

Heya all, this is a present for my Ranma fans. I essentially went back through discarded bits and pieces for several ideas/story bits and repurposed them into significant segments of this chapter, including bits from an OOLLLD Zelda/Ranma blurb. Funnily enough, it worked... as did having two whole days in a row with nothing to do but not eat (checkup thing, don't ask) and write and a muse that won't let me go.

This is also a semi-gift for Hiryo. It isn't quite what he wanted just yet, but my muse worked in this direction, so there we go. Hope you all enjoy this and the Superbowl. As a proud enemy of the evil empire, I must root for the Seahawks, even if they aren't my real team.

I hope you all enjoy, even if it isn't' going to become a main fic of mine for... oh, years. Best case is, if one of the existing Ranma fics end and this has garnered enough interest to follow up on over the other Ranma-style teasers I've written.

Alto OUT THERE.

Chapter 1/Prologue

"Damn it, this is so stupid!" a wrathful, bellow cry sounded from the second floor of the Tendo estate. "Stupid, freaking, darn thing!"

Hearing the dulcet tones of her younger sister Kasumi Tendo looked up from where she was working on dinner. "Oh my, I wonder what that is about?"

"Don't ya mean 'what now' Kasumi?" Ranma Saotome, chaos magnet, martial arts phenom and, more importantly to Kasumi, long-term guest of the family asked. He was outside training in the yard, but with it being summer, all the doors were currently open to let in the nice warm air. Currently, Ranma was doing one-fingered handstands with a large boulder on his feet. "Akane's always shouting about somethin'."

Kasumi shook her head gently, wiping her hands and stepping away from the kitchen counter. "Now, now. You two have been doing better..."

She trailed off as her eyes trailed up from Ranma's face to his chest, and Kasumi tried very hard to not flush or become embarrassed. Ranma's shirt had fallen down a bit, giving her a lovely view of his abs and muscles as they moved with his... unique method of doing handstands. *Oh my, but that is a very nice view. Akane, you are one lucky girl. Now, if only you could admit that.*

After the Wedding Disaster™, Kasumi had decided to start acting more overtly as a peacemaker. The reason for this was that Ranma had gone out of his way during that disaster to protect her mother's shrine in the dojo, and even to avoid significant damage to the house,

something none of the other people at the party had been willing to do. He had known it was there, having seen Kasumi cleaning it occasionally, and despite his own rocky relationship with his mother, Ranma had wanted to protect it just because it was important to Kasumi.

Nabiki hadn't cared about their mother's shrine when she told all of those interested in Ranma or Akane about the marriage. Kasumi's father and Akane both hadn't done that. Akane hadn't remembered the shrine was there in her fury, too busy hurling around chunks of wood or wielding her Large Mallet +24 to Perverts, while Soun had also been running around or haranguing Ranma to fight harder to do anything positive.

Not only had this finished ruining Kasumi's image of her father, already badly eroded over time since Genma and Ranma had shown up on their doorstep, this event had shown Kasumi a side of Ranma that she'd only seen glimpses of before, enough to earn him a reevaluation in her eyes and to make Kasumi realize she needed to put herself forward more. She still didn't like a lot of Ranma's attitude, and his narrow focus on the Art was incredibly off-putting, but she had long known that there was a diamond in the rough under there, and seeing it start to shine through with only a bit of positive reinforcement was quite gratifying.

However, while she had been doing her best to keep the peace between Ranma and Akane, that had pushed Kasumi into interacting with Ranma more than she had throughout most of his time in the Tendo Household. That in turn led to moments like this, where Kasumi became uncomfortably aware that Ranma was as attractive, physically at last, as the girls chasing after him seemed to think.

"And it wasn't as if that shout was directed at you," Kasumi continued, keeping her voice level with a tiny smidgeon of difficulty as she pulled her eyes away from the current display. "That sounded more like a shout of simple frustration than anything else. Perhaps you should go and see what Akane is shouting at?" She then smirked just a little impishly. "Before your father or mine get home and hear her shouting and see you're not doing anything about it."

"You got a point there, but if I enter her room and Akane's in a mood, she's liable to take out whatever frustrations it she's dealing with on me. I'll go and see if you come with me," Ranma said, having gotten used to having Kasumi around to act like a single-woman-sized peacekeeping force to the point he was more than happy to take advantage of it. Even so, a part of Ranma's mind quailed at his own words, shouting about how that was cowardly, how he was acting like a little girl relying on Kasumi.

But that part of his mind, which Ranma had lately begun to label Genma's Fucking Stupid Ideas, was small and drowned out by the far larger part of Ranma's mind that didn't want to pile up any more bonus miles on Air Akane (patent pending) this week. It was spring break, a lot of the other crazies weren't around, and it was just too nice to spend time trying to figure out how to get back to Nerima after being punted out of it.

Finishing his rep, Ranma slowly lowered himself to the point his head was an inch above the ground, then pivoted his entire body, until he could gently set the boulder clamped between his calves down. Control like that was part and parcel of the Anything Goes Style, and it also allowed Ranma some time to think as Kasumi answered with a chuckling affirmative to his demand.

Despite that, Ranma's mind wasn't on whatever Akane was doing. Rather, he was thinking about the week to come, the homework he knew he had to be doing at some point or else Kasumi would pout at him and generally how things were going at the moment.

With Kasumi playing peacemaker for the last few months, things between him and Akane were... okayish. They weren't great, they hadn't really improved, but at least they one or the other would stop before either insulting or attacking one another. That was a far cry from really getting along, and ever since the Wedding Disaster™, though, and Ranma had been doing some thinking whenever he could and had come to a few uncomfortable conclusions.

The main one being about the Art and the fact that he really wasn't growing any longer. Yeah, Ranma could still learn things whenever Happy or Cologne were around to add to the chaos, but those old farts only ever added to the chaos when it suited them, I.E. when they could watch and have fun at his expense. Beyond those two, there weren't any more interesting styles he could learn in Nerima, and worse, there didn't seem to be any big bad enemy on the horizon in the near future.

As for that future? His mom, dad, and the Tendos all thought that Ranma was simply going to go on to college to get some kind of degree to allow him to train people in the Art. Yet that was the last thing on Ranma's mind. Indeed, the **very** last thing. While Nabiki wasn't his favorite person, she'd gone off to college soon before the adventure the rest of them had in China with the Pheonix Tribe, and as part of his repayment for her role in the Wedding Disaster™ Ranma had a long talk with her. Specifically about college, what it was like, and so forth.

Because of that, Ranma knew exactly how many classes he'd need that weren't even connected to the Art or teaching, and he wanted nothing to do with it. Heck, he didn't even know if teaching the Art was something he was interested in to that extent.

Saying it to anyone else however, well, it was just going to lead to arguments and violence, in that order. Not even Kasumi would simply accept the fact that he didn't want to go to college. *Mom would probably call me unmanly if I decide on something like that, unless I start being 'manly' with all the girls to offset it. The old man would wail about how dishonorable I am or whatever,* he thought morbidly.

So he wasn't growing anymore in the Art, and in the future there was that looming problem. This was the last year of high school for both Ranma and Akane. Akane was already making plans to go to a girls-only university that specialized in acting. Given their past track record, Ranma just knew that his parents would probably try to force him to either go to the

same college as a girl, or to a nearby normal college, just to continue to push the two of them together.

Which is another thing entirely. With all the moments of introspection he'd had lately, Ranma wasn't certain any longer that he was or had indeed ever been in love with Akane. After the past two years, there was sooo much miscommunication, not enough understanding, and far, far too much baggage. A case in point was her wanting to go to college to become an actress. She had decided completely on her own, not talking to him or anyone else.

That reminded him of the time when Ukyo had tried to take advantage of the Weakness Moxibustion to force Ranma to become a house husband. Or, well, Shampoo in general. The fact no one seemed to want to talk to Ranma about their plans, only assume that he would go along with theirs had always grated on him. Now, after the Wedding Disaster™, after everything he'd done in China, and coupled with the fact that he was no longer growing in his own passion, well that was making Ranma think furiously.

Finishing his rep, he flipped himself forward, doing a roll in midair before a pirouette as he pushed himself off the ground one final time to clear the side of the pond, landing on the porch with his arms outstretched. Kasumi gave him a polite clap, and Ranma grinned a little, always enjoying showing off like that whenever he could. "Thank you, thank you. I'm here all week," he announced grandly with a bow.

"Literally, unless your father comes back and tries to steal you away for a small training trip or something." Kasumi chortled, and Ranma grinned a little wider. Since the wedding fiasco and some conversation he wasn't privy to between her and Nabiki, Kasumi had started to show a little more emotion, on top of playing peacemaker far more aggressively than before. Ranma wasn't really certain, which he was most thankful for, but he liked both. "Now come, let us go and see what Akane is having trouble with."

With that, they went up to the room that had at one point been Nabiki's. When she moved out, several pieces of furniture had been sold off to put in a new desk and a computer. It was an expense that both Ranma and Akane, entering their final year of high school needed for schoolwork. It was also good for gaming, as could be seen on the screen right now.

"I thought you were up here doing work, Akane," Kasumi said, staring at the game over screen and shaking her head. "Is that what you were shouting about earlier, some silly computer game?"

"No, this is the third darn time I've run into a game over since the first time I shouted," Akane grumbled, scowling just a little at her older sister came in together with Ranma. Kasumi was, well, interfering with her attempts to deal with the pervert lately. It wasn't Akane's fault that Ranma kept on getting under her skin so easily, or was always leading on girls who were after him for some bizarre reason, or always forgot that he was supposed to be **her** fiancé!

It seemed these past few months that Ranma had been getting away with far too much, and Akane felt only she had been forced to change by Kasumi putting her foot down after the damages done to the dojo with the wedding.

It didn't occur to her that Ranma had actually changed a lot in those six months thanks to Kasumi's gentle remonstrance is two. Yet he hasn't called her un-cute or even a tomboy for months now, and while he still had to work to not insult her cooking, he hadn't even mentioned the Art or anything about her training. Which was a big concession in his mind.

"And before you start Kasumi, I already finished half of the homework I need to do this week. Most of it wasn't hard, Furinkan isn't exactly known for its high standards or anything," Akane continued, smirking just a little bit at Ranma, who growled and looked away.

As if that stuff matters, Ranma thought. That was what he told himself, whenever the subject came up. It was plain and total disinterest really. Yet saying that aloud would get him looked at by both girls and he didn't want that.

Kasumi opened her mouth to say something, when the game behind Akane's head finished reloading, and she blinked, staring over her shoulder. "Oh my, those are some very handsome boys..."

Akane nodded, her ill humor at her sister disappearing for a second. "Oh yeah, they are! I got this game from a shop I stopped in on the way home the other day when it was raining. They let me stay there until the rain stopped, and I found this game in their bargain bin, and it looked really interesting with different types of combat and plot, and like you said, it's got pretty boys on the cover."

"I'd expect that kind of thing from Nabiki," Ranma teased, and Akane glared at him for a second, before Ranma went on, staring at the boys on the main menu screen. "They make me remember that guy from the hot spring we ran into once, the one who hid underwater and attacked people."

There were five boys on the computer screen, and okay, even Ranma supposed he could call them handsome, with a young woman who was kind of cute lower down in the center. The five boys were situated as if they were fanning out from her, with the words 'Alto Liebe' in front of them. One had purple hair, one had green, one had glasses, one had red hair, and one had a crown on his head. They all looked like the kind of weak, pretty bishounen, which were all the rage these days, although the redhead's stance seemed to want to show off some muscle.

"They are very pretty, but I don't see anything there worth shouting about," Kasumi said, shaking her head.

"It's the game system. You can only save at certain choices, with only four save slots. You can't save right before a fight, and the fights are impossible! Worse, there's no choices near

them so far. I have to go back and play almost thirty or forty minutes before getting back to that same fight again, and if you miss something, or make the wrong choices in the dialogue, your characters will be too weak to win the fight.”

Now Ranma was interested. “Fighting? What kind of fighting are we talking about here?” He had no interest in what kind of game this might be, and frankly, didn’t have much interest in the computer. He’d never needed electronics like that or even a phone before, so why bother now?

Whereas Kasumi was looking at her sister, one eyebrow rising as she took in more of the image, as well as the badly hidden box the game must have come in, which had an eighteen plus sign on it. *Honestly, Akane, if you’re going to play those kinds of games, at least wait until night, and don’t shout about you losing a fight or something in them! Ugh, I am so glad that Ranma doesn’t seem to understand the implications of a picture like that.*

Trying to avoid her sister’s look, Akane explained about the fights, which came in three different categories: ship-based air combat, mech combat and dungeon crawling exploration type monster combat, which was the first to be introduced and where Akane had seemingly run into a wall.

Ranma looked interested, and he casually reached over and pulled the bed forward to sit beside the computer. “Can you show me some of the fighting?”

A little reluctant to put her hand in the meat grinder again, but feeling almost compelled to try, Akane nodded, and turned back to the screen, loading her most recent save. She then hit the shift key and sped through several dozen different screens of dialogue. “Even you’ll find this kind of fighting is stupidly hard once you see the stats we start with and the stats of our enemies. Hell, even someone with your speed will have trouble here.”

“We’ll see about that,” Ranma answered with a smirk that caused Akane to snarl.

Sighing, Kasumi sat down on the bed that Ranma had pulled forward, mentally making a note to tell Ranma to push it back in before he left the room. She then leaned in, whispering into Akane as ear “Turn off the mature bits, please. And if you can’t, we’re going to have a talk, young lady.”

Akane eeped, turning wildly away from the screen to look at her sister, who gave her a knowing glance. “I, I, um... I’m sure I can do that,” Akane stuttered, unable to even argue under that knowing look.

“What are you two talking about?” Ranma asked impatiently. The screen had paused on what looked like a normal school classroom, and that was the last thing Ranma was interested in. “And why is this occurring in a school? Is it like that Real Bout High School game or

something?" In Ranma's mind, that kind of school made a lot more sense than normal schools, but no one had ever asked him.

"No, not at all. It's a school for noble children in a kingdom where adventuring and dungeon diving is seen as really honorable and heroic. You play as a commoner who's there because you have a lot of light magic, which is holy and healing magic which is really rare in this world. But because you're commoner, you get bullied a lot until you make friends with the five guys," Akane said, changing the term 'capture targets' to something more PG friendly even as she quickly went through the settings.

"Feh, holy magic? Man, if that could do stuff for curses, I'd be a lot happier. But all the priests who've seen the Jusenkya curse can't even believe magic's real, let alone have access to any themselves," Ranma grumbled morosely, crossing his arms and glaring at the screen.

The fact, he didn't seem to understand what she was doing made Akane breathe a sigh of relief. *Perverved idiot, he's got no idea about computers or games or anything, and thank goodness for it. I've heard horror stories about what boys do on the internet, let alone with access to their own computers.* "Beyond that, there's a lot of other stuff, politics, world building and whatever."

The way Akane said this, made it clear that she wasn't all that interested in it, but Kasumi perked up a little, and asked the younger girl to play the starting sequence. That kind of thing always told players a lot about the world they were about to enter, something Kasumi knew from her own games.

And if some of those games were of a... similar variety as this one, that was no business of anyone's but Kasumi's. Just because she had become the matriarch of the Tendo household at a young age didn't automatically mean she had stopped being a young girl. *I wonder if her interest in this kind of game is a good sign that Akane is developing an actual libido, or not in that she prefers to play a game like this rather than interact with the young man she's actually affianced to, who is also quite the catch? Hmm...one step forward, one step back, I fear.*

Shaking that thought off, Kasumi listened to the narrator explain the world, while Ranma watched scenes of fighting, flying ships, and mechs that went along with those words. "This sounds actually quite interesting Akane. Oh, I know, if you are having trouble beating it on your own, perhaps you and Ranma could make it a bonding experience to work on it together?"

At the suddenly mulish expressions on both younger folk, Kasumi sighed mentally, before shrugging her shoulders internally. *It was worth a try.* "Or perhaps we could all three play? It sounds like I might have fun with it too. Maybe Nabiki can join us if she decides to come home this week from college."

While Akane just nodded at that and excitedly began to talk about the five boys with her sister, happy to have something girly to talk about with her, Ranma frowned a little, staring at

Kasumi. There had been something there when she mentioned college, but it was gone too quick for him to figure out. *Was she unhappy that Nabiki had left? Or unhappy that she couldn't go to college when she should have?*

Moments later, after Akane had gone back to her save and then restarted the speed running, they were at one of the fight scenes in the dungeon, and Ranma frowned a little, watching Akane play it out. It looked a lot like a regular RPG with some added stuff, but it did have a certain kind of rhythm to it, and there was a lot of hand eye coordination skill needed for landing critical hits and block the same from hitting the part.

When she died, Ranma opened his mouth, but a pinch on his thigh made him pause, looking over Kasumi for a second as Akane threw up her hands and shouted, "See! I don't know what I did wrong, but there's no way to beat this fight! I didn't even get the enemy monsters into the yellow, even with all the characters hitting just one beast. And don't tell me it was just that one beast, I tried the same thing on each of the others with each different play through, that's why I shouted! Not even someone like you could beat this, Ranma!"

The pinch didn't do nearly as much as that phrase did to change what Ranma had been about to say. "You think so?"

"Yes! This is but the first fight in the dungeon, and this game gets progressively harder and harder! I looked online, and they said that the difficulty rating is horrific in this game. There are a few ways that we can make it easier getting the guys stronger, but that requires a lot of spam saving." Akane sneered at him over her shoulder. "As it is, I am willing to wager even you would you lose yeah!"

Akane knew precisely what he was she was doing. Not being able to back away from challenges was a tenant of the Anything Goes Style, and Ranma was more likely to fall for that kind of thing than any of the other people who used it.

And he did so this time too, falling for it hook, line and sinker. "Hi! Just watch me. I'll beat it in no time flat."

Moments later, while Kasumi looked on with a faint smile on her face, and a giggle on the insides, neither Akane nor Ranma were very happy. Ranma had indeed beaten that first battle, and several more. But soon after they reached the third level, the main character ran out of her magic and the injuries quickly piled up in the next two fights.

Even Ranma's hand eye coordination skills letting him score critical hits with every offensive attack didn't matter much when even correctly defending against attacks meant you still lost HP, just a little less. One by one, the boys accompanying the MC, whose name was Olivia, fell, and alone she didn't have any offensive magic.

Finally, they died, and Ranma huffed, pulling away his hands away from the keyboard and mouse. "Okay, maybe you got a point about needing to figure out how to get those guys, Brad, Chris and the rest, stronger. The only one who's decent right now is that redhead, Greg? The others are pathetic. Brad's magic takes too long to figure out and he's got way too little of, what's it called, MP?"

"Mana Points," Akane said, still scowling a bit that Ranma had been able to get so much farther than her. "And now we have to go all the way back to the beginning of the dungeon and try again to last until the fifth level. Or, like I said, figure out how to get them stronger from the start. I told you! I told you there was no way even someone like you Ranma, with your freaky abilities would be able to beat this game!"

"And how long will that take?" Kasumi asked, cutting in. She'd been mostly silent during Ranma's run, and now both youngsters started remembering she was there. Akane deflated a little bit, and Ranma, who had been about to argue back, also paused.

"UM... Fifteen minutes or so? I think? But like I said, we'll have to get each answer right when dealing with the boys to get the group dynamic up, or we'll still be far too weak for the dungeon. It apparently really makes a difference."

Ranma frowned a little, having seen the bar for Group Dynamics, but having not figured out what the heck it meant, as it wasn't actually under the player's control. It was completely determined by choices made before you actually entered combat apparently, and made your characters faster to attack and stronger to boot.

"And if we don't speed run? I quite enjoyed that bit of world building that you allowed me to see, and that introduction movie made it look interesting," Kasumi questioned mildly. *If I'm going to stay here and keep the peace between these two as they bond over this game, I hope, I might as well get something out of it. And those boys are quite pretty. Perhaps one of them will interest me enough to play this game as Akane is.*

"Maybe an hour and a half? Depends on if Ranma can read at fast enough to keep up with us," Akane said somewhat snidely.

"My reading skills are fine, thanks! It's my writing that sucks. But if it's going to take that long, how about we break for now. Kasumi was working on lunch, and I was working up an appetite earlier. Letting a Kasumi-made-meal go to waste is a sin," Ranma said, his tone is serious as someone reciting holy writ.

The wink he gave Kasumi kind of spoiled it, but she still appreciated the sentiment, and Akane only grumbled a little bit they all stood up and headed downstairs. During the meal, Kasumi forced Ranma to promise to work on his homework, while Akane and Kasumi played the game, promising in turn that she would help him with his homework.

Not ten minutes after starting the game though Kasumi stared blankly at first the screen, then Akane. "Are you sure?"

Feeling as if Kasumi was somehow judging her, Akane waved her hands rapidly. "I'm positive! This is the first choice of the game, and I've tried both of the other choices already, just because I wanted to see what would happen. I didn't see any of his stats or... group dynamic points go up from either of the other choices, and online it says that every choice you have should give you something."

"But-- slapping him? He's the Prince!" Kasumi said, gesturing towards the blue-haired youth standing in front of the protagonist, and thus their view as the game was in point of view at the moment.

"I know, but well, maybe he wants to be treated like that," Akane said.

Ranma rolled his eyes from where he was working on his homework, and decided to stay out of this conversation. *No way would any guy want to be just slapped by some random girl he just met. I know I for sure didn't enjoy it when Akane first hit me! Mind you, she did with a table at the time, but the point still stands.*

Sighing, Kasumi shrugged, and gestured Akane to make the choice. After a few moments, of back-and-forth, Kasumi had to shake her head as the Prince mentioned how interesting that made Olivia, and that they would need to talk more in the future, ending with the protagonist winning a relationship point with him. Neither girl had bothered to explain to Ranma about the relationship points, figuring he would get it eventually, and by then it would be too late for him to back out of helping with the fight scenes, but to see one earned in such a manner...

"I stand corrected. That... That's a little strange, but all right, maybe if it is indeed the first time anyone has told Prince Julius off or anything, I can see it as a novel experience for him. Also, incredibly bad parenting. But fine," Kasumi muttered, her brows furrowed.

That subtle dig at Akane went over her head, as Kasumi knew it would, but to her surprise, Ranma blinked, staring at her for a second over his papers. His gaze didn't last long, but it was a reminder for Kasumi that Ranma was a lot more observant than most people gave him credit for. *It's just most of the time he only uses it while learning the Art*, she reflected ruefully. "Let's continue."

True to Akane's statement, the game took a while to get through, with Kasumi reading every bit of it, looking intrigued. She really enjoyed fantasy worlds and stuff like that and always read the words of any game she was playing.

The world of Alto Liebe had magic, and was built on islands that floated, a fascinating idea, as well as rumors of an ancient war between people who could use magic and people who

couldn't. The social structure seemed incredibly detailed, and the backgrounds were amazing to look at. So, Kasumi could admit, were the boys. They all were indeed quite pretty, although some of the choices they made in that hour and a half were truly bizarre, even by Nerima standards.

