

A Horse of a Different Color

"Come back here, pork-chop, and die!" Saotome Ranma was in hot pursuit of Ryoga, over a particularly infuriating subterfuge involving Akane's beach-bag and a small pig. Ryoga leapt two lanes of slow-moving traffic and disappeared behind a large tree. He didn't reappear; and when Ranma reached the tree, Ryoga was nowhere to be found.

Ranma grimaced, and scratched the back of his head. *Sometimes I wonder*, he thought, *if that guy's ability to get lost is under more control than we think*. And he looked about to discover he was just as lost as Ryoga.

Gaijin. Thousands of gaijin, a whole festival of them, young and old in bright casual wear. The cars were driving on the wrong side of the street. It was the wrong time of day, and all the signs were in English. Uh-oh.

Something came arcing towards him from a crowd of shouting children. He saw it from the corner of his eye, and turned to block; but blocking a water-balloon doesn't do much good. As she completed the turn, she found herself face-to-face with a blonde woman only a few feet away. Surprise was written on her face. "You just turned into a girl," she said.

Fuming, Ranma tightened the waistband of her trousers and began to wring the water out of her sleeve. "Sorry," she said in halting high-school English. "Having bad day."

The woman handed Ranma a towel. As she dried herself, Ranma looked the woman over. Late twenties, wearing a bathing suit under a top and shorts; sandals; not a martial artist, but not in bad shape. The look on her face was understanding, rather than the shock Ranma was used to seeing. Her ki-aura gave Ranma double vision. There was something unusual here.

She motioned. "Come, we should talk," and headed towards an empty picnic table. Ranma followed, moving gracefully through a clump of running children with large water guns. *Too late to get me*, Ranma thought at them.

They sat. "I'm Erika," the woman said.

"Ranma desu." She looked around. They were surrounded by a noisy crowd in constant motion. Just like any other festival, they were as good as alone. They could speak freely.

"How long have you been changing?" Erika asked, concern on her face.

"Year. Since Jusenkyo." Ranma had never been in a conversation like this.

"That's strange. Most new Weres settle down to the moon cycle in just a few months. How did you get bitten?"

"Bitten? Moon?" Ranma was seriously confused now. "Don't understand. Change with water."

"Water?"

"Cold water, turn girl. Hot water, turn boy. Moon does nothing. And mostly, get bitten by pig name Ryoga." Ranma began to wonder if this woman knew what was going on. "You know people change?"

"I change. Under the full moon, I become a rabbit."

"Rabbit?" Erika stuck her fingers up over her head and twitched her upper lip. "Ah, *usagi!* Rabbit! I know boy turn duck! He float, water not so bad." Ranma resolved to cram on English before she chased Ryoga again.

Erika had never heard of people turning into ducks. In her experience, it was mammals all the way. And what was the water about? "You've come to an interesting time and place," she told the redhead. "This is Minneapolis, and we're having our Aquatennial."

"Festival?"

"Yes. This is the City of Lakes" – she pointed to one nearby, with brightly-colored sails moving about – "and the Mississippi River. We celebrate water."

Ranma closed her eyes and sighed.

oOo

They drifted through the fair, talking. Ranma and Erika had both realized they communicated better if they took time to think. (Ranma's habit of talking before thinking didn't work in English.) Erika bought them roast corn on the cob, which Ranma ate with astonishing speed and enjoyment. They joined a soccer game, which Ranma dominated. They threw flying disks, and watched a boat race.

Gradually, they learned about each other. Ranma explained martial arts, training trips, Jusenkyo, and water; and the social complications of changing sex. Erika explained the full moon and the bite of a Were; and said she had a friend who changed from man into woman with the full moon. "He was bitten by a woman," she said.

Ranma was glad P-chan wasn't contagious.

"I thought you were new to shape-shifting," Erika said. "I thought you might need a friend, somebody to explain, might like a chance to meet a few other shape-shifters."

And after Erika promised to buy dinner, at a place where the owner turned into a bear, Ranma was quite willing to go with her to the Outlook. A free meal, a native guide, lots of shape-changers, maybe someone to help her get home? Erika thought her friend Mao spoke Japanese, that was a start.

oOo

Two hours before sunset, they got in Erika's car – it was an easy walk to the parking lot – and headed out. "Best get there well before sunset," Erika said. "There's a full moon tonight, and

Bjorn likes to talk with new people before things get interesting."

Ranma wasn't used to cars, so she felt just a bit safer when Erika showed her how to wear the seat-belt. Soon, she was looking out the window with interest. They were driving along a scenic road beside a creek, with large, handsome houses and trees arching overhead. Everything was very clean, and there was a great deal of open space. Ranma was used to the city and the countryside, but not this mix of the two.

A turn down a less-elegant street and through a shopping district. Onto a highway, and Erika drove faster. There were speeding cars all around them, and only Ranma's trained senses (and Erika's practiced ones) kept them aware of everything. Past a small airport, over a hill, and the road turned to the right and began winding down into a river valley. Birds were everywhere, and river-plains spread out below and to their left.

Erika pulled onto a drive that led into a parking lot by a low stone building. She stopped. "We're here."

Ranma spent a moment pulling in the scattered threads of her attention and finding her center. After a bit of fumbling with unfamiliar latches, she got out of her seatbelt and out of the car. A soft breeze from the south was filled with the scent of water and greenery. She followed Erika into the building.

The lights were low and warm, and the far wall was one enormous window looking south over the river valley. There was a bar in the center, surrounded by stools and backing up to a swinging door. The huge man behind the bar was idly polishing it, and setting out coasters. "Erika! You're here earlier than usual. And who's this with you?"

Erika put her hand on Ranma's shoulder. "Bjorn, this is Ranma. She's a Japanese shape-shifter who's somehow gotten stranded in Minneapolis. I thought I'd bring her by to meet some of the locals, and maybe get some help. Doesn't Mao speak Japanese? Ranma only has a bit of high-school English. We could figure things out better with somebody who has good Japanese."

Bjorn looked Ranma over. He wore a Norse tunic, and was even larger close-up. His aura was much stronger than Erika's, and definitely peculiar. It was the same double-vision thing. Ranma looked around. There were a few other people, and most had the double aura. If these peoples' bodies were as varied as their ki, they were probably all shape-shifters. Didn't seem anything like Jusenkyo magic, though.

Bjorn shook his shaggy head. "She looks awfully young, Erika, and small. Are you sure she should be in a Were bar at the full of the moon? What does she turn into, anyway?"

Now Ranma didn't understand English well, but she understood enough to know this man didn't think she could defend herself in here. She wasn't about to put up with that. She frowned at Bjorn, and held out her hand. "Hot water," she said.

Bjorn raised his eyebrows, but he poured a cup of steaming water from an urn and handed it to Ranma. "You want a tea-bag with that?"

Ranma looked Bjorn in the eyes. "Small. Cute. Young. *Helpless?*" She poured the water over her forearm. She shot up in height; suddenly a black-haired, athletic young man stood there. Still holding Bjorn's eyes, he smiled a dangerous smile. "I challenge you."

oOo

Ranma and Bjorn faced each other at the empty end of the parking lot. Erika and several others stood back near the building; Erika had insulated carafes of hot and cold water. Shadows were long as the sun neared the horizon, and two ravens settled into a tree to watch. Perhaps they sensed battle and, in the timeless way of ravens, were hoping for a meal.

Bjorn looked down at his smaller opponent. "I realize you're trying to make a point here, kid, but"

"Not try. Make, or not make. Ready?" and the two began to circle. They feinted, to test one another's reactions. They made a few preliminary strikes and grapples. There was a sudden flurry of movement, and Bjorn landed in the bushes on the side of the lot away from the building.

Grunting, he got to his feet and returned. "Not bad," he said as he again started moving cautiously about Ranma. Several cars had come into the driveway, but stopped when they saw the two. Their drivers got out to watch. Bjorn was striking harder now, and so was Ranma; they'd both seen they didn't have to worry about injuring their opponent. Bjorn lashed out and Ranma ducked under the blow; but Bjorn twisted his body as he was drawing back his arm, and got Ranma in the head with his elbow. Ranma went tumbling across the lot.

Ranma never really fell – he rolled - but there was road-dust on his back now to match the leaf-stains on Bjorn's tunic. "Hai!" he shouted, and bounded back into the fight. He dove, rolled, and got Bjorn from behind with his feet; Bjorn fell onto all fours, then spun about and grabbed at Ranma. It's never a good idea to grab at a master of Anything Goes. Bjorn hit the tree the ravens had landed in, upside down, and slid onto his head. The birds cawed harshly, and took to the air.

A man hit the tree and fell, but a bear got up. Ranma realized Bjorn wore a tunic for the same reason he wore loose Chinese silks: it fit both forms. Bjorn shambled towards him. "A werewolf changes with the moon, but a were-bear changes at the prospect of battle!" he growled, and smiled a bearish smile filled with sharp teeth.

Ranma held his hand out for Bjorn to pause, and motioned for Erika to come over. "Be fair," he said; and poured ice-water over himself. He shrank, became onna-Ranma, and adjusted her waistband. "You change, I change," she said, and blurred into action almost more rapidly than Bjorn could see. Suddenly there was a red-haired girl dancing on Bjorn's head. She yelled "kachuu tenshin amaguriken!" and swarmed down his back, tickling at amaguriken-speed as she went. While Bjorn was trying to stifle his laughter, she stole the belt from his tunic and strapped his ankles together. As he swayed, she leaned back, lined him up, and held her hands cupped. A ball of fire grew between them. "*Mouko Takabisha!*" she cried as she threw her hands apart, and blew him into a bush halfway up the hill.

By the time Bjorn's head quit ringing, Ranma was there to help him up. "Good spar," she said. "Father turns bear too. Felt like home." They clasped each others' forearms, and for a wonder, didn't use it as the opening for another throw. They walked happily together towards the building, accompanied by the smell of scorched bear-fur. All the people who were watching applauded as they came.

oOo

Ranma was sitting at a table busily chewing through her third buffaloburger. Bjorn had insisted dinner was on him, which is another thing you can't safely do to a master of Anything Goes. Since Ranma wasn't sure of her next meal, she was taking on plenty of food.

She was eating, but she knew the place might be dangerous. Now the daylight was reddening outside the window, and people were drifting towards two doors at the back, one for men and one for women. There was an air of tension, and anticipation. Erika rose from the table. "Please stay girl," she said. "My jealous boyfriend may be here later. I'll be back in a few minutes." She headed towards the women's room, but turned for a moment to face Ranma. "Remember," she said, as she put her fingers up and twitched her nose. "Usagi."

oOo

Ranma smiled at the mist-grey angora rabbit coming towards her table. Jusenkyo did good curses: she was a fine-looking girl, Ryoga made a cute piglet, Mousse was an excellent duck, and Shampoo – no, she wouldn't go there. They seemed to have quality curses here, too – that was one beautiful rabbit.

There were growls, and snarls, and scrabbling noises. A werewolf came loping out of one of the doors. Ranma revised her opinion – that was an *ugly* wolf. But he looked competent, and didn't seem to be making any threats. Well, Jusenkyo had Tarou. Even curses can slip up now and then.

The rabbit sat, just as a waiter brought a salad plate. She twitched her nose at Ranma. "Call me Bugs," she said.

"I sometime Ranko, girl form."

"Different body, different name," Bugs agreed. She picked up a cherry tomato, and nibbled at it. Behind them, Ranma could hear the room filling. While there was a general air of tension, she didn't feel any threat focussed on her, so she continued to watch Bugs. Who looked over Ranma's shoulder, and smiled. "Here comes my friend Mao," she said.

Ranma turned to look.

"AAAA! NEKO!" Ranma was on her feet, flinching away from Mao, when she bumped into another furry form. "AAAAAAA!" Her eyes darted about the room. Weres everywhere looked at her, and at least a third of them **werecats!**

Ranma sank to the floor, eyes tightly closed, then rose to all fours. Her back arched. Her eyes opened wide, and there was nothing human about them. She hissed and spat and twitched her fanny. She leaped in the direction with the fewest bodies in the way, screaming a battle-cry. Pandemonium.

In the shocked aftermath, Bjorn looked over his club. Werewolves and werecats moaned and howled on a bloody floor, a few severed limbs among them.

"Bring out the hamburger," Bjorn shouted into the kitchen. "This much healing is going to be hungry work."

The floor was deeply scored by giant claw-marks. Several chairs and tables had been cut neatly in two, and more smashed and shredded. A hole had been ripped through a solid stone wall. Ranma

had vanished through it into the dusk and the moonlight.

"Wow," the were-bear whispered to himself. "That was the finest *berserker*gang I've ever seen, or even heard of." He dropped to all fours and ran towards the hole in the wall. "I have **got** to meet that kid's family." And he, too, slipped into the night, hot on Ranma's trail.

Mao and Bugs clutched each other, and quivered, eyes wide in surprise and fear. "She just screamed 'CAT!' and then all this happened," Mao whimpered.

Bugs hugged her were-Siamese friend. "Let Bjorn take care of her," she said. "God knows why, but were-bears *like* this kind of thing. And they seem to know how to handle it."

"I want to go home," Mao said. "I'm afraid."

And an entire room of werewolves and werecats – and one were-rabbit - looked out into the gathering dark with a shudder.

oOo

Ryoga stepped from behind a tree, and found himself on a nude beach somewhere in the wilds of Marin County. As dozens of lithe, tanned, naked Californians turned towards the intruder, his nose spurted blood and he fell to the ground.

"What's with this guy?"

"He just collapsed!"

"Ewwww, look at the blood!"

"Maybe this cold water will bring him around."

"Bweeeeeee!"

A Bear of a Different Color

Three hundred pounds of brown bear named Bjorn padded through the rushes and groves of the river bottomlands. His head swung back and forth as he sniffed the air, following the scent-trail of the girl named Ranma who'd just destroyed his bar. Behind, there were yelps and wails of pain, dying out in the distance. The full moon was rising in the east as twilight dimmed in the western sky.

It's not every day that a slip of a girl takes on a bar full of werewolves and werecats, and leaves it in shreds. Bjorn badly wanted to talk with her about that.

Nighthawks were whizzing in their arcs above him – nothing unusual there – but ahead, several red-wing blackbirds took flight from the rushes. Wrong time of day: something or somebody had disturbed them. He was catching up.

He caught a glimpse of red in the shadows of a willow. The wind was wrong; Bjorn quietly circled towards the bluffs until he could catch Ranma's scent. Mmmmm – woman and blood and sweat, of course, and fear dying away. Plenty of adrenaline. Still, she was settling down. The bear sat back on his haunches, and waited.

Half an hour. She hadn't moved, hadn't made much noise. Bjorn thought he'd seen her licking her hands. She circled several times, and lay down. Another ten minutes, then.

Finally, the bear thought it was time. He rose, and began walking slowly towards the willow, not especially trying to be quiet. Nobody wanted surprises here. "It's okay, Ranma," he said as gently as he could in his growling, chuckling bear-voice. "They're Were. They'll heal up just fine. You didn't do any permanent damage." The girl shot up on all fours, arched her back, and began to hiss as soon as she heard him.

He approached carefully. She had her right paw in the air – it was hard to see it as a hand, somehow – and was making scratching, threatening movements at him. "Ranma. It's okay." She leaped forward, and swung; great wounds opened in his shoulder. She scampered backwards, then turned to face and threaten him again. "It's okay, Ranma."

He sat, and healed himself a bit. The blood stopped flowing; the wounds closed. Ranma stood, tense; but the movement of her paw slowed and stopped as the bear continued to do nothing. "It's okay, Ranma." She dropped her paw to the ground and stood on all fours, her head cocked at him, then began to circle him. Gradually, she drew closer. He held his paw out, claws curled back. She sniffed it, darted away, then came back to sniff it again. She rubbed her cheek against his paw.

Slowly, carefully, he reached out and tousled her hair. She purred. She squirmed a bit, butted her shoulder against his side, and curled up, leaning against his great furry frame. Gently he drew her to his side, and made himself more comfortable. A quiet purring buzz came from her, drifting into an equally quiet snore.

I'm lucky her father turns into a bear, Bjorn thought. It gave me a real head-start in gentling her down. If she's like most berserks, a night's sleep should take care of the rest.

He looked fondly down at the girl nestled against his side. *So much promise*, he thought. *So little control. We'll have to do something about that.*

Moonlight and shadows slowly moved past, revealing, then hiding, then revealing again the bear and the small girl sleeping beneath the willow. The life of the riverlands went on about them, keeping a respectful distance.

oOo

"Moshi moshi, Tendo residence"

"Hi, Kasumi, it's Ranma."

"Ranma, where are you? We've been starting to worry." Ears pricked up at the shogi board and in front of the television.

"I think I'm in a place called Minneapolis. But I don't really know, because everybody here speaks English, and I don't, not very well. This woman who turns into a rabbit took me to a club where everybody changes shape, and she thought there might be somebody there who knew Japanese, only that turned out to be a c- c- ca- – and then the next thing I know I woke up in the woods next to a bear wearing a bloody tunic, and, and, when the bear took me home for breakfast we went past the club and it was all torn up and I think I'm in all kinds of troubblll -l -l" Ranma's voice was tumbling out, and it rose to a wail near the end. Ranma didn't like being confused, and girl-Ranma wasn't nearly as shy about showing it.

"Gently, Ranma, gently!" Kasumi soothed. "You know Nabiki speaks English. Is there anybody there who could talk with her and explain things?" She motioned the middle sister over to the phone.

Ranma turned to Bjorn, appeal in her large blue eyes, and held the phone out to him. He smiled, and took up an extension instead. "Bjorn Njalsson here. I'm the bear Ranma has probably been telling you about. But right now, I'm human."

"I'm Tendo Nabiki. Ranma and his father live with us, here at the family dojo in Nerima. Ranma disappeared last evening, after we came home from the beach. He's with you?"

"Yes, here in Minneapolis. We're in the north central part of the United States. But if my grasp of world time is right, she walked in my door about ten hours after she left your house – and she'd spent several hours with my friend Erika. Even a jet plane couldn't get here that fast. Are you sure we're talking about the same Ranma?"

("Ranma, how *did* you get there?" "I followed Ryoga.")

"Changes sex? Knows this telephone number? It's the same Ranma. *Nobody* can explain how he got there – the best I can say is that he got caught up in the fringes of a friend's curse."

"Well, last night, besides changing sex, she pretty much turned into a cat. Then she tore up my club."

"Oh dear. That was the neko-ken, the cat-fist. Were there cats around?"

"Dozens of were-cats. But what she was doing acted more like a claw than a fist."

"-*Ken* can mean 'sword' as well as 'fist'. 'Claw' isn't a bad translation." And Nabiki told Bjorn all about the Neko-ken.

Bjorn was silent for a moment, then said thoughtfully, "I can see I should have a bear-to-bear talk with Ranma's father."

Nabiki's eyes shone as she thought of the money she could make selling tickets to *that* conversation. "Genma turns into a panda. What kind of bear are you?"

"I'm a brown bear. The most famous brown bears are the grizzlies. I'm a rather small for a grizzly at, oh, a hundred-forty kilos."

"Oh, my!" Nabiki turned to the room and filled in her family. Genma began to sweat. Akane, at the television, smirked. Kasumi wanted to know what grizzly bears ate, in case Bjorn should drop by. And Soun didn't quite know what to think.

Bjorn spoke seriously. "For many generations, my family has held mastery of what could be called the bear-claw. We call it the bear-sark, from the Old Tongue.

"From what I've seen of Ranma and the cat-claw, the cat is the master. This is dangerous for everybody. I'd like a chance to train her. Some of the ways we teach our cubs may help, and it's just the perfect time of year for it."

"Ranma has only a month of summer vacation."

"We'll be finished, one way or another, by the next full moon. And since Ranma got here without benefit of passport, it'll probably take that long to arrange a trip home."

"I'll take care of the passport," Nabiki said.

"I'll pay the airfare," Bjorn said. "I think I can arrange an entry-stamp for the passport. Some people owe me favors."

Nabiki was thunderstruck at the generosity. "It may take a while to pay you back"

"Don't worry about that. I'm an elder in the local community of shape-shifters and berserks. Ranma is both, and a guest as well. It's both my duty and my pleasure to take care of her."

Nabiki held the phone at arm's length. She looked over at Genma, then back at the phone. An honorable bear, a respected elder; a bear with money, and favors due, and a sense of hospitality. She looked at Genma again.

Definitely a bear of a different color.

Then she continued. "Bjorn-sama, everybody here looks very curious; and I am sure Ranma wants to know what's going on. I'm going to switch to Japanese and explain. Make sure Ranma's listening?"

"Done."

Ranma, Bjorn, and Nabiki talked, shifting among languages. While this was going on, Ranma was paying attention to both Bjorn's words, and Nabiki's translation. She hadn't expected an exercise in Anything Goes linguistics – but everything could be practice, right? If Bjorn was going to teach her, suddenly English became useful for the Art.

After some discussion, the outlines became clear. Ranma would stay in hot-water form as much as possible. If the neko-ken took over, Bjorn might need to force a change of form. It was almost always easier to find cold water.

"I've sparred with Ranma, seen her tear through a room full of werewolves. She'll be as safe in the Northwoods as I am. But there are *some* creatures we leave alone – call it enlightened self-interest." Bjorn explained skunks and porcupines, and showed Ranma pictures. Nabiki translated for Ranma. "Don't worry about other animals," Bjorn added. "Most of them can be quite tasty. And they all know not to bother a bear."

"Nabiki, you take care of the passport, and send it to my address. I'll get it stamped, and I'll have Ranma back to you just after the next full moon."

Nabiki checked her calendar. "Summer break is over two days after full moon, and Ranma will be going back to school. Don't be late."

After a flurry of well-wishing and goodbyes, the call was over.

"You like Akane very, very much, don't you?" Bjorn said.

"Nani?" Ranma replied, with a question on her face.

"She was the only one you had a hard time talking with. I can recognize shyness in any language. And – you can't easily fool a bear's nose."

Ranma blushed. She knew perfectly well what Bjorn was talking about, even if the details of translation were a bit fuzzy.

Bjorn's next phone call was to his brother Thorbjorn, arranging for him to take care of the Outlook. "The wolves need a bear in the house to keep them polite," Bjorn explained.

Ranma took a quick rummage through Bjorn's camping equipment, and found everything they'd need. The restaurant kitchen had plenty of food. Ranma packed very lightly – bedroll, tarp, a few pots and pans, bowls and cups, rice, seasonings, and tea. Bjorn smiled to himself. This was very auspicious.

"You need tougher clothes," Bjorn said. "Boots especially. Where we're going, the bones of the Earth poke up into the open air. These are some of the oldest, hardest rocks in the world. A good rain jacket too – the nights can get cold and damp."

Bjorn's vehicle was enormous. Bjorn had a knapsack already packed, so they loaded it and the camping gear in the back. They got in, Ranma buckled up (still wary of automobiles), and they were off. It wasn't long until they were at a shopping center, sprawling buildings with bright signs surrounded by hectares of flat land covered with parked cars. The only thing like it Ranma had seen in Japan was an airport, and he stared with open eyes.

By noon Ranma was in jeans and tough boots, with more tossed in with the gear. After some complicated roads and traffics through the city, they were headed north. Bjorn didn't seem talkative, and Ranma didn't want to distract him, so they rode in silence.

They passed through land that was rolling, but relatively flat. Eventually trees started to crowd the road, and began shifting to aspen, birch, and pine. Rocks were more common.

A grey sea stretched into the distance before them, with port and ships, loading-docks and bridges. The road went down, down, through cutouts in rugged cliffs, and through a mid-sized city.

Past this city, the road was narrow and curving, crowded between the sea to the right and the cliffs to the left. Gulls wheeled above, and in the distance Ranma thought he saw an eagle. The rock-cliffs were dark, with tinges of red; the stones were solid despite many years of exposure since the road had been cut through them. "Bones of Earth," he whispered. "This is place of power."

"It's a place of water, and rock, and hardship," Bjorn said. "The rocks are old, and that sea to our right is actually the largest lake on Earth. Its water is clear and sweet, but cold. In winter, the air can freeze a thermometer. But it's a place of great beauty, too. Indians say this is the land of Manitou."

"Manitou?"

"The Great Spirit, the chief of all the gods."

"Ah, Kami-sama we call Him."

They drove an hour or two further, through small towns and past lone houses. Most of the houses were plain and weather-beaten, but very sturdy. There were a few boats on the sea. Bjorn pulled off the highway into one of the larger towns, one with a lighthouse. "This will be our last indoor meal for some while. The food is okay, and Sven and Ole's is a legendary eating-place. Up here, a lot of people sustain themselves on myth and legend."

They ate pizza, in a room with fish mounted on the wall, then got back in the SUV and went further North. Bjorn pulled left onto a road, a very rough one, and they jounced through forest for several miles. They pulled into a clearing with a sturdy log home, several outbuildings, and a truck.

A large man came out to greet Bjorn. They grasped forearms, and obviously were glad to see one another. Bjorn introduced him to Ranma: "This is my cousin Steinbjorn. He's gone native – he turns into a black bear. I think his great-grandmother may have been fooling around."

This man's aura, too, suggested he had bear in him. Ranma nodded and bowed. "Saotome Ranma, of Anything Goes school of martial arts."

"You'd better believe it!" Bjorn said, placing his hand proudly on Ranma's shoulder. "Last night, Ranma tore up my bar, werewolves and all!" Ranma wished Bjorn wouldn't keep repeating that. He simply couldn't understand why that was a matter for either of them to be proud of.

"Ranma's a shape-changer and berserk, but not like us. Would you believe it, the shape-change and the berserk don't have anything to do with one another?" Steinbjorn's eyes widened, and Bjorn shook his shaggy head. "We're here to work on getting her human and berserk sides onto better terms with one another."

"Her?" Steinbjorn raised one eyebrow.

"Well, that's the shape-change." Bjorn shrugged. "Sorry, Ranma. We try our best to honor the forms we're in, but I'm a bit off-balance here because it was your girl form that tore up the bar."

"You not complain about bar, I not complain you say 'girl'."

"Anyway," Bjorn said, "we'll be out in the woods until after the dark of the moon. Can you take care of our things until then?"

"Glad to," Steinbjorn said. And with that, while Ranma took up the supplies he'd prepared, Bjorn went into an outbuilding and emerged as a bear.

"Thought you change for battle?" Ranma said, cocking his head at the bear.

"The more comfortable my Human and Bear natures become with one another, the easier it is to switch between them. We're here to get your Human and Cat more comfortable with each other. The Cat is a creature of nature, and there's more nature here than almost anyplace I know." (Ranma winced each time Bjorn said "cat".)

"And if we accidentally touch off your neko-ken, I may suddenly find myself with a battle. So it's appropriate."

Bjorn turned and shambled down a faint trail into the woods. Ranma donned his pack, and followed.

The summer day was long, this far north, and Ranma had been running on excitement and adrenaline. But it was after midnight in Japan. An hour into the woods Bjorn and Ranma found a thicket of blackberries and started to eat.

Ranma knelt by the bush, to pluck the low berries. The sun was warm, he was eating good food, and he was on a training trip with a companionable bear. Filled with satisfaction, he closed his eyes a moment to savor it all.

When he opened them again, the moon was high. He was lying on his side on a soft layer of pine-needles, and he felt well-rested. To one side a great mound of bear breathed deeply; but as Ranma stirred, so did the bear.

They both went through their various stretching-and-yawning exercises. A bear's yawn in the moonlight is very impressive.

"Why you let me sleep?" Ranma asked.

"Cats *live* at night. People are day creatures. You need to learn the night. Besides, Japan is half a world from here."

"Night here, day Japan?"

"You got it. This way when you go back to school, you won't want to sleep all day long."

"Will not promise," Ranma said with a smirk. And Bjorn smiled back.

They set off again, deeper into the woods. The path was dark, especially when the moon went behind clouds; but bears are four-footed, and after years of walking on fences, Ranma's balance was excellent. They moved smoothly and silently.

Bjorn stopped suddenly, head cocked to one side, then moved slowly into the bushes. His paw flashed through a beam of moonlight. There was a sudden squawk, instantly cut off; and Bjorn began to eat.

"Dinner ..."

"Growf!!" snarled Bjorn, as he waved Ranma away.

"Bears all alike," Ranma sniffed.

Bjorn finished off whatever-it-was – Ranma hadn't quite caught the details – and sat on his haunches, wiping his paw across his muzzle. He rumbled contentedly. "I'm a bear in the woods at high summer. There's food for me. You brought rice. Maybe you can catch something to cook with it. It's not a good time of year for fruits and nuts, but there are lots of young animals who haven't learned survival very well yet."

"On training trips, mostly hunt by day."

"If you already can do that, you won't learn much – will you?"

So Ranma built a fire and cooked rice, and thought of Kasumi's food. The Tendos would just be starting the noon meal.

While the rice was cooking, Bjorn settled down next to Ranma, and carefully avoided staring into the flames or getting downwind of the smoke. They had fallen into the same speech patterns Ranma and Erika had used the day before – slow speech, lots of time to consider their words.

"I see well at night," Bjorn said. "But I mainly hunt by scent. When you were looking around, back at the Outlook, you could tell who was Were. You can see auras, can't you? Could you use that at night, see animals by their auras? Could you do the same kind of thing with your ears, and your nose?"

Ranma had never used ki as his dominant kind of vision, but could imagine the possibilities. He ate his rice slowly, chewing his way along the skein of thought. *I wonder if this is what Zen archers do when they shoot blindfolded?* His father had kept him away from all but the basics of most weapon-forms, so he didn't know as much as he'd have liked.

Eventually he finished. "Will meditate on that," he told Bjorn as he sank into seiza.

First he looked at Bjorn, because he was familiar with him. What was it about his aura? Well, it was very strong, and heavy on yang. Bjorn had great aggressive potential, quiet at the moment. There was earth in him, and fire.

Then Ranma looked around. The trees and rocks were almost invisible to his mind; the trees were alive, but not the kind of life he'd had much practice with. And the fire was scaring most of the animals away.

"Your forest. You find me in morning if I get lost?"

"Yes," Bjorn replied.

Ranma rose smoothly, and silently vanished upwind.

Away from the fire, the world was different – and he'd had to go a surprising distance before he was away from the fire. It was quiet, but not completely quiet; dark, but not completely dark. A slight breeze rustled the trees. The moon was high and bright; that showed him the landscape, but no animals. He found a place shadowed from the moonlight, sat again, and opened his mind and spirit to the night. And was terribly vulnerable when maniacal laughter echoed through the stillness. Before he quite knew what happened, he was twenty feet up a tree with images of Kuno Kodachi jangling in his mind.

The cry came again, but Ranma was more prepared. It had a flute-like quality, with enough echoes to prove it came from some distance. Still, it was disturbing – not the least because it reminded him of the madness of Kunos. He was not at all sure he wanted to share a forest with whatever made that sound.

Carefully, he shinnied down the tree and made his way back to Bjorn and the campfire. Bjorn looked up as Ranma entered the circle of light. "Back so soon?"

As the cry was repeated, Ranma pointed in its general direction. "What is?"

Bjorn smiled a bear-smile in the flickering light, and said, "Bird. Loon." He rose and motioned Ranma to follow him, then padded silently into the darkness. They traveled for five minutes or so, up a hill and onto an outcropping of rock that looked down upon a lake. The water was still, and the setting moon reflected clearly upon it; there were ripples here and there as fish rose to the surface. Again the cry, but now Ranma could see a pattern of ripples, a wake that indicated something was swimming. He looked more closely. He couldn't see the birds themselves, but the water said there was a small family of them, swimming together.

"When you hear a loon," Bjorn said, "you are in the wild. That's practically the definition around here. Come, sit with me."

The bear settled to his haunches, while Ranma found a comfortable rock nearby. "I apologize," Bjorn said. "I didn't consider how different our woods must be from the forests you know. There are strange sounds, strange sights, strange smells, strange foods. Before you try to learn the forest, you should learn some of the details. The rock you are on – feel around the base"

oOo

After several nights of meditation and rice, Ranma was beginning to perceive the world around him in a different way.

On all fours, Ranma stalked the dim flicker of a rabbit's ki. Closer ... closer ... his legs uncoiled

in a leap. He hit a tree-trunk painfully hard with his left shoulder, then watched the ki of the rabbit vanish into the night. He could see animals – but trees were still invisible to him. *Damn, it was almost as bad as mallets; and without any of the compensating advantages!*

oOo

Ranma woke in late afternoon, hungry after nothing but rice for his late-night meal. Something else was eating, though; the bite of a deer-fly had brought him to awareness. And as the sun went down, the mosquitoes came out.

Driven to distraction, he fired off a small *mouko takabisha* at a particularly annoying mosquito, and smiled as it vanished in a brief *pop* and a spark of light. Then he sat on a log, and practiced. By moonrise, he'd learned to infuse a bit of *mouko takabisha* into his battle aura, and to draw it into his skin. Then he lowered the strength until he could maintain it all day while hardly noticing. Mosquitoes still landed on him – but as soon as their wretched little hypodermics started to drill in, a flash of ki came bursting out to kill them without any fuss, and they fell to the ground.

He smiled. Bjorn had his thick fur to protect him, but Ranma had noticed him rubbing up against trees as if he itched. Obviously, *something* was getting through. But once Ranma learned the trick, *nothing* had bitten him. The bear would be *so* jealous when he showed him in the morning!

oOo

Ranma had spent a week of nights learning to use ki to strengthen his vision, his hearing, his sense of smell. He saw greys, flickering and shimmering in the dimness. He'd seen that on television back home, nature shows taken through a night-scope. He could hear tiny rustlings in the underbrush. He could smell things – but he had to learn what each smell meant as he went along.

There was only so much his eyes could do with starlight, even with a ki-boost, but at least he could avoid trees and boulders. And the ki of animals was more focussed with context around it. *This* rabbit didn't stand a chance.

He started a low fire, set water to heating, and cleaned the rabbit. He tossed it in the pot and let it simmer, then added rice, soy, a bit of salt, and some of the tasty roots Bjorn had shown him. He waited.

In the near distance, he could hear Bjorn's bear-form breathing slowly, deeply. Once Ranma had gotten used to the woods at night, Bjorn woke by day, and guarded Ranma's sleeping form. They talked at dusk and dawn, and shared a few quiet moments as well. Several times, Ranma had his cat-nightmare; but when he woke screaming, Bjorn would comfort him and promise to keep all the cats away as Ranma slept.

At night, Ranma studied the night and the woods and himself. No need to guard Bjorn – who would bother an adult bear?

Ranma ate. The rice-and-rabbit was good, but strangely unfilling. "No fat," Bjorn had said. "The animals don't fatten up until fall. That's when the real bounty arrives. We'll both be hungry for fat before this moon is done."

oOo

The sky had been cloudy most of the day, and dusk was a sullen thing hours ahead of its due time. Neither Ranma nor Bjorn liked the looks of the weather. There was no time for food. "We need shelter," Bjorn said. They cached their supplies, and began looking.

In the dim not-yet-night, they found a rock crevice beneath a cliff and crowded into it as a gust of wind swept the trees and the smell of moisture filled the air. There was a mutter of thunder in the distance, a patter of rain, and then a sudden downpour. The wind grew stronger, and lightning flashed. Trees creaked and groaned as they swayed. A spray of water blew into the crevice, and suddenly Ranma was a girl. Smaller, she wriggled further into the opening between the rocks, away from the storm.

There was a tremendous flash and an immediate explosion of sound, followed by cracklings barely heard with their ringing ears. A tall pine fell, perhaps fifty feet from their shelter, with a prolonged series of thuds and snaps.

That was the climax. In an hour the storm had blown off, the clouds had cleared, and a sliver of the waning moon began to light the forest. Ranma ventured out, followed by Bjorn; and she went over to see for herself what damage the lightning had done to the tree.

Near the tree, there was the body of a porcupine. A big *fat* porcupine. It had obviously been killed by the lightning, and fallen with the tree – it was already partially cooked. Ranma's mouth watered. She didn't care what Bjorn said about porcupines, she was going to eat it. Eat it *all*.

Bjorn came snuffling up behind, and looked at *her* porcupine. She whirled and hissed at him, and lashed out with her claws. Pieces of the tree fell to earth as Bjorn ducked out of the way. He backed off, and looked at her quizzically.

Ranma looked back. "More polite say 'growf'?" she asked. Then, delicately using her claws, she peeled the skin off and threw it – and the quills – away. She carved some dry wood out of an old fallen branch. She cooked and ate most of the porcupine, but she let Bjorn have the umbles.

The forest was sweeter after the rain. The air was fresh, the berries bursting with juice, the leaves green and thick. After Ranma had digested her porcupine, even the next day's rabbit stew was more filling.

oOo

It was the dark of the moon. Ranma was well-fed, so he wandered, watching the life of the forest going about its business. There the quivering light of a rabbit; up in the trees, the dim glow of a sleeping squirrel, the tiny cluster of sparks from a bird-nest, the silent flight of an owl. He could see a bright predator creeping through the night – large for a fox, small for a wolf. The jovial, bearlike aura he'd learned to associate with raccoons went wandering by.

He thought of Nerima. Peace and quiet were all very well, and clean air and wilderness, but he missed his friends. What were Hiroshi and Daisuke up to? How was Ukyo? He even felt a bit of nostalgia for Shampoo and her bicycle. What were the Pervert and the Old Ghoul doing, without him to play with? Who was Nabiki making money off of? He didn't wonder about oyaji and Tendo-san; he knew perfectly well they were playing shogi and getting drunk now and then.

Most of all, how was Akane? The longer he was away from her, the more he missed her. The mallets and cooking faded into the mist, and all he could think of was her smile. Well, her smile and – he stopped to think a moment – perhaps the old grizzly's nose had been right. Not just the smile.

Ranma climbed a ridge, found a rock-point, and gazed out over the land. The predator he'd seen earlier was stalking a rabbit. It made its pounce-and-kill as he watched, then ate. After a while it wandered towards him, climbed partway up the rock face, then settled on a ledge and sat, glowing with contentment.

The starlight was too dim to actually see. Ranma decided to wait for dawn – he could see the first flush to the east – so he could add another animal to his list of familiar things.

Ranma lay on the rock, lazily content, thinking of the hunt and perhaps of his mate. The hunter lay below, lazily content. Slowly, light grew towards dawn. The creature was well-camouflaged, so it wasn't until Ranma had been watching for some while that he began to pick out its form. Pointed ears, with a tuft of hair. Short tail. A compact form.

It was a cat. A strange, large cat, a short-tailed cat, but a cat. Within Ranma's soul, the Cat stirred; and he began to purr. And the cat below purred as well. They were that way when Bjorn came silently up.

Bjorn sat, silent, and smiled. After perhaps an hour of basking in the warmth of the new-risen sun, Ranma shook himself, stretched, and padded over to Bjorn on all fours, then butted his head and shoulders against Bjorn's flanks. He rose, then sank into seiza before Bjorn, and bowed.

"Thank you, Bjorn-sensei. This first time since child, I comfortable with cat. Have learned much from you."

"And it's time for you to sleep now," Bjorn said. "Your human part has learned some of the ways of the Cat. Now your Cat must learn more of humans. You'll have to rise in the afternoon, when people are awake and about. Sleep, and let me think on your next lesson."

Ranma found a soft spot under an evergreen, cushioned with needles, and curled and wriggled himself into a comfortable nest. He slept. And as he slept, he dreamed.

Again he was a small child, covered in fish sausages, about to be tossed into a pit by Genma. He struggled and cried, but there was no escape – down he went, and the door was slammed shut over his head. He looked around. The eyes of many cats surrounded him; he could feel their hunger almost as a living thing. They began to advance on him.

But this time, he was the largest, fiercest cat in the pit. He spat and howled, and the other cats shrank back; then he burst out of his bonds, scattering sausages among them. As they began to eat, Ranma gathered up the kittens, and sausage enough for them, and curled around, protecting them as they ate. He purred – or was it she? Perhaps she was the mother cat? No matter.

When the food was gone, Ranma looked up to the light coming through the cracks of the door. He would never accept a cage. With a snarl, he leaped up and tore at the wood with his claws. It parted before him, and the door collapsed into the pit, bringing the heavy body of a panda with it. A panda? What did pandas have to do with this?

But the panda, falling in, had hurt some of the cats, and scared them all. They leaped upon it, Ranma first of all, and attacked with claws and teeth. It screamed a most un-pandalike scream, and practically levitated out of the pit, then ran gibbering into the forest trailing torn clothes (clothes? A panda with clothes?) and streaming blood from dozens of minor wounds and several major.

Ranma carefully gathered up the kittens, carried them out of the pit, and found a quiet place to rest with them. He settled down, curled around them, and began to purr.

Bjorn, watching over Ranma, sighed in relief. He'd seen the dream before – the whimpers, the pitiful scabbings – and was afraid it was happening all over again. But then the boy's motions became more purposeful. He settled down, even in his sleep, and began to purr.

Purrs instead of screams. If he was any judge, there'd been a huge breakthrough this morning. He'd been doing his best to stay out of cat territory until Ranma was ready, and it seemed to have worked. And there were still two weeks for finishing touches. Bjorn settled down next to Ranma, and went into a contented doze.

oOo

Bjorn and Ranma stood by a pond in a clearing sprinkled with flowers, looking at an ancient tree. It was partially rotted, hollow with only a few leaves still growing. Ranma smelled decayed wood, a bit of something acid, and a wonderful aroma of concentrated flowers. There was a humming in the air. "Bee tree," Ranma said. "Last time was near one, speed training."

Bjorn shrugged. This kid had been through some seriously weird things. "Taste training, this time. Cats love good food – but they can only eat meat. In your body, your Cat will taste honey for the first time." Bjorn shambled towards the tree, and began tearing chunks off with his claws. The bees came swarming out, and gathered about Bjorn. With one paw covering his nose, he continued clawing until he reached the honey. Paying little attention to the stings, he began to gorge himself. But where was Ranma?

A smaller cloud of bees had decided Ranma might be a threat. Dancing and leaping in place, his hands blurred about him. Bjorn watched in amazement for a moment, then realized Ranma was slapping the bees down, one at a time, without a single reaching him. A grin split Ranma's face. "Still got it! Yatta!" He drifted towards the tree, dealing easily with the thicker swarm of bees. His left hand shot into the hive, and came out filled with honey. And then Bjorn was treated to the sight of simultaneous Anything Goes speed-training and eating. Which, from the looks of it, was *also* speed training.

Ranma finished off with several leaps and flips, and a dive into the pond. "Sticky!" she cried, as she scrubbed her hands and hair. "Heat water! Turn boy! Want tea with honey!"

Bjorn shook his head, and went into the water with her. "Sticky fur is even worse than sticky hands." And they swam a bit, then rested in the shallows.

Later, as Ranma drank tea and they watched the sunfish they'd caught cooking on a spit, Bjorn turned to Ranma. "Actually, beyond the honey I'd intended that as clawing practice."

oOo

Ranma-chan sat on a fallen tree in the evening light, and meditated on the world about her. Spray from a waterfall had triggered her curse, but since the dark of the moon, the neko-ken was no longer such a threat; it was easier to stay a girl than to make a fire, heat water, and turn boy again.

"That's about the fifth time in the past three days," Bjorn had noted. "In the beginning I thought you were talking up your problem with water. But the stuff really *does* chase around after you."

And Bjorn was testing Ranma's enhanced senses as a cat. Not a good idea, building a fire – the smoke would have dulled her sense of smell. Better to leave it fresh and unspoiled.

"I smell a *bear*," Ranma-chan caroled. But a frown crossed her face. This bear didn't smell like Bjorn. She turned, and there was a large black bear examining her from behind. Startled by her motion, the bear charged for her.

She grabbed the bear by the foreleg and flipped him through the air, feeling a strong sense of *déjà vu*; but unlike the panda, she put enough spin on the blackie so he landed rolling instead of against an obstacle. Wanting nothing further to do with her, the bear scuttled off into the woods. And when Ranma turned back, there Bjorn was, downwind from her.

"Not bad," he said. "You even landed him gently."

"Didn't want to hurt bear," Ranma said. "Too many bears in family."

oOo

Noise and wood-chips filled the air. Half-a-dozen tree-trunks had been set upright in the ground, and four men and a woman were using chainsaws to carve them. Bjorn – as a man – and Ranma were in the crowd at Lumberjack Days, watching and eating roasted corn and hotdogs. Ranma was considering the possibilities of a chainsaw in the martial arts. He snickered to himself at the thought of Konatsu with a chainsaw. *Hard to be a ninja with something that loud!*

Bjorn nudged Ranma. "There's still one trunk available. You could do better than that guy in the middle. He obviously doesn't know anything about bears."

Ranma smiled back. "Is that challenge?"

Bjorn caught the judge's eye – they seemed to know one another – and motioned to the last trunk. He cocked his eyebrow in a question. The judge nodded "yes". Bjorn gave Ranma a push. "You got permission, kid."

Ranma moved forward to the trunk, and looked it over. He popped his claws, and took a gentle swipe. A slice of wood curled off and fell to the ground. He consulted his memories of the forest, and set to work.

First prize went to a leaping muskellunge. Ranma would have taken second with his bobcat, but he was disqualified for not using a chainsaw.

oOo

Ranma sat in the diner, watched the cook flipping pancakes. In the back of his mind he could feel the Cat purring, as it thought of another meal. Ranma and Bjorn had been slowly eating their way

back towards home, teaching the Cat the joys of human cuisine.

"A penny for your thoughts," Bjorn said.

"Thinking of okonomiyaki," Ranma replied. "Cat thinking of meal in front of us. Both enjoying smell. But penny only worth single yen. Could you pay in herring?"

"No herring around here," Bjorn replied. "But it's fine walleye country. Fish for dinner?"

Ranma grinned like a Cheshire cat, though he didn't know of that particular variety of feline.

oOo

The full moon had come again, and Ranma and Bjorn were back at the bar. It was a farewell party, and Ranma was finishing up a particularly fine meal. He was male, of course – he'd been a girl last time, when he took the place apart, and he didn't want to frighten the werewolves.

But the wolves knew, and the cats knew. Too many had seen him change last moon, when he was sparring with Bjorn; and Ranma's scent was similar enough in both forms that he could be recognized. They gave him a wide berth, especially the cats, and the mood was edgy and subdued. Bjorn had said he was okay – but nobody wanted to put it to the test.

Erika, in her rabbit form, was sitting at a nearby table with Mao and a woman who appeared normal. Ranma had met Mao before – she'd been the werecat that triggered the neko-ken last time. He hadn't met the other woman, though her aura was heavier on yang than most women's.

Ranma finished his meal and gathered up his courage. He had to apologize. Hesitantly, he went over to their table, bowed from the waist, and spoke in Japanese for the first time since he'd talked with Nabiki. "Mao-san, I am deeply sorry for my behavior last time we met. I was cursed as a child with extreme fear of cats, and reacted poorly when I saw you and all the other cats. But now Bjorn-sama has helped lift the curse. With luck, I shall never again behave that way. Can you forgive me?"

Mao smiled (a bit nervously) and motioned towards a fourth chair at their table. Ranma sat, marveling that he could read a cat's emotions so easily. And Erika – Bugs – held one hand each towards Ranma and the normal woman. "Ranma, this is my friend Lena. Lena, Ranma. The two of you have a lot in common. But first, tell us what you and Bjorn have been up to."

"Been north, in forests. Bjorn teaching me be cat. Now I know enough, learn by self. Was nice, being in woods."

Mao's whiskers twitched as she smiled. "Want to go down to the riverlands with me? There are some interesting smells."

Ranma was smiling back, and started to rise. "That'd be good," he said in Japanese. As he pushed his chair back, he jostled a waiter, who spilled ice-water over him. She scowled, tried to wring out her top, and realized there really is nothing to wring out on a wet T-shirt. Erika snickered, and from the bar they could hear Bjorn's snort.

Lena's eyes got very, very wide. "You turned into a woman," she said.

Ranma sighed, and sat back down. "Even in bar full of werewolves..."

"You don't understand," Mao said. "Lena is only a woman during the full moon. The rest of the time, she's a man."

"I change water, she change moon?"

Lena smiled warmly at Ranma-chan. "This is wonderful!" she said. "I've never met anybody who changed sexes like me before. Do you enjoy it as much as I do?" Her amber-and-gold jewelry caught the light as she leaned forward.

Ranma's jaw dropped, and she looked at Lena in dismay. "Enjoy?"

Lena raised her eyebrows at that. "When I'm a man, I understand women like most men never will. When I'm a woman, I understand men. I get the good bits of both sides. What's not to like?"

Ranma cradled her head in her hands, and stared at the table. "Oh, joy, another learning experience," she muttered in Japanese.

Mao chuckled, and nudged Ranma. "Bjorn's had you out in the woods learning cat," she said. "Maybe Lena should take you shopping."

oOo

Ranma, Bjorn, and Erika were standing by the security gate at the airport, saying their goodbyes. "I thought bad luck, get dumped here," Ranma said, "but some of best luck ever. Erika, you good friend. Bjorn, you great teacher." And he took their hands. "I miss you both."

"Oh, I've already signed up for lessons in Japanese," Bjorn said. "I still want to have a talk with your father. You might suggest he learn English. And *you* have things to teach *me*. I'll be paying you a visit one of these days."

After a large group embrace – any embrace with Bjorn in it was large – Ranma walked through the gate and was lost to their view. Bjorn turned to Erika. "Let's get something to eat," he said. "And I can tell you more about what happened a month ago. That kid's had a rough life. Even with all the fuss, thanks for bringing him to the Outlook. We helped him a lot; and that hole in the wall tells a wonderful story. I don't think I'll ever get it repaired neatly."

oOo

The Tendos were all waiting for Ranma at Narita airport; but it'd been some while since the flight had arrived, and they'd seen no sign of him. Customs always had a terrible backup on these large planes. So when a teenager wearing jeans, hiking boots, and a "Sven and Ole" T-shirt approached, it took them by surprise.

"Ranma!" Kasumi said. "I've never seen you dressed like that!"

"Silly Kasumi!" Ranma smiled. "When I came to Japan from China, wasn't I wearing Chinese clothes? Now, here I am from the Northwoods." He stopped and looked at them. "It is *so* good to be back with you all."

Ranma spoke in English: "Thanks, Nabiki, for your help getting training organized, and getting me home. I learned much English there – can we practice together once we settle down in school?"

Then he headed towards Akane, hands reaching out to her. "Akane" But he was interrupted by a splash of water and a mighty cry of "Sweeto!"

Ranma looked down at the tiny pervert clinging to her breasts, and her face twisted in disgust.

"Ranma, m'boy, it's good to" Happosai started to say; but there was a bright flash and a crackle, and he fell to the ground smoking, blown off like a particularly large biting fly. He recovered and angrily turned to Ranma, only to see her on all fours, kneading a rapidly-shredding pile of cloth. He felt a cool breeze. Those were his trousers! That was his *underwear!* And he hadn't even noticed! *This could not be allowed!*

Ranma looked up from the pile of cloth, staring at Happosai's crotch. For the first time, they heard the Cat speak.

"Mmmouussssssiieee...."

Happosai disappeared. There was a gabble of angry female voices, receding into the distance. Ranma stood, picked up the cloth, and dumped it into a trash receptacle.

"That was my variation on the 'Crouching Tiger' – I call it the 'Crouching Wildcat'." She smiled at Soun. "Think I should keep it?" Then Ranma went the rest of the way to Akane, and took her hand. "Let's get my pack, then I want to go home."

Akane looked at their two hands, joined. She was struck speechless, her mind dithering somewhere between a mallet and a kiss.

"Cats aren't *nearly* as shy about showing their feelings as people are," Ranma said as she began walking towards baggage claim. "Let's go home."

Blankly, the Tendos followed along.

A Curse of a Different Color

Ranma woke to dimness. He was confused for a moment - for a month now, he'd been waking early in the afternoon. Where had the light gone? Then he realized the light was still where it was supposed to be: back in Minnesota. But *he* was in Japan again, on the other side of the world from the daylight. And his body still had some timing adjustments to make.

He checked his surroundings more thoroughly than the night before (when all he'd wanted was sleep). Yep, still the guest room at the Tendo dojo. He was home.

He didn't see much that was different, though now he saw it more clearly through the eyes of a cat. Genma's travelling gear was gone. He heard gentle breathing all around, and a bit of a snore from Soun's room; everybody was still asleep. He could smell panda, and nervousness, a few days old.

Silently Ranma dressed, then catlike went out to the courtyard. He explored it, cataloguing the sights and sounds and smells of home with his new senses. By the dojo, near the corner you might peek around to see the house, he smelled panda again - more recent, still nervous. When he had more time, he'd have to follow that trail.

Near the koi pond, there had been cats; near the gate, dogs. In the trees above, he could sense the dim ki of sleeping birds; and over in the bushes - a rabbit! He crouched, began to stalk, then shook his head and laughed. He didn't have to catch his own meals any more. Soon, Kasumi would be in the kitchen.

Ranma leapt to his favorite place on the roof and sat, smelling the flowers in the neighbors' yard on the night breeze, smiling at the stars. The East was slowly brightening, and drowsy birds began warming towards the dawn chorus. The paper carrier left the morning paper at their gate.

Below he could hear Kasumi waking. He waited until he heard her in the kitchen, then jumped down. He gathered up the paper, then slid the door open, deliberately making a bit more sound than necessary. "Ohayo, Kasumi. It's Ranma."

She was just starting breakfast, putting water on to heat. She turned to smile at him as he sat on the stool at the end of the counter. "You're up early!"

"I'm still wakin' by an overseas clock," he said. "But that's fine. I'm back with my family, and I wanna catch up. Why not start early?" He looked at the pot with a smile. "You can even use all the hot water for cookin' - no koi pond this mornin'. I'm sure the koi appreciate it. Which reminds me. Where's oyaji?"

"Oh, my, Uncle Saotome left on a training trip several days ago." Kasumi held her forefinger to her chin in thought. "And to tell the truth, I think he was worried you might be bringing Bjorn-sensei back with you."

"I heard Nabiki on the phone, tellin' him Bjorn wanted a bear-to-bear talk with him. And while a panda may be a bear, a grizzly is a **BEAR**. That sounds like oyaji, all right."

"Oh, Nabiki didn't help any. She decided to research grizzlies, and brought back all kinds of articles and left them lying around. Naughty Nabiki!" Kasumi and Ranma twinkled at each other.

Ranma was startled. He'd seen mischief on Kasumi's face before, but was that an actual bit of gleeful malice? Perhaps without the Usual Suspect in residence, some of the domestic problems had actually come to roost in oyaji's lap? "He's been snoopin' around, there was sign in the yard. He'll prob'ly show up once I'm at school for the day."

Kasumi shook her head over Genma's behavior, then changed the subject. "Since this is your first meal at home, what kind of breakfast would you like?"

"I've had plenty Western breakfasts lately, so none of that. Rice and miso? And if you want to make somethin' really special, fish? There's nothin' like my own woods-cookin' to make me appreciate even the simplest meals you make."

"Fish? I guess the cat *did* take hold on you!"

"Unfair. Haven't I *always* liked fish?"

Now Kasumi was setting up the rice-cooker. "Name a food you *haven't* always liked," she said over her shoulder.

Ranma sighed.

"Well, there is that," Kasumi agreed as she measured out the rice. "You and Akane both like miso with dashi stock. Should I add bonito flakes too?"

"And maybe some kelp," Ranma agreed. "Food just ain't the same, thousands of kilometers away from the ocean."

"What *did* you eat over there?"

"Bjorn-sensei had me do my own huntin' and cookin'. I'd brought rice, so there was always that. There were berries and mushrooms, and some good roots. I usually caught at least one rabbit a day for stew. The best, though? Wild honey from a bee tree. When Bjorn and I were hungry for fat, there was a wonderful fat porcupine. Sometimes they call 'em 'tree-pigs'."

Akane came in, wearing jogging clothes. The tea was ready; Kasumi poured her a cup, which she drank gratefully. "Ah, that's what I need to wake up for my run! You're up earlier than usual, Ranma."

"M'head's in a different time zone. I think I'll stay here with Kasumi and the food this mornin', but can we run some katas together after school?" He turned to Kasumi. "Can I have some tea to perk me up? Usually, gettin' thrown in the koi pond sets my blood goin'. But oyaji's not here today."

