

Howdy all on this Merry Christmas for those of you who celebrate. For those like me, well, it's a great day to veg and have Chinese food LOL.

So, I looked at my stories this month (DA, most of which I wrote this month, ATP, King of Champions, Stallion) and realized that HP stories were taking too much of the month up. And because my Ranma muse felt this was interesting, I decided to write this out as a teaser chapter. Maybe in the future after Semblance of Hope is done I will pick this or the Addventure Homage story up as a present during months dominated by HP. It's a thought since this only took me about three days LOL.

In other news, King of Champions will be out on New Year's along with Stallion of the Line. I have send about 2/3rds of the King of Champions out to an editor and gotten it back and am sending Stallion out in parts. This means that work on the winner of the last poll this month will start after Stallion and the last bit of King of Champions is done. Don't worry though, as I already have around 6,000 words of that one written too and will announce the obvious winner late tomorrow night. That winner won't be edited save by the good old Grammarly, but it should be out by New Year's Eve or Day at the latest.

So without further ado, here is the teaser chapter of Growing Together, a Ranma/Shampoo(/possibly Mai Shiranui) fanfiction. It will definitely tie into Street Fighter and King of Fighters.

### **Chapter 1: Rain, the Ultimate Peacekeeper.**

Ranma Saotome, martial artist extraordinaire (in his mind) stared up at the rain coming down from the skies over China then over at his (currently her, long story) father, who was trudging along through the rapidly diminishing woodland and growled, "Screw this and your dumbass prediction, Old Man! Look at that sky, does it look like it's going to stop raining any time soon!?"

Genma turned, holding up a series of signs. As he was a nine-foot-tall panda at the moment, his signs were the only means he could use to communicate. Of course, he added his own fillip to the task, both in terms of general communication and the use of signs. "Boy, you're starting to sound like that form of yours!"

"What the hell does being a girl have to do with it!? We've been traveling for two days straight in, off again, on again rain and that rain looks to be coming down even heavier! I'm cold, tired, and hungry Old Man!" the redhead growled in return. "Besides, there's a perfectly suitable cave back the way we came. Let's get under cover and wait for this shit to blow over!"

The panda grumbled, and the sign, without any apparent stop to actually write something new, flipped, showing a message. "And what if that crazy Amazon catches up with you? What then?"

Ranma hesitated, and not just because of the mystery of the signs. They had been on the run from the Amazon warrior named Shampoo for more than...Ranma paused, thinking and realized she

wasn't certain how long they'd been going since the Amazon village. Genma had been adamant about not retracing their steps, and, given how abruptly they'd had to move on in some cases, Ranma was certain that the old retard had been up to his tricks again.

He'd gotten better at making certain Ranma wouldn't find out, but beyond being a great martial artist, Genma was also an excellent thief at need. And his need ranged from food to liquor, while on the road along with little things here and there. Now, Ranma didn't have a problem with stealing food when you were starving or grabbing clothing when the alternative was going naked, but stealing martial arts scrolls? That was where she drew the line.

*After all, why not just stick around, learn all the locals're willing to teach ya, then move on after? Then there had been that whole Dragon whisker thing. That had taken a few days to sort out. Ugh, worse thing is, I can only blame myself for that one, not like I can for Jusenkyo.*

That was easily the height of his father's stupidity in Ranma's mind. *How the hell did Genma think going to a cursed springs was a good idea? And how the flipping ancestor-cursed dog humping FUCK did the old man not notice he had transformed into a panda before attacking me!?*

But whenever they had stopped since leaving the Amazon village, they had passed through near Jusenkyo for very long, Shampoo had caught them up. The girl, she was only Ranma's age, had been some kind of village champion, and they, starving from several days of no food, had eaten her prize. *Not my finest hour, I'll admit, Ranma thought ruefully now, thinking back on that moment. But she didn't have to be such a sore loser with the Kiss of Death crap.*

Since they had left her village, the Amazon girl had been on them like white on rice, always catching them up if they stayed too long in any location. It was almost enough to make Ranma impressed. *Hell, if she wasn't out to actually kill me, I think I would be impressed with her ability to track us down like that, to say nothing of keeping up with us.*

But she **was** out to kill Ranma, and Ranma tended to take that kind of thing personally. Shampoo was also more than willing to use bladed weapons, which Ranma was not very used to. Not from other martial artists anyway. Crooks, gangsters, people who his father and she had swindled out of their money when they bet on the young boy against that local champion, sure. That kind of people deserves whatever they got in Ranma's opinion.

But this, this was something new. Shampoo actually used real Chui and swords, and used them very well, better than most martial artists Ranma had run into before this. And Shampoo was a girl to boot. Despite the fact that he'd spent a few months now (he'd spent more than a month trying to chase his old man down to beat him up, but eventually tired of not succeeding) as a girl himself occasionally, Ranma still didn't think much of women warriors. *And then there's the whole where-to-hit-her-thing. I mean, would it be perverted if I hit her in the boobies? And how hard can I hit her anyway? I didn't hold back much when I laid her out in our match but she was up again in like a minute.*

"If she catches us up, I'd rather fight her off after getting nice and warm, if not well fed, since I know we don't have any foot left. Come on old man, the rain's coming down even harder now!" the soaked redhead answered at last, as another peel of lightning flew across the sky.

The lightning changed his father's opinion. Looking ahead of them, Genma could see they were about to start to leave the forests behind, and head into the plains of the low country. In that kind of area, Genma might become the largest thing around quickly, and as such attract the lightning. As such, he once more flipped his sign, and somehow the first message he had shown Ranma had been replaced. "Very well boy, you've got a point but where should we go?"

Ranma waved her arm back the way they came. "There was a break in the cover about an hour ago and I looked up that hillside to the left. I already told you I saw a cave there. If it's deep enough, it could serve us as shelter."

His father grumbled back, but nodded. she didn't like the idea of retracing their steps, but that was neither here nor there. Getting dry at the very least would be an excellent idea. *Times like this I wish I had more than one gi. Still, such a hardship is just part of following the path of a martial artist. And bear was a much better buy anyway.*

The two of them reached the cave easily enough, but the rain, already heavy, had indeed started to come down in sheets, so much so that Ranma could barely see a foot in front of herself, and knew for a fact that it wasn't all that long until any attempt to find their way would have been impossible. "Look at that Old Man, I was right," she observed grumpily, kicking her father for good measure, wringing her drenched hair out.

The Old Man growled, but Ranma grabbed his sign, and broke it across her knee, tossing it into the center of the cave. It was a good-sized one, thankfully, with a bit of clearance above them even for the bear, and more than enough room for a dozen people comfortably. "I ain't interested in your excuses or taunts right now Old Man. We need a fire, we need to get warm! Or else we're both going to catch our death of pneumonia."

Another sign appeared in the panda's hand saying, "Boy, you haven't been sick a day in your life. Stop..."

Then it disappeared as Ranma grabbed it in turn, scowling at him as she once more broke the sign, noting that both had been soaked, darn it. "There's a first time for everything!"

Rolling his eyes, Genma pulled out some flint and tinder, tossing them onto the dry ground of the cave. Then, feeling thankful for his fur once more, Genma turned away, reaching into his bag once more and pulling out a bit pickings of food that he had been saving and hiding from Ranma.

Unfortunately, eating quietly was not a panda skill, and Ranma heard his chewing over the sound of his breaking the signs. "What the hell!" Ranma charged towards her father. "You had food this whole time!"

Another sign read, "Finders keepers," flip came the sign, with larger calligraphy this time, "boy!"

There was a crack of thunder and lightning behind them, causing the bear to flinch and look in that direction. That allowed Ranma to bounce up off of the roof of the cave, coming down with a hammer kick straight on top of the panda's head, sending him unconscious to the ground.

“Hell yes!” Ranma shouted, flinging her arms in the air. Then she grabbed the bear, and pulled it deeper into the cave, tossing it to one side of the mound of wet wood, and then began to search in Genma’s pack, knowing everything in her own had been drenched. *I’ve still got my knife and a few campout supplies plus my bedroll, but it’s all drenched, damn it!*

Inside his father’s bag, Ranma found a few wrapped bits of chicken, a few dumplings, a day old but still good and even a bottle of water. *What the heck is an Evian bottle doing here?* Shaking off the mystery of the west’s commercial reach, Ranma she growled at her father angrily. “Oh sure, ‘we haven’t had food for days boy’ quote, ‘you have to learn to live off the land again boy, you’re going soft.’ Why don’t you try to practice what ya preach, Old Fart!”

Still grumbling to herself, she found a warm piece of cloth, and tossed that down, looking morosely at the wet wood and the even sorer state of her bedroll and clothing. There was little chance of the wood catching, and Ranma scowled shivering. “Damn, but at least it’s a nice summer day, not winter. I can survive one night wet and miserable.”

With a sigh, she pulled out of her wet clothing, tossing her shirt and pants down to join the rest of her soaked things, standing there naked, bar her boxers and feeling quite a bit like a drowned rat in all honesty. “Feh, China weather during the monsoon season. You can keep it!”

Just as she was about to sit down, a sound by the cave doorway caused her to turn that direction. It sounded as if someone was running for the cave, and Ranma blinked in surprise. *Who would be out in this weatherrr.... oh don’t tell me...*

A second later, Ranma gaped as Shampoo of the Amazons entered, running inside the cave quickly, hunched over against the rain. As she entered, Shampoo straightened, breathing out a sigh of relief, until she caught sight of the redhead, her eyes widening in shock.

As Shampoo stared, Ranma got over her own shock quickly to notice something. The other girl, who had always previously only ever looked poised and well-groomed looked just as bedraggled and wet as Ranma did, something Ranma couldn’t help but notice thanks to how her clothing was clinging to the purple-haired girl like a second skin. And her surprise at seeing Ranma was also obvious.

Thinking quickly, Ranma forced her gaze to not stray back down to away from the other girl’s chest again, and held up her hands and seeing the other girl readying herself to charge, decided to try out her new skill in speaking Chinese. “Truce!”

That brought the girl up quickly, and she scowled, pausing in taking her stance, shivering as a burst of wind entered the cave. Ranma nodded frantically pointing at her. “Truce! Both wet, both no good.”

“Your Chinese is like that of a retarded child,” Shampoo muttered, but she made no move to attack Ranma, turning aside slightly to ring out her hair, grumbling.

Frankly, this week had been among the most miserable of her entire life and standing there drenched to the bone, Xian Pu of the Joketsuku damned how quick she had been to give the foreigner the Kiss of Death. When she had done it, Shampoo – she knew how foreigners mangled her name and it

amused her - had thought it would be a means of escaping the village for a time. Shampoo loved her home, but it was kind of stifling lately. She disliked how some of the Blooded Warriors resented her skill, thinking her too big for her panties thanks to being able to fight them on an even footing despite her young age. Beyond that, Shampoo had seen some of the books that the local peddlers traded for and thought the ones showing maps of the world and especially the pictures were amazing.

She also, bluntly, wanted to get away from Mousse, her childhood friend turned stalker. It was rapidly getting to the point where she would have to choose between killing him or accepting his hand in marriage. Shampoo did not think about the blind Mousse in that manner, and yet, when they were young, they had been deep close friends. But by the laws of the tribe, it was either one or the other, and it would only become worse once Shampoo hits 17. At that point, Shampoo would be either forced to become a Blooded Warrior and if Mousse pestered her then...

At first it had worked very well. Shampoo had enjoyed traveling, and the panda and the redhead had left an easy trail to follow. She enjoyed seeing new places and had even stayed at a hotel that had hundreds of TV channels! Some of the shows were amazing, especially the ones showing translated foreign shows.

But then the weather changed, and now Shampoo was wet, cold, and muddy from the hips down. She had nearly been caught in not one, but two different landslides, and one of them had turned into a mudslide that had captured one of her legs, sending her down into the muck and mire. Luckily the rain had washed most of it away.

So, Shampoo was not in the mood for a fight. *And fighting someone who is just as wet and who also is nearly naked is dishonorable anyway.* Shampoo let her eyes trail downwards, noting how fit the other girl looked. *Huh... she's only what, a size smaller than me? Funny on such a short girl, and her waist actually might be smaller than mine too. But what is up with her underwear? "Why Boxers?"* she asked quizzically, cocking her head to one side. "Are they comfortable?"

Then Shampoo shook her head, remembering the wet, miserable redhead was her target, and that she had just spoken in decent Putonghua. "You didn't know Chinese when you were in my village!" *Was this outsider toying with us the whole time?* If that was the case Shampoo would attack, miserable or not.

Ranma quickly shook her head, which would normally send her pigtail flying, but her hair was still so wet it barely moved. "No, I learn since. Not good too." Ranma shrugged then pointed at Shampoo, saying dryly, "Running not good learn."

"Heh." Shampoo smirked a little at that, feeling a bit of pride at having been the reason why Ranma and her panda had been forced to move so fast. Then her stomach rumbled, and Ranma grinned. The next second, something was flying towards her head, and Shampoo was about to duck reflexively, when she saw what it was: a meat bun.

She grabbed it out of the air, it was cold, but still good camp fair, and she munched down on it. "Truce accepted," she muttered through a full mouth

With a grin, Ranma nodded, trying hard not to stare. But Shampoo was... well a **girl!** And Ranma had never been this close to a girl before for so long that wasn't trying to fight him, and certainly never in the presence of a girl who was so wet, drenched as she was. She was having trouble keeping his eyes away from the other girl's chest, where she could see the outlines of a somewhat abused breast band. Ranma also instinctively knew Shampoo's breasts were larger than her own, and would fill up his hands very nicely. Shampoo's hips and thighs too were barely covered and as she turned away to glance outside, Ranma bit back a grunt at her perfect rear.