At one point, even Ranma had to say something. "Wait, this guy's supposed to be some kind of sword master in training, right. And you've tried the other two choices? The ones that just encourage him to try harder, to maybe find a new opponent to stretch his abilities? You're left with, with that?" Ranma pointed at the screen as if it had personally affronted him.

The words, 'You know, sometimes it's best to just take a step back, and better yourself rather than keep hitting your head against a wall for someone whose opinion of you won't change,' sat there.

"The best way to prove someone you're good is to try different types of training or, yeah, find different opponents! Not just take a step back and start doing other things!"

Both girls looked at him for a moment, then shook their heads as one. Then Akane, with a great deal of smugness, clicked on the choice, and then made Ranma read out the parts of Chris, the budding Sword Saint, as they continued.

When the relationship point flew up from the dialog box, Ranma stared, then stared some more, and shook his head, glaring first at the computer, then at Akane. "Why was that plus one stuck in a heart-shaped box? And how the heck does that make sense? It's like he's got no passion for his school at all!"

"Maybe he doesn't. And it was in the shape of a heart because this is a romance game," Akane said with a smirk. "One you already promised to help me finish."

While Kasumi tried to keep a chuckle inside, it failed and Ranma stared at both of them, a look of betrayal on his face, before he sighed, then flopped back on the bed hard enough to almost bounce off into the wall. "Fine, but don't expect me to be invested in the idea of bringing any of these guys along on our adventures. Greg sounds okay so far, but Chris just sounds like a wimp, and don't get me started on Jilk, the useless buffoon, or Brad the playboy idiot!"

"I rather think we'll find out why words such as this matter more to Chris than any amount of encouragement to just train better as we continue in the game," Kasumi interjected diplomatically. It would've had more impact on Ranma if she also wasn't giggling at his histrionics. "Now come on, let's see if we can get through the dungeon at least."

Not an hour later, it was Ranma's turn to snicker. Akane and Kasumi had argued for a bit on some of the choices and then decided to see if they already had enough relationship points, which equaled better stat points all around for the individual, to beat the dungeon. Akane had

argued that they needed all the relationship points they could get, while Kasumi argued that they should treat this game like it was real life, and, "Answering only what you know the other person is going to like isn't the start of a good relationship. It's rather duplicitous in fact, just like save spamming."

That had meant that Akane had only been able to change the answers a few times, which gave them some more group dynamic points and relationship points, but not nearly as many as Akane's walkthrough, open on her phone, seemed to indicate they would need. She had been all set and ready to act smug about it and mention the cash items that everyone online had mentioned.

Unfortunately for Akane, she had forgotten how Ranma had been able to beat the dungeon already with the most basic stats and next to no group dynamic points. Now, even with the prerequisite that none of the romance targets or the protagonist could fall in the last two battles, Ranma had beaten the five floors of the dungeon, ending the first dungeon exploration. "What was that you said about impossible?"

"F, Feh, don't get cocky! This was just the intro dungeon, and like I told you before, the difficulty rating on this game is supposed to be insane!" Akane barked back. "It's so bad that you need to use cash items to beat it. Hell, I'll bet even you will never be able to beat the game without using them."

"Bring it on!" Ranma stated before he could stop himself. *Damn it, am I really gonna keep playing this game?! UGH. Well, on the other hand, I know exactly whose money would be used to buy this cash item thingie, whatever that means. No way would the tomboy princess be willing to work in the first place.*

To one side, Kasumi fought the urge to rub at the bridge of her nose, before allowing herself a wry smile. *I suppose some things will never change. And if I'm stuck here playing peacemaker, I suppose the game is pretty enough and the world building at least is fun to explore.*

True to form, Ranma's prediction about his ability to continue beating the game's combat scenarios proved accurate over the next few days, with Akane getting angrier each time, but they kept at it. All three of them felt compelled to continue, the game calling them back to play it both together and separately over the next four days. None of them could figure out why, but it was there.

This didn't always go smoothly. Occasionally, Ranma couldn't help himself and laughed or interjected something about the love interests that Akane took umbrage with. Only Kasumi being there would stop such arguments. If she wasn't, Ranma either was turned into a girl, or more often took a flight on Air Akane™, while Akane shouted at him for having the, "empathy of a slug, and the decorum of a preschooler," or similar.

Akane and Kasumi also argued occasionally about the boys. Akane liked the Prince, most of all because he was the best looking in her opinion and she liked his hair, with Greg being her second favorite, something that had Kasumi shooting sly glances between Akane and Ranma when she mentioned it. Alas, Akane didn't seem to notice, and instead mentioned how he reminded her of Ryoga instead of Ranma, something that had Kasumi frowning a little.

Luckily, Ranma didn't seem to care one way or another, although whether or not that was because this not the first time Akane had shown a preference for Ryoga over him or that he didn't care about Akane's opinion, even Ranma would have been able to tell you. At this point, Ranma was completely done with getting angry or jealous about Akane, one way or another. He still didn't get along with Ryoga, though, who had, since getting with Akari, actually had begun to be even more durable than before, somehow.

As for the character who Akane likened to Ryoga, Ranma felt that Greg was a meathead of the first order. "All that talk about not wanting to upgrade his stuff, about how it's all the warrior, not his gear, that's like not wanting to learn a new style or even a new attack because you think your abilities already can match anything out there. It's stupid."

This had earned him a glare from Akane, as that sounded like a dig at her, and it had been. But Ranma had learned to hide his facial expressions just a little bit since he'd arrived in Nerima, and luckily, as if summoned by Akane's words, Ryoga took that moment to show up.

While Ranma was dealing with his rival, Kasumi and Akane continued the game, apparently entering a portion of the chapter that was devoted to two of the boys in particular. Julius, and his friend, Jilk. Ranma arrived back in time for the two of them to argue about some of the choices and simply sat on the bed for a time listening, trying to figure out where they were in the story with little luck.

Eventually, the two of them stopped arguing, selecting a choice for Jilk that made Ranma frown a little. "I missed something didn't I? That's not the school, I can tell that, and that choice feels like it's one of the more important ones, although why I don't know. Praising a guy for having his friend's back shouldn't be that important, right?"

Actually, I wouldn't know, he reflected after a second's thought. I can count on the fingers of one hand the amount of time people beyond Kasumi and maybe Cologne who've ever helped me without having some ulterior motive. Okay, so Granny's got a lot of those, but her help's always been with the Art, and I can take that that.

"It turns out that Jilk has been groomed since birth to follow Julius around and to act as a spymaster, following in his family's footsteps. Only, apparently, he doesn't like it all that much. He doesn't like 'acting in the dark' as the game puts it," Kasumi said, frowning heavily. "I must say, I'm not sure that I agree with that idea. Moreover, some of the choices we've made, which give us relationship points with him, they feel... Well, I think he might need some time at a psychiatrist."

Ranma shivered a little at that idea, knowing that Kasumi had at one point said he needed that kind of thing. *I'm perfectly fine, damn it, it's everyone else not realizing I only care about what I think is important that's the problem. Well, okay, there's the, the furry demon BS, but still!*

He remained silent though, shaking his head and watching as the two girls worked their way through the next few moments of the game, which apparently took them from a waiting room in the palace into seeing the Queen, Julius's mother.

"That's his mother!?" Kasumi, Akane and Ranma all exclaimed at once, before Akane glared at Ranma and he held up his hand, pointing at her quickly. "You said it too!"

What followed was a discussion that sounded like a worried parent mixed with a ruler, as it should be, with a lot of it going over Ranma's head because he had missed the past hour and a half of the gameplay. Kasumi filled him in on some bits, including the fact that Julius had a fiancé, a fact that made Ranma feel a little sorry for the guy, and had been ignoring her in favor of Olivia, the protagonist.

That didn't make Ranma sorry for him. That just made him annoyed, as it seemed, judging by the Queen's words, that this marriage was really important to the kingdom. There were only a few choices in this segment, and Kasumi chose two of them, getting no relationship points, while Akane chose two more, getting one relationship point with each boy in succession, but making Kasumi frown a little, as did Ranma.

"I don't like that," he muttered, shaking his head. "I mean, marriages like that are really important right? Olivia's... I guess she's nice, but she's got nothing going for her in terms of a power bloc, right?"

"I agree. It looks as if Julius wants nothing more than to run away from his fiancée and even being a king," Kasumi said shaking her head. "Considering we haven't heard anything about any other heir up to this point, that is a remarkably foolish thing. And some of his choices you made since this part began which got relationship points, I don't know, I think he's rather pathetic."

At that blunt statement Ranma laughed, while Akane stared at her sister, aghast at hearing her put down anyone like that. "Kasumi! How can you say that!? He's soulful, wanting to get away from his position as prince, and looks to be finding love in a commoner. That's the height of romance!"

"Wanting to leave the palace to explore the outside world is one thing. Wanting to run away from your duties and responsibilities, from your family and parents, that is entirely another. Moreover, I remember some of the choices you made with Julius before about his relationship with this Angelica girl. It doesn't sound like a very healthy relationship, and it

doesn't sound very much like he put in any effort whatsoever," Kasumi retorted, shaking her head.

The look she gave both Ranma and Akane made them a little uncomfortable at that point, and Ranma blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. "Yeah, but at least Julius isn't as pathetic as Chris, right?"

"I wonder. We haven't seen much about him just yet," Kasumi murmured, letting her gaze linger on them both before gesturing to the screen as an arena duel to qualify in mech armor came up. Apparently, it was to make certain the characters, including Olivia, could be trusted in mech suits. "Regardless, I think you're up, Ranma."

Ten minutes later, Ranma was done with the fight, and had finished in such a way that they received a prize of a special weapon by beating not only the first instructor, but all of them without even taking a hit. Akane glared at him a little, then muttered "Show off!" as Ranma buffed his nails on his shirt.

"So long as the game has hand eye coordination stuff, I can pull through," Ranma boasted, ignoring his first try with lacking relationship points.

As the game continued, this did indeed turn out to be the case. And Kasumi continued to get lower and lower opinions of the boys. They were in no way men in her mind, they were just too needy and didn't seem to understand the world around them in any kind of context or form that she could understand. A perfect example was how Greg called anyone dealing in arms or mech parts 'glorified death merchants' without understanding how those same arms merchants provided his family and others with their military gear. Or how Brad and Julius had no understanding of money, while being liberal with how much they used. Jilk also seemed too attached to Julius to be healthy, and his sudden attachment to Olivia was similarly concerning even when they didn't get all the relationship points with him that they could.

It was as if each of them had lived in their own separate little bubble, and Kasumi thought that was very much a product of poor world building. *Surely no families would be so blind as to their children's real thoughts and desires, right?*

For some reason, that thought hurt her to think, and she shoved it away hoping to never see it again.

Similarly, Ranma didn't think much of the boys either. Their individual skills were barely acceptable, their tones were uniformly arrogant when speaking to anyone not the protagonist, only differing from one to another in word usage and politeness. Greg's refusal to upgrade his gear or learn new skills frustrated Ranma as the game continued, while Jilk's special attacks bothered him with how dishonorable they were, and Julius's sheer lack of skill as a pilot, which hit their party dynamic stat, was awful. Chris was only okay, but his attitude was just so weird to

Ranma, who just didn't understand how anyone would take the insults Chris passed on from his family as anything but taunting and reasons to get better.

Brad in particular, annoyed all three of them; even Akane called him a, "pretty boy Playboy, who's only redeeming feature is magic, and he wants to leave that aside to train his body in order to match up with his friends who are better adventurers."

The next day, after dealing with a stop by Shampoo, the group continued to what apparently was the penultimate point of the second chapter of the story. Some kind of Graduation Ball for the Academy the story was placed in. Ranma wasn't at all interested in it and zoned out as the two girls exchanged comments about the pretty boys, who even Kasumi had to admit were, if nothing else, at least nice to look at.

He was used to this by now, having had to zone out several times, as Olivia the protagonist went around kissing the five boys. Why it was okay for her to kiss several boys and for Ranma not to have several girls after him, when he didn't even do anything to encourage them, he didn't know, but put down to Alto Liebe being a game. Although Kasumi still seem to have some issues with it occasionally, remonstrated with Akane for going for relationship choices that strung the boys along rather than choosing who to go for from the start and concentrating on that one.

However, in this, Ranma had to side with Akane as she explained, "I went online and you apparently need all of the boys to have their full stats at the end of the game to have any chance, and if you don't romance them for the first few chapters, several of them will fall out of the game entirely, making the entire combat later on much harder, and cutting out a lot of the world building experience. This game's got great graphics and all, but I for sure don't want to play it again, do you?"

Even Kasumi had to admit that that sounded like a bad idea, and Ranma agreed. Indeed, she wondered why they were still doing this at all. It had been several days, and whenever any of them were free, it seemed they gathered to play this game. *And I'm not even into computer games all that much, let alone games like this.*

As for Ranma, he knew that Akane had been quite correct to point out that the difficulty scaling in this game was horrific. It was only because of Ranma's insane level of hand-eye coordination that they had gotten through several of the battles up to this point. Having more party dynamic points to cut down on wait times between attacks and so forth was a major deal, as were upping the boys' separate stats.

After zoning out again for a few minutes, Ranma was drawn back to the present moment in the game when Kasumi murmured, "My word, what do they feed girls in this world! Olivia is quite pretty, and so is this Angelica girl. Still, if she truly has been bullying Olivia, and is behind all of the little moments we've been dealing with in terms of getting our books burned, our stuff ruined and so forth, I suppose that beauty is only skin deep."

Looking at the screen, Ranma saw that a woman had just hurled a glove at the protagonist. The woman was their age or thereabouts, clad in a European-style red dress, which clung to her curves in a way that practically made Ranma's eyes flick downwards. Angelica had red eyes, a somewhat startling hue, which Ranma could only help not help noticing now, as there looked to be tears in them despite the furious snarl on her face. She had blonde hair done up in a severe looking bun and stood with some measure of dignity in the image despite the tears in her eyes and the snarl on her face.

Overall, she was a striking figure, and Ranma could only shake his head as he took her in. "Okay, she's hot... damn, that's Julius's fiancé?"

"Oh of course you would think that you pervert!" Akane growled angrily, turning to him with a snarl.

Beside her, Kasumi shook her head, both amazed that Ranma would have so little self-control as to let that thought out, and actually did seem to have some measure of sex drive. *My word, he must have incredible amounts of control if he hasn't already fallen to Shampoo's wiles. Or he could just have a type. Angry, proud.. hehe...oh my, that's funny.*

"Hey! You two have been going gaga over those pretty boys from the start, and I can't say one person is pretty?" Ranma barked back.

Akane seemed ready to snarl at that, pushing up from her chair, but Kasumi laid a hand on her shoulder. "Akane, what have we been talking about? Violence in the home is never a good idea. Besides, Ranma is right. If you and I can spend hours talking about how attractive boys, surely Ranma can make one comment about a pretty girl."

After a second, Akane subsided, settling for making a 'I'm watching you' motion, but when she turned back to the screen, Ranma allowed himself to take in Angelica's form again. *Wow. Er, wait, what was Kasumi saying about her bullying the character we're playin' as? I think I'd remember her if we'd seen her before this.*

After the duel that followed, which was rather pathetic in Ranma's mind as no one seemed to be on Angelica's side, the sextet graduated from the academy and the game quickly picked up speed, something Ranma was incredibly thankful for, and Akane was somewhat annoyed by. There weren't nearly as many 'steamy' moments and those that were, were quickly glossed over because of the changes she'd been forced to make that first day to cut out the hentai scenes as they all worked on the game.

That was still bothering Ranma little bit. Whenever he thought of it, it felt a little weird for him to want to be so invested in it, even if Akane had pricked his pride. Still, the fight scenes kept him interested, going from mech combat to ship-to-ship combat, to exploration (dealing with bandits and puzzles), to dungeon diving, and a whole lot more.

Days passed, and the trio kept going even a spring break ended and Akane and Ranma went back to school, even if they could only play for a few hours every day. Thankfully, for once, the chaos of Nerima seemed to calm down save at school. There, Akane and Ranma still had the occasional issue with Kuno, who was repeating his senior year for the second time in a row. This had him join them in class, making for a lot more annoyances from him and the principal. Shampoo also showed up several times, but even then, only at school or away from the Tendo place.

A week and a half after going back to school, they were in the penultimate chapter of Alto Liebe. Ranma sat most of that out, because it was the most heavily romanticized point of the story. However, his attention was brought back by kick to his leg as Akane exclaimed, pointing at the screen, "See! I told you we needed more relationship points, Kasumi."

On the screen was a blinking warning note, and Ranma leaned over Kasumi and Akane's shoulder, getting an annoyed huff from Akane who raised hand to push his face away even as he read. "Warning: from here on out every battle is a life-or-death struggle. You will not be able to save from this point on, and every battle has consequences based on how you win it and who is your primary companion, which will determine the ending." Are you saying everything we've done up to this point didn't?"

"It probably did, but at this point, the game is ratcheting up the tension. It's a good plot device if heavy-handed, although haven't we been playing the game as if every battle was a win-or-lose?" Kasumi asked quizzically.

"I sure as heck was," Ranma said, allowing Akane to finally push his head back and away from between them.

"Yeah, but here, I think it's warning us specifically because we're only locked into a few of the boys' romance arcs, and depending on who, each fight will be more difficult I think," Akane said, frowning pensively. *I knew I should've put push more for the harem route, but no, Kasumi said we had to be more realistic, and had to spend all that time exploring the world and figuring out what these boys were actually like instead of simply choosing the answers that would please them. Admittedly, I was kind of annoyed at most of those choices too, it's their job to please me, not the other way around, but still!*

"Will we not be able to even exit the game after this point without starting the segment over?" Kasumi asked.

A test on that score prove that this was indeed the case and all three of them decided to put this off until the weekend.

The weekend came, and all three of them once more found themselves in the study room, feeling **compelled** to be there. Indeed, all three of them had felt a growing compulsion to get back into the game since they had left it three days prior.

Ranma had dealt with it by simply putting more of his time into practicing the Art, fighting his father, and, perhaps surprisingly to many who knew him, history. Kasumi had gotten him into historical texts and books about famous battles and so forth in an effort to widen his horizon, and it had taken since the Wedding Disaster™. So much so that his history scores were now actually acceptable to graduate with, unlike his math, or language arts scores. That, and both Shampoo and Mousse showed up twice in that span of time, giving Ranma just a bit more excitement.

Kasumi and Akane didn't deal with it nearly as well. Kasumi drowned out the desire to play the game with tidying up the home and all of her other work around the place. Meanwhile Akane, who had permanently joined the acting club at school after the Romeo and Juliet debacle that had happened a few months after Ranma had arrived, dove more into her acting than anything else.

None of them thought there was anything unusual about the urge to play the game, the compulsion. All three thought that they were hooked on the story or the combat scenes in Ranma's case and wanted to see it through due to his earlier boasting.

Not questioning it like this was something that they would come to regret in short order.

Whatever the game might have thought about these last few battles, Ranma persevered. They lost the first battle twice, then Ranma got the hang of the new ship-to-ship combat, which included needing to deal with mechs and living monsters as well as human vessels. Then came some mech-to-mech combat against someone called the Black Knight who was supposed to be nigh on unbeatable according to Akane, but Ranma was able to do so with his own hand eye coordination skills, not even needing to rely on the buff from Olivia, the protagonist, who had apparently turned out to be some kind of saint.

While Ranma had thought Olivia had been interesting at first, he hadn't really kept up with the story after that little bit had come out. Coupled with the fact that she would apparently have been allowed to marry several of the boys because of it.

For her part, Kasumi watched the fights with only a bit of interest, and became annoyed with the story being told in-between, because it was very clear that yes, Akane had been correct. They had been supposed to go for the harem route in order to see all the world building and side quests, which infuriated her. The game was clearly not good enough to warrant playing it repeatedly yet she still felt that the harem ending was incredibly unrealistic.

Akane, on the other hand, was perched on her seat the entire time, eagerly choosing the choices now that would give them relationship points to use in the battles. This drew some severe side-eye from her sister at several points, and Ranma had to leave the room for a moment to vent about some of the responses from Greg and Chris, the so-called adventurer and the successor to the Sword Saint. Julius on the other hand, bothered Kasumi more than a

little bit, in that he didn't seem to have any kind of empathy for the fact that other people were dying throughout this entire portion of the story.

Indeed, the game itself didn't seem to want to delve deep into the fact that this was about a war going on against an island-eating monster, and that made Kasumi somewhat frustrated. *All that world building, and now they won't take it to its proper conclusion. This truly was a game meant for girls and girl's fantasies*, she reflected, shaking her head. *I Sometimes despair for my gender, I truly do.*

Yet despite the continued warnings before every fight, Ranma persevered, saying at one point, "So long as I know there's a chance and it isn't outright programmed to be unbeatable by weakening me or giving the enemy infinite health, I can take it."

The fight scenes and everything else took the better part of the night, as they did have to go back several times despite Ranma's skill. Yet, they kept on progressing through whatever the game threw at them.

It was deep into night by the time they finished, having split for dinner at one point, which Kasumi had, for the first time in years, not made herself. Rather, Ranma had been sent out for takeout, and not from Shampoo's or Ucchan's. Thankfully, Happy had forced Soun and Genma out to pay for his drinks, so it was only the three of them for most of the night. They had returned later, drunk as usual, but beyond their singing it hadn't mattered much.

Finally, at around two in the morning, with Kasumi yawning and Akane looking as if she was both hyper and tired at once, Ranma lifted his hands away from the keyboard, thrusting both of his fists into the air. "I did it! That monster, unless it's got some kind of super healing spell or something, is going down. I beat it! Without any of the idiots dying either!"

"Since you would've automatically game overed if you had lost one of them, that's probably a good thing," Akane said, watching as a cut scene began, showing the demise of a giant island eating monster, as well as the small castle built on board the thing.

All three of them watched avidly as the story continued, only for the image to suddenly start to glitch out. "Wait, what the? Is that part of the game, or is the computer breaking down? It still counts if we beat it though if it is," Ranma added hastily looking over Akane. "I told you I'd help you beat the game and I did. This ain't my fault!"

"You bastards!!" shrieked a new voice, high pitched and feminine, causing all three of them looked around wondering where it come from, before turning and staring as the screen shifted. "You beat the game without cheating, without the cash items, without giving me any of the despair, hate or rage I need! wanted! Well, I'll have my revenge one way or another for this humiliation!"

As the voice screeched, the computer came alive, shifting and transforming, arms and mouth appearing everywhere, reaching for them.

There was a reason why this particular game had been in the bargain bin at the small, out of the way shop that Akane had been forced to take shelter in. This particular game disc had been taken over by an old Negaverse Youma who had escaped the Sailor Senshi attention over in Juban Ward when the rest of them had been wiped out months back by playing the long game. Instead of trying to siphon off enough energy all at once to become more powerful, it had instead found out about computer games. Specifically, it had found out about otome games and the amount of emotions and angst they could create in the girls who played them.

