hand, although I warn you, you may be somewhat disappointed."

"Par for the course for the day, if you don't mind me saying. This area isn't exactly a mecca for martial arts," Ranma grumbled a bit. He knew that coming here was important, that Shampoo's idea of laying down a false trail was a good one but today had been kind of boring.

*Fun, he realized, when I was with Shampoo, but still, kind of boring.* The fact that it could still be fun was somewhat surprising to Ranma, but he set that observation to one side as he continued his work, thinking about what Martial Arts Construction could be like. *I think I remember seeing a dojo sign for them back in Nerima, but I didn't stop in at the time because Akane was with me. Last thing I needed was for her to get better at using a hammer.*

As Ranma was working, the priest was on the phone speaking to several of his fellow priests scattered around Japan. Word would spread that the young Saotome had broken off from his father, and that his father had apparently settled down somewhere.

The priest's observation on the scrolls he had on meditation proved kind of accurate, but Ranma still looked through them. He then spent about an hour following some of the meditating concepts, before deciding to give it up. It just wasn't working for him and he admitted defeat as sunset turned to night.

"Do not be concerned," the priest announced as he noticed Ranma's frustrated expression as he handed back the scrolls. "Perhaps, meditation like this isn't for you. Just like school is not. Do you think better, while you are moving? Or when you are sitting still?"

“Moving. I always think better on the fly, and I always learn better by doing. But isn’t the point of meditation, you know, sitting still and trying to get in touch with your inner self, disdaining your physical body??”

“You do not have to sit still to get in touch with your inner self, young man. And considering how far you have thrown off convention in other matters, why should you not do so with this?” the priest questioned, and then asked slowly, “Speaking of scrolls however, you said your name was Saotome, correct? Only, I seem to recall a friend of mine, a fellow priest, mentioning that name in quite negative connotations...”

“Meaning that my Old Man and I visited him, and things began to mysteriously disappear?” Ranma groaned. “I apologize, and you can pass that on. When I was younger, I didn’t realize what my old man was up to, but a few years ago I started to, and I tried to put a stop to it. But it wasn’t like he kept notes of where we go on or anything like that so I could make him return stuff. It’s only been in the last year when I could really make him do anything, anyway.”

At that point in his training, Ranma had begun to surpass his father in speed and technique. Not in strength. Genma was powerfully built in both panda form and human form well beyond what Ranma could contrive. Genma could also take way more of a pounding than Ranma. But even so, Ranma estimated that in another year at most his old man would be no match for him.

“Understood. And I did not hear your name connected to any crimes. Trouble, perhaps, and there is no doubt you have left a somewhat arrogant impression on many, but not a criminal one. But where is your father now? You mentioned that you were now traveling alone.”

“Not exactly alone, but not with him,” Ranma answered, unwilling to bring up Shampoo and other’s budding relationship with the priest. That seemed kind of wrong to him. “I left him back in the Nerima district, if you want to send some leg breakers after him or something.”

“I will have you know that priests such as myself and my friends do not use leg breakers,” the priest huffed, but although his eyes were twinkling. “We might however send some priests to speak with him about why it is wrong to steal from temples and other holy places.”

“If you’re not cursed yet, we’ll make you wish you were’ kind of thing?” Ranma laughed, nodding his head. “Go for it. If anyone deserves that kind of thing, it’s the old man.”

After that, Ranma returned to the dojo where he had won a night’s lodging, finding Shampoo returning from grabbing food for the two of them. They greeted one another, and then headed up to the room, using the teen’s desk as a table, eating as Ranma explained what he’d learned.

Nodding thoughtfully at the short-term goal, Shampoo asked, "So, what Ranma want do long-term?"

"I want to head into India," Ranma answered easily, with a smile on his face as he stared up at the slowly lightening sky above them. "Maybe hit up some of the islands or that, but my old man and I turned back at Vietnam. Anyway, there are a few martial arts masters in India who were rumored to have styles that sound inhuman, magical. I didn't even believe them, I thought our turning around was fine, then, we went to Jusenkyo."

With that, Ranma shook his head, laughing quietly. "That seemed to work like a dam had burst. We ran into a few other magical things while running away from you. And now looking back at those stories, I gotta wonder."

"What kind of rumors Ranma be talking about?"

"There is supposed to be a kind of martial art there that allows you to mold your body, lengthen your legs and arms and suchlike. Maybe even create fireballs and other element attacks."

Shampoo frowned pensively. "Shampoo never hear of something like that. Element attack, yes. Changing body no." She paused again, then scowled. "I hate this!" she said, switching to Chinese. "How exactly do I sound when I'm speaking in Japanese? These young men who tried to 'flirt'" she raised her hands putting quote marks around the word, "with me once called me a bimbo, I thought at first it was a comment on my looks but..."

Hearing the word bimbo in Japanese among Shampoo's rapid-fire Chinese, Ranma winced. "You want to slow down, I think I know what you're talking about but..."

Shampoo sighed and said simply, "Language barrier suck."

Ranma nodded, then, squeezed her hand. "We'll get through it. Think of it as something to do while our bodies are too sore to do anything else."

She chuckled, then asked the question about what a bimbo was and Ranma's wince returned. "Yeah that's what I was afraid you were asking. It means a woman who is not very smart. Pretty, but with nothing in her head, basically."

"So, like the man who tried to hit on me on the ship I took to Japan. Handsome, strong looking, but not really, and too stupid to not take no for an answer," Shampoo mused, although she continued to speak in Chinese. It was time for Ranma to stretch his communication skills for a change.

Ranma didn't object to this, and slowly worked out what he said. Then he laughed answering in the same language. "Yeah. Pretty much. Also, like what Ranma sound like in Chinese yes?"

Laughing, Shampoo decided to change back to the previous conversation. "I'm fine with going to India, that sounds amazing. A part of me would also like to head to Greece. I understand that they also have legends of Amazons, and it would be fascinating to see what our foreign brethren are like. But India, and the other Asian areas are just as good for me. I also want to try to keep up with my other lessons. And maybe we should start looking around for some other means of gaining money. We won't always be lucky enough to find stupid idiots after all."

"Meh, you'd be surprised. Stupidity like air, always there," Ranma retorted, the two martial artists sharing a snicker.

By that point both of them were done eating, and Ranma started to tell a story about the time he and his Pops had been run off by a pair of female foxes who had just had kittens, and how his Pops had tried to explain that his whole 'women were weak' thing was only about human women. Shampoo in turn commented on how she had learned to roofhop through the trees and had startled an owl of his nest, and then been chased by it through the woods until her great-grandmother had scared it off.

Her rendition of the owl's affronted had Ranma in stitches. They both then took turns making the other laugh as they cleaned up, headed over to the bathroom to brush their teeth, and came back, still joking with one another, until Shampoo decided she wanted to do something else. She signaled this easily by hopping into Ranma's lap. "Fun friend time done now. Girlfriend boyfriend time start, yes?"

Taking the hint, Ranma leaned forward, kissing Shampoo on the lips, who eagerly returned the gesture. A few seconds passed, and Ranma then pulled back, before moving to kiss Shampoo on the cheek, then up to her ear, nibbling. Ranma saw Shampoo bite her lip at that, then moved down to her neck as Ranma did the same, finding a place on Ranma's collarbone that made him grunt, a certain reaction growing underneath her rear. Ranma moved back to her mouth, kissing her tenderly, while Shampoo's arms tightened around him.

Just as Ranma was about to open his mouth and let his tongue out to play, the door to the room abruptly opened, and the teenager came in, carrying a book bag. He stopped, staring at them, and then shouted, "Oh God dammit! Just because my father said you could use my room, didn't mean you two could get hot and heavy in here! Not when I, when I... you bastard!" he shrieked pointing at Ranma.

Growling, Shampoo hopped off of Ranma's lap, and was suddenly holding one of her Chui, pointing it at the teen. "Shampoo think rude little boy need be taught lesson!"



The boy quailed but Ranma grabbed her arm, stopping her from committing murder, before gesturing the youngster to grab whatever he wanted, and then get out. "And just to make sure that there's no hot and heavy whatever, Shampoo can sleep in here, and I'll sleep outside in the hallway."

Shampoo made to object, but then shrugged her shoulders, understanding that they weren't nearly at the position where they would feel comfortable sleeping in the same bed, and this one was built for one person after all. "Although I don't think I'm going to get into that bed either, I'll just sleep on top of the covers instead. Who knows what this little boy has done in it?"

"Harsh," Ranma laughed, as he translated what Shampoo had said in Chinese.

Thankfully, there were no further incidents, and the two of them left early the next morning. The two of them lay down a false trail, being seen by lots of people heading towards the port during rush hour. From there they even swam out into the ocean for a way before coming back ashore further south. Once back on shore, Ranma used maps to lead the way towards where the Martial Arts Constructions school was.

At one point Shampoo called a halt, having seen a few doctors in the area that offered acupuncture and traditional medicine. Since Shampoo had proved by now that she could read written Japanese far better than she could speak it, Ranma left her there, giving her the address of the Martial Arts Construction place and heading on towards it.

He started to hear the sounds of demolition about a block away from the actual address he'd been given, although it wasn't quite like the sound of other construction yards Ranma had passed in the past. Interspersed with the sounds of heavy equipment and the din of people using jackhammers, were shouts of, "Hiyaah!" and "Ha!" followed by the sounds of flesh hitting wood or stone. There was even a shout of, "put your backs into it! Your hands are the hammer, the nails your target. Always remember, strike from your shoulder down, get your full body into it, each time. And if the nail bends, you are off target! You'll have to start your rows again."

Because of these sounds, Ranma was not surprised when the dojo itself turned out to be a construction yard. In the center of the yard, there was a large three-story house, which looked extremely well-made, with several ornate statues at each corner of the patio which seemed to go all around the house. There was even a small pond, complete with a bridge over it.

Around the house was a cleared zone, filled with stone, gravel, pipes, wooden slats, several types of equipment large and small, various types of shingles, stones and so forth. It looked like someone had taken a construction yard and a landscaping shop and mixed them together before sticking a sample house in the middle.

Different areas seem to be set up for different techniques. In one zone, Ranma saw men performing muscle strengthening exercises, lifting a large block of concrete or steel and setting them down, again and again. In other places, there were rows of wooden slats set up and men standing in front of them, using their palms to strike nails into the wood. To one side of that, a journeyman seemed to be lecturing several students about the proper method of laying down electrical wires, while using a wire in one hand almost like it was a whip to pick up various tools on the ground around him.

Looking around him though, Ranma had to hold back a laugh as he took in the students of Martial Arts Construction. The fact that all of them were wearing construction hats, and visibility jackets was fine. Every dojo had their own martial arts outfit, after all. But the members of this dojo were **all** burly middle-aged men. Even the students looked older than their voices sounded and had muscles upon muscles. *I wonder if that's a prerequisite or a byproduct?*

Ranma stood in the entrance to the construction yard dojo for a moment, trying to pick out which among them was the master. But with most of them being middle-aged and built similarly, that wasn't easy. *Unless that guide teaching the youngsters about electrical wires is the master?*

Regardless, there were certain proprieties that Ranma had to stick to. "Dojoyaburi! Here comes a challenger" he shouted, reaching up to bang one hand on the metal plate that did as a sign above the entrance.

Instantly, all work stopped, even the men working with the heavy equipment pausing, and Ranma noticed for the first time that on the other side of the man with the jackhammer was another man, working on destroying another slab of concrete. As he stood up, Ranma could see him ringing out his hands, and whistled internally. *If he could keep up with the speed of the jackhammer, that could be interesting to learn.*

"Who dares challenge the construction dojo?! We'll tear you apart like a building made out of mud and paper!" shouted one of them, moving to stand threateningly over Ranma. All the others meanwhile started to do muscle poses. "It takes a real man to work construction!"

While the words were different, this was part of the act, and Ranma rose to the challenge. Darting forward, he lashed out with a single jab. The man saw it coming, but couldn't dodge, barely able to put his weight onto his back foot before the blow crashed into his chest. He stumbled back, and then Ranma was in the air, leaping up and into a roundhouse kick that took the man in the side of the face, hurling him sideways and to the ground.

Both strikes hadn't been as strong as Ranma could make them, so the guy got to his feet a second later, but Ranma had proven his strength, and he shouted out, "I am here to challenge the dojo master, not the students."

The journeyman looked down at the student who had moved forward to challenge Ranma and the first place, then lifted him into the air with a flick of the electrical wiring he was using like a whip tossing him towards several of the other students. “And who are you?”