"Katas?" Akane said. Then, trying to get the conversation back on its accustomed track, "You're still afraid to spar with me?"

"Akane, I ain't gonna spar with *nobody* 'til I get used to these claws. I've learned a few things about *usin'* 'em. Don't know fer sure how *not* to use 'em. Somebody could get hurt bad."

"I don't see any claws."

"Neither did Happosai, but they sliced his pants off real neat. Remember?"

Akane had strong issues with Happosai, so this cheered her up immensely. "Katas, then!" she said back over her shoulder as she headed out for her run.

Ranma sat, quietly sipping his tea and enjoying one of the rare peaceful moments in the Tendo home, as Kasumi hummed and good smells began to happen.

After a while, dragging footsteps and muttering were heard from above. Kasumi spooned coffee into a one-cup coffeemaker and added hot water. There was the sound of shuffling, and water, and flushing, and Nabiki came slowly downstairs, eyes half-open. She and the cup of coffee arrived together at her regular seat at the table - she was reaching for it as she sat. She hunched over, elbows on the table, and drank, then stared into the cup as if to read fortunes in its bitter depths. She grunted, sighed, and fell silent.

She's a bit less intimidatin' this time of day, Ranma thought. Have ta keep that in mind. I wonder how much I could charge her for a cup a coffee? But the payback would be rough.

Soun came down, and smiled when he saw the paper at his place. He sat, and disappeared behind it.

There were no pandas.

Akane came in, glowing from her run, and sat next to Ranma. The breeze from the opened door caught up with her and wafted her scent, fresh and strong, to his nose. His mind reeled and his body snapped to attention, and for a moment, Akane was all he could see. *This is what I've been missin'*, he thought; but he had enough sense not to say it.

Kasumi served out breakfast. Ranma's first mouthful went as rapidly as usual, but the taste was so strong and good that he slowed to appreciate it. As a result, he finished at the same time as everybody else. He rose, and made a gentle bow to Kasumi. "Thanks for such a wonderful breakfast," he said. "Now I know for sure I'm home."

Nabiki rose and picked up her bag, ready to head off for school and the day's enterprise. But Ranma touched her on the elbow. "A word before you go?" he said as he cocked one eyebrow at her. She raised her corresponding brow, but let him guide her into the kitchen for a moment's privacy.

"I'm gunna try stayin' out of fights at school for a while," he said.

"You are telling me this just *why*, Saotome?"

"Well, y' make money bettin' on my fights. This'd help ya set odds, and I suppose that's okay, 'cause we're family, but I'd like some say in it too."

"And what percentage of the take do you want for this?"

Ranma smiled a most unsettling smile. "Put it on my tab, 'Biki. I don't imagine you'd like givin' me money any more than I like givin' it to you."

He smiled again. Catlike, he began to wander off towards the dining room and Akane, then looked back over his shoulder as he went through the door. "If I *gotta* fight, remember what I did to Happosai." Then he was gone.

Nabiki blink-blinked, and stood stunned for a moment, then hustled out the door. She *definitely* had to talk with her people.

Back in the dining room, Akane was starting her patented Slow Burn. Just what was Ranma up to? Flirting with Kasumi? Doing something in the kitchen with Nabiki? WHAT?

Actually, it was more like a Fast Burn, but Ranma had been awfully nice to her earlier, so it had to start from zero. While she was trying to decide what next, Ranma said, "c'mon, Akane - let's get washed up and head for school. We don't wanna be late, first day. And it'll give us time to talk. You c'n have the bathroom first."

At that point her mind seized up. All she could do was follow her well-worn morning routine, sluicing off the sweat from her run, then changing to her school uniform. And wonder what was going on.

As they started walking to school, Ranma stayed on the sidewalk instead of jumping to the fence nearby, and made sure he was downwind from Akane. He'd been gone for a month - this was almost a chance to make a first impression again. He wanted every advantage he could get.

Right now, he could smell uncertainty and a fair bit of adrenaline coming from her. He knew he wasn't always the best talker, so he remained silent and simply took her hand. She went tense for an instant, then began to blush; he could hear her heartbeat speeding up. So far, so good.

But Akane wasn't completely ready to give up her burn. "So, Ranma," she said. "Just what were you up to in the kitchen with Nabiki?"

"Well, I figger Nabiki's gamblin' operations help keep the family afloat. So I told her I'm gonna try hard *not* to get in fights. I can use the neko-ken now, Akane. But I don't totally control it. That's dangerous. I don't wanna to slice Kuno up when I only mean to punch his nose. So if I'm not gonna fight, maybe Nabiki can make some money out of *that*."

"An' to tell the truth," - Ranma put his free hand behind his head and looked a bit abashed - "I was threatenin' her some. 'Member those photos of us Kuno had? Don't want that to happen again. So I told her I wanted more say in how she made money offa me. Then I told her to remember what I did to Happosai. That was a twofer," he said with a quirked smile. "She can use it for bets. And now she knows I can use embarrassment as a weapon just like she does."

Akane looked up at him from beneath lowered brows. "Who are you, and what have you done with the *real* Ranma?"

Ranma squeezed her hand gently. "A month in the wilderness, away from everything, leaves plenty of time to think."

He could hear her heart beating, rapidly still, but the tension was out of her body and the tang of anger gone from her scent. *This is a good time to keep quiet*, he thought. They walked several blocks in companionable silence.

But Ranma realized he hadn't given Akane anything like a whole answer. He looked over at her. "Um, Akane?"

"Yes?"

"You've never seen me rested and relaxed before. When we came to your place I'd just been hounded across China by Shampoo, swum the ocean to Japan, and just a few blocks before we got to your place, I was knocked on the head by oyaji. Since then it's been Amazons and Kunos, and getting thrown in the koi pond at *least* an hour before I want to wake up. Then there's that 'man among men' thing.

"In the Northwoods with Bjorn-sensei, I didn't have any of that. I had a month with all the sleep I wanted, and nothing worse than bears to deal with. And none of the bears were pandas. Which was just as well, because there wasn't the least bit of bamboo."

Akane sighed. "It was pretty peaceful here, too."

"Let's try to hang onto it," Ranma said with a squeeze of Akane's hand.

As they came up on the gates of Furinkan, Ranma let go. "If Kuno's on the other side, I'm gonna try ignorin' him. I may need space for that. If he's really persistent, you'll have to do the poundin'." He smiled, and ducked.

Akane chuckled, and made a pro-forma swipe with an invisible mallet over Ranma's head. But she lost her smile when she heard the Blue Wonder's voice.

"So, foul sorcerer!" he declaimed. "You disappear for a month, yet still hold the fierce tigress Akane in your thrall?"

Ranma kept walking, unperturbed.

Kuno moved to stand in his way. "Halt, miscreant! Release the maiden, lest the vengeance of Heaven strike thee!"

Ranma continued on, somehow dodging the kendoka without seeming to notice him.

"Have at you, then, knave!"

Ranma danced between the blows as he passed. "Windy today," he said to Akane as he smoothed down his bangs. And the two of them went through the doors of the school, leaving the Boy Thunder to wonder why his bokken was only a third of its normal length, and the ground around him littered with thin kite-shaped slices of wood.

Looking down from her classroom window, Nabiki smiled as she considered her profits. *Something's going to happen at lunch*, she thought. *I'd best start offering bets on what it'll be.*

Of course Ranma and Akane went first to home room. They took their old seats without much fuss, and began chatting with their friends. There was a lot of catching up to do. Hiroshi and Daisuke immediately were asking Ranma where he'd been, and what he'd been doing. Yuka and Sayuri wanted to know what Akane thought about Ranma now that he'd returned from wherever he'd been.

But they'd barely gotten started when Ninomiya-sensei called the class to order. Everybody passed through the roll call without getting sent to the hall, and began English class. They got the traditional assignment, of course: an essay about "what I did on my summer vacation". In English. Two pages by the end of the hour.

Ranma was not sure what to write. His English had improved immensely, but how much could he say about his adventures, and still be believed? He was gently chewing his pencil in thought when the door slammed open.

"Saotome! What did you do to my bokken?"

"Happo five-yen satsu!"

Ranma sighed, as Ninomiya-sensei tapped her suddenly-larger foot. "A guy could manage okay without that," he said in English.

Ninomiya-sensei raised her brow. "That was some of the strangest English I've ever heard."

"Minnesota talk," Ranma replied.

And as the school nurse's clean-up crew was carrying Kuno's limp form out, Ranma began to write. He left out the were-bears and the wildcats, and concentrated on his linguistic and dining experiences. Ninomiya-sensei would appreciate them more.

History class was next. Ranma always enjoyed that one – ancient battles and warriors and shoguns were bedtime tales for young martial artists. More of the same, in greater detail, was meat and drink to him.

But then came math. Normally, he'd sleep through it. Today, he was pondering delusional samurai kendokas. What to do, what to do?

When the lunch bell rang, Ranma and Akane headed for their customary tree. They sat down, opened their bentos, and began to eat.

"What about Kuno?" Akane asked. "He seems as bad as ever."

"We've hit 'im with kempo, judo, and musabetsu kakuto, and none of 'em seemed to make an impression. I wanna try some bushido. Maybe he'll pay more attention to that. Kami-sama knows, he might listen better if we leave him conscious."

"Bushido?" Akane asked. "But that's ..."

In the distance, they could see Ukyou and Kuno both closing in, with grill and bokken respectively. "Can you go keep Ukyou busy, Akane? I wanna talk about Foul Sorcerers with Kuno, and it'll be easier if he doesn't have any Fierce Tigresses to distract 'im."

Akane raised one eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

"Please?"

Akane knew Ranma didn't say 'please' very often, and she didn't want to discourage the habit, so she headed out towards the chef just as Kuno came within speaking range.

"Accursed sorcerer! You send the fierce tigress Akane away, so I cannot wrest her from your grasp?"

Ranma kept his seat on the ground, but placed the lid on his bento and set it to one side. He sent a short prayer of thanks to the kami – Kuno had changed his rant just a bit, and in the best possible way. "Accursed, yes, but no sorcerer. And you should be able to recognize at least one of the curses, because you suffer under the same curse yourself."

"What madness is this? I bear no curse! Think you a samurai would not know such things?"

"It's a family curse, Kuno-dono. It strikes a whole generation. Could you perhaps see your sister as being cursed? Then you might be, yourself."

Kuno was plainly shaken by that. Ranma was glad he could see it, because Kuno was downwind, and he couldn't get any hints by scent.

"I won't lie to ya, Kuno. I probably got more curses than you – at least three I know of. But I think the curse we share has caused lots o' trouble between us. And now one of m'other curses has changed everything. Right now, we *can't* fight any more. It could destroy both our souls."

"I shall *not* believe a sorcerer! Something has happened to weaken you; now thou'rt playing for time to recover your strength."

"You're samurai, Kuno. Bushido demands righteous living and honesty of you. I'm a martial artist, and live by a similar code. Do you think I like being called a liar?"

Ranma moved into seiza, and spoke formally. "Kuno-dono, I charge you as Samurai: for righteousness and honesty, find a place where we may speak in peace and believe one another. Your resources are greater than mine. Find a priest, find a kendo master, find whatever witness you choose, but find somebody who can recognize a sorcerer or a liar and deal with him. Then let us go before him and speak honestly and forthrightly – for if things continue as they are, we may end in tragedy. Until we find this person, I ask you for a truce." Ranma bowed to Kuno, and fell silent.

Kuno did not know what to do, so he fell back upon formality himself. He sat seiza before Ranma, and kept silence for some while as he thought. Saotome had never spoken to him in this fashion before. In fact, almost *nobody* had. In the final analysis – respect, especially from a foe, was worth a great deal to Kuno Tatewaki. He hadn't been getting much of it lately, away from the tournament circuit.

He looked Ranma in the eyes, and spoke. "Serious speech, and a serious petition, demand serious reply. I shall seek the person you describe, and we shall have a meeting before him. Our

relationship shall then be determined by the results of that meeting. Until that day, I shall attack you neither physically nor by speech." He bowed to Ranma.

Ranma spoke. "I am glad to hear your response. Until then, neither shall I attack you, physically or by speech. I await our discussion eagerly." And he bowed to Kuno in return.

Kuno stood, and walked regally away. Ranma sighed in relief. *So far, so good. Now all I have to do is talk him down from that high horse.*

Akane came up to Ranma as he was breathing deeply, centering himself after the stress of the conversation. "What happened?" she asked.

"I got me a short truce, but now I'll haveta talk with him again once he finds a priest that can handle vile sorcerers," he replied with a sigh. "That means more formal talk. Hittin' Kuno is easier than talkin' with him, but maybe talkin' will work where hittin' won't."

"Did you get me a truce, too?"

"Akane, he doesn't think he's attackin' you. So why should he stop? I'll see what I can do next time I talk with 'im. 'Til then, most ya can probably expect is less of the 'sorcerer' stuff."

Akane sighed. "So I talked to Ukyou. She knows about the neko-ken, so I told her it was giving you Interesting Times. She's going to try putting less stress on you for a while."

Ranma sighed in return. "And just like Kuno doesn't think he's attackin' you, she doesn't think she's stressin' me. Well, 'sa start. One step at a time."

They finished off their bentos with subdued appetites, and walked hand-in-hand back into the school for the afternoon classes. *Please, Kami-sama, let the afternoon be quiet.*

oOo

And the afternoon *was* quiet. Oh, there was the incident with the volleyball in PE, but volleyballs are cheap. And people wanted to know what had happened between Ranma and Kuno. "We spoke," Ranma said, and wouldn't elaborate. Kuno was no more talkative, which was not at all like him.

After school Ranma and Akane walked home together. The ladle lady got him, but that was the worst that happened. It was as if the whole world were holding its breath, worried about starting anything.

"You say your senses are ten times as sharp now, but you still can't see her coming?" Akane teased.

Ranma-chan grumbled as she wrung water out of the tail of her tang. "Dammit, she's just washing her sidewalk. She don't mean me a lick of harm. So she don't set off any alarms in my head." The two continued down the street, the redhead trailing wet footprints behind her.

No sooner had they taken their shoes off by the door than they saw Nabiki leaning against the wall waiting for them. "So?" she said. "What happened between Kuno and you?"

"We spoke. We got a truce for a while."

"Surely there's more to it than that?"

"Sure is. But that's between the two of us."

"I'm going to find out, you know."

"Who's gonna tell you? Kuno and I were the only ones within earshot." Then an idea came to Ranma. She cocked her head to one side, and smiled at Nabiki. She held out her hand. "Fifty thousand yen, please?"

Sizzling elegantly, Nabiki went up the stairs and into her room. She closed the door. But Ranma could hear her fist come down on her desk, and muttered curses.

oOo

After dinner that evening (Genma still hadn't shown up) Akane curled up on the sofa to watch television. Ranma snagged a spare cushion, and curled up on the tatami near her. Some while later, during a quiet portion of the show, Akane noticed a slight buzzing. She pricked up her ears and looked around. It seemed to be coming from Ranma. His eyes were closed, and he was breathing gently.

Kami-sama help us, he's purring, Akane thought.

oOo

Ranma woke again to dimness, this time on the tatami. After he'd gone to sleep, someone had put a blanket over him, and the freshest scent was Akane. He yawned, stretched, and smiled.

Oyaji still hadn't come home. It was time to hunt him down and have a long talk.

Ranma went to the refrigerator for a snack, then had a quick rinsedown with cold water in the furo. She changed clothes. *Heh, it'll really honk oyaji off if I'm a girl when I find him!*

She went to the spot by the dojo where there'd been panda scent. There was more now, fresh. Sniffing, Ranma began to track her father back to his lair.

After half an hour, she was in one of the neighborhood parks. There was the quiet sound of a small stream, and she could feel his sleeping ki deep in the bushes nearby. Quietly, she crept up on him.

Genma woke, flying through the air. He splashed down with a terrible curse cut off into a 'growf' in midstream. Then he rose, snarling, from the waters.

"Hold it right there, oyaji. You're in enough trouble already – don't make it any worse."

"Growf?"

"I got good news, and I got bad news. The good news is that Bjorn-sensei didn't come back with me. The bad news is that the Cat came back."

Genma produced a sign, not remembering it was too dark to read: "I don't know what you're talking about."

Ranma read the sign, even in the darkness. The Cat was with her. "It's the neko-ken, you doofus. You remember the neko-ken? The cats? The fish sausages? The way I pleaded with you not to toss me in the pit?"

"It was for your own good, boy." (flip) "And why are you a girl?"

"I'm a girl because you knocked me in the damn spring," Ranma said. "And I've given you credit for thinking it was for my own good. But now I have another point of view."

"It *was* for your own good, boy!" (Genma had a lot of practice with that sign.)

"And how would you feel if you were taken from a comfortable home? Starved, hauled about, tossed in a pit, starved some more – and then had some poor kid thrown on you? Over and over?"

"Growf?"

"I've learned the neko-ken for real now, you idiot. That means I'm sharing this head with the Cat. Do you think we *cats* enjoyed your training? Are you going to say it was for our *feline* good too?"

"They were only worthless cats!" Suddenly Genma realized who was reading his sign along with Ranma, and tucked it behind his back. It was too late.

Ranma snarled, and leaped at Genma. Only the older martial artist's reflexes saved him, as he jumped into the air. Ranma hit, and growling, began to shred the boulder she'd landed on. "Run, oyaji, run! I'll try to hold the cat back!" Huffing, the panda receded into the distance.

Ranma-chaneko fumed as she tore at the rocks. She stared longingly in the direction Genma had run. Eventually Ranma-chan diverted the Cat over to Genma's camp. She knelt, and began quietly to shred every last item Genma had with him into slivers and scraps. A deep chugging, halfway between a purr and a growl, came from her. Then she took down her pants and marked the devastation as her own. She stood, fastening her pants again about her waist.

Should have done this as a guy after all, she thought. It would have been neater.

And she went home to tell Kasumi that Uncle Saotome would probably not be showing up for some while.

oOo

On Tuesday, Ranma was walking down the street when Ryoga descended like a bolt from Heaven, shouting "Ranma, prepare to die!" When the sound and the dust and the flying stones quit, Ryoga stood alone in the crater he'd made. He looked around for Ranma. Then he heard a low snarl coming from the tree beside him. He looked up.

Ranma was crouched on a branch, hissing and spitting and making threatening motions with his paw. Ryoga broke out in a cold sweat, and carefully backed away. "Uh, er, I can see you're not quite yourself today, Ranma. We can talk about this later"

And then Ryoga did what he did best: he got lost.

oOo

On Wednesday, Ranma and Akane were walking home from school together, chattering happily, when Ranma heard the Bicycle of Doom approaching. At the last instant, he ducked and slashed upwards with his claws. Shampoo landed awkwardly, with flat tires, and bent the frame of her bike.

"Fer Pete's sake, Shampoo, be more careful with that thing! You almost hit me!"

Shampoo untangled herself from the wreckage, crying "So, so sorry, airen!" and tried to glomp him. But somehow Ranma bumped her and she missed, glomping Akane instead.

"Shampoo, what the heck are you up to! Let her go!"

Shampoo staggered back from Akane, who was radiating bright green.

"Shampoo, you've knocked me for a loop with that thing half a dozen times. You're an Amazon, you think men are the weaker sex, and you claim I'm your husband. Isn't this a bit too much like wife-beating? And what are you doing glomping Akane? Is *that* the kinda spouse you wanna be?"

Shampoo shook her head dazedly, and picked up the remnants of her bicycle. "Shampoo confused. Must talk with Elder Cologne." And she trudged off in the direction of the Cat Cafe.

oOo

Thursday, Kuno met Ranma at the entrance to Furinkan. "I've found the right man to witness our talk," he said. "There's a shrine in Okayama that holds a demon prisoner. The priest is a powerful swordsman, and he has a good reputation for wisdom. Would this Saturday be acceptable to you?"

"How we gonna get to Okayama? That's down in Chugoku region!"

"We'll take the bullet train. It'll be a long trip, but we can get there and back in a day if we start early."

"I can't afford that."

"I'll pay. This is a serious matter of honor. As you noted, I have greater resources."

"I can do it, then. One more request, Kuno-sempai. Could ya bring a piece of steel along, about the right size to make a knife? I got somethin' to show you, an' you'll be more sure of it if you supply the steel."

"Saturday, then. The front entrance of my estate, six in the morning. We shall leave from there."

"See ya then. Thanks for going to all this trouble, Kuno-sempai."

oOo

Friday night, Ranma prepared for a day-trip to Okayama. He laid out fresh clothes, and spent some time at the Tendo family shrine. "It's for Akane too, Tendo-san. Do your best." Then he went back in the house, did homework with Akane, and went to sleep early.

Cats sleep with their ears open. A little after midnight, Ranma heard the scrape of his window being carefully opened.

Happosai.

Happosai with a bucket, and his pipe.

Ranma didn't even want to *think* what Happosai might be up to. He lay still, damped his ki down, and watched through narrowed eyelids as the old master crept closer. *I don't need a distraction*, Ranma thought. *The pervert brought his own.*

Even as Happosai was beginning to pour the water, Ranma jumped up and slashed with her claws at the pipe. There was a terrible jar through her arm – the pipe must have been charged as full of ki as the old ghouls' staff – but it fell in several sections.

"**Mousie!**" Ranma-chan cried joyously as she leaped for Happosai. But he wasn't that easy to catch, and in an instant he was gone.

Ranma closed the window and lay back down to sleep. In the morning, bathed and neatly dressed, he was waiting at the gate to Kuno's estate.

oOo

After the train ride, after the bus ride, Ranma and Kuno found themselves at the foot of a long stone stairway. Still in silence, they began to climb.

Several hundred steps later, they stood in the courtyard of the shrine. The priest stood in the door. They bowed to him; he bowed in return.

"Kuno-dono? Saotome-san? Welcome to the Masaki shrine. I am Katsuhito. Please, come in."

They entered, and sat with the priest before a low table. A young girl with long, pale-blue ponytails entered with a tray, and served each of them with tea, bread, and salt.

Ranma was startled. While the ki of the old priest showed a man of great power, that was only to be expected. But when Ranma looked at the girl, her aura was so strong it almost blinded him; more, it gave him triple vision. Beside her he saw an elegant woman, and behind the two, a majestic tree.

Surely, this girl was not a were-tree!?

They sipped tea in silence, tore pieces off the bread and sprinkled salt on them, then ate. They drained their tea. The girl took their plates and cups, put them on her tray, and left.

"We have shared food and drink," the priest said. "The ancient laws of hospitality hold. There shall be no fighting while we remain on the temple grounds.

"Now, Kuno-dono, you asked for this meeting. Could you explain more fully what you wish of it?"

Ranma raised one hand. "Before we start, may I ask somethin'?"

Katsuhito nodded assent. "How does such a young girl have so much power, Katsuhito-sama? Just being near her felt like being in full sunlight. And there was a tree looming over her."

The old priest's brows rose behind his square-rimmed glasses. "She is not so young as she seems," he said. "And if you saw a tree, at the very least it is a sign we should go to the holy tree of our shrine to continue this discussion." He rose, and motioned to the two. Together they left the shrine and descended the steps.

The tree was on a small island in a pond, with stepping-stones going out to it. It was girded with a sacred shimenawa rope with paper streamers. Up close, it seemed even more unworldly to Ranma than it had in his – vision? "*Are you the demon's prison?*" he wondered as he looked at it.

Ranma stood before the tree. The only sound he heard was the sighing of the wind, the rustling of branches. He suddenly felt that he was alone, and turned to Kuno and Katsuhito, to find they were gone. When he looked back to the tree, the woman of his vision stood beside it. She was tall, with long pale-blue hair, elegantly dressed and agelessly young – a mature version of the girl that had served tea. Gracefully she sat by one of the larger roots, then patted the ground beside her and smiled at Ranma. He, too, sat.

"That is an interesting question," the woman said. "I wonder how you came to ask it, let alone realize I was there to be asked. May I know your mind?" Her red eyes looked into Ranma's blue.

Somehow Ranma knew this was *his* decision, and she would respect it. His time with Bjorn came back to him. If he could trust a grizzly, surely he could trust a woman of such serenity? His ears heard her heart beating, slowly and calmly. The scent of blossoms, and earth, came to his nose. It was time for him to learn trust. He nodded.

Gently she smiled, and reached out to touch his brow. Twin markings on her forehead glowed. There was a chime, the sound of a drop of water falling into a crystal pool, then an instant where he felt an unearthly love and understanding. His mind came back to his body seated upon the ground. He sighed in contentment, knowing somehow that he had been heard, and not found wanting.

The woman touched the back of his hand. "You deserve an answer."

"The one you ask of is not a demon – she is my niece. I am Tsunami, the Goddess of a distant world. She is Ryoko, daughter of my sister goddess Washu. Many years ago, Ryoko was taken from her mother, and raised by a cruel and selfish man who thought of her only as his weapon." Tsunami smiled wistfully. "You can see why your story reaches out to me, now that I know it – your story, and that of the Kuno boy, if what I read in your mind is true. But Kagato was a hundred times worse than your father, or Kuno's.

"Seven hundred years ago, Ryoko escaped and fled to Earth, where she was captured by the priest of this shrine and locked away in a cave. Her body lay still, while her spirit could wander the temple grounds and take in its peace. And it seems she learned to love, too. Recently she was freed from the cave, and is learning to bring her body and spirit back into harmony, learning to reconcile the love she has learned with the hate she was taught."

Tsunami smiled again, this time looking towards the future. "If she lives through the next few thousand years, she'll make a fine young kami. Until then – children can be *such* a trial!

"You," she continued, "are learning to reconcile the human and the cat. And doing a good job of it, though there's a long way to go. You still have much work before you combine male and female ..."

Ranma looked at her, opened his mouth. She spoke before he could. "You're not one of mine. In this, I will not act. Bring your curse up with the local kami. But I've read you down to the bottom of your soul. You still have much to learn, and that curse is one of the lessons. You'd miss her if she were gone.

"And though you have a long way to go, you're still trying to help the Kuno boy bring the two halves of his soul together – the samurai, and the schoolboy raised without a mother by his idiot father. I think I can help there, by soothing his mind as you speak. His problems come, not from the wrath of the gods but purely from humanity.

"I can't have your mind remembering this. But your soul will." She kissed him on each cheek, and on his forehead. The scent of flowers grew even stronger in his nostrils. "Go now. You're on stage."

As Ranma looked behind himself, he saw Kuno and Katsuhito. He turned to them, bowed, and sat seiza. For some reason, he was filled with peace and confidence. A lingering fragrance brushed past him on the breeze. Kuno and Katsuhito also sat.

Kuno spoke.

"There has been bad blood between Saotome Ranma and myself since the day we met. For reasons I considered good, I claimed he was an evil sorcerer. He claims, now, that he and I suffer from a curse that has caused much of this conflict. We are here before you – priest, warrior, and tamer of demons – to speak of this curse. With you as witness, we need fear no further sorceries."

Ranma spoke.

"There is truth in what Kuno Tawewaki says: my life has been touched by sorcery and magic. But I am the victim of sorcery, not its creator. As a priest of long years, and a master of the martial arts, you must have learned to distinguish between truth and lies. I call upon you, as witness, to judge the truthfulness of our speech."

Katsuhito spoke.

"I hear, and in this holy place, agree. If I see sorcery, or hear lies, I shall act. Until then I shall hold silence. Nor shall I speak of what I hear to others." He raised his hand, in a gesture familiar to both martial artists, then dropped it. "Begin."

"Saotome Ranma, what is this curse you claim you and I and my sister share? And how has it caused conflict among us?"

"Kuno-sempai, it's a simple and common curse. We were raised by idiot fathers. Worse, we had no mothers with us to temper our fathers' idiocies."

"Continue," Kuno said.

"I was raised on the road, movin' from place to place, learnin' the arts of combat and insult. I almost never stayed long enough to make friends, seldom even acquaintances. I made two friends in all those years, an' because of th'way oyaji took me from 'em, they came back as enemies. My social skills are rotten, 'cause I've never had much chance to use 'em. And I'm used to hittin' problems on th' head or throwin' 'em into a wall.

"And you? Raised in a mansion by father and servants, along with yer sister. Told stories of past glories. Y'know, while Sasuke ain't a bad sort, he's a ninja. They got funny ideas about honor. 'Nen when you get to school, yer father's principal. You're rich. You can get away with anythin'. But that doesn't get'cha friends. It gets ya toadies. I don't think either of us got very many true friends."

Tatewaki grimaced in pain. His eyes were closed, tears leaking from their corners. For several minutes he was silent, breathing heavily. When he spoke, it was no longer with his customary elegance. "And my sister?"

"I bet yer father wasn't comfortable with girls. Did Sasuke do more to raise her? You, you got Samurai honor and Samurai tactics. Kodachi, she tries for the Samurai honor, but her tactics are more like a ninja. And neither of you understand people who ain't Samurai."

Kuno Tatewaki was silent again – or at least, he did not speak. Ranma heard his heart beating irregularly, his breath catching in his throat. Kuno's face was bowed down, but Ranma smelled the salt tang of tears. Without looking up, he finally choked out, "Tendo Akane and my pigtailed goddess?"

Ranma reached out, put his hand on Kuno's shoulder. "Akane? She's caught up in the same curse we are, but her father's nowhere as bad and she has sisters to help. The pigtailed goddess? 'Member I said I had at least three curses? She's caught up in my third curse. And it's not the time to talk 'bout that, yet."

Now Ranma was holding both of Kuno's shoulders. "Kuno-sempai, I'm weary to the bone of fighting. I've just had a month away from it, an' now I can't go back to the way things were. I *won't* go back to the way things were. I want a *life*, not a lifelong battle. I want a *home*, not a battleground.

"If there's anybody in Furinkan who can understand me, it's you. If there's anybody who can understand you, it's me. I dunno if we can be friends. We *can't* be enemies any longer."

Ranma moved to sit beside Tatewaki, then kept silence. The two sat for five minutes, then ten, lost in memories, emotions playing over their faces.

After fifteen minutes, the old priest spoke. "You've both been staring your past in the face, and seeing things you didn't like. I know – I have more past than the both of you put together. It's why

I'm priest at a lonely shrine: duty and memory keep me here, and the peace sustains me. Saotome-san, Kuno-dono, there have been no sorceries and no lies. But the whole story has not yet been spoken. What brought the two of you to this place? Rather, what brought the two of you to the decision to come?"

The youths rearranged their garments and their faces.

"You said that to battle now could cost us both our souls," Tatewaki said. "How?"

"Kuno-sempai, Katsuhito-sama, have you heard of a technique called the Neko-ken?" And Ranma told them about the pit, the cats, the fish, the claws and eyes, and the madness that could descend upon him. "Member when Gosunkugi told you I was afraid of cats, and you dumped me in a pit of cats? I shredded your bokken. You were lucky I didn't shred *you*. I wasn't human when that happened.

"Ever since I was taught the Neko-ken, I've had the soul of a cat in me, as well as the soul of a human. Mostly, the human was in charge and the cat slept. Sometimes it was the other way around, and I was very dangerous.

"This last month, I studied under a master of the bear-claw. They also have two souls, bear and human, but over the years they've learned to bring the souls together so they work as one. I learned the beginnings of this. Now I'm part cat all the time, and I can use the claws of the cat whenever I want.

"Kuno-sempai, did you bring the steel I asked for?"

Kuno Tatewaki took a cloth-wrapped rectangle from where it was held in his belt, and gave it to Ranma, who unwrapped it. It was perhaps twenty centimeters long, two wide, and half a centimeter thick, of finest tool steel. He spread the cloth on the ground before him.

Concentration plain on his face, Ranma brought forth his claws. One end of the steel he rounded, corners and edges, to make a comfortable grip. Then he took the grip in his hand, and began carving a blade on the other end. In less than a minute he had a serviceable small knife. He handed it, grip-first, to Kuno.

Tatewaki and Katsuhito both looked at the cloth, covered with slivers and shavings of sharp steel. They looked at the knife. They looked at one another. Then they looked at Ranma.

"Test the knife," Ranma said, looking at Katsuhito.

The priest reached out, found some deadfall wood from a nearby shrub. He carved it with the knife. Then he placed the knife on a rock, and hammered it with another rock.

"This is a sharp knife, of good steel," Katsuhito said as he handed it back to Kuno.

"Hold the knife out, point-first, over the cloth." Kuno did so. Then Ranma waved negligently at the knife and it fell into pieces, which dropped to the cloth.

"I scarcely felt that," Kuno said. "How sharp *are* these claws of yours?"

"Dunno – still learnin'. Plenty sharp enough to carve through rock and steel."

"The soul of a Samurai is his sword. You're of an old family. Your sword must be at least a thousand-layer sword, maybe more. What just happened to the knife? I don't want to do that to an ancient and honorable sword."

"And what if I killed you? I don't want that on my soul. But the angrier I get, or the more desperate, the more the cat comes to the fore. He doesn't mind killin'. This time I'd be there to watch. So let's not fight any more – please? The stakes are too high."

Ranma stared into Kuno's eyes, and Kuno stared back. *How odd*, thought the kendoka. *I've never looked into his eyes like this. They are strangely like the eyes of my pigtailed goddess.*

Katsuhito said, after a moment, "So your fathers are the first curse, and the neko-ken is your second curse. But you speak of a third?"

Ranma looked down, at his hands, at the pond. He looked up, first at Katsuhito, then at Kuno. He took a deep breath. "It's not yet time to speak of the third curse. First, Kuno-sempai must observe the curse my father bears." (Ranma smiled wryly to himself at the pun.)

"Before we came to Nerima, my father and I traveled to a cursed training ground in China. There he fell in the Spring of Drowned Panda. And now, when hit by cold water he turns into a giant panda with a human mind. Hot water returns him to human form.

"When you come to me and say you have used both cold and hot water on my father, Kuno-sempai, I shall speak with you of my third curse."

Kuno said, "I have seen a panda on the streets of Nerima. This is your father?"

Ranma nodded.

Katsuhito spoke. "Then I think the two of you have talked sufficiently. I have seen no sorcery, deceit, or lack of good faith. Would you care to use the shrine for a while now, to meditate?"

The two boys stood, and bowed. "We must leave now to catch the train home," they said. "We thank you very much for your aid, Katsuhito-sama." And they walked back towards the bus stop, after yet another bow to the priest.

"This formal speakin's gonna drive me nuts yet," Ranma said as they walked comfortably together.

Kuno punched him lightly on the arm. "You need to learn better speech, Ranma-kun."

"And you need to tone yours down."

They smiled. "Perhaps we can teach one another?"

oOo

Katsuhito gathered up the cloth with its sharp slivers, and walked back to his home. In the kitchen, he met the girl. "Sasami, you would not *believe* the conversation I've just witnessed."

Sasami lifted a ladle of soup, tasted, smiled and added just a pinch of sea-salt. "I don't have to believe – I was there with Tsunami. It was even stranger than you know. But we promised not to talk about it."

"True, true. When is dinner?"

oOo

That night Ranma slept, and dreamed he was crouched on a high branch in a noble tree. Beside him on the branch sat an elegant woman with long blue hair. "Good cat," she said as she scratched the back of his head just above his pigtail. "*Good* cat." Ranma squirmed in pleasure. "You spoke well today. I think friendship will work for the two of you."

"You had *four* curses, you know. The fourth was the most traditional: 'interesting times'. After you left I talked with Kami-sama about it. Your father had it put on you, to keep you from slacking off or going soft."

"Kami-sama and I spoke sharply with the kami in charge of that curse, and he agreed the curse would suit your father even better than you. So we transferred it over."

The woman stroked Ranma gently along his back, as she silently vanished away bit by bit, leaving only a smile behind. "Sleep well, dear cat."

And Ranma did.

Interlude in Pale Green

After his long and tiring trip to Okayama, and an excellent night's sleep, Ranma didn't wake as early as he'd been doing recently. But that was still early enough to be in the kitchen sipping tea when Akane stopped in for hers. "Good morning, Ranma," she said. "How did things go with Kuno yesterday?"

"Surprisin'ly well," he smiled. "But there may be side effects. Mind if I come along on yer run? We can talk about it then."

Akane was thunderstruck, but eventually managed a shy smile. She still wasn't sure what Ranma was up to, but so far it was easier to get along with. She finished her tea, and they headed out the door.

Behind them Kasumi smiled as she picked up the cups. The *wa* of the Tendo compound had improved since Ranma's return. She'd had enough time to see some of the reasons herself – all week Ranma had been rising early, and spending quality kitchen time with her. He was obviously taking time to think before speaking, and had been getting along more smoothly with Akane in consequence. Uncle Saotome had been gone, and her father was behaving more normally. (She'd definitely started seeing Genma as a bad influence now that she'd had some time away from him.) There were no fights in the yard, so she hadn't had to do as much work there. And grandfather Happosai was staying away too, which helped Akane's temper no end.

She was Neriman. She didn't even *think* about how well things were going – that would be asking for trouble. But she went to the household shrine, and silently thanked her mother. *And*, she thought, *if Bjorn-sensei does show up, he is going to get a very good meal.*

oOo

By this time, Ranma and Akane were several kilometers into their jog and entering a park. "I like the pathways here," she huffed. Ranma could tell she wasn't winded – her heartbeat was still too slow for that – but her breathing was disciplined for exercise, not speech.

Ranma smiled. "I like nature too," he said. "Let's go 'round the park a few times, then we can rest and talk." He was careful to let the depth of his breathing come out in his speech. Akane might have thought he was humoring her if he hadn't.

Eventually they plopped down onto a park bench. "I shoulda taken this run with you long ago," Ranma said. "You have a gentler focus when you run than you do in the dojo."

Again, Akane didn't quite know what to say. Was this a compliment to *now*, or an insult to *then*? So she held her tongue and her temper, and focused on her breathing. A little silence wouldn't hurt.

After they'd listened to birdsong for a while, Ranma began to speak. "Kuno found a swordmaster-priest he trusted, down Okayama way. We talked, with the priest as a witness. For a wonder, Kuno listened."

Akane made a gentle noise of inquiry.

"Told Kuno I had three curses I knew of, an' he shared the worst one. We were both raised by idiot fathers, without a mother to help hold the idiocy down."

Akane thought of pineapples, haircuts and the neko-ken, and solemnly nodded agreement. "Even *Kuno* couldn't argue against *that*."

"An' that left us kinda socially inept."

Akane smirked.

"An' here's the part ya might not like. 'Cause I said you suffered from the same curse. Oh, not as bad as we did - your dad wasn't as bad as Kuno's or mine, and you had sisters to help, but still"

Akane went rigid for a long moment. Her heartbeat jumped, she stopped breathing, and her aura flickered. There was an acrid smell of electricity and adrenaline. But then she sighed. "I don't like it, but it's fair."

They sat for a while more, each aware of the other. Ranma was realizing that *silence* was a second important lesson he'd learned from his time in the Northwoods. This wasn't martial arts – he didn't need to react immediately. He liked just being with Akane, no talking. But eventually he broke the silence. "He's lonely, you know."

"He? Kuno? Lonesome?"

"We haven't been good for him, Akane. He was rich, and his father was Principal. He could get away with anything. That wuzn't real, and deep down, he knew it. So he clawed his way to the top of the Kendo heap. He was team captain, and got some *real* respect for it. 'Nen he was foolish enough to make that challenge. An' you wiped the field with him and made him a laughingstock."

"He helped!"

"Not gunna argue. But you made the kendo team a joke, too. Their strongest fighter gettin' creamed by a younger girl, with her bare hands? They didn't like him much for that. 'Nen I came along and made it worse."

"You make him sound almost reasonable. If I hadn't been there, I might believe you."

"We don't haveta believe. But that's the way he sees it. An' if we can see his mind, maybe he'll try ta see ours. I already got him partway there."

"You're asking a lot."

"I know. But I wuz with him all yesterday, and we'd sworn not to fight. After he ran through his big talk, he got down to small talk. He ain't near as bad once he's done with the Shakespeare and the haiku."

"But what could the two of you talk about?"

"Our mutual curse. Martial arts. Kuno and me *are* the best male fighters in Furinkan, after all."

A breeze came up and the trees released their store of morning dew, plus a bit extra from a midnight shower. Ranma brushed the water from her face while Akane snickered. "And you and me and Ukyou are the best female fighters. We got lots to talk about. – an' not just fightin'. Kuno's a lunatic, I'm a sex-shifting braggart, and Ukyou's a crossdresser livin' with another crossdresser. Lotsa interesting things. And you fit right in, bein' a tomboy and all ..."

The mallet flashed into existence and Ranma leaped off. They had another hour's invigorating run before they came, panting and laughing, into the Tendo compound.

oOo

After they'd washed up, Akane went out for ice cream with Sayuri and Yuka. Ranma and Nabiki were sitting on the sofa practicing conversational English when the door slid gently open and a tiny, tentative face peered in at them. Ranma looked over with a neutral expression. "Hello, jiji."

"Ranma, my boy! May I come in?"

"Sure, jiji. Just be careful not to scamper – that sets off the Cat. And" (Happosai's ki senses could see a tail lazily swaying back and forth) "you're the bessssst play-toy. You lasssst. It'sss funn to chasssse you."

Happosai gulped.

"Don't sscurrrry, don't pissssss me off, and 'sssspessshally don't wake me sssssuddenly, and you ssshould be all rrrright."

Happosai looked downcast. "I suppose that means I can't have your panties when you're my sweet Ranma-chan?"

"Well, jiji, at the airrrrport the other day I noticed you werrren't cirrrcumcissssed"

That pretty well killed the conversation. Happosai went quietly to his room while Nabiki struggled to keep from laughing her head off. She *did* have an image to maintain. When Kasumi looked disapprovingly at them, Nabiki noted that, "Happosai never steals *your* panties. *We* look at it differently."

"What she said," Ranma added.

Ranma and Nabiki looked at one another, then back to Kasumi. "If you're feeling left out, we could arrange it," they chorused. Kasumi blushed terribly and went back in the kitchen, while Ranma and Nabiki gave each other high-fives. It wasn't often they could feel righteous about embarrassing Kasumi, but this was one of those times.

oOo

On Monday, Ranma and Akane walked through the gates of Furinkan to be confronted by Kuno Tatewaki, with his bokken resting on his shoulder. "Hey, stickboy-kun, how's it going?" Ranma said.

"Well, sorcerer-kun, I have had days when my path stood more clear before me."

"Me too. We gotta do something about that." Ranma bowed respectfully to Kuno. "Sensei, we three did not get off to the best of starts. Can we begin again?"

Kuno returned the bow, to both Ranma and Akane. "It is the custom to give one's own name first, is it not? I am upperclassman Kuno Tatewaki, captain of the Kendo club, sometimes known as the Blue Thunder of Furinkan High."

Ranma bowed back, thinking it both a bit silly, and more than a little worthwhile. "I am Saotome Ranma, heir to the Musabetsu Kakuto Saotome-Ryu. My companion is Tendo Akane, heir to the Musabetsu Kakuto Tendo-Ryu." Akane bowed.

"You know the tree where we eat lunch," Ranma said. "Would you join us there at noon, to discuss paths taken, and paths to be taken?"

"I shall," Kuno replied. "Until, lunch, then." All three bowed, then headed together for the school entrance. Inside they parted company. Above, Nabiki checked over the bets and smiled. *Nobody* had bet on *this*. She got to keep *all* the money. Except (and her smile got a bit one-sided) for Ranma's share. At least the boy was letting her take it off his debts, instead of demanding cash. And she sighed. *Every silver lining has a cloud*, she thought.

Akane and Ranma made it to class several respectable minutes before the late bell, but Ukyo's desk was still empty by the time Ninomiya-sensei called the roll. Everybody was looking over at Ranma and Akane – *what* had happened with Kuno? – but the two of them looked resolutely innocent and disinterested. There were going to be rumors, all kinds of rumors, but they were *not* going to give the rumor mill anything. It would have to do all the work itself.

oOo

Akane sat in math class, distracted by the slight buzzing noise from Ranma's direction. She knew what he was doing. He'd been surprisingly alert during English and history, but he was napping now. And he'd learned to do it with his eyes half-open, so he wasn't being persecuted for it.

Ranma's sleep patterns had changed since he'd returned. Oh, he still slept in the same classes (except for English), but he was napping more during the evening. If she sat down for TV, Ranma would be there, curled up purring and dozing at her feet. Or – if Ranma were female – she'd curl up on the sofa beside her. Ranma's girl form was small enough to fit without crowding. And the kami help anyone who woke her when she was sound asleep.

One night Akane had been wakeful, and she'd looked out her window. By the light of the waning moon she'd seen Ranma moving about the yard on all fours, sniffing things and investigating them. He'd gone behind the dojo, she'd seen a flicker of motion over the wall, and nothing had happened for the rest of the hour she'd watched. What was he doing in the middle of the night?

He was saying more with his body, less with his mouth. She wasn't sure if this was good or bad. It was wonderful to go for days without hearing "uncute", but Ranma was starting to act like he had the right to hold her hand or curl up near her. It warmed Akane's heart, but disturbed her at the same time. And she was starting to feel guilty at the way he flinched and grew colder whenever

she said "pervert". How could she punish him for that? It wasn't the same when he didn't insult her back.

And besides, she'd started stroking his shoulder, and even running her hand through her hair when she was cat-napping beside her on the sofa. Could she help it if she'd always gotten along with the Cat? She blushed, just the tiniest bit. Ranma's nostrils twitched.

Now there was this lunch with Kuno. It was only twenty minutes away. *What* was she going to do, going to say? There was over a year's accumulated bad karma to deal with!

Fifteen minutes.

Ten minutes.

The bell rang. She got her bento and headed out the door, Ranma with her. As they reached their customary tree, Kuno Tatewaki joined them. Silently they sat, unwrapped their bentos, spread the cloths on the ground, opened the boxes. Ranma and Akane had bentos by Kasumi. Akane wasn't sure where Kuno's came from, but it looked splendid.

They began to eat. After several mouthfuls Ranma smiled broadly. "This sushi is even more wonderful than Kasumi's usual!" he said. He took it up in his chopsticks, and used the claw of his forefinger to slice a good piece off onto Kuno's rice (that being neutral ground). "Try it, sempai!"

Kuno chewed thoughtfully. "Piquant indeed," he said. "The two of you are fortunate to have her cooking for you." He took his chopsticks and put one battered shrimp on Ranma's bento, and another on Akane's. "Our cook is skilled, but she spends more effort on presentation than taste. You might enjoy her shrimp, however."

Despite Kuno's protestations, the shrimp was tasty indeed. And so the meal passed in small talk and quiet enjoyment of good food. But soon enough the food was gone, and they were left with tea and one another's company.

Akane was unsure what to say, and Ranma had been more quiet of late, so it fell to Kuno to break the silence. "There's much history among us," he said. "Let's not speak of it now. For if we did, 'twould be a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. We have a future to discuss, instead."

Akane loved Shakespeare herself, and this made her smile. "You can't know how glad I am to hear you quote the Bard," she said. "Ranma has been behaving differently since he returned. And since your talk with him over the weekend, you have been, too. I was starting to feel surrounded by changelings."

They all had a good chuckle over that. Akane had never seen Kuno laughing quite so genuinely. "We may or may not be idiots ourselves," he said, "but we were surely raised by idiots. Good William said it better than we could: it makes a wild tale, but you can't expect meaning from it. Now, 'tis time for us to leave our idiocies behind."

Despite her long history with Kuno, Akane was charmed. Suddenly she could understand how Ranma had spent a day with him and emerged unscathed.

Ranma spoke. "We gotta talk about Akane, Sempai." She felt a sudden rush of anger. "More important, we gotta listen to her." And she calmed again.

"Sempai," Akane said, "please stop the challenges. I'm not a prize to be offered up to the winner of a fight. It's hurt my opinion of men, and of yourself."

"Really improved your ability to fight multiple opponents, though."

Akane whirled on Ranma. "What was that?!"

"Anything goes, Akane. You may not have enjoyed it. You may have *hated* it. But you gotta admit, it was educational. I'm better with a single opponent. Make it a dozen, an' you can probably take care of yours as fast as I could handle mine. 'Specially now I gotta be careful not to damage people."

Akane glowered at Ranma. "Are you saying I should be grateful?"

"Nope. Just sayin' that awful as it was, some good came of it. Sorta like me an' the Neko-ken."

Kuno was watching the two go back and forth. When Ranma mentioned the Neko-ken, he shuddered. He'd just a few days ago learned the true horror Ranma had been subjected to, and now Ranma was comparing his – Kuno Tatewaki's – behavior to *that*?

And while Akane was undergoing a delayed reaction to Ranma's words – he *had*, after all, said she was as good as he was, with a dozen opponents – Ranma turned to Kuno. "Sempai, people can learn. People can move beyond their past. You're lucky you're not my father – he didn't. An' worse for him, the Cat hasn't had time to move beyond *its* past. So Oyaji is hidin' from the Cat. We may have to find some other way to demonstrate my third curse."

Kuno waved that aside. "We can worry about that later." He turned to Akane. "Akane-san, please accept my deepest apologies. In my delusion, in my confusion, I had no idea that what I was doing was so offensive to you. Though misguided, it was sincerely meant as praise for your warrior spirit."

He looked back and forth between Ranma and Akane with a quirked smile. "Beside, I wasn't thinking at my best. I kept getting hit on the head." The two blushed.

"We're sorry about that," Akane said as Ranma nodded. "By the time I was through fighting all those other people, I had so much adrenaline going you didn't have even the faintest prayer of my acting reasonably."

Ranma added, "And I had other issues. I'll tell ya after we talk over my third curse."

Kuno smiled. "Well, then! Tendo Akane, I would date with you."

Akane flinched.

Kuno continued. "But last weekend, Ranma-kun explained the engagement dilemma the two of you have. It seems your romantic life is complicated enough already. And so, until you find a resolution – Tendo Akane, will you allow me to occasionally keep you company?"

Akane was flabbergasted, but after a moment she began to smile. "That is quite acceptable, sempai," she said. "But I will take it amiss if you suddenly leave me to chase after the pig-tailed goddess."

"But I must have you both!"

Ranma and Akane beat him about the head and shoulders with their bento boxes, without doing significant damage. Kuno attacked, using kendo moves with his chopsticks; but Ranma defended with Seven Lucky Gods chopstick technique. And they all had a good laugh, but on Akane's part it was nervous. What had she gotten herself in for? Obviously, Kuno wasn't as insane as he'd seemed in the past – but was he as sane as he seemed today?

The mock-fighting had put Ranma into a somber mood – even Akane and Kuno (neither of them noted for perceptiveness) could see that. "What is it, Ranma-kun?" Kuno asked.

"I love the Art," Ranma said. "But with claws, I can't even spar safely. It'd be like you sparring with katana instead of shinai." Ranma looked back and forth between Kuno and Akane. "You're both fighters. Tell me – what does a fighter do, when he doesn't dare fight?"

Akane cast her eyes down. She was starting to see more of what was behind Ranma's new behavior. Part of it was euphoria from making peace with his Cat, of fearing cats no more. But part was depression, from no longer being able to enjoy a good fight. She squeezed her eyelids shut, and her heart clenched in sympathy. *Damn*, she thought. *It's all very well for this new Ranma to make **Kuno** think. But now he's starting to make **me** think.*

Kuno, bless him, had something useful to say. "There are times when shinai or bokken will not do. Times when I simply need sharp metal in my hand, and something to cut. Recently I have begun to study American-style teppanyaki cooking. Though I'm still a novice, it's immensely satisfying to deliver a thousand cuts in a hundred seconds, and end up with a work of art."

Ranma and Akane looked at him with enormous eyes.

"That's it!" Ranma said.

"Wow!" Akane said.

Ranma grasped their shoulders, an enormous smile upon his face. "When I was studying with Bjorn-sensei, he had me enter a woodcarving contest. Everybody else used chainsaws, but I used my claws. It was *so* satisfying! Yes! There *is* more than one Art!" He looked around the schoolyard. "Hiroshi! He sculpts in clay! He's in the Art Club. I'm gonna haveta talk with him!" He made to get up, but then sat down again.

"Teppanyaki," Akane said with stars in her eyes. "Do you think you could come over some evening and show Kasumi and me how to do it?"

Ranma shuddered quietly, but concealed it. Things were going far too well for him to risk upsetting Akane or Kuno. The class bell rang.

They all rose, gathering up their bentos and heading back to school for the afternoon. But Akane was extremely happy. *I'll have to make a special dinner for Ranma to celebrate*, she thought.

oOo

Ranma had stayed for the after-school meeting of the club, which had lasted over an hour, and he was swinging happily home. Hiroshi had been struck silent in amazement, but the club's advisor, Kinomoto-sensei, was vocally overjoyed to get another sculptor. There was going to be an inter-school competition later in the fall, and Furinkan hadn't had anybody who worked in wood or stone. Now they did, and could enter yet another category. Yatta! One day along, and he was already in a competition!

But a block from the dojo, Ranma's smile slipped. He could tell: Akane was cooking.

I don't like the ssssmell of thissss... the Cat thought.

It ain't no worse than that dead fish you ate before I could stop you.

I was hungrrry. And we didn't get ssssick from the fisssssh.

We won't get sick from this either, Ranma thought. I have an idea. And he told the Cat.

That'ssss crrruel. I like it!

Then we'd better hurry, Ranma thought. We have to block the door so nobody can escape. And he got there just in time to forestall Nabiki's "sudden errand".

Nabiki and Soun begin insisting he eat the meal his fiancée had prepared specially for him. Soun employed his patented waterworks, while Nabiki used her well-practiced scorn. If Ranma was going to make her stay, by golly, she was going to make sure *he* ate the first serving!

Ranma sat down, looking surprisingly cheerful for a condemned man. Akane brought the dishes in, put the meal on the table, and began ladling it out. Ranma took an extra-large serving. "Itadakimasu!" he said, and his chopsticks begin flying between his food and his mouth. Soon his plate was empty. He patted his tummy with a smile, and belched inelegantly.

Everybody but Ranma and Kasumi began to look sick. There was a sudden stampede for the bathroom. Kasumi looked at Ranma. "What? Anyway, the Cat made me do it. It ain't what it looks like!"

Kasumi said "It looks like you happily ate Akane's cooking."

"Right, it ain't what it looks like." Ranma took Kasumi's hand and headed for the kitchen. "I gotta get something to eat while they're busy, so they won't notice me bein' hungry."

"They looked like they'd be occupied for some time. What happened, and why didn't it happen to you and me?"

"We were the innocents. I didn't want to eat the food, and you didn't try to make me eat it. To defend myself – that *is* one of the things the martial arts are for – I broke out the *gourmet de foie gras* move."

"Wasn't that how you defeated that creepy Picolette Chardin?"

"No way I could eat as fast or as much as he could. But I still emptied my plate first. Is it my fault most of my food ended up in his mouth instead of mine?"

"Oh my, but that wasn't a very nice thing to do to Akane!"

"Kasumi, how often have we told her to taste the food before she feeds it to us? I just enforced that a bit. And I am *more* than tired of Nabiki and your father pushing me to eat it. So I gave them all what they were asking for, and my share of it as well.

"Notice I didn't get hit with a mallet? In fact Akane was pretty happy, until she started throwing up. Do this a couple more times, and we all may live through dinner. You won't warn them, and spoil the lesson?"

"Now, we've got a kitchen to clean up. You scrape out the pots, I'll kill the food if it gives us any trouble, and then we can both wash the dishes."

Which they did, chatting quietly to the counterpoint of distant retching in three-part harmony.

Blue Amazon

The door chimed as Ranma walked into the Cat Café one Friday evening. It was late, the evening rush was over, and he'd seen Shampoo and Mousse heading off to deliver full loads of take-out.

At her perch by the kitchen counter, Cologne widened her eyes. "Well, son-in-law! What brings you to visit an old woman?"

"Hiya, Old Ghoul. I just came by to have a talk with Elder Cologne. Is she available?"

Cologne made to hit him with her staff for the 'Old Ghoul' comment, but stopped almost before she started. "That's not a very polite way to ask."

"You don't like bein' called 'Old Ghoul', I don't like gettin' called 'son-in-law'. Th' whole thing is too damn personal. I wanna talk with the rankin' Amazon Elder 'round here, not someone who thinks she'd make a great gran'mother-in-law."

"This is formal, then?"

"'Formal' means I gotta talk funny. Call it 'serious'."

Cologne headed deeper into the café, snagging a pot of tea and two cups as she went. "Come," she said. "Join me in my quarters."