With that in mind, she had created Alto Liebe by searching for dimensions that had handsome boys and a story that young women would get into. This had been remarkably easy for a being born from the supposed nothing between dimensions, able to transport herself or open doorways to any dimension she wished, and she continually took from that world ideas and concepts that she, as a youma, would not have been able to think of on her own. She had then spread herself out into hundreds of copies of the game, and because of the pretty boys on the cover, and a minor attraction charm, the game flew off the shelves, so much so there were a lot of confused managers wondering where the game had come from.

Alas, the youma did too good a job. Eventually, after several months of glutting on the feelings of the girls who played the game, people began to no longer play the game or buy it. With no negative feelings and emotions to sustain her spreading her essence around, the youma had been forced to retreat into one single disc, and hope that someone would eventually come along to buy it.

Akane had come along at just the right time, and the youma had taken a chance. A compulsion charm, and she had not one, but three victims to suck the negative energy out, as she transferred herself into the computer. But she had quickly become frustrated. First, the computer wasn't connected to the internet, so she could not escape that way. And while Akane had provided a continual feast of anger, frustration, rage, arrogance, jealousy and misplaced lust, Ranma didn't provide practically anything except a tiny salting of frustration and anger, and Kasumi had seemingly no real negative energy within her, save a bit of sexual desire and a tightly controlled jealousy, buried so deep the youma couldn't feed on it.

Starving as she had been, the youma had been forced into a loop, using her energy to continually open the dimensional door, pumping the other world for ideas to make it harder, pulling in the negative energy of the group along with some life force, only to lose it as the trio continued to persevere. Now she barely had enough energy to shift her form into the computer, but she was a youma. Revenge was just as important as fleeing in order to come up with another scheme.

“You will pay for this, this constant edging, you bastards!” The youma reached forward, many, many arms of shadow and barely-there substance coming from the computer, keyboard and even mouse.

Ranma grabbed Akane, the closest one to both him and the youma, and pulled her away from the screen. The hands came forward still, but Ranma kicked them away as he tossed Akane out the window, moving to grab Kasumi. “Wait for a second and catch Kasumi when I throw her out!” he shouted, as the claws of the youma tried to follow him.

With his hands free, Ranma fought back. Having fought Negaverse Youmas a few times, when they tried to move into Nerima, he gathered his ki into his hands, lashing out with a Moko Takabisha. The youma responded quickly, though, sacrificing a hand to intercept the strike of positive energy, but Ranma didn’t press his advantage, instead diving for Kasumi, who had been rapidly crawling for the door.

He didn’t reach her. Instead, a suction force came from the screen as the youma once more opened a doorway between dimensions. “Got you!” The vortex grabbed Ranma with all the force of a Hiryou Shouten Ha, only condensed and controlled, dragging him backwards towards the youma. “I might not have all three, but neither of you will escape my revenge!”

Ranma grunted as hands grabbed him. He tried to fight them off, his hands glowing blue, but the vortex kept pulling him in. Worse, the hands didn’t have enough substance for him to kick off of them and try to fight the vortex.

Before he could figure out a way to fight through it, his feet disappeared into the black and white portal that had replaced the screen, As the miasma of the dimensional doorway sucked him ever deeper, the vortex also caught Kasumi. The last thing he saw was one of the youma’s hands grabbing Kasumi, tossing her back towards the vortex just as the door behind Kasumi burst open.

OOOOOOO

Down below on the first floor, Happosai, the ancient and shrunken master of Grandmaster of Anything Goes, feeling the negative energies of some kind of powerful youma nearby went from drunken sleep to combat ready in an instant. Pushing his ki out into his body to burn all the alcohol from his system, Happy looked around, then heard the noises above, and without preamble launched himself upward. His kiseru, his long pipe, slammed into the roof above breaking through to the second floor of the Tendo Household, while below, Genma and Soun groaned, pushing themselves up and looking around at the noise, now hearing the shrieking from the youma.

Making for Nabiki’s old room, Happy arrived just in time to see a head disappear into the screen, and shouted, “Youma! Release your prisoners or—” he dodged the limb as a came for

him, then with a cackle a dozen more followed, each of them made more from shadow than flesh.

Happosai batted them aside, but the youma, knowing the jig was up, closed the doorway to the other dimension and pulled her presence out of the computer. The computer crashed down behind her, and she jumped for the window, beating out Happosai's lunge by a bare second. The youma alighted on the outer wall, raced on, her arms slowly pulling back into her like tentacles from an octopus jug.

Staring around for a moment, Happy shook his head, feeling out the house with his ki sense and not feeling Ranma anywhere either. "KASUMI!" he bellowed, racing after the youma.

He was swiftly joined by Cologne, coming in from the Nekohanten, where she too had felt the surge of negative energy. "What is it?" she asked, shouting to be heard from several rooftops away as the two of them tried to come at the youma from different angles. It didn't work, and it skirted away from them, raising in a different direction.

"I don't know. It looks like it came out of the computer the youngsters were using for schoolwork. I don't know how those things work, or anything about them but I'm certain they don't run on negative energy!"

"Botheration. Where are the youngsters then, what caused it to wake up?"

"I don't know that either. I only saw Kasumi's head disappearing into the computer screen, before the youma fled the computer. I did see Akane down on the grounds looking a little winded."

That caused Cologne's eyes to widen, because she was certain that if Kasumi was in there, so too was Ranma at the very least. Luckily, she also knew Shampoo was back home, so she wasn't getting tied up in this mess.

The two ancient martial artists chased the youma as it raced on, its form shifting and changing until it more resembled a gazelle paired with a woman's upper half, rather than a woman wearing an octopus jar on her back and a square for a chest. This centaur form allowed it to race across the rooftops with significant speed, almost leaving them behind.

Both elders began to throw out their own attacks, Happa Daikarin from Happy and small-scale ki attacks from Cologne, as well as hurled objects torn from roofs or pulled out of ki spaces. But neither of them had been expecting a fight like this and didn't have any anti-demonic items ready.

The creature was still well ahead of them when a voice shouted, "Moon Tiara Blast!"

The oldsters both skidded to a stop as a blast of holy energy sailed up from a lower roof, crashing into and through the youma, causing it to disappear into swirling smoke as a last despairing cry of, “No, dammit, not you! Years, **years** I’ve spent hiding, and now **noooo!**”

Seconds later, the last of the spectral remains disappeared from the nighttime sky, and the two elders grimaced and raced on, rooftop where it had been when it had been struck. “Dammit, not a hint of it left. That’s not good. We don’t know where Kasumi was taken... or Ranma I suppose.”

“Wait, that thing kidnapped someone? Drat!” a new voice shouted, and a young woman around the same age as Akane and Shampoo hopped up onto the roof, her light blonde hair practically gleaming in the moonlight to match the two red orbs that were worked into her odangos. She was also wearing what was very obviously a Sailor Senshi suit. “Does that mean that there is another youma nearby or something? Where did that youma come from anyway? I thought we’d seen the last of them a few months back,” she grumbled to herself.

The sight of that outfit on a girl caused Happosai to lose the plot instantly. “Hotcha!”

A slam to the side of the head sent Happy sideways before he could pounce on the young girl, and Cologne glared at him for a second. “Not the time, dolt!” She turned back, looking over at the blond girl. “You would be Sailor Moon correct? I believe there’s supposed to be someone intelligent among your group, could you please call her? We have a situation”

Sailor Moon stared at where the wrinkled old man lay, then over to Cologne, her hand inching towards her scepter for a second, causing Cologne to snort. “And if you go for that scepter young lady, I swear I’m going to wrap it around your neck and throttle you with it. We’re from Nerima, if that means something.”

“Oh, you’re some of the weird martial artists, huh?” Releasing the grip on her scepter, Sailor Moon pulled out her communications mirror. “Am-er, Sailor Mercury, and um, Sailor Mars, I think we might have a little situation.”

Moments later, a girl that looked a little bit like Akane, if she cared for her appearance and had taken up computers, science and yoga rather than acting and what the fool girl still called the ‘Art,’ appeared over the rooftops. She was accompanied by a taller, far better built young woman, her height a bit over Sailor Moon, her hair a lustrous black, and her Sailor Senshi suit marked by red highlights instead of the blue of the more academic looking young woman.

The taller girl skidded to a halt as she stared at the two old people, her eyes narrowing. “Is this some kind of youma possession or—”

“Hotcha, times two!” A recovered Happy made for her, only this time, Cologne didn’t stop him in time, and he leaped onto Mars, who screamed, headbutted him hard, and then tried to kick him, only for him to flow around the kick and jump towards Moon, cackling happily

and holding up a bra that Mars recognized. "How the heck, how did he, that's part of my costume?! It can't come off like that!"

"The magic makes it an even greater prize!" Happy chortled, rubbing the bra against his face in a way that made all three young women shudder as fire arced out towards him from Mars, missing wildly. A holy energy attack and an ice blast followed, but Happosai bounced and weaved through it all until Cologne thwacked him on the upside the head again, grabbed the bra and tossed it back to Mars.

"Pervert on your own time, Happy. We've got a mystery to settle. You three, follow us. I'll explain on the way... and you might want to burn that bra, dearie."

"Are we supposed to really take directions from someone who looks as if she's a Russian Baba Yaga?" Mars muttered, before she was smashed to the ground by a blow from Cologne as well.

"None of your lips girl. I see all of you have either neglected your training or never actually got formal training in martial arts. You should've seen that blow coming a mile away. Well, I'll take care of that after you all help us."

That didn't sound as if it was an offer for an exchange of services. It sounded, in point of fact, like a threat, but with Mars groaning on the ground, Moon and Mercury both decided that it was better to follow the old woman than try to fight her.

When they arrived at the Tendo Dojo, Cologne had told them all she knew, with Happy adding bits as he followed after. The sight of the panda and the shrieking girl kind of confused them, as did the fact that the girl looked a little like Sailor Mercury when she was out of costume. "Of course, I'm not worried about that pervert! With him gone, it'll just make everything so much more peaceful around here. I just want nee-chan back."

"I am very, very glad I decided not to wake up my great granddaughter, or else she would probably have killed the kitchen destroyer for that one," Cologne muttered, gesturing the three Senshi to follow her to the ruins of Nabiki's old bedroom.

The sight of the trio of Sailor Senshi had the girl gaping, then rushing inside muttering about grabbing a book for them to sign, while the man and the panda simply stared before a sign appeared asking, "What's up with the cosplayers?"

"They're the real deal, if Sailor Moon over there destroying the youma who did something with son-in-law and Kasumi is any indication. I'm hoping they can tell us what the youma did before hand, unless of course son-in-law and your daughter have shown up again?" Cologne asked hopefully.

That had the man bowling tears, and once more while the three Senshi exchanged glances, wondering if there was something wrong with the man. Mercury surreptitiously scanned him, then shook his head, although when she scanned the panda, she blinked. "The panda is some kind of curse form... or cursed? I'm not certain which, there's a lot of chaos magic there whatever it is. Don't hit it with any kind of magic though, I'd need to do a full set of scanning to figure out what's going on there, let alone figure out how to fix it," she whispered.

"Don't bother. Even if you could cure his curse, it's not worth it. He's a dumb lazy buffoon in both forms," Cologne said callously, although internally, she was wondering if a Sailor Senshi could truly do something about Shampoo's curse. That had never occurred to her when she first heard about these girls, as youmas and land-based water-transferred curses were two very different things. "Come on, let's examine the computer that Happy said the youma came out of. You, girl, explain what was going on prior to that moment."

Roping Akane into it, the six of them headed up to the room where the computer had been, ignoring the damage done to the room with some difficulty. There, Mercury began to piece the remains of the computer together for a few moments, eventually connecting the memory of the device to her own portable one, humming thoughtfully as she worked.

For her part, Sailor Moon shook her head as Akane admitted to having been almost compelled to finish the game, and how the youma had appeared afterward. "Darn it, that really does sound like a Negaverse Youma. It makes me wonder if there are more around. We'll have to figure out if more copies of this game have youma in them or if other games can have youma like that in them too." She smirked then, laughing a little. "Of course, that means I'll have to play them all to see, but I can take on that task willingly."

"Idiot! There are two missing people on the line here," Mars barked. "Mercury, can you tell us anything?"

"I'm afraid not. I examined both the disk of the game itself, and the computer. I discovered quite a bit of dimensional and Negaverse energies, but I can't trace them. Nor can I find any hint of any kind of magical storage in the computer itself where the two prisoners could be housed. I, I don't know. With the youma gone, normally I would've assumed that the two victims would be popped out again, but this... I think, furious that it couldn't make you into victims, this youma used its powers to send them somewhere. I, I can't find them."

"Could it have sent them to another dimension maybe? Find that dimension then," Sailor Moon ordered, her good humor vanishing. There were people here who might be really hurt from this and that was never funny.

Mercury hesitated, then, decided to be blunt about it. *Best to pull off the Band-Aid now.* "Sailor Moon, I can't even tell which dimension it was. It isn't like they have labels or anything, and without the energy to lead back to that specific dimension, I have no idea. Furthermore,

how would I create such a doorway? That's beyond my magic or indeed, any of ours, even Sailor Pluto can't create new doorways to cross dimensions."

The blulette shook her head. "Maybe if we had another Negaverse Youma we could force it to open such a door, but even then, figuring out what dimension, even with the game here to go by, would be the work of a lifetime for a mega-computer. My computer can't do those calculations, and even if we could, we're lacking all the other bits and pieces we would need to go after them."

"So, what you're saying is, there's no way to get my sister back?" Akane asked, working her way through that slowly, snarling and trying to feel angry that Ranma hadn't been able to protect her sister, with all his talk about what being a martial artist and everything else, while the rest of her was slowly beginning to realize that she would never see her sister again. In doing so, she totally ignored the fact that she had been saved by Ranma herself, but that was par for the course with Akane.

"I... I'm sorry," Sailor Moon said.

Mercury nodded her head slowly, her face sympathetic. "Maybe if we bring in the Outers and everyone else, we can figure out a way, but I don't think so. Wherever they are, they are on their own, and I don't think we'll ever find them or they can ever get back here."

OOOOOOO

At around the same time that the chase was beginning back in their old dimension, Ranma groaned, pushing himself up from a hard stone floor. Memories flood into him and he began to look around quickly, breathing a sigh of relief at seeing Kasumi nearby. *Thank Amaterasu we were sent to the same place!*

Moving over Ranma quickly examined the older girl for injuries, finding none save a large bump on her head. Kasumi didn't move as she examined her, but even so Ranma was fine with that. *She could've broken her neck or something. Head trauma can be healed after a while. I'm a living example of that! Best to let her sleep it off for now.*

Gently pulling Kasumi to the side of the strange tunnel, and propping her up there, Ranma looked around thoughtfully for second, tapping walls, noting that it sounded as if there was solid earth behind the stone. The hallway itself looked almost medieval, with cobblestones underneath and walls of similar build. There were bits and pieces of masonry missing, and the floor was badly uneven.

The sight of the torches also continued to draw Ranma's eyes, as that pointed to someone being around here, but there was something off about them that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Finally unable to stop himself, Ranma walked over to one and saw that the

torch wasn't a separate sconce fit to the wall. Rather, it was **growing** out of the wall. The stone of the wall smoothly became the wood and metal of the torch and its supposed holder.

Odder, the fire wasn't moving right. Or rather, it wasn't moving at all. It just burned, straight up, without any movement like there would be in any normal fire as Ranma moved around it, shifting the air flow. The shadows it cast from Ranma being there didn't look quite right either. They were darker, harder to see the wall and floor through.

"Okay, that's not normal," he muttered, looking around them thoughtfully. "So, are we in a youma-style dungeon somewhere, in the stomach of the youma or what?"

Figuring there was only one way to find out if they were in fact in either a dungeon or a youma's innards, Ranma pulled his hand back then flashed it forward, finger extended. While this trick was something Ryoga used regularly, Ranma had learned the skill eventually. *Though I still can't believe Cologne actually got Ryoga to think this'd also work on people. People aren't rocks, dude.*

Of course, Ranma conveniently forgot he also had thought the technique would kill him with a poke. Just because he was slightly more aware of his own failings didn't mean Ranma was immune to ignoring uncomfortable things about himself.

Ranma's finger tapped into the wall, shattering the stone there, pelting Ranma and the surrounding area with smaller bits of pebbles. Again, since he had basically forced himself into a more high-tech version of the toughness training (it involved wrecking balls rather than boulders on rope) the pebbles didn't really hurt him, but beyond the stone wall, there was simply more stone and dirt beyond.

There was also no caterwauling in the distance, no howl of pain. So Ranma figured that they were indeed underground somewhere, not in the belly of the youma. "Well, it was worth a shot."

Glancing over, Ranma was surprised the noise of his attack hadn't woken up Kasumi. She still slumped there unmoving against the wall of the tunnel. However, as he turned back the other way, there was some chittering from further down the hallway and Ranma turned in that direction, watching as monsters appeared there.

There was no other way to describe them. They were man-sized but looked like ants standing up on their back legs, with four arms, and ant-like heads. They charged forward, claws and mandibles wide.

A normal person might've quailed. Even most martial artists would've been a little bothered by the bizarre sight. Ranma, on the other hand, fresh off a short fight against a youma, simply grinned and cracked his knuckles. "Fantastic. I was just thinkin' I wanted ta punch something and here you all come right to me."

With that, he charged forwards, meeting the ants head on.

Later, as he was busy cooking the ants over the fire he had taken out of stuff in his ki-space, Kasumi began groaning, drawing Ranma's attention to her promptly. "Easy, Kasumi! Don't move too much, I want to check you for a concussion, okay?" he warned, hurrying over to her.

"Concussion? I, I don't feel queasy, my stomach is fine, although, what is that delicious smell? Wait, what happened, why does my head hurt?" the gentlest Tendo muttered, first reaching up to her head then at Ranma's words letting them drop, as she opened her eyes reluctantly and began to look around. "The, the last thing I remember is sitting before that computer and playing that, that dratted game. W, why were we so invested in it anyway? The world building was fine, but everything else was..."

Her words trailed off as Ranma knelt down, and began to touch her face and head. His touch was surprisingly gentle as he lightly probed the injury to the side of her temple as he looked into her eyes, searching for any dilation. Ranma's deep blue eyes were compelling and filled with care and concern like they were now? Well, Kasumi was having another one of those moments where she was noticing that Ranma was quite a desirable young man underneath all that prickly exterior. "Follow the finger for me, okay?"

Kasumi did so, and watching, Ranma smiled with relief. "Your eyes look to be tracking well. When you landed, you didn't get cut or anything like that, but you're going to have a nasty bruise on your head for a little bit. Can you stand? Let's check your balance."

With that, Kasumi found herself lifted to her feet like she was a young toddler being pulled into the air by an adult. She stumbled for a second, but Ranma held her steady until she started to walk, whereupon she found her eyes drawn to the makeshift campfire and the meat, whatever it was, cooking over it. "What, what is that? A crab? It looks like crabmeat, but that shell, that's all wrong."

"I'm kinda hoping for either crab or shrimp taste yeah, but it's an ant monster really," Ranma announced blithely as he urged her to take a few steps, his hands hovering and ready to catch just in case. "That wasn't the only type I've seen since, but the slimes didn't seem to be making good eating. I had to explode them with shots of my Moko Takabisha inside them and the slime got everywhere. I spent ten minutes getting it out of my clothing and hair, not to mention the smell."

Kasumi at first thought Ranma was leading her on, but then as she moved around, more of the surroundings registered. The tunnel, the odd light fixtures situated haphazardly along the walls, the bodies of five monsters laid out to one side of the tunnel, with one of their fellows having been pulled towards the fire and dismembered by Ranma. In the other direction at the edge of her line of sight there were a lot of strange reddish splatters on the wall, too gelatinous to be blood.

She felt her gorge rising a little, shaking her head and instantly regretting it, the motion making her go cross-eyed with pain for a second . At the same time, everything with the youma flooded back to her. "Wait, Akane! Did she escape? That youma, it must have sent us here."

"Yeah, I was able to grab her and toss her out the window. You fell the other way, and then I had to deal with a few claws to the face before I could grab ya. By that point, you'd already made your way to the doorway. I saw you get grabbed just as I was sucked in by the youma's vortex or whatever you want to call it, but by that point everything but my head had already been pulled in," Ranma apologized sheepishly. "Sorry I couldn't save ya too."

"You, you did your best, Ranma. Does, does that mean we in a creation of the youma inside its own body? This isn't some kind of elaborate hallucination, or something?" Kasumi asked hesitantly, having very little knowledge about youmas, or what they might be able to do.

"That was what I thought at first, but I figured if it is some kind of hallucination or if the youma's body is really like this, there'd be signs I was causing some injury when I blew up a wall," Ranma said, pointing along the wall towards where the five dead monsters lay. "I did a little bit of scouting, and were in a kind of cul-de-sac. It opens up into this area down there, but there's nothing there now and the other way, the way these ants came from, leads into a few more tunnels, all of them branching off."

"I, I see." It occurred to Kasumi to ask how far Ranma had scouted around, then, and she frowned a little. "Wait, you, you just left me here?"

"Eh, no," Ranma waved that off. "The lighting in here plays tricks on ya like that, I didn't go too far in either direction, barely fifty yards. Nah I could see ya all the time if I turned my head to look over my shoulder. Ya were never in any danger or anything."

While Kasumi thought that was more a statement of Ranma's arrogance than fact, she decided to let it go. *Nothing happened, and I am in no mood to have histrionics, let alone deal with Ranma's protestations.* "Very well, if we are not in the youma, where could we be? It all looks vaguely historical, I suppose, old, I mean."

"With magic?" Ranma scoffed, shaking his head as he led her over to the fire, sitting her down there. The meat smell was getting to him now, and he hoped that the warmth of the fire would help Kasumi through the last of her shock, as she didn't seem to be doing as well with all of this as he was. "Who knows? Magic and youmas are both weird. Mix 'em together, who can say? I doubt we were really sent back in time though, the monsters are kind of a clue, there."

Kasumi slowly nodded, staring at nothing for a moment, and Ranma hesitantly shifted away from her, muttering under his breath, as he reached into his pocket. Eventually, he pulled out a small bottle of Tylenol, and held it up for Kasumi's inspection. She smiled gratefully at that, took it, and then the water bottle that came out next. That sight caused her to chuckle wryly. "How much stuff do you have in there?"

“Not as much as Mousse. Not even as much as pig-boy in his backpack. I don’t go camping nearly as much as he does. Still, I got a few supplies, seven water bottles, a few really durable pots and pans, some odds and ends, my sleeping bag...” he trailed off, then shook his head. “Er, you can have that. I’ll sleep on the floor. It won’t be the worst place I’ve slept by a longshot.”

“Which rather says more about your upbringing than I care to contemplate,” Kasumi said, a comment that she probably wouldn’t have made under normal circumstances as it was a dig at both Ranma and Genma, and she didn’t normally go into saying such things aloud, finding it counterproductive.

