

Hey Everyone! Here is the next Chapter of **Climbing Together**. In other news, I have gotten **ATP** back from one editor, and will be going through it, though I also sent it out to the editor who went back into Chapter 47, so I may weight for him to try and get his version back to me before posting the chapter. **Stallion** is still with Tomon. I have also decided not to try to write up a Bhaalson Chapter. Doing so would simply mean a horrible product, or just freaking annoy me. On the other hand, a Fate Touched chapter is verrry doable... LOL. 2:2 Baby! And if I remove it too from the small story poll, why, that would mean that my two SW stories are the only ones on the April poll, wouldn't it?

This has been seen by Hiryō.

### Chapter 3: Rope Burns

Ranma stared up at the contraption that he and Shampoo had put together. To one side was a small one-story platform, almost like something from a treehouse they had made between two of an oak tree's branches. Above this was a Bungie cord connected to what looked like a straightjacket... and was. Ranma had found it in a joke shop in town. If someone was placed into the straight jacket, they could then be swung out into the open air.

To one side of this, facing it at a right angle, was a much larger tree with only a few large branches where a large boulder was held in place by a net attached to a thick hawser. Staring at it, anyone could see that it could be released to swing around like a massive flail.

"...All finished like this, it reminds me of something I saw once in a book about siege weapons. That probably shoulda occurred to one of us before this, really," Ranma mumbled looking askance at his companion. "Er... Shampoo, you sure this will work?"

Shampoo scoffed, waving his concerns away with one hand, although from her expression, Ranma could also tell that she was feeling a bit of trepidation, and the fact she spoke Chinese rather than Japanese was another indication. "It will work! This setup is precisely what I saw the older warriors using, except without the Bungie cords and the wire netting around the boulder. It will work... I just don't know how painful it's going to be."

She shook herself then flung one arm around Ranma's waist, hugging him. "But as the Americans are supposed to have said first, no pain no gain, right?"

"Hah! I doubt they can really take credit for that though, they seem ta try and take credit for most things," Ranma snickered, throwing an arm around Shampoo's shoulders, kissing her cheek. Now nearly a month into traveling and being in a relationship with Shampoo, Ranma was almost used to the Chinese girl's spontaneous displays of affection and was more than willing to respond. Especially when they were alone like this.

But there would be time enough for romance-stuff when it got too dark to train, and there was an important question to be answered right now. "So, who goes first?"

Shampoo looked up at Ranma, then shrugged her shoulders a bit, holding her hand up in a loose fist. "Jiǎndāo shítou bù (Rock paper scissors)?"

"Sure, but are we playing to see who goes first or doesn't?" Ranma quipped, causing Shampoo to laugh, but eventually, it was decided to play for who would go first.

The two of them exchanged wins for a time, although Shampoo tried to use her chest a bit to distract Ranma, something that Ranma didn't notice, much to her annoyance. *Hmph! I need to look into a better wardrobe. Making out and feeling up one another over our clothing is nice, but I want something more soon, darn it.*

However, she still won best four out of five, and moments later, Ranma was helping her into the straitjacket, while Shampoo tried to psych herself up, muttering to herself in Chinese. "Right, I can do this. I'm the one that thought this up. It'll work. This training is really important if we want to be able to tank blows from someone, even like Honda. We need this. I can do this!"

When Shampoo was secured, Ranma pushed her off the platform, watching as she swung through the air a few times before stopping. That was the easy part.

Ranma hopped over to the other tree, where he found the release catch, they had made holding the Boulder in place. "Ready?"

Shampoo was now having second thoughts about all this, but she was an Amazon warrior and refused to show fear. Indeed, she tried to make a joke of it, saying, "Ready, but if Ranma say something like this hurting Ranma more than Shampoo, Shampoo will punch Ranma in boy bitsSSSSS!"

Her voice rose into a shriek as the large boulder came towards her, and a second later, the boulders smacked fully into her. the momentum of the impact pushed her away as the boulder finished its swing while Ranma pulled it back into position. "Why would I say that? Seriously, that line sounds really stupid. Is it from one of those shoujo mangas ya read? If so, it's proof they rot your brain."

Groaning, Shampoo shook her head as Ranma used another rope to pull the boulder back. "Nevermind."

Ranma shrugged. "If you say so." With that, he released the boulder again, making Shampoo wonder if this training could be called spousal abuse before it crashed into her.

Each blow after that rattled her insides and caused Shampoo to groan in agony. Sometimes it hit her side, sometimes her back depending on how Shampoo twirled in the air. But any thought of this being a quick-fix type of training faded after the fifth shot. If anything, the blows were hurting more, smacking into Shampoo's already sore body.

She got her revenge though later that day when after twenty iterations of the boulder versus Amazon fight, the two switched out, and Shampoo made certain that his arms were tied tightly to his side, in the straightjacket as Ranma had just pointed out he could probably shatter boulder like that into rubble if he wanted.

"That be cheating," Shampoo caroled when Ranma complained about how tight she was tying him. "Remember, purpose of training is to become tougher. Not just smash boulder."

"I still say there's something fishy about this, but..." Ranma shrugged, winking at her and kicking off the platform himself before she could push him even as he kept speaking. "Since you went through the training, I suppose I have to too, you know?"

Alas, the two teenagers should have thought about this idea through in greater detail because, by the time Ranma was done, Shampoo's muscles had mostly seized up. The continued blows to her entire body had battered her so much Shampoo could barely pull the rock back into place, let alone release Ranma from his ropes.

Seeing his girlfriend's distress, Ranma somehow got free on his own and moved over to help her out of the tree. But by the time they had moved back to their camp nearby, neither of them were willing to move around to do anything bar laying down. They went to bed hungry that night and accordingly planned out the next day somewhat better.

Three days of self-torture followed, and as Ranma woke up on the third day, he scowled as he worked on breakfast. "I gotta wonder if we're doing something wrong. Maybe splitting time in the device like we have is messing with its effectiveness? Or are we just wrong on how long it takes to get results? Because I gotta tell ya, the pain of getting smacked around is not going away."

Shampoo shrugged, groaned and made no move to get up from her sleeping bag. They had made a point of buying better sleeping bags after they left Honda's place, and the softness of the built-in pillow under her head proved that to have been a very good move. "Shampoo not know, unfortunately, but all for taking day off. Shampoo has bruises on her bruises."

Ranma looked down at himself, then shrugged. "I don't, but I feel as if someone tried to pound me into the dough for a pizza."

"Shampoo wondering if maybe she should contact grandmother," she mused aloud. "She would know how to do the technique correctly." But she looked at Ranma and shook her

head, a teasing yet serious look entering her eyes. "Probably wouldn't like me teaching outsider. But if Shampoo tell Grandmother we married..."

"None of that," Ranma quickly answered, ruffling her hair. "Nope. We're just dating. You know that whole kiss-and- you're-married thing bothers the heck out of me. We'll switch to full days and see if that helps."

Despite the head pat, Shampoo pouted, still firmly of the feeling that they were indeed married, whatever Ranma said. Still, she understood he was uncomfortable with jumping straight to being married, and after reading so many girl's mangas, she understood why and could allow him his delusions on that score. *He's not protesting our relationship, after all, just being married instead of just dating. And he's getting better at being affectionate, so I can deal with that.*

Another two days followed, with both of them a little annoyed at the training and the consequences. Their dinners remained very haphazard affairs, both of them just too sore to do anything but crawl into their sleeping bags. For another, this soreness sharply curtailed their cuddle time. Ranma tried once to make out with Shampoo, but just touching one another with anything but their lips was enough to cause them both flashes of pain.

Even kissing became hard after Ranma 'accidentally' attempted to headbutt the boulder. Not only did it not destroy the boulder as he had hoped, but his face remained sorer than the rest of his body the next day.

On the tenth of their toughness training, Ranma left a quietly groaning Shampoo behind and headed into town, reflecting that the switch to full days-on training seemed to work, but slowly. Certainly, he wasn't feeling it as much today as he had the first day of training. Shampoo also didn't seem to be as bad off as she had been, although she still refused to move that morning.

*I just think she's a little lazy feeling a little lazy. Not that I can blame her. It's time for a day off, for certain.*

Regardless of Shampoo's overall health, Ranma felt up to cooking something today, rather than simply digging out some beef jerky or other snack thing for dinner. And he wanted to make the most of it.

With that in mind, Ranma headed into town, where he found a good deal on some fish and purchased a new container of various spices and sauces. With that done, Ranma was about to leave town when some laughter from a group of men sitting outside a dojo caught his attention.

The place didn't teach what Ranma considered a real martial arts style, only teaching basic Judo. He had challenged the dojo master for some money the day after leaving Honda's

place since they needed money for the various bits of equipment that went into the toughness training device. Still, the man had taken it relatively well and had helped Ranma find deals on the supplies he needed. He seemed a man who was well connected like that, and seeing him talking to a few other older people dressed in martial arts gis grabbed Ranma's attention. He slowed down, listening intently from behind a nearby corner.

"Sado-style Hotojutsu?" Hahaha, that sounds more like a fetish, not a martial arts style."

As Ranma closed, one of the other men spoke up, moving his hands randomly. "A young stevedore interrupted a bar fight by knocking out all of the participants in seconds. I still have nightmares of that knotted rope coming towards my head, only to stop an inch away from my face, then flip away to smash someone else when the user realized I wasn't part of the fight. It was a show of control that I've never seen with any chain-type weapon. Just think about what you could do with something more serious, a meteor hammer or something similar."

"And you say they used the rope to block a knife strike? And the rope didn't fray or anything? Must've been a very dull knife then," the local master, whose name Ranma might have heard but no longer remembered, replied. He wasn't visibly scoffing, but he obviously didn't believe his companion either.

"The young woman in question..."

The speaker was interrupted by hoots of derision, but he growled back, "Yes, she was a young woman and a stevedore, you bastards. This is modern times. Any woman can do any job they want. So long as they don't care about marriage anyway," he added, causing the other men there to snort in agreement.

Nearby, Ranma rolled his eyes at that, shaking his head. *Eesh, and I thought my old man's view on women was a bit old-fashioned. This is making his opinion seem normal.*

"Anyway, the knife was more a machete than anything else, no idea how the asshole got it into the bar. He'd had already cut a wooden chair leg that one of the other fighters was using, sliced it clear down to his handhold before kicking his legs out from under him. But the young stevedore blocked it with the rope, bound the man's hands with a flick of his weapon, and hurled him aside. And then he was still using his rope weapon. I think it was a Surujin, a second later. And get this, the man was still bound, but the weapon didn't look any shorter!"

"Now I know you were in your cups too much!" the local scoffed. "That's some kind of ki ability you're talking about, and that's an old wives tale if ever there was one..."

At that point, the conversation was interrupted by an irate female voice going, "What was that about old wives!?"

Hearing that, Ranma took the opportunity to leave unnoticed as the man tried to explain what he had really been saying to the irate middle-aged woman who had come out of the dojo behind him. Ranma recognized her as the lady of the place and someone who had a rather cutting tongue and had no desire to stay around. *Sado Island, huh? If nothing else, if this school can teach how to impart ki into a weapon, that alone would make it a style I'd want to look into. Still, Sado Island is back the way we came. Heck it's across from Niigata, right?*

Ranma was still trying to remember his geography, as he turned his feet towards leaving town. But as he did, something caught his eye, and he slowed down, hopping down to stare at a poster on a lamppost.

"Wanted for petty theft, drunk and disorderly conduct. Yes, we really mean it," Ranma read, staring at the mug shot of a panda on the poster for a second before groaning, slapping his forehead. He then looked around quickly, ducking into an alleyway, debating whether or not he should take to the rooftops again or keep to the alleyways.

Deciding to stay with the alleyways, Ranma moved over into a nearby alleyway, where he found himself accosted almost at once by a few toughs. "Oy, who do ya think you are walking through ouCCCH!!"

Ranma lazily slapped the man wielding a small knife on the wrist, deadening his hand before grabbing him by the arm and tossing him into his two fellows. Since they all looked Ranma's age, he figured that was enough for now. "Word to the wise, guys, don't just attack random people. You might catch a tiger by the tail."

With that, he was off, moving through the backstreets of the town, doubling back to try to throw off anyone who might've spotted him. But this time, Ranma's luck evading his father ran out.

The first he knew of this was a street sign flashing towards his head from behind. Ranma grunted under the impact as he was hurled sideways into a wall, the 'GOOONG!' sound making him feel a strange moment of déjà vu, recalling how his father had knocked him out before arriving at the Tendo place.

But unlike that time, Ranma wasn't knocked out, and coming away from the wall, he rolled to one side to avoid a punch from his father, who was not currently in his panda form. *Not that there's much of a difference there, although I suppose his human form isn't nearly as likely to cause a riot given that wanted poster.* "Dammit, Pops, why can't ya get a freaking clue, huh?!"

"Boy, you have spent more than long enough with that gaijin tart of yours! It's now time to come back and do your duty for the school!" With that, the older man charged forwards.

“Ugh, really, now with the racial slurs.” Scrambling to his feet, Ranma barely had time to set himself before his father was on him. Ranma redirected two blows before he leaped up into the air. His father followed, and the two of them traded punches and kicks. Ranma overextended very slightly, which his father took advantage of, grabbing his leg and hurling him into the ground.

At that point, Soun made an appearance, lashing down at Ranma with a polearm, the end of it marked by a small bag full of sand or something similar. This was the kind of weapon that police would use in ancient times to knock out perps without hurting them much.

But Ranma rolled as he hit the ground, and when the staff came towards him, he grabbed it with one hand, pulling the other man in. This put Soun in the way of Genma. Sweeping to one side, Ranma’s foot caught Genma’s leg, upending him before Ranma lashed out with an equally fast uppercut.

Genma grunted but also moved with the punch, flipping in the air and lashing out with his own kicks, which Ranma blocked, while Soun pressed in, his staff lashing out. "Come now, son. You surely can't be enjoying going around everywhere with that Chinese girl as much as you would having a real roof over your head and real meals and spending time with your fiancée!?"

A kick shattered Soun’s staff, and Ranma grabbed its end, slamming the other end into the older man’s jaw as he leaped into the air. "In case you forgot Weeps-a-lot, your daughter ended our relationship! As far as I'm concerned, that ends any honor agreement I might've been caught up in thanks to you and my old man being morons!"

"Soun has two other daughters you could get married too, you know!" Genma grunted. He had already leaped upwards and now had the height advantage. He launched a series of attacks from above Ranma, trying to pin him in place between himself and his friend.

“Heh, I note ya didn’t mention how you and Weeps-a-lot are morons. Does that mean ya agree with me?” Ranma taunted before pushing off a block from one blow from Genma. Instead of continuing to fight, he darted away, fleeing down an alleyway between two restaurants.

Both older men chased after him, only for Ranma to lash out with a kick to the side of a trash compactor, sending it towards Soun and Genma. While Genma leaped up over the compactor, Soun couldn't dodge and was barely able to get up his arms up in time to block. The compactor crashed into him, sending the mustachioed man flying across the street.

Genma landed, and reached for his son, shouting out, "Oh, what dishonor you have brought to our name, what did I ever do to deserve a son like you, who would run from his obligations like you did, and now fight to not be brought back to answer for them?"

“Oh, you’re so full of crap, Pops! I told ya, Akane ended the agreement between our families. I gave it a nice try, but that’s it!” Ranma grabbed his outstretched arm and lashed out with a series of kicks to his stomach. Ranma then flipped himself up words, grabbing the emergency stairwell above, flipping himself up further as his old man made to follow. “And besides, judging by how weak your friend is, do you honestly think he has anything to offer?”

Growling, Genma leaped up to the rooftop, showing his strength by making it in one leap, whereas Ranma had needed to pause halfway up. But as he cleared the rooftop, Genma was forced to block a thrown pottery plant that Ranma had picked up on a windowsill on his way up. He was able to, but the dirt got in Genma’s eyes just long enough for Ranma to close.

Several punches landed on Genma's stomach before he could defend himself, causing the older man to grunt in pain. *The boy's gotten stronger, blast it!* At this point, Genma was very worried that Ranma was too strong for him to control, even if he could beat the boy down.

Then Ranma was above him, legs and feet hammering into Genma's shoulders and face. But Genma was made of sterner stuff than his friend and took the punishment, lashing out with his own series of punches while trying hard to get into the air himself. But once more, Ranma retreated rather than getting drawn into a drag-out fight.

“Gotta catch me, Pops!” Ranma taunted, hoping to get his father angry enough to make a mistake. It didn’t work, and the old man gradually pushed him backward. Ranma leaped to another rooftop, and the two Saotomes continued to fight, moving across the rooftops until Ranma got a break.

He saw a building that he knew was being readied for demolition and moved the fight in that direction. Lighting down at the edge of a nearby building, he rolled forward, slipping under his father's charge, before jumping across to that rooftop. As he did, he stumbled to all fours, smacking his hands down on the top of the roof. As he did, he whispered. “Martial Arts construction technique, Nail Hell.”

Seeing his son down, Genma leaped forward, landing on the same roof and lashing out at him just as the nails from all around the roof flew upwards. The ones nearby smacked into Ranma, but in the first sign that maybe the durability training was working, if not as fast as they had hoped. The nails just bounced off him, with Ranma barely noticing.

Genma wasn’t so lucky, with several of the nails slamming into his legs, feet and outthrust arm. Genma was one heck of a touch character regardless of his current body, so the nails didn’t penetrate, but they certainly stung like blazes causing his attack to falter as he landed.

And then the roof, already weakened, and now without nails connecting the boards to one another, collapsed under Genma. “OUCH, boy w, whhWAHHH!”



Knowing he had to keep up the pressure, Ranma followed up, leaping into the hole. With his father thrown off balance, he got the upper hand again, a series of punches getting through the older man's defenses into his face even as he felt towards the next floor.

Genma beat Ranma off eventually, even as he landed on the next floor down. Ranma then shifted his target, shouting out, "Martial Arts Construction, Shattering Punch, and..."

The punch Ranma landed didn't go through the floor at that one point, instead once more the strike released energy into the surrounding area a trick he really wanted to use in a broader setting than just through construction materials. And this time, instead of the nails being forced out of the wood, the wood in a wide area disintegrated.

This sent Genma falling forward into the hole once more. "Agaiinnn!"

"Suck it, Old Man, Jackhammer landing!" Before Genma could do anything, Ranma came down on him, feet first. All of his weight hammered against the back of Genma's head, and then he began to stomp, his feet moving so fast they would have seemed a blur to anyone normal there. It wasn't quite as fast as the technique should have been, Ranma just hadn't been able to put either his feet or his hands through the training needed yet. But the modified jackhammer attack was enough. Genma's eyes rolled up in his head as he crashed into the first floor of the building.

Hopping upward, Ranma grabbed onto the side of the second hole he'd made, flipping himself upward to land on a rooftop nearby. "And now to make sure you stay put old man. Martial Arts Construction, Safe Demolition."

With that, Ranma raced around the house hands lashing out at specific points at the corners before darting inside through the broken door, striking several of the support beams. When he ran outside, the whole building collapsed inwards, burying Genma within. "WOOOT!" Ranma whooped. "Who knew that time Master Ishiku dragged me and Shampoo to a demolition job just to have us prepare food for the rest of 'em would pay off."

