

So, heh, um... yeah. This chapter could be considered a whole arc in one chapter. If I went that route, I'd probably expand on the setting a little bit – give all the fighters in the real tournament their own waiting rooms, maybe a personal what I call fixer, expand on Mai and Shampoo's parts, expand the fights – but none of that would impact the actual plot. And frankly, while tournaments and stuff are going to be a recurring theme in this work, I did not think this one would be the place to go into all of that first. So here you go.

This has been edited by me with Grammarly (OH MY GOD, that was so nasty) and Hiryo as well, who helped immensely in adding a bit more to the characters, and pointed out some story/lore issues.

Chapter 9: Sometimes the Lion Gets You

"...Hmm..." Chun Li's look was actually making Ranma a tad uncomfortable, almost embarrassed, an amazing feat frankly. Ranma wouldn't say that he didn't have any kind of shame or anything like that, but feeling like this for something Ranma had done because of his Pops was something he'd thought he'd long since put behind him. "Look, all Ranma say is this place be better gain than apartment place Chun Li want to use, okay?"

"And you have yet to tell me why or how you know anything about the underground fight circuit," Chun Li growled, poking the table.

The move made her chest move slightly inside her police uniform, but Ranma, despite having had his libido well and truly awakened by being with Shampoo, didn't notice. "Ranma no think Ranma had to!" he exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air. "Come on, girl, Ranma be walking martial artist, how you think Ranma earn money?"

"One, I'm older than you. Call me girl again, and I'll smack you upside the head so hard you'll be seeing double," Chun Li growled. "Two, I need some more than that, Ranma. I don't think you're a plant or anything, but if you want me to take you're suggesting seriously, then I'd like to know where your information is coming from." Chun Li calmed down a bit, actually smiling at Ranma. "You can also speak Japanese, Ranma. Your Chinese is kind of hard to follow, and I can speak Japanese."

Ranma frowned, then shrugged, switching to Japanese with some relief as he began to respond. "Fine. When, when I was younger, my Pops would put me in these underground arenas. I was told it was training, and I always kind of enjoyed it. Facing off against adults was always more exciting and tough than facing anyone my age. It, um, it took me until I was around thirteen or fourteen before I realized why the adults were all taking it so seriously and that money routinely changed hands. After that, I refused more often than not."

Mainly because my old man refused to share the wealth even if I was the one who was fightin', Ranma thought but did not say aloud. Chun Li struck him as a very straight-laced, by-the-book sort, and by the look on her face, even that little bit was enough to get her angry.

“That’s my explanation. But I’ll warn ya now, if you wanna find my old man to make him pay for his crimes or whatever, good luck! I sure as hell ain’t gonna help.”

By this point, Ranma figured Genma had broken out of jail. If so, finding the older Saotome would not be easy, and as long as the opposite was true as well, Ranma was fine with that.

Ranma was entirely correct on this score. In point of fact, the two Saotomes were now on the same continent, although different nations admittedly. Genma was currently in South Korea, searching for a ‘rising evil,’ as Madame Rose put it. Something he was not altogether happy about, but with her ki mark on him, there was no way he was going to escape the woman, who he and Genma had gone to for help in locating Ranma twice before. Genma would need to pay off his debt to her one way or another.

“I just might. A child in the underground fighting tournaments, that’s even worse than what I thought, that you had just seen them from afar or talked with former street fighters,” Chun Li grumbled.

“What did you... You know what, never mind. I don’t care what you suspected.” Ranma rolled his eyes. “Anyway, that’s my idea.”

Chun Li looked down at the map of the city that she had initially brought out to describe the places where their investigations had pointed them to where underground fights happened. They didn’t know where the final tournament occurred, but the police had an idea of a few dozen places across the city where the preliminary bouts were or might be occurring.

Ranma had pointed to one of the sites as being the most likely in his opinion to be a permanent place, used regularly rather than on some kind of rotation like many of the other sites. “Go over it again for me.”

Listening to this from the side, Fei Long shook his head and tapped Shampoo on the shoulder where she sat next to her Airen. “Can I speak to outside for a moment?”

Shampoo nodded, whispering, “I don’t think I have anything to offer to this conversation, but you better not try to flirt with me! I know I’m pretty, but I’m also taken.”

Rolling his eyes, Fei Long gestured them out into the hallway of the police precinct.

Behind them, Ranma sighed, then pointed to the pictures of the building in question, his fingers tapping it, then the pictures of the area around it, ignoring for now the fact that Shampoo and Fei Long had just walked out of the office. “The area’s in a factory district, which ya all mentioned. I’m not gonna...”

“Do you talk like that deliberately, or were you raised in the hicks?” Chun Li interrupted, looking at Ranma, a wry smile on her face. “You’re not fooling anyone.”

Ranma pouted a bit, then shrugged. “Eh, I suppose it’s easier to fool people with that act in Chinese. Anyway, you all figured out that the building’s owned by a shell company, you said. Fine. This building’s older than the apartment complex you wanted us to use. It isn’t all that old either, and it doesn’t make anything dangerous. So, no inspectors, right?”

“Well, yes, even here in Hong Kong, there are some things that need safety inspectors. And you’re right, cosmetics isn’t one of them. But the apartment complex has an outer wall, is hidden, and noted to have sound dampening walls,” Chun Li argued back.

“Yeah, but the outer walls of any factory would be thick enough to keep in sound, and it isn’t on any kind of main street. The apartment complex is more central, but that’s the problem there, too. Now, I’m not going to say that the apartment complex isn’t shady. Your points about there not being enough people living there for the size of it, and not even many seen outside on the various terraces or whatever is really bad. But that doesn’t mean it would be good as a place to have an arena. You couldn’t hide people coming and going, and let me tell ya, most martial artists or fighters? We’re a weird bunch.”

Chun Li shook her head, her earlier annoyance at Ranma seeming to know too much was gone, and she wondered what else he might be able to bring a set of new eyes to. “Alright, smart guy, if you think that’s a good place to have the preliminaries, where do you think the real tournament’s going to take place?”

“Underground.” Chun Li just looked at Ranma, and he held up his hands in peace. “Hey, I’m serious. Hong Kong’s a reeeaaally old city, right? Who knows what’s underground.”

Outside, Fei Long and Shampoo paused right out of the door. Mai was further along the hallway on the phone, sending texts to Ken and Ryu, asking them if they wanted to join the trio on this mission to infiltrate the local underground fight scene. Nodding her way, Fei Long looked back at Shampoo. “Look, you were right about my lead actress’s fighting abilities when you and her got into it earlier. Unfortunately, I can’t force Mili to change her combat style, but the entire purpose of this film is to be as realistic when it comes to combat as possible. To show traditional Chinese martial arts as genuinely as we can. So if Mili’s not going to play ball, we still have time to switch things around, like I talked to you about back on the set. Because of that, I want you to become an official stunt actress for me.”

Shampoo frowned. “Stunt actress? We only talked about me stepping in for that one scene. What do you mean, switch things around?”

“At the time, I did, but frankly, given Mili’s shown skills in that scene tells me I need to change things up on a larger scale. As for a stunt actress, that means you’ll be shown throughout the movie as yourself. You won’t need to memorize any lines or anything, just where

you stand on the stage when you're supposed to enter the scene or start the fight, fight and maybe do a few hand gestures. I don't have to explain those, do I?"

Snickering, Shampoo glared at him, a fierce, bloodthirsty smile on her face, then made a cutting gesture across her throat. She then ended with giving them the finger, a European and American thing that had spread even into her small village. "You mean that kind of thing?" she asked, her face smoothing back to normal.

"Exactly! Especially that throat-cutting gesture. That was good improv," Fei Long answered, hoping to butter Shampoo up a bit. "That way, you can be the silent killer, the combat junkie who doesn't care about anything but fighting. We can even put in something about the character having lost her tongue in the past for some transgression or other against the main villain."

"I thought that what's-her-name was the villainess," Shampoo said frowning. "Or was she the muscle? I can't remember."

"Mili was originally brought in as the pretty muscle. That would be your role if you agree. Mili's role would then shift into being more of the cerebral kind of criminal lieutenant who only fights when necessary. You'd be her silent, deadly older sister."

"What?!" Shampoo squawked in outrage, thumping Fei Long in the chest with a finger. "That bitch is **at least** ten years older than me! How are you going to make this," Shampoo gestured down at her body with both hands and without an ounce of modesty, "look older than that woman? There's not enough makeup in the world."

That caused Fei Long to laugh, and he nodded. "I suppose we could make you the psycho younger sister. Ooh, that Mili has come to Hong Kong to find, and look after. It could add a little more complexity to her character if she fell into crime while you jumped in feet first because you wanted to fight."

Elsewhere in Hong Kong, Mili scowled down at where she had just shattered the cup in her hand. She'd been feeling uneasy for a few moments and then suddenly felt a spike of pure anger go through her. "Somehow, I just know this has to do with that bimbo! I wonder if that whole fight down by the docks was staged?"

The Chinese actress bit her finger so hard she was in danger of piercing it, growling, "Yeah, that's it, that whole fight was staged. Just so that bitch could come in and claim my role, push me out of the spotlight. Those punks fell way too easily to her and the others for it to be anything else."

While Mili began to mutter to herself in her apartment about conspiracy theories that had no basis whatsoever in fact, Mai finished texting with Ken and Ryu, chuckling at how slowly Ryu had been answering, and how badly his spelling was while texting. She moved over to

Shampoo, and hearing the last bit, she threw a companionable arm over Shampoo's shoulder, to which the girl replied automatically with her own around Mai's waist, looking over at her in question. "Ken and Ryu are in. They both said the plan sounds fun. Well, Ken at least was able to type that correctly. Ryu, not so much. Now, what is this I hear about you wanting Shampoo to become a proper actress? How much money are we talking about here? One scene is one thing. This sounds bigger than that."

Fei Long grimaced a little. "I'm not exactly made of money! I'm funding this entire movie myself, which is hard enough on my savings. Before you ask, I can't go back and split Mili's contract down the middle. Do you have any idea how long that would take me? Her general attitude about it would be bad enough, but then she'd get her lawyers involved. I am not going down that road."

"We're not going to ask for that much, but I'm certain that you have a contract around for stunt doubles, right? Surely some other actor you're employing needed one?" Mai pressed.

With her arm still around the other girl's waist, Shampoo internally kicked herself, grateful that Mai had joined the conversation as she wouldn't have thought about asking for money. Upstaging Mili and showing her **real** Amazonian martial arts would've been enough of a draw, yet the fact remained that they were low on funds at the moment, thanks to Mai splurging on their hotel. They would undoubtedly have had to start trolling for idiots again. And frankly, as she thought of it, Shampoo didn't want to force Mai to be the sole source of money when they couldn't do that for whatever reason.

Mai's already done so much for me and Ranma when it comes to convincing us to get better supplies, introducing us to the Martial Arts Bank, and making us realize we need to set aside money away in the bank rather than simply keep it in our ki spaces all the time. To say nothing about cell phones and stuff. None of which I would've ever thought of and Airen probably thought of as pointless until Mai showed us what they could do.

"Actually, that's not a bad idea. Since most of what Shampoo'll be working with is stunt work, I don't have to pay her as an actress. I have no doubt you would be a good one," Fei Long hastily added when Shampoo glared at him. "But this way, it saves me some money, and you still get paid."

"How long would you want me around?" Shampoo asked, nodding her head in agreement. "I'm not certain how long we want to be here in Hong Kong. Especially if we get on the bad side of the local Triad. Whatever happens with this tournament and Chun Li's mission, the Triad will still exist after all."

"You won't have to worry about that. Remember, I volunteered my people to help you three change your identities for this. By the time my makeup artists are done with you all, there's no way you'll be recognized," Fei Long assured her. "As for how long, for your part, three, four weeks? A week to rewrite the screenplay, ten days to get you used to the role and

memorize all the timing issues and record the non-action bits, then seven days to get the various fight scenes right.”

Shampoo frowned a little at that, thinking it was too long, but then glanced over at Mai again and, reminded of her desire to help out with the money aspect of their trip, slowly nodded. “You never said how much money this would earn me.”

When she heard the figure, Shampoo nodded firmly. *50,000 yuan for a month’s work? Damn! “I’m in!”*

“Just remember, Shampoo doesn’t do anything until we have the contract in hand,” Mai warned, pulling away from Shampoo as the door to Chun Li’s office opened.

Ranma came out first, with Chun Li following, gesturing the group to move ahead of her. “Come on, I’ll get you all into one of our police vans. I don’t want any hint of the police employing new martial artists to get out until you’re done with your sting operation, especially after your antics earlier today.”

In fact, I might need to put a watch on Fei Long, Chun Li realized. Just in case he was recogni... what am I saying. Of course, he was recognized. Yes, guards.

Blinking, Ranma was about to point out that they could probably get out over the rooftops but shrugged his shoulders, and went along with things for now. Soon, with another policeman who, like all for task force Chun Li had personally vetted driving the truck, they headed out into the city.

Forty minutes later, Ranma, Mai and Shampoo were dropped off next to an alleyway, sneaking out the back of the truck. From there, they leaped up onto the nearest rooftop, startling Chun Li as she watched them go. “Huh. I never thought of, hmm, I wonder if I could travel like that...”

“Please don’t try, Miss. A policewoman traveling like that would cause a scandal, the truck driver muttered, shaking his head.

“I never travel like that either. It looks interesting, so long as you don’t suddenly discover that you’ve got a fear of heights,” Fei Long murmured, staring after the trio, a strange expression on his face. “Looking at those three, I feel as if I have not taken my Art as far as I should have. Strange, isn’t it? I’m famous, I can finally use my wealth and fame for something I have always wanted to do, helping people in Hong Kong. But looking at them...” He shook his head. “Nevermind. So, how are you going to get me back home without people seeing me coming out of a police van?”

