

I can't draw. Covers both sides here.

Brought to you all as a New Year's present, here is the next chapter of my DC/Ranma crossover concept. Now, those of you who are hardcore DC fans may note that I have changed quite a few events that occur at various times in DC, along with another, mildly connected character, and the origin story of Captain Marvel and the wizard who gave him his powers. I did so for many reasons and because, much like the Marvel 'canon' timeline, the DC timeline resembles the most chaotic ball of yarn in existence rather than anything organized.

Despite that, I hope you enjoy this chapter.

This chapter has been Grammarlied, and it has also been looked at by [Hiryo](#).

Chapter 2: Old Treasures, Old Problems, New Issues

Slurping at the last of the broth of his ramen, Ranma set the takeout bowl aside, leaning back against the headboard of the bed of the temporary hotel room he had checked into a day before, balancing the credit card the Japanese government had given him to use while on jobs, shaking his head with a scowl of remembrance. "Man, who knew finishing the job would be tougher than the job itself? Ugh."

Getting in and out of the Dragon King's headquarters had not been easy. It had taken him five tedious days to case the joint, a series of high-rise apartments all owned by the same yakuza family, which the Dragon King was the head of. On the outside, they looked like regular apartments. Inside, there had been a warren of variously sized rooms, with only the topmost of one segment being actual apartments for the gang's higher-ups. It was part fortress, part base of operations, part drug lab, and Ranma was left wondering how they'd gotten the thing built in the first place. *Corruption for sure, but how much? Meh, not my problem.*

Sneaking in had also been somewhat easy, and the fight itself had been very anticlimactic. Ranma had been able to get in and then back out, carrying the Dragon King, who, unlike the original from WW2, could actually transform into a cool dragonoid monster. That hadn't mattered much when Ranma had knocked Dragon King unconscious and hogtied him like a mummy in chains before Dragon King realized he was there, though.

However, handing him over to the police had not been easy, considering how many of the local police were in the Dragon King's pocket. Three times Ranma had left the guy at a police station, only to have to hunt him down again within hours. Luckily, the government had thought of that and given Ranma a series of tech-type toys, including a tracker and a microphone. Now the internal corruption police, whatever they were called, had several dozen people to investigate, and Ranma had gotten lucky on the fourth time.

Amusingly, the Dragon King hadn't bothered to return to his own people that third time. Instead, he'd had the gall to demand police protection. Worse, he'd actually gotten it, and Ranma had to go in and drag him out of the third precinct. Still, as per his orders from the government, he had **finally** found a precinct where the majority of the police assigned there weren't willing to just let the guy go on the fourth try. By that point, the government had routed a SAT (Special Assault Team) unit to take him into custody.

"That... okay, that was kind of hilarious. I wonder if the government guys can get me a recording of that 'oh no, not again' line he squealed the last time? Heh, that would make a great ringtone," Ranma mused, then scowled. "Wait... come to think of it..." His thoughts going down a not-so-fun road, Ranma quickly went through his stuff, making certain the government hadn't bugged him.

It honestly didn't surprise him when he found a tracker in one of his shoes.

"Assholes," the pig-tailed Saotome grumbled, before calming down. *Just remember, Ranma, this was your last mission of this type for the government. You've got the rest of the weekend to kill before you're supposed to be meeting with that archaeologist gal. What was her name again? Laura Crivens?*

Seven months had passed since Ranma and the government had come to their agreement, and Ranma's life had changed quite a bit since. First, he had moved around most of the time during those months, something he had greatly enjoyed. He had really missed it during his time in Nerima, seeing new things every other week or so, meeting new martial arts masters. Although most of those masters weren't worth much, to Ranma it was refreshing nonetheless.

Throughout those months, Ranma had also kept in contact with his mother, Nodoka. She had retaken her maiden name of Nakahama after divorcing Genma.

This was something of a mixed bag in Ranma's opinion. While he enjoyed having a parent he actually liked, not just respected as a martial artist, Nodoka had been continually on his back about the need to learn things beyond martial arts. The fact that she had gotten the government involved with that aspect had annoyed him initially, but eventually, Ranma had just decided to go with it. Some fights just weren't worth it, as he had learned a decade ago from Diana.

It was because of his mother that Ranma had learned several different languages, pushing beyond his pidgin of curses and questions about food, which he could already do in Korean, Vietnamese, and Chinese. He could now speak English and French fluently, along with Chinese and Korean, the French having been chosen by Nodoka after she learned about a particular incident in Nerima. She had also helped him make a clean break from his life there, despite the two older Tendo sisters surprisingly trying to reach out to him along with Ukyo. A

point that came to his mind now as he remembered the last time he had talked to his mom before this job began.

Nabiki was the easiest to figure out. She had somehow learned that Ranma was working with the government, and kept on trying to convince him to give their 'relationship' a chance. "I'm not that stupid girl! You just want me for my paycheck. You can't have it. Heck, joke's on you, since I don't even have it! Hah!"

Snickering to himself as he remembered his words to her at the time, Ranma hopped over to the nearby TV. Turning it on, Ranma began flipping through the channels, trying to find something to watch as he remembered how fast Nabiki had backed off once she learned that he wasn't really working **for** the government, he was working off a debt **to** the government.

On the other hand, I still have no idea why Kasumi was so unhappy to see me leave. Akane was more than happy to see the back of me, after all. While he and the oldest Tendo daughter had been somewhat friendly during his time living with the family, Ranma couldn't say there was any great connection between him and Kasumi. Not like he had with Shampoo and the other Amazons, who had remained in China after the events at Phoenix Mountain. She's just too much of a wallflower, I mean, she's cute, sure and great at housekeeping and cooking and... that's it. Like, I never got a sense of her personality beyond that.

Finding a dancing competition, Ranma decided to work off some of the ramen. Hopping up onto the tiny table next to the one chair in the room, Ranma balanced there for a second before moving into a kata as he watched the dancers on the screen. His mom, beyond forcing him to learn different languages and take online classes for math, writing and so forth, had also forced him to learn how to dance and act in high society. He had known how to dance previously, of course, but only martial arts versions: martial arts ballroom dancing, capoeira, martial arts street dancing, and so forth.

Who knew you could dance just for the fun of it? *I'm still having trouble not lashing out automatically at other dancers or my 'partner,'* he mused.

Nodoka had also introduced him to music, technology and cell phones, things that Ranma hadn't had much time for before this. Mainly because they were way too fragile and expensive to replace. Ranma surprised himself by liking American modern rock, and some classical Chinese and European stuff too. Modern Japanese was a little too blah for him; it was too much about the show rather than the actual music.

And then there's Ucchan. Ranma scowled a bit before he slowly lost himself to his kata, letting his irritation flow out of him. Darn it, I thought she and I could be friends. But she's still trying to fit me into a mold, wanting me to just stay around while she runs the restaurant. Ugh. I hope she got the hint after our last conversation, but given how slow to change their minds most martial artists are, I ain't holding out much hope. And yes, Mr. Conscience, I know that's like a pot callin' a kettle black.

An hour later, Ranma finished creating a few Sing Dance kata, hopped off the table and lay back out on the bed. Pulling out a graphic novel, he decided to watch some news as he read. "I wonder if they have anything about Wonder Woman?"

It turned out they did. The hotel picked up one of the world's news networks, which was showing an aborted disaster. A runaway train in Europe had been stopped by Wonder Woman. Apparently, it had been hijacked by terrorists, and someone on the train had decided to record events on their phone instead of getting to safety or trying to help.

"Now that is a mindset I just don't get," Ranma murmured to himself. "You're on a hijacked train, and a hero comes to your rescue, and the first thing you do is grab up your phone and start recording? Not see to your safety or the safety of anyone else you're traveling with? Not even trying to fight back? Weird. Still, that hair, and the way she moves... Yeah, that's definitely Diana-nee. Awesome. I am sooo going to head to America after my work with this Laura chick is done."

Since leaving Nerima and getting away from anyone who would be willing to attack him as a pervert for the slightest provocation or use anything they learned about Ranma against him, Ranma had researched Wonder Woman quite a bit. While her real name still wasn't known, there was quite a bit of information about her online, enough to make Ranma certain Diana and Wonder Woman were one and the same. The known fact that she was an Amazon and had come to Man's World was a big clue.

Grinning at the idea of his former trainer/big sister figure, Ranma watched the news for a bit, hoping for a close-up of the woman. This time, Wonder Woman had not stayed to talk to the press after handing the terrorists over to the local police. Even her discussion with the police hadn't been caught on tape.

By the time the news finished, it was pushing 9 o'clock, which was when Ranma always tried to call his mom. *Yes, I'm a mama's boy, sue me*, Ranma thought to himself, remembering how during the briefing for this job Ranma had cut off a talk with his so-called superiors in order to call his mom. The look on the guy's face had annoyed Ranma a lot, but he had refrained from doing anything permanent to him.

Nodoka answered on the first ring, her tone vibrant and happy. "My manly son! I just saw the news that the so-called Dragon King was apprehended by the police. The police are trying to take credit for your work again, but I know it was you. Although honestly, even in his monstrous form, he just doesn't look as dangerous as his predecessor."

"Mom, we've been over this!" Ranma groaned, even if he agreed with her about how lame the Dragon King had been. The moron hadn't been a martial artist of any kind, and his wyvern form hadn't been as durable as Pantyhose Taro, let alone someone like Herb or Saffron. "I can't tell ya about my specific jobs, and I'm fine with the police taking credit even if I was

involved." That fooled Nodoka not at all, and Ranma honestly didn't care. "I don't want to be in the spotlight, and I don't care for getting thanked or whatever. To me, this is just a job."

"I know, and that speaks well of you, but I am still very much ambivalent about the agreement you and the government reached about these things. I still say we should have had a lawyer look that contract over for us," Nodoka fretted. "I know they were willing to pay for your online classes and so forth, but still, pinning you with half the debt your father accrued under the Saotome name can't be legal."

"Eh, since I decided to keep the Saotome name, I figure it was... well, probably not entirely legal, but close enough. As for lawyers, the only lawyers I know are martial arts lawyers," Ranma answered idly. "I remember they came after me and pops once. We sicked Nabiki on 'em. It was about the only time I can remember being grateful to know her."

Ranma heard his mother snort, but that opening was enough to let her change the subject for a moment. "Speaking of Nabiki and your past relationships, Ranma, have you met a young lady yet? I thought for certain that you and Shampoo would settle down, but you never seemed to show any interest in her. If a more traditional woman is your style, I can introduce you to..."

"Come on, Mom, you know I'm not in a position right now to actually get into relationships at all. As for types, I don't know if I have one..." Ranma interjected, lying a little bit at the end. By this point, Ranma knew he had a type: strong, feisty girls. Whether that was because of his memory of Cassie and the Isle of Women, or his life since, he didn't know, but regardless, Ranma had no desire right now to be tied down to anyone, and that was the way it was going to stay.

His mother was persistent, however, and brought up several girls she thought would be interested in him, and vice versa, but Ranma beat off all her attempts to set up a formal omiai. Eventually, Ranma steered the conversation back to Nodoka herself and what she had been up to recently. So, despite the whole matchmaking attempt, the night ended on a positive note, and he hung up, watched another hour of TV and fell asleep.

As he did, his dreams took him back to his time on the Isle of Women. To when he and Cassie had first been introduced, and how Diana had talked him into learning manners. The adventure he and Cassie had with the monkeys, and the first time he'd met a mermaid.

Part of Hera's enchantment on Ranma's memory was to keep those memories at the forefront of his mind, influencing his dreams. Already this had served a purpose. The strength of those memories and the desire to get back to the Isle of Women convinced Ranma to not only get cursed but to embrace his female form. The dreams of his training with the Amazons also fueled his drive to get better, knowing that Diana had so easily manhandled him when he was younger.

Even as he fell asleep now, he was comparing himself to how Diana was back then, thinking about how a spar between them would go. *I hope she and Cassie have gotten stronger, or else meeting them again would be a little disappointing.*

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Diana sneezed, quickly holding up her hands to her nose lest she expectorate over the controls in front of her.

"Bless you," Superman said automatically from where he was sitting beside her, before going on teasingly, "I thought you said that you couldn't get sick. Are Man's World diseases too strong for you?"

"I'm not sick, perhaps some dust got in my nose? Or perhaps someone is talking about me. Either is much more likely than anything in Man's World being 'too strong' for me," Diana retorted. Seeing Superman's confused expression, she laughed and explained the Japanese superstition about how if someone was talking about you somewhere, you would sneeze.

"That's honestly sort of funny. But where did you learn about a Japanese superstition like that?" Clark asked.

Diana didn't reply to that, simply smiling sadly for a moment before poking him in the ribs. "Enough about that. You wanted to talk to me about Kara, so talk."

The two of them were currently on watch in the brand-new Watchtower's control room, though calling it a watchtower was a bit of a misnomer. It was, after all, a space station.

Even now, looking out one of the nearby viewports, Diana had to shake her head at the very idea of being out here like this. *Space. There's something amazing about the very idea of it. I can treat magic and even most normal science as everyday things, but being up here and seeing the stars so clearly, it still has the power to take my breath away.*

The space station was a large structure, divided into different areas. The majority was taken up by a training center, much like the one in Superman's frozen fortress in the Antarctic. There, members of the Justice League could train against one another, gaining new insight into one another's personalities, abilities, and heightening their own combat skills. This was something Diana had pushed for hard when the Justice League was first starting out.

Beyond that, there were a few conference rooms, labs and living quarters, although only one or two members of the Justice League were ever living up here at any one time. Most of the time, they would simply rotate who was on watch duty. The only one who was almost always up here was the Martian Manhunter, an actual alien, one of the few that Diana had personally met.

J'onn J'onzz was also the Justice League member she most respected beyond Superman. It took a lot of courage to know that you were the last of your kind in existence, and to not only keep on living, but also wish to use your abilities, your powers, for good.

The room where the two of them were currently sitting was not the control room of the space station, but the duty station. Here, feeds from various satellites around the world were fed into the computer, where those on watch or the underlying computer program would sift through them for important goings-on. This allowed the Justice League to know when a natural disaster or supervillain rampage was underway worldwide. If it occurred in a nation with which they had agreements with, they would respond, much like the United Nations Peacekeeping Force.

"Only," as Clark had dryly admitted once, "more effective."

This didn't mean they could go anywhere they wanted throughout the world, of course. Many world governments wanted nothing to do with the Justice League, or indeed any superpowered hero, not even the local variety. But many who didn't like the Justice League in general and refused their help against local supervillains were still grateful to have superpowered help during natural disasters. Which was enough for now. *We've got our hands full as it is, some days, without needing to cover more area against superpowered activity.*

Clark sighed, shaking his head. "Right to it, huh? No small talk?"

"You deliberately volunteered to take watch with me, so I assumed it was serious. If it isn't, I'll be more than happy to make small talk with you, Clark," Diana answered with a chuckle.

Clark made an 'ah' noise, but shook his head. "It's not anything life-threatening. But while I know you said that Kara has made friends among the Amazons, not just your apprentice, Cassie, I'm worried about how Kara will acclimate to normal American society. I'd like her to come home, get her used to a normal life again this summer. She'll need her own alter ego, you know, and Kara can't get used to hiding her strength from other people if she's always around people like your folk."

Diana sighed, having anticipated something like this, although she felt that Kara could have stayed another year or more on the Isle of Women. And to say that Kara was making friends was an understatement. She had become quite popular with the philosophers and natural scientists, and even Diana's mother. To say the least, this was not something most could boast. Kara even got along with Donna and the other adult warriors.

And Kara had been extremely good for Cassie, too. The two of them were as thick as thieves, best friends who pushed one another hard in all of their training, not just physically but mentally as well. The knowledge that Kara had as a representative of a more advanced society - and not just more advanced in comparison to the Amazons but compared to all of Earth -

worked to push Cassie to become a better student, a drive that had been severely lacking in Diana's apprentice before this. *Which my lady mother never stops harping on about whenever I go home.*

Kara, like Clark, was an alien from the planet of Krypton. She was the daughter of two scientists, who had given Kara her first mechanics set before her first stuffed animal.

Thinking about that, Diana looked at Clark with some amusement. "You realize that your American educational system is not going to do Kara any good at all, correct? She already knows more about math and science than most people with PhDs. Certainly, more than I do anyway."

Clark chuckled, rolling his eyes a bit. "No, really? That surprises me. After all, it wasn't as if Kara was the young girl who knew how to use most of the technology I found in my survival pod or anything..."

The two of them shared a laugh at that, Clark having told Diana, Bruce and the others about how Kara had basically dismantled the survival pod Clark's adoptive family had kept on their farm. This had taken Kara only a few days after she had convinced Clark she was his cousin – via messages on her survival pod and a blood sample, not just their shared powers - and Kara had then helped him use that technology to upgrade the Fortress of Solitude in several ways. Upgrades Bruce and the others had considered when designing the Watchtower.

After a moment, Clark went on somewhat more seriously. "Still, as good as her education is, and as good as the Amazons are teaching her about combat and other things, they're not exactly an accredited school, are they? And I am serious about my worries about Kara learning to keep her strength and other abilities under wraps. Learning self-control among Amazons can only take her so far compared to dealing with normal people."

That caused Diana to chuckle again, shaking her head and conceding the point. Unfortunately, while technology was advancing in Man's World at a rate that even now Diana found somewhat off-putting, the educational system wasn't evolving as quickly. Testing out of high school and college entirely wasn't going to happen. *And let us face facts, Kara's general knowledge and historical knowledge are as bad as mine was when I first came to Man's World back in the 40's. And it is also a fact that dealing with other people, especially boys her age, would probably be good for Kara.*

"Very well. If I am not mistaken, high schools in America are letting out soon?" When Clark nodded, Diana went on. "In that case, Kara can come home in another week. That will allow you, Martha and John time to start creating a local persona for her, contacting the schools and so forth." She smiled a bit. "And Kara can also help them out around the farm, which I know they will need this time of year."

"This time of year and every other time of year," Clark answered with a somewhat put-upon sigh. "I routinely stop back home once a month or so to help around the farm, but even then, there's always something that needs to be repaired, which I'm no good at, or some help around the farm from one day to the next that Pa is too proud to ask for my help with. And you do not want to know his response to my last attempt to just buy the farm and bring in more workers or better technology."

"Do what you can. That's all you can do. John knows precisely how far he can push himself, Clark. And even if he didn't, Martha certainly does. I wouldn't worry too much," Diana answered, amused and somewhat happy about how much care Clark showed his adoptive family. It was part of what made him such a down-to-earth person, despite his powers. "And you must remember, Clark, that you can't solve every problem. And sometimes a man's pride in his work is just as important as the work itself."

That thought brought her mind to something else, and she bit her lip for a moment before deciding to just blurt out what she was going to say. "By the way, I noticed another article from Lois Lane about a criminal group she helped break the news on, and how Superman swooped to her rescue. How... how is your relationship going there?"

Clark winced a bit. "I... have to admit it isn't going as well as I had hoped. Sometimes it seems to me as if Lois is more in love with the image of Superman than with Clark Kent, the man. She likes having Superman around to, well, be at her beck and call. And now she's kind of taking it for granted. That's... I was in Argentina helping with a forest fire, and then had to race back home when her emergency signal went off, only to find that she had gotten herself captured again. I, I don't like that, and that's not the only issue we're having."

As Clark released a super-sigh, Diana shook her head slowly, tapping her fingers on the controls in front of her. Looking back, she felt that Lois and Clark getting together had been a mistake. They were not equals in any way, not physically, and frankly, not mentally either. Lois was very much a modern city girl, and her morals and personality clashed hard with Clark's down-to-earth attitude. Lois was also highly opinionated and a firm believer in the Fifth Estate, while Clark wasn't.

The problem was, Diana didn't really have any relationship advice to give, something she admitted now. "I'm afraid I can't help you. While I am not solely interested in women, as so many of my sisters back home are, it isn't as if I have been in a relationship out here in Man's World since I returned. I have my relationship with Steve to look back on for advice, but it was a different time back then; modern relationships are very different."

Only a few men have grabbed my attention since my return to Man's World. You and Bruce being the two major ones, Diana admitted to herself, listening with half an ear as Clark morosely answered that his own sensibilities and Lois's weren't exactly the same either, something that Diana had just internally acknowledged. *And of those two, Bruce's general attitude, his distrustfulness, his grim outlook on life and his secretive nature combine to become*

a... What is the term? A turn off? Which just leaves Clark. And that means giving him relationship advice may lead him to break up with Lois is dishonorable. Still, not giving him advice at all would not be something a friend would do.

"I think there are a few questions you need to think about, Clark," she said aloud. "First, which persona do you give priority to in a relationship? Superman, the hero, or Clark Kent, the man? And second, if you take away Superman the hero, do you, as Clark Kent, have enough chemistry with Lois to stay together? Can you talk to one another about things not directly related to your work as reporters or your work as Superman? Do you have similar likes and dislikes?"

Clark's lips twisted a bit as he thought about that, but Diana went on inexorably. "What are dates like? Do you like what you do on them? Is she someone you can see yourself, well, cuddling with and watching a horribly cliché movie, if that's what you like, or going out on a run or some other exercise? I know that old saw about opposites attract is occasionally true, but it only goes so far. Building on one another's strengths and having things in common is far more important. Or at least, it was for Steve and me."