Just then sirens in the distance began, and Ranma winced. "A, yep, time for this guy to exit, stage right." With that Ranma raced off, hoping that the building now sealing his old man in would hold long enough to give him and Shampoo a head start. *I doubt it though. I've seen him get hit by boulders larger than that house.*

Ranma nearly stumbled then as he leaped from one building to another, the realization of what that meant hitting him. "Oh damn that bastard, he's been holding out on me!" *That tears it, that Hotojutsu style is going to give me the skills necessary to hogtie that old fart and deliver him right to the nearest freaking zoo!*

Away from the scene of his fight with his old man, Ranma another thought brought on a scowl as he remembered that the attack had cost him the food he'd bought. *Damn it!* Then he

grimaced as his knee twinged on landing. That reminded him he had taken a few hits from his old man and noticing a few bruises he winced. "He might not be quite as strong as Honda-san, but he's way closer to it than I am. I'm going to be bruised for the rest of the day. That's proof that we really are doing something wrong with this toughness training thing."

Shaking his head at that, Ranma continued on his way over the rooftops. "I can still outsmart him, thanks to my new skills, but still...I think we've overstayed our welcome here. Time to pack up and move on," he grumbled.

Despite leaving both older men unconscious behind him, Ranma still double-backed and took to the side streets several times. Then he left the town in a different direction from the national park he and Shampoo had set up shop in before circling back.

This took some time, and Shampoo was frowning as he arrived. "What took you so long?" Shampoo asked, showing a marked improvement in her Japanese as she frowned at Ranma, noticing the lack of bags. "And where is the food you went to buy?"

"Heh, well, I spotted a wanted poster for my old man. Would you believe it was panda form?"

"Shampoo now really in favor of the beat him until he gets the idea plan," Shampoo interrupted.

"Yeah, well, I just did that. Pops and his friend Weeps-a-lot caught me before I could get out of town. I managed to beat them both, but I doubt it'll take." Ranma snorted. "Still Soun's showing made me certain I made the right decision to leave Nerima. The guy's pathetic. I could probably beat him with both arms tied behind my back."

Shampoo snickered at that, although a part of her was annoyed Ranma hadn't mentioned that leaving had allowed them to travel together. *Grr, no wait, Shampoo, you knew Ranma's priorities before you got together. You knew that getting stronger was part of why Ranma wanted to leave, and the rest was getting away from his father. Your budding relationship, no matter the laws of the tribe, was a secondary concern.*

"Anyway, I think we need to get out of here," Ranma went on, unaware of Shampoo's inner annoyance. "Beaten or not, Pops is tricky, and I wager that he be willing to play really dirty get me back under his thumb. Pops was really set on me taking over the Tendo dojo for some reason, going on and on about honor this that."

"Shampoo a little annoyed at the need," Shampoo answered, her accent coming back as she responded. "But understands. We not getting very far with toughness training anyway. Think switching off days takes too much impact away."

“Yeah, I think the same thing. Still, live and learn. Anyway, I thought we should try to throw them off again. If we take to the sea for a bit and instead of continuing south, head back north, we should throw my Old Man’s nose off the scent.”

Shampoo cocked her head and then shrugged. “That make sense throwing off Weepy and Growly. But what train? Shampoo thought plan was keep head south then to Hong Kong before moving along coast.”

“That’s actually another point in favor of heading back north,” Ranma answered, grinning as he clapped his hands together. “You see, I heard about a Hotojutsu style being taught on Sado Island.”

“Shampoo knows Hotojutsu, rope javelin and other things like that. Good for midrange fighting, but Shampoo not so good with that kind of thing,” the Chinese Amazon admitted.

“Maybe not, but this could be a good place to get better. And the talk about them mentioned some things that could only be explained by the use of ki.” Ranma explained what he had overheard.

Shampoo thought doing this on account of rumors was a bit weak, but if this school could really tell her how to push ki into her weapons, that would be a major benefit. She hopped to her feet before groaning in pain at the sudden movement, yet still excited at the training on offer. “Ooh, then what we waiting for?”

As she recovered, Ranma moved around the camp, policing the area, packing their stuff into their bags, before placing his own and Shampoo’s bag on his shoulders. “You can take it easy until we get to the coastline, Shampoo. Sorry, but I ain’t gonna swim with you on my back.”

*For several reasons,* the pig-tailed martial artist reflected, blushing at the idea, which Shampoo saw. That response brought a smile to her face, even as she admitted that her bathing suit wasn’t anything to get happy at.

It took them the better part of the night and a good portion of the morning to cross from near Nagoya to the other side of Japan. There, they had found a small beach, where the two of them had separated into different changing areas. But staring out over the ocean, Shampoo’s interest in the plan disappeared as she had to face the fact of actually going through with swimming north until they reached Sado island, a trip that would have taken them mere hours if they used the train to get to Niigata. “Shampoo having second thoughts now. She think this is crazy... and that Ranma’s swimsuit be too too ugly,” she added, glancing sideways at her companion.

Now in his female form for obvious reasons, Ranma wore a school swimsuit, a one-piece suit that was about as un-sexy as Ranma could make it. “Bah, I told you about Kuno,

remember? Why the heck would I get a sexy swimsuit when I didn't want to attract further attention, huh? Besides, yours isn't any better."

Pouting, Shampoo had to admit that. While she was technically wearing a swimsuit, it was really just a two-piece version of traditional pearl divers. It wasn't the most flattering garb, but Shampoo's body was such that Ranma and indeed many of the boys around them, were having trouble taking their eyes off the Chinese girl, particularly the curves of her thigh, rear and chest, which oddly enough were all covered but still very visible.

Seeing Ranma's eyes unable to leave her caused her to snicker. "Then Shampoo think both need swimsuits, yes?" Reaching over and uncaring the audience around them, Shampoo touched Ranma's cheek, trailing her finger down to the redhead's neck. "If Ranma good, maybe Shampoo model few, hmmm?"

Trying to keep her blush down, Ranma nodded. "Er, I ain't really good about fashion if ya want my opinion, but I guess I can do that. Er, for now, though, let's get into the water." Still blushing and moving like an automaton, Ranma headed to the water, still carrying their bags, now stuffed into a water-tight bag nearly as large as she was in male form, the bag tied to one wrist by a long string. That bag had used up most of their remaining cash, but neither martial artist was concerned. There were always idiots to fleece, after all.

Snickering, Shampoo followed, ignoring the looks of the people around them and the attempt of one heavily tanned young man to flirt with her. As she entered the water, he tried to follow, but Shampoo had recovered somewhat from the toughness training and dove through the water after Ranma, who was already well away from the shore. The flirtatious youth tried to keep up with them for a few minutes, but the two martial artists quickly left him well behind as they traveled north, keeping the land in sight as they did.

The two of them swam for several hours before putting in to shore for a rest. Ranma had a nosebleed there, seeing how Shampoo's clothing was nearly see-through and now clung to every curve she had like a second skin.

Seeing that, Shampoo smiled and pulled the redhead into a kiss. She didn't deepen it, though, knowing that Ranma was not comfortable being kissed like this in his female body just yet. *Still, Ranma's kissing back quicker in this form now. That's a good thing*, she reflected, pulling back and letting Ranma look around for some wood to make a fire.

The small rocky beach they had gone ashore on was unused, and the two of them found a small cave to spend the night in, moving on early the next day. Even so, it was late afternoon by the time they made shore on Sado Island.

This meant that there weren't as many people on the beach, where they came out of the water, which made this process far easier than it might have been. It was a nice place, and Ranma had some trouble finding an out-of-the-way area to transform back to his male body.

As he rejoined her, Shampoo, who had changed back to her normal outfit, smiled, winking at Ranma and linking arms with him, saying, "Shampoo like Ranma regardless of form, but like looking up into his face much better, yes? Though she also wonder why Master Ishiku not know about this Hotojutsu school if it be on this island. It what, hour trip by boat to Niigata?"

"Ehh, I don't think it's so unusual. Remember that I only heard about it from listening in on a conversation between one of the local fakers and a few of his buddies who had traveled around. That's the way word about martial arts styles travels, and I don't think Master Ishiku was a very friendly guy. And remember all the trouble we were running into fakers ourselves."

Shampoo had to agree with that point. *And the more fantastical a style sounds, the more people will believe the stories exaggerated*, she thought. "Then we need be careful ourselves, yes?"

"Yeah. Seeing how late it is, let's look around for a hotel or someplace to set up camp without getting in trouble with the locals. We can start asking questions about any local Hotojutsu school, but I doubt we'll find anything tonight."

Leaving the beach and the boardwalk area behind, Ranma and Shampoo headed deeper into Sado the city. Alas, the first few hotels they found were of the love variety, and while Shampoo was interested to see the rooms and maybe convincing Ranma to take the next step in their marriage, Ranma was not.

They were still looking around for a reputable hotel when a human-sized shape passed over their heads over the rooftops. Ranma blinked, staring upward past the glare of the lamp posts. "Er, was it me, or did a man who looks like a shorter, way older version of Soun just race by?"

Shampoo was about to reply, but the next moment, a young woman followed after the little, shouting angrily, "Get back here! Dammit, you've peeped on me for the last time, you, you reprobate!"

"Huh... that gal, I think that was Mai," Ranma muttered. "The ninjutsu user I met at that tournament a few days before arriving in Nerima. I think I mentioned her to ya before, right? Let's go see what's going on."

That caused Shampoo's eyes to narrow, but she followed Ranma up onto the rooftops, where they quickly caught up to the woman as she tried to chase after the first form he had seen. As they did, Shampoo took in the other young woman's looks, and while a part of her had to nod at Mai's sense of style, internally, Shampoo's possessive side reared up and hissed.

The Japanese girl was taller than Shampoo, with long dark brown hair tied into a tight, waist length ponytail with bangs falling to either side of her light brown eyes. She wore a

sleeveless outfit Shampoo had seen on kunoichi dress in manga, with two red and white tassels at the back ending with large balls of the same colors and ropes around her shoulders.

With that outfit on, it was obvious she was wearing, either a very small breastband or nothing underneath, as it showed off both a lot of cleavage and side boob. Both of which made it clear Mai had a larger chest than Shampoo by at least a size, although they looked even fuller than that.

“Yo, Mai, what’s going on?” Ranma quipped, grinning.

At first, Mai’s reaction was all he could hope for. Mai stumbled, nearly falling on her face, but she quickly recovered and lashed out with a punch that Ranma dodged blinking in surprise. “What the hell, where did you come from!?”

“Down below, we saw ya chasing after the oldster and wondered what was going on,” Ranma answered, ducking under her punch and backing away.

Mai paused her attack, pulling back her hand from where she had been about to lash out with a fan, flicking it shut and staring at Ranma even as she turned back to try and spot the man she was hunting. “You, you look kind of familiar... right? I think I met you at that martial arts competition I entered out in Hokkaido. You analyzed one of my matches.”

“That’s me,” Ranma said with a nod as she and Shampoo bracketed the woman.

“Huh, small world. But is there something I can do for you? Because right now, I have a pervert to pummel,” Mai growled.

“What did he do? And do you want some help?” Ranma asked.

Shampoo added, “Shampoo think all perverts need occasional beating down. Keeps them from getting make heads.

“Hah, now there is a woman after my own heart! As for what Jubei did, he spied on me in the bath and then groped a few other girls and me as we were coming out of the public baths near here.”

“Damn, let’s spread out and catch the pervert then!” Ranma smirked. “Come at him from three different directions, cut him off from running away and beat him into the ground.”

“Sounds like a plan. A quick warning, Jubei is tricky. He’s not a master of Judo for nothing,” Mai warned, then looked over at Shampoo. “Hi, I’m Mai Shiranui. Nice to meet you. So long as we beat the pervert into the ground anyway.”

“Shampoo of Joketsuzoku,” Shampoo answered, introducing herself before Ranma could.

Seeing Shampoo staring at Mai through narrowed eyes, Ranma frowned slightly but decided it was some weird women thing and quickly outlined a plan. The two girls agreed, and Ranma ducked down into an alleyway. Shampoo did the same, heading south around a taller building.

With the other two circling around their quarry, Mai raced after him away from the ocean, ignoring the cries of shock and surprise from those on the ground below.

Not having noticed her two new semi-allies, Jubei stopped and, alighting on a movie theater’s roof, turned to face Mai. “Hohoho! Racing after me so passionately, Mai-chan? That’s enough to give even an old dog like me some interesting thoughts!”

“Kunai Bunshin!” Mai shouted, concentrating her ki into her hands and launching daggers towards Jubei’s feet. As the weapon left her hand, the ki she had shaped in her hand created several different images of the same weapon, which also streaked forward, obscuring where the real dagger was aiming.

Jubei chuckled, then yelled out, “KI-AI!!!” and thrust his fist forward, creating a wave of air pressure that struck the incoming daggers, pushing them off course.

He didn’t see a kick from Ranma coming until the last second, but to Ranma’s surprise, Jubei was able to block it with a palm. He couldn’t catch Ranma’s foot, though, the young martial artist pulling his leg back and launching a series of punches and kicks.

“And what is this? Some errant knight attempting to help you, Mai? Andy will be so sad to hear you’re two-timing him like this!” Jubei taunted before a blow got through his defenses and hurled him sideways.

*Blast, I’ve not been struck like that since I was the last time I fought Hanzo full on when we were younger,* Jubei thought, pushing to his feet then yelping as Mai struck out, her fan lashing forward like a baton.

Dodging around that strike, Jubei tried to get a quick feel in, but Ranma pressed in too fast. “Oh darn it, come on, why are you ruining this old man’s fun, youngster!?”

“All perverts need to get their heads caved in a time or two Old Timer. Don’t take it personally, you’re just my weekly quota,” Ranma taunted.

The two of them kept Jubei’s attention fully occupied, but to Ranma’s astonishment, they couldn’t finish him off. Blows sent both ways occasionally got through, but while Ranma could redirect Jubei’s blows most of the time, they still stung. *Still, at least he really is just a*

*judo fighter. I know that style so well I can tell where his blows are coming from as if they were written in neon lights even without being able to read his body language very well.*

In contrast, Mai grunted under the impact of punches that got through her defenses. She wasn't as able to dodge or redirect Jubei's blows, now that Jubei was taking this seriously, although her own skills were enough to keep him from getting a feel in or using her to get in Ranma's way, not an easy thing to do.

As for Ranma's strikes, they felt like sledgehammers even when he redirected them. Jubei tried to use some of his own ki moves, but Jubei had let his physical skills slide so much that he barely got in a few strikes on his own, pushed almost entirely on the defense.

So busy was he with the two attackers he didn't even see Shampoo waiting for him to get close to the edge of the roof. Once she saw his back towards her, Shampoo leaped up from below and swung her mace at the back of Jubei's head. The blow crashed in, sending him stumbling, and the next moment, Ranma's blow rocked his head to one side. Mai's next blow took him right in the fork, causing Jubei to squeal and fall to his knees, where Mai finished him off with a hammer kick. The old man slumped unconscious.

Mai breathed a sigh of relief as Jubei succumbed to his injuries and shook her head. "I know he's a friend of my father, and I shouldn't feel good about seeing him get such a beat down, but screw that! I've been dealing with his antics way too much since he took over my training a year ago."

"Huh, is that why you were at the tournament?" Mai nodded at Ranma's question and explained that her grandfather, Hanzo, had been away from home for much of that year, and whenever he was home, he would concentrate on training Andy, her fellow student. "I don't blame him for that. I've already pretty much mastered Shiranui-Ryu, but to then turn around and let that pervert be in charge of my training is just... Raaaahhhh!!!" she growled, stomping her foot and glaring down at Jubei. "I decided to come here to get away from him, and what does he do? Somehow, he follows me!"

"Er... you need a moment?" Ranma stepped back quickly, putting several yards of space between himself and Mai, while Shampoo just crossed her arms and nodded her head sagely.

Thankfully Mai simply stood there for a moment, breathing in and out before shaking her head. "I am good. I am calm. I have kicked him in the balls and it was good. Now I wish to move on," her voice was calm, but it was the calm of a volcano that had just erupted a bit and might have an even bigger eruption waiting under the surface.

"Right... but um, what do you want us to do with him? Just leave the old pervert here?"

"Good question," Mai muttered, but Shampoo already had a solution.



She grinned and pointed over her shoulder toward the distant ocean. "Catch and release always good, yes?"

Moments later, Ranma had used his Martial Arts Construction to build a large, water-tight casket. Once he was finished, they dropped Jubei's still-unconscious form into. Seconds later, the pervert was floating out into the ocean, and Ranma, Shampoo and Mai stood on a nearby rooftop watching him go. "So... you said you were here for something? And I hate ta ask, but what was the name of your martial arts school again?"

"Oh, it's Shiranui-ninjutsu. As for why I'm here, I'm here to look at the Musubime Osoroshi style Hotojutsu school. What about you two?" Mai asked politely.

Shampoo blinked, then looked eager, leaning into Mai's personal space, clapping her hands together eagerly. "Wait, did you say ninjutsu!? Nin-nin stuff!? Shampoo see you using Bunshin, copy your throwing daggers. Are you kunoichi?"

"Hahaha, um well, I like to style myself a kunoichi, but my style isn't that of the full kunoichi," Mai snickered a bit, shaking her head and looking a bit embarrassed. "That, and there really isn't much connection between the modern view of shinobi and what they really were. So, we call ourselves more just 'mystical martial arts' really."

Shampoo pouted, then shrugged. "All dreams of kunoichi dashed but suppose it better to make your own. Make it real to you rather than to others." *And judging by your outfit, you certainly use the whole seduction thing anyway, regardless of what you call yourself,* Shampoo thought, backing away, feeling a mixture of jealousy and intrigue. *I wonder what I would look like in that kind of outfit?*

At that point, Ranma's stomach rumbled so loud that it almost sounded like a lion, and both Mai and Shampoo backed away quickly, staring at Ranma. Then Shampoo began to laugh, and Ranma hung his head. "Erm, can we go get some food now? We can keep talking, but er, the master must be fed."

Mai joined in with Shampoo's laughter even as she pointed over her shoulder. "Come on, I know a good noodle place."

"So, what's your story?" Mai asked moments later as she took a spoon of the noodles. The trio had grabbed some takeout and retreated to a rooftop where they could look out over the beach. "Are you here for something or passing through? Ooh, and are you two traveling together?" she asked, wiggling her eyebrows at Shampoo.

To Mai's surprise, the foreign girl didn't blush. Shampoo simply clamped onto Ranma's side, nodding happily. "Shampoo and Ranma on a romantic journey of adventure!" *And thank you for giving me that opening! I really hope you're not interested in Ranma, Mai, and if so, you'll back off now.*

Ranma made to open his mouth, then closed it and shrugged. "You know what, that's not actually a bad way of describing it. Shampoo and I met in China, and then again when she came... here for some reason or other, and I had basically decided I was done with following my Old Man's plans for my life."

"There are at least two, possibly even three different stories hidden in that very brief explanation," Mai muttered, shaking her head.

*And I'm trying hard not to be jealous,* she added internally. While Ranma hadn't put his arm around Shampoo or anything, Mai noticed he didn't pull or push her away either and simply put that lack of response down to the fact that public displays of affection were seen as gauche in Japanese culture. *On the one hand, I'm glad to see another girl who isn't going to let that stop her from flirting, but on the other hand, damn it, Andy! Would it kill you to return some affection!?*

Instead of dwelling on the romantic reasons she would be jealous of the twosome, Mai concentrated on the training journey side of things. "But traveling all over would be amazing, especially out of Japan. I would love to see Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, maybe the Peloponnesians," Mai sighed longingly.

Shampoo raised an arm in the air and shouted "Hawaii!" and Mai nodded firmly, exchanging a handshake and laughing with the Chinese girl.

Confused, Ranma cocked his head to one side. "What kind of martial arts would you learn in Hawaii?" *And is it just me, or is Mai, like way nicer and less flirty now? This version's better.*

"That not be point of going there, trust Shampoo," Shampoo chuckled. "One sentence: Bikinis and luaus."