Ranma’s brief grin told her, he hadn’t taken umbrage at all. Instead, he simply turned back to the meal, his mind very clearly on more important things.

Chuckling quietly, Kasumi took the two Tylenol, watching as he slathered some kind of sauce onto the meats, turning the skewers. “You say you’ve been scouting around. Do you, do you have any idea how to get us home?”

“Nope,” Ranma said, shrugging his shoulders lazily. “We don’t know where we are, so how can we get home? There’s also this.”

He pulled up a compass from next to the fire what looked like a small heavily dented on the size, but well cared for. Normally, the needle would be pointing north, but at present, that needle was twirling around like a helicopter’s rotor. “Oh my. That’s not a good sign.”

“Either some thing about this place is interfering, or wherever we are in a larger sense is interfering. Still, we’ve got food, fire, light, I think we’re pretty good.”

Ranma’s arrogant confidence caused Kasumi to sigh faintly, and she shook her head, despite the pain it caused her. “Well, that’s nice for someone like you Ranma, but us normal people—” she cut herself off, a hand coming up to her mouth mortified. She hadn’t meant to say that aloud. *Good grief, I must be more worried about all this than I thought.*

“Hey! As long as I’m fine you are too, Kasumi. I’m not going to leave you here or anything like that,” Ranma said not taking her words as anything important. “Don’t worry, I can look after you.”

That caused Kasumi to chuckle a little. *Leave it to Ranma to be at home in such a bizarre situation.* She then blinked, and asked quickly, “Wait, do you have anything electronic in your ki space?”

“Er, my Walkman? That’s about it. No cell phone or anything like that that was what you were thinking of. Ki space doesn’t hurt my Walkman. No idea what it would do to something like a computer or cell phone, but since I never owned one, it never came up anyway.”

Kasumi's slumped shoulders indicate that was what she had been thinking, and Ranma tried to cheer her up for a second, telling her a joke about the first time he'd found himself in a tunnel like this, when his Pops had tricked him into working for some sewer workers, telling him that there was a monster that had to be fought by a martial artist down there. "Only, unlike these monsters, that one just turned out to be an alligator, kind of like Kodachi's Mr. Turtle, only smaller. I still don't get how that thing was so big! What the heck was she feeding it? I mean, I know Kodachi attempted to feed me and a few other people to it over the time I knew her, but still, she never succeeded in that..."

Through the story of a small Ranma trying to take on a rather larger alligator, Kasumi smiled a bit and then smiled even more when Ranma offered her the first bite of the food. She was incredibly leery of eating monster meat, but her growling stomach rejected her attempt to refuse. She daintily bit into it, hoping that Ranma had napkins or something as well, then blinked at the taste. "It tastes like shrimp, and whatever sauce you put on works with it quite well," she complimented.

At that point, both of them turned their attention to the food, simply enjoyed the food and talking about little jokes and bits of humor. Soon, though, both of them were full, and their circumstances crashed down on Kasumi again. She started to look around, her face shifting into a worried look as Ranma hopped to his feet, stuffing everything he wanted back into his ki space.

Kasumi was still looking around, wondering where to go from here, when Ranma held out a hand to her. "Come on, we're not going to anywhere just sitting here. Let's get a move on. If this is a tunnel, it's got to have an exit right?"

"Right." Buoyed by her companion's irrepressible confidence and good humor, Kasumi let him pull her to it her feet, again marveling at the easy strength that Ranma showed. Kasumi was used to being around martial artists. Her father what had been a very good one at one point, and she could well remember when he could handle her just as easily. But it been a long time since she had been so close to such.

The two of them traveled in the direction away from the dead end, with Ranma pointing out weak points on the dead monster ants when they passed them. Surprisingly a few of those matched what they would be on a human, but Kasumi wasn't going to question it.

Soon, they came to the intersection Ranma had mentioned to her earlier, and he held up a hand, pulling out a bit of cloth for second from his ki space. He held it up in the air, then shook his head. "No wind. Which probably means were too far underground for that kind of thing. Darn. Anyway, last time I was here, I went left and then came back and went straight. The left ends in a dead end just like the other end of the tunnel here, although no slimes. Instead, a few rat-like monsters jumped me from hidden alcoves, oh, and I found this."

He pulled out a large, diamond-studded bracelet from his ki space. "This place has actual treasure chests like in RPG games. Really cool, all ya gotta do is kill the monsters and loot it."

He said it so cavalierly, Kasumi almost found herself nodding along, as if pitying the monsters, before the question as to what would have happened to her if she got jumped like that went through her and reminded Kasumi that Ranma had apparently left her alone while exploring. Before her fears got the better of her, or she could take him to task for that, Ranma continued on, stuffing the bracelet back into his ki space. "Going straight, I found a stairwell leading down, and I figure that's not what we want. With that, I decided to come back and then my stomach rumbled before I could go right."

"I suppose in every great story some food must occur," Kasumi said weakly, trying to keep her own spirits up with the admittedly very lame joke, before she scowled. "You realize, though, that going further like this, especially down the left passage, means you did leave me alone and out of sight? Please don't do that again, Ranma."

"Er... right, yeah I'd kinda forgotten about that," Ranma mumbled, even as a part of him tried to convince him that he had been right and that Kasumi hadn't been in any danger. That part had him speaking up now. "I still think ya weren't in any danger, though. There wasn't any way to get to you without going through the intersection, and I would have seen it."

"And what if this dungeon is one of those where monsters can just pop up anywhere they want?" Kasumi demanded archly. At that, Ranma looked down, and she nodded. "As I said, don't just, just leave me like that, alright?"

"I, you're right, I never even thought of that. My bad," Ranma muttered. Without the months of training Kasumi had given him doing even that much might have been impossible, but now he did so, and even understood he was indeed in the wrong. "I, I'm sorry, Kasumi. I promise I won't ever leave ya alone again."

Seeing how apologetic and shame-faced Ranma looked, Kasumi smiled, feeling a bit safer now that Ranma had given her his word. *Say what you will about his sense of honor, Ranma rarely breaks his word once given unless it was given under duress, which this certainly is not.* "Thank you, Ranma. Now, I suppose we have to travel the road less traveled, yes?"

"Okay, the first one was lame, but that was good one. Nice wordplay," Ranma said bouncing back with a chuckle as moved to take the right passage.

"I've seen your attempt at writing Ranma, you wouldn't know actual wordplay if it bit you on your nose," Kasumi joked, setting aside the earlier moment.

"Hah, shows what you know. The 'Make 'em Mad Make 'em Stupid technique is a core part of Anything Goes, and my Pops made sure I mastered it just like the Aerial Style. A lot of the time it's simple stuff, but sometimes, you have to play on words to get under a person's skin,

compare them to stuff that makes them think for a few seconds before they erupt. I don't go into that level of the technique all that often, because, well, I don't have to. Have you seen the people I fight normally? But it is a part of it," Ranma laughed.

That caused Kasumi to laugh a little, but her laughter abruptly stopped as she walked past one of the torches and saw how it had seemingly grown out of the wall in some fashion rather than be its own real fixture. That told her several uncomfortable things, least of which was the fact that this was not a man-made area. *Do the ant monsters put up these torches or grow them somehow? If so, why do they look like regular torches so much? This is all very strange.*

While Kasumi was becoming more concerned and more fearful of their surroundings, Ranma remained his usual upbeat, easy-going self. Frankly, this was kind of fun to him. Exploration like this was always interesting, exploring forests, exploring mountains, old temples and that kind of thing. This was a bit more than anything he'd ever dealt with before, but the ant monsters hadn't proved to be any kind of threat to him. Even the strikes that got through his defenses, which had only actually occurred when he allowed them to, lacked the strength to actually hurt him.

The tunnel opened out a little bit ahead of them, and stepping forward, Ranma saw instantly that there were several other tunnels leading into this one. His eyes narrowed, instantly understanding this would be an ambush point, and he gently pulled Kasumi closer to himself, one of his hands beginning to light up with blue ki. "Stay close okay? And if it comes to it, use some of that aikido you know."

Kasumi blinked, the observation knocking her out of her growing concerns. "How do you know I practice aikido?"

"I wish I could say I noticed how fluid your movements and everything are, but just put that down to you always being graceful," Ranma said, oblivious to the surprised flush that crossed Kasumi's features at the compliment. "But I caught Nabiki performing a few aikido katas once, and she said that you taught her. She uses that and those gymnastic exercises she did to keep in shape, and I figured you did the same."

"I do. My mother was a practitioner, and I always found myself drawn more to the gentle styles rather than the hard ones," Kasumi admitted.

By this point, they were standing in the center of the area where the tunnels met, and Ranma was peering from one to the other, a toothy little smile on his face that suddenly reminded Kasumi of a shark or lion contemplating a meal. Under other circumstances, that might've been extremely off-putting, but right now, she found herself oddly comforted by it.

A second later, as Ranma stared at one of the tunnels, ant monsters burst out of that tunnel and several of the others, charging towards them in a choreographed ambush, just like

Ranma had expected. The ones in the tunnel he was facing fell crying and screaming as his Moko Takabisha slammed into the first of them, blasting through it and into the second one, before Ranma was whirling, leaping into the air. Using Kasumi's head as a pivot point he launched himself sideways into several of the other ants who had charged forwards faster than the others without Kasumi even feeling the weight on her head.

His feet slammed into the head of one of them, shattering chitin and neck alike, then he was reaching down, grabbing up two more, and using them as a flail to smash five to the ground, before he leapt off. A second later he was in the center of another group. He bounded all around Kasumi as she stood there, staring and watching.

As good as the Aerial Style was for covering a lot of area quickly, even when he had to protect a sedentary Kasumi, Ranma couldn't quite be everywhere at once. In this case, because the troubles didn't come just from the tunnels. Instead, it came from above too.

As Kasumi stood there, there was a cracking sound. As she looked up, stone tumbled down, revealing where several more ant monsters dug from above, dropping down on top of Kasumi.

Even as he was dealing with some of the other ant monsters and keeping them away from her, Ranma saw this and hurled a bit of a monster's arm towards the falling monsters. It crashed into one of them with such force that it took him into two more, pushing them away from their trajectory down towards Kasumi.

Despite that, two more still landed nearby and charged her.

"Kasumi, remember, they don't have good centers of balance!" he shouted, even as he disengaged with the monsters he was fighting in and hopped towards her, launching still more purloined bits of monster at others trying to close with Kasumi.

Those bits crashed into several of the monsters but one of the two still reached her. Kasumi almost froze, but Ranma's shout and his words earlier came back to her, and her face firmed. A hand flashed up to grab the wrist of the ant monster as it tried to rake Kasumi's face missed as her head dipped to the side and Kasumi whirled, and hurled the monster over her shoulder in a perfect shoulder throw, slamming it headfirst down into the ground.

The monsters own speed and weight meant that was a killing blow, as its next step snapped, and she released it, ducking under another strike. Her hands came up, grabbing and twirling that monster in a circle, blocking another monster, then gently pushing, sending both of them to tumble over one another.

"That's the way!" Ranma laughed as he flew past her, slamming into a clump of the monsters that had come down from on high, finishing the ones that he'd already downed off

and killing three more, keeping up a dialogue to keep Kasumi's spirits up. "That should be a meme: aikido mistress says yoin, or hippity hoppity, your momentum is now my property."

Kasumi giggled at that a little bit, even as she ducked under a strike from another monster, then resolutely redirected a blow from its middle-most arms, twisting, shoving, and forcing that monster into the way of another. She knew Ranma wouldn't normally be this talkative, at least she didn't think so, and he was just trying to cheer her up, but drat it if it wasn't working, and somehow, Kasumi found herself taking part in it. "I am a woman who knows aikido, and aikido says, heck your strength, your momentum is mine!"

With that, Kasumi tripped up two more, battered aside a third, and then twirled a fourth down on top of one of the ones she'd already tripped, crushing the head of the one on the ground into the rock. Another strike came from her blindside, and she yelped, but shifted away from the hit, and suddenly, one of her hands glowed and a frying pan suddenly appeared, made out of solid-state ki, a trick of the Tendo School. When it hit, it didn't just smack the ant monster aside. It shattered the ant monster, hurling it's through the air broken and coming apart at the seams.

"Ha! I knew you could do that! Your Pops, Akane, the rest all thought I was wrong, but I knew you had used that technique to hit Happy once when he first showed up!" Ranma crowed, still fighting to one side, guarding her back and killing three or four times as many ant monsters as got through to attack her. *Should I have had her stay back in the tunnel? Nah, the monsters digging down could've still attacked her the same way as here, only I'd have been out of position.*

Kasumi didn't bother saying anything, wailing around her like Akane on a sugar high faced with the pervert rush at Furinkan. With Ranma guarding her back and zooming around the place as if gravity and he had a special relationship, the two of them continued to fight off the monsters.

As the fight continued, they slowly ran out of room as the bodies piled up. This forced Ranma into a more sedentary combat style, but suited Kasumi to the ground. At that point, her ki weapon actually started to put down more of the monsters than Ranma did, the strength of her strikes meaning she could take down two or three at once.

Eventually, the rush began to trickle out, and Ranma and Kasumi found themselves nearly pressed against one of the walls, bodies of ant monsters piled up to the ceiling and beyond near the hole, blocking them from anything but the nearest tunnel leading away from the battlefield. "Well, drat."

"You know, you can curse right? I mean, I realize it isn't something that you should do all the time, or anything like that, but using heck earlier, that was just a little lame," Ranma teased, grinning cheerfully as he wiped the blood off of his hands. *That was amazingly fun. Fighting against enemies that aren't human, that I don't have to hold back against, the don't have hold*

some imaginary grudge or demand anything of me, but simply come at me with intent to kill and no other reason? Sign me up, please!

"I am a lady Ranma, and I do not curse," Kasumi said, mentally adding *outside my own head, anyway*. She then sagged as her ki weapon disappeared, and the tiredness hit her. Having anticipated that, Ranma caught her around the shoulders, gently guiding her away. "Oh my, I am not used to the drain from using that technique so often."

"Yeah, I remember your father gettin' knocked out a few times when he calls on his full armor and weapons. Akane doesn't seem to have much of a problem with it, but she never uses it for very long either, mostly just to smack me," Ranma said glibly, shaking her hit his head. "Do you think you're hungry again or—"

"Ranma, if you suggest we cook some of those monsters up, I am going to be most annoyed. We just finished fighting them, and I don't want to see blood or guts or anything for a little bit, all right? My metabolism also isn't as efficient as yours, so I'm full from the earlier meal still," she drawled, shaking her head. "Let's just get away from this place. I would assume that, if these ant monsters are intelligent, we've just dealt with what amounts to their forces in the area. We should be safe... why are you looking at me like that?"

Ranma continued to look at her with a flat, dead expression for a second before he shook his head. "I just forgot that you haven't actually been a part of most of my adventures. You never say stuff like that. When you're around me, anyway."

A moment later, Ranma's words were proven prophetic as Kasumi took a step forward, and something under her foot went click. The two of them looked at one another, echoing, "click?" before the floor gave way.

Kasumi didn't even have time to scream before Ranma grabbed her, pulling her into his arms, pulling her close as they bounced off something, that she couldn't see in the dark. Something else hit his arm where it wrapped around her shoulders, and his elbow flicked out, diverting another something from her side. Then they were sliding along something, Ranma grunted as he pushed off of another unseen thing, and then landed a moment later, as Ranma set her down, no worse for wear. "See what I mean?"

"I, I will endeavor to watch my words better in the future," Kasumi muttered, shaking her head.

Luckily, the darkness of the trap chute had ended, and the pair of them could look around themselves for a few moments in the light of some of the weird torches.

Ranma turned, staring up the way they'd come, estimating that they were far deeper than if they had taken the stairs downwards. "Do you think it's worth it trying to get back up

there?" he asked, staring at how much smooth surface there was. *Okay, going in there practically blind would not be fun, but it would still be doable.*

"Probably not. We'd have to push our way through a lot of the ant monster bodies to get to any of the other tunnels. Perhaps this one will lead back to the staircase you found earlier..." Kasumi's voice trailed off once more as she stared at the small indent in the floor where they would have come out had Ranma not suddenly shifted them through the air at the last moment. That trap would've been far deadlier were it not for his abilities, since that small pit was lined with spikes poised to puncture their bodies easily.

Ranma didn't seem to care about the danger that they had narrowly avoided, simply nodding, then pulling out another cloth to try his trick to check if there was any wind movement. There wasn't, obviously, and he sighed, before gesturing. "Left or right? I've got no idea where that staircase is in relation to where we are now."

"That is not something I wanted to hear," Kasumi muttered, shaking her head. The click that came when she stepped forward was also not something she wanted to hear, but this time, she was ready for it, and when Ranma reached forward, she had already reached a hand out towards him. He grabbed her arm, pulling her sideways into his body, as a spear launched itself from a hidden hole in the wall right through where Kasumi had been standing a second ago.

She stared at it, then blushed a little at how close the two of them were, coughing and pushing gently away from Ranma. "Well, thank you for that. I think we need to take it slower from now on. We must have gotten very lucky in that first area but there seems to be more traps here."

"And slime monsters," Ranma added, pointing down the hallway. Turning in that way with trepidation, Kasumi saw the slime monsters Ranma was talking about.

She had seen them in a lot of games she had played over the years, and Kasumi had often thought that the slime monsters looked kind of cute. These monsters did not look cute. They looked creepy. They crawled along the floor, larger than her shoulders, on the ceiling, and on the walls, and a few of them had bits of ant monster dissolving inside of them. They were also all a dark reddish color rather than the nice light blue that was normal and games for the first monsters you spotted.

That thought rattled around in her brain for a moment, but Kasumi quickly turned and pointing in the other direction. "Let's go that way then."

Ranma chuckled picked her up, and hopped over the tiny pit, landing on the other side. The two of them continued on, with Ranma in the lead checking for traps with the spear he'd grabbed from where it had stuck in the opposite wall after trying to impale Kasumi. He tripped two more such traps before he paused, staring at a portion of the wall.

Moving over to it, he wiped his hand down it, then looked ahead of them, before backing away slightly. "Now, do I have anything heavy I can roll forward?"

After a few moments, he ran back, breaking some of the spikes from the earlier trap. Quickly tying them all together with some rope from his ki space, he came back and rolled the odd cylinder forward. A second later, Kasumi watched as the two sides of the corridor slammed together, crushing the iron spikes into thin plates, before slowly backing away.

Before Kasumi could say anything, Ranma grabbed her up over one shoulder. They were halfway to where the trap had been sprung before the walls were back to where they had been, then passed it. A grinding noise behind them had Ranma jumping forward, and they cleared the edge of the crushing trap quickly.

"Well, that was fun," Ranma said as he landed, sitting Kasumi on her feet.

Kasumi wanted to be a little angry at his attitude. They were in a life-or-death struggle here, and she wanted to get home! But how Ranma had gotten her through those traps and been protecting her all the while against most of the monster ants, kept her from taking it personally. She simply shook her head and gestured him forward. "Come on, intrepid adventurer. I rather think I would like to see if we can discover if this place has an outside to get to please."

Ranma blinked, as if the idea that they wouldn't find a way out of whatever tunnels they were in hadn't occurred to him and he nodded, moving forward again. Several dozen traps and an ambush from several shadowlike monsters, which Ranma had to disperse with his ki attacks later, they came under attack from another type of monster. This time the monsters looked almost like lions, except with scales in different places and three eyes, which, combined, kept Ranma from freaking out.

At that point they decided to take a break. Ranma skinned and peeled off the monsters, shoving their hides into his ki space for a second before pulling them back out, then setting them out against one of the walls. Kasumi looked at him, and he shrugged. "There's no air in my ki space, so it kills all bugs and germs and such like."

"Fascinating," Kasumi murmured, then looked over the coats. "Are you worried we might need those?"

"Well, if we find a way out of here, how do we know it's not winter?" Ranma asked. "Then you'll need a coat, right?"

That made far too much sense for Kasumi, and she nodded, turning back to where she had been working on some lion steak, using some of the materials from Ranma's ki space to cook with was an intriguing experience, and she found herself enjoying it for some reason. It was challenging and challenging in an area where she greatly enjoyed experimenting already.

"How long do you think we've been moving?" she asked, yawning.

"I don't know, a few hours. I think it'd probably be around seven or eight in the morning back home... Do I have a watch on me somewhere?"

Kasumi glanced up occasionally over the next few moments in amusement as because Ranma practically thrust his head down into his own pocket, holding a flashlight in his teeth as he searched for a watch, finally finding an old pocket watch. Where it had come from he had no idea, but opening the case of it, he saw that it was still working. "Huh, yeah, it would be around nine o'clock back home. That means we been here for six or seven hours."

Looking over at Kasumi he shook his head. "If you're tired, take a nap. I'll stand watch. So long as I've got food, I'm still good to go."

"I have mentioned how good your metabolism is once already, haven't I?" Kasumi murmured, nodding as she yawned again. "I think I'll take you up on that offer, after we have these lion monster steaks of course. They should be quite tasty, although the meat will be gamier than I prefer."

How long she slept Kasumi didn't know, but she woke up only somewhat refreshed, her head hurting again and with her back somewhat paining her as well from sleeping on the hard stone floor. Ranma's sleeping bag wasn't exactly a luxurious one, and lacked any kind of additional padding to go underneath the user.

However, Ranma greeted her with some tea from his ki space, and some chunks of the lion meat from last night along with half of a granola bar, so she decided to push through it beyond asking for some more Tylenol. Ranma quickly pulled the same bottle out.

Thirty minutes later, they were heading off, while Kasumi took stock of her clothing. Luckily, she hadn't changed into her night clothing or anything like that when they were playing the game, but Kasumi was still dressed in her simple, utilitarian blouse and skirt. However, the hem of it was quite frayed, there were a few cuts and slashes through it, and her underwear was beginning to feel a little... uncomfortable with sweat.

A moment later, her bowels reminded her of other issues and she hastily asked Ranma if there was a place nearby where she could perform her morning ablutions. The word went over Ranma's head, and Kasumi sighed, before saying, "I need to go to the bathroom."

"There's a trap pothole back that way, I was using it. I stuck two of the spears into the stone wall nearby for you to rest your arms on," Ranma said, pointing in that direction "Oh, and here." He pulled out a toilet paper roll, handing it over. "You'd be amazed how important those rolls can be. I always have a few on me at all times."

Kasumi was soon back, having had no difficulties, but her clothing was still a bit of an issue, and she asked hesitantly if Ranma had any changes of clothing on him. He shook his head. "No, sorry. I mean, I've got some bras for my girl form, but you're a little bigger in that area than my girl form is. I hate wearing them most of the time, but they're useful occasionally. You'd have to let them out though, and I don't have any needle or thread."

"Well, thank you anyway," Kasumi sighed. "Let's get a move on please. And I hope that eventually we find some measure of civilization somewhere."