"Agreed..." Clark actually smiled for a moment before his expression shifted, showing his embarrassment. "And that idea of a date actually sounds like fun. But as for Lois... I, I don't want to admit it, but I have to say that I think... well, it might sound stupid, but I was kind of blinded by the glamour of Lois Lane, ace reporter and all-around city girl, when I first arrived in Metropolis. And I still am somewhat in awe of Lois's reporting skills. But sharing my alter identity with her and then getting involved with Lois so quickly after that might have been a mistake. Which leaves me wondering if we can make it work. And if not, what then?"

Diana winced a second time at that, even as a part of her wanted to jump up in the air at the very idea that Clark could become single anytime soon. "That one, I'm afraid I can't help you with, unless you want to enlist J'onn..."

At that point, a warbling noise drew their attention to the screens in front of them. A few seconds of working the controls brought up a satellite image of an oil tanker under attack from pirates near the Horn of Africa. It would not have been worth the attention of the Justice League if not for the fact that they were holding off local naval forces, and looked to be placing what looked like a very futuristic-seeming bomb on the ship. As the pair of heroes watched, the ship's course quickly shifted to carry it into Durban, the largest port in South Africa.

"Let's postpone this discussion for now, we've got work to do," Clark said, standing up, with Diana standing up as well, signaling Green Lantern that they might need his help. It was time to go and be heroes.

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Monday morning, Ranma woke up very early to a call from his current lords and masters, causing him to nearly smash his cell phone flat against the bedside table. Staring at the time, he growled, grabbed the cell phone, and spoke into it, his voice hoarse. Ranma never liked getting woken up by other people, even if he was something of a morning person. *Fuck, it ain't even morning yet!* "It is barely five o'clock in the morning. This had better be good."

"Sorry for waking you up Ranma," the voice on the other and apologized quickly, and Ranma calmed down a little bit, noting that it was one of his normal governmental minders, one of the guys who knew how martial arts mad Ranma was, and had a vague idea of his general attitude to them along with the superpowered world Ranma lived in. "Unfortunately, Ms. Croft is used to a different time zone. We just finished telling her that we require her to use you as a bodyguard, and Ms. Croft wants to meet the, and this is a direct quote, 'the right plonker' you lot think I need to watch my shapely bum who I'll have to drag along like so much dead weight'."

That taunt woke Ranma up just like his Pops used to with a bucket of water, and with a grin, he asked where they were to meet up.

Forty minutes later, which had consisted of ten minutes of discussion and twelve victories in the training room, Lara Croft's very British backside smacked into the wall of the training area for the thirteenth time. It did so precisely where Lara's back had smacked into the wall the last twelve times, something she was now very aware of. *Bloody Hell, it isn't enough that he's throwing me around, but he has to add that last cherry on top of my humble pie? Ugh.*

Lara slid to the ground headfirst, grunting under the impact. She slowly rolled onto her side, holding up a hand and waving it this way and that. "White flag, bloody white flag. I give up. Damn me, and I thought I was a good martial artist! You're tossing me around like I'm one of those birds who only take lessons to stay in shape or something."

"As far as normal people go, I suppose you are kind of good," Ranma said judiciously, deciding not to taunt the woman further. "I'd rate you as a black belt in judo, and your boxing style is really quite good. You've done a decent job incorporating it into your judo. But I haven't been normal since I was six and Pops was teaching me how to balance while standing on a speeding food cart."

"Food... you know what, I don't want to know. But how the hell did you not react that last time?" Lara asked, shaking her head as she slowly got to her feet, swaying from side to side, somewhat dizzy. "I've never run into a guy, regardless of his age, who wouldn't react when I gave him the old lean and shake."

Lara Croft was a twenty-never-you-mind-year-old who stood about equal to the height of his male body, which meant she would be several inches taller than his female form. She was also built to a degree that would have let her fit right in with Shampoo and the rest of the Amazons, with long legs, a perfect-looking rear, decent muscles, and a very generous chest.

Lara also had long brown hair tied into a ponytail, deep, expressive brown eyes, and lips made to smile or smirk in equal measure. She liked to wear skintight green tank tops, short shorts that looked vaguely military and combat boots.

Smirking, Ranma shook his head. In the last match, Lara had tried to fluster Ranma by leaning forward at the start, kneading her back as if in pain and thrusting her chest forward, giving him a view down her top. There was no denying that Lara was extremely attractive. But her looks, especially in her current outfit, reminded Ranma a bit too much of Nabiki for him to react.

Pulling out a water bottle from the ki space within one of his pockets, something that caused Lara to release a, "Fuckin' Hell!?" Ranma doused himself with water.

Now with her shirt wet and clinging to her chest, Ranma flashed her own cleavage towards Lara, before standing up straight and jiggling in place a bit as Lara fell onto her rear, staring at the redhead in shock. "Well, there's the fact that I have a pair of my own whenever I want. I'm not going to say that I never react to girls in a fight, but just giving me a view like that isn't gonna do it."

Not these days anyway. Took me more than a year to get used to Shampoo or Ucchan doing things like that. And even now, if Lara weren't so obvious about it, it would have worked better. Ranma tended to react more to such things when they were spontaneous.

Several minutes of shocked exclamation, experimentation, and questioning later, Lara Croft sat back down in the same office where she and Ranma had initially met, pointing at Ranma with her thumb. "All right, fine. I'll admit that Ranma will make a very good bodyguard. Frankly, you could've just mentioned that, what did you call it, Ranma, ki space? Why not chi space? You do know that cultivation and soft-style martial arts originated in China before they migrated to Japan, yes?"

"Eh, I kind of made up my own theory about how to break down ki and its various parts. Ki comes from the body, chi from the environment," Ranma answered blithely, ignoring the semi-mocking tone Lara had just used or the point she had raised, which he didn't know enough about to argue. *Ya can point out historical stuff like that, so long as ya don't whine about me throwing you around the training area.* "And if I had just gotten you to agree to take me along with my ki space, would ya be willing to listen to me as much as you will now when I tell you something's dangerous?"

Lara scowled, about to open her mouth to protest that statement on various levels, before closing it. Lara had enough self-insight to realize that, yes, she probably would have treated Ranma as a porter rather than a bodyguard if Ranma hadn't shown that Lara was absolutely no threat to him on a physical level. *Bleedin' heck, he let me pistol whip him, and all it did was warp me colt's barrel. I'm gonna have to get a replacement now, to say nothing about what he could do when I tried to shoot him instead.*

While Ranma wasn't so tough that he could just tank the high-caliber rounds of the handguns that Lara favored, he was fast enough to either dodge or redirect them with his fingers if he could see the muzzle flash. He paid for that last with broken fingers, but even so, it was quite impressive.

Equally impressive was the fact that the pain from the broken fingers didn't seem to matter to Ranma at all. And the fact that he could use this ki thing to heal from the wounds almost as quickly as they were made was something Lara desperately wanted to learn if she could.

"Fine, you've got a point. Still, you're willing to carry stuff for me, yeah?" Lara questioned, then winked at Ranma. "No self-respecting gentleman would ever think of forcing a lady to carry her own bags, after all."

Rolling his eyes, Ranma answered, "So long as you're not talking about your ladies' dainties or something. I might turn into a girl half the time, but I draw the line there. Doing anything different is just asking for some kind of pervert moment to happen."

Lara snorted but agreed that Ranma had a point. She spent the rest of the day figuring out what she wanted to bring on this dig and getting Ranma to stuff them into his ki space, which he did so cheerfully.

When she asked him why he was so happy to help her, Ranma answered honestly. "I have to enlarge my ki space and the entrance to it every time you ask me to put something new in there. Which is actually a pretty good ki exercise. I'll tell you when ya have to stop."

In point of fact, Ranma did not tell Lara to stop until she had all of the equipment, recording devices, size modifiers and various archaeological equipment, carbon dating devices and so forth - enough for an entire dig team - stuffed into his ki space. At that point, she was ready to go.

"By the way, where are we going? I was told the first dig site was someplace in Japan, but that was it," Ranma inquired.

"We're searching for the cave of Amaterasu. Apparently, it's got a dragon guardian. Not that I believe that last obviously," Lara said, shaking her head with a wry smile. "Even after meeting you and finding out magic is real, there has to be a limit to what is myth and what is also real, you know?"

"Hah,ahaha, hahahahahahahaeheh," Ranma snorted, then began to cackle, a full-on evil laugh, while Lara looked at him and the government officials in confusion. It took Ranma several minutes to regain control of himself, at which point he shook his head slowly. "You're just asking for something to happen to us, aren't you?"

Lara once more looked over at the government official, who simply shrugged. "Right, well, now that you've got your crazy out of you..."

"Me!? You're the one who doesn't realize just how much crazy stuff is out there," Ranma retorted, now grinning wildly. "But why am I complaining? This way, I might have a fun fight. But you told me what we're looking for, where are we going?"

"Well, right now, we're going to head over to my plane so we can load you up. Then you get to become the envy of a lot of men and sit behind me on my bike as we head south to a little place called Ryugenzawa.

"Huh... why does that sound familiar?" Ranma mused, following his new employer out the door.

Behind them, the government official looked after them, then down at his computer, murmuring, "They'll be fine. They will. They won't kill each other at least. And I'm sure that Ms. Croft's track record of finding trouble is exaggerated, just like..." he couldn't even finish the sentence, the lie was so big. Instead, he clapped his hands together, bowing them in a brief prayer for Lara, Ranma, and the immediate area around them when, not if, they ran into trouble.

"Okay, again, all this is looking kind of familiar," Ranma muttered the next day, trudging into the woods deep in the interior of Shikoku, walking beside Lara as she trudged slowly on through the thick underbrush. "When did I... oh don't tell me..." He paused, staring at a large warning sign, then back down the trail to where Lara had left her motorbike, seeing a slight dip in the land that he seemed to remember. "Oy, ya better be on the watch for traps."

"Traps out here or KyAA!" Lara's voice ended in a quite girly squeak as the ground underneath her feet gave way. Her reflexes were such that she was able to throw herself backward, showing a decent amount of agility. The area in front of her collapsed into a man-sized pit, and a rumble spread throughout the area.

"Yep, that's where I recognized the name from. Ugh. Ya would think people would learn," Ranma grumbled, then brightened up a bit. "But wait, this means I really will get a good fight out of this. Nice."

"What are you talking about?" Lara asked, kneeling beside the trap and examining it, looking remarkably blasé for her recent experience.

"You'll see when we get to the lake. That's what we're here to find, right? I don't suppose you've heard the phrase, let sleeping dragons lie, have ya?" Ranma questioned, hopping up into a nearby tree.

Shaking her head at Ranma's actions and his sheer physicality, Lara shouted back, "If I let sleeping dragons lie, I'd never get anywhere. Now give me some actual bleedin' information about the place, not cryptic responses. Who do you think you are, a tump-penny psychic?"

"Gonna take a leap of faith here and assume ya just insulted me somehow. I'm not trying to be cryptic, I just figure ya won't believe me until you see one of the local wildlife for yourself."

So saying, Ranma continued to look around, getting a feel for the place. It had been a little under a year since he was here the first time, and he was having trouble picking out any landmarks among the foliage. Ryugenzawa was one of the most heavily wooded areas that even Ranma had ever seen in all his travels, let alone in Japan.

Lara grumbled but kept silent until a chittering noise drew her attention to another tree. Turning in that direction, she blinked, cocking her head to one side as she stared at the critter making the noise. "Ranma, is there a reason why I am being eyeballed by a squirrel about as large as an Irish wolfhound?"

"Ya know, for an archeologist, ya maybe shoulda done so more digging locally when you came up here." Ranma leaned down, poking his head into sight for a moment. "Ryugenzawa, this whole valley, is under the effect of the Water of Life. The water in this place makes animals who drink it grow way bigger and way stronger than normal animals."

"I talked about it with your government, and they simply told me this place was a national park!" Lara protested. "They never said anything about that; all they mentioned was there were rumors of an illegal petting zoo years ago and the area being too remote to garner any interest."

"Hah, so the local district folk lied to their superiors. Color me surprised," Ranma grumbled, rolling his eyes. "Then again, maybe they don't know either. I mean, it ain't like anyone who isn't a martial artist would be coming out this far anyway."

"Tell me about it. We topped up in Matsuyama, and to get here nearly drained my bike's tank thanks to the number of twists and turns that road had," Lara grumbled. "And we've been walking all morning to boot." Her glare Ranma's way caused him to smirk, amused by her irritation that he had obviously kept his own pace low to match her own.

Just then, there was a rumble, and a fox leaped out of the woods. This was no normal fox; it was a fox as large as a Tibetan tiger, and it seemed to have none of a normal fox's fear of humans as it charged towards Lara, its mouth open, eager to bite. "Kon, Kon!"

Before Ranma could move, Lara had pulled out one of her handguns and shot the animal through the eye. She did so without any hesitation or pause, as if Lara had faced similar threats numerous times before.

The noise of her gun was loud in the woods, and Ranma stared as the creature collapsed, its body skidding to a halt right in front of Lara. "Right... okay, just so you know, um, some of the critters in here will have armor those guns of yours can't do anything about."

"Even their eyes?" Lara asked as she knelt down beside the beast.

"Don't know about that. Just remember it took a lot to hurt some of them," Ranma shrugged, dropped down next to her and gestured. "Come on, I think I know the direction of the lake you're interested in, and that noise will attract trouble."

"Good, and as we go, you can fill me in on this place more. Obviously, my own information is lacking..."

Two more animal attacks, which Ranma dealt with, and numerous attempts to convince Lara that he should just carry her through the trees later, Lara had all the information on this place that Ranma had. She'd also avoided four more traps, knowing to look for them now. However, she hadn't spotted a small rope that she had brushed past at shoulder height, and now she was looking at the clacking pieces of wood that the rope had been attached to.

"So, this is a trap set by one of these zookeepers, I presume? You'll note, Ranma, that I'm not disbelieving you any longer," Lara said primly, her colts in her hands once more.

"Er, yes, but would you not look to kill either of them? I ain't gonna stand here and just let you shoot 'em. I don't think either of them is tough enough to survive that," Ranma warned.

"I can shoot to wound, you know," Lara grumbled, making no move to put her weapons back in their holsters. "And if you think I'm going to let some stupid plonker who thinks that he's still in charge around here attack me, you have another think coming."

"...Fine, but only if we have to. Trust me, Shinnosuke is pretty easy to deal with if you know what you're doing. The older guy... eh, you can shoot him in the knees for all I care," Ranma snorted. "Honestly, what is it with the older generation of martial artists screwing us youngsters up like they do? Do all of them think mental trauma is a key to greater martial arts skills?"

"I honestly have no idea how to react to that one, but I suppose it makes sense to you," Lara answered with an eyeroll.

A second later, a voice barked out, "You there, what are you doing here? People are not welcome here."

Several dozen yards away on top of a small boulder, a young man had just appeared out of the surrounding foliage. He was scarred on one cheek and wearing ragged clothing. The

broom in one hand and the long blue coat he wore over his shoulders as if he were a zookeeper of some kind completed the look.

Deciding to be diplomatic and trusting Ranma to protect her, Lara holstered one of her guns and reached into her backpack, from which she pulled out a small sheath of papers. "My name's Lara Croft. I'm here with permission from your government to search out and discover an archaeological site of historical sig—"

That was as far as she got before the young man thrust his broom forward so fast Lara couldn't even move the papers away before the end, which looked blunt, stabbed straight through them as if it were a spear. He tore the paper out of her hands, tossing the pieces up into the air and off his broom. "Everyone knows that anything written on paper is a lie! My job is to protect this area from outsiders and outsiders from what is within. Leave, or I will make you, murderer!"

"It was one giant bloody fox, and it was attacking me! How did you suppose a normal person would react!?"

"Not by gunning poor Wugie down like that! You foreigners and your guns, you think that any problem can be solved by shooting at it!" Shinnosuke growled.

"Hey, at least she didn't kill the other two animals we've run into," Ranma said, stepping forward, not listening to Lara muttering about how he should just knock out the idiot. He did actually agree that Lara seemed a bit too trigger-happy. But unlike Shinnosuke, he was willing to make allowances. "I realize this is probably a stupid question with your memory issues, but do you remember me? I came here with a girl named Akane? You're kind of sweet on her."

"I, I remember the name of Akane, I remember meeting her." Shinnosuke held up one of his arms, showing off a blue ribbon there. "I remember she gave me this. But I don't remember you, stranger. I think I would if I'd ever met someone with such an idiotic-looking little pigtail."

"Am I supposed to be taking tips from a 'fashion don't' like you?" Ranma scoffed, then pointed past the other young man deeper into the valley. "Regardless, Lara was telling the truth. She really is here working with the government and has their permission to excavate and dig around or whatever it is archaeologists do."

"This is our land, and we won't let you do whatever it is you want here! Leave, or I will be forced to throw you out," Shinnosuke answered firmly.

Lara growled a bit, but Ranma held up a hand, his eyes surveying the area between him and the other young man. "You want to throw me out, you can come ahead and try."

With that, Ranma charged forward, matched by a similar charge from Shinnosuke. Right before they were about to close, Ranma kicked off the ground, jumping backwards. Shinnosuke

continued his charge forward over the ground where Ranma would have stepped a moment ago, only for the ground to collapse underneath him, dumping him into a pit. Before the other young man could try to push himself out of the pit, Ranma was on him, kicking him hard in the head and knocking him unconscious.

"I really shouldn't be hitting him in the head. Shinno's probably got some brain damage from his grandfather doing that all the time as it is. But it is the fastest way to deal with him," Ranma said philosophically.

"So I can see," Lara said with a shrug. "Should we just leave him here then?"

"Yep. Shinno'll get himself out of the pit eventually. And I would rather we find the lake quickly so we have time to do whatever you need to do before it gets dark out. I think it should go without saying that setting up camp in this valley is not a good idea, right? I mean, I would be fine up a tree for the night, but can you say the same?"

"For sleeping, sure, I've done that before. Now who's underestimating who?" Lara taunted, shaking her head. "Although we will have to be very careful to clear up after ourselves and put away the various equipment I'll be using."

Ranma shrugged and gestured one more time up into the trees. Before he could say anything, Lara continued on, stepping around the pit with the mad zookeeper in it. "And if you suggest one more time that you carry me through the trees. Ranma, I'm going to assume you have some kind of ulterior motive to get your hands on my bod."

Grumbling at that, Ranma followed Lara through the trees, circling around her position as she made her way forward under his direction. Eventually they broke out of the trees at the age of the late that Lara was looking for. "So, this is the lake with the eight-headed dragon in it? It is certainly large enough to house an equally large beast. Reminds me of Loch Ness, if a bit smaller, and with the local foliage right up against the lake most of its length."

Ranma shrugged at that, gesturing to the water. "Well, you're the one with the mission here. What do you want to do first?"

Nodding, Lara instructed Ranma to fetch a few tools and various types of sensor equipment as she examined a map she had made by translating an ancient Japanese scroll she had found in the British History Museum. When he heard that, Ranma had to count to ten before asking, "Did it ever occur to you to, oh, I don't know, return the scroll to the Japanese government? Rather than just a translation?"

"To quote a thief, 'I stole it first, right and proper'" Lara chuckled, shaking her head. "Sorry, Ranma, but I don't see that. My countrymen were very proud of their thieving ways when we used to call ourselves an Empire, and while modern sensibilities are more mixed, I am

certainly not going to try to convince the British government to hand over something so historically significant. Especially not when I'm personally benefiting from it."

Rolling his eyes at that, Ranma continued to set up the devices around the lake as Lara directed. They linked to a program on her laptop that she could use to create a 3D map of the lake using echolocation. As she did, she instantly found what looked like the entrance to a cave along one side of the lake, leading off. She also spotted some rocks and other shapes with unusually uniform, straight edges along the bottom of the lake, suggesting that, in the distant past, there had been buildings of some kind there.

Under her directions, Ranma marked out the area directly above the cave with a red X, as he shouted questions back at her. "If we're just interested in the cave, why don't we follow the signal for that? I can bust us into it from above."

"And destroy who knows what is inside? Unless you can tell me you can both bust through and stop any falling debris from destroying anything within, that's a hard no," Lara retorted. "This is why I had you stuff all of that underwater gear in your ki space too."

Neither of them noticed the water in the lake shifting, bubbles coming to the surface. Lara was busy on her laptop while Ranma was hammering in the two red-painted wooden stakes. They didn't even notice someone else arrive on the scene until he bellowed and attacked. "You there! Whatever you are doing, stop it!"

Warned by the shout, Ranma lazily dodged aside as an elderly man flashed through the air where he had been standing. The old Man's fist instead slammed into the ground with punishing force, hurling the two red stakes away as it shattered the ground. "Leave this place at once, or you will face my Megaton Punch!"

"Your Megaton Punch is worth crap if you can't hit someone with it," Ranma pointed out as he landed nearby, smirking at the old man. *Now you, I don't have any problem breaking in half, you old fart!*

"Grandfather! I don't know who these two are, but they are here for something in the lake!" Shinnosuke's voice came from the other side of the lake.