Ranma blinked, staring at his companion and nodded slowly. "Um... okay, yeah, I can see the appeal now."

"Hahaha!" Mai laughed as Shampoo made the victory sign with her hands.

**OOOOOOO**

Elsewhere, Kuno the elder sneezed as he hurled his explosive pineapple. The large fruit missed his target and hit the wall behind it, blasting it into pieces, much to the irate shouts of his current master. "Again! You're not leaving this island until you can hit eighteen targets one after another and then cut ten poles fit for the luau later!"

*"Yes, Master!" It must be my little Tatewaki or Ko-chan thinking of daddy. Well, don't worry, my sweet Keiki, I will be coming home soon!*

OOOOOOO

“So, you’re here to look into the Musubime Osoroshi school too?” Mai asked after Ranma had told her the reason for their being on the island. Mai took a bite of her noodles and looked at the sky before looking back at the two wanderers, frowning. “I hate to tell you, Ranma, but I’ve been here for a few days, gathering information on them...”

Ranma made an interrogative noise around a bite of his food, and Mai shrugged, understanding what he was asking. “My own school isn’t really in favor of going around and learning from others like you two are doing. But it makes an exception for things that might fit our style. Hotojutsu seems to be a perfect fit, giving us a mid-range weapons style.” Mai scowled, waving her head out toward the ocean. “And I also needed to get away from Jubei... who then followed me here. Blast it.”

Shampoo reached over and patted Mai’s hand consolingly. “Perverts same whole world over.”

“Ugh, tell me about it.” Mai rolled her eyes before looking back at Ranma, shaking her head commiseratingly. “But anyway, Ranma, you won’t be allowed in. It’s an all-girl school. That’s why I was still here rather than trying to find it. I had to throw off Jubei before I could. I didn’t want to make a bad impression.”

“That’s understandable.” Ranma frowned, then shrugged, reaching for the water bottle he had bought with the noodles. it was cold enough. “But I think,” he said before pouring it over his head, “that I got it covered,” the redhead finished.

Mai’s eyes widened, and then they rolled back in her head as she slumped backward, fainting dead away.

Shampoo grabbed her, laughing even as she did, while Ranma grinned. “I’m actually beginning to enjoy that part. Not so much the reactions after they wake up.”

A small splash of the water from the bottle to her face was enough to wake Mai up, and she whirled around, staring at both of her companions, her chest flopping so much even Ranma could not help but look down at it for a brief second before controlling himself. Luckily, Shampoo had been looking too, so she didn’t notice his momentary loss of control.

“H, how, what the, what was that! How...Ranma? That has got to be the quickest clothing change and disguise I’ve ever seen!” Mai said, reaching across the table and poking Ranma in the chest, thinking that it was some kind of padding.

“But why the water, and how did you...” Mai trailed off as she felt a nipple underneath her finger and watched as the breast, she had thought was simple padding, gave slightly under her touch.

It didn't give very much, not nearly as much as Mai's own would have, but it was still very real, obviously as she could feel the nipple hardening just slightly under her touch before Ranma batted her hand away. "Hey, no touchy! Honestly, what is it with girls and poking my tits, huh? Is this some kind of female bonding thing I don't know about?"

"Back home in village, Shampoo often felt up by other girls in the bath and did same to others too. Personal space between girls be very different than between boy-girl," Shampoo answered with a shrug. "Have read mangas showing boys on sports teams using towel whips. Is same thing."

"That is so not the same Shampoo!" Ranma shot back, shaking her head.

At that point, Mai had recovered enough to make somewhat understandable sentences. "How, what the! Is this some kind of transformation technique?" she muttered, grasping at straws. Even her master would've had trouble completely transforming his clothing, let alone putting on a bra, padding it, changing his hair color, and...

Suddenly Mai's thoughts trailed to a halt as she stared at Ranma, slumping back. "W, where did your height go?" she muttered, staring at the redhead.

"Height no matter," Shampoo giggled. "It a magical curse."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Magic?" she repeated skeptically.

Ranma shrugged, pushed the water towards her, and reached into his pack, coming out with a small heating plate. "You want to try it?"

Moments later, Mai watched as Ranma transformed back into his male body, bulking upwards and a little outward in the shoulder area. She even went so far as to place her hand on his shoulder when Ranma transformed, getting a little of the water on her hand and feeling as if she'd just touched a rubber sheet with many things moving underneath it for some reason.

Seeing Mai's look of freak-out growing, Shampoo nodded. "Shampoo agree. Seeing change one thing, feeling it happen another."

"You both should try it from in here," Ranma grumbled, looking up at Mai. "So, do you believe me now?"

Snorting, Mai moved back to her previous spot, her rear thumping down into it so hard her skirt wafted up slightly, her eyes wide and unseeing. "Okay, I've seen a lot of weird stuff. And... I mean... there is a certain mystical component to some of my school's techniques. But honest to goodness magic and curses? That's beyond anything I ever thought could possibly be real. Still, I can't deny what I saw or felt just then..." Mai shivered before going on resolutely. "Where in the hell did this curse come from? So, I can stay well away from it."

“That a logical response,” Shampoo nodded and then explained about Jusenkya, mentioning that her own people were situated nearby. “We use curse as punishment. If one to be punished goes, comes back good curse or not cursed, she let free. If not, she cursed.”

“That sounds really waaay too much about punishment rather than justice to my mind, but I’ll let that slide.” Mai then began to laugh quietly. “But yeah, Ranma, I suppose you ‘have it covered’.” She snickered then, rubbing Ranma’s hair. “Ooh, you’re so cuuuttee shorty....” she teased, until Ranma smacked her head away, pouting.

It was true though. Ranma was barely five feet, at least two inches smaller than Shampoo, who was smaller than Mai, who stood five feet five inches.

Snorting at Ranma’s glare up at her, Mai stood up. “Anyway, we should get moving. It’s already evening, and we don’t want to try to approach Musubime Osoroshi once it’s night out.” *Before I get distracted by how this makes your whole relationship even more romantic, drat it.*

United in purpose as well as curiosity about one another, Mai led the two wanderers over the rooftops, heading out of town. She had gotten directions to where this Musubime Osoroshi Hotojutsu school was situated in Sado-Yahiko-Yoneyama Quasi-National Park.

This took them out deeper into the woods, passing into the rest of the island proper, which was, for the most part, a national park and heritage site. The trees here were tall, the foliage underneath deep, and all in all, it looked like a very nice park. And better, all three of them could move through the forest just as easily as they had been moving over the rooftops previously, talking about their training up to this point, rivals, and fights they had been in. Typical martial artist ‘getting to know you’ fare, really.

But as they came closer to where Mai’s information said the Hotojutsu were supposed to be, the Shiranui-Ryu heiress started to slow down. She looked around them and then down to the ground, following something the other two couldn’t see, her eyes narrowing.

“What wrong?” Shampoo questioned while Ranma quickly ascended the tree, almost automatically taking the overwatch position over the two other girls.

“There are traps around here.” With that, Mai jumped to the next tree, where she balanced on a thin branch, kneeling down and pushing aside a bit of the foliage. This revealed a thin string going down the tree toward the ground. It turned out to be connected to a large tree branch as thick across as Mai was, hung as if it was still connected to the tree, but set so it would swing down much like the boulder Ranma and Shampoo had used in the toughness training.

“There’s more up here,” Ranma reported, hopping down to join the two girls. “It looks like an early warning system.”

Shampoo frowned, cocking her head. "Is this some kind of test?" she muttered in Chinese, not really expecting an answer from Ranma.

But to her surprise, she got one from Mai. "I'd wager so, yes. You have to get through them one way or another before you prove yourself worthy of being taught by Musubime Osoroshi. My own family does something similar, although ours are more obvious than this. And probably a bit more lethal closer in, hence why they are obvious."

"You speak Chinese!" Shampoo squealed, clapping her hands in delight and fighting the urge to glomp the other girl. "Oh my word, it's been liked breaking logs with a needle to get Ranma interested enough to learn."

Mai laughed. "Yeah, say what you will about Jubei, but he was very firm that I needed a good grounding in languages and history since he took over training me."

Ranma had been following this and understood about one out of every four words and now sighed theatrically. "Great, now there's another reason for me to learn Chinese. Thanks, Mai."

"You're welcome," Mai chirped, moving off through the woods as Ranma groaned behind her, laughing at the redhead's pain. In turn, Shampoo snickered, gave Ranma a kiss on the cheek, and then hurried after Mai.

Knowing that there were traps about, all three of them moved through the trees slower now, while Mai could move even more silently than Ranma did through the foliage. But the redhead proved that she was just as good at spotting traps as Mai quickly. Halting progress at one point, she gestured to a tree branch that both other girls had been about to jump to and made the wait sign with one hand.

As they paused, Ranma leaped higher up into the same tree he had gestured to, landing with her feet on two smaller branches. Then, to Mai's astonishment, Ranma almost seemed to sit down, one leg curling over the branch as she let go with the other before flipping downward, holding herself steady with only that one leg supporting her weight as she reached downward.

"That branch is nowhere near thick enough to hold her weight. Ranma, is there something you want to tell me? Some other magical ability you have to negate gravity?" Mai drawled.

"Redistribution and cancellation of weight is a staple of Anything Goes, Aerial Style," Ranma answered, wiggling one hand. This brought Mai's attention to the fact that Ranma's hand was gently touching the tree's trunk, while the other one was reaching down towards the erstwhile branch that had caught Ranma's attention.

That light touch seemed enough to redirect some of Ranma's weight, and Mai whistled quietly. "I might want to learn that."

"Shampoo knows! Sparring with Ranma fun, but Aerial Style very hard to get used to," Shampoo pouted.

They watched as Ranma reached into several smaller branches sticking out around the one Mai and Shampoo had been about to jump to, pulling out several very thin metal wires, which would've tangled their feet up something fierce.

*Or worse if they have barbs on them. This trap could easily be made fatal,* Mai realized.

"You're always vulnerable right as you land." Ranma shook her head. "Someone knows about tree-walking for certain."

"So, do we stay up here, or do we switch to the ground?" Mai asked. "It's a case of harder to spot traps versus more traps to deal with."

Ranma suggested they stay in the trees, and after deliberating, the other two agreed, and the three of them kept moving. Although they were now slower than before. Eventually, the traps got so thick and so well hidden that it was almost inevitable that one of them would trip a trap.

That worthy turned out to be Ranma, who, upon landing on a branch that she had previously made certain was free of traps, moved off, brushing aside a branch above her head as she moved forward. That branch was attached to a secondary trap, which swung a small stone into Ranma's face, even as she jumped forward.

It didn't really hurt, but it startled Ranma enough to mess up her jump to the next tree, and she landed on a branch that she hadn't been aiming for. The next instant, long wires wrapped around her feet, and Ranma overbalanced backward, yelping, "Redhead down!"

A spring trap on the ground greeted Ranma, but Ranma was already flipping herself upwards and landed hands first, pushing off the trap even as it activated. Two logs came out of the forest to either side and would have crashed into Ranma if she had been in the same position as a moment ago.

Landing nearby, Ranma grinned cheerfully, reaching down and tearing her way out of the wire, her grin segueing into a whistle of surprise at the amount of strength that took. "This stuff is tough."

Unfortunately, Shampoo and Mai were both a little distracted watching Ranma's accident and each of them activated a trap. Shampoo found one of her arms tied to her side,

although she raised her other arm before the spring-launched bola had been able to completely encircle her.

Mai wasn't so lucky, and while able to dodge being caught, another bola's iron ball cracked into the side of her head and sent her falling down onto the ground. However, despite her cursing, Mai was no stranger to pain, and her fan lashed out and down into the ground around her as she shouted out a technique from her school. "Burst Blast!"

Much like the technique Jinbei used in the brief fight against him, Mai's fan flung out a blast of wind, which caused several of the traps below to activate before she landed. With the way clear, Mai flipped herself, landing on all fours in among them, staring around her like an angry cat in the middle of hurled daggers, tiny darts and another bola.

Nearby, Ranma had made the mistake of looking towards Mai as she did this, about to congratulate the taller girl on a great wind technique, since Ranma wasn't certain if she would've been able to do that with so little prep time. However, the redhead's words caught in her throat as she watched Mai's breasts sway from side to side and saw a decent amount of side-boob from this angle.

Instead, Ranma whipped her head around to one side, shouting up at Shampoo. "Watch out, I'd wager that now that we've sprung so many of their traps, were going to be ambushed soon..."

As Ranma spoke, shouts from all around them echoed, and long meteor hammers flew from the hands of several women who burst out of the foliage all around them, attacking as they came.

"Yeah, see, just like that. That's how my luck goes," Ranma muttered, racing forward to close the range.

Shampoo snarled, then launched herself towards the women, not even bothering to try and break out of the bola around her waist that was clamping one arm to her side. Shampoo knew she was strong, but with no leverage, she'd have to use her other hand to unwind the bola, which wasn't going to happen. *First, beat these bitches down, then release myself.*

"You have entered the Ropeway, the great test of our school! You have failed the first test, and now you must fight your way out wish to prove worthy," shouted one of the women. Her clothing, the same dark green and mottled brown pants and shirts as the other women around her, was denoted by a red collar, indicating higher rank within the school.

Beyond wearing the same outfits, they all used rope or chain-based weapons. Kusarigama were very much in evidence, along with rope darts, weighted ropes, bolas, meteor hammers, and chain whips but made of lengths of rope with connecting metal bits. The one marked by the red collar used a manriki, although its length was rope instead of a chain.



Mai brought up her fans as if they were two daggers, jabbing aside one of the incoming scythes easily, then launched herself forward, her fan opening to block another strike from a meteor hammer. Her fan darted forward, then Mai moved her arm in a small loop, tying the rope around her arm before Mai pulled. A punch to the head sent that attacker to the forest floor, groaning, while Mai spoke, her tone practically normal. "This reminds me of some of the tests my grandfather put me through. Only most of it would be mechanical, rather than actual people."

Ranma nodded, ducking under a series of blows from one of the women, who was using a shorter-ranged rope dart. She was using it expertly, flicking it in and out quickly, but not fast enough against someone of Ranma's caliber. She dodged it by a hair, and her hand flashed up, grabbing the rope and pulling her in. The woman moved with this trying to loop the weapon around Ranma's head and shoulder, while lashing out with a punch, but Ranma blocked it and returned a punch that caused the other girl to double over. The next instant, her own weapon was bound around her arms and waist, and Ranma let her there, moving on quickly.

"Yeah, this definitely reminds me of one or two of my Pop's training techniques," the redhead drawled even as two more attacked her with meteor hammers.

But these were not nearly as well-trained as the one who had closed with the pigtailed girl, and Ranma's hands darted forward. Even as the two girls tried to redirect the weighted ends of their meteor hammer away, Ranma caught their ropes beyond the weight and tugged both women off balance. With that done and seeing their meteor hammers were wound around their forearms, Ranma whirled, tossing them through the air.

Both women crashed to the ground accompanied by grunts of pain. But at the same time, Ranma grunted as an impact to the back of her head sent Ranma forward.

Another woman lashed out at his legs with a chain whip. but Ranma leaped up over that attack and closed, kicking out and catching her opponent in the chin, sending her flying. "Huh, these gals need to work on their footwork and quick thinking."

"Tell me about it," the one marked by a red collar grumbled even as she charged in before halting, using her manriki to good effect, whirling one end to block a jab from Ranma then the other to smash into the shorter girl's chest. "But not all of us are novices!"

"So I see," Ranma grunted at the impact but moved through it, trying to close, reflecting this whole fight was proving she needed to add some weapons skills to his repertoire. *Screw Pops' ideas of what's weak and whatever. Weapons can help, even if they ain't as adaptable as fists and feet.*

To his surprise, the journeywoman flicked her manriki again, whirling it around, blocking the redhead's blows and redirecting them to the side. She then tried to go for Ranma's feet but could still recover and block the kick this earned her as Ranma leaped over her strike. The other

woman, a college-age girl with bleached blonde hair and a tan – basically a ganguro gal – used a portion of the rope length to block Ranma’s blow, the rope acting almost like a length of wood. “Huh... ki manipulation.”

The journeywoman snickered and twirled away, the weighted metal end of her manriki suddenly popping out several spikes appearing there as she flicked it at Ranma’s face. “That’s not all we can do!”

Nearby, Shampoo had already pulled out one of her maces and was now smacking aside any of the long-range attacks that came near her, having landed near four meteor hammer users. Growling, Shampoo charged forward like an angry bull. The proud Amazon had not liked being caught in the trap earlier and wanted to **discuss** matters with these women up close and personal.

However, the women didn’t let this happen. Seeing her weapon, one of them shouted some kind of code. “Ascending Rose!”

The women who had been the target of Shampoo's desire to inflict violence spread out in every direction up into the trees. From there, they began to attack from long-range once more from various angles. As they did, another one of their fellow students came out of the wood, hurling a weighted net towards Shampoo, catching her even as she tried to leap after them. “Aiyaa!”

Seeing this, Ranma moved to her assistance, breaking off fighting the journeywoman, who had been pressing him decently hard but wasn’t able to keep up with Ranma’s sudden jump to the side. Bouncing off a branch above them, Ranma landed near Shampoo, tearing the net off her, but even as she did so, the ground underneath her gave way into a pit trap.

“Oh, you have to beeEEE!!” she screamed just as it caved in under her weight. Yet despite her surprise, Ranma was still able to roll forward as the ground gave way. Grabbing the pit's edge, she hung there for a second, glancing down and seeing a pit of spikes before flipping herself upwards. But that opened Ranma up to two more flung nets, which tangled the redhead something fierce.

But Mai was still free, and she danced backward and away from several rope darts coming her way even as many of the women around them turned her attention to the tall girl. As she twirled back to face the attackers, they all balked, seeing her holding a small bomb in her hand. “Wh... where did...”

Mai winked at the girl who spoke before lobbing the bomb forward. This was followed by more as she twirled, so fast even Ranma couldn’t figure out where the bombs were coming from. *I know that was an example of weapons space, but where the hell is Mai hiding a pocket on that outfit?* The redhead thought in shock, pausing her attempts to tear the nets off her.

Tiny explosions of smoke and fire went off as the bombs hit. There wasn't enough gunpowder in them to really hurt anyone unless they got hit right in the face, which Mai was careful to not let happen. But it was enough to disorient those nearby and fill the area with smoke.

In that smoke, Mai closed, finishing off three of their attackers in quick succession, although one of them was able to get a good blow in, which doubled her over for a second. But Mai just used this to grab at the woman's upcoming leg, twisting and hurling her into a fourth Hotojutsu user.

By the time the smoke began to fade, Ranma finally got herself free. Meanwhile, Shampoo had lost her mace, and her one arm was still captured, but several of the other attackers lay unconscious nearby, hurled in every direction by furious blows from the annoyed Amazon.

Seeing the rest of the Hotojutsu users down, Ranma raced forward, intent on finishing her duel with the journeywoman. "Come on, Ganguro gal, let's finish this!"

"What did you call me midget!?" the other woman shrieked angrily. "My hair might not be natural, but my skin color is, you little...!"

The woman flicked out her manriki once more, but not at Ranma. Instead, she aimed at the net Ranma had just pulled off, intent on catching the redhead's legs. But Ranma leaped up over it, then world around several more blows from the weapon, noting in shock that the rope length of the manriki had extended in the woman's hands. *Holy hell, another ki application, oh yes, coming here was a great move!*

One time, the woman was too slow to pull her weapon back, and Ranma landed balancing on top of the woman's weapon, causing her eyes to widen right before a kick caught her in the face, hurling her backward. And unfortunately for the tanned girl, like the others, she just didn't have the strength to take a blow from Ranma. She was hurled off her feet, unconscious, although Ranma had been careful not to actually break her nose or anything else.