With Ranma in the lead, they started off once more, although their journey didn't start off very auspiciously, as within one step in the next, a trap that Ranma missed activated, and a wall opened up, firing out a jet of water with enough force to crush bones. Ranma was hit in the side by it and hurled into the opposite wall, where she grunted at the impact, cursing.

Kasumi stayed well back, watching as the water subsided, and Ranma dropped to her knees, shaking her head. "Dammit, I missed that one! And here we were just talking about my female form. See what I mean? Fate and luck have it out for me wherever I am."

"I might actually start believing that," Kasumi chuckled, although she became surprised when Ranma decided not to return to his male body just yet. When she asked why, he shrugged.

"When I change into my female form like that, it's a sign that I haven't spent enough time in it according to the water attraction side of the curse. I figure I'll stay in it for a little while longer, and that'll decrease the chances of me getting splashed or other water traps."

That was a little off to Kasumi, but she shrugged her shoulders. It wasn't as if she objected to Ranma's female form by this point, although when he first showed up, she certainly had. That, and his overall attitude of course but mainly the curse. Magic had frightened her back then, but now, two years on, and especially given the current circumstances, Ranma's curse seemed almost blasé compared to what they were dealing with.

The two young ladies continued on their way, dealing with more traps, a few more monsters, larger and more dangerous monsters, but slower and thus just as easy for Ranma to deal with. These were huge, bearlike monsters, with numerous red jewels embedded in their bodies, but they were just too slow to hit Ranma, and thus it took more time to skin them and take the jewels than fight them.

Once more, they spent a night in the tunnels, with Ranma sitting out a few traps and getting some sleep himself while Kasumi cooked a meal. She woke him up when the stew was done, and Ranma stayed on watch for the rest of the night to let her sleep in turn. With the traps out, Ranma also got a few hours' sleep again, waking far more refreshed looking than Kasumi did.

The nature of this place, and the exertions were beginning to get to Kasumi. At times she had been having fun, but being underground, the monsters, and the dangers were starting to break through her self-control. Ranma persevered, trying to keep her mood up, even offering to give her a piggyback ride, something that had Kasumi flushing a little bit for some reason and waving him off quickly.

The next day, they came to an intersection, and the two of them debated for a few moments. Kasumi argued that there seemed to be a slight incline to one side, and that that probably meant that that would take them deeper into whatever underground warren they were in. The other way didn't have an upslope but at least leveled out.

Ranma wanted to go forward and scout either direction for a bit, but Kasumi, worried because they'd just dealt with a monster attack, wanted him to stay close by. Hence, they decided to go the way that didn't slope downwards. A few traps and one monster attack later, they ran into another major monster assault. Thankfully, after that they found a small area where Ranma could guard the entryway as they rested.

Along with a treasure chest. Kasumi hadn't seen that before, and hadn't really believed it when Ranma had told her about the one he'd found before. This one, though, was heavily locked, and Ranma had to shatter the top of it rather than open it normally.

Within had proven to be a necklace with a few strange dog tags made out of stone with what Kasumi supposed were runes on them. They glowed with what had to be magic, but neither of the displaced teens (Kasumi might be 20, but she still thought of herself as a teen) were brave enough to put it on and find out what it could do.

The next morning, within an hour of setting off after another meat-based breakfast, the nature of the cave seemed to change. The walls, which had been stone, was now changing to more dirt than stone, and ahead of them, Ranma could almost see something that gleamed almost like metal.

This made Kasumi a little worried. "We don't know anything about what could make metal here. It could be some intelligent monster, or something else entirely."

"Maybe, or maybe it means we're coming up on the surface and some kind of facility buried into the stone on top of this place. If that's the case, the way out's through," Ranma argued.

"I don't know Ranma, I told you yesterday I feared we had begun sloping downward." Kasumi shook her head. "I agree your idea makes some sense, but still we haven't seen any other sign of people at all."

"We haven't, but I still think we can deal with anything we come against. And turning back, we'd be forced to spend at least another day in these tunnels getting back to where we were," Ranma warned.

At that, Kasumi grimaced, and waived him on. "Fine, but if we discover that we have indeed been going downward somehow, I reserve the right to tell you I told you so."

"Wait, I would be able to stop you from doing that!? News to me," Ranma retorted, and Kasumi chuckled, shaking her head at his attitude, and oddly wondering why Ranma seemed so upbeat while her mood was getting worse the more time they spend in these tunnels.

I want to go home. I want a shower. I want to sleep in a bed, or at least make a comfortable sleeping bag. I want vegetables and fruit, not just various types of meat. I want to see my father and Akane again, I want to be in my home again!

For his part, Ranma had been doing some thinking while on guard the past few nights. He knew that if time passed in the same manner, at least three days had gone by since the youma had sent them here, and no one had shown up trying to rescue them. That probably meant that no one knew where they were or could get here. Furthermore, he'd been thinking about the nature of the youma, and the way it had snared him.

That wasn't the first Negaverse Youma that the Nerimans had dealt with, and one thing that Ranma had learned from an overheard conversation between two of the Sailor Senshi, while Ranma was in his redheaded form, was that they came from another dimension. If that was the case, it made sense for the youmas to have powers that could cross dimensions, or perhaps even be able to send people across them. If that was the case, well, they were here for the long haul.

At first, that thought had depressed Ranma, but after a while, he had decided that since there was no way to get back, they might as well make the best of it. And in doing so, Ranma knew that all of his honor obligations, all of his problems for the future and everything else that he been contemplating, no longer mattered. In this new dimension, whatever kind of shape it came in, he could make a new life.

Admittedly, the idea of making a new life here in this weird underground dungeon area didn't exactly appeal to him. The idea of never seeing the sky again was a horrific one to Ranma. But the idea of starting over in some new place was a tantalizing one.

Unaware that their thoughts were running in entirely different directions, the two explorers pushed on, and soon discovered that Ranma was correct. There was metal in the walls, some kind of structure that this tunnel led into. It certainly wasn't a natural entrance, judging by the edges, and Ranma left Kasumi there for a moment, shifting forward into the open area, cautiously, staring around for more traps, monsters or whatever.

He found them in the form of several large monsters, their desiccated forms scattered around the area. There wasn't enough of them left to tell Ranma what killed them, but he grabbed up a few large claws, which looked almost like a mole's, slipping one into his normal pocket before he looked around some more.

This looked like a regular office building-type hallway. It was lined with doors leading into rooms, most of which looked like they had been communal quarters. Shaking his head, he headed back to Kasumi to report. "If people were here, I don't think they are any longer. I found evidence of fighting between monsters, maybe, but no other monsters. Nevertheless, there's a lot of signs people did live here, including some clothing."

"Ooh, thank you!" Kasumi murmured. "Maybe we can find more supplies, although fruits and vegetables are probably far less likely." She almost glared at Ranma as he opened his mouth. "And if you say proteins good for you or a meat only diet is fine for me or anything else of that nature, I will be most angry."

Ranma nodded, holding up his hand peaceably, and the group into the facility. There, Kasumi quickly began ransacking the personal quarters. Doing so, she found several items of feminine apparel, and with Ranma guarding the door, she hastily searched through the rest of the room, finding several sports bras, that, while labeled with names and numbers she couldn't figure out, at least looked the appropriate size. She even found some leggings, and came out dressed more like Ranma was, a shirt and pants, a moment later, with her regular clothing bundled in her hand arms. "Could you store this for me?"

Ranma nodded, taking the stuff and turned to look down one of the corridors even as he stuffed it into his pocket. "I think there's something moving down there now. Stay behind me."

"As if I have been doing anything different," Kasumi murmured. She'd only been involved in the two fights with the ant hordes, and the second time she'd been wielding a spear from a distance, the tip of it on fire to occasionally ward off the ants.

"Just making sure. Working with someone sensible is a new thing to me, you know? I'd hate to think how Akane would be handling all this. She'd be racing all over the place, trying to prove she's stronger or tougher than me," Ranma said, shaking his head with a laugh that was just a little bit loud to be funny.

Kasumi frowned at that and would've remonstrated with Ranma about speaking poorly of her little sister but closed her mouth after a few moments. He was right, after all. *Worse, Akane would probably have been blaming Ranma for everything, even though it was her game who was housing the youma that sent us here.*

The pair of them moved forward and a second later, Ranma's warning about movement proved accurate, although the nature of that movement had both of them pausing in place to

stare. Ahead of them were several new monsters, or at least, Ranma supposed they were monsters, but in this case, they weren't flesh and bone.

They were instead robotic. Large doglike robots that came up to Ranma's waist, their backs containing a large gun. They moved forward lightly on their feet, and seemed to be sniffing the air almost but apparently their sensors didn't seem to be all that good. They only began to fire their laser beams towards Ranma and Kasumi when they were within a few dozen yards.

As one the entire pack charged forwards, letting out no noises, firing as they came, forcing Ranma to grab Kasumi and push her back into a doorway. The doorway didn't give behind her back, but she slipped there to the ground, laser blasts going on all around her as Ranma dodged and yelped, hissing as a few of those beams hit them, then blinking as they didn't do much. "What the, what the heck?"

When one of the dog droids slammed into his legs though, Ranma was almost upended, such was the speed it had reached in those few moments. He moved with it easily though,, lashing out with a kick that shattered another droid, before his elbow caught the one that had barreled into his leg, and then that leg came up in a sideways kick crushing into a third.

Having seen that their lasers weren't doing anything, the dog droids charged in, biting and growling. Yet they lacked the strength to penetrate Ranma's legs, although he did grunt a little bit at in pain from the biting.

Soon, he smashed the last of them to the ground, shaking his head. "What the heck, I thought lasers would hurt. Those didn't."

"Either they were very low powered lasers, more like superpowered flashlights, or, well, have you done any training that makes you immune to heat?" Kasumi asked, staring up at where the lasers had cut into bits of the metal, melting away segments.

Ranma slowly blinked, then nodded. "The Phoenix Pill! It makes me darn near impervious to heat-based attacks. I mean I can still sweat and feel a muggy kind of heat, but the only way I can tell hot water from cold is if there's steam coming off of it. I honestly kind of resented Cologne for a while for that one because hot baths and showers kind of loose their pull. Now, if it had spread to include not being able to feel the heat of food, I'd've tried ta kill her. But I got used to it."

A grin slowly crossed his face. "And it makes me resistant to lasers? That's kind of awesome!"

"Yes, well that makes one of us. I think I'm going to stay further back from now on Ranma. If we run into any more monsters that throw around laser beams, I'm going to be at a decided disadvantage," Kasumi said, her tone worried.

Ranma nodded, as that was a major understatement. Kasumi lacked the speed to dodge if she saw one of the monsters pointing their back lasers at her, and if one of them hit, well, she might be able use the Tendo style but that didn't mean she was in a more durable than a normal girl. "Unless you can summon up that ki armor Soun uses, then yeah, stay several yards behind me and close to the wall."

Kasumi obeyed, reminding Ranma again that dealing with her was a **lot** easier than dealing with Akane. Shaking his head at that, Ranma pushed on quickly, shifting through the last remnants of the robots, coming to a circular stairwell leading both up and down. "Which way do you think?"

"Up. Offices and important people are always on the higher floors," Kasumi asked, thinking of what she had seen of ships in the past in various mediums.

Nodding, Ranma and headed upwards, running into several more of the strange doglike robots on the stairs. He was able to deal with them easily enough and then found himself facing a larger robot at the end of a long hallway. Standing several feet taller than Ranma, this one reminding him strongly of a Gundam of some kind he'd seen on TV ones, with guns for arms and several tread legs.

It fired the guns at him, both of which turned out to be solid-state type guns, which Ranma took a lot more seriously than the lasers at this point. Ducking under the fire as it chewed into the wall behind him on the other side of the stairwell, Ranma rolled forward, tossing a portion of one of the dog droids up and into the head of the monster. It clanged, its sensors going sideways for a second and he whooped. "Gotcha, you Gundam reject!"

Releasing the first noise that Ranma had heard from one of these robotic constructions since the fighting began, a sort of squawking noise, but since it was also aiming its guns at Ranma, Ranma didn't stop, still dodging the fire, as it punched through the metal of the floor. A second later, he bounced up and off the ceiling, then down into the droid. His fist smashed into and through it, then he brought up his other hand, and tore in either direction, shredding the entire droid in two. "They don't build robots like they used to," he shouted over his shoulder to Kasumi.

Kasumi hesitantly stepped out of the stairwell onto the floor where Ranma was, shaking her head in his attitude. "Ranma, robots of all sorts were made to fight regular people... and occasionally other giant robots. You are martial artist, and I don't think the term regular has been used for any of you except possibly tongue-in-cheek."

Snickering at that, Ranma was about to reply when a nearby speaker spoke, first in English with a British accent, then in Japanese. "//Intriguing, this dialect is known to me. Downloading Japanese.// Ahem, attention intruders. While you are somehow able to speak a language from the Old Humans, your powers and abilities to defeat my ROGS and my Prime Security Droid can only come from a New Human. As such, you will not be allowed access to this

facility. I will instead self-destruct rather than let it fall into New Human hands. Also... I hate you. Go die."

"...Okay, hurtful. I don't know who's actually speaking to us right now, let alone what these new and Old Humans are. Still, you saying stuff like that gives me hope that there are other humans around here, because I've been seriously wondering that," Ranma said, looking around until he saw where the voice was coming from.

"And since you're willing to speak to us at all, I don't suppose you'd be willing to negotiate... although come to think of it what would we even give you? If you're a robot, food and monster parts won't matter to you and I doubt we've got any info ya'd pay for..."

"Your words are confusing and are an asinine attempt to prevaricate. I say again, this facility will self-destruct rather than fall into New Human hands. Your magically assisted strength and speed might avail you against my robots, this unit was never designed to be a military facility. But that does not mean that we are without recourse. Or to dumb it down to New Human standards, Step one step closer, I go boom, taking this whole place with me, and hopefully the pair of you as well."

"Excuse me, but could you explain what you mean by New Human and Old Human? The two of us are very much not from around here. In point of fact, we were teleported into the dungeon that has grown up around your facility via a dimensional transfer of some kind," Kasumi said politely coming up to stand beside Ranma and looking at the same speaker. It was only polite after all as that was where the voice was coming from.

"Dimensional travel is impossible. No amount of scientific advancement allows for such things. Ergo, even if I believe your words about your origins, you arrived by magic, which means New Humans. New Humans are those that can use magic. Old Humans are those who cannot. Go die in a ditch," the AI intoned.

While Ranma was ready to pick a fight with the asshole on the other end of the speaker, Kasumi persevered. This place had given her hope again, and she was not going to let anything happen to it. Not until they had as much supplies from it as they could, anyway.

"Neither of us have magic. I understand that Ranma's abilities seem superhuman, and they are, but they have nothing to do with magic. Rather, they have everything to do with a lifetime spent training and pushing his body well beyond what most people would consider the normal limits. As for myself, I surely haven't shown you anything magical. If you are objecting to us being here on the basis that we are New Humans, we are not. And I would be willing to take a test to prove this."

Ranma made to object, but Kasumi shook his head her hand, holding up the other hand. "Ranma, whoever this is has information, and I am... I am very fearful from what he said about

New Humans and Old Humans, and everything we've seen here, that we are indeed in another dimension, a dimension that will ape the game we were playing."

"I've been thinking the same thing, although I don't know where the new and Old Human things coming from," Ranma admitted. "But taking some kind of kooky lab experiment-type test is too dangerous Kasumi. Let me take whatever test they've got."

"Your abilities would make them doubt their own scanners. This... I'm assuming I'm talking to some kind of artificial intelligence? You don't seem to be a computer, and I don't believe that a human being would be able to live down here for very long without going crazy."

"You speak to the artificial intelligence created to run this facility. This facility at present has no need of an artificial intelligence, but your entry and destruction of my garden droids woke me up from sleep mode. Thieves. Trespassers. I will gladly take you both into oblivion."

"Sleep mode? I heard of that before. What, is your operating system Mac or Windows?" Ranma snickered.

This earned an electronic razzberry sound from the grill. "Don't even joke! Both of those are antiquated systems and... and you would have no knowledge of them even if you were Old Humans from the war. Unless you were historians. Both systems were no longer in use well before the war began and had long since faded into obscurity. You claim to be Old Humans and claim to be another from another dimension. And yet you are speaking Japanese. Fakers. Go kill yourselves."

Wondering why the AI sounded bloodthirsty, Kasumi shook her head. "Perhaps this dimension simply has a faster sense of time than our own? There are ways to tell, the position of stars and so forth, but why would you believe us unless you can verify we are Old Humans. Again, I volunteer for—"

"Agreed. I will send a medical droids to you. It will take a sample of your genetics. If you are Old Humans, this opens up a wealth of possibilities, both short and long-term. But if you are proven to be New Humans, I will self-destruct instantly, taking both of you with me. Glorious, glorious mutual destruction."

Ranma scoffed at that, and was about to reply belligerently, when Kasumi again cut them off. "That sounds fair. I doubt you will find anything strange or unusual about me. Ranma on the other hand, you might have trouble getting a needle into."

"I will only even attempt to do so once you have proven that you are an Old Human. Until then, this is mere supposition." The lights of the floor went on at that point showing a long hallway heading off into the distance, making Ranma wonder how big this place had been.

Moments later, a droid on four small treads trundled towards them. It had several spindly arms and two main ones, with each of the spindly arms ending in a different type of medical gear. Behind it, the android-like front shifted into a long gurney made of metal that ended on top of another set of treads.

The medical droid trundled up to Kasumi and when instructed, she held out her arm. A needle came up and pressed into her arm, making Ranma fight his reflexes to reach out and grab it. Luckily, he could see it was a clear needle, nothing inside already.

He watched as the blood sample was taken. The droid then opened a small aperture, inserting the small tube the needle had been attached to. The hatch closed automatically as lights began to go on inside.

The droid's arms came up, and almost absently began to wrap a cloth around where the needle had been taken along with a small swab. It had just finished its task as the voice from the wall came back. "Astonishing! Already, we have proven that you are indeed an Old Human! The genetic differences between New and Old Humans were known well before the war began, and it is easy to search for such. You are indeed Old Human. This droid will lead you to the control center so we may talk in person. After that, we must speak about the future."

"What, you don't wanna test me?" Ranma quipped, his shoulders tensing noticeably as he gave Kasumi a look of admiration. He would simply have gotten into a fight with the thing or simply run away when it started to self-explode. Trying to talk it down completely like that, that wouldn't have occurred to them, and agreeing to let it test his blood, that gave him the heebie-jeebies. Now that Kasumi had gone through it, though, he would follow.

"If it will make you feel included," the droid snarked back, turning as the medical droids turned back to Ranma.

Shaking her head, Kasumi smiled faintly. *Well, at least the AI isn't casually insulting or threatening us.*

Ranma held out his arm, concentrating for a second, pulling away his ki from his skin. "You're going to really need to jab it in there and you might need to use a different needle."

"I assure you that my medical droid will jab you as hard as it possibly can," the AI responded, causing Kasumi to giggle a little.

Instead of delicately trying to insert the needle, the droid raised its hand and stabbed downward as if the needle was a dagger, and Ranma winced just a little bit. However, the needle still bounced off. "I warned you."

"And you still maintain that you are an Old Human? Please! Do not lie, it is clear that, while your companion is indeed an Old Human by some strange fate, you are not."

"I assure you he is. We came from the same dimension after all, and Ranma's abilities were known there. Several people had differing styles, but all of them were martial artists. They had pushed their bodies to an incredible degree, and that allowed them to perform feats of strength, durability and speed that were beyond the understanding of most people. Perhaps you should just take a swab from under his tongue? I understand that can also tell you many things about a person's DNA," Kasumi suggested.

"Or if it's just blood you need, I can get some of that out myself," Ranma volunteered. *If being an Old Human gives us some special status, I don't want Kasumi to be the only one with it. Who knows, this AI might then try to get rid of me and just go somewhere with her to preserve her genes or something.*

"Very well. If you are willing to continue this farce, do so. The medical droid will prepare a petri dish."

Moments later, Ranma watched as the blood-filled petri dish disappeared into the same hold in the medical droid that Kasumi sample had been in. He'd used one of the claws from the lion monsters they've fought on and off, and had needed to press in pretty darn hard to do it too; still, it was done now.

Once more, Ranma saw lights go on even as the hatch to that little area closed. Then they waited... and waited. And waited.

Ranma began to grin, while Kasumi giggled a little, also understanding what was going on. "So, we'll just walk down this hallway, shall we? Perhaps by the time we find wherever your core is, you'll have gotten over your existential crisis?" she quipped.

This caused Ranma to smirk. *Something about our situation's brought out the snark in Kasumi. I like it.*

As the medical droid made no move to follow them, the two of them skirted around it and headed down the hallway, then up again to a far smaller floor as Kasumi asked for a water bottle, taking a sip gratefully. It had been a long, long time since she'd walked for so many hours. Being on her feet was an entirely different thing.

This floor held offices and other things of that nature in several sides, all of them lined with a lot of computer equipment consoles and various things of that nature. The one at the far end opened as they came closer, and inside was what was very obviously a control room of some kind. Kasumi had seen the like in a few movies, although this one was far more high-tech than any she'd seen before.

In the center of the far console ahead of them, a round object the size of a basketball pulled itself out of its charger, turning around to stare at them with what was very obviously a single eye set into the ball. "This is impossible," the ball spoke. "You are completely Old Human,

yet you tore apart a robot with your bare hands. I can detect no weapons or technological aid, yet with your build there is literally no scientific principle that would allow for such a thing.”

“Perhaps, but empirical evidence would suggest that in this, you should believe the truth of your sensors and tests rather than preexisting data, shouldn’t it?” So saying Kasumi curtsied lightly towards the AI. “Perhaps now that we have proven ourselves, we can introduce ourselves in turn. Hello, my name is Kasumi. This is Ranma. We come from another dimension, and we arrived because a youma sent us here.”

“That just about covers it yeah. I’m a martial artist and Kasumi’s a daughter of martial artists and probably has a few tricks that you’d think are impossible without magic, but neither of us actually use it. Although, I do suffer from a curse, and if you thought that my blood sample being that of an Old Human was weird, my curse is probably going to make you short-circuit,” Ranma said, snickering.

“The idea that another dimension has contact with magic is not out of the realm of calculation given your arrival here. Curses and so forth were also known during the war,” the AI stated dismissively. “I fail to see why a curse on you would matter much—”

Knowing an opening when she was gifted one, Kasumi used the last of her water bottle to splash Ranma in the face, triggering his curse.

For seemingly a second stretched to eternity, the AI continued to stare at them with its cyclopean eye, then it said, “I stand corrected.”

Then it’s lights went off. Indeed, all the lights went off for second, as the hovering ball fell to the floor only to be caught by Ranma as he darted forward, laughing all the while.

After a few moments, the artificial intelligence rebooted, then pulled itself up and out of Ranma’s grip, hovering over the pair of them staring from one to the other. “That kind of curse was not known to us, but I have been able to separate that into its own separate memory bank, and it will no longer impact my functions. As we were exchanging greetings, I will do so now, so long as you can refrain from doing anything else that will damage my logic circuits.”