Lara groaned, setting aside her laptop and jumping to her feet, grabbing her twin pistols, only to stop and stare at the violence of the water in front of them. The three men also became aware of that, and the oldest of them, who looked even more like a cross between a hermit and a zookeeper than his grandson, shook his head. "You fools, you have woken it up once more! The Orochi beast will eat us all!"

From the lake, giant heads emerged. Each was as tall, jaw to the top of its head, as Lara and looked almost like the eastern version of the Dragon: short beards, wide eyes, and a fanged snout to make any crocodile green with envy. They stared all around them, and instantly began

to attack the small devices that Lara had Ranma set up along the lake, completely ignoring the four humans.

“The echolocation devices! The vibrations they are causing must have woken the beast up somehow. Its hearing must be incredible!” Lara yelled in delight.

“You see, you fool! And we have no way to put it back to sleep. My idiot of a grandson let a girl take the flute we used to control the Orochi away with her when she left.”

“Who cares about putting it to sleep again?” Lara yelled, firing at the beast. One of its heads lashed down towards her and the first device Ranma had set up. Lara was able to dodge; the device wasn’t. Nor was her laptop spare. One was bitten and torn out of the ground, the other crushed under the weight of the large lizard-like head. “The beast’s aggressive, so we have to kill it to get to the cave anyway.”

“Woot, finally a fight!” Ranma cheered, grabbing up a nearby tree limb and hurling it at the nearest head. The head facing Lara didn’t stop munching on the device until the makeshift spear crashed into the side of that head, whereupon it and several other heads turned to Ranma.

The oddly medusa-like heads flashed towards him, jaws gaping, but Ranma simply grinned. He slammed a Moko Takabisha into one of them, then ducked underneath another, a punch lashing out which smashed two of the teeth out of the second head’s mouth, but that was all. The ki blast had barely rocked the first head.

“Right, forgot about how freaking durable this thing is,” he mused, leaping upward and rolling between two of the Orochi’s heads, one of them being the one he had hit with a ki blast.

“Stop ganging up on Orochi. I won’t let you harm any more innocent animals! What did Orochi ever do to you!?” The older man, whose name Ranma hadn’t heard before, hurled several small brushes towards Ranma, their bristles made out of sharp wire.

Ranma dodged through them all, then raised a foot to meet the old man’s descending broom. The man had reinforced it with ki, so the broom didn’t break, and he brought it around in an arc before stabbing forward in a series of strikes. Ranma blocked or dodged them all, landing a kick on the old man in return that sent him hurling away to land by his grandson.

“Besides trying to eat me every time it sees me?” Ranma guffawed in return. “Besides trying to eat anyone it sees? It’s a damn menace, you freaking fossil! And Shinnosuke, I can understand familial loyalty and wanting to protect your territory, but seriously?! Are you even happy here, man?”

That brought the younger of the pair up short for a moment, then he cocked his head, staring at Ranma. "Wait, why are you acting like you and I have met before? I would remember meeting someone as rude as you."

"Oh shut up," Lara said, pointing one of her twin handguns toward the boy, who blanched. Whatever issues he had with remembering things, it was very clear that he at least understood what guns were. "Three iterations of your memory issues, and that joke's gotten old already."

Lara's other gun unloaded into the same head that had swallowed her laptop and was once more coming towards her, but didn't do any damage. Lara was forced to dodge away, flipping herself hand over foot several times to get away from the questing heads until they turned their attention to Ranma, who was actually hurting them. However, she was still able to intimidate both of the 'zookeepers' into backing away. "I might not be able to do much about that beastie, but you two aren't bulletproof, so back off!"

With the two locals cowed by Lara for the moment, Ranma charged forward, not even noticing when he transformed into his female body thanks to a splash from the water of the lake as the seventh and last small Orochi-head joined its brethren. Ranma had become so used to it over the past few years that he just automatically altered his sense of balance along with the change, knowing his arms would be shorter, his legs less powerful. He had even trained his female form to be faster than his male body to throw enemies off, something that he took advantage of now as he bounced and danced in among the many heads of the Orochi.

"You got that beast tied down, Ranma?" Lara asked, pointing one gun at each of the locals.

"Yep. Doubt this beastie has gotten any smarter since last time, so I should be able to deal with it in the same way. Um, ya don't really want me to try and kill it, do ya? Only, not only does that seem overkill, but I'm kind of worried it would go all Hydra on us," Ranma warned.

Lara blanched. "And here's me without any acid or lots of fire. No, ya don't have to kill it. The locals, as dense as they are, have a point. The Orochi is a unique animal and should be studied. All we need is to knock it out for a bit."

"Right... I'll get right on that," Ranma muttered, amused at Lara's words and somewhat annoyed with her somewhat arrogant view of the world at the same time. *Still, her reaction to the real head of the Orochi will be hilarious.*

Seeing that Ranma didn't seem to be in any danger, indeed, he seemed to be having fun, bouncing between the heads and sliding down one to kick another, Lara turned her full attention back to the two locals. "Now, I am going to say this in very small words so you dim bulbs can understand. I'm on a mission for your national government to search for ancient

historical sites around here. I had an official writ to that extent until Shin-boy over there shredded them with his broom. So you both can..."

"Who are you again?" Shinnosuke interrupted.

"GAAAA..." Lara growled, cocking the safety on one of her colts back for a moment before calming down. "Right, don't let the idiot's buffoonery get to you..."

"You're the idiot for coming here! These animals are under our protection!" the ancient-looking man shouted. "We won't let you exploit them."

"We don't want to exploit the animals... just whatever might be at the bottom of the lake," Lara ended in a low mutter. Unfortunately, Lara's shaking her head proved to be a mistake as both zookeepers charged forward.

"Damn it!" she grunted, firing at them both. The pair had spread out and were now zigzagging and leaping into the air. Lara couldn't keep her eyes on both of them and had no luck shooting either of them before they closed.

"Ranma, some help would be nice!" she shouted, rolling forward and whirling, bringing up one colt to redirect a strike from one broom end before Shinnosuke's broom head slammed into her midriff. Lara let out an oof of air as she was flung backward, her back crashing into the ground with numbing force. *Bloody hell, these martial arts types hit like brick walls!*

At that point, Ranma crashed feet-first down onto the older man's head, driving him into the ground. "And that's enough out of you two!"

Shinnosuke turned, lashing out. He was faster than his grandfather, but to Ranma, he might have been moving in syrup for how slow he was. Ranma dodged around his attacks, then, as Lara cocked her guns, yelled, "Don't bother, just keep the old man covered. I got this." A moment later, this proved to be the case as precise strikes to Shinnosuke's arms had him releasing his mop, opening himself up to a kick to the side. Before he could right himself, Ranma was behind him, and an almost gentle touch at the base of his skull had Shinnosuke clear out for the second time that day.

Meanwhile, Lara was staring at the Yamato no Orochi. "You know, Ranma, when I said you had the beast tied down, I didn't mean it literally."

Presently, the seven large heads of the dragon – Lara had noticed one was missing – were tied up like the world's most impossible knot. All of them were still squirming, but getting nowhere. "I don't know what's more impressive. The fact you did that, or how quickly you did it."

"Heh, it's the best way to deal with that beastly. Tie it up and then deal with each head one after another. I'll finish knocking it out if you can keep Hermit Senior over there contained."

"Be serious," Lara grumbled, shaking her head and moving over to the groaning and slowly rousing elderly idiot.

Finishing off the old man was the work of a moment for Lara, who simply pistol-whipped him upside the head several times until he stopped twitching. After that, the two of them spent a few minutes tying Shinnosuke up along with his grandfather, dumping them both to one side of the lake. "That's assault, assault on a duly appointed governmental worker, and obstruction," she grumbled. "And considering living out here can't be healthy, and what Ranma mentioned before, I am gonna see if I can do you for child abuse too, old man."

"You were awfully gentle with that guy, considering he was basically disobeying a direct order from the government to cease and desist and allow us to explore," Lara said later as she finished checking over her wetsuit and mask. "And can I say it's nice to know that you still need to breathe with everything else you can do?"

Ranma looked up from where she was working on setting the gas canister on her back, rolling her eyes at the older woman's comment. "I'm still human. I might be able to hold my breath for... I think it was twenty minutes the last time I timed it? Something like that. But I do still need to breathe."

"Huh, impressive." Lara glanced over at the pile of stuff that Ranma had pulled out of her ki space, shaking her head at the fact that Ranma was still dressed in her loose silk pants despite changing her top into a bikini. *I understand the need for pockets, but she could still wear something a little more fashionable, right?*

"But are you sure about swimming down there?" Ranma worried. "Being in contact with that moss is enough to let the water affect the animals around here so much, what will it do to you and me?"

"I'm certain there's something down there, yes. The echolocation mapping software told me that before the Orochi came out of the water," Lara answered. "As for the water or the moss floating in it doing anything to us, probably nothing so long as we don't do it every day and don't get any of the water into our mouths. That's why I brought in the special full facemasks for us rather than just the mouthpieces," Lara soothed.

She wasn't a regular scientist or even an archeologist. Being careful and taking her time was not in Lara's lexicon. "And you didn't answer my question anyway."

"That you're so blasé about this is really worrisome. Give me something I can fight any day, not magic or stuff like this," Ranma muttered, shaking her head. "As for Forget-me-boy, why would I be harsher on him? Shinnosuke was raised here, raised to defend the beasts from

outsiders and vice versa by his crazy-ass Pops, something he and I have in common. Shinnosuke was just doing his job as he saw it. Besides, he's a lot weaker than I am. Part of my Code means I don't beat up on people weaker than I am if I can help it."

"I take it you knew him? I mean, you mentioned you had before, but the way you're talking about him now, it sounds as if you were friends. And you mentioned Akane earlier, too..." Lara guessed, trailing off leadingly.

"I've run into Shinno before, yeah. This girl I was living with, and before ya say anything, no, we weren't involved, although our parents were pushing it," Ranma grumbled at the end. "We came up here, and I thought Akane and Mr. Memory Loss were sweet on one another. I tried to help them out until we figured out his memory issues. There's no way you could be in a relationship with someone who forgets you every few hours, ya know? Beyond that, he's just too damn stubborn for his own good, like ya saw,"

"Hah, too damn stubborn, you'd know something about that, wouldn't you?" Lara teased, only to scowl as Ranma retorted that it took one to know one. Lara didn't really have a defense against that statement, so, with a sigh, she finished tying back her hair, pulling the mask into place a second later. "Come on," she went on, her voice now muffled through the glass. "Let's get exploring."

Ranma nodded and followed the older girl down into the water; the two dove into the lake. Swimming as deep as they could go, the lights on their helmets lit their way until they reached the bottom of the lake. Unfortunately, with the destruction of the markers and Lara's computer, they would have to search around the edge of the lake manually before finding the cave entrance Lara was looking for.

Almost immediately upon entering the water, Lara saw a glimpse of the real face of the Yamato no Orochi, causing her to scream and flail in shock, swimming away from it as fast as she could go. It took a few minutes for the fact that it wasn't moving to register, and when it did, she swam right up to Ranma, thumped their faceplates together and gave the redhead such a glare that it should by all rights have incinerated her on the spot.

Instead, Ranma simply grinned back at her, and Lara finally snarled, sighed and pushed away from the redhead.

It took them about forty minutes to find the cave. By that point, Ranma had fought off several large eel-like creatures who thought the two young ladies looked just scrumptious, but they still had time on their air canisters as they tread water in front of what looked like a random large boulder set into the side of the lake. She gestured at it, and Ranma nodded, moving forward to grab the edge of the stone. She tried to move it and had a lot of trouble getting her fingers in behind the stone for a few moments before pulling it away.

The current created as the water flooded into the cave caused Lara's eyes to widen, and she shouted, "COCK!" inside her helmet, but there was nothing she could do about it now. *Damn it, I hope this isn't just a shallow cave, or else the water is going to do a lot of damage!*

So annoyed was she by her oversight that Lara didn't realize the current had grabbed at her as well until it had pulled her towards the tunnel fast enough to cause her to scream in shock. Only Ranma's quick reaction time saved Lara from a concussion at best. The redhead's tiny hand – and where the extra height/weight went when Ranma transformed still bothered Lara – grabbed onto Lara's shoulder like a vice, the martial artist swimming away from the cave, dragging Lara as if she weighed nothing at all.

They stayed away until the underwater currents had subsided, by which time they had to turn around and head back up to change out their air canisters.

Once they had pulled off their masks, Ranma asked, "So, should we set up camp now and go back down there tomorrow morning? The sun's setting and—" Ranma interrupted himself with a sigh as she caught Lara's look. "Yeah, I didn't think so." *Yeesh, she's about as obsessed with archeology... or treasure hunting... as I am with martial arts.*

Back in the water, Lara took the lead, having left a small phosphorescent flare at the entrance to the cave. The light from the flare was kind of disturbing in Ranma's mind, almost like the lighting in cheesy horror movies. But Lara swam past it like it was second nature, and Ranma shrugged and followed her in.

Inside the cave, the light of the flare quickly began to dim, but Lara used some kind of sticky substance to place a series of lights on the cave's wall, almost like a glow-in-the-dark trail of breadcrumbs. She gave Ranma a thumbs-up after the third one, and Ranma nodded back, knowing that she wouldn't have so many of those things if Ranma hadn't used his ki space.

From there on, they swam through what was obviously a tunnel rather than a cavern, one that became a bit thinner as it went on until it was around three feet by six feet. Luckily, neither of them suffered from claustrophobia, and they continued on.

Eventually, Lara's light showed a series of steps leading up the gentle angle of the cave. *Well, that certainly shows that someone was here in the past. Whether or not this is the real cave of Amaterasu or not is still in question, Lara, don't get too excited just yet...*

The two of them began to climb, and a moment later, both she and Ranma paused as their lights glinted off something just at the edge of the light. Moving forward, they stopped once more as what it was became clear.

Gold covered the bottom of the steps leading upwards. Gold covered the walls, and even the top of the cave, disappearing into the darkness beyond the flashlights.

The two women exchanged a glance and then moved forward more quickly. They were soon pushing up out of the water, pushing up out of the water as it fell away from the last few gold-covered steps. Those steps led up into a cavern lined with gold. In the center of the gold, the trail of moss led forward, now covering the floor from one side of the cave to the other.

Gold, Lara noticed instantly, which appeared to have been melted at some point in the distant past, as if the cavern's walls had been converted into molten gold that hardened into various shapes and strange forms. *Not just from magma or something else either. If it had been lava, other material would've been left behind along with the gold.* Everywhere she looked, she saw only gold, nothing else mixed in, at least not visibly. *Bizarre.*

As she looked around, Lara became somewhat dazzled by the gold despite her best efforts. *I mean, even if this gold is only on the surface of the rest of the stone here, we're looking at millions of pounds worth of gold!*

She only stopped trying to calculate the actual amount of money all this represented when Ranma thumped her on the shoulder, gesturing her forward. "Come on, let's see if this is actually worth it."

The blithe way Ranma dismissed the gold amused Lara enough to put her own reaction to it to one side, beyond remarking, "Well, the government's going to be happy they funded this little expedition of mine. Even if we don't find anything else, the gold here is going to be enough to repay their investment fifteenfold. More, if the gold goes into the wall deeper than a centimeter."

Deeper into the cave, the two girls found what looked like a bed carved into the cave wall. This was made of gold as well, its surface showing it had been melted multiple times, with various small images marked into it. A few other tiny trinkets scattered around the place looked to be made of glass and stone beads, and a few other bits of cloth that had long since eroded, showing this place had not been quite airtight, regardless of the entrance.

At the far end of the cave, a small altar sat. Around the altar and on top of it were more markings, but this time in Japanese kanji, or rather, not really. As Lara knelt in front of them, she saw they were instead some kind of pre-kanji symbols, which looked to Lara like Kanji, Chinese, and Korean all mixed into one. "Could this be Yayoi Language, the language of the original settlers of Japan? That would be a fascinating find if so."

Ranma wasn't listening. Instead, she had moved over to the bed and was examining the carvings there. "Weird, these look like the kind of images a kid'd make on a wall with a crayon when bored. Funny. Some of them are good, others not so much."

Shaking her head, Lara looked back at Ranma. "Could you hand me a notebook? And then figure out a way to see how deep the gold goes? I don't think we want to keep swimming through that entrance every day, with Orochi still alive, but it's going to take me a while to

transcribe all these images, let alone decipher them. Like I said before, I would wager that the government will want to get in here if only for the gold."

Ranma looked up at the ceiling, wondering aloud, "How far do you think we came?"

"We weren't traveling at a very steep angle, so we traveled quite a way. Why? What are you thinking of, and why do I get the feeling I should run for the hills?" Lara scowled, glared at the redhead.

"Welll..." Ranma drawled. "I have this technique called the Bakusai Tenketsu. It lets me shatter rock... and ground, and other things. So, if we can figure out where the cave is from above, we can mark out the area and dig down, really easily. And isn't one of the things you stuffed into my ki space a massive metal detector?"

"Yes, although I'll need to get a new laptop first..." Lara stared around her, then they both turned as the water by the entrance shifted a bit. As if, Lara thought with some unease, a large creature was moving around in the distance. "Yeah, let's get out of here and come back in from above, Ranma. Good thinking."

Getting out past the now thrashing Orochi wasn't fun, and if Lara had been on her own and able to get this far in the first place, Lara would have been overcome then. The movement of the water was simply too strong for her to force her way through. But with Ranma dragging her, Lara made it to the edge of the lake, where they both exited quickly. At that point, Ranma dragged the two 'zookeepers' away, heading off to their hut, where she dumped them just as the old man was rousing himself from the head trauma Lara had given him. Ranma made sure they would both remain tied up, then headed back to the lake.

Meanwhile, Lara had moved well away from the lake after marking the edge of it right above the cave. With that, she moved away in a straight line, dealing with a few animals as she went before Ranma met up with her. Ranma glared at Lara, seeing the corpse of another animal in front of her, this one a giant badger. "Okay... Well, at least we have enough meat to last us for a while."

Lara blanched, but at Ranma's continued glare, caved in. She had eaten worse in the past, after all. "Fine, but right now I need to go get another laptop. So, which way is the exit to this place?"

Snorting, Ranma lifted the taller girl into her arms, ignoring her splutter of indignation. "With the Ranma express, any way is an exit."

It took them a few days to map out where the cave was, as it turned out that the tunnel they had been in had not, in fact, been straight. Eventually, the metal detector found the cave, and Ranma's rock-breaking technique did the rest. The gleam of the outer edge of the gold nearly blinded them both, and they had to deal with Mr. Megaton and Shin-no-memory, as

Ranma called them at least three times a day, but at that point, Ranma was able to use his ki claws to cut into the gold. Gold wasn't exactly strong, although there were four inches of it surrounding the cave, not just a centimeter.

When Ranma cut through it, the moss on the floor of the cave began to shimmer, almost glowing itself when the sun hit him. The moss also began to grow quickly, but only in the portions directly exposed to sunlight. "So, er, you interested in the moss too, or what?"

"I'll probably take a few samples, but no. The history of this place is what interests me the most," Lara replied. "Anything else, well, the government will have to make a decision to remove the Orochi before doing anything more, if they choose to. They might not."

With easier access to the tunnel secured, Ranma's job turned from assistant excavator to full-time bodyguard. Lara spelunked and tried to translate the language on the altar while Ranma guarded the entrance, fending off numerous attempts from the animals and the two zookeepers, who simply didn't seem able to get a hint. "Reminds me of my Pops and his friend, the human waterfall," Ranma quipped one night. "Every time me an' Akane shouted we weren't interested in the whole marriage agreement, they'd just keep coming back, demanding and pushing. Heh, and these two are about as effective as Pops and Weeping Man were, too."

Of course, Ranma wasn't willing to let Lara just concentrate on her work. Getting Lara to do anything was a bit of a trial, but Ranma was adamant and pulled her away for training for a few hours every day. He pushed her to perform various katas, working them into a single whole, creating what Ranma took to calling Gun-Fu.

During these training sessions, the two of them got to know one another better. Lara's high-class heritage came about, as did the nature of her mother's passing, although she didn't share how her father died just yet. Some misadventures were shared in both directions, along with what they hoped to do going forward after the pair of missions Ranma had been assigned to Lara for were completed.

Strangely enough, at least to Lara, the time they spent together didn't build any kind of attraction between them. That was highly unusual in her experience, but she put it down to Ranma's curse. At first, she thought he might be gay, but Ranma didn't show any sign of interest in boys when she tried to bring them into conversations either. Further, there were a few times when he did blush and stammer around Lara, so that wasn't it. It seemed as if, for the first time in her young life, Lara found a young man who didn't seem to think she was his type, and that astonished and amused her in equal measure.