For a moment there was silence as Ranma and the others looked around, then Mai breathed out, straightening up from a combat crouch and adjusting her outfit slightly. "That was interesting. I don't know if I'd have been able to win through on my own."

Ranma thrust out her chest, about to boast that she would have, but Shampoo's club caught her in the shoulder. The Amazon had taken the time to pick it up – her chui were gifts of her late mother - before stowing them in her weapons space again, then reaching down to the bola around her waist and tearing it into pieces. "Ranma no lie. Number of traps, surprise on enemy side, and that journeyman able to step back, give orders? Ranma would lose too."

"Well, I suppose... but ya didn't have ta blurt it out Shampoo," Ranma muttered.

“Shampoo do. Ranma sometimes have too too big ego, even for martial artist.”

“Ooh, that’s harsh, especially coming from you, little Miss Village Champion,” Ranma taunted.

Shampoo grinned, but Mai interrupted their banter. “An ego can be a good thing, so long as you don’t take it into extremes. I think that’s what Shampoo saying.”

Ranma pouted at them both ganging up on her, but before she could say anything, a new voice interrupted them. An old but amused female voice, its owner unseen in the forest around them.

“That is indeed the case. Although more important to the matter at hand, you were attacked so violently because of how deep into our area of the forest you were able to come before tripping some of our traps. I am afraid Misaki and the guards reacted more violently than they should have.”

Ranma scowled, crossing her arms and looking around, trying to figure out where the voice was coming from. But the echoes of the woods and groans of their former opponents were making it impossible to pinpoint. “Well, that’s nice to hear, I guess. And I suppose those first traps we bypassed wouldn’t have been lethal. But er... Mystery Voice, what happens now? Is this where we challenge you for the right to learn some of your school’s techniques?”

“No, I don’t take challenges like that, child. They are a pointless waste of time. As for what does happen, you have already passed a test of skill, although not in the normal manner. But that just means we need to get creative.”

Shampoo was about to open her mouth and say that this answer worried her, when she found rope again going around her waist, accompanied by one going around her neck, mouth, and forehead. These ropes were pulled taut, even as Shampoo tried to break free, and the Chinese girl found herself tied up and on the ground before she could jump free, let alone shout out for help. “Aiyaa! Why is it always Shampoo!?”

Ranma was already turning in that direction charged forwards, but the redhead was attacked before she could move to Shampoo’s aid. Ropes lashed down out of the foliage above, a rope going around her neck.

Ranma grabbed the rope, although not fast enough to stop it from looping around her neck. With that hold, Ranma flipped herself upward, twirling in place, pulling the rope around her legs, hoping to pull it out of the user’s hands. This didn’t work, but Ranma bent at the waist, and that worked, tearing the rope free. But before she could do anything more, several more ropes caught her, and soon, Ranma was tied up as well.

Mai got lucky. She was standing on top of a downed tree, with more area around her free of things to block her line of sight, and she did so for a few moments. Yet from her position, Ranma saw the real attack coming up from below. *Okay, that's bizarre. I knew this school had some ki techniques but that much control?!*

As she watched, thin ropes moved along the ground like extremely long snakes before bunching up under some unseen order to catch Mai around the legs. The ropes then continued to climb up her body, even as she tried to jump away. Despite her struggles and an attempt to cut at the ropes with a dagger, Mai was soon tied up in the traditional Hotojutsu capture style. The ropes continued to move under some unseen user's command until she was completely tied up.

Then, somehow, the ropes broke off, cutting themselves off, around her legs. The bits of rope around Mai stopped moving, while the rest retreated, soon disappearing into the grass and undergrowth.

With all three 'invaders' now tied up like prisoners ready to be transported to the shogun for sentencing, an old woman hopped out of the tree beyond where Shampoo had been attacked. She was taller than even Mai but stooped a little bit with age. Her arms and legs were completely wound around with ropes and thin chains. Ranma couldn't tell where either chain and rope began, seemingly one leading into another, but the connections were also hidden to his eyes.

The edge of these chain-ropes was moving even as the old woman stepped forward. Both arms were making little circling motions to gather her weapon in from the ground below. Around her waist was another manriki, its weights dangling like a belt buckle around her waist. There were even a few chains in her long solid-gray hair, which Ranma suspected could be used as a weapon too.

"I thought you said that we had won our challenge. And that we weren't going to have to fight you," Ranma grumbled to the woman, who could only be the master of the school they were all here to investigate.

"What my companion means to ask is, might we know the name of the learned one who has trussed us up so well?" Mai cut in. "Forgive her. Ranma has a mouth much larger than her size would indicate."

"Well, at least one of you has some manners. My name is Atama Nawa, Master of Musubime Osoroshi Hotojutsu," the woman said, smirking slightly, "and I said you had shown your combat prowess. Unfortunately, part of this exercise was also supposed to show us how you fair in the first level of our teaching rather than the second and third."

"I'm sorry, but what does that mean exactly?" Mai inquired. Her tone was still polite, but she was also trying to twist her body to work a hand free. But she was having no luck at all.

As she did, both Ranma and Shampoo made a point of looking away. The way she was tied up looked sexy on Shampoo, who wore her normal tai chi chuan outfit, which wasn't designed to be very sexy. On Mai, who was wearing a far sexier outfit if nothing else, it was enough to cause death by blood loss in any male, no matter how self-controlled. Somehow her outfit was still pressed against her body rather than off one side or the other, which would have let her breasts out. Her legs were tied together, crisscrossed with rope up her body. Her arms were tied behind Mai like Ranma, only even higher, while her chest and privates were caught in the center of a series of triangles.

Atama smiled at them faintly. "Our school has four levels of training that a person can learn. The first is evasion and escape. You two proved to be excellent at evasion and detection and then extremely skilled in combat, which is spread across my school's second and third levels of training. Now, I need to see where you fit in with the rest of my students in terms of escape, the last portion of the first level of education."

Ranma nodded at that as it made some sense. *Although this can't be the first time outsiders have come by to investigate their school, Nawa's acting like this is normal.*

With that, Ranma looked down at herself, blushing just a bit at what the ropes were doing to her clothing and body presently. Two of the places where the crisscrossed ropes wound around her body were especially annoying, rubbing at her nipples. A third was right over her navel and almost tickled her, but thankfully not quite. And even better, Ranma's legs were just looped around by the ropes instead of the rope being tied in various knots.

The perusal of her own predicament done, Ranma looked over at Shampoo, which proved to be a mistake. If Ranma's rope prison was a slightly erotic sight, seeing Shampoo tied up like this was worse.

Shampoo was gagged, a thick knot over her mouth, causing her to be unable to speak. Her breasts were caught in ropes above and below, squeezing and pushing them forward in a way that reminded Ranma of a doujin Hiroshi had forced into Ranma's face. Shampoo's arms were tied to her side by those same ropes, her hands flailing free near her crotch, and her legs were tied in such a way that she was kneeling, facing towards Ranma.

"The objective here is to discover if you can escape the Hotojutsu capture technique. If you can escape using a weapon upon your person, that is all right. It just will show there is room for improvement in your basic flexibility. I also noted, respectful one, that you and the purple-haired girl both used weapon space, an extremely advanced ki technique," Atama noted, addressing Mai and Shampoo. "Undoubtedly, that can be used for this as well."

Ranma looked down at her own body, thinking about it, then decided to try, flipping herself up onto her feet, somehow balancing there on her toes despite how taught the ropes were around her legs. Pressing her shoulders back, Ranma brought her head down, where she began to bite through the rope around her chest.

“A little unorthodox and quite inelegant, but acceptable for now, I suppose,” Atama muttered. Her verdict given, she turned her attention to where the tallest intruder was still struggling.

Mai also tried to move her arms and neck but couldn't. Realizing this quickly, she turned to other means and began concentrating, feeling out her weapons space.

As the now nearly free Ranma looked on, something in Mai's chest burst, burning away both a bit of her outfit and some of the rope, allowing her to wrench her upper body free.

“Hmm, now what was that?” Atama questioned, moving closer to Mai while around her, Atama's students started to recover, groaning and holding their injuries.

Mai blushed a bit, mumbling something under her breath.

“I'm sorry, dear, but while my body may still be spry, my hearing's not what it used to be,” Atama drawled.

“It's my boob window, all right! It's a weapons space situated in my cleavage!” Mai shouted, hopping in place in embarrassment. “My Judo teacher made me practice it this past year until I could form a weapons space within my darn cleavage. It's useful, but you seriously don't want to know how he 'taught' me how to use it.”

“Heh, well, don't worry, child. All you had to do was escape. I'm not going to take points away for how you did it. Although I can certainly understand if you're here to get away from a perverted master.”

Atama flicked her arms forward outward, and Mai flinched, thinking she was about to be tied up again. But instead, the ropes around Atama's arms coiled around bits of the rope Mai was still caught in, and suddenly, the ropes around Mai fell away.

Being the only one still incapacitated, Shampoo grumbled, but hearing Atama's words, she twisted her hands and body until her hands were hidden between her thighs and stomach. Undulating a bit, Shampoo grunted and groaned against the knot in her mouth, but somehow a moment later, there was a glint of metal, and she was holding a tiny punch dagger in her hand.

Ranma blinked, staring. “Er, where were you hiding that?” she asked, never having seen that dagger, not even when they were in the cave in China.

Using the extremely tiny, very thin palm dagger, Shampoo sliced the ropes around her thighs then her feet. With that done, she showed an insane level of control, dropping the dagger to her foot, where she caught it in her toes. As the others watched, she somehow bent her leg upwards, slicing both her shirt and the first two ropes tied under her chest, freeing her forearms to move. Soon Shampoo was free, pulling the knot from her mouth and finally able to

answer Ranma's question, although the answer wasn't very informative. "You not want to know, Ranma."

"Well, that was an excellent example of improvisation, my dear. Well done!" Atama clapped. "However, allow me to show you one trick for free that, should you wish to learn from my school, you could learn with enough dedication."

She turned to the journeyman who had led the defense against the three 'invaders.'  
"Misaki, front and center."

"Yes, Master." With a final glare Ranma's way – evidently Misaki didn't like being called a ganguro despite dying her hair blonde, which was weird in Ranma's mind - the younger woman moved to stand in front of her master. She stood still, even as the ropes coiled around Atama's arms moved under her ki-commands, flashing forward and somehow splitting into multiple ropes as they wrapped around Misaki's body.

*Oh wow, is that some kind of replication via ki? That makes even my school's Bunshin seem a shadowy, hehehe, imitation,* Mai thought, her eyes wide at the implications.

Soon, as the three newcomers watched in various shades of red, the woman was completely tied up, much the same way that the trio had been, standing up as Mai was, but otherwise the same. Yet as they watched, the woman closed her eyes. A second later, portions of her body began to glow, the glow encompassing different bits of the rope coiled around her.

A second later, some of those knots had loosened. Misaki then showed flexibility almost equal to Shampoo's, working one arm free, then the other until finally standing divested of her former rope prison.

"I'd be interested just in the ki manipulation this school has, never mind the weapons skills," Ranma muttered. "I'm not certain how applicable that particular trick would be in fight, but being able to connect to your ki so easily could be a major help."

"Shampoo think Ranma right, though she think style is a little perverted, despite Old Woman's comments on elegance. But willing to go along with things," Shampoo whispered.

Mai nodded firmly. "I'm not so interested in that ki technique. I get some of that for my own style. But evasion, embedding ki in weapons and then manipulating those weapons the various ways Master Nawa showed, ooh wee!"

Now having shown the trio of newcomers another aspect of her school, Atama was satisfied they had taken the hook. Now she turned away, inwardly chortling. *Yes, these three can bring more real-life combat training to my school, which it severely lacks at the moment. And there could be some techniques worthy of being added to our repertoire as well here. That*



*weapons space technique two of them used, for example. Needing to share some of our own is a small price to pay in comparison.*

Master Nawa whistled, and moments later, several middle-aged appeared, moving to help the wounded. None of the youngsters were badly injured, but a few would be sore for days from the pummeling the trio of erstwhile intruders had given them.

To Ranma, the newcomers looked more like schoolmarms than martial artists, only fitter than most of that breed. The clucking and muttering about their charges certainly added to that impression. *Huh. Is this a martial arts school or a girls' boarding school?*

Ten minutes' walk at the slow pace of the wounded brought them to the edge of the forest and out into a large, cleared area where the school began. And once more, Ranma wondered if Musubime Osoroshi was a boarding school or a martial arts school.

In the center of the cleared area was a single large building, which looked like someone had transported Furinkan High's main building here, minus the clock face. That absence made Ranma breathe a sigh of relief. *That would be weird even by my standards, but hey, it could happen. But I soooo do not want to see Kuno around here.*

A little lower, wider and longer building set to one side, amidst several outdoor areas for different training exercises. A series of smaller cabins scattered around the area's outer edge added a camp-like atmosphere to everything.

While the worst battered among the students were taken towards one such building, Atama turned to the others. "Show our guests to the commissary girls. When they've been fed and watered, I'll send Karin to bring them to my office. Misaki, with me."

The younger girls all bowed something that Mai and Ranma followed quickly. Ranma wouldn't normally, but Nawa had already shown enough for Ranma to take her seriously as a Master. Shampoo didn't. In her society, bowing was for the clan's elders or doctors. Being a martial arts master was not enough to win automatic deference. But Ranma elbowed her in the side, and Shampoo sighed and followed suit.

As the older women left, the three newcomers suddenly were crowded by the remaining young women they had fought less than an hour ago. "You three were so good!" one of the girls who fought them said, leading them in the proper direction. "No wonder the mistress needs time to figure out where to put you. I don't think anyone's ever been able to fight their way through the ambush point. And then you were all able to get free too, which is even more unusual."

Ranma shrugged, trying to downplay things. "We did bring some pretty interesting skills to the party."

“Bah, we rocked, and you know it, Shortie,” Mai bragged while Shampoo grinned and nodded, enjoying the attention.

It reminded her of being back home with her clan. *I wouldn't say I miss home, but I do miss some of the girls my own age. Silly, really, especially given Ranma being here but... oh... A frown suddenly appeared on her face. Oh dear... unless this place is like those weird schools in the shoujo-ai mangas I read once, this could put a serious crimp on my love life. Damn.*

Unaware of Shampoo's suddenly annoyed thoughts, the girls led the trio into the commissary. There, other girls were doling out a simple dinner of rice and fish. But there was a lot of it, which warmed a portion of Ranma's soul quite nicely.

As they sat down, Mai was still looking around with a smile. When there was a break in the conversation, she observed, “This place looks really nice. I had honestly feared this whole school was a pervert's idea of a good time. And while the whole being tied up thing worried me, I'm pleased to see that isn't the case.”

“Oh no, Master Nawa is death on that kind of thing. A few days ago, she and Apprentice Yukari ran off some old pervert who had been trying to get through the traps. He evaded the ready guards entirely and was almost to the school's hot springs before he finally ran out of luck. Can you believe that?” another girl nearby said, shaking her head.

“You don't say,” Mai murmured, sweatdropping. *That sounds like my attempt to lead Jubei off after coming out here this afternoon failed miserably, darn it. Thank God I wasn't with him at the time.*

“Huh, that sounds bad. But tell me, what else does Master Nawa teach here?” Ranma asked, looking around at their fellow diners.

“Everything!” chorused many of them, laughing.

“You'll see soon,” one girl added. “I just hope you had good grades in school, or else you'll run into trouble here.”

“Huh?” Ranma and Shampoo chorused, while Mai looked curious.

“This school isn't just a training school. It's a kind of elite high school too,” one of the other girls answered. “It's actually one of the better ones on Sado Island despite its small size.”

Ranma groaned loudly at that, while Shampoo and Mai looked intrigued. Soon, dinner was done, and Master Nawa sent one of the other teachers to lead the trio to her office.

As they sat down across from Nawa in a room that looked more like a principal's office than anything else, she asked them what they hoped to accomplish. "I don't get the impression any of you are looking to join my school here full-time, which is a pity."

"We're not here for that, sorry. We're here to learn as much as we can and incorporate it into our own styles. Shampoo here practices Joketsuzoku Wushu, and I practice Anything Goes, which both emphasize learning from other styles," Ranma explained. *Although I'm being way more open about it than my old man ever was.* "Mai here is the heiress to her style, so she just wants to..."

"To learn as much as I can. Specifically, the traditional Hotojutsu skills of capture and some of your ki techniques. I'd be willing to pay..." Mai spoke up for herself, only to fall silent as the glare on Master Nawa's face registered.

Luckily it wasn't directed at her, rather at Ranma, who blinked in surprise and growing concern. "I know of Anything Goes. It's an ancient martial arts style, led by a man named Haposai. Do you know him?"

"Never heard of him," Ranma replied honestly. "Why, he owe ya money or something? Or did he steal something? If he promised someone from his school would marry someone from yours, you're outta luck."

Mai stared at Ranma in surprise at this list of possible wrongs, but Atama relaxed. It didn't look like Ranma was lying. *And with a body like that, there's no way Haposai wouldn't have taken advantage of her being part of his school. Good grief, I've heard of the term short stack before, but never has it appeared so accurate before.*

"Or something. Let's just say Haposai is to women's underthings as Mai's former master was apparently to her," Atama drawled, watching Ranma breathe a sigh of relief. "Still, I can tell that you are telling the truth, even if that litany tells me that you have been in contact with someone from his school that has continued the dishonorable acts he began."

She held Ranma's gaze for a time, and Ranma just nodded. "Yeah, my Pops always went on and on about honor, but sometimes, he didn't act that way. Still, I try to hold myself to a higher standard."

"Mmm... well, we will see. And with that unpleasantness out of the way, let us turn back to the subject at hand. You're not the first group of students we've dealt with who has come here with training in other styles. I am perfectly willing to pass on a certain amount of training to you, so long as doing so does not disrupt my school. And for the record, I accept no dojo challenges or anything of that nature. Understood?"

Atama waited until all three nodded with varying degrees of understanding before going on. "And I will keep the secrets of my school to myself and those who are actually a part of it. That is nonnegotiable."

"Wait, that whole ki controlling rope thing you showed us before, and your ki loosening technique that ganguro used to get out of rope bondage wasn't a secret?" Ranma asked in surprise.

"I would recommend not calling Misaki that to her face outside of a sparring match. Inside it... go nuts. She needs to learn to control her temper," Atama advised dryly. "As for those two techniques? One you will not be able to reproduce without direct instruction. The other is merely a refinement of basic ki control."

"Basic ki control, she say," Shampoo grumbled. "Shampoo getting impression Ranma and Shampoo be flailing in dark before this on that topic."

"Quite possibly if you are trying to teach yourself how to use ki beyond your weapons space techniques. We'll return to that topic in a moment. But as I mentioned before, our school has four levels of instruction. The first is evasion, trap work and escape. I know all three of you need to work on your escape abilities, but what about trap work?"

The three of them looked at one another, and Mai held up a hand, indicating she would probably be interested. Shampoo followed while Ranma shook her head. Traps weren't direct enough for his/her preferences. On the other hand, Mai and Shampoo could see the utility of them in various ways.

Atama marked that down, looking up at them after doing so. "Hmm, as a side note, and this is something you might have heard already, but I need to go over it officially. So long as you are here, you will also be taking regular high school lessons."

While Mai and Shampoo nodded, Ranma scowled and looked away, her arms crossed under her chest. Seeing that, Atama chuckled dryly. "This school isn't just a martial arts school. It is a boarding school for those who wish to learn here. I have been offering traditional education for close to two decades now."