The room was cluttered, with scrolls and artifacts, strange bits of jewelry and statuary, and a multitude of interesting smells. Chirping boards told Ranma it had a nightingale floor. In the center there was a rich and comfortable rug, with a low square table centered on it. Cologne put the two cups at opposite sides of the table, poured tea, and knelt by the table on the side away from the door. "Close the door, Ranma," she cackled. "Come sit with me. Have some tea."

Ranma took the side of the table across from Cologne. He inhaled the aroma of his tea – nothing funny in it – and drank, watching the old woman as she drank in turn. They both settled into position and into comfort, each carefully monitoring the other's ki and their small movements.

Finally Ranma spoke. "Things have changed, Elder. Other things have to adjust."

Cologne nodded, no cackle this time. "You frightened the liver out of Happosai, and destroyed his pipe. I didn't think it could be done. *I've* never been able to. And now I hear you've made friends with that Kuno boy. *That* must have taken divine intervention."

Ranma smiled. "I was away for a month. I lucked out an' met a master of the Bear-Claw. They got two natures, bear and human, but they've learned to get the two workin' together. He taught me to get my cat soul workin' with my human soul."

Cologne nodded. "You said 'cat' without flinching. Does that mean Shampoo's curse is no longer a problem?"

"That's the least 'a the things we gotta talk about. First, we gotta talk Amazon law."

"Amazon law says you're married to Shampoo, and there's no way you're going to get around that."

"Shampoo tried ta kill me, for a solid month. Amazon law said *that*, too. I don't know your law. What other surprises ya got?"

"That ... is a secret."

"Ha ha, Elder Xellos. Look, I don't like surprises. And I don't like being told what to do. My ol' man and my mother an' Mr. Tendo been putting all kinds of expectation on me. I've had it with that. Now Amazon law says I'm married to a woman who tried to kill me for a solid month, who crashes inta me with her bicycle at least once a week ..."

"You really upset her over that, last week. 'Wife-beating' indeed!"

"An' what's the difference? Amazon men deserve it? Then I don't wanna be no Amazon man. Look, Cologne, Shampoo may be cute, a good cook, and a great fighter – but she's violence, compulsion, potions, and death-threats all wrapped up in unpleasant surprises. I ain't gonna marry her and go back to your village and be some kinda Amazon yamato nadeshiko. I won't, and the cat sure as hell won't. You ever try tellin' a cat what to do?"

"Where is this – cat – you talk about?"

Ranma sank into the neko-ken, and flared his ki-claws. A tail of ki was lashing furiously behind him, and his eyes gleamed with green fire. Cologne paled a bit, but sat firm. "*Thissss* cat," Ranma said. "When I ssay 'two ssoulss' it ain't jusst talk. You sssure you want mmmeee 'rrround yourr village? And pisssssed 'bout it?"

"That's a strong argument, but Amazon law is pretty firm on this."

"Ain't no law can't be got 'rrround with a good lawyerrr. Sssay some ambitiouss fella from the People'ss Army beatss one a yerrr fighters? And a week later, the resst of the People'ss Arrrmy comes by to assk for him back?"

"Um"

"Well then. Happossai beatss you. On a good day, he maybe could do it. You gonna marrrry him?"

"Ummm"

"Rrrright. Trry somebody Happossai's ssscared of. Like me."

Cologne's shoulders slumped. "You're right – things have changed. Let me think." She closed her eyes, and Ranma slowly backed out of the neko-ken. The Cat sniffed, turned around three times in his mind, and went back to sleep. Tea hardly counted as food, and it didn't look like there was going to be a fight. Ranma took another sip of tea, and waited.

Cologne's eyes opened. "Amazon law respects ability in battle – almost anything can be settled by challenge. For a personal disagreement, it's personal combat. But this is a matter of law, so you'd have to challenge and defeat an elder." She sighed. "I suppose that means we fight?"

Ranma nodded agreement. "I don't wanna get us hurt. Look, can we have a challenge where the rules say no serious injury? Where the goal is somethin' else?"

Cologne thought a moment. "If we both agree. What do you suggest?"

"Well, we both got long hair. How 'bout you tie yours up in a ponytail? I win if I get yer ponytail, you win if y' get my pigtail?"

Cologne smiled. "I like it. Clear victory, no blood. Can we use weapons?"

"We don't wanna pull hair out by the roots. I'm usin' my claws, you can have a knife or a scissors. You can even use your staff, if you're willin' to risk what happened to Happosai's pipe."

"Well, son- ... er, Ranma, we need somebody impartial to judge the challenge. And everybody around here seems to have a bias."

"Well, old ... er, Cologne, then we get *everybody* to judge. It'll balance out. Nabiki can do videos and bets, and we can split the take three ways after expenses. If they make or lose money on it, they'll remember who won well enough. And if they forget, they can look at the video."

"Ranma, that is positively sly."

"I'm sharper when I've had enough sleep. Shall I set it up with Nabiki for next weekend?"

"That sounds reasonable. Now, about Shampoo's curse?"

The Cat pricked up its ears as it slept. *Cats* were being discussed.

"That's one bright spot in all a this. Even with our problems, Shampoo's been good 'bout my cursed form. It's nice now I can handle *her* curse. And I think the Cat wants to meet her."

"Ah, son-in-law – I know, I know, but let an old woman have her dreams – you are truly starting to grow up. What *happened* while you were gone?"

"Well, Elder Ghoul," Ranma smirked, "A lot of things happened. The pressure was off. I got lots of sleep. And I only had Bjorn-sensei to talk with, mostly, and he spoke English. So I was silent a lot. Hadda think before I said things. Now I got the Cat in my head. Cats are impulsive, so I hadda grow up a lot to ride herd on him. An' the Cat has issues with oyaji over the Neko-ken, so the panda's hiding away from the two of us. That's a lot of pressure gone there, too."

"And there ain't been the usual chaos. I musta got a kami on my side for once, instead a playin' tricks on me. Most everybody been behaving themselves."

"I can believe that," Cologne smirked. "If there were a berserk in the room, I'd behave carefully too. Come to think, there *is* a berserk in the room."

Ranma smiled a truly complicated smile, with joy and malice and *schadenfreude* and sorrow all mixed in. "Just don't try an' collect my undies, Cologne. I don't like collectors like that." And Cologne felt an equally complicated reaction – as if she'd been warned and complimented all at once.

Ranma stood. "Thanks for the tea, Elder, and the discussion. I'll talk with Nabiki, and we'll get in touch with you for the arrangements." He bowed, and walked to the door. There wasn't a single chirp from the floor, which startled Cologne almost as much as the rest of this surreal evening. Ranma smiled at her, and was gone.

oOo

As Ranma left the café, the kami in question decided to let Ranma know he was still on the job. Ranma was almost bowled over by a panda running hell-for-leather on all fours. Close behind was Principal Kuno snapping at the panda with hair-clippers. Following that, Kuno Tatewaki and Sasuke pelted by waving super-soakers. And ... "OHOHOHOHOHOHO!" ... oh dear. Ranma faded back into the shadows and waited until Kodachi bounced past.

This would be worth watching – preferably, from a distance. Ranma leaped to the rooftops, and followed.

The chase wound up in a blind alley. Genma must have been *really* flustered to allow that. There was a brief flurry of clipping, black-and-white fur flying through the air, then Tatewaki got the panda with his super soaker and it turned back into Genma. His gi seemed much the worse for wear, with torn and shredded places wherever Principal Kuno had gotten him with the clippers. Genma whirled, burst through one of the walls, and disappeared with the posse after him. Ranma took off for the front of the building.

It was a gardener's shop. When the procession came racing out the front, Principal Kuno was ahead and Genma was chasing him with pruning shears, trying desperately to get the miniature palm-tree growing from the man's head. Sasuke blasted Genma with his super-soaker, and he turned back into a panda covered with bald spots. Pandas may be famous for their hands, but they really aren't that good at grasping anything other than bamboo. Genma-panda fumbled and dropped the shears. Principal Kuno whirled on him, and again brought forth the clippers. Kodachi staggered out the door, laughing her head off, and collapsed against a streetlight. The turmoil headed into the distance and Ranma followed, the sound of mad giggling falling behind.

There was a loud splash. The panda was in the canal. And – wait. Where had Principal Kuno gotten that surfboard? He leapt into the canal upon it, and began furiously paddling after the panda. Tatewaki and Sasuke stood on the banks watching them go.

"I suppose you're wondering why I called you all here tonight?" Ranma's voice came from immediately behind Tatewaki and Sasuke.

Sasuke jumped. "You aren't supposed to sneak up on a ninja!"

"Sorry 'bout that. I'll throw a few shuriken to announce myself, next time." Ranma turned to Tatewaki. "Where'd you find the panda?"

"He was camping in the shrubberies on our estate. Sasuke spotted him, and let me know. We decided to make it a family affair."

"That was smart, fer the panda. He musta figured I'd stay away from yer place. Too bad he didn't know we been talkin'." Ranma looked Tatewaki in the eye. "Sensei, you've fulfilled my conditions, and your sister also. When can we speak of my third curse? I'd prefer a quieter time, without yer father around. An' you may not like what you hear, an' yer sister even less. Would it be safe to include her?"

"There are places my sister considers sacred, not to be disturbed by the quarrels of the world. One is the Rose Hill Teahouse. Could you join us there tomorrow at noon? I'll reserve the private room."

"Okay if I bring Akane? She knows all my curses. If we're gonna be open with each other, she sh'd be there too."

"Perhaps I should order a calming tea? Akane *is* the Fierce Tigress, after all. This would not be an occasion for ferocity, on her part or my sister's."

"Sensei, the more I begin ta know you, the better I appreciate society manners. I'll be there, and Akane will probably be there also. Until then ..." and Ranma walked silently into the darkness beneath the trees.

oOo

It was midnight, the dark of the moon, and Ranma was on one of the taller buildings in Nerima. She was female from one of Nerima's sudden showers half an hour earlier. She should have gone home, but too much had happened for her to sleep. She and the Cat were still snickering over the panda's rude, ragged shearing. The air was rain-fresh, with a light breeze blowing in from the Pacific. The clouds were gone from the eastern sky. There were stars to be seen, and to her cat's vision, the skyglow from the remaining clouds made the city glisten. It was quiet – a major city never sleeps, but the nightlife was off towards the city center.

Something in the back of her mind was nagging at her. Something distressing was happening, somewhere, but what was it? It wasn't something she could see, and all she could smell was the sea, and fresh tar from the roof. She closed her eyes, and listened. In the distance, there was the faintest of cries. It sounded like a cat, a very weak cat in terrible trouble. She headed towards the sound as best she could, being careful on the wet and slippery roofs.

It was closer than she thought, coming from an alley so dark even her eyes had trouble seeing. And the ki within a barrel in that alley was dim and flickering. The barrel was half-full of water – and in the water, half-drowned, a small cat.

Shampoo.

Ranma pulled her from the water. Shampoo's cursed form was limp and cold, barely conscious, whimpering. Amazon warriors are brave – but cold water is an enduring enemy, one you can only fight for so long. Ranma held her close, then opened her tang and put Shampoo inside with her body heat. She took her bearings for a moment, then headed for the Nekohanten at a run.

Cologne was tossing restlessly on her bed, endlessly reworking her evening's confrontation with son-in-law – with Ranma – when she heard a loud, urgent knocking. She and Mousse almost collided at the foot of the stairs. It was Ranma at the door.

"Cologne, thank the kami! Shampoo needs your help!" Ranma pulled the limp form from her tang. "She was half-drowned in a barrel of cold water."

"Mousse, start warming towels, and blankets. I'm taking Shampoo to the furo!" Cologne pogoed off, with onna-Ranma carrying Shampoo-neko close behind. Cologne turned the faucet and warm water spilled into the tub. Ranma poured as much warm ki into the small form as he could. "Now, Ranma. Put her in."

Ranma carefully dipped Shampoo into the water. Ranma immediately turned male – but Shampoo stayed cat for several long minutes before slowly, slowly expanding into her human form. She slumped in the tub, but Ranma and Cologne held her head above water, and they could feel the warmth gradually returning to her body. Cologne reached for towels and blanket from Mousse, who was waiting anxiously outside.

Eventually Shampoo's face began to flush, and Cologne took that as a sign she'd had enough heat. Ranma lifted her out, Cologne toweled her down, wrapped her hair, and swaddled her in a blanket. Then Mousse carried her upstairs, and together they put her to bed, wrapped in quilt and comforter. "Stay to watch her, Mousse. Let me know if anything happens. I'm going to talk with Ranma." Cologne pogoed out the door with Ranma following, down through the darkened café, off towards Cologne's room.

"Elder, I'm still wet and cold from the rain myself. Mind if I snag one of them blankets Mousse warmed?"

"Of course, Ranma. I'll prepare some hot tea."

Soon they were seated as they had been earlier that evening, though Ranma was wrapped in a blanket and the atmosphere was much less formal. "So, Ranma. What happened?"

Ranma cupped his hands around his tea. "I was on a rooftop enjoying the night when I heard a faint cat-cry. No cat'ss going to sstand sstill for that, so I tracked it down. Shampoo was in a barrel, half-full of water – there was no way a cat could have gotten out. She was barely conscious. There was a cloudburst half an hour before. It must have caught her in mid-air, and she fell in the water. I'm lucky I found her –she's so small as a cat, she didn't have the body heat to last much longer. I fished her out, put her in with my body heat, and brought her here."

Cologne brought out her pipe, and busied herself filling it, tamping it, getting it properly alight. She took in several deep, soothing mouthfuls of smoke before she said anything.

"Ranma, I think you saved my great-great-granddaughter's life tonight. I cannot tell you how grateful I am. I can tell you, though, that you just ran into another piece of Amazon law. And this one you might not mind nearly as much."

Ranma sipped his tea, and grunted noncommittally.

"You just saved an Amazon warrior's life. Even better, you were a woman when you did it. And that means you have the right – not the *obligation*, but the *right* – to become Shampoo's shield-sister."

"Elder, we're gunna have to talk this over. But I'm worn out from the day, Shampoo's unconscious, and you and Mousse been woke up in the middle o' the night to trouble. It ain't the time to make important decisions. We gotta wait 'til Shampoo's better, at the very least.

"'Til then, we should be with her. Is that gunna make anything more complicated? I mean, besides my life with the Tendos? It's way too late to call them."

"Maybe you should be a girl. It'd be best for her to see the person who saved her when she wakes up. And it won't bother Mousse as much, that way. Other than that, no."

"I can do that," Ranma said, and on their way through the kitchen Ranma dipped her hand in cold water. They went up the stairs to Shampoo's room. Mousse was in a chair where he could watch Shampoo, and had his glasses on for once; and Shampoo was breathing much more easily. She seemed to be in a natural sleep, now. Cologne took a spare blanket and settled herself on the softest chair in the room, while Ranma curled up on the tatami at the foot of the bed, wriggled a few times into comfort, and lay her head upon her arms. "Wake me at sunrise," she told Cologne.

And for the first time, Ranma willingly slept with Shampoo.

Red Letter Day

Ranma was wearing his finest Chinese silks. He stood from the table, which bore the remnants of a light meal. Kuno Tatewaki rose with him, wearing formal kendo-gi and hakama, followed by Kodachi, who wore a kimono of red satin brocaded with black roses. Akane, in a yellow sundress, was already standing. She was holding two glasses of water.

"Now's th' time, people," Ranma said. "You've seen how m' father's curse works – y' nearly knocked me over yesterday, chasin' him with yer super-soakers. Take my hands, so y'know I'm stayin' in one place. Akane?"

Akane handed a glass of cold water to Tatewaki, and a glass of hot water to Kodachi, then stepped back and took one of the deceptively-casual stances of Anything Goes – just in case.

"Right now, I'm the person I wuz born as," Ranma said. "Pour cold water on me, Tatewaki."

"Pig-tailed goddess!" "Scarlet harridan!"

"Kodachi, some warm water, please." And Ranma returned to his male form. "I ain't a goddess, and I ain't a harridan. I'm Ranma. Since oyaji took me to China, I got two forms. An' water chases me around, so the form I wear keeps changin'.

"But whichever form, it's the same *me*. An' it's been rough bein' your eternal love in one form an' your eternal enemy in the other. *Both* of you. I mean, I *really* woulda appreciated it if you'd noticed I was the same person either way. It's not like I didn't try tellin' you. Maybe playin' with th' panda helped you break on through. Y' didn't have any strong feelin's 'bout him, so it didn't cost you anythin' to see."

Tatewaki was rocking on his heels, hand over his face, muttering "Blind, blind, Kami-sama, was I blind!" Ranma motioned towards Kuno with his head, as he raised his eyebrow at Akane. She shook her head 'no'.

Ranma sighed, and splashed himself with cold water from Tatewaki's glass. Then she took his arm. "Tachi-kun, we were all blind. You couldn't see we didn't want you the way you wanted us. We didn't see how much it was hurtin' you when we beat you up in front of the school. I mean, we didn't mind beatin' you up – that's what martial artists do for exercise. But we shouldn't'a done it in front o' everybody.

"Just one more try, Tachi-kun. We got past the 'foul sorcerer', we got past the 'fierce tigress', now let's see if we can get past the 'pigtailed goddess'. I can't be y'r goddess, but maybe we can be friends." Tatewaki looked from under his hand, and saw her smiling. "I thought you'd be more comfortable 'f a *gal* held yer arm this way. It ain't romance, it's comfort." Tatewaki smiled back at her, tremulously.

Ranma looked over at Kodachi, who was still standing in the same place, the same pose. Her mouth was slightly open in surprise, her eyes more open still, and there were thin trails of smoke

coming out of each ear. Well, it wasn't *actual* smoke, but Ranma's ki senses could tell Kodachi's mind was whirling madly in pursuit of its own tail. Which wasn't an *actual* tail, but ...

Akane was watching Kodachi, still ready to move instantly if needed. Ranma patted Tatewaki's hand, then went over to the low table and splashed some tea, turning male again. He smiled wryly at Akane, then went over to take Kodachi's hands. "Kodachi? It's Ranma."

Kodachi twitched. Her eyes came back to life, widened even further as she saw Ranma holding her hands. Then she stepped back, and jerked her hands free. "I am sorry, Ranma-sama, but you can no longer pay court to me. It would not be appropriate for a samurai to have a spouse half male, half female. It breaks my heart, but such is the way of the world.

"To soothe the hurt, I shall have vengeance, instead: vengeance on the foul sorcerer Saotome who caused this tragedy of magics. The panda must die!" She gathered herself, swept with unstoppable dignity from the room, slid the shoji door closed behind her. They could hear her voice murmuring regrets to the hostess. There was a short pause, then a distant and receding voice crying "The sorcerous panda will suffer! Ohohohoho, he shall suffer the death of a thousand haircuts!"

Ranma and Akane, dumbstruck, looked at Tatewaki. He shrugged. "We are a traditional family. Obviously my sister has decided to take a tradition I no longer need, and combine it with one of my father's."

Nobody wanted to argue with this, so they sat and had one last cup of tea. Then Tatewaki stood. "Be kind to me, for I have lost both my loves in the past few weeks. And while you were my loves only in my mind, wounds to the mind are the most painful of all. I must go to meditate; but perhaps I shall see you this Monday at school – my friends? Now stay as long as you wish, for everything here has been taken care of." He left, with as much dignity as Kodachi but without the subsequent outburst.

Ranma looked at Akane. "Did that go well, or poorly?"

"I don't know. Part of me is overjoyed, and part wants to cry."

"Me, too."

oOo

Ranma and Akane argued as they walked together towards the Tendo compound.

"Why wouldn't you try to comfort him?"

"I have a longer history with Kuno than you do. Smile at him, yes. Be friends, maybe. Touch him, NO!" Akane thought a moment. "But thanks for asking me to comfort him, first. I might have thought you were doing something perverted there, if you hadn't."

"What *is* this thing you got about perversion?"

"Well, after the fights started, people began to gossip. Just *why* was I beating up all those boys? Was it because, perhaps, I didn't *like* boys? Perhaps I liked girls?" Akane smiled wryly. "Of

course I was shouting 'I hate boys' as I charged. That didn't help. Just another problem that goes back to Kuno ..."

"And there I was, a girl you liked, revealed as a boy. And nobody was sure which of me you were engaged to. Being called 'tomboy' proly didn't help either." Ranma sighed. "We got things to work on." He sniffed the breeze. "There's one the Cat and I gotta work on together: a sick panda hidin' behind the dojo. Wanna help me?"

"How am I going to help you with the Panda?"

"If the Cat starts actin' up, remind me that I really don't wanna kill him."

"Yeah, that sounds like the way I sometimes feel about Kuno."

They fell silent then, as they entered the compound. Akane went to one end of the dojo and Ranma to the other, and they worked their way around the back. Akane roused the panda first. He bolted away from her, only to run into a blockade named Ranma. "Goin' somewhere, oyaji?"

The panda was in bad shape, with bald spots scattered about, shivering and coughing from the chill he'd taken in the canal the night before. But he still had some spirit left. He held up a sign asking "Oh, what have I done to have such an ungrateful son?"

"As I recall, oyaji, ya threw me in a pit full a' cats. Neither the cats nor I are happy with you over that."

Genma froze as he thought that over. He remembered Ranma-chan and the Cat tearing up the boulder. He remembered returning to his camp to find it shredded and stinking of – carnivore piss. Oh dear. Oh well, time for the Crouch of the Fierce Tiger. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I was only thinking of teaching you a new technique! I didn't realize you wouldn't like it! I didn't even know to think of the cats!" It was amazing – for a man as lazy and illiterate as Genma, he could turn those signs out in an instant.

Ranma sighed, and picked the panda up by the shoulder. "Oh, what have I done to deserve such an unthinking and worthless father? C'mon in, oyaji, let's see if we can do somethin' about that cold ya have. Where'd ya get it? Steal it from a priest?"

Soon enough, they had Genma soaking in the hot furo to take the chill from his bones. Soun was with his friend, giving him thimble-cups of hot sake. And Ranma had his fathers shredded and torn gi. He took it to Kasumi. "Oneechan, could ya do me a big favor an' wash this, then patch it? But patch it, y'know, with some bright-color cloth? I got an idea I wanna check."

"Oh?" Kasumi said as she held the gi out at arms' length.

"Yeah. I think that gi turns into the Panda's fur when he changes. It's frayed in all the places Principal Kuno gave the Panda a haircut. I wanna see what a few patches of hot pink do to him."

Kasumi closed her eyes and giggled. "Oh my, I'll try to make your father very handsome and decorative!" She headed towards the laundry with a spring in her step.

Ranma went back to the furo. From inside, he could hear Genma's muttered complaints. Ranma knocked on the door. "Kasumi's washin' and mendin' father's gi. With a cold like that, Mr. Tendo, why don't you put him to bed under a warm comforter until it's done?"

Then Ranma went to talk with Akane and Nabiki. The three of them took to the dojo. With the elder Tendo and Saotome occupied in the furo, and Kasumi mending Genma's gi for maximum effect, it seemed the quietest place. Ranma really wanted quiet, because he knew Akane wasn't going to like what he was about to say. The fathers would only make things worse.

Ranma put the moment off by giving Nabiki a short fill-in on the events of the past couple days, starting with the Kunos' panda-chase and continuing through the noon meal.

"But that's not all," he continued. "Yesterday evenin' before the panda came by, I confronted Cologne about the outsider laws. We were gonna have a trial by combat over them. Now we may not haveta. And that's where you come in, Nabiki. I need somebody who's *real* good with words.

"Y'see, last night after the panda chase, I wuz too wired to sleep. So I went roof-hoppin', and got caught by a shower just before midnight. And maybe half an hour after that, I heard a cat in trouble. It was Shampoo. When the shower caught her, her cursed form fell in a barrel and almost drowned. I fished her out, and took her over to the Cat Cafe.

"Cologne and Mousse and I got her warmed up and back to human, and into bed; but she was still unconscious. So I stayed with them until she woke up and we knew she was okay."

Akane's mallet-hand was making involuntary grasping motions, and her face looked like thunder. Ranma gulped, and continued rapidly, "Colognesaidsavin'anAmazon'slifemeantIcouldbecomehershieldsister. Andgetoutfromundertheoutsiderlaws."

"Try that again, a bit slower, Saotome," Nabiki drawled with a sidewise glance between Ranma and Akane.

"Maybe if I'm Shampoo's shield-sister they'll give up insistin' I gotta marry her. But I want you along, Nabiki, in case th' Old Ghoul has a joker in the deck. An' you too, Akane, 'cause I don't want you thinkin' I'm doin' something behind yer back."

Akane's hand was still clutching, and a ghostly mallet formed around her, but her practice not-hitting Kuno was beginning to pay off. Nabiki could see that, so she decided to help defuse the situation. "So, Saotome – what are you going to pay for my help?"

Ranma looked at her incredulously, but noticed a twinkle in her eyes. He hoped it meant something good. "Well, ya get to help me out, an' maybe get another fiancée outa the way. Yer younger sister might appreciate that. An' you get to be a fly on the wall. You like bein' a fly on the wall."

"I'm not sure I like the comparison, but you have a point."

"Me an' Akane can't stay cool that easy 'round these discussions. They hit too close to home. We did okay with the Kunos. We don't wanna spoil the winnin' streak. If we lose it around th' Old Ghoul, we are *definitely* shafted. An' you're the specialist in cool."

"It's always good to be appreciated," Nabiki said.

"I'll haveta try that some time," Ranma replied with a crooked smile.

"That's not quite what I meant."

"It's what ya said."

"True," Nabiki replied, secretly giving up hope for financial gain from *this* transaction. It wasn't really important. With Ranma, it was just moving spare change around inside the household – more work than it was worth, except for the practice and the leverage it gave her. She wasn't sure how wise or safe it would be, though, trying to use leverage on the body the Cat lived in. And knowing all about a shift in the dynamics between Ranma and Shampoo would be worth a lot for setting odds in the betting pools. *Call it a loss leader*, she thought, *or maybe a business expense*.

"Anyway," Ranma continued, "Cologne said ta come by the Cat Café tomorrow mornin'. It's Sunday. Their schedule has more slack on Sunday morning, so we'll have th' time ta talk. An' we'll all have time ta think, an' get ourselves ready. This might go smooth – Cologne seems sincere this time."

"Let us sincerely hope so," Nabiki said. "Tell you what, she used the term 'shield-sister'. I want to research that on the Internet. And I've collected *some* information on Amazon Law, though they try like you wouldn't believe to keep it from getting out. So I'll be up in my room."

"While you're in there, could ya make sure the Panda knows not to throw me any surprises? That oughta help keep the house an' the Panda from growin' holes where they don't need 'em."

"I can do that."

"Thanks, Nabiki." "Thanks, oneechan." Ranma and Akane smiled at Nabiki, melting the Ice Queen just a little, then turned to smile at each other. Nabiki left, and the two were alone.

Ranma put his hand behind his head, and smiled sheepishly at Akane. "I know ya don't like me hangin' round with th' other fiancées," he said. "But we gotta get close to 'em, past the wall I've tried to put up, so we can talk. We don't do that, things'll keep goin' the way they have been. That ain't been good."

Akane swallowed her pride and anger, and put her hand on his as they sat together. "You try keeping out of glomps, and I'll try to keep my mallet in my pocket." And she gave him a tremulous smile.

"That's really all we can expect, right now," Ranma said.

They went to the house, and Ranma went in the kitchen looking for a bit of food. Lunch with the Kunos had been sparse. Ranma appreciated quality, but quantity meant a lot to him. Munching on a bit of leftover fish, he checked on Kasumi. He found her sewing on Genma's gi, using cloth of every color she could find. They grinned at each other.

"I'm using scraps that are too small and garish for anything else. This gi is doomed anyway – it was in terrible shape." Kasumi went back to her work, while Ranma finished off the fish. Then he strolled through the kitchen, washed his hands, and wandered back into the living room.

There was space on the sofa beside Akane. Normally Ranma curled up on the floor when he was a guy, and used the sofa in her smaller girl form. But he was tired, needed a cat-nap, and wanted to be near Akane while he did it. So he sat, and lay down, and squirmed a bit to find a comfortable place. And he lay his head in Akane's lap, because after all, the Cat had always been comfortable in Akane's lap. He purred a bit, then dozed off.

Akane didn't quite know what to do, but Ranma had smiled at her. He'd been holding her hand ever since he'd returned. He'd actually dealt with the Kuno problem. He hadn't done anything perverted yet. And they'd gone for days without a fight. She could tell he was trying as hard to be nice to her as she was to be nice to him.

She'd always wanted a cat.

So she gave half her attention to her soap opera – how romantic! – and occasionally smiled down at Ranma. He looked so innocent while he was sleeping. The rest of her mind was occupied with the changes she'd seen in Ranma in the last few days. *It would be nice*, she thought, *if he were actually able to get close to her without the automatic defensive reactions he used to show.*

Of course, she was half to blame for that – she cringed a bit at her memories of blazing back at him every time he put his foot in his mouth while trying to compliment her. And her mallet didn't help.

It all swirled together in her mind - guilt and affection warring, with the battle echoed on the television - and she allowed herself to wonder what life would be like with this new person, part Ranma, part cat, whose head lay in her lap. She smiled to herself, and wandered off into fantasies of married life, especially some of the more intimate portions. Having his head in her lap was *definitely* spurring fantasies of that sort!

She noticed he wasn't sleeping as calmly as before. He would occasionally twitch or squirm; his breath was increasingly ragged, and came more rapidly. Was he starting to have another of his nightmares? As she looked down with concern, his eyes suddenly started wide-open, and he gazed at her intensely. Then he jerked upright next to her, legs curled up beside him on the couch.

Ranma was still half asleep. He had a raging erection. There was a scent that reached in through his nose, grabbed him by the hindbrain, and dragged him into a new world he'd seen in dreams, occasionally glimpsed in real life, but had never actually visited. He didn't dare move, for fear of what he might do, and what Akane might do to him in return. He looked at Akane, eyes wild, and met her eyes looking back at him with concern.

They stared. "We have to talk," they both said in the same breath.

"And we have to do it where we won't have – help," Ranma added. Akane nodded. Neither Nabiki nor the two fathers would be able to resist the temptation. Whatever they had to say, they didn't want it peddled around the schoolyard. As for the fathers, the less said the better.

Akane smiled. "I'll give you a ten-step lead, then take after you yelling. They'll all think it's business as usual, and ignore us."

So Ranma went out the door, bounced off the rock and over the koi pond, and vaulted the wall; while all the time Akane was after him screaming like a pack of devils chasing down a victim. In

a surprisingly short time, they were in the nearby park.

They settled next to each other in swings, laughing, with a good view in all directions and no place close for eavesdroppers to hide. Akane fanned her face. "That's exercise!"

"Anything goes," Ranma replied, and they went into fresh peals of laughter.

But they gradually settled down, and sat swinging back and forth, trying to think of the best way to start their talk.

Ranma was first to break the silence. "The old grizzly taught me a lot about being a cat," he said. "But he told me something about my feelings, too. I was a girl when I called, that time in Minnesota, and talked with all of you. And he looked at me, and said, 'You like Akane very, very much, don't you?' When I asked how he knew, he said 'You can't fool a bear's nose'.

"And now you've just told me you like *me* very, very much."

"Now wait a minute, here!"

"No, Akane. You can't fool a cat's nose, either. What does it tell you when there's a dozen tomcats, prowlin' 'round a house?"

"It means they smell a female cat in heat ... hey!"

Ranma smiled a knowing smile. "And if you tell me you didn't have the hots back on that sofa, I will apologize most humbly."

Akane blushed and said, very quietly "... I can't tell you that ..."

Ranma reached out and took her hand. "Akane, Bjorn didn't let me ignore how much I wanted you. Now I know you want me in the same way. I'm not gonna be afraid any more. I want you. I think I love you. And I know you feel somethin' like that, too." With the index finger of his free hand, he tapped the side of his nose.

Akane, still blushing, squeezed his hand. "I think I love you, too," she said in a small voice. She moved over to Ranma's swing, sat in his lap, and rested her head upon his shoulder. "So now what do we do?"

"It wouldn't be right ta have each other before we're married. It's time to stop fightin' it."

"But Ranma, if we got married they'd just start pestering us about an heir. I'm not ready for that."

"Who says we gotta tell 'em? Akane, we were both sixteen when I arrived. But I was an older sixteen. I'm only a month short a' eighteen now, and then we'll both be old enough ta get married. Oh, we gotta get parental consent – but considerin' how ready those two are to haul in a priest every time we're polite to each other, don't you just bet they already have the paperwork? All we gotta do is *borrow* their paperwork, and head down to city hall.

"An' then we'll be married, and they'll still be bustin' their butts tryin' to make us *get* married. Think o' the fun we can have watchin' 'em scheme!"

Akane giggled. "I like it." She raised her head, and kissed Ranma. "Kami-sama, why were we afraid of each other for so long?"

Ranma's nostrils twitched. "Akane, you're doin' it again."

She blushed. "I know."

They held each other. "It's going to be a long month, isn't it?"

Polychrome Panda

Like the morning before, Ranma was dressed in fine Chinese silks; but this time, she wore the formal clothes of an Amazon warrior, as best she could from what she had. Akane was dressed in Ranma's second-finest Chinese, and Nabiki wore the more severe suit of a Japanese businesswoman.

They came down to breakfast together. Genma was sitting at the table looking bilious, still dealing with his cold and a hangover as well. But though his face was glum, his gi was – colorful. It was the only clothing he had. Ranma had shredded almost everything else the man owned, and the few bits he had left, Kasumi had put in the wash. Repeatedly.

"Wow, oyaji, that's pretty bright. If Nabiki hadn't had her coffee already, that'd wake her up! But y'know, isn't hot pink a bit, oh, *girlish*? And that rose pattern"

Genma growled, and huddled down around his tea. "You're a fine one to talk 'girlish', boy. What're you doing all tarted up like an Amazon? Go change back this minute!"

"Nah. We're goin' over to visit th' Amazons, so this is only polite."

"Visit the Amazons? Are you catting around with that Shampoo girl, now? Have more respect for your fiancée, *boy*! I think it's time we got in a priest for the two of you to drive this foolishness out of your head!"

Ranma took this as a reasonable excuse to throw Genma in the koi pond. And she watched, a beatific smile on her face, as a rainbow panda crawled out. "Now *that*," she said, "is *really* a bear of a different color." Nabiki had her camera out, and was taking photo after photo of the vivid creature.

I wonder, Ranma thought. Shampoo pulls maces out of nowhere, Mousse pulls anything he needs, and Akane always has that mallet. Can Nabiki use Hidden Weapons too? She has a camera whenever she wants one.

Soun started wailing "The schools will never be joined," then went into a full-scale Demon Head in the middle of it. A wailing demon-head was interesting, but while the tears of smoking acid might have been dangerous, they vanished before they reached the floor.

The three girls ignored him, ate some rice and miso soup, then stood. "Thanks for breakfast, Kasumi," Ranma said. "We'll be over at the Cat Café, and I don't know when we'll be back. Should be home by evening, though." They bowed to her, then left with Ranma in the lead. They walked out into a bright, cool day with a refreshing breeze, which was a very good omen.

Away from the house, everybody broke down laughing over the panda. "We can use him for advertising," Nabiki said. "Just give him a gi with 'Tendo Dojo' embroidered on the back."

"Are you sure you want people to trace that panda back to *us*?" Akane said.

Ranma looked thoughtful. "If we cut red cloth to look like a bra, and sewed it in the lining of his gi where he wouldn't notice it"

Akane's eyes and mouth went wide with a surprised smile. "I want to see what that does to Happosai!"

"Give me lots of warning. *That* deserves a video, not just photos!" Nabiki wondered if she could sell the tape to the television news. No, no question of that. She wondered how much she could *make* on the deal.

They were still chuckling over the idea of a decorator panda as they knocked on the door of the Cat Café. Mousse, in fresh white robe, let them in, then locked the door behind them. Cologne was wearing elaborate robes also, much more so than usual. "So, Ranma!" she said. "Something seems to have amused you."

"We've discovered an odd fact about the Pool of Drowned Panda, Elder," she said. "Very humorous tale."

"Heh-heh," the Elder cackled. "Bright-colored panda, I'll bet. Having your clothes meld into your cursed form, then reappear with hot water, can be one of the sillier aspects of Jusenkyo. How'd you find out?"

"Principal Kuno gave the panda a haircut. When he returned to human form, his gi was tattered where the hair was gone. So I had Kasumi patch the gi with bright-colored cloth."

"Just another proof the kami have a sense of humor," Cologne said. "But you already know that. You get up the grit to confront me, and the very same day, something happens to make it unnecessary."

"I'm here to talk with ya 'bout that," Ranma said. "But I wanted Akane and Nabiki here with me. And Shampoo should be with us, too."

"She's still resting, but you're right. Mousse, could you bring Shampoo down? Ranma, can you help me get some cushions for her?" Cologne headed back into her room, and Ranma followed. They came out just as Mousse carried Shampoo, wrapped in a quilt, down the stairs. Her hair was unbound, and fell in a purple cascade. They settled her comfortably, then found places for themselves.

<Are you still okay with this, great-granddaughter?> Cologne asked in Mandarin.

<Yes, great-grandmother. I want Ranma as my husband, but Ranma as my shield-sister would be very good too.>

[What that about?] Ranma asked Nabiki in English.

[Basically, 'speak now, or forever hold your peace'.]

Cologne fell over laughing. After several minutes of twitching and snorting and banging her walking-stick on the floor, she recovered. "I suspected you knew English and Mandarin, Nabiki," she got out between wheezes. "But you surprise me, Ranma."

"Elder, Bjorn-sensei spoke English. Understandin' was needful to learn his Art."

Nabiki smiled in mildly shark-like manner. "English and Chinese are good languages for international business and negotiation," she said. "And we're here to negotiate, aren't we?"

Cologne smiled sharkishly back, but with fewer teeth. "I thought we were here to discuss and decide." Then she dropped the shark aspect, but kept the smile. "No tricks this time around, Nabiki. We owe Ranma far too big an honor debt for saving Shampoo's life."

"Even so, Elder, Ranma has asked me to be here. She knows I'm better at seeing the ramifications of things." Nabiki inclined her head at Ranma and Akane.

"I don't want to make Ranma uncomfortable," Cologne said. "And this is very simple. Ranma saved Shampoo's life – they've both said so – and was a woman when she did it. That means Ranma can become Shampoo's shield-sister. As such she'll be free of the Outsider Laws. She can become an Amazon by adoption, and will then be a woman by Amazon law. A woman cursed to turn into a man with hot water, it's true, but there'll be none of that second-class status Ranma is so worried about. Or Ranma can become an ally of the Amazon nation, and be whatever sex she or he feels like. In either case, the kiss of death and the kiss of marriage will no longer apply."

"What does bein' a shield-sister mean, Elder? Ya don't sound like it's just a title."

"Well, Ranma, it means you train with your sister. You teach her, and learn from her. If possible, when one of you goes into battle both of you go, to protect each others' backs. If you come to Joketsuzoku, you come as family and your shield-sister will provide hospitality. If she comes here, she is family, and you will provide hospitality. It's not marriage – both sisters are free to marry as they wish."

"Elder Cologne," Nabiki said, "we need to know more about Amazon marriage law. If Ranma became an Amazon by adoption, would she have to marry a man?"

"Only if she wished the marriage to be recognized in Joketsuzoku."

Nabiki turned to Ranma. "So much for Amazon-by-adoption. I think we'd better research 'ally'."

Ranma was shaking her head 'yes' repeatedly, with wide-open eyes. "Good catch, Nabiki."

Ranma and Akane thought of the marriage plans they'd made the day before, and looked at one another. *One problem taken care of before it happens.*

"Seems we got two things to discuss," Ranma said. "Feelin's, and laws. Elder, could you an' Nabiki an' Mousse go discuss laws? I wanna talk feelin's with Akane an' Shampoo."

Nobody could live as long as Cologne without learning to recognize when you're being told to go away and take surplus people with you. But Ranma had earned the right to ask, and she'd given a good and useful reason. *If you want Akane with you, it looks like you won't be my son-in-law after all,* she thought. *But I realized that when you confronted me. A strong ally is nearly as fine. Maybe we can get two.* She gathered up Mousse and Nabiki and headed back towards her room.

Ranma gathered up cushions for herself and Akane, and they knelt on either side of Shampoo. "Shampoo," she said, "we all haveta talk. None of us have been good at talkin'. But Akane and I

finally got through to Kuno that way. Now we need ta decide what ta do 'bout becomin' shield-sisters.

"Can the three of us talk honest now, in secrecy? I don't trust *my* family, and I don't trust yours, and I don't trust Akane's. But we've hit a place where we haveta trust each other, you an' me an' Akane. It's that, or everthin' is gonna keep on goin' downhill."

Shampoo's eyes began to glisten. She thought of the potions, of the magic, of all the tricks she'd used on Ranma. But Ranma was offering to trust her. That was good. And Ranma was insisting Akane be part of the trust. That was bad.

She'd almost died of cold and drowning, a day and a half earlier. She was still weak in body and spirit. She sat, wrapped her arms about her knees, and let her head rest on them. Her hair fell around her face, draped over her shoulders, and she was shaking gently. From the shadows of her hair her voice came, weak but filled with emotion: "Aiyah. Will talk honestly. Shampoo promise not tell great-grandmother, panda-man, or mercenary girl. Not tell anybody."

"Well, then," Ranma said. "I'm not gunna be no Amazon male. I've seen how things are in your village, an' how things are here at the Cat Café. Don't want that. An' I don't think I wanna be female. I'm gettin' used to it, it ain't so bad, but I'm still a guy that turns into a gal. Just like you're a gal that turns into a cat."

"Great-grandmother say you part cat now."

"I sure am, an' a huntin' cat to boot. So my days o' bein' afraid of yer cursed form are over."

"Aiyah! That good!"

"But cats are direct, once they figger out what they want," Ranma said as she reached out to Akane, who took her hand. "An' I want Akane."

Akane looked at Shampoo with more compassion than Ranma had expected. "And I've accepted Ranma. We're planning marriage."

Shampoo was silent, face shadowed by her hair, but Ranma could hear the breath catching in her throat. Finally she choked out, "But you my airen!"

Ranma put her free hand on Shampoo's shoulder. "By th' Outsider Laws, Shampoo. But if I'm yer shield-sister, I won't be no Outsider. We can get out from under the laws with honor."

"Shampoo want Ranma for husband!" She was shaking now, and there was the salt smell of tears.

"You can't have me that way, Shampoo. I don't love you. But I respect you as a warrior. Shield-sister I can live with. Husband, I can't."

Shampoo turned her head, looked up at Ranma from shadowed eyes. "You mean that?"

"If you, and I, and Akane can agree, I will become your shield-sister. Akane?"

"Do I have to agree, Ranma?" Akane asked.

"Akane, I'm not gonna do this without yer permission. Remember though, it's not just Shampoo gettin' me for an ally. It's *me* gettin' *Shampoo* for an ally, too. You know what a sorry mess life can be 'round Nerima. Wouldn't you rather have Shampoo by my side, next time some stray prince comes botherin' us? Heck, if you're my wife and she's my shield-sister, wouldn't that make you two sisters-in-law?"

Shampoo's eyes opened wide, and she began to smile. "Aiyah! We all study together under great-grandmother, kick tail on next prince!"

Akane began to smile, too. "I could learn Amazon fighting?"

Ranma smiled as well. "Akane, your father and I never could teach ya so good 'cause we couldn't bring ourselves to hurt ya. The Elder ain't got no problem with that. An' she knows enough 'bout ki, maybe she can help me control my claws! Think of all we could learn!"

Akane looked Shampoo in the eyes. "If you can learn not to see me as obstacle-for-killing, maybe I can learn not to see you as competition. Do you think we could do it?"

Shampoo sat upright. "Shampoo not be jealous of sister-in-law if Akane not jealous." And she gently kissed Akane on the cheek.

Akane blushed, but she knew: this was not a kiss of death, or marriage, or passion. This was a kiss of family. And she'd had a solid year to see how seriously Shampoo took her kisses. It was a constant mystery to her how the Amazon could be so mercurial, yet so hard to deflect from her chosen path. "Well," she said. "It sounds like we wait for Nabiki to give us the all-clear. But remember, Shampoo – nothing about marriage. Our parents have been awful pushy about this, and we're going to take them over the jumps. That won't work if word gets around."

Shampoo reached out and hugged the two of them around their shoulders, then lay back down. Ranma and Akane re-arranged their cushions and lay alongside her. Ranma crossed her arm over Shampoo and rested her hand on Akane's waist; Akane reached across to Ranma. That's how they were when the other three returned.

"For Pete's sake," Nabiki said. "Get a room, the three of you!"

Ranma sniffed at her. "We're already in a room. But do you smell anything?"

"No?"

"Well, then."

"I'm no cat. I don't have your sense of smell."

"Pity. You'd know these things if you did."

While Nabiki was thinking *that* over, Ranma and Akane rose to a kneeling position, and helped Shampoo sit up between them. "So, Nabiki," Ranma said. "How complicated is it to be an Amazon ally? Is it safe?"

"It's not bad," Nabiki said. "You aren't an outsider any more, so you don't have to worry about the Outsider Laws. But you aren't an Amazon either, so you don't have to live by the specific laws

about being an Amazon. Really, all you have to do is remain honorable and keep your promises. You *will* have to make promises, but you'll know about them when they happen."

Cologne held up a small book bound in brown leather. "These are the rules we expect allies to follow. It's much smaller than the full book of Amazon Law. You might want to read it over before anybody makes any promises." She handed it over to Nabiki.

"Elder," Ranma said, "Shampoo thought you might be willing to teach me, and perhaps Akane, along with her."

"That *is* part of 'training together', Cologne replied. "But Akane isn't going to be a shield-sister. Do you have something you want to tell me?"

Ranma and Akane looked at each other. "No, Elder, we don't have anything we want to tell you right now."

Cologne raised her brows (such as they were). "We expect allies to keep Amazon secrets. In return, we keep the secrets of our allies."

And Nabiki raised her brows as well. "Are you keeping secrets from family, Saotome?"

Akane's growing slow burn burst into flame. "Keeping secrets, Nabiki? From my father, whose emotions are completely out of control, and who likes to go drinking? From the panda that drinks with him? From a sister who makes a living by selling secrets? I can't see why you'd think such a thing!"

Ranma reached to twitch the book out of Nabiki's hand, while Akane's mallet flickered into view. "Ranma! How dare you get me into a mess like this!"

Ranma leapt up and flew through the door, with Akane after him yelling about bakas in the auditory version of her father's demon-head. "I'll check in later" came floating back as they vanished down the street.

Nabiki sighed. "Ranma's been getting harder to predict, lately. But Akane's as easy as ever."

Cologne had been watching the ki of the two girls, and suspected Nabiki was missing something. There hadn't been nearly enough hostility to match the sound and fury. She turned towards Shampoo, and winked.

oOo

When they were well away from the Cat Café, Akane quieted down and stowed away the mallet. They kept running until they were well away from their usual haunts. Then Ranma slowed, Akane caught up, and they walked side-by-side, smiling and breathing deeply from their run. "Wow, we must have run halfway to Tokyo Tower. But this is one way to get out of tight situations," Akane said.

"As long as we don't get carried away. It wouldn't be good, droppin' back to *real* fights."

"We're going to, you know. Everybody argues. You're worried about the Cat taking over and hurting people. Sometimes I think the mallet takes *me* over."

"Bjorn-sensei says that people who get taken over like that are berserks. Before I made peace with the Cat, I was dangerous. An' I guess I'm still dangerous, but now I got a lot more choices. I'm learnin' control by usin' my claws to do sculpture. Maybe you gotta learn to make peace with your mallet. Lemme think on that one."

Akane pointed to one of the small shops on the street. The owner had swept the sidewalk, and was cranking down the awning in preparation for opening. It was a very seductive shop. The sign was covered with painted petals and read 'Sakura Ice Cream – sweet pleasure for the moment.'

"Less thinking, more ice cream," Ranma agreed. "We need it."

They had enough money. They followed the man inside, and looked happily into the glass-fronted cooler. There were tubs of many colors, tubs of many flavors. Desire warred with desire, and consulted their wallets.

"I'll have a bowl of ice cream," Ranma said. "Double-scoop, cinnamon spice."

"A hot fudge sundae for me," Akane added. They took their bowls and went to the booth in the furthest corner, then sat as the shopkeeper brought them spoons, napkins, and glasses of water. They smiled at one another, dipped their spoons in unison, and put them in their mouths.

"Wow!" Ranma said. "This cinnamon stuff is pretty strong with my new sense of taste. Want to try a bit, Akane? Can I have a spoon of your hot fudge sundae?"

They swapped bowls. Ranma got a nice scoop, ice cream and fudge both, and rolled it over her tongue. "I knew it," she said. "Chocolate and vanilla work for *everybody*, no matter what." Akane smiled in surprise at the cinnamon. They decided to keep each other's bowls. And for a while, everything was quiet except for gentle slurping sounds, the clink of silverware on glass, and the occasional sigh of contentment.

Eventually they finished, and leaned back. "Good," they smiled, rubbing their tummies.

"But we can only take so much good," Ranma added. "I'm startin' to worry. Ever'thin' has been goin' too well. We finally opened up to each other. We got Happosai, and both Kunos, off our back. We stand a good chance of solvin' the Amazon problem, and bein' trained in their Wu Shu as well. We even got Nabiki helpin' us. It's not perfect – I thought oyaji was intim'dated, but he sure didn't act that way this mornin'. But too many good things have been happenin'."

"Something's bound to go wrong," Akane agreed. "Let's see if we can find a way to keep it from happening to us."

"Now *that* sounds like an idea. How we gonna do it?"

"We don't let the world *realize* things have been going well."

"I get it. We keep on complainin' and fightin' with each other. An' maybe none o' the kami or th'other martial artists will try to balance out th' karma?"

"Right on, fiancé!"

"Good idea, fiancée! So whadda we do next?"

"Give me the book. I'll go home and study it, and maybe fume at Nabiki a little for being nosy. You take a walk for a while – it wouldn't do for us to get home together – and think about training me and my mallet. Then come home, step careful around me and Nabiki, and I'll leave the book in your room to study."

"Better leave it somewhere else. Th' panda shares the room with me, an' he might try stealin' it."

"I'll put it under the girl's underwear in your dresser drawer."

"Give it to Kasumi. I think th' old pervert's trained, but I might be wrong."

"Okay." Akane stood, bent down, gave Ranma the kiss of family (with just a hint of the kiss of marriage), and left with a wave. The storekeeper, a man in his early thirties, shook his head at such a sad waste of prime young female beauty. Ranma smirked at him, took one last sip of water, and left.

oOo

Ranma was strolling through the park, deep in thoughts of mallets and werebears, when she heard several rapid steps behind her – heavy steps but quiet, with the last footfall especially strong. There was a blaze of angry ki as well, rapidly approaching, and finally a great cry of "Ranma, prepare to ... urk!"

Ranma had sidestepped just as Ryoga began to shout. Her claws flashed out. Segments of war-umbrella clattered heavily to the ground as she grasped Ryoga's tunic by the neck. She twisted it tight.

"Prepare to die, Ryoga?" she said mildly. "Prepare to die – or to kill? This's gone on long enough." The lost boy's face began to purple. "Ya keep shoutin' 'prepare to die' as if ya wanna kill me. Should I take ya seriously? Do ya take yerself seriously? If ya mean it, are y' ready to take the risk of me killin' you first? I warn ya, your corpse will look like some giant cat clawed it all up. They gonna be lookin' for a tiger did it." Ranma inserted one claw on her free hand under Ryoga's bandannas – all of them – and sliced them off. She caught them.

"Here's yer bandannas," Ranma said as she gently set Ryoga down. "Now, d'ya wanna talk about it?"

Ryoga's face looked naked without the bandannas, and very, very worried. He held his throat as he wheezed, and a normal color began to creep back into his face. "You said ... *huff* ... 'cat!'"

"Yep," Ranma replied. "And I got you to thank. Last time I chased you, you dropped me off in just th' right place to learn to work with th' neko-ken instead of bein' slave to it. But now that I'm parrt cat, I don't think the sssame. Ssspecially about threatssss."

Ryoga's face kept right on going past its normal tan, all the way to pale – blanched, even. "The neko-ken?" he asked through a tight throat. Ranma could smell the nervousness coming off him.

She took Ryoga by the arm, and guided him over to a nearby bench, and sat him down at the upwind end. "We used ta be friends," she said. "Least I thought so. I'd take y' back an' forth

between home and school so y' wouldn't get lost. That bread stuff? I thought we was just rough-housin'. But yer startin' to convince me ya mean me serious harm. The power levels we're at now, somebody's gonna get hurt. It ain't gonna be me."

"Because of you, I've seen Hell," Ryoga said; but it was obviously just his mouth taking a familiar path.

"I've seen Hell too, y'know," Ranma said as she sat next to Ryoga. "It's Hell when someone I thought was a friend tries ta kill me. It's Hell when the person who tries ta kill me turns into a pet pig and sleeps with th' woman I love."

"*Love?*" Ryoga blurted.

"Catsss don't hide theirrrr feelingssss," Ranma said. And they sat in silence for a while. Then Ranma spoke again. "And sssince I'm not hidin' my feelin'sss, here's how I feel. Next time ya sssay 'prepare to die', be prepared to die yourssself. Orrrr at the very least be prepared to lose what yer aimin' at me – umbrella, fist, or foot. You're too powerful fr me not to take you seriously. Consider it a verrrry dangerousss form of ressspect."

Now Ranma could smell even more nervousness, and Ryoga's heart had sped up. She looked down at the ground and spoke, as much to herself as to Ryoga. "When ya dropped me off in Minneapolis, I met a man, an heir of the Viking berserks. You know what *berserk* is?" She looked up at the Lost Boy. "In Malaya, it's called *amok*. In America, *going postal*. A martial artist is ready to fight. A warrior is prepared to kill. Berserks may kill without even noticin' – it depends on who or what gets in the way. When Bjorn-sensei saw me in the neko-ken, he knew I was a berserk. And he spent a solid month trainin' me to get some control over it. I still have a lot to learn.

"Now Ryoga, do you know any other berserks? I think I know two: you an' Akane. When Akane gets carried away with her mallet, she's berserk. When you get carried away in a fight, *you're* berserk. And you don't think of anythin' but yer fight. That first time you went at me at Furinkan? You damn near chopped Akane's head off, instead of just her hair. You've knocked down trees and walls, you've destroyed cars, you've damaged houses. That's not how a martial artist behaves, and I ain't gonna put up with it. *I* might be able to live through your attacks – no guarantee. You start endangerin' bystanders, and I'll put you down like a mad dog. It'd be my duty, because only a berserk stands a chance o' takin' out a berserk.

"I'm tryin' to train Akane to come to terms with her Mallet, just like I'm comin' to terms with my Cat. I don't think I could teach you, but I could put you in touch with Bjorn-sensei. What'cha say?" She smiled into Ryoga's horrified face. "You really oughta study under him. He's a lot tougher than I am, an' they got a lot o' wilderness in Minnesota. He's a good sensei, and it's a good place to train."

This was a lot more "prepare to die" than Ryoga was prepared for. He fainted. When he came to, Ranma was gone. There was a name, address, and phone number in Minnesota tucked in his pocket. Ryoga wandered off, thinking furiously.

oOo

"Tadaima!"

"Well, Saotome, the wanderer returns. Just what did you *do* to upset my sister so?"

Ranma smiled at Nabiki, put her finger to her nose. "That," she said, "is a secret." She laughed at Nabiki's flash of indignation. "Th' old ghou! did that to me a couple days ago. I thought it was worth repeatin'."

"I don't like it when you keep secrets from me, Saotome. I'll find out sooner or later, you know."

"Oh, I'm sure o' that. But I have ways of findin' things out, too. Right now you're not sure what ta think o' me. Half o' you is worried, and th' other half is a bit turned on. I think y' like a fella you can't boss 'round." Ranma looked down at her, mmmh, definitely non-*fellowish* form, and added, "...or whatever I am right now." Nabiki's face flamed scarlet. *That* shot had gone right through the Ice Queen façade.

Ranma smiled. "Thanks a lot for helpin' us, Nabiki. Th' whole thing is compl'cated, but we'll work it out. I feel a lot safer with you on our side." And Ranma went upstairs to the room she shared with her father, leaving Nabiki downstairs with open mouth.