Above the police van, Ranma and the girls raced along side by side. “Hey, I feel kinda hungry. Want to stop in at a twenty-four-hour store or something?”

"You and your bottomless pit," Mai snorted. "But fine, let's get something to eat. Then we need to figure out how to meet up with Ken and Ryu tomorrow, then get to Fei Long's for our disguises. That will be fun."

"Maybe for you two. I'm a guy... er, unless you think--" Ranma began hesitantly.

"No." Shampoo leaned over as they landed on the next rooftop, leaning in to give Ranma a kiss. "I know why you're thinking about using your female form, Ranma. You want to be with us because you're afraid of what might happen to two girls."

"Huh, so I'm not the only one who thought about that," Mai murmured, giving a flushed Ranma a wink. "Don't worry about it, Ranma. Remember, I'm pretty immune to most poisons and Date Rape drugs. I'll notice if someone tries to slip some kind of gas into the room, and we can go without eating any food or drinking."

"I guess, but--"

"But nothing, Airen," Shampoo interrupted Ranma again. "Do not treat me or Mai like little girls who need help. We would not have volunteered for this if we thought we couldn't handle it. Even without you around to watch us."

Nodding, Ranma sighed, shrugged, and then pointed down at the street as they came to an intersection. "Okay, fine. I won't worry about that. So... food?"

OOOOOOO

Returning to the police precinct later that day, Chun Li sat down at her desk, frowning pensively. She pulled out some of the data, the evidence they had compiled over the past few years of work against the Triad. *The rumors of the tournament were one thing. The reports of gun trafficking mixed with the recent rumors of military-grade guns like machine guns and rifles are another thing entirely. I... the whole undercover plan I came up with for Ranma and the others will hopefully work. But if they call us in... I might need more firepower.*

With that in mind, she pulled out a phone and began to type in a phone number, one that her father had given her for a military man in the PRC (People's Republic of China) her father told her he trusted. When the phone was picked up, a man answered. "As this is my private number, this had better be important."

"Major Heidern? This is Chun Li. My father is an inspector with Interpol and gave me this phone number for if..."

OOOOOOO

Getting out to the temple/dojo where Ken and Ryu were staying was actually quite a chore, well out of Hong Kong proper and set into a suburban sprawl itself, removed from most paved roads and all public transportation. It was almost as if the area had been left behind by everything that had made Hong Kong a modern city, an area of small buildings, small businesses and more. It was a startling change from the rest of the metropolitan area, and it took the trio a while to find the temple.

Not that any begrudged it. For Mai, it was a quaint, fun little place. For Shampoo, it reminded her a bit of home. For Ranma, there were several small food stalls and restaurants to sample, and getting away from the noise and people was fantastic.

The temple was set on a hill, as most such places tried to be, with a tiny copse of trees around it on three sides and a few houses set along the stairwell leading up to the temple proper. When the trio got to the top, they found a sprawling front yard area but a rather small, one-story temple building that was probably barely large enough for three or four people to lay down in comfortably, let alone live in. There didn't seem to be room enough for multiple rooms, but there was a small area set to one side of the main building, out of which a chimney rose, which probably meant that was the kitchen. The grounds and the building, though, were immaculately well cared for, with more than enough room for a decently large class.

On the ground to one side of the temple, Ryu and Ken were sitting cross-legged, their eyes closed as they meditated, not reacting to the trio's arrival. The old monk, Oro, whom Ranma and the girls had met before, was walking around them, his one working hand up in front of his mouth as he chanted, presumably to give the two martial artists some background noise to allow their minds to better drop into meditation. Ranma didn't think that kind of thing would work for him very well, but it might for other people.

Ranma was about to call out to them when Oro looked up, catching his eyes and shaking his head firmly. While continuing his chant, he pointed them over to sit on the grass nearby. Ranma rolled his eyes at that while Mai scowled. They were something of a time limit, after all, and Fei Long had told her that it might take the better part of a few hours for their disguises to be done. Even though she and Shampoo had talked about their outfits last night, which was a process they didn't want to speed up.

They didn't have to wait long however, as Ken opened his eyes, breathing in deeply, and then moving up into a kata before bowing towards Oro. The kata wasn't nearly as fluid or swift as some of the ones that Ranma preferred, but it was still impressive looking. *He's perfectly balanced, putting all his body's strength into each blow for sure, karate with Shotokan mixed in, just like I thought. It's a good style, but it isn't as fluid or adaptable as Anything Goes, I think.*

Oro slowly nodded, his chanting halting. "Good. Show me your balance, your skill. Remember, though, no emotion, no ego, anger or rage. Only pure qi."

While he spoke in Chinese, Ranma understood the word qi meant what Ranma called ki, internal life energy given form. *I gotta wonder what he's teaching them.* The ancient monk still gave Ranma a bit of a strange vibe, which only grew as Ken launched instantly into an attack.

Those were serious blows he was trying to hit Oro with, but Oro simply dodged, ducked, and then began to block, redirecting the strikes that Ken was launching at him with his sole working arm, not even using his legs. *Yeah, that's about what I thought. Each blow would hurt. Ken ain't used to facing opponents faster than he is, and his lower body needs more work... or is he just out of practice using both kicks and punches? A mistake in his personal training? I know he and Ryu said Ken had to head home a few years ago after spending... what was it, seven years, I think, with Ryu and their master.*

"So Ken isn't just a pretty face," Shampoo murmured, looking at the fight going on, her thoughts somewhat more admiring than Ranma's, not picking Ken's style apart as Ranma had automatically but seeing the positives. "I had honestly wondered."

"I did, too," Ranma answered in Chinese. Shampoo had forced him and Mai to practice Chinese for a long while the night before, and whenever he had slipped into Japanese, she had gotten into the habit of glaring at him or threatening to tickle him. Which, when a laughing Mai joined in, was most effective.

But Ranma couldn't deny the practice had done him and Mai both a world of good. "Ryu looked like a severe martial artist, but Ken could've been a pretend. He's got a lot of power in those blusters, maybe as much as the Bogard brothers."

As he spoke, Ranma winced, only half-listening to Shampoo as she corrected some of his word choices to look over at Mai, but the taller girl only nodded. Evidently, Mai was able to think about Andy and Terry without any more feelings of pain about how her relationship with the silver-haired ass had ended. *Okay, calling Andy an ass isn't fair. I know I might've acted the same way if not for that time in the cave with Shampoo teachin' me that talking is just as important as punching, but still, I like ta think I'd have figured out a way to let Mai down gently... without hurting her feelings... you know what, I'm just gonna stop thinking about this now.*

When Mai spoke, she agreed with Ranma, although she pointed out that Ken looked to be a bit less fluid, something Ranma had noticed before. Ken wasn't actually using any paired strikes, simply shifting from one hit to the next randomly, as if his old style was based on single, powerful strikes, pummeling the enemy into position. "He'd probably actually hit a bit harder, but I doubt he would be able to adapt easily. Andy and Terry began to use ki attacks early on in their training. I don't think Ken can just yet."

"Don't be so sure about that," Ranma said, scratching at his chin thoughtfully while also feeling relieved that his mention of the Bogards hadn't elicited much response from Mai. Why he felt so relieved that Mai no longer seemed to be holding a candle for Andy, he didn't

contemplate. "He may be using ki to reinforce his strength like we can do with our speed or strength." *Although I doubt it's to the level we can.*

Just as Ranma was thinking that, Ken's hands began to glow with orange-gold energy. Not with an attack, simply reinforcing his hands in a blue layer. Looking at it, Ranma's eyes widened in surprise at the amount of power that Ken was putting out. *Pretty impressive. That looks as strong as some of Terry's attacks, and it's far more contained than my Blue Burst. Neat. I knew Ryu mentioned ki attacks, although I hope he meant more than just this kind of thing.*

The next second, Oro held up a palm, taking a punch from the younger man and holding it there easily, his own hand not glowing at all but holding the blow easily. "Excellent. Gouken has built your foundation well. Now, you must build upon that, bringing forth your inner energy faster on command. Your body reinforcement is well above what I expected, but your spiritual strength is worse. Keep meditating. Your Yin and Yang energy are not yet in harmony. After that, you will find your training going much more smoothly, though, as I said, you will need to come up with actual qi attacks on your own or from Ryu."

Sighing, Ken nodded, surprising Ranma a bit when he spoke in Chinese rather than Japanese. "Yes, Master Oro. Meditation was not easy to do back with my family in the States."

Oro didn't reply to that, instead moving over to Ryu and slamming a chop down on the younger man's head without any warning. Ryu instantly reacted, his hands coming up to block, and Oro smiled. "Good. You have already begun to exhibit more situational awareness about feeling the world around you through your sixth sense. Your inner qi is much more in harmony than Ken, but you still need some work there before you can bring out your qi quickly and without unnecessary thought."

He looked over at Ken, who chuckled sheepishly, scratching his nose and looking away. "I know I need to work on that too, Master Oro."

"You will need even more work than Ryu on that point," Oro answered a bit repressively. "Ryu already has a greater strength of qi than you do, thanks to continuing his training while you were called back to America."

When Ken winced, Ranma wondered if there was a story there. Right now though, they had other things to talk about. "Yo, Ryu, Ken. You two said you were interested in joining us for a little explore, you not going to back out now, are you?"

"That would be 'adventure', not 'explore' and 'you're' not 'you'. Not bad, though," Shampoo judged.

"Hell no," Ken retorted, shaking his head as Ryu stood up, moving to join them. "Not a bit of it, although I'd like some more information. All Mai told us via text was that you guys were

thinking of infiltrating an underground martial arts fight scene. The term 'infiltrating' caught my attention."

"Yeah, I don't know if you notice, but we're not exactly made to be spies or anything. If we're only going to watch, I'm going to say no," Ryu added in Japanese, smirking a little. It was evident that he wasn't going to try to speak Chinese, but at least he understood it.

Ranma looked around, making certain no one else was coming up to the temple and then nodded to the girls, who began to explain. The idea that they had met Fei Long interested Ken, while Ryu was more interested in the rest of the story, who spoke in Japanese. "It sounds like offering to help was the right thing to do, although the idea of going out and good-looking for these gangsters wouldn't have occurred to me. I would've just stayed on the defense, even though I know the best defense is a good offense. I wouldn't have felt comfortable with taking the law into my own hands like that."

"Well, in some places in this town, there isn't much law to have in your own hands, so it made sense to us at the time," Mai answered with a shrug, wincing a bit as she heard that line aloud, knowing it was wrong but going on regardless. "Whether or not it would've worked in the long run that's up in the air. But this way, we can not only stop any further attacks on Fei Long and his movie but also perhaps remove one of the Triad's biggest players here in Hong Kong."

"Yeah, definitely count us in," Ken said, exchanging a glance with Ryu, who nodded firmly. The idea of getting into these underground fights would've interested Ryu regardless, but the fact that they had police backing and a righteous cause simply added to it. "So what do we have to do?"

"We got idea of where to go, and Fei Long will get some of his makeup artists and costume people to make us up some older identities. That way, it hopefully won't get back on us in the future. Which may be big. Shampoo going to be a star in Fei Long's movie, we be here at least month. Organized crime and fight tournaments are inextricably linked after all," Ranma explained, messing up a few words, but none egregiously as he kept on speaking Chinese. "Ranma know he, Mai and Shampoo want take part in more tournaments like this."

"Yet your police friend said that they want to bust this big guy, the Raging Dragon, for way more than just being part of organizing the underground fight scene, right?" Ryu asked.

"It's Mad, not Raging, but yes," Shampoo agreed.

Ken understood what his friend was saying and switched to Japanese to make the point. "We might need to talk more about that. I bet you anything that this place will do a body search before we're allowed into the fights."

"Maybe, maybe not. We'll cross that bridge when we come with it. Right now, though, we should get going. Coming to get you took us way out into the boonies," Ranma joked.

"And Ranma's stopping every time we saw a new food stall cost us even more," Mai joked, dodging back from an elbow from the pigtailed man, laughing.

Throughout all this, Oro had stood by one side, examining the trio of newcomers.

Shampoo was the least interesting to him. Oro had dealt with the Amazons in the past and could easily see the subtle tells of true Amazonian training in her. *She seems to be trying to gain control of her Yin energy in a way most Amazons that I have met have done, but that is too new an addition to tell if anything interesting will come from that. Her companion, the Shiranui heir, is probably the source of that and her balance of Yin and Yang is extremely good. Mai is in full control of her Yin energy, and I can also see in her a growing mastery of the Yang side of qi. She will be able to bring her style to a whole new level, one that past masters of the Shiranui Ninjutsu, such a silly name, would ever think of reaching. Excellent. Jubei did very well with her, and these friends of hers have undoubtedly pushed her along.*

That, and she is extremely beautiful. Not mature enough in attitude, but in body, certainly. While Oro had turned aside from the pursuit of worldly pleasures to gain mastery of his inner Yin energy and commune with the world as a whole, the ancient monk could still appreciate beauty. And both these young girls were gorgeous in their own way, although Oro would no sooner think of acting on that thought than an atheist would think of praying in a church.

Despite his appreciation for the two flowers before him to Oro, the most fascinating one of the trio on a martial arts level was Ranma. He could detect very little in the way of Yin from Ranma; his core was almost entirely made of Yang qi. Yet it was shaped and coiled, controlled and condensed in a manner that Oro knew would take Ken and Ryu, both of them highly trained, very instinctual, naturally gifted martial artists, months if not years to reach. It felt like Ranma was still searching for ways to express that energy, but the control was already there. All that remained was to consciously express it in a controlled manner.

Moreover, the imbalance he wasn't so bad to the point where Ranma wouldn't be able to use **any** Yin, to the point where his mind would forever be unguarded or where he might start to have problems with the more spiritual side of the Art. Sometime in the near past, someone had pointed out that weakness to the youth, and he had begun to correct it.