"Please tell me that doesn't mean flower arranging or anything like that? The girls were teasing us something fierce about that," Ranma asked, her face scrunched up.

"My word, you really are a tomboy, aren't you?" Atama chuckled, shaking her head. "No, we do offer etiquette, flower arranging and other electives. But you don't have to take them. The mandatory classes are language arts, social studies, science and mathematics."

Mai sighed, raising a hand quietly. "You'll probably want to test me on those. I've been homeschooled. And Shampoo too. She's Chinese, so..."

“Can you read Japanese, dear?” Atama inquired.

Shampoo nodded firmly, and Ranma snickered. “She’s got a manga collection that she practices reading on.”

This earned the redhead a punch in the arm, but Atama merely chuckled. “Education is where you find it.”

She rang a small bell, and another woman came in. Atama talked to her for a few moments, and the woman left quickly. “Journeywoman Setsuna will ready tests for you all after this meeting.”

She ignored Ranma’s whine of fear with amusement and turned the conversation back to martial arts, which, Nawa was amused to note, made Ranma perk up right away. “Now, the second level deals with capture and combat. There again, you all have a major leg up on your fellow students, and this is where we will talk about payment.”

Atama asked all three of the newcomers at that point to help train her students from the apprentice level on down. Even her two apprentices, which in her school was a level above journeyman, needed more real combat experience. So long as the three stayed here, they would help give her school that greater level of training to make them understand the difference between practice and real life. Atama was willing to train them in the escape-type ki techniques, some flexibility practices and weapons instruction. She felt all three would probably pick that last up very quickly.

“However, unless you have something to offer, I will not teach you any of my higher-end techniques,” Atama finished firmly. “I have developed these techniques over time,” *Primarily thanks to run-ins with Happosai, Tung Fu Rue and that fuck Gouken, but no need to go into detail now.* “And I will not share even my non-secret techniques with anyone without being paid for it commensurately.”

“What if we had things techniques to trade. You mentioned interest in that,” Ranma guessed.

Smirking inwardly at Ranma’s question pushing the direction where she wanted it to go, Atama nodded somberly while internally doing a fist pump. “In that case, things are negotiable.”

“We’ve all got the weapons space technique and can teach that,” Ranma mused.

“I can even teach ... my boob window,” Mai stated with a resigned sigh. “It’s an advanced version of weapons space, but once you know the basics, creating a space between your skin and your clothing is simple enough, if a bit draining at first.” She brightened then. “Or

the creation of flashbangs and minor bombs?" *I can't teach them the Bunshin, that's a secret technique.*

"Shampoo wants know that one!" Shampoo snickered, grinning as Ranma blushed rosily, staring away from the two other girls as Atama hummed thoughtfully. "That technique look too too useful. Shampoo know some weapons combat, some medical knowledge."

"We, Shampoo and I, have another technique we can probably show you, but it's more a physical enhancement technique than anything else. But it is a really good one. We also have a few other talents that you might want to take advantage of."

It took all of Shampoo's skill to not gape at Ranma as she spoke, wondering what the redhead was talking about. *Has Ranma figured out a way to learn the Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken?*

"Hmm... I would like you to put on a demonstration of these techniques to myself and my apprentices. Rei should be back in a few days," Atama mused. "When she does, we'll talk about this enhancement technique. Anything else?"

Ranma talked about her Martial Arts Construction skills, which Master Nawa was also interested in taking advantage of. "There is some repair work I would like you to see to if you can. I won't instruct you in the ki lengthening technique, but I won't forbid my apprentices from using it in front of you. Fair?"

Nodding eagerly, Ranma agreed with that right away. While he needed to figure out a ki sight technique to really see what that technique was about, seeing it in action was enough for him. *After all, I doubt I'll add a rope or chain weapon to my normal style, but even seeing it could teach me something else.*

"Good. In that case, please follow Setsuna. She will take you to the room where you will be given your various tests. After that, she will take you to your cottage."

"Wait, our cottage?" Ranma questioned, her eyes widening. "You mean, er, we'll all be together?"

"Indeed, you arrived together and will be bunked together. And frankly, we don't have much room for guests at this time anyway," Atama admitted.

The other two girls stood up, but Ranma was still protesting. "Wait, but I could like, build a cottage, you know."

"Really, Ranma being silly. Shampoo already know Ranma snore, no big secret there." Shampoo stood up with a grin, wrapping Ranma's arm up with her own and dragging the redhead out of the room. "Now come on. Get painful bit over with, yes?"

“Nor would I want a new cottage put up. The school is good just the way it is,” Atama growled.

“By the way, you said there were four levels to your school’s teaching,” Mai asked as she began to help drag Ranma out. “What is the fourth one?”

Atama smirked, leaning back slightly, her gaze becoming almost half-lidded, most of her seriousness fading as she gave them what could only be called a sultry look. All three youngsters backed away, although Mai’s eyes widened, and she looked a little intrigued. Then the look on Atama’s face was gone, and she sets crisply, “Level four is the sensual side of Hotojutsu, where we enter the realm of deliberate eroticism. How you can question prisoners by driving them mad with pleasure how to use ropes in the bed just as well as the battlefield. I didn’t think any of you three would be interested, nor would I be willing to just teach such willy-nilly, so I didn’t mention it.”

Mai frowned thoughtfully. “I wonder if Andy would get into that kind of thing, either being tied up or by tying Andy up...” she mused aloud.

“If you want some **basic** lessons in that area, Miss Shiranui, I can include such instruction instead of something else. But I’m not going to teach you any of the esoteric arts in that area,” Atama answered firmly. “But go on with you now. You have tests to take.”

As they were led away, Mai looked around thoughtfully. “This place almost reminds me of my family’s dojo in its heyday. Of course, there are only two students by this point, and Andy’s got his own style on top of that. But even so, we still have the area and the dojo, no matter how empty it seems.”

“And this place has a lot of students. Although, I gotta wonder if that is due to the martial arts, or Atama’s willingness to mixed martial arts with actual schooling,” Ranma muttered. “I’ve never run into that before. Hell, it’s mostly been the opposite with the real styles.”

“Is good idea though. Same as what Shampoo get in village,” Shampoo enthused. Although part of her was annoyed that this place would undoubtedly put a crimp on her romance with Ranma, she was interested in getting to know so many serious martial artists. Although none of the acolytes had impressed her, they all seemed good-natured and earnest girls.

“Yeah, but it will slow down our training time,” Ranma whined, with a real air of grievance about her. “I left Nerima to get away from schooling and stuff.”

For her part, Mai was actually looking forward to going to school with others. Outside of elementary school, she’d been entirely home educated and was looking forward to trying to see if she could make friends here.

Ranma frowned, thinking about it, then sighed and nodded. By that point, they were out of sight of Atama, who had moved over to her window to watch the trio be led away.

Moving away from the window, Atama sat back at her desk, humming thoughtfully. *Amazon Wushu, interesting, and I'm glad to finally meet Lin's little girl. But Anything Goes, hmmm? She seems a nice girl, although it's obvious her school is still up to its old tricks. I wonder who took over for old Happosai? And what happened to the Undying Pervert? No way old age could have finally claimed him, not after who knows how many decades.*

OOOOOOO

In a distant cave, a diminutive creature sneezed near the entrance to the cave, where a large boulder had been placed, while around him wafted the horrendous odor of unwashed male underwear. "One of my disreputable students must be talking about me! When I get out of here..."

OOOOOOO

Ranma and the two other girls were at their various tests until around eleven o'clock. By then, Ranma was as wrung out mentally as he had ever been, and Shampoo's eyes had crossed. Even Mai was mumbling about "The numbers going to eat me..." as they were led away.

It was only when they arrived at one of the out-of-the-way cottages that Ranma remembered the next part of this predicament. *GAHHHHH!!!*

Before the aqua-transformo-sexual could protest, Setsuna had opened the door and ushered them inside. Ranma opened her mouth then, but Setsuna just waved and walked off to find her own bed. "Remember you three, we get up early here, so I'd suggest unpacking and getting to bed as soon as possible."

Ignoring Ranma's stammering, Shampoo looked around, nodding in approval. The cottage was simply laid out, but well made, built around a single main room serving as a bedroom. It had a small laundry and a bathroom. In the main room, the three cots were lined up in a row. But it was obvious that one of them had been squeezed into the room recently, and there was barely any room in the cottage's main room because of it and the other pieces of furniture, a small circular table, and a single small wardrobe.



Now done with her perusal, Shampoo turned to Ranma, asking innocently, "Why Ranma so red? It only us girls."

"You know perfectly well why," Ranma growled. A wicked thought occurred to Ranma then, and deciding to take revenge for being stuck with the other two like this, she whirled, her fingers flickering out to tickle Shampoo's side.

Surprised by the assault, the Amazon girl attempted to get away, only to find herself hemmed in by one of the beds. Soon she was being tickled mercilessly with Ranma using her greater strength and speed to pin the taller Amazon to the bed, tickling her mercilessly. Eventually, she gasped out, "**GIVE**, Shampoo give!"

Mai had watched this from the sidelines, partly amused, and part... something else Ranma couldn't quite place. *Jealous maybe? But why would that be?*

"What brought that on?" the tallest girl in the room asked, warily standing by the door, ready to bolt if Ranma tried that with her. *I doubt she... he... will, not with how much Ranma reacted to Shampoo and I being tied up earlier. Ranma seems somewhat prudish. But I didn't see him... her tickling Shampoo like that either.*

"UGH! First, this is just wrong. I might be in this form now, but remember I was born a guy," Ranma grumbled, running her fingers through her hair as she moved to perch on the bed next to her girlfriend, who was now gasping and whimpering at sore ribs from how loud she had been laughing. "While... okay, sharing a room with Shampoo is something we're working towards, sharing a room with her and you together? That's just asking for trouble. And she knows it, the little temptress."

That caused Mai to smile, oddly touched, while Shampoo muttered about Ranma of all people calling her little. Mai didn't know very many people well, but she knew she was attractive and figured that the number of young men who would be willing to think of her feelings at a moment like this could be counted on the fingers of one hand. *Andy would, but he'd have just fled instead of sticking around... damn it.*

Not aware of Mai's inner thoughts, Ranma smacked Shampoo on the leg. "Second, Shampoo **knows** that I don't like to spend long periods of time in this form. If I could have gotten a room on my own, that could have given me time to..."

"**NO!**" Shampoo growled out, waving a finger in Ranma's face. "Shampoo read enough manga know where that road leads. You stay in female form all time here, or else just asking for trouble. Or does Ranma want reverse of what happened at Furinkan happen here, huh?"

"...You mean girls coming after me with hot water instead of boys with cold?" Ranma asked, confused.

“Actually, I think she just meant you’d eventually just be found out, run out of the school. Along with us since we arrived with you. Even me,” Mai muttered, also having read enough manga to know how badly wrong this could go, a fact that was like, ironically, a cold splash of water to the face. “Yeah, Ranma... you’re better off just staying in female form the whole time you’re here.”

Ranma stared at her in betrayal, his blue eyes wide like a puppy’s, and Mai had to bite her lip to not coo at how cute the short redhead looked at that moment. But she held strong, nodding her head as Shampoo spoke, explaining in no uncertain terms that this school would kick them out the moment that Ranma’s curse was discovered.

After a few moments, Ranma subsided and reluctantly agreed with them on that point, although she still felt that they should have pushed for a second cottage. “If not for me, then for Mai. I mean, look how crowded this place is.”

“Shampoo not mind sharing bed with Ranma, then get rid of one bed, yea?” Shampoo giggled but held up her hand as Ranma turned to pout at her. “Is joke!”

As Ranma leaned back, Shampoo went on in Chinese. “Actually, Ranma, I think we shouldn’t be doing any romance-type activities here. I’m getting the impression that the girls here are very straight. If the conversation about this Donny Yen person that dominated the conversation in the commissary was anything to go by. And you heard Master Nawa, no illicit activities.”

“Yeah, but judging from what level four of her training is, I think that’s a bit of a wash, personally,” Mai muttered, shaking her head in bemusement.

Shaking her head at that, Shampoo pointed a finger at Ranma. “But more importantly, you mentioned a speed technique to Master Nawa. What the heck are you thinking? I told you my Elders would have a problem with me sharing our techniques with you, let alone you sharing it with a complete stranger. I do want to go home at some point, Ranma, and if we share that...”

“It’s not if your clan’s technique is the only speed technique out there,” Ranma argued back, causing Shampoo to nod agreement. “So long as we don’t use your clan’s training method, then I think we can get away with it. And remember what I said after we fought Honda-san. We need to work on our physicality. The Toughness training might not have worked well so far, and I don’t think we’ll get away with it here. But this kind of thing should be easier.”

Shampoo was about to ask what kind of training Ranma had thought up, but Mai interrupted, asking, “Excuse me? Why are you talking as if you two fought with Yokozuna Honda-sama?”

“We did,” Shampoo answered, before explaining the Street FIGHT aspect of their journey, and how they met Honda. At that point Ranma took up the tale.

By the end of the explanation, Mai was once more a little jealous, although it had nothing to do with the twosome’s relationship any longer. “Huh, that’s actually really amazing. Sumo wrestling isn’t my sport, but Honda-san is still a national hero, and I rather think I’d like to meet him. Still, what would you need for this training of yours?”

“Hmm, I will need some props for my idea to work. A large fish tank and some fish, the smaller and faster the better. And those little net things you use at parties or festivals,” Ranma counted off on her fingers. “The trick will be to dip out **all** the fish without getting the net broken. It will be good coordination and speed training. At least, I think so.”

Mai crossed her arms under her breasts, bringing both of the other girls’ attention to those objects, with even Shampoo staring for a moment. “Okay, I’ll bite. I can get my hands on all that if we’re allowed to head into town. I even have a ready-made excuse since I left some of my bags at the hotel, as I didn’t expect the school to be so large or organized. But I want in on this training. What was its name again?”

“Chestnuts Roasting Over an Open Fire. Amazon Technique is, throw the chestnuts into a fire, pull them back out without getting hands burned,” Shampoo answered promptly, still speaking in Chinese.

Mai blinked, then blinked again, staring incredulously at Shampoo. “Are you Amazons all masochists?”

Shampoo blushed at that, then lashed out with a kick towards Mai, who ducked under it with a laugh. “Careful, there’s not enough space in here to roughhouse, you know.”

“I think we saw a pond on the way here. We’ll need to remember to feed them,” Ranma said, ignoring the antics of the two girls. “But I’ll wager anything that this is still a lot easier than learning the Amazon way, Shampoo. And far less painful than the martial arts construction one.”

Mai looked interested, but Shampoo shook her head, moving forward to put her few bits of clothing from her weapons space into the drawers of the wardrobe. “It involve pounding concrete with fist like jackhammer.”

“Yeah, it’s a good way to strengthen your hands but frankly, the pain of it gets too much to learn the speed technique part well,” Ranma answered with a sigh.

Nodding thoughtfully, Mai followed Shampoo, noting the other girl needed some more clothing. Then she looked between her two new roommates thoughtfully. *I didn’t see this*

*coming, but why not take advantage of it to answer some questions that have been eating at my mind since we met.*

She hopped over to the bed, leaning against the headrest as she looked at Shampoo, one eyebrow rising and waving her hand at Ranma as she grinned. "Now that we're all situated here, though, we can talk about really important things. Romance! How did you two get together? Give me all the juicy details!"

Shampoo returned the taller girl's grin. Like most women, Amazons were prone to gossip. And her courtship with Ranma was, while really unusual, also very romantic. A part of her was worried that Mai might develop an interest in Ranma, but she hadn't seen any sign of that so far, so Shampoo was free to brag instead of just defend her territory.

For his part, Ranma just groaned and looked away when an embarrassed blush. While Ranma wasn't embarrassed by her relationship with Shampoo, there was a big difference between that and wanting to share it with someone else.

Unfortunately for Ranma, Shampoo ignored the redhead's discomfort and went into the details about their first meeting, their second meeting in the cave, and then their meeting on the rooftop of the Tendo place.

By its end, Mai clapped excitedly, then shook her head with a faint sigh. "Ooh, all that sounds amazing! I'm really happy that you two..." she sighed, shaking her head. "I wish that I had something similar."

Shampoo blinked, then stared Mai up and down, one eyebrow rising. "Shampoo think you probably could walk down street, whistle, and have choice of men from around Japan, let alone island."

It wasn't often that Shampoo found herself jealous of another woman's looks, but Mai was definitely gorgeous. *Although how she gets away with no back pain with those things is beyond me.*

"Hah, you'd think so, but the love of my life doesn't seem willing to, well do anything romantic anymore."

Shampoo made an interrogative noise while Ranma just lay on her bed, waiting for this torture to be over. Seeing Shampoo interested, Mai pulled out a picture of Andy Boggart, holding it out to Shampoo. Ranma glanced at it and saw a guy with long, strangely silverish hair, which Ranma thought was kind of girly. *And this is me sayin' it.*

Beyond that, Andy had a thin, almost arrogant bishounen face but with a smile on it when the picture was taken. He looked about college age, maybe a little younger, and had some descent muscles on him. *Still, muscles ain't everything.*

“This is Andy! He’s a fellow student of my school, although he wasn’t originally. He’s only been with us for about six years or so. Before that, we knew each other as kids, but he was learning his parent’s style. ...Why that changed isn’t my story to tell,” she finished, frowning, her brown eyes darkening further before she shook her head and banished whatever memory had darkened them.

“And you’re sweet on him,” Shampoo said in Chinese.

Mai nodded firmly. “I love Andy, I have for years. And at first, he was kind of responding. But then he just... stopped.”

From there Mai told the duo – or at least Shampoo – how she had become interested in Andy, how they had gone on a few dates and their training together.

Shampoo ate it up, gleeful at the idea of a childhood romance like that. However, as the tale went on, Shampoo began to see a problem with how Mai was. This sounded a little too much like a reversal of her relationship with Moose.

*Only Mai’s not blind and is one heck of a catch!* Shampoo thought, her eyes straying down to Mai’s chest again in jealousy. In everything but height and bust, Shampoo felt she wouldn’t lose to Mai, but in those two areas, the Japanese girl was her superior. *Skilled, gorgeous, intelligent – she’s able to speak Chinese! Grandmother would ask her to join the clan in a heartbeat.*

And Mai’s next words washed away any connection between Mu Tzu and Mai there might have been.

“He doesn’t tell me to stop, though!” Mai made certain to emphasize. “Andy doesn’t tell me he’s not interested or anything. He just looks uncomfortable, blushes and runs away. I don’t know what changed. I keep trying to get Andy to be a little, you know, **proactive** romantic-wise, but he seems to only be interested in the martial arts and getting stronger.”

*Well, that’s a big difference there! I never encouraged Mu Tzu or shown any interest in him. And I certainly have never blushed and run away. If what she’s doing is making uncomfortable, he should just say so, not run away. That’s not the way to respond to a woman’s interest. And as for the rest...*

Shampoo looked over at Ranma, snickering, but Ranma quickly held up her hands. “Don’t put that evil on me! If I was just interested in the martial arts, I’d have never kissed you or invited you along on this trip. I just think that The Art is equally important and getting better in it should be my life’s goal. But it’s not my life’s everything, and I’m more than willing to put effort into, er, other things, like our relationship.”

"I see," Mai muttered, while Shampoo melted just a bit at Ranma's words and the shy look the redhead was giving her. "You lucky bitch."

Shampoo flashed the V sign at Mai, not taking her curse seriously. "What have you tried so far?"

"Well, for a while, I waited for him to make a move after we had gone on a few karaoke dates. He never did. So, I started to flirt with him in more and more outgoing ways. He just keeps on blushing and stammering and running away," Mai sighed, shaking her head.