Pinkku Monday

For once, Ranma and Akane made it to home room before the last bell. Sunday had been busy, but they'd managed to get to sleep on time; and Ranma had warned his father sternly enough that he'd been able to wake up on his own schedule. He suspected Happosai had whispered in his father's ear, also, about the consequences of waking Ranma unexpectedly.

Ninomiya-sensei took attendance, and then began English classes. Since he'd met Bjorn-sensei, Ranma was using English for martial arts. It also let him talk with Nabiki without the fathers understanding, which was proving uncommonly helpful. In just a few weeks, he'd become a star pupil instead of a laggard.

Today, Ranma was distracted. The class wasn't any different, the students weren't any different, but now Ranma knew what that particular odor meant. It had told him, in no uncertain terms, that Akane wanted him.

Now it was telling him Yuka wanted somebody. From her occasional glances, it looked like it might be Hiroshi. And no sooner had Yuka calmed down than some other girl – he thought it was Kaede, over by the window – started. It was driving him crazy!

"Well, Saotome-san, you seem quite distant. Would you care to share your thoughts with the rest of the class?"

Ranma blushed, and rubbed the back of his head. "Sorry, Sensei. The air coming from the window was so – ah, stimulating – that my mind was far away." *And I was even honest*, he thought.

Unfortunately, the rest of the morning continued in the same fashion. *I've heard people say high-school students are full o' ragin' hormones*, he thought. *It's bad enough when they act on it. I wish I didn't haveta know when they're thinkin' about it.* He couldn't even sleep through math. He had to stay awake to avoid doing something embarrassing in his dreams. Ranma was more thankful than usual when the lunch bell rang.

As they opened their bentos beneath their favorite tree, Ranma was in a nervous, jaundiced mood. "What is it?" Akane asked.

"I know too much," he said. "You say all boys are perverts?" (Akane blushed) "From th' shower after gym, I can testify you're right. I gotta watch the faucet like a hawk to keep 'em from gettin' me with cold water. But dammit, now I know all the *girls* are perverts too. They just don't talk about it as much. 'Round me, at least."

Akane raised an eyebrow.

"Think o' those poor tomcats, Akane. They're all sittin' in the yard o' the house with the female cat in heat. But what if *every* house had a female in heat? Their noses would be pullin' 'em every which way. They'd burn out their little brains tryin' to figger what to do, where to go."

Akane raised both eyebrows. "I think I know where you're headed with this."

"Thank Kami-sama the window was open and keepin' the air fresh. I don't think there wuz but twenty minutes all morning, some girl wasn't all hot 'n bothered. It wuz drivin' me nuts!"

Akane bonked him lightly over the head with the lid to her bento. "You aren't supposed to think that about anybody but me!"

Ranma ducked. "It's like tellin' me I gotta only think of ice cream when I'm surrounded by sukiyaki!" He looked up at Akane. "Actually, you're an ice-cream sort of girl."

"Cold?" Akane said with a frown.

"No, no, more – pure. Suki-yaki got a bit of everythin' in it. You're centered. Not always in a comfy place, and we gotta watch that berserk, but you are what you are. I guess I'd say yer more like that cinnamon ice cream, passionate but single-minded."

"Why, Ranma!" Akane glowed. But she couldn't say more, because Kuno was coming towards them.

"Ranma-kun! Akane! Am I interrupting anything?"

"It's okay, sempai, we were just talkin' 'bout some ice cream we had yesterday. How are you? How's yer sister?"

"I am – coping. My sister has shut herself in her greenhouse, and speaks only to Sasuke. Who tells me she has been researching fleas, and has ordered everything she needs to breed them herself. This is a disturbing aberration, and I hope she gives it up before it gets out of hand. Her black roses, at least, cannot escape."

Ranma and Akane both shuddered. They knew, if this went on, that someday Genma-panda would show up covered with fleas. And as soon as he turned back to Genma-human, the fleas would be looking for a new home. "I'll see if I can talk her out of it," Ranma said. "Would she listen to me?"

"She might, if she didn't think that was the only reason you were there."

"Sempai," Akane said, "You mentioned teppanyaki cooking last week. Kasumi and I would like to see you do it. Perhaps we can work it all together? I know it takes special equipment, so we'd have to come to your house. Is there any day you'd be willing to have us over?"

" 'Twere best done swiftly," Kuno said. "It would be wise to dissuade my sister before she starts. But I'll have to plan a menu and gather supplies. Wednesday evening?"

Akane gave Kuno her most charming smile. "*Thank* you! I'll talk with Kasumi tonight, and let you know if she can make it."

"I'm really lookin' forward to this. Maybe I can learn cookin' as a kind of martial art?" Ranma said with enthusiasm. Then he thought again. "Hey Akane, maybe we can practice martial-arts cooking together? We'll both be starting at the beginning."

They'd all sat, and as they talked, they ate. They were swapping morsels back-and-forth, and if Ranma got the best of the trade nobody really minded. They knew the size of his appetite. But as the bell was ringing to call them back to class, there was a brief sun-shower, and Ranma became a girl again.

"That's an unsettling thing to see," Kuno said.

"It's even more unsettlin' to have it happen to yerself," Ranma replied. "But I'm used to it. It's easier t' live with than th' neko-ken was." They ran for the door, and made it to their afternoon classes in the nick of time.

The afternoon was not unlike the morning, with a few notable differences. It started off with a medley of interesting odors – some of the class couples must have been flirting over lunch – but the smell didn't seem nearly as strong to Ranma. And she didn't especially give a damn. *There goes Yuka again*, she thought, rolling her eyes. And then it hit her. **She didn't give a damn!** As long as she wasn't a tomcat, she could go to school in peace.

Oh boy. I wonder what Akane'll say about this. I wonder what oyaji will say? I wonder what Ninomiya-sensei will say? I hope once Akane and I get married, it'll satisfy me enough that I c'n come back to school as a guy again ...

At least the Amazons will approve.

At the end of the school day, Ranma quickly told Akane what was going on. "I'll be home in an hour or two," she said. "The art club meets on Mondays. An' I'm really startin' to enjoy it." They waved at each other in parting, and Ranma went off to the studio.

oOo

Ranma got home somewhat before dinnertime, and found she'd gotten a letter in the day's mail. *I hope it's not a challenge*, she thought. *I'm busy*. But it didn't look like a challenge. She opened the letter. It was in Ucchan's handwriting.

Dear Ranchan,

A couple weeks ago, Akane said you had a bad case of "interesting times". I guess it was contagious.

When I got back to Ucchan's after school that day, Konatsu told me my father had called. His brother had died of a sudden heart attack. Tetsuo was my favorite uncle, and I was pretty much out of it, but Konatsu bundled me up along with everything else, and got us to Osaka for the funeral.

After that, things got very alcoholic and very emotional. The men in our family tend to die young, and Tetsuo-ojisan's funeral made father think of his own mortality. He wants an heir real bad, wants to see that heir before he dies, and he was giving me a lot of trouble over not having 'caught' you yet. I got the impression he wouldn't have minded an illegitimate child, even. Shades of your mother!

And then he somehow found out that Konatsu isn't quite a ... traditional Japanese woman. That, in fact, I could stay the male he registered me as, and Konatsu could stay a registered

woman, and even so, we could produce little heirs for him. And what with the way we were registered, the marriage would be legitimate and so would the heirs.

Kami-sama, it *bites* when your parents start making marriage decisions for you. I'm so sorry, Ranchan, I *thought* I understood the pressures all us fiancées were putting you under. Suddenly I had two fiancés, and let me tell you, Konatsu *really* liked the idea. My father was after me, and my aunts were just as bad, and Konatsu kept looking at me with those puppy-dog eyes, and everybody was saying how romantic it was and why didn't we have the wedding *right now*? And join the schools. Ninja okonomiyaki? Shuriken with Special Sauce? I think not!

But as I said, things were kinda drunk that evening, and next morning, Konatsu and I woke up in the honeymoon suite. No way could we avoid noticing what we'd been doing. So we ordered a fancy breakfast, charged it to my father, and talked all day. Thank the kami we'd already discovered we got along, while we were both living at Ucchan's. Marriage didn't look nearly as bleak as it otherwise could have, and all my problems of family honor had gone away.

I'm writing now from a hot-springs resort on Hakone Mountain. Konatsu and I are enjoying marriage more than we ever expected, though I will have to tell you about some of the more interesting aspects of honeymooning with a ninja after I get back home and we can have a, mmh, boy's night out for that kind of man-talk.

I should be back in business at Ucchan's in a week or so. Give us a visit – there's a Ranchan Special with your name on it.

Friends always – Ucchan

P.S. – Father was muttering that vengeance and marriage-promises made very poor companions, but now he was able to clear his mind just for the vengeance. Konatsu and I managed to get your name off the list, but you might hint to the panda that now is a good time for a long vacation in Tibet. Or maybe not. Heirs *and* vengeance? Father could die a happy man. – U.

oOo

Ranma stood there for a solid minute with her mouth wide open. Then she went up the stairs on cat-silent feet and ghosted in the door of Akane's room. She held her finger to her lips. "*shhhh...*"

She showed Akane the letter. "Kami-sama's in a generous mood, I think." And watched while Akane read it twice.

Akane blinked at her. "This means – you don't have any other engagements left?"

"Not 'less the panda's been up to somethin'. Which he prob'ly has, but if it doesn't show up in the next month, we're home free!" They grabbed each other by the hands and danced in a little circle, quietly, waving victory fans as was household custom when it appeared the schools were to be joined. But they didn't have the ceremonial drink of sake, because they'd noticed the fathers never were that sharp afterwards.

When they finally slowed to a halt, Ranma sat on the chair by Akane's desk, and she sat on the edge of her bed. "I gotta write letters," Ranma said. "And it wouldn't be a good idea to write them around here. Too many eyes. I wanna write Ucchan back, and see if Bjorn-sensei got any suggestions about trainin' mallets. So maybe I should go to the Cat Café. These days, our secrets are probably safer there. I think it'd be a good idea for both of us to be Shampoo's shield-sisters. Happosai and oyaji are both nervous around Amazons, so that'll help keep them in line. And that way we won't have to tip our hand about being married, to explain you training with Cologne. An' we gotta decide how much we wanna tell Cologne, and find out how Mousse is takin' all this"

"Not so fast, Ranma. I think we have to talk with Nabiki first."

"Oh, geez"

"Yes, but she's my sister. She doesn't care for your father. And I heard you teasing her last night, about being a bit turned on by you. Trust me. Our secrets are a lot safer if *we* tell her, than if she finds them out herself. And we *do* want to keep her helping us."

Ranma raised her face and spread her arms to the heavens above. "Hear me, oh kami. I finally get her to stop hittin' me over the head with a mallet, and what happens? She starts hittin' me over the head with common sense! She is a *cruel* woman!"

Akane giggled, and the two went down the hall to Nabiki's room. They tapped on her door. Nabiki opened it, looked at them suspiciously. "You two are up to something."

"Yes, and we're here to tell you about it," Akane said. Nabiki promptly pulled them in, and closed the door. She sat on the bed; Akane took the chair at Nabiki's computer desk, and Ranma sat on the desk itself.

Akane realized she should be the first to speak, and she wasn't sure what to say. She held her hands up before her face, forefingers together, twiddling them. But eventually, and with a bit of a blush, "Ranma and I are getting married."

"This is why Ranma is a girl right now?"

Now it was Ranma's turn to blush. "Sorta, sorta. It's all tied together." She looked down at the floor, folded her arms below her breasts, took several deep breaths. "See, we wanna do this right. An' I won't be eighteen for weeks yet. And that's how old I gotta be to get married, even with parental consent. An' Akane and I, well, a gal's body is a *bit* less insistent than a guy's. So I'm hidin' in here until we can make it all legal."

Akane jumped in. "We don't want the parents to know. They'd be on us about heirs before we're out of high school even. And think of all the fun we can have watching them try to force us to get married when we're already there!"

"Besides," Ranma said with a twisted grin, "it'll be interesting havin' oyaji fuss over me being a girl."

"Happosai?"

"Me an' Happosai had a couple encounters you don't know about. I think he'll behave."

"We didn't want to talk about this at the Cat Café," Akane said. "Too, too many witnesses. So far, only you and Shampoo know."

"An' we need yer advice, Nabiki," Ranma said. "You know how to balance secrets."

"Please, oneechan?" Akane said.

Ranma had pierced through her ice-queen façade yesterday. This, from both of them, completely destroyed it. Nabiki's mouth began to smile, her eyes began to water. She sprang to her feet, embraced Akane, then snagged Ranma into the embrace as well. "Imoutochan! Ranma! You're going to be family for real! I'm so happy for the both of you! All that pain is finally going to work out!" She broke out into very nearly a Soun-grade wall of tears as she squeezed them tightly. Ranma and Akane looked into each others' eyes, then hugged back and began to do a bit of crying themselves.

Nobody else heard – Nabiki had made sure her room was soundproof. After a while the three collapsed onto Nabiki's bed, and just lay there a while recovering. But eventually Ranma spoke.

"I've gotta write Bjorn-sensei. Akane and I realized she needs mallet lessons, just like I needed cat lessons. Bjorn-sensei did me good. Maybe he can help Akane too. And I wanna tell him th' good news, 'cause Akane and me woulda never got together without his trainin'. An' Nabiki, yer better at English, so you can help write th' letter."

After a while, this is what they came up with, short and to the point:

Bjorn-sensei,

Perhaps you remember telling me that I was very fond of Akane, and telling me why you knew. When I returned to her family home, this knowledge told me that she was very fond of me. As a result we are to be married in a little less than a month, on the day it becomes legal for us. We are keeping this a secret, for family reasons.

However, we have a concern. Akane and I have realized that she, too, is a berserk. When she loses her temper she manifests an enormous mallet charged with life energy, and smashes whatever has annoyed her.

We wonder if you could give us some advice on the training of mallets and their users. Your help with my Cat has changed my life for the better. Now we hope you can help change life for the better for Akane, the one I love.

Sincerely, Saotome Ranma

And then Ranma left Akane and Nabiki to sister-talk, while she went off to write a letter to Ucchan.

Dear Ucchan,

I am happy for you and Konatsu, and look forward to seeing the two of you together. The Interesting Times continue here, in a good way. I finally got through to Kuno about my curse, and to Kodachi at the same time. Not only has he backed off from his romantic pursuits, but he's starting to turn into a friend. (Sasuke helped a lot – it is *good* to have a

ninja on your side.) Kodachi immediately told me I could no longer pay court to her, for it would be improper for a woman of the Samurai class to be married to somebody half-man, half-woman. Then she swore vengeance upon the foul sorcerer Saotome, for ruining her chance at true love. By that, she meant the Panda. As Kami-sama is my witness, that Panda's karma is coming home to roost all at once. You should have seen Sasuke and all three Kunos chasing him with super-soakers and hair-clippers!

Then I saved Shampoo's life, and will become her shield-sister and an Amazon ally. That will erase all my problems with their Outsider Laws, and now that Shampoo and I are supposed to guard each others' backs instead of marry, she's a lot easier to be around. Since you are now married, that brings me down to the one Tendo engagement. I chased the Panda away for quite some while, and frightened Happosai into behaving. Without accomplices, Tendo-san is rather subdued. Oyaji's back, but I'm working hard on breaking him of his bad habits. For the first time in years, I can relax without questions of honor coming around to nag at me – though I am sure my mother will want grandchildren as badly as ever. Do you suppose your new wife would consent to bear a few for me? (Actually, we *could* be fertile together. I don't even want to *think* of that.)

But these things are small compared to my big news. You left before I could tell you, but while I was gone during Summer vacation, I managed to make peace with the neko-ken. Yes, I can say "cat", see cat, even hold cat and stroke it happily. In fact, Shampoo was a cat when I rescued her. I'm still getting used to being half-cat – it doesn't show on my body, but it sure shows in my behavior. It is definitely Interesting. Food is different and better now, with my more powerful senses of smell and taste, and I'm eagerly looking forward to that Ranchan Special.

Friends Always – Ranchan

PS – Powerful food isn't always a good thing, but I've also found a way around Akane's cooking. It'll be great to have that boys' night out with you and swap a few stories. – R

Ranma sealed and stamped the letters, then went to mail them before anybody in the house could get at them. Before she left, she poked her head into Nabiki's room, only to find the two sisters deep in a discussion of weddings. She smiled as she went silently down the stairs and out the door.

In The Black

Ranma was helping Kasumi prepare breakfast. The night before, after she'd gotten back from mailing her letters, they'd pulled Kasumi into Nabiki's room, sworn her to secrecy, and filled her in on the wedding plans. Then they'd all gone to bed. Ranma couldn't speak for the others, but *she'd* had the best sleep in years, even amidst a generally-improved sleep schedule.

They rubbed shoulders as they passed, and Ranma gave her shoulder a friendly little twitch. Kasumi giggled, and they smiled at each other. Ranma finished setting the table, and brought in the newspaper.

Nabiki drank her cup of coffee, and Akane came in from her run. More smiles all around. The year was turning towards fall, and the sun was just rising; the air was crisp and clean. New beginnings are supposed to happen in spring, but they were making do very happily.

Soun came down, and sat with his paper and a cup of tea. Finally, as Kasumi was bringing the food to the table, Genma came grumbling down the stairs and sat. His mood darkened when he noticed his son was not only his daughter this morning, but was wearing one of Kasumi's old Furinkan uniforms with an apron over it, and helping serve the meal. He was used to a morning spar and a refreshing dip in the koi pond; this was adding insult to the break in his routine. He started to protest, but was silenced by a contralto growl from Ranma-chan and a flare of green light from her eyes.

They were halfway through breakfast when Soun commented, "Looks like somebody finally won the lottery."

"Can I see that?" Genma asked. Soun folded the paper and passed it over. Genma looked the article over; fumbled around in his patched gi and came out with a ticket. He compared it carefully to the numbers in the paper. His eyes widened, and he fell over backwards.

"Eh?" "Hey oyaji, what's going on?" "He tried to read something, got wedged, and now he has to reboot." "Get your foot out of my soup!"

Slowly Genma sat up, eyes sparkling behind his glasses. "Soun, old friend, I've just won fifty million yen in the lottery!"

Everybody but Nabiki edged back. Genma could be enough trouble without money. How much trouble could he be *with* it? Nabiki knew Genma didn't hang onto money very well. She was wondering how to net some of it as it flew away.

Soun and Genma huddled together, comparing the story with the ticket. Then they leaped to their feet and began dancing in joyous circles. "New clothes! Fine food! Sake! A wonderful wedding!"

Ranma looked at the two and placed her barbed shaft with exquisite precision. "Hey oyaji! I'm gunna have to stay a girl for the next couple months. Can I have some yen to buy clothes?" Genma stopped stock-still, while Soun continued dancing; the two went down in a tangled heap, with sputtered curses from Genma and a few victory flags still flying.

Akane looked at Ranma, winked, and sniffled. "Wah! I'm engaged to a girl!"

"I'm safer as a girl. As a fiancée, you smell."

Akane blushed, hauled out her mallet, and began chasing Ranma around the room. Nabiki began calling out odds on the fight. Kasumi clasped her hands with a beaming smile and said "They're such a perfect couple! They're *both* violent maniacs!" Soun and Genma clutched each other and collapsed into wails, despairing that the schools would ever be joined. The pursuit went out the door and over the wall, with the noise gradually receding into the distance.

Kasumi said "Oh, my, they didn't finish their breakfasts. I'll have to make extra-large bentos for them. Can you take them to school, Nabiki?" Nabiki grumbled, but nodded her assent.

oOo

They'd left so early, and run so fast, that they were the first students in the classroom. Ranma-chan went up to Ninomiya-sensei's desk. The diminutive teacher was looking skeptical. "Saotome-kun," she asked, "why are you in my classroom as a girl? You're wearing the uniform, so it's obviously not an accident."

Ranma put her hand behind her head, and sighed bashfully. "Sorry 'bout that, sensei. Over summer vacation, I was studyin' to use my ki different. An' right now, that means I c'n get pretty uncomfortable as a guy. I thought I c'd pay more attention in class as a gal."

The teacher looked at Akane. "Tendo-kun, you live with Saotome-kun. Is this true?"

"Yes, sensei."

Hinako-chan cocked her head to one side and chirped, "Well, that's fine, then. Do you have any candy?"

Ranma and Akane wore blank expressions for a second, then looked at each other. "Do we have any candy?" And when the answer was 'no', "Oi! And we didn't finish breakfast!"

Yuka and Hiroshi came in, and promptly started interrogating their friends. Then Sayuri, and Daisuke, and Kaede, and all the rest. Everybody wanted to know what was up. Ranma kept silent. Akane folded her arms and grumped. At the far side of the room some perceptive soul noted that Ranma and Akane had been lunching with Kuno in recent days. A whisper of "Pigtailed goddess?" went around before the bell rang and class got down to business. Ranma's ki senses were jangling with all the attention being paid her, but it was nowhere as distracting and unnerving as the assorted teenage scents had been the day before. And so the morning wore on at its usual slow pace, until the lunch bell rang.

Ranma and Akane didn't have bentos, so they headed for the school cafeteria. But Nabiki caught them before they'd gotten there, and they all went out to their favorite tree to enjoy an autumn day. The ginkgoes were beginning to show yellow streaks on their leaves, and the maples a tinge of red. The trees rustled in a light breeze. The sky was blue, with small clouds, and the sun warm enough to offset the breeze perfectly. The schoolyard was more full than usual – everybody wanted to catch such excellent weather.

Kuno soon joined them. "Ranma-kun! Akane! And is this my mercenary goddess?"

"Hello to you, too, Kuno-chan," Nabiki said dryly.

"I talked with Kasumi," Akane said. "She'd like to see you doing teppanyaki too. She'll be with us tomorrow evening."

"Teppanyaki?" Nabiki asked. "Have I fallen down a rabbit hole? I didn't know you were studying to be a chef, Kuno-chan. I must be slacking off!"

"We were talkin' 'bout what to do when you can't fight for real," Ranma said. "Tachi-kun said there were times he simply *needed* a sharp piece of steel and somethin' to cut up. This is what he does, just like I'm learnin' to carve wood an' stone."

"That's interesting. Can I come along?" Nabiki asked. "I'm sure the fathers aren't going to be home tomorrow evening, and I'd rather not eat by myself."

"What are your fathers doing?" Kuno asked.

"The kami help us, Genma won fifty million yen in the lottery. They'll probably be out drinking."

"That's not good," Kuno said. "It's enough money to get in trouble with, but not enough to shield you from the consequences."

"That's what we're afraid of."

"I'll have Sasuke look after your fathers. For all your sakes, I'd hate to see something happen to them while they're in their cups. And Sasuke is a surprisingly versatile man."

"Ano ..." Ranma said. "I'm gunna be a girl for a while. I hope that won't cause any trouble with yer sister?"

"A girl?" Kuno asked. "I mean, I noticed; but you seem to prefer being male."

"Bjorn-sensei had me doin' some things with my ki. Y'know, my folks want me to be a 'man among men' real bad. I can go along with that, but bein' a man among *women* is pretty rough these days. Until I get my ki senses tamed down, it's less unsettlin' bein' a woman. I'd rather not go inta detail."

Nabiki cocked her left eyebrow, and Akane giggled. Kuno shrugged and said, "She may be disappointed, but it will probably cause both of you less stress. So: four ladies for dinner, tomorrow evening? I look forward to it." Reminded of food, Kuno dug into his bento.

Nabiki looked at Ranma, whose legs were perhaps a bit too far apart, and skirt too high. She leaned forward and whispered, "You're giving me a fine show, Saotome. Are you advertising?"

Ranma sniffed the air, blushed, and brought her legs together. Nabiki handed out the bentos, and the three girls began to eat.

When Ranma and the sisters got home they found the fathers dressed elegantly, and very merry. Genma's ratty, patched gi was gone (the smell of burnt cloth drifted in from the yard) and he was wearing a tailored white gi that was halfway to a suit. Soun's hair and moustache were neatly trimmed, and he was wearing a brown suit. There was a restrained odor of expensive sake drifting from the two, but they were mostly sober.

"We went down to the lottery commission and I had the prize deposited in the Bank of Tokyo," Genma said. "We drew out some pocket change, and visited a tailor. Then we had a good meal, and stopped by a market to get Kobe beef. Kasumi's in the kitchen with it now."

Ranma and the Cat both liked the idea of Kobe beef. They also appreciated the smells coming from the kitchen. "I hope you bought lotsss of beefff," Ranma said. "Becaussse nobody iss gettin' between mmmmeee and mmy ssshare."

Genma was taken aback by such a threat from his girly-son, but he'd heard the Cat's contribution to the statement. So he smiled, and said "There's plenty for both of us, boy, and everybody else as well." And Soun nodded his head with a broad grin. Kasumi appeared at the kitchen door and gave Ranma the thumbs-up. Ranma went to put her books away, change, and wash up.

When they gathered at the table, everybody had apparently decided such magnificent food deserved respect. They were all dressed well and kneeling formally. Ranma helped Kasumi bring the food out. There were steaks on platters, little red potatoes, green beans, and sautéed mushrooms with bamboo shoots. "Kobe beef is too fine to cover with sauce. I thought a western meal made sense tonight," Kasumi said. Everybody cried "itadakimasu" and dug in, some not bothering to accumulate vegetables before starting on the steak. When his fork came back short, even Genma had to be – and was – satisfied with what was on his plate.

After dinner everybody was leaning back in sated bliss, aided by the ceremonial sake Genma and Soun had served around. Nabiki raised her small cup in a toast. "That's one of the finest meals I've ever had, Kasumi. You're a miracle-worker with ordinary food, but you outdid yourself with the food Genma brought home today." She smiled at Genma, who smiled smugly back and tossed down another cup of sake.

Kasumi could tell Nabiki was sincere, and that she was slanting her words at Genma. So she closed her eyes, clasped her hands against one cheek, and said, "Oh my, yes! That was wonderful beef he brought home, and very good mushrooms. Uncle Saotome, we'll have to make you do the shopping from now on, if we want to keep eating like this!"

Genma smiled a self-satisfied smile. "Kasumi's a better shopper – I just had the money to do it right."

Nabiki circled in for the kill. "Well, then, you'll just have to give her an allowance. She shops, she cooks, we all eat, and everybody is happy."

Genma was feeling expansive after the meal and the sake. He whipped out his shiny new checkbook. "My old friend Soun and his family should benefit from my good fortune!" he said as he wrote out a check for five million yen. He gave it to Kasumi, because after all, the lady of the house is in charge of the finances. Genma was big on people obeying traditional gender roles. Then he took the bottle of sake and his cup, and he and Soun went happily over to the shogi board.

Kasumi started clearing the table. Ranma and Nabiki helped. Once they were in the kitchen they gave each other silent high-fives, and huddled. "We have to get this into our bank before something happens, or Genma changes his mind," Nabiki said. Ranma and Kasumi nodded in agreement. So Kasumi endorsed the check and Nabiki took off for the night depository, with Ranma along for safety's sake.

An hour later, Ranma and Akane were in Nabiki's room plotting a stealth honeymoon when they heard a knock at the door below. "That must have been loud," Nabiki said. "I have good soundproofing in this room." There were crashes and shouts. Ranma was out the door like a shot, heading for the action.

Downstairs, Genma was on the floor, hand raised in a warding gesture. A large man with a larger spatula was standing angrily over him. Soun was by the kitchen door, shielding Kasumi from any spillover violence. Akane and Nabiki came rushing down the stairs behind Ranma; upon seeing the situation, Akane took a stance to protect Nabiki.

"Now, Saotome! For stealing her dowry and ruining my daughter's life, you DIE!"

Ranma leaped between the two of them, and grabbed the spatula near its head to hold it back. "No, Kuonji-san!" she yelled. "You don't want a murder on your hands! I won't let you!"

"You shouldn't talk, Ranma – you *are* Ranma? From what Ukyo tells me, he's ruined *your* life too!"

"You don't know the half of it! But if anybody kills 'im, it'll be *me*! And I don't want Ucchan to have a murderer for a father!"

Nabiki murmured in Akane's ear, "This is a job for the Ice Queen." She stepped into the room. "Kuonji-san, you want *justice*, not death. Genma stole your yatai, ten years ago? What if he gave it back, with interest? Now that Ukyo is married, the dowry is the important thing – the dowry, and honor. Ten years of heavy interest should add up to something like respect, if not honor."

Kuonji-san quivered in rage. "Oh sure. How do you compound interest on a yatai? From everything I've heard, Genma doesn't have any money – whenever he gets some, he drinks it up. And honor? Don't make me laugh."

"It seems to me, ten years interest on a yatai ought to add up to a restaurant – Ucchan's restaurant." Nabiki smiled a cold smile at Genma.

Genma whimpered. He could tell where this was heading. But that spatula was awfully sharp, and he wasn't anything like sober. *I wish I were a drunken master...* he thought as he cringed protectively over the pocket with the checkbook. "Boy, protect your poor father!" he cried to Ranma.

"I ain't no boy right now, and you ain't that poor," Ranma said. "Nabiki's makin' sense. You got a chance to patch up the family honor some, by doin' the right thing for Kuonji-san. Yer always tellin' me how important honor is, oyaji."

Soun surprised everyone by agreeing. "Your marriage promise to my family came first," he said, "but that promise to the Kuonjis always bothered me. You took their livelihood. I'll respect you a lot more if you do this."

"I'm only a poor old man!" Genma wailed.

"You're a poor old man who won the lottery today," Soun said. "We both studied under the same Master, but this is just one of the places where his teachings were wrong."

Genma crouched on the floor, surrounded by cold eyes. This was the biggest, meanest chicken that had ever come home to roost. *I expected this from Ranma, the way the boy has been lately*, he thought. *But if Soun thinks the same way, I'm in real trouble.*

Kuonji-san glared down at the sniveling Genma. "I was talking with my Ukyo just last week," he said. "She still owes thirty-eight million on that restaurant. I seriously doubt this useless sack of flab and lies could come up with that kind of money." He struggled to get his spatula free from Ranma's grip.

"Don't kill me!" Genma shrieked. "I'll write you a check!" And, hand shaking, he did.

Kuonji-san inspected the check, and the checkbook, carefully. He knew Genma had a tendency to vanish, leaving behind broken promises. But when Soun added in the letter from the lottery, he was finally satisfied. "It's a fine wedding present you've given my child," Kuonji said as he left. "And with the dowry redeemed, I can have a peaceful life watching grandchildren. Be sure you stay away from them." He left, sliding the door closed with a bang.

Soun came over, and with Ranma's help they hoisted Genma to his feet. "You've done a good thing," Soun said. "Your honor is the better for it. And you still have millions of yen left to play with. So let's go have a drink, and forget all this unpleasantness." Soun and Ranma deposited Genma on the sofa; then Soun got the bottle of sake and a pair of glasses, and the two sat side-by-side in silent contemplation.

The girls went upstairs, and into Nabiki's room. And they all agreed that Genma behaved much better when he was faced with a credible threat of death. "But," Ranma said, tapping her nose, "he came awful close to wetting himself. We'd better check the sofa in the morning."

"That's okay," Nabiki replied. "Let him. We can buy new cushions – we have five million in the bank." And they all laughed, then pretty much went limp in reaction after the confrontation. Nothing useful was done for the rest of the evening.

oOo

The next morning, Soun's paper had a picture of Genma, and the headline '**Nerima man, musabetsu kakuto Saotome-ryu master at the Tendo dojo, wins lottery**'. Genma himself did not come down for breakfast – he was still sleeping off the stress and the alcohol of the previous day.

Towards the end of breakfast, Ranma and Akane began arguing at the table. Nabiki huffed out the door, while Kasumi took them both by the ears and hauled them into the kitchen, saying "Father had a busy day yesterday, he doesn't deserve a fight at breakfast." Then she let them go, and asked, "What is it?"

"With that headline, all the folk oyaji owes are gunna know he got money," Ranma said. "Sometime today er tomorrow, this house is gunna get interestin'. I think after lunch you should go shoppin' an' stay away, then meet us at Kuno's at six."

"Oh my, I think you're right! Ranma, you should dress well tonight. Here's some of the household budget money – you and Akane go shopping this afternoon yourselves, and get some better clothes. Then we'll see each other at six."

Ranma and Akane went upstairs and put a change of clothes for Akane in her pack just-in-case, shifting some of her books over to Ranma's to make room. Then they went back downstairs, got their bentos from Kasumi, and headed for Furinkan. Ranma was about to leap up on the fence when Akane pointed out it wasn't very modest in a girl's uniform. "And if you're going to be a girl for a month or two, you should do it right."

oOo

That evening the four girls met at the gates to the Kuno mansion's grounds, just before six. Kasumi looked Ranma up and down approvingly. Ranma still wore red-and-black silk, but not at all the usual: she had a collared black-silk blouse with the top two silver buttons undone, and a red below-the-knee skirt, pleated so she had lots of freedom to move. A wild-orchid pin of silver and coral accented the blouse, with matching silver-and-coral earcuffs. Her silver watch had a red bezel and band. There were black silk Chinese slippers on her feet. Her hair had been taken out of its pigtail, and was in a loose ponytail tied with black ribbon. Her perfume carried a faint scent of orchid. "That's elegant, and simple," Kasumi said. "Did Nabiki help you shop?"

"She sure did," Ranma said. "Do you think Akane and me could pick this out? We're tomboys!"

Akane snickered. She was dressed much the same as Ranma, though in her case the colors were blue blouse, black skirt, and blue slippers. Her perfume was rose, her jewelry silver and hematite.

"Since we have five million yen," Nabiki said regally, "we chose to enjoy it. We can't do it often, so we should do it well." She wore a soft and simple sleeveless dress of a rich brown color that complemented her hair, and a red-gold shawl clipped at the neck with a goldtone pin.

Kasumi was wearing her nicest house dress. "I feel so plain," she said.

"You're never plain, oneechan," Akane said gently. Ranma and Nabiki nodded in agreement. And so did Kuno Tatewaki, who had come quietly up during this exchange. He opened the gates for them, then led them into the mansion and to a small parlor with a single bonsai as the focus of the room.

Kuno Kodachi was there. She did not look as if she had been sleeping well, but she greeted them graciously and poured tea. "I still have a few preparations to make," Tatewaki said as he withdrew. The five women sat quietly, and sipped an excellent green tea.

"I hope you are doing well, Kodachi-san," Ranma said. "It pains me to think I have upset you."

Kodachi smiled bleakly. "Tatewaki and I are upset because we made fools of ourselves. You were but the messenger."

Ranma was silent for several heartbeats. "All of us are fools, sooner or later. Lets hope we all recover from it." Several more heartbeats, then "Speakin' of fools, don't do anythin' too terrible to my father for a while. Yesterday was real bad for him."

"My brother says he won the lottery. I don't see how that's bad."

"He won fifty million. Then his past started showing up. He's down to about seven million right now. With his face in the papers, we expect the rest of his creditors to start showing up tomorrow."

"OHOOHOOHOOHOOHohoho..." Kodachi caught herself, and stopped laughing. She covered her mouth. "I am sorry, Ranma-sama, but your curse has ruined one of my most cherished dreams. And the curse was your father's fault. I cannot bring myself to feel sorrow at his woes."

"Oh, he doesn't like my bein' a girl any better than you do. That's one o' the reasons I'm dressed this girly – I want to rub it in his face. Besides, I'm stuck with bein' a girl for a few months, and I wanna do it well."

"Living well is the best revenge?"

"It's great even if you aren't *thinkin'* revenge," Ranma said. "The revenge is just the cherry on the sundae."

About then, Tatewaki came to the door and said all was ready for dinner. They stood and filed out to the dining room. The table had a thick tablecloth, and on that, a large chopping-block and an electric hibachi. Ranged on either side were dishes of meat, seafood, vegetables, and condiments. The ladies took their places around three sides of the table, while Tatewaki stood by the chopping-block. He picked up a knife, and began tapping it in rhythm, then flicked shrimp onto the block and peeled them with a quick flurry of motion.

The sound was almost as hypnotic as the lights flashing from the polished steel blades. Slowly, Ranma began to notice music rising up in the background, with the knives moving in time. Kuno diced onions, then carrots, and transferred them to the grill with a quick flip. He juggled a sauce-bottle, then poured sesame oil. Good smells began to happen.

Kasumi was seated at the center of the table, near the chopping block, and Ranma noticed her fingers beginning to mark time with the music. Her hand darted out, took a small knife, and began to move it in time as well. Tatewaki's eyebrows rose, but with the back of his knife he slid an eggplant and a small pile of mushrooms in her direction. Kasumi began chopping mushrooms, starting one cut to Tatewaki's two then picking up to full speed. She trimmed the eggplant and began cutting it into thin slices.

Tatewaki began flipping shrimp into the air with his knife, landing neatly around the vegetables on the grill. Kasumi dealt out the slices of eggplant as if she were playing poker. Then they both carved the beef, alternating cuts until it was a neat pile of delicate strips. Tatewaki scooped them up, spread them out around the grill, while Kasumi sprinkled mushroom bits among them and added spices. They were both grinning like maniacs by this point. It was like they were doing a kata together. The others at the table sat, stunned, eyes growing wider by the moment.

All shows have a curtain. Tatewaki and Kasumi laid their knives down with a 'clack', and began shifting food from the grill to the plates. Everybody else applauded. The two chefs bowed, then

sat; and everybody began to eat. The food wasn't totally consistent – this *was* the first time the two had cooked together – but it was all good.

Kasumi picks up cooking techniques like I pick up martial arts, Ranma thought. Her respect for the quiet sister rose yet another notch. So did her respect for Kuno Tatewaki. "You two were dancin'," she said. They blushed. Ranma caught Akane's eye and raised one eyebrow at her. Akane spent a moment in thought, then nodded. Ranma nodded back. The evening was turning out far more interesting than they had expected.

After dinner, Kodachi took them all to see her greenhouse. There were roses of many colors, though she was proudest of the black roses. Ranma noticed several books on fleas on the workbench. She caught Kodachi's attention and nodded to the books, then put on a Yakuza face and dialect. "You got some nice roses here, lady. Be a shame if anything happened to them. Like aphids. Nasty things, aphids – they move around all by themselves. Get into all kinds of trouble."

"I take your meaning," Kodachi said. "Very well, then, we shall not practice biological warfare." Ranma smiled at her. She smiled tentatively back.

The four got home quite late, chatting happily, and found the fathers snoring drunkenly at their front door, collapsed into a black wheelbarrow. They got them up, and into their rooms. When they went back to close the door, the wheelbarrow was gone.

oOo

In the morning, Ranma was awakened by murmurs and mutters. She peered out the window. In the dim light, a crowd was starting to gather. She recognized people from the training travels: priests, and martial artists. The breeze carried the scents of anger and anticipation. Ranma stopped Akane as she started to head out for her run. "Stay indoors. The yard is filling up with bill-collectors. I think they smell a checkbook in heat. And I saw some people oyaji robbed or swindled."

Kasumi was already in the kitchen, and well aware of what was happening. She put on coffee, while Akane went upstairs to rouse Nabiki. They were having a quiet council around the kitchen table when the knocking started. Then the phone began to ring. And the crowd outside was getting restless. Nabiki went to talk with the crowd, while Kasumi answered the phone. "Moshi moshi, Tendo residence."

It was Sasuke. "Get up to the roof," he said. "I'm flying in evacuation."

There was a stir in the side yard. Several merchants were being buffeted about by an invisible force. The martial artists and the priests closed in. It wasn't long before Genma was revealed, dressed in his fresh white gi. His eyes were bloodshot, he wasn't very coordinated, and since he was covered in wards and had at least two martial artists on each arm and leg, he wasn't getting away.

A remarkably silent black helicopter swooped down over the house. Kasumi, Nabiki, and Akane scrambled up the rope ladder it lowered. Ranma waved the helicopter off – "I'm staying here," she shouted up. "He's miserable, but he's my father." In the yard below, most of the crowd was surging towards the dojo, with Genma's captors leading the pack. The rest waved their fists and shouted imprecations at the copter, which flew into the distance in the direction of Furinkan High. Soun was wading into the crowd, trying to reach his friend. Ranma leaped down to join him.

By the time Ranma and Soun reached the dojo, things were beginning to sort out. There were priests at the entrance, holding the people back, and muffled grunts and curses came from inside where Genma was being tied down. Pretty soon his arms and hands were free to write checks, but the rest of him was covered with rope. Somebody had even added duct tape to the cocoon to make sure it *stayed* wrapped. The priests rounded up several accountants from the crowd, and they began going over the checkbook that had been found in Genma's pocket.

"Line up," the oldest and most dignified of the priests shouted, with a voice trained by years of conducting services. "Claimants with documentation at the head of the line." And so the relentless process of chartered accountancy began to devour the remnants of Genma's fortune. By early afternoon everybody with paperwork had been paid, and the rest of the money was divided equally among the remaining merchants. Most of the people left, taking the accountants with them. Only the priests and the martial artists remained, though there was a fair overlap of warrior monks.

The priests clustered around Genma, ringing bells, waving chains of paper, and stating his offenses. They called upon a great many Kami to bear witness to Genma's sins, and to take appropriate retribution. Then they, too, left.

Ranma and Soun stood forth. "So far, things have been reasonable," Soun said. He looked at Genma with sorrow in his eyes. "I didn't realize how many people you'd wronged." Both men began to weep.

It was Ranma's turn to talk. "I recognize a lot of you," she said. "I think I know why you're here. I don't blame you. But I'm gunna insist, you only get to beat on him one at a time. And he gotta be untied first, so he has a fair chance."

From nowhere, Happosai appeared at Ranma's side. "What she said." Most of the people hadn't met Ranma as a girl, so she didn't impress them. They knew Happosai. Very few wanted to fight against him.

One large and angry man with a bo-staff didn't feel like going with that program. He stepped forward. "You gonna stop me, shrimps?" Ranma shredded the staff, while Happosai whipped the man's trousers down around his ankles.

"I think we are," Ranma and Happosai said together over the sound of laughter from the crowd, and a few murmurs of 'neko-ken?'. While Happosai kept the crowd back, Ranma went over to her father and sliced the ropes off of him with three sweeps of her claws. The murmurs of 'neko-ken' got louder, and the crowd backed up several paces.

"The life of a martial artist is fraught with peril," she said. "But now you can face it like a man." Genma glared at her through his tears.

Before things could get worse, they got worse in an entirely unexpected direction. Several policemen, drawn by the hubbub, appeared at the door with a clipboard covered in warrants. "Saotome Genma," the commander said, "you are under arrest." Genma shrieked like a child, and vanished into the umisenken. When the police and the martial artists poured into the yard, they saw only a moist panda sitting in a stand of bamboo, chewing on the tender tips.

These were Nerima police. They knew the score. Before Genma even thought of dropping his 'cute little panda' act, he was festooned with half a dozen tranquilizer darts. He reared up, roared, and fell flat on his back. He began to snore.

The police commander walked up to Soun. "This is your dojo, Tendo-san," he said. "Do you have papers allowing you to keep a panda on the premises? They're an endangered species, so there's a lot of red tape."

Soun couldn't even demonstrate ownership of the panda, let alone the right to harbor him in the middle of a populous area. The animal control wardens arrived with a large truck, and loaded the panda in. "We'll be keeping him in quarantine for a week," they said. "Then we'll get in touch with China, and see if they have any records. He'll probably end up in a zoo in Beijing. They have quite a breeding program." The chief warden gave Soun a receipt, and headed out with the truck. The martial artists followed after them, muttering.

Happosai clapped Ranma on the shoulder. "I think most of them are pretty satisfied," he said. "They wanted to get in their own licks. But they had hours and hours of watching Genma squirm for his sins, so they'll be less activist from now on."

Ranma looked down at the shriveled master. "Why did you help me, jiji?" she asked.

"I wouldn't let them destroy one of my favorite students," Happosai said. "And if they'd pushed, you might have gone into the full neko-ken. That could have ruined my happy home here with you all."

"Besides," Happosai dug his toe into the dirt and twisted it back-and-forth, "You would have fought to save your father. I didn't want to see my sweet Ranma-chan get beaten on by all those men."

Ranma looked at Happosai incredulously.

"What?" the gnome asked. "I can't appreciate you from afar any more, either?"

Ranma put her arm around Happosai's shoulders and squeezed. "Keep your hands to yourself," she said. "But thanks. It's good to have backup now and then." She headed into the house. "I don't know when Kasumi will be back, so I guess I'm the cook tonight. Let's have dinner."

oOo

In Okayama, a sacred tree was laughing its Juraian ass off to the accompaniment of a light show. Tsunami had heard a storm of prayers rising up from the direction of Tokyo, and had gone to see. That was the most powerful 'interesting times' curse she'd ever met, and it seemed to be making itself at home. Ranma had dealt with the curse for ten years. Maybe in ten more years, she'd think about getting it removed from Genma. *I wonder who else could use it*, she mused. *Washu might, but she's an 'interesting times' curse all by herself*. Then she dissolved back into laughter.

Bright Golden Crystal

Ranma and Soun were in the Tendo Dojo, watching as the priests and accountants distributed Genma's money to the merchants he'd victimized. Nobody had tried doing anything physical to Genma once he'd been tied up. That might have been the influence of the priests, but having a pair of martial artists made sure it stayed that way.

Soun was growing more and more distressed as each merchant had told Genma just what the payment was for. He *really* didn't want to know this kind of thing about his good friend.

Ranma was carving small figures in wood, using her claws unobtrusively. The Cat was awake and snickering as Genma squirmed, and Ranma wanted to keep her claws occupied. Besides, when she'd talked with Cologne, the Elder had said it was customary to make gifts for a new shield-sister.

Now all she had to do was gently keep Akane from making some kind of ... edible ... gift.

oOo

Akane wished people would back off. Ninomiya-sensei had given her a grilling over Ranma's whereabouts before Principal Kuno took her off de hook. "Dat keiki busy, busy!" he'd said with a rather nasty smile.

Then Yuka and Sayuri had started questioning her. During lunch period, rumors had seeped in about the riot at the Tendo Dojo, and nobody was leaving her alone after that. Every few minutes, another note landed on her desk; and twice, teachers had reprimanded her about it.

She wanted to hit somebody over the head with a mallet. Genma was probably the best candidate, but he was far away and busy besides. Perhaps the next person who passed her a note?

One hour forty minutes of school left and counting down. She sat and sulked as the air about her shimmered faintly green.

oOo

Nabiki sat in her classroom, but her Ice Queen façade made sure nobody bothered her. She valued knowledge. She valued control. She wanted to be in charge, so she could protect her family. Now people and circumstance were changing all around her, and there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

Ranma had come back different – more assured, more assertive, less willing to be manipulated. And strangely interesting. Very interesting, she admitted, and wasn't sure what to think of herself about it.

Her sisters had changed. Akane was less argumentative, less violent, more willing to listen. And she was *sure* she'd seen Kasumi exchanging some fairly warm looks with Kuno Tatewaki.

Damn, Kuno-baby was changing too; and he was her chief customer and play-toy.

Then there was Genma. For over a year he'd sat, manipulative and obnoxious, as one catastrophe after another came to visit Ranma. Suddenly all the catastrophes were landing on Genma, and Ranma was having smooth sailing. On the other hand, *her* father seemed to be growing a bit of spine.

Shimatta! It was going to take time to get things sorted out and back under control. At least they had a five-million-yen cushion to sit on while she did it, thanks to Genma's latest adventure.

She sat, muttering silently to herself, and didn't let even the tiniest portion of it show on her face.

oOo

Kasumi was alone in a mansion. Not totally alone – there were servants – but alone.

She didn't like it.

The servants were part of the problem. Her little sister was part of the problem. Her father was part of the problem. And she, herself, was part of the problem.

When her mother had died, and her father collapsed into himself, she'd done as best she could to keep the household going. She was twenty now. She'd been a housewife for more than half of her life, too busy for a social life. A housewife, without some of the more important benefits – someone to sleep with, someone to hold, someone to love and make love with. For a while, she'd thought she might get that with Tofu-sensei. But he'd disappeared one day without a word.

Then her youngest sister had told her she was getting married. Akane, who hated boys. Akane, who hadn't had any more dates than she, herself. Not only that, she was getting married to a hunk like Ranma. Kasumi occasionally spent bitter time scolding herself for turning Ranma down that first day – but how could she have known?

And here she was in an empty house, with servants doing the work that could have distracted her, leaving her nothing to do but think. An empty house – but an empty house with possibilities. After school, Kuno Tatewaki would return.

She knew the problems. She'd heard Akane and Ranma complain about him. But when she'd come here with the others for dinner, she'd been charmed. He liked to cook! More, he was good at it – and in a way that would let her use her heritage as a martial artist. Food and knives and graceful motions, oh my! And then he'd come with that helicopter to rescue them when all those people wanted to ... speak ... with Uncle Saotome.

This must be explored.

oOo

Kuno Tatewaki was in his classroom, feeling good. Dinner had been a success beyond his wildest dreams. His every move had been swift and sure, and then Kasumi had joined in and they had danced. Yes, Ranma-kun had it right. That had been a dance.

Then he'd rescued the Tendo sisters from an ill-mannered crowd. He'd been in the helicopter himself, helping them in. The fierce tigress Akane had thanked him. The mercenary girl Nabiki had expressed gratitude. And the domestic goddess Kasumi – she had held his hand a bit longer than necessary when he gave her a lift up from the ladder. And she had smiled.

He'd check with Ranma and Akane before he said anything – he knew he often saw affection where there was none. But Kasumi's smile was very promising.

oOo

At Saint Hebereke, Kuno Kodachi was depressed and subdued. She'd lost Ranma-sama, unless she were willing to accept the red-headed harridan as part of the deal. Her brother had lost his loves too, but he was recovering with unexpected speed and unaccustomed resilience, flirting with that older Tendo girl. Dark shadows of loneliness threatened to overcome her.

None of the other girls on the Rhythmic Gymnastics team dared approach their Captain. When she was this way, nobody could predict what would happen – rage, insane laughter, or a punishing training session. Best to leave Kodachi-san alone.

oOo

At the Cat Café, Cologne was preparing for the shield-sister ceremony. It wasn't complicated – it happened on the battlefield, often as not – but she wanted to have everything go well. Upstairs, Shampoo was preparing her gifts. They had a café to run, too. She broke off her preparations as three customers entered.

oOo

On Hakone Mountain, Kuonji Ukyo and Kuonji Konatsu were packing to return to Nerima and their restaurant. *Their* restaurant! Ukyo's father had called to tell them he'd extracted compensation from Genma, and paid off the mortgage. Married life was looking better all the time.

oOo

Ryoga was in a swamp surrounded by alligators. He hated alligators. He'd thought Mr. Green Turtle was bad, but *these* were *wild, hungry* alligators. An hour ago, several had tried eating him, and he'd beaten them up with no problems. But then uniformed men in the strangest boat he'd ever seen – it was flat, and they sat up on it on chairs, and it had a big airplane propeller on the back – had started chasing him. They were yelling something in English about "protected".

He heard the propeller-boat in the distance, headed in his direction. He quickly knocked the alligators out and slid into the swamp to hide, not knowing about the leeches.

"Damn you, Ranma, this is all your fault!"

oOo

In Minnesota, Bjorn Njalsson was at his computer making flight reservations to Tokyo for Mao and himself. He'd stay at the Outlook through the next full moon, then his brother Thorbjorn

would handle things while they went to see Ranma and Akane. A wedding between two berserks? This, he wanted to see. And Mao could translate. She'd thought the trip would be exciting.

oOo

In the evening, Akane went home to check out the territory. Their yard was a trampled mess, but there weren't any strangers in it. That was a start. She removed her shoes in the genkan.

"Tadaima!" she cried; and heard Ranma's welcoming voice from inside.

Ranma and Happosai were eating a simple meal. "Yer father's in his room," Ranma said. "The day was pretty rough on him. But he's okay, just weary."

"And you're eating dinner with Happosai?" Akane said in astonishment.

"He helped me keep th' martial artists under control, once everybody else left. He deserves dinner, at the very least." Happosai was smiling and nodding as he shoveled in the food.

"Where's your father?"

"Oh boy, that takes some explainin'. See, towards the end, the police came with warrants. They wanted to arrest him. He broke loose and tried his 'cute little panda' trick. They filled 'im full of trunk darts an' carried 'im off to Animal Quarantine."

Akane snickered. When Ranma didn't object, she guffawed. But eventually, she ran down. "What will you do?"

"They wanna ship him to the Beijing Zoo breedin' program. I couldn't let somethin' like that happen to all those poor pandas, so I'm gonna see if Cologne can get the shipment diverted once it's in China. Nerima's too hot for oyaji right now, anyway." Ranma motioned to the food. "Sit down an' have a bite. I'm an okay trail cook."

"First I have to call Kasumi and Nabiki and let them know the coast is clear."

"They over at Kuno's?" And when Akane nodded 'yes', Ranma said, "Th' three of you should prob'ly stay there tonight if Kuno'll put you up. I'm bettin' we didn't have *all* of oyaji's 'old acquaintances' here today. But me an' your father an' Happosai should be able to handle things tomorrow. An' that should take care of most the trouble."

Akane went off to see her father – he was asleep in his darkened room with a cool damp towel on his forehead – then made her phone call.

Tatewaki answered. "How are things, Akane-san?" he asked when she identified herself. In the background, Akane could hear Nabiki and Kasumi.

"The house and the people are fine, the yard is a stepped-on mess, and Genma-panda has been captured by Animal Control. They're sending him to a breeding zoo in Beijing." Tatewaki passed the news on. She heard Nabiki's chuckle, and a cheerful "Oh, my!" from Kasumi. She continued. "Ranma says there'll probably be more people tomorrow, and suggests we stay the night at your mansion."

"I thought that might be the case, and took the liberty of having the servants prepare our largest guest-room for the three of you. With all the turmoil, sisters will probably sleep better together."

"Tatewaki-kun, you are being unbelievably empathetic, and just plain *good*. Bless you!" Akane felt the beginnings of tears at the corners of her eyes. She sniffled. "I'm so sorry for hitting you the way I did!"

"But I challenged you! I would expect nothing less from my fierce tigress!"

Akane smiled through her sniffles. "Ah, Tatewaki, the whole world has changed this last month. And you and I, especially, for the better. I'm going to eat dinner with Ranma while she fills me in on the day. I'll be over in a couple hours."

Akane joined Ranma and Happosai at the table. The meal was simple, and mostly eaten, but there was still enough for her. Pickles and rice, grilled eel, and a salad which probably (if she knew Ranma) had sweetened rice vinegar for the dressing. She took some rice and followed it up with a tender morsel of eel. She was right about the salad. She sighed. It was good to get some food in her stomach (which had been gnawing on itself all day, and needed the distraction). It was unsettling to know Ranma was such a decent cook. She looked at Happosai, and realized this was not the time to discuss such matters. Ranma was watching her, and from the look on her face and the occasional twitching of her nose, was following her thoughts. She sighed again, and took another bite of eel.

"I'm sorry it ain't very fancy," Ranma said. "Let's go out for ice cream afterwards?"

Akane liked the idea of ice cream, and this particular suggestion was becoming their code-word for private time. She smiled. "Sure. Sakura, again?"

"Good ice cream, but it's a bit late in the day for that long a run. Somewhere closer?"

"You've got it."

Later, walking to the ice-cream parlor, Ranma said, "I don't think either of us'll ever make it to Yamato Nadeshiko."

"Oh," Akane replied, "I can just *see* you turning into the perfect Japanese housewife."

"Hmpf. Kasumi does that. And lookin' at her tells me how far we'd have to go. I'm not gonna go that far."

Akane's walk slowed a bit. Her head was lowered, her face pensive. Ranma slowed, and turned back to see her. "Ano" Akane said, as she came to a stop. "Do you ever wonder what it'd be like being engaged to Kasumi?"

Ranma could tell this was serious. They were nowhere near a park, but there was a low wall. She picked Akane up by the waist, and set her on it, then hopped up beside her. She put her hand on Akane's, and was silent for a while. "Kasumi's one of the dearest people I know," Ranma finally said. "But she doesn't live in the same world I do. What would we do together? Or Nabiki. If I wuz on the fight circuit, she could be my manager. But I don't want the fight circuit, and runnin' a dojo wouldn't make enough to keep her happy."