It seemed to glare at them for a second, then as neither seemed to be doing anything but smile in Kasumi’s case or snicker in Ranma’s, it continued. “I am Phaeron, and this is my facility. Or what is left of it after seismic upheavals and abandonment. Now, with introductions out of the way, I believe we have information to exchange.”

This went on for a while. Phaeron had a lot of questions about their world, about the youma that had sent them here, the rumors about where those came from, and the fact that both Kasumi and Ranma had wondered if maybe they had been transported into a game. That was a little too far for the end of artificial intelligence to countenance, but Ranma and Kasumi

were both willing to wait until they had more data to back up their claims rather than argue with it.

Kasumi became more certain of her supposition as it became time for Phaeron to exchange information with them. It did so in the form of stories, images and anecdotal evidence of a war between the New Humans and the Old Humans, which ended up shattering the planet, causing massive amounts of mana transference into the atmosphere, and an almost complete change to the ecosystem and several natural laws of gravity thanks to the amount of magic released.

“At the time my facility was created, we were in danger of losing all offensive momentum in the war. With the miasma of mana in the atmosphere, there were simply far more New Humans being born all the time, and they were adapting more quickly to the changes made to the natural war in the first round of hostilities. This facility was quickly abandoned after earthquakes in the new sky island it was a part threatened to wipe out all life on the island. The next I know of is when my sensors detected our walls being breached by some external enemy. My defenses dealt with that threat easily. Then you came along.”

A lot of the particulars matched what Kasumi remembered from the history of Alto Liebe’s world, but she decided not to bring it up just yet. She would wait until further present evidence came up. For now, they had other things they needed to think of, all of which went under one overarching heading. “So, where do we go from here?”

“Up and out,” Ranma said, speaking up for the first time in a while. He had been busying himself with some stomach crunches, now rolled to his feet, shaking his head. “We rest here, you go through whatever clothing and whatever is available for the pair of us for the rest of the day, and we both get a full night’s sleep. And then we head out into the dungeon and head upwards. Phaeron, since your mobile now, do you want to take anything from this facility?”

“There are several fabrication units here that I think we would need to take, which might be useful in the future; although I agree, the facility’s place underneath or within a, a dungeon, a place of high magical intensity, is not optimal. Further, I would like to talk to you about long-term plans once we are aware of whatever is going on the surface. As you do not know that, I am willing to wait for now on that score.”

Phaeron seemed to hesitate for a moment, then gravitated towards Kasumi. “However, artificial intelligences cannot act on their own if there is any alternative. That is hardwired into our coding. As an Old Human however, you can be designated primary user. In this case, as you are the only two here, you would also be given administrative privileges. Essentially, I would become your aid, your advisor. This is the role that I was programmed for, although I was more programmed to be an advisor for whoever led this one facility. Under present circumstances, I am more than willing to expand my horizons.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ranma nodded.

Kasumi agreed a second later, with a faint smile as she reached up to pat the little ball on the head. "Happy to have you, Phaeron. Now, I don't suppose you have some kind of water supply and a shower?"

OOOOOOO

Once they started, retracing their steps was actually easy up to a point. Phaeron had several sensors built into his pod that could allow him to scan all around them ahead and deep into the stone, building a three-dimensional map of the dungeon. Combined with Ranma's ability to slowly but surely smash through solid stone from one floor to another when it was discovered that doing so would create shortcuts, they covered pretty much the same area in a straight line in one day that it taken Kasumi and Ranma on their own four.

This was after having rested for an entire day in the facility. Its purpose had been to gather geologic data and experiment on the miasma ocean that now covered the original surface of Earth, such as it was, hence why Phaeron had such scanners. More importantly, the pair had been safe, the one entrance from the dungeon guarded by teams of the robotic, laser-armed robot dogs Ranma had smashed through on their way into the facility.

These were the ROGS, which was short for Robotic Optimized Guard Sentinels. Kasumi thought they were cute, so long as they weren't firing laser beams in their general direction.

Inside, Kasumi and Ranma had access to beds and had been able to sleep throughout the night. Indeed, it even had a kitchen, although all the ingredients within had decayed over time, even those in cans or jars. Luckily there were a lot of water bottles and even a few boxes of pasta kept in airtight conditions, which allowed them to expand their food choices dramatically. There, one of the fabbers had solved that issue.

All they had to do was feed it raw material in the form of monster bits, create any meat-based product that they could wish. It couldn't create vegetables or fruit or anything of that sort from such things, though. As Phaeron put it, "There is a limit to what science can do, and my fabber units are not the equivalent of those devices from that stupid Star Trek show. Honestly! I remember debates on that score, and the amount of computational power needed to create any kind of food on demand, even if you had the materials, would be astronomical. To say nothing of the holodeck."

That was just one rant of many that the AI had released during their time in the facility. Most of the others had been directed towards Ranma's abilities, and Kasumi had thought that was fair enough, but all in all, she had to wonder how stable Phaeron really was after who knew how long asleep.

On top of sleeping and eating a bit better than they had been, the two of them had time away from one another. While Ranma and Kasumi had gotten along well enough prior to coming to this world, and indeed Ranma could call Kasumi a friend as well as a big sister figure while

she treated him like a younger brother occasionally, some time apart had been necessary, if more so for Kasumi than Ranma.

Ranma used this time as he would any kind of free time. The facility had an exercise room, and Ranma made extensive use of it, talking to Phaeron all the time about what the artificial intelligence knew of magical monsters, fighting against magic users and so forth. While also, yes, dealing with Phaeron's ranting and raving about his abilities and how they were too close to magical for his liking. "Only your genes are good you pigtailed impossibility, only your genes!"

As for Kasumi, she spent her time doing a few things. First, working with the fabber that handled meat products, trying to come up with something that wasn't just more meat skewers on a stick and succeeding in creating several meals for them during their time in the facility that were pasta based. Second, combing through the facility and coming up with changes of clothing for both herself and Ranma, and using the base's cleaning system on her own clothing.

Beyond that, for a goodly portion of the day after they woke up from a good night sleep, Kasumi had a good cry.

Ranma didn't know she had done that. Kasumi kept it to herself, although she suspected Phaeron knew, but she hoped that the artificial intelligence knew enough about humans to keep that to itself. The last thing Kasumi wanted was for Ranma to blame himself for their circumstances. However, those selfsame circumstances had hammered home into Kasumi in bits and pieces throughout their trek through the dungeon, and after a good night's sleep, she hadn't been able to keep it all contained.

Afterwards, Kasumi practically became the moving force behind the trio's push to get through the dungeon to the surface. She had had enough of being underground, and Kasumi wanted more than anything else to find other people, and hopefully, find some way home.

Kasumi knew that had only a slim chance of occurring. Kasumi even knew that holding out hope for the impossible might hurt her in the long run. But she wasn't going to give up. She wasn't going to give up on trying to see her family again, on returning to their old world and her old life, not unless Kasumi knew there was no chance whatsoever of doing so. Indeed, a part of Kasumi kind of resented Ranma for seemingly being so at home here in this weird world, even happy being stuck inside a dungeon. His good humor, though, did more to buoy her spirits than grate on her nerves, thankfully.

And so, they had begun their trek this time quite well, getting up equal to the level where they had first arrived, only not that part of the dungeon. It turned out that the dungeon had different areas to it, where one monster or another predominated. The dimensionally displaced duo had landed in an offshoot directly above and around Phaeron's facility, and then, with Phaeron mapping and Ranma breaking through sheer stone, they basically cut across and up to a new area, which Phaeron believed would continue upwards.

After resting for a full night, as Ranma had nearly exhausted himself making the tunnel to this new territory, the group moved on, leading them to find that this area was different in two ways. One, the cave was more solid stone and brick than rock and dirt. And two, it was dominated by a few new monsters, several of which, to Ranma's delight, actually proved to be dangerous to him soon after they tried the same trick on a smaller scale.

Coming up out of a tunnel he'd just made, Ranma found himself at the bottom of a cylindrical cave whose sides were lined with small tunnels all around. Those tunnels seemed to only come up to his waist, but were about the same width, and each of the ones above his head had ledges, as if something was supposed to perch there. "These dungeons started to appear during the war against the magicals, right? Were there any ideas about whether or not they had brains or something? Do the monsters who live in them shape them, or does the dungeon shape the monsters?"

"It is believed to be a symbiotic relationship, but one predominantly in favor of the dungeon as it feeds off the bodies of the monsters just as much as intruders. The dungeons occasionally create items while releasing significant magical miasma to entice monsters within, where they are copied and recycled. There was no sign of any kind of intelligence running any of the first dungeon which appeared, only instinct and adaptation," Phaeron said, flying up to join him. "Although I do see why you asked. This looks—"

"Yeah. Float back down, let Kasumi rest for a bit," Ranma said, cracking his knuckles as things began to stir in several of the small tunnels, or perhaps nooks? He wasn't certain just yet. *I'll figure it out though.* "I got this."

"So long as you realize that I will step in if I perceive the danger is too great," Phaeron warned. "I cannot afford to lose one half of the percentage of Old Humans that are still alive to the best of my knowledge."

"I didn't know you cared," Ranma snorted, then as a wasp monster, basically just an oversized wasp with a deadlier looking stinger and swords for legs, came at him, Ranma jumped into the air, lashing out with a kick that crushed its face in. "Just keep out of the way and map this place and as deep into the sides of it as you can go. I can't tell which of these tunnels take without you."

More wasp monsters appeared, diving down on Ranma, but Ranma jumped up to meet them, grabbing onto a swinging forearm, flipping himself up, lashing out with kicks, punches and even head butts. He used few ki attacks, wanting to conserve his ki. When they had fought those shadow monsters a few days ago, Ranma had learned he might run into monsters occasionally which could only be hurt by energy type attacks, much like fighting with the youma that had sent them here in the first place.

Ranma grunted as he was hit from behind by a needle, but the monster that had tried to drive it into him didn't have enough strength to stab into his skin, and he used the momentum

of that strike to head towards one of the walls, landing above one of the nooks. Gripping the rock, he kicked into the face of another wasp monster, before pulling back. As he did, he noted absently that it was a small cave instead of a tunnel.

A dozen other wasp monsters pulled back for a moment, then were joined by more from higher up in the cylinder, coming down at Ranma in a wave.

"Come on then!" Ranma snorted, pushing himself up into the air then kicking off of the wall of the cylinder higher, meeting them, grabbing one of their stingers as it came for his face, using that to twitch himself aside and smash still more. One still hit him in the shoulder despite his best efforts, and that one actually penetrated his skin, causing him to grunt in pain. *Can't let them get up momentum then*, he thought, ripping his shoulder back and punching out with Amaguriken speed, smashing that wasp into splinters, then two more, then a third.

The wasps kept on coming, swarming, getting in each other's way now occasionally, as Ranma fought them in midair, as at home in the air as they were. He started to aim for the wings, sending them crashing to the ground below, as he was around four stories up by this point. Dog sized, with their armor not being nearly thick enough to protect them, the impact with the ground killed all of them, although he did hear a shriek from below when one of them actually fell through the hole that he had dug up into this wasp nest.

"Ranma, I regret to inform you that you are indeed correct. This was a dead end. Once you're had your fun, please come back down," Phaeron grumbled, hiding itself via cloaking technology from the monsters. "Honestly, if he wasn't giving me such good data on this type of monster, I'd think he was as stupid as a New Human to continue fighting."

"OY, I heard that, tin can. You think these monsters would just let us go once I invaded their territory? Once I did that, it was a fight to the death," Ranma argued back.

"...I don't have enough data to argue with that point, although I do believe that most dungeon monsters are assigned territory within the dungeon and do not follow adventurers out of it unless they sense weakness."

"Maybe, maybe not," Ranma said, continuing to fight even as he kept up a conversation with the AI. "I'm not going to take a chance on that. And if you're getting bored, you do have some onboard weapons don't you?"

"No, I don't. This is an artificial intelligence core. To use weapons, I would have to link into a specifically designed combat system, and I do not even have the plans for such. Moreover, the ROGS can't climb up here. That is something we will need to be aware of in the future."

That gave Ranma an idea, and he ordered Phaeron to gather the robo-dogs to one side of the horizontal tunnel he'd dug up into the wasp nest. Falling back towards the ground, Ranma dropped down into the hole, grabbing up one of the doglike drones, while another climbed up

onto his back. Ranma then launched himself up into the tunnel, smashing two wasps aside even as they began to descend down into the tunnel after him.

Dropping the pair of ROGS down, Ranma leapt up into the air again leaving the drones there to grab the rope that he had already deposited there in preparation for pulling up Kasumi and the dogs before. One by one, those two units pulled up their fellows, until all eight were on the floor of the cylinder. Whereupon they began to fire upwards into the mass of wasps surrounding Ranma.

With this anti-air fire hitting his enemies, and Ranma providing a mobile shield and, in gamer terms, aggroing the enemy, it only became a matter of time before all of the wasp drones were dealt with. This in turn forced seven more wasps of particular size and build out from where they had been waiting along with an even larger wasp, it's whole body shimmering like metal. She was also far faster, zooming around the area twice as fast as any of the other wasps could move.

Ranma supposed that was the queen of this hive but regardless, even though he did take still more damage fighting them, none of the wasps had any kind of armor that could stand up against the lasers of the ROGS. Who, with Phaeron feeding them tracking data, proved far better at fighting than they had the first time Ranma ran into them. Three of the Royal Guard wasps were down before Ranma even reached them, and it soon devolved into a duel between him and the Queen.

Here, Ranma took another real injury, a stab straight to the stomach this time from the queen, who possessed enough power to punch through his durability, although not very far. Her stinger got stuck in Ranma's flesh by an inch which was more than enough to pain him, and he howled, even as he brought his fists down into her thorax, shattering the thin metal and causing blood to spurt out as the stinger snapped off. "RAAHHH, got you!"

This wasn't enough to kill the queen, and still howling in pain, Ranma fell back, falling through the air as he pulled at the stinger, wrenching it out of his body, letting his ki start healing the wound. With everything he'd gone through in Nerima, that ki healing was actually pretty darn good, able to deal with whatever concoction was on the various stingers, although the physical evidence of the strike was still pretty nasty when he hit the ground a moment later. Rolling, he came to a stop, and the ROGS all around him finished off the last two Royal guard, then zeroed in on the queen, perforating her with lasers even as she tried to retreat.

Slumping down against one of the walls, Ranma grinned, concentrating and pushing more of his ki towards his wounds. It would cost his reserves more than he normally cared for, but he could heal it far faster this way. "Well, that was fun."

Down below, Phaeron had already floated back down to where Kasumi waited along with the last three ROGS to protect her just in case another monster came along. "Mistress, I

have a question. Is Ranma a masochist? That is the only explanation that comes to mind for someone who enjoys being wounded like he does.”

Phaeron never called Ranma master. Only Kasumi. This was another way the AI showed disdain for Ranma’s abilities and how often his various martial arts type tricks seemed to appear magical.

Kasumi blushed a little, shaking her head. “I believe that he is what is called an adrenaline junkie, and also perhaps, yes a bit of a masochist. I think all martial artists have to be, in order to deal with the pain, they put themselves through to get so good with the Art.”

Ranma rolled his eyes at that remarking internally, *Yeah, that’s Kasumi all right, the same person who called Akane a kind but violent girl that first night we met. Not that I’d argue with her, she was right then and she’s right now.* “You said we would have to retrace our steps a little, right? I’ll be down in a second with the ROGS. Unless you want me to break out the fabber and feed some of these wasps into it?”

“No need. I already have all the data I would require from them, and we already have enough supplies as it is,” Phaeron said, with Kasumi echoing the sentiment a moment later.

Nodding, Ranma transported the ROGS down, then asked Phaeron to show him the map of the area he’d made. “Huh... you didn’t mention anything about a hidden door up top.”

Phaeron stared at the 3-D holographic image he had created. “You are correct but what purpose should something like that serve?”

“Loot. Come on, I’ll show you.” Ranma snickered and then hopped back up into the wasp nest. There he bounded upwards, leaping from one perch to another. He didn’t bother with any of the wasp eggs there. Wiping the next out wouldn’t serve any purpose.

Up top, he found the hidden doorway was straight across from him, too far for him to jump and with the ceiling too far away to bounce off of. “Clinging Gecko it is... but first. Phaeron, give me a target.”

Phaeron obliged, going over to tap his core against the wall. A second after he moved, a Moko Takabisha flew, slamming into the wall on the other side, which crumbled away, revealing a small alcove behind it. Phaeron moved in, and stilled. “Ranma, you and the Mistress told me of treasures, but I had thought they were magical items and jewelry.”

“The ones we’ve found so far are,” Ranma answered, hoping to move this along and get back to Kasumi. Even with the ROGS to guard her, he didn’t want to leave her alone for long.

“This item, which you absolutely must take, is not a magical one. It is instead an item of the Old Humans. In this case, a combat suit. It has no power, but I can create such when we find

enough materials.” Phaeron came out of the hidden alcove. “I think it would be perfect for the Mistress once we can power it. None of the monsters I have in my database from your stories or even human-held weapons would be able to get through it.”

Blinking, Ranma nodded, and used his Clinging Gecko technique to climb around to the other side of the cylinder. There climbed into the aperture, finding the treasure just lying on the floor. It was indeed a suit of some matte black material, looking almost like it would be form fitting, but with a built-in belt and backpack, separate but constructed of the same cloth or latex. Ranma wasn’t certain which, but still grabbed it up, stuffing it into his ki space. “I like your priorities, Phaeron.”

“I rather doubt you will in the long-term,” Phaeron muttered.

“What did ya say?” Ranma asked, grunting as he leaped out and downward to another ledge.

“Nothing!” Phaeron answered, floating down beside him.

Thankfully, they didn’t really need to retrace their steps all that much and soon, they had burrowed up again to another level. Here, they found themselves in series of hallways and with Phaeron’s probing the surrounding, the trio headed off.

For a time, traps were the real problem, but with Phaeron being able to spot them and then direct Ranma in ways to disable them, that only proved troublesome in that it slowed them down. They went up three different floors in this manner, dealing with yet another type of monster, bear-shaped monsters this time, paired with more of the shadow stalkers as Ranma taken to call them. These were the nearly formless shadows that he had to disperse with ki rather than physical strikes.

In turn, they couldn’t really hurt Ranma. Yet they did tear up one of the ROGS and nearly hit Kasumi when they appeared out of shadows behind Ranma, something Ranma took a little personally.

Pressing on, they found still more traps but continued on relatively easily on the next floor despite Ranma being turned into his female form by a water-based trap again. Mainly because on that level, the most dangerous monster turned out to be rock golems, and, well, Ranma pulled a Ryoga several times that day. It didn’t stop them from losing another one of their ROGS though, right before they found a place for Kasumi to have a nap. The pace and the few times she’d been called on to defend herself had taken its toll on her endurance, as most of these floors were tilted or had numerous steep staircases.

This time, with the ROGS and Phaeron around, Ranma could also get some sleep. It was even comfortable, as Phaeron had gone ahead with one of Kasumi’s requests for him to make more comfortable sleeping bags, and had created what amounted to high-tech versions of

Ranma's old sleeping bag. The bottom of them hardened underneath the user to the perfect amount of softness and support, while the whole bag warmed or chilled itself to the perfect degree your body needed to follow sleep.

Kasumi was out like a light within seconds of trying it, while Ranma took a little longer. He wasn't used to that kind of comfort, and a little thrown off by it, although he had admitted the next morning, while Kasumi was looking a little green at the meat heavy breakfast that Ranma provided from their supplies that he could get used to that kind of thing.

The next floor was entirely monster based, a different type this time, a smaller version of the ants and shadow stalkers, the two types of monsters working together. This proved more dangerous than Ranma had dealt with previously, and several of the shadow monsters got past him despite the narrow confines of the corridor to attack Kasumi and the ROGS, taking another ROG down, leaving them with five.

Thankfully, Kasumi's frying pan made a second appearance, allowing her to deal with many of them and for to by Ranma enough time to get back and kill the last one. However, it did cause a certain issue...

Kasumi stared at the wobbling artificial intelligence as it and the ROGS all around them starting to come alive again. "Betrayal, horror! I have been taken in, bamboozled. You too are a New Human! That is the only explanation. Energy to solid matter without any kind of technological aid, this cannot compute. It does not!"

"I will endeavor to try and not use that technique in front of you, but it **was** a life-and-death situation," Kasumi said, holding onto her frayed self-control with some difficulty. The life-or-death situation had indeed been very close this time, and the last shadow stalker would have killed her if not for a glowing fist that punch straight through its neck, dissipating the shadow creature even as its claws went for Kasumi's face.

If not for her ki pan she wouldn't have survived the other shadow monsters in time for Ranma to save her from the last one. "I would suggest you put it in the same storage memory area or whatever it is called that you already put Ranma's curse in."

"You can call it Star Trek-like energy to matter convergence nonsense or something," Ranma said, pointing out 'helpfully' snickering a second later as the AI twirled around to glare at him.

However, Phaeron did seem to pause, then bobbed up and down, perhaps the equivalent of a human shrugging his shoulders. "That might actually help. After all, it has often been said before magic started to appear that any sufficiently advanced science can appear like magic to those who cannot comprehend it. I will do so. However, I demand a moment to scan your brain functions, Mistress. The genetics came back as positive for Old Human, but with this power of yours, I must be certain."

Phaeron sounded more like it needed that reassurance for its own sanity than anything else rather than needing it to deal with some kind of hardwired programming, but Kasumi simply nodded, and stood there as the floating robot scanned her head with some kind of scanner. Eventually, Phaeron was satisfied, and said aloud, "You are indeed Old Human. I suppose I must build up a certain amount of mental flexibility to deal with this martial arts madness as you have so thoughtfully put it. Just please, warn me next time."

Biting back any hard words she had the on that kind of thought, as Kasumi rather would've liked more warning before the shadow monsters burst out of the shadows from the torches, the oldest Tendo daughter simply nodded. "Can we please get a move on? I, I don't know how many more days of not seeing the sun or sky I can take."

Ranma nodded and took the lead, while the ROGS came up on the rear. "Yeah, I'd like to see a sky sometime soon too. Hell, I'd even do with a rainy overcast day right now. But shift the formation a bit, Phaeron. Keep two ROGS with Kasumi at all times, then have three behind her for now and one between her and me so I can push ahead further. I'll be Vanguard. Heh, in RPG terms, that'd make you our scout/sensor."

The use of those terms actually brought Kasumi out of her momentary funk, reminding her again that they might've been transported to a dimension that had certain game mechanics and so forth. Obviously, there were no levels or anything like that, but still it had monsters, dungeons, treasure and so forth, so it was enough of a parallel there. "That brings up an interesting question, Ranma. You have all the abilities of an evasion tank as well as a what was it called again, damage per second, er, DPS, yes, that was it. The ROGS are clearly our archers, as their bite attacks are worthless, and they're so hard to replace."