On his own, Oro sensed, without any true guide. Fascinating. Yet Saotome, that name... something about it rings a bell. Moreover, the lazy looking yet tense body, the way he is so poised, that too looks familiar.

With that thought, Oro interrupted as the group began to prepare to leave. "Tell me, young man. I did not realize it before, but your presence, your last name, the way you stand, and what I sense of you, it reminds me of something. What is your martial arts style?"

"Er, well, I'm kind of in the making of process my own, but if you want to know what I was trained in, I was trained in Anything Going Style of Wild Grappling. The air side of it, to be more pointed. Although if someone from my school did anything to you or whatever, don't expect me to pay for it," Ranma warned, while Shampoo shook her head and mumbled corrections under her breath. "I don't have any of the school's rolls or anything that my old man might've stolen and I never even met the old degenerate I've heard began my school."

"You got out that last sentence without any mistakes. Good work, but we still need to work on your word choice and grammar. Like, a lot," Shampoo grumbled. "And I know you said once you thought my accent in Japanese was sexy, Ranma. I have to tell you, that is **really** not the case when you speak pidgin Putonghua."

Oro chuckled, shaking his head. "Do not be so hard on him. Languages are difficult. It took me more than a decade to speak Hindi. But Anything Goes... that would be Elder Happosai, yes? Ah, then you would be young Genma's boy. Such an odd youth he was, the one time I met him, lazy yet somehow focused and a natural martial artist in a way that Soun was not."

"Er, yeah. The old pervert. I ain't ever met him, though, and I don't even know if he's still alive," Ranma stated, looking a little bemused at how kindly Oro was taking about both his Pops and Happosai. Most of the time Happosai came up in conversation it was with some negative connotation. But Oro spoke about him like he was an old friend or an acquaintance at least. It was weird.

"I see. Yes, Anything Goes has always taught adaptability overall, a... build-yourself-up approach, adapted to the life one leads in a way most formal styles would reject. I prefer to build on strong foundations in a more controlled manner, but I suppose one cannot argue with results," Oro mused. "It will be interesting to watch you as you continue on your path."

"What about you, Master Oro? I doubt you'd be able to get accepted into the fighting tournament, but having you nearby might be a good idea," Ryu asked. "And this is your city, after all."

"I do not own Hong Kong. The very idea is laughable. Moreover, it is not this old monk's place to solve the ills of the world. This is not a problem of the Art or the planet. This is a problem of the law." Oro shook his head. While Oro had sensed a large source of what felt like Satsui no Hado (Soul of Murderous Intent) within the city for many years, it was not the most powerful he had felt, not even in the top ten, really. "I am an old man. I can well remember far more horrible things than this Mad Dragon fellow could ever have done in his short lifetime. And whoever replaces him, and someone always will, maybe even worse. I will not tell you that

it is wrong for you all to step in. That is your decision. I am merely teaching you two as a favor to Gouken, not to guide your steps or offer advice to any others. But that is all.”

That was too deep for Ranma, and he shook his head. “So you won’t help, fine, thanks. Don’t worry. We’ll restore these two tomorrow. I can’t vow they be in same shape they in today. Especially if either of them fight me, Shampoo or Mai,” Ranma smirked at Ryu, who smirked back, understanding Ranma’s words despite his confusing wording.

“Them’s fighting words,” Ken snorted, eager to get in on that as well. For their part, Mai and Shampoo laughed in the background and promised themselves that if Ken or Ryu were overlooking the pair of them, the girls would make them pay for it.

Oro continued to watch the fivesome head off, shaking his head quietly, then turned back and headed into his temple. *A boy who learns best through overcoming the obstacles put in his way by life, looking for a possible user of Satsui No Hado. I wonder what will come of that. It should be interesting to see after the fact, at least. As well as if Ryu and Ken will continue on the path of the Kyoji no Hado (Power of Nothingness) going forward as Gouken and I hope.*

OOOOOOO

Ken occasionally tried to flirt with Mai as the group headed off, but once Ranma and the girls leaped up onto a rooftop with the ease of a jumping frog and expected the two older youths to follow them, both he and Ryu had too much to do concentrating on jumping and landing to spend much time admiring the scenery.

They still did that, though. Both of them greatly enjoyed the sights around them, having never traveled like this before, and the sight of Mai and Shampoo ahead of them, but this was a very different way of moving around the city than either of them had ever trained for. They could do it. Both Ken and Ryu’s sense of balance was incredible, well above an Olympic gymnast’s level. They just never thought of traveling like this before. It was a workout for their legs, but they were still able to keep the other three in sight as they raced across the roofs, making far better time than the group would have if they had taken a car like Ken had thought they might.

Soon, they arrived at Fei Long’s apartment complex, where they had to bounce upwards off balconies several times before reaching the one where Fei Long had set out a red towel, marking it out as his. Mai and Fei Long had set that up earlier that day via text. In fact, Mai was also the one to tell Chun Li where to meet them. While Ranma and Shampoo were able to use phones, they didn’t really figure them or everything they could do into their daily lives just yet, something Mai teased them about as they arrived. “See, it worked. Calling ahead, planning, good, yes?”

Rolling his eyes. Ranma moved around Mai, hip-checking her lightly in the side. “Yes, yes, you nerd. We get it.”

“Nerd? Is that the best you can do?” Mai taunted as Ranma opened the door.

When they entered, they found Fei Long with several other people waiting for them, most of whom shrieked and shouted as the group of martial artists pulled open the door to the balcony. “What the!?” was the loudest shout, although it had to fight to be heard over the shrieks of two of the women. “Where’d they come from?!” came next, with the girls joining in to add to the volume.

“I told you they would be coming in from my balcony. What did you think I meant?” Fei Long snorted, clapping his hands loudly to cut through the sudden tumult. “Calm down, girls, James. These are the folk who need to become someone else for a bit.”

“Er... Right.” The one other man in the room, who was obviously James, nodded, cocking his head to one side. He said something to himself in English, which Ranma caught only a bit of as the older man moved forward, shifting around the five of them. His eyes didn’t linger on Mai or Shampoo as most men’s eyes would have. Instead, he was simply taking all five in like they were so many manikins. “Okay, I can see what I’m working with here, but give me some more parameters what we’re shooting for. What look are we going for, grungy, sexy, high-class? Do you want to keep the varied martial artist motif going? What changes can we make to your hair color or style? And what about accessories?”

“I think I can get by with just wearing this, can’t I?” Ryu asked instead of answering that question gesturing down at himself and his martial arts outfit. While he could not speak much Chinese, his grasp of it was good enough to get one with and he could speak excellent English. “I mean, I’m not wanted by the Triad or anything, and I’ve been told several times I’ve got a face that can blend into the ground.”

Once this was translated, James nodded. “Probably, although if you want to pull off the wandering martial artist thing, you might want to wear a dirtier one if you’ve got one. Or one that’s a little frayed around the edges. That thing looks as if you just pulled it out of the wardrobe.”

While Ryu began to pick and tear at his sleeves, Mai and Shampoo looked at one another and nodded, having already discussed the look they wanted to go for. “We think we can get by with a few props and some real weapons for Mai if you have any. Beyond that, cosmetics and hair color changes.”

“Oooh, going to go for the Gladiatrix look?” James nodded, gesturing to the four girls across from him. “Ladies, let’s start with hair color, then props. Cosmetics won’t last if you get all sweaty, but that can be made to work for you with the right type.”

The two girls moved into the group of older women, who instantly moved them towards the bathroom, chattering excitedly. The two martial artists blanched a bit at the number of

ideas the other girls were bombarding them with, with Shampoo doing most of the talking for the pair as she would be for the rest of the day.

The girls being seen to, James turned to Ranma. "What about you? If you want to dress up similarly to Ryu here, you might be able to pull off the whole dojo brothers thing, which would be interesting."

"I no think the whole brother route is necessary." He looked back at Shampoo, then shrugged. "Ranma thinking just random stuff? Communist soldier outfit from Mao's era to start. Worn it before. Maybe bit more added on... as well as some way to change my eye color. Ranma figure Ranma's hair not distinctive." *And if I want to stay a guy, there's only so much I can do about it thanks to the Dragon's whisker.*

As if his words on that score had summoned it, a woman came in from the apartment's kitchen, holding up a tray of cold drinks. She was dressed in a uniform of some kind, like that a hotel waitress might wear, but with a slightly shorter skirt, so Ranma supposed she was some kind of servant to Fei Long. "Before that, does anyone WHOOA!" The woman tripped on a small bag of some kind, missing it by her feet due to the tray she was carrying.

The drinks flashed up into the air towards Ranma and the other boys, and even as Ranma dodged, he sighed. *Of fucking course.* The next second, even as Ken and Ryu ducked away, two of the cold drinks upended in midair, dropping what they contained all over the youth.

'Wha, what the hell?!' Ken shouted while Ryu gaped, and Fei Long, James and the cosmeticians, who had turned from entering the bathroom, all shouted or shrieked in shock.

One of them backed away rapidly, pointing at the woman who had tripped. "What in the world is in those cups?!"

Ryu and Ken both also backed away rapidly, staring between the short redhead and the servant. Where before Ranma had only been a few inches shorter than the two older youths, the redhead barely came up to their pecs.

"Wh, what the hell am I looking at?" Fei Long muttered, moving around Ranma now, raising his hand up and down to indicate where the top of Ranma's head had been and where it was now. "Padding or something, and I've seen female martial artists change clothing so quickly they're a blur, so going in drag, I could understand. But where the hell did your inches go..."

"What about the hair color? A wig, maybe?" James added weakly.

While Shampoo and Mai were laughing at his predicament, Ranma scowled, speaking in Japanese so as to make it clear, forcing Shampoo to translate between giggles. "Alright, quick rundown. One, magic is real, but really freaking rare." That seemed to be enough for the

cosmeticians to get over their initial shock, and one of them even raised a hand, but Ranma waved her down. "No, I don't know any, or really much of anything about magic itself. This body's from falling into a cursed spring where a girl drowned at some point. The cursed springs are just that, cursed."

"Poo," the woman muttered, shaking her head. "So much for eternal youth or perfect skin, I guess."

Rolling her eyes at that, Ranma continued his normal explanation of the curse, glaring at the woman who had come out from the kitchen, speaking Japanese and letting Shampoo translate for Fei Long and the others. "No, my mind doesn't change, only my taste buds. No, I ain't into boys in this form. I'd sooner remove my skin with a Brillo pad. Cold water activates the curse. Hot water will change me back. So unless ya want the mother of all wedgies, ya better get me a hot drink ta make up for this!"

As Shampoo finished translating, the servant-girl scampered off, and Fei Long sighed. "Please don't try to intimidate my servant."

For a moment, everyone just looked at Ranma, and then Mai clapped her hands together. "Ranma's oddness aside, let's get this started, okay? We've got a lot to do, and I think we all want to be out of here by around six."

The cosmeticians all nodded, and they and Ranma's girlfriend and friend who was a girl continued their walk towards the bathroom.

With nothing really to do, Ryu was free to ply Ranma with questions while the pigtailed redhead waited with ill grace for the hot water. Ken joined his friend, waving off James to watch as the hot water arrived, and Ranma instantly poured it over her head. The change occurred, and Ryu slowly shook his head as Ranma's height grew back to where it had been before. "That is so weird..."

Ken took it a step further, moving over and pouring another cup of cold water over Ranma's head to the once-more-redhead's anger. "What in the hell, dude!?"

"This is honestly amazing," Ken whistled, shaking his head and, oddly, not ogling Ranma. "Do you know if your magic form ages with you? Is it what you'd look like if you were born a girl, and..." he picked up the teapot, dumping it back over Ranma's head, shaking his head as he watched the change before once more turning Ranma into a girl, "can you feel it happening, what does iTTTT!"

That was as far as Ken got before Ranma's foot caught him right in the fork. Unprepared, Ken groaned in agony, falling forward into a rising knee while Ranma brought her clasped hands down on the top of his head. The agony from the pain in his crotch and the double blow to the head served to knock Ken out for a moment, and Ranma huffed, pulling away from the blond as

his body slumped to the side. "Damn it, blondie, I ain't a damn toy ya can just do whatever ya want to!"

"Now that he had coming," Ryu snorted, reaching down to grab his friend by the shoulder and dragging him to one side.

Rolling his eyes, Fei Long gestured. "Come on, Mai was right. We've got a lot to do. Now, Ranma, change back to a man if that's what you're going for tonight, and then we'll start with your clothing while the girls get started on props."

Mai and Shampoo had decided they'd both dress up to look even more like Amazons than Shampoo normally would. To start with, Shampoo wore the same light blue colored long-sleeved blouse and pants, a red and gold enameled breastplate she had then when they had first fought.

For her part, Mai wore a light red outfit, with armor in dark black, although in her case, the breastplate James and the cosmeticians came up with was, while looking as well made, not so... good at holding back what was within. The boys, even Fei Long and James, blushed, hearing the girls mutter about how tight they had to make Mai's breast bands in order to get the prop armor to fit her chest. Ranma, who had seen that chest several times in barely covered states, was particularly having issues, trying hard to keep his mind on Shampoo rather than their equally sexy companion.

Added to this, the girls decided to go the 'villainess' Amazon route as James put it.

Both girls wore forearm bracers with spikes coming out of them and makeup to make them look a little more intimidating. This came in the form of red eyeliner, longer eyelashes, and with their hair done in the same long topknot style that Mai favored. Both of them found that process a little more annoying than they expected but put up with it well enough.

As this process came to a close, James saw Ken stirring and leaning down, pulling his fellow American to his feet. "Come on Mr. Masters, let's get you changed for your night out on the town, considering you're somewhat well known."