"I got the right sister. We may fight a lot, but we can fight side by side just as strong as with each other. We can be partners. D'ya see that for me with Nabiki or Kasumi? If you c'n live with me not being a perfect housekeeper, or a perfect man among men, I can live with you that way."

"As long as you don't leave the freezer door open on the ice cream. *You*, I think, already know enough not to leave the toilet seat up."

"Bitter experience, Akane, bitter experience. The panda is messy."

oOo

Wooden knives flickered through the air. Tatewaki had cooked dinner, with Kasumi coaching; now Tatewaki was teaching Kasumi the showier aspects of teppanyaki. They were using wooden knives before going to the real thing. Kasumi was juggling two knives with her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth.

Nabiki had never seen Kasumi's tongue do that. If her sister was putting forth so much effort and attention that her normal smile was absent, she was *serious*. Kasumi missed a catch; but she'd seen that coming, and moved her hand out of harm's way. Her foot swept out, caught the handle of the knife at just the right moment, and kicked it back up into the pattern. "Good!" Tatewaki said. "Consider working that into your routine!"

Damn, Nabiki thought. *Ranma should be here to see this.*

Beside her in the practice hall Kodachi sat, head down, her body lax instead of its normal taut. Nabiki couldn't tell if she were watching, or not. Her head wasn't moving, but Nabiki couldn't see her eyes. "It's wonderful to see the two of them this way," Nabiki said.

Instead of replying, Kodachi stood and walked briskly through the door. But as soon as she passed out of her brother's sight, she stumbled a bit. Then she began to run.

Nabiki had to know what was going on. She rose to follow. Kodachi had headed for her greenhouse. By the time Nabiki got there, Kodachi was settled onto the stool in front of her workbench. She was slumped over, head on her arms. Nabiki knew that posture. Her room was soundproofed to help keep secrets, and tears were one of the secrets she kept. It was lonely being the Ice Queen.

She put a gentle hand on Kodachi's shoulder, and left it there. No motions, no speech, just a touch. She felt Kodachi flinch, then hold quite still. After several minutes, Kodachi rolled her head to one side, looked up at Nabiki with one smudged eye. "Why?"

"That's a lot of questions for one word," Nabiki said. "I'll give you three answers. I won't even charge for them.

"You lived by your dreams. They've been taken away. That's why you hurt.

"I lived by my certainties. *They've* been taken away. That's why I understand. That's why I'm here. I don't hurt as bad as you do, but I hurt too." There was another stool further down the bench. Nabiki fetched it, sat down at a respectful conversational distance from Kodachi. They breathed in the scent of roses while the gymnast thought this over.

After a while, Nabiki quietly said, "None of us had a chance, really. It was all settled that first day, when Akane said 'You want to be friends?' In all his life, Ranma only had two friends, and he hadn't seen them in years. The panda has a lot to answer for. I hear you want to make him pay. Can I help?"

Kodachi looked up, then sat upright. She extended her pinky finger; Nabiki locked her pinky finger with it. "For pain and loss," Kodachi said.

"For mine, and yours, and Ranma's," Nabiki said.

"The panda must suffer," they both said, and nodded sharply in agreement.

"But no fleas," Nabiki added. "Not unless we can be sure the panda won't be coming home to roost."

oOo

After their ice cream, Ranma and Akane walked together, holding hands. They found a lonely spot and kissed good-night for a while, then Akane went back to the Kunos' and Ranma went to talk with Cologne. After perhaps an hour's discussion, she sought out the Animal Control quarantine facility.

She wrapped herself in the umisenken, and ghosted into the building. It didn't take that long to find her father – the building map had "Large Animal Facilities" marked on it. At this late hour the lights were off, and most of the animals asleep. Darkness held no problems for a cat, though some of the animal odors were distracting.

"Yo! Oyaji!" she hissed outside his cage. Snores and mutters returned. Ranma looked around and found a bin of large dog biscuits. She hefted one, and threw it between the bars of the cage. It hit Genma-panda on the nose with considerable force. The panda gave a yelp and a snort, then rose on its haunches and looked about.

"Oyaji!" she hissed again.

The bear rose to all fours and shuffled over. It grunted.

"I been checkin' 'round," Ranma said. "They know perfectly well who you are. They're takin' this chance to get rid o' you without botherin' with a trial. They're shippin' you to a breedin' zoo in Beijing, with instructions to keep hot water away from you."

The bear whimpered.

"This town's too hot for you. I made arrangements with Cologne. They're gonna divert your crate from Beijing once it reaches China. So behave yourself 'til then."

The bear whimpered again, but Ranma had silently left. There was no reply.

oOo

Friday was a low-key version of Thursday, but the visitors were much less persistent when they realized the guest of honor was no longer there. Early on, Soun had gotten one of the local priests,

one who'd been there the day before, to help explain the situation. "Genma's gone, his money's gone, the law took him away." Which was true enough as it went, even though it was the animal laws that were being invoked and the animal wardens enforcing them. By the end of the day it was starting to sound like just another repetitive chant, and the last few claimants had been wondering aloud if the priest were, perhaps, hypnotized. But they went.

Towards sunset, the sisters came home. Soun embraced them tearfully, and exclaimed how sorry he was that they'd had to go through all that trouble. He was puzzled when Kasumi blushed and giggled, and said it was no trouble at all, she'd rather enjoyed the adventure.

Ranma had been in touch with the Kuno mansion, and knew when they were returning, so she was standing there in an apron, dinner prepared and the table set. Akane helped her serve the food. There was the rice-cooker, of course – no meal is complete without rice – and chicken teriyaki. There were bowls of miso soup, mixed attractively with cut green onion and sliced carrot, and salads. And they could smell dessert in the kitchen, but they weren't sure what it was.

Kasumi was a bit flustered, knowing somebody else had been using her kitchen. But Ranma had helped her before, so she wasn't too worried. Everybody settled themselves by the table, and Ranma passed the food around.

"Oh, my, this is good!" Kasumi said.

"Since I got here, watchin' and helpin' you has put some polish on my trail-cookin'. And havin' a better sense o' smell tells me how things are developin'."

"You should study with Kasumi and Tatewaki," Nabiki said. "She's been teaching him to be a better cook, and he's been teaching her to juggle knives. It's an amazing sight, and the food's good. They've gotten even better since their first outing."

Soun looked back-and-forth between Nabiki and Kasumi. He was missing something – juggle knives? – but it certainly seemed to have put his oldest daughter in a good mood.

Ranma and Akane turned their heads, looked into each others' eyes, raised their eyebrows, and shook their heads in agreement. They turned to Kasumi. "Can we study with you, oneechan?" Akane said.

Kasumi looked taken-aback for a moment, then nodded. "Perhaps you'd have an easier time learning cooking if you spiced it up with knife-throwing," she said to Akane. "I remember how well you were doing on rhythmic gymnastics until you twisted your ankle. But you have to listen to your sensei."

Ranma and Akane both smiled, then went back to eating. Without the panda trying to take her food, Ranma was eating at a fast-but-reasonable pace. It didn't take long until everything was gone, down to the last morsel. Ranma and Akane cleared the table – "Sit down, Kasumi, *we're* doing this tonight!" – and they brought in bowls of sweet sticky rice with custard, sprinkled with coconut shavings and ginger. When they'd finished, Ranma brought out small cups, and a flask of warm sake. "It's been a rough week," she said. "A bit of sake will help us relax, without impairin' us if more trouble knocks on the door." She poured, and they all sipped quietly.

Then she stood and said, "Akane and me got things to do tomorrow, and we should talk about 'em first. Nabiki, would you mind doin' the dishes, so Kasumi can have an evenin' off?" They went

upstairs, leaving the middle sister gasping with an indignation she knew she couldn't get away with showing.

Once they got into Akane's room, Akane wanted to know why Ranma had said that.

"Acchan, just lookit the way Kasumi's been actin' with Kuno. How long you think she's gonna stay 'round the house? The rest of us are gonna haveta take up the slack. If I cook, Nabiki does the dishes and keeps the books, you handle the laundry, and we all share the cleanin', it'd come out somethin' like even. Maybe we c'n even get your father out workin' in the yard. It'd be good for him. But we can worry about the details later."

And they fell to discussing the shield-sister ceremony the coming day, until Nabiki slid open the door, somewhat more vigorously than required. "Just *why* did you mousetrap me that way?"

"Sorry, Nabiki – we didn't think to warn you." And the two explained their thoughts.

Nabiki was still simmering, but at a lower heat. "I don't like change," she said. "And if it means I have to wash dishes, that's just another thing to dislike."

"Yeah, but you been watchin' Kasumi and Tatewaki. If things keep goin' at this rate, she could be a Kuno pretty darn soon. And she'll move out, because do we want any Kunos livin' here?"

Nabiki nodded thoughtfully. "Even if we get along with some of them, there's always Principal Kuno to consider. He might come to visit."

Ranma continued. "Kasumi's been doin' most of the housework, and none of us have been complainin'. But if she moves to another house, do we got the right to complain? We're just gonna have to share the work, and be glad for her. It's easier to get used to it gently, rather'n all at once. Not to mention, if she *does* move out she'll feel better if she knows we can cope."

Akane added, with a smile, "Besides, neechan, she's going to be preoccupied even before she moves. Wanna bet?"

Nabiki shook her head. "I don't do sucker bets." They all went into Nabiki's room, so they'd be less likely to be overheard. They settled down comfortably, and began filling each other in on recent events. But for some reason, Nabiki didn't tell them about her pact with Kodachi.

oOo

Ranma, Akane, and Shampoo knelt on a rug in Cologne's room. Ranma was wearing the clothes she'd worn when she rescued Shampoo. Shampoo had been in her cursed form, and her clothes weren't available – she was nude. Akane wore the garb of an Amazon warrior, which Shampoo had gifted her with before the ceremony. They were in a triangle, facing each other. Cologne stood behind them, also in the garb of a warrior. Incense smoke rose from a small brazier.

Cologne held a sharp dagger high in both hands. "Artemis, Goddess of the Amazons, hear our words, consecrate our weapons, mark our deeds."

She lowered the dagger to waist-height, still held upright. "Blood, life, and death – three of the most powerful things we know, all found on the battlefield. Only honor, love, and friendship are strong enough to let us withstand them.

"Ranma, Shampoo, Akane – you have met in battle, fought together, fought against one another. Now, Ranma, you have saved Shampoo's life and wish to join her as shield-sister; and Akane, you wish to join them both." She raised the dagger again, moved it in a crescent. "Owl-eyed Athene, Goddess of Wisdom, guide their thoughts and words."

She stood behind Ranma. "Saotome Ranma, do you wish to join with Shampoo and Akane in shield-sisterhood, to defend and support one another in battle and in all of life?"

"I do."

Cologne reached forward with the dagger and slashed a quick cut on the back of Ranma's left hand. "Then let your lifeblood flow."

She stood behind Shampoo. "Shampoo of the Amazons, great-granddaughter of mine, do you wish to join with Ranma and Akane in shield-sisterhood, to defend and support one another in battle and in all of life?"

"I do."

Cologne reached forward with the dagger and slashed the back of Shampoo's left hand. "Then let your lifeblood flow."

She stood behind Akane. "Tendo Akane, you come unblooded in our battles; but Ranma and Shampoo will gladly have you join them in shield-sisterhood. Will you join them, to defend and support one another in battle and in all of life?"

"I ... I do."

Again Cologne cut with the dagger. "Then let your lifeblood flow." She took Ranma's hand and Shampoo's and brought the cuts together. "Let your lifebloods flow, and mingle." She did the same with Ranma and Akane, Shampoo and Akane.

Now Cologne turned, set down the dagger, and took up a small pot of unguent. "You are all strong in battle. But there are things even the strongest warrior cannot do for herself. Hold forth your left hands, palm up." And she put a daub of unguent in each palm. "The palm of your hand cannot touch the back of your hand. You cannot soothe your own wounds. But you can soothe one another's."

Ranma spread unguent on Shampoo's cut, and she spread unguent on Ranma's in return; then they both turned to Akane and spread unguent on her wound. She, in turn, spread her unguent on theirs. Then Cologne wrapped gauze bandages over each girl's hand, and tied them off. They put their hands together in the middle of their triangle, and Cologne wrapped them all at once.

"Rise, sisters," Cologne said. "Rise, and stand together before gods and humanity alike. What blood has joined, let nothing short of bitter death break apart." She reclaimed her dagger, moved it in its crescent once again, then held it high. "Artemis, mark our words and deeds."

Then Cologne worked a quick 'splitting cat hairs' so she could hug all of them at once – something that would normally be impossible with her short arms. "My grand-daughters!" she said happily.

Shampoo donned a simple blue-silk yukata, and they all knelt formally around Cologne's table. "Cologne swept out of the room, and soon returned with a simple feast – bread and salt, plum wine, tea, and rice. She stood at the fourth side of the table, bread held high in both hands. "In the days when the Amazons rode the plains of central Asia, we had a custom. Hospitality was offered, and accepted, with bread and salt, and wine. Three thousand years later, we keep this custom."

She took the loaf, and broke it into four pieces. She sprinkled a pinch of salt on each, then poured wine into five cups. The bread and wine was passed around, so each had a section of loaf, and a cup. They all ate; they all drank. Then Cologne poured a thin stream of wine from the fifth cup into the brazier. There was a hiss of steam and a plume of sweet-smelling smoke. "So be it," she said, and raised her cup to the heavens. "Let the wine and the incense be sweet in the nostrils of the gods, and may they support us in our resolution and our deeds."

Cologne dropped her formality, and sat. "Bread and salt and wine are for ritual," she said. "Tea and rice are for sustenance. Let us eat."

The tea and rice were simple, but the finest that could be had, and all the girls were so choked up by the significance of what they'd done that they had very little appetite. It was sufficient. They ate little, spoke less. Cologne was genuinely happy. When they finished, Cologne stood, and made shooing motions.

"Go. Get out of here. This is your day – do with it as you will." So they went upstairs, and changed into everyday Japanese clothing, and went out the door into the light.

All three were still very emotional. For Ranma it was a foreshadowing of his wedding a few weeks in the future. For Shampoo it was the end of one dream of Ranma, the beginning of another, and a sister to share the new dream with. And for Akane it was another sister, and a grandmother, *and* a foreshadowing of her wedding. She broke into a run. "Ice cream!" she laughed.

They ran and ran, laughing, sometimes going down the street, sometimes skipping over the rooftops, occasionally jumping through the trees. Akane led the trio. She knew where she was heading. Panting, they came to a stop outside of Sakura. "This is where we went, a week ago, when I chased Ranma out of the café," she said. "Golly, they're good!"

They went in, and crowded up to the case. "There," Akane pointed. "That cinnamon is fine." Shampoo had a bowl of cinnamon. Akane chose vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce, pineapple chunks, and a cherry on the top. And Ranma had a hot fudge sundae. If it was good last weekend, why not another dose?

They sat in a booth. The run had broken their solemn mood; they laughed, and chattered. After half an hour they each got a cone, and left in a happy jostling mass. The owner had been watching; he no longer knew what to think. *It may or may not be a waste*, he thought, *but those are some prime young women*.

As they passed a mailbox, it began to change and grow into a very strange figure of a woman wearing a body-suit made of postage stamps. "Tsubasa?" Ranma asked. "What in the world are you *up* to?"

The woman pulled apart her bodice, revealing a black star. A black beam shot out, and hit Ranma. "I *will* have your pure heart!" she cried. "Postal!"

Akane and Shampoo were stunned for a moment as Ranma screamed and convulsed, then fell to the ground. A bright golden crystal came from her chest, and began moving up the beam towards the woman, shimmering as it went.

Black Cat

As Ranma screamed and fell to the ground, Akane and Shampoo shook off their surprise and attacked – Akane to the right, Shampoo to the left. From behind there was another scream, a very angry one, and Ranma-neko leaped forward as well. Suddenly the strange Postal creature was surrounded, with maces coming from one side, a mallet from another, and sharp, sharp claws from the front.

Postal leaned to one side and avoided the mallet; but moved into Shampoo's range and was struck high and low with maces. Since they were coming from opposite directions, this flipped her legs from beneath her, and she fell hard on her left side. Ranma's claws raked across her side, gouging pieces out of her hip. Even as Postal landed, the pieces of hip were slithering across the street towards her; once they got close, they jumped through the air and rejoined their mistress. Shampoo's mace had broken Postal's right arm – but even before she landed, it straightened out, and was good again. Postal leaped into the air and counterattacked, throwing razor-sharp postcards, trying to break past Shampoo to claim the crystal floating in midair. This time, Ranma's claws took the lower portion of a leg off, and both Shampoo and Akane missed their strikes; but they dodged the postcards, having had experience with Ryoga's bandannas.

"Monster not alive!" Shampoo shouted. "Just mailbox somebody use alchemy on! No ki at all!" And she drove back in, throwing one mace at the creature's stomach, then when it doubled over, getting its head with a two-handed swipe of the other. Postal's head was ripped off, hit the wall of a drugstore above the display window, and bounced into the street – then flew up, rejoined the neck, and healed back in place.

Postal had somehow managed to avoid every strike of the mallet. A blue-green aura shimmered around Akane. "Postal no baka!" she howled, and swung again. She missed, but drove the transformed postbox towards Ranma-neko. Ranma took off Postal's left hand, and it bounced on the street – but this time, Akane was ready. "Try *this* then!" she bellowed as her mallet came down on the returning hand.

The creature screamed. "Aaiiiii – postal postal POSTAL!" and the 'hand' turned into a carved-off slice of postbox. It stopped scuttling back to its mistress, and lay motionless in the street. Akane and Shampoo looked at it. Ranma kept on attacking.

Now that they knew the trick, Shampoo concentrated on driving the creature towards Ranma-neko while Akane played whack-a-mole with the severed bits. In less than ten seconds, Postal lay on the ground whimpering "postal postal postal ..." with no arms and legs at all. Shampoo smashed her mace into its face, and while its vision was obscured, Akane delivered a tremendous blow to the black star on its bosom. And the 'woman' transformed into a tattered remnant of a postbox, lying silent and leaking letters. The crystal hovered in the air. Ranma-neko prowled around the box, looking for her enemy, hoping for more of a fight. Akane stood panting, then sat with a loud "whooff" on the curb, going slack as a berserk often does after the fight. Her mallet disappeared.

Ranma-neko looked around. Enemy gone – and that lap looked familiar. She trotted over, butted her shoulder up against Akane's side, and curled on her lap, purring. Akane put her arms around

Ranma and slumped against her. Shampoo stowed away her mace with a look of fierce satisfaction, then looked about. Not much property damage, and all the bystanders had gotten out of range as quickly as they could. A good, swift battle.

In the street, a withered seed-pod emerged from the side of the postbox, fell to the ground, and broke open. A dark mist emerged, took spectral form for a moment, then dissipated.

"Quickly!" said a woman's voice. "Put the crystal gently against her chest. It's the only way to save her."

Nobody was there, but the voice came from the direction of a nearby Toyota; and Shampoo saw the glint of eyes beneath. She leaped into the air, twisted as she flew over the car, and came down nearly horizontal, toes and left hand taking the impact while her right hand swept beneath the car. There was a startled yowl, and Shampoo found herself holding a black cat by the scruff of its neck – a black cat with a golden crescent moon on its forehead.

"Aiyah," Shampoo said. "Moon on forehead? Amazon legend say Moon Cat belong to Goddess, able talk. You talk, tell me use crystal? Tell more!" She shook the cat gently. The cat sweatdropped.

Quickly, the black cat decided. "Take the crystal, hold it against your friend's chest over her heart, and she'll re-absorb it. Those creatures capture people's soul essences and take them to their master for use in evil spells. If your friend doesn't get hers back, she'll die!"

Shampoo knew cats. This animal was speaking truth. She brought the crystal to Ranma and Akane. Akane scratched Ranma-neko's shoulder; she purred, and rolled to show her tummy and chest. Shampoo put the crystal over her heart. It sank slowly into Ranma, who stilled and stretched, and spoke. "Akane? I'm so tired ..." and fell asleep.

"She'll be fine after a couple hours' rest," the cat said. "Now could you put me down?"

"Only if Cat-san promise not run away. We need talk."

"Let's talk somewhere else. People are already coming back to see what happened. Pretty soon the police will be here. Would you enjoy telling policemen why you were beating up a mailbox?" The cat smirked. This issue had come up in her life before.

Shampoo set the cat down. "Akane tired. Put Ranma on Shampoo's back, you take cat. We get moving." Akane lifted Ranma onto Shampoo; Ranma wriggled a bit closer, then went thoroughly back to sleep with her arms snuggled around Shampoo's shoulders. Akane took the cat and they headed away, dodging around gawkers and pedestrians, avoiding a line towards Nerima just in case somebody was paying notice. After ten minutes and several kilometers of jinking down side-streets and leaping the occasional wall or roof, they found a small park and settled on a bench. Shampoo set Ranma down, then she and Akane sat either side of her. Ranma leaned against Akane and gave a delicate snore. The black cat jumped into Shampoo's lap.

"You know this monster, Cat-san?" Shampoo asked. "This first time we meet one."

"The monster is called a *daimohn*. They've been showing up for several weeks now in Juuban – I'm advisor to a group that's battling them. I must say, I've never seen one taken down as fast as you three did."

"Monster stupid, get in fight with Amazons. Amazon womens too, too good fighters."

"The red-haired girl," the cat said. "How could she keep fighting? Once a daimohn takes somebody's heart crystal, they collapse."

"Ranma has two souls," Akane said, "human and cat. The monster got her human soul. That upset the cat soul, and it's a deadly fighter." A pleased and surprised expression crossed the cat's face.

"Look," said the cat, "I think we should try working together. My name is Luna, but I'm only an advisor. I have to check with my Princess first. Is there some way I can get in touch with you?"

"Visit Cat Café in Nerima – is one place we meet. Can make at 9 in evening tomorrow?"

"I'll be there. Even if we don't team up, there are things you should know."

"Is good. Shampoo will be seeing you then, Shampoo my name. This Akane, and sleeping one is Ranma. We shield-sisters."

The cat bowed to each in turn, as much as a cat could bow, and jumped lightly to the ground. She looked back over her shoulder. "Until tomorrow," she said as she walked off at a dignified pace.

As Luna headed towards a street-corner, Shampoo spoke quietly to Akane. "Take care of Ranma, and Shampoo clothes," she said. Once the black cat was out of sight, Shampoo darted to a water-fountain, splashed herself, and shrank into her cursed form. She scampered towards the corner Luna had gone around.

Akane gathered the clothes, settled herself and Ranma a bit more comfortably, and relaxed. This wasn't how she'd visualized a quiet afternoon in the park with Ranma, but it wasn't bad, not bad at all. Then her eyes widened a bit, and a grin started up. "Whoa! *This* time, *I* saved **Ranma!** Yatta!" Not bad? Her day was complete!

She looked around. It was a small park – a couple benches, a flowerbed, and several trees. This late in the year only the chrysanthemums were blooming, but they made a bright display. The trees had leaves of yellow, bronze, and red. A few early-fallen leaves rattled across the pavement in the breeze. The air was brisk, and Luna had said "a couple hours". Akane sorted out Shampoo's clothes, and draped them unobtrusively over Ranma and herself to keep that little extra bit of warmth. Then she smiled down at the smaller girl whose head was in her lap.

I guess I've come to terms with the curse, she thought. I love Ranma either way. But I can hardly wait until we're married, and Ranma can be a man for me. On the bench, Ranma's nostrils twitched. But in girl form, the message wasn't urgent enough to rouse her.

oOo

"**Amazons?**" Rei said. "Where do we get Amazons in Japan?"

"The girl who said it was the tallest one, the one with purple hair," Luna replied. "She looked Chinese, and had a Mandarin accent."

Ami fiddled with the Mercury computer. She read a bit, then looked up. "The original Amazons were nomads on the steppes of Asia. We get the stories from the Greeks, but horse nomads could have made it to western China easily enough. There are mountains, so they probably wouldn't have gone further east. And there are still rumors coming out of Qinghai province."

"That might account for one Amazon," Luna said. "But the middle girl was pure Japanese. And the small girl had red hair. I don't have the faintest idea where *she* came from."

Usagi snagged another cookie from the diminishing pile. "They took out a daimohn," she said through a mouthful of crumbs. "Worry about the details later."

"That was the fastest daimohn I've seen," Luna noted. "It had the redhead's heart crystal five seconds after the seed activated. And it was jumping around and throwing razor-sharp postcards."

"I wish we could have been there, but we had a daimohn of our own," Minako said. "It's a good thing the Mercury computer said there might be trouble in Shinjuku ward. That way we at least had Luna there as an observer."

"We weren't needed. Those three girls said they'd never seen a daimohn before, but they'd figured out how to fight it in ten seconds, and beaten it in another ten. I've never seen anything like it. Those girls were **fast**."

"Were they powerful?" Makoto asked with raised eyebrow. "Did they have special attacks?"

"It all happened so fast ... I don't know. I'd guess they don't have as much power as we do, but they're a lot faster. The tall one with purple hair, her name was Shampoo, was using a pair of Chinese maces. The second had black hair and looked kind of like Ami, and she had a glowing mallet. They said her name was Akane. And the redhead, she was barehanded. But she was slicing off pieces of daimohn like she had razor claws a foot long."

"Wait a minute," Ami said as she continued taking notes. "The redhead was fighting? But I thought the daimohn had her heart crystal?"

"The redhead's name was Ranma, and Akane said she had two souls – Cat, and Human. And maybe the daimohn took the human soul, but that just got the Cat mad. When we returned the heart crystal she started talking, then went to sleep. While she was fighting, she was just hissing and snarling."

"Cat soul?" asked Artemis.

"I didn't get many details," admitted Luna. "I wanted to check with the Princess before I said too much. So I set up a meeting tomorrow. It's in Nerima. Guess where."

"Ano?" Artemis said.

"The Cat Café."

"I approve," Artemis said.

"And I approve too," Usagi agreed, showing a hint of Princess Serenity. "Luna and Artemis, go meet with these Amazons. Give them communicators so they can get in touch with you. But they're awfully free with information, so don't tell them about the Senshi."

"I've already mentioned Juuban. They'll probably guess. The Chinese girl took one look at me and knew I was a moon cat."

"They can guess. Just don't let them *know*."

"Yes, my liege."

Serenity added, "Could you do a fire-reading on them, Rei?" Then Usagi took the last cookie. "I'll read your manga while you're doing it."

"Just one *minute* there, odango atama!" Rei flared.

"Awww, Rei"

Outside the window, a small pink cat turned to leave. It would be a long walk back to Nerima.

oOo

When Ranma awoke, she didn't remember the fight. "It was great!" Akane enthused. "Shampoo drove it towards you, you sliced it in chunks, and I finished off the chunks with my mallet. It was over in half a minute."

"I hope I was wrong about it bein' Tsubasa ..."

"A talking moon cat named Luna told us it was something called a daimohn, and daimohns steal souls. But when it got your human soul, the cat took over."

"Talkin' moon cats? Akane, that's weird even for Nerima. And this's Shinjuku. Where do we get talkin' moon cats in Japan?"

"Juuban, apparently."

Ranma sat up, looked around. It was coming on towards sunset, and the lights were lit. "Hey, it's just the two of us. Not that I'm complainin', mind you, but where'd Shampoo go? It's evening. How long have I been out?"

"Notice the extra layer of clothing helping keep us warm? She's in her cursed form, following the moon cat. She left me to take care of you and her clothing. The moon cat said you'd need a few hours sleep. You've been out of it maybe two and a half hours, so she was right."

Ranma kissed Akane on the cheek. "Thanks for watchin' over me. It's gettin' late, we'd better head for the Cat Café and then on home." They gathered up Shampoo's clothing into a neat bundle, and jogged off towards Nerima.

oOo

"Tadaima!" Ranma announced as she took off her shoes and stepped into slippers. Nobody welcomed her. The house was dimly lit.

In the living room she found Soun and a half-full bottle of sake. "Where is everybody else, Tendo-san?" she inquired.

"Nobody here ..." came the slurred plaint. "They took Genma away. Kasumi and Nabiki went over to the Kuno place. Akane's been gone all day. You've been gone all day." The Tendo patriarch went into a fit of tears that seemed all the more sincere for their lack of theatrics.

Ranma sat next to him on the sofa. "Now, Tendo-ojisan, I'm back. Akane should be here soon, because she was chasing me. Kasumi and Nabiki probably don't plan on moving to the Kuno mansion tonight. Oyaji, well, I'm letting him cool down a bit. Nerima is too hot for him. But I've arranged things once he reaches China, so he'll be back in a few weeks."

Soun reached for the bottle with a tearful smile. "I hope everybody gets back soon. I don't like being alone. It's been years since Kimiko left me" He threw back a shot of sake, and looked sadly at the portrait in the family shrine.

Ranma *really* didn't know what to do. So she sat beside the Tendo patriarch, and said nothing. *He don't want to be alone*, Ranma thought. *I can do that*. She reached out to the gentle side of her Cat, and began purring quietly. *Maybe this will help?*

The door slammed open, and two sets of eyes turned towards it. Akane came stomping in, the volume of the stomps dropping as she changed into slippers. "Ranma! You were catting around with Shampoo all day!"

"Now Akane, didn't I buy you ice cream? An' I let you beat on the pieces I sliced off that monster. Don't let's make a fuss, because I don't think your father is up to a fuss."

Akane shifted gears instantly, as she hurried to her father's side. "Oh, Daddy, what's wrong?" She saw her father looking at the shrine.

"Everybody went away," Soun said mournfully.

"Kasumi and Nabiki are over at Kuno's," Ranma said quietly.

"We're home now, Daddy. But it's time for you to go to bed." Akane got her shoulder under her father's arm, and began helping him towards his room. "Be useful," she said to Ranma. "Get daddy a cold compress."

Ranma brought the compress to the door of Soun's room. Akane took it, and closed the door. "I'll talk with *you* later!" she said to Ranma. From inside Ranma could hear her voice, low and soothing. Akane began to sing a children's lullaby. After perhaps ten minutes, she came out and quietly slid the door shut behind her.

"Mother used to sing me to sleep with that song," she said with a gleam of tears in her eyes.

"I never realized how *much* my father means to him, how *much* you three mean to him," Ranma said.

They went quietly upstairs to Akane's room.

"This pretendin'-to-fight thing isn't as much fun as I thought it would be."

Akane nodded. "We better keep it up until we're married, or they'll throw some ridiculous circus of a wedding. But after that, we should let them know. I think daddy wants grandchildren just as bad as your mother, even if he isn't as noisy about it."

"Heck, Akane, we can't have children while we're still in school!"

"Well, I know that, silly! But we can give them a bit more hope for the future."

They were silent for a while, as the two comforted each other with their presence. The stillness was broken by a gentle cry of "tadaima" from downstairs. Kasumi and Nabiki were home.

Ranma and Akane went downstairs to shush the sisters. They were both cheerful, and smelled very interesting – Kasumi of food, sweat, and just a bit of lust, Nabiki of roses and just a bit of lust.

"My!" said Ranma with a smirk. "Are you glad to see me, or is that afterglow?" Kasumi smiled, and laughed the purest laugh they'd ever heard from her. Nabiki blushed faintly.

They all went upstairs to Nabiki's room for a quiet talk.

"Daddy was really depressed tonight, with an empty house," Akane began.

"We can't let the parents find out we're gettin' married," Ranma continued. "They'd put on a circus. But we'll let 'em know once it's done. It might make 'em all feel better for the future, and that'll make life easier on everybody."

"Speaking of empty houses, how did you two do over at the Kunos' tonight?" Akane looked at her sisters.

"Slaving over a hot griddle," Kasumi said. "And Tachi-kun has moved me to blunted metal knives." She giggled. "Once I've had more practice, I think I'll challenge Ukyo to a cook-off."

Ranma and Akane looked at each other. *Have we created a monster?*

Nabiki held her hands in a minimizing gesture. "Oh, just a bit of planning and plotting. What were *you* two doing?"

"We fought something called a daimohn, and met a talking cat. And Ranma doesn't remember a bit of it."

"It's a pity – the way Akane tells it, that was quite a battle. We were just comin' out of the ice cream shop when I was jumped by a rogue mailbox. The next thing I remember was wakin' up a bit before sunset." Ranma pouted. "You're gonna have to come with us from now on, Nabiki. Next time, I want a video. I can't let the *Cat* get all the fun."

After breakfast the next day, Kasumi gave Ranma a letter from America. "This came in yesterday's mail while you were out."

It was one of those fold-over air letters. Ranma slit the flaps with a careful claw, and unfolded the paper. "It's from Bjorn-sensei," she said. "He and Mao are comin' to Tokyo. He wants to evaluate Akane, and Mao will be his translator. She's one of the were-cats from Bjorn's club."

Ranma smiled nostalgically. "When the moon rose and all the Weres turned, Mao scared me into the neko-ken. There musta been a dozen were-cats in the club, an' Mao was the closest. That's what got Bjorn-sensei interested in trainin' me. A month later, I was okay with cats and got a chance to apologize to Mao. Bjorn's a wise old bear, and I got a lot to thank him for. Maybe he can smooth Akane's path some, too."

"This is the fellow I talked with on the phone?" Nabiki asked.

"Yep. You'll like him. An' I'm lookin' forward to seein' him meet Cologne. They're both Elders, in their own ways, and heirs to thousands of years of martial tradition. Never met two people more sure of themselves. Gonna be a clash of titans. Cologne likes rules, and Bjorn doesn't."

Soun frowned at Ranma. "Does this mean my little girl is going to grow ki-claws?"

"Naw. Bjorn's interested in that mallet of hers. I got claws 'cause of the Cat. Akane'll prob'ly get better control over her mallet."

"I think we all want to meet him," Kasumi said. "I'm going to cook a fine dinner for him. And maybe, if Tachi-kun and I are trained enough by then, *we* can cook him a dinner too."

Ranma's thoughts quirked into a grin. *She's sayin' we. It's weird, Kasumi and me havin' the same pet name for Kuno.* Aloud, she said "The first dinner you cooked with Tachi-kun was a good beginnin'. I'll be glad to help you eat one you think is up to your standards."

Kasumi looked at her father and smiled sweetly. "You'll like our cooking, daddy. You better come too."

Akane and Ranma worked on homework that morning, and Nabiki on homework and the household accounts. After lunch, Nabiki and Akane stayed home to keep Soun company. Kasumi did the dishes, then went over to Kuno's. Ranma spoke with Akane. "I gotta get a debriefing from Shampoo," she told Akane. "You told me what you saw, now I want to hear what she saw. I should be back in a couple hours. Then we can go over in the evening, after dinner. I wanna meet that cat. Take care o' your father."

Akane nodded. "Until we get Genma back, we shouldn't leave father alone. It's hard to believe your father is actually good for something, but there you have it."

"I s'pose family honor should be insulted, but we *do* gotta get used to bein' honest with each other..."

Akane spread her hands and shrugged. The left side of her mouth quirked upwards for an instant. They winked at each other, then Ranma was out the door.

That evening, Ranma and Akane reached the Cat Café around 8 p.m. Cologne and Shampoo were finishing up the evening rush; they settled the newcomers in a booth, brought tea, and continued their work. They were busier than usual, because Mousse was nowhere to be seen. In a free moment, Cologne plopped down on the bench next to them. "Either of you want a job as waitress?" she asked half-seriously.

Ranma had worked at the Cat Café during the Phoenix Pill affair, and considered the question more than half-seriously. When Cologne was back to the kitchen, she said, "I dunno, Akane. We don't have much money. Maybe we could earn enough for a bit of a honeymoon? Cologne would have to advance our salary, but she trusts us these days."

"We only have two weeks. Let's talk with her after this meeting with Luna."

Ranma sighed, cradled her hands, and leaned her chin on them. "M'birthday's a week after this comin' Friday. We'll have to get out of school that day, go down to the City Offices, and do the paperwork. I found oyaji's signed permission for me in his stuff, and Nabiki found your permission in the family papers. Got your hanko ready?"

"Yep," Akane said. "Ready to go. That certificate is going to get stamped to a fare-thee-well." She leaned forward towards Ranma, chin on hands, and fluttered her lashes at her. "But I'd feel better if we could get a religious ceremony too."

"There's a priest in Okayama who's done well by me so far. Maybe we can arrange something. Maybe we can even get the parents in on the ceremony, as long as they don't know ahead of time what's going to happen." They sat quietly, chins on hands, smiling at one another.

Shampoo came over and sat with them for a moment. "Aiyah!" she said. "Busy day. Do what great-grandmother said – come help waitress with me!" The restaurant was getting ready to close, so Ranma got up and started cleaning tables. After a moment, Akane did too.

They'd finished the dishes, hung up the 'Closed' sign, and lowered the shades. It was 9 p.m., and as Shampoo went to lock the door she heard a scratching noise. She opened the door instead, and saw Luna on the sidewalk. "Come in, Luna-san, Amazons glad to see you."

Luna walked in, followed by a white Moon Cat. Shampoo gestured to Cologne. "Honored moon cats, this my great-grandmother Cologne, Matriarch of the Amazons. Honored Matriarch, this black cat named Luna, moon cat who help us yesterday."

Luna bowed respectfully. She indicated her companion with a paw. "Honored Amazons, my companion is Artemis, also an advisor in the battle against the daimohns."

Cologne hopped down from her stick, knelt by Artemis. "The chief deity of the Amazons is Artemis, goddess of the moon. Might you be related?"

But before Artemis could say anything, Cologne's eyes swiveled to the door. So did Ranma's. They had a very bad feeling. A fat slate-grey cat walked in, and brought the feeling with it.

"Kwan Yin, mother of mercy!" Cologne said as she moved into a guarding stance. Ranma was down on all fours, hissing. Ranma and the new cat crouched low in their forequarters and circled slowly around one another with frowns, watching carefully for any suspicious moves.

Artemis brushed his forehead with the back of a paw and looked heavenward. "*Just* what we need!"

Luna jumped between Ranma and the grey cat. "You, Rhett Butler! You behave yourself!" She turned to Ranma. "His dramatic entrances can be somewhat – overdone." And she frowned at the white cat. "Be polite, Artemis."

The grey cat sat, and smirked at Ranma. Ranma raised her forequarters, and looked down her nose at him. Then she turned her back on him, shrugged her shoulders, and rejoined the others by the table.

Luna sighed. "The grey cat is Rhett Butler. He's one of the Seven Great Youma. Despite that, he's never harmed people that I know of; and he's saved my tail several times, once literally. He's appointed himself my bodyguard. He understands speech. I think he can talk, but I've never caught him at it." She looked at Rhett Butler. He sat there with 'who, me?' written all over him.

Cologne collected herself. "Ah, I am remiss. As host to this meeting, I should offer refreshments. Honorable cats, is there anything you would like?"

"A bit of tuna would be welcome," Artemis said.

"I like tuna also," Luna added, "but Rhett Butler prefers liver."

"Shampoo, would you join me in the kitchen? Cookies for our human contingent, and their tea is going cold. A pitcher of ice water, and some cups and bowls, too."

Soon they returned, and for a short while there was the happy sound of eating. But a cup of tea went astray, and soaked Ranma. "*Uff da!*" he said in a low and disgusted voice. "When I'm comfortable bein' a guy, cold water chases me. Now I'm gettin' comfortable bein' a gal, and the hot water starts in." Fortunately, he was wearing his Chinese silks, so he could adjust the waist for comfort.

"Uff da?" Cologne asked. "I know at least ten languages, but that isn't from any of them."

"In Minnesotan, it means 'Why me, Kami-sama, why me?' Kinda."

Luna and Artemis were looking at Ranma in astonishment. "You're a *magical girl*?"

Ranma winced. "I'm a guy, mostly! It's a Jusenkyo curse. Cold water turns me into a girl, hot water into a guy again. But I was born a guy."

Cologne drew her authority as Matriarch about her. "This is getting out of control. With monsters showing up, we don't have time for that. I'll introduce the Amazon contingent, then you, Lunasan, can introduce yourself and your friends."

She pointed to Ranma. "This is Saotome Ranma. When he was young, he learned the Neko-ken. This gave him the soul of a cat, a berserker rage, and long, sharp claws. Later, when he was near my Amazon village in China, he fell into the Pools of Sorrow. This gave him the ability to turn into a girl with the application of cold water. As Matriarch of the Amazons, I'd not call that a

curse. Recently, his cat and human souls learned cooperation. He's one of the best martial artists on Earth today."

She nodded to Akane. "She is Tendo Akane, Ranma's fiancée and a powerful martial artist in her own right. She, too, is a berserk. In her case, this manifests as a glowing mallet filled with ki-force."

"And this is my great-granddaughter Shampoo, best warrior of her generation from our village. She's learned enough hidden-weapons style to carry several maces, a sword, and a few other weapons even when she seems unarmed." Shampoo produced a sword, then made it vanish again. "She, too, fell into the Pools of Sorrow."

"The three of them are newly joined as shield-sisters. As you have seen, honored Luna, they make a formidable team."

"I am three hundred years old, heir to three thousand years of Amazon tradition and learning, and a fair fighter myself."

"That's all very well," Artemis muttered, "but I've been around for over ten thousand years."

Luna whacked him with her tail. "And you slept through most of them."

Artemis sniffed. "Of course I did. I'm a cat."

"Honored Matriarch," Luna said, "Artemis and I were advisors to the Queen of the Moon Kingdom, ten thousand years ago. When the Kingdom fell, we were sent into a deep slumber, to awaken when the Princess of the Moon was reborn. We're not warriors – we served during peace. We do have the equivalent of your hidden-weapons technique, however." Luna flipped in the air, and a small communicator fell on the table beneath her. She batted it over to Cologne with her paw. "This will let us contact one another."

"When the Princess re-awakened, we were faced with an invasion of youma trying to conquer the earth. We beat them back, defeated them and their mistress, and sealed them away. Rhett Butler was one of the most powerful youma. But he took a liking to me, and since he didn't fight against us, he wasn't sealed away with the others. He's like Ranma – he has two souls, two bodies, and a berserker rage with claws. One of his souls is cat, the other youma. His other body is much larger, a terrifying combination of human and cat."

Cologne lifted the communicator, turned it over, opened it up. "What's on the other end of the communicator?" she asked. "There must be more than three cats. Who defeated the youma? What other warriors does your princess command?"

"I'm sorry," Luna said. "My princess ordered me not to say. She thinks you're a bit too open with information."

Cologne looked innocent. "Your princess? That would be Usagi, would it not?"

Ranma chirped up. "Does Ami really look like Akane?"

Artemis and Luna sat there blank-faced. Rhett Butler took another bite of liver. Of the three, Rhett Butler carried off nonchalance the best.

"We're warriors," Cologne said dryly. "When danger appears, and a possible alliance, we investigate. Our youth have been taught the ways of war. Your princess and her court have not. Your security is very weak.

"Now, honored cats, shall we speak freely? Or would you rather return to the Azabu Hikawa Shrine, so your princess can speak for herself?"

A Grey and Quiet World

The table at the Cat Café was crowded, and covered with scraps of paper. Akane was cross-eyed from an excess of information, but Shampoo was paying attention and Ranma was positively lapping it up; they both were in battle-computer mode. Rhett Butler was asleep under a table at the far side of the room, with residues of liver and milk on his whiskers. Luna and Artemis were on the table, looking over details in the notes, and Cologne was talking with Sailor Moon by communicator.

That had been rough. Luna and Artemis hadn't enjoyed telling their Princess that security was completely blown, especially after they'd let Cologne and the others know Serenity didn't think highly of the *Amazons'* security. But at least it was blown by potential allies.

"You seem," Cologne said, "to have three levels of enemy – daimohns, witches, and the mastermind behind them. And they call themselves 'Death Busters'. Not a pleasant name."

"I'm afraid so," Sailor Moon said, her voice more clear than such a small speaker should be able to handle.

"Find the mastermind."

"We've been *trying*," Sailor Moon said, with a look of annoyance.

Cologne snorted. "The daimohns are cannon fodder. They aren't alive, and they don't know much. That leaves the witches. Don't let the witches escape – capture one. Question her."

"How?"

Ranma got a warped look on his face. "The witches have all been female? Send Happosai." But then he began to smile. "He sure can distract *me* when *I'm* in girl mode. And I'm a better fighter than those witches, betcha!" He began to laugh. "Hey Moon, you could deal with worse. Happosai may not be reliable, but he's sure predictable! An' he's durable enough you can use your big guns on the witch he's attached to."

"Won't that hurt him?" Sailor Moon asked, with a look of concern.

Ranma smiled. "If you got Happosai on your team, you won't *mind* hurtin' him. No girl would."

"And you know this how?"

Ranma poured cold water over his arm, pulled down her eyelid, stuck out her tongue, and gave Sailor Moon the red-eye. "Biidahhhh! Didn't you believe the cats when they told you?"

Moon looked at Ranma in annoyance. "Are you related to my friend Rei?"

Ranma shuddered. "For the sake of the world, I sincerely hope my father has no other offspring."

Cologne smiled an evil smile. "Heh. You won't even have to use torture to make the witches talk – just leave them in a room with Happosai."

Sailor Moon gulped. "What is he, some kind of tentacle monster?"

"Nah, the tentacle monster is named Taro. He wouldn't be any use, except maybe to chase Happy away." Ranma put her hand about a meter above the table. "Happosai is short, bald on top with curly white hair around the back and sides, and three hundred years old. He's a grandmaster dirty old man with an underwear fetish."

Cologne made a warding gesture. "Let's save him for emergencies." Then she turned to other matters. "We can't help each other until we know each other better. We have to get together. Akane, can we use the dojo for a meeting next Saturday?"

"I don't see why not."

"Then, Sailor Moon, this is what I suggest. Njalsson Bjorn, a master of the bear-claw, is coming to Nerima to evaluate our two berserks. Ranma and Akane have just joined with Shampoo as shield-sisters – I will have to evaluate them for Amazon training. Could you send your best strategist, your best brawler, and at least one cat, to join in the evaluations? In return, Shampoo can be with the rest of you to help defend Juuban. She's an excellent strategist, brawler, *and* cat."

In the communicator, Sailor Moon was seen looking to either side. "Ami? Makoto? how does that sound to you?"

There was a murmur of agreement, and a slightly louder voice saying "Dojo? You bet!"

"Saturday morning, then, 9 a.m., at the Tendo Dojo in Nerima. And now," Cologne cackled, "I need all the beauty sleep I can get these days. If there's nothing else, we should adjourn. Tomorrow is Monday, and Monday is a hard day."

With that, everybody said goodnight, and started to move out. Luna held a leftover bit of tuna under Rhett Butler's nose to rouse him. She'd learned to wake a berserk gently.

Ranma and Akane walked home under stars with the moon at full, and a scud of cloud coming in. It was 11, and everybody had gone to sleep; but Kasumi had left a note. "Bjorn-sensei called, and talked with Nabiki. He and Mao should be arriving at Narita, 8 p.m. Wednesday."

They kissed quietly – they didn't want to wake the rest of the household, it was none of their business – and went to bed. And to sleep, without any difficulty. A productive evening can do that.

oOo

Kuonji Ukyo was back in class. School is meant to give knowledge – but the two weeks she'd been away had given her knowledge in a whole new realm. Now she knew things most of her classmates would have given almost *anything* to know. Things for which they had spoken true words and false, honeyed and bitter, a lot of anxious and sleepless nights, and as much of their time and allowance as they could convince their intended to spend with them.

Ukyo knew what went on between married couples, behind closed doors. It sure beat studying the Meiji Restoration.

But now what? She dreaded the talk she should have with Ranma and Akane, though from the way both were acting, it might not be as terrible as she feared. She looked out the window at the rain and the trees moving in the wind, appropriate weather for her first Monday back at school, and sighed. The rain might explain why Ranma was a girl, but not the girls' uniform she was wearing. And while she usually felt tension between Ranma and Akane, today it seemed comfort.

Lunchtime would be interesting.

That rainy day, everybody ate indoors. Most of the seats in the classroom were full, so they took their bentos down to the lunchroom. They bought milk tea, and found a small table away from the crush. Ukyo cast her eyes onto the table as she opened her bento, and was surprised to look back up and see how close Ranma and Akane were to her.

"How's married life suiting you?" Akane asked breathlessly. "How does it feel to have all the complications behind you?" Ranma asked. Then they looked at one another. "Sorry for talkin' over you," they both said.

Ukyo laughed, blushed, and smiled all at once. "You two sound like you're starting to find out yourselves," she said.

"Nani?" Ranma and Akane said in unison.

"You're starting to talk in sync. And you're not fighting. But why are you a girl, Ranma? Have you two decided it's easier to be sisters?"

"I mentioned savin' Shampoo in my letter? I'm her shield-sister now. Akane signed up too, so we *are* sisters, at least by Amazon Law. Been busy since then – we took down a rampagin' mailbox in Shinjuku. Shampoo herded it, I sliced pieces off, and Akane hammered 'em. "

"Rampaging mailbox?"

"You hadda be there. Wish I wuz, but I'd gone Cat."

"That's not all," Akane said. "But we shouldn't talk about the *other* reasons here. Can we come by Ucchan's after school? We can talk then, and we both want to see you and Konatsu together."

"Got your weddin' pictures back yet?" Ranma added.

Ukyo raised her eyebrow at the two. "Do I detect ... *interest*? Do I detect ... *plans* being made?"

Ranma and Akane blushed, at which Ukyo said, "Yes, *definitely* come by. See *our* restaurant." Then she added, "Now, since the previous subject is tabled – tell me about my father and Genma?"

"Oh, *that* was a good one!" Ranma and Akane harmonized, telling Ukyo about her father's little dustup with Genma; then Ranma went on to describe the next day. "An' now he's a panda, in quarantine at Animal Control, waitin' to be sent to a zoo in Beijing."

When Ukyo recovered her breath, she swore her father would die of a laughing fit to hear the story. "When is the panda being sent off? If father survives, we can go wave farewell."

"Dunno. Soon." But then Ranma saw Kuno coming into the lunchroom. "Akane, there's Tachi-kun. I wanna talk with him 'bout the next couple Saturdays. You know what I mean."

Akane waved Ranma to go, then turned back to Ukyo.

"Tachi-kun?" Ranma heard Ukyo ask as she headed over towards Tatewaki.

oOo

At the end of the school day, Ranma made a quick trip to the Art Club to pick up supplies, then met with Akane and Ukyo at the front entrance. The wind had died down and the rain was somewhere between mist and drizzle, so the three walked out into a grey and quiet world where the most frequent noise was the sound of wheels on wet pavement and the brightest lights were the reflections of car lights. They made a pretty picture together under their umbrellas, pigtailed red and short black hair over girls' uniforms and long brown hair over a boy's uniform. Most of the standing water had run off, so they didn't have to pay much attention to their footing; they were chattering happily together as they went.

Soon enough they reached Ucchan's, and moved into dim food-scented warmth. The restaurant wasn't open – Ukyo and Konatsu had just returned the day before. They left their shoes, jackets, and umbrellas downstairs and went up to the living room.

"It's not much yet," Ukyo said as they interrupted Konatsu, who was wearing a house-dress instead of her usual kimono, at her cleaning. "But Konatsu moved into my room with me, and that frees this room up for visitors and conversation." She and Konatsu gave each other a warm hug. Konatsu's old futon was folded into a sofa against the wall, and there were cushions on the tatami mats.

Ukyo and Konatsu sat comfortably together on the futon, holding hands, while Ranma and Akane each adopted a cushion. There was a photo album on the low table, and to nobody's surprise, it was filled with pictures of the wedding and the honeymoon. They clustered around, made cooing noises, went "ahhh..." at pictures of the cog railway on the mountain, and laughed at Ukyo and Konatsu mugging for the camera.

"It was a lovely wedding," Ukyo sighed. "I wish I'd been there." But Ukyo's father had plied her with strong liquors to get her in a cooperative mood, and she remembered the wedding no better than Ranma remembered the mailbox. Konatsu's memory was clearer, but she'd not needed as much persuasion.

"Okay," Ranma said, "this is gettin' complicated. Ukyo, you're the husband; Konatsu, you're the wife. The details are a bit – *otherwise* – for this particular marriage. But then, Akane and I will have that problem sometimes too. What do we call you?"

Ukyo and Konatsu looked at each other with a smile. "Go by the clothes we're wearing, honey. It doesn't confuse the spectators nearly as much." And Konatsu nodded, looking up at Ukyo through the lashes of her half-shut eyes.

Ranma agreed. "That's the way the Weres do it," she said. "Honor the form you're in."

At that point the room developed multiple conversations. Ukyo and Ranma were talking Weres and the neko-ken, while Akane and Konatsu were talking weddings and honeymoons. Soon everything converged on berserks, martial artists, and marriage.

"We're getting married too," Akane said, smiling at Konatsu. She and Ranma had already told Ukyo on the walk over. "We'll be legal a week from this Friday. But we don't want the parents to find out until it's a done deal, or they'll take over and make a mess of things. They get enthusiastic."

"So we're gonna sneak down to the registry that Friday and get a civil marriage," Ranma said. "But Akane wants a religious ceremony too. That's why I was talkin' with Tachi-kun this lunchtime. He knows a priest down near Okayama. We're gunna see if he can do it on such short notice."

"We can afford it," Akane smiled. "Nabiki got some money out of Genma before your father got to him. We put it in the bank before it could escape."

"You thought my 'interestin' times' was contagious? Looks like marriage is goin' 'round too. Ukyo, you're my oldest friend. I want you to stand up for me at the weddin'. An' I'm thinkin' Tatewaki for my other groomsman. Akane is makin' her own choices.

"Y'know romance and ceremony never go smooth in our lives. So we're gunna ask Shampoo and Cologne and Bjorn-sensei to stand guard over the wedding. *Nobody* is gunna cause trouble with a grizzly bear on duty. With Cologne there, even Haposai will behave if he shows. Not that we'll tell him, but that's no guarantee. An' Shampoo's our sister now, both of us, so we won't ask her to pick a side – she'll be right in the center.

"O'course this depends on gettin' the priest an' all. Bjorn is comin' to Tokyo this Wednesday, an' Cologne and Bjorn are givin' us all kinds of evaluations, and a wedding less than two weeks off – we're gunna haveta wing it."

"Kami-sama," Ukyo said with wide-open eyes. "Honey, I never thought I'd be standing next to Kuno Tatewaki at a wedding. Are you sure the Fierce Tigress and the Pig-Tailed Goddess will be safe with him in the wedding party?"

Akane shrugged. "He and Kasumi are turning into a couple – it's hard to believe, but there it is. He won't misbehave around her."

"*Kasumi?*"

"Not only that," Akane said, "they're working up some competition for you. Teppanyaki cooking. Kasumi's coaching him on the cooking, and he's teaching her knife-juggling."

Ukyo and Konatsu looked at each other. "Are you *sure* we're back in Nerima?" Ukyo said.

"You bought the tickets," Konatsu replied demurely. "And this is our restaurant. But are you sure these two are Ranma and Akane?"

Wednesday after school, Ranma and Akane came home and changed into good casual clothes, and the whole family headed off to Narita airport. This took perhaps an hour and a half by rail – plus waiting and walking – so they barely got to the international arrivals gate in time. At nearly two meters tall, Bjorn was easy to spot in the slow procession out of customs. They couldn't hustle over to him – security would ask pointed questions – but soon enough he came through the gate. Mao was following close behind, and Bjorn was hauling the luggage for both.

As soon as they got out of traffic, Ranma hugged them. "It good see you again!" Perhaps this was not very Japanese of her, but Bjorn wasn't very Japanese. Then she got down to the serious business of introducing them to her family. "This is Njalsson Bjorn, teacher and elder and Master of the Bear-claw. And this is Mao, who will help translate for him." Ranma bowed to Mao. "I am sorry, Mao-san, but I do not know your full name."

"I am Chang Mao," the slim woman said, bowing to Ranma and her family.

"This is my second family." Ranma motioned to Soun. "Tendo Soun, Master of the Tendo Dojo."

Mao bowed, and Bjorn followed suit a bit clumsily. "We are honored to meet you, Master," Mao said.

"This is Tendo Kasumi, eldest daughter and mistress of the house. This is Tendo Nabiki – you spoke with her on the phone, Bjorn-sensei. And this is Tendo Akane, my fiancée." Ranma gave Bjorn a stern look to remind him the wedding was to remain a secret. "My father, Saotome Genma, is tied up, and not available at the moment." Akane and Nabiki both snorted.