Eventually, his connection to Wonder Woman came out, with Ranma admitting he would be heading to America once he was done working for the government. Hearing that, Lara chuckled to herself, shaking her head. *Okay, if he has met that lady and is used to girls as gorgeous as her, I don't feel so baffled about his lack of reaction to me anymore.*

"I know something about Wonder Woman, although I've never met the lady personally. I would rather not go to the colonies at all, but considering that she and the Justice League are becoming a little more active worldwide, maybe we'll meet eventually? I'd love to ask her a few questions about ancient history. Like with this whole expedition, I'm really interested in the line between history and mythology, you know?"

Ranma winced. "Er, from what little I remember of Greek history, they told me when I was on the island, I'd set aside any thoughts ya had about the heroes back then. The term hero definitely meant something way different back then in comparison to today, even when you take the legends into account."

"I'm more than happy with that idea," Lara answered earnestly. "The truth always matters more than whether or not we are comfortable with it."

Nodding at that, Ranma smiled cheerfully and smacked Lara lightly on the thigh. "And speaking of things we're not always comfortable with, get up. Let's get back to work on making certain you know what to do with those guns of yours in close combat."

OOOOOOO

Cassie sighed as she lounged on top of the seawall leading down to the harbor, staring up at the dawn sky in the distance, feeling more alone now than she had when Kara had arrived on the island. It had been a month now since Kara had left, and Cassie was missing her terribly, once more left behind on the island by a friend just like she had been when Ranma was kicked out. The fact that once more her friend hadn't wanted to leave but had been convinced to do so did not make it any easier for Cassie to be left behind again.

That feeling of loneliness always came back to the young Amazon at moments like these. Donna and the Queen did what they could, keeping her busy, pushing her training even harder, and, thanks to Kara, she had finally reached the point where she was training with the adult warriors. None of them resented the younger girl's greater physical abilities or growing skills, which made for a much better environment.

But neither were they friends. The warriors didn't go out of their way to exclude Cassie, but she was still younger than they were, and they had formed friendships and cliques that went back centuries. She wasn't an unwanted outsider any longer, but she still wasn't part of the group. So, every day would start and end the same, with Cassie out here, staring out to the ocean, wishing for Diana or Kara to return. Or maybe, wishing to head out after them, but not knowing how.

Unbeknownst to Cassie, the young blonde Amazon was being watched at the moment.

From nearby, Queen Hippolyta stared at her for several moments before turning to look at the priestess of Hera, who stood beside her. "I understand that this might be the best for

Cassie, but are you certain this is what the goddess wants? I oppose letting Cassie leave. She is still very young after all. Diana was in her twenties when she first left the island, while Cassie is barely sixteen, and my daughter was far more mature for her age than Cassie is."

"Lady Hera was most insistent. The time is coming quickly when Cassie will need to stand beside Diana and their fellow superheroes. What threats Lady Hera sees coming, she is not as forthcoming about, but she is certain that Cassie will do much good in Man's World and will grow in doing so in a way we will be proud of."

"I note that you are not saying she would be safe," Hippolyta answered, shaking her head.

"Would you believe me if I did?" The older woman in the robe asked incredulously.

Hippolyta grimaced at that, then admitted she probably wouldn't, and turned, leading the way back to her palace and the temple beyond.

That night, Cassie found herself eating with the Queen once more. Normally, Cassie would be polite if somewhat withdrawn and very formal at these meals, but what Hippolyta had just told her had put a grin on her face that it would probably take a war hammer to remove. "Are you serious, my Queen!?" She practically squealed. "I can really go to Man's World in a few weeks?"

"Inside voice, dear," Hippolyta drawled, making a show of reaching up to one of her ears and working a finger in and out of it as if she had gone momentarily deaf. The younger girl had the grace to look embarrassed at that, but was still staring at Hippolyta eagerly, and the Queen chuckled, shaking her head. *Wanderlust. I suppose it grips all of us when we are young. I just hope that, like Diana, Cassie does not come to much mischief out there. Not as I did.*

"Yes, child, in two weeks, Diana will arrive to help transport you into Man's World. There you will live with her and continue your training. Whether or not you become a superhero, as Diana is called in her alter ego, is up to my daughter and perhaps her allies. I am unclear about the whole hero business, frankly. Honestly, would it kill Diana to contact me more often? A mother worries..."

Cassie let the Queen go off on that tangent for some time, turning her attention back to her food and counting down in her head. When she reached five minutes, the Queen was finally back on the subject at hand, and Cassie tuned in once more. "Anyway, yes. Hera has decided that we Amazons need another representative out there in Man's World. For what reason, Hera is not as clear about. However, what she is certain of is that your training needs to change a bit."

"Change? You mean become more serious about physical training? I can skip out on my other lessons to train harder," Cassie suggested, trying hard not to sound too eager. Kara had

been the bookworm between the two of them, even if their competition had spread into such areas. Without Kara around, Cassie saw no need to push herself further.

Chuckling, the Queen shook her head, but her tone and expression were serious, if somewhat sympathetic, as she went on. "No, child. Instead, your training will be to see if we can harness some of your divinely given powers beyond the merely physical. I realize that is a... delicate topic, and I do not wish to make you uncomfortable. But that aspect of your being needs cultivation."

Cassie grimaced, staring down at her plate, extremely uncomfortable with the very idea of even talking about her so-called divine origins. She had been told a few years back why her mother, Helena, hadn't really wanted Cassie around. She had learned about her real sperm donor being Zeus, and how he had nearly ruined her mother's marriage to Laphelia. She didn't blame her mother for that response, of course. All the blame lay on Zeus and his inability to keep his man bits in his pants. But even so, acknowledging the fact that she had such a connection to the divine made her very uncomfortable.

"Are you sure that's a good idea, your highness? I mean, I thought the whole idea of my not knowing about my origin was the fact that tapping into that aspect of me might draw Zeus's eye. Which in turn might convince him to push past the barrier Lady Hera and the other goddesses empower around the island."

"That is a concern, but remember, child. The power is within you, it is part of who you are," Hippolyta answered sternly. "You do not have to call upon Zeus as a priestess would Hera to create divine miracles. The magic is already there. You just need to learn how to use it."

The look Cassie gave the Queen showed her how uncertain she was about that. Yet Hippolyta simply smiled faintly and continued to convince the girl on that score. It wouldn't do for Cassie to continue to grow while being so uncomfortable with one aspect of her very being, after all.

That night, Cassie went to sleep somewhat worried about the training to come. The Queen had been very vague about how exactly she would draw out Cassie's divine powers...

And yet at the same time, she could barely force her eyes closed, so excited was she to see Diana again, to see Man's World with her mistress by her side. *And hopefully Kara too! After all, once I'm in Man's World, nothing is stopping us from meeting up again. I miss her something fierce! And maybe, maybe I can even find Ranma again? It's been more than a decade, so I doubt he even remembers me, but even so, that could be fun too, especially if he's kept training like I think he will have.*

OOOOOOO

“So what are ya going after this time?” Ranma asked, as she sat lazily in the chair in the private ship that Lara had bought for this mission. The sun was so nice that both she and Lara had decided to work on their tans, letting the ship drift for a while. The two of them were the only people aboard the small ship – the size was the only thing stopping Ranma from calling it a yacht – as Ranma’s multiple skill set had convinced Lara she didn’t need a large crew for this job.

“We’re heading to the island of Yamatai. It’s a remote island several hundred miles off the southern shores of Okinawa, one that is habitually plagued by storms. A lot of experts the world over have tried to explain that away, but even before I met you and your curse, Ranma, I wondered if there was something magical going on there,” Lara answered, lying beside Ranma in a far more daring bathing suit. The V-shaped suit had finally won a full-on blush and stutter from Ranma when Lara came out to join her, something that Lara was quite smug about, given how rarely she could get a rise out of Ranma.

“Her name is Himiko, the Sun Queen. She was mentioned in some historical texts the Japanese government handed over to me, the younger sister of an Emperor during the end of the Yayoi Period in Japan. The Earliest time mentioning Yamatai and Himiko is from 170 AD, but the island is continually mentioned until the storms began to be noted in historical writing in Okinawa during the Nara Period.”

Ranma wracked her brain for a moment, then nodded. “That period had a lot of natural disasters. So, one more group of disasters wouldn’t have made much of a difference at the time. But you say the island keeps on getting hit by storms?”

“Yep. It’s become the Japanese equivalent of the Bermuda Triangle, only much smaller. The Japanese government believes that if we can get there, the knowledge we find will be worth the risk, and I agree. It isn’t just about Himiko and the island’s odd weather pattern, either. One mention of Yamatai says that, early in the Sun Empress’s reign, her brother sent her a whole library of ancient tablets recording Japan’s history up to that point. Even if the writings are more propaganda or mythical in nature, that kind of find would be amazing,” Lara said enthusiastically.

Ranma thought about it and could understand that. *And I can see the government looking at those storms, going ‘ooh, magic’ and deciding to toss me at it, regardless of Lara’s skillset. Just makes sense, really. But...* “Okay, and now for the real reason you’re interested in it? Magic ain’t enough to interest you so much that you’d jump at this mission so quickly after the last one, and I doubt those ancient tablets would be either. Not given your reaction to magic and how leery you are of it.”

“Well, there is the connection between the idea of someone being called a Sun Goddess and the fact we found Amaterasu’s cave and know she existed once,” Lara answered loftily, turning away and sticking her nose in the air for a moment. But Ranma kept on staring at her, one sardonic eyebrow demanding explanation. And eventually Lara cracked. “There’s also the

fact that my father was researching Yamatai when he died. He was reaching out to a man named Dr. Fate for help at the time, but I couldn't find anything out about him, save the fact that he's some kind of hero. Where he is, how to contact him, what problems, nothing. Which brought me back to Yamatai and Himiko."

Blinking at that, Ranma shrugged. "Okay, that makes some sense, I guess. So was your father attacked because of looking into this stuff, or did he disappear on the island?"

"I think he was killed because he was going to attempt to go there. Someone or some group was willing to kill to keep people from going there," Lara answered firmly.

"So the chances of us being attacked even before we hit the storms are pretty high, right?" Ranma asked.

"I'd say so, yes." Lara turned onto her side, watching Ranma blush and turn away from the amount of jiggle this displayed, but refraining from having fun with the younger youth for now. "How good are you against ranged fire and fighting at sea?"

"You know, there was this debate in my old high school on who was cooler, ninjas or pirates. I never understood that, I mean, ninjas obviously, because they are based on martial artists. This will give me a chance to prove it," Ranma answered with a vicious grin.

More than a month later, Ranma stared up at the edge of a pit trap in the deepest parts of the underground complex of the palace of Himiko, his feet braced on two large, lethal-looking, and very dirty iron spikes set into the pit trap's floor. In his arms, Lara looked quite shame-faced, trying not to catch his eyes as he looked at her scathingly. "Pirates, dealt with them in a bare few hours. Storms, we got through those alright with your brain and my brawn, with your ship intact. Fake mysticism, puzzles and cannibals, bullets and fists dealt with 'em all. That freaking vampire spirit, a lot of legwork and extrapolation, sure, but in the end, no big deal."

It had been a very full month, and Ranma was glossing over a **lot**. How the cannibals had called themselves the Solarii Brotherhood. How the leader of the Brotherhood had been a member of a group called the Trinity at one point, a group of mysterious religious fanatics who had Lara's father killed when he looked into Yamatai, where they had an interest in figuring out Himiko's power over the storms. How the vampire spirit had been the original Himiko, slain in an ancient battle against someone she cursed as 'the blasted foreign interloper.'

While their time on the island had been quite fraught, and Himiko's ghost had proven one hell of an opponent, the rest of the problems had been relatively straightforward to deal with. That was what happened when you brought along a one-man army who could just as easily tear down a mountain fortress as put up an amazing treehouse. To say nothing of Lara's brain and her numerous guns, again brought along courtesy of Ranma.

Which made this moment all the more amusing to Ranma, as before this, Lara had not really put a foot wrong while the pair translated, exploring, and figured out what to do about all the problems they'd faced on this island. "And now, now, when we are just looking through this building for the historical documents and what 'killed' Himiko, this happens."

With every sentence, Lara twitched, but Ranma was remorseless. Lara had teased him horribly each time his own lazy-lion attitude had gotten them in trouble on this island, and he was for sure going to return the favor now. "'I know what I'm doing' you said. 'There's no way that trap still works,' you said."

"UGH! Fine, I'm human, I mess up, damnit. You don't have to harp on about it. You're such an utter cock sometimes, Ranma!" Lara grumbled. "I thought the pit trap mechanism would be so much rust by this point. Now, can you get..."

Lara trailed off, and Ranma blinked, jostling her slightly in his arms. "Oy, ya were saying? I kind of want to toss you up there and get out of this trap, y'know."

"I don't know why you're so annoyed about it; it isn't like this trap was much of a threat to you," Lara muttered before pointing at the side of the pit. "Take me over there."

Ranma shrugged and, balancing easily on the supposedly death-dealing spikes, walked them over to the wall, whereupon Lara shoved her flashlight into his mouth with a muttered, "Hold my torch."

He glared past the bulk of the flashlight at the back of her head for a second, then paused as he looked at what was inscribed on the wall. "ISTD zat Geeppf?"

"I didn't understand that at all. Didn't your Mum ever tell you not to speak with your mouth full?" Lara snickered, leaning forward and to one side to examine the circle of ancient Greek. The fact that it was written in a spiral made it somewhat annoying to deal with. "But I made out a G there, so I'm going to assume and say yes, it's Greek. How did you know that?"

Ranma conked Lara on the back of the head with her flashlight, mumbling as he did, causing her to roll her eyes. "Ah, yeah, that was my mistake. Just hold on and let me translate this for the nonce."

The fact that Ranma instantly began to make beeping noises around her torch annoyed Lara no end, but she persevered, promising bloody vengeance in the future. Finally, she had it. "Okay, I've got it, and now, let's fall back up top and plan some Ranma." She helped this process along by reaching up and pulling her torch out of his mouth, making a face as she did. "UGH, Ranma, you got slobber all over it."

"Ya shoved it in my mouth! Yer lucky I think that flashlight's too precious right now to bite through and be done with it," Ranma retorted, hopping upwards.

A second later, they were in the basement of Himiko's palace. Normally, the basement would be where things were stored in a palace, either records or prisoners. But Himiko seemed to have already begun to hide from the sun when she was still alive, and the basement in her palace was actually the throne room and Himiko's personal living quarters. Or rather, where she and her group of all-female priestesses lived. If the records and historical items Lara was interested in were anywhere, they were here.

But in each room, they had found much the same. The throne was a great find, made of gold, bronze and rubies. There were dozens of similar statues and artifacts, damaged only slightly by time, thanks to being here in the basement. All of them were amazing examples of Japanese artwork. But there weren't any scrolls, tablets or anything else to show the history of the place. Up until this point, Lara had only found the historical records of people who had come to the island previously, or those few written records left behind by the civilians of Yamatai, written far after Himiko had originally died. Those were amazing, but not what the Japanese government had paid Lara to find.

But now, Lara had a lead. "That Greek, it says, 'to learn, one must first learn to deal with tragedy. The First step to wisdom is often the most perilous.' I think we've found the hidden entrance to the library!"

"You think it has anything to do with what Himi-aho's spirit was shrieking about a foreign interloper? This Greek wizard comes along, beats her, steals her stuff and hides it underneath her palace?" Ranma mused. "Wish I could say if that was a good move or not."

"I would wager all my inheritance on it, Ranma," Lara answered with a grin. "Besides, that pit trap, which was Greek manufacture, not Japanese. The use of iron spikes and the timing of it, I should have realized. Regardless, it's time to break out the echolocation devices again."

Shrugging, Ranma did so, and Lara pulled out her laptop – she'd bought another after the Orochi incident – and after a few minutes, she grinned in triumph. "Yep. There's a passage there for sure."

One adroit use of a specially prepared explosive later, a man-sized hole had been blown in the side of the pit. Ranma had also taken the time to remove many of the spikes, and the two of them had waited for a time to let the bad air within the pit escape. Now they jumped down, with Lara leading the way along. Four stiletto, dart and bladed traps later, Ranma and Lara found themselves entering what looked like a mix of living quarters, library and treasure room.

"YES! And, and some of those are Greek and Egyptian... Carthaginian too. Bloody hell, I think I just had a crisis!" Lara exclaimed, looking around excitedly. "Bring out my laptop, my numbers kits, and my books, Ranma, my god, this, this could be the biggest find in history!"

"Even after all mention of magic is removed?" Ranma asked, bemused. Lara and the Japanese government agreed on that point. The world was not ready to know that magic

existed. Not like this anyway. The world was still grappling with the existence of heroes, supervillains, and aliens. It didn't need to know that magic and ancient gods were both real.

"Even then!" Lara bubbled happily. "Heck, even if these are all about the travels of this adventurer, whoever he was, I would wager we can learn a bleedin' heck of a lot!" With that, Lara began moving around and cataloging the items they'd found, writing the period and language each represented into her laptop as she took pictures.

As Lara was doing this, Ranma found himself walking around the area. Something was niggling at his senses, some kind of sixth-sense thing Ranma put down to his perfected Neko-Ken training. *It ain't dangerous, but it's like, like an electric storm sort of feeling... like a potential in the air, enough to make the hairs on my neck stand up. Weird...*

As Lara continued her work, Ranma soon felt almost compelled to look to the back of the library. Moving in that direction, he found what looked like any other scroll shelf against the far wall. Yet there was something about it, something that drew Ranma's attention to it. And as he looked at it, Ranma noticed that, unlike the other bookshelves, this one was not a standalone. Instead, it was set **into** the wall rather than against it. Looking it over carefully, Ranma stepped back and tugged on one side, then the other, experimentally. One noticeably clicked, and he moved back to it after testing the other, tugging.

The bookshelf came away from the wall as Ranma pulled on it, and on the other side was... well, to Ranma's eyes it looked like a laboratory. Glass vials around the place connected by tubes filled with different colored liquids, a small fireplace, an urn of some kind, numerous tables scattered around, along with a few open scrolls. In the corner of one table, a small disc of some kind of metal floated in what Ranma thought might be a magnetic (or magic) field, spinning like a CD. In the center of the room was a large chair piled high with rotting furs, while in front of it was a large dagger with a single edge that gleamed in the light, showing no sign of the ages since it had been laid there.

Narrowing his eyes, Ranma stepped forward, frowning thoughtfully as he looked around. "Alright, I give up. Why would someone go to all the effort to hide a laboratory after hiding everything else down here so well? And do such a piss poor job of it, too."

"Perhaps because what was studied here was so important or private?" a voice asked from nowhere, its tone both sardonic and snarky.

Ranma whirled, crouching down, one fist pulled back, the other thrust forward, claws of ki appearing around his fingers as he readied himself for combat. Anyone who could sneak up on him like that was not someone to take lightly.

There was no one there. Nothing but a spinning disk... Seeing that, Ranma groaned. "So not magnets then. More magic?"

"Indeed, although the magnets are a good guess, and show you at least have some knowledge. But how exactly are you in here at all? My calculations indicated that it has not been long enough for most magic to have left the world, and thus, my wards should still be up. And yet you also know of magic," the voice mused, losing its snarky tone. The voice was that of an old man, almost like O-Sensei's. "Fascinating."

"Yeah, I know that," Ranma said with a nod, slowly untensing. There was no actual threat; the voice sounded irascible, but also intrigued. *For sure puts it above Himi-aho.* "In my defense, yer hiding your lab was kind of obvious. And um, what language are we both speaking right now?"

"Oh, what makes you say that? As for the language, we are speaking our own languages and hearing in that format too."

Setting aside whatever the hell that could mean, Ranma deadpanned at the spinning disk thing, figuring he should treat that as if it were the spirit. "Really? You have all of those scroll cases scattered around, standing free, and then you have this one inset into the wall? No, that's not obvious at all!"

"I see that while your knowledge of magic is lacking, your sarcasm shows a certain level of mastery," the voice drawled. "And physical hiding methods did not matter at all here. For I had finally discovered the means of using blood wards. Hence my earlier confusion. You certainly don't look like you're related to me, but you must be to be here."

At Ranma's confused expression, the voice went on. "Look at the ground around the entrance."

Ranma did so and saw a series of tiny Greek lettering there, the meaning of which he didn't understand. He could recognize Greek, sure, but so could any high schooler who had taken world history. Thankfully, the Spirit obligingly explained what he was looking at. "Those are my blood wards, a special kind of warding-style enchantment that only those of my blood can bypass."

"Nah, I call bullshit," Ranma disagreed. "There's no way I have an ancestor from Greece."

"The blood ward is keeping our conversation from being heard outside as well. If you wish to test it, turn and shout towards whoever else is out there. If there is someone out there anyway, I can't see past these wards either. My enneagram has very limited senses, obviously," the voice trailed off, sounding somewhat annoyed at itself.

Shrugging but deciding he had nothing to lose in obliging the spirit thing, Ranma turned and bellowed at the top of his voice, "Lara, get in here!"

With the scroll shelf pushed out of the way, Ranma could see Lara moving around between two of the scroll shelves. He could even see a flash of one of her hands covered in a plastic glove as she was carefully moving one of the scrolls. But the movement didn't stop as he shouted, and she certainly didn't seem to be coming towards him. Two more shots resulted in nothing, and Ranma sighed, turning back to the spirit's spinning disk.