Ken with him reluctantly, glaring over his shoulder back at Ranma. "Okay, so maybe I was a bit too into experimenting with that body of yours, but I am still going to get you back for that, Ranma."

"Ranma up for a challenge anytime, Blondie. Just let Ranma know what kind of steak you're putting up," Ranma said with a snicker. Mai and Shampoo looked at him quizzically, and he shrugged his shoulders. "What? Mai's got her monthly allowance from homefield, and you're going to get paid for being an actress. Ranma figure should do something to add to our travel chest."

"That's fine by me," Ken agreed, and the two boys were quickly separated while Shampoo took a moment to once more correct Ranma's word choice.

For his part, Ranma was the second easiest. Ranma put in an old revolutionary era Chinese soldier's outfit, similar to a few he had worn before, but with the mark of communism crossed out and with the arms torn off at the shoulders. Between that and contacts to make his eyes look brown, Ranma's whole appearance seemed to shift a bit.

However, getting the contacts in was incredibly difficult. To the point where Shampoo and Mai had to hold Ranma's head still to let the makeup artist put them in. "Gah, the hell, isn't there another way of doing this? This is so freaky, letting someone else's sausages near my fisheyes!"

"Suck it up, you big baby!" the cosmetician who was working on him teased, giggling at Ranma's pidgin Chinese as Shampoo groaned. While Shampoo had been right, his messed-up version of Putonghua wasn't sexy. Coupled with Ranma's whining, it made him seem like a much younger boy and that, and his general attitude and how he handled his curse, had disarmed the beauticians, removing any sense of wariness or fear. Indeed, they were all enjoying this a lot and yammered to one another constantly in Chinese so fast Ranma and the other non-native speakers could only follow one sentence in five while Shampoo took part in the discussion eagerly.

In contrast, while the girls enjoyed working on Ken enjoyed flirting with the handsome American, changing his looks was much harder. His hair was eventually dyed brown, then spiked upwards, making it look almost like a mohawk, but not quite. His red gi also went, replaced by a biker outfit, loose jeans, leather jacket and a T-shirt with a skull and crossbones on it underneath. That, coupled with a pair of aviator glasses, let him look American but wiped out anything that could be linked to Ken Masters.

During this process, Chun Li arrived, as she and Mai had organized. Fei Long buzzed her through security quickly, and she was ushered into the apartment by his servant just in time to hear Ken bemoan the loss of his good looks. "God damn, and I thought just getting all that gel in my hair would be bad, my looks, my beautiful blonde locks, ugh!"

He turned to the newcomer. "Miss, whoever you are, please, don't look at this current outfit of mine and assume it's how I dress normally. Believe me, this is just to fit in with the criminal element." He bowed floridly words her and should have looked utterly ridiculous, considering he looked like a biker thug at the moment, yet somehow, he still pulled the move off with a relatively good bit of panache.

They looked at him, then held out her hand. She was currently in her off-duty outfit, which consisted of tight jeans and a sweatshirt. "Officer Chun Li, Hong Kong police force. I'm the one that came up with this whole infiltration play on the fly. I was having second thoughts, but seeing everyone's outfits, I'm feeling much better about your chances of not being recognized.

I'm certain by this time, at least some of the so-called civilians that were caught up in that fracas from last night have told people the general appearances of those involved."

"Why do you think we wanted to get new looks?" Mai asked rhetorically in Japanese, staring at herself in the mirror once more. *Ugh, I know we're supposed to be going for the mean badass look, and I normally like red, but I don't think I like it as eyeshadow.*

Chun Li ignored Mai, pointing at Fei Long. "In fact, your face was almost certainly recognized, and Mad Dragon isn't the type to take that kind of provocation lying down."

Fei Long scowled. "If you think I'm going to hide someplace or run away, then you are dead wrong. I didn't stand up against the Triad on my own before these three arrived just to flee now."

"I'm not saying you should do that. Just know that there will be a few policemen watching you for the next few days, especially if you leave this building." Chun Li shot back.

"And will you be joining us in our little escapade?" Ryu asked, cocking his head to one side.

As per usual, he was speaking Japanese, like Mai had a moment before. But like with Ranma the night before, Chun Li was able to understand him easily. "No. I'm just here to drop off the equipment you'll need to actually make this infiltration work. A large task force will be on hand, complete with helicopters, to speed us along the moment you all have found any evidence of anything more than the fighting tournament, but we can't be anywhere really nearby without giving the game away. The Triad has far too many policemen and government officials on their payroll unfortunately.

With a self-deprecating shrug, Chun Li admitted, "And honestly, I'm probably far too recognizable these days."

Ryu simply nodded at that, while Ken could not stop himself from muttering in Japanese, "Heh, yeah, I doubt it's her face she's famous for, either. Those hips do not lie, damn."

That had everyone who understood that language nodding sagely in agreement beyond Chun Li herself, who glared at the blonde. "If you're going to make comments like that, I'm not certain you're going to prove a positive to this operation."

"On the contrary, I think your inability to roll with that kind of comment would be just as bad as your actual face and everything else being so well known," Ken answered quickly, waggling his eyebrows before becoming serious. "You think that these fighters or the people there to watch the bloodsport are going to be polite?"

"He's got a point, Chun Li," Mai said, shaking her head and gesturing down at herself in her new persona. "Why do you think Shampoo and I opted for something like this?" she gestured down to her body. "Intimidation and a **lack** of sexiness to keep the comments or worse at a minimum."

"I guess that's alright, so long as you don't push it too far," Chun Li agreed with a sigh to Ken's defense, while Ryu simply shook his head at his friend's antics, although he had trouble keeping his own ways from drifting down Chun Li's body. While her bust line wasn't as preposterous as Mai's, being much the same size as Shampoo's, those hips and her rear were jaw-dropping. Then, when Chun Li turned back to the kitchen table where she had laid a bag, he had to force his eyes away from her rear. Since Chun Li wasn't on duty, she had dressed in a pair of exercise leggings and a sweatshirt. While only a bit less baggy than Mai and Shampoo's leggings, there was only so much that could be done to hide Chun Li's thick, muscled thighs and hips.

"Anyway," Chun Li continued, trying to get the conversation back on track as she pulled out five phones first, handing them over to the others. "I presume the phones don't need to be explained but they are all from different companies and make so they don't look suspicious if any of you are searched. We don't think that the Triad is technologically capable of tracking phone signals, although they might be able to block outgoing signals. They are text only, and you'll need to use them to tell us what you've found."

Next were some tiny cameras, so small they fit into the hand with room to spare. They were even thin, looking like three credit cards set on top of one another and made to look like a belt buckle.

"The cameras are made to replace your normal belt buckle and be activated by a click at the top here," Chun Li explained, holding one up. "Just line up the lens with the target and click. Ryu, I'm afraid since you don't have a regular-looking belt, it would look very weird to anyone if you had one of these. Metal belt buckles don't really go with soft cloth belts like your gi has. But Ranma and Ken can get away with it. Shampoo, Mai, do you two have belts under those chest plates?"

Chun Li looked at them thoughtfully, trying hard not to feel a bit jealous at the size of Mai's chest, even when held tight to her body by the chest plate. *Just keep reminding yourself of the amount of back pain those things have to give her girl*, she thought to herself, while the two 'Amazons' shook their heads. "In that case, you'll need to keep them in your pockets."

Last came a set of even smaller listening devices. These looked like quarter-sized buttons that were wirelessly linked to their paired phones. Any recordings coming in once the listening devices were turned on would be stored in the phone, able to be retrieved later.

“There might be a few small problems,” Ryu said, frowning a little. “One, I don’t have pockets in my gi, so I can’t carry **any** of that stuff. Two, are we sure that they won’t try to search us or something?”

“Yeah, I understand about thinking they can’t track phone signals in their base, that’s relatively new tech. But body searches and stuff, I’d wager that’s normal when dealing with a place where the higher-ups of the Triad are known to be,” Ken mused.

“Eh, that isn’t a problem,” Ranma said. He had been working on shifting his ki space from one pair of pants to another since putting on his costume just like the girls had been doing all along and now asked Chun Li politely to hand him some of the phones. She handed him three, thinking that he was going to hand the other two to Mai and Shampoo, but instead, he put all three of them into his pocket.

For a moment, Chun Li watched, wondering why, but then her eyes widened, as did nearly everyone else’s in the room as they noticed that there was no bulge there to show where the phones were. “What in the heck?!”

“EEE! Do you have a bag of holding!?” one of the cosmeticians squealed.

“Nope, even better. Ki space. It’s one of the best ki-based techniques we’ve learned,” Shampoo explained with a giggle, proud that it was a technique she had first learned of from her tribe. “Although Mai, who learned it before Ranma and I did, has a very special variety.”

“Oh hush, it isn’t my fault that using my sexiness to throw off my opponents is part of my usual style,” Mai joked back. “That and sheer surprise. Pulling out one fan from between my tits that’s one thing. Pulling out four one after another is way more surprising.”

“I don’t know if your listening devices will work while they’re in my ki space, but we can at least get the phones and the cameras past security this way without even needing to worry about them detecting them, just in case they are as paranoid about the fighters as they are about the guests. Ki-space beats out metal detectors,” Ranma explained, having seen that when they traveled through the airport.

“Okay, that looks amazing! There’s so much you could do if you had some kind of unlimited pocket space,” Ken enthused. “And I definitely agree that should get us past security. Ranma, when we fight, you’re going to put teaching Ryu and me that technique up as your part of the wager.”

“All right, but it’ll be expensive,” Ranma quipped.

“Money is literally no object,” Ken said, shaking his head. “That technique is too useful to let it pass us by.”

“Hopefully, Ken and I will be able to figure that out quickly,” Ryu agreed.

While the rest of the martial artists seemed to be taking this calmly or with interest, Chun Li stared at nothing, horror filling her brain at the idea of that technique being used by criminals. *Oh my god, wait, this, this could let me reopen a lot of cold cases. I need to talk to Ranma or Mai after this is over. And not just to make certain that he doesn't use this power for evil. And maybe a way to detect it, if there's such a thing.*

It was but the work of a moment for everyone else to hand Ranma and Shampoo half of the listening devices and cameras that Chun Li had provided. The pair separated them into both pockets and then Shampoo practiced some sleight-of-hand tricks so that she could pass the various devices back to one another without being seen before deciding they were as ready as they were going to be.

Ranma didn't need to. He was already pretty good at those kinds of tricks, which was basically a combat technique to hide a strike from your enemy taken to the next level. It was precisely the kind of thing Ranma's father had taught him when he was younger.

“Remember, call us up if you need extraction once you have found enough evidence. My team will be ready to go within a moment's notice. And if you're taken anywhere, or even think you need to, don't forget that those phones have GPS locators on them.” She smirked at Ranma. “Those I tested a moment ago and they don't work while in your ki-space. But they should still be good to go.”

The others all nodded, but then Shampoo pointed at Chun Li. “Don't forget! You and I have something to settle! I'll be in Hong Kong for a month, and we're going to have that match of ours soon.”

Chun Li smirked back, crossing her arms over her chest and looking at the younger girl. “I'm looking forward to it.”

“Ah, speaking of, before we head off, Fei Long, do you have that contract for Shampoo ready?” Mai asked.

Fei Long nodded while inwardly cursing. He had hoped that Mai and Shampoo would forget about the whole contract thing, but he really wanted Shampoo in his movie. “I do. Do you want to go over it now?”

Mai nodded, and Ranma, deciding he didn't need to be involved in that conversation, turned to Chun Li. “You just tested the GPS thing on the phones, right? Let's test some other things with my ki space. Specifically the listening devices. I doubt the cameras will work, heh.”

Shrugging, Chun Li agreed, and the two stepped outside onto the balcony while Ken and Ryu fell to arguing about whether or not Ken should act as if he could only speak English as part

of his disguise. "Ryu, you can pull off the country bumpkin martial artist so well you won't need anything more, but me, I might need an extra something."

James and the other people there all looked at one another, and one of the women muttered, "I thought Ranma said he didn't know magic."

"Eh, they're martial artists; their idea of normal is very different than ours. Why wouldn't their concept of magic be?" James shrugged. "Now come on, ladies. Let's get this cleaned up and out of Mr. Fei Long's hair, shall we?"

OOOOOOO

At Mai's behest, they put down well away from the supposed cosmetics factory where they would start their infiltration of the underground fight scene. From there, the group would walk the rest of the way to the factory. When Ken and Ryu asked her why, she shrugged her shoulders. "Any place like this is going to have watchers out and about. Especially if this place is a permanent setup like we think it might be."

Ken and Ryu nodded at that, privately thankful for the opportunity to get back down to the ground. This whole roof-hopping thing was fun at first, but after a few more close calls, both of them were very aware of the heights they had been traversing.

As they landed, Ranma blinked, then looked over at her, pushing her shoulder lightly. "That reminds me, what are you going to do with that bike you stashed up on the rooftop?"

While Ken and Ryu looked confused, Mai laughed, explaining that she had spotted a watcher during the attack on Fei Long and his movie set. "The guy was on a nice motorbike, and I've always wanted to see how it felt to drive one of those things. I'll probably retrieve it in the next day or so. It's safe where it is, as I doubt there's any chance of anyone actually spotting it up there."

"Pity, I think a motorcycle would fit my disguise perfectly," Ken quipped as they leaped down into an alleyway, Ranma leading the way and looking for security cameras. "Er, speaking of, are we all going to go in together?"

"Good point," Ryu said, looking at them all, chuckling quietly. "We don't exactly look like we belong to the same group or whatever you want to call it, do we?"

"That was the point," Mai and Shampoo said together, causing everyone to laugh.

Even as he shivered at the idea the two girls would continue to use the dreaded twin speak, Ranma decided that Ken had a good point. "The girls can go in together, but they're the only ones that should, I think. The rest of us will stagger our arrival a bit."