"As we were taxiing into the terminal," Bjorn said in English, "we saw a caged panda being loaded into a plane."

"It was a China Airlines cargo flight," Mao added.

"Don't talk about panda in Japanese," Ranma cautioned them in English. Nabiki was snickering, and whispering in Akane's ear.

With a certain amount of bowing and translating, the little procession got underway. Ranma, Soun, and Akane each took some luggage, so nobody was overburdened. "We booked two rooms at a hotel near our dojo, as you asked," Kasumi said; and Mao translated for Bjorn. "You must be tired after such a long flight."

Mao smiled. "The full moon is just past – as Weres, we're used to staying up for long periods this time of month. And Bjorn-san booked us in first class, because he is too large for economy seating. We got a nice nap."

But then Mao brushed at her jacket. "It will be good to settle down, freshen up, and change clothes. A hotel will be very welcome."

The train came, and they got on. At this time of day it wasn't as crowded as rush hour, so they could see to the far end of the car. One of the riders there looked to be a sumo wrestler. He and Bjorn stared each other up-and-down, and decided it was better not to do anything about it. The train traveled on through the night.

In the hold of a China Airlines plane flying west over the Sea of Japan, an unhappy panda shivered in the chill dryness of the stratosphere. It was a cargo flight, and they weren't conditioning the air as comfortably as they would for passengers. He hadn't had any of Kasumi's cooking for the past week, and precious little bamboo – and that, dried-out and stale. They'd been feeding him out of a bag of raccoon chow. For days now, there had been a tanuki in the next cage, and he was in the cargo hold with him. The wretched beast was nocturnal, and growled and whined all night long. Genma hadn't gotten more than an hour of uninterrupted sleep in days.

The panda sneezed. He wasn't sure if it was the chill, or somebody talking about him. But at least he managed to spray panda snot all over the tanuki.

Brown Bear

In Beijing, Genma was offloaded from the plane into a warehouse. He sighed with satisfaction when he saw the tanuki's cage set down some distance off. He immediately sank into the deep sleep he'd been missing for days. He wasn't awake to see an unobtrusive woman swap out his bill of lading.

In the morning, he was roused when his cage was taken up by fork-lift and put into the belly of a smaller plane. *Good*, he thought. *They're shipping me out of Beijing. The boy must have succeeded in diverting me.*

Several hours later, as the plane jolted up-and-down in turbulence, Genma reconsidered the 'good' part of his thoughts. But eventually it landed – a much smaller airport this time – and Genma was back on the forklift express. He huffed a bit, breathless, and couldn't decide whether he should be annoyed at the cold, or grateful for his fur. The air was dry and thin. He had the uneasy suspicion that mountains were in his future – and with his luck, the Bayankalas.

A bored, sun-browned workman in heavy garments scooped raccoon chow from the nearly-empty bag and dumped it in his bowl, then refilled the water bottle. *That man looks positively Tibetan*, Genma thought. He was left alone for hours, to contemplate the uncommonly-dark sky at the zenith. Another fork-lift, and Genma and his cage were on a large, dusty truck. Other cargo was loaded on – sacks of rice, agricultural machinery, several bicycles, wooden crates labeled with stenciled Chinese – and a tarpaulin was thrown over the back and snugged down. Genma could see a bit out of the back, where the canvas wasn't completely tight – mostly road, but when the truck went around corners he could see some landscape to the sides.

They traveled all day and through the night. The road was winding and rough; the truck jounced and slid. Sometimes Genma saw rocks, sometimes positively hair-raising crevasses and precipices with mountains in the distance.

In a tiny and disheveled town, the cage was transferred to a much smaller truck which had obviously once had an intimate relationship with a mountain-goat, or perhaps a yak. It was parked outside of a tavern – Genma smelled the beer, yearned for a taste. Finally the small truck's driver came out, mug in hand, stumbling and laughing with half a dozen friends. He got into the drivers' seat, started the engine, and drove up a mountain trail singing at the top of his lungs in Mandarin. Genma's cage was uncovered. He could see where he was going. He could look over the side and see where he *might* go, if the driver were careless and lurched to the left. Now Genma was *really* yearning for a drink: this trip would pass better with anesthesia.

Eventually, all trips end. Genma's cage was deposited on the ground in the middle of the Joketsuzoku village. Women came to interrogate the driver. He shrugged, and held out a clipboard. There was more discussion, pointing at Genma and the cage, and though he knew little Mandarin, Genma heard the word for 'panda' quite a few times. He'd learned *that* word fast enough on his last visit. Eventually an Elder signed the papers. The driver got back in the truck, and drove away.

Genma was surrounded by Amazons, questioning, arguing, gesticulating. Finally one of the Elders said something definite, pointing back into the village. A cheer went up from the tribe, and the women streamed away and got back to the serious business of battle-practice.

Several men came out, wearing aprons and carrying a huge cauldron. They hung it from a tripod over the central firepit. One man – the one with the knives and a cleaver – came over to examine Genma while the others began hauling water. Another man, scruffy and ill-smelling, came from what was obviously a tannery on the downwind side of the village; he too looked Genma over.

Genma's estimate of the situation had gone from 'bad' to 'dire' and was currently sinking past 'angry Nodoka'. It looked like he was in for a feast that would be even more trouble than the first one he'd had here. Well, hey-ho – he was in familiar territory at last; and this cage was made to hold a wild panda, not a martial artist.

When all the men were busy building a fire, except for the man with the knives who was chopping vegetables, Genma quietly put a few vacuum blades through the far side of the cage and crept off down the trail, cloaked in the umisenken.

As Genma disappeared, the Jusenkyo Guide, who was enjoying tea and a pipe with several of the Elders, said "Too too sorry, Mister Customer not want to stay for feast in his honor. Not even stay for us heat water to change him back."

The Elder Lilac rocked back-and-forth with laughter. "We must thank Cologne for sending him. It's nice to have outside entertainment now and then. He won't be nearly as much fun if he ever learns Mandarin." A chuckle went around the small circle. A serving-boy topped off everybody's teacups.

oOo

When Ranma, Akane, and Nabiki got home from school on Thursday, they found Soun and Kasumi chatting happily with Mao, while Bjorn was looking around and reading body language. "Bjorn likes the dojo," Mao said. "He may need someplace larger later on, but it'll be fine for early tests. It has excellent atmosphere."

"That's good," Ranma said. "There will be others visitin' on Saturday. Elder Cologne of the Chinese Amazons will be evaluatin' several of us; and I've found another berserk. This one is a shape-changer, but neither of his forms are human. We'll have a busy time. Movin' to a different place would make it even busier."

Mao translated that for Bjorn, who raised his eyebrows. "How did you meet this other berserk?" he asked in English.

Ranma replied without waiting for the translation. "He is cat. Was introduced by other cats." Mao translated for the non-English speakers.

Bjorn smiled in approval. "You're learning fast," he said. Again Mao translated.

Kasumi stood, and bowed. "If we are to have dinner, I must cook. Bjorn-sensei and Mao-san have agreed to eat with us. Since Bjorn is here to meet Akane, perhaps you would all like to adjourn to the dojo while you wait?"

Everybody agreed with that, once it was translated around.

Ranma and the Tendos bowed to the spirit of the dojo. Mao and Bjorn followed suit. Then Ranma said "warm up," and she and Akane began to do katas. Nabiki and Mao retired to the side, where they talked quietly. Bjorn started a few stretches to limber up. Soun was watching Ranma, Akane, and Bjorn like a hawk, reading their states of readiness.

After a while, Ranma thought she was ready. She spoke in Japanese, to Soun and Akane. "Bjorn-sensei is not a martial artist. He is a shapechanger, berserk, brawler, and warrior. I should spar with him first, to show you what you'll be gettin' into." She stepped into the center of the dojo, and Bjorn stepped out before her.

Soun raised his hand, then dropped it. "Begin."

Bjorn and Ranma circled each other casually. Occasionally one would make a feint to judge the other's reaction. After a minute or so of this, Ranma charged for Bjorn, then tucked-and-rolled under his legs and got him from behind. But she'd done that in their first fight, back in Minnesota, and Bjorn was expecting it. His hands came around as his body twisted, and he got one of Ranma's ankles as her kick sank home. She managed to kick his hand loose with her other foot, but he'd given her body enough momentum that it came whizzing past. She got an elbow into his ribs as he wrapped his right arm around her waist and squeezed. Then even as she put her heel into his kneecap he grabbed her right arm with his left hand. Going with the pain in his knee he fell forward onto Ranma, and the air exploded out of her with a *whoof* as a hundred-fifty kilos of Bjorn crushed her.

Dazed as Ranma was, Bjorn hadn't landed all that well either, and he'd twisted his arm. Ranma squirmed out from under him before he could react, and was halfway across the dojo before Bjorn regained his feet. "He prefers to grapple," Ranma told their audience. "He's part bear, and bears love wrestlin'." And she began to bounce about the dojo like a superball on amphetamines.

One of the bounces connected with the back of Bjorn's head, both feet. She wasn't kicking hard enough to do serious damage, but it rang his chimes a bit anyway. The second time she came at him, she went for his midriff – but instead of dodging or blocking, he opened his arms wide and accepted the kick, then enfolded her before she could bounce off. And he managed to wrap her into a rather small red-haired spheroid before she could do much of anything. Ranma only had one hand free, and while she could have gotten off a devastating crotch-shot with it, she held back. She knew what that was like from her other form, and she *liked* Bjorn. So she just said "crotch shot" and Bjorn nodded and let her loose.

"That was a tie, I think," he said. "Want to go up a level?"

Ranma nodded 'yes', and Bjorn turned to Mao. "I'm going to go bear," he said. "We're escalating. My bear form is a lot tougher, and it heals better."

To Ranma, Bjorn said, "Take a few minutes, then use your claws. They need to see what your claws can do, and that I can take that kind of damage. But make it a shallow wound. We don't have to overdo it."

Ranma crouched down and twitched her fanny. "Yesssssss," she said, and Soun could see a ki-tail lashing furiously. Bjorn shifted into a bear, and growled more seriously than Genma ever had. His teeth gleamed wetly. Everybody stepped as far back as they possibly could; Nabiki stood in

the doorway ready to escape if it came to that. It sounded like everything would be under control, but a girl can never be too careful... Kasumi popped her head in the door – she'd heard the growl in her kitchen – then left again.

Bjorn reared up and roared, while Ranma vanished into a snarling blur. There was a slapping noise as she hit his nose, then dodged back; Bjorn swiped with his claws but missed. Ranma was buzzing around him – it almost looked like the cloud of bees back at the bee-tree – and delivering slap after slap. But Bjorn caught Ranma with the back of his paw and knocked her across the room into a training dummy, which fell in shreds as Ranma used her claws to gain traction on it. She darted back towards Bjorn, then past him, and his left shoulder suddenly had long, bleeding gashes in it.

They stopped, and bowed to each other. Now that Ranma was still, the Tendos could see that she, too, had claw-marks on her left arm and side. They weren't bleeding, but they were there. Bears have claws too.

Ranma and Bjorn stood side-by-side, while Ranma explained. "Thiss rrrreally wass morre of a demonstration," she said as she slowly emerged from the fringes of the Neko-ken. "Bjorn-sensei and I have sparrred enough to know how far we can go. You saw how he was bleedin'? My claws did that. It's why I don't spar seriously any more. But the blood has already stopped. Were-bears heal *real* fast."

Ranma went to Akane, took her by the hand, and brought her to stand before Bjorn. "This is Tendo Akane, Bjorn-sensei. She's stronger than I am, but not as fast, and likes to grapple. When she gets angry, she creates a war-hammer as her weapon."

Then Ranma spoke to Akane. " Bjorn-sensei is a berserk like we are, but he's mastered it. He only goes totally bear in the most desperate fights. He heals rapidly and well, so you needn't hold back. Try to use your mallet on him without losin' control."

Ranma positioned them facing each other, then stepped back. She raised her hand, then dropped it. "Begin."

Akane stood there, hands clenched, face twisted up, marshalling her anger. *Not as fast, indeed! Try not to lose control!* A livid green glow began to rise about her, and when Bjorn darted forward and smacked her in the rear, her mallet flickered into existence.

Ranma smiled to herself. It looked like Bjorn wouldn't even begin to fight until they'd helped Akane goad herself into her berserk. *And there she went!*

An image of a panda superposed over Bjorn in her head, she leaped forward, shouting. "**I've had enough of bears!**" She took a two-handed swing at Bjorn's head. On Ranma, that would automatically have been a hit – but Bjorn didn't love Akane, didn't have Ranma's inhibitions. His huge paw swept out, and knocked the mallet across the room. Akane wasn't *just* her mallet. She grabbed that huge paw, turned and bent, and threw Bjorn several meters in the opposite direction from her mallet.

Even as the old mallet shrank and dwindled, a new one grew in her hands. Bjorn came roaring back, but this time she nailed him; and while he was shaking his head to clear it, she malleted him in the midriff and sent him out the door into the night. Nabiki barely dodged in time. Bjorn hit the ground and rolled. Then he lay still.

In the light spilling from the dojo, the sight of her unmoving opponent shook Akane out of her rage. "Did I hurt him?" she cried, and ran towards the bear.

The bear had been playing possum. He sat up, and held one paw out towards Akane, palm first. "Enough," he rumbled; and Ranma translated.

"Whew!" Akane gusted out, and slumped. The bear climbed to his feet, and took her right hand in both paws. "Definitely a berserk," he said, "and a powerful one."

Akane was staggering – the journey back from berserk really took it out of her – and Ranma and Nabiki each supported her by one shoulder, back into the house and onto the sofa. But Ranma still had one more thing to do. She'd scented another cat, a familiar cat, and her ki senses had confirmed it.

"Luna-san?" Ranma said to the darkness outside of the door. "Will you come in and join us for dinner?"

Luna walked in, with all the dignity a noble cat of the Moon Court could muster, but spoiled the effect by complaining. "A black cat is supposed to be a good spy."

"Only if the person you're watchin' doesn't have a sharp nose," Ranma replied. "I've told ninjas the same thing when *they* complained."

Ranma turned to go back into the room with Luna, and found everybody (except Akane) staring at them. "What?" she said. "We got signin' pandas, talkin' bears, knife-throwin' ducks, and a boy that turns into a girl. A talkin' cat is that hard to believe?"

"Knife-throwing ducks?" Mao said, then translated for Bjorn's benefit.

"Fer heaven's sake, Mao, *you're* a talkin' cat three nights a month. Mao, this is Luna. She's a Moon Cat. Luna, this is Chang Mao. She's a were-cat, and changes with the moon. The two of you got things in common."

Luna put one paw to her forehead and sighed. "I thought Minato ward was unusually strange. Now that I'm getting to know Nerima, I still think Minato is strange. But I'm not as sure about the 'unusual' part." Ranma chuckled, and Akane perked up a bit and smiled at the cat.

Luna walked over to Akane where she lay, and jumped lightly onto her stomach. "Using that mallet is rough on you," she said. "I'm glad to see you cheering up again."

Akane stroked Luna, and she curled up and began purring. "It's not *using* the mallet that does it," Akane said. "It's coming back down, and realizing where my mind had to *go* to use it. It's not a nice place. Thanks for helping me ground myself."

Ranma came over and sat on the floor next to the sofa. She put one hand on Akane's shoulder, stroked Luna with the other. "I know what ya mean, Akane," she said. "You wouldn't wanna go where I had to go to use the neko-ken, either. 'Member how I always had to nap afterwards?" And then Ranma relayed the conversation to Bjorn.

"With some training, you may learn to love your mallet," Bjorn said. "You just need to move it into your life, instead of saving it for, er, special occasions. Look how well Ranma gets along with cats these days." Since Ranma and Luna were both purring, nothing more had to be said.

At this point, Kasumi called them to dinner, and a good meal was had by all. Kasumi hadn't planned for Luna, but a small plate of sashimi filled her needs quite nicely.

Conversations wandered off in all directions. Ranma, Luna, and Mao discussed interesting smells, and where they were to be found. Nabiki and Bjorn talked about running a business, with occasional side-inquiries from Kasumi over Were cuisine, and how it changed with the moon. Ranma demonstrated Anything-Goes eating for Bjorn, but stopped when he growled. Soun and Akane talked about the testing in the dojo. Cologne, Shampoo, and the Cat Café were discussed, and shield-sisterhood.

Soun was uncertain about his Akane learning martial arts from Cologne, let alone Bjorn, but he couldn't deny that he hadn't been teaching her very well since his wife died. And Ranma thought she could see a bit of determination in his face as he came to that realization. *Maybe he's starting to come out of his despair*, she thought.

oOo

After a pleasant evening, Ranma walked to the hotel with Bjorn and Mao. She didn't want them to get lost in a strange place, and it was a welcome chance to prolong the conversation with her friends. Luna came along at Ranma's request.

At the door, Ranma said that she and Akane would be coming home after school. "And then we can go to the Cat Café for dinner," she added. "You should meet Shampoo and Elder Cologne before we all get together on Saturday. If you're at the dojo, we'll leave from there. Otherwise, we'll be over here about 6:30 to get you. It's an easy walk." She and Bjorn hugged each other, and Ranma rubbed cheeks with Mao. Then they parted.

When they were well away, Ranma spoke to Luna. "Let's go someplace we can talk in private," she said. "Mind me carryin' you? It'll be an excitin' ride."

"Akane has already carried me," Luna said. "I hope it won't be any more exciting than that."

Ranma swept Luna up into her arms. "More exciting, but shorter," she said as she leaped onto the roof of a nearby shopping arcade. They went well away from the edge, and found a nice pipe to sit on. (She had no intention of sitting directly on a tar-and-gravel roof.)

"It was encouragin' to find you at the dojo tonight," Ranma said. "Checkin' out the lay of the land ahead of time is good strategy."

Ranma could smell embarrassment from Luna. "You caught us flat-footed" she said. "It frightened us. If you knew that much the day after meeting us, who else knows what else?"

Ranma smiled, her teeth in the moonlight clear to Luna. "We didn't know as much as you think. The shrine, and the names and faces o' five teenage girls and two cats. Cologne used those to tease the rest of the info out a' you. She's a real good interrogator."

"But how did you know even that?"

"Black cats are supposed to be good spies," Ranma said, imitating Luna's voice as well as she could. "But Amazons are trained for it. Shampoo followed you in her cat form."

Luna scowled. "She was that young pinky-lavender cat I saw?"

Ranma nodded. "Right now only me, Akane, Shampoo, and Cologne know your connections. Everybody else just knows I'm friendly with a talkin' cat. Around here, that's normal. Knife-throwin' ducks, don't forget."

"What *is* it with the duck?"

"Well, you've seen me turn from girl to boy, and back again. It's a curse I got at the Pools of Sorrow in Jusenkyo, China. There are lots of curses at Jusenkyo. Shampoo fell – I got a suspicion she was pushed – into a pool that gives her a cat curse. My father landed in the panda pool, a boy named Mousse from Shampoo's village fell in the duck pool, I know a guy landed in the Little Black Piglet pool. Then there's Taro, and Asura. Let's just say 'tentacle monster' and 'terrible goddess' and move on. Most of 'em come by Nerima now an' then.

"Mousse, he's a master of Hidden Weapons. He can pull a poleaxe outa his sleeve. But ducks are smaller, so when he's a duck, he pulls out knives. He could prob'ly still pull the poleaxe, but a duck isn't strong enough to use one. Come t'think of it, I ain't seen him lately. Wonder what he's up to?"

Luna sighed. "We could use an armed duck for reconnaissance and air cover. The daimohn just keep on coming. None of them seem to fly, but the witches like heights. It's hard to get at them from the ground."

Ranma chuckled. "Oi, do you have the *wrong duck!* He's so near-sighted he flirts with telephone poles because he can't tell 'em from the gal he wants."

"A real friendly-fire problem?"

"You got it, except he ain't always that friendly. Not that it improves his aim."

But then Ranma got serious. "We gotta talk about secrets. We got 'em, you got 'em. Neither of us want 'em to spread. What are we gunna do on Saturday? I mean, you're just a talkin' cat, no problem. If you bring Rhet Butler – Bjorn-sensei wants to meet him – he'll be just another cat, with more power than most. But Cologne wants to meet a couple o' your gals, too. Do we want people knowin' the Senshi are around, or seein' their other forms? And Shampoo will be in Minato with your friends. We got troubles of our own, we don't need your witches identifyin' her and sneakin' around Nerima lookin' for us."

Luna thought a minute, then another. She smiled a cat-smile, and did a backflip into the air. A small rod rattled onto the gravel roof. Ranma picked it up, and looked it over. "A pen?" she said.

"It's a *disguise* pen," Luna corrected. "We only have a few, but this is a good time to use them. Think of the disguise you want. Hold the pen up, say 'Moon Disguise Power', then release it gently into the air."

Ranma thought a moment, got a crooked smile, and did so. The pen spun, shooting out stars which surrounded Ranma as she was lifted into the air and silhouetted in moonlight. After a moment the light-show ceased, and Nabiki Tendo lowered gently to the ground.

"Hey!" Ranma-Nabiki said indignantly. "You didn't say anything about *naked!*"

Luna snickered. "A disguise isn't as good if you let other people see you putting it on. The Moon Kingdom gave users some, er, incentive to disguise themselves in privacy."

Ranma grumped, but couldn't argue with that. *Good thing I don't have much feminine modesty*, she thought. (She'd been starting to learn it, these last few weeks as a girl. It hadn't fully sunk in.)

"The disguise stays as long as you keep the pen on your person. It even fixes your touch and voice and smell – the Moon Kingdom cats had sharp ears and noses. Shampoo, Ami and Makoto can disguise themselves. Then all we need is a little discretion. So get this pen to Shampoo before Saturday."

"I like it. What kinda limits do these pens have?"

"Well, you're still you, with the same strength and abilities. Pick a disguise about the same size, shape, and behavior as your normal self. You can't disguise yourself as an elephant or a mouse, but you might succeed as a trained chimpanzee if you walked bowlegged."

"I c'n see it. I'll write signs and learn to play shogi ..."

"Nani?"

"Private joke."

And then Ranma-Nabiki and Luna sighed, leaned back, and watched the stars for a while. The moon was about a quarter up the sky, several days past full. Luna raised a paw to it. "Up there," she said. "Above the middle, and a little to the right. That's the Sea of Serenity. The capitol of the Moon Kingdom was in the mountains to the south. We had a lovely view of Earth. I came to Earth a few times. From here, the Moon was blue, with green and amber for our crops and white from the clouds. It looked like Earth still does."

Luna fell silent again. Ranma moved closer to her, rested her hand on Luna's shoulder. The cat began to cry. Ranma picked her up and held her to her breast, Luna's head resting on her shoulder. Ranma stroked, stroked, until the cat hiccuped, then fell silent.

"What happened?" Ranma asked gently, after a while.

"Queen Beryl and the Dark Kingdom happened. She tried to conquer it all, and destroyed so much that the magic couldn't hold. There were people living on all the moons and planets, but when the magic died, everything died. Earth was the only place people could live without magic, and even here, most of the people died and the rest fell into barbarism for thousands of years. Everything done by magic was undone. Cities crumbled, crops withered, the air went away.

"My poor world, my poor people! There are only two cats left, only a handful of humans – me and Artemis and my princess and her court." The cat began to cry again.

Ranma couldn't say anything, but she could hold Luna. She did, until the cat fell silent, and beyond.

"I'm sorry," Luna said at last. "I've tried so hard to be strong for my princess, for my Artemis. Give me a sympathetic ear, and I fall apart."

"D'you want me to walk you home? You shouldn't be by yourself. You already have too much of that."

"Could you? I don't want to be alone. But this is important, Ranma, this is why we fight. Queen Beryl came back, about a year ago. She tried again. We pushed her back into the Dark Kingdom, sealed her overlord Metallia away again, but she could have done terrible damage. We can't let it happen. Those are the stakes," she said, as she moved her paw over the glowing cityscape of Tokyo, then lifted it to point at the barren Moon.

Somberly, Ranma dropped her disguise. She walked to the edge, stepped over, landed gently on the ground with Luna still on her shoulder. Ranma began walking towards Minato ward.

oOo

Ranma crept into the Tendo home around three in the morning. She didn't get much sleep. At breakfast, Akane wanted to know what was wrong. "Your appetite just isn't there. You have shadows under your eyes."

"I was up late, talkin' with Luna. I'll tell you more on the way to school."

"Wait a minute, Saotome," Nabiki said. "What can a cat say that's so unsettling?"

Ranma turned to Nabiki. "It's Luna's story to tell. Until then ..." Ranma thought, then held her hand out. "... ten million yen."

"That's ridiculous!"

Ranma looked at her, silently, and there was no laughter in her eyes.

"... isn't it?"

Ranma shook her head.

"It isn't?"

Ranma nodded. "We're holdin' this close to our chest, and there isn't any money in it. But it's ten million yen worth o' serious, and more." Nabiki was far from content with that, but it was all she was able to get.

Soun wanted to know what Ranma had gotten his daughter into. "It's a martial artist's duty to protect those who cannot protect themselves," Ranma replied. "I can't ignore that. I don't think Akane can, either. We may need you teaching, but we'll see how that works out."

Kasumi was concerned in a more practical way. She'd seen Ranma picking at her food. Whatever her mood, her appetite would not be long denied. She went into the kitchen and added several sushi rolls with tuna and wasabi to Ranma's bento. They'd come in useful before the day was out.

The day was bright and chill. With no blanket of cloud the night before, the land's warmth had leaked away. The chill fit Ranma's mood. At the same time it got her blood moving, so she was both introspective and restless. Akane walked by her side; Ranma had learned silence during her training in the Northwoods, and Akane had taken to it also.

Ranma extended all her senses. Nobody close enough to overhear. She sighed. "Akane, I'm *so* glad we're set to marry in a week."

"Nani?" This was not what Akane expected to hear.

"Monsters, Akane. The world ended ten thousand years ago. The whole solar system was inhabited. Then the Dark Kingdom invaded, and everybody died, except for a few here on Earth. Luna really *is* a Moon Cat, from the Moon Kingdom. All that's left of her world are two cats, and a handful of humans. I've never heard such loneliness, as when she was telling me.

"It almost ended again, about a year ago, when the Dark Kingdom returned. Back then, you and me were still fightin', tryin' to protect ourselves from gettin' too close to each other. If the world had ended, we'd never have gotten together."

She touched Akane's hand. "Stay around, will you?"

"With my tomcat? Of course."

"And with my tomboy." The banter raised Ranma's mood a notch. She smiled at Akane. "Not much of a tomcat right now," she said. "And the way things are goin', it'll stay this way durin' the day. But I can be a tomcat for you at night." She sighed. "Hot water is startin' to chase me, now, and cold water is ignorin' me. I think the curse wants me spendin' time in both forms. I'll be glad when we're married, and I'll have a reason to be a guy. Besides bein' born one, I mean."

They walked for a while, then Akane said. "In a week, we'll find out what's been putting that smile on Ukyo's face."

They entered the gates of Furinkan, and saw Kuno Tatewaki. They came up to him, surrounded him, hugged him. "Thanks for agreeing to be there for us," they said. Then they continued on into school.

"What was that all about?" Tatewaki said. As did everybody else who'd seen it. Not that Kuno minded; and Nabiki made quite a bit on bets that day. But she didn't sell information, because she didn't have enough.

oOo

Ranma and Akane made it to the hotel by 6:30. Bjorn and Mao were in the lobby – Mao reading brochures about local attractions, Bjorn making notes in a small spiral book. Bjorn stood to greet them. "I've been doing e-mail and the internet," he said. "I have ideas about sledges and hammers. They might work for mallets."

Ranma translated for Akane, but needed help from Mao – the English words for striking tools don't map perfectly into Japanese.

The autumn day had warmed considerably from morning, but the evening was chill again. Most of the pedestrians, including Ranma and Akane, had jackets, and Mao a coat, but Bjorn didn't bother. Ranma wondered if that were custom, comfort, or bragging – Bjorn came from a cold place and had both bear and warrior in his system. Ranma could have warmed herself with ki; but her red hair made her stand out enough without further advertising.

The Cat Café was a warm and well-lit haven from the darkness. Most of the booths and tables were already taken, but Shampoo led them to a reserved table with room for half-a-dozen. Ranma did the introductions in a mix of English and Japanese. "Bjorn and Mao, this is Shampoo of the Amazons, shield-sister to Akane and myself. And this is Cologne, Matriarch of the Amazons and our adoptive great-grandmother. Cologne and Shampoo, this is Njalsson Bjorn, Master of the Bear-claw, and Chang Mao, who is travelling with him and serving as his translator."

Everybody bowed in greeting, and Mao murmured a few words in Chinese. But Mao spoke Cantonese while Cologne and Shampoo spoke Mandarin, so everybody ended up using Japanese and English.

"We're full, so we won't have more customers for a time," Cologne said. "We'll have the last meals out in a few minutes, and then Shampoo and I can sit with you."

"Let me help, Grandmother," Ranma said. "Shampoo can sit n' talk. She won't have as much time with Bjorn-sensei as you and I."

"Why *thank* you, Ranma," Cologne said. "Have you decided to come back to work here?" They were heading towards the kitchen as they spoke.

"I think I'll be too busy for that," Ranma said. "You need another talk with Luna to see what the stakes are. Can't Mousse help? Come t'think of it, where *is* he?"

Cologne ladled out several bowls of ramen, then scattered chicken strips and scallions over them. She added bowls of rice to the tray. "His poor eyesight finally did him in," she said. "This is for table three. I'll tell you more when you're back in the kitchen."

Ranma took the tray, and the food, to table three. "You're not the waitress who took our order," the alpha male at the table noted.

Ranma smiled – at least she was more than an anonymous servitor. "That was my sister. She's busy with family matters right now." She looked at the order, and distributed the food. Then she was back in the kitchen, watching Cologne toss sliced veggies into a wok. "Poor eyesight? Is he injured?"

Cologne indulged in a satisfied cackle. "Nope. Married. Remember Dowel? She was the other warrior on the challenge log with Shampoo, your first visit to the village." She broke an egg into the wok, mixed it with the veggies, added some pork.

"Oooh-KAY," Ranma said. "She was *quite* large and muscular, as I recall."

"Well, just like Mousse always had a thing for Shampoo, she always had a thing for Mousse. He was the only boy in the village who didn't flinch when he saw her."

"I can already tell where this is going."

"Heh-heh, it took her this long to save up for a trip to Japan. She arrived a week ago, tucked Mousse under her arm, and went back home. But she stopped by a love hotel first, to make sure the marriage was consummated."

"Poor Mousse. He should have ducked when he saw her coming."

Cologne leaned against the counter, laughing. "Ha! I didn't think you had that good a triple-entendre in you, Ranma!"

"Nani? What's a tribble-entender?"

Cologne pulled herself back together, and prepared another tray. "I'll tell you after you're married," she said. "Take this to table five. It's the last order for now."

By the time Ranma had distributed the food, Cologne had taken food to Bjorn's table, and was already seated across from him. Ranma made a quick circuit of the café to be sure the customers were okay, then went to Bjorn's table. She took the free chair they'd thoughtfully left between Akane and Shampoo.

"... we don't have a village," Bjorn was explaining to Cologne. "We know our family, we know our neighbors, but we keep pretty well spread out."

"Well, who's in charge? Who enforces the rules?" Cologne asked.

"We don't have rules. We're bears. It'd be worse than trying to herd cats." Bjorn looked over at Ranma. "How well do you herd, Ranma?"

"Not very well," she smirked. "But Cologne already knows that. I'll *give* my allegiance, but nobody can claim it otherwise."

Cologne sighed. "It doesn't sound like you'd make disciplined fighters."

Bjorn laughed. "A berserk can't be disciplined, and a Were doesn't need it. We thrive on chaos. I *love* going up against disciplined fighters. They make a fine target, standing there in formation."

Ranma spoke up. "He doesn't fight like us. We were sparrin' yesterday, an' he left his belly open. I went for it, and next thing I knew, he had me rolled into a ball. He'll take a hit to get an advantage – he heals fast enough to get away with it."

Cologne shook her head in disbelief. "I'll have to see this, tomorrow." She thought a bit, then added, "Amazons can't fight like that. Our healers are good, but they can't do their best work in the middle of a battle. And there aren't enough of us to risk accepting damage if we can help it."

Ranma smiled as she ate, then launched a diversion. "It's good food, granny, but you already know my tastes. Akane, Shampoo, I've been told it's the custom for new shield-sisters to gift each

other. This all happened in a rush, so I wasn't ready. But I've been workin' on it, and made something for Bjorn-sensei while I was at it."

Ranma reached into a pouch, and removed a small ivory bear. "I carved this for you with my claws, Bjorn, in memory of our time in the Northwoods. It's what we call *netsuke*."

Bjorn accepted it, turned it over in his hands. "Why, this is me! You even have my smile right! Thanks ever so much! But where did you get ivory, Ranma? It's illegal, these days."

"It's really tagua nut, 'vegetable ivory'. Carvers have used it for netsuke for many years – it's an ideal size and shape, and it grows on trees. Bjorn, how do you know what your smile is like? They don't have mirrors in the woods!"

"Silly Ranma! I own a Were bar. There's a very large mirror behind the bar, and much of the time I'm looking in it."

Ranma flushed a bit in embarrassment, then pulled out a small netsuke of a bobcat. "This is for you, Shampoo. It's a cat I met in the Northwoods, the first one in years I saw without being afraid. You're a memorable cat, and I thought you might like to see another memorable cat in my life." Shampoo took it, and cooed over it.

"And finally," Ranma said, "This is for you, Akane." It was a small hammer, pierced for a thong so it could be worn about the neck. The head was large, and the handle tapered down to the end. It was incised with interlaced scrollwork.

"A Thor's Hammer!" Bjorn said. "Yes, that's the perfect gift!"

Akane shook her head, but took it. "I'd think you had too many bad memories of hammers," she said.

"I have a lot of bad memories of cats, too. But I'm over that now. It's a wish for your success." Ranma took out a narrow thong, and threaded it through the hammer-handle. She stood behind Akane. "Hold it where you think it belongs," she said, and tied the thong to the proper length. She snipped the loose ends off with her claws, then sat back down and admired it on Akane.

By now, everybody had eaten and there was a general buzz of conversation. Ranma made the rounds of the tables, and ran the cash register for a while. Then there was a lull. She went back to Bjorn's table. "You elders can discuss fighting and governance. But I have to talk with my sisters. Shampoo, could we go to your room?"

The three stood and bowed, and went upstairs. Shampoo closed the door, and she and Akane sat on the bed. Ranma stayed on her feet. "That mailbox we fought was just the tip of the iceberg," she said. "There's more where it came from, and backup. We need disguises if we don't want their attention on Nerima. And Luna gave me what we need. Ready for somethin' unbelievable?"

The other girls nodded. Ranma took the pen, thought a moment, held it high, and said "Moon Disguise Power." She was swept up into her henshin lightshow. After a moment, Kasumi settled gently to the floor. "Oh my, that was startling!" she said.

Shampoo was fanning her face with her hand, and Akane said, "Were you being perverted?"

Kasumi shrugged. "Nudity is part of the package." Then she did it again, and turned into Shampoo. "Aiyah, there two Shampoo in room! What happen?" She dropped the disguise, and was Ranma again. "We can look like just about anybody. Fix the disguise you want in your mind, say 'Moon Disguise Power', and release the disguise pen into the air."

Akane took the pen, and shortly Dr. Tofu stood there. "My, you two look healthy!" he said. "I hear Kasumi was just here?" He began to dither.

"I didn't think of that," Ranma-chan said with wide-open eyes. She took the pen and became Ranma-kun. He kissed Akane most thoroughly, then sniffed. "Doesn't work," he said. "Luna said the pen would translate smells, and I guess it's a two-way street. You still grab me by the nose this way, Akane." He dropped the disguise, and went back to being her. Then she fanned her face with *her* hand. "Ah, peace! Looks like I'll have to stay a girl during school. I wonder if the disguise can fool hot and cold water?"

Shampoo became Cologne. Ranma tried passing her hand through the air above her. It felt very strange. "Luna *said* we should pick a disguise roughly the same size and shape." They sat to discuss disguises, and decided to go for Yamaguchi Momoe, an idol singer who'd been out of the game for twenty years, but still was popular. She had glamour, and since the real Momoe had aged, they wouldn't be endangering her. As they were heading downstairs again, Ranma said, "Don't tell Bjorn or Mao. There are levels of secrets here."

At the table, Bjorn and Cologne were arguing furiously over the best way to run a restaurant, both of them ignoring a customer beckoning from table two. "Let those two talk," Ranma said. "I'll waitress, Shampoo can cook, and Akane can referee the table."

Afterwards, walking home from the hotel, Ranma took Akane's hand and led her into a park. It was another clear night, and the moon was large and orange upon the horizon. Ranma pointed to it. "Up there, upper right, near the shadowline. That's the Sea of Serenity, where the capitol of the Moon Kingdom used to be. You seen those pictures of Earth from space? Luna says that when she was young, the moon looked like those pictures. So we're in the big leagues now, dealin' with forces that can ruin a world, and forces that can fight 'em off."

"A martial artist's life is filled with peril," Akane said.

Ranma shuddered. "Don't do that. You sound too much like the panda." They left the park, walking a bit closer together than they had entering it, and went back to the dojo. Tomorrow would be a busy day.

Between the Daimohn and the Deep Blue Sea

Saturday morning they gathered in the dojo, Ranma in Chinese silks and Akane in her yellow gi. Cologne and Mao wore their everyday clothes. Bjorn had on his tunic, and there were two rather nondescript junior-high schoolgirls in nondescript clothing. It was hard to remember exactly what they looked like, or what they were wearing. They were accompanied by a black cat and a slate-grey tomcat of impressive size and ominous aura. Soun was there as Master of the dojo; and Kasumi, as mistress of the household, had brought tea, rice balls, and a tray of pickled vegetables. Nabiki had thought the whole thing through, decided there was an unacceptable likelihood of chaos, and gone over to the Kuno mansion for the day. Kasumi planned to go there too, after everybody had their noon meal.

Happosai had gotten wind of the occasion and was also present. He'd looked the schoolgirls over, and left them unmolested. Who knew what might be hiding behind an "I'm hard to remember" aura? He sensed large amounts of female ki, and that was good; but there was a deep reservoir of mana in there too. He didn't fool with mana.

They were introducing themselves around when the challenge bell rang. Muttering, Soun opened the door and stared into a white expanse of gi, with a necklace of dojo signs. He raised his eyes, and saw a large face, with large eyes and lips, no hair on top, and a small black moustache. He lowered his eyes, and saw a black belt.

"I'm the Dojo Demolisher," the man rumbled, "and you were harsh to my little brother when he paid a visit. I'm here to see if your dojo is worthy. I challenge you for your sign." Then he looked inside. A momentary flash of surprise crossed his face when he saw Bjorn, who was every bit as large as he was.

Soun spread his hands. "Demolisher-san, you arrive at a busy time. We are evaluating the two heirs to the dojo today. There are two masters, and two grandmasters, present. You would not fit our schedule. Could you perhaps come another day?"

"Are you Tendo-sensei?" the Demolisher asked. "The sign at your gate says 'To defeat owner in savage combat, use rear door'. It does not say 'To defeat owner sometime next week...'. A true martial artist is ready at all times."

Soun looked at the giant, and said, "One moment, please."

He motioned Bjorn, Happosai, and Cologne into a huddle. They discussed the situation for a moment. Happosai said "I've heard of this Demolisher. He uses the dojo signs he's already taken as weapons and shields."

Cologne provided an English translation for Bjorn, who smacked his right fist into his left hand. He said "This will be an excellent test," and the huddle broke up.

Soun spoke. "Honorable Demolisher, there is a simple way to meet both our schedule and yours. Before you battle one of the masters, you must first defeat the two heirs to the dojo. They were about to undergo testing, and you shall be the test."

The dojo Demolisher shook with laughter. The signs about his neck, and the quiver of signs stowed upon his back, rattled in merriment. "I see teenage girls. Bring them on."

Bjorn took Ranma by her shoulder. "This isn't a test of your power," he said. "We both know you can take him. I want to test your control. Take away his signs without harming the man, the signs, or his clothing." Mao translated for the crowd and the Demolisher.

Ranma and the Demolisher moved to the center of the dojo, while everybody else moved back to the walls. Rhett Butler jumped to the ceiling-beams, and Luna moved near the door for an easy exit if necessary. Akane had heard the sneer in the Demolisher's voice when he said "teenage girls", and she was quietly pumping up her anger. A pale-green aura began to shimmer about her.

When Ami, the shorter of the two schoolgirls, saw this she took out a small computer and began recording the energies in the dojo.

As referee, Soun dropped his hand, said "begin", and got rapidly out of the way.

Ranma stood, watching the Demolisher. The Demolisher watched back, massive and stolid. His right hand flicked out and a sign was spinning through the air at Ranma, who batted it to one side. Both of the Demolisher's hands moved, and two signs came spinning at Ranma. Again they were batted aside; and the schoolgirl – Ami – noticed they'd all landed in the same neat pile. She was studying the fight, not watching it.

"Yo, Demolisher-chan," Ranma called out. "I'm s'posed ta take your signs. It's no fun if you *give* 'em to me." A chain of signs came whipping through the air in response, with the Demolisher holding one end in his hands. Ranma blurred into motion, ducked under the chain and close to the Demolisher, and used her claws to snip the rope. The signs went flying, landed on the growing pile, and the Demolisher was left with the one sign in his hands. Ranma decided, as long as she was in close quarters, to punch the man in the belly. *That's not harmin' him*, she thought. *Just tellin' him to be careful.*

She sank her fist in, and met an inch of flab underlain with solid muscle. Both of the Demolisher's fists were coming down at her now, and he hadn't even made a sound. So Ranma kept on ducking, rolled past the Demolisher's left side, and snipped the quiver of signs off with a quick swipe of her claws as she leaped past. Then she did a flip-and-kick that knocked it over onto the pile of signs, and found herself balanced on one hand on the Demolisher's head. The man swung at her with the sign that was still in his hands, but she pushed off over its path and the sign hit him in the head instead.

She had most of his signs, now; he was down to perhaps three in each hand, which he was using like war-fans to attack, block, and distract. He gave an occasional grunt, but it was more of a quiet *kiai* than of any exhaustion or effort.

That guy got a lot of muscle, Ranma thought. *Might damage somethin' if I tried to pry the signs outta his hands.* So she jumped into the air, rebounded from a ceiling beam, and angled over to the remnants of the morning snack. She grabbed a handful of chopsticks. Then she began bouncing around the room again, and whenever she had a clear shot, she threw a chopstick at one of the Demolisher's shiatsu points. *Learned somethin' fightin' Prince Kirin an' his chopsticks*, she thought. Soon enough the signs fell from the Demolisher's nerveless hands, and in a quick flurry of hand-and-foot strikes, Ranma kicked them over to the pile.

Soun called a halt to the combat. "Ranma has completed the assigned task."

Ranma bowed. "Demolisher-san, I am fortunate I was told not to harm you. You are so strong and hard, it would have been wasted effort." The Demolisher bowed back, with a dyspeptic look on his face. He went over to reclaim his signs, but Ranma was there first. "You came to take our sign," she said. "If we can take your signs, that's just as fair." The Demolisher growled under his breath, but returned to the center of the dojo. Ranma poked the counteracting points so the Demolisher could fight again, then began to pick up the stray chopsticks to get them safely out from underfoot.

Now it was Akane's turn. "Teach him respect for teenage girls," Bjorn said. "But don't damage him too badly." When that was translated, the Demolisher snarled and got into a more aggressive stance.

Akane rushed forward, and hit the Demolisher with a strong kick. But the Demolisher wasn't just his signs, any more than Akane was just her mallet. He was surprisingly fast and agile, and nearly as tough as Ryoga. There was a quick flurry of blows back-and-forth, and Akane flew backwards into the wall with a crash. The Demolisher smirked at her, then made the mistake of saying, "Sorry about that, little girl."

Akane rose to her feet, and kept on rising. It was the finest aura attack she'd ever made, more frightening than her father's demon-head and tall enough to scrape the ceiling of the dojo. She held a monstrous hammer, and swung it with terrible power at the Demolisher. The Demolisher gathered his energies, and manifested a sign-shield of ki. He held it high, and blocked the onrush of the giant hammer.

But after all, Akane was only her true size. So while the Demolisher was blocking the image of a hammer, she closed in below his block, and hit him a powerful blow in the midriff with the *real* mallet. He doubled over, and she got him on the head with her return blow. Then she leaped above him, and drove him through the floorboards with her third hit.

She reared back, and was about to hit him again when Ranma cried out "No, Akane! No! You'll kill him!" Akane stood, breathing heavily, then collapsed to her knees as the mallet vanished. Soun called an end to the bout, and he and Ranma rushed to Akane's side to support her. With their help she stood, wobbled, then shrugged off their help. Her berserk had evaporated, but she still had enough anger to sustain her.

She bowed to the Dojo Demolisher, then turned her back to him and went over to the food, poured a cup of tea, and drank it down. "Phewwwww," she blew out her breath.

"We're going to have to work with Akane," Bjorn said. "She came too close to doing permanent damage to the fellow." Ranma nodded. Ami, off against the wall, was working the keys of her computer furiously.

Bjorn helped lift the Dojo Demolisher out of the hole in the floor, dusted him off, plucked slivers out of his gi.

Soun approached the two. "I'm sorry, Demolisher-san, but you simply do not qualify," he said. "We'll keep our sign, thank you, and the ones you brought with you as well."

Steaming, the Demolisher turned and stomped towards the door. Luna was in his path, and he moved to kick her. But as his foot came forward, it was suddenly nailed to the floor by a fish skeleton, driven tail-first.

The Demolisher yelped, and looked up to see where the skeleton had come from. Rhett Butler posed on the rafters, then jumped down and stalked forward, a sour expression on his face. As he walked he grew, and stood, until the Demolisher was facing an eight-foot-tall demon cat. The cat wrapped one huge paw around the Demolisher's neck, and with the claws on the other, sliced his black belt off. Then he released the Demolisher's neck, bent down, and grinned toothily in his face.

"Demolisher-kohei," Happosai said, "I believe your belt has just been revoked. A true martial artist does not kick small animals out of frustration."

The Demolisher looked around. The demon cat was before him. Ranma and Akane had just beaten him, and Akane looked like she wanted another go. Cologne and Happosai were radiating battle aura, Soun was doing his Demon Head, and Bjorn had gone bear. Even the schoolgirls against the wall were frightening – the short one was glowing a pale blue and radiating cold, while electricity crackled around the taller.

Bjorn twisted his head to one side so the Demolisher could see his teeth more clearly, and roared. The Demolisher blanched, backed out the door, and left quietly, limping. "**And don't slam the gate!**" Soun added.

Happosai looked at the pile of signs. "Soun, m'boy, if you restore all those signs to their proper dojos, it will really boost the reputation of Anything Goes. And it wouldn't hurt if you carried the Dojo Demolisher's belt with you." For once, Soun had no objection to following Happosai's instructions.

And then Happosai looked over at the schoolgirls. *I wonder if silky darlings from a magic girl are worth the risk?* he thought. And decided to find out some time when he wasn't quite as – surrounded.

Demon cat and grizzly sized each other up. Ranma jumped between the two. "**Don't you dare!**" she yelled. "We still need the dojo! You can fight some other time!" Bjorn and Rhett Butler shrugged, and returned to their less-intimidating forms.

Bjorn raised his eyebrow at Ranma. "You did say he had two forms," he said. "I wasn't expecting quite *that* much of a difference. But he didn't act very berserk."

"Neither did you," Ranma commented. "And a good thing, too!"

Rhett Butler walked over to a quivering Luna and began licking her cheek to comfort her. Ranma began to stroke her fur, then lay on the floor and curled around Luna and Rhett as she continued to stroke. Between the two of them, they got her calmed down.

oOo

Shampoo stood in disguise outside the Crown Game Center, in the Azabu-Juuban section of Minato ward, with butterflies in her stomach. She was more alone than usual, in a land that was still foreign to her, and about to meet famous warrior-women. Perhaps she would fight monsters

with them. The monsters were okay – she'd fought enough monsters to be comfortable with that – but working with a strange team had her nervous. However good a warrior she might be, she was still young, and far too eager to please.

She took a deep breath, centered herself, and pushed the door open. She entered.

It was Saturday morning. The walls were lined with game machines – beeping, making explosive noises and flashing lights. Each machine had at least one teen playing, and often two or three watching. This was a chaos of a different stripe. But she came of a restaurant background, so she searched for the island of calm. She knew there had to be one somewhere, else the place would go out of business.

It was a handsome, twentysomething boy in an apron, with light-brown hair, standing behind the counter. "I'm supposed to meet Usagi here this morning," she said to him. "She here?"

He smiled at her. "She's not here yet. But her friends, Rei and Minako, are at the race-driving game." He pointed. The girls seated at the machine saw him pointing, and waved. Shampoo smiled her thanks to the boy, and went over to join them. Now that they'd been pointed out, she recognized them from the time she'd spied on the shrine.

"Nihao, Rei, nihao, Minako. What you doing?"

They held up coins. "You're Shampoo? Glad to meet you. We're playing the racing game while we wait for Usagi to show up."

"How that go?"

"We'll show you." The girls each put a coin in the slot. A light counted down, and when it reached green they pressed down on the foot controls. On the screen, a red race-car and a yellow one began to move around a track. The images sped up, scenery blurring by at greater and greater speed, until finally the red car – the one driven by Rei – spun out and crashed, and 'Game Over' came on the screen.

Rei simmered a bit, and muttered under her breath, then reached into her purse and pulled out a small rectangle of paper. "Rin, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, sai, zen. Akuryou taisan!" she said as she worked her hands through intricate gestures. She slapped the paper onto the game machine.

Nothing happened, and Minako laughed. "Just because you lost doesn't mean the machine is evil. Remember, 'a loss is better than never'." They stuck their tongues out at each other.

Shampoo smiled to herself. These girls were so *young!*

"Game look fun, but I don't drive car. Is game with bicycles?" They looked around the arcade, and settled on a motorcycle game as the best compromise. Soon Shampoo and Minako were racing; and after a few practice games, Shampoo was winning easily. "I deliver take-out on bicycle," she said. "Used to obstacles."

After the fifth race was won, a voice came from behind. "Ah, Miss, may I race beside you?" Shampoo turned her head to the voice. It belonged to a tall short-haired blonde about her own age, in brown jacket and green plaid slacks. Minako and Rei were drooling, with hearts in their

eyes. Shampoo looked hard, with both normal vision and ki-sight. "Minako and Rei like girls?" she asked.

"What?" Minako and Rei said in unison, blushing lightly. "He's HOT!"

"Is girl," Shampoo replied.

The tall blonde winked at her. "I never said I was a boy."

Shampoo smiled back. "Shampoo know several cross-dresser. Is fine, long as they not try fool me. Want race, then?"

"Ten'oh Haruka at your service," the boyish girl said. Minako vacated one of the faux motorcycles, and Haruka took it. They put coins in the machine, the light counted down, and Shampoo was off. She looked to the side; Haruka was just sitting at the controls, arms folded. "What?" Haruka said. "I'm just giving you a handicap."

"I'm not handicapped."

Haruka looked at the game, startled to see how far ahead her opponent was. She took the controls and began to race, seriously. And she lost, seriously. She lost the second race. And she was winning the third race when Shampoo did something with the obstacles that had her soaring overhead to victory. Haruka slumped, head down, arms hanging by her side. "Complete defeat."

"Not true, you do pretty well. Maybe tomboy have good game sense? I'm shield-sister to two tomboys, they good that way. But I master of Bicycle-fu. Tomboy up against too too hard challenge."

A girl Shampoo recognized as Usagi came running in the door, carrying an ice-cream cone. "Hi, Rei, Mina! Sorry I'm late!" She tripped as she ran towards them, and the cone flew into the air. Shampoo reached up, caught it casually, and gave it back to Usagi once she'd stood. Usagi blushed and put one hand to the back of her head.

"Nice shot," Rei said as she stuck her tongue out at Usagi.

"Nice ice cream," Usagi retorted as she stuck her tongue in Rei's general direction, then stroked it over the ice cream. She smiled in sweet caloric bliss.

Rei grumped. First she'd lost the racing game, now she'd lost the tongue war. It wasn't her day. But the kami gave her a consolation prize: after Usagi finished the ice cream, she noticed Haruka. Her eyes filled with stars and hearts, and she began to breathe heavily.

Rei leaned near Usagi's ear, and whispered, "He's a girl." Usagi's smile wilted. "Rei, you're so *mean!*"

Another girl entered, with teal hair, a violin-case, and a womanly outfit in the same colors as Haruka. "Sorry to keep you waiting," she said.

"Oh, I've had the most fascinating time." Haruka indicated Shampoo with her hand. "This is – I didn't get your name, miss."

"Call me Shiho."

"She beat me three times in a row on the racing game."

The girl with the violin raised her brows. "I've never heard you say *that* before!"

"She has good reflexes," Haruka said. "Usagi there tripped and her ice-cream cone went flying. Shiho caught it – and made it look easy. They could do a juggling act."

'Shiho' and Usagi looked at each other, and began to stalk towards the newcomers.

"Come, Michiru," Haruka said. "I think our presence elsewhere has been requested." Michiru took Haruka's arm, and the two walked companionably out of the arcade.

"Hmpf!" Minako said. "Not only is he a girl, he's already taken. Well, a grape on the vine is worth two in the bush."

Nobody could think of a good reply to that, so the four decided to go to the shrine where they could talk in peace, without the clanging and hooting of the games and the ears of the players.

As they came up the long stairs and into the courtyard, a white cat was waiting for them. "Nihao, Artemis!" Shampoo said.

Artemis brushed up against her leg. "Hello, Shampoo!" Then he raised his face to the other girls and said "We're the only ones here. Talking's okay."

Shampoo lifted Artemis to her shoulder and they rubbed cheeks. "You three magic girls, have two forms," she said. "Shampoo magic girl too. We meet each other other forms? Artemis maybe like meet Shampoo again, too. Go inside to kitchen or bath?"

They went to the kitchen, puzzling a little – it had more room. The cats had told the Senshi that Ranma changed between boy and girl, and that Shampoo had another form. What would it be? "Not able talk in other form. Warm water bring me back," she said; and held her hand under the cold-water faucet. Suddenly her empty clothes fluttered down to the floor, changing as they fell to an Amazon battle-costume. The disguise pen fell out of a pocket, and rattled across the floor. The clothes weren't quite empty – a small lump stirred beneath, and a young white cat with pinky-lavender markings emerged from the neckline. She looked at Artemis. "Mihao!"

Artemis looked at the Chinese sex-kitten, and got throbbing hearts in his eyes. Shampoo sweatdropped. The three senshi whopped themselves in the back of their heads.

Shampoo-neko leaped onto the counter, batted at the hot-water tap until it was running, and dipped her paw into the stream. Suddenly there was a naked Shampoo-human kneeling on the counter. But she didn't look like the Shampoo-human that'd come to the shrine with the other girls.

"What the heck?" "Who are you?" "What's going on?"

Shampoo got down, and began dressing. "Disguise pen too too slow – much quicker drop disguise. In fight, speed important, so Shampoo come here in disguise. Call me Shiho when in

disguise. Fight monster, drop disguise first. That way girls and Senshi seen with different persons, people not connect them."

After that, the senshi all transformed. Shampoo hit each of them with a Nerf mace before they were halfway done, to demonstrate the advantages of speed. Then they went out in the yard, where Venus used her Love-me Chain to gather in dry wood, and stacked it in a pile. Mars ignited it with a Flame Sniper. And Moon produced a package of marshmallows, which they proceeded to toast. Introductions among warriors are usually silly, formal, or dead serious; the girls had gone with silly. Shortly after they'd gotten the fire going, they'd all changed into their everyday forms (which included a disguise for Shampoo). Rei had gotten hot chocolate from the Shrine kitchen, while Minako dug out a picnic blanket for them to sit on.

Shampoo was curious, so while they were toasting, she asked "Why sailor girls take so long change form? Why take so long get first attack off?"