Even with Ranma picking up the damaged ROGS, the second fabber they had brought with them in Ranma's ki space had only been able to build one of them the night before, bringing their number up to six, only to lose another one to the shadow stalkers. The fabber could've built more obviously, but they would've had to stay in one place let it do so. Since Kasumi had not been exaggerating at all when she said she didn't know how many more days of no sky or wind she could take, that was just not going to happen.

"Phaeron is indeed our scout sort of person, so what does that leave for me if we were really an adventuring party from one of our games?" Kasumi forced a moue on her face, shaking her head as she tried to have fun with it for a moment to help leave her near-death experience behind her. "Or do you think you're on one of those annoying escort type missions and I'm the one you're escorting?"

Realizing what Kasumi was up to, Ranma turned and began to walk backward, looking Kasumi in the eyes as he answered. "Hah! Not after seeing ya use aikido on those monsters, I don't. As for your role, since ya don't like getting up close and personal, you could go the healing route if you wanted to, like that Olivia chick from Alto Liebe. Or, you could take it a step

further and maybe become a bard? I've heard you singing a time or two, and I'd wager ya could get people ta stop fighting and listen if you wanted ta."

"Those w, were special occasions," Kasumi answered somewhat flustered both by the compliment and the odd answer. "And what kind of things would I be doing as a bard anyway? Things that I wouldn't be able to do as a healer, I mean. There is a reason why healing and light magic are so important in that game Ranma. Even you wouldn't have been able to beat it without the main character."

Ranma almost took umbrage at that idea, but he had to ruefully admit that there had been numerous battles where he had needed indeed to rely on Olivia's healing powers. Never her special abilities, but not everyone had his reaction speed. "Oh sure, healer is darn important, but we could use more long-range firepower and help across the board in terms of speed and reaction time for the ROGS. A mage type would be able to help with the first problem, sure, but I don't see ya as the type to like laying down the pain. A bard, though would help the entire party with buffs, just like Olivia did later in the game. Having both a bard and a healer and one party would be a way better idea than having both of them in the same person."

That made sense to Kasumi, and she nodded thoughtfully, before Ranma went on, smacking his chest. "Besides, with me being our front line, I can heal myself. Heh, if I couldn't, Akane would've given me at least twenty concussions over the past two years, to say nothing about what the rest of the crew've done to me a time or two."

Kasumi winced at that, and opened her mouth to remonstrate with Ranma, how he shouldn't say things so cavalierly like that, and to maybe defend her sister, but she didn't get the chance, as Ranma held up a hand, frowning a little as he stared ahead of them. "I can see another staircase there. Phaeron?"

"I don't detect any upper-level directly above us, so I have to assume that this tunnel either goes in a different direction or just keeps on going the next floor as we have seen before. Neither am I detecting any movement on the stairs itself," Phaeron supplied.

"Maybe but the top of staircases are still good ambush points. Wait here. I'll be right back."

With that, Ranma loped forward, at the bottom of the stairwell where it sat nearly out of Kasumi's line of sight in the distance of the tunnel. He then ran back, pointing back to the stairwell excitedly. "There's a fight going on up there, and I think at least a dozen voices. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but we might've just found some signs of humans being around here at least. What should we do?"

Thankful that Ranma had indeed come back and informed her of things before suddenly charging in, Kasumi smiled at him, then asked if he understood what was being shouted. When

Ranma shook his head, she frowned just a little bit, while Phaeron said, "I did tell you that Japanese was a nearly forgotten, unimportant language by the time I was created."

"Then I think this is more of a combat situation than a possible diplomatic one. In that case, I think we should go with what you think is best, Ranma," Kasumi declared. "If they were about to meet someone for the first time who they could actually talk to, both Kasumi and Ranma knew who should be the one to approach first. But if there was fighting to be had, and no one seemed to be speaking Japanese, that put it right back into Ranma's hands."

"Got it," Ranma agreed, before going on quickly. "All right, here's what we're going to do. Phaeron, you're going to come forward with me, will scout for a few seconds, then you'll find some place to hide up near the roof while I dive in. After that..."

OOOOOOO

The day had started out magnificently. Not only had Angelica Rafa Redgrave eaten a most scrumptious breakfast, but she and her friends had been finally granted leave to enter a dungeon for the first time. She had wanted to do so to get some experience prior to going to the Academy in a few months as adventurers, the men and women who had originally formed Holfort.

That was a life she would never be able to come close to once she became Julius's Queen. Other matters would take up her time from start to finish at that point, something that she had learned early on in her training with Queen Mylene. Yet, despite the fact that Angelica longed to be Julius's wife, for the two of them to live their lives together as they made Holfort stronger than ever side-by-side, Angelica still revered the adventure life as her ancestors had done for generations.

Recently, there had been rumors of a baron making a fortune by finding Lost Items, and the rumors of that had added extra impetus to Angelica's already-existing enthusiasm for the adventurer life, causing her to nearly beg her father for weeks for permission to go on a dungeon dive. Her father had finally agreed to let her and some of her followers who would be joining her at the Academy to dive into a dungeon near their lands. The dungeon had been ranked as a D-grade dungeon on their charts, so he had even only sent along two guards with them, with orders to not do any fighting unless someone seemed to be in danger of losing their life.

At first, everything had been going their way. The first floor had been relatively easy to deal with. Angelica's fire magic and her training with a sword had proven more than enough to deal with the plant monsters that patrolled that floor. She had more trouble making her companions take things seriously, even if all of them had volunteered to come along.

The boys were trying to show off, the girls disdainful of their efforts, while not wanting to take part in anything but long-range sniping with magic or magical guns, and neither showed

the proper decorum for being in a dungeon, making her rather angry with them all. Yet she was able to belabor them into shape eventually, and all of them knew some form of magic, enough to make the battles of the first floor relatively easy.

However, things went entirely sideways when they started to run into traps. Specifically, a pit trap that opened up under the feet of more than half the group, leaving only two people behind on the first floor as the group fell who knew how many levels down. The fall might well have killed many of them if not for the wind users among Angelica's entourage slowing their fall.

There shouldn't have been any traps. Angelica had read and reread the report on this dungeon, and not anywhere in it were any traps reported. It was simply a D-grade dungeon filled with monsters of various bug and types, rather than traps or any other monsters.

Then the monsters had started to close in. Even there, their information was quickly proven false, when they were faced with rock golems and bear monsters to go with the ant monsters, who, this deep into the dungeon, were larger and tougher than the ones on the first floor.

Both of Angelica's guards had died, slain by shadow creatures who had ambushed them during a battle against a quartet of bear monsters. The two men had put down one of the beasts on their own and wounded another, while Angelica and her friends dealt with the other two, only two be slain before any could come to their aid. Two of her followers were also injured in that same battle.

Worse in a way, the group had no way of knowing how to get back up, how to get back to the entrance and they all knew it. With the guards, the security blanket, dead, Angelica was dismayed to see her followers panic, forcing Angelica to keep order. Indeed, it was so bad that it was only a mental reminder that they were still pre-Academy students, not real adventurers, that kept her from biting remarks at their cowardice.

That, and knowledge of her own growing concern. This was well beyond anything she had ever feared to run into, and Angelica found herself questioning her skills and the series of choices that had led them all here. Yet she knew she couldn't show it. that was one of her father's most important and earliest lessons.

"Remember my girl, we nobles must be more than simply people in fancy clothing. When danger comes or when it is time to make important decisions, we must lead the way. The best way to lead is to be calm in any situation, to control your emotions, maintain decorum and provide an example as well as a voice of command."

So that was what Angelica did. Her calm voice cut through the growing tumult, and she called everyone to order.

With Angelica firmly controlling the reins of the group, as well as being both the best damage dealer, and bizarrely, the best with a sword despite several of the boys among her entourage having claimed numerous times that they had been taught swordsmanship, the group pushed on.

Twice more they ran into monsters, and once another spike trap. They didn't lose anyone but had yet to find any stairs heading upward. Instead, they simply kept on moving, not finding many side passages or anything else, and those they did led into monsters, not any way back up to the surface.

After each battle, it took and more of her time to soothe the group's concerns, to allay their fears of being trapped in a dungeon, and even Angelica was beginning to feel the walls close in when the group of boys sent ahead to scout discovered a room that had a series of stairs leading up and down alike.

Crouching down next to the wall of the tunnel with her followers lined up behind her, Angelica surveyed the cavern, fighting hard to not bite her lip worriedly. It was squarish, this cave, like a few of the treasure rooms they had found so far, filled with items that would no doubt enrich her followers if they got out of here.

Angelica hadn't taken any. She didn't want to be slowed down, and was rather dismayed when so many of her friends didn't agree with that point.

Shaking that thought off, Angelica took in the cave again. It had a high ceiling, maybe four stories tall. Several tunnels lead off from it, both on the floor and up the walls in places, being very obviously for flying type monsters. There was a hole in the floor at the far end of the cavern. The cavern itself was the size of a mech armor arena, and there was an even larger entrance along the same wall where the hole in the floor was. She couldn't see anything in the hole, but what she could see was a series of ledges stuck into one side of the wall, leading up, up to a cave there that might take them back to the surface. Right now, there were only ant monsters in the cavern, but Angelica sensed that would change quickly.

Of course, it might not, but we haven't seen anything like this cavern before. There's no way to go but forward. Still, that doesn't mean we can be stupid about this.

Angelica turned, glancing along the line of her friends and followers, keeping her worry off her face with difficulty.

That this effort just made her seem cold and haughty was not something Angelica knew. But her followers all twitched as the Redgrave red eyes fell on them one after another. "We keep together, shifting along the wall to one side. Our target is there. Do not speak once we enter the room and go as quietly as we can. If monsters appear, we will form two rows, our backs against the wall and fight and maneuver as we can. Understood?"

The shaky nods this earned her did not fill Angelica with much confidence, but she still gestured the three scouts forward. Armed with guns like several of the others, they'd proven the best able to move quietly before this.

This was proven now as they moved along the edge of the large cavern, making it halfway to the ledges before any of the wandering ant monsters noticed them. Even then, it wasn't the three in the lead, but rather several of the folk following them who caused noise enough to make the ant monsters notice them.

As one, the hive-based monsters turned and charged but Angelica was ready.

"Stay together! Form a half circle and keep your back towards the wall! Carmen, Ariel, use magic to disrupt the horde, I'll head hunt any shadow stalkers. The rest of the girls, plow the road for us, boys, get into formation!"

"You heard her!" Carmen said, glaring at a few of the boys when they seem slow to answer, staring at the incoming horde, lashing out at them with her water magic, slicing several in half. "Where's your posing about your swordsmanship and pride now!"

While harsher than Angelica would ever have allowed herself to be, the mixed words seemed to work. The ant monsters closed in, but were met by steel and magic, while they continued on their way. The three scouts, separated from the rest, laid down cover fire with their guns, the slow, 'BLzz-orp' of the magical rounds firing providing a backdrop to the rest of the battle.

However, as the group continued forward, more monsters began to appear. Slowly at first, more ant monsters pouring out of some of the tunnels. Then more, with lion lizards coming out of another. Then more, wasps from on high appearing from small entrances unseen in the shadows above.

"Do not falter!" Angelica shouted. "Magic users, keep disrupting the monsters, don't let them hit the line more than three or four at a time. I'll start picking off the lion lizards. Scouts, keep the wasps off us."

"Even as the scouts obeyed, downing a trio of wasps with precise shots, Angelica launched her first fireball, only to flinch as a scream erupted ahead of them. "ARGGHHH!!"

Twisting around, Angelica saw a shadow stalker appear from a shadow underneath a torch in the direction they had been traveling. Its claws gouged into and through one of the boys' arms, and he screamed, falling to the ground.

"Blast you!" Angelica hissed, killing the monster with a small bolt of fire.

Even as Angelica killed the monster, though, two other boys wavered along with a girl as a lion lizard hit the line. Ariel killed it, but not before it nearly tore a boy in half. “EEAGGH!!”

That was it. With two more of their party down, several of the boys at the front of their moving half-circle broke formation, cutting down a pair of ant monsters, they raced on towards the ledges. Several girls followed, blasting out with their magic at any monsters between them and their target.

Angelica found herself cursing in a way no nobly born young lady should as the whole of the formation shattered, with every one of the other girls turning to flee, and the boys doing the same. “Dammit! Keep it together, we can—”

That was the last Angelica had for speech as the first of ant monsters and a lion monster burst through the now rapidly collapsing front line, reaching for her rather than turning back to maul the boys behind them. The lion monster ate a fire bolt to the face, condensed and controlled the ball seared through scales and flesh alike, while she danced underneath the blow from one of the ant creatures, blocking its lower arms with her shield, her sword up and stabbing.

Pulling out, she whirled, bring the sword, an arming sword enchanted to never rust or lose its edge, around to block another strike, then a third, a fourth. Downing a second ant monster, Angelica shouted. “To me, to me! Reform!”

She glanced back, hoping to see Carmen, Ariel and the rest at least guarding her back, only to realize with a start that all her other had also begun to break. Even Carmen and Ariel had stopped fighting and were just racing away, putting several boys and girls between them and the monsters as they raced to get to the ledges leading upward. There were still a few scattered girls and boys fighting, but any cohesion was gone as more monsters pushed forward.

For a moment, Angelica felt despair, knowing there were too many, yet Angelica fought on. To do otherwise would be to disgrace her family, and she would not do that. Even as a strike got through from behind where she should’ve been protected by her friends and followers, she still fought, ignoring the damage done to her chest plate.

Even as she went down to one knee after blocking an overhead strike from an ant monster, her sword flashed out stabbing into its side deeply. A roar, and an aura of flame erupted around her, causing the monsters to step back and for the one impaled on her sword to shriek as it was turned into charcoal. Another two fell away, having not retreated from Angelica fast enough, rolling on the ground in a mad effort to put out the flames.

For a moment, she stood in the center of the area she’d cleared, her aura of fire magic visible as she shouted, “Blast it all, you cowards, work together! Or e, else—”

Her words faltered as another monster appeared, coming out of the larger entrance she had noticed earlier. An earth golem, it was several times larger than she was, its head nearly brushing the roof of the cavern, made entirely out of stone.

As it arrived, it's hand was already reaching forward. Before Angelica or any of the others could do anything, it swatted several of Angelica's followers off the ledges, shattering two of them.

For a moment, Angelica could do nothing but stare, watching as several of her followers, people she had thought she could count on and might one day call friends, were crushed, their own cowardice putting them in a position to be wiped out like flies. Then the monsters started to push in towards her, led by some wasps, and Angelica turned her attention back to them.

She dealt with the wasps with small bursts of fire, backing away as she reined in her fire aura. Before the first of the landbound monsters could reach her again, her attention was diverted as a group of monsters near the hole that she had noticed they first came upon this area exploded away from it.

Many of the monsters turned in that direction, giving Angelica a breather, and she too looked in that direction, almost idly blocking a blow from an ant monster with her sword, only to gape as a man appeared there. He jumped up from the hole like a grasshopper, lashing out with a kick that took a wasp in the back of the body, using that hit somehow to launch himself sideways. The man was dressed in unusual looking clothing and certainly wasn't one of her group, but that hardly mattered as he grabbed and tossed monster-bits hard enough to knock other monsters, even lion lizards, off their feet.

The next second, he landed in front of the golem, rolling forward under a blow. Continuing the roll, Angelica could see through a group of ant monsters as his finger flashed out to just lightly touch one of the golem's legs. He must have used some kind of earth magic, because the leg exploded under his touch, sending the monster toppling, crushing several ant monsters.

The next moment, their would-be savior had leaped up landing on top of the golem, shattering its head in such a way the debris crashed over and through several monsters between him and Angelica's current position.

"//Hey! Sorry to break in like this, but you all look like ya needed a rescue. And all you gotta do to pay for this service is get us out of this dungeon!//" the man shouted in some foreign language, before leaping into the largest concentration of monsters. This group was Angelica and her nearest companions, and for a second, she just watched him move like the wind itself given physical form, feeling new hope rise within her.

Landing in among the monsters, Ranma lashed out with fists and feet, sending them flying every different direction, before grabbing one of them, twirling around and tossing it up

and over the head of Angelica Redgrave. He had recognized her from the game, although she'd only been on the screen a few times. *And none of those times had ever captured how amazing she could look* he thought. *Mind you, the flame background kind of adds to it, as does the fact she's only a few inches shorter than me, but still.*

The next moment, he was by her side, trying hard not to notice that her armor and under shirt had been torn enough to give him a glimpse of her chest. Now was definitely not the time for that. Twitching his eyes away, Ranma smashed several monsters into the ground, grinning at her for a moment, then twirling around her to kick out another monster. "I don't suppose I can get really lucky and have you understand me right now can I?"

Angelica looked at his smile a little smile appearing on her face, yet she shook her head before frying two monsters. Seeing that lack of response, he sighed. "Yeah, I figured I couldn't get that lucky."

Ranma's fist and feet dealt with a few more monsters, then he covered his fist with ki, slaying two more shadow stalkers that tried to attack him from behind, and then the third would have gone for Angelica. She twisted around, launching a fireball up above his head at a group of wasps that had been trying to attack several other humans up by another entryway. A second later, she shouted at them, and two of them, both women, began to lo magic down, followed by the two boys with them firing with strange looking guns.

I wonder if they are up there on purpose, or if they broke away from the rest of the group? Ranma thought, turning a sneer on several of the others who were still on the ground floor. Relieved of the pressure from the monsters by his arrival, they were backing away rapidly, putting distance away from the fighting. Even now, when Ranma had dealt with the giant golem, those guys seemed too fearful to rejoin the fight.

It was rank cowardice in Ranma's opinion. *Still, I suppose for a normal person, a horde of this size would cause a lot of issues.*

More ant monsters and lion monsters came out of various tunnels towards them, as if the fight was garnering the intention of every monster on this floor and then some. Still, that was fine by Ranma. He laughed as he continued to fight, while Kasumi and the ROGS appeared from the stairwell, taking up position there. The ROGS instantly began to fire at the monsters, with Kasumi for some reason acting like she was directing their fire, staying well back for now.

Wonder what that's about? Maybe I should get Kasumi a gun of some kind? I bet Phaeron could whip up something for. Should've thought of that before, darn it! Regardless, the ROGS proved again to be very good at killing monsters. As three kept Kasumi and their fellows safe, the other three concentrated on the wasp monsters.

Ranma pushed forward, with Angelica falling into a position behind him. This protected his back, and Ranma had to grin a little at how easily Angelica fell into that natural position..

Soon, with him taking some of the pressure off her, she began to use her magic more liberally, tongues of flame crashing over the horde to either side along with small aimed bolts of fire lancing out from her, while she used her sword sparingly. *Now that's what I mean! Get Kasumi some long-range stuff, and even without a healer or bard and we could make a full adventuring party.*

Ranma laughed at that thought even as he smashed another smaller golem into pieces with a touch of a finger, shredding the monsters behind it. He darted forward into the opening, and he and Angelica met up with some of her fellows.

Twirling up and away, Ranma landed behind Angelica as she twisted around, barking out orders, killing several more monsters before jumping back up and over her to smash into the horde again as she slew still more with her magic. Even if he couldn't understand the language, the results spoke for themselves.

"//Make a damn square! Earth mages, bring up a small wall around this position. The rest of you, keep using your magic. Let this fellow here be our front line. None of you have proven sufficient at the task!/" Angelica snarled, her teeth barred and her red eyes flashing with rage.

These people had left her to die. They had ignored Angelica's orders, broken and fled, leaving her, their patron and friend, behind. There would be repercussions for that, for all of them, especially Carmen and Ariel. Who were still up there with the two surviving scouts, simply lobbing attacks downwards.

Seeing a shadow stalker bypass the man, she stepped forward, wreathing her sword in flame and stabbing it forward. The shadow stalker died screaming, and Angelica whipped her sword up and into an incoming ant monster. Cutting its head off she stabbed her sword into a second's thorax with a second strike, sending it screaming to the floor as the fire leaped from blade to monster.

Another monster's strike got through, as one of the so-called men fell back away from her, uninjured but frightened by a claw aimed at his head that missed by a foot. *Another coward*, she reflected, even as she moved with the strike. It shredded armor and clothing alike, yet missed her skin, and she killed the monster with a thrust through one of its compound eyes.

Beams of some kind of magical energy she'd not seen before started to lance in and through the monsters around them, proving especially deadly against the wasp creatures. Not one more of them got past those strange beams and soon, the last of the monsters on the ground also fell, revealing the strange... summoned beasts? Angelica wasn't certain what they were. They were all metal-seeming for one thing, but they seemed to be following a girl who looked to be a few years older than Angelica around.

That worthy made her way towards them and Angelica took a moment to stare at her, and her strange clothing, and then at the man and his own, equally strange clothing as he looked back at her, before turning away, a blush suffusing his features. From where it came from she had no idea, but he pulled out some kind of strange shirt, and tossed it in her direction.

Catching it, Angelica looked at it, **silk**, in confusion, wondering why he had tossed it at her. *To be so cavalier with a silk shirt, he must be a noble of some kind wherever he is from. But...* It was only as she felt a slight chill on her side that Angelica realized that the side of her breast and a decent amount of cleavage had been exposed by near strikes. While the one to her cleavage was already darkening into a nasty bruise, the one to her side had yet to do so, letting the man see a decent amount of side-breast.

Flushing, Angelica pulled the shirt over her head and armor, nodding her head gratefully to the boy. As she did, her body started to come down from its combat high and inform her of its numerous aches and pains. Still, Angelica pushed those to the side for now to address her savior. "Not only an impressively powerful adventurer, but with some manners as well. Thank you stranger, although the fact that you don't speak my language is somewhat strange if you were investigating this dungeon. Surely a wandering adventurer should make it a point to know the language of the lands they visit."

With that, and not waiting for reply from the man, who had turned to look at her again, still with that faint blush on his face, Angelica turned away and began to remonstrate further with her companions. They quailed, trying to make excuses, trying to back away, but she was having none of it.

Her point-by-point observations on their lack of character, will, strength, and loyalty was interrupted by a gentle hand on her shoulder. Turning, she found the brunette woman with the strange guard animals had crossed to her and was now smiling at her gently.

That smile hit Angelica almost like an almost physical force, and she could literally feel her anger, frustration and feelings of betrayal leaving her. After a second stuck returning that smile, Angelica simply sighed, then reached up and took that hand, a gesture that she would never normally use with a complete stranger, but seemed appropriate like right now. "I don't suppose you understand me?" she asked.

The woman seems to understand at least her intent as she shook her head, then tapped her chest. "Kasumi."

Angelica nodded, the name sounding as if it was Alzer almost, but not quite. "Kasumi," she repeated the girl's name with a smile, then tapped her own chest. "Angelica Rapha Redgrave."

Kasumi showed no sign of understanding that Angelica was a noblewoman. She simply nodded, then gesturing over to where Angelica's original savior stood, still looking away from

them, either because he was still embarrassed or leery that there were still more monsters. A sentence from the brunette had him turning towards them, and a roguish smirk appeared on his face, causing Angelica's heart to speed up for some reason as those deep blue eyes locked with her own red ones.