At Ranma's suggestion, they decided to split off. Ken doubled back a little and came at the factory from another direction while Ryu simply slowed his pace. Ranma took to the rooftops again. Hopping up and over several buildings, he then dropped back down. Rounding the corner, he had a straight walk towards the factory.

Several toughs were gathered outside the side entrance of the factory, which admittedly was not normal. They were smoking, crouching down in place and playing dice or just talking to one another, while two men in suits that screamed 'bodyguard' were looking over the group. They were very obviously part of the same organization, as they weren't fighting the punks, but either a different branch or much higher up than the group of small-time street toughs.

The street thugs, the same variety that had attacked Fei Long the other day, sneered Ranma's way, and one of them started to walk over to him. "What the hell, another would-be fighter? Are torn-off sleeves supposed to make you look tough, ya dumb hick?"

Ranma smirked, gave the punk the finger and kept on walking. When the punk tried to move in front of Ranma, Ranma grabbed him by the shirt before he could move without even breaking stride and hurled him up and over to slam into one of his companions. Seconds later, Ranma was by the door and the two men in business suits. "Yo, heard there were some fights to be had here?" he asked in his best Chinese.

"Heh, if you think that little show is enough to make you a big shot, you've got another thing coming. Still, all comers are welcome at this point. Just don't expect to walk away if you disrespect the higher-ups like you did that little punk," one of the toughs growled.

The man made a point of letting his shirt open just slightly to show where he had a pistol strapped to his side, and Ranma nodded, acting properly respectful. *Although, after last night, guns like that don't exactly scare me.* "You got it. I just don't like it when little idiots like that think they're so hot."

Spitting to one side, the doorman jerked a finger toward the door. "It's three fifty up front to enter, one-time fee. And if you think we care about taking care of any broken bones or whatever, you are in the wrong place."

"Yeah, we ain't exactly a socialist group," snickered the other man.

A commotion behind Ranma caused Ranma and the two bouncers to turn. Ken had arrived and was currently trading insults with several of the would-be toughs. *Guess he decided to not go for speaking just American English.* Ranma had been around a few Brits in his time and knew there was a difference.

When the punks got physical again, Ken was able to deal with them easily enough. Hard blows smashed two of them to the ground, while the other found himself howling in pain as Ken grabbed his hand and twisted it hard up behind his back.

Looking at this, Ranma could only shake his head, concentrating hard on his Chinese as he spoke. "... So, do you keep those gangsters out here like this just as some kind of audition? Like, 'you got to be this tough to get in' or somewhat?"

The two bouncers snorted at that, missing the last ill-chosen word, and the one who seemed to at least think he had a sense of humor said, "There's a bit of that, although it's more like how little fish follow around big fish, you know? Like in the water, there's always smaller fish around sharks, yeah? To take part of the meal after the shark's done the hard work?"

Ranma and the man shared a laugh at that before Ranma passed between the two men pushing open the door. Entering the building, he was followed shortly by Ken. The door was just closing as he heard several wolf whistles from outside, signaling that the girls had arrived, but Ranma didn't pay that much attention, instead staring around them.

The factory floor was huge, three or four stories tall, and about as big as a city block. Where he and Ken had entered from was near what looked like the actual factory stuff, conveyor belts, some strange machines and so forth. However, deeper in, a thin wall was set up, to the side of which a man armed with a machine gun sat. Through the wall, Ranma could make out the sounds of a crowd, shouts and cheering blending into one loud cacophony.

"Thousand-fifty Yuan or equivalent," the man drowned, pointing to a bucket set beside him already nearly full of bills. "Can't pay, get out."

Ranma nodded, while Ken tried to argue that American money was superior for a moment. Entering the next area, he found himself at the back of a packed crowd of gamblers and thugs. Another man waited there, and he looked at Ranma. "Betting or fighting?"

"Fighting, hoping to find some actually strong opponents," Ranma answered, telling a significant portion of the truth there and, for once, not needing to concentrate on his Chinese to get it out without trouble.

The man nodded turning to Ken as he entered, taking a moment surveying the crowd. "Damn, and here I thought there might be some babes here."

The organizer snorted, somehow able to hear that over this shouting and shrieking from the crowd, while Ranma tried to peer over their heads towards what looked like several small fighting arenas that were around the area. "You don't get babes at this part of the tournament, kid. You gotta prove how strong you are before you get onto the big stage, where the real money and everything else are. Come on, the fighters are over here."

The two of them were led through the crowd that filled this portion of the factory. As Ranma had seen, there were areas in the crowd kept clear of onlookers by small fences that you could hop over if you wanted to, but in between them were benches where other would-be fighters were sitting, waiting for their chance. At the far end of the crowd was a walkway leading

to what looked like a staircase going downward that had been hidden behind a large piece of equipment.

As Ranma watched, one of the fights ended. A small, thin old man had been able to get a far larger man into a chokehold. Holding onto his back and shoulders like a monkey, staying in position despite all the moves the other man was able to do. He even hopped off for a moment as the other fighter rolled forward, hoping to slam him into the ground, then right back on as the roll ended. The larger man was unconscious, although the smaller bald man didn't release his chokehold until the announcer shouted, "And we have a winner in pit number three! That's The Monkey Fist's fourth win in a row, folks! And you know what that means."

"Head on through!" shouted the crowd.

As Ranma and can reach the fighters, the bald man was ushered out of the ring he fought in and then through to the marked-out zone, raising his hands to the crowd until he was out of sight down the stairwell. *Okay, so ya win four fights here to go on. Judging from this lot, I doubt that'll be the only thing we gotta do.*

"So, let me guess," Ken said, as he too had seen that. "You have to win a fight in each of these little rings before going on to bigger and better things?"

One of the nearby fighters had heard that and snarled coming off of his bench like he was going to attack Ken right there. He had an edge on Ken in both height and shoulder width, but Ranma would wager that Ken was stronger than the larger man. "You talk like it's a done deal, punk! I ain't ever seen your ass here before. Some of us have been trying to get over since..."

Ken sneered, waving his hands towards the open arena. "Yeah, yeah, you're the local guy, yer gonna get there eventually." Ken rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Let's see if you've actually got the talent to back it up."

With a snarl, the man nodded, glaring over at the official who had ushered Ranma and Ken to join the fighters. The man shrugged his shoulders and then watched as another fighter stood up, poking Ranma in this side. "This brat's new, too, and he looks like he's from out of the sticks. Run along home to your farm community, little boy, don't try to play in the big leagues."

"Little boy, seriously? Is that the best you can come up with?" Ranma shook his head, sighing sadly, as many in the crowd turned and began to wolf whistle just like the thugs outside had. That grabbed the attention of the organizer who'd ushered Ranma and Ken to the fighters, but someone else had already met up with the two girls, talking to them for a few moments.

The announcer noticed this as well. Ignoring the fights going on, including the one that Ken and the larger man had just started, where it turned out that, no, the local fighter didn't have much talent, he pointed out the two girls to the rest of the crowd. "What's this, what's

this?! Two fine roses want to prove that they've got some thorns, gentlemen! Two female fighters have joined us! It's been a couple of tournaments since the last time that happened, let me tell you, and oh my word, the looks of these ladies beat Bloody Hokuto all hollow!"

The crowd hooted, hollered and whistled, although the actual response was either extremely happy or sneering contempt. Some of the crowd even shouted at the other fighters to put the two girls in their places. Others were even worse, shouting out about how if the girls were looking for a good time, there were a lot better ways to get the blood pumping than fighting.

Shampoo replied to this by leaping up and over most of the crowd, landing in an arena where a fight had just finished, cracking her neck and shoulders explosively. "Let's see if any of you are man enough to back that up!" she shouted.

Behind them, Ryu finally arrived, joining the fighters without anyone saying anything, concentrating on the girls as they were.

The spars that followed weren't really much, not worth calling them fights even. Ryu was somewhat surprised when his second opponent pulled out a dagger, and the announcer didn't say anything then or in the fourth fight, when he saw that Mai had been fighting someone who used brass knuckles from the get-go. But that was about it.

Ranma finished all four rounds quickly and easily, as did Ken, while the two girls and Ryu took their time 'resting' in between bouts. Every time the two girls were out there, their fights became the instant center of attention, and watching, Ranma could tell Shampoo started going out of her way to humiliate her opponents. Not to play to the crowd but in response to them. To Ranma, it was clear she was imagining each and every man in that crowd in the place of her victim. Mai, on the other hand, was faster to rearrange their faces a bit.

Soon enough, all of them had finished the four fights necessary to move on. The announcer hyped that up somewhat, getting five newcomers who swept the prelims so quickly. He joined the others walking down the stairs. They didn't talk to one another since they were still being observed by two more of the toughs in suits.

The stairwell led down to a small area with somewhat nice sofas, where two other fighters waited, the small old man that Ranma had seen and someone else who must've passed before they arrived. Both of them looked up in some surprise as the fivesome joined them but shrugged their shoulders and turned their attention back to the door.

"Wait here. We need one more fighter before you all can go on to the next round of preliminaries."

Having established his character, Ken spoke up then, asking, "And it's only after the preliminaries are finished when we start to see some money or babes?"

Ranma was impressed that Mai was able to follow along with Shampoo's response so well, the Amazon snorting. "As if an ugly bastard like you would ever get anything without paying for it."

"Hey now, at least I'm not dolled up for a night out on the stage. You two look like you're those, whatcha-call-em, kabuki, from Japan," Ken shot back.

"No fighting allowed in here or in any place other than in the arenas," the man who'd followed them down said, making a cutting motion with one hand. "You got problems with one another, save it for the arena." He paused, raising a hand to an ear that held a small headphone, then nodded as if something had just been confirmed for them. "Girls, you two can go in now."

"That's discrimination!" Ken and Ranma shouted, Ranma figuring that anyone would be annoyed, which, considering the faces the two other fighters were currently wearing, he was right about.

"What the hell, they get sent right through just because they're girls?" Ken continued.

"Sex sells morons," the man in the suit snorted. "They don't get a free pass past the point preliminaries, never you fear. The bosses just want them to pass through quickly so, if they get past the final prelims, they will have enough time to get ready for the real tournament."

That made Ranma's eyes narrow a little, and he glanced over at Shampoo and Mai, hoping that the pair of them understood that wasn't a good sign. Mai caught the look, then smirked haughtily, walking towards the closed door, which opened as she did. "Well, boys, at least you have the honor of watching **this** as it walks away."

With that, she began to sway her hips just a little more than normal, and Ranma wasn't the only one who had to stop and stare for a moment as she did. Ryu did too for a moment before shaking his head and looking over the man in the suit. "So, does that mean we need three more fighters to join us rather than one? Only, I would really like to get on with this and find some actually good opponents."

Mentally, Ranma had to nod at that. Ryu seemed to be playing it relatively normally, like he was the wandering martial artist he looked like, just looking for tough fights. Whether it was acting or not, he didn't know, but it worked as the man replied that no, the two women would still count to the whole of the fighters being sent on to the next round of preliminaries from this site.

This site, huh. That might be important info. I wonder if Chun Li's spot, that apartment complex is also a tournament site. Although, are they all connected somehow, or are they gonna transport us? And come to think of it, how are we underground? Chun Li's map of this place didn't show a... silly question. Triad. Right. Probably bought out the city council or whatever.

It was a good thing that they only had to wait for one because it was around forty minutes before another fighter joined them. The new man didn't look like he would be up for much; his shoulder was bare and looked to be a mass of bruises, and he had one black eye so bad that his eye was practically shot. Yet he was still there and still willing to go on to the next round. If he had even been given a choice, which Ranma didn't know.

The door opened, and the group was shown down yet another flight of steps to a hallway. This led directly into and out of a security checkpoint that looked as if it would fit right in at any airport. "Come through one at a time," a guard said. He wore a suit like several of the other Triad members, but his gun was visible like the man who had taken their money before letting them fight, and two more men armed with pistols were nearby. "If you've got weapons, put them in the bin and then walk through. Anyone with a wire, you're going to be deader than a doornail in a moment."

Shrugging, Ranma and Ryu walked straight through while Ken had to divest himself of his belt for a moment, as did two of the other fighters. Ryu watched with interest from behind Ranma as he passed through the metal detector, and nothing happened. It seemed like Ranma had told the truth about his ki space, which meant it was an even greater technique to learn, something Ryu really wanted to do. *I hope that he agrees to teach us that technique regardless of whether Ken wins or loses their match.*

Ken was thinking much the same thing and reflecting that he had been telling the truth about money being no object. Anything smaller than a personal plane, anyway.

Soon, the six fighters were ushered through into a large underground area that looked almost like a gym. In the center of the area was a pit, and there were other fighters already around the area. All of them looked a little tougher than the last group, but scanning the crowd, Ranma didn't see any issues. As they entered, the five of them were called over, and a man with a clipboard took their names down.

Thinking quickly, Ranma decided to use a name he'd read once, plus his Pop's first name. *Can't use my own since it might let 'em trace me back to the girls.* The name Ranma chose was thus Genma Wudang.

Ryu put down the name Ryan Sujimoto, although Ranma would wager that he had come up with that on the spot. Ken had put his name down as Jason Voorhees for some reason. The name seemed to register with Ranma for some reason, but he couldn't figure out how. Yet it seemed to pass, and the bookie taking their names told them what was going to happen. "Head to an open pit when called. Win two fights, and you're on to the real fights later on. Weapons are allowed, as are lethal strikes, though we might charge ya for cleaning up after."

Ranma nodded and headed over while Ken, still playing into his character, asked if any babes had come through recently. "I mean, they looked like they were straight-up crazy, but their bodies were fire!"