“Ranma, of the Anything Goes School of Indiscriminate Grappling, Aerial Style.” Ranma added a bow from the waist to the man, who returned the gesture. “I am on a training journey and wish to contest with your master. I will not challenge for your sign, or for the pride of your dojo. Only to see if there is anything I can learn from you.”

The journeyman nodded, pleased with Ranma’s manners, and then barked out, “Foremen, we have a challenger!”

There was a moment of silence, and then the door to the house banged open. A man strode out, his hair noticeably gray, but his shoulders and visible forearms just as muscular as all the men around Ranma. He was also taller, about a foot or more taller than even the journeyman. He wore glasses and had a short cropped beard, under which he wore what looked like a good suit and tie, but with the arms ripped off at the shoulders. “Thank God! If I had to spend more than another twenty minutes talking to would-be clients, I’d have to hit something anyway.”



(Think of a mix of these two images)

Seeming to sense all eyes on him, the older man growled angrily at his students. “What, do I hear any volunteers to take over talking to them again? Just because we are Martial Arts Constructions doesn’t mean we can do the impossible, or do any of you want to sit down with the client and explain no, we can’t build them a floating castle again?”

Ranma blinked, but apparently there was some kind of story behind that, as every student and even the journeymen, the man who had greeted Ranma, and the man who had been trying to keep up with the jackhammer, both looked away or muttered apologies. By the time Ranma turned his attention back to the master, he had pulled off his tie, tossed it to one side, and was in the process of replacing the torn suit with a safety jacket over a muscle T-shirt much like the ones everyone else around them wore.

“Huh, that was quick. But I gotta ask, if you were talking to clients on the phone, why the suit and the tie?” *And why the heck did you rip the sleeves off?*



"It's help me get in the right mindset, you little piece of shit!" the master bellowed, startling Ranma with the profanity as the older man set aside his glasses. "After all, clients can't do with real fucking manly language! This is a real construction yard boy, we curse is much as we breathe here!"

Ranma slowly shook his head from side to side, then walked forward, as the man turned his attention away, heading around the house in the center of the yard to the area behind it. The theme of a construction yard merged with a landscaping area continued there but it was marked by several large arm's-length screws drilled into the ground marking a circle. There was a lot of stuff within the circle, but it was evident that it was still supposed to be a ring. As Ranma watched, a rope was strung between the nails, marking the edge of the ring even better.

"My name is Ishiku, and I am the motherfuckin' leader of Martial Arts Constructions!" The man said, stepping lightly over the rope while Ranma behind them, landing across from Ishiku in the ring. "My journeyman Yama told me you challenge me to learn from my school? Why not just fucking join up, brat? We could put some muscles on your frame!"

"Hell no, all that muscle would just slow me down, and I like my own school thanks!" Ranma retorted, causing Ishiku to guffaw. "I win, and I get to observe and train alongside your people. Myself and one other," Ranma added hastily remembering Shampoo. *She would probably be very pissed that I almost forgot, although honestly, I can't see her being happy around here... Unless she actually likes the view of all these... manly... guys.*

Ranma tried to think about that for a moment, then shook her his head. He doubted it, but the thought annoyed him for some reason, and following that feeling, he pulled off his normal silk shirt, hanging it up nearby, standing there in a muscle tee.

While he didn't have the muscles of the guys all around him, something they let him know through jeers and shouts of derision, Ishiku didn't join in. The boy was obviously built for speed and his muscles reflected that, giving Ishiku a hint of what was to come. "Fine! Although I'll add the caveat that if you train with me, you'll have to actually fucking work on construction projects with my crew. And if you're not actually joining my school, you're not going to get paid for it. And we fight until one of us has his back fully on the ground, the other above him ready to deliver another blow."

"Kind of tightfisted, but yeah, sure." Ranma shrugged.

Ishiku nodded, grateful that Ranma didn't quibble on that point. "This agreement has been reached and witnessed by my students. So unless you have a second?"

"I do, but it doesn't matter. She's off looking elsewhere for other styles anyway. I'll trust your honor and that of your students," Ranma answered.

“Good!” Ishiku clenched one fist, slamming into his palm, then crouched down, putting up his hands as if he was a boxer, although Ranma noticed that while one fist was tight, the other was loose, as if it could switch to a grapple. *Or, Ranma realized, grab up the material all around them. Well, it is Martial Arts Construction. It would be kind of strange if he didn’t make use of props. But he is not the only one that can do that.*

The martial arts master waited for Ranma to take a stance, but he stood there, his arms at his side, his knees slightly bent, as he seems to rock on his feet. That caused Ishiku to scowl, but not with anger at Ranma’s supposed arrogance. No, he understood that Ranma’s stands might seem unguarded, but the young man was ready to move deflected or blocked anything. *He’s good, this isn’t just a young man being arrogant then. Excellent. “Ready? Go!”*

With that, Ishiku stumped forward before quickly, grabbing up a wooden floorboard and launching it towards Ranma. Then with that one hand he kept on grabbing more of them, hurling more than a dozen forward before the first had reached Ranma. “Martial Arts Construction: Floor Assault!”

Ranma smacked and battered them aside, but Ishiku grab them out of the air before they hit the ground, slamming them down into the ground in front of him, before throwing a punch as Ranma closed in, forcing Ranma backward. The air whistled as Ishiku closed, one foot lashing out not at Ranma, but into a bucket, hurling it up into the air, where his palm slammed into the back of the bucket, sending the nails within out like a shotgun blast.

Grunting with effort Ranma smacked them aside before rolling forward, and Ishiku leaped up over him, lashing out with a kick which Ranma blocked, caught, and turned into a throw, which hurled Ishiku to the side. It didn’t seem to hurt him though, simply knock him off his feet.

But Ishiku landed on a pile of quicksand bags, grabbing up one of them and hurling it at Ranma, before slamming his hand down onto the ground. The wooden slats that he had previously thrown bounced where they had hit and when they came down, they were in a path of a road leading street towards Ranma. “Martial Arts Construction, vinyl finish!”

The bottom of his feet were covered with some kind of slick substance, which he used to skate forward faster than Ranma had anticipated and Ranma grunted in pain as several blows struck him before he could fall back, blocking what he could. A second later as he was forced to the side of the ring, Ranma blocked the third punch that came his way, flipping up and into the air, lashing out with a kick that caught the martial arts master in the side of the face, sending him stumbling. *Fuck, that hurt! This guy’s stronger than my old man.*

In return, Ranma’s blow didn’t hurt Ishiku , and Ranma had to pull back quickly lest he be grabbed by the martial artists other hand, which suddenly was holding nails. “Nail Targeting!”

With that, Ishiku launched nail after nails towards Ranma as he was in midair, thinking to skewer him easily. But Ranma, while wondering where the man was pulling the nails from, was able to dodge most of them, only one of them slamming into his side, leaving a hole in his shirt and some blood coming from where it had hit his side. But it hadn't penetrated.

Ranma's next kick caught Ishiku face, sending him stumbling. Ishiku rolled to one side to avoid another kick, and Ranma touched down, finding himself assailed by a pipe which Ishiku had grabbed up. But once more, Ranma tapped the front of the pipe, pulling himself up and into the air, where he lashed out with a series of punches, then bounced around Ishiku's head as Ishiku lashed out in turn, trying to catch Ranma and pull him down.

Four strikes to the head later, Ishiku realized that wasn't going to work. Ranma was as at home in the air as on the ground, if not more so, and his ability to use momentum and Ishiku's own attacks to stay above him like this, was astonishing. *I need to change the fight around a bit. If I can get a hand on him, it's over but doing that is harder than I thought.*

Thinking quickly Ishiku fell back under Ranma's assault reaching behind him to grab a series of pipes and a wrench, tossing the pipes and wrench into the air. This allowed Ranma to bounce up still higher, kicking off of the pipes and where they were in the air, but Ishiku raced forward, catching each of them in turn, and built himself a gantry in about twenty seconds, which he then began to climb, almost like a monkey, using one hand and his feet, while the other one grabbed another bucket and used the Nail Barrage again. "High Rise Combat!"

When Ranma fell down towards the ground, the gantry was in place, and within the gantry's environs, he and Ishiku traded blows. And it was here that Ishiku revealed two more secret skills within his school. "Jackhammer Blow!"

With that cry Ishiku's hands almost disappeared to Ranma's sight, hammering into him in several places as he quickly tried to escape the attack, shifting away enough the blows couldn't hit him. Interspersed with the punches were attempts to grab him, but the two times it worked, Ranma was able to break the grab by slamming a hand into Ishiku's wrist.

Grunting in annoyance at how durable Ranma seemed to be, Ishiku found Ranma's foot impacting his stomach, causing him to double over, his Jackhammer blow assault ending. he tried to grab at Ranma's foot, but it failed, and the next second a hammer punch crashed into the back of Ishiku's head, hurling him down towards the ground. He stop his fall thought, and twisted around, grabbing at a series of safety ropes. Within seconds he had them all tied together and hurled them froward, "Safety Net!"

"Ya really gotta work on naming stuff!" Ranma grumbled, leaping to another segment of the gantry only for Ishiku to twitch his outstretched arm, sending the net after him.

Ranma grabbed at the net, but then found himself hauled into the air, and towards Ishiku . But to Ishiku's surprise, Ranma went with it, releasing his grip on the net as he

somehow bounced up and over Ishiku's shoulder. a backward mule kick as Ranma pushed off one of the pipes in the gantry caught Ishiku in the back of the head, and before he knew it, the net he had created struck him. It didn't tie him up entirely, but it was enough of a distraction that Ranma's next punch dumped him to the ground, where he found one of the pipes wrenched out of the construction and tapping his chest where he lay on the ground. "My match."

Scowling somewhat at being beaten like that, Ishiku nodded as he tossed off the net. "Damn, I should've just fucking retreated every time you took to the fucking air like that."

"I would've had to come down to try to get through your defenses, yeah," Ranma agreed, setting down the surprisingly heavy pipe. *Huh nearly everything around here is so heavy they remind me of Ryoga's umbrella.* "Still, that was pretty good match."

"Agreed. You beat me fair and square. You wanted to learn from my school, right?"

Ranma nodded, grimacing slightly at the pain of the blows he had taken looking at Ishiku thoughtfully. While Ranma won the match fair and square, Ishiku didn't even look winded despite the amount of strikes Ranma had landed, while Ranma had taken a lot of hard blows, way more than he'd had since the last time his father had been able to really overwhelm him in a spar. Hell, even Ishiku's face didn't look battered, which was even more humbling given how many punches Ranma had landed there. "I think there's a lot of I can learn here. Both in terms of actual construction, and martial arts."

"Excellent!" Ishiku laid a heavy hand on Ranma's shoulder, nearly knocking the youth over, gesturing him towards the others and out of the ring. "Come on then. We'll start you with simple stuff, but we'll have you using your hands to hammer in nails before the day ends."

"That works."

Ranma was working with the others on precisely that thing, when Shampoo leaped down from a nearby building over the construction yards safety wall. "Ranma!"

"Hey Shampoo," Ranma said, waving one hand, even as he thrust forward with the other, grimacing slightly at the pain from slamming his palm into the nail. Still, the whole nail went into the wood, and Ranma realized that was pretty good progress. *And if I stopped learning when I got bruises, I'd have never learned to walk a fence, let alone do anything else.* "Any luck?"

"Yes! Shampoo find martial arts acupuncture, eager to learn style. Precise, small-scale attacks, with big results. Excellent to offset Shampoo's weapon style, yes. Is too too hard to learn though," the Chinese girl added worriedly.

“Yeah, although if you’re using needles, I would think it would still count as armed style right?”

“Needles only start. After learn, can use finger,” Shampoo answered proudly.

All around them, the other men in the construction yard, including Ishiku , who was overseeing the journeyman having a competition with a jackhammer, stared at Shampoo.

The other journeyman, the one who had greeted Ranma, and seemed to be the electrician, came over and did a muscle pose, as he stared down at Shampoo. “Little lady, this is no place for the girls. Only manly men can be in here, the sacred area of the construction yard!”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have said that,” Ranma murmured turning back to his next nail, and with a grimace, punching this one, before wringing out his hands. *Yeah, that is harder on the knuckles than the palm, annoying. Still, it will toughen up my hands something fierce. And I can see that being useful in the future. To say nothing of the other things that Ishiku showed in that match, and the speed technique with the jackhammer blow thing.*

Shampoo world on the journeyman and was suddenly holding her large chui. “Unconscious man say what?”

“What?” The man answered, before Shampoo brained him with one of her maces, sending him crashing to the ground, unconscious.

“Anyone else want call Shampoo weak?” Shampoo growled. “Where Shampoo come from, that fighting word!”