Unhappy or not, Shampoo was one heck of a sight right now, and Ranma hadn't had any experience being this close to such a sight. The only thing she could compare it to was the few times she and his father had traveled through a red-light district. And then, the fakeness of it all, the overdone nature of the women, had repelled Ranma. But Shampoo was a fellow martial artist, his age, no longer trying to kill him, very good looking and well, it was just very hard not to stare right now.

*Damn, who knew that I'd ever be grateful for this curse. If I was in my real body, I would be having a really awkward boner right now.*

Just because she had been on the road for most of his life the meeting that Ranma didn't know anything about girls and boys and reacting and stuff like that. Romance, that Ranma knew she didn't know, and modesty she had no time for. But birds and bees, yes.

Across from him, Shampoo finished her meat bun, grinning somewhat cheerfully now that she had some food. She held up her hands, waving them theatrically, "Look, nothing up my sleeve, but..."

The next second, she was holding two large cobs of wood, that Ranma could tell were dry. she blinked in shock, then quickly grabbed the electric lighter, taking out a tiny tin of oil, pouring it out onto one of the logs. It quickly came alight and Ranma moved the rest of the wet wood nearby to dry, along with her clothing.

"You don't have any other clothing?" Shampoo asked questioningly. She was used to being around other women naked occasionally, but at the moment it was kind of off-putting.

Ranma shrugged, completely unconcerned. "I no know say."

Shampoo groaned, then tugged at her own wet shirt, watching the girl's eyes travel to it, and a blush appear. *Huh, that's funny.* "This is clothing," she emphasized the word. "Do you have any?"

Ranma pointed at the second lump of clothing now set by the fire along with his sleeping bag. "That only."

Shampoo grumbled, and in an effort to not look at the naked girl who was her target, looked at the bear. It was unconscious, a large lump visible on its head. "Did you do that? Did your attack panda turn on you?"

"Panda," Ranma nodded. "It fight, I win." Ranma figured that was easier to say than explain the Old Man had been holding out on him.

Shampoo nodded, but the sight of the panda brought her back to what the law of the Amazons told Shampoo she should be doing right now: fighting this redhead and killing her for the dishonor of her loss. She looked at Ranma speculatively, a scowl on her face.

Ranma caught the look, the scowl appearing on the pretty Chinese girl's face, and then very deliberately drop kicked the way that she had just thought of her out of her mind, turning back to the fire, and pulling out some of the other bits of food, settling the cold chicken cutlets on bits of wet wood, splinters from the signs doing double duty as skewers. "You know weather?"

At that question, Shampoo broke out of her murderous thoughts, nodding and Ranma went on. "How long..." she paused, then tried again. "Rain how..."

Once more she stammered to a halt. "Dammit, I should've made a better push to try and learn some Chinese! But no, 'it's a waste of time boy, if they don't understand that you're challenging them, then they're stupid, and they deserve to lose. And if we need something they should understand us regardless, we're not here to try to civilize these barbarians.' Dammit pops! Why the hell do I ever listen to you!?"

During the rant, Shampoo had watched the redhead, seemingly extremely frustrated add her own inability to communicate, and now she laughed as the girl actually used different tones of voice to herself as if she was having an argument with someone. She had no idea what Ranma was saying though. Shampoo knew it was Japanese, but that was about it. Given the Amazons' attitude towards the Japanese, a holdover from World War II, learning Japanese was seen as something only the Elders had to do, as part of the penance of being Elders in the first place.

Killing the Japanese on the other hand, that was something a lot of people among her mother's generation and older could tell stories about. The war against them was so bad that even children as young as 12 among the Amazons had been called to serve. But that service had won them their independence from the communists.

For now anyway. Shampoo knew that her grandmother was a little concerned about that, but only a little. The Bayankala Mountains where her people resided was far too remote, far too hard to get to for modern warfare. "The great Mao Zedong bragged about his Million Mile March, but he never went through these mountains, in fact, he deliberately skirted them," her grandmother had told Shampoo several times.

Still that was not important right now. "The rain will last several days," she announced. Then she repeated herself slower, enunciating each word clearly, so that Ranma could get the gist of what she was saying. "It will be very heavy."

Ranma groaned, then looked down at her clothing, then out to the rain. "Heavier than this?" She asked in Japanese, then groaned and repeated herself "Heavier rain?" and then pointed out the with end of the cave.

"Yes. It will get heavier very soon, and stay that way for at least a few days," Shampoo answered, once more speaking slowly and clearly.

Ranma sat, then stoop up resolutely, not bothering to put on her clothing. *Besides, I've still got boxers, they cover the most important bits.* Moving towards the doorway, she stated, "I go hunt."

Blinked at that Shampoo laughed. "What animal do you think is going to be out in this mess!"

Ranma didn't understand most of the words, but she knew she was being laughed at, and pointed up and away up the hill. "I see sheep. Farmer not all need."

Once more Shampoo blinked, then slowly nodded, correcting the sentence absently. "Yes, I suppose sheep would be dumb enough to be out in this, especially if one has escaped from its paddock." She stood up to, reluctance in every portion of her body. She did **not** want to go back out into that, but Shampoo would be darned if the redhead was the only one willing to put in some more work to make this cave a bit more hospitable. "I'll go too, I'll gather some wood for us."

When she understood what she was saying, Ranma nodded, then made a wait here gesture, before moving back to did not his bag, pulling out a small, hand-sized hatchet. Shampoo tensed instantly, but Ranma flipped it so that she was holding the blade, holding out the shaft to her. Shampoo smiled at that, it would save her weapons some wear and tear, and if this foreigner thought that she was unarmed beyond the hatchet, well, that was all to the good for now.

She looked over the bear, gesturing at it. "What about the bear? What are we going to do with it?"

Ranma turned to look at her father speculatively. A part of her wanted to wake the Old Man up and get him helping. It would give them a two on one advantage in close quarters if Shampoo decided to start anything. But frankly now that she was able to communicate with her no matter how badly, Shampoo seems pretty reasonable so far. *No, the old man would only make this more complicated.*

With that thought, Ranma moved over to one of the rocks inside the cave, lifted it up, and brought it crashing down on top of the bear's head. The carefully aimed blow laid out the panda, further, and would keep the older man out for a much longer time than the previous blow alone. She then shrugged her shoulders. "It not awake, it not need eat."

Shampoo laughed, nodded, and then turned to stare out into the rain again, her good-humor vanishing at the sight of the rain pounding down. Ranma moved to stand next to her, on the opposite side of the hand holding the hatchet. There was no sense in tempting the girl after all. Shampoo looked at her, shaking her head at the fact that the other girl hadn't bothered to put on her clothing. *Is she some kind of exhibitionist maybe? Or is she just that determined not to get her clothing even wetter.*

Ranma didn't notice the look, squared her shoulders, then held up her fingers counting down wordlessly. Shampoo grimaced, but when Ranma clenched her hand, both of them leapt out into the rain, then quickly moved in different directions.

OOOOOO

"I tell you I saw one! A naked nymph, just like in those fairy tales the Brits used to tell during the war," an old man exclaimed, waving his crutch around.



“And I am telling you, you have been drinking your own moonshine too much,” scoffed a much younger man. “There is no such thing!”

“I tell you I saw her. Almost naked save for a pair of boxers, tits the size of your hands, hair as red as blood!”

“Well, there you have it, why would a nymph wear Boxers?”

The first interlocutor paused, staring at this, and then frowned, thinking about it. “Remnants of her last victim?”

This earned him a smack upside the head, and the two farmers continued to look around for the lost sheep, grateful for their ponchos.

OOOOOOO

Ranma came back to the cave, shaking her head, and tossing the sheep before her, grateful that Shampoo had made it back before her. Shampoo solemnly handed Ranma her hatchet, gesturing down to the woods she gathered. “I hope that’s enough because I am not going back out into that! Not if it isn’t life or death.”

the redhead nodded, having understood the words ‘not going,’ and getting the gist of the rest of the sentence. She had held up the sheep, and then set it down on the flat ground away from the fire. I snapped its neck,” she said in Japanese, then remembering herself, gestured to the sheep’s neck, and made a twisting motion with her hands.

Shampoo wordlessly knelt beside her, and Ranma tried hard not to look at the girl. With Ranma gone, she had also divested herself of her clothing, setting it by the fire. And the breast band she was wearing was very obviously not big enough, her breasts swaying gently despite the obvious muscle on the other woman. Below that a toned, hard, muscled stomach led Ranma’s eyes down to where she could see a thatch of light purple hair over...

Even though she turned away, the sight was already burned indelibly into Ranma’s brain and her heart pounded as Ranma once more was very grateful she was in a female body right now. *At least in this form I ain’t gonna embarrass myself or give Shampoo a reason to kill me... again. Hell, do women even, you know, have anything that...* Ranma broke off that thought, shaking his head.

*Huh, she must be cold with how hard her nipples are,* Shampoo mused, looking concerned for a moment. *And my word, they are a really startling shade of crimson, aren’t they?*

For a few moments, the two women were silent, their animosity washed away with the miserable conditions and the rain. They skinned the sheep, set the creature to one side on a makeshift rack to be blooded, and then Ranma braved the outside to set the outer fur out, letting the rain wash it for a about an hour before bringing it back in, setting it by the fire to be warmed.

Shampoo and Ranma actually worked quite well together during this, both of them somewhat surprised at the other’s skill. Eventually, they were done with the animal for now, and would just have

to wait for the blood to be drained, so that they could start carving out cutlets. By that point, Ranma's clothing at least was dry, and she pulled it on with relief, patting herself and muttering about her chest under her breath, only now noticing her hardened nipples. "Damn but if these things don't get cold! And um... jeez, they are kind of sensitive too, huh..."

Ignoring how the redhead was basically feeling herself up for a moment, Shampoo stared morosely at her own clothing, then with a shrug, lay out on the ground beside it, pulling off her breast band.

Seeing this out of the corner of her eye Ranma gulped and turned, unable to stop herself. They weren't the first set of breasts Ranma had ever seen, heck even Ranma's cursed form weren't. That first had involved a wild escape from a group of yakuza who had more modern weapons than the two Saotomes had wanted to deal with, and connections with the local militia. But thankfully they hadn't thought of looking on the rooftop of a communal bathing area, where Ranma and Genma had hidden themselves. Ranma hadn't meant to, but his eyes had strayed downwards more than once.

But while Shampoo's weren't the first, they were certainly by far the best. Ranma instantly could see they were indeed larger than Ranma's female form. They were also fuller looking, despite how perky they were. Ranma estimated they would be more than a handful even in his male form. Shampoo's nipples were astonishingly a very light pink.

Realizing she was staring, Ranma quickly looked away, moving over to make sure that Genma wasn't waking up by the simple expedient of dropping another rock on his head.

Shampoo didn't notice Ranma's staring, instead looking at her pile of clothing as it gently steamed by the fire, adding another cob of wood to it. "I really have to start using my weapons space more. I know Mousse only uses it for actual weapons, but surely, I could have packed in a few changes of clothing. Grabbing dry wood before the rain began was a good move, but some more forward planning would have been even better," she murmured to herself before frowning over at the noise of the blow to the panda's head. "Why you do you keep concussing that poor animal?"

Ranma understood animal there, and shrugged, gesturing to Genma. "It not well train," she said in his pigeon Chinese. "It trouble."

"Are you going to say that it was the first one to reach the winners table holding my prize for the tournament?" Shampoo asked archly. "Using a poor dumb animal as the scapegoat isn't very honorable."

Again, Ranma didn't get much of that, and so didn't answer simply cocking his head to one side and shaking her head. Shampoo scowled, and then sighed, looking over at her clothing again. But then Ranma's voice caught her attention. "Now we food, shelter, warm, talk yes?"

"What's there to talk about?" Shampoo growled, her ire returning. "You stole my prize for winning the tournament, and then, in my weakened state, you humiliated me! The law says that I can kill you for that and I will."

Even as she spoke, Shampoo had to push down all of her insecurities about actually killing someone, using the anger she had felt at the time of her humiliation to do so. *Yes, she deserves death for humiliating me like that after a full day of fighting, taking advantage of my weakness like that!*

But Ranma shook her head, waving her hands frantically. She might not have understood a lot of the words there, but the tone had certainly come through. Ranma spoke in Japanese for a few seconds, before remembering herself, and switching back to her pidgin Chinese, grumbling internally again. *Stupid Old Man!*

"I know you mad," she said, spelling out the word mad, hoping it came across. "But we stuck..." Ranma had to think of a word to use for the word stuck, and then finally gave up, just gesturing out the entrance of the cave to the torrential rain down coming down. It even looked worse than it had when they'd rushed out to grab gather up firewood and the sheep. "So why not..." Ranma paused, then just stood up and got into a stance, miming some punches towards the wall, then gesturing towards Shampoo.

"You want us to fight in here?" Shampoo frowned. "I thought the whole point of this." Shampoo gestured towards the meal the fire and everything else, "was to keep from doing so. If you're feeling well enough, that's one thing, but as much as I'd like to, I'm not."

The word fight Ranma knew, and she shook her head. "train. Train fight."

"You mean a spar?" Shampoo murmured, frowning. "Why? My honor demands..."

Ranma interrupted her, gesturing to her cheek. "You kiss, that, you mean kill. But me not want die. You want to keep chase?"

"Well... not really," Shampoo admitted. *Being away from the village is nice, but I could do without chasing Ranma and her pet panda all over the place.*

"So we spar!" Ranma announced excitedly, holding up three fingers. "Two three, two three winner."