How he could sound like a Californian beach bum in his barely understandable Chinese Ranma didn't know, but he pulled it off. He even got a reply. "Yeah, we saw them. Already through their two fights and to the real tournament, wrecked their opponents something fierce too."

"That gives me even more motivation. Let's do this!"

Unfortunately, Ken would have to wait. Ranma was the first one called up, and moving through the much smaller crowd of only fighters, Ranma heard himself get called a pretty boy and shook his head with a chuckle, calling over his shoulder, "It's called skill, dumbass! If you dodged, you wouldn't look so much like someone's taken the ugly stick to your face. Although, in your case, it might be an improvement."

Again, Ranma didn't need to concentrate on his Chinese just then, something he noted. *Huh, I guess insults come to me easily, regardless of language.*

"What did you say, you little bastard?!" shouted the fighter who had spoken up, pushing several of the others out of his way as they laughed to try to get to Ranma. A few of them held the enraged man back, reminding him of the rules: No fighting except in the arena itself.

Hopping down into the pit, Ranma grumbled a little as he looked around. It was only about as wide and around as 13 feet or so, which would greatly hamper any kind of style based on maneuverability, like Ranma's. *Still, I doubt any of these guys will need to get the full aerial-style treatment.*

Across from him, a huge, thuggish-looking older man with a faintly German look to him, he looked like a character in a movie Ranma saw once, also made his way down the arena, jumping down as Ranma had but landing far harder. Looking at him, Ranma shook his head. "You are a long way from home."

The man snarled, slamming his two fists together, and charged forwards. He soon regretted that choice, and several of the onlookers whistled in shock as Ranma grabbed his fists out of the air, holding them still despite the far greater muscle mass of the German. Ranma then lifted him up and off of his feet and twisted around, shoulder throwing him into the wall of the pit. The man groaned in pain, and Ranma released his grip before kicking him straight in the head, knocking him out.

Ranma's next fight wasn't much of anything either, although this time, he faced an opponent who was armed. The man used twin knives, almost long enough to be short swords, but not quite. In Ranma's opinion, he wasn't good with them, but Ranma admitted to himself that he was biased even as he broke through the man's defenses, slamming several hard blows into his chest and stomach before grabbing the man by his prominent chin.

Twisting around, Ranma slammed him face-first into the ground with such force that he was immediately knocked unconscious. *I mean, I have been getting used to fighting Mai and Shampoo, and they move like greased lightning in comparison to this buffoon.*

Similarly, Ryu and Ken's first fights weren't much either, although their second matches were a little more interesting.

Ken faced a man with gauntlets on his hand, but watching closely, he saw when the other man made a strange twist with his wrist and was already dodging before the other man could finish his wrist twist. A small needle with some green coloring on it sped past his previous position, and before the man could even blink, Ken was on him. Two sharp blows broke the man's jaw and a few ribs, sending him crashing to the pit's floor with a cry of agony.

Of the three boys, Ryu's second bout was the only one which could be called a real fight. He was faced with a man who was, in Ranma's opinion, the epitome of a musclebound oaf, but unlike the man Ranma had fought, this one was able to keep on taking a lot of punishment. He seemed entirely based on a defensive style, taking Ryu's blows on forearms, upper arms and knees, then retaliating with attempts to grab, pulling Ryu into a series of punches.

Ryu took a few shots himself before changing tactics. Instead of targeting the man's upper body and face, when he started to attack again, he shifted targets from the man's lower waist to the knee that he raised to defend it, slamming a blow into the side of the knee.

The blow to the man's knee had him kneeling on the ground, and before he could blink, a kick to the side of the temple slammed his head back into the wall of the pit. The double impact was enough to rattle his brain, and he couldn't raise his defenses again as two more punches finally laid him out.

As soon as Ryu's second opponent was unconscious, his name was called, followed by Ranma, Ken and one other man. He wasn't one of the men that they had come down from their starting point with, and Ranma wondered idly where the other entrances to this arena led to.

They were soon on another flight of stairs. They went down at least three flights of stairs this time and into what looked like a repurposed segment of the sewer. The smell caused all of them to gag. From there, they walked for at least fifteen minutes at the, in Ranma's opinion, slow as a turtle's pace until they came upon a door set into the side of the sewer. Through that, they were then let down another flight of stairs and into a large waiting room. There, Ranma and the others found more than two dozen other fighters, all of them looking far tougher than the riffraff they'd dealt with before. There were also a lot more foreigners, non-Chinese, than before.

All of them moved as if they had some considerable training or experience. Two of them looked as if they were former military, one Korean, one Chinese. Another man stood silent, reading a small book of all things, not even noticing those around him or so it seemed. Two

looked as if they had gone to the same school of hairstyling as Ken's assumed identity. One had his blue hair up in a long mohawk. Another was a massive black man with a mohawk that looked almost painted yellow rather than dyed, which was tipped with metal bits. Another man, who looked vaguely Russian (maybe, Ranma wasn't certain), topped even that man in height, with huge shoulders but a very visible paunch. Beside him was what looked like a prisoner's ball and chain, done large enough to match the man's size.

In fact, it was with some annoyance that Ranma realized he was the smallest man there. The only one who didn't tower over him by several inches was a heavily tanned man in a weird cloth mask thing.

Once they were inside the waiting room and the smell of the sewers was beyond them, the man began to explain what was going to happen from now on. "All right, you all have gotten this far into the tournament. This is where you start earning some actual money and maybe getting some attention from the movers and shakers up there. You want to have an easy life, you make it big here. If you just want money or simply good fights, you'll get that. And yes, Jason, before you ask, there will be women out there, too."

Ken, who had raised his hand, lowered it, smirking slightly, although his eyes narrowed a little as the man pulled out a wad of hundred-dollar American bills. "But there are some rules here. One, obviously, you don't talk about what goes on here." He handed the money to one of the fighters, then quickly pulled out his gun and put it against his forehead, the fighter's eyes widening in fear. "The money is yours, but if you talk, a bullet costs nothing, you know?"

All of them nodded, looking sufficiently cowed, and the man pulled his gun away, handing the man he'd threatened a few more hundred-dollar bills for his momentary terror. "As you already saw, weapons are acceptable here. So is death in the arena. You won't be killed for losing, but you will be dumped out on the streets with whatever money you've earned up to that point. You get paid per fight won, and you get nothing until the end of the fight."

All of them nodded at that, and the man walked off, moving through the crowd of fighters. Many stared at him disdainfully. Others retained their disdain for the newcomers. Ranma, in particular, earned some sneers since, even with his disguise, it was obvious he was younger than the others there. Whereas Ken seemed to blend in almost seamlessly.

Ryu moved off to one side while Ranma made to find a corner to lean against. That this put him and Ryu in a position where they could speak quietly was completely coincidental. "I don't see any video cameras," Ranma whispered.

"What about outside in the hallway?"

"Not there either."

"It looks as if the good lady was right about them not being into technology all that much," Ken agreed from Ryu's other side, using his hands as if he was gesticulating and Ryu, explaining some kind of martial arts movement or something while Ryu acted uninterested, an introvert dealing with an excitable extrovert in a weird place. Ken had also switched to Japanese, hoping that few of the nearby fighters would be able to follow that language. "Although, the use of hundred-dollar bills was interesting. Especially from someone who's got to be barely more than a gofer."

"Why?"

"It's proof that whatever is going on here has international ties." Both Ranma and Ryu looked a little confused at that, and Ken explained. "If this fight tournament and whoever was behind it wasn't a big shot or was just tied into the Chinese market, they'd use Chinese money. Hundred-dollar bills, though? They're used worldwide, especially by criminals. My father mentioned once that they are the best kind of currency for the not exactly legal kind of thing. That means the Triad's definitely involved, and there might be way more deals and stuff going on here in the background than we thought."

Ranma nodded. He didn't understand why hundred-dollar bills specifically would be like that, but he at least understood that American money was better than most. "You think we should start listening to rumors?"

"Not here. All of these men are fighters, that's for sure, and I doubt you'd get any interesting kind of conversation from them," Ken answered, shaking his head, then subtly jerking his chin towards one of the waiting area's corners. "We'll be able to watch the fights from here."

Ranma nodded, his eyes flicking up to a corner of the room where a large TV around two yards across was hung, showing what looked like the arena they would be going into in a moment. It was a cage, like Ranma had seen previously when traveling with Genma, with steel cage walls surrounding a ring that looked like a boxing ring, although the floor was made of concrete, not canvas. It was set at the bottom of an auditorium of some kind, or perhaps an amphitheater, with rings of watchers all around it.

Thanks to the angle of the camera that concentrated solely on the arena, Ranma couldn't make out much beyond the first two rows. Currently, the men and, Ranma was surprised to see, a few women among the crowd, were just watching the Chinese equivalent of boxing bunnies moving around the area, hyping up the crowd for the fights to come.

As he watched, a fighter was called out to the arena, his exit from the waiting area obscured by the far larger bodies of the other fighters. *Wait, I wasn't the shortest man here, woo!* The fight on the screen was indeed small and wiry, reminding Ranma somewhat of the monkey man from their earlier matches, but he knew how to work the crowd, raising his hands and roaring at them, doing backflips, front flips and so forth.

"Ryan Sugimoto! You are up first."

Ryu opened his eyes from where he had seemingly been meditating, rose to his feet, and moved forward, with the other fighters watching grimly.

Eagerly, Ranma leaned forward, causing Ken to snicker a bit, muttering, "Scoping out your future opponent? You think it will help?"

"I think you need to go back to trash talk school," Ranma quipped, eyes not leaving the image.

Ryu was quickly ushered into the arena, showing that Ranma was right; the area down here must be soundproofed if the arena area was that close, and they couldn't make out any roaring from the crowd. Unlike his opponent, Ryu didn't try to play to the crowd. He simply walked in stoically, stopped and took a stance, saying nothing, not even acknowledging the crowd.

"So, is that Ryu in the zone, or is he acting?" Ranma wondered. *If Ryu's got that much concentration, I doubt the Anything Goes Make 'em Mad, Make 'em Stupid will work on him. Something to be aware of.*

"That's Ryu in the zone," Ken muttered, both of them keeping their voices low so that they couldn't be overheard, watching as the other fighter worked the crowd for a few more seconds, then cartwheeled forward, flowing across the ground and then up into a rising kick. Ryu dodged backward easily, his fist flying forward to connect with the other man's leg, but he quickly flipped out of it and around into another kick, followed by a series of punches. Ryu blocked and deflected all of them, and when the other fighter made to try to disengage, he charged forward, keeping the fight close.

The other martial artist made a mistake at that point, launching a punch that sailed over Ryu's shoulder and not pulling back quickly enough. Ryu caught him in the center of the chest with a punch, then his other hand flashed up, catching the retreating arm and hurling the man sideways into the cage. The man tried to bounce up and off of it into a leap that almost looked like something from Ranma's aerial style, but Ryu jumped up with him this time. A series of kicks and punches were deflected, and several hard blows landed, knocking the man back to earth. Before he could recover again, Ryu was in his face, and a deflection turned into a straight palm strike to the man's forehead, sending him hurtling backward into the wall again. When he came bouncing off of it, a fist slammed into his chin, and the man was out like a light.

Not bad, Ranma reflected, wincing a little at how much power Ryu or Ken could put behind their blows. *Not nearly as mobile as I am, but again, just like I saw in an earlier fight with Ken, every blow that gets through their enemy's defenses counts. And Ryu is a little better at duping his enemy into making a mistake than Ken is. His lack of aggression would also probably give me issues, drat it. I wonder how durable they are. And I haven't seen how well Ryu can use*

his ki to do anything but strengthen himself. I've got a major edge in speed, but Ryu might have a slight edge in striking power without ki coming into the equation. If it does... well, we'll see.

Ryu had just returned to the room when the door opened again, and another few fighters were ushered out. A moment later, as the next fight began, the door opened again. Ranma's eyes twitched away from the fight to see who had entered, and any analytical skills he had fled his mind. Every fighter there stared at the twosome who had just entered the room, with some of them sporting blushes as Mai and Shampoo walked in. They were not wearing the same outfits they had been in before and did not look very happy about it either. They growled angrily at the men in the room, then stomped toward the corner where Ranma had taken up residence.

When they came close, Ranma made a show of widening his eyes and holding up his hands as if not looking for trouble. The two girls looked at one another, huffed, and moved over to lean against the wall nearby, with a final glare Ranma's way when he didn't beat feat.

As the girls turned to look at one another again, Ranma could not help himself from looking at their outfits.

Mai was dressed all in white lace and a strange medieval style corset thing. It was... technically modest since it covered everything, but not really. Not on Mai's body, not with how tight it was and how little fabric was doing so much work. Her arms were wrapped in white ribbons, and her legs had long white boots on them that came up to just below her knee. For some reason, the term Sexy Angel came to Ranma's mind as he looked at her, particularly in the chest area, where the thing was very obviously straining to contain Mai's breasts. The lace tying the corset shut was visibly bulging out whenever she moved, just this side of pulling apart.

Oddly, Mai retained her makeup, which very much did not go with the rest of her current outfit.

Similarly, Shampoo also retained her makeup, but in her case, it actually kind of worked. Because she was wearing a sadist outfit. Fishnet stockings, fishnet arm sleeves or whatever they were called, Ranma had no idea, paired with a black latex outfit that looked somewhat like a bathing suit, only really not. She was actually showing a little more cleavage than Mai was currently, the outfit she was wearing confining and presenting her chest instead of simply protecting, as Mai's beyond-stressed corset was currently doing.

Ranma remained silent, staring sideways at the girls as if they were bombs waiting to go off and as if he couldn't quite take his eyes off them, much like many of the other fighters in the area were. Amazingly, the raw fury in the girl's faces kept all but the stupidest from making comments, and even those foolish enough to make comments did not try to approach them.