“Then I really want to be where you came from lady!” Ishiku guffawed, as he came over, the other journeyman following him, ringing out his hands like Ranma had been a moment ago. “Daichi, we’ll continue later. Get Yama up and into the house. And the rest of you, my match with Ranma should have shown that powerful things can come in small packages!”

He nodded towards Shampoo. “Little lady, while not exactly approving of how trigger-happy you were just now, your defense of yourself was fucking awesome! We’ll get along just fine.”

While Shampoo smiled, bowed from the waist, and returned her maces to her energy space, Ishiku turned to Ranma, gesturing with his head towards Shampoo. “I take it she is your plus one?”

“Er, the way you say that phrase makes me wonder, but yeah, Shampoo is the other student I was thinking might join us. But she just said that she had found another style she wanted to study so I suppose she’ll just stay here with me?”



“Well if you thought she was going to stay here, I’m afraid we’re going to have to build you a house for a bit!” Ishiku guffawed, slamming his two massive hands together. “After all, we’re all guys here, and having one woman sleep in the room with so many guys, that just wouldn’t be right.”

“We could get a hotel...” Ranma began, but Ishiku had already turned away, looking around at his watching students, who were blushing and looking at Ranma at Shampoo, hearts in their eyes.

Ranma frowned at that, while Shampoo was also kind of confused. The muscles on display were nice, but if Ranma was just learning, that meant he’d already beaten the master here, which means that while they had impressive muscles, they weren’t as strong as Ranma.

“In fact, what is the first rule of Martial Arts Construction boys!” Ishiku bellowed.

“Learn as you do!” came the shouted reply.

“That’s right. Book learning can only take you so far! You learn by doing and by watching others. So Ranma, you’re going to put up a little house just for you and Shampoo. And we’ll help, won’t we crew?!”

“Yes sensei!” came the shouted reply, although Ranma heard one whisper of, “anything to have a cutie like her stay around a bit.”

While he didn’t like that sentiment, he couldn’t argue with it, and he bowed from the waist towards Ishiku . “You realize that Shampoo and I will only be staying here for a few weeks at most, right?”

“Judging by how fast you learned some of my techniques already, and how well you’re handling the nail punch training, yeah, I can see that. But we could use a second house as a sample house anyway. Two birds with one stone, lad,” Ishiku bellowed, slapping Ranma on the shoulder.

“Then I’ll agree. Shampoo, you want to help out?”

“Is good! Shampoo can learn today, chiropractor only wants train Shampoo in the mornings anyway.”

“Woohoo!” several of the students bellowed, and all of them began to pose, as they had been when the student had challenged Ranma. Shampoo looked around at them in confusion, while Ranma put in arm around her with shoulders, pulling her into a brief hug. “Just go with it, they’re good guys, just really awkward.”

“So long they know not flirt with Shampoo,” Shampoo agreed.

Thankfully, while the Construction Crew guys were a bit odd, they seemed to understand that Shampoo and Ranma were together. Indeed, many of them just asked about that as Ishiku and the journeymen got to work, going over the plans for a small, one-story house. The fact they were on a training journey together seemed to be an extremely romantic idea to the construction crew.

“Alright you lot, when I call your name, group up by number!” Ishiku began, then went on. Soon, Ranma was working with a crew to prepare the ground for the house, clearing away the area, digging a bed for the concrete, while Shampoo began to help to put together piles of material from around the yard for later use.

As they worked, the crew around Shampoo started to show off. They weren’t flirting with her per-se, but they were trying to get her attention. Posing was fine, as was showing off, but when one of them brushed Shampoo aside and made to lift a pallet of wooden slats saying, “Oh let me get that for ya, Miss,” Shampoo decided that was enough.

“Shampoo got it,” she shot back, hip checking him. Her hip smacked into his own with enough force to send him stumbling, and with barely a grunt of effort she hefted the pallet over her head. This made her shirt pull out of Shampoo’s tai chi pants and showed off the Amazon’s bare midriff, something she at first was not aware of.

“Guh...” The same could not be said for the burly men all around her, who stared at Shampoo and that slice of skin in shock, red covering their faces.

“Girls man... they look so soft,” one of them murmured.

“Yeah, but she’s strong too... why the hell is she with that twig again?” another one muttered. The approval of the couple’s relationship had suddenly taken a dive.

Once more, Shampoo didn’t notice this, only setting her pallet down, showing off her rear accidentally. Turning around, Shampoo saw the group she’d been assigned to just staring at her, and she huffed, putting her hands on her hips. “Grr... is Shampoo strength so surprising it freeze you all like statue? Does Shampoo need smack heads again?”

“She’s right you lot! Get moving!” one of the Journeymen bellowed.

Still, the showing off persisted. Not a single pallet could be picked up without the man doing posing in some fashion. Indeed, many of them would call out to her, shouting, “Hey Miss, watch this!” or “Hey, I’ve got this, Miss Shampoo!”

But Shampoo was an amazon, and regardless of rippling muscles or size, she was just as strong as they were, and she wasn’t impressed by it at all. Every time she was called on, she would stare, then just shrug and turn around going back to work.

Ranma however did notice, and feeling his competitive urges rise up again, started to show off in turn. Not having many shirts, he first pulled off his Muscle T, leaving him be in just his pants. Then he began to race around, lifting up several of the construction tools, several overfull pallets of wood, rock slabs, and so forth that would have taken one of the journeymen or Ishiku to lift on their own. He also moved faster than any of those three could.

Looking over, he saw Shampoo looking his way more than once, and smirked whenever one of the group trying to impress her looked his way. *Well, that seems to be working, heh.*

*You know, I once read that most people think women aren't supposed to react to, what was it, visual cues, as much as men. Whoever wrote that is a freaking moron! Shampoo thought, biting her lip. It was all she could do to keep from drooling. God, it's like watching a panther move! Mousse who!?*

For Shampoo, raw muscles and power were not a draw. Real strength was, which Ranma had. Regardless of his size, Ranma was stronger than anyone there bar Ishiku and the two senior students. He didn't have their muscle mass, but that wasn't important. Every muscle and sinew that Ranma had was defined on his spare frame, and while his arms were not as big as the men around them, his six pack was just as impressive. And when the construction crew moved, it was ponderous, not clumsy but slow. When Ranma moved, he was under complete control, moving like some great predator even while doing something so blasé as kneeling down.

The two of them continued to work as the house went up in an incredibly fast time. Normally a house like this, though simple, would take at least a week, maybe longer with modern equipment. Even a 'sample house' would take that long. The Martial Arts Construction school was finished the walls, plumbing and most of the electrical lines by the time evening began.

At that point, stomachs began to rumble, and most of the crew was pulled off the work. As his crew sat around drinking and now talking to the newcomers, with Ranma talking to Yama and going over a book about wiring and plumbing, Ishiku pulled out a cell phone. "Alright crew, what do you lot want to order for dinner?"

"Thai!"

"Nobunori's!"

"Okonomiyaki!"

"Pizza Palace!"

"Oooh, yeah, hot wings!"

All these and more were cried, but Shampoo looked around, and shook her head. "Shampoo no want to put Ishiku out like that. Paying for takeout for this many, it be too too expensive. You have kitchen and ingredients, Shampoo cook. It be thanks for putting us up in luxury like this."

The Amazon's words caused silence among her listeners, all of whom stared at her, including Ishiku, whose jaw dropped in shock. "A, a home cooked meal!?"

Wondering what the significance of that phrase was, Shampoo nodded. "Yes. Shampoo be just as good cook as martial artist you know."

Ranma's addition of 'I'll help too' was lost as many of the MAC students burst into tears. "A home cooked meal!"

"A meal cooked by a woman!"

"OH my god, I must be dreaming! Something beyond takeout!"

"Kaa-sannnn!"

Even Ishiku was in tears as he bowed several dozen times towards a now thoroughly startled Shampoo. "Missy you just made us all so, so happy! Do you have any idea how long it's been since any of us had a real, home-cooked meal? Bentos and other takeout just doesn't cut it."

"Er... right. Shampoo not promise much until see ingredients but," Shampoo was interrupted by Ranma, who had pulled on his muscle T and over shirt by this point, volunteering to go get whatever she wanted. She smiled at him, causing many a grumble from the rest of the crowd as she moved off to the main house.

Coming back, she gave Ranma a long list of ingredients, and he and Yama hurried off, spooked by Shampoo's gritted teeth and twitching face. They weren't out of shrieking range before her voice reached them as she laid into Ishiku and the others. "You put raw meat and chicken together! You have eggs so long they go wrong! Milk is not best left after due date! Your kitchen a disaster, you, you idiots!"

As they ran, Yama looked away from Ranma's confused look. "Just... just don't ask. We um, it's not exactly easy to find girlfriends when you spend all your time building your muscles or training, you know?"

To say that Shampoo's quick meal of meat buns, fried rice, and several radish dishes was a hit, was an understatement. Indeed, there was another spontaneous combustion of tears from many of the men even before they ate it. "Oh my god, a real girl, a real girl has made us a meal and is even handing it to us, a home cooked meal!"

Smirking and deciding she wasn't really happy any longer to be the sole object of attention from dozens of men, Shampoo picked up a bottle of water from nearby and tossed it towards Ranma. Ranma was just handing another man a plate of food and didn't see the water coming, the bottle erupting as it smacked into him. "If you want girl serve you, Shampoo able to bring out other girl!"

"Gah, Shampoo, what the hell, girl!?" Ranma yelled, turning toward the other girl as the man who she had just handed a plate to dropped said plate in shock.

"That's our line!" bellowed many of the MAC crew around them. "Wha, what just happened!?"

Ishiku even looked horrified, staring down at his water bottle. "She's put something in the water! It's some Chinese magic curse!"

Shampoo turned in his direction, laughing cackling like a witch for a moment until Ranma smacked her upside the head and went on to explain her curse. "Stop blowing their minds like that, eesh. What it is, is a curse I got in China, so you were right on that, but it ain't Shampoo doing it. What happened was..."

After he explained his curse, the MAC students fell into three categories. The first were appalled and worried a lot about how magic was possible and what it meant. The cry of "Where does the mass go!?" was shouted by this portion of the crowd, and the best mathematicians among them quickly broke out the sake.

The second group were simply stunned, but also kind of horrified by the idea of turning into women, saying it would be a fate as bad as death. Ranma might have agreed with that crowd at one point, but now seeing Shampoo lay into them with a spoon and her words, felt quite justified in not mentioning that at the moment.

This left him open to the third group, which pulled him aside, and, giving Ranma a serious case of *déjà vu*, one of them asked, "So, er, since that isn't your natural body and all, would you um, that is would you mind giving us a look?"

All the side conversations ended as a wail rose up by the main as he was tossed several hundred feet through the air to land in the small pond in front of Ishiku's house. The next man crashed into the out wall of the construction yard, missing one of the bulldozers – they were there just as comparison, much like the jackhammer - by a foot.

"Drat, I missed," Ranma announced flatly, turning to the rest of the crowd, her eyes lit up like hellfire by the various lights around the area. "Anyone else want to ask about something perverted?"

A mass of shaking heads answered him and Ishiku could be heard to mutter, "Damn female fury, reminds me too much of my ex-wife that does."

The rest of the meal passed uneventfully, with Ranma turning back to his male form and Shampoo sitting with him, talking quietly about the traditional doctors and acupuncture experts she wanted to study with. If some of the MAC students around them seemed to blush and stare at them, with one of them mentioning the word 'yuri' under his breath dozens of times, neither Ranma nor Shampoo commented.

*After all, it is kind of true, Shampoo reflected. Eventually we will be going that way, if our relationship keeps on going, anyway.*

After dinner, the two of them were shown the sitting room and the kitchen by the journeyman who had handled interior design. As the two of them were looking at the bathroom though, he made tracks, snickering under his breath. The couple didn't notice this until after they had taken out their toiletries and played a game of rock-paper-scissors to see who would have the first bath, which Ranma won despite Shampoo's best efforts at a puppy-dog face.

"Huh, where'd Daichi go?" Ranma asked, looking around.

Shampoo huffed, heading to the doorway. "Shampoo no know, too busy being annoyed by Ranma not knowing proper facts of life about girlfriends and bathrooms."

"Oh, get over it. I've used the Puppy Dog Eye Attack myself Shampoo, ya need to work on your pout and making your eyes wider to get the full effect. Still..." Ranma looked over at Shampoo as he turned on the hot water, having already filled a basin with cold water to wash with. "They're a bit awkward, but I think they're good guys, yeah?"