Now that interested Shampoo, if she was indeed getting the gist of what Ranma was suggesting. *It is unusual, but if I can take the outsider best two out of three, that would justify my honor, and, it would prove to everyone that my winning the championship wasn't a fluke, regardless of my age!* Thinking things through, Shampoo nodded firmly. "What are the rules?"

Realizing from her blank face that Ranma hadn't understood her, Shampoo sighed, and then explained what she meant slowly and clearly before grumbling, "And when we're not fighting, I'm going to be teaching actual Chinese!"

"Agree," Ranma replied instantly, nodding just as firmly as Shampoo had. "Hate not talk."

"That would be I hate not to being able to speak well I think," Shampoo drawled. "I can help you with your vocabulary and correct your sentences as we go along. Whether or not that translates to you actually being able to speak intelligently is up to you."

The dig went right over her head unfortunately, and Shampoo sighed. That was no fun. So, she repeated her earlier question. Ranma understood this time and held up one finger. "One time, hands only. Second time, weapons. Third time, on log, anything goes."

Despite his mangling of Putonghua, the gist of what Ranma was saying got through, and after a few seconds contemplation, Shampoo nodded. "That makes good sense. I like it. We will start tomorrow, yes?"

That Ranma understood and nodded. Then, with the serious stuff abandoned, Ranma moved towards the fire, and gestured Shampoo down with them. "I know this fire," she used the Chinese term for fire, pointing at the wire, and saying the words in Chinese. "Start there?"

Shampoo sighed. Teaching Ranma how to speak Chinese wasn't her idea of fun, but neither was hearing her so disrespect the Chinese language. "Let's make a deal. You teach me how to speak Japanese, or at least my vocabulary, I teach you Chinese."

However, before they could get too deeply into a language lesson, Genma stirred despite the multiple blows to the head. And the first thing Genma saw was Shampoo sitting by the fire. And automatically, Genma attacked, roaring and growling as he charged forwards. He made to bat Shampoo aside, grab up the boy and run out only the sight of the torrential rain pausing at the sight in dismay as lightning flashed across the sky.

Shampoo went flying into the side the cave, grunting on the impact, while Ranma but was able to duck under the paw that would've grabbed at him, kicking up and off the ground shouting out "Dammit Old Man, why do you have to ruin everything!"

A kick caught the panda in the chin, and Shampoo came up and off of the side of the cave, thrusting forward with her Chuis, having thankfully been able to dress during the short language lesson. The panda blocked them, and began to attack both girls, growling out 'what the hell is going on here boy!' in panda. But Ranma had divested him of all of his signs, having piled them up next to the fire to be dried.

Shampoo gaped seeing a panda, quick enough to dodge her attacks, although it was a near run thing and bits of her clothing got shredded more than once, as did the redhead's, before a lucky blow sent the panda stumbling into the side of the cave. As the panda pushed off the wall, Shampoo was able to get below its lunge, striking out hard up into the bear's privates. Not having anticipated that at all – it was a target few martial artists would go for - the panda gasped as his furry privates were introduced to the large Chuis heads and doubled over lost in his own private agony, until Ranma brought down a rock onto the panda's head, then stomped on it several times for good measure.

For a moment, the two girls were silent, and then Shampoo giggled. "You are right, it is a very poorly trained animal. In terms of respecting you anyway."

Ranma shrugged battle off, not understanding with the other girl had said but understanding she was at least in a good mood. "I get rope?"

Nodded firmly Shampoo once more reached into her ki space. She had brought a long rope along just in case she had to scaling the cliffs or make a bridge for herself, which in the mountains, was almost a given. *I thought of that but didn't think about spare clothing. Maybe Grandmother is right, I am a bit scatterbrained.*

Now it came in handy for a different reason, letting the two of them tied Genma up, and then Shampoo watched as Ranma lifted the panda into the air, setting it down so that it was blocking some of the wind from coming in. Almost instantly this had in fact, warming the cave by margin and Shampoo smiled gratefully, feeling much more comfortable in a few seconds.

For her part, Ranma was oblivious of the other girls' stares, as she made certain that Genma's wrists were tied together, and then muzzled the panda for good measure. *Maybe I should look into that rope martial arts school I saw once when we get back to Japan. What was it called combat style Shib-something? Could be useful.*

After that excitement, both girls curled up in the now slowly warming cave, have some food, and talked until they started to feel tired. Then Ranma offered Shampoo her sleeping bag, noticing that Shampoo didn't have one. Shampoo was about to refuse but then shrugged and nodded. She even thought about offering to share it, but didn't. As friendly as they were being, the redhead was still a veritable stranger and also someone she was going to have to fight tomorrow.

Not knowing how close he had come to death by blood loss or embarrassment, Ranma laid out on the other side of the fire, placing a bit more wood there before closing her eyes and going to sleep quickly. The two of them had to wake up occasionally thanks to Genma shuffling about, but a few boulders smacked to the head shut him up quickly.

The next day both of them woke up refreshed and warm, but the fire had gone out. Ranma to working on that, as Shampoo began to prepare strips of the sheep's fat for breakfast. They spent the morning making up a meal for the rest the day, while Shampoo instructed Ranma on Chinese. She found Ranma was a quick student, remembering words after only a few repetitions. It would be some time yet before Ranma could create fully sentences but being able to communicate to Ranma would be much easier. In turn, Shampoo asked Ranma about Japanese and the places he had been, finding the topic a fun conversation.

However, the afternoon saw them standing at either side of the cave, both of them taking martial arts stances. Normally, Ranma wouldn't do this, taking an actual stance instead of simply standing loose and ready for anything. This also annoyed your opponent something fierce. But for this combat, Ranma decided that would be counterproductive. Getting Shampoo angrier wasn't needed. "We say 1, 2, 3 and begin at 3, yes?"

Shampoo nodded seriously, crouching down, her hands clenched in front of her as she took up a stance from the Joketsuzoku Wushu. Ranma surprised her by taking up a stance from Wing Chun, a Chinese martial art instead of anything she would recognize as Japanese. "Ready, go." With that the two girls charged forward.

Around ten minutes later, Shampoo over-extended very slightly and a bare second later found her back slamming down onto the ground. Before she could recover Ranma grabbed her arm, her legs going over Shampoo's body as she locked in a submission hold from a grappling martial arts school.

The purple haired girl cursed, slapping her free hand, and tried to get out of it but Ranma kept a tight grip on her arm, pressing Shampoo's arm into Ranma's breasts as she did so, something Ranma tried not to notice. "Give up. I break you arm, you not able win others."

Shampoo grumbled, but also tapped her free hand ground of the cave three times. Ranma nodded at that, let go, and allowed Shampoo to roll away, before flipping to her feet. "You speed good, but you not used to no weapon?"

Gone was any hesitation or awkwardness, as had been the case when they had been trying to think of something to talk about that morning, or during the language lessons. This was martial arts, and both of them were passionate about it. When Shampoo replied, Ranma began to deconstruct the fight in a such a way that Shampoo's eyes widened, but she listened intently, likening it to a lecture from one of the elders. It was really impressive.

The fight had invigorated both of them, and they spent the rest of the day talking quietly, listening to the sound of rain outside, and exchanging some of the fire on the fireplace. Ranma found Shampoo a very dedicated martial artist, although she had no idea of the styles that Ranma had been subjected to over her lifetime. A lot of her training had been in how to live off the land, hunting with bow and arrow, and fighting with dozens of different weapons.

Hearing that, Ranma had the sinking suspicion that when it came to weapons combat, she was going to lose, either on a technicality, i.e. going for a strike without a weapon, or just because Shampoo was better at using them. The Chuis were her favored weapon, but she was as also very advanced when it came to ki manipulation. The whole weapons space thing was fascinating, as was the fact that every Amazon knew about ki.

Up to this point, Ranma had only a vague understanding of ki, and only when it came to how quickly her body healed from injuries and how utterly immune to becoming sick she was. Ki space though was eager to try and figure it out if she could do the same thing.

In turn, Shampoo was simply astonished at how much different styles Ranma had incorporated into her own. The idea of going around and taking bits and pieces of other people's martial arts styles was a bit unusual, and Shampoo thought it was a bit rude, which Ranma agreed to. Sometimes they not like it. My Oyaji, er father, he not such good person."

Shampoo understood that Ranma's father had been the one to send her on this training journey, but when asked where he was, Ranma dodged the question, and continued to ask Shampoo questions of her own training. In this vein, the two of them continue to get to know one another, something that Shampoo somewhat regretted as she stood across from the redhead later that day for their second of three bouts. *After all, if the elders decide that this best two out of three idea wasn't good enough, or if I lost, I'd be right back to trying to hunt Ranma down to kill her.*

The fact that Ranma had to make do with one of Shampoo's weapons, a long spear, made her smile somewhat, believing she would have the advantage.

But as the fight began, Shampoo was reminded of a simple fact. Ranma was faster and stronger than Shampoo. As much as Shampoo had decided she wanted to find Ranma's father and play his head like a bongo with her Chuis the fact remained that Ranma's training had been insanely harder than her own. *Without a weapon in her hand I bet Ranma could make even grandmother sweat!* Realizing this for fact rather than able to assume it had been her tiredness that let Ranma win against Shampoo in her village lit a fire under Shampoo. *I will get better than this! I will become stronger!*

But then, Ranma made a mistake. As she leaped into the air to bring her spear flashing down, the back of the spear caught on one of the small stalactites on the roof of the cave. That messed up her downward thrust enough for Shampoo duck forward. Her sweeping Chui caught Ranma and upending Ranma in midair. "Hiyaa!"

The next blow flashed down towards Ranma's head in midair, but somehow she dodged it, landing and thrusting. But Ranma's back was now to the walls on two sides with no room to maneuver upward, and when Shampoo danced around her spear thrust, Ranma couldn't dodge again. The Chui tapped against Ranma's forehead gently.

"That's a win for me!" Shampoo shouted, delightedly doing a little victory dance. *By Athena that feels good!*

Watching her, Ranma grinned, shaking her head, and nodding ruefully. "Win for you," the redhead agreed before switching to Japanese. "And that'll teach me to remember the environment darn it. I lost way too much of my midair ability when I tried to use a spear inside a cave that has a varied ceiling."

Nod understanding much of that, Shampoo continued to smile even as she rolled one sword shoulder. "That only leaves the log challenge." As one, the two women turned, staring over the bulk of the panda to the outside where it continued to rain cats and dogs.

"No now?" Ranma suggested.

Shampoo nodded firmly. "I am not going out in that again. Not until that much clears up."

Ranma's stomach chose that moment to growl, the sound echoing around the cave, and Ranma blushed, placing her hands around her stomach trying to make herself look even smaller than normal as Shampoo stared at her, then began to giggle. "Food's a good idea, yes?"

With that, Shampoo moved over to the fire, putting a bit more of the wood on top of it, and then pulled over more of the sheep meat, laying it down on a flat stone as Ranma presented it, having founded near the back of the cave. "Sheep meat isn't my favorite, but maybe we can make something edible."

Ranma nodded firm agreement that idea, despite having only understood two out of every five words. Still she was getting better, and as they worked on the meal, Shampoo continued her education, enhancing her vocabulary further.

The rain didn't let up for the rest of that day, and only began to peter out around midday two days later. By that point, Ranma and Shampoo were actually on their way to becoming friends, something Shampoo wouldn't have ever put money on. Ranma was simply too friendly and too upbeat to really dislike a personality, which called out to Shampoo's own upbeat attitude. Ranma also wasn't someone who took life all that seriously outside of her martial arts training.

And there? Well, Ranma had given her a lot of different tips for training exercises and introduced her to several styles. Most were designed for unarmed combat, but Shampoo knew she could transfer them into her own style, much like Ranma had done. That was pretty excellent in her opinion. In particular one of the training ideas would let Shampoo segue into her clan's Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken training, a type of speed training that would make her up to fifteen times faster than Shampoo was now.

The two of them had spent several hours each day just exercising, with Ranma giving Shampoo a few tips, and Shampoo to her surprise, giving Ranma a few. Some of these had to do with being a woman, some had to do with martial arts. But she was careful not to share any of her clan's secret techniques or training outside of the ki space technique, which she knew other people could use. After Shampoo won and they could become real friends, then maybe as a Clan Friend Ranma could be allowed to learn them... along with Shampoo herself. She had seen the training but had not gone through it herself.

Regardless, in the late afternoon of the fourth day, the two women stood across from one another on a makeshift log they had chopped down and moved into an empty field near the cave. As she watched the other woman stretch, lifting a leg straight upright against her chest, and then pirouetting stretching out her calf and ankle, Shampoo shook her head, noticing a certain bounce to the chest area that shouldn't have been there. *How the heck does she not know about the need for breast bands?*

*They aren't as large as mine, but they are certainly a decent handful.*

Regardless, Ranma's not knowing about breasts bands, her use of boy boxers and her general lack of feminine dignity or modesty amused Shampoo greatly. It was very clear that being on the road on her own, with her only companionship a panda of all things, hadn't done Ranma any favors in the area of femininity.

*Still, she is strong and likable. Maybe after I beat her, I can introduce her to the tribe, instead of just declaring her a Clan Friend. I think she'd fit right in, and having another friend, in particular one who has seen so much of China and the rest of Asia, would be fun. Those books she mentioned, the graphic novels sound amazing. Far better than the Maoist drabble that the traders always try to foist off on us.*

Shaking her head, Shampoo put such distant thoughts out of her mind as she continued to stretch herself, staring across at her opponent. It was a nice, bright sunny day now, although the ground was still very mushy, and would remain so for many days to come. Hopefully the good weather would



continue. Traveling back to her village would be much easier and that kind of weather. *Although I don't honestly know if I want to go right back. Maybe I can... meander a bit. See the sights some more.*

Once more her introspection was broken, but this time by Ranma. "You ready?" Ranma asked.