Soon, the winner of the fight returned, and two more men left to take their turn in the arena. At that, everyone slowly turned their attention back to the camera feed on a large TV.

As they did, Ryu knelt down nearby to go back to meditating, although not without looking at the girls first obviously, Ranma had to ask, doing so out of the corner of his mouth and in Japanese. "What in the heck..."

"Don't ask," Shampoo growled, the sound and the tone of voice rather fitting with what her outfit was already saying about her disposition.

OOOOOOO

"Not that I am saying we're not worth the preferential treatment, but if you think you're going to get anything out of it, or anyone in this place is going to touch me outside of a fight, you would best think again!" Shampoo growled as she and Mai followed a man through the sewers. The smell was making her irritable, as was the fact they hadn't had any good fights yet. Both Mai and Shampoo had easily won their two bouts, leaving their enemies unconscious, battered and possibly wiser for the experience. "We are proud Amazons!"

"You have to prove you're stronger than us to get even a kiss, and guns don't make you strong," Mai added, snorting and tossing her head as if dismissing the idea entirely despite needing to concentrate very hard on her diction to get the words out properly in Putonghua.

"None of that. It's just if you are able to actually fight well enough, well, there are a lot of ways you could make extra money that don't involve anything like that," the man said, holding up his hands quickly. He had introduced himself, but his name hadn't registered to either woman. His job was a 'fixer', and he was one of many people who worked for the Triad to make this tournament as interesting as possible, in his words. What that would mean for the two girls, Shampoo wasn't certain she wanted to know. The man struck her as quite sleazy, but she felt that was probably par for the course.

They were quickly ushered down and through a large waiting area. Like the smaller one they had seen with the boys, it had several large sofas and chairs around the area, but along one side was a row of lockers and weapon stands, with two doors marked as showers and toilets, respectively.

Just as Ranma and the others would see later, there were a lot of fighters here, both Chinese and foreign. Many of them turned and stared at the two women, some in surprise, some hungrily, and more than a few with incredulity.

"Oh, come on!" came a shout from one of the latter fighters. "Are we supposed to assume that these two little girls can actually fight?"

"Now, now, it is unusual, but it isn't all that unknown either. The last tournament, we had that musclebound Italian, Marisa, as much as most of us didn't think she was all-woman." The fixer's joke was met with chuckles from several in the crowd, showing they were locals who had taken part in the tournament before, possibly several times. "Then, six months before that,

we had four female fighters join us. I don't think that I need to remind anyone of Rainbow, Hokuto, Roxy or Decapre, hmm?"

That put many a thoughtful, faraway look on several of the local's faces, and the fixer smirked. "Although, if you really want to see if either of these ladies are good enough for the big ring, volunteer to fight one of them."

Needless to say, most of the fighters there volunteered instantly, thinking that fighting Mai and Shampoo would be an easy win for them and getting their hands on the two girls would be fun in and of itself. The two who were chosen to do so instantly began to regret this way of thinking and their 'good' fortune.

Not a minute later, Shampoo hefted her last opponent, a man several times her own weight over her in both hands and then body-slammed him into the ground. As the man groaned in pain, she glared up at the surrounding fighters. "Any other weaklings want to step up to an Amazon?"

Several of the men stepped backward, but another fixer, not the one who'd brought the two women down, clapped several times, waving the fighters off. "Alright, that's enough. The crowd's gonna start arriving soon, and we need to clear the area. You lot, return to the waiting room. You two, come with me."

While the other fighters were led back the way they had come from, some snickering, others shaking their head in shock, the two girls moved over to join the speaker, who was a bit older than the other fixer they had met. He was dressed in a simple business suit rather than the wildly garish yellow and green suit the other man had been wearing, yet his overall ferret-like looks and his smirk gave this man an even sleazier feeling than the last man.

Seeing him turn and move towards another door, Mai and Shampoo looked at one another, and Shampoo growled out, "I thought we already were clear on this. We're not going to--"

"No, no!" the man said hesitantly, although there was a look in the man's eyes neither girl liked. "We're not going to demand you do anything like what you're thinking. It's just, well, ladies sell. And there is a set precedent here. Hell, last year Rainbow even enjoyed it."

"What do you mean by that?" Shampoo asked, while Mai grabbed the man lifting him into the air and slamming him into the wall. He scowled, but Mai's other hand grabbed the pistol he was hiding at his waist quickly as Shampoo went on. "This better not be some kind of funny business! We are Amazons. We're here to fight!"

"And *gasp* earn money, right?" the man asked, gasping, but acting as if this wasn't the first time he'd been on the receiving end of such threats. "We'GGHH, we're not going to ask you to go aggggGHainst your code or anything like that." Mai slowly loosened her grip, still holding

the man off the floor several feet but no longer choking him, and the man went on more normally. But you have to admit, seeing girls fight is sexy, so we want to add to it.”

“What do you mean add to it?” Shampoo growled, touching Mai’s arm. At that, Mai reluctantly let the fixer drop to the floor. “And we better see more cash for this.”

“Your current outfits are about as sexy as wet paper bags,” the man answered blithely, straightening his suit and moving on towards the door he’d been making for a moment ago, waving off some of the guards, who had been pointing guns the ladies’ way. “We’ve got a lot of fight-tested outfits, any one of which’d make either of you look like sex on wheels as well as hell on wheels. And if you agree to wear what we pick out for you, you’ll get triple the amount of money per fight than a man would.”

The two girls looked at one another, then gestured to the man as Shampoo answered for both of them. “We’ll decide when we see the outfits you pick out.”

The two girls were led through that door down another hallway that was set perpendicular to the one they had come through first from the waiting room, which led to another area that had several stairs that led upwards, although where they led, neither girl knew at the moment. There, they were led into a changing room, a relatively good-looking one with padded benches and a bar that had some drinks and snacks on it. Not that either girl was tempted to try any food these people might offer. Through another doorway, Mai and Shampoo could make out tiles leading into what looked like a shower and bathroom area.

Several girls were already there changing into what looked like Playboy Bunny outfits for the most part or putting on the final touches to their makeup in front of rows of mirrors. All of them looked up, blinking at the two newcomers. None seemed concerned that there was a man in the changing room, although a few girls about to come out of the showers pulled back in, one of them sticking their head out and staring at the man warily.

Before any of them could speak, the weasel-like man quickly pushed past one of the girls who were standing near the doorway, gesturing for Mai and Shampoo to follow him in, gesturing to a large locker set into one of the corners. There, he opened it quickly and began to rummage through various outfits within. “You said your names are Su Lin and Mu Dai, right? How would you feel about dressing up in S&M costumes?”

“Little man, unless you want to be my gimp, that is not going to happen!” growled Mai, concentrating hard to keep her Chinese from sounding too horrible, while Shampoo just shook her head and cracked her knuckles.

The girls around them looked at the two fighters, then back to the man, shrugged, then continued to get ready. It wasn’t that they were unconcerned with a man being there, Mai realized. It was that most of them were used to it.

"I could authorize you to get even more money..." The man wheedled. "Five times a normal fighter's amount per fight, maybe? If you give a good showing." The tone he used indicated something more than just the actual battle, but that seemed par for the course.

"Up front," Shampoo growled. "Even considering this idea should get us some money, frankly. This is cheapening our skill!"

"That's the breaks, girl! This is the underworld, not those pansy-ass martial arts competitions. You're not going to get honorable spars or whatever you think you might be getting here. This is where real fights happen." The man rolled his eyes. "Sex and money make the world go round, not honor."

"I'm wondering if it would get in trouble if we broke something on him. His dick, maybe, he's not using it. Of course, I'd have to break his legs first, so he can't run," Shampoo growled, a little too aggressive in Mai's opinion.

The reason for this was the looks they were now getting from the girls all around them, many of whom looked as if they were ready to bolt for the door if violence really started to happen. *Odd, I would've thought that they'd be used to violence, even if they're just going around the crowd with drinks during the tournament. Or is it because it's so close and personal here?* Mai didn't think so, which was kind of weird.

"Half upfront and half after," the man shuddered a little at Shampoo's threats but fought back gamely.

"Fine. But if you think you're going to stick around and watch as we change, you've got another thing coming. Out. And if I look around and find a single camera anywhere in here, little man, they'll be finding your body parts for weeks."

The man nodded fearfully and raced out of the room. Even as he did, he was excitedly pulling out his walkie-talkie and talking into it. "Boss, you'll be happy to know we've got two female fighters this year. And their bodies are on par with that Japanese gal, Rainbow Mika!"

OOOOOOO

Ranma slowly shook his head as yet another fighter left the area, the previous one not having won his match. "Well, I know you both are way more than what's on the surface, but well, er, you, you're both rocking those outfits, so there's that, I guess. And you're both strong enough to stop anyone who tries to take advantage of you. I know it ain't coming from people whose opinions actually matter, but I'd say you could just take the compliment?"

At her Airen's words, Shampoo fought hard not to preen, not wanting to show any indication the two of them were in a relationship. Beside her, Mai did much the same, although she didn't have to keep it up for very long, as her name was called next.

She still looked a bit depressed, and Ranma decided to send another compliment her way. Watching the other fighters to make certain none of them noticed for a moment, he leaned to the side, whispering as two names were called out to fight. "Er, seriously, don't take it so badly. Those assholes, all they see is the surface," he whispered. "But that's, like, the least of what makes you an' Shampoo special. Strength, good looks, those things are a dime a dozen. Strength of character, that's another story, and ya both got that."

Ranma knew that was an area he knew he'd struggled with a lot. He'd gone along with his father too often when he was younger because he hadn't really cared about anything but the Art. Ranma hadn't known better for a while, but after hitting his teens, he had, and still went along because following his old man was both the only thing he'd known and the idea of not doing so had been scary. It had been the disaster with Shampoo, Jusenkyo and everything else that happened since the Cursed Springs that finally helped Ranma break free from the older man.

"Just concentrate on the fights, your skills, your style. You're full of surprises, and I bet you'll blow them away," Ranma finished.

"Heh, thanks." Mai smiled, some of her depression leaving her. While she routinely used her sexual wiles in a fight, the idea of having that forced on her, and to a degree she was uncomfortable with, had made her wonder how people saw her. Coupled with the memory of Andy's rejection, that had made her self-esteem wane for a moment, but Ranma's words encouraged her. "You're something else, you know? Everyone else here, nearly all of them, can't see past my tits or face. You care more about making sure my head's in the game."

"Because I care about ya," Ranma answered simply, looking at her out of the corner of his eye with worry. "You, um, you're not regretting coming along with Shampoo-chan and me, are you? I mean, if you are, then after—"

"No," Mai interrupted, smirking a bit as she turned just enough to send a wink Ranma's way. "I don't regret coming with you and Shampoo. And I definitely don't regret meeting you in the first place. That changed my life, Ranma, my goals, for the better."

Ranma flushed a bit at that, and a moment later, Mai's assumed name was called, ending the moment. This left Shampoo looking over at Ranma from a bit further along the wall, a faint smile on her face, which contrasted sharply with her overall look at present.

"Er, wh, what? Did I say something wrong?" Ranma asked, speaking a bit louder but thankfully, the chatter of the crowd of fighters continued to cover their small conversation.

"No. Airen, you said a lot right. Mai needed the pick-me-up. Your words also reminded me why I fell for you. Not just because of our shared interests, but because of how you look at me and how you think," Shampoo answered simply before both martial artists, a faint blush on

their faces, turned to watch the fight as the announcer shouted out their friend's assumed name.

The crowd outside was going insane, loving the fact a woman was going to fight in the blood-soaked arena, although one among the mid-tier booths looked on with perhaps a slightly different thought process than the rest. *Ah, so gorgeous. This Amazon is truly a magnificent specimen. I do wonder what beauty her corpse might maintain? A flower is only beautiful right before it loses its life.*

It came as no surprise to either of them that Mai dismantled her opponent. He was a middling fighter at best, with an okay knowledge of wing chun and judo, but he wasn't nearly fast enough to keep up with Mai, only landing a single blow to her shoulder before he had been knocked to the ground, his body a mass of bruises.

The fight ended when the man couldn't push himself to his feet, and a moment later, they heard the announcer go, "And that was Mu Dai of the team of Mu Dai and Su Lin, or as we like to call them, S&M! And don't worry gentlemen, if you weren't into the Sinful Angel look, you'll be able to see far more than that here! Because, unlike our battle bunnies, this real battle Bunny has agreed, admittedly for a lot of cash, to come out in every fight in a different outfit! Without further ado, let's bring out the second member of this pair, Su Lin!!"

On the side, Shampoo began to growl angrily, her hands clenching and unclenching. "We didn't agree to any such thing! I'm going to wring that little maggot's neck so hard his head pops off!" she snarled.

Ranma wasn't the only one to back away from her, watching warily as she became the next one to be called out. Even the largest men in the room avoided the Dominatrix outfit-clad Amazon as she stalked toward the door.

The same man, a blonde man sitting with several others yet at the same time alone in one of the mid-tier booths, hummed in delight. *Yet another gorgeous woman! My word, even if I do not see my target in action, this night has not been a waste at all.*

Shampoo's first opponent for the actual tournament had a similar build to Ranma, although he was several inches taller. That did not save him from the beat-down Shampoo gave him. The man looked to be somewhat well-trained, but he took a moment, just like Ryu's opponent, to try to play to the crowd, winking at Shampoo lasciviously despite how wary he, like all the other fighters, had been toward her and Mai when the two entered the waiting room. He even made some strange tongue motion between two fingers that Ranma figured was supposed to be lewd.

That moment of grandstanding cost him as Shampoo crossed the intervening distance before he could get his guard up. He was then quickly backed into a corner. He seemed willing to take a few shots from her well enough, and Shampoo simply wailed at him. Even without her

chui, which she had left behind in the waiting room, Shampoo could hit about as hard as anyone could. Within a few minutes, the man was down, his arms visibly broken and his head badly bruised, along with a broken jaw.