"Mm, Shampoo understand they need more female touch on lives in general, but yes, she agree, they are good guys," Shampoo answered, tempted to stay and watch Ranma change, but when Ranma paused, giving her a pointed look, she instead winked, and left the room, deciding they weren't ready for that just yet. While both had seen the other's body before this – or at least Ranma's female form above the waist – seeing it in this kind of setting seemed too intimate for where their relationship was just yet.

About forty minutes later, Ranma came out of the bathroom, only to find Shampoo sitting in the main room, glaring at the book in her hands as if it had personally offended her. "IS there something wrong with that manga, Shampoo?"

"Grr. No. Just.. look at the bedroom," Shampoo replied in Chinese, seemingly too angry to translate to Japanese.

“Huh?” Doing so, Ranma stared, for the image in the bedroom was worthy of both his shock and Shampoo’s anger. The entire room was done in tones of red and pink, and in the center of the room was a massive stand-alone bed shaped like a heart, complete with red blankets, heart-shaped pillows and frills. “GAH!”

“Yes. That thing is a monstrosity, and I have half a mind to go find Daichi and introduce him to my chui!” Shampoo snarled, still in Chinese.

Ranma only got one out of every three words there, but that was enough for him. “Yeah, I don’t think I even want to sleep on it. Do you?”

“NO!” Shampoo snarled, shivering. “Gah, it looks like those horrible hotel rooms you can rent for a few hours.”

With that agreement reached, the two of them bedded down in the sitting room.

Despite that prank and their rather violent response to it the next day, the couple’s time in their ready-made house proved quite nice. As they had learned that first day, most of the MAC students were generally nice guys, who, while jealous of Ranma to a certain degree, fully supported the idea that a martial artist could get a hot girlfriend, and the two wanderers continued to cook for the crew, cementing their place as fast friends to all of them.

On the martial arts side, those two weeks also served both of them well. Ranma learned far faster than anyone else Ishiku had ever met, learning everything Ishiku was willing to teach him, and even some of the secret techniques the school used. His book learning fell behind, but that was all right by both Ishiku and Ranma.

To Ishiku’s delight, while Shampoo decided that Martial Arts Construction was not for her, she dedicated as much time as Ranma did with Ishiku on muscle strengthening exercises. She also worked with the various local doctors who practiced acupuncture. She learned quite a bit from it, and cheerfully told Ranma about it every night.

During that time, Ranma’s toughness training on his hands bore fruit, and by the end of his time there, he could punch metal (he broke the concrete too fast) for hours without feeling it in his hands at all. He also figured out the weapons space trick that Ishiku had used in their match.

Unlike Shampoo’s version, Ishiku organized his ki space. He called it the ‘personal cabinet,’ because that was what he turned his weapon space into. He could even, somehow, this part Ranma was still having trouble with, label each item, so that when he had a thought in his head and reached into his weapon space, only that item would come to his hand. This was unlike Shampoo, who kept her chui in her sleeves, and some of her other traveling items in a ki-expanded backpack.

“Do you think that we should both go through that toughness training? Over our entire bodies I mean? Rather than just our hands,” Shampoo asked. In the two weeks they’d been here, Ranma had helped Shampoo with her Japanese much more than Shampoo had helped him with Chinese. She needed the help in order to talk more intelligently to the acupuncture doctors, and it had paid off.

“Of course,” Shampoo had said at one point, “when we leave Japan, we’ll be switching to Chinese most of the time. You’ll need to learn how to speak a civilized language abroad after all.”

“Doesn’t English count?” Ranma asked since he also knew that language. Shampoo’s deadpan look at that didn’t need any translation, and both of them had fallen about laughing.

“Maybe, but I’d like us to figure out a better way of training it rather than just, you now hammering on something, with various parts of our bodies” Ranma said now in reply to Shampoo’s question.

Shampoo paused from where she was combing her hair thinking, her eyes suddenly elsewhere. “Is that what was going on??” she murmured to herself in Chinese.

Ranma still didn’t understand her though, and asked what she meant, whereupon Shampoo turned, smiling excitedly. “I think, I think there’s a kind of toughness training! I saw some of the blooded warriors in my village being subjected to it. They were hung on a rope and swung repeatedly into a large boulder. I thought it was some kind of torture, but if it isn’t, then maybe... I remember one of them being hit by a chui to the head, and the mace breaking rather than her head! That’s got to be it.”

After he translated Shampoo’s rapid-fire Chinese, Ranma nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense. But unless we want to ask Ishiku to use his wrecking ball on us, we’re going to have to wait until we get away from civilization a ways to try and set something like that up.”

“True. Now tell me more about this personal cabinet ki space thing. Being able to make better use of my ki space would be great, and it sounds almost like what Mousse does, only not as ki intensive,” Shampoo ordered. Like Ranma, she took martial arts very seriously.

Ranma did so, and from there the conversation segued into ki, what it was, how to build it up and so on. Shampoo had seen a lot of its use over the years but didn’t really understand the general workings or how one built it up. Ranma in turn understood how you built it up, and one way in which he unconsciously used it: healing. Ranma had been using it that way for years, thanks to Genma’s torture/training.

And both of them had seen ki used to enhance weapons. Shampoo’s grandmother continually used her ki to enhance the strength of her walking stick, while Ranma had seen it



used to enhance Kuno's bokken into something as hard as steel. He'd even used it himself on occasion.

Between that, and the work they had both done on ki space, the young couple was able to meditate and feel out their energy reserves, manipulating it to a certain degree within their bodies and clothing. What to do with their reserves beyond what they already knew though, was a question. Because neither youngster understood how to project it out of their bodies like Ranma had seen in so many cartoons.

Regardless, two weeks flew by before both of them had learned as much as they could from the locals. Worse, the day after Shampoo had a revelation about the training she had seen, Ranma saw a poster up asking about a loose panda in the area. When he reported this to Shampoo, she was a little annoyed, convinced that she could have learned some more about herbal medicines at the least if they stayed.

But compared with the annoyance of having the panda interrupt their time together, Shampoo was willing to move on. "I don't want us to trouble the Martial Arts Construction folk, they been quite nice to us," she said, gesturing around the small one-story house they'd made on the first day.

The heart shaped bed was still a bit much in her opinion, and both of them had refused to sleep on the monstrosity. But it was the thought that counted, and the rest of the house was actually very nice.

"Agreed. It's just a shame."

Shampoo looked at Ranma in confusion, and he shrugged a bit. "I didn't work with Ishiku and the others today, I went out in my girl form trolling for idiots. Probably a good thing if my old man is in the area, but it allowed me to build up enough money to actually take you out on a nice planned-sorta date like we talked about a few weeks ago. Now we'll have to wait until we move on for it."

Shampoo smiled at that, and hugged Ranma's side, leaning up to give him a kiss on the cheek. But later that night, in the dead of the night, the two of them left with no one the wiser, leaving behind a brief apology note for not saying goodbye to Ishiku and his school.

**OOOOOO**

"I tell you Saotome, this is where I was told Shampoo was staying. And if she's staying here, it's dollars to donuts that your boy is staying here too," Soun announced.

Genma snarled, staring in annoyance at the construction yard ahead of them. "I'll agree that it does sound like the boy, wanting to learn another style and add it to our own, just like I told him to over the years, Tendo. At least that hasn't changed. But why this one?"

“Ah, but you are not thinking strategically my old friend.” When Genma turned to look at him, Soun went on, speaking as someone who actually had run a dojo at one point and knew one could not live off martial arts alone. “You may see this just as a martial arts style, but it is in fact a commercial product. Something that could be very useful while on the road just for the two of them. And could also be used to make the two of them some money.”

“True,” Genma answered thoughtfully, nodding his head. “And in the future when we drag him, er, that is when we convince him to do his duty and marry Akane, you can even offer it as part of the dojo’s teachings.”

“Exactly! As much as I’m furious with your son for being so dishonorable as to run the instant some foreign floozy comes along, at least he did something right. Now, let’s get in there, and finish Operation Get the Fiancé Back!” Soun declared.

“Be careful Tendo. Remember that Shampoo will be with him, and if she’s used some kind of vile Amazon magic to control Ranma rather than just her wiles, we might have to fight both of them to free the boy.”

Soun nodded seriously, and the two of them moved to the entrance to the construction yard. “A challenger appears!”

Minutes later, the two of them were running back out of the construction yard, with several dozen of the Martial Arts Construction students racing after them with Ishiku in the lead. “Run away! Run away!” Genma shouted.

“After them! Capture the enemies of true love!” Ishiku declared.

“Right!” bellowed his students in response.

They didn’t get far however, before there was a tinkling sound to one side, and a hurled Buddhist staff impacted Soun’s legs dumping him to the earth. Genma leaped up over a similar staff that whirled in aiming for his legs from the side but couldn’t dodge a clothesline. “Nirvana lariat!”

Rolling on the ground, Genma grabbed at his throat, groaning in pain.

Soun meanwhile was able to push to his feet and stared ahead of them as a group of monks leaped down from the surrounding buildings to join the one who had clotheslines Genma. They were obviously monks: bald heads marked by rows of dots, long goatees, and the clothing. But Soun could not remember the last time he’d seen monks so well built or grim looking.

“Genma Saotome, karma has come for you, Namu Amida Butsu. You will return to what you stole or pay for it in this life and the next,” the monk in the center of the group announced.

The monks had been busy since Ranma had been at the temple back in Niigata a few weeks ago. Representatives had been sent into Nerima to find Genma, only to find him no longer in residence at. However, Nabiki had been more than willing to sell out both older men for a monetary remuneration. She'd had to put up with a lecture on the lure of worldly pleasures, but felt she still came out ahead in the end.

"Now hold on friends, whatever my friend has done, I am certain that we can work out something," Soun protested.

"We do not think in terms of money or worldly desires. We only want returned to our various sects what this one has stolen. If he has misplaced or lost or otherwise no longer has them in his possession, he must be made to work to pay them off. At which point, only Inari and Amaterasu will judge for how long he must work," the leader, a senior sendatsu, or pilgrimage leader, announced firmly.

Soun made to protest further, about to say that they didn't have any evidence that Genma had stolen anything, when his old friend tried to bolt, only to be cut off by another priest. He and the monk started to exchanged punches and jabs from the monk's staff as Genma addressed Soun. "It's no use trying to talk to them, Tendo! None of them understand the trials one sees on the road! We must escape! Maybe, we can get Ranma to work for them instead, but for now, bringing back the boy to do his duty is the most important thing."

Before Soun could do anything, one of the MAC students reached them, grabbing him from behind with two massive ham-sized hands on either shoulder. "Don't think that you're going to get away from us homewrecker!"

Whirling around, Soun was able to throw the man off his feet, taking the next one with a sliding kick, before leaning into a palm strike that sent him flying into two others. While he had gone badly to seed over the years, Soun hadn't forgotten everything he'd learned from the dread master. "You seem to be right Saotome, but if they think us easy marks, let's disabuse them of the notion!"

"Get them!"

"Yama, lead the others in our school's patented capture method!" Ishiku bellowed, as he charged forward into the melee.

"Martial Arts Construction, Encompassing Fence!" Yama ordered, and ten of the Martial Arts Construction students ranged out quickly around the melee. With two others following them carrying supplies, Yama and his men began to build, a large cage around the fight right there in the middle of the street. Made of steel bars and made to make certain that the largest, most wily animal could not break through or sneak between the bars, no one had ever escaped once within the cage.

Yet this time, it didn't work. Genma was a master escape artist, and he saw them coming. Grabbing Soun's shirt, he hurled him upwards shouting "Do the face, my old friend!"

Realizing what Genma meant, Soun instantly began to use one of the few ki techniques he still could. His head grew to many times its own size, as an aura of dread flared out from him, his mouth and face shifting form into something quite demonic looking, complete with long pink tongue and wide, bloodshot eyes. "Go away and leave us alone! Where is the honor in ganging up on two people with your numbers?!"

Accompanied by an aura of fear this technique was made to cause terror in all who saw it, and now, the effect was immediate. Many of the construction workers collapsed where they stood or ran away in gibbering terror. Even Ishiku stumbled back, while Yama and his men all collapsed to their knees in horror.

While the monks were made of sterner stuff and stood their ground reciting sutras, Genma had used this distraction to leap upwards over the cage, landing outside. From there he threw a rope up towards Soun who grabbed it, and was flung to the side, landing on a nearby roof. There Soun leaped down to join Genma in running away as fast as they could go as the monks raced after them, the half-finished cage only a small impediment.

Any plans to try to track the boy down were mute at the moment. They had to save their own hides first.