He tapped his hand against his chest, and intoned, "Ranma." He then waved his hand around, and then pointed upwards, looking at her expectantly. "//Ya wouldn't happen to know the way out of here, would ya?//"

"Yes," Angelica answered, as that needed no translation. "I rather would like to find a way back to the surface. While I enjoyed this little adventure up to a point, I think I've had enough of this particular dungeon, thank you."

End Chapter

1. **Obviously the pairing will be Angelica/Ranma/Kasumi.** Very obviously. As you can see, Ranma's already attracted to Angelica. He won't make a move though, since Ranma knows about her relationship with Julius and later, hearing how she's actually be happy about it on a personal level rather than, as it seemed to be in the game being that she just wants to be queen, he won't try and get between them. He would never do that, having seen and experienced far too many examples of that kind of thing.
 - a. Ranma will be fascinated by how good Angelica is in terms of rulership, paperwork and so forth. Her verve and energy will attract him from the start, even if he doesn't understand how she let it out like that. This will be an example of 'love watching what you do' a couple doesn't have to do everything together, they just have to respect one's passions (and have passion for one another, LOL).
 - i. Angelica will draw Ranma into the military side of things, and the two of them will have a lot of talks about combat, magic, and so forth, with Ranma giving Angelica unique insight, and Angelica convinces Ranma to expand his horizons in a way that no one else has been able to, not even Kasumi: by appealing to his very well-hidden desire to help other people.
 - ii. Ranma and Kasumi alike will have a major impact on Angelica's sense of self-worth as will their adventures. She will be a far more self-confident person when they arrive at school, and not nearly as much of that self-worth will be wrapped up in her relationship with Julius.
 - b. For her part Angelica will get to know Ranma and he will quickly become her first real male friend and coupled with Kasumi they will basically be the best mix of friends and followers she could ever dream of. Ranma will be there for her when she needs it, and they may even low-key flirt occasionally without realizing it in terms of praising back and forth, offers to take her hand, dancing instruction and such.
 - i. Angelica will respect Ranma's strength and skills and will **love** how he pushes her to embrace her Adventurer heritage. Pushing both Kasumi and Angelica to become stronger will be a full-time project for Ranma and their new AI, Stephen. He would admire Angelica's drive and she would admire his in turn.

Finally, when you pare away Angelica's noble airs, her sense of humor, coupled with her desire to get better and be the best at whatever she puts her hands to and Ranma's personality will be, strangely, a decent match for one another.

- ii. Angelica will also believe for a while that Ranma and Kasumi are interested in one another, but not getting involved due to their past – yes, the pair will be very open about coming from another world with Angelica, the AI and everything, some of which she will keep to herself. But regardless, she will be trying to hook the pair of them up even as she deals with the fact that Julius doesn't care for her and is being ensnared by Marie, – so, a lot of miscommunication, cross purposes and woeful sighing, while all the time, Ranma will be trying to keep her feelings up
- c. Kasumi and Angie, a tale of opposites attracting. In a way, Angie will remind Kasumi of all the bad parts of Akane, but also with a lot of good added on. She's kind underneath a prickly exterior, has a giving nature, and is pragmatic rather than demanding, while also having an excellent work ethic and isn't quite as prone to losing her temper as Akane. Angie in turn will find in Kasumi a mix of big sister, confidant, and, growing over time, the type of person to smack her up the head before she makes a mistake or when she needs one to get moving.
 - i. It will be Kasumi who also starts to learn about diplomacy, politics, and the economy. While Ranma will be pushing Angie to take her training more seriously and become an Adventurer, Kasumi will be the go between, convincing Ranma Angie can't just become an adventurer, but that Ranma in turn shouldn't, and can occasionally do good as a noble, and being an example, if not a leader.
- d. Reluctant Kasumi and Ranma. Ranma will not realize he's becoming close romantically to Kasumi until he runs into a moment like she did in the fic, *Much Ado About Kasumi*, a point where he goes 'oh no, she's not just Big Sis Kasumi, she's Sexy Kasumi,' while Ranma will be attracted to Angelica right at the start, and be somewhat annoyed by it.
 - i. Ranma will be the first to want to progress their relationship. Bad news, he doesn't have any idea how to do that given their past near-family relationship.
 - ii. Kasumi will be VERY reluctant to admit to more than a base attraction to Ranma because she will be the one of the two to keep clinging to the hope of getting home. While Ranma will embrace this world for all its faults (they won't be blind to those) Kasumi will have more trouble with basic stuff after leaving the dungeon. Moreover, her general attitude will need to change a good deal to accept everything.
- e. Oh no, I'm Bi. – Angelica will need to have a moment like this with Kasumi, to realize she's also falling for Kasumi. Since this occurred in canon with Olivia, it's not a stretch. Ironically, Kasumi will admit she feels some attraction to Angelica faster than she will accept her growing feelings for Ranma and will be freer to act on it than

Ranma as she will sense far faster than him that her relationship with the Prince is as doomed in this world as it was in the game.

- f. Healthy leavening of romantic comedy, misunderstandings and probably more slapstick and back and forth. Think of how Ranma and the girls from Vanadis act rather than like in Making Waves or Horse for the Force. Like it will be near to the halfway point of the fic before they actually get together. But once they are there, oooh boy will those relationships go into full throttle quickly.
 - g. SLOW BURN. Yeah, this will be very slow in terms of romance to get off the ground. Once it does, well, it's gonna go quickly.
 - h. Mylene...(Yes, Hiryo, this is addressed to you...) is **not** going to be in the pairing. There will be a bit of pining and physical attraction, but given how Ranma will not be getting along with either of her children, that's not going to go anywhere. In return, Ranma will find her physically attractive ("How the fuck does she look barely a few years older than Mr. Pathetic!?") and somewhat like Angelica, admirable in a lot of ways. But he will disagree with a **lot** of her choices and her overall desires to not rock the boat, keep the status quo and so forth. To say nothing of the way she just takes all the work on herself without attempting to murder the king. She's just too passive in a way that Ranma wouldn't be attracted to, and Ranma in turn would be creating far too much extra work for Mylene and trouble for the status quo. Plus, there will be a lot of tension between Angie and Mylene after the duel and its outcome, unlike in canon. The **ONLY** way I could have her join the trio is if she just wants to abdicate and get away from the throne and her old life in its entirety, and that is so out of character for Mylene.
2. **Redgrave Faction Ascendent.** Before the start of school, Ranma, Angie and Kasumi will do at least a few dungeon dives, and the goodies they find will be making a big impact, not only to the Redgraves, but their faction and the kingdom as a whole. Books, powerful Lost Items, magical items and another AI sphere. Cleare... maybe? But certainly, several other AIs. The Redgraves will, both militarily and economically be even stronger than in canon, and will also have begun to make alliances with the Roseblade faction, the smallest of the political factions in the kingdom. This will, in turn allow me to WORLD BUILLLLLLLD. Lol.
- a. Those factions will be:
 - i. the Royal house – Mylene leads this faction while Roland is a figurehead at best, an annoyance at worst. Mylene works to keep the status quo, having made the various marriage agreements with the Redgraves and the rest in order to bring more power to the central government and create an even more formidable power bloc in the future. She will believe that is the best way to create reform and will not be happy about anything that rocks the boat before Angie and Julius take power as what should be the most stable royal couple/government in more than a dozen generations. Atlee is her primary right hand and loyal man, and the Atlees and Marmorias will be tied to her rather than to Roland, while the Arclights and Fields will prefer to listen to the King.
 - ii. Redgrave – they will already be a military and industrial powerhouse, the most powerful Ducal house by a wide margin, led by a man who is only a step

below the Arclight patriarch as a hero of the nation. They get along well with Greg's family, and are behind a lot of industrial innovations, and adventurer groups. Their limitations will be food production, and the fact they have a lot of territory to police and defend. They are also deeply resented by other nobles.

- iii. The Frampton faction – thought to be tied entirely to the Royal house, they will be playing their own game while espousing a love of Holfort's traditions and its Matriarchal society. He will lead the largest faction in terms of nobles tied to him, although how many of those nobles think they are also tied to the royal house is up in the air. He will be tied to the Forest of Ladies like in canon, and through them, the impoverishing and control of most of the rural barons whose lands are the primary battlefields between Holfort and most of its neighbors. Food production and numbers will be their main areas of strength.
 - a. They will be hammered badly when Ranma almost accidentally rolls over the Forest of Ladies secret, bringing it to light so easily it will be hilarious.
 - b. The Offreys will also suffer quickly after the start of the academy arc. They will have messed with Olivia. Angelica and Ranma will have no mercy.
- iv. Roseblades. They will be another military powerhouse family that isn't tied to the Frampton's or Redgraves. They will be of some concern in many ways because of how independent-minded they are and how willing to follow their own honor code, but they also have next to no ability with diplomacy, and have little to no room for economic growth. They are small-scale, but loyal, and their military is as professional as the army itself.
- b. Peacekeeper Kasumi... yeah, kind of obvious this one. Even Angie's father will fall under the power of her patented saint smile.
- c. Followers, who needs them: With Kasumi and Ranma becoming excellent examples of friends and allies, Angelica will be working hard to remove many of her followers from any position of power, will make it clear to all she speaks for herself, thank you, and will even be on the lookout for more people to bring in to replace those she has yeeted.
 - i. Olivia. Looking for talent will lead her to Lucas, who is already on a mission to do just that on behalf of the royal family. Olivia will be brought in, and become yet another dear friend, with Angelica tutoring her in how to act in high society, and Olivia providing a second voice of common sense for both Angelica and Ranma. More on her later.
 - ii. Leon... will be very reluctant to be brought in, but once at the academy will have very little choice other than outright refusing and thus being taken in by some of the other factions.
- d. Organizer Angie – this will show Angie at her best, a networker, researcher and deal maker trained by Mylene to do just that.

- 3. Adventuring.** In the original while told adventurers were revered and being shown a few dungeons, it wasn't exactly central or prominent for long. So here we will see more of the guild, more adventures and more OCs. In particular a big part of the fic, and indeed Holfort's economy, will revolve around dungeons, what can be harvested, and what items can be found within. These can range from everyday items – magic crystals, potion ingredients, toasters, batteries and other Old World items, all the way up to supremely rare items which are entirely magical in origin and can create odd and interesting reactions.
- a. Shadow Secretary – one of the things that Angie will earn in a dungeon is a bond to a magical Shadow-using maid spirit who will prove to be the best supporter she could ever ask for, taking a lot of the paperwork and footwork off her feet... and making some seriously suggestive comments occasionally as her attitude goes from 'Hai Hime-sama' to 'ara ara Hime'
 - b. HK version 2 X2. While Ranma and the first AI they find won't get along all that well, with Phaeron bonding more with Kasumi, and then, reluctantly, with Angelica, in their adventures, the group will discover several more Lost Items. These lost items will occasionally have AIs
 - i. Scipio. A FAR more advanced version of a ROGS, it and Ranma will bond on being battle junkies and always looking for ways to improve themselves. Scipio will also be incredibly loyal, have a decent sense of humor, and be more than willing to throw down. He will be... less than happy about New Humans, but won't be as homicidal towards them as...
 - ii. Artemis. The only female AI (beyond Cleare, still a maybe) they will find, she is the AI of a destroyer from the battle against New Humans. To say it will be massively overpowered is underselling things. Even Luxion in *Partner* would hesitate to fight the *Artemis* one-on-one. She will also be a bare step below genocidal towards the New Humans and will constantly be pushing Ranma to either fuck or kill every New Human they can get away with, although she will not want to damage the environment all that much given how badly it's changed over time.
 - c. Lightning Queen Angelica – turns out fire isn't her strongest elemental leaning, her tutors lied thinking the Redgraves would be furious to learn their daughter had an elemental trait that wasn't the family's traditional fire. This will come out quickly in her adventures with Ranma, and she will come to master lightning in a way that is just this side of frightening. Just think of her as the girl from this song with barely a few months of learning, that's how strong her lightning affinity is.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHGPEnF5WiM&list=RDpHGPEnF5WiM&start_radio=1
 - d. The power of the Bard compels thee. This one just leaped out at me. With the help of a few items, Kasumi will eventually gain items that will allow her to use abilities similar to that of bards in typical D&D: encouraging, empowering, sleep, fear causing/disPELLing, that kind of thing, while Olivia handles the pure healer role.
 - i. Song mistress Kasumi... sort of. As her vocal powers increase, Kasumi will always need to link them to songs, much to her chagrin, as her ability to

come up with lyrics will be... a source of great amusement for others and consternation for her. HEH.

- ii. Empathic powers activate! – Kasumi will be able to use music to pull out emotions and actions from people easily, and cut through people's BS.
 - iii. Kasumi, mistress of Sass. Eventually, as she learns to pour her power into words of growth and health, so too will Kasumi begin to learn offensive bardic magic, which will in turn effect her... well, willingness to verbally spar and even roast people. Which she will start to be worryingly good at once she has been made to realize there's no way home.
 - e. Black Magic and monsters. Roaming monsters will be just as big a threat to peace as pirates. Further, Black magic will be a thing that will cause a lot more trouble than just in the monster controlling flutes of Fanoss. Black magic and demons will in fact constitute mid boss level enemies and will follow the decimation of the Offreys.
- 4. I don't hate easy, but oooh boy, you definitely worked for it.** Kasumi and Ranma alike will quietly, in the case of Kasumi, and loudly, in the case of Ranma, loathe all five of the main male leads of the original game. For Julius, Ranma will need to bite back his anger and hatred, and his jealousy about Angelica's feelings for the prince will just make it worse.
- a. Beyond the prince and thinking that he doesn't deserve a girl like Angie proves quickly to be, Ranma will have a particular disdain/contempt for Chris and Greg. Chris he will look at like, as he said in the intro, a bit of a pussy and 'a mix of Kuno and Akane only worse.' Greg will be just seen as a meathead until they actually meet in person, whereupon he will be upgraded to idiot and buffoon because he will be after Ranma's female form. Ranma will also hate the fact he, thinks that gear doesn't matter in a mech fight. Even Ranma isn't that dumb, although their talks on that score will have Kasumi fighting a case of the twitches.
 - i. In turn, Chris and Greg will both HAAATE Ranma's easygoing physical superiority.
 - ii. Chris will instantly think Ranma's backhand comments and teases about his style are personal insults, will never see that Ranma was hinting at ways he could get better, and will further be frustrated by how his father tries to make him learn from Ranma occasionally.
 - iii. Greg will disdain Ranma the moment Ranma starts to be a friend to his former fiancé, who he's hated because she's the daughter of an armor and arms merchant. There won't be anything romantic there, but Ranma will just appreciate the girl's love of mechs and guns, while Greg will hate her for 'making blood money.'
 - iv. On the other hand, Greg will have fallen in love with Ranma's female form after they work through a dungeon together. He will become Kuno in how he keeps on missing the actual change, and not believing anyone about the girl not having any interest in him.
 - b. For Kasumi, Brad and Jilk will be particular annoyances. Brad's whole attitude and the way he leads on so many women will be anathema to Kasumi, while Jilk's general attitude, disdain for Angie, and how he has been honey-trapped will be disturbing and cringy to her while Ranma will just think he's a lame ass ninja who can't ninj.

- c. Brad on the other hand, will be after her almost as much as Marie when Marie tries for the harem route because Brad will become enchanted with Kasumi prior to the academy. In a way, she's even more his ideal woman than Marie is. She won't have worked for it, but her general peaceful attitude, demure nature, and smile will grab his attention.
 - d. Jilk will legitimately think that Kasumi has brainwashing powers. This will be compounded by a few things that happen due to some Saint relics, but he will be trying to counter her words at every turn after a bit, and may become violent towards her when he sees her able to calm even Julius down when he's been prodded by Marie. Jilk, like the others, won't be convinced by anything saying otherwise.
 - e. Julius and Ranma... ohhhh boy, seething hatred going either way. Julius will hate how Ranma almost accidentally takes center stage in anything physical, how close he is to Angelica, and how she doesn't seem to demand he act appropriately or comes down on him at all for going against what should be demanded of him. He will hate Ranma's freedom, his ability to do whatever he wants – at least that's the way it will look to Julius – and how his mother seems torn between exasperation and frustration with Ranma and low-key flustered around him.
 - i. Conversely, Ranma will be extremely harsh on Julius for how closed off he is, how he's so willing to walk away from what Ranma sees as the honorable thing, how he's willing to dishonor Angelina by breaking the agreement – which, as much as he can understand the sentiment isn't something Ranma would be willing to do – how he doesn't learn, want to grow or put forth effort even to achieve his dream of leaving his responsibilities behind.
 - ii. Worse than all of that will be his total lack of empathy and willing to understand how his actions, as a royal have consequences. Some of that will remind Ranma too much of some of his old decisions, but even at his worst Ranma would have never allowed his actions to hurt so many people.
 - iii. Julius the pedo – not so much that he will be, but that Ranma will point out loudly and frequently that he and his father have this in common.
 - iv. Julius won't be interacting with Ranma and the new Angelica before school begins, so he will be completely surprised by how she has changed, her entourage has changed, and will just not know how to act
 - v. Kasumi will simply hold Julius in some contempt. In her mind he isn't worth more than that.
- 5. Split Loyalties.** All of the AI that scans Ranma or comes into contact with him will see him for what he is: a pure Old Human, without an inch of magic. His odd abilities will not be easily understood and will cause them issues, as will the curse, but his DNA will be undeniable. As such, a lot of them will feel split loyalties from him to their master, be it Leon or someone else.
- a. Phaeron, the long-term planner. He will be planning much the same as Luxion did: the spread of Old Human genes. Once he's certain the New Human magical gene is recessive, he will try several underhanded methods to get Ranma and Kasumi to

sleep with both one another and other people. That will cause a lot of problems until Kasumi finds out he's doing it and orders him to stop.

- b. Luxion the loyal. Despite meeting two Old Humans, Luxion will determine to stay with Leon, urging him to be more proactive and, more, work with Ranma and Kasumi. However, he won't be able to go against them, even to the point of spying on them once he determines they are indeed Old Humans.
 - c. AI Council. Eventually, Phaeron and the other AIs will determine that Luxion, as an AI for a colony ship, is of higher rank than they are. While they won't become his direct subordinates, they will, barring direct orders against it, take anything he says as a strong suggestion, and more often than not be willing to work with him going forward... even if they give him as much lip as Cleare does in canon.
6. **Super reluctant Lord, somewhat accepting Lady.** With their abilities and riches, Kasumi and Ranma, despite being foreigners, will be brought into the Holfortian noble structure. Kasumi will become a Marchioness and Ranma a Baron to start with, becoming a Count eventually, then a Duke. Ranma will, needless to say, be very against this, but with Angelica's help will start to see how he can help more people as a noble, while also not interfering in his pursuit of always bettering his mastery of the Art. Kasumi will be reluctant at first because she doesn't want any ties to this world they can't sever if they can go home, but once it is made very clear that's not an option, she will embrace her role, becoming to Angelica what Minister Atlee is to Mylene. On the other hand, Ranma and Lucas will come into conflict because Ranma doesn't like tea parties, while Kasumi loves them.
7. **Plot? What Plot?** While they played the game and will freely acknowledge this world is the same as the one portrayed in the game, Ranma won't remember much of it and the idea of following a set plot will annoy him as he's decided this whole life is his second chance. Worse, admitting they needed the fivesome and the holy maiden would be admitting his own weakness, and that's a big no for Ranma. Kasumi will have decided it's a guideline, no more than that, and the idea of treating people as if they were simple characters would be appalling to her.
- a. Confused, worried, frustrated Leon. Leon will be able to blend into the background pretty easily, which he has stated many times is what he wants, but will find that there are issues with doing that. Leon will also be very frustrated because he can't predict how the changes of Ranma and Kasumi will resolve.
 - b. Horrified Marie. While losing a few of the 'capture targets' to Ranma's female form will be horrifying, the rest of the changes Ranma and Kasumi have made will slow and frustrate her efforts a great deal. It will, in her opinion be like playing the game with another player, one whose goals has nothing to do with you, but you have to account for them.
 - c. Punch the king. Yep. Ranma's gonna do it the moment he realizes how much of an ass the king is. This will, in turn, earn him the king's enmity, making 'the Masked Knight' show up occasionally, trying to cause issues for him. However, Ranma and Scipio will deal with him easily. It will also, unfortunately, make Roland try to back Julius and Marie in an effort to use them to make problems for Ranma, whose raw combat skill and abilities will infuriate the King thanks to his own ego.

- d. Shadowy Shenanigans. It will turn out that Rochelle, the Holy Land, has its fingers in a lot of the duplicitous, underhanded things going on in Holfort, and will also be funneling money to Fanoss. This will introduce segments of the 'third game' early.
- e. Alzer Issues. With Artemis obliterating one of their semi-normal raiding fleets, Alzer will become interested in what's going on in Holfort, and will send several students to the academy. This will lead to more issues for all involved.
- f. Fanoss frustrated. Ranma will be turning over a lot of weapons and other things to the Redgrave Faction as part of how he will be paying his taxes. This includes weapons capable of fighting Luxion on an even footing, and which can wipe out Fanoss' military forces. Hertrude will not be pleased, but will also develop something of a fascination with Ranma, his curse and everything else.
- g. Black Knight, a real threat – not so much because the ships Ranma finds won't be able to deal with him, but because Ranma's own pride won't allow it. He will be a real rival for Ranma and not the friendly kind. Unlike Roland and the Sword Saint, the Black Knight will have kept on training and getting better, along with his Black Blade being a literal magical parasite from the past.
- h. There's Healing, and then there's problem solving. Hertrauda is kept as a prisoner not only as insurance, and Hertrude will have thought for years she was simply ill. However, a chance meeting with Olivia will prove it was poison, and thus who exactly poisoned her will become a major question. However, that will only be the start of dozens of issues within Fanoss, far too many of which will
- i. AI enemies. There will be many AIs who have gone insane and wish to just wipe out all humanity. There will be others who will refuse to follow orders and others who will try to manipulate their users, like in canon. There will also be monsters from the past, Magical equivalents of AI, that Ranma and company will need to fight. The first of which will be the Black Blade of Fanoss.
- j. Possession is a Problem. The Saintess' items are going to be a long issue, showing up whenever they find an item. Kasumi, Olivia, Marie and even Ranma's female form will need to deal with voices in their heads occasionally, and that in turn will cause more problems both silly and dangerous.
- k. Olivia out there. Olivia will be met early on, and with Kasumi helping her along in terms of her confidence, Ranma's odd training, and Angelica in her corner, anyone who messes with her will have issues up to their eyeballs. However, this training will have taken her healing magic to an absurd degree. She will also have a spine, and have some actual sass to her occasionally, just because she's needed to rein in Ranma's attitude and Angelica's eagerness for adventuring. I might pair her eventually with Leon, but there will be several issues there.