"Okay, I suppose I'm convinced about that aspect. But how the hell did a Greek adventurer or wizard or whatever you are leave behind a Japanese ancestor?"

"I'm presuming you're asking about you specifically, rather than the mechanics of it, given your apparent age," the spirit answered, his tone snarky once more, before shifting into sounding almost sheepish, and Ranma got the impression that if a spirit could blush, this spirit would be. "As for how you came into being, well, I suppose that means I wasn't as past my prime when I arrived on this island as I had thought..."

The spinning disk suddenly pulsed with energy, flowing out to a nearby flask. Instantly, Ranma leaped backwards, landing on the far wall and clinging there with his ki claws extending into the rock, his eyes narrowing in suspicion, but all that happened was that the flask began to glow with energy, and images appeared in the air above it. "You see, I was pushing seventy years old by the time I arrived here in my travels. I had traveled the world, starting from my home in Thebes, searching out magical knowledge, different means of using the raw power of the universe."

Ranma stared at the image in the air, then shook his head dryly. The image looked like someone had stuck a Dumbledore-esque beard onto a random Greek statue of a man, paired with piercing topaz eyes, a healthy, tanned skin tone, and a winning smile. "Really? I'm supposed to assume that you look like some kind of cross between Socrates and a Greek statue?"

"I do not know who this Socrates fellow is; he might have been past my time. But it is nice to know that you at least recognize true artwork when you see it."

"Yeah, that's artwork for sure," Ranma answered, making the spirit realize what he said.

The image spluttered for a bit as if the ghost, although it called itself an enneagram, whatever that was, was having trouble keeping the spell going as the spirit harrumphed in annoyance. "Anyway, here on this island, they were under the control of an immortal witch named Himiko. She survived by..."

"Transferring her personality and soul into one of her priestesses when she grew old, subsuming the original and taking the body over," Ranma answered. "We found writings about that and ran into her ghostly vampire spirit thing and her Oni followers already."

At that, the spirit became sheepish once more, if for a very different reason. "That's good to know at least. I was able to do little more than weaken her direct connection to the ley line beneath the island. Without my doing so, Himiko's cursed storms would have spread for thousands of miles in every direction. But I had never run into a creature who could remain alive once her physical form was beheaded. I stopped the ritual of her transferring to a new body and thought that was the end of it."

The image changed, showing the still-good-looking old man fighting through a series of Storm Guard, then speaking to several dozen priestesses, seemingly convincing many of them of his point, while others attempted to stab him in the back. Then there was what seemed to be a mass exodus from the palace as he explained how he had seized it. "I took over the palace, and when Himiko returned in her undead form, I was able to discover a means of keeping the undead away, but not to permanently kill them. And Himiko was far too smart for me to entrap, unfortunately."

"Okay, I don't want to get a full flashback, Old Man," Ranma said, holding up his hands in an X pattern. "I've already lived through fighting against Himiko, and for your information, it was a mix of a silver dagger into the skulls of every one of her Oni, and trapping her spirit in direct sunlight. Which, on this island, wasn't easy, let me tell you. Thank Amaterasu, we could stab each Oni in turn rather than needing to do it all at once. But what does all this have to do with you being my ancestor?"

"That is actually excellent to know, not that I could do anything with the knowledge, but it is good to know that her spirit has finally been defeated for all time. As for how you came about? I would've thought that was obvious." The voice turned smug then, "Many priestesses were very... grateful for saving them from the threat they didn't even know existed. Par for the course for a wandering mage."

A series of images appeared of various women, including one with auburn colored hair, almost the same color as Nodoka's, which startled Ranma. Her face looked nothing like his mom's, but the hair was definitely a dead ringer. "I imagine that during the Exodus from the island after Himiko's spirit reemerged in its cursed form, your ancestor made her way to the main islands of Nippon somehow."

For a moment, both spirit and the man fell silent, and then Ranma shook his head. *I can think about the sheer randomness of this and whether or not I have my Pops or this spirit to blame for strange shit always finding me later.* Right now, there were other things to think about. "So what now? Are you going to try to take me over like Himiko did her victims, or what? And what's your name anyway?"

"My name is Shazam, well, it was when I was alive anyway. And as for taking you over, obviously not. The very idea is repugnant. But as for what to do..." The now-named Shazam fell silent for a moment, the soul-memory observing Ranma with its limited senses.

Shazam had not left this enneagram or the others before it behind out of the goodness of his heart. He had been ordered to do so by Prometheus, Titan of Foresight and Friend of Man, when he was alive. For Shazam had been the strongest wizard in all the Mediterranean at the time, and Prometheus had foreseen a time in the distant future where his powers would be needed.

But Zeus and the other gods were death on the idea of anyone beyond them becoming immortal, so these soul-memories were the only means of leaving behind a portion of Shazam. That and a ritual he had learned from the Egyptian god Heka, who had helped bind Shazam's power to his blood, thereby making it hereditary. It only needed a ritually created spark to ignite.

The fact that an Egyptian God was willing to help out in this case had made it clear to Shazam that Prometheus was very serious about this prophecy, and Shazam had followed the Friend of Man's orders on this aspect as well as he could. To that, he had left behind several enneagrams of himself at different times in his last ten years of life, scattered throughout the world on his adventures... just as he had left behind women filled with his seed. Each soul-memory was hidden as artfully as Shazam could contrive when they were made, waiting for any worthy descendants to find them and perform the ritual to awaken their power.

Moreover, in Ranma being here, and in the youth's very nature, Shazam could feel the workings of the gods. Hera's magic was visibly embedded in Ranma's mind. Nothing dangerous, that much Shazam's soul-memory could tell, although nothing more. But he also fit the movement of Prometheus, perhaps, and Poseidon too. There was even a hint of Sekhmet in Ranma somehow.

How that last came to be, Shazam had no idea, as it looked like a botched Blessing. Nevertheless, it was there.

With all that, it was obvious that Ranma's being here was the person the soul memory had been placed here to wait for. He was one of many possible iterations that could result in Shazam passing on the knowledge of what his blood contained to a descendant, opening the spark of magic within their shared lineage.

"As for what to do now, I will fulfill my reason for leaving this memory behind. You have come here in the pursuit of strength, and you will have it! I will walk you through the ritual and..."

"Wait a minute, hold up, I'm not here looking for anything! I'm here as a bodyguard to someone who is. And 'ritual' smacks of magic, and while I'm not exactly against magic, I've seen too much of it to think it comes cheap," Ranma interrupted, again making an X with his hands in front of his face.

"Then you are far wiser than most Mages. But no, the price for my magic is simply the time needed to awaken it, and then master its use beyond the physical. I was very careful in the various agreements and lessons I learned while creating my own style of magic," the wizard soothed. "And giving your general warrior ass that, I believe my magic will also, at the basic level, aid you greatly."

Ranma was intrigued by that, but still shook his head slowly. "I don't know. I'm as good as I am, as strong and fast and so forth, because I have trained my ass off. Magic seems like cheating. I also don't understand why you would be doing this in the first place. Just because I'm your descendant?"

"That is certainly part of it. The other aspect is because of Lord Prometheus and his words to me, which caused me to leave such soul memories behind." Ranma groaned at that, but gestured for Shazam to continue. "Lord Prometheus said there will come a time when this world will need my powers, far after I have passed. I believe your being here means that time will soon arrive."

"I'm no hero, I'm not the type to step in and try and save the world or whatever," Ranma protested, although it was a somewhat lukewarm protest. Ranma's Code meant he was supposed to protect someone weaker than himself. But neither would he go around looking for people to save. There was a distinction there... at least in his mind.

"Are you not part of the world? Would you not step up to defend it if you were faced with a threat to the whole of the world?"

Ranma had nothing to say to that, and pouted a bit, crossing his arms and looking away from the spirit. "And what about magic being cheating?"

Knowing he was winning the youth over, Shazam wheedled, "My magic, once learned, can be called upon. It is not a permanent fixture in your physical being or anything similar to that. Consider it simply another tool you may use as needed. You would only use it to even the playing field if that is what you want."

"... Okay, that sounds like something I can agree to. So long as you realize that I'm not going to use your magic except as a last resort," Ranma warned.

"So long as that does not imply that you will not learn how to use it at all until you must, I can agree to that stipulation. It is your life, Ranma. I would simply urge you not to assume that knowledge of the magic will come to you as needed. You must experiment with it as I did," Shazam warned.

"Duh," Ranma snorted. "I'll train with it, don't worry, I'm just not going to use it for real unless I have to. And I would like a better explanation on what the hell this magic will do to me."

By his tone and stance, Shazam could tell that, despite having agreed to learn Shazam's magic to awaken the power within him, Ranma was still extremely reluctant about the very idea. But that was fine. He would learn in time. "Excellent. As for what it will do, how would you like to have the immunity and strength of Hephaestus, the speed of Mercury, and the power of Zeus's lightning at your fingertips, to say nothing about the endurance of a titan and to have your mind protected by Sekhmet?"

"... Okay, that sounds great, but..."

"Your body will change, your physical skills enhanced to the level to challenge the very gods. You will be able to use lightning once you can control it, and even fly," Shazam answered, dumbing it down a bit.

"And there's no downside?" Ranma demanded. "There has to be, it's magic!"

"Not particularly. As I said, I was not the most powerful Mage of my time because of my vast skill set or knowledge, but because I was very careful in wording the agreements that gave me my powers, and thus could use them freely. I paid ahead for them, as it were, so you don't have to," the soul memory answered, sounding extremely smug for a moment.

"..." Ranma glared at the spinning disc for several moments, unsure if he believed the thing. Yet he couldn't deny that it was tempting, really tempting. And it was true Lara couldn't get in here, so maybe they really were related. "Okay, what do I have to do?"

This turned out to be somewhat simple to start with. A magical circle had already been inlaid into the ground underneath the chair where Shazam had passed away. Removing the bones and scraps of fur and clothing that remained of the man was somewhat jarring, given that Ranma had been spending the last twenty minutes speaking to his memory, but Ranma removed the chair and the body, finding the ritual circle underneath unchanged.

That was good, and Ranma didn't need to hear the relief in the soul's voice to know that. Using magic at all was daring Fate to have her way with you. Screwing up with magic was, in Ranma's opinion, standing naked on a hilltop during a thunderstorm and shouting out to Fate to do her worst.

The next thing the ritual required was an ankh, an Egyptian symbol that Ranma had seen occasionally in history texts. He didn't know its significance, but Shazam explained that it was a symbol of Heka, the God of Magic and Healing. "It was he who helped connect my magic into my very blood rather than my soul and brain so it could be passed on to my descendants."

Under the soul-memory's direction, Ranma knelt within the circle, holding the ankh in both hands, having cut his palms with his own ki claws. Ranma felt kind of stupid as he did so, but he followed through with the ritual, calling out to each of the gods with whom Shazam had made agreements as Shazam told him what to say, sentence by sentence.

“Awaken, awaken within, awaken without, changed forevermore. I call upon my ancestor’s agreement with Zeus, let your lightning live through my blood and body. I call upon Hephaestus, let your strength infuse my form as I become a living forge. I call upon Atlas, let me shoulder any burden that comes my way. I call upon Achilles for his courage and insurmountable will. I call upon Mercury, let the power of flight come to me! I call upon Sekhmet, Goddess of Lion and Protection, let me take up your mantle and defend this world!”

While he had initially considered saying something snarky to the spirit, that feeling faded as Ranma began to recite the ritual words. He could feel something welling up within him, the blood on the ankh warming on his hands, and then, as the ritual went on, that blood disappeared inside of Ranma, as if his ki healing had somehow sucked in the blood once more.

And with it came an intense jolt of energy, a kind of energy that bubbled within him, until finally Ranma’s entire body became a flame. His eyes gleaming like flashlights, his mouth open wide as the ankh slowly dissipated, Ranma’s back arching in soundless agony.

How long this went on, Ranma didn’t know, but he came back to himself lying on his side, his body still twitching as he did so. “What the hell!? What was that!? You never said it would hurt!”

“You never asked,” the soul memory shot back, and Ranma realized that, related to him or not, Shazam was a bit of a dick. After a second, the enneagram went on. “The power within you has been awakened. All you need to do is call upon it. At first, you will need to use my name as a mantra to do so, but eventually, as you master the magic, so too will you become more adroit in calling it to yourself.”

Ranma scowled, pushing himself to his feet and concentrating on his body for a moment as he moved into a kata. At first, he couldn’t feel anything different, but after a few seconds of Ranma-style meditation, he felt it: a secondary source of energy within him. He couldn’t quite reach across the barrier between it and his ki for some reason; the two powers weren’t similar enough for that, but he could sense it there.

Thankfully, however, that was all he could sense. Ranma’s body had otherwise not been changed. Finishing his kata, he turned back to the spinning disk. “I don’t feel any different.”

“You’re not using my magic yet,” the spirit answered equitably, although Ranma could detect some tiredness from the tone, and staring at the disk, it didn’t seem to be rotating as quickly. “Simply say my name, and the power will come to you. And remember, I told you that my magic was of the body. Your body will change when you activate the power you have now inherited.”

Ranma still felt a bit off about this, but sighed and went along with things for now. “And my body changing ain’t something new to me at this point. Shazam.”

Instantly, it was like the energy he had sensed within him had been waiting for that signal. It burst out, flashing into his every cell. Between one moment and the next, Ranma changed, as completely as if he had activated his curse.

Blinking, Ranma looked down at himself and was astonished. He had grown at least a foot in height and was **far** wider across the shoulders. Indeed, his whole body had changed into a more powerful version, like Ranma had taken up weightlifting when he was younger, rather than simply adding strength training to his other martial arts exercises.

His body was massively powerful now, but as Ranma instantly moved it into a series of katas, he came away somewhat annoyed that it wasn't as flexible or agile as he could have wished. "Still, if this magic form can be trained, then I can fix that, I suppose. And can I say it's great that the magic also stretched out my clothing to fit this new form? It would suck to be wearing torn clothing every time I use this magic. Although where the lightning bolt on my shirt came from, I don't know."

That was the only thing about Ranma's clothing that had changed. He was still wearing the same martial arts pants he had worn today, along with the same silk shirt. But instead of being a simple red and black short-sleeve shirt, the center of Ranma's chest was now marked by a yellow lightning bolt on the red background.

"That is a minor gift from Ptah, Egyptian God of Craftsmen. I had quite a bit of trouble with clothing at first, until he agreed to weave an enchantment into the rest of my magical being, so that I would not, in his words, embarrass the gods I call upon for my magic." Once more, the spirit sounded a little tired now, and Ranma's eyes narrowed as he looked at the spinning disk. "As for the lightning bolt, well, Zeus had an ego."

"Gotcha," Ranma nodded, snickering a bit at that, his attention turning back to his own body, his concern forgotten for a moment as he looked down at himself as he performed a series of squats and kicks. "Any idea how this would react to a curse?"

That question seemed to wake the enneagram up a bit, or at least his voice no longer sounded so breathy. "Curse, what curse?"

Ranma pulled out a bottle from his ki space, ignoring the spirit's shout of 'you already have magic?' as he held it up above his head. "No, that's not magic, that's a life energy trick. I... don't know if you had a term for it in Greece. Physical vitality taken so far that it becomes a pool of energy within your body? Anyway, as for my curse?" Ranma dumped water over his head and quickly noticed he hadn't changed. "Holy hell..." He breathed before shaking his head and looking over at the magic disk. "Okay, how do I cancel this form?"

"By simply saying my name again. As I said, as you train with it, you will be able to call upon and cancel the use of your power without the need for a verbal spell."

Ranma did so and found himself once more in his normal body, which was admittedly something of a relief. Ranma always preferred speed over strength after all, and his new magical form definitely was the exact opposite. Or at least it felt that way to him.

With that done, Ranma poured the other half of the water bottle over his head, activating the curse. "I got this curse while in China at a place called the Jusenkyo, the Cursed Springs. Don't suppose you've ever heard of it?"

"That is something I have never seen before," Shazam's soul-memory admitted. "I am afraid I came here by ocean rather than traveling across the land. At the time, I was embroiled in a fierce battle against several Mesopotamian wizards, and traveling through their territory would have been unwise. And the first time I tried to make landfall, I found myself fighting through doctors. The second time, in the middle of the Civil War, I decided to stick to islands after that for a bit."

"Okay, so one is a curse, and one is a positive right? So wouldn't my own body's power let me control the curse that was placed upon me by someone else?"

"No. The magic within your blood would cancel the curse, would stop it from impacting you, but only as you call upon it," Shazam answered, the soul memories trying to work it out as he spoke. "However, if you can master connecting to the magic within and shaping it into spells, and find a spell that can dispel curses, you could eventually do so."

"Huh, well, I wouldn't want to really get rid of it, more control what activates it, really," Ranma answered with a shrug.

"Wait, you **want to** keep turning into a girl?" That seemed to astonish Shazam even more than anything else Ranma had said. The enneagram sounded even more tired than before, even more ethereal than before.

"Let's just say there's an island I want to meet, which has certain requirements for entry," Ranma answered with a wry chuckle. But then he decided to bite the bullet and ask, "Is something wrong?"

"I told you. What you have been speaking to is but a soul memory, an enneagram. I am not a full spirit; I am a memory of a man left within this desk, with magic enough for a specific purpose. That purpose has been fulfilled. And now, now the memory will fade..."

By this point, the spinning of the disk had nearly stopped, and Ranma stared at it for a moment before nodding his head, remarking aloud that, "Magical memory or not, you for sure sounded a lot more human than a lot of people I've met in the past. I hope that if your creator believed in an afterlife, he got the pick of 'em."

The soul memory chuckled at that, and Ranma bowed his head towards it as the small disc of silver and bronze stopped moving, the magical field around it collapsing, sending it toppling to the floor beneath. He waited for a few seconds, looking around him, before leaning down and picking up the disk, seeing the markings on it, and flipping it between his fingers for a few moments as he stared at it thoughtfully.

Ranma wasn't one to be sentimental, but talking to his ancestor as he had, that had been... Kind of amazing. *And after talking to him for so long, there's a bit too much of me in his sense of humor for me to not believe that.* The visuals had needed work, but the story sounded fascinating, as did Shazam himself. *He said he had left other soul memories out there, maybe I can find some of them in the future?*

He blinked, then scowled as that thought ran to its natural conclusion. "Crap, I hope that doesn't mean I won't have to fight other people with these powers... although for sure that would be a reason to take them in the first place, despite a part of me still thinking it is cheating."

Shaking his head and deciding not to borrow trouble, Ranma placed the previously magical disk into his ki space and left the laboratory. There was nothing in there for him now.

Almost immediately upon leaving, Ranma heard a shout from one side. "What the bloody... Another hidden area, Ranma? Why didn't you call for me?"

Before Ranma could reply, Lara was hurrying forward, only to stop as she hit the blood ward, bouncing back as if she had just run into a rubber wall. "What the hell! More magic?"

"Yeah, blood-based magic. Apparently, one of my ancestors came from this island," Ranma said, simplifying things tremendously.

That caused Lara to blink, but eventually she decided to take it at face value for now. "What did you find in there? Anything interesting?"

"You might say that," Ranma answered, before smirking and gesturing Lara away for a second. "Shazam."

One long explanation later, Lara had, after shaking her head and putting the image of BUFF Ranma away in her mind for later perusal, decided to set aside his new form and how he had gotten it. While fascinating, Lara was interested in history and antiquities, and Ranma hadn't gained any special knowledge of Shazam's personal history or the time he had lived in. Beyond that, Lara also agreed to keep Ranma's new powers a secret for now.

Ranma wanted very much to not let anyone discover his new abilities until he had a good grasp of them. And even then, he probably wouldn't share the knowledge of his powers with many people. One thing Ranma knew for certain was that being on top always attracted

people who wanted to tear you down, and he saw no reason to believe that having access to this power would be any different than being the best martial artist in Nerima had.

So Lara made Ranma promise to get in touch with her if he learned anything new about ancient history, but otherwise, Lara decided to put Ranma's new abilities out of her mind for much the same reason Ranma wanted to keep them under wraps. That kind of power drew vultures, and Lara had no desire to deal with such.

The two of them soon moved back up to where they had set up their base camp outside the palace, with Lara going over her notes, and Ranma leaving her there for a bit to practice with his new form.

The next morning, Lara came out of her tent and stopped, staring as Ranma worked through one of his martial arts katas. He was in his regular body now, and she shook her head, her eyes raking up and down his form. Even in his normal body, Ranma put the best athletes to shame, the perfect mix of gymnast and swimmer.

Sometimes I think it's a pity that he and I friend-zoned one another so quickly, but then again, Ranma is a little too wild and willful for my tastes even before he discovered this new power of his. With everything that entails, I'm doubly certain I don't want to be involved with him even for a short romp in the sheets.

She shook her head and moved over to start a pot of tea for herself, as Ranma came out of his semi-trance, becoming aware of her nearby. He took in her form as she knelt beside the fireplace, setting a pot of tea next to it to boil, unconsciously giving him a great view of her side boob. He quickly turned away, shaking his head with a blush. While she was immensely attractive, Lara was just a bit too... much. Still looking away, he asked, "So, what's on the agenda for today? Back into the library?"