Shampoo flipped her Chuis through her fingers, then took a modified Wing Chun stance, thinking through what was about to happen and hoping the change in style would throw Ranma off a bit. Of course, against an opponent like Ranma, plans were not exactly a good idea. Still, Shampoo had a very, very basic one based around her understanding of Ranma's own style. *Charge forward to feint an attack, pull Ranma into her own. Survive her onslaught, wait for an opening, don't even try to keep her grounded, it's impossible out here.*

That was about all the planning she could do frankly, but Shampoo felt that if she could survive that initial rush, her chance of winning would go up. *Not much* she admitted to herself, staring across at Ranma. *Not much at all. But enough and if I win...*

Unfortunately for both Shampoo and Ranma, Genma had woken up that morning, Ranma having forgotten to knock him out once more that morning. This wasn't the first time he'd woken up for a bit, but this time he remained lucid long enough to realize his predicament, i.e. that his ungrateful brat had tied him up. *Bah, but he's made the amateur mistake of tying my hands to the front of my body and together.*

Genma was an escape artist of the first-order and spent several minutes loosening the arms around his paws, before slowly slipping out of them and then untying himself quickly, grouching quietly under his breath. Now, out of the cave, he spotted the boy in his weak female form facing the crazy Amazon girl. *Damn it, I was right, the boy's been hoodwinked by her! Damn it. Ah well, at least he's got his old man looking out for him.*

With that, the panda rumbled forward, moving faster than anything its size should have. Coming close to the spar from the periphery Genma then leaped toward them crossing the last few feet almost unseen, paws flailing in either direction just as the two warriors were about to engage.

Ranma's eyes widened as he started to turn that way, but that was the only hint Shampoo had before a blow smashed into her face, hurling her backward knocking her unconscious and breaking her nose in the bargain. The one that hammered into Ranma didn't do as much damage, only causing her to stumble with her head ringing, but then Genma leaped onto her back its feet first, smashing Ranma's head into the ground.

Seeing both youngsters were out like a light, Genma nodded firmly. "Grouf." He stared up at the sky and after a moment's indecision, decided not to try and warm up some water just yet. Who knew how the weather would turn, regardless of how nice it was now.

*Hmmf, I'll have to convince the boy that she did something during the match, hopefully he'll still be gullible enough to believe me. And hopefully she won't be chasing us any longer!* With that, he ran off, the redhead on her shoulder. *Bah, the things I do for the boy.*

OOOOOO

Shampoo woke up, groaning, one hand rising to her head, her body half caked in mud, several yards away from the makeshift challenge log that she and Ranma had put together. "What happened?"

She groaned, trying to pull herself out of the muddy ground doing so only with some difficulty. Moving over to the log, she rolled on top of it, grumbling at how muddy her back and butt were.

Then she looked around in confusion, feeling at her face. What, something hit me? W, was Ranma holding back on me?! GRAH!"

A burst of fury went through Shampoo at that, and for a moment, that was the only thing she could think of: That Ranma had just been toying with her, and now that it was a sunny day out, she had put Shampoo down hard. *Just like when we were in my village! Was she trying to get me to share our techniques with her?* Shampoo's teeth clenched angrily, and she pounded one fist down on her thigh.

But the pain of that actually made her think. "Wait, she was still outside of my range, I think." One hand rose to her head once more, touching her forehead and then her neck and nose gingerly, noting the last was broken. "At least I think she was. But then where is she..."

She looked around at the mud a wry, bitter twist coming to her lips. "Still, I'll be able to follow Ranma's tracks quickly at least."

Even as that thought percolated through her mind, Shampoo blinked, staring at the other set of tracks that were there. Panda tracks. "That panda, did it attack me?"

For the next few hours she searched around for Ranma's tracks and didn't find any. *So maybe the panda attacked us both? And carried her off? That would be strange. Maybe they made the plan together and this is just a trick to throw me off the trail even more?*

Shampoo again scratched her head before wincing, then moving on earth hand to her nose, setting it with a howl of pain. "Dammit!"

Whatever happened, Ranma wasn't here any longer, which meant that their match had been either dishonorably ended, or, in terms of their agreement, called on account of outside interference. *Which means* Shampoo thought, straightening her shoulders, *I still have to chase after Ranma. And if she did have any part in siccing that panda on me, I will kill her just as my laws demand. And if not? I always wanted a panda fur rug.*

With that thought, she made her way to the cave, only to find her pack upended, and much of her cooking utensils and spices taken. "That tears it, no animal would be that smart...although, this one did seem smart enough to be using martial arts," Shampoo groaned, still uncertain what had happened. But thankfully, they hadn't taken her secret supply of medicines, hidden in an inner pocket of her pack. She pulled out a few small bills, popping them into her mouth before leaning against the wall of cave, sliding down onto her rear.

She waited until the pill kicked in, then stood up, gathered her things, and resolutely went outside, wincing only a little now. The sun was high and the weather hot. This is a good day to be on the hunt. Whichever prey I decide to skin.

OOOOOOO

Ranma had woken up about an hour before Shampoo and found herself tied up on his father's back, both of them still in their cursed form. Instantly, Ranma began to wiggle, growling out "Damn it Pops! What the Fuck did you do that for? One more match, one more, and I could've gotten Shampoo off our back!"

Between the time Ranma had been knocked out and woken up, the Old Man had once more gathered enough wood and his permanent marker, and now raised a sign in front of his son's face, smacking the sign against it several times before pulling far enough away for Ranma to read what was written there. "Hah! Don't you think it, boy."

The same sign flipped, showing, "That woman was crazy, her entire culture was crazy." Flip to the wrist side once more. "You think she would've let you live just because you beat her again?"

"Hey! Shampoo and I talked and..."

"And she started to use her feminine wiles on you without you even knowing!" Her father interrupted her by smacking Ranma in the forehead with the sign again. "She gave you the Kiss of Death!" A new sign. "And the guide told us that was irreversible!" Flip. "Do you think she would be willing to just say," flip, "oh that's nice and then go home without your head?"

Ranma flinched a bit, scowling but not answering. *And it's kind of true, Shampoo's er, feminine wiles were kind of getting to me, although I'd swear she wasn't doing it on purpose.*

A new sign, the writing on this one Boulder, almost somehow conveying a sense of smugness. "That's what I thought. Trust me, my interrupting the two of you was the best idea." Flip. "Forget her boy. Were nearly back to civilization anyway."

"What?"

Ranma felt herself hurled it up into the air, and then came down with her upper body facing forward, and craning her head, Ranma and stared at the city ahead of them. "How long have I been out?"

"No more than four hours," was the signed reply. "You're getting soft boy if that little love tap had you unconscious for that long." Flip. "But it looks like your old man was right, we were close to the nation."

Grumbling, Ranma allowed her head to dip forward, as taking it against the pandas for covered but still fat side. "All right Pops, you've made your point."

"You just wait, boy," Genma's sign read. "We'll be there in a moment, and I'll be able to dump us both," flip, "into some hot springs and then you can break out of those ropes."

While Ranma agreed with the idea of turning back into her real body, she shifted around in the ropes and was unable to find any purchase. "I don't know Old Man, unless changing makes the ropes break on themselves, I don't know if that's going to happen. In fact, it might be kind of painful."

"That's what you get for you and for joining teams with that Shampoo character just," flip, "so, you can steal all the food. What have I told you about sharing boy?"

"Absolutely nothing!" Ranma barked back, rearing her head back and now headbutting the side of the panda. "Untie me you Old Coot!"

The panda grunted lightly with each hit, but Ranma couldn't do any real damage, and Genma just ignored her, moving forward.

A moment later, several extremely confused people watched on as a panda carrying a young girl hopped up over a fence containing a small hot spring, landing in the center of the pool.

A loud yowl of pain was heard, and another voice saying, "Suck it up boy, rope burns don't stay very long anyway," in Japanese. Needless to say, the confusion was complete, and many of the people in the small town began to race away to find the local police.

Seconds later, Ranma and Genma were on their way, well ahead of any kind of pursuit, as Ranma stared morosely down at his upper arms and lower arms, visible thanks to the shirt she was in being a muscle to her shirt. Both of his arms were covered in rope welts and shook his head with a sigh. "First thing we get to, when we get back to Japan, we look up that rope style martial arts we ran into right before making the trip over."

"Why?" Genma asked, although she didn't did dismiss the idea. This was about martial arts after all.

"I just think we both need some exercise in breaking out of that kind of thing." *And it will help me hogtie you the next time. More knots, much tighter, and make sure his hands aren't tied together.*

Soon, the two of them were near the ocean, a small inlet away from most of the major cities, but still somewhat close to Japan. "Are you sure we have to do this again Old Man?" Ranma asked, gesturing to himself and patting his flat chest with some proprietary concern. "I mean, we've just spent more than a week in our cursed forms. Do you really wanna give up being human again so soon?"

"We don't have any money boy, and besides, you know the authorities here in China don't like us Japanese."

"Yeah," Ranma drawled. "You'd think they'd be able to look past ancient history or something." His father glared at him, but didn't say anything, knowing that as a shot across the bows of a few ultranationalists martial arts masters they had met in their time back in Japan. Genma was more worldly than that but knew those would be fighting words in lots of places. *Although maybe that is what the boy wants. Heh. Good.* "Quit stalling boy, let's get a move on."

About half a day later, Ranma and his father pulled themselves out of the ocean in a small inlet on the side, before Ranma groaned, looking around them then up at the cliffs all around them. "Well, for a place to come to shore this would not be my first choice, but any port in a freaking storm, especially when you were crazy enough to set out to sea without, you know, a ship!"

"Quit whining like a little girl and let's get climbing!" Flip. "We'll make a camp on top. You still have that fish you caught?"

"That and two others," Ranma said, pulling them out of his ki space. Shampoo's explanation had allowed Ranma to re-create it. She still couldn't pawn put much into the ki space, just large enough for the three fish really, but even that was helpful.

"Good." With that, the panda led the way to the cliff, and began to climb up adroitly.

Ranma growled, stood back, then getting a running start leaped upwards, before hopping up the cliff like a demented bouncy ball, flipping herself in the air to performing perfect Triple Lutz before ending with her feet together, and her arms outstretched. "And the crowd goes wild!"

Then she paused, and shouted down "Hey old man, I don't think we'll need to make camp. There're a few signs up here for a hotel. We're on one of their walking trails."

Later that night, Ranma sat finishing his meal. It turned out this place didn't have any kind of martial arts challenge or dojo, that he (Ranma had changed back as fast as humanly possible and scarred several cooks doing so) could challenge for a night's lodging, and the two of them had been forced to work around the hotel for a while to pay for it instead.

Ranma was still eating when his father back. "Get up boy, there's a martial arts tournament near here. Let's go see if we can enter."

Ranma eagerly hopped to his feet, and the two of them left the hotel. Unfortunately, when they arrived, the tournament was closed to new people. Ranma even volunteered to take on any three of the competitors for a spot, figuring that getting some more money for their trip would be a good idea but there were no takers. This was an honest, if somewhat small tournament.

Scowling, Ranma shrugged, then looked around for his Pops, only to find him by the concession stand, which had a sign that made Ranma's eyes go wide: Free food for betting customers.

"Quick question," Ranma asked the ticket seller, "is there a limit to when we can bet to get the free food?"

"Been on the road for a while, have you?" the older man asked, smirking. "I remember my old own days on the road. I'd have eaten my boots if I could find the right sauce."

Ranma laughed, nodding his head, and the older man went on. "Well, you have to place a bet before the second match, or you won't get the food. Beyond that, and so long as you aren't a pig, it's fine."

Ranma frowned, pulled out his money, and asked politely to see a list of the people.

These came complete with pictures, and Ranma frowned looking through them. A few of them looked like people Ranma remembered vaguely from dojos they had visited years past, but one image caught his eye. It was of a woman's face, perhaps his own age or maybe a bit older, brown hair, pouty face, and a few notations about her style: Shiranui Ryu Ninjutsu. *Huh, I don't know that school. But Ninjutsu, huh?*

Ranma frowned thoughtfully, then shrugged. "Anything you can tell me about this Shiranui girl?"

"I'm not going to tell you anymore about any participants, you'll just have to watch the first match and decide for yourself," the older man waving him away and turning to the next customer.

Ranma's went over and slapped his Old Man upside the head, telling him about the need to bet before eating, and the older man scowled, before gesturing Ranma up into the stands. "Let's see how good your eye for spotting true martial artists are, boy."

The next few moments, the two of them sat at the far back of the public space, watching as the contestants came out. They moved down the line of contestants as they formally pledged to honor the rules of the tournament, and to always obey the law of the martial artist. With Ranma and his father dissecting each of them in turn.

When they came to the woman Ranma had noticed before, Ranma's eyes merely bugged out of his head, but he blinked back rapidly, looking away as his father began to develop a nosebleed. "D, damn! She is nearly falling out of that thing. You think that's part of her style?"

"Of course it's part of her style," his father's tone somewhat nasal as he replied, one hand on his nose. "She's a female ninja, seduction is part of the game! The more concentration you're wasting on looking at her bits, the less you have to dodge her fists."

Ranma nodded is that made sense, then asked "So would she be a good bet?"

"To win the tournament? No. You'll note that a few of the others aren't reacting at all to her. I'd estimate one of them will probably be able to win the tournament, that one boy at the far end, for example."

"Huh..." Ranma looked, blinking. "He looks kind of like me, weird. Same kind of hairstyle, outside of the pigtail anyway, same blue eyes... you haven't been you know had another child at some point without telling me, right?"