"Is that why you're here?" Ranma snickered. "You think tying him down will force him to give you a straight answer?"

"Yes," Mai answered bluntly. "Something like that anyway. If he doesn't want to open his presents, I'll by God make him mine!"

She looked at her two listeners closely, searching for irritation with that idea or revulsion at her outgoing stance. But she didn't see any, instead seeing Shampoo cackling aloud at her wording.

With the worries about Mai's advances being wholly unwanted out of the way, to Shampoo, the way Mai described her courtship of Andy was precisely how a normal Amazon would go about courting a foreign male. *Indeed, if Ranma hadn't responded to my kiss as he did or come up with this whole training journey thing, I'd probably be just as forward with him.*

On the other hand, Ranma simply shrugged, unconcerned about it, as this wasn't his issue. "If this guy's serious about the martial arts, it would be nice to have a rival. You think you could introduce me to him so we can spar a bit."

"You should've come up with a different way of saying that given the form you're wearing," Mai teased, and Ranma shuddered, grabbing the nearby pillow and hurling it at Mai's face with unerring accuracy, causing the large breasted woman to flop sideways onto her side with a whoop.

When she sat back up, Mai asked hesitantly, "So neither of you see a problem with a woman chasing a man rather than vice versa?"

Shampoo laughed and explained her reasoning on that score, while Ranma simply shrugged. "You might not be acting like a traditional Yamato Nadeshiko, but martial artists aren't supposed to be traditional. If Andy is looking for that kind of thing, he should've already indicated that he wasn't interested in you, and I'm not talking about just running away blushing. I think he's just embarrassed and unable to, you know, deal with feelings."

Mai to looked at Shampoo. "You really lucked out, didn't you?" While Shampoo just looked smug, Mai decided it was time to change the subject. "Anyway, we've talked about romance enough for now. What about fashion? I love that outfit you're wearing, but I have to say that it's probably more for hard use than anything else. What do you Chinese Amazons wear for special occasions?"

Shampoo happily replied, asking Mai about her own outfit, how much of it was based on fashion and how much of it was psychological warfare. The two of them laughed at that, as Mai explained how often her outfit had helped her in a fight distracting her opponents.

At first Ranma tried to not to listen to the conversation for many reasons, looking over the math textbook they had been given and trying to figure it out, before finally getting up and heading outside to exercise. She came back in an hour later only to instantly turn back around as the two girls had apparently started to compare bra types, as well as what colors were sexiest. A contest Mai won much to Shampoo's chagrin.

Shampoo's bust had grown a bit since the last time she'd bought a bra, and she hadn't actually brought more than a few changes of clothing with her, when chasing Ranma and Genma. The young Amazon had actually been very grateful for the school lending them some training clothing.

Both girls looked up, then blinked at the redheaded after image as the door closed behind Ranma. They looked at one another, then began to laugh, shaking their heads.

*This is going to be a long stay, isn't it?* Ranma groaned outside the door, banging her head against the outer wall of the cabin.

**OOOOOO**

The next day, training began early. Really, really embarrassing training.

"The best way to learn is by doing! So we're going to be tying each of you up, assigning you to a journeywoman, and working you through how to flex your body and muscles in order to escape from various normal capture methods. And then we'll be walking you through the few that you can't escape through with mere physical means and teaching you how to use our ki escape techniques," Atama's senior apprentice Yukari, explained as she led the new Trio into a classroom on the first floor of the same building.

"Are all three of us going to be the same room?" Mai asked innocently. While she knew that Ranma was at the moment a woman and had spent the night sleeping in a bed in the same room as the boy-turned girl, Mai also knew that Ranma was mentally a guy given the way he had blushed and stammered at times. And the way they were 'captured' by Master Nawa the day before had been incredibly erotic, even to Mai.

*On the one hand, watching Ranma die of blood loss would be hilarious, but on the other hand, I'm not certain I would be very comfortable with her looking at me like that in more controlled situations. Other than Andy, of course. Or that Shampoo wouldn't try to kill me or everyone else if he did. She's got a good handle on it, but I've seen a few flashes of that girl's jealousy and it's best not to poke the sleeping bear.*

"No." Yukari opened the door to the classroom, and Mai and the others looked inside, seeing that it had been partitioned out into small cubicles, providing privacy to everyone going through this training. "You'll have to break out of your bonds in front of several journeywoman and a crowd of your peers when you complete this training, but to begin with, you'll only have your instructor. We know it's embarrassing."

"Are you going to be all right with this?" Shampoo asked in Chinese to Ranma. "I know that you're still a little leery about... you know, being touched and stuff in your female form, and this is going to be going quite a way beyond that."

She had spoken slowly enough that Ranma could pick up most of her words and Ranma nodded, oddly philosophical about things. "The ropes aren't another person, so that's not going to set me off, and while I'm more interested in tying up a certain old man of our acquaintance so that he can't get away, learning it from this side of things is also a good idea. And It really can help with your flexibility, you know."

Mai and Shampoo blinked at that, then looked at one another and laughed. Ranma stared at them, wondering what was going on, but the two naturally born girls waved the redhead off. And after a moment, Ranma shrugged and entered her own little cubicle, where she was greeted by one of the matronly journeywomen, thankfully. *Oh thank goodness it ain't the Ganguro girl.*

Throughout the day, the three girls were put through their paces in terms of escaping from various Hotojutsu style incarcerations, as well as regular things. This ranged from simply tying their wrists together behind them, tying their elbows and knees and ankles together, chaining their hands together, even using zip ties. That last was a new one to all three, but the journeywomen explained that this part of the course was actually designed to be taught to young women who, through family connections or other reasons, were in danger of being kidnapped. Thus, being able to break out like this could help save their lives or virtue and was normally accompanied by further resistance training to various illegal drugs. That training was open to the three martial artists too, but after discussion they all agreed it wasn't necessary.

"I mean, building up immunity to various knockout gases and stuff could be interesting, but I don't know how necessary it is for me. I'd started to build up an immunity to that dealing with Kodachi back in Nerima," Ranma said that night, only to be interrupted by Shampoo.

"Blllllittttccchhhh,...." the Amazon drawled causing Mai to stare at her and lean forward eagerly to ask what had caused that reaction.



It took a while to get back to the topic at hand, but it turned out that both Mai and Shampoo had built up an extreme immunity to that kind of thing as part of their previous training. "Amazons always be pretty, so be in danger of kidnapping from young age. Immunity to drugs and stuff be simple enough to build," Shampoo opined, making no mention of a pair of rather annoying twins of her acquaintance.

"Yes, and I've built up an immunity to gases and other things as part of my training in Shiranui-Ryu. If you two go forward with your plan to leave with me and head south again, I can help you built that immunity up when we arrive at my home in Kyushu," Mai added.

On top of that, for the most part, the trio proved that they were already flexible or strong enough in Ranma's case to flex out of the ropes. That surprised the watching journeywoman, who wondered aloud if that was cheating. "And how the heck is someone so small so strong?"

Eventually though they did start to run into things that none of the three could just break out of, and the accompanying journeywoman started to instruct them in various ways to move or flex their bodies to weaken the ropes binding their bodies. "Eventually, you'll get to the point where you could even use these moves on wire-based capture techniques," one of the trainers explained, somewhat shocked at how quickly the trio of newcomers were learning the techniques.

After the morning training, the three of them were forced into classes for the afternoon, and then an early dinner was followed by more instruction. This instruction took the form of using ropes or chains as weapons. Here once more the trio had such a large head start in this training, so much so, they were quickly relegated to training solely with Master Nawa and Yukari.

Part of this training though was how to use grapnels, ropes or kusarigama not only to fight, but to help them travel along. Mai took one look at Master Nawa, the coils of rope on her arms having dropped down and now forming into hooks and grapnel as she moved around the forest, and shook her head, a wry grin on her face. "Good grief! It's like watching a knockoff Spiderman! When paired with my own family's style, being that maneuverable will be incredible."

To Mai's shock Ranma asked, "Who's Spiderman?" while Shampoo also looked quizzical.

"I need to introduce you two to American comics. They're not as deep as Japanese graphic novels can be, but they have some amazing characters and combat scenes."

"What overall plot like?" Shampoo asked, watching avidly as Master Nawa move back through the forest to them, and gestured them to pick up several long grapnels for themselves.

Mai chuckled shaking her head. "What overall plot? There's an overall theme to most of those comics, but not an overall plot."

"Shampoo give it a miss then. But want be first to try this, yes?" The Amazon said, twirling the rope.

Ranma did the same, but in her case, she closed her eyes for a brief second, and then pulsed some ki into the rope. Atama saw this, and her eyes widened in surprise. "You did not mention that you already had some instruction in adding your energy into your weapons."

"I've seen it used more often than I have actually used it myself. I had this rival, who liked to use bandannas as weapons. He could make them into these weird boomerang things, or use them as clubs," Ranma explained, before moving to one side of Shampoo. "On something this big, that's going to be way tougher."

And rope-based movement didn't imply just moving over and through trees. Atama showed them how to use chains or ropes like giant springs, hurling themselves over obstacles or straight up far higher than even Ranma could jump. And they could even be used to move over to traps and spikes.

That was a little too specific an exercise for Ranma's tastes, not to mention the concentration needed. But swiftly shifting from using them to move to using them as an added layer of protection, which you could charge with your ki? That was interesting.

The first few times they tried to use the ropes to travel were not pretty. Even Ranma's training in moving through the forest wasn't quite up to moving that quickly while trying to control and use ropes to travel. The ropes kept on getting tangled, and his attempt to use his ki to control them failed miserably. That required a level of ki control that Ranma could barely imagine let alone use.

Shampoo too had trouble, her reflexes failing her. In contrast, Mai was able to use the ropes to travel, pretty well, but couldn't deal with the strength needed to keep going after the first ten minutes, her arms aching under the strain. And she too had control issues, the ropes becoming even more tangled than Ranma had.

However, by the end of the second day all three of them had shown improvement, which was all Atama wanted. She released them to do their homework for the regular class and reminded all three, while pointedly looking at Ranma, that they weren't allowed to slack off in that classwork if they wanted to keep learning from her school.

Ranma was still annoyed by that, but the other two girls were more willing to go along with it and convinced Ranma to do the same. However, she did spend an hour practicing the speed technique with the fish and the water.

Over the next few days, Master Nawa proved to be a very good teacher, as did most of her journeymen and Yukari, who, by all rights, should have been a master herself. The three newcomers built on their better starting point swiftly and within two days began to surpass most of the others in the various training exercises. Eventually it got to the point where Master Nawa was having Shampoo and Mai teach classes to several of the others on the weapons space far faster than she had expected.

The cleavage window that Mai had learned was a hit among the girls, after several long minutes of giggling, anyway. And Shampoo's own knowledge of the energy space was just as good. By the end of the first week, Yukari and Master Nawa had both shown progress in ki-space technique, and Master Nawa had agreed to teach the trio her ki-growth technique. This was the technique that would allow them to extend a rope or chain-based weapon. She did warn them however, that the technique was both ki intensive and hard to master.

"It calls for a control none of you have, although you might be closer to the power requirement than I was when I was your age," Atama half-warned, half-grumbled.

To Ranma's continued disgruntlement however, he did not join them in this training. Instead, she was forced into remedial classes. It turned out that Ranma's writing, both in terms of actual handwriting, and writing skill, were not up to what Atama wanted anyone at her school to have, no matter how long they would actually be there.

The redhead grumbled on this point on the sixth evening of their stay at Musubime Osoroshi rubbing her dominant hand's wrist in annoyance. "Seriously, what is up with the handwriting thing?! I mean come on, how important is that to a martial artist? I don't got anyone I'd write a letter to, I ain't the kind to issue formal challenges, hell, I don't even pay taxes."

"Who knows, given your tales about weird styles, maybe Ranma running into martial arts calligraphy in future?" Shampoo teased, while Mai choked at that last point, blinking and frowning her brow as she wondered if her school actually paid taxes too. Despite her own writing ability in Japanese not being very good, Shampoo's actual calligraphy was very neat and tidy.

Ranma stared at the other girl, then slowly shook her head. "Why do you have to tempt fate like that?"

Coming back to the conversation from her minor mental dead-end Mai snickered, sitting back on the bed, as she turned her attention back to her math homework. "That would be kind of amusing to watch. Although I have no idea what kind of practical skills a martial arts calligraphy style would teach you. Maybe forgery, but that's not exactly an everyday combat-type skill."

Done going over her homework and satisfied with much of it, Mai set it aside a moment later, leaning back against the head rest of the bed. With three beds in here, there was only enough space for a small dresser and an equally small table, with no room for actual chairs. "So, how do you all think the training is going? We've been here a week, I figure that's long enough to get a feel for it."

"Eh, pretty good. I'm not exactly happy about the whole splitting our time thing, but I think we're all getting the hang of what you keep on calling 'imitation Spiderman'. We're supposed to be starting to spar with some of the journeywoman tomorrow, weapons only, which should be cool," Ranma answered.

Listening to the redhead, Mai had to hide a giggle. Despite his curse, Ranma still spoke like a guy, and it always struck her as funny, especially when Ranma was trying to work on her homework, biting her lip and shifting in her chair like a little girl wanting to run outside. "I really like those rope javelins, and might want to start carrying one around. But I'm not so happy about our ki manipulation stuff."

Shampoo spoke up then. "Ranma be patient. Ranma learn best by watching, then doing, yes? In ki manipulation, no able to see, so it hard. But it barely a week, give it time."

"Personally, I thought it'd be going faster since we all already have experience in using ki consciously. Still, if you're both having trouble with it at least that makes me feel a little better. I thought my training with the boob window and Bunshin would allow me to pick up this whole diverting ki to a specific point would faster, but I'm having a lot of trouble pushing it out of my body at so small a specific point beyond my hands. That's kind of annoying," Mai grumbled.

Ranma nodded, although her face was thoughtful as she leaned back against the wall beside her bed, setting her own work down on the small desk between her bed and Shampoo's. Shampoo's was pushed almost directly against Mai's, barely leaving enough room on that side for Shampoo to stand up.

Seeing Ranma's thoughtful expression, Shampoo asked her boyfriend-currently-girlfriend what she was thinking.

"I think that maybe we're going about this all wrong. I mean, I don't know about you Mai, but when it comes to ki stuff, Shampoo and I are basically making it up as we go along. Other than the fact that it's tied into general health, we don't have any idea how to build it up, or how much normal people have."

"... Hmmm, that is true. My grandfather taught me about ki, how to meditate and connect with it, but we haven't talked about how to build my reserves other than general exercise and general meditation yet. We're supposed to this summer when he returns, but that hasn't happened yet. What are you getting at?" Mai asked, her eyes narrowed as she stared at the redhead.

"Why do we need to bother with moving our ki around our body to a specific point? Yeah, that could allow you to you know escape without anyone the wiser, but if getting out of the binding is the main thing, then why can't we just... pulse it out from our bodies?" Ranma mused.

"Unshaped? Unformed? That sounds weird," Shampoo answered bluntly. "And really exhausting."

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm thinking of these Wuxia films I saw while me and my Pops were in China." Shampoo made an interrogative noise, and Ranma explained some of them, and one or two of them Shampoo had seen as well. While remote, her village did actually get some TV channels, although most of them were Chinese Communist Party propaganda.

Back on track Ranma went on. "Anyway, in those films, the people were able to release their ki bursts, not formed like an attack, but still powerful enough to fling their enemies around. It, it could work..."

With that, Ranma hopped to her feet, then hopped up onto the table, which allowed her to have some more room. She then mimed a fight, where an opponent hit her and Ranma let loose with some kind of energy, trying to describe the scene she had seen in the movie.

"That sound even tougher than pulsing out ki from one point, Ranma," Shampoo said disparagingly. "Also, seem to imply that Ranma have ki to spare."

Mai frowned thoughtfully, but didn't say anything, unsure what to think.

Ranma nodded, and hopped off the bed still looking thoughtful, heading towards the door. "I'm going to go train for a bit."

The two girls stared at one another, then Mai asked, "do you think she'll do it?"

Shampoo looked out the window, then shrugged her shoulders. "Shampoo learning never bet against Ranma. Unpredictable is her middle name."

The two of them fell silent, as Shampoo finished the last of her homework, then Mai asked hesitantly, "So, Ranma said at one point you have some manga you have on you? I don't suppose we could work up a trade, hmm?"

Shampoo nodded, and reached into her bag, pulling out some of the mangas in her collection. Soon after trading titles between them, the two girls were reading excitedly, laughing and joking together. After the last week, both of them were well on their way to becoming friends, despite Shampoo being a little concerned about the good-looking Shiranui girl living in such cramped conditions with Ranma, female form or not.

The next day, when they were going through their escape training again in the morning, Ranma closed her eyes, ignoring the words of the journeywoman assigned to her for the moment. Instead, she concentrated inwardly, feeling the thrum of her ki within her. Then, as Ranma's breathing and heartrate slowed, she waited a brief second, before thrusting her ki out of her body. That was the easiest way of describing it. It was like Ranma was standing in the middle of a deep pool that was also her, and she pushed her will outward, splashing water everywhere.

It worked far better than Ranma had anticipated. The ropes binding her body exploded outward, sending torn bits in every direction, causing the journeywoman to stumble back in surprise. Ranma then hopped to her feet, before swaying woozily. "Oooh, okay, maybe that's a little tougher to do than I expected."

"... I think I'm going to go get Master Nawa," the apprentice muttered, shaking her head. "I don't know if that counts Ranma."

Moments later, Atama was there, and the journeyman explained what had happened. Listening, she shook her head. "I knew the three of you were strong, I didn't thought you were that strong in terms of your ki, Ranma."

"I'm not," Ranma shook her head. "I wasn't making any headway in the whole moving ki through my body and pulsing it out at specific points thing. So, I thought about just pulsing it out in general. That doesn't mean I'm strong or anything, just taking your training in a different direction."

"Yes, it does mean you're strong. I doubt anyone below Rei and Yukari could to this, and still be able to move," Atama answered dryly before pausing a moment as she considered things.

"Still, it's strange. Women and men learn how to use ki in slightly different ways. Men, generally speaking have more, but struggle with fine control. Women have fine control, but struggle to build up their ki," Atama mused, staring around the cubicle and not noticing Ranma's twitch. "Still, despite what Tatsumi says, I think we can say that this was a successful training exercise."

But Ranma shook her head. "No way. I'm exhausted! I don't think I could put myself through a single fight right now, let alone try to complete an escape or whatever. I need to practice this." *But I think I really am onto something here. Something way bigger than just a way to get out of ropes or chains. Hehehehe...*

Atama looked at Ranma shaking her head. "If you wish to do so, I'm not going to stop you. But I think what you're talking about is the need to build up ki, and there I am afraid I cannot help you. Beyond exercise and general meditation, I do not know of any way of building ki. And frankly, you might already have almost as much as my apprentices if you are able to do

this. And I thought Shampoo and Mai had a decent ki reserves for their age." She mock-scowled, shaking her head. "Some girls have all the luck."

Again, Ranma just shrugged, trying to avoid Master Nawa's eyes for a moment, as she slumped down. "I suppose just meditation for now, then?"

"Perhaps. Although I have heard of specific mental exercises that can help you enlarge your ki reserves, as well as various... well I believe they're called cultivation methods these days. Not certain about those," Atama shrugged before wagging a finger at Ranma. "Just don't let it get away of the rest of your education Ranma. You're already behind as it is."

The young redhead's groan was music to Atama's ears.