The next three and a half weeks fell into a routine that day. Lara would spend the morning trying to repair the radio to get a signal out and call for a pickup. She had flatly refused to let Ranma just carry her and swim towards Okinawa, even if the storms around Yamatai had dissipated. And their own boat, with its radio, had been a casualty during the fighting with the former mercenaries turned mad cannibals who had inhabited the island prior to their arrival.

And in the afternoon, she would delve into the library, continuing to catalog and translate as she went.

Normally, spending three weeks on a deserted tropical island would be difficult if you didn't bring enough supplies. With Ranma's extremely varied skill set solving practically everything, beyond having a toilet that could be flushed and enough soap on hand to clean his body and clothing, that was definitely not the case.

Meanwhile, Ranma would guard the camp and the palace's only entrance, while also training with his new body away from Lara's questioning eyes. Eventually, he got to the point where he could use it almost as naturally as his curse form, although really connecting to his magical core was still beyond him. Moreover, Ranma was still adamant that he wouldn't use it unless he desperately had to.

After three weeks of Ranma scrounging parts from all over the island, including downed airplanes and crashed ships, Lara was able to repair the radio, and get in touch with the Japanese government once more. Several dozen teams of archaeologists arrived on the island within days, with Lara assuming overall command. The government was warned about the amount of magic and the mentions thereof they had run into, and assigned six Miko and four Shinto priests to help Lara, along with a SAT team to make certain there was no one else hiding anywhere on the island any longer.

While Lara was being told 'Congratulations, you are now in charge,' Ranma was being informed of his next job. "Wait, I don't even get time off? Mind you, this job really wasn't all that difficult after the first few days of mad adventure, but still," Ranma grumbled.

"You will have the rest of the day off to spend time with your mother, but this is something that cannot be put off. One of our most important industrialists is heading to Gotham for a symposium on a new form of energy. You will provide security as long as he is within the United States. You will remain by his side until he is back on a plane heading back to Japan," the governmental official ordered, his voice stern but somewhat apologetic.

With that, the government official pressed the intercom button and respectfully asked for Mr. Matsumoto to join them. As soon as the man entered, Ranma let loose an internal sigh, keeping it inside with some difficulty. *Well, I went from easy on the eyes but hard to bodyguard Lara Croft to this... Like falling off a cliff, I suppose, in looks, but hopefully, he'll be a bit easier to guard.*

His new VIP was middle-aged, paunchy and had what looked like a perpetual sneer on his haughty face. He looks down at Ranma immediately, shaking his head and sighing. "This is supposed to be my bodyguard? He barely looks as if he should be out of high school."

"Shouldn't be actually, I'm eighteen but didn't graduate. But, if you want to be bodyguarded by the best, you have to assume that the best is going to come in an unusual shape sometimes. And I would be willing to show off my abilities if you need me to. Although the very fact that the government is telling me to guard you probably means you're already clear for a lot of the information about me."

The man's sneer faded slightly, but he still rubbed Ranma the wrong way as he dismissed them with a wave of the hand, turning back to the government official. "Remember that I will be leaving tomorrow morning. Have this one ready at the airport waiting for me."

Ranma opened his mouth, but the government official quickly spoke up before he could say anything. "Of course. Have a pleasant evening, Mister Matsumoto. We just wanted the two of you to meet, so any awkwardness is out of the way. We will leave your protection detail in Ranma's capable hands."

The instant the man left, Ranma let the government official have it with both barrels, shouting that this was not a good use of his abilities and warning the man that this would be the last job he would do for the government. "Remember, the original deal was to take out a few idiots like Dragon King, guard Lara for the two expeditions you were paying her for and this. After this, I am done. Hope you lot are happy using me as a freaking show horse guarding Mr. Smug-aho!"

The government official sighed, having known that Matsumoto and Ranma not getting along was almost a certainty. Still, he had been told to make an offer so... "The original agreement, yes. However, if you wish to perhaps continue to work with us, I..."

That was as far as he got before Ranma turned away and headed out the door. Staring at the closed door, the man, the same one who had introduced Ranma to Lara, shook his head. "... Yes, I suppose that was a foolish question."

Before heading home to see his mom, Ranma bid Lara farewell. The two of them had become friends over the past few months, and Ranma wished her luck in the future.

In return, Lara, who had already initiated a hug after hearing Ranma was leaving, leaned down and kissed him on the lips. Ranma stiffened, even his pigtail going straight, something that Lara noticed and was highly amused by as she pulled back from the brief kiss. "Whoever gets with you is going to be a very lucky girl, Ranma ... if they can put up with your randomness, sense of humor and martial arts madness. Look after yourself, okay? I don't want to look you up in the distant future and discover you've disappeared from the face of the Earth or something."

"Right back at you, tomboy," Ranma snorted, shaking his head with a chuckle. "I'll match my martial arts madness and raise you your archaeology madness!"

Snorting, Lara pulled out her phone and shared her contact information with Ranma, saying that if he was ever in the United Kingdom, he could look her up. When that was done, Ranma pulled her into another hug and then released her as Lara was called over to meet her new colleagues.

Ranma looked after her for a moment before sighing and deciding to find a hotel, then calling his mom to tell her the news. *And hey, this will at least get me to America, so that's a plus.* That thought did cheer Ranma up a good deal, and he went on his way whistling a bit under his breath.

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In a small room on a farm in rural Kansas, Kara sat on the floor, staring blankly at the math book that she had just read cover to cover. "Really? That stuff was supposed to be hard? College prep? Ughhhh...."

Sighing, she set it aside to join the science books that Martha had given to her from the local high school. Kara was supposed to be a senior in high school, but if this was the kind of thing she was supposed to learn, Kara knew she would be bored out of her mind within a bare few classes of either science or math. *Ugh, a whole year devoted to just this one book? Maybe I can test out of these classes?*

The problem was that, even as a senior, Kara was going over material she had learned in middle school or earlier while back on Krypton. *Maybe Kryptonian brains just develop faster than humans? Or... Maybe my parents were just that pushy. I'd definitely weigh in on the second one there.*

That thought was bittersweet, as Kara remembered all of the arguments, if that was the real word, she'd had with her parents, Zor-El and Allura In-Ze, about how much time she had to spend studying. It seemed as if their family wildly oscillated between getting along tremendously and wanting to gouge out one another's eyeballs when they ran into differences of opinion, and even at the best of times, there was this push to be, well, exemplars of what Kryptonians should be: logical, intelligent, driven. *I wonder what they would think about me now, here among humans, another race that looks almost exactly like us? Under a yellow sun.*

After a moment, Kara shook off the spike of sadness this developed in her again. She had become used to that pain in the nine months since she had arrived on this strange world. The time since then, around ten months now, had dampened the agony to a dull ache, as had the fact that she actually quite liked it on Earth. Kara had especially liked being among the Amazons and meeting Cassie. And Kara knew part of her disgruntlement at the moment was the fact that she was missing her friend dearly.

Yet even that sadness faded a bit as Martha called her down to breakfast. "Kara, get yourself down here, hon, breakfast's on!"

"Coming, Auntie!" A smile on her face, Kara hopped to her feet, joining Martha and John at the dining table, smiling at the heaps of food there. The food and the warmth of this place were amazing, so unlike her parents. They always made time for her and were generally speaking happy and supportive, but they weren't really warm personalities per se. Emotions like that were for children. Whereas the first thing Martha did when she entered the room was give her a sideways hug, ruffling her hair before pushing her towards the table. Kara could have easily ignored her shove, but she went along with it, her smile widening a bit. "Eat, eat! You've got a full day ahead of you, as does my John."

John smiled over at Kara as she sat down, but his eyes narrowed a bit as he took in Kara's hair and the clothing she was wearing, which was the same Kara had worn the day before. "Did you pull another all-nighter? You know that's not good for you, hon."

Kara winced a bit. "I, I really don't need all that much sleep, you know?" She argued somewhat lamely. "And I figured I could knock off that math book entirely if I pushed it a bit. And I was right. I've got all my homework done for science and math finished for the whole year now."

"However you spend that time, I wish you wouldn't do that. You need to start to get more sleep Kara, it helps your brain work through things," Martha scolded as she brought over a heaping of bacon.

"Agreed. If you really must pull an all-nighter, that's one thing. But don't forget that you need sleep, Kara. Set your alarm clock to go off at twelve so you know you need to head to bed," John advised. "We're not telling you this just because we want you to start to act more human, Kara. We're worried that a lack of sleep might bother your mind, and you might not notice until you cause an accident. You know you're still having trouble controlling your strength as it is."

Wincing at that, Kara admitted they had a point. Indeed, the forks and such she was currently using were given to her by Diana. She did need to get some sleep after all, it was just the amount of sleep they argued about. *And I know they're arguing because they care.* "All right, Uncle John."

"Good. In that case, if you've also done all your work, then you can help me out around the farm." John laughed as Kara's face lit up at that, and she bent to her food with a will. Kara always enjoyed helping out on the farm more than hitting the books. Even better, unlike the schoolwork, farmwork helped her forget, for a bit, how much she was missing her best friend.

She didn't notice the looks John and Martha exchanged, as they looked over the younger girl's head for a moment. The Kents had dealt with a superpowered teenager before, but Kara had come to them as a teenager, and worse, she wasn't nearly as good as Clark had been at making friends. It was obvious that the farm really wasn't the place for Kara, no matter how much she enjoyed working there. That she missed her friend was also obvious.

Clark was right when he said she needed to acclimate to a normal human life, but I think she needs a friend just as much... Martha worried, resolving to get in touch with Clark as soon as she could.

OOOOOOO

Ranma was in hell. There was no better way to put it, a hell that had begun when he first met with Matsumoto at the airport, and had culminated in this, this noisy, crowded

ballroom, where there are hundreds of voices chattering and not a one of them saying anything he was interested in. *Give me back my cannibal mercs and undead samurai, damn it!*

To say that Matsumoto had not been a gracious primary, which was the term used for someone you were body-guarding, something Ranma hadn't known until talking to a guy at the airport in Tokyo, was putting it mildly. He had made it very clear that Ranma was there to be seen, not heard. As he wasn't a trained professional, whatever that meant, any opinion Ranma had about the security issues would be ignored. Ranma was there to use his martial arts skills to defend Matsumoto if needed. Matsumoto had further made it clear that he felt it was unnecessary, and that the best Ranma could do would be to look pretty and keep his mouth shut.

"In all honesty, if I thought I could get away with it, I would force you into your female form; it is certainly far more pleasing to the eye than your male one. But I won't do that, so be grateful," Matsumoto had said as his private plane took off.

"That, and if you did try to force me into a dress at some highbrow party, I'd probably take it out of your hide the moment you were back on this plane. Remember, Matsumoto, my job is to defend you until this trip is done. And I cannot give less shits about what you or the government think about me," Ranma retorted. There'd been a time when he had respected authority and older people automatically, like most Japanese, but that was far in the past.

To say that the two of them did not like one another was an understatement. At that point, the two men had moved to separate areas of the private jet that Matsumoto was taking to Gotham. They ignored one another very pointedly until it became time for Ranma to be fitted for his suit when they landed in Alaska. He tried to protest, but had been told in no uncertain terms that he had to wear a suit to one of the venues Matsumoto would be visiting while in Gotham.

The itinerary called for him to be welcomed by Gotham's mayor when they arrived. Matsumoto was a major (48%) foreign investor in a new science lab, which would be adding several thousand jobs of various types to the city, and thus extremely important to the man and Gotham in general. After that, there would be several days' worth of facility tours, meetings, and a demonstration of the new energy source.

Whatever it was, Ranma wasn't a scientist, so it went way over his head. Regardless, the main point Ranma needed a suit for was for a soiree that night where the other investors, the mayor, reporters, and the so-called local rich and famous of Gotham would rub elbows, and, in Matsumoto's words, 'glad hand.' That was a phrase Ranma hadn't heard before, but he got the gist of it easily enough.

He hadn't even been able to choose his own suit; instead, Ranma had been forcibly fitted with the standard, bland black-and-white security guard uniform, complete with a tie, which he felt was something of a torture device at the best of times. Still, Ranma could have

borne that with relative ease. Compared to the first time he had been forcibly changed into a guy while wearing panties, this was nothing.

And up to this point, the day hadn't been all that bad. Boring as hell, but not bad. Ranma had stood around, his arms crossed and a glare on his face, with a receiver in one ear, overhearing what the mayor's police escort and then the security guards at the new facility were talking about. Ranma hadn't let on that he knew English yet, and the locals apparently had a few assholes among them, but hey, Ranma had learned a few new English curse words and slurs, so that was all good.

Meanwhile, Matsumoto was on a charm assault, completely ignoring Ranma, which Ranma had been perfectly happy with.

But now, standing near Matsumoto, moving like a silent shadow through this party, was something else entirely. He was not one for highbrow parties, not one for mindless, **endless** talking. Glitz and glamour did not interest him at all. And it was so noisy! More than fifty people, all of them talking, laughing, drinking, trying to impress one another, flirt or whatever, while some local band played a song in the background that Ranma couldn't hear through the tumult. *Maybe it's the Neko-Ken coming out, but yeah, this is my idea of hell.*

The ballroom itself was also a little too ostentatious for Ranma. The Wayne Hotel's ballroom was large, well-lit, with numerous chandeliers and wall lights, marble columns, and a few pits of golden frippery here and there. Which completely matched the people within for glitz and glamor.

And yet, on the ride here inside the limo, Ranma had seen that the majority of Gotham was run down and dirtier than any Japanese city he had been in. Even just moving from the limousine to the hotel's entrance, he had seen at least four homeless people out on the streets, trash bags lined the streets, and Ranma thought he had even seen a few rats just on the way here. *I hope to hell this is just a Gotham thing rather than an American thing*, he grumbled, scowling and pushing through several people to remain in position near Matsumoto. Just within grabbing range in case anything happened.

Ranma knew he was being somewhat unfair, as the same difference between rich and poor could be found in any city he had ever been in. Ranma had also read up on Gotham a bit while bored on the plane, and whereas most Japanese cities were not so openly corrupt, Gotham seemed almost to revel in a certain degree of corruption and crime. *But at the same time, it has several dozen colleges and produces a lot of scientists and so forth. What a weird difference.*

"You look about as happy as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs," a voice said in Japanese behind him, almost shouting to be heard over the party's background noise. "You're Matsumoto's bodyguard, right? Don't look now, but you seem to be getting a few looks from some of the ladies around here. If you need any help in that area, I can give you some advice."

Ranma snorted, looking around and realizing that, yes, the voice behind them did have a point. Several girls, mostly the waitresses, were looking in his direction. Why that was, Ranma didn't know, as he thought there were at least a few other guys here that were better looking than him. *None of them are as pretty as that guy from the hot springs we ran into that one time, but I'd say there are a few that are at least prettier than me.*

"If I were a cat in a room full of rocking chairs, I could probably just smash them. Can't do that to people, though," Ranma retorted in the same language, turning to address his next words to the person who had spoken, even as he kept an eye on Matsumoto, who seemed happy enough to have found a few locals to pontificate to at the moment. It turned out the guy was actually both a scientist and an investor, so he understood a bit more about the new energy source than most of the other investors seemed to, and was able to explain it to them. "As for girls and so forth, I doubt anyone here would actually be interested in me, and I certainly know I wouldn't be interested in anyone here."

The man guffawed loudly, shaking his head and holding out a hand, the other holding a glass of what looked like bourbon. "Don't knock it till you try it, kid. But looking closer at you, aren't you a little young to be a bodyguard? Oh, I'm sorry, where are my manners? I'm Bruce Wayne. I own the hotel and a lot of other things."

Bruce Wayne stared at the young man in front of him and, behind his affable, gregarious playboy persona, analyzed this strange youth who, despite looking as uncomfortable as he had mentioned a moment ago, prowled through the room like a lion in the savannah. A cross between knowing he was the most dangerous person in the room and a kind of lazy fluidity. It was that movement that had garnered so much attention from many of the women in the party.

His movements were swift and certain; not once had he bumped into anyone or been bumped in turn. Every movement showed a degree of body control that screamed he had extensive martial arts training. And by that, Bruce meant that even he would call it a lot, rather than what a normal person would think was an amazing amount.

When informed that Matsumoto, who was the other chief investor in the 'linear energy matrix development project' that Wayne Tech had started to fund, would bring a bodyguard along, Bruce hadn't thought much of it, but he had researched the man a bit as a matter of course. After all, it would be normal for someone like Matsumoto to have a full team, 4 to 6 people devoted to his protection, and Batman had several contacts in Asia who would be able to do this kind of job and only a few would he be sanguine about seeing again.

Yet this Ranma Saotome was completely unknown to him. Not only was the name unfamiliar, but his regular contacts, bar O-sensei, had been completely quiet on him. Many admitted they had heard rumors, but only that, and others just didn't answer. For his part, O-sensei had simply said, the young man was a good sort, if quite rambunctious. Bruce's old

sensei had sounded almost fond of Ranma, something that was odd, although the sparing way O-sensei talked was par for the course. If Ranma had secrets, O-sensei would keep them.

And officially, Ranma's abilities and background were hidden behind layers of security that even Batman hadn't been able to penetrate. All Bruce had been able to discover was that he was a martial artist, his level marked 'extreme' which was, with his connection to O-sensei, worrisome considering what Bruce knew about martial arts himself. The Batman, after all, would also be marked 'martial artist extreme' in Japan's system, too.

Bruce had become much more curious at that point and actually considered calling in Justice League resources to help them crack the Japanese government's systems or to press O-Sensei for more information. But he had decided against it, unless the boy proved a threat. The first would be a misuse of resources, and the second would probably end with O-Sensei just hanging up on him.

While Bruce was analyzing Ranma, Ranma was analyzing him, hiding it behind a laugh and a reach for nearby finger food with one hand, while he gripped Bruce's hand with the other, instantly noting the hidden strength there. Looking at Bruce, Ranma could see he was quite powerfully built beneath his suit, which was carefully tailored to hide it for the most part.

So, the Playboy has some muscle on him? Weird, but not something Ranma cared about too much. "Name's Ranma. For my sins, I'm here to guard Matsumoto."

"Your sins? You're a little young to have sins built up already, unless... is that the reason why you're not interested in any of the girls?" Bruce asked, laughing at his own joke, trying to finish off the image of an idiotic Playboy with more money than sense or tact.

"Let's just say that my old man left me with a lot of debt and leave it at that," Ranma answered, before turning and dancing around a group of reporters who were going over something or other, following his principal through the crowd as he and the people he had been talking to made for one of the food tables.

Bruce followed after him, waving one hand airily to one of the girls, a short Korean girl who had turned away from the conversation with the other reporters to give Ranma a look that Ranma didn't even notice. "You see, right there?! That girl was obviously giving you the go-ahead eyes there. But how does your father having a debt end up with you being a bodyguard?"

"That's my story to tell, or not as the case may be," Ranma retorted, pulling out a plate from within his sleeve pocket, and moving behind Matsumoto, grabbing up some more food for himself. If Ranma was going to be stuck in this party, at least he was going to be well fed.

Bruce blinked, as did several other people around them, whispers of shock and exclamation rippling through the crowd as Bruce asked, "Where did the plate come from? Are you a magician too?"

At that, many of the crowd turned away, assuming it had been some kind of trick the instant the option was given. But Ranma shrugged and was suddenly holding a fork, with which he began to eat quickly, saying between bites, "It's called a ki space. You use your life energy, er, let's call it body energy potential, I suppose, to create a pocket within a pocket, and you can enlarge it at need."

"... I've been into meditation and stuff like that in the past, and I've run into ki, or the Chinese version anyway. But I've never heard of that," Bruce said, now trying hard to keep his two separate personas separate. After all, Bruce Wayne had no interest in martial arts. Batman, on the other hand, was extremely interested.

"Yeah, it is really hard to learn. You have to build up your life energy well beyond what most people can. But if you can, anyone can learn it so long as ya know it's possible and yer willing to put in the time," Ranma answered with a shrug, emphasizing his Kansai accent for a moment just for the fun of it.

Bruce nodded at that, trying to make sense of it, then had to turn and smile as a few other people moved through the crowd, calling his name. By the time Bruce turned back, Ranma was gone, hovering behind Matsumoto once more, as he and his fellows had moved into a corner to one side of the glass doors leading out to the balcony.

Frowning at that, Bruce decided to leave off questioning him further. Anymore might seem suspicious, and besides, tonight really wasn't the time to be Batman; it was a time for Bruce.

At least I hope it is. The Joker is making waves again, after yet again pressuring Harley to join him. Blast it, I'd hoped that she and Ivy would stay together longer this time, but Ivy has disappeared from her normal haunts, and on her own, Harley is not yet able to avoid falling back in with Joker.

But this kind of thing shouldn't interest him all that much. And of the other gangs within the city, only Mister Freeze would have any interest in something like the new kind of energy source. And he won't bother with it until it is proven technology rather than in the developmental stage.

Even as he joked and generally made a minor fool of himself as only the richest playboy in America could get away with doing, Bruce's mind was ticking over like a clock, going through his plans for that night, the number of supervillains at play in the city currently, the jobs he had sent Batgirl and Robin on, and the fact that Superman and several of the other Justice league members were planning to leave Earth for a time.