Genma shook his head, frowning as he too looked at the participant. "No, although you're right, he does look like you. Odd. Although he also looks both older and meaner."

As the two Saotomes watched, the first few matches began, and Ranma's pick, Mai, worked her magic. It was clear the first man she faced a man in his thirties, was too busy staring at her tits. Which, admittedly, Ranma could understand. Mai was at least a size larger, maybe more than Shampoo, and her breasts were a little more... pendulous as a result. *Or maybe that is because she's not wearing a*

*breast band or anything.* Her legs too were on display to a large degree, her small kimono being sliced up to around her hips.

Her thigh and lower legs were both heavily muscled, though, and Ranma was much more impressed by that and the muscles on Mai's arms than the rest of her. *Or, well, just as much anyway,* Ranma admitted to himself, watching as Mai delivered a spinning kick that threatened to show off even more of her legs and maybe her panties too. More importantly, the kick laid out her opponent who collapsed like a sack of wheat.

Ranma grinned as he went over to collect his winnings, nodding to a small elderly man who was doing the same, cackling gleefully. Ranma had gotten five to one odds, the man Mai had faced being one of the favorites to win it all.

Returning to his father, he smiled cheerfully at the old man. "Your turn Pops, or else you're going to have to work off all that food you bought." Genma opened his mouth, but Ranma went on blithely, flashing his teeth in a dangerous smirk. "And if you think that I will pay for your stomach, you've got another think coming. Or do you not trust your ability to see real talent, huh?"

Scoffing Genma heaved himself to his feet, moving in that direction. Soon he was back, and the two Saotomes began to analyze the fights once more. This drew in some of the other watchers, and indeed some of the participants heard them. When he got up to head to the bathroom, Ranma was surprised to hear someone call out to him, "Hey cutey with the pigtail, over here."

Ranma blinked, looking over to the speaker, and found his self-control suddenly under intense pressure as Mai Shiranui stood there a smirk on her dark red lips. "You were the one who analyzed my last fight right? You felt that I was open to grapples?"

"Er, um, yeah. Sorry, er, fighters who use a lot of kicks usually can be taken by surprise if someone goes to grab their legs or arms. You're um..." Ranma stammered to a halt.

"Go on..." Mai smirked, crossing her arms under her chest, pushing her breasts up and out. She was astonished that the young man didn't look away from her eyes. *Wow, that's some good self-control.* Mai knew the reactions she garnered from the opposite sex, heck she'd been trained by her pervert of a grandfather to make use of it. But this guy wasn't getting caught out on it.

Seeing that she listened more intently to his words as he went on. "You're also a bit too flashy. You don't pull back your punches quickly enough. You mix up your attacks, and you're really mobile, but you're um, if a guy can keep his attention on your shoulders, you're kind of easy to read. Sorry."

That made Mai blink in surprise and she shook her head. "Okay, I wasn't expecting that. Really?"

"Yeah, really. Sorry, but I've trained against so many styles, I know the weaknesses that can open you to one type of martial art school or another."

Thinking about it, Mai frowned thoughtfully. "Okay, you're right. I've got a few tricks, mostly based on weapons and hidden surprises, to counter grappling. But my main defense against grappling is

well..." Mai gestured down at herself. "The fact if any guy got a hold of me, the last thing he'd be thinking about is beating me in a match or otherwise."

"Er, yeah, I get that, but what if it's a woman? An um, straight woman I mean. Or someone like me or that guy over there with the camo pants? Someone able to control themselves?"

"Oh, you think you would be able to control yourself in that case?"

"Er I think I'd probably be a blushing mess and unable to go through with grappling you, but that's me," Ranma admitted.

Mai giggled at that, but was impressed Ranma kept his eyes locked with her own as he spoke. "Okay, so how would you fight me?"

When Mai asked that, Ranma's face changed, becoming more intense, wilder, a smirk on his face as he answered, "I'd go on the attack. You like to move around and attack your opponent from several angles, but my style's an aerial one. I'd overwhelm you in the air, and that would negate a lot of your kicks or use them against you."

"Ho, you sound plenty confident there?" Mai snorted. "Why didn't you enter the tournament then?"

"We just got back from China early today, and we aren't exactly from around here, so we didn't know about the tournament until tonight," Ranma answered with a shrug.

Mai's brows furrowed her mouth forming a very pretty moue. "Wait, if you just got back from China, why are you here at all? We're more than two hours' drive from the nearest port. Did you come out here for the tournament? I didn't know it was being advertised that openly."

"It ain't. We just happened to come ashore near here."

That statement made Mai have even more questions but she turned away when her name was called. "Okay, well, I'm just going to have to leave this here, I guess. Still, if your ever near Kyushu, look up the Shiranui school. I'd be interested in seeing if your skills back up that mouth of yours."

"Heh, you're on. And good luck yeah? Just remember what I told you and you should be fine." With that, Ranma held out his hand in a fist.

After a second, Mai laughed, and gave him a fist-bump, before moving off to enter the ring, amused again at the level of self-control the pigtailed martial artist had. *It almost reminds me of Andy, but of course Andy's far more handsome, and more driven too. Although I'd be interested to see how Ranma stacks up against the Boggards in the future. Could be fun.*

Ranma took a few minutes just closing his eyes and going through a Buddhist mantra he'd learned at one point about controlling desires before turning away. *What the hell is up lately? First Shampoo now this beauty?*



Once he was certain he wasn't about to pop a stiffy in public, Ranma moved back to his father, finding him being confronted by a strange man with gold rings on his fingers and a garish outfit. Pausing, Ranma slunk into a nearby shadow, grateful that it was getting dark out. From there, he watched what was going on, interested in where this other old guy knew his father. He was not disappointed.

"...Very well Genma, but I want to know where you and Ranma are going to meet up. My sweet Kaori longs to meet her fiancé."

"And I tell you Daikoku, I can't say. We were separated swimming across from China. We've got a few places we could meet up, but we have to get in contact first," Genma answered, looking worried, and indeed quite annoyed.

"You expect me to let you just walk off, again!? Hah. No, Genma. I will just have to go with you to..."

Having heard enough, Ranma decided to get to the bottom of this. He backed away, found a near empty bottle of water, and dumped it over his head, before returning to her father. "Hey, Pops! I got my money from that last bet and placed a new one on that Shiranui girl. I think if she listens to my advice, she should win at least two more matches before running into trouble, but then some ass got me with his water bottle."

The stranger blinked, staring at Ranma. "Er, young lady, who are you?"

"Ranko Saotome. And you Mister?" Ranma answered boldly, having thought some of this conversation through as 'he' changed into 'she'.

"I... you didn't say you had a daughter too Genma," Daikoku shook his head in shock, then he laughed. "Thank goodness you take after your mother, young lady!"

"Hah! Yeah, I've heard that before. But how do you know Pops?" Ranma questioned. "I heard you saw something about wanting to meet my brother?"

"Yes, I did! Do you know where he is? Your father told me he lost sight of Ranma when you all were swimming from China. And I must say that is quite a feat! You are to be praised for your dedication to the Art my dear!" Daikoku announced. "As to why I want to meet him, why, your brother is betrothed to my daughter! Just imagining a man able to perform that marrying into my family is enough to make me dance. Hah, and all for the sake of a single meal of fish and pickles."

Ranma did not need to feign shock at that, and she stumbled back, before scowling over at her father, who now looked like he too would desperately like to use his cursed form right now. "What the hell!? This is the first I've heard of this, and if I ain't heard of it, I bet you ain't told Ranma either! What the hell Pops, choosing Ranma's wife without asking!? There better not be any agreements like that for me or I'm gonna introduce your balls to a nutcracker!"

That had Daikoku both wincing and laughing at once, while her father tried hard to control himself, knowing any eruption would possibly give the game away. "I didn't want you... or your brother

being distracted while on our training journey. Now that it is coming to an end, we can start to think about that kind of thing. Once we meet up with him.”

Ranma rounded on Daikoku. “And what about your daughter, is she okay with being married off like, like a prize mare!?”

That shut Daikoku up, and he was about to answer huffily, when he heard his daughter’s name being called. “Hah, well my Kaori is a nice, biddable girl, who’s always known what she would be called on to do for our family. Now though you will see what our Martial Arts Catering can do for a martial artist. Your brother will learn a lot and the future of both our styles will be assured.”

With that he hopped away, leaving Ranma staring daggers at his old man. “Fish and pickles? Fuckin’ really old man!?”

“It was **TWO** pickles and you know what it is like on the road boy, you do what you have to in order to survive,” Genma retorted, then gestured to the back of the bleachers. “Now come on, let’s get out of here while the getting is good.”

“Right. Although we are going to talk about this Pops. I hate it when you make plans without me, and this is a big freaking plan you’re trying to make here. I was serious about the nutcracker thing.”

Wincing, Genma prayed Ranma would calm down, or else he would have to tie him up and carry him the rest of the way to Nerima. “R, right...”

OOOOOOO

Shampoo grimaced as she smacked another wandering hand away from her rear. She had found a pleasure yacht heading to Japan and asked to work for her way across, thinking her cooking skills would be on demand. But no, she had been forced into the waitress position thanks to her looks, and alas, the majority of the people on the yacht belonged to a baseball team. In other words, young, horny men.

*Admittedly some of them are handsome but they are so weak! she mused as the man whose hand she had smacked stumbled away, holding his throbbing wrist. And if anyone tries to mess with my drink again, I am not going to be responsible for my actions. Ugh, as if an Amazon wouldn’t recognize when someone adds something to our food.*

Four more sprained wrists and a glaring manager later, Zian Pu headed into the room she shared with several elderly women and her fellow waitresses. They all gave her and the other two waitresses commiserating looks, but Zian Pu ignored them, flopping down into her bed. *I swear to Athena if the captain tries to stiff my wages or something stupid, I am going to kill him.* She twisted onto her back, staring up at the bunk above her. *Ranma because of you I have truly seen hell and I am going to make you pay for it!*

OOOOOOO

Ranma sighed, scowling as he slumped at the Tendo table, depression rolling off him in waves. Normally Ranma wasn't one to let things bother him, but the last few days had just been a huge ordeal after another. First, he'd had his (at the time her) kiss stolen by a Mikado 'I'm too pretty to hate' Sanzenin, who seemed a serial cheater/adulterer in the making with how he liked to break couples up.

Second in the challenge match, not only had Ranma barely learned anything he could use outside a skating rink, but he had also been forced to fight most of it in his female form, with Ryoga as a partner. That had been humiliating, even worse than how long it took Ranma to learn how to skate in the first place.

Then, just as Akane might just, you know, be moving past her anger at her sisters foisting the fiancé thing on her, she somehow decides that Ranma is bullying Ryoga and goes off with him looking for her stupid P-chan. Then, when Akane and Nabiki bring out female Ranma for ice cream, who should show up? Shampoo. By busting through the wall of the ice cream store and attacking out of the blue, no less, shouting her old battle cry of "Ranma, you I kill!" as if their meeting in the cave hadn't happened at all.

*I can't believe it, but it looks almost like...like...the old man was right. Gah, I can't even, just thinking that makes me feel sick,* he thought, those words sounding a bit more like a whine than Ranma was willing to acknowledge. Even so, he felt his thoughts were right on both counts. *Darn it, Shampoo just attacked me completely out of the blue! I mean, I can understand she's angry, but I thought we had become friends in the cave, or at least near enough she'd give me the benefit of the doubt.*

That actually kind of hurt. Ranma wasn't really close to most people, but he and Shampoo had seemed to get along at the time. Certainly, he had spent more time actually talking to her than he had anyone here in Nerima. *Mind you, most of what we talked about was martial arts, but that's the important stuff anyway, right?* Then he sighed. *Oh, who I am kidding. She didn't see the old man's attack, so all Shampoo knows is that she was attacked, so obviously she would blame me, it's supposed owner.*

"Well Ranma, are you going to explain what that was about now?" Akane huffed, crossing her arms.

"Yeah, that Shampoo girl was awfully cute~," Nabiki teased, smirking at him. "Not cheating on your fiancée are you?"

Ranma looked at her warily while Akane retorted hotly to that. In the month since he'd arrived, Ranma had quickly learned that Nabiki was a troublemaker. She liked to stir the pot just because she could, and Ranma seemed to have become her favorite tool to use for that kind of thing. But looking at Akane's angry face and Kasumi's inquisitive ones, Ranma knew there was no way he was going to get out of this. *Best to give it to them straight I guess.*

"It ain't like I asked for this either, remember Akane?" Ranma interjected, overriding Akane's building diatribe, smirking over at Nabiki. "As I remember things, it was your sisters who decided to throw you under the bus."

While Akane blinked at that, her forward momentum ruined, Nabiki paled and Kasumi looked away, saying nothing, which was about par for the course as far as Ranma had seen. But he spoke into the silence quickly, wanting that to fester for a bit. *Besides, if I try to say anything now the old men would leap on me.* “Anyway, Shampoo isn’t a fiancée or anything. She’s a bit more complicated than that, and... I guess at least seventy-five percent my fault.”

With that, Ranma gave them all the abbreviated version of what it happened, being very clear that it was his old man’s fault for eating the prize food first, just like it was his fault the girls had this whole marriage thing hanging over their heads. “Well, him and your own father anyway. As for what happened in the Amazon’s village, \*I only joined in after the old man was already pigging out. And how was I supposed to know that the food was supposed to be her prize, none of the others were trying to stop the panda from eating it!”

“So, she gave you this Kiss of Death because she is a sore loser?” Akane scoffed. “Ugh, that sounds so stupid. Just take your loss and learn from it, for goodness’ sake.”