Life at the school continued, with Atama pushing the Trio into enlarging the group they were teaching the ki space to, and vice versa as their agreement dictated. By the second week, Shampoo and Mai and Ranma had all mastered the speed technique training, which they then shared with Master Nawa and her most senior apprentices.

Their training with the schools' non-linear weapons also proceeded apace, with each of them acquiring skills with one or more. Shampoo began to use a chain-based meteor hammer, which she could connect to her chui-based wushu. Mai preferred a manriki, which she could use as defense rather than offense, already using throwing daggers in her normal style. While Ranma enjoyed using the rope darts, which she could use both for long range attacks and defense. Although only Shampoo felt that she would work her chosen weapon into her everyday style, Mai and Ranma thinking their new skills would be good situational weapons, especially when added to their ki-space.

By the end of their third week, all three were training in enhancing their weapons with ki. Eventually they would be able to stop attacks up to and including bullets.

Unfortunately for Ranma, her regular education time continued to take up half their time the school, and her annoyance with that was apparent every evening, causing Shampoo and Mai to tease the redhead mercilessly. Both of them actually enjoyed the school aspect, getting to know the other young girls here, and while as outsiders there was a bit of building jealousy, their personalities kept it from building quickly.

But for all three of them, it proved to be in sparring with the locals and one another where they had the most fun and improved the quickest.

Of course given the combat abilities all three of the newcomers had shown, Atama did not make the mistake of putting them against anyone else, instead, pairing them against one another. Thus four days after they arrived, Ranma and Mai stood across from one another.

Thankfully for Ranma's sensibilities, Mai had donned one of the local outfits, which, while formfitting, didn't distract Ranma so much. So the redhead was able to fully concentrate on her actual fighting abilities rather than the physics defying question of how the heck her outfit stayed on.

"Get her Airen!" Shampoo shouted from the sidelines, where she, Atama and much of the rest of the Musubime Osoroshi school stood, watching eagerly. Atama had ordered several of them to take actual notes about the spar to share with the others, and had broadly hinted that they would be quizzed on their observations afterwards.

"Ready to get beaten Red?" Mai taunted, flicking out her fan to one side, twirling in place, before taking up a stance. It was a low crouch, with one foot forward, her fan open by her head, her other hand thrust forward, empty at the moment.

It looked like something from a more ostentatious version of Tai Chi, but Ranma knew better than to take that as a given. From what little Ranma had seen of Mai, a lot of the Shiranui style was in throwing off the opponent, luring them into false assumptions.

You wish! Ranma Saotome doesn't lose!" Ranma retorted, standing there in her own loose, seemingly bored pose.

But Mai too had seen Ranma in action, and knew that pose was a faint just as much as her own, and that Ranma was both faster and stronger than her. *Keep Ranma on the ground, or if she's in the air, back away quickly. Try not to get in a straight contest up close with her if you can avoid it.*

"Enough posing. Begin!" Atama said from the sidelines, chopping her hand forward without any preamble.

With that, Mai shot forward, but paused halfway to Ranma. Her hand pulsing slightly with ki she tossing her fan like it was a dagger ahead of her, the closed fan seeming to multiply in the air. "Bunshin no Jutsu!"

The number of copied fans however mattered not at all as Ranma just leaped over the lot of them. Twirling to one side, Mai dodged his attack, and was suddenly holding a long spear, thrusting it forward.

There were shouts of surprise from many of the students who hadn't seen this trick in action before, unlike the Bunshin, which Mai had used in the woods. Even Shampoo had to nod. Having a weapons space that was so large as to have a spear in it was impressive. *Back home, Mousse is the only one to have a large enough ki space for that kind of thing, although of course his space is far larger than that.*



Beside her, Atama frowned as she saw that it was a real spear, its spear tip visibly sharp. She was about to halt the match but stopped as Ranma weaved out of the way, his hand flashing to the side into the spear tip and shattering the wood right behind the tip with a punch, before he moved in.

But Mai had already dropped her weapon, and met Ranma with several forearm blocks and palm jabs, followed by a rising knee that Ranma blocked, using its momentum to hop into the air.

Seeing this, Mai threw herself backwards, flipping several times and lashing out with a kick once when Ranma closed. Ranma blocked it and use the momentum to remain in the air but Mai kept on retreating. Then, when Ranma tried to close once more still in the air, she threw several Bunshin-multiplied daggers in his direction, using the distraction to get away from the edge of the training area.

By the time Ranma dealt with those, she was back across the training area from her, twin fans open and ready in her hands. *Dammit! Ranma's mastery of the that aerial style of hers is so bizarre! How can she remain in the air for so long, and just catch my real throwing daggers and ignore the copies somehow. Even my grandfather couldn't do both at once. And my forearms are freaking numb just from a few exchanges.*

Ranma on the other hand was surprised that she had modified her own attack so quickly to try and negate his aerial style. Few people Ranma had encountered were so quick to adapt to it, even though it was obvious that Mai couldn't actually deal with it. *That knee attack was interesting too. That almost felt like a Muay Thai strike.*

This time, it was Ranma who rushed forward, and decided to use some of the Hotojutsu style that they had been learning. From her wrist, a length of rope two yards long and thick around as Ranma's wrists came out, and she whirled, lashing out before she reached Mai.

Surprised, Mai leaped up, then realized her mistake as Ranma kicked up off of the ground, the rope flashing again towards Mai. Mai's fans became as hard as steel as she channeled ki into them using something that Atama had been teaching them, and she sliced into the rope, cutting it away even as she flipped through the air away from Ranma, who followed up.

She landed while Ranma was still in the air, but ducked to the side, and once more pulled a spear out of her boob window, hurling it up towards Ranma. Mai also tossed up to smoke bombs, which went off in Ranma's face.

Charging into the smoke, Mai's fans landed several hard blows on Ranma's forearms and chest, pushing the redhead back, but Mai suddenly found her hand gripped in one of Ranma's, and pulled in. *Crap! That's what I get for not sticking to the plan!*

Several elbow and knee shots were exchanged, with Ranma realizing quickly that this was also part of Mai's style. It did indeed seem like she had added some Muay Thai into the Shiranui-Ryu. A second later, she broke the hold, and tried for her own, while also lashing out with a palm strike towards Ranma's throat.

Ranma dodged it, then tapped her on the forearm as it passed, causing Mai to over balance just a tiny bit. The redhead then was able to get in a shot to Mai's stomach which doubled her over with a gasp of pain. Another blow to the side of her head followed, hurling Mai out of the smoke to land on the ground, where she rolled, groaning.

Even so, the heir to the Shiranui style pushed to her feet, in pain but still game. She was just about to send another hail of fans at Ranma as he leaped up out of the smoke, but Atama shouted, "That's enough!"

When the two looked towards her, Ranma landing nearby, Atama shook her head ruefully. "As fascinating a match as that was, and while I liked the fact that both of you incorporated some of the things you have already learned here, I think it was a little too fast... and hidden..." she mock-glared at a sheepish Mai, "for much of my students here to get much out of it. From now on, we'll try to limit this kind of spar to once a week, and have the two of you spar against myself or Rei."

Of the two senior apprentices, Rei was both the younger and most physical.

Mai and Ranma glared challengingly at one another, but Mai then sighed, shook her head, and stood up, cracking her back. This obviously thrust her chest forward in a way that made Ranma turn away to look back at Atama. Even with the clothing she was currently wearing, that was a bit much. "I suppose you're right Master Nawa. We did kind of fall back into our own styles there for a bit."

"Don't take this as a criticism Mai. You both fought very well, and you **were** incorporating what I've been teaching you these past few days. But I think you just realized something yourselves. Adding new abilities to your personal styles is something that will only occur over time, not quickly, yes?"

Both of the combatants nodded in rueful agreement, and it was proven the very next day that Shampoo had actually incorporated more of Master Nawa's training with binding and other techniques than Mai or Ranma had. indeed, Shampoo actually scored a full victory on Ranma.

When Ranma moved in for the kill, Shampoo suddenly bound one of her arms to her side throwing off his landing. The next second a blow from her chui put the redhead on the ground before she could rip in his way free.

In contrast, when Shampoo tried the same trick early on her battle with Mai, Mai's use of her daggers and a kusarigama negated Shampoo's use of a meteor hammer.

But all three of them greatly enjoyed the sparring and got a lot out of it, although what Mai got out of it was slightly more limited than what Ranma and Shampoo did. Mai realized quite quickly that both of her companions outstripped her in strength and speed. She was close to Shampoo in strength, but Shampoo was wicked quick. And Ranma's basic physical abilities completely outmatched her own. So, while Ranma or even Shampoo were struggling with some of the regular education stuff, Mai could be found in the weight training room, working out there to the best of her abilities.

Alas, that first night the only night full of embarrassments for Ranma. Indeed, it was very odd to have a day go by during their time at Musubime Osoroshi without Ranma blushing so much it hurt at least a few times per day. Sharing a room with two gorgeous young women was not nearly as much fun as it sounded, especially when Ranma was in the form of a young woman currently, but thankfully, Mai and Shampoo understood that Ranma was still very much a guy in her head.

And yes, that was somewhat confusing to them all occasionally.

Regardless, they didn't come out of the showers in just towels or naked. They didn't try to rope Ranma into their conversations on fashion and movie stars, only asking his opinion about music or food when those topics came up. And they made a point of only talking about such things occasionally. Most of the time their conversations were about traveling, The Art, and cooking. They even helped Ranma out when she slipped up, not knowing some piece of information she should as a young woman or covering for Ranma when it came to not joining the others in the bath.

Although there were still incidents, of course. Some martial arts classes they took with the rest of the acolytes to build flexibility were so bad Ranma had to excuse herself several times or let people notice her nosebleed. Misaki seemed to have it in for Ranma and tried every other day to ambush or annoy the redhead. Ranma also did have to bath and coming up with reasons for not going in with the other girls got old quickly, even with Mai and Shampoo's help. As did bathing very late at night or just with super-cold showers and not just entirely thanks to Ranma's curse. Just because they were helpful did not detract from the fact Ranma was sharing a very small room with two beautiful girls, after all. And Shampoo was a cuddler. Enough said.

But those were just the incidents involving Ranma's curse or hormones. There was also the time where her and Mai's period coincided. While Ranma had dealt with this particular horror before and knew what to do, her emotional and impulse control still went out the window. That was made worse by Mai's, which made her a rage monster. The rest of their time at the school had Ranma using her spare time to repair the damages the two had caused.

Thankfully for all concerned, Shampoo was actually quite docile around her time of the month. She dealt with a good deal of pain, but little emotional turmoil.

However, within a month of their stay, all three of them were at the point where they either had to devote themselves to the school to learn more, or come up with more in trade, and none of them could. Ranma's new 'ki wind' (temporary name) technique was too energy intensive for any of them to use, although Ranma felt that Shampoo was closest to it of all of the women there, bar Atama, who could use it. But as she had warned Ranma, the older woman had been extremely drained from the exercise.

As a past hand at having outsiders around like this, Master Nawa had seen this moment coming and one evening called the Trio to her office. "You're at the point where you all need to either make a decision or leave." She began without preamble. "While Mai and Shampoo's general character has slowed it down, there is a slowly growing undercurrent of resentment and annoyance with how quickly you three, all outsiders, have taken to our training. And I know full well that none of you are willing to join our school full-time, are you?"

Ranma shook her head firmly gesturing to Shampoo. "The two of us are on a training journey. We're not going to be tied to any single school, and you're right, we're at the point where we need to think about moving on."

Mai hesitated. "I.. a part of me would like to stay. I've liked my time here, but I do have a duty to my own family's martial arts style so I can't just join another school. There's really no one else to take it on besides me. Andy might've been learning from our style, but he's got his own martial arts school to take up.

"I thought you said he had an older brother?" Ranma questioned.

"He does, but Terry has no interest whatsoever in actually becoming a teacher. And he's like the two of you, always travelling, although in his case he prefers to fight yakuza types and street fights to gain experience rather than searching out real martial arts schools. He's always on the move, never settling down as Andy has."

Despite a somewhat disparaging tone, Mai looked whimsically sad at that. She and Shampoo had several conversations over the past few weeks, including Ranma in them sometimes, when he wasn't busy with his homework anyway. Most of those conversations were about traveling, and the sheer fun that could be had being footloose and free. Traveling wasn't always sunshine and rainbows, but it was certainly far more interesting than staying home with her grandfather or Jubei, even if you took away her annoyance at Jubei's perverted attitude.

Shampoo said nothing. In point of fact, she was getting a little annoyed of late. Part of that was because her monthly cycle had just passed but a majority was because she and Ranma had not had **any** time together here. There just wasn't enough privacy. Even though Mai had

offered to step out of the room for that kind of thing, there was always someone coming in and asking questions about the speed technique, general training or whatever.

Shampoo had also been leery about initiating anything with the reluctant Ranma around so many other girls who could possibly react negatively. She knew that wouldn't happen among Amazons course, but among these Japanese girls, with the general prudishness the Japanese had towards showing affection? Who knew?

"In that case, I have a proposal that could earn you all some cash before you go." Atama went on, interrupting Shampoo's thoughts.

While Mai didn't look all that interested, while Shampoo did. After all, more cash was always a good thing, and Ranma had spent almost all of their money they'd had before traveling here on food that ended up getting ruined by his father's ambush. For her part though, Ranma just shrugged. "I'd be interested more in taking some of the weapons you've got here, but what exactly are you wanting us to do?"

"There are reports occurring around the island of two incidents I want you to look into. One is a wild animal sighting. There appears to be a panda somewhere on the island, stealing food and especially drinks for some reason. People assume he's some kind of escaped animal from a zoo, but no one has any idea how a panda got on the island at all, and the authorities are concerned, as the park rangers on the island don't have tranquilizers or anything of that nature. They apparently ordered them, but..." Atama shrugged. "The joys of bureaucracy. They won't be given any without any actual picture of the animal, and they haven't gotten that lucky yet."

Ranma bit back a groan, but Shampoo couldn't stop herself from clasping her head in her hands. Atama looked at her quizzically, but Shampoo just waved her off, and Ranma spoke for them both. "...Okay we'll look into that. And what was the second thing?"

"More of the same really. There's been another report of some kind of food thief going around in Sado the city. All that's known is that it's a blur, but one that's generally human-shaped. Regardless, the town mayor passed on the request that I send some of my girls out to look into this. And I thought of you three."

All three nodded indicating they understood. Even when compared to her most senior apprentices, Shampoo, Ranma and Mai were far more effective combatants. The apprentices were dangerous if they had any kind of range to deal with or worked together, but if not, then all three of the girls would win, simply because they could take more damage. That had become apparent over the last week, and was yet another thing stoking the fire of the slowly building jealousy that Master Nawa wished to head off by helping these three on their way.

"We'll do it." Ranma spoke up again nodding over to Shampoo who nodded back, miming beating something with her mace for a moment that won a smirk from the redhead. "If

you have any information on where this second food thief is, or where the panda was last spotted, that would be a major help"

It turned out that the panda had actually been spotted several times moving around the national park all around the school. That was also a reason why Atama was worried. Mostly pandas were if not gentle, then certainly not the type of animal to attack humans. But this one had apparently barged into several picnic sites and scared off the humans for their food.

Leaving Master Nawa's office and returning to their room, Mai turned to the other two, crossing her arms under her impressive bust. Ranma tried hard not to notice this as the redhead joined Shampoo in falling back onto her bed and smacking her head against the pillow but failed. "Okay, it's obvious that this panda thing means a lot more to you than it does to Master Nawa. What's going on?"

"It's my pops," Ranma groaned shaking her head. "Remember about my little... issue? Well, he fell into another one of those springs, and out popped the panda. Not that it really mattered much to his body type. Or his gluttony. Or his normal laziness," she added.

"If he's chased you here, then your father doesn't seem to be the lazy type," Mai drawled, sitting down on her own bed and kicking out her legs across the way so that they rested on top of Ranma's waist where he laid across Shampoo's bed. The redhead scowled at her and tried to push her legs off, but Mai just kept them there smirking a bit. "I've never fought a panda before. And if you're about to say something about this not being my problem or anything, I'm going to kick you."

"Why would I say anything like that? The more the merrier," Ranma smirked, and then grabbed her foot and began to tickle it mercilessly, causing Mai to shriek and kick out, rolling back off of her bed into the small, cleared area directly in front of the door.

Rolling her eyes at their antics, Shampoo dragged them back to the issue at hand, speculating aloud, "Shampoo wondering how they do it."

Ranma frowned at that, looking over at her, sitting back down on the bed and turning her body towards Shampoo as Mai also released her stance, and sat down primly at the foot of her own bed. "What do you mean? I mean, my father isn't the best hunter or anything, but he's got a panda's sense of smell, and is stubborn as all get out."

Shaking her head, Shampoo changed to Chinese in order to get her point across better. "Maybe, but how does your father know where we are **now**? We doubled back entirely, then swam through the ocean, a third off of Honshu's length before arriving here to throw off the trail. How did he find us?"

Mai held up a hand before Ranma could speak, then raised one finger to her lips, nibbling on her fingernail. "Shampoo has a point. If your father arrived on your heels here, it

could be that he somehow followed your sent or maybe just was asking people if they had spotted you. But staying out to see for that length of time should've thrown even that off. And unless you told someone where you were going?"

She waited, watching as both of them shook their heads before going on. "Then how did he figure out you were here, specifically at this school? Maybe rumors about our fight against my grandfather could've helped them a little bit, but even then, how would your father then know you were still at the school?"

Ranma crossed her arms, staring up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "Actually, now that you pointed out like that... I have no idea."

The three of them bandied ideas and concepts around for a time, but Mai's idea of Ranma somehow having a GPS locator or something like that on him was shut down quickly. "How would my old man afford it? How would he know how to work it? And wouldn't it have lost power by this point?"

From there the speculation grew progressively more bizarre and eventually, the Chinese girl decided to cut through the speculations, wondering in Chinese if they were just thinking too much about it. "What I mean is, isn't there something about a Razor, er, the simplest answer is often the best or something like that? What if instead of just hearing rumors about our fights against your grandfather Mai, they ran into him when he escaped the casket, we put him in?"

Ranma and Mai both blinked, then Ranma nodded. "That makes too much sense. Although that makes it troublesome if we head to your training school after this Mai."

Mai grimaced at that, not liking the idea of saying goodbye to her two new friends so soon, but she nodded. "If your father follows us to my family's dojo we'll have Andy on our side, and even if they somehow made friends with Jubei and through him my grandfather, I could convince him to stay out of things too. Maybe even give you two sanctuary for a bit."

Shrugging, Ranma hopped to her feet and to the dresser they all shared, opening up the one drawer she used. The two real girls monopolized the rest of them, but Ranma was more than happy to let them do so after putting a small piece of paper in the handle of hers so he knew which one was which. The one-time Ranma had opened up the drawer the two ladies were using as their underwear drawer had given Ranma 'problems' for the rest of the day. "Thinking about it now isn't going to do anything, let's get a move on. And remember guys... er gals," she hastily corrected herself. "Remember that part of the reason why we were here in the first place is, because we wanted to figure out ways to capture the old man he couldn't get out of."

"Shampoo think that an excellent idea! Capture Fat Fool, hand him over to zoo!" Shampoo said enthusiastically. "That would only leave Weeping Man, right?"

"Yeah, and from how little he did when he and my Pops ambushed me the last time, he's not gonna be a problem." Ranma looked over at Mai. "Unless Jubei is with them too?"

"No way. One, he's too lazy for that kind of thing, too, while he's perverted, he wouldn't have helped them drag you back to this Nerima place. Even if they could convince him, it was the honorable thing to do, he'd simply see it as an internal affair of your martial arts school," Mai answered. *Not unless they had something perverted to offer him, and if that happens, Jubei is freaking dead to me and I might make it literal too!*

Not an hour later, the three of them were leaving the school, making plans. First, they would deal with the panda. Then, they would hunt down this food thief.