Green Lantern had requested help to play peacekeeper on a nearby planet, which was going through a very violent civil war of some kind. Bruce was against the trip, but he had been overruled, even though that would leave Earth without several of its most powerful defenders. *I understand the Thanagarians might become militantly expansionist if the nobles win out, and that could cause trouble for Earth, but even so...*

Shaking his head, Bruce banished the thoughts about that, deciding to handle the rest of the night and then whatever else was on his plate currently. And with Gotham, that always meant his plate was full anyway. *Let the others play hero for other planets if they wish. If Superman and the rest think they will be thanked for this, they will undoubtedly be disappointed.*

More than forty minutes later, Ranma was thinking heartfelt thoughts about trying to set off the fire alarm or something to end his torment. *Is that why people drink so much at this kind of thing, because it dulls the pain of the noise? Or because they have an excuse to not remember whatever anyone is telling them?*

Shaking his head, Ranma was grateful that at least Matsumoto had decided not to keep on moving through the party, instead staying put, having scored a few chairs. That made Ranma's job easier. He simply leaned against the nearby marble pillar and watched the party, keeping one eye on his principal and the other roving through the crowd, looking for any threats. Other than a few arguments, one truncated shoving match, and a few ladies who were glaring at one another as if trying to mentally set each other on fire, though, everything seemed remarkably peaceful.

This might be why Ranma remained tense, glaring all around him, waiting for the trap to spring.

When it finally came, it began in a way Ranma hadn't anticipated.

As Ranma was still glaring around, laughter began to rise throughout the party, becoming louder quickly. Ranma was not the only one who turned, confused, looking for the source of the laughter.

The security guards at the party came in two types: those like Ranma, who concealed their weapons and followed specific members of the crowd, and those provided by the mayor. These amounted to visibly armed policemen guarding the entrances. Now, four of the five policemen Ranma could see from his current position were laughing wildly, their bodies spasming as they laughed and laughed, a rictus grin appearing on their faces, smiles so wide they were very obviously fake, and more than that, probably heard quite a bit. It looked like a lethal version of laughing gas, or maybe something they had eaten, Ranma wasn't certain.

Not knowing what this was did not stop Ranma from acting, though. He surged forward, sliding between two of the people Matsumoto was talking to. Grabbing Matsumoto out of the

chair, he thrust the older man back into a pillar where Ranma stood in front of him, staring around him even as the man spluttered, his brain only slowly catching up with events. But before he could say anything, the sources of the manic laughter drew his eye, and Matsumoto's eyes widened, and he fell silent, gulping as he stared all around him. "Is, is there any way we can escape?"

Shaking his head, Ranma watched as the other personal security guards acted, pulling out guns and grabbing their employers. Two made for the doors only to find them somehow barred from the outside. "Doesn't look it, unless ya want me to carry you and jump to the streets?" The ballroom was on the tenth floor of the hotel, but it did have a balcony, so that was a viable option.

Before Matsumoto could reply, the music of the band cut off abruptly as several of their members succumbed to whatever was causing people to burst out into laughter. One fell forward over the small stage to land headfirst on the ground, probably with enough force to hurt despite the short fall. The other simply stumbled to her knees, then to her side, laughing until.... she wasn't. Nor were the first security guards to have succumbed to whatever this was laughing anymore. Instead, they were lying still on the ground as the doors to the balcony flew open. *Fuck, so it's paralytic too or just lethal?*

At that point, people began to stampede, but even as the crowd smashed into the doors, they didn't budge. Which was interesting, in Ranma's opinion, but so was the fact that a few people weren't joining the herd. Most were being pulled away by their bodyguards, many of whom were forming a makeshift defensive position behind one of the bars. Others were just moving away from the crowd, heading into the other corners, looking for shadows to hide in. Bruce was one of those, which Ranma noticed, but figured the guy had at least some idea of how to look after himself, given his body type.

That was about all Ranma could notice before the glass doorways out to the balcony, which had previously been closed, almost hidden behind thick blinds, burst open, and a group of very odd people entered. "What a marvelous party, Harley! But how could anyone have such a grand old time and not invite the Joker himself!?"

"Downright rude it is, Mistah J. But then again, crashing a party's always fun, right?"

"All too true, my dear, yet I have to admit to still being hurt, you know?"

The people who entered from the balcony were, for the most part, wearing leather jackets and jeans, looking almost like typical bikers, except most bikers didn't also wear clown masks. Each clown mask was different, but they were all masks, except for the two people who had been speaking as they entered.

One was a middle-aged-looking man with green hair and entirely white skin. Not pasty, not sickly white. Chalk white, the white of a clown's makeup. His mouth was also delineated in

bright green, seeming stuck in a permanent smile, his eyes wide and manic above it. And where most of his followers wore biker outfits, he wore a pretty decent-looking purple suit, complete with a tie. Although the tie was kind of tacky in Ranma's opinion, since it had a copy of his face on it. The suit had a flower in its pocket, and in his hands was a long-barreled handgun of some kind, while on his shoulder was a short-shafted hammer. The hammer looked like one of those joke hammers that clowns use to hit one another with, but Ranma figured that it might be a serious weapon.

Next to him was a girl a few years older than Ranma, possibly in her college years or just beyond, wearing a jester's black and red outfit. A skintight jester's outfit, like one that would be worn by a jester who worked a lot of acrobatics into her act, and who didn't have much in the way of modesty, as it was very obvious, she wasn't wearing anything underneath, given the way her nipples stuck out a bit from under her outfit. Her face was also made up to look like a clown, though in her case it was more court jester than circus clown. She had red lipstick and a small double-diamond-shaped mask over her eyes. Her hair was dirty blond with blue and green streaks worked through it.

She seemed to eschew the long-range weapons of her fellows, all of whom were armed with machine guns. Instead, she only had an even larger version of the clown hammer resting over her shoulders.

Nearby, Bruce Wayne faded into the background, making his way to one of the corners where he had spotted a grill leading into a ventilation shaft. As he did, he spoke in a low tone, his mouth not even moving. "Alfred, use the Batcave's computer system to connect to the city electricity grid. I'll need the lights of the hotel out in a minute."

No answer came, as Bruce couldn't get away with wearing an earpiece in his public persona. He'd tried it once when he was just starting out, and had it spotted four times in the same party, forcing him to come up with an excuse that time. But at least his lapel could have a small microphone, connecting him back to the Batcave and Alfred, who was always stationed there while Bruce was out and about.

"FREEZE, Joker!" shouted one of the bodyguards, causing, ironically, both Bruce and Ranma to roll their eyes as the two men both had the same thought: What was the point of that?

So much for being professionals. Deal with the people attacking you, however you can. Arresting them ain't your job, Ranma grumbled as several of the joke(er)-gang fired at the group of bodyguards, while the rest kept the crowd covered. This included Ranma for the moment, which kept him from moving. As fast as Ranma was, he couldn't stop bullets from flying past him to hit Matsumoto or other people.

Two of the bodyguards fell, wounded or dead, unable to even get a shot off, while the rest cowered under cover. The tables thankfully seemed able to stop the bullets, but that was probably scant comfort for the people behind them.

“Now, that’s enough of that, folks!” the Joker laughed like a madman. “If you think you can upstage me, the joke’s on you. But if you just stay there nice and docile, you might get out of this alive. Might.” Again, he laughed, and, as with madmen everywhere, once they laughed, others joined in.

There was a lot of screaming by this point, with people pushing and shoving, hiding behind one another, or simply trying to bullrush the doors. Matsumoto, thankfully, hadn't joined the herd, remaining solidly behind Ranma. Despite his disdain for Ranma’s intelligence and general demeanor, he did seem to trust Ranma’s skills at least.

Although their remaining where they were meant that he and Ranma garnered the attention of the two leaders of this group, as they stalked deeper into the ballroom, the gang spread out as they did. One bodyguard tried to pop up and fire back, but another round of bullets riddled him, and after a few seconds of new screaming, the crowd was quieted by the lead guy pulling a bullhorn from his side. “Now, now dear folk, we’re not here to kill you all! Just a few select of you. The rest we’ll just steal everything you have on you. We don't want a complete bloodbath, just a bit of money on the side. And just think, if you had actually invited me to this thing, all he would've had to deal with is my jokes,” he bellowed, gesturing his people forward. “You all know what to do.”

With that, a lot of the screaming did stop, beyond a few whimpers and the wounded bodyguards. Seeing that, Ranma shook his head. *Who would trust a criminal clown anyway? Fucking idiots.*

At that point, the criminal clown turned his attention to Matsumoto and Ranma. “But you two, you don’t seem to be able to understand the program here.”

Even as the majority of his followers moved towards the crowd, who were now even more packed in on the other side of the ballroom than they had been previously, the leader and his... girlfriend? Only female follower? Ranma wasn’t certain, but she joined the older clown as he turned his attention to the two Japanese.

“Ooh, Mistah, J, they’re Japanese! It might be an honor thing with them, never show your back to an enemy or something,” the woman said.

“That is true, or they might just not know who I am, and isn’t that a shame! I am the Joker, foreign gentlemen. You would be Matsumoto, right? One of the major investors in the new energy development project that this party is supposed to celebrate?” the Joker said, looking past Ranma, and gesturing him to one side. “Now, now, bodyguard, we wouldn’t want to cause any accidents, would we?”

Ranma looked over his shoulder at Matsumoto, although he didn't take his eyes off the two in front of him. Not just because they were a threat, but because they had just moved to block the machine guns of the rest of their group. "Hey Matsu, I can take care of them, right?"

While the Joker laughed at that and brought up his gun, Matsumoto nodded frantically. The woman also took a step back, pulling her hammer off her shoulders.

By that point, Ranma had already moved. The Joker was fast and brought up his gun, firing at Ranma, and even figured out that Ranma would be charging at him. But Ranma's hand lashed out in the air in front of him, and his ki claws cut the bullets apart midair while he lunged forward.

The Joker was extremely fast for a normal person and had his mallet off his shoulder, swinging towards Ranma before he crossed the distance between them. His female companion did the same with her larger one, twirling like a top, only for Ranma to smash both of them out of the way with a single punch each, although the impact made him wince. The hammer was definitely not made of wood, whatever veneer covered it. *And they are a hell of a lot heavier than they look. Wonder how they do that?*

Regardless, Ranma's return blow hurled the woman entirely off of her feet as the head of her hammer shattered. The same thing happened to the one in Joker's hands, though there the entire thing shattered, not just the head. Even as Joker howled in pain from being hit by a few flying splinters, Ranma's foot crashed into his chest, shattering ribs and hurling Joker back out onto the balcony, where he rolled, crashing into the guard rail.

His men turned their guns in the direction of the disturbance, but wavered as Ranma used the Umi-Sen-Ken, disappearing in that brief instant where none of them had a gun on him, taking Matsumoto with him. This technique was one of two sealed techniques that his father had created: the Quiet Thief (Umi-Sen-ken) and the Loud Thief (Yama-Sen-Ken). Ranma had never really gotten into the Loud Thief technique, since he already had ki claws and various ki attacks, but the Umi-Sen-Ken technique, which basically pulled in your sense of self and allowed you to hide in plain sight from other people, was extremely useful.

Groaning, the woman pushed herself to her feet. But to Ranma's surprise, she didn't try to order the man into anything; instead, she rolled away, heading towards one of the walls. "Oh hell no, no way am I going to deal with a Japanese version of Bats! Nope, nope, nope!"

This proved to be a very good move as the rest of the gang, after a moment's indecision, started to fire at where Ranma had been. They hosed that entire area of the ballroom down with bullets, so many that Ranma wondered if they'd be hitting the Joker out on the balcony.

Now that would be ironic, Ranma thought, from where he was now clinging to the ceiling. He held Matsumoto in one arm, his other hand clamped around his mouth as his back and legs stuck to the ceiling thanks to another subtle ki technique he had learned from his

Pops. Modified Scared Gecko Technique for the win, baby! Now, let's see if the idiots will move further away from the civvies...

Suddenly, the lights went out. Ranma paused, staring, unable to see through the darkness of the room, the only light coming from where the Joker's body had been smashed through the curtains over the glass doors leading out to the balcony.

"What the hell!"

"What's going on!"

"Who cares, just keep firing!" were some of the shouts from the gangsters below. "Kill the crowd, that will draw the would-be hero out!"

And then the door burst open from behind the crowd, and smoke began to fill the room. The hall beyond had what looked like a large toy car set against the wall, but it must have been what had blocked the door a moment before. Instantly, the crowd of partygoers stampeded, screaming, pushing at one another, even stepping on their fellows, in her haste to get away, as something darker than dark flew above them, something Ranma sensed more than saw in the blackness and smoke.

As the crowd fled, Ranma's eyes began to adjust to the darkness enough for him to start to see through it to a certain degree. *I wish I had gotten that cat-sight technique to work. It would come in handy right now.* Because interspersed with the sounds of the fleeing crowd were the sounds of someone going to town on the gangsters.

Leaning in, Ranma whispered into Matsumoto's ear. "I'm going to stick you up here, stay quiet."

With that, Ranma pulled out a large circle of duct tape – never leave home without it – and quickly and efficiently taped Matsumoto to the ceiling. As he did, Ranma reinforced the tape with a bit of his ki so it would last for a few moments despite the other man's weight pulling on it.

With the man now showing a modicum of intelligence and keeping quiet on his own, Ranma landed down below, just as the jester girl made for the balcony and a body flew out from deeper within the ballroom. Ranma caught the body by his shoulder, holding him in midair for a moment. He looked at the girl, who had frozen at the sight of him in the light now coming through the multiple bullet holes in the drapes over the doors, then at the body and grinned.

"Oh no, you don't do it, you ass!" the girl shouted, right before Ranma hurled the body at her, bowling the blonde woman over and sending her crashing through the balcony doors, shattering them further and letting in much more light.

As the sounds of violence continued behind him, Ranma followed after her, stepping over her groaning form. "Sorry, girl, but you guys just don't seem able to handle my punchline?" he quipped.

She looked up at him, her eyes narrowing, as she pulled a card marked '4/10' from somewhere. "Well-timed joke, but your delivery could be better, especially considering the fact you actually haven't punched anyone unless you count destroyin' mah hammer, ya meanie."

"I'll remember that, honest reviews are so hard ta get," Ranma said, moving over to the leader, intending to capture him, figuring he could come back for the girl and the unconscious body on top of her. As he did, he noticed that the entire area seemed to have been hit by the power outage. *Weird, maybe the cops here have some close-combat specialists, or maybe this is the work of Batman, the local vigilante hero guy I read about when I looked up Gotham.*

To his surprise, the Joker was pushing himself to his feet, blood dripping copiously from his mouth where something inside had burst. "Huh, you're actually pretty durable for a normal guy. Still, you obviously need some medical attention, so if you would just..."

"The only one who decides when the joke ends is me!" Joker shouted, grabbing at the flower in his pocket and pointing it at Ranma. From the middle of the flower, a stream of something shot towards Ranma. But Ranma had developed an acute unease of anything in liquid form thanks to how often it got him in trouble with his curse, and he instantly dodged to one side. Darting in, he grabbed the hand that was aiming the flower at him, and twisting it around so that the jet of whatever it was splashed into the guy's forehead and face.

This proved to be a mistake, as the liquid in this case was acid.

"AHHHHH!!!" the Joker screamed, stumbling back, his hands going up to his face as the acid ate into his skin, flesh and bone and into his brain within seconds, so strong was the acid.

A second into this attack, Ranma registered what was going on and dropped his hand away from the one that had been guiding the acid flower. "Shit!"

Nearby, Harley Quinn stared at her on-again, off-again obsession/lover. Harley knew that her relationship with the Joker had never been particularly healthy, not since the first time they'd gotten together when he had somehow twisted her from a normal psychologist trying to help Joker through his problems to becoming just like him. Ever since, the allure of the Joker sometimes dragged her back.

She had only just rejoined his crew a few days ago when he came looking for her, and with Poison Ivy out of town, Harley Quinn had fallen under his influence again. Having seen Mistah J being manhandled earlier had started to break her out of her normal fixation on him, along with taking a large bit of wood to the face from her own clown mallet.

Now seeing Mister J dead by his own weapon and seeing where said acid had been splashing right in front of her face before the guy in the pigtail turned it back on, Joker finished off whatever connection they might've had. She finished pushing the bruiser off of her and rolled to the side of the balcony, where she grabbed the guard rail and hefted herself up and over, wanting to get gone now. *I don't know who that kid is, and I really don't want to make his acquaintance any further! Besides, I saw Bats inside, too, and he's just way too much of a downer!*

As Harley made her getaway, Ranma tried to dump water in the Joker's face, but almost instantly, he realized it was too late. The acid had struck Joker's forehead and eyes, searing the eyes out of their sockets and melting into his brain within a millisecond of it striking. "Shit! I didn't want..."

Behind Ranma, the doors to the balcony burst open. Ranma turned, staring for a second as a man dressed up in an extremely militant-looking bat-person costume stalked towards him. *There really is a Batman, huh.*

The guy took in the body of the Joker as Ranma stood up, stepping away. Judging by the clenched teeth that was the only part of the guy's face that Ranma could see below the bat mask, he did not approve. "Hey, don't blame me! He's the one who brought acid to the fight! I didn't even know what it was."

"You are coming with me," Batman growled, furious. Bruce hated it when events happened that he didn't plan for, and both Ranma's skill earlier and the Joker's death fell under this category. Furthermore, he was very firm in his opinion that heroes did not kill. The power of life and death could only be held by the state. And here came this foreigner into Batman's city, not knowing **his** rules and killing the Joker!

Ranma's eyes narrowed, and he cocked his head to one side. "And why the hell would I go with you? Hell, why do you care? Because judging from earlier, you sure as hell weren't this guy's friend. And now you're glaring at me for dealing with them?"

"I'm the Batman, and Gotham is my city! We don't allow meta-humans here who don't know the rules," the Batman growled, launching out a batarang.

Ranma caught it, and then winced as a jolt of electricity went through a string connecting it to Batman's gauntlets. He dropped it, wringing out his hand, and then the Batman was on him, lashing out with a series of punches and kicks that Ranma dodged, having a bit of trouble with the punches, since Batman's outer forearms had several fin-shaped protrusions sticking out.

And despite the ridiculous suit the guy was wearing, he was actually a pretty decent martial artist, maybe up to Ukyo or Shampoo's level when they first met Ranma. The one punch

that made it through Ranma's defenses had him nod in appreciation, even though it didn't actually do any damage despite catching him on the chin. "You're good."

The next blow the Batman threw, Ranma dodged, and he grabbed the bits of metal sticking out of the Batman's outer arms, snapping them off as he kicked out hard, catching Batman in the side of the knee. Batman moved with it, deadening most of the force of the kick, and coming back up into a knee blow towards Ranma's stomach, which he pushed to one side, his own punch taking the Batman in the side of the head and hurling him sideways.

Batman rolled, the Kevlar and shock-absorbing layers in his suit deadening much of the force of Ranma's punches, but even so, Batman scowled angrily, knowing that he would have had to plan for this encounter for it to go his way. Ranma's mix of sheer physicality and training was something Batman hadn't dealt with before. *He's not as strong as Manhunter, Superman or Wonder Woman, nor is he as fast as the Flash, but he is extremely well-trained, better than any of them bar Wonder Woman. I can't hurt him enough to win this fight outright. Even my electricity trick didn't bother him.*

Before Batman could work out what to do, Ranma heard a shout from inside, "Ranma! The tape is giving way!"

His turning in that direction allowed Batman to hurl several more batarangs at Ranma, but he dodged through them all, saying, "Sorry, dude, but whatever your issue is, I've still got a job to do."

Hissing in annoyance, Bruce watched as the infuriating young man entered the room, deciding that the time to be Batman had passed. *I will need to carefully plan our next encounter. Having my emergency suit won't cut it.*

About thirty minutes after Ranma caught the flailing Matsumoto before he could go splat, Ranma stood, his arms crossed as the police Commissioner and a few others questioned him closely about what had happened to the Joker, as his body and the bodies of his victims were being carried through the once more lit ballroom, the power having come back moments after Batman had disappeared.

Thankfully, his protection of Matsumoto had completely changed the scientist/investor's view of him. When the police made noises about wanting to arrest Ranma for involuntary manslaughter, Matsumoto defended him. "Both of us have diplomatic immunity, Commissioner, specifically so that my bodyguard could act in any manner he chose to defend me. I do not see why you are trying to pin anything on him when the perpetrators of tonight's sick events are all around us being carted away by your police currently. But only after the majority of them were dealt with by your local vigilante. To my mind, your police and the security that was on hand were both grossly insufficient. You seem more like trash collectors than true officers of the peace."

"Hey! You see here, you fucking slant-eyed—" an extremely overweight police detective began.

"Bullock!" the Commissioner, an older gentleman whose name was Gordon, Ranma thought, shouted, turning to glare at the fat man and gesturing him away. With a sigh, he turned back, shaking his head. "I realize that in the movies diplomatic immunity means you can get away with literal murder, but in the real world, there are real rules and laws even to self-defense."