**OOOOOO**

Ranma and Shampoo had decided to cross back to the Pacific side of Japan+ rather than the Sea of Japan side, thinking that would throw off any attempt to follow them. They spent a few hours when they arrived in Hamamatsu, which Ranma was quick to point out was near to Nagoya, a city known for its sumo wrestling. Normally neither of them would have much interest in that, but Ranma remembered the card they had found that first night trolling for idiots, and looking at it, found the address was for a place in that town as the site of the next street FIGHT.

"Maybe if we go there, we'll get at least some more information about the Street FIGHT circuit and decide whether or not they're good for us. What do you think Shampoo?"

"I think it's a good idea, and maybe we'll even be in enough time to find and watch some of the street fights. But before that," Shampoo teased in Chinese, wagging a finger in Ranma's face, "you owe me a date. You said you had enough cash and even a plan, right?"

Ranma nodded, then said they should probably find a place to stay first. They found a hotel that had a room available with two beds, and then, spent about an hour going around using some of the money that Shampoo had earned over the past few weeks, and that Ranma had basically stolen from thieves the day before. Thinking ahead, the duo purchased quite a lot

of rope, camping gear, and a new bedroll for Shampoo. The sleeping bags that you could find here in real civilization were **far** better than this stuff that she had left her village with. Even Ranma found one he wanted, but he put that aside since the brief shopping trip was cutting into their cash and he wanted enough to take Shampoo out later.

When Shampoo headed back to the hotel to meditate and play with her ki space, Ranma looked around the area, and found a movie theater in a good side of town, as well as a restaurant that sold ice cream for dessert. He had learned over the past few weeks that Shampoo was almost as much of a glutton for ice cream as Ranma had been for those few days when he was forced to realize that his female body was fully... operational, so to speak. Then, he purchased tickets for the movie, and headed back to the hotel with those and a reservation for tonight at the restaurant in hand.

Back at the hotel, he didn't go straight back to the room. Instead, he stopped over in one of the public restrooms, changing into a decent suit. Or at least as close as he could get. Long silk kung fu pants, black this time rather than blue, combined with a far more ornate kung fu silk shirt, showing a Chinese dragon down one arm and coiled around one side of his chest. It wasn't really dressy, but it was better looking than what he normally wore, and very obviously something he changed into on purpose.

The guys back at the Martial Arts Construction school had been very firm on that. The girl always needed to know that you were putting forth effort, even if it wasn't an ultra-fancy date.

Heading to the room, he knocked rather than opened the door with the key card, and when Shampoo answered it, he grinned at her, watching her eyes widen in surprise. "Hey Shampoo, ready to go out?"

Biting her lip, Shampoo looked Ranma up and down, her eyes going from surprised to tender, as she nodded once. She held out a hand, and Ranma took it, squeezing it gently before pulling on it lightly to get her starting to follow him. She instantly latched onto his arm, and Ranma let her, leaning his head against the top of hers as they walked down the hallway.

"So I looked at the movies, and I decided that I couldn't stomach any of the romance movies. Sorry but I.."

"Ranma, Shampoo like romance, but only in real life or when reading about it in manga. Movies always too boring. Did you choose a comedy or something?" Shampoo hoped he hadn't chosen an anime. For a date that would be a bit too silly.

"Action comedy actually, with Fei Long in it. We'll see if it's any good, and if not, that can be fun in its own way..."

The martial arts movie they chose was a movie with Fei Long in it, and both of them had been prepared to hurl insults at the screen every time there was a fight scene. But while the acting was only so-so and required quite a bit of heckling on both of their parts, some of the action was actually pretty good. It was clear that Fei Long was actually a decent martial artist. Not up to their level for certain, but pretty good.

“Maybe there is something to Akane’s dreams of becoming a martial artist and an actress at the same time,” Ranma mused, as they exited the film. “The whole film wasn’t all that good, but he tried his best you know?”

“I think that your talking about another girl while on a date with me is a little wrong,” Shampoo intoned, teasing Ranma gently before leaning up to give him a kiss on the cheek. They hadn’t, to her consternation, made out or anything in the back of the theater. But that was all right, as they had both been having too much fun heckling the movie.

“Sorry about that, I’ll try to do better,” Ranma said seriously, kissing Shampoo back on the cheek.

She refused to let it go at that however, and boldly kissed him right there in the middle of the road, causing many of the passerby to look at them disapprovingly. While the Japanese could be affectionate and loving, they kept that kind of thing private. Only showoffs acted out like this in public.

Ranma knew that, and while he returned the kiss for a few seconds, he pulled back quickly, putting an arm around Shampoo’s shoulders and gently turning her away from him, so they could walk side-by-side. “Come on, I made a reservation at a restaurant for us tonight too.”

Shampoo smiled happily at that, nuzzling into his shoulder, and then amusing herself by glaring back at a few people who were looking at the two of them a little too censoriously for her tastes. Soon though, they were at the restaurant, which was a little bit ritzy, but not all that much, and which specialized in American food, whatever that was, along with ice-cream-based deserts.

The two of them entered and were shown to a booth, where Ranma, delighting Shampoo again, handed her down into the seat. When they sat, she reached over the table and took his hands, squeezing them as she spoke in Chinese so as to not mess up her words. “I want to thank you for this Ranma. I’ve read all of these manga, I’ve read romance novels for years, but this is the first date I’ve been on. It isn’t everything I imagined it would be, but it’s close enough, and I really appreciate the effort you put in.”

*Well, looks like Ishiku was right about that!* Ranma thought ruefully, reminding himself to buy a gift basket and send it back to Ishiku and the rest of the Martial Arts Construction **school guys**. “You’re welcome, and you’re worth it, Shan Pu.”

That was the first time that Ranma had used her name in Chinese correctly, and Shampoo blushed, looking down at her hands, wondering if Ranma understood the meaning of her name, before realizing that she didn't know the meaning of his either. *So at least we're even there.*

Ranma smiled at the blush, squeezing her hands for a moment. Then the two of them parted as the waiter move towards them to take their order.

They were halfway through the meal, talking about various famous martial arts films, and which of them they liked, when disaster struck.

Ranma hadn't been paying much attention to the rest of the restaurant, which had been another thing that Ishiku had told him about. Always pay attention to your date, no matter what. However, his attention was diverted instantly towards the source of a very particular laugh.

"Oh no, please no!" Ranma whimpered, slapping his forehead and about to duck underneath the table.

But it was too late. Kodachi had seen him. She moved towards him, the waiters and the other people in the restaurant parting for her like she was a prophet come to part the waves, although not nearly as welcome. "HOHOHOHOHO, it is you Ranma-sama! Why, fate himself must have allowed us to meet!"

"This is Kodachi, yes? Ranma description of laugh be too too spot on," Shampoo tsked, scowling angrily at the woman who had interrupted her date.

Ranma's response was to bang his head on the table.

Still, Shampoo took that as an affirmative, and slowly stood up, crossing her arms as she glared at the other woman as she annunciated each word in Japanese. "Go away. Can you no see Ranma and Shampoo on date?"

"Bah, obviously you have used your foreign harlotry to ensnare him, as Sasuke reported. But I will have my love free of you now!" Kodachi shouted, and then, before anyone could interfere, she pulled off her dress, tossing it behind her to be grabbed by one of several other young women, who had followed her in.

Ranma recognized a few of them from St. Hebereke's martial arts team and realized they must've come to this restaurant to celebrate a win or something in the area. *Huh, kind of lowbrow for Kodachi, but I suppose the team might have chosen it as a group.*

That was as much thinking as Ranma had time for, because the second Kodachi had tossed her clothing inside, she had also lunged forward in her leotard, a ribbon flicking out from

one hand, the other holding a small baton, which instantly sprouted spikes. "Release Ranma-sama from your foul spell or face the consequences!"

"Ranma under no spell, and Amazons no take kindly to threats," Shampoo retorted, lashing out with a knife hand, smacking the ribbon to one side, and then launching herself forward. In her hand, she was suddenly holding one of her large chui, which crashed against Kodachi's defense, chui and baton straining.

Kodachi however did not allow the fight to devolve into strength versus strength, instead giving way, then twisting around to one side. Leaping up onto a table, she ignored the restaurant goers who were now cowering underneath it, kicking a small pot of tea up into Shampoo's face.

Shampoo hissed as it struck, but thankfully it was only lukewarm, not scalding, and she fell back, as Kodachi lashed at her with her ribbon.

Ranma leaped forward, launching a kick at Kodachi, who dodged it and stared in shock as Ranma landed lightly on the table she'd been on a moment ago, while she landed on a second, balancing there as this time another baton appeared in her hand, having lost her club a moment ago. "Darling Ranma, I know well that she is forcing you to fight but, I cannot allow you to interfere with me while I am trying to free you. Get him girls!"

The girls who had come into the restaurant with Kodachi lashed out towards Ranma with spiked balls, throwing stars or clubs. This forced Ranma to dodge and weave between them, while Kodachi turned her attention back to Shampoo.

As he moved from table to table, Ranma debated internally watching the incoming attacks almost as much as the scattered cold drinks around. He really, really did not like fighting girls. Someone like Shampoo got a pass, because she took martial arts as seriously as he did and it would be insulting to her if he didn't treat her seriously. But these girls? These girls were gymnasts, not real martial artists. *So that leaves either continually dodging or getting creative.*

The initial hail of throwing objects faded out, and more than one of the girls pulled out a gymnast's ribbon, twirling it around like a whip, while others grabbed out batons. To others that might have seemed a decent mix of defense and offense as the ribbons whipped past Ranma's head as he continually leaped about, forced away from Shampoo and Kodachi for now. But to Ranma, well...

"Getting creative it is," he said, grabbing one of the ribbons out of the air, and pulling it out of the girl's grip.

The next second, he had another one, and pulled this girl up off of the ground, and into the air. Bouncing upward, Ranma gently touched down on her stomach, then up onto the roof, twirling her around behind them, the girl becoming tied up in her own ribbon before dropping



down. As she hit the floor Ranma grabbed two more ribbons out of the air, and then was in among the girls, the ribbons flicking out to hogtie and disable.

Meanwhile, Shampoo had stowed her Chui. There were too many civilians around, and not enough room to swing them. So, she grabbed up the fallen baton Kodachi had been using and twirling it in one hand went on the attack. Leaping up into the air she batted aside Kodachi's ribbon, and then dodged a flung rose. Ranma had told her about Kodachi's pension for poisoning and had no desire to test those poisons out. *I got quite enough of that from those annoying twins!*

Dodging that brought her to standing on top of a table facing Kodachi, and she kicked a plate of something up into the air, whirling around and smacking it with one hand, launching it towards Kodachi. Two more plates were tossed and deflected by Kodachi's ribbon, then Shampoo was rolling forward onto the ground, smashing the table out from under Kodachi.

Kodachi tried to flip up into the air, but Shampoo followed, taking a slash on one arm from the ribbon as it suddenly solidified into an edged club, but punching out hard. The punch caught Kodachi in the center of her stomach hurling her up into the air, where she crashed against the roof.

Shampoo fell back to earth, landed, and as Kodachi gasped in agony and shock, unused to actual punches being delivered in a fight, launched herself upwards again. Twirling around Shampoo brought both of her fists up above her head. Her fists crashed into Kodachi's chest and head, knocking the little girl out entirely.

Flipping away through the air, Shampoo let Kodachi fall down towards the ground and was somewhat amused to see Ranma flick out a captured ribbon, grabbing Kodachi from midair. With that he pulled her into his arms before tying her up and dumping her on the already tied up forms of the rest of her teammates.

In the distance, sirens could be heard and Ranma slapped his palm with the fist of his other hand, muttering, "Oh right, this isn't Nerima." He grinned cheerfully down at the girls, shaking his head. "Have fun explaining this to the cops, girls."

With that, Ranma looked over at the owner of the restaurant, who had come out sometime in the violence along with several of the kitchen staff, many of whom had armed themselves with knives. He pointed at Kodachi, saying simply, "She started it, and she can pay for it all. Trust me, she's got the cash."

With that, he raced over to Shampoo, said, "Time we were gone," and then leaped up towards skylight. Clinging there for a brief second, he unlocked it, kicked it open, and flipped up onto the roof, with Shampoo leaping up after him.

The two of them raced away over the rooftops, putting several dozen blocks between them and the restaurant, before slowing down. When they did, the two of them looked at one another, and then fell over laughing. "Well, that not quite first date Shampoo want, but still fun!" Shampoo howled in laughter.

Ranma also laughed from where he was laid out on the rooftop, and he watched as Shampoo's laughter turned into giggles, watching as she shook her head, trying to get control. Her laughing, flustered face was one of the cutest things Ranma had ever seen and moved by an instinct older than any combat instinct he'd had drilled into his head, Ranma gently reached forward.