There, just like Mai before her, when she left the cage, she was ushered back into a side entrance, leading same changing area that the battle bunnies, Mai and Shampoo used previously. There, she saw Mai being restrained by several men, shouting out angrily at the man who they had been talking to earlier. Three other men were already down, unconscious on the floor, yet even in her fury, Mai was somehow able to keep her accent to a minimum. "--doesn't matter what you think, if we don't go along with it, that doesn't matter a damn!"

Shampoo, who was honestly quite pleased with the fact that Mai's Putonghua was so good, was about to join in when a voice spoke up from behind her. "Enough."

This caused her to twist around, crouching down into a combat stance as she looked at the man.

The man who had snuck up on her somehow stood over even Mai's height by at least a foot, with broad shoulders and powerfully muscled arms ending in hands large enough to palm the head of one of her chui. She could tell his blonde hair was fake, but there was also something about his eyes that was a little unusual for a Chinese. Despite it being kind of warm down here, he wore a long, fur-lined white coat to go with a black shirt and black pants.

More than his looks or the manic-looking smirk on his face there was something off about this man to Shampoo's senses. Her spiritual sense wasn't all that good, as she and Ranma hadn't found someone able or willing to teach them ki sight. Yet something about this man was getting Shampoo's hackles up something fierce. He was dangerous, extremely so. *Could this be the Mad Dragon that we were warned about? The big boss that Chun Li sent us here to find evidence against?*

"You and your little friend caused quite a stir out there. A lot more money is changing hands, a lot more interest in the fights from on high, and money being spent, all of which I get a cut from. That's what we like to see here," the man said, patting Shampoo on the shoulder, causing her to shiver a bit in revulsion, becoming more certain that something about this man was broken. So much so, that Shampoo could barely stand to be near him.

He looked inside the girl's dressing room to where the toughs were still holding on to Mai. They instantly let go at his gesture, and he looked between her and the little man on the floor. "How much money did Zui Lin promise you?"

Mai growled but named a figure before Shampoo spoke up for her, pointing a finger at the man they had been talking to. "But we never agreed to keep on changing outfits every fight! That's damn tiring! Not to mention tiresome."

"Double it." The man ordered instantly. "Have up front while you're changing, half after you win." The man looked at Mai and Shampoo closely, not as if he was looking at them in a sexual way, but as if he was trying to figure them out. "Which I rather think you will for a bit. We'll see if you've got staying power." He grinned then, and the feeling of wrongness Shampoo had felt previously doubled. "Of course, you could argue, then I'd be forced to beat you both down right here. My guests might all be annoyed by that, but a boss can't be questioned in his own halls."

The girls exchanged looks, but looking at Mai, Shampoo could see the same wariness of this man in her eyes. *Even if we win, can we fight him and the rest of the thugs out there? And then link up with Ranma and the others? When a single announcement could get most of the fighters here on the Triad's side? Even without Chun Li's mission for us, I can't see us getting out of here.* "Fine," Shampoo growled aloud. "But we choose our outfits, and we are not for fucking sale or whatever!"

"Hah! Fine. As for buying a night with you, I won't offer it to anyone, but others might proposition you directly when you're out there. No violence when dealing with 'em that's about all." Ryuji pulled out a wad of hundred dollar bills that made the ones Shampoo and Mai had seen before seem small, plunking it on a bench. "And don't bother returning to the other changing room. You'll be changing here, so that makes no sense. I'll make certain the intercom in here's turned on so you can hear the fights, and I'll even have someone roll in a TV for you to watch the fights."

HE grinned then, laughing, a barking, nasty sound even though he was seemingly genuinely pleased. "See how magnanimous I am! Just keep making things interesting, and we won't have any problems."

Left alone in the women's dressing room, Shampoo moved over to drop onto a bench. "That, that was..."

"Worrying," Mai agreed, slumping down beside her. "It was that. Although, besides the money, this might be a good thing, I guess. This will give us some more time to get a handle on where we are and more time to ourselves. The boys might not get any chance until well into the tournament. Although we'll have to be very careful about the various bugs just in case. I think we should only wear them one at a time; the better to hide them if we need to. I'll charge my boob window enough to keep it in place while we're out there."

"That's all fine, but that bastard gave me the creeps! And not in the perverted way the rest of the crowd does," Shampoo answered before looking over at the lockers, a faint moue on her face. "Do you think we really need to...?"

"I don't think that man is one you say no to, especially not when we kind of agreed to it. Although I have to wonder if they treated the other female fighters who came through here like

this,” Mai murmured. “If we see any of the girls, we might want to ask them about some of those female fighters.”

“I just hope all these outfits they have for us are things we can fight in without spilling out of,” Shampoo grumbled, then turned to the row of lockers filled with various outfits. “And I am not going to be a bunny girl!”

OOOOOOO

Ken smiled happily to himself as he began to count the cash he’d just won. Not that the cash itself was anything to him. Frankly, the tournament side of things was probably pocket change to his family. *Although the deals and money being changed behind the scenes is probably a different story.* The money only mattered to Ken as a way of keeping score, which he was all in favor of.

He smirked at Ranma as the two passed one another by and then Ken moved on to head towards a few weapons racks, ostensibly to check out the weapons being offered by the tournament rather than brought in by the contestants. This put him by Ryu, who slid out one of the cameras and a set of listening devices towards Ken as Ranma had done to him a moment before. His friend knelt down and quickly made them disappear into one of his costume’s many pockets.

For his part, Ranma headed out the door and soon found himself facing his first opponent in the arena.

This was an older man, around his father’s age, maybe? It was hard to tell since his eyes were hidden behind a pair of black glasses, the kind that made his entire eye invisible. He was shorter than most of the other fighters, even Ranma by a good five inches or so, and knelt down to the ground, taking a stance that Ranma could tell was meant to let him sprint forward or move to the sides quickly.

He was wearing a weapon that reminded Ranma of this weird horror movie he had seen advertising for, about an idiot who invaded people’s dreams and killed them in their dreams or something. Frankly, to Ranma, the guy had looked about as threatening as a bad haircut, and this fighter’s strange claw gauntlets, the claws at the end of the fingers rather than on the back of his hand, wasn’t any better. *Those things are so long and thin that I bet they break easily. I’ve never seen the point of gauntlet weapons in general, but those look really lame.*

His opponent was ignoring Ranma for the moment, looking really disgruntled as he stared longingly towards another door from the one that he and Ranma had come out of a moment ago. “Dammit! Why the hell couldn’t I face one of the girls! That would’ve been way more fun.”

Ranma tensed, his head suddenly shifting from side to side as he waited, twitching and ready to dodge if he could. His concerns, thankfully, seemed to be in vain after a few moments, and he breathed a sigh of relief. *Oh thank God, looks like Lady Luck decided that was simply too obvious an opening to take for once.*

This did not, however, make Ranma any less angry at the man for attempting the curse to that degree, let alone his desire to face Shampoo or Mai. "Eyes on me, Scissorhands, or else I'm gonna make you eat those things."

The man laughed at that, shaking his head as he crouched down. "Ah well, while your flesh isn't as nice to look at, I'm certain that cutting it will still give me some satisfaction."

When the gong sounded to begin the fight, the other fighter charged forward as Ranma just stood there for a moment. The man slashed at Ranma the instant they closed, but Ranma dodged under the attacks, lashing out with a kick that the other man leaped over, his claws lashing out again. Ranma deflected the strikes launching a few of his own, but he didn't take to the air just yet. Instead, he twisted them around, getting used to the man's speed as he slowly shifted the fight towards one of the walls. *He's about as fast as Shampoo, let's see how his situational awareness is.*

Turns out, it wasn't all that good. Even as the older man kept jumping around Ranma, who ducked, dodged and retreated, the man didn't realize they had come close to one of the walls of the cage. One of his claws hit the wall, holding the man's attack in midair, and Ranma instantly went on the attack.

Flipping onto his hands, Ranma kicked upwards with both feet, catching the man in the upper chest, hurling him upward. A moment later, the man slammed into the top of the cage with a loud rattling noise.

Even as the man started to fall towards the ground, Ranma flipped back onto his feet, launching himself upwards, not at the man, but passed him. Bouncing off of the cage's top, Ranma followed the man down from above even as he tried to turn around to bring his claw hands to bear again. That effort stopped as Ranma collided with his back. One hand found the back of his bald head, and Ranma rode the man down onto the floor of the arena with such force that he was knocked completely out within seconds.

Ranma rolled clear, snorted, and moved towards the entrance to the cage, shaking his head. *Well, that as interesting, but also lame. I hope some of those big bruisers can take more damage than this oldster.*

He wasn't out of the arena before the next match was called. "And returning once more after her earlier showing, give it up for the S in S&M, Su Lin, showing off a new outfit as promised, folks!"

Ranma stopped and stared, not that anyone would have blamed him, even if they didn't know the gorgeous Amazon was his girlfriend. Shampoo had indeed changed, although the scowl on her face showed she wasn't all that happy about it, which Ranma could understand. Both girls were serious martial artists, and being treated like simple eye candy was beneath them.

Despite being furious that his girlfriend was being denigrated like that, Ranma's eyes and... lower bits... were not complaining.

Currently, Shampoo was dressed like a punk rocker. She had a short, sheer skirt that might, Ranma's brain reminded him, prove hard to kick in. Above the skirt, Shampoo wore a strange tie-dye shirt under a leather jacket that looked like the one Ken was wearing as part of his disguise. It wasn't the same cut, though, and looked great on her. It also worked, again, with her makeup, although Ranma had to admit her chui, which she had brought out this time,

Flouncing toward the arena, Shampoo saw Ranma looking at her. To her relief, his eyes showed no shock or jealousy that other people were also looking at her, nor did there seem to be any disgust. Rather she saw sympathy and the same love that she always saw there. *Well, that makes me feel better, anyway.*

That feeling went away instantly as she looked at her opponent. The feeling wasn't like the bleached blonde boss from earlier, but there, again, was something about this person that set her on edge, and Shampoo was raising her chui even before she entered the cage.

Instead of being allowed to stay out near the arena and watch from there, Ranma was hurried back to the waiting room by one of the fixers. That was a bit weird to Ranma, but he took a moment to look up at the crowd. Only the first three rows were made of what Ranma considered typical gangster types: local Hong Kong folk to a man, with a few women beyond the bunnies spread about the crowd.

While some of the bunnies strutted around the cage between it and the first few rows, most had headed up into the middle area, which was separated by a half-wall from the first three rows. Above that line, there were a few boxes separated by more half walls with what Ranma supposed were good chairs, drinks and the bunnies. There, there were surprisingly more women than below, very rich-looking women to boot. *I didn't think that many rich women would go for a bloodsport, but I ain't about to judge.*

Above that row, there seemed to be four more scattered private boxes, each of them behind glass. The glass there was one way, and Ranma couldn't see anything within beyond the gleam of the glass itself. *And up there are the real bigwigs. The Triad bosses, for certain.*

He arrived back in the large waiting room just as the match between Shampoo and one of the other men began. He was an older man, too, older than Ranma's former opponent, with a well-manicured goatee in the Chinese style, long mustaches, and an overall well-cared-for,

respectful-seeming look. Yet there was something about the twist of his mouth and eyes that made Ranma want to punch him on general principle.

The two fighters started off the match with weapons, a staff against Shampoo's maces, but Shampoo lost one of her chuis quickly, the staff flicking against her hand with such punishing force she was forced to let go as her hand spasmed. *This guy is strong and fast, too. I think the time of easy fights is over.*

He then did something, catching the end of the staff and flipping it up and into her other mace, blocking it for a moment, then flicking the chui Shampoo had let go into the farthest corner from where they were currently fighting. Their weapons clashed against one another several times, then he raised a hand away from the shaft as he redirected one of Shampoo's blows into the floor. Ducking under a punch, he reached up. Instead of grabbing her arm or punching her chest, which she was already protecting with the knee, the older man let his fingers linger on her forearm. He then flipped sideways out of the way of the resulting kick, but that kick came slower than Ranma had expected, and Shampoo looked completely out of sorts for a moment, shivering in place.

This happened again seconds later, the old man touching Shampoo's calf as he ducked under a kick, whirling his staff around in his other hand, trying to take her pivot legs out from under her. But Shampoo got over her shivers quickly and kicked up and off the floor with that leg, flipping into a crescent kick that the man barely dodged, and he could only bring up his staff to try and deflect the next blow from her chui, which shattered his staff and nearly brained him, but the older man ducked backward enough for the chui to finish its passage down into the ground.

Before Shampoo could recover from her strike, the old man hurled one piece of the staff at her face, forcing Shampoo to duck, and this time he grabbed onto her wrist, twisting.

Shampoo was much stronger than the man had thought and hurled him up and away into the wall of the cage. He bounced off it, flipping under a follow-on kick, reaching up to fondle her rear in a way that drew laughter and applause from the crowd and a shriek of fury from Shampoo. "You bastard!"

Doing a barrel roll in midair, Shampoo brought her mace down where the man had been a second ago, even as he rolled away. The one remaining bit of his staff flicked out, slamming into her forearm right behind her wrist, and again, Shampoo was forced to release her weapon. The next second, the man used his other hand to bring up the previous mace he had deprived her of, bringing it around in a massive blow.

Shampoo took the blow on her forearms, grunting in pain. But there was no accompanying crack of broken bones, to the surprise of more than one person in the crowd. The announcer put the crowd's thoughts into words, shouting, "Holy crap, Su Lin's almost as durable as Marisa from six months back! But she's a hell of a lot hotter, isn't that right?"

Even as the crowd roared in approval, Shampoo was hurled sideways. She landed in a