For a moment, Nabiki and Ranma just stared at her, and then Ranma slumped back in his chair, smacking his head against the table.

“Ranma, my table hasn’t done anything to you, so please don’t hurt it,” Kasumi requested, then looked up as the doorbell rang. “My, guests. I will go see who that is.”

Looking up from his slumped position, Ranma looked at the remaining Tendo sisters then over to where the two old men, who had been playing shogi, were also very obviously listening in. His father looked angry at Ranma’s attempt to blame him, but not over much, and with a final scowl sent that way, Ranma went on. “So, Shampoo chased us all through China, popping up whenever we stayed too long in one place to try and kill me. Although at one point, I tried to solve things with her, best two out of three. But...”

“Ranma, you have a guest,” Kasumi announced, entering the sitting room once more.

The guest in question caused various reactions. Genma, already in his panda form, froze, while Soun spat out his sake, and Nabiki and Akane both blinked in alarm. Ranma just stared as Shampoo moved around Kasumi, looking around the Tendo’s room with a frown.

For her part, Shampoo was somewhat confused at the moment, mostly by the young woman who answered the door. She wasn’t a warrior for certain, and yet, when Kasumi asked her to leave her shoes behind, and put on slippers, she found herself obeying instantly. That was kind of weird. It was like the young woman, for all that she wasn’t more than a few years older than Shampoo, gave off more mom-vibes than Shampoo’s own mother. It was confusing.

What was even more confusing was that as they entered the room, the mom-girl gestured to a young black haired Japanese boy, saying, “This is Ranma.”

“You Ranma?” Shampoo demanded, cursing inwardly. *Crap! I sound just like Ranma did speaking Chinese. How sad is that?*

*Still, he's kind of handsome* she reflected. The black-haired youth had an extremely good build, definitely a martial artist of some kind, and he looked to be a bit taller than Shampoo, which she kind of liked. Decently broad shoulders for his size and age and blue eyes. *Very handsome face too, and not like the pretty boys on so many posters I've seen since coming to this weird little island.*

Ranma nodded, and the girl sat beside her, then as Kasumi directed, Shampoo sat down next to him while the older girl moved into the kitchen to prepare some snacks. Then, with a slightly mischievous glint in her eyes, Shampoo thrust out her hand, patting Ranma's chest and feeling the muscles there.

Of course Shampoo could tell he was a male just by looking, but hey, free touches! "You male. Where female Ranma?"

"I, I don't know," Ranma coughed, flushing a bit at the way Shampoo's hands lingered on his chest and then traveled a bit down, feeling his pecs and abs. "Er, she's a free spirit you know, comes and goes."

Shampoo's eyes narrowed, and she turned away from her fun to point at Akane and then Nabiki. "You with Ranma female. You tell where is."

At hearing the command and warning in Shampoo's tone, Akane got her back up at being ordered around. "Now see here, you gaijin! How dare you come to my family's house and make demands of me! Why the heck would I even help you in the first place!"

While Soun nodded sagely at that and the panda whipped out a sign saying, "Look how quick she is to defend him, it's destiny I tell you, Tendo. Destiny!" Shampoo's eyes narrowed, and suddenly, she was holding her Chuis, having pulled them out from her ki space. "You either tell now or tell after beat you."

"Just try it you!" Akane growled, getting to her feet too.

"H, hey wait, let's all just calm down!" Ranma tried to diffuse things, surprising the others somewhat. "Besides, female Ranma told me that she and you already had worked things out. Best two out of three..."

Ranma trailed off at the look on Shampoo's face and when she spoke, her voice contained a lot of anger. "Ranma win first. Shampoo wins second. Third, Ranma send panda on me!"

Over the weeks that had passed since their aborted cease-fire in the cave, Shampoo had become more and more certain of that. After all, why would a panda attack like that, especially one that was so well-trained, unless it had been told to. And how would a panda know to search her pack for her supplies? Especially when the remnants of the sheep carcass was right there? While normally vegetarians, even a panda could not have ignored that and certainly not for anything he could find in her pack.

"Now that isn't what, er, my sister told me! My old man I mean the panda, he attacked both of you!" Ranma protested. *Should I just tell her about the Jusenkyo curse? No, that'd let her make the*

*connection to me and my 'sister' being one and the same, and if that happens...* Ranma suppressed a shudder. He really didn't want to learn what Shampoo could be like if she had the anti-pervert power up all women seemed capable of using when she found out she'd spent so much time undressed around someone who had been born male.

"So female Ranma tell you. All Shampoo know is panda attack, and then I knocked out. I not even see panda doing the attacking before I go out." Again, Shampoo cursed her inability to speak in a cogent and intellectual manner, but she hoped that her words got across to the buffoon. "And so, Kiss of Death still on. Shampoo must kill, for honors sake."

She hesitated, seeing the mail Ranma across her his arms angrily, and went on more hesitantly. "Shampoo not like it, but honor still dictating it."

Akane rolled her eyes, standing up again. "Has it never occurred to you Shampoo, that your clan's rules really don't apply to anyone outside of it! God, you sound like you were stuck in the twelfth century or something!"

"Oh," Shampoo asked coldly. "You not care about family honor?"

Akane spluttered, then shot back, "Not enough to kill someone!"

"Then you no martial artist," Shampoo answered with a lazy shrug. "Now, you tell me where I find female Ranma or..."

That was as far as she got before Akane charged. If there was one thing Ranma had learned over the past month and a half, it was that despite her lack of skill and true dedication to the Art as he saw it, (he wouldn't go as far as Shampoo had, but...) Akane hated being called out on the fact that she wasn't a martial artist. "How dare you, you Chinese hussy! Get out of my house!"

Kasumi's shout of, "Akane, not inside!" from the entrance to the kitchen went unheard, as the youngest Tendo barreled towards.

Instantly Shampoo was on her feet once more and lashed out with a kick, catching Akane in the chin, causing her to stumble back. A bare second later, Shampoo's Chuis appeared in her hands and then was holding her Chuis once more, one of them lashing out to smash into Akane's leg, upending her to the floor. Her other Chui came down in a blow that would undoubtedly have cracked bones at the very least.

Ranma had a moment to note that she was aiming for Akane's stomach instead of head. It would've been a debilitating instead of a killing blow. But he had already moved by the time that percolated through his brain, and he kicked out hard, catching the weapon as it descended, smashing it out of Shampoo's grip to whirl away to be caught by his father's paw.

In the other paw, Genma held up another sign. "Ahah! I knew he cared about her too Tendo!"

"Indeed, my old friend, their chemistry is undeniable," Soun nodded.

Shampoo whirled towards Ranma bringing her other Chui around, but Ranma's hand grabbed it behind the Chui head, grunting at the impact to his palm. *Shampoo is pretty darn strong!* But Ranma was way stronger, and he pulled the weapon out of her grip, kicking out at the same time. She blocked the kick but was still flung backwards out of the open doors to the backyard, where she rolled, coming to a halt. She hopped to her feet, grinning. "Is good! Talk cheap."

In actuality, Shampoo was just fed up with having to think things through in terms of what she felt towards the female Ranma. Her own pride, the confusion about what had happened during the log match, the friendship they had been slowly forming, it was all too much for a young woman who very much preferred to keep things simple. And, she also felt male Ranma was extremely handsome.

*Heh, he's certainly a step up from Mousse on two major points: one, he's able to actually see, and two, I don't think of him as a brother. So even if I lose, I win* she thought to herself gleefully. *Not that I am going to make it easy for him.*

With that, she darted forward, once more pulling out a weapon from her ki space she dashed towards Ranma with a long spear, the same one Ranma had used in their weapons only match in the cave. The added range of the spear and Shampoo's speed, which she had built on in the month since they'd last fought, gave Ranma a bit of trouble for a few seconds while he was stuck in the doorway. Shampoo also knew that if this Ranma was anything like the female one, she had to keep him grounded, and so didn't fall for any feints, protecting the area above and directly in front of herself.

But despite this, Ranma only needed one slower than normal stab to bounce up and over the thrust, and then Ranma was in the air above Shampoo, moving out into the backyard beyond.

At that point, the battle was no contest. Shampoo was fast, agile and she used her spear well, but Ranma was a master of the aerial style of Anything Goes, and he had the whole sky to go with. Ranma also had a natural longer reach than Shampoo and used that occasionally to his advantage after smashing her spear to pieces.

But Shampoo kept on fighting, until Ranma knocked her out with a blow to the back of the head that sent the Amazon flying. She crashed into the side of a tree, where she slumped down unconscious.

"Well," Nabiki said stonily staring at some of the damage done to the patio and the doorway, "I..."

"I hope you're happy Akane," Ranma interrupted, scowling at both sisters as he gently laid Shampoo out next to Kasumi, who quickly placed a cold pad on her head. He wasn't in the mood for Nabiki's troublemaking. "We were actually trying to talk her down and seemed to be getting somewhere until you got all annoyed at her."

"What did you expect Ranma?" Akane shouted back, pointing at the girl. *Is it just me, or is Ranma showing her far too much sympathy for someone who wants to kill his female form!?* "She insulted my honor is a martial artist."

Ranma ground his teeth, and he was about to open his mouth, but then, his father came over, dumping a bottle of tea over himself, and growling angrily at him. "She's right boy! Indeed, you

should've been the first one to stand up and defend your fiancée's honor! You stepped forward when the threat became physical but even so..."

"Hey!" Akane shouted, "I don't need anyone to defend me!"

Ranma ignored that, glaring up at his old man, giving him the finger. "And whose fault do you think this is, huh?! If you hadn't interrupted, I would've beaten her back at the cave. Shampoo would've been satisfied that I was better than her, but also honorable, and we could've..."

"Are you listening to yourself boy? That Amazon gave you the Kiss of Death in the first place because she was a sore loser! This is the same arguments we had at the time, and nothing's changed except that she's proven to be willing to kill you again!" Genma barked back.

"Then why was she willing to talk to us today instead of threaten you all?" Kasumi asked softly, smiling serenely. Instantly the shouting in the room and did, as all of them shuffled looking a little nervous at the woman's feints mile. "For my part, I believe that Shampoo is a very conflicted young lady. She showed no true desire to kill Ranma as her honor dictates, but rather resigned anger at it. I agree with Ranma, she might've been able to get out of it, except for your outside interference, Uncle Saotome."

"And I disagree," Genma answered back, shaking his head like a bull that had just taken a hit between the eyes. "Besides, she attacked your sister."

Kasumi coughed, looking over at her sister, who crossed her arms and glaring angrily at Ranma for some reason. "Yes well, I have mentioned that Akane's a nice girl, she's just a bit of a violent maniac at times. I'm certain an apology will..."

"I'm never going to apologize to her! How can you even ask me that Kasumi!?" Mount Akane flared up once more. "You heard what Shampoo said, she thinks I'm not a martial artist just because I don't think my honor matters more than the law!"

Again, Ranma had to bite his lip to keep from saying anything. *It would be singularly unhelpful to say any of the many things I've been thinking about her and the whole Tendo school* Thankfully, Shampoo groaning provided instruction. Ranma looked down at her and Kasumi smiled, reaching down and removing the cloth from Shampoo's head if she was all right.

For a moment, Shampoo had been back in her village, having just been thoroughly trashed by her grandmother for acting like a brat. It happened often enough, but eventually, the message, whatever it was that month, stuck. But Kasumi's voice brought her back to the here and now, and it was all Shampoo could do to not to squeal happily as she remembered what had happened. **Yes!**

The male Ranma had been good, just as good or perhaps a little better than his sister. Not only had Shampoo fought as hard as she could, but Ranma had defeated her cleanly, and there was only one response and Amazon woman could do such as that. She sat up, nodded thanks to Kasumi, and then looked to her side, where Ranma was sitting.



“You’re not going to give me the Kiss of Death or anything are you,” Ranma asked, although for some reason he could feel his heart beginning to pound. *I mean, all I was doing was defending, it wasn’t like that was a proper martial arts match or anything.*

“No. Shampoo not give you Kiss of Death...” Shampoo purred.

Somehow, the way she spoke sent a shiver of something up and down Ranma’s spine. Fear? Anticipation? Something, and he found himself rooted to the spot as Shampoo moved closer. Before anyone else could say anything, Shampoo leaned forward and kissed Ranma on the lips. It was awkward, and somewhat twisted her body around the bed, but Shampoo still did it. She held the kiss for a second and Ranma found male instincts he didn’t even know existed responding, pushing him to lean forward just a bit to press his own lips slightly against hers.

Then as shouted of shock and outrage began, Shampoo pulled back, saying in Chinese, “I love you, beloved.”

While everyone around them started to shout or blame Ranma for whatever was happening, heck, even Kasumi was shouting, “Oh my,” Ranma stayed silent, staring at Shampoo before turning his attention to the others as Shampoo smirked slightly and turned her attention to the cup of tea on the table nearby. Ranma continued to shout ignorance or just bellow back insults at his father and Soun, then, when everyone understood he didn’t know what the heck this was about either, turned back to Shampoo.

But instead of anger or annoyance or any of a myriad other emotions Ranma was feeling, when he turned back to Shampoo, all she saw was curiosity and surprise. “Explanation please?” he asked in Chinese.

Shampoo smiled at that, grateful he was taking this so well so far. He hadn’t returned her kiss as much as she would have liked but Shampoo felt she could put that down to the fact that it had been so sudden, and they were after all in public. Still, the laws were clear. The Kiss of Death could not just be given whenever, it had to be given at the first moment when the Amazon in question could do so.

“Is simple. If outsider female beat Amazon, must kill.” She hesitated, then shrugged. “That law anyway. Hopefully more... like, like cloth than wood.”