Shampoo blinked, and turned to him, her own eyes widening as Ranma leaned over, pulling her into a kiss. Both of them still running on adrenaline from the fight, this quickly became a **very** heated kiss, and the two of them quickly began to make out ardently, their tongues licking and twining around one another.

It was only when Ranma rolled them over so that her back hit the roof, that Shampoo remembered where they were. She gently placed a hand against Ranma's chest, pushing him away, and whispering in Chinese, "Let's head back to the room."

The two of them moved on their way, holding one another as they walked, but not stopping to kiss until they were back at the room. There, Shampoo practically ambushed Ranma, pushing him against the doorway as soon as it was closed. Ranma kissed back just as ardently, but when his arms went around her, Shampoo instantly noticed the change. Gone was the aggressive fervor of before, and its place was the same tender gentle touch as had been in Ranma's kissing ever since the first time Shampoo had taken the plunge to see if this time, her instincts hadn't let her down.

That caring, gentle, tender touch caused Shampoo to tremble, it really did, feeling him hold her like this, like she was a flower that he could crush accidentally. And knowing how strong Ranma was, having seen him outperform the martial artists at the construction school, she well understood he **was** that strong.

But at the same time, it annoyed her, because Shampoo felt she was strong, and she wasn't going to break. So when Ranma's arms went around her, she reached back and gently pushed one of his hands down until that hand was not on her back but cupping her rear.

Ranma felt the soft, pliant flesh under his hand and froze, allowing her to dominate the kiss for a time, until his brain functions finally began to respond once more. While Shampoo's constant affections, her touches, kisses and desire to be close to him had worn down Ranma's desire to take things slow, he still wasn't all that prepared (or really knowledgeable about) for the physical side of things beyond kissing. Indeed, Ranma had really pushed himself to be romantic tonight, especially the public kiss on the cheek, which Shampoo had taken advantage of.

Yet even so, feeling that soft flesh under his hand, hearing Shampoo whimper something in Chinese which he couldn't translate at present, it awoke desires in Ranma that he had rarely allowed himself to contemplate. So Shampoo put a leg around Ranma's, Ranma lifted her up by her rear, carrying her deeper into the room.

How they got from area by the doorway to the beds, Shampoo didn't know, but soon, she was on her back, with Ranma on top of her, their lips still pressed against one another. No clothes were coming off, Shampoo was very certain that Ranma wouldn't go that route without her permission, and she wasn't prepared to go that far just yet either.

After all, for all of the passion that she was feeling and firmly believing that they were married thanks to her people's laws, Shampoo understood that they'd only really known one another for a little under three weeks. Time away from one another obviously didn't count towards that total, and this was only their third date, and only that if you wanted to count trolling for idiots as a date.

However, she didn't have a problem with feeling one another up over their clothing, and as Ranma pulled back his gaze down at her, Shampoo gently took one of his hands in hers, and pressed into her chest. She watched his eyes widened, and he tried to pull it away. But Shampoo held firm, smiling and nodding in acceptance.

After a second spent staring into Shampoo's face, Ranma gulped, then allowed his gaze to look down at where his hand currently rested. As he did, an expression of awed astonishment appeared on his face.

The sight of that look caused Shampoo to shiver again and thank the goddess Athena the man she had found could look at her so. Not as an object, not as a thing to sate his lust, not someone to be afraid of, simply an object of desire and affection. *Not love, no. Ranma has the right of it there, we don't know each other anywhere near long enough for that. But still.*

Shampoo was not wearing a bra. She had taken it off before meditating and hadn't bothered to put it back on before answering the door. And the touch of Ranma's fingers sliding gently over her shirt, was intense, and she smiled at him as he played with her breasts, until he leaned down and kissed her again as her own hands went to Ranma's rear and abs, delighting in the tone she found there.

How long they made out and played together, Shampoo didn't know, but eventually, their passions had subsided into something softer, and Shampoo fell asleep in Ranma's arms for the first time. It would not be the last.

OOOOOO

Back in the restaurant, a young girl with blonde hair done up in drills stood up from the VIP segment of the restaurant. She was thirteen years old and had been dragged to the meeting

by her father. He explained they were at this restaurant because he was meeting with several of his lower-level managers, and he didn't want to overawe them with his wealth, while also taking them and their families out for a good time.

For her part, young Karin Kanzuki had thought she would be bored out of her mind. The children of the various managers that were brought along were so plebian, so... boring.

Yet the floor show had been phenomenal. The fight between that foreign looking girl, the rather handsome boy and the rhythmic gymnastics team had been phenomenal to watch. The only thing that would've been better would be if this Kodachi girl had actually won her love back from the gaijin whore.

*Alas, it was not to be, but she was quite good! And those moves...* "I think I just decided that I will change schools," Karin mused as she watched Kodachi pull out a check, write an amount on it and show it to the manager. The older man's eyes widened in shock, and he began to bow profusely.

*Yes indeed, Kodachi looks to be interesting, and perhaps she has much to teach me.*

Ignoring her father's attempt to grab her shoulder, Karin moved forward, moving to help Kodachi unwrap her fellow rhythmic gymnastics students from their own ribbons. The girl looked at her thoughtfully, then nodded once and returned to her own work, while the restaurant owner talked to his workers, sending out a few to stall the police before turning and shouting that all the meals tonight would be on the house. "My name is Karin and I was wondering, how would one go to transfer to your school, and how quickly thereafter, could I become part of your Rhythmic Gymnastics Team?"

**OOOOOO**

Early the next day, the two of them left the hotel. As they did, Shampoo spied a local newspaper in the small shop attached to the hotel. Laughing, she pointed it out to Ranma, who instantly went in and picked it up, reading the article on the front page, ignoring the glares from the store worker. The article's title said, "Martial Artists Gone Mad," and detailed story of what had happened last night. But there weren't any pictures bar one, just as Kodachi pulled off her uniform, to reveal the leotard underneath.

"...So Kodachi got away, or more likely threw her wallet at the restaurant owner and then just walked out," Ranma mused, shaking his head as he looked over at Shampoo. "I did say the Kunos were rich, remember?"

"Shampoo remember. Maybe next time, we roll them, yes?" Shampoo answered, putting an arm around his shoulders. Hesitantly, Ranma's arm when around her waist, and she shivered as he then greatly daring, pulled his hand away just enough to run his fingernails up and down her hip. The sensation was astonishingly distracting even through her clothing, and

she reflected that Ranma was getting better at showing affection like that, which she quite liked. "Better, maybe this means she not..."

Quickly, Ranma raised his free hand up to block her mouth, shaking his head. "Please don't say things like that. Seriously. Please!" He then pulled his hand away, frowning as he wiped it on his pants. "Why the heck did you lick my hand? Who does that?"

"It depends on circumstance," Shampoo said, and seeing a chance to get back at him for muffling her like that, which she rather disliked, took his hand again, pushed one finger out, and then licked it. The way Ranma's eyes widened, and his face reddened to her and almost like color, it seemed he got the point. She let his hand fall back and thrust her own fingers forward in a victory sign. "Shampoo win."

That was not what she should've said to Ranma. One thing that his father had instilled and Ranma along with the love of martial arts and traveling was to never back down from a challenge. This one wasn't a martial arts challenge, but that didn't Ranma's instinctual response, only the action thus evoked.

Fighting back his blush, Ranma took her hand before she could pull it back out of his face, and then it was Shampoo's turn to start to blush as Ranma kissed her fingers one after another, then let his tongue out to delicately run along her skin as she had done a moment ago. "Two can play that game," he taunted between licks.

While blushing still at the act, Shampoo's eyes narrowed, and she was about to escalate further, when a cough from one side interrupted them. The store clerk stood there, glaring at them. A middle-aged man, with more than a slight paunch to him, he thrust a finger out to the entranceway. "This is not a library or, or some alleyway somewhere. If you two want to flirt, go somewhere else."

The two of them paused, their hands moving away from one another, and Ranma led the way out of the hotel. "Should we declare a draw on account outside interference?"

"Mmm," Shampoo agreed. *Although Shampoo win next time!* She thought, trying to will away the last of her blush. "But now we go?"

Ranma nodded, and after consulting a map as well as his compass, pointed in the direction they should go. They raced across the street in the diagonal across a crossway, then without stopping, leaped upwards, bouncing off of a lamp post, and then higher and higher still until they were on the roof of the seven-story building there. Then the martial arts couple raced away over the rooftops, ignoring the shouts and exclamations from the normal folk below.

What they could not ignore a bit later, was coming on a recent accident where two cars had collided. There were sounds of an ambulance in the distance, but there was so much traffic it might take a while for any aid to get to the accident, and Ranma could see that at least one of

the cars engines was still on, and both were leaking gas. No one else was moving to help them, so with a hand gesture, Ranma directed Shampoo down with him.

Between himself and Shampoo they pulled the victims out of the vehicles, and got them to safety to one side, where Shampoo began to administer first aid. While the Chinese girl was busy with that, Ranma ran back, tearing the engines out of both cars before the fire could reach them.

Shampoo insisted they stay as she took care of several of the victims, all of whom had bruises and head wounds, with one of them having a nasty cut across his face that was bleeding profusely. It was evident that at least one of the cars' airbags hadn't gone off properly, and Ranma found himself and several of the other onlookers turned into gophers for Shampoo, as she barked orders to get her cloth, water and antiseptic.

It was a side of her that Ranma hadn't seen before, but Ranma found he approved of it greatly. *She might not want to be a healer as she put it full time, but she definitely has the right take-charge attitude for one.*

They stayed there for the better part of the morning, until actual help arrived in the form of police and ambulance workers, who took over from Shampoo, thanking her for her help. Without Shampoo one of the victims would have bled to death before they arrived, and the other might well have lost an eye. However, when the policeman began to ask questions about their abilities, Shampoo and Ranma decide to make tracks.

Ranma did this in his own fashion. "Look, a distraction!" he shouted, pointing towards the wreckage. Astonishing Shampoo, the police around them all turned, and by the time they turned back, Ranma and Shampoo were gone.

Again Shampoo found herself laughing as they raced across the rooftops, shaking her head. "Shampoo cannot believe that worked!"

"It's all about the tone and pointing. People automatically turned their eyes to look towards wherever someone's pointing, and if you add a surprised or scared tone to your voice, the words don't actually register. It's odd to think about, but my Pops actually had some good advice about distractions and stuff like that," Ranma opined.

Then, he looked at Shampoo, who was still giggling quietly as they ran around, leaping to another building and out over a road, still going in a generally speaking straight line out of town towards the next one over. She didn't notice at first, but as they neared the edge of the town, where the buildings turned entirely into smaller houses and businesses, she at last noticed, turning to look at him as he leaped down onto the road, still running easily. This is the kind of pace they could both keep up four hours and doing so would be good exercise. "What is it?"

“Nothing. It’s just, when you were talking about you know acupuncture and herbal medicines and stuff, I honestly only saw it as an extension of martial arts. Back there though, I guess you could say I realized it was just you know another facet of your personality. I liked it,” Ranma announced with a laugh.

This caused Shampoo to blush rosily, even more so than Ranma’s flirting that morning. It was such an endearing thing to say, like a line right out of one of her josei novels. She reverted to Chinese as she mumbled, “Thank you,” leaning into Ranma’s side for a moment before pulling away.

The young couple raced on, following the road out of town before cutting across country towards Nagoya, one of the three cities famous for Sumo Wrestling in Japan.

The two of them even picked up speed as they hit the national park lands, bouncing up into the trees. Ranma began to make it a contest, patting Shampoo on the shoulder saying, “Tag you’re it,” before bouncing off through the foliage.

However, despite their speed, the delay dealing with the traffic accident had cost them.

The couple was able to find the place where the Street FIGHT was happening well enough. It was happening in an empty lot behind a food warehouse. The area around it was guarded by several dozen looking toughs varying from street punks to men in business suits, real professionals with watchful eyes, twitching fingers and earpieces behind their hair.

Ranma and Shampoo stared at those in particular, before simply bypassing them by taking to the rooftops, and then heading deeper inward towards the site of the fighting. There they found several fighters already making their way away from the battle, muttering incoherently to one another about their losses.

Landing near someone who was counting money as others handed it to him, Ranma gestured with his head towards the match going on. “Are we too late to join in the matches?”

The man looked over at Ranma, to taking his build and attire, before shrugging laconically. The pigtailed kid looked a little young but if he wanted to throw his life away in a street fight, well, around here that probably wasn’t going to happen considering the local champion, and if he lost it might dissuade him from the future stupidity.

Not today though. “Yeah, sorry kid. But there’s only so long we can keep this going without someone snitching, and street fights aren’t exactly legal.”