Usagi looked at Minako, who looked at Rei, who put her hand behind her head. "Eheh, eheh ... we were wondering that ourselves. So we had Mercury check it on her computer. See, magic is powerful and dangerous. So it's kept under lock and key. The key to opening it up for use is the little dance we have to do, and the speech. Mercury could explain it better. She says the more experience we get, the faster we'll be able to do it. Eventually, we won't need the dance at all. We're a lot faster with the second shot."

"I see. Just like young warrior take longer recognize situation and draw sword."

"I think that's right. Mercury said something about the magic being 'peace-bonded'."

"I know peace-bond. Show good-will, keep from hurting innocents with hasty action. Make sense now. I'm trained, and fast. Use mace or sword or body as weapon, no peace-bond. But not sure kill monster by self – last time, took all three Amazon sisters. We meet monster, I keep it too too busy while you unlock magic, then you come hit it hard. Sound good?"

Minako, Rei, and Usagi smiled and nodded 'yes'.

"Have another question. Why naked transformation?"

The three all blushed, in their different ways. Usagi was embarrassed, Rei looked a bit angry, and while Minako was blushing, it was a *knowing* blush. "To keep the men on our side?" she said with a giggle. Usagi and Rei blushed even more. Then Minako added, "And to distract the men that *aren't* on our side."

Rei snapped, "Which is *so* very useful, since most of our foes are female?"

"See, it works!" Minako said smugly. Rei stamped her foot, and Usagi hid her blushes behind a screen of hands.

Minako looked over at a reddening Usagi. "Usagi-chan," she cooed, "Have you ever seen Tuxedo Mask transform?"

Usagi pulled the blanket over her head and began muttering "perverts, perverts, I'm surrounded by perverts..." as the other three girls laughed.

The conversation was interrupted by the smell of burning marshmallow. They got back to the serious business of toasted sugar-puffs. Then they cleaned up the yard, put away the cups and the blanket, and headed down the stairs again for some serious shopping, Artemis riding on Minako's shoulder.

"How we find monsters?" Shampoo asked.

"They usually find us," Usagi said. "Can't have a quiet day shopping, or a peaceful date without monsters, mutter mutter growl..."

"I understand. Monsters always find shield-sister Ranma, too.

A while later they were strolling along the street beside a concrete-lined drainage canal, dry at this time of year, when they heard a scream and a commotion from an auto-tuning shop just ahead. A strange lavender woman with wheels came dashing out and leaped into the canal.

"Monster!" Shampoo yelled as she dropped her disguise and ran forward, then jumped over the fence at the edge of the canal. She landed just in time to take out one of the monster's wheels with her sword. It spun, crashed into the wall, and sat up holding its head. "This is too dangerous," it said. "I'm glad I was wearing a helmet."

But by then, Shampoo was upon it, and a helmet wasn't going to save its head. Shampoo lopped it off. Like the last daimohn, its head came rolling back to rejoin the body, and the real fight began. Shampoo could see it had a Pure Heart Crystal – she was not about to let it get away. Every time it turned and started to run she'd cut a tire, or smash a foot, and the daimohn was too busy repairing itself to have much luck hurting her back.

Sailor Venus appeared at the fence. "Venus love-me chain!" she shouted, and a chain of stars whirled out to wrap themselves around the daimohn. "Flame sniper!" "Moon spiral heart attack!" Sailor Moon yelled, and with a cry of "Lovely!" the chained and scorched daimohn was blasted to nothingness by a giant pink heart. In its place was a battered, upended car.

Shampoo caught the Pure Heart Crystal, held it gently. A withered seed-pod fell inside the car, cracked, and a wisp of smoke escaped.

Two more girls in sailor suits appeared beside her. "Give us that," the blonde in the blue-and-white seifuku with the gold bow said.

"Not yours," Shampoo replied as she tossed the crystal to Sailor Moon. "Get crystal back to rightful owner!" she cried. Sailor Moon turned to head towards the shop the daimohn had come from. Venus and Mars leaped into the canal to stand beside Shampoo.

Shampoo looked at the new girls skeptically. "Why you want crystal?"

"To see if it's a Talisman," the blonde said.

This sounded less and less good. "What you do with Talisman?"

"There are three talismans. If we get them all, we can join them to create the Holy Grail and save the world from the coming Darkness."

"And what happen to people crystal come from? This not 'collect them all' game. This serious to them."

"Losing three lives to save the world – it's regrettable, but necessary."

"That death-magic. Cannot save world with death-magic. Amazons ruthless, but not *that* ruthless. We not let you do this."

By now, the Amazon and the sailor-girl with the yellow bow were in each others' faces, and very intense. "How do you plan to stop us?"

Shampoo pulled one mace from stuff-space, and caressed its head. "With this. With Amazon sisters. Has to be better way."

The tall blonde flipped backwards, raising her hand. "World Sha*..." she began to say, only to collapse to the ground as Shampoo leaped after her and clouted her on the head.

"Deep Submerge!"

A huge wave crashed down upon Shampoo, Venus, and Mars. When it receded, Venus and Mars were down, coughing, trying to stand up. Where Shampoo had been there were only empty clothes. The other new sailor girl, the one with teal hair, picked the tall blonde up and leaped out of the canal with her.

Sailor Moon reappeared at the railing above. "He's okay! I got his Heart Crystal back to him ..." then trailed off as she saw Venus and Mars staggering to their feet. "What happened?"

Venus coughed up a bit more water. "Those two sailor girls, the ones that've been showing up at our other fights, they didn't like it when Shampoo told them they couldn't have the crystal."

Artemis leaped onto Sailor Moon's shoulder, whispered in her ear. "Shampoo's okay. She's trailing those two girls in her cat form. But don't say anything loud, they may still be in earshot."

Venus and Mars picked up Shampoo's clothes and jumped up next to Sailor Moon. Artemis motioned them in, told them what had happened. "Moon," he whispered, "maybe you should stay here with the man we saved. Take the clothes, and try to get them dry. Venus, go back to the Crown Game Center. And Mars, go back to the shrine. When Shampoo tries to get back in touch, those are the three places she's likely to go. When she shows up, we can use our communicators and all get together.

"Get to it!" Moon said, and the three senshi split up to go their separate ways.

oOo

Genma-panda padded down a game trail. It had been a day since he escaped the Amazon village, and he was hungry enough to eat raccoon chow. It wasn't a good year for bamboo – and bamboo was so low in calories, he'd have to spend all his time eating. No time left over for travel. He wanted to keep moving away from the Amazon village.

The trail was on the side of a valley. A rushing mountain stream flowed below – he could always hear it, and sometimes see it through the trees. Occasionally it widened out into quiet pools. He'd seen fishermen casting nets into the pools.

He wondered how much they'd caught. He'd eaten enough of Kasumi's food in his panda form to know he could happily digest fish. Pandas *were* bears, after all, even if most of them acted like herbivores. A cold mountain stream might not let him change his form – but he could get drink from it, and maybe food.

As the day wore on, he dozed and watched the fishermen. In mid-afternoon they headed away from the stream with their catch, and he quietly followed. Pandas like the evening and the night; his time would come.

They reached a small, impoverished village. The women were outside, working around a single firepit, and children played. When the men arrived with their baskets of fish, everybody set down their other work, took up knives, and began gutting, skinning, and decapitating the catch. They ran sharpened sticks through the filets, then hung them from a wooden frame over the fire to dry and smoke. The offal was thrown into a pigpen to a great uproar of squealing and crowding. Then they sat around the fire, dished up wooden bowls of some kind of stew, and ate. They were talking, but Genma couldn't understand a word.

After the last flicker of candlelight had died down in the huts, Genma crept into the village. He grabbed one of the sticks, pulled the fish off, and ate them. Then he took half a dozen more for later reference, and silently left.

As the waning moon rose, he was going down the trail again, happily carrying several meals' worth of fish. In a few more days, the Amazons wouldn't stand a chance of finding him. Then he could find civilization, hot water, and perhaps transportation. Things were looking up. So was Genma.

But looking up, he wasn't watching the trail as carefully as he ought. Suddenly it gave way beneath him, and he fell with a great crackling and rustling and thrashing of branches into a deep pit. A *tiger* pit. He shook himself, and climbed to his feet – then heard a rumbling growl nearby, and saw slitted eyes and the gleam of fangs. Large eyes. Large fangs.

*And me covered with fish, he thought. I'm too **old** to learn the neko-ken!*

+++

Black and White and Wet All Over

Akane hung the 'occupied' sign and slid the door to the outer bath shut. Ami and Makoto were looking around with great interest. "Wow," Ami said. "A big house, a dojo, now a full traditional furo."

"It's not what it looks like," Akane said shyly, with her hand behind her head in unconscious imitation of Ranma. "Our family has lived in this house for generations. We could never afford to buy it today."

"Oh," Ami said, blushing. "I didn't mean to imply ..."

Makoto began to laugh. "Two peas in a pod," she said. "You can *both* be so bashful." As Akane and Ami turned towards her, they saw each other in the mirror, side-by-side. But while Ami saw Akane clearly, Akane saw a hard-to-remember generic face.

"It's difficult to tell," Akane said.

"Oh, the disguise magic!" Ami put her hand to her face. Then she dropped her transformation and her disguise. Her image cleared. Akane opened her eyes in surprise – they were almost twins, though Ami was younger and a few centimeters shorter.

"Wow," Akane breathed. "We could have some fun with this! Loan me your disguise pen?" Ami quirked an eyebrow, handed the pen over, and transformed into Sailor Mercury. After a quick study, so did Akane.

"Shabon spray!" said Mercury, and the outer bath filled with fog. Mercury dispelled it with a gesture.

"Shabon spray!" said pseudo-Mercury, and nothing happened. "No magic," she lamented.

"You don't need magic," Makoto said as she was slipping off her sweater. "You have a mallet."

Mercury smiled, transformed back into Ami, and began undressing. Likewise Akane. Soon their clothes were neatly hung. Makoto looked the two over. "You aren't twins with your clothes off," she said.

Ami blushed, and Akane looked irritated. "What?" they both said.

"Well, just *look* at the two of you! Ami, you have a swimmer's body. Akane, you have a fighter's body. With muscles that dense, I'd bet you're a *lousy* swimmer."

"Sink like a stone," Akane said ruefully. "Ranma used to tease me about being built like a brick. I never really understood."

"Where *is* Ranma?" the two Senshi asked. "I'd think she'd want a soak too, after all that exercise."

Akane filled a bucket with cool water, and dumped it over her head. "First of all, Ranma didn't raise a sweat this morning. It was a really light workout for her."

She handed the bucket to Ami, and began to soap herself. "Second, Ranma turns into a guy with hot water. Three girls and a guy in the furo? I think not!"

She took the spray, and rinsed herself. "And third, Ranma's *my* guy. You don't get to look at him in the bath."

She looked back over her shoulder as she entered the inner room. "Besides, Ranma told me she was heading out this afternoon for business with Mao and the cats." She eased into the furo with a sigh of contentment. Makoto joined her, then Ami. They floated in warmth (though some floated better than others) feeling the tensions of the morning fade away.

"He's yours?" Makoto finally said. "It's hard to think of Ranma as 'he'. And you keep switching genders when you talk."

"It's easier on the innocent bystanders if the person they see matches what you're saying. Ranma really *is* a guy, but ever since he got cat-senses, it's more comfortable for him to be a gal in public. Tomcats are ruled by their noses when there's a – receptive – lady cat around. And we all know teen girls can get pretty receptive. Especially around a hunk like Ranma, when he's a boy."

Makoto smirked. "We better keep him away from Minako."

Ami giggled at Makoto. "I bet he looks like your old sempai."

Akane smiled, slowly. "Want to see? He's going to be a guy tonight, for a special dinner. You two could come? Kasumi's going to be one of the cooks."

When both girls nodded, Akane leaned forward, pulled them closer, and whispered. "Be quiet about this, because our parents are lunatics. But Ranma and I are getting married in a week."

Both girls' eyes got wide, and they nodded frantically. "See, our folks want us to get married real bad, but they go overboard. They'd make the wedding into a circus, and half the weirdos in Tokyo would turn out to ruin it. And our parents couldn't keep a secret to save their lives. So we're keeping it a secret.

"Ranma turns eighteen this Friday, and we're going downtown for a civil license. For something formal, there's a shrine in Okayama with a swordmaster-priest. We'll talk our folks into going there with us. They'll think we're going for the sword-arts. They won't realize we're there for the priest until the ceremony starts."

Makoto closed her eyes, and raised her face to the heavens. "So romantic ..." she breathed.

"It's our engagement dinner tonight," Akane said quietly. "Just family and friends. My sister and her new boyfriend are cooking. Of course at the wedding my sisters will stand up for me, and Kasumi's boyfriend is standing up for Ranma. But the family doesn't need to know *that*."

And they giggled and whispered together until they had to get out of the furo for fear of overheating and wrinkles.

oOo

While Akane, Makoto, and Ami headed for the furo, Ranma picked up Luna and jumped to the roof. Rhett Butler made the jump also, though not very gracefully. They looked down at Mao. She spread her hands and shrugged. "I could do that if the moon were full." So the three jumped back down, and they all found a nice sunny spot near the koi pond.

After they'd circled around several times and settled in, they rested in silence for a while. But eventually Ranma sighed, and spoke to Luna. "Cats can be more than you seem to realize."

"Nani?" said Luna. Rhett Butler closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

"Knowledge is power. Our cat-sister, Shampoo, knew who and where you were in just a couple hours. She's trained. But you been fightin' Daimohn for weeks. By now, you should be pretty sure where they're comin' from. You got th' general idea – you were over here checkin' out the dojo a few days back – but I can tell. You're peacetime advisors."

Ranma turned to Mao. "Luna's hooked up with some devil-hunters. Keep it a secret."

"I can see why," Mao said. "I'm a Were, and I keep it secret. There's a nest of vampires up in Brainerd, and vampire hunters, and *both* sides keep it secret – or at least *try* to. I think we all understand."

Luna had lowered her head, and her whiskers drooped.

Ranma tousled her head, scratched her between the shoulder-blades. "Yep, I'm pickin' on ya. That's how Anything Goes makes y' work harder. Think, Luna – you're small, but you're fast, agile, and got good senses. By th' time trouble arrives, you sh'ld be out of sight observin'. An' if the trouble gets away, you c'n follow it home. If y'know where Daimohn come from, you c'n pay 'em a visit when they're not expectin' it. *Act*, instead of react."

Luna raised her head. Her red eyes looked into Ranma's blue. "I think I need a teacher."

Ranma licked her lips in a very feline way. "I think y' need a meal. An' I know where we c'n find a teacher 'long with it." She crooned "livverrrr" in Rhett Butler's ear. His eyes blinked open.

Ranma stood, and motioned to the others. "Let's go have some food." She headed out the gate of the compound.

Ukyo smiled and said "Ranchan!" as they came in the door. She looked at Ranma's entourage. "I hear you've been hanging around with a talking cat?"

The black cat looked up at her. "That's me. I'm Luna, and these are my friends Rhett Butler and Mao." Luna nodded towards them as she spoke.

Ranma added, "We've never caught Rhett Butler talkin', but when he's a wise-ass it fits. We're pretty sure he understands us. He's a berserk. An' Mao's one o' the cats I met over Summer break, but she's only a cat under the full moon. Fellas, this is my childhood friend, Ukyo. She owns the restaurant."

Ukyo looked them all over. "Let's see if I have this right, sugar. You're turning the dojo into a cat house?"

Ranma and Mao sighed. Luna facefaulted, and Rhett Butler deadpanned.

"Food first," Ranma said. "A small tuna okonomiyaki for Luna, a medium liver for Rhett Butler, a special for Mao, and three specials for me. T' start." Ranma took a sheaf of yen out of her pocket, ruffled them. "We'll even pay. Your father didn't get *all* oyaji's winnin's."

Ukyo made a face. "*Liver* okonomiyaki? I have chicken livers, but ..."

Ranma shrugged. "Demon cats don't have th' same tastes as th' rest of us."

"Demon cats?" Ukyo's eyebrows raised. "Let's see: a demon berserker cat, a talking cat, a were-cat – and you. Everybody here seems to have either adjectives or footnotes attached."

"Includin' you an' Konatsu, I might add. Is Konatsu around? We gotta talk with her."

"She's upstairs, sugar, decorating. The lunch rush is over, and she has time. Why don't y'all grab a booth?" Ukyo turned to the grill, poured batter, added small piles of liver, tuna, and whatnot. "Not that I'm complaining, but we aren't supposed to have animals in here."

"These cats are part o' your vermin-control measures. Do you see any vermin?"

"Well, Tsubasa was in earlier. He just won't give up."

"We shoulda got here sooner. Can't expect it to work when the cats ain't on duty."

Mao and Luna raised questioning brows at each other. Rhett Butler sat, occasionally licking his whiskers when a whiff of cooking drifted by. Ukyo added the toppings and sauce, brought the food over. She was careful to serve Rhett Butler and Luna first, with a quirk of her lips at Ranma. "I'll get Konatsu," she said.

Rhett Butler belched, and looked up from an empty plate. Ranma smiled in respect. "I think he liked it, Ucchan. Make him another when you get back."

Soon four humans and two cats were seated cozily in a booth. Rhett Butler had eaten another two liver okonomiyaki, but he looked more like he'd eaten the canary. He padded over to Ukyo and stropped his shoulder against her side. "Seems like you'll have a steady customer," Ranma said. "Put 'im on my tab. But only one a week, mind you."

Then she leaned forward, and spoke quietly. "We need your help, Konatsu. Luna here," (she nodded to the black cat) "is hooked up with some devil-hunters. She's not big an' powerful enough to battle devils. But a black cat could be a good ninja, and that can be part of devil-huntin' too. Would you be willin' to teach her?"

Konatsu looked Luna and Ranma over, exchanged glances with Ukyo. She nodded. Ukyo went back to her grill, accompanied by Mao, who wanted to talk recipes. Konatsu led Ranma, Luna, and Rhett Butler through a door in the back, and upstairs to the newly-arranged living room.

Konatsu excused herself, went into the bedroom, and returned a few minutes later in kunoichi garb. Ranma and Rhett Butler had found a warm spot of sun near a window. Konatsu sat seiza on the opposite side of the room, where it was darker, and motioned Luna over to her. "Luna-san, frame of mind is important in ninjutsu. When I wear a kimono, I am a waitress or hostess. A housedress turns me into a homemaker. The garb I am now wearing makes me a ninja. This is not true – I am always a ninja. But *your* frame of mind is as important as mine. If I control what you see, I control what you think and do. And this is what you must learn."

Ranma turned to Rhett Butler, who was curled up in the sunlight, eyes closed, and purring. *Good idea*, she thought, and curled up herself. She'd been on the prowl the night before, though she'd taken a cat-nap in a shrine around midnight when it rained. More naps were always welcome. Konatsu's voice made a gentle background, to which Luna would occasionally reply. She drifted off, into a dream filled with cats. *Ah*, she thought. Those were the kittens she'd rescued, in the neko-pit, that first dream after she'd met the bobcat. She *churred*, and they came scampering and tumbling over to her. They were growing nicely. She began to lick them.

oOo

"Father, we need you as a teacher," Akane said as she stood with Ami and Makoto.

Soun perked up. Since Ranma returned from the Northwoods, life had been a roller-coaster ride, and he'd had precious little control over it. It felt good to be needed. "Yes, daughter?"

"Ami and Makoto have a problem. They were ordinary schoolgirls who happened to be there during devil attacks. All of a sudden, these devil-hunting powers landed on them and sank in. And now the devils just keep on coming. Well, usually the power runs in families, where the next generation learns the basics before they get the powers."

"Some say the Mano clan devil-hunters are over a hundred generations along," Soun noted.

"But Ami and Makoto got the powers without the training."

Soun looked the three over. "Is that why you had them here for evaluation this morning?"

"That's some of it, daddy, and we wanted to show them what *we* could do. One of their devils jumped Ranma a week ago, and it took me and Shampoo and Ranma-neko to put it down. I don't think anybody else in Nerima could have done it, except maybe Happosai or Cologne. We don't want devils running around killing people and possessing them. A martial artist can't allow that.

"And daddy, if we can kill devils with our training, and they can kill devils with magic and spirit-power, think how good they'd be with training as well as magic."

Soun took a deep breath. His mind turned inward. *I haven't been worth much since Kimiko died*, he thought. *But I don't have the luxury of that any more. My little girl needs me. And Ranma was so upset after she talked with Luna. This is more serious than Akane is making it seem.* "I'll do it. How can we work it?"

Akane smiled brilliantly at her father. His heart warmed at that. "Bjorn-sensei will be here another week or so. Ranma and I will be training with him for that time," she said. "Ami needs strategy and magic, so she might do best with Cologne as a teacher. But you'd be the perfect teacher for Makoto."

Soun looked the tall girl over. "You're a street-brawler," he said. "I could tell this morning."

Makoto blushed, and nodded.

"That's good. You'd have to unlearn brawling for most forms, but Anything Goes can build on it." Soun headed for the dojo, motioned the girls to follow. Inside they bowed to the shrine, giving respect to the spirits of the place. Then Soun and Makoto moved to the center of the room, and bowed to each other.

"I'll leave you two to your lessons," Akane said. "Makoto, learn the Art without your powers – that way, you won't be at a loss if a devil jumps you before you can transform. Besides, I want you to leave my father in good condition." She headed towards the door. "Me and Ami are going over to the Cat Café. We'll be back in time to get ready for dinner over at the Kuno mansion. Sunset, remember." And the two left.

"Ah," said Soun. "The beginning of all martial art is learning how to fall. In combat, it makes the ground a friend instead of an opponent. Watch carefully, now ..."

oOo

Ami and Akane came through the door into a fierce dispute between Cologne and Bjorn, mostly in English with the occasional multicultural gesture. There were a few customers, even in the middle of the afternoon, and they weren't being properly tended to. Akane sighed. "Ami, do you understand English?"

She nodded.

"Good. Go listen to those two. They're bound to be saying something interesting, and I should take care of the customers." Akane reached behind the counter, put on an apron, and went over to a table where the people looked a bit impatient. "I'm sorry – Grandmother does so love to argue. May I get anything for you?"

"Another pot of tea, if you please, and then our check."

Akane nodded, and went into the kitchen. Cologne cringed for a moment (she wasn't as distracted as she seemed) but relaxed when she heard Akane filling a teapot from the urn. Akane was a dangerous *cook*, but she could *serve* just fine. Akane came out, set the pot on the table, and went over to the counter where she ruffled through the order slips until she found the right one. She put the bill on a small plate and used almond cookies to weight it down, then set it beside the teapot. Then she went back to the counter, listened to the argument, and waited for customers to act like they wanted something.

Eventually the café was empty except for the four of them. Cologne motioned Akane over to the table. "Bring cookies, and sit down." She gently brushed Akane's cheek. "Thanks for taking over the counter without being asked."

"You know, if some wizened old stranger had asked me to do it, I'd have balked. But when I saw my granny having a great conversation, of course I didn't want her taken away from that."

Cologne cackled vigorously, then explained to Ami and Bjorn that "Ranma and Akane used to call me all kinds of nuisance until they got adopted as my granddaughter's shield-sisters. Amazing what becoming family can do for your outlook." Then she looked at Ami. "So, young one – what were Bjorn-sensei and I talking about?"

Teachers never caught Ami off balance, and she wasn't letting Cologne do it either. "Well, Cologne-obasan, you both were making a fuss, and obviously having a great time. But at the root, the two of you were discussing when to attack, when to retreat, when to temporize, and when to make peace. And always, to gather information."

"We agreed on gathering information, but not on when to attack or retreat. Why was that?"

"I just met you today, but I've been told a few things. You, Cologne, are a village elder. You lead a band of warriors, and not that large a band. You *must* be aware of the negative consequences of battle. Bjorn-sensei, on the other hand, is a berserk. He goes into battle alone, and when he's hurt, he heals almost instantly. For him, the joy of battle is foremost. Obviously, he will attack more readily than you. But information will make a battle safer for you, and more enjoyable for him."

Cologne stamped her staff on the floor with a gap-toothed smile on her face. "You and Ranma have brought me a live one, Akane! I'm going to enjoy having her work here! Now, I have to close down for the evening. You two run along, and Akane, tell Ami what I'm talking about. We can say more after dinner."

Next thing Akane and Ami knew they were out the door, and Cologne flipped the sign to "Closed". They heard the click of the lock.

"What just happened?" Ami asked plaintively.

"She turned you over to me," Akane smiled. "I'm going through the same training, so I can tell you what it's like."

"She said 'working here'?"

"Being waitress, that's the training. In China, Cologne is a powerful elder of her tribe. In Japan, she's gaijin. She doesn't have a license to teach. She has to support herself, so she runs a café. But she demands a lot from her staff, and brings us up to speed in a thousand little ways. Ranma learned the *kachuu tenshin amaguriken* as Cologne's waitress. Funny name, chestnuts, but a powerful technique. Cologne likes theatrics, and so do the customers – cups and plates juggled, food flying through the air, somehow caught and set neatly in place without spilling. You won't believe what it'll do for your reflexes. But training without a license? Never!"

"So she makes everyday life into lessons?"

"That's it, Ami. That's Anything Goes, too. *Everything* is practice. I'm learning the physical arts, mostly, and she's working on my self-control. I'll bet the fanciest sundae at Sakura that she'll *argue* with you. That'll be part self-control, part assertiveness, and a lot of Sun Tzu."

Ami shook her head in wonderment. "The Socratic method of martial arts teaching..." she murmured. The two girls walked on. It was late afternoon of a nondescript October Saturday, cloudy, and the little commercial district wasn't all that attractive. But it didn't take that long for them to get into residential territory. Most of the trees still had some leaves, though more and

more were on the ground. The fresh-fallen leaves were dry, rattling along in the breeze; yesterday's leaves had been rained on about midnight, and were sulking damply in the gutters.

Ami took a breath of the cool, damp air, let it out again. "I don't think I'll be able to get permission to work as a waitress. School wouldn't approve, and neither would my mother."

"Your mother is a doctor, isn't she? Cologne-obasan knows a lot of traditional Chinese medicine. And you'll be learning Chinese history, and a lot of philosophy. Waitress? You'd be helping a master of Chinese medicine dispense herbs!"

"Isn't that, oh, a bit close to lying?"

"Truth comes in a thousand flavors, and goes especially well with herbs and spices. That's not lying, it's diplomacy. See, you'd be learning diplomacy too! Just think of it as an eccentric juku. Cologne would be glad to charge a yen a day for lessons."

Ami suspected Akane had been learning to argue from Cologne. "We can discuss it tomorrow. Maybe all get together at the shrine."

Akane smiled as they entered through the Tendo gate.

oOo

The house was bustling as everybody hurried to change clothes for the dinner. Ami and Makoto had it easy – all they needed were their disguise pens and a few moments of privacy. They'd also used the privacy to check in with the rest of the Scouts and with Ami's mother, so nobody would worry if they stayed late.

Soun wore the brown suit he'd gotten when Genma won the lottery, and Akane was elegant in the black-and-blue silk outfit she'd had for the last dinner at the Kuno mansion. Ranma was male for the evening, wearing his finest Chinese silks in red and black; and more than a little uncomfortable from Akane and Makoto's reaction to him.

"My heavens," Makoto whispered to Akane as she fanned herself. "You'd *better* keep him out of sight."

"You don't know the half of it," Akane whispered back.

Soon Mao and Bjorn were there, a bit ruffled in travelling clothes, and they all headed off to the Kuno estate. Ukyo, Konatsu, and the cats were already at the gates, and Cologne arrived at the same time. Kasumi and Nabiki were already there, had been all afternoon.

A servant bowed them in, and led them directly to the dining room, which had been completely re-arranged to handle the crowd. Teppanyaki chefs want to be close to their audience, so Tatewaki had searched out a circular table with a large cutout in the center. He and Kasumi were in the cutout, surrounded by two grills, plates and baskets of foodstuffs, knives and spatulas and cleavers neatly arranged before them. The rest of the people were seated around the table. Luna and Rhett Butler were under the table by Ranma's chair.

Ranma's nose was working overtime. Fifteen people, two cats, a hidden ninja, two hot hibachis, and a table covered with fine food will do that to a cat. Mostly, the people were anticipating a

pleasant meal, which was a very comfortable smell. Tatewaki and Kasumi smelled of nervousness – it *was* their first public performance as a team – with an undertone of romantic tension. And when a draft of air came from Kodachi's direction, he smelled sadness.

*She sorta drooped when she saw me as a guy, Ranma thought. I guess it **was** easier on her for me to come around as a gal up 'til now. But Nabiki's sitting next to her, and they been pretty close lately. I hope she can help Kodachi handle it.*

Nabiki looked around her. "We got here just at sundown," she said. "I guess that makes this a Night of the Round Table." She smirked at Tatewaki, who facefaulted, recovered, and smirked back at her.

Kasumi looked around also, and noted that Principal Kuno had brought hair-shears and a pineapple to place alongside his plate, bowl, cup, and chopsticks. *Oh dear*, she thought. *I guess it's time to learn if I can tame the Kuno – eccentricities.* She looked directly at Ranma. "As I was coming up the path, Ranma, I noticed one of the trees had wind damage. Didn't you mention you'd run across a martial-arts tree-surgeon last week?" She rolled her eyes in the direction of the Principal.

Ranma's mind went blank for an instant from such an off-the-wall question, but he saw a small palm tree out of the corner of his eye. *Ah*. "That was last month, Kasumi," he said as he thought. Fortunately, Nabiki had been tutoring him in Martial Arts Conversation. "What happened last week, he introduced me to some Martial Arts Gardeners." He held his chin between thumb and forefinger. "But I don't wanna hang 'round with them, 'cause I've heard some of 'em belong to the Bonsai Liberation Front."

Kasumi was grateful – Ranma had caught what she was doing. "Bonsai Liberation?"

"They don't approve of bonsai. They say plants should be free to grow, not tortured into a stunted miniature of their natural form." Principal Kuno nervously caressed the tiny palm-tree growing from his head. "They've learned ninjutsu so they can creep unnoticed into houses, to spray a powerful growth-promoter onto bonsai."

Tatewaki said "I hope you're paying attention, Sasuke."

"I am, Master Kuno," came a voice from the ceiling.

Kodachi, the botanist of the family, decided to contribute. "That must be gibberellic acid," she said. "I've used it to bring roses out of dormancy. I'm sure it would work on bonsai."

Nabiki could tell where this was heading, and threw wasabi in the mix. "Didn't something like that happen a year or two ago in Azabu-Juuban, when an entire flower show went mad and started capturing people?"

Ami, a complete innocent, chipped in. "Oh, that wasn't the Bonsai Liberation Front. I live there, and the Sailor Senshi said the plants were possessed by youma. Completely different thing. There weren't even any bonsai at the show." Makoto, who loved plants and included plant growth among her powers, quietly resolved to talk with Ranma after dinner, and perhaps Kodachi.

"Whatever," Ranma said with a shudder. "I've heard it's bad stuff. The plants start to grow, an' grow, an' of course the roots grow along with th' rest of the plant, and pretty soon they bust outta

the pot. What happens after that depends on where th' pot was, I guess, but if th' plant lands on good soil, it can grow to enormous size."

Principal Kuno felt the base of his palm-tree, and blanched. He excused himself and left the table for a moment. Ranma pricked up his ears. From the next room, he could hear the Principal phoning to order plane tickets to Hawaii, one way.

Tatewaki quietly threw the hair-shears in the trash. Kasumi picked up and examined the pineapple, obviously considering its use in dinner. She sniffed it, shook her head, and tossed it, too, in the trash. Principal Kuno didn't fuss about his missing toys when he returned, and dinner got underway.

It started as before, this time with two chefs. Tatewaki began to juggle his knives, and somehow slabs of pork ended up before him, and before Kasumi. She took up her knives, and watching Tatewaki, began to juggle them, clumsily. One of them got away from her, and flew towards her face. She ducked out of the way, and it fell behind her.

Soun's eyes popped open, and his heart was in his throat.

But Kasumi kicked her heel up to meet the knife-handle on its way down. The knife bounced back, spinning slowly, and fell neatly into her right hand. Her movements smoothed out, and became a graceful dance of steel. The knife flicked out, *sssh, sssh, sssh, sssh*, and the pork was sliced. Halfway through, Tatewaki said "May I cut in?" and began to slice the meat at right angles to Kasumi's cuts. The blades didn't interfere with one another in the least.

Everybody realized they'd been suckered – except for Kodachi and Nabiki, who'd watched the two practice. Soun swallowed his heart, and began to breathe again. Kasumi looked at him and smiled radiantly, without missing a stroke. "Blades *are* part of the martial arts, daddy." And as he watched his daughter's hands, he began to notice a shadow of the moves Genma and Ranma used when they dueled over food. A warm glow crept over him. *Kimiko, you should see this*, he thought.

Soon enough, the dance had an intermission, and it was time to eat. It was plain to all the experienced people that Tatewaki had led the dance when it was sharpened metal, but Kasumi had taken the lead when it was food. And if the food were as fine as the knifework, they'd be happy, indeed. Which they were.

The conversation broke up into small groups. Nabiki, Kodachi, and Ami – the smart set – were talking about plant growth, greenhouses, the biology of mutation and hybridization, and the economics of nurseries. Ranma, Akane, and Bjorn were talking martial arts and berserker-gang. Makoto was between the two groups, her head swiveling as she tried to keep up with both conversations. Soun and Principal Kuno were both sitting quietly, tears of happiness streaming down Soun's face and occasional twinges of nervousness jolting Principal Kuno.

After getting a nice bit to eat, Luna and Rhett Butler had gone over to Mao. They were discussing the olfactory dynamics of the occasion. Rhett Butler occasionally took a lazy swipe at Happosai's foot as it dangled over the edge of the chair. Happosai and Cologne were fencing verbally, and the demon cat's distraction was *not* helping Happosai's eloquence.

The cooking and eating went on. After the pork, there was eel. After the eel, takoyaki. Ukyo and Konatsu were watching every move, saving it up for future reference; but Tatewaki and Kasumi

had been wise enough to serve neither ramen nor okonomiyaki, so they didn't provoke any challenges.

Makoto smiled, and sighed. "Don't they look so *happy* together?" she cooed. Kodachi overheard, and her previous depression surged back. Her eyes closed, her face closed; she got to her feet, and ran out of the room.

"I'll take care of her," Nabiki told Ami as she got up to follow.

That quenched the happy mood, and the dinner slowed to a stop. Tatewaki and Kasumi quickly turned off the grills and cleaned their workspace, then headed off to find Kodachi and Nabiki. Principal Kuno went to pack his suitcases. Bjorn and Mao were outsiders, and left for their hotel as soon as possible. Ukyo made a few notes on a pad of paper, then she and Konatsu headed for Ucchan's. Cologne and Happi grabbed Soun, and started nudging him towards home.

Ranma and Akane, Ami and Makoto, and the cats were left. They walked out the door into the night. "Stay on the path," Ranma noted. "It's safer. Their family ninja likes booby-traps."

"Normally, I'd invite you to stay the night," Akane said. "But we're dealing with a broken romance here, and we might be picking up pieces until after midnight. Kodachi wanted Ranma very badly, and didn't handle it well when she found she never really had a chance."

"I understand," Makoto said.

"I'll call home, and see what's happening there," Ami added. And she got out her communicator. She talked for a while with Moon, then called home. Then she turned to Ranma and Akane. "Shampoo did real well," she said. "They took care of a daimohn this afternoon, then she spied out the identities of some other sailor girls that've been hanging around us. She headed home some while ago."

"Why don't we all come by the shrine tomorrow afternoon?" Ranma said. "We can talk all kinds of things over," Akane finished.

So they walked to the subway stop, and waited until two girls and two cats boarded for Azabu-Juuban. Then Akane and Ranma walked back to Tendo-ke. They might have enjoyed a slower walk, and perhaps some lingering in the park, but the breeze held a definite chill. Ranma put his arm around Akane's shoulders, and they moved close together for the warmth.

"I wonder when they'll get home," Akane said.

"Late," Ranma replied.

They entered the house, kissed goodnight, and went to their rooms to begin their last week of sleeping alone.

oOo

Nanibozho was a minor trickster-kami in the Department of Blessings and Curses, nowhere as important as his namesake in the North American office. Thus, he was surprised when a major kami like Inari-sama paid him a visit. He bowed, and murmured a few reverent words of greeting.

Inari entered, lowered his sack of rice, and sat comfortably upon it. He brought forth two small cups, and a flask of rice wine. "Come," he said. "Sit with me. Share the honest bounty of the harvest, and the joy the winemakers have made of it."

Nanibozho sat seiza before Inari, and took a cup when it was offered. Inari poured; they both drank deeply, and sighed. Inari sat in contemplation, and the trickster sat in silence. Life could get interesting when major kami were around, and he wasn't about to risk annoying one. He knew too much about *interesting*. It was his job.

After a timeless time, Inari spoke. "We share an interest," he said. "The Saotome family."

Ah, thought Nanibozho. *Suddenly it becomes clear*. "I've been managing the Saotome curse of interesting times."

"I should have been paying closer attention," Inari said. "But the younger Saotome was being followed around by some idiot that kept demanding the Vengeance of Heaven be delivered through his hands and sword. I kept my distance – the idiot was far too tempting a target, and I'm trying to cut back on the smiting. Then one day Tsunami-sama paid Kami-sama a visit, and the two of them went buzzing off in a huff. I hear they ended up with you."

"They did. Who *is* Tsunami-sama, and how did she get so much influence with Kami-sama?"

"She's the chief kami for a world named Jurai. More, she and her two sisters are the chief kami of our entire **universe**. She outranks you, she outranks me – whisper it – she even outranks Kami-sama Himself."

Nanibozho pursed his lips. "What brings her august presence here? And what got her interested in Saotome?"

"Well, her niece has been in a cave on Earth for the past seven hundred years. Tsunami-sama came to check things out."

"Are we going to repeat all the fuss from when Amaterasu was young, and hid in a cave?"

"No, the niece is out of the cave now, and matters are proceeding well. But the cave was on the grounds of a shrine; and while Tsunami was there, two youths prayed before the sacred tree she was residing in. Saotome and the idiot, would you believe? Their conflicts had gone too far, and they hoped to mend them. She took to the two – their stories reminded her of her niece's troubles that ended up in the cave. So she put the idiot on the road to healing, and helped them listen to each other. That set them on a path that could lead to friendship. As a blessing, she asked Kami-sama to transfer the curse from Ranma to Genma."

"I've never met a man who more deserved that curse. It's a joy to keep his life busy. I'd been feeling guilty about the kid, so I did a bit of repair work on the after-effects of his curse myself. Or maybe *her* curse."

Inari was sitting on the rice-sack in her female aspect, with kitsune by her side. She smiled at Nanibozho. "Thanks." She filled their cups with sake again. "Let us be merry, and consider ways to make Saotome Genma's life both interesting and appropriate. I believe you left him in a tiger pit?"

"**And** I picked the pit carefully. There are some old customs in that part of China. I thought one in particular might be fun."

oOo

Genma was a tired bear, but a fortunate one. The Eastern slopes of the Tibetan plateau weren't good tiger country. His companion was only a snow leopard – a *hungry* snow leopard, true, but with a judicious combination of bluster, threat, and bribery-with-fish, the leopard had left him alone. Pandas might eat bamboo, but they were still *bears*; and he was a very large panda.

Of course the fish were all gone, and the leopard – and the panda – would be hungry again soon. He didn't want to think what would happen then, and figured it'd be a good idea to get out of the pit before he found out. Neither he nor the leopard dared sleep – the first to nod off would probably be the next meal, and several more meals after that. Dawn was coming, and he could see his companion more and more clearly.

Genma set to digging at the sides of the pit. If he were careful, he could collapse the sides bit-by-bit, and build a mound to climb out on. But half-a-dozen swipes at the earth, and his claws were tangled in something. He looked over his shoulder at the leopard, just in case, and tugged.

A net. The pit was lined with a net.

Well, pandas and leopards could climb nets. He began digging again, with renewed enthusiasm. But before he was even halfway out of the pit, he heard voices approaching, talking in Mandarin. Brute faces looked down into the pit, saw the bear and the leopard, and drew back. There were shouts. Then he could see them hooking a rope and pulley over a stout branch, and the net coming together overhead.

With creaks and grunts and laughter, the net was pulled out of the earthen sides of the pit, then hauled into the air. Genma and the leopard were squeezed into one struggling lump, but took only minor damage because they'd used their claws on the net instead of one another. The air filled with growls and roars.

Oh Kami-sama, thought Genma. *Those guys are Musk*. And those guys were also spreading the net out on the ground, so panda and leopard could get away from each other. They tossed nooses over the net, tied them off, and Genma was in his own claustrophobic mesh bag, well-separated from the leopard. Then the Musk warriors snapped off saplings to use for poles, stripped the branches off.

Strong ones, too, Genma thought. *Best not to do anything until they open the bag*.

The warriors slung the bags under the poles, hoisted the whole assemblage up, and trotted downhill along the game trail. Occasionally they detoured around seemingly-innocent patches of trail – but Genma could see they were pitfall traps. *What are Musk collecting animals for?* Genma wondered. And then a terrible memory came to him. *They used to dunk animals in the Spring of Drowned Girl, then lock their curse. That's how they got their wives*.

The procession came around a ridge. Below and ahead, Genma saw the valley of Jusenkyo.

Red Maraschino Cherries

"Sssst! Artemis!"

The small white cat cracked one eye open. Luna. Black cats in the middle of the night were usually bad omens, but he could always hope. Mina muttered in her sleep, reached out a slow hand to stroke him, then pulled it back under the covers. She gave a little *snurgle* noise, sighed as she settled down, and was still.

Luna was still poking him with her paw. He uncurled, stood, stretched, then followed her out the open window into the night. October was growing cold, and the window wouldn't be open much longer; convenient while it was, though. The Moon was near its third quarter, and well up in the sky, so it was after midnight.

Luna was outside in the shadows, and so was Rhett Butler. *Oh great*, Artemis thought. *The youma's still sniffing around after her*. But he knew better than to say anything. Besides, Luna was heading for the hedge down the street. That was one of the places they talked, when they didn't want people to overhear.

There was a nice layer of leaves under the branches where the wind couldn't carry them off, and quite a few leaves still on the bushes that made up the hedge. The three settled down (with a bit of rustling) and got comfortable. "We have to compare notes," Luna said. "Ami, Makoto, and the Amazons want a Senshi meeting tomorrow. We'd better be ready." She shivered. "Now I understand why the Amazons act so fast. Nerima is a dangerous place. They have to be ready for anything."

Artemis focussed his ears on her. Rhett Butler looked smug.

"They were just doing a few tests in the dojo," Luna said. "Seeing how well Ranma and Akane could handle themselves. A dojo demolisher showed up and wanted to fight. So they decided *he* could be the test. Ranma handled him easily, then Akane went a bit overboard; but they stopped her before she could seriously damage him. He didn't like that." She took a deep breath. "He was angry, and tried to kick me. Rhett Butler fixed *that*."

Rhett lifted one paw. There was a gleam of claws. He licked the back of the paw, and began to clean his cheeks. Artemis raised an eyebrow.

"In less than a second, Bjorn went bear. The two old grandmasters, and Tendo-san, raised the most enormous battle auras. You could tell Ranma and Akane wanted to tackle the demolisher, but Rhett Butler already had him by the neck. And then Mercury and Jupiter started putting out *their* auras. I think the average youma would have wet herself. Even Beryl would have been nervous."

Rhett Butler looked quizzically at her. "Oh, don't *give* me that," Luna said. "You're one of the seven *Great* Youma. There's nothing average about you."

Artemis looked at Rhett Butler. "Thanks," he said. Then when the other cats said nothing, he continued. "We had a busy day here, too. There was a daimohn attack down by the canal. You should have seen how brisk Shampoo was. She kept it busy until the others could transform. Venus chained it, Mars roasted it, and Moon dusted it. Then things got weird.

"Those two strange seifuku-girls showed up. Shampoo got into an argument with one, and clouted her over the head. The other girl used some kind of water attack. That knocked Venus and Mars down, and transformed Shampoo into her cat form. She followed them home as a cat. So now we know who they are, and where they live. And a bit about what they're up to."

"*That's* useful," Luna said. "They've saved several of us, but they act like we're getting in their way."

"They're students at Mugen Academy, a couple years older than our Senshi," Artemis said, "and have henshin rods just like our girls do. The blonde is named Haruka, and the aqua-hair is Michiru. When they're transformed, they call each other Uranus and Neptune. And they're trying to find heart crystals that add up to some kind of holy grail. Shampoo says that's death-magic, and she won't allow it. They say it's needed to save us from The Silence, something that's tied up with the daimohn. The daimohn are after the crystals for the grail, but whoever is in charge of them seems to have different plans. Nasty ones."

Luna sighed. "New monsters." Her ears perked up. "New cats." She gave a feline shrug. "New Sailors, independent ones that don't seem to think much of us, and working at cross-purposes. At least the *cats* are cooperating."

"I got to meet Shampoo's cat form. She's a cute young thing, with white and lavender fur. And she sure could move when she was following the two new Sailors." Artemis smiled in reminiscence.

Luna sniffed, and the fur on her tail bottled up just a bit. She leaned towards Rhett Butler. Artemis' whiskers drooped. But underneath his visible depression, he was thinking, *Aha! Jealous!*

"I got to see Ranma fight again," Luna said into a silence that had gone just a bit too long. "This time, she was a human as well as a cat. I thought she was fierce when she and the other two Amazons took apart that daimohn. This time, she was just as powerful but a lot more controlled. Akane has power too, but less control. And then there was this enormous American, who turned into a bear; and a Chinese woman who turns into a cat during the full moon. She does have a smell of 'cat' about her."

Both moon cats sat for a while, wondering about people who turn into cats at the full moon. Were they, perhaps, some sort of distant relative?

"We don't have to bother about the bear and the were-cat. They're going back to America in a week or so. It's just as well, because I think Rhett Butler wants a fight with the bear, and the bear seems agreeable to it. Who knows what kind of damage they might cause?"

Rhett Butler sat on his hindquarters like a sardonic *maneki-neko* good-luck cat, and held up his right paw. Moonlight glinted from one claw. He grinned evilly. *He* knew what kind of damage he could cause. The two moon cats shuddered.

Bringing her mind back to the problems at hand, Luna continued. "Nerima is full of people who aren't quite what they seem. In the evening, Ranma shifted into his male form and we all went to a pre-wedding dinner at his friend's house. He and Akane are getting married in a week.

"His friend's family is rich. The father is the principal of the Furinkan school, and he has a palm tree growing out of his head. His son seems okay, but the daughter, Kodachi, smells of roses, more strongly than perfume would account for. They might be part plant; remember Ail and Ann? Mercury seemed quite taken by Kodachi. She and Kodachi and Akane's sister Nabiki were talking up a storm about breeding plants. Jupiter was watching the cooks but she was listening to the gardening talk also.

"Earlier in the afternoon, they took us to a café. Ranma said I needed ninja lessons, that I was much too small to fight daimohns directly, but ideal for a spy and infiltrator. They had the most wonderful tuna okonomiyaki there. The cook looked a bit like a man, but smelled like a woman. The waitress was the ninja who'll be giving me ninja lessons. She sure looks like a woman, but smells like a man."

"Oooohh-kay," said Artemis. "Minako, Usagi, and Rei *all* thought Haruka was a boy. It sounds like we've found the right ninja to infiltrate. Because I wonder if Haruka and Michiru aren't trying to infiltrate *us*. That might be why they showed up at the arcade."

Luna nodded. "We need to know more about what's happening. Artemis, I think we both should study ninjutsu. Rhett, do you want to come along and make sure we can deal with any trouble? The way I see it, the Amazons can hit them low, the Senshi can hit them high, and we can sneak in under the radar."

With that settled, they all went home, and to sleep.

oOo

That Sunday morning, Ranma woke early to a quiet house. He was male. The dinner at Kuno's had been a nice chance to let the boy side out, but it had some *very* uncomfortable moments. He was still melancholy over Kodachi's sadness at seeing what she couldn't have. At least they'd all given Principal Kuno a lot to think about.

He heard stirrings from Akane's room, but no sound from anyone else. It'd been a fraught evening for Nabiki, a lot of work for Kasumi, and Mr. Tendo undoubtedly needed extra downtime after that stunt Kasumi pulled with the knife. Let them sleep.

He went down to the kitchen, put the kettle on to heat, rinsed the rice, and started the rice-cooker going. By the time Akane was dressed and downstairs, he had tea ready for her. "Have a good run," he said as she drank. "We'll be goin' over to the shrine this afternoon, and that prob'ly means talk. So let's get our exercise early." Then Akane was off, and Ranma prepared everything for coffee. He'd actually *make* the coffee when he heard Nabiki moving around.

Let's see now. Coffee and tea ready, rice cookin', let's get the newspaper. He did, and set it at Mr. Tendo's place. *What to cook? Somethin' simple, that can sit around til people are ready to eat. Onigiri, with a hint of pickled ginger to settle their stomachs. Miso soup. That should do. It wasn't like they'd starved lately.*

oOo

Bjorn Njalsson lay down his fork with a happy sigh. He took a long drink of coffee. "They do food well here," he said.

Mao was still eating, daintily. "That's why I recommended this hotel," she said. She took a delicate sip of green tea. "You really should try a Japanese breakfast."

"God wants Norwegians to have coffee in the morning, and everything that goes with it. I'd rather not cross Him. But I certainly had an interesting Japanese *dinner* last night."

"Complete with drama."

"Well, we're here for Ranma and Akane. Fortunately, we won't have time to meddle in any other romances before we leave for home."

"Speaking of metal," Mao said, "we should be on our way soon for our lunch meeting with that swordsmith. It's quite some way out of the city."

"And he may well be the best person we've found to help train Akane in hammer-work after we've gone. I'm looking forward to meeting him. I've seen my cousin Wayland's smithy. I want to see what smithies are like in Japan. Maybe I can bring home a few suggestions."

"Do you have the knife Wayland made wrapped up properly for a gift?"

"Yes, I checked how it's supposed to be done. Everywhere, gifts make a visitor more welcome. As the old verse says, 'mutual giving makes for friendship / so long as life goes well.'"

"I'll have the concierge call a taxi. It's easier than depending on the subway and the trains."

oOo

"Leave the 'Closed' sign up, Shampoo. We should go to the Tendos' and discuss things with Ranma and Akane. Also, I want to talk with Kasumi about helping at the café. If we're going to be saving the world on an unpredictable schedule, we'll need somebody reliable to take up the slack during sudden emergencies."

"Nabiki not like being left out, great-grandmother."

"Let's see if we can think of something to keep her busy, then."

When they got to the Tendos', Nabiki had already gone over to the Kuno mansion.

oOo

After an early lunch – Kasumi had really appreciated the breakfast Ranma cooked, but wanted to fill in any gaps – Ranma, Akane, Shampoo, and Cologne took the O-Edo line to Azabu-Juuban. Then they headed off on foot. None of them really knew the way (Luna hadn't taken the train when Shampoo was following her) but they managed with landmarks.

They'd sighted the temple hill, and were closing in on it when they heard a shout – really, a scream. The three girls looked at each other, dropped their disguises, then barreled around the

corner to find a daimohn stealing the pure heart crystal from a boy who looked about college age. This daimohn was tall, green-and-brown, and rather like a pine tree. When the Amazon sisters charged, it looked torn between escaping, and fighting. That hesitation cost it the escape, so it began firing exploding needles at them. Its mouth was moving, but they couldn't hear anything but a faint whisper among the explosions.

Shampoo didn't think maces would work on a tree-monster, so she grabbed fighting hatchets out of her weaponspace. Ranma popped her claws, and Akane brought forth a mallet. Ziggling and dodging needles, they closed in on the daimohn from three sides. It didn't stand a chance. Again, Akane delivered the final blow.

Akane took the heart crystal, and was heading back towards the boy when they heard two voices say "Just a moment, there!" With a cry of "World Shaking!" a globe of light began spinning towards Shampoo. She jumped out of the way, and Ranma fired a moko takabisha back at the blonde girl in the seifuku who'd sent the globe at Shampoo. It knocked her tail-over-teakettle, and left her kneeling on the ground, shaking her head.

Beyond the two hostile fuku-girls, they could see five Senshi headed their way at top speed. The aqua-haired girl was looking around wildly, seeing just what a tight spot she was in. Akane finished returning the crystal, jumped to her feet, and they began closing in. Sailor Aqua pirouetted, cried "Deep Submerge!," and threw a wall of water at them. Then she lifted Sailor Blonde to her feet and they took off running, leaping to the rooftops. Ranma went after them. Sailor Blonde was a bit shaky at first, but steadied out and began running strongly. Ranma let them get away after a kilometer or so. She wasn't at all sure she wanted to catch them. Shampoo had already followed them home yesterday, so she knew where they were going. Besides, the breeze from the run had finished drying her clothes.

Ranma dropped to the ground, shifted her disguise, and headed for the temple. By the time she got there, the others had already arrived. The college guy was lying on the floor, his head in Usagi's lap. She was running her hands through his hair, and crooning "Mamo-chan".

"I hope I'm not interruptin' anything," Ranma said as she entered. "I get the feelin' I've already helped spoil the day for a daimohn and two girls in seifuku."

Akane and Shampoo said "Your turn," as Ranma was buried under four girls and two cats crying out their gratitude.

Cologne snickered. "Seems you three saved Sailor Moon's boyfriend. Usually, he only turns into Tuxedo Kamen when Moon is threatened." She turned to the Senshi. "What kind of idiot warrior-mages did you have on the Moon? Not bothering to give somebody the power to protect himself?"

Luna looked up at Cologne. "The Silver Millennium *was* a matriarchy, after all. The Moon mages rather leaned on the Earth mages. Our *girls* can protect themselves."

Artemis gained a sour expression, which hinted he'd been through similar – discussions – before. "Mamoru is the protector of *Earth*, and Earth was independent. The Moon Queen ruled the rest of the Solar System, but on Earth, the King was in charge. It wasn't so much leaning, as their values were different, and so was their magic. Anyway, once we all get more experience fighting, those problems should go away."

Cologne rapped her staff on the floor. "This is no time for old arguments. We've just won a skirmish. Now we find out what we've learned. Shampoo?"

"This monster fight like last two: dumb. Throw things. We cut piece off, it grow back on. Akane hammer seem to stop that. And blonde girl poor loser – Shampoo knock her out last time, this time she attack without warning. We okay if we keep ahead of monsters and girls, in trouble if they get ahead of us."

Ranma snrked. "Poor loser? Who chased me all across China and back to Japan to kill me because she lost a fight?"

Shampoo blushed.

Cologne held up her hand. "None of that. Akane?"

"I'm starting to realize my hammer works really well against them, but I don't know why."

"Ranma?"

"What Shampoo and Akane said. And those other two girls, they're tough. I hit one with a moko takabisha, and it only knocked her down and stunned her a bit. Then she was off and runnin'. I let 'em get away after a kilometer or so. It might be useful ta have 'em think they can outrun me. After all, Shampoo already found out where they live.

"About Akane's hammer, I been thinkin'. My claws are made of ki, and Shampoo's weapons are made of iron. But them mallets Akane uses are solid, sometimes wood and sometimes iron, and full o' ki. Maybe it takes hittin' the daimohn with both at once?"

Cologne said, "That makes a sort of sense. I'll have to try hitting a daimohn with my staff to see what happens. It's filled with ki. Next daimohn, try charging your fists full of ki." Then she looked over to Usagi. "You girls were coming towards the fight within a minute. How did you know to transform, and how did you know where to go?"

Usagi was still concentrating on Mamoru, so Ami answered. "We can feel danger and dark magic if it's nearby, and heard the scream about the same time we felt the daimohn stealing the pure heart crystal. My computer gave us a precise location."

Cologne stroked her chins in thought. "Ranma and I can feel ki being used in battle. Akane and Shampoo are learning. So you have the same sort of ability, but for magic?"

Ami nodded.

"Could you feel those other two Sailors?"

"No," Ami said slowly. "But my computer can detect them while they're transformed."

"If you can't feel them directly, maybe they aren't using dark magic," Cologne said. "And there's one more thing. There was a woman, a redhead, watching from some way off. I felt malice from her. She left as soon as the daimohn was beaten. Did any of you feel anything? Did the computer pick up anything?"

The senshi and the three Amazon girls looked at each other. They shook their heads and murmured "no" in various ways. "I'll research it with my computer," Ami added.