“Oh, you mean more flexible in practice? Not so rigid?” Kasumi supplied, understanding Shampoo’s pidgin Japanese was not up to the task just now.

“Yes that!” Shampoo answered, bowing towards the older woman gratefully. “But if outsider male defeat Amazon, needs must give Kiss of Marriage. “

Ranma’s face paled, and he waved his hands wildly. “Wait, wait! Do you mean we’re married!? Just because you kissed me!?” *She cute and that kiss was... well it was um, wow, but that’s waaay too far, especially with all the way my old man’s sold my hand a few times as it is.*

Shampoo shook her head. “No. Shampoo not know word in Japanese, but it about stuff before. It promise to try to marry...” she attempted to say.

Once more Kasumi came to her help. "I think it is the equivalent of a promise ring, perhaps? You want to date and see if you are compatible?"

"Yes!" Shampoo latched onto the one word she knew, date, in that sentence. "Date! Yes. Lots of that. In old time, would marry quick. These days, not."

"You wouldn't happen to have a booklet about your people's laws, would you?" Nabiki interjected, smirking slightly as her sister turned redder, and Ranma deflated quickly, as if not married so quickly was his primary concern. Not that another woman, cuter and curvier than Akane, was now after him. "And you don't seem all that disappointed Ranma?" she taunted.

Ranma gaped at her, waving his hands wildly. "Hey! Don't put this on me, I..."

"You didn't push her away," Akane answered sharply, turning on him like a terrier looking for her favorite bone. "It almost looked like you were enjoying it!"

That of course, brought Ranma's automatic defenses to bear. "Well, maybe if someone else I could name wasn't such an un-cute flat-chested tomboy I..."

That was as far as he got before the table was lifted up and smashed into his head, hurling Ranma and the pieces of the table out of the still open doorway to the backyard.

"Oh my, I do wish he could keep a control of his tongue more," Kasumi murmured, staring after her table.

Shampoo glared at the one called Akane, cracking her knuckles explosively. "You attack Ranma again like that, around Shampoo, Shampoo not hold back!"

Akane scoffed, and turned, stomping off, and the two old men began a familiar moaning refrain, moving over to the nearby wine cellar. This left Nabiki and Kasumi to clean up was not lost on either Tendo sister and they both sighed before getting to work.

OOOOOO

Later that night, Ranma sighed, leaning back against the top of the chimney on the Tendo's roof, scowling in annoyance. He had quickly found that this was a nice quiet place where no one else would come and bother him. And right now, he really needed to think about it things. Shampoo, Nerima, Shampoo's kiss, the Tendos, Shampoo and whether or not she'd kill him, his old man and the future.

Setting aside his thoughts on Shampoo as being a bit too jumbled right now, Ranma decided to first think about Nerima and the Tendos.

*That fight with Kuno was kind of interesting, and the fights against the other local martial arts styles have also been kind of cool, pushing me to adapt. Yet without me being surprised by those pictures coming out of his pocket, Kuno would have been no threat, and take their skates off and the comedy team of Pretty Boy and Klepto wouldn't be much either. That's sort of a theme around here, their basic skills are all just okay, but the martial artists take normal judo or Aikido and adapt them to an insane*

*level for their specialties. It's... fun... and keeping me on my toes, but I don't see any of them really able to make me sweat outside of Ryoga and his whole disappearing act's too annoying to plan for.*

*And the Old Man's making me go to school, Ranma snorted, shaking his head. While seeing that science teacher run away screaming about how 'the laws don't matter, why don't they matter' was kind of funny, it's a major drag. Mostly because of Kuno and Akane.*

That thought segued into the next easily and Ranma sighed, staring up at the stars, trying to take some solace in them as always. *I got to say, the so-called home life is something else. Nerima might be a fun place to visit but I'm thinking now it ain't so nice a place to live. And at the heart of that is Akane and the rest of the Tendos.*

First, the problem with the Weepy Man. He was just like Ranma's father, manipulative, only more in an emotional manipulation kind of way, rather than an ego and pride kind of way. But Ranma knew their tricks by this point. *And my willingness to care about either of their opinions, is in the basement and ain't gonna change. Screw 'em.*

Then, there was Kasumi. Ranma liked her, but she was such a wallflower! *Come on girl, stand up for what you think or are yourself at some point, please!* The only times Kasumi ever even raised her voice was when someone tried to make trouble at meal times, or wreck the house. Worse, Kasumi was older than Ranma and had made no bones about the fact that she saw Ranma as a guest, nothing more nothing less. Kasumi wasn't a problem but she wasn't a solution either.

*No, the two major problems in the house are Nabiki, and Akane. Mind you, that's like comparing a handgun to a cannon, but they're both the same kind of thing.* Nabiki made Ranma uncomfortable, her manipulative ways, and the way she had routinely taken pictures of both Ranma's female form and her sister pointed to the fact that this was not someone Ranma wanted to be around. To say nothing about how she always seemed to egg either Ranma or Akane on to make their fights or arguments bigger.

*And then we come to Akane.* After a month living with her, Ranma had decided he could barely stand the girl. She was just so inconsistent. *One day she's nice, the next she's trying to tear my head off. One day she's being friendly, the next second she thinks I'm picking on Ryoga. And would it kill her to call me something beyond pervert!?*

Worse was the way she treated the Art. Yes, Akane was the only one of the three sisters who seems to practice some form of martial arts. *But that is just it, she practiced, she didn't live it! She didn't look to the future and say this is what I want to do! Hell, she treats the martial arts as just a way to keep herself fit most of the time.*

Heck, the one time they'd had a candid discussion about what their parents wanted them to do, Akane had seemed horrified at the idea of either joining Ranma in teaching – which Ranma had no interest in- or looking after the house being stuck there while Ranma taught martial arts... That wasn't something Akane wanted.

And yet, just like today if anyone questioned her devotion to the martial arts, she blew up at them. She had no self-control, and routinely attacked Ranma, not just verbally but physically, which he

was beginning to really dislike. Especially when compared to how he and Shampoo had talked and got into know one another for that time in the cave while still also planning to fight.

*She and I were willing to put aside all the reasons to be unfriendly and got to know one another. And here Akane and I were without any reason to dislike one another but we are like furry demons and dogs. Worse is I'm the one supposed to change what I'm doing, what I'm supposed to be doing and she ain't willing to do the same or even listen to me most of the time. I know what a real friend is like and it ain't Akane.*

That wasn't even mentioning the whole marriage shite. Ranma hadn't taken it seriously since he knew his old man had sold his hand off at least once before this and knowing Genma that was probably only the tip of the iceberg. So to Ranma's mind, there was no real honor agreement here.

It didn't matter which agreement was first, as his old man always stressed. All that mattered was that Genma had dragged their family name through the mud each time he'd made agreements he'd never intended to honor. So really, it was best for everyone that none of the agreements were honored or else the family they were marrying in would also lose honor too.

*Hell, I don't even know why Pops and Weepy... hehe, sounds like a comic team. Ooh, even better, Greedy and Weepy. Ranma spent a few seconds snickering at that before becoming serious as he looked out over at the dojo. Anyway, I don't know why they want to bring the two schools together so soon. It ain't like Soun has shown anything that tells me he's even developed a style at all. All Akane does is break bricks and throw simple punches and kicks. Ugh.*

*And as for Akane and how she and I have been dealing with this whole uniting the schools thing? A freaking train wreck is what it is. Maybe if Akane had been as nice as she'd seemed for the very short time she had known Ranma before the curse came to light, maybe things would be different. If she was less hostile maybe. And if I actually was, um, well at all attracted to her I'd be willing to put up with... eh, who am I kiddin', if she had the same body type as her sisters, I still wouldn't be willing to deal with her shit.*

And beyond not liking the whole Tendo homelife thing, Ranma was also getting bored with staying in one place. While his father had instilled in him a love of the martial arts, that wasn't the only thing he had done. Because of their constantly moving on, Ranma had learned to love travelling. He loved to see new places. He loved to learn new techniques and finding and challenging new people. Here in Nerima, while he wasn't bored outside of school hours, he also wasn't really getting better per-se. Learning more styles was okay, but outside of further stretching his ability to adapt, that didn't help him get any better, really. The majority of the local styles were just too specialized.

*I need more real fights, more fights that push me and are dangerous, instead of just, just about honor, pride and girls. I'm all for those things, but come on, three fights in a month that got my blood pumping, and again, take their skates away, and the terrible twosome are no darn threat! Ugh. Maybe if Ryoga was a regular but...*

Ranma looked up at a noise, and blinked when Shampoo landed lightly on the rooftop, so lightly he could barely hear anything. She looked at him, smiling tentatively, and Ranma smiled back just as

tentatively, patting the rooftop next to him. She had left earlier when he was unconscious, either asked to leave or simply run off by the old men, Ranma didn't know.

When Shampoo made to cross the distance into his personal space, Ranma held up a hand, looking very nervous. But there were sooo many ways this could go wrong, Ranma knew he had to head off at least a few of them. "We, we should talk a bit, I think."

Shampoo frowned, then shrugged, and sat cross-legged facing Ranma. The serious way in which she'd taken that statement made Ranma also serious, and he sat up, twisting around into the lotus position as he looked back at her. "Er... so... um, did you see my old man transform earlier?" he asked, hoping to start on that.

"Man with glasses and bald head? He no do anything but shout. He your father? Ouch." Shampoo giggled lightly, shaking her head and continuing in her pidgin Japanese. "And Shampoo think Uncle Bowl-cut bad."

Ranma groaned. *Okay, there goes the easiest way of saying this. Time to pull off the Band-Aid, I think.* "So, I, I need to apologize. My Pops, he um... he has a curse. You see, we, um, we went to Jusenkyo er...b, before going through your village."

At first Shampoo didn't understand why Ranma was talking about things as if Ranma had been there instead of his sister, but the instant Jusenkyo was mentioned she got it. Whatever else, Shampoo was not stupid and knew that if both the older Saotome and the younger were at Jusenkyo, that could only mean one thing. *The panda is the older man, ugh and...* Remembering certain events in the cave, Shampoo's eyes narrowed and she stood up, cracking her knuckles, and glaring down at the still seated Ranma in anger. "Which form original?" she hissed.

"This one..." Ranma quickly pointed at himself. "M, my female form I got it the cursed Springs. I, I'm sorry I..."

Instantly Shampoo thumped Ranma on the shoulder as hard as she could. Ranma made no move to move, and she hit him twice more on other parts of his arm, muttering "That for looking at me in cave."

"Fair enough," Ranma nodded wincing slightly. Shampoo was strong. Not as strong as Ranma and Ryoga but certainly up there with the other martial artists he'd fought recently. "Er, so you know, Pops was the one who interrupted our match. I'm sorry but..."

"I okay with that now," Shampoo answered with a smile. "If kisses given to same person, it on me choose which one to follow." She then seemed to wilt a bit, looking almost vulnerable as she locked gazes with Ranma, her face visible thanks to the lights of the area around them. "Question is, what you think of me."

Ranma thought about that for a moment, then answered hesitantly. "I think you're really strong, you're a great martial artist, you are a pretty good conversationalist, er talker," he added, when he looked saw Shampoo's confused expression. "And I liked it."

“Not just looking?” Shampoo questioned, now switching to a more biting yet vulnerable tone.

Ranma scratched at his pigtail sheepishly, then assayed an attempt at a compliment and a bit more truth. “Er, no, that, that was nice, but talking with ya for hours on end was even better. And er, I felt really guilty about it afterward, especially given the trouble I’ve run into with my curse form since.”

That cheered Shampoo up and she nodded. “Is good then. But what problems Ranma run into?”

“Heh, well, in terms o’ danger, there is this crazy brother sister pair around here called the Kunos, Tatewaki and Kodachi. Who er...seem to have formed love hate relationships with my different forms.” Shampoo looked blank at that and Ranma explained. “Um, Kuno he and I were fighting, I er, fell into a pool at school, and he saw my female form. He’s got a thing for strong martial artist types, he was after Akane before I got here and...”

Shampoo scoffed, interrupting. “Bah! If Angry Girl strong, this area too too pathetic.”

“Hahaha, yeah, I kinda agree with ya, but if you see a tall guy around our age wearing a kendo outfit and sounding like he’s trying to decide if he’s a Brit or a Samurai with every sentence, run. If ya beat him ya might end up having him chase you down to. He seems to take a beating like no one I’ve ever seen and keeps on coming back for more. I think he might actually enjoy it.”

“Shampoo once met British person. His English very proper and intelligent. Ranma now ruin it for me,” Shampoo mock pouted. “Still, sounds like he more blind than Mousse if not see curse and believe you foul anything. He dangerous?”

“Ehh, not really? He’s got this cool air pressure attack, but so long as you know he has it it’s easy enough to dodge.” Ranma watched as Shampoo perked up at that news, and began to ask him questions, ending with her on her feet and taking a stance he had described from the match Ranma had with Kuno, a Chinese sword in her hand as she mimed the move, humming thoughtfully.

The sight had him smiling and he continued to do so as she turned back to him. “Shampoo find funny Angry Girl sister sell pictures. Is very very mercenary act, yes? But Also funny Kuno obsessed one form, hate other.”

Ranma sighed and shook his head. “Er not quite. She hates my female form and loves my male body.”

This had Shampoo giggling, which increased as Ranma explained about the whole Martial Arts Gymnastics adventure. The fact Akane had hurt herself in such a silly manner and that Ranma had to fight in her place tickled Shampoo’s funny bone. “Shampoo bet you too too cute in leotard,” she teased.