“Legal or not, they might be fun,” Ranma mused, shrugging his shoulders as if that didn’t matter to him at all, which it really didn’t. To Ranma’s mind, laws were just guidelines anyway. He moved over to Shampoo, who had pushed through the crowd by the blood of expedient of doing so, and then dealing with anyone who tried to wrap her with elbow and knee. This

included one man who was now very much regretting his attempt to grab her rear, holding his thoroughly mangled hand and whimpering while his fellows dragged him away.

Standing next to her, Ranma turned his attention to the fight, gently nudging his shoulder with his own. "We can't sign up, I got the impression this is all going to break up soon, and that's the last fight of the day."

Shampoo nodded but didn't turn her attention from the fight, and Ranma hadn't either, his eyes widening even as he told Shampoo the bad news, and he slowly shook his head as he went on. "On the other hand, we might not need to. I recognize at least one of those guys."

In the center of the reading stood a massive man, easily the size of his father, with even larger shoulders. He was dressed in an odd mix of samurai helmet and facemask, and what looked like armor from Fist of the North Star. He was fast, mobile, and seems to use a mixture between boxing and an armed style that used jitte, although by this point he had lost his weapons out of the ring thanks to his opponent.

It was that opponent who Ranma knew. He had seen him in various televised sumo matches over the past three or four years, and indeed, he was something of a national celebrity. Edmond Honda, the sumo champion, Yokozuna three years running. His face was painted in a traditional manner, and was wearing his normal sumo garb, moving around the makeshift ring far more quickly and easily than someone his bulk should.

As Ranma whispered the man's identity to Shampoo, Edmond Honda ended the fight, smacking aside one of his opponents' attacks, and then ramming his palm into his opponents' chest, shouting out the traditional cry of the sumo. "Dosukoi!!!"

His opponent fell back, his defenses wide open, and Honda took advantage. A series of palm strikes lashed out, tossing the man backwards and out of the ring where he crashed to the ground, unconscious.

"Winner, Honda-sama!" shouted a voice from nowhere, and Ranma looked around quizzically, wondering where that had come from. They couldn't see anyone with a megaphone or anything, but it simply sounded loud enough to come from one.

A second later, one of the men in suits didn't pull out a megaphone, shouting into it. "All right folks, that's it for today! Let's all get out of here before the local authorities arrived to break up our fun, yeah? Pay your dues at the front if you haven't already, and remember if you try to argue, that owing us an arm and a leg for the privilege of watching isn't an exaggeration!"

Honda nodded, adding his own words of encouragement to the ground, slamming his hands together to cause a reverberation of noise that drowned out the boos and hisses from the crowd who obviously wanted to see more fights. Nudging Shampoo, Ranma gestured



towards Honda, and whispered out, "Let's follow him. If nothing else, we can learn more about this whole Street FIGHT scene."

"You no think he object?" Shampoo asked quizzically.

"Nah, Honda is supposed to be a really likable guy and is touted as almost single-handedly reviving Japan's love of sumo wrestling, as well as taking it to other countries. He was the first sumo wrestler to ever accept a normal wrestling match, and the fact he won it cemented his fame. He's kind of a modern-day hero to a lot of people I guess." Ranma wasn't about to fanboy over the older man, but he acknowledged that Honda had been pretty damn important to his own branch of martial arts.

Shrugging her shoulders, Shampoo followed after Ranma. The two of them took to the rooftops quickly, leaving behind the crowd that had been watching the fight as it dispersed, waiting nearby. They watched the sumo champion leave the warehouse district, heading towards a waiting limousine of all things. The man was so heavy the limo noticeably dipped down as he got in.

The two of them exchanged glances, then Ranma shrugged, and mimed either jumping down onto the limo, or continuing over the rooftops

Shampoo signaled her agreement with the second idea, thinking that Honda would probably hear the first one. She wasn't anywhere near as silent when she landed as Ranma could be, and they didn't want to make a bad impression on the man. Soon the two of them were racing after the limousine as it cut into and out of traffic, able to keep up with it thanks to being able to take a straight line, which allowed the two martial artists to cut off a few corners here and there, where they waited for it to catch up before darting ahead again.

Inside the limo, Edmond Honda's driver blinked as he stared out one of the side view mirrors, then very deliberately tilted the mirror upwards so much it was no longer much help in letting him see the traffic around him. Instead, he stared into it at the two people on the roof nearby, who seemed to be looking back his way. "Sir, we seem to have a tail. Two people, I can't tell ages from this far, but one of them looks female, the other male, both dressed in a non-normal fashion."

Edmond frowned from where he was reading a newspaper, setting it aside as he leaned back in his large chair at the back of the limo. The chair would normally fit three or even four people, but with his bulk, Edmond took up most of the space. "Keep going. If they attempt to attack, I'll deal with it. Until then, let's assume that they are fans of some kind."

"Fans who can leap across streets and race over rooftops?" the limo driver inquired as he saw them do that following after the limo to one side.

"That just makes it more interesting," Edmond mused.

Soon they were out of the city proper, heading up into more rarefied areas, and then further up into the mountains to where sumo wrestlers were trained. Above even that, the Yokozuna's mansion resided, which had been Edmond Honda's home for the past four years. He could have bought his own mansion someplace else, but Edmond felt that would've been discourteous to those who had gone before. Instead, he had funneled a lot of his own money into making this place even more palatial, as well as promoting sumo wrestling in general.

The two youngsters gained speed in the forest around them, something the limo giant driver dutifully reported, and when they arrived at the mansion, they both leaped down, waiting outside the walls while the gate closed behind the limo. Seeing Honda, nodding back to the driver. "See? They don't mean any harm and are certainly not enemies. Enemies would hardly be ringing the doorbell."

Edmond waited outside the limo as his driver continued on towards the garage, staring towards the gate. "Come ahead then!" he boomed. "I'm not going to have a conversation with you this far removed. And I know that wall is no real barrier."

Ranma and Shampoo glanced at one another, and Ranma laughed. "Told you so." With that, the both of them leaped up and over the wall, clearing it easily from a standing start, before racing towards Honda, coming to a halt in front of them, where both of them bowed. Ranma bowed in the Japanese manner from the waist at a full ninety-degrees, while Shampoo's bow was shallower, her hands thrust out, one palm clasping her fist.

"Well, you have manners for stalkers. Can I ask why the two of you were tailing me? And what martial arts you practice? I've never seen or heard of someone being able to race across rooftops as easily as the two of you apparently were," Edmond answered, waving off their bows.

"That is actually just a kind of training for us," Ranma said with a shrug, looking over at Shampoo, who nodded in agreement. "Anyway, my name is Ranma of the Anything Goes School of Indiscriminate Grappling, and this is Shampoo of the Joketsuzoku. We're traveling martial artists and we're kind of interested in the Street FIGHT circuit. I was honestly hoping to get there in enough time to have a match, but..."

"But Shampoo and Ranma, cross accident. Have to stop and help people. Make us too too late. Shampoo wondering if Honda up for a match?" She blinked as did Ranma, as the sumo wrestler's stomach, which probably on its own weight more than Shampoo, grumbled, and she laughed. "Shampoo and Ranma willing to cook tonight, make too too delicious Chinese meal if want?"

The openness of the two youngsters and the friendliness of the pair disarmed what little concern Edmond still had about them, and he patted his stomach. "While that sounds delicious, if you two want a spar, let's do that first. Head down that path over there, and you'll find my personal training dojo. I'll meet you there after I speak to my butler and get changed back into

my combat garb. But I think I will take you up on that offer of Chinese. My own chef is quite brilliant, but only cook traditional Japanese food, and I would quite like some more variety. Try telling him that though, and still far you get..." Edmond grumbled.

Shampoo smiled prettily, and Edmond found himself smiling back. Ranma also pulled out a piece of paper and wrote down a list of ingredients that Shampoo rattles off quickly. She took a look at Honda, then added, "Family size for all that, Shampoo thinks."

At that the sumo wrestler laughed, once more smacking his stomach with both hands. This caused a small booming noise before he turned away as he took the list and headed inside the mansion to hand it off to his butler.

Moments later, the limo driver was heading out in the van they used for shopping and other things, while the butler was trying to soothe the savaged ego of the chef, and Honda was heading towards the gym. He found Ranma and Shampoo there already, dancing around the room, lashing out at one another with punches and kicks, while Shampoo wielded two large chui, hollow maces of remarkable size. Edmond had always thought of them as somewhat childish, but seeing them wielded by this young girl, showed that they had potential. *And would hurt something fierce if they weren't hollow*, he reflected as Ranma was tagged in the shoulder by one of Shampoo's blows.

However, he turned it into a twirl in the air, bringing his foot around and down onto her shoulder in turn, sending her to her knees. A kick to the face sent her flying backwards, although she rolled with it, Meanwhile Ranma was somehow still in the air, bouncing off of the roof and down towards her again.

Edmond laughed, slamming his hands together several times, which signaled a halt of the action. He watched as Ranma instead of attacking viciously, just sort of landed on top of one of Shampoo's Chui, her arm not even wavering as he did. That should've been impossible, of course, but Edmond took the sight in stride.

Then Ranma was hopping off of the chui landing beside the girl. He pulled Shampoo into a light hug from behind and whispering something in her ear that Honda couldn't catch before moving over to stand across from Honda in the ring.

"It's always nice to see young people take up the Art, even if it is not my style, and I can tell that the two of you have been training for a long while! I daresay either of you could have dealt with my idiot of an opponent today, or indeed any of the other three I faced." So saying Edmond kicked off his feet and took a sumo stance, looking across at Ranma, a challenging grin on his face matching the one on the youngster. "However, I think you will find that I am a bit out of your league still."

"We won't know until we try," Ranma said with a shrug, and then looked over to Shampoo, who still looked a little annoyed at having lost their small match. They'd decided to

have a spar to see who would fight Honda first, whoever could land the most hits before the sumo wrestler showed up being the winner.

Ranma had beaten Shampoo out with that last kick to the face, and she was forced to acknowledge once again that Ranma was simply her better when it came to martial arts. Perhaps once she incorporated her new needle-based style, she would be able to give him a better fight, but until then, Ranma was simply faster and stronger than she could handle.

*Just as my man should be!* Shampoo reflected as she moved to stand to one side between the two of them. She picked up a nearby flag, holding it up in the air. “Rule is not of that of sumo, rule is simply person knocked out of ring or to the ground loses. Otherwise, anything go, yes?”

Edmond nodded. “That’s always the rules in a street FIGHT. Sometimes they don’t even include the whole ring out bit.”

“Good to know, and yeah, I agree too.” Having both of them agree to the rules was important considering that they practiced two entirely different martial arts styles. But the moment Ranma said he agreed, Shampoo lowered her arm and the flag she was holding, signaling the start of the match.

Ranma darted forward, as Honda did the same, much slower than his opponent admittedly, but with all the ponderous unstoppable nature of an avalanche. “Dosukoi, Hundred Hands Slap!” he shouted, thrusting his hands forward palm out one after another.

But to Ranma, especially after his training in Martial Arts Construction, those hands might as well have been moving at the speed of a normal person’s punch. He rolled to one side, then as Honda turned, reached up and grabbed one of those arms, flipping himself up and into the air before Honda could pull back his hand.

He lashed out with a kick that took the older man in the face, and unlike when he had just been sparring with Shampoo, Ranma didn’t hold back. **At all.** Honda was known for being tremendously strong, and like during his match with Ishiku, Ranma figured he didn’t need to hold back.

The sumo wrestler grunted as the blow landed on his cheek, turning his head slightly, but it barely staggered him and Ranma blinked, before flipping himself higher upward, as Honda turned his hands upward as well, throwing palm strikes out faster and faster. They became a blur, to most anyway, but Ranma could still follow them, and danced on top of them, kicking out lightly and even occasionally using his own hands against Honda’s, deadening the force by using it to maintain his position in the air until he kicked up further.

He then bounced up onto off of the roof, landing behind Honda. Honda tried to turn, and Ranma lashed out with several punches to his back and side, trying to land a telling punch.

But even the one that crashed into the back of Honda's head barely staggered him. The man's body weight and fat, which hid quite a **lot** of muscle, basically worked as if the man was wearing several layers of armor.

A second later Ranma was forced to dodge, as Honda finished his turn, lashing out with an elbow blow from one hand. Then turning fully around, Honda charging forward once more, intent on pushing Ranma out of bounds as he was off-balance, using his knees and elbows this time.

Ranma however was not off-balance and rolled again to one side. Then, as Honda pulled back one of his palm thrust, grabbed onto the older man's arm again, flipping himself up and into the air once more, grinning down at the older man.