"You mentioned witches," Cologne said. "Could this have been one of the witches? Because if it was, whoever's behind the daimohns now knows you're getting help from us. If she *was* a witch, she could have been masking her presence. Life may be about to get difficult."

That was a conversation-killer. So Cologne decided that, perhaps, some tea and cookies would occupy them while they all thought things over. When she suggested it, Makoto immediately hopped up and hustled off to the kitchen. Ranma followed her. Soon they returned with cups and teapot, and a plate of cookies. Even occupied with her Mamo-chan, Usagi started to make the cookies disappear. Ranma was impressed, and took it as a challenge. She proceeded to make them disappear even more rapidly. The plate was empty before any of the others got a cookie, except Akane, who knew what she was dealing with and grabbed one as it flew past. "Kami-sama, there are *two* of them," Rei said in an awed voice as she looked between Usagi and Ranma.

Makoto got another plate of cookies, and set it down far from the two appetites. Then she began pouring tea, and Shampoo carried it around to the rest. Usagi took hers and raised up Mamoru's head, and held the cup to his lips. He began to sip, and roused somewhat.

After a while, Cologne spoke. "There are too many pieces to this puzzle. We have to simplify things."

Eyebrows rose. Makoto wondered "How?". She rather approved of simplicity, but didn't see any easy simplifiers here.

"We have two big unknowns: those other sailor girls, and whoever is behind the daimohns. The sailor girls are the easy question. We know their names, and know where they live. Why don't we gather some more information. Then I'll go talk to them. I really don't think they'll harm a poor old granny." Cologne batted her eyelashes. "And if they try, I'll just have to deal with it."

The Amazon girls snickered. The Juuban girls looked at one another with questioning eyes. Cologne chuckled to herself – she loved this part. "You, girl," she said as she pointed at Makoto. "You're a fighter. Let's have a gentle spar. Nothing too destructive, mind you."

Makoto and Cologne moved to a bare area of the room; the others moved to the walls. Makoto didn't feel right attacking such an old woman, so she wasn't really ready when she suddenly was surrounded by a dozen Colognes, courtesy of the Splitting Cat Hairs technique. Then she crumpled to the floor after being poked in the Instant Paralysis shiatsu point. It had only taken a second or two, and it left the other senshi with wide eyes and open mouths. Mamoru began struggling to get up.

"She's okay, sonny boy. Relax, you still need to recover from that daimohn." Cologne used her staff to poke another shiatsu point, and Makoto was able to move.

"Can you teach me that?" Makoto said. She was definitely too enthusiastic to be in pain.

"Which one? For the confusion technique – it's called 'splitting cat hairs' – you need to learn the chestnut fist first. For the instant paralysis, you need to know anatomy and shiatsu. And the paralysis works on humans, but often as not, you fight youkai or monsters. It might not work on

them. It might not even work on *you*, when you're transformed. Learn from Tendo-sensei for a while. He has some good techniques. He'll let me know when you're ready."

Ranma had a thoughtful look. "I wunner if instant paralysis would work on witches? Or mebbe instant unconsciousness?"

Akane looked at Ranma, and considered her peculiar luck. "Try instant unconsciousness first. Who knows what a witch could do just by thinking at you?" Ranma and Cologne both nodded in agreement.

"If not work, punch too, too hard, real quick," Shampoo added. "Stop witch thinking."

"Once we have a witch, what do we do with her? Dogs can chase cars, but it doesn't end well if they catch one." Rei was a bit of a pessimist, and as a miko, the closest they had to an authority on witches.

"She's a witch? Burn her!" said Minako.

"Are you doing that Monty Python thing again?" asked Ami. "Just because you watched it all the time while you were Sailor V in England..."

"It helped me practice my *English!*" Minako said, throwing her hands up and out. "It was cultural *understanding!*"

"It was the best you could find without any anime on the BBC," Rei said tartly.

"Oh look, this isn't an argument!"

"Yes it is!"

"No it isn't!"

"Is too!"

"It's just contradiction!"

"No it isn't!"

"It is!"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I was looking for the being-hit-on-the-head lessons."

"Oh, tomorrow's daimohn will be handling that class. You should come back then." Mina, who had been carrying both sides of the argument, gave herself a high-five, then subsided with a grin.

"Refreshing as this has been," said Cologne, "we still have to decide what to do about the witches. Whatever it is, it shouldn't give them a chance to learn more about us."

"Shampoo followed both Luna and those new Sailor girls back to their bases," Ranma said. "We should probably start by followin' a witch home."

"I can see that," Cologne said. "First of all, we should keep Sailor Moon and Akane focussed on daimohns. We *know* they can finish them off. Artemis and Luna aren't trained as ninjas yet, and that's the most important thing for them. I'd rather have Shampoo at the Cat Café to help train Ami. Ranma is probably the sneakiest of the humans, and the best fighter. She'd be best at following the witch, and stands a good chance of getting back even if the witches catch on to her."

Ami and Makoto looked at Ranma. "You can fight like that, and you're sneaky too?" they asked.

Ranma stood for a moment, calming herself into the proper frame of mind for the umisenken, slowly vanished, then faded back into view on the other side of the room after a few seconds. Artemis looked at her with head tilted to one side. "I could still smell you while you were doing that," he said.

Luna laughed. "She caught *me* that way, Artemis. Lets hope these Death Buster people don't have any cats."

"I guess I'll have to improve the technique," Ranma said. "A cat can be a dangerous enemy." Rhett Butler nodded firmly, once.

And then the ice cream was brought out, and everybody had a cheerful time getting to know each other. They were starting to get a grip on their problems, and had battle plans for the future. Oh, plans never survived contact with the enemy – but the enemies' plans had the same problem. In the meanwhile, there was vanilla ice cream and chocolate syrup to eat. Rei even had a bottle of cherries.

oOo

In the valley of Jusenkyo, Genma watched the Musk warriors dip the leopard into one of the springs. A leopard went in, but a girl came out. The Musk used a ladle to pour permanence water on her, then released her from the net. Two warriors took her to the side, despite her uncoordinated attempts to escape. The rest picked up the portion of the net with Genma in it. He howled and raged and struggled, but they carried him over and dipped him in.

When the Musk pulled Genma out, there was a burst of excitement in Mandarin. The warriors gathered together in an arguing circle, though they were careful to hang on to the leopard-girl. After a minute or two, the largest of the Musk barked out an order, and the others untied the net. They didn't use the permanence water.

Instead, they stood there, some of them glaring at Genma and others laughing. Genma wasn't at all sure what was happening, and when some of the Musk made shooing gestures, Genma took off running.

By the spring, the warriors were pointing. "Look at that panda go!" one of them shouted. Genma didn't understand Mandarin, and put on more speed just in case. Soon, a black-and-white blur had disappeared over the hills. The Musk wrapped a blanket around the leopard-girl – she was naked, and the air was cold – and headed back for their citadel.

Grey Ghost

Azabu-Juuban and its residents had been interesting, but Ranma and Akane were back in Nerima. Cologne and Shampoo had gone to the Cat Café, while Ranma and Akane went home to change into warmer clothes. (In Fall the temperature drops at night.) Then they'd headed out (separately) to the park to talk. They were still playing at standoffish – the two wanted their wedding to be a complete surprise to Soun and Nodoka.

"Could you *believe* the look on *Mamo-chan's* face when I transformed?" They sat on the same swings they'd been using when they decided to marry.

"Poor thing," Akane said. "Here the guy is completely surrounded by powerful girls. I'll just bet he's of two minds about *that*."

"N'en I come along, and c'n do both sides of that all by myself," Ranma noted with a smirk.

"After we took out the daimohn that stole his heart crystal, he's not about to complain. But he must be thinking hard."

"Well, he wasn't at his best. We'll just haveta see what he's like when he's on top of his game."

"They say he's going to marry Usagi, and the two of them will rule the Earth."

"They're nice enough, an' there's nothin' wrong with ambition. It'd be interestin', an Emperor and Empress who can kick monster butt. I hope they have time ta grow up first, though. An' they better keep those cats as advisors. Things go better with cats."

"Tomcat!"

"Tomboy."

The two smiled at each other for a while. Then Akane got serious. "How are we going to work the wedding? My father and your mother should be there. But if we aren't careful, we'll make them suspicious. For one thing, you haven't been talking with your mother lately."

"I'm bein' careful," Ranma said. "Careful she don't see me this way. You know what a fuss she makes about 'man among men'. Do I look like a man among men to you?" She gestured at her petite body and generous bosom. "I been doin' 'woman among women' ever since I figgered out what that scent meant. It's more peaceful that way, but it sure ain't manly."

"Okay, we get married in a week. That's 'man among men'. But if you don't start popping out grandbabies real soon, next thing you know here comes the cloth-wrapped bundle. We're too young for kids. We gotta put an end to that. No, *I* gotta do it. She might talk a good line of belief, but it won't stick unless she gets it from me."

"Sometimes I think your mother is just as loopy as your father."

"They *did* marry each other."

"You told Tawaki he suffered the same curse you did: being raised by an idiot father without a mother to soften the problems. You might be even *worse* off if you'd had your mother along for the ride."

Their shadows moved back and forth in the moonlight, and the swings creaked, as the two girls swayed in thought.

oOo

"Moshi moshi, Saotome residence."

"Hello, mother."

"Ranma? What are you doing as a girl, son?"

"Ano ... telephoning my mother?"

"That isn't very manly."

"Telephoning? Sorry about that." There was a click, and Nodoka heard a dial tone. She raised one eyebrow, and dialed.

"Moshi moshi, Tendo residence."

"Akane, I would like to speak with Ranma."

"I'm sorry, she just left. She seemed angry."

"Well, *I'm* disappointed. Why's Ranma a girl?"

"She's practicing being a woman among women. Doing a rather good job of it too, from all indications."

"What?!"

"She has *wonderful* clothes sense. Oh, she wears modern clothes; but if she had the money, she'd get a proper kimono too. And she's not nearly as much of a pervert. When she changes for phys-ed in the girls' locker room, there's hardly ever any problem."

" ... "

"We were having some trouble with this *cat* business, but Ranma made a breakthrough. Now she's not only a cat among cats, she's one of Tokyo's *top* cats. Why, even the tigers in the zoo back down from her!"

" ... "

"Are you okay, Auntie?"

" ... "

Akane covered the phone – lightly – with her hand, and bellowed. "Ranma, get your furry tail in here and talk with your mother. I think I broke her."

Ranma, who was standing beside Akane, gave her a grin and a thumbs-up. Then she tromped her feet in a startlingly-good imitation of stamping in from outdoors. She took up the phone.

"Mother?"

"Woman among women? Cat?" Ranma held the phone away from her ear. Nodoka seemed upset.

Ranma took the phone to the sofa, and settled down for a long talk. "Cat. It all started when oyaji took me on that training trip."

"Ranma, don't call your father 'the old man'. It's not respectful."

"Now mother, I spent the last ten years with him. I have more experience than you do. And a lot of it has to do with the cat. Have you heard of the neko-ken?"

"I've heard rumors – both Genma's family and mine are martial artists. But I don't know any details."

"Well, it goes like this. First you dig a BIG hole ... "

Half an hour later, Ranma finished an abridged account of his training under Genma. With a quaver in her voice, Nodoka asked, "He did all *that* to you?"

"Oh, those were the highlights. I left out the wolves, and the cliffs, and the shopkeepers. Those actually worked."

"Wolves?"

"Nothing like a pack of wolves to keep you running longer than you'd normally manage. Great endurance training."

"Shopkeepers?"

"A pack of shopkeepers can keep you running almost as long as wolves."

"I don't think I want to know about the cliffs."

"Just as well."

"Now, son – as I asked before, what are you doing being a girl?"

"Well, that goes back a couple months, to when I was in Minnesota."

"Minnesota?"

"We can explain that some other time. Anyway, since I'm a shapechanger, I was invited to a meeting of shapechangers. Most of them were werewolves, but quite a few were were-cats. I'm afraid I freaked out at that, and tore the place apart."

"Werewolves?"

"Later, mother. Nerima is full of shapechangers. There's me, and Shampoo turns into a cat – oh, by the way, I'm officially her shield-sister now. And Mousse turns into a duck, but he's gone back to China. Why shouldn't Minnesota have shapechangers too?"

Nodoka sighed. "Keep on with the story."

"Anyway, Bjorn, the guy who owns the place, is a were-bear. He's a master of the Bear-claw, and he said I showed all the signs of a strong berserk. So he offered to train me to better deal with the Cat."

"You keep saying 'the Cat' like it really exists."

Ranma sighed. "It does, mother. I came out of his training with the soul of a cat in my head, as well as the soul of a human. Both souls have been there since oyaji's neko-ken training – in Minnesota, we just learned to get along. Now, instead of going insane when there are too many cats, I understand what's going on. I can use my claws any time, and my senses are all sharper. And since learning to be a cat improved my life so much, I decided to learn more about being a woman. If I'm going to be female half of the time, I should be good at it. There were a few other reasons, but we can talk about that some other time too."

"I can understand that, son, but being a woman isn't really all that manly."

"Mother. You declared me sufficiently manly some time ago, remember? Annnnd I wonnn't sssstand sssstill forrr sssseppukkkuuuu."

"Ranma? What happened to your voice?"

"That was the Cat. He shares my body, after all. He's not about to let it get killed."

"Oh, my!"

"Well, he shares my memories too. And you did make an awfulll fussy about that conntrrract."

" ... "

Ranma held out the phone to Akane. "This time I think I broke her. You want to take over the conversation?"

Akane took the phone. "Auntie, Ranma actually had something quite different in mind when she called."

"What, more troubles?"

"Not at all. Ranma thought I could benefit from training also, so Bjorn-sensei is here in Japan for a while. He's arranged for me to meet a swordmaster-priest down in Okayama this coming

Saturday. Since you bear the Saotome honor sword, I thought you might like to come along. I hear Katsuhito-sama is one of the finest swordsmen in all of Japan."

Nodoka wasn't about to turn down an offer like that, so after a bit of discussion she agreed to meet them at the Tendos' early on Saturday morning. Then they and Bjorn-sensei (and Mao, his translator) would take the bullet train to Okayama. And maybe Mr. Tendo would come along too; he had some swordcraft, and appreciated a chance to talk with people like Katsuhito-sama. When Nodoka finally said her goodnights, she sounded dazed and a bit whipsawed.

Ranma and Akane grinned at each other. "Get 'em off familiar ground, eh?" Ranma said.

"Hitting her with the cat before she had a chance to rant about manliness put her off-balance," Akane replied. "Nabiki's been doing a good job tutoring us in Anything Goes conversation."

"Now we gotta talk with your father. That should be easy, compared to this. Tomorrow, after school?"

Akane nodded, and they went upstairs to thank Nabiki for the lessons. But Nabiki wasn't home yet, so they went to bed. Separately, of course, but the days were counting down on *that*.

oOo

The next morning, as Ranma and Akane approached Furinkan, they saw Bjorn and Mao outside the gates. "We didn't want to disturb you at home, this early in the day," Mao said. "Bjorn wants to discuss your training with a few of your teachers. We can't stay much longer – we should be home by the full moon, in a little over a week. But while there are some things better taught in Minnesota, there's much you can learn here at school."

Akane raised her eyebrows. "It's a very strange school." Ranma nodded in agreement.

"Might that be the principal's doing? Didn't Ranma threaten him two nights ago? And get away with it?" Mao raised her eyebrows back at Akane. "That was quite a story she told."

Ranma and Akane blushed a bit. "Principal Kuno is moonstruck in his own dysfunctional way," Ranma said. "A story doesn't have to be sane to get to him. Sometimes, it doesn't even have to exist. Just watch out for the pineapples, coconuts, and hair clippers."

They entered the yard, and Kuno Tatewaki was waiting for them. He might be paying his attentions elsewhere these days, but he still enjoyed greeting his fierce tigress and the pig-tailed girl. His hair ruffled in the autumn breeze, as leaves blew past. "Did I hear you mention my father?"

"Bjorn-sensei wants to arrange some special training for Akane," Ranma said. "We were worried he might try to sneak in a haircut."

"No problem. His plane took off yesterday. Right now, he's probably eating lunch in Hawaii. You put quite the scare into him. I'm more worried about my sister."

"How is she?" Ranma and Akane said together.

"Her mood flutters about like a sheet in a typhoon. But really, 'twere best spoken of at another time. At *this* moment, we have work to do. Let us go to the vice-principal's office."

"We can talk more at lunch," Ranma agreed. And they all headed towards the school entrance.

Kyoutou-sensei's office was as unlike Principal Kuno's as it was possible to get. Instead of sand and small palm trees, it was modern, but Japanese. There was a Hokusai print on the wall, and tatami mats on the floor. His clothing was business formal, and his secretary a proper office lady. He was obviously trying to distance himself from his boss. "What may I do for you?" he asked.

Kuno Tatewaki bowed politely. "Kyoutou-sensei, I would like to introduce Bjorn-sensei." Bjorn heard his name, and sketched a bow. "He is here for a short time, training Tendo Akane in his Art. But he must return soon to his home, and would like to discuss her education here at Furinkan."

The vice-principal raised an eyebrow. "Very well, I can give Bjorn-sensei some time. But not much; I find myself suddenly in charge, and there are many things to do."

Tatewaki's mouth twitched. "My father is in Hawaii, and will probably not return soon. I must apologize for his departure on such short notice."

The vice-principal smiled. "I shall bear up under the strain." He indicated the door. "Now, it is past time for you to be in class. Kaede, will you give them notes excusing their lateness?"

After the youth had left, Kyoutou-sensei motioned Bjorn and Mao to chairs before his desk. Mao sat down; Bjorn sat down carefully and gently, to avoid overstraining his chair. Mao spoke first. "Vice-principal, do you speak English?"

"I taught English before I took up administration," he said – in English.

Bjorn smiled. "Practice is good in all arts, save perhaps the art of dying. Thank you, sir, for making things easier for me. I only recently found myself with two Japanese students, and have not yet learned your tongue."

The vice-principal waved this aside. "We are both teachers; we simply have different subjects. What is yours? What are you teaching Tendo-san?"

"I'm a master of the Bear-Claw. It's an ancient warrior art from the Norse countries. By giving yourself over to your fighting spirit, you can become far more powerful in battle. But it is dangerous for novices. Sometimes the spirit takes over when it shouldn't. That can cause problems.

"As martial artists, Ranma and Akane unknowingly woke their fighting spirits. I am teaching them control and moderation."

"The school can use that," the vice-principal agreed. "Have you begun already? There's been less property damage recently, and not just from those two."

"I taught Ranma over summer break," Bjorn said. "Akane is a new student for me. Her spirit takes the form of a mallet, or hammer. Do any of your teachers deal in the gentle control of hammers?"

The vice-principal smiled. "Ah, the famous mallet. I think Kinomoto-sensei, the art teacher, might do. He's looking for a few more sculptors."

"Coppersmithing, perhaps?" Bjorn said.

"We already have some of the tools," the principal said. "I'll let him know you'll want to speak with him."

"One more thing," Bjorn said. "They are to visit a swordmaster-priest in Okayama, this coming Saturday. It would be nice if they could prepare on Friday. Could they have that day off?"

"I don't see why not. They've gone off on enough adventures *without* advance warning. Kaede, could you do the paperwork?"

oOo

At lunchtime, Ranma and Akane looked out the window and decided there was too much wind, and too little sun. They went off to find Tatewaki, who was eating lunch with Nabiki in the classroom they shared. They joined them. They'd have privacy, because nobody in Furinkan was foolish enough to eavesdrop on Nabiki.

"I got a note in class, from Bjorn," Akane said. "He wants me to join the art club and practice coppersmithing."

"I like that," Ranma said. "I've been having fun there. Now we can have fun together." Nabiki waved her index finger in a *tut-tut* sort of way, with a roguish smile.

"Coppersmithing," Tatewaki said as he thought. "Perhaps some day you might take up swordsmithing?"

Akane nodded happily. "Bjorn has already suggested that. If he gets good reports about my work with copper, he'll arrange some ironworking for me."

"Good," Ranma said. "But from earlier – how is Kodachi, sempai?"

"She was doing well for several weeks," Tatewaki said. "But something broke the night of the dinner. She alternates between despair, and confidence she can overcome it."

Nabiki nodded agreement. "Sometimes her mood switches within just a few moments." She looked drawn, and it was obvious she'd been up late trying to lift Kodachi's spirit.

Ranma's new watch gave off a quiet beep. A light glowed on it. "I'll be back in a minute," she said as she rose from her chair. Then she jumped out the window. The schoolgrounds were only sparsely populated, because of the chill.

She lifted the crystal of the watch, and saw Sailor Mercury. "My computer is picking up a daimohn in Shinjuku."

"Location?" Ranma asked. And Mercury told her.

"Damn, that's pretty near where the last one was. Akane and I will get on it. You let Shampoo know. And tell her to bring Bjorn, if he's around. He might enjoy a fight." Ranma jumped back to the window. "Akane – emergency. We gotta go *now*." In an instant, the two were diminishing figures, bounding across the skyline.

"What?" said Tatewaki.

"It hurts to say it, but I don't know," replied Nabiki. "They won't tell me. All I'm sure of, they've hooked up with a couple devil-hunters and their talking cat. Something the cat told Ranma really affected her. I think Tokyo has a *bad* devil situation brewing."

oOo

Akane and Ranma looked down from a tall building. A bulky daimohn that looked like she had a garbage truck in her ancestry was raging about, shouting "Trash! Trash!" in a voice like an airhorn as she tried to pry a young woman out from a narrow crevice between buildings.

"We shouldn't let 'em think they can predict what's comin' at 'em," Ranma said. "Disguise yourself as Monlon of the Seven Lucky Gods school, remember her? Hittin' 'em with a mallet or a mandolin, it all looks the same. As for me ..." Ranma lifted her disguise pen. Light swirled, and she morphed into a very large bobcat. She leaped, snarling.

Suddenly, the daimohn found herself beset by a hissing, clawing buzzsaw of a cat. She swiped at it with one of her loader-arms, only to have the arm slashed off. "Trash!" she cried, and spewed forth a great pile of – trash – at the bobcat. Which was attacking her from the rear by the time the trash hit in front of her.

As the fight swirled about, it was plain that Ranma-cat had the advantage in speed and cutting force, but the daimohn was immensely strong. Worse, she was filled with all sorts of things she could use as weapons and patches, even before cut-off portions could rejoin her. This was not a fight Ranma was going to win easily, if at all.

By herself.

As the daimohn turned in an attempt to catch Ranma, she found herself looking at the rapidly-approaching belly of a long-necked mandolin. It smashed into her face with a loud *twang*, and knocked her backwards halfway through a concrete wall.

The tall, pale-haired woman with the mandolin turned to the cat. "I got the woman to safety."

The daimohn moaned. One of her headlight-eyes was swollen shut, but the other began to glow with a black light, and sent a beam of darkness writhing towards Monlon-Akane. She blocked it with the mandolin. The darkness splashed off it, then began to flow around. It reached Akane, and she screamed in agony as she fell. By then, the bobcat had slashed the daimohn's head off, and it went rolling in the street. That didn't kill her, but it sure spoiled her aim. After a few quick, shuddering breaths, Monlon-Akane stood, and walked towards the daimohn. Just as the head was returning, the mandolin hit. The head became the grille and headlights of a truck, and lay there.

Wouldn't it just be Ranma's luck that the daimohn had backup lights? She was still able to fight, backwards, though her great cries of "trash" were reduced to shrill beeps. The fight was easy, though long and messy. Ranma sliced, Akane smashed, and gradually there was less and less of a

daimohn to deal with. In the distance, Ranma could feel the ki signatures of Cologne and Shampoo approaching.

"Keep alive," Shampoo cried as she joined the fight. "See if it can answer questions." The daimohn shot a black beam at Shampoo, but it was a feeble thing and easily shrugged off. By the time the Scouts arrived, they'd whittled and crushed Ms. Trash down to a nub.

"Sorry we're late," Sailor Mercury said. "We had a daimohn of our own to handle first. I think they're trying to double-team us." She looked at Monlon-Akane. "Who are you?"

Akane whispered in her ear. "Disguise pen – I'm Akane, that's Ranma," as she nodded at the bobcat. Then she whispered the same to Shampoo.

"Safety first," said Mercury. "Moon, do you think you can purify what's left without killing it?"

The small daimohn lay in the street, peeping. Moon looked it over. "That's not much of a threat any more. I'll try my gentlest healing spell." A crescent wand appeared in her hand, and she spun as she said "Moon Healing Escalation." The air about the daimohn filled with stars and crescents.

"Refresh!" cried the daimohn, in a high piping voice. She wobbled, and then a small toy truck tipped over on the pavement. A withered seed-husk fell from the back, and split open. A grey mist came out, in the shape of a small ghost. Ranma immediately pounced on it with a yowl, caging it within her claws; but it poured right through them, and blew away.

"We gotta figger ssome way to catch that ghosst," Ranma said. "I think there'sss been one frrom every daimohn I've fffought. We're not gonna have luck asskinng garbage truckss questionsss, but maybe ghostsss?" Normal people would be unsettled by a talking bobcat – but everybody here was used to talking cats.

"And how do you plan to ask a ghost questions, granddaughter?" came a gravelly voice from behind. The sailor scouts jumped. The Amazons didn't; they knew Cologne liked to surprise, and wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

"Sailor Pluto is always startling Moon," Sailor Mars said. "Do you think you could give Pluto a startle for us?"

Everybody chuckled, though some of the chuckles were more melodious than others.

"We could try finding Mao-Mo-Lin to ask the questions," Ranma said. "He's a ghost."

"Not want him around," said Shampoo. "He almost turn me into full-time cat."

"I'm a miko," Sailor Mars noted, "and have dealt with spirits before."

"Good," said Cologne. "You and I can work on a way to catch one of them."

"The Moon Kingdom also had ways of handling spirits," said Mercury.

"You too, then." And Cologne sighed. "I just failed to catch a witch. Got her good and proper in the instant-unconsciousness point, but she disappeared anyway. At least our difficulties involve daimohn-ghosts and witches *getting away*, rather than pursuing us."

The bobcat sat on its haunches and proceeded to lick its paw and wash its face. "What we need iss sssomebody who can latch onto the witchessss, and go with them when they disappear. Then spread panic and connnfusionn."

Cologne sighed. "It keeps coming back to Happosai, doesn't it?"

Ranma-bobcat spread her claws. "Happosssai hass an undersstanding with me. He behavesss, and I don't scirrrcumsssize him." She cocked her head. "Witchesss are magical girrrlss, ssorta. He'd rissk a lot forrr their pantiesss."

Cologne sighed again. "You talk to him."

"Wait a minute, *magical girl panties?!?*" Moon and Mars said in unison. They looked at each other with surprise. "Make sure he knows we're wearing *leotards*, no panties involved. *Armored leotards. Impervious armored leotards.*"

This time Ranma-bobcat sighed. "You *do* know how to hand out a challenge."

oOo

In the mountains of Western China, a cloaked figure of indeterminate sex and species stood in the cold mist by the side of a gravel track. *I think this is the road they brought me up to Joketsuzoku on, in the back of that truck. I wonder how well they guard the truck.*

Shivering slightly, Genma began to trudge downhill.

oOo

Standing in the hall outside their classroom holding buckets, Ranma and Akane muttered and grumbled. "Save a woman, slay a monster, help the sailor senshi, and get back to class five minutes late. Five minutes! And what do we get?" Ranma shook her hand, and the water in the bucket splashed. Ranma was already a girl, and the water was cold, so it was only pro-forma.

"But wasn't it fun?" Akane said. "Hey, next time we disguise ourselves, let's do Wedding Peach!"

Ranma wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Nah, they're already used to magical girls. I want Super Mario Brothers."

Crimson Ink

When the bell signaled the end of classes, Ranma and Akane packed up their books and bentos and headed down to the Art Room. Inside, Akane noticed several girls who seemed nervous. (*Strange, she thought, I've taken cooking class with most of them.*) But she was distracted by the smells: paint, wet clay, hot metal, fresh-cut wood.

Kinomoto-sensei bustled up to them, wearing a shop apron with many pockets. His hand swept around the room. It was large, and cluttered with workbenches, easels, storage, and supplies. He spoke to Akane. "As you can see, we're set up for many different arts and crafts." He pointed to a sturdy mid-size bench with many strange hammers in a rack to one side. "Over here is the metalwork area."

He opened a small locker. "This is assigned to you, so you can keep your projects and materials separately, like most artists prefer. In turn, don't use anybody else's materials without asking." He pointed to several shelves of copper in sheets and rolls. "Bjorn-sensei gave me a budget for your materials, so here's a starter stock. If you want something more or larger, I'd like a week's warning to get hold of it."

He took out two rolls of copper strip, maybe a millimeter thick and several centimeters wide. "These are both copper, but the two strips have been treated differently. Unroll maybe a decimeter from this one." Akane did; it unrolled easily. "Now this." The other roll was a lot stiffer.

He lit a wide-mouth burner at the center rear of the bench. Holding the stiff copper with tongs, he passed it through the flames until it glowed red; then he dipped it into a small tank of water. There was a hiss of steam. "Bend it now." It was soft.

"That's half the trick right there," Kinomoto-sensei said. "Now here's the other half." He put on hearing protection, handed some to Akane. "You can go deaf from hammering metal," he said. Then he took the sheet of copper that had started out soft, and a hammer with a rounded, polished head. He began hammering the copper gently against a small, polished anvil, and soon had a dimpled area a couple centimeters wide. He handed it to Akane. "Feel that."

Akane did, and snatched her hand away. "Hot! Hot!"

The teacher smiled. "It works that way. The hammer's been moving the copper around inside this strip. That takes a lot of work, which means heat." He dipped the metal into the cool water, then gave it back to Akane. "Now try bending it."

"It's a lot stiffer where you were hitting it," she said.

He heated it red, then quenched it. He handed it back to her.

"It's soft again," she said with raised eyebrows. "Is it supposed to get soft?"

"That's called 'annealing'. *Most* metals soften. When the first ironsmiths came along, imagine their surprise when the iron got harder." He handed her the copper strip and the hammer. "Now you try it, on the other end."

Akane placed the copper on the anvil and took a mighty whack. Instead of a smooth pattern of dimples, the strip had a crater, precisely in the center. The teacher looked warily at it. "Good aim, but you should use lighter blows, and more of them."

"Akane," Ranma said. "You and the copper are on the same team. Don't kill it." When Akane glared at her, she went over to her own locker, took out a tagua nut and magnifying eyeglasses, and sat at a small bench with a bright light. She began sketching away, then started to draw on the nut itself. Akane suspected she could have heard purring, if only art labs were quieter; but the potter's wheel was rumbling as it turned, somebody was hammering nails, and there was a low murmur of conversation.

"Let's try again..." the sensei said, handing her fresh copper.

Walking home after the club, Akane was grumbling. "I thought I'd make something," she said.

"Now, now," Ranma chided. "You're beginning a high calling. Throughout history, kings and pharaohs and emperors have honored warriors, smiths, and poets. The warriors win battles and glory, the smiths make the swords the warriors need, and the poets tell everybody about it.

"We're warriors now, but we started as martial artists. And how do you start as a martial artist? Your sensei knows what the human body can do. He teaches you what *you* can do, and he teaches you to do it. Only with long experience can you start doing it well yourself. Kinomoto-sensei is just giving you those first lessons in what copper can do. Then come the first katas. After *that*, you make."

"Nobody taught you carving," Akane said. "You just started."

"I had to learn the neko-ken first, though. With regular carving tools, I'd be a beginner."

"Why are the things you make so small?"

"Life on the road, Akane. Big stuff doesn't travel well. And I like the tradition of netsuke."

They walked towards home in the chill breeze, deep in thought. Akane smelled her hands, and could detect metal on them – or at least a smell that had always meant metal to her. She held them out to Ranma for an opinion.

"Smells like oil and wax, scorched from the heating you did. Probably they put a thin layer on to protect the copper until it was used."

oOo

After an early dinner, Akane went over to the Cat Café for her evening shift. Ami was already there. The evening rush was going strong – they bustled about taking orders, bringing them to tables, and running the cash register. Shampoo and Cologne were in the kitchen cooking furiously to keep up with the demand; and occasionally, Shampoo would rush off on her bicycle for a quick delivery.

"Teaches you to keep track of ten things at once," Ami said, as she caught her breath during a lull.

Akane nodded. "And set priorities, and plan the safest route across the battlefield, er, room." Some stranger to Nerima had tried patting her fanny. She'd only given him a hard stare, and was very proud of her self-control. Cologne had seen, congratulated her, and assigned her to the cash register to cool down. On balance, Akane figured it was a win.

As the dinner rush was beginning to clear out, Nabiki and Kodachi came in. They took a small corner table. Akane went over. Nabiki gave her the family 'later' look, and ordered white tea and cookies for two. When Akane went to get the order, Cologne raised an eyebrow at her and turned to Ami. "*You* take care of that table." Then she motioned for Akane to stay in the kitchen.

"Kodachi's hurting," Cologne said gently. "You and Ranma are getting married. She might not like frequent reminders. Ami got along extremely well with the two of them, Saturday evening. If you get a chance before I do, tell her that table is her first priority tonight."

"Nabiki will appreciate the help. She's been working hard to keep Kodachi's spirits up. It has her frayed around the edges – not enough sleep, too much coffee."

"That bad? When you get a chance, ask Nabiki if she thinks Kodachi would accept soothing herbal teas. That girl has never been quite right in the head, and piling heartbreak on top of it is bad. But Amazons, too, have to deal with heartbreak. We have medicines that help. I'll prepare some special tea, just in case."

Akane went out to the cash register, and watched. None of the customers seemed to need anything at the moment. Ami was talking with Nabiki and Kodachi (she heard murmurs about roses) and all seemed well. After a few minutes Ami went back into the kitchen, and Akane could hear Cologne talking quietly with her. Then Ami came out to stand at the counter.

"I don't know her history," Ami said. "What was Kodachi like before this happened?"

"When I've seen her, she's been aggressive and hyper. But Nabiki says, now that they're getting close, that Kodachi is depressed a lot. She stays home when she's that way, if she can."

"Oh dear," said Ami. "That sounds bipolar. I wonder if there's some way we could have her evaluated."

"If she trusts anybody these days, it's Nabiki," Akane said. "Kodachi loves plants, so herbal medicine might be the way to start."

"That's what Cologne suggested, too. I think I'll go over and talk with them about it." Ami rose, went over to the corner table (grabbing a loose chair along the way) and sat down. Soon the three were talking. After a while, Ami went into the kitchen and returned with a cup of tea, which she gave to Kodachi. When she had a chance, Ami smiled at Akane, and nodded. Akane didn't reply – she was dealing with several groups at the register.

After two more cups of the special tea, Kodachi was looking much happier, and the conversation seemed upbeat from where Akane sat. Kodachi got up and went to the rest room, and Nabiki gave Ami a high five. When Kodachi returned, she and Nabiki paid their bill and left.

There were only a few customers remaining, and they all had their orders, so there was time for Ami and Akane to have a quick huddle with Cologne. "That tea works fast!" Ami said. "After the second cup, it was almost night turned to day."

"Come, student," Cologne beckoned. "It is time for you to learn to make that preparation. Akane, you and Shampoo have the café for the rest of the evening." Cologne pogoed off to her sanctum, with Ami following close behind.

"Aiyah, shield-sister," Shampoo said. "Tea work too too good. Love my sisters, but I need help from tea, too, after Ranma become shield-sister instead of husband. Glad ribbon-girl get help."

Akane gave Shampoo a quick hug. "Life is better with sisters and friends."

The remaining hours went quickly. The four of them closed the café down, sat at a table, and had a quick bowl of ramen together. Then Akane walked Ami to the subway station, and Cologne and Shampoo cleaned up for tomorrow.

"Those two are smart," Ami said at the entrance to the station.

"True," Akane agreed. "They could be useful, helping us think about monsters. But I'm still not sure how much we can trust either of them. My sister is mercenary, and Kodachi is unstable. We might be able to get them on board with the Amazons, without letting them find out who you are. And Kodachi is a good fighter, too."

"No hurry," said Ami as she heard her train approach. "So far, we're keeping ahead of the daimohns."

oOo

The next few days were stressful. There are a thousand things to do for even a small wedding. Ranma and Akane had to pick up their wedding garb, have a final fitting, and get it over to Kuno's mansion without being seen. They had to make sure of the hours for the City Offices, and the exact details of papers and payments involved. Kasumi and Tatewaki took care of most of the details in Okayama (bless them). They talked with their respective parents about swordmaster Katsuhito, and the 7 a.m. departure of the bullet train.

And they tried to sleep. Ranma was fortunate – a cat can sleep any time. Akane didn't sleep well, but she compensated with caffeine and adrenaline. It gave her a bad temper, but she was trying to maintain that image. And it kept Soun from hanging around asking questions.

Nabiki was cheerful, at least. The Amazon tea had worked wonders for Kodachi. The next night the two had gone down to the Cat Café and bought a supply; and while they were at it, had taken a table and some conversation as well. They were becoming regulars.

Friday morning dawned. Ranma got up early, and helped Kasumi with breakfast while Akane took her morning run. When Nabiki came downstairs, she handed her coffee. She brought in the newspaper and set it at Soun's place, but separated out the business section for Nabiki. Then, fortified with tea and bearing hidden papers, Ranma and Akane set off to Bjorn's hotel to have breakfast with him and Mao.

"It's a big day," Mao said, looking over her teacup with a smile. "Going to have a big meal to keep you going?"

Ranma shook her head. "Not much room in my stomach – it's full of butterflies." Akane agreed. They both ordered rice, and miso soup with ginger.

"We can get more food after we take care of the paperwork," Akane said.

"Too bad you couldn't make it to that battle on Monday," Ranma commented to Bjorn as they waited for their breakfast. "Biggest monster we've fought so far. You would have enjoyed it."

"I couldn't keep up with Shampoo. So I went back and finished my lunch at the Cat Café. Kasumi made it there fast enough to keep the place open.

"I wish Cologne hadn't left – she's a great conversationalist, and I can't believe what a good fighter she is at her age. By the way, do you know how old she is?"

"Shampoo is her great-granddaughter. That makes her at least sixty. An' she hints she's over three hundred. Leaves a lotta room for guessin'."

Akane nodded. "She likes to keep people wondering. If you talk with her long enough, she'll give you a dozen different numbers."

Mao shook her head. "I hope I look that good at three hundred. But I won't."

Ranma looked askance at her. "I thought Weres lived almost forever?"

"That's vampires," Mao said. "We don't talk to vampires. Nasty bunch, arrogant, and they smell almost as bad as zombies."

"I don't think I want to know," Akane muttered.

"Believe it," Ranma said. "A were *knows* a bad smell. Intimately. So do cats. Of course, we may not all agree. The Cat and I like the smell of dead fish, but that's a minority taste."

Mao giggled. "Some of the wolves roll in it."

"Ick!" Akane shuddered.

"Indeed," Ranma said firmly. "That'ss a waassste of a perfectly good dead ffisssh."

Their breakfasts came. There was a dead fish on Mao's plate. It was fresh, and had been nicely grilled, so that didn't count.

After breakfast they went up to Bjorn's suite. Ranma used the warm water to change to a boy, then swapped into the clothes in his knapsack. The two of them used the disguise pens – in a side room out of sight – to change their appearance. They didn't want to be recognized, just in case there was any trouble looking for them.

"Amazing," Bjorn said. "You even managed to change your scent."

"You hang around with cats, you gotta watch that sorta thing." Ranma and Akane hugged Bjorn and Mao. "See you tomorrow morning," they said, and headed out onto the street. They caught a bus, and after ten minutes or so, ended up near the city offices. They got out to walk the last block.

Over the noise of the city, they heard a "moo" coming from above. They looked up and saw a minotaur with tentacles flying by.

"Not our business today," Ranma said, shaking his head.

"But wouldn't it be fun seeing the look on a daimohn's face if Tarou started stomping it?"

"Some other time, Akane. We don't need the complications right now."

"I was teasing, silly."

Hand in hand they walked into the building, and checked the directory. Then a quick detour into a dark corner, and they were themselves again. They headed for the proper office.

The whole affair was surprisingly easy, and didn't really take that long. They presented their identification, they showed the clerk the permissions Genma and Soun had signed, and they paid their money.

"Which family register will you be going into?" the clerk asked.

"Oik!" said Ranma; and "erk!" said Akane. They hadn't considered that. But when they thought, it wasn't all that hard to decide.

"I'm th' only Saotome in my generation," Ranma said. "There are three Tendos. It'd be nice to be named Tendo – that'd go with the dojo – but it'd really bother my mother."

"So we're Saotomes, then," Akane said. They nodded at the clerk. He filled in and shuffled a few more papers, then handed them a form. They looked it over, and took deep breaths. Ranma stamped the form with his hanko, then Akane with hers. They looked at the crimson marks with their hearts in their throats.

The clerk bowed to them. "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Saotome. May you have many years of happiness together." He made a copy, and handed it to them. They carefully tucked it away into Ranma's knapsack. Their day's work was done.

In the same dark corner, they resumed their disguises. Ranma held his hand out to Akane. "Well, wife, what do we do now?"

"Not that, I'm afraid. We have a Shinto wedding tomorrow. You're supposed to be abstinent the day before a Shinto ceremony." Akane made a small face.

"There's abstinence – and then, there's abstinence. I don't think Shinto says anything about ice cream." Ranma was willing to look at the silver lining for one more day.

"Ice cream is a kami, with a powerful influence on human affairs."

"Let's go to the temple of the ice-cream kami, then, and worship." Saotome Ranma took Saotome Akane by the hand, and the two began heading for Sakura, in Shinjuku. That place was strong in the ways of the Cream.

oOo

Ranma, Akane, and Soun were up well before dawn. Kasumi and Nabiki were still in their rooms. Ranma had spent time out with the cats the night before, and had gotten home at the right moment to start breakfast. Now he was bringing it in: rice and pickles, miso soup, and grilled eel.

"What? More dead fish?" Akane grumbled. Ranma turned away to keep Soun from noticing the grin on his face. They ate in relative silence, not yet awake enough for conversation. Then the three were out the door, headed to meet Bjorn, Mao, and Nodoka at the subway station.

Once they were out of sight, the lights went on in Tendo-ke. Kasumi and Nabiki were frantically getting ready to travel. They nipped down to the kitchen – Ranma had left food for them, including coffee for Nabiki. In just a few moments, a limousine was at the gate, with Tatewaki, Ukyo, Konatsu, Cologne, and Shampoo. Sasuke was driving. They sped off for the airport.

Dawn was breaking as Ranma, Akane and Soun arrived at the subway. They were the first there, but Nodoka came shortly after. She seemed relieved to see Ranma as a guy. Bjorn and Mao completed the set as they got out of their taxi. With Bjorn along, even on a weekday they wouldn't have needed pushers to get into the subway car. Soon they were at the train station, boarding the Shinkansen for Okayama. The weather was pleasant, and if forecasts could be trusted, it would be even better at the shrine.

Ranma insisted Bjorn and Mao take seats by right-side windows. "You show me great landscape in Minnesota," he said. "Now you see great landscape of Japan."

The Kanto plains near the track were heavily built up – that happens with railways – but nicely landscaped. Bjorn and Mao were astonished by the train's speed. "I've never gone this fast, close to the ground," Mao said.

After an hour or so, they were leaving the Greater Tokyo area for mountains. "Now you see what I mean," Ranma said. The air was clear, and there was a small cone of snow ahead and to the right.

As they continued, the cone of snow got larger and larger, and grew a mountain beneath. "Fuji-san, sacred mountain," Ranma said.

"It's even more beautiful than the photos," Mao breathed.

Bjorn was staring, fascinated. Ranma's senses prickled. Finally Bjorn spoke. "You called Northern Minnesota the 'bones of the Earth'," he said slowly. "There, I think, is the hot, red blood of the Earth, flowing beneath a layer of stone. This, too, is a place of power."

Mao translated for the rest.

"There's a place in Minnesota that reminds you of Fuji-san?" Akane asked Ranma.

"Only a bit. Japan is a young land, born in fire. Northern Minnesota has some of the oldest and hardest rocks on Earth," Ranma said, his eyes seeing a distant country. "The kami there are just as strong as our kami. But they're not the same."

After that, Ranma's night caught up with him. He found a sunny seat, curled up into an improbably small ball, and purred a bit before going to sleep. Nodoka was taken aback.

"He was out last night with the cats," Akane fumed. "I don't know what he does with them, but sometimes he comes home reeking of fish."

Mao snickered, and whispered in Bjorn's ear. He chuckled. Soun and Nodoka looked at each other with questions on their faces, but a glimpse of Akane's sulfurous mood kept them silent. Soun wondered: *Is that what she was complaining about when she said 'More dead fish?' at breakfast?*

The train sped into the day, heading for Okayama.

oOo

In the Bayankala mountains of China, Genma had found hot water and was back to his old self. He still wore the cloak – it was chilly in the mountains – but at least he could throw the hood back and face the world.

He was tired of being chased. Maybe he wouldn't steal the truck after all.

He'd found a hatchet lying in the road. Could he trade it for a phone call? He walked into the mountain village where the trucker lived, found the tavern by smell and memory, and went in. Maybe if he was fortunate, he could trade for a phone call *and* a mug of beer?

For a wonder, one of the gaffers in the tavern knew Japanese. The average Chinese doesn't like the Japanese at all – bad blood left over from the War – but then, the average Tibetan doesn't like the *Chinese* very much. And the Bayankalas had been part of Tibet until China annexed them. What with this and that, the old fellow was willing to help Genma. He even bought him a drink.

The Tendos didn't answer the phone.

Nodoka didn't answer the phone.

Genma didn't have anybody else to call.

The old Tibetan coughed a bit, and cleared his throat. "You look like a strong young fellow. I need help repairing a stone wall. You do that for me, I'll feed you until next Tuesday, when the truck from Xining is due. Do it well, I'll put in a good word with the truckers."

Genma swallowed his pride. Honest work? He supposed it was better than being chased through a mountainous wilderness. He sat down, and shook the man's hand. But even as Genma settled into his chair, the old man was standing up.

"Let's go, lad. I'd hate to see you slacking off. Lazy kids, these days, mutter mutter ..." He headed out the door, and Genma had no choice but to follow.

In Heaven, Inari and Nanibozho smiled and took another drink of sake. Then they started to plan games with cold water. Genma might stay himself, but he was due for a *lot* of close calls.

White Wedding

Ranma, Akane, and the crew took a bus from the Okayama train station to the Masaki shrine. The road went through hills and mountains, with colored leaves still on the trees. The sky was blue, with clouds drifting above, so there were times of light, and times of shadow. The air was crisp but not cold – a perfect day in mid-October.

They took a footpath into the woods, and after a short while were in a large clearing with a circular lake, and a large tree in the center of the lake. It was girded about with sacred shimenawa ropes and dangling strips of gohei papers.

The tree had green leaves, and enormous presence. Ranma stopped and bowed to it. He'd told Akane about the vision he'd had, and how much this tree had meant when he and Tawaki came here to mend their relationship. She also bowed humbly. Soun had enough ki sense to note the life-force of the tree was greater than he'd ever seen. Mao whispered in Bjorn's ear that this was a holy place, and he inclined his head. And Nodoka bowed, because that was the custom.

Then they turned from the tree and the lake, and began climbing the neatly-swept stairs to the shrine. The dry leaves rustled in the breeze, but none fell onto the steps. They had to rest on the landings, because Mao was older and didn't have as much endurance, but they made it to the top in good time. The old priest Katsuhito was waiting there, the red roof of the shrine at his back.

"A good day to you," Katsuhito said, smiling at Ranma. Then he looked at Bjorn. "I am Masaki Katsuhito, the priest of this shrine. And you are Bjorn-sensei?"

Mao said, "He is, good priest," and translated for Bjorn. Then she relayed Bjorn's reply; "We are training Ranma and Akane, and these," (she nodded to Nodoka and Soun) "are his mother and her father. She bears the clan honor sword, and he is a teacher of martial arts. Since you, Masaki-dono, are a swordmaster of great repute, we thought they should meet you."

Katsuhito nodded. "It is good to involve parents in the training of youth." Then he turned to Nodoka. "Your bundle has the shape of a sword, Saotome-san. Might this be the sword Bjorn-sensei mentioned?"

Nodoka blushed and nodded.

"May I see it?" Katsuhito took the bundle when Nodoka gave it to him, unwrapped it, and withdrew the sword from its scabbard. Then he stepped back for space, and began a strange but simple sword kata. The blade flashed in the sunlight as it flew through arcs and circles in his hands.

Soun and Nodoka were watching Katsuhito. Ranma and Akane quietly moved to the background, and disappeared around the corner of the shrine.

The kata was not long. Katsuhito stopped in its final posture. "Good balance," he murmured to himself. Then he pushed back his sleeve, and drew the sword parallel to his forearm. It left a bare

swathe among his arm-hairs. "And I see it has been both well-used and well-maintained. It appears to be of the early shinshinto period. Would you know the maker?"

"Our sword was made by Kato Tsunahide himself, though we were not the first owners."

Katsuhito's look became reverent. "He was an excellent swordsmith, and the school he founded had many more." His eyes lost focus for a moment. "He sought to combine the virtues of the old with the virtues of the new. A good man."

Soun cocked his head to one side. "You sound almost as if you knew him."

"He made a pilgrimage to our shrine, later in his career, to see the sword of Yosho. Our records praise him." Katsuhito looked at his audience, and saw interest. "Our shrine was founded seven hundred years ago. A great demon came, pursued by the samurai Yosho. There was a terrible battle – do you notice the roundness of our valley? It was not always a valley, but in their rage, Yosho and the demon destroyed the mountain that had been here before they arrived.

"Yosho finally defeated the demon, and sealed her in a cave with many wards. Then he founded this shrine to keep watch over the cave. And we preserve the sword against any future need. Would you care to see it?"

Everybody was very eager.

Katsuhito led them to the water basin. "The sword is holy, and kept in the shrine, so we should first purify ourselves." They all washed their hands, then their mouths, and again their hands, Bjorn following Mao's lead. Then Katsuhito preceded them to the shrine entrance, and opened wide the doors.

Nodoka and Soun were stunned. Akane was there, dressed in wedding white; Ranma was dressed in sober black and grey. Their friends and family were beside them, and they beckoned Nodoka and Soun in.

The two stood for a moment, mouths open; then Nodoka fainted, and Soun began to cry. Every wedding needs somebody crying, and Soun was a world-class tear-smith. Sasami, dressed as a miko, brought out Katsuhito's robes. He vested himself while waiting for Nodoka to recover.

oOo

Two women had come to the foot of the stairs leading up to the shrine. One was a dignified woman with purple hair, wearing formal robes. She said, "Sasami was using her Tsunami voice when she told us to make sure nobody went up the stairs to interrupt the wedding. I wonder what was going through her head?"

"Well, princess, she seemed awful definite. 'No guys in tiger-stripe bandannas with packs on their back. No small black pigs.' I'm not sure what she meant by the 'pig' part, but the rest is pretty straightforward. We're dealing with some kind of vision here." This woman seemed older, and was dressed informally. Her hair was pale blue, and spiked. A black tail waved behind her.

"Where on Earth am I now?" said a male voice. A guy in a tiger-striped bandanna, with a pack on his back, came out from behind a nearby bush.

Ryoko looked at him in mild surprise. His fangs were even more prominent than hers. Sasami hadn't mentioned fangs.

Ayeka spoke. "You are on the grounds of the Masaki shrine, pilgrim. But the shrine is in use for a wedding. You must wait a while before you visit it."

"I heard you guys talking about me. Ranma's behind all this, isn't he?"

Ryoko was itching for a bit of a fight. The princess had been behaving herself lately, and she needed some action. "It's his wedding," she growled. "And you aren't gonna disrupt it." She stood in front of the steps with her arms crossed, staring him down.

Ryoga didn't pay much attention to being stared down. He leapt over Ryoko, and began to rush up the stairs. "I'm coming, Akane! I'll save you!"

Ryoko grinned to herself, and took off after him. He was fast, she was faster. Soon she had him by the straps of his pack, lifted him up with a grunt, whirled him about, and began to frogmarch him down the stairs. Ayeka was running up towards them, holding the hem of her robe to give her legs more freedom.

It proved no easier to frogmarch Ryoga than to stare him down. He slipped out of the straps, whipped around, snatched his umbrella, and glared. "I could use a good fight, but there's no time for it." He clouted Ryoko over the head with the umbrella, stepped in with a right cross as she dropped the pack, then grabbed her by the ankles and threw her into the woods. He began to run up the stairs again, but was lifted into the air in a cloud of spinning wooden cylinders instead.

"Azaka! Kamidake! Attend me!" Ayeka snapped. Then she turned to frown at Ryoga. "We'll have no more misbehavior from you," she said as he fumed in midair. With two giant logs on either side, and a swarm of smaller wooden cylinders, he was completely unable to gain purchase for a blow or a leap.

Instead, he began to glow a sickly green.

A pearly sphere snapped into place around Ryoga just in time to hold in the Shi Shi Hokodan. As Ayeka's vision cleared from the green flash, she saw a blackened and rather crispy figure slumped to the bottom of the sphere.

A voice came from her side. "Don't worry, princess, he'll recover. And I got the shield up in time to protect the rest of us." A young girl with enormous, spiky red hair was by her side, sitting in midair before a translucent computer keyboard and screen.

"Thank you, Washu-chan. Sasami gave Ryoko and myself a larger task than we realized."

A moan came from the woods. "Did Mihoshi crash her ship on me again?" Ryoko staggered out with her clothes torn and the beginnings of a black eye. There were twigs in her hair, and tree-bark on her back. She was missing one shoe.

Washu-chan put her index finger to her right cheek. "My, an ordinary Earth human did that to *you*? *That* shouldn't happen." She turned to look at Ryoga, who was beginning to sit up in the force sphere. "This must be investigated!"

A chibi-Washu appeared on each of her shoulders, waving flags and dancing. "Guinea pig! Guinea pig!" they chanted happily.

Ryoga slumped back down. He didn't like the sound of those – whatever – singing "pig". He was trapped, with no way to escape. And he'd completely failed to rescue Akane from that dishonorable Ranma.

Depressed, he began to glow green again. Washu immediately bent to her keyboard. Ryoko was giving him the red-eye (with the one he hadn't blackened). Ayeka just sniffed, and turned her back. She didn't want to be flash-blind again.

oOo

The wedding was over. Everybody'd had the ceremonial sake. Soun and Nodoka, arm in arm, were dancing in circles and singing. The lyrics were disjointed; Nodoka was singing of grandbabies, while Soun harmonized on the joining of the schools. They alternated verses, so it worked in its own strange little way. Ranma and Akane were hugging people all around. Katsuhito and Sasami, side by side, were smiling.

Mao turned to Bjorn. "Our work here is done."

He returned her smile. "Let's invite them to Minnesota, next summer. Wayland could teach Akane a lot about hammering."

They settled in beside Katsuhito. "Bjorn would still like to talk swords," Mao said quietly in his ear. He nodded.

Exhausted, Soun and Nodoka settled onto a bench. After they'd had a while to catch their breaths, Tatewaki and Kasumi approached. Tatewaki bowed formally. "Tendo-sensei, I know you are busied at the moment; but this is a proper time.

"I would like your permission to court your daughter Kasumi."

Kasumi joined hands with Tatewaki, and took her father's hand as well. "I too would like that, father."

This time, it was Soun's turn to faint.

Ranma and Akane Saotome were already down the stairs. (Everybody else thought they were still changing clothes.) They only had a day and a half for a honeymoon, and then it was back to school. The others could surely do without them for a while....

As they walked, Ranma heard a faint 'bwee' coming from the house they were passing. Fortunately, his cat-ears were much sharper than Akane's; she heard nothing. They continued on towards the bus-stop.

oOo

In class the following Monday, Ukyo looked at them with a question on her face. They smiled two sleepy, satisfied smiles back at her, smiles full of a fresh and wondrous knowledge.

Ukyo bent over towards them. "The two of you *are* coming over to Ucchan's after the Art Club. Right?" They smiled their agreement. Then, as the sensei began to speak of the Meiji Restoration, first Ranma, then Akane, bowed their heads in sleep.

After they get out of detention, Ukyo thought as an eraser whizzed past her head on its way to Ranma's.

END