"And I didn't mean to kill the idiot," Ranma said, rolling his eyes as he repeated what he'd been saying several times already. "That moron was the one who brought the acid; all I did was turn it on him. How was I supposed to know it was acid anyway? By the time the spray hit the balcony, I'd already turned it on him. It wasn't like I had enough light to really tell the color of it or anything."

At that point, someone else leaned in to whisper into Gordon's ear, and he deflated a bit, seeming to finally accept the inevitable. "All right, your diplomatic immunity checks out with the Japanese embassy in Washington. If I had known that, I don't think I would've let you off the plane, Mister."

Ranma rolled his eyes at that, deciding to refrain from the number of responses he could make to that comment, while Matsumoto pushed his chest out and shouted out about how, again, it seemed as if the locals weren't up to protecting him. "Indeed, this whole affair is making me question whether or not my investment in the new laboratories here in Gotham is really a good one!"

"Now let's not be hasty here," the mayor said, moving from in front of the crowd of reporters to put himself between Gordon and Matsumoto, smiling the professional politician's smile towards Ranma. "I am certain that this attack was not the start of a trend or anything more serious. The Joker is one of the most random, or was, one of the most random criminals you could ever hope not to meet. The laboratories will be safe. Indeed, after this incident, I believe the city can go out of its way to provide extra security in the form of more police to patrol the area around it if you so wish."

Ranma tuned out the rest of the conversation while Matsumoto and the mayor spoke on this score, until the mayor had calmed Matsumoto's concerns. At that point, Gordon turned to Ranma and asked him about his abilities, but Ranma remained close-mouthed, stating that Gordon didn't really need to know. "I'm not going to stick around. Gotham is not my idea of a good time, so my skills don't matter to you."

"And you would be willing to give us a statement on it being an accident?"

"The dude had acid in his flower somehow. Again, how is this at all my fault exactly?" Ranma growled, now thoroughly annoyed. "Would you be demanding questions of someone

like this who had been able to turn the tables on a pervert, or someone who had been able to fight off a home invasion?"

"We would, if the person doing so is a meta-human. People who are so far beyond the norm have to be held to a higher standard," Gordon answered firmly. Superheroes and people like that could not go around killing people, not even by accident, not with street-level threats like the Joker anyway. Aliens, sure, superpowered monsters or whatever, Gordon was fine with the Justice League putting those kinds of threats down permanently. But while he was an awful human being, the Joker was still human. He should have been tried by the law.

"I'm a what now? I'm just a martial artist, old guy. Everything I can do can be learned." *Well, in this and my female body, anyway.* Ranma was still getting used to the idea that he had a third, magically reinforced body. But he hadn't even thought of using it earlier, so, so at present it didn't matter, really.

Gordon snorted at that, shaking his head. "So you say. So that was a no on the statement, was it?"

"As his current employer, and as we both have already stated the fact that we have diplomatic immunity, which, by your own words, has been cleared by the Japanese ambassador in Washington, Ranma does not have to give you anything. I further urge you, Ranma, not to do so."

Ranma nodded, as nearby in the crowd, Bruce scowled in irritation. *I'm going to have to keep an eye on him. This time, it might have been an accident, but Ranma certainly isn't showing any remorse, which isn't good. I also don't like the fact that he's both so open about his skills and so closed about himself. Regardless, I won't have the boy making trouble in my city, or anywhere else in America, if I can help it. Here's hoping that he just goes straight back to Japan, where he can continue to be their problem. But if not, I might need a means to follow him.*

OOOOOOO

The next morning, two other foreigners were arriving in America. This time, in the state of California. The youngest of the two had never been to America before. The other was a woman named Diana Prince. It said so right there on her ID.

Diana was known at San Diego's yacht club as an avid boater who regularly left the country for her job as an art expert and former Interpol counterfeit spotter. She smiled and waved at a few people she knew as she left the port area behind, heading to the car park where she had left her car. To Diana, the sights and sounds of the city of San Diego were nothing new.

The same could not be said for Cassie. She gaped around her like she had never seen a city before, and she hadn't, not like this one.

Chuckling quietly, Diana kept one hand on Cassie's shoulder, alternating between pushing her along and dragging her, shaking her head with a wry chuckle as Cassie stopped the tenth time she saw a car. "Come, child, is it so stunning that man would build cities such as this or things like cars? I'll admit their populations can be somewhat off-putting, and I rather dislike man's proclivity for building solely in rectangles, but you shouldn't let it overawe you so."

"But, but there's so much more here!" Cassie whispered in a fervent hiss.

"Yes, there is, but eventually, you will realize that nature has much more going for it than cities do, and for every amazing thing to do in Man's World, there is a hidden danger or cost," Diana warned. She wasn't that cynical most of the time, but Diana wanted to make certain that Cassie knew not to run off and leave her behind, as she could feel Cassie's muscles bunching, urging her to race off. That would be an extremely bad idea. *I know how many issues I ran into when I first came to man's world, and I have no desire for Cassie to make the same mistakes I did.*

"That sign, it says music on it, does that mean it has instruments, or is there music played there?" Cassie asked, showing off her knowledge of English writing. The fact that the pair were now also speaking English was another good sign of what she had learned.

Diana looked in the direction she had been pointing and saw a record studio. She began to chuckle, shaking her head. "No, or rather, they do sometimes play music in places like that. But that is not their main purpose." Looking at her young charge, Diana began to laugh, shaking her head and turning aside from heading towards the car park. "Come. I think the first thing we're going to do is go on a bit of a shopping spree for you. I had wanted to put it off until we reached my apartment, but so long as you are willing to carry the majority of your things, we can go now."

Cassie blinked, then nodded rapidly, and the older woman led her away, chuckling now. Several hours later, Cassie had been given her first set of Man's World variety bra and panties, several sets of clothing, and had changed into jeans, a t-shirt and a bomber jacket, a stark contrast to her former dress. Cassie was also now carrying a duffel bag over one shoulder that looked so heavy that several men they passed gaped at her. Finishing Cassie's new look was a large set of headphones, connected to a CD player in her pocket.

That last had been the only thing Cassie had insisted on buying, more than grateful for Diana's largess in purchasing the rest of the stuff she was currently carrying. Diana had no ear for music, while Cassie very much did. Now she was bobbing her head to the music, leaning against Diana, who was similarly carrying a few small bags in one hand, putting an arm around the younger girl's shoulder.

As they got into Diana's car, a small sports car whose lines Cassie quite liked looking at - although she knew nothing of cars obviously - Diana pulled off her headset, and smiled wryly at her elder. "You know, Mistress, Man's World has a lot of stuff going for it. Silk underwear,

jeans, all of those books, and music you can play whenever and wherever you want. Although I did see evidence of what you were saying before. Their cities could do with a good cleaning, couldn't they?"

"They could indeed, and if you think San Diego is dirty, I suggest you never go to Gotham," Diana answered with a laugh. *Although I probably wouldn't let you go there anyway. That is Bruce's domain, and he gets annoyed at any of us stopping by, let alone someone like Cassie.* "Now, I suggest you put that CD of yours into my car player. We have several hours of driving ahead of us before we get to Star City."

Cassie nodded eagerly, and by the time the car left the car park, she was already bobbing her head to heavy metal music, while Diana rolled her eyes and promised herself they would be switching to something else soon. *Oh dear, I really am turning into my mother, disapproving of my younger charge's taste in music... Mother must never find out about this!* Diana thought, as she began to wind her way through San Diego's traffic towards the highway, chuckling quietly to herself.

OOOOOOO

Ranma stayed pretty quiet for the rest of his time in Gotham, simply guarding Matsumoto like a shadow, a process that was not interrupted again during their stay. Which was the reason why he remained in the background as he did. Yet more than once, Ranma stared out the window of the hotel room he and Matsumoto were staying in to discover that Batman was nearby, watching them through the window. The creep.

For his part, Batman was no longer furious about the Joker's death. All the evidence pointed to his death indeed being an accident, and that was how the local newspapers were selling it for certain. The fact that Ranma gave no public statements about his actions and simply disappeared whenever he saw cameras was rather amusing to Bruce. After a few days, the Penguin attempted a bank robbery, and the local newspapers forgot about Ranma. Some even ran with the idea that the person who had died was a double, but Bruce knew better. The DNA matched his previous samples of the Joker, and he was truly dead.

However, he was still very suspicious about Ranma and his abilities. This young man, who could fight him to a standstill and was clearly a meta-human, had come out of nowhere and was being protected by powers within the Japanese government for some reason. From Bruce's perspective, Ranma had no compulsion about killing; the first blow he landed could easily have killed a normal person. He seemed not to care about keeping most of his abilities secret, as he should, yet was secretive about his past, which was a red flag to Bruce.

The young martial artist also didn't seem to know any of the rules meta-humans had to follow to keep on the side of the angels, and gave the impression that he wouldn't care if he did. That he would face any threat sent his way with an equal amount of force. That was not something Bruce could allow. So he kept an eye on him whenever he had the time.

For Ranma's part, his ten minutes of fame from killing the Joker showed that whatever anger Batman and the commissioner had for the act was definitely not shared by the majority of the citizens of the city. The accident was lauded as perhaps the greatest accident of all time, killing the so-called clown Prince of Crime, getting him permanently off the streets in a way that a place called Arkham Asylum, which was mentioned several times in connection to the criminal, hadn't been able to do.

Having read that in an article during breakfast, Ranma turned to Matsumoto, who had distinctly mellowed toward Ranma since the incident. "Asylum, am I not translating that right, or is that a place where you send crazy people?"

"A lot of the so-called supervillains here in America are deemed insane by their laws, and thus cannot be held fully accountable for their actions, again under American law. Thus, they are sent to asylums like that one, where they are supposed to be helped through their mental issues," Matsumoto answered dryly.

"And exactly how effective is that?" Ranma quipped.

"Not very. And that doesn't even consider how often people break out of Arkham Asylum itself."

Winning at that, Ranma let the subject die, turning his attention to the American breakfast in front of him.

After another week and a half of various meetings of all sorts, which was a week longer than it took for people to forget about Ranma's killing of the Joker, Matsumoto was finally ready to head back to Japan. He would be doing so the same way they came, via a private jet, which would stop over in Alaska for fuel before heading home.

As they were leaving the hotel for the last time, Ranma asked if the plane could stop in California instead, and was told no. They had a cargo to pick up in Alaska. Several parts sourced from American companies had been sent up there for Matsumoto to pick up for a project another company of his was working on back in Japan. Thus, their itinerary was already set.

That annoyed Ranma somewhat, as he had hoped to take the plane to California and leave Matsumoto there. From his research into Wonder Woman, Ranma found she was more commonly seen on the West Coast than on the East Coast, where Gotham was. *Still, the numbers aren't that different. Heck, she's seen pretty much across the country like Spandex Man and unlike Batboy, who is mostly seen here in Gotham.*

He stayed silent after that until after Matsumoto was boarding the plane, then tapped him on the shoulder. "Well, unless you think there's going to be a threat to your life in Alaska, I think I'm going to leave you here."

"Your job was only to protect me until I was done in Gotham, as our government knew and fully understood how dangerous this city could be. If you want to leave now, and as you put it once, explore America, you may do so with my thanks and my apology," Matsumoto answered earnestly. "I was wrong to look down on you for your lack of education and prospects, your life outside the grid, so to speak. You truly do stand at the pinnacle of martial arts. Although I will warn you that your diplomatic immunity will not extend past the end of the day. And you already know that you are the target of some unofficial displeasure from those in positions of authority here."

"I'm not going to spend any time here in Gotham, don't worry about that. And I'll accept your apology, Matsumoto-san. I'll admit I thought this job was a waste of my talent, but that Joker guy at least proved that the government was right to send me with you," Ranma replied, bowing towards the older man, who did the same, both of them bowing to an equal height, a show of great respect from the older Matsumoto. "Safe travels, sir."

Not ten minutes later, Ranma left the airport under the Umi-Sen-Ken, heading to the nearby bus station, dropping the technique halfway there. He had thought about taking the train, but not only did he not have much money now that he was no longer working for the government, but he also really wanted to explore America. He'd never been there before, of course, and he thought seeing the sights would be a lot of fun. *After I leave Gotham behind, anyway.*

But halfway to the bus station, Ranma could tell that he was being followed. And not by a random person either. No, this person was good, as the feeling of being watched had kept with him through several stores and double-backs. *God, it's like Gosunkugi all over again.*

Just prior to entering the bus station to buy his tickets, Ranma turned, staring around him at the passersby and then up at the rooftops. There, he saw movement and scowled. *Batass is at it again.*

Rolling his eyes, Ranma raised a finger towards the distant figure, then turned and entered the bus building. Instead of heading towards the ticket booth, Ranma headed towards the bathroom. Entering, he quickly began checking his clothing to see if someone had again managed to slip a tracking device or something on him, like the one he'd discovered from the Japanese government at one point. He then did the same with the rest of the clothing he'd worn here in Gotham, which was stuffed into his ki space, finding two trackers.

Surprisingly, both were still working in his ki space. That was fascinating, and something Ranma would make use of in the future. But right now, he just wanted to make sure Batass couldn't track him. *Although I have to wonder how he got them on me in the first place. And these things are really tiny, way more so than the one the government folk tried to put on me.*

With a shrug, Ranma waited until a few other men entered the bathroom, then flicked the two trackers at them. One tracking device hit each individual on the legs, and Ranma

changed into his female form, then used the Umi-Sen-Ken, following a third guy as he exited the bathroom. Moving over to the woman's bathroom, she waited until the door opened, then released the technique, and made her way nonchalantly over to purchase a ticket for the next town over.

Her red hair got a few strange looks, and one of the people at the ticket office froze, staring at her, before muttering about Ivy under her breath for some reason, then louder, "No, the rest of her body doesn't match up, it's just her hair," before processing Ranma's money and giving out her ticket.

Huh, why do I think there's a reason why I haven't seen anyone dying their hair red in this city? Shrugging unconcerned at that, Ranma headed out to wait for her bus.

In New York, Ranma took in the sights for an hour or two before deciding she was done with cities and took another bus to the outskirts. From there, Ranma, once more in his male body, pulled out a compass and decided to head south for a bit before jogging off.

Ranma kept jogging for days, stopping occasionally to take in the sights of New York and Pennsylvania. These were mainly national parks and historical sites, and running the hiking trails or swimming the rivers was a lot of fun. Beyond that, Ranma only ran into trouble a few times. And even then, the trouble was mostly about seeing a crime happen in front of him. Although a particularly moronic gang assumed that just because he was running along the side of the highway meant he was easy pickings at one point. Luckily for Ranma, the gang actually had some money on them, which solved one of his issues.

Occasionally, Ranma switched it up over the next two weeks, taking a bus or train from one city to another if there wasn't anything in between that interested him. But those means of travel were too boring for Ranma to keep using for long, since he couldn't get away with exercising on either one without people complaining.

Thus, Ranma spent most of his trip across America on his own two feet. This was his mode of travel when Ranma passed through a small town in Kansas, the name of which he didn't notice. Indeed, the place would've been entirely unremarkable, except for what happened twenty minutes later.

Ranma began to jog along a road dominated by various farmsteads, the farms so large the houses could barely be seen in the distance to either side from a distance let alone like this, with the wheat growing on either side so tall that Ranma's line of sight became almost nonexistent despite the fact that the road he was on was a major road of some kind. Ranma was just thinking about speeding up and leaving all this behind him when he heard a loud noise in the distance. "Was that a sneeze?"

He turned to look in that direction, but obviously couldn't see through the corn. It was only when a shadow blocked out the sun that Ranma looked up... "WhaGG!"

Flying through the air towards Ranma was a large tractor. It was currently flying through the air, end over end, as if someone had hurled it towards Ranma, its thresher arm flailing wildly.

Ranma didn't have time to dodge entirely, so instead, he jumped up onto the thing as it came towards him, grabbing onto the tractor's roof. He held on, flipping with it, using his knowledge of momentum and the Aerial Style of Anything Goes to deaden much of its tumble, bringing it to a halt with its wheels down, where it crashed into the ground, creating a small crater.

Gasping, Ranma slumped forward. "That was too close!"

"Oh no! Oh no! Uncle John is going to kill me!" A female voice muttered, rapidly coming towards him, and Ranma turned in that direction, blinking as a young woman flew over the weight field, only for her eyes to widen as she saw Ranma on top of the tractor, which was now sitting on its wheels in the middle of the large crater its landing had created.

Before she could say anything, Ranma asked, his voice somewhat strained from the near, well, not near-death experience, but certainly a very nasty battering. Even Ranma wouldn't have walked away from getting hit by a tractor going at that speed without a heck of a lot of broken bones. "Did you throw this at me!? What've I done to you!?"

Leaping down to stand with his arms crossed in front of the girl, Ranma noticed that she was shorter by an inch or so by Ranma, she was blonde, her hair a lighter color than Ranma remembered Cassie's had been, and somewhat buxom, something that was slightly on display thanks to her shirt, a plain long-sleeved shirt that was open at the top a bit. Although judging by the way her hair was sticking out all over the place, either she was having a very bad hair day, or she was not a young girl who cared overmuch about her appearance.

Not that it mattered, given the body underneath her current farm-girl outfit. Beyond her bust, which was a bit larger than Ranma's female form, he estimated she had extremely long legs, which her jeans hugged in no uncertain terms, a very pretty, almost heart-shaped face under her messy blonde hair, and light green eyes.

"Er, I, um," Kara Zor-El stammered, completely at a loss, her face going a bit white as she stared at Ranma, as he looked at her, waiting for an explanation. "Um... freak hurricane?" she tried.

"Which only picked this tractor up and hurled it at me? I saw you flying for a second there," Ranma deadpanned. "Want to try again?"

Oh, I wish being under a yellow sun gave us Kryptonians some mental powers or something to erase memories along with everything else. That actually brought up the memory of the movie she, Aunt Martha and Uncle John had watched last night, one she had particularly

enjoyed. With that in mind, she held up her hand and waved it, hoping against hope that this would work. "I'm not the superperson you're looking for?"

At that, Ranma snorted and let his arms fall to the side, shaking his head. "Okay, that was pretty funny. Just tell me that you didn't actually aim this at me, okay? I had a rival back where I used to live who used to toss cars at me occasionally, but a whole giant freaking tractor is a bit much."

Kara blinked at that, then shook her head quickly. "I didn't! I sneezed and I..." At that point, Kara felt another sneeze welling up within her, and quickly clapped both hands to her nose. But she wasn't quite quick enough, and a gust of wind picked Ranma up and hurled him into the air. She gaped up at him, and was about to launch herself up into the air to rescue him, but Ranma flipped himself midair, deadening most of his momentum and then continued to do it until he landed in a cornfield on the other side of the road.

Kara went after him, surprised that he landed in one piece. "I am so sorry!"

"Okay, you need to do something about your allergies, I think," Ranma said with a chuckle, his earlier anger now completely gone. Kara was so apologetic that it was like being angry at a puppy. "And I'm fine with being hurled up into the air, just the next time don't use a sneeze, okay? That's kind of dirty. Anyway, I'm Ranma. How do you do, miss 'I'm not the droids you're looking for'?"

At that, Kara allowed herself a little giggle, looking away and blushing faintly as she realized she was talking to a boy. It wasn't the first time she'd done so, of course. She'd had a few male friends back on Krypton, and she'd met a few boys going into town with Aunt Martha and when she went into the high school. But they had been, well, kind of plain? Not to mention stupid, way too full of themselves, and sexist.

Ranma looked quite exotic in his silk pants and shirt, with his oriental features and hair tied in a pigtail. He also seemed to have some powers of his own, which was just fascinating to her, and while he seemed arrogant, he could just as obviously back it up to a certain degree. *He also hasn't made a sexist comment yet, that's a plus.* "Er, I'm Kara. How do you do?"

"Better than you if you're going to have to explain what happened to that tractor," Ranma snickered, and Kara gulped, turning to look back toward the road. Seeing her crestfallen look, Ranma tapped her on the shoulder and gestured to it with his thumb. "Come on, let's see if we can get it working or barring that, out of the crater it made at least."

End Chapter

On Lara/Ranma: I didn't want to have a full chapter of just Ranma and Lara's adventures, just enough to show that the adventures she had so much trouble with wouldn't be so much of an

issue with him along. I realize this goes against the general rule of show, don't tell, but I really wanted to get into DC proper and start getting the central characters together while also showing how Ranma and Lara interact – no romantic feelings, but teasing/taunting and jibes going back and forth.

The Joker attack – Joker is not a normal person, but he isn't at the level of Batman in a fight, who loses out to Ranma in terms of both skill and raw physical stats. And he had no idea who he was dealing with. Nor did Batman really. If Batman had time to set up a trap and otherwise prepare, he could beat Ranma, but it would not be easy. Here, nope. As for Joker dying... I thought his death by his own acid flower was just the greatest moment of irony.

As for the ending, I had wanted to write Ranma meeting Martha and Uncle John, and getting to know Kara a little better, before moving on. However, I decided I wasn't giving that enough time, so I'm going to end this here. I hope you enjoyed it.