Edmond laughed, and thrust up with both of his arms, shouting out, "Dosukoi!" again. But Ranma once more used the momentum of his blows to leap further into the air, as he thought about what to do. *Damn, but I am glad that I put my hands through that toughness training. This guy really is as strong as Ishiku . Shampoo and I will need to make a choice soon, speed or strength, and I just don't know which will serve us better. Still, while I probably can't afford to be hit, I bet that I can still hurt him.*

"Hammer Overdrive," Ranma murmured, once more in the air over Honda, his hands disappearing into his pockets. Ranma pulled several hammers from his ki space, tossing them down towards Honda, who smacked them out of the sky not even noticing the impacts to his palms and forearms. *So much for that idea!*

A second later though, he was on the ground to one side of Honda, his hands disappearing. "Jackhammer blow!"

Grunting in actual pain now, Honda staggered sideways, shock on his features as one of his feet left the ground under Ranma's hundred-plus blows to his side. But then his other leg twisted and suddenly, Honda was lunging forward, trying to grab Ranma. Ranma cut out his attack, ducking away. But then the moment Honda's foot was on the ground he once more lunged forward, hurling himself into the air. "Flying Headbutt!"

"Gah!" Ranma instinctively leaped up as well, but when he tried to attack from a superior position – above – Honda's flying form, his blows bounced off the rapidly twirling sumo. A second later, Honda's brief flight ended as he skidded to a halt whirling around his hand reaching to grab Ranma again, who barely dodged out of the way, halting his charge to take advantage of Honda's position by the edge of the ring.

Dancing backwards, Ranma thought about some of the more esoteric styles he'd learned. *Damn, I really can't get through his mix o' fat and muscles! Not easily. I could go for the legs, but he is way faster than you'd think with his bulk. Still, unless I want to go for the eyes or*

*throat, his knees might be the only target I got. And even then, I don't know how quickly he could heal if I hurt his knee. But he's too damn tough for anything less.*

Meanwhile, Honda realized the opposite of that equation. Pausing, Honda allowed his hands to fall to the side, signaling a pause in the match. "I think this is a match between the wind and the mountain. The mountain cannot really harm the wind, but neither can the mountain be eroded so quickly by the wind. You're not strong enough to get through my toughness in any meaningful manner without hurting me more permanently than either of us would like, and I'm not fast enough to catch you. I'd be willing to keep trying to see which of us has more endurance, but honestly, I don't see either of us learning anything from this match. What do you think?"

For a moment, Ranma's training under Genma rebelled. He could see a way to win this fight, he could! *But doing that would cost me more in the long run. I ain't willing to try and cripple the guy, not in a friendly match.*

With that in mind, he nodded. "We really weren't looking to try and beat you, really. We, Shampoo and me, we wanted to see where we stood in the Street Fighter circuit, and I think we understand that now." He looked over at Shampoo, shrugging his shoulders. "Honda's right, I'm not going to get much out of this. Unless he gets really lucky there's no way he can tag me and my punches just aren't doing anything even at full strength."

Honda nodded sternly. "It would be very different if we were fighting to the death, but this was a friendly match, not a real battle." He then winked at Ranma. "And you young man would be astonished at how hard you would find it to aim for my legs. I barely used knee jabs at all, after all."

"Hah!" Ranma snorted, moving forward to bow formally to Honda, who returned the gesture. "You're probably right about that." *And if I was stupid enough to let him hit anything but my hands, I think I'd be the one losing. Shampoo and I really need to look into that toughness training idea.*

Shampoo nodded agreement and looked over at Honda, asking politely if he was still up for a match with her. Moving that massive bulk as fast as Honda did had to take it out of the man, no matter how strong he was. And he'd had matches earlier that day.

But Honda simply waved a hand, indicating she should take Ranma's place. None of the matches today had been very difficult, and Edmond Honda knew it was time for him to get back out on the circuit if you wanted to face anyone really worth the challenge.

That thought changed rapidly however as the match started, and Shampoo smacked one of his palm strikes aside as she rolled to one side, moving faster than he could keep up with just like Ranma. And unlike Ranma, those maces could hurt. *What in the heck!? That hurt! Good grief, and I thought Ranma's strength and speed was a surprise.*

He leaped to the side and away from Shampoo dodging a blow from one of them that could well have taken his legs out, and to the side he heard Ranma chuckle. "Damn it, I knew the legs were a good target. So much for not finding it easy to attack them huh, Yokozuna?"

Shampoo answered tartly, never taking her eyes off her opponent. "Indeed, Ranma think that up too too slowly. Sometimes better to remain on the ground, you know?"

"Bite your tongue!" Ranma retorted, and Shampoo laughed even as Honda charged her. "Body Slide!"

The move sent Honda forward in a charge along the ground, lowering his center of mass and protecting his legs. Contrary to her previous comment, Shampoo, took to the air just as easily as Ranma had to avoid it, thrusting down with her large chui, which crashed into Honda's arm and side, even as she flipped over him.

They turned to face one another, but Honda was noticeably wary now. "Those are not hollow, are they?"

"Course not! What use hollow chui be?" Shampoo retorted, shaking her head as if the very idea was hilarious.

Edmond's grimace increased at that, and he reflected that this match was going to bruise pretty badly.

However, Shampoo was not nearly as mobile as Ranma was. Eventually she made a mistake, and Honda, sporting several bruises on his arms and more on his chest and thighs, finally caught her with a elbow blow that lifted the girl up off of her feet. In midair, she tried to flip, but couldn't dodge a palm strike from the side. The blow slammed into her forearm dislodging her weapon, even as it sent her tumbling with a cry.

The next second she looked up, and Edmond was in the air, twirling as he headed towards her. "Flying Headbutt!"

Shampoo was able to roll out of the way, but Honda landed perfectly, flipped, turned, and was within palm range before she could move. "Hundred Hand Slap!" Several strikes landed, hurling Shampoo backward and out of the ring, to roll into the wall, where she lay for a moment, before thumping the ground with one fist and pushing herself to her feet.

Ranma was there instantly, helping her to her feet, looking at Shampoo solicitously. "You all right, Shampoo?"

"Shampoo feel very happy that Ranma beat her first, but also very sore," Shampoo admitted, leaning up to kiss his cheek, and happily leaning against his side as Ranma put in arm

around her. She looked back towards Honda and bowed formally as Ranma did the same once more, this time with Shampoo using the Japanese style bow.

Edmond acknowledged the bows, looking at the two of them with appreciation. They'd given him two very fun fights, and he felt all three of them had learned something today. Ranma had learned he needed to up his durability across his entire body and work on his striking power, while Shampoo needed to work more on speed and accuracy with her chui. In turn, Honda learned he needed to work on pulling his strikes back faster, defending from above, and, astonishingly, his durability.

The older man was about to comment on that, when his stomach roared like a lion the size of an elephant, filling the training hall from one side to another. As the echoes still bounced off the walls it was answered by Ranma's, and Shampoo began to giggle, shaking her head. "We talk more over food, yes?"

The two men answered in the affirmative. About forty-five minutes later, Edmond, now freshly showered and in a robe, sat down at his table as Ranma and Shampoo began to bring out Chinese type dishes from the nearby kitchen.

The conversation that followed was just as agreeable to all three as the previous matches. Honda told Shampoo and Ranma about the Street FIGHT scenes, which was a tournament that was being held worldwide. Each nation seemed to have at least four roving groups that organized matches, and which kept up with the leaderboard, such as it was. Who had organized the whole thing Honda didn't know but it was about as honest as something inherently illegal could be. While people had died in the tournament, that was an exception, not the rule. As far as Honda knew, it was being organized by rich fighters themselves, rather than the underworld, although he doubted that organized crime was entirely removed from the monetary side of the events.

But beyond the Street FIGHT tournament, there were rumors of new, far more aboveboard tournament starting up soon. "Or rather, once again. King of Fighters is historically just as serious as Street FIGHT, but it hasn't been around for more than fifteen years. Unlike the former though, I know precisely who's funding KoF, and while a few of them aren't people I'd have over for tea, their love of a good battle and the Art is something I can trust."

"Would it be anyone we know?"

"Rugal Bernstein and Geese Howard," Edmond supplied, but saw no flicker of recognition. "Very reclusive, very old-money rich Europeans, who practice the Art to a very high degree and demand that of others. They are also heirs to fortunes that may or may not have been... enhanced by ill-gotten Nazi gold. And who spout a very survival of the fittest mindset,

Both his listeners tsked at that, and the sumo wrestler nodded. "See what I mean about not being people I would have over for tea?" He waited until the youngsters nodded, then went



on, "If you want to be involved, you have a due date to submit your name. Once you do, you will be challenged to one-on-one matches, as well as team matches occasionally via text messages, which include local information as to where to go for the match, rules and so forth."

"That does sound like fun," Ranma reflected. "When is the cutoff for that?"

"Next summer, officially. Unofficially, I know that the Street FIGHT scene is being used as a kind of training ground for people who are going to sign up for it. I don't know the connection between the two, and I worry that there is something more going on behind the Street FIGHT scene but haven't yet heard back from my various government contacts. So for now, I am simply taking part on my own. As for King of Fighters..." Edmond looked at the two of them speculatively. "I don't suppose if it occurs that the two of you would like to join a team with me?"

"We love to," Shampoo replied for them both quickly, causing Ranma to look at her, but he nodded in agreement anyway. "Better to have team of friends, who trust can watch back, then people who simply strong, yes?"

"My thoughts exactly," Edmond answered, lifting a sake cup to her, having noted that neither of them drank, which he approved of given their ages. "But tell me, what are you going to do now?"

"I think we're going to take a break from traveling for a bit. There's a few parks near here, we'll set up in one of them, and put ourselves through a few training styles. My hands went through toughness training recently, and I think we need both of us to put ourselves through the full body version. Whenever you landed a punch, it mattered a hell of a lot more than when even Shampoo did the same with her chui. That, strength training, and speed training. Basically, we've both gotten our styles up to where I'm comfortable we can hold our own in terms of skill but not basic physical ability."

Shampoo nodded, although she wasn't as sanguine on the skill thing as Ranma was. "You show we have long way to go. But we keep growing, yes?"

Edmond nodded agreement at that, although internally, he was wondering how quickly the two of them would learn that kind of thing. They were already almost his equal already and as Ranma said, their disparate styles were extremely good. Still, while he loved Sumo, Edmond knew that it took a lot of skill to adapt it and limited his abilities against many of the opponents he'd heard about through the Street FIGHT scene. So maybe they were right.

The talk diverted from there to more general things. Edmond told them a bit about the area, and listened intently to their stories about their travels, laughing raucously at some of their stories, and, making a note to look up this construction crew. This Ishiku fellow sounded interesting, and while Edmond knew himself to be immensely tough already, there was no

reason not to take some more endurance training. Especially not after the battering that Shampoo had given him.

They kept talking until the sun began to set and the two wandering Martial Artists decided it was time to go. As they were leaving, Ranma leaned over, asking Shampoo, "Would it be all right roughing it in the forest for a week or so while we train. I mean, we could probably come back into town if you want."

"Is Ranma tried to be insulting? Shampoo is Amazon, well used to being out in the wild. Besides," she smiled, her tart tone disappearing as she leaned up to kiss his cheek as she switched to Chinese, "roughing it also give us more time together. Without somewhat romantic but inquisitive construction folk, or other interruptions like Kodachi and her ribbon."

Ranma stared at her, holding up a finger, which segued into a slap to his forehead. "While I agree, why did you have to tempt fate like that? Why?"

Shampoo made to open her mouth to argue back that she had done no such thing, but reviewing her words, she suddenly slumped, nodding her head thoughtfully in agreement. "We screwed, yes?"

"To be interrupted somehow? Definitely. Still, that won't stop us training or having fun, will it?" Shampoo shook her head firmly, and the two of them moved off, walking now as they made plans, pouring over a map of the area. Whatever chaos fate was going to throw their way, and both of them were certain it would happen, training came first.

### End Chapter

And that is the second chapter of ***Climbing Together***. Unfortunately, thanks to the votes I received on the Future of the Patron Only poll, this is the last you will see of this work for a time, until ***Semblance of Hope*** is finished. But again, I will remind you that poll won't be up in February. I have put ***ATP*** on hold this month so that I can finally update ***Bhaalson Remodel*** as the rotation of the Patron Only poll demanded. That, and it lets me plan out the next chapter of ***ATP*** better. But you will see at least one goody this month...

Oh, but tell me about my use of images. Do you like it, think it adds something? Isn't needed? Tell me.