Realizing the other girl was just teasing instead of taunting and having to erase an image of Shampoo in a similar outfit, Ranma laughed too. “Heh, I will have you know I was gorgeous.”

“Short as curse form is, better cute as button than gorgeous,” Shampoo retorted. “Why you so short anyway?”

Snorting Ranma waved one hand airily. "How am I supposed to know? Isn't that the body of the woman who fell into the cursed spring?"

Shampoo shook her head. "No, curse change victim to curse version of self, not original. That what Great Grandmother say anyway."

"Huh. So this is what I'd look like if I was born a girl? Guess that Dai-whatever guy might've been right, in that form I take after my mom, whoever she was," Ranma mused, then shook his head, noticing that Shampoo had sat down again and now the two of them were so close their feet were touching as they sat facing one another. "Well, anyway, the match was kind of interesting. I learned a lot about hidden weapons, a few new throws, and some ribbon combat I think could be useful. But overall, take the special rules and the homefield..."

HE stopped there as Shampoo made a little interrogative noise and Ranma realized he had to explain that, going into detail about how Kodachi had the whole match rigged against Ranma. "Didn't help her thought. And she's a sore loser, so she comes back later that night, and declares that she's given up her old love of male Ranma but made an entirely new one."

That caused Shampoo a case of the giggles again, and Ranma smiled hearing it. He didn't really have the words to explain why he liked the sound but hearing Shampoo giggle was a lot better than hearing other people laugh or have fun at his expense. It was like Shampoo was both commiserating and having fun listening rather than just laughing at Ranma's misfortunes.

Shampoo caught the smile on Ranma's face and for some reason began to blush, falling silent, which in turn caused Ranma to blush and look away. For a moment the two of them just sat there, staring around them rather than at one another, until eventually Ranma had his face under control once more. "Er, anyway, um, back to us, I guess. We can talk about Ryoga later. Er... listen..." Ranma paused once more, then decided again to go with bluntness without being insulting. It had worked so far, after all. "Look while I'm happy that you're not going to try and kill me any longer, I don't want to go back to your village."

At that, Shampoo's eyes narrowed, and her face closed down dangerously, but Ranma held up his hand and explained, "It isn't anything here holding me back, whatever ya might've heard. I mean our family is kind of pushing me and Akane together, but neither of us want. Plus, my old man is so dishonorable, whatever he says about family honor I take with a lot of salt you know? So it ain't that."

Ranma had spoken too fast for a moment there, and had to slow down and explain things better but, Shampoo eventually understood and calmed down. "Okay, is understood. But then why you not come with Shampoo?"

"What about you?" Ranma asked in turn. "Do you really want to go back to your little bit of China? Because I gotta say, I thought I saw a lot more interest in my tales about traveling and stuff than that."

A part of Shampoo wanted to say yes. but she didn't, not really. "Shampoo miss mom, miss dad. Never been away from them before. But bigger part..." Shampoo hummed thoughtfully, turning slightly away from Ranma and then laying out on the rooftop, looking up at the stars for several silent moments

before continuing. "Bigger part say want to explore. World way bigger than just the village. What see more of it. Want see more graphic novels and books!" she added excitedly, turning on her side to look at Ranma, her smile widening into an almost childish grin.

Ranma laid back too, turning on his side as Shampoo had, so they were looking at one another, but laying down face to face instead of sitting up, about an arm's length between them. "So, er, I'm not ready to you know marry you or anything like that. But... I... well, I want to leave here. I want to get away from my Pops, I've wanted that for a while. The Tendos ain't exactly my favorite people either, and for all the bizarre challenges and such, I'm not being challenged as much as I could be here."

"Shampoo understand that. Shampoo need challenge Blooded Warriors get challenge at home. If beat them, they not take good, and Shampoo not learning much any longer anyway. But what Ranma saying to Shampoo?" Shampoo questioned hesitantly, wondering why Ranma was mentioning leaving. *Ranma knows I would just have to follow him if he did, so is he telling me this so that I know, or...*

"Well maybe we could travel together?" Ranma asked hesitantly. "Get to know one another learn more martial arts, find new fights together, see the world. I'd say we should head back to China and your area first, but since you also want ta see the world, I can look around for cures elsewhere first, you know? It's important but getting out of here and getting stronger is more important, at least for me."

Her hopeful guess having proven right, Shampoo had started to nod at the first, and she kept on nodding as Ranma added more reasons, although the nods slowed as he mentioned finding a cure for the curse, holding back a wince. *Oh dear, I think Grandmother once mentioned that the curses of the springs don't cancel one another out, they merge....*

But that was a conversation for another day, and Shampoo smiled in affirmation. "Shampoo like all that! When Amazon leave town, she supposed to search out new martial arts styles anyway...But..."

As she spoke, she leaned forward, getting into Ranma's personal space using her arms to perch above him looking down at Ranma's who's face flashed red at her closeness. But to her delight, Ranma made no move to escape, just staring back at her like a deer caught in the headlights.

*Now, to find if he is a good man instead of just a good martial artist* she thought, a surge of worry going through her for just a moment. Then the memory of Mousse, and how few choices she would soon have there rose in her mind, spurring Shampoo forward and she leaned forward staring into Ranma's eyes.

"But date and getting to know one another just as important as get stronger. Me want know you better. See if, if make it mistake again," she ended hesitantly, pulling back.

Ranma slowly sat up again too, noticing how close they were now, but, oddly, feeling no panic at the idea, only a bit of confusion and a curious amount of interest in what this meant. "I, I don't know what you mean."

"Shampoo kiss female Ranma out of pride, not really want to kill. But law is law. Shampoo jump at chance kiss handsome man, but not know you. Know you little," she went on quickly when Ranma



opened up his mouth, "but only as good talker. Not as..." she stumbled to a halt, once again reaching the limit of her ability to communicate in Japanese.

"You, you want to know if I'm a good person?" Ranma guessed, then hesitated. "I, I don't know if I am. I mean, I tricked ya, right? And um, all that stuff in your village, and even a lot of the stuff I've done before that. I ain't exactly above tricking my opponents when I can in martial arts matches or out of them, to say nothin' of... well, I know I ain't perfect."

Shampoo waved that off. "You good martial artist. And you let Shampoo smack you for you peeking in cave. That start. But need know more. Need know if, if can fall in love," she finished, flushing in embarrassment. "Need to know if you good man, good partner."

"Shampoo," Ranma began hesitantly, "I, I mean if we're traveling together, maybe, maybe that could happen. But how do you think you could tell if I'm a good man right now?"

"You kiss me back slightly before," Shampoo blushed, almost stammering alongside of her normal pidgin Japanese. "Kiss again then both know if maybe us make sense, yes?"

"Then we'll both know," Ranma repeated, a blush suffusing his features but he remembered how soft her lips had felt, how soft Shampoo felt, like silk wrapped around steel. And after a few seconds, he slowly nodded.

Internally leaping about in joy, Shampoo smiled, bit her lip, then slowly leaned in, pausing halfway. Ranma watched her come, his eyes locked on her face, watching as Shampoo's eyes slid closed, watching her lips, how wet they seemed, how desirable. Then he leaned forward, matching her.

Sweet heat, sweet touch, **softness**. Shampoo's smell, soap and lavender and some kind of honeysuckle maybe, invaded Ranma's senses, as her soft lips, the softest things Ranma had ever felt pressed against his. And instinctively he pressed back, his arms going around the purple-haired girl.

For a moment, hovering there Shampoo had despaired. That Ranma would call this off, that if they went through with his plan, it would be only as friends, that she had again made a mistake and would eventually have to answer for her hasty nature and pride.

But then, he began kissing back, and now his arms were around her. They weren't clinging, they weren't squeezing, no. Shampoo moaned as those arms, stronger than hers by a wide margin, held Shampoo as if she was the most precious thing in the world, a treasure Ranma wanted to hold, but not make control.

She whimpered as one hand went to the small of her back, the other arm around her shoulders. Returning the gesture, Shampoo pressing her chest into she Ranma, feeling his muscles, as he felt her large breasts slowly flattening between them slightly.

Ranma made no effort to deepen the kiss, just keeping up the same slow pressure, shifting his head slightly to either side as Shampoo did the same, and then leaned back, smiling at her. Shampoo smiled back brightly, leaning her forehead against Ranma's as they both breathed in deeply. "Shampoo now know make no mistake."

Ranma slowly nodded, then leaned in quickly, kissing her again to her delight. This one was shorter, but both of them were now breathing in hard, and Ranma's smile turned just a tad crooked. "Yeah, I, I don't think I'm making a mistake either."

Then an unexpected voice interrupted the moment from the side. "Ranma, are you still up here, get inside you idiot, we have school to... w, what the hell is going on up here!" Akane stammered to a halt seeing the two of them embracing, and then she shrieked. "You fucking pervert! On our roof!!! Well, if your so-called honor doesn't matter to you, then this whole fiancé relationship never happened!"

From somewhere Akane pulled a hammer, hurling it towards Ranma and then leaping back down the ladder she'd used to get to the roof. She didn't see Ranma and Shampoo separate, rolling in different directions to avoid the hammer. The hammer slammed down into the roof, leaving a dent there before disappearing.

"Huh, ki weapon, neat," Shampoo deadpanned.

"Yeah, but if you need to get that angry and out of control to use one, I don't think it's worth it," Ranma answered, as shouts and bellows began below, a plan percolating through his mind. "Hey, let me handle this, okay?"

Before Shampoo could reply, the two drunkards barreled up and out onto the rooftop where they began to berate Ranma. To one side Shampoo glared at them, cracking her knuckles, but Ranma waved his hands waving as if nothing had happened, although he sent Shampoo a wink before he began to speak. "I don't know what she was on about! Shampoo was here to try and find out more about female Ranma, I tried to stop her from starting a fight, Shampoo tripped, I caught her, that's it!"

"Hah that's a likely story," Nabiki murmured, smirking slightly as she poured oil onto the fire. "Akane might have been seeing things, sure, but after this afternoon the evidence suggests otherwise."

"Aiyah, male Ranma tell true," Shampoo agreed hesitantly, taking heart in that wink and the simply amazing kiss they'd just had. "Mad girl just overact. I go now. Find female Ranma. Still must deal first her." She nodded at Ranma and said, "Talk about date after, yes?"

"GRAAAH, more talk about that fool foreign foolishness!" Genma grumbled, scowling at his son, as Shampoo disappeared into the night over the rooftops before Ranma could reply. "You should be down and apologizing to your fiancée for this afternoon anyway not up here lollygagging where this foreign hussy can find you!"

Soun nodded his head sagely, scowling at Ranma as he stroked his mustache thoughtfully. "I agree. Perhaps, the two of you should move out. If you are going to abuse my hospitality like this, I don't think I want you here for now."

*And that way, he and Akane can have some time to cool off before Ranma apologizes. And a few days spent living out on his own will force Ranma to realize how good he has it living here with my family. Besides, it's not as if he's just going to run off without his father. How could he survive?*

But to his surprise, while Genma looked appalled, Ranma took it with aplomb. Indeed, inside, he was jumping for joy. "Eh, if you're sure, Mr. Tendo. I can kinda see your point." He glared at his father for a second. "After all, who know what other trouble might come looking for me or my old man. I'll be gone in a few minutes."

"N, now wait a minute!" his father began to protest, but Ranma leaped up off of the rooftop and down, where he nodded at Kasumi, who looked a little pained. But he ignored her. She'd had a month and a half to try and be something more to him than just a random piece of furniture in the house. She hadn't and that was that.

Moments later, Ranma had his pack, and while his father was still protesting, he leaped out. Ranma shouted "I'll see you at the school, old man. Or you can stay here for the night, I'll just spend the night there."

About fifteen minutes later, Ranma twisted around, not heading for Furinkan, but the nearest park. There, Ranma ignored the sight of a small, abandoned tent, looking around hopefully. That hope was rewarded when Shampoo came out of the trees, leaping down towards him. Ranma grinned, caught her, and the two shared another short kiss. When they pulled back, Shampoo asked, "So, this when we run, yes?"

Ranma smiled, no, he beamed at the Chinese girl, pushing back a desire to kiss her again. *Nope, my hormones don't control me... not that much anyway.* "Yep. Hope you're rested Shampoo, because I want to put a few districts between me and the old man before we do anything else."

Shampoo giggled, having seen Ranma's eyes trace down to her lips, but also willing to put off more fun in that direction for now in order to get away from the numerous distractions that might get in her way if they stayed here. "Aiyah, sound like fun. Ranma lead the way, yes?"

With a nod, Ranma turned, and with Shampoo beside him, raced off, away from Nerima and the craziness there, determined to find some craziness of his own, the kind that would make him a better martial artist. *And this time with a far better companion too! This could be a lot of fun...*

### End Chapter

So, this Ranma isn't quite bog-standard LOL. He has a much greater wanderlust, like a few of my other Ranma's. He also, like the Ranma in *Chaotic Space*, hasn't had anything done to curtail his limbo. He's not had the Nerima Indoctrination, nor his father messing with pressure points which I have used several times before. So, while maybe his decision to leave his father behind may seem fast, I think it and his decision to leave the rest of Nerima behind makes a lot of sense when Shampoo is here, wanting to travel with him, a martial artist he respects even if she's not his equal, and is, above all, attractive and kind to him!! That's a winning combination.

Beyond that, both he and Shampoo are not as skilled as I normally have Ranma at the start of the tale. In skill level he's closest to the one in *Horse of the Dead*. This Ranma is very beatable. and will quickly realize he's not anywhere near the top of the martial artist mountain. How he deals with that knowledge and losing will be very interesting. So, we will see how this all goes... eventually. LOL.

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed this present, and for those who celebrate, have a Merry Christmas!