About an hour later, the trio were fully packed, their backpacks stuffed into their ki space and heading to the last place where the panda had been seen, talking about how to capture the elder – and lazier, and fatter – Saotome. "Panda or not, I want to deal with the ass in a way that'll tie him up for a long while."

"Shampoo just wish she knew more about pressure points. Remember her grandmother saying there a pressure point that make it impossible for someone to use hot water," Shampoo pouted, kicking the ground even as she walked beside Mai and Ranma, the trio taking their time at the moment.

"So it wouldn't be able to transform back into his human body! That's an amazing idea Shampoo, maybe when we get to Hong Kong can write your grandmother?" Ranma responded enthusiastically.

Mai frowned a bit at that reminder that after they left here, these two would only be spending a little bit of time with Mai and her family down in Kyushu before leaving Japan entirely. That idea bothered her a bit, which Mai put down to her jealousy about Ranma and Shampoo's romance, or the ambitious nature of their training journey. But she still nodded at Ranma suggestion.

To this Shampoo prevaricated, saying that she'd be willing to do that, but staying in Hong Kong long enough for mail to get back to her would be a major annoyance unless they found things to do there, saying in Chinese. "Sending mail to clan land and back is not easy. Mail is mostly carried on foot or by motorcycle out in the boonies. So, we could be stuck there for a month or more if we have to wait for mail to make the round-trip."

"And I don't even know really what to tell Grandmother." Shampoo sighed. "Remember Ranma, I'm supposed to be taking the male outside who beat me home, not go on a worldwide adventure with him."

Shaking her head at that, Ranma redirected the conversation to her father. "Let's set that aside for now. I think leading my Old Man into a trap is the best idea, and the two of you



learned a lot about making traps and stuff, right? So leading Pops where we want him to go would be a good idea.”

Mai pulled out a map from her cleavage window, flicking it open and the three of them paused there on the trail, looking it over for a moment. Eventually, it was decided to use a little area of sharp jagged rocks, small trees and bushes for the ambush site.

It was a little more open than the rest of the forest, which could mean that Genma and Soun wouldn't anticipate it having traps of any kind even if they had brushed the outer edge of the Musubime Osoroshi's defenses. It was also close to the area where the panda had been spotted most recently.

Mai however had a suggestion. "Instead of letting him chase you into that area Ranma, why don't we use this panda's greed and his general attitude against him?" Mai explained what she meant, and Ranma nodded, grinning in amusement. The plan would prick both Genma's greed in the sense of the food, and his habitual anger with Ranma about Ranma's female form.

Getting to the chosen area took them around twenty minutes, as they were moving silently and always on the watch for the panda, Genma in human form, or Soun. When they arrived in the area, Ranma patrolled around it, keeping an eye out, while Shampoo and Mai placed the traps.

When that was done, Ranma dressed himself up like one of the regular practitioners at Musubime Osoroshi, as did Mai. The two girls then fussed over the redhead's hair, causing her to blush hotly as they commented on how clean her hair was, and how silky it felt. "Honestly Ranma, it should be illegal for someone who doesn't care so much about their looks to have such nice hair."

"Shampoo agree! And she **know** Ranma not care much! Five minute cold shower should not be able to make your hair this nice," Shampoo grumbled, as the two girls worked Ranma's hair into a series of long curls, coming down her neck. It was easily the girliest style of hair Ranma could ever imagine, and this was helped by the judicious application of some eyeliner, and lipstick.

"And who exactly is to blame for me needing to take cold showers huh, who?" Ranma mumbled, her lips moving into a power before Shampoo smacked Ranma's chest. "Is this really necessary?"

"Enough of that. You agreed with the plan. And seeing you dressed up like this, especially with the makeup, is going to make your father see red, right?" Mai asked. She was a master of suing her looks in combat, and this was actually quite fun for her.

"If it doesn't give him an outright heart attack, he'll be furious," Ranma agreed with a sigh. "That doesn't mean I have to like it though."

"Look at the bright side. We could have played dress up even further, put you in some spandex or Lycra, as if you were one of those hoity-toity city girls out for a hike through the woods," Mai snickered.

The look that she got in turn told Mai that Ranma felt this thought was, in point of fact, not helpful. "You girls gotta remember, whatever I look like, I'm a guy inside. Guys don't wear makeup." *And you two have been rubbing my self-control raw this whole month, blast it!*

"Well, some guys do, but I get your point," Mai giggled, backing off a bit.

Now somewhat repentant, Shampoo hugged Ranma from behind, smooshing her breasts against the shorter redhead's back and neck, as her arms went around Ranma's chest just below her breasts. "Shampoo promise to make it up to you..." she whispered throatily into Ranma's ear, causing Ranma to blush hotly, and for Mai to chuckle shaking her head and imagining herself and Andy in such a position.

Soon enough, Mai too was ready, dolled up in similar attire to Ranma, although she had a bit more makeup on. The two of them then headed out, while Shampoo hid near the ambush point, her chui at the ready and eager gleam in her eyes. *No more running or evading, time to brain me a panda! Sweet revenge here I come!*

Soon, Mai and Ranma were near the area where the picnic goers had been ambushed by Genma in his panda-form, and Mai began, speaking a slightly loud voice to get Genma's attention if he was nearby. "I think someplace around here would be perfect Ranma. What do you think?"

Ranma followed along, looking around ostentatiously as she answered, and to Mai's surprise, when the redhead spoke, her normal 'boku' accent was gone. "It's a nice area, but I would prefer a place with a better view than just a bunch of trees. Wasn't there a stream somewhere nearby? Let's see if we can find that."

At first, it looked as if Ranma's father had moved on. They continued to move around, mentioning Ranma's name every time they stopped as they very obviously attempted to find a place to picnic that they would both agree on, but the panda did not make an appearance. It was only when they started to push out of the forest towards the more used areas of the park that the panda appeared, barreling out of the woods and growling.

Both young women shrieked, and backed away. "Kyaa! Bear!"

Spotting Ranma, the bear's eyes widened, and it instantly stood up on its back feet, a sign appearing without any preamble saying "I knew traveling with that Amazon hussy would be bad for you!" Flip "Look at you now! You are so girly it makes me gag!"

Mai was a far better actor than Ranma, and even as Ranma read that line and stewed about it, Mai had turned away so as to seemingly miss the fact that the panda had stood up on its hind feet and produced signs in order to communicate. She grabbed Ranma's arm, tugging hard. "Run!"

Ranma did so but stopped to give his father the stink guy, then smack her pert rear at him, before racing after Mai, catching up quickly. And she did not forget to grab up the bag of food, putting it on her back as she raced along. The panda chased after them, barreling through the woods as Mai and Ranma very deliberately kept just ahead of him, only occasionally taking to the trees, as if Mai couldn't quite keep up with Ranma there.

As they retreated, Soun appeared, trying to cut them out as he shouted, "Miss, we have no problem with you or your martial arts school! We're just retrieving our own wayward student! Please leave Ranma and stand aside"

Mai didn't seem to hear, acting the part of a panicking martial artist faced with, well, a wild animal that could tear her in two, shouting out "I don't know what you're talking about old man! What kind of psychopath sets a panda on two teenage girls!"

"Young lady, my friend won't harm you if..."

But Mai kept on running, noticeably slowing down over time only for Ranma to drag her along, acting the part of someone in over their head. This, coupled with Ranma's not replying to either of them spurred both older martial artists on in their chase.

While Soun thought that this act was a bit out of character for Genma's son, he thought that perhaps the boy was acting in this way for a reason. *Perhaps learning some martial arts technique that would normally only be taught to women? That would certainly be in keeping with how Ranma used his female form while in Nerima.*

In contrast, the site of Ranma dolled up like that had Genma seeing red, and he wasn't thinking at all at this point.

Eventually, they spotted the area where Shampoo and Mai had set up the traps. Mai took the lead, and the duo raced through it, not activating any of the traps. Then they were in the center of the area, and the panda and Soun raced out after them.

Genma charged into the rocky area on their heels only to instantly trip, a wire underneath his feet sending him forward his furry nose crashing to the ground. A pressure trap right in front of him opened up, the bear traps mapping cracking shut an inch away from his nose, causing him to freeze long enough for a spring trap to launch a boulder up and onto his back from nearby. The bear howled in pain, and then Ranma and Mai charged back.

Meanwhile Soun also found himself racing through several traps, chains, parts, and a small pitfall opening up in front of his boot, causing him to stumble forward. From every side bolas flashed out and Soun found himself hogtied in on the ground, with Shampoo pressing his head down, and thumping him hard in the back of the head with a chui.

With that one blow, Soun was out of it, and Shampoo shook her head, looking over to where the bear had forced its way back to its feet, pushing the boulder off his back, and was now using his signs as weapons against Mai and Ranma. "Shampoo think Ranma was overstating how weak this one is," the Chinese Amazon murmured, kicking Soun in the rear and sending him flying still hogtied to land in an open area nearby.

Then she moved to join the attack on the panda, launching a net in his direction. At the same time, Mai pulled back, and began to use her manriki.

With one foot caught by a chain trap attached to a nearby boulder and thus unable to take to the air, Genma couldn't get away. He still fought on though, using his signs to shout out about how dishonorable Ranma was, how he betrayed the art of Anything Goes and its future every day he was away from the arena.

But a blow from Mai's manriki crashed into the side of his head at the same time Ranma kicked him in the guts, followed by an uppercut. This was the last thing Genma saw and finally laid the bear out and Ranma gleefully let several large chains fall from her ki-space.

"All right! Let's hogtie this steer, and then head back to Master Nawa," Ranma shouted in triumph, and Shampoo cheered, while Mai just snickered, although she did help the two chain the panda up.

**OOOOOOO**

"...So, Master, what are we going to do with a panda?" Rei asked. The youngest and most physically imposing of Atama's direct apprentices stared incredulously at the large animal currently tied up in traditional Hotojutsu form, albeit with chains at the moment.

"I know someone at the Zoo in Tokyo. Maybe they'll be interested in bringing in a male to start up a breeding program," Atama shrugged. "I'm more concerned with the man who Mai said was somehow controlling the beast. We'll need to keep them separate, of course. And keep the beast unconscious. Rei?"

"Yep!" Rei said cheerfully, heading out to get some of the drugs they used to help desensitize their students to. A concoction of some of that stuff would keep the panda out, she

felt. And if it had the normal upside it did in large amounts, well, Master had said the panda might be used in a breeding program, anyway, right?

OOOOOOO

With Genma and Soun taken care of, Shampoo, Ranma and Mai decided to put off until tomorrow the task of hunting down the food thief. For now, they opted to head into Sado the city and rent a few rooms for the night. Heading back into town and with no plans to return to the school, of course, meant that Ranma transformed back into a guy, which he celebrated with a loud whoop and hopping around like a demented bunny rabbit.

The sight should have been hilarious, given Ranma hadn't removed the makeup, although for some reason he had changed his hairstyle back to his pigtail. And indeed, Shampoo was laughing uproariously, shouting out between guffaws that Ranma needed to wipe his face before they got to the city.

For Mai however, the sight of the running makeup on Ranma's grinning countenance barely registered. She was too busy staring, trying hard not to verbalize once more that Shampoo was a very lucky girl. Mai had almost forgotten what Ranma looked like in male form over the past month and seeing him now after getting to know him seemed to heighten the impact. Ranma wasn't as broad in the shoulders or obviously muscled as Andy, but Mai knew for a fact that Ranma was actually far stronger. She had seen him lifting whole trees, hauling them around like they were fifty-pound weights, for goodness' sake.

He had absolutely no wasted flesh on him at all, every muscle was toned and shaped to perfection for the Art, not just weightlifting or to be seen. *And I'd wager that his hair is just as fluffy and nice to run your fingers through in this form as in his female body. I wonder what he looks like shirtless...* Mai thought, before shaking her head, asking. "So, where will you go from here do you think? Are you still going to take me up on my offer to come by Kyushu and my school?"

Ranma looked over at Shampoo, who nodded. "Yeah, I think what we did with my old man should hold him for a while. And I think that meeting this Andy guy could be interesting. Him and his brother, who, I'll note, you didn't mention until today."

"I don't actually know Terry all that well," Mai answered with a shrug. "Like I said, he's both older than Andy and me, he's a little over college age, and he's a wanderer to boot. Beyond that..." Her face closed off again as it always did when Andy's background came into the conversation. "It's not my place to say."

"Although we might not travel with you," Shampoo spoke up, causing Ranma to look at her in confusion, and Shampoo rolled her eyes, grabbing Ranma, who had taken the time to

transform into his male form once more, and shaking him several times before releasing him. "Ranma, it be nearly a month! Shampoo want some romance, darn it!"

Instead of blushing or being confused, as a part of Mai had thought he would, Ranma just nodded. "Actually, I had an idea in that direction. You said before that you wanted to buy us both some new bathing suits, right?" Ranma asked, swinging an arm around Shampoo's shoulders giving her brief hug before pulling away, not wanting to make Mai uncomfortable. "We could have a full day of it at the beach after we catch this food thief in our new suits, and then I could take you out to dinner in my male form."

"Shampoo think that sound too too good! Have romance time with female Ranma first in the waves and then later on the beach male Ranma."

"Eeh, part of me thinks that is going to be tempting fate too much, but we will see. Just realize if I do end up flashing any guys when I'm splashed with cold water and don't have a suit on, I'm going to blame you," Ranma quipped, causing Shampoo to giggle.

"You could just charge them for the show," Mai said, scowling very slightly for a moment before banishing the expression. The two of them were so cute together sometimes, that it made Mai jealous. Not just because she thought they were a nice couple, but because Ranma was actually putting forth some effort into the relationship. *When was the last time Andy did anything in terms of our friendship, let alone a relationship? I hope my new tricks will force Andy to start showing interest in me. If not, I really will be at the end of my rope.*

As that thought occurred, Mai began to laugh, and both of her companions looked at her in confusion. She explained it to them, and both Ranma and Shampoo laughed as well before Mai asked if she and Shampoo could head out shopping now. "Remember, you need more than just a bathing suit."

Ranma didn't have a problem with this and waved the two girls off. "You two have fun, I want to stay at in my male form for the rest of the day if that's all the same to you too. And, I'm still hungry."

Both women rolled her eyes at that but got up and headed off to do some shopping. Ranma paid for their food, and then began to wander around, eventually finding a small noodle yatai. *Huh, it almost reminds me of something, for some reason. Weird.*

Barely had Ranma ordered when shouts of 'stop, thief' reached his ears. *Damn, well my luck is working as normal, darn it.*

Poking his head out of the stall, Ranma saw a blur heading down the road away from him. Several other people who were standing around holding bowls or skewers in hand blinked in shock as the blur passed them faster than any of them can see. As it went the blur grabbed the food out of their hands, racing on before they could try and react.

Ranma blinked, then dodged back out of the reach of the blur, noting it was actually a young girl, around fourteen maybe, maybe a little younger? Dressed in a fuku with brown hair, wide eyes and a childish face she stared at Ranma as she passed by, and then bounced away out over the rooftops.

Eating his bowl quickly, Ranma tossed the bowl behind himself to the owner of the small yatai, giving chase quickly. *Well, this looks just as interesting as capturing my old man, who would've thought?*

The blur tried to escape, but Ranma caught up quickly, and as he did, his hand flicked out. From his sleeve the rope dart Ranma had taken from Musubime Osoroshi shot out, aiming at the girls' feet. The dart wound around her leg, the rope pulling taught quickly as Ranma tugged on it.

To his surprise, the girl moved with the attack, lashing out back at Ranma with several kicks from both legs, but Ranma blocked them, and with a few twists of his tied the rope around her free leg, pulling it taut. Ranma then twirled, flipping the youngster around to crash back-first into the top of the rooftop they were fighting on. "Now, I wonder what your story is kiddo? You stealing food for fun, training, or..."

He broke off as the girl's stomach grumbled, and Ranma sighed. "Or just because you're hungry."

Staring at the girls face as she looked up at him in shock, one hand rubbing at her sore back, Ranma knelt beside her, and untied the rope around her legs. He had been hungry far too often when on the road with Genma to be able to look at that face and turn away. "Come on kid, let's get you some food. And what's your name anyway?"

"K, Kurumi," the woman said, shaking her head as she let Ranma help her to her feet. "Wow Onii-san! No one's ever been able to stop me from taking their food before! And what was with that rope trick thing?"

The two of them talked for a while as Ranma led the girl away from her recent victims and found another place to grab some food at. The girl was a bottomless pit even by Ranma's standards, eating a whole bowl full of katsudon in the time Ranma took to take out half a dozen bites. *I never thought I would ever run into someone who had a stomach to match the hereditary Saotome bottomless pit!*

Kurumi could also talk a mile a minute. "Andsowebeenlookingaroundandtravelingandit'sreallyfunbutsometimesyouknowwedon'tfinda nyjobsthatwecandotowork, andfoodgetsalittlescarcesolgoalittlecrazyandooohhopemynee-samadoesn'tgetangryatmeagain,we'retryingtofindourfatheryouseeandeverytimewetrytofinda uetowhereheis,itgoesnowhere,butshewasreallyhopefulaboutthisone,andonee-samawillbereallyangryifwehavetoleavebecauseIgotpeopleangryatme."

"Breathe kid," Ranma quipped, ruffling her hair. Shampoo seemed to like that, so he figured it would work on Kurumi, and it did seem to, the younger girl pausing to take a breath, and then leaning into his hand, a bright smile on her face. "The food's not going anywhere, and you're talking too fast for me to understand more than a few words at a time."

"Kurumi!" a voice shouted, and Ranma turned around, blinking his eyes and staring for a second.

Ranma had thought that Kasumi would forever remain the girl who was closest to the whole Yamato Nadeshiko ideal. But if Kasumi embodied the personality and housewifely abilities encompassed by that concept, the girl walking towards Ranma embodied the physical characteristics.

She was not as tall as Ranma was, but taller than her younger sister, had dark black hair done up in a ponytail, and was moving at a sedate, controlled pace while wearing a schoolgirl's uniform that on her looked way better than it did on her younger sister. Her chest was far more modest than Shampoo or Mai, although it could be equal to Nabiki. Her legs were long and well-built underneath her skirt, which went down to just below her knee, completing the image of a demure young maiden. *Good grief, now I understand why silver uniforms like that are sometimes thought of as a fetish thing.*

"Nee-sama! This is Ranma, he offered to buy me food when he caught me stealing food before!" Kurumi said happily, zero shame in her voice. "He's a really good martial artist, and he did this rope trick that caught my legs. Then he was also nice and offered me food."

Pausing, the older girl took Ranma in for a moment, then bowed from the waist, saying profusely, "Thank you very much! I wish I could always find jobs which would allow us to work for our way, but sometimes my imouto's hunger gets the better of her."

"Not a problem, I know how it is on the road sometimes. To my mind, if you're hungry, then feeding your stomach comes first," Ranma answered. "And your little sister said you two practice some kind of martial arts, and were looking for your old man. Can I get the full story there? I mean I can understand being on a training journey, but how did you two get separated from him in the first place?"

"Ah, I am sorry for my imouto's poor manners. As for our circumstances, we are not so much on a training journey as you would understand it, but simply searching for our father. We have been since we were very young." The girl then blinked, before smiling politely at Ranma. "But I'm afraid I am guilty of being rude. I am Natsume Tendo of the Tendo school of indiscriminate grappling. May I know your full name, Ranma?"

**End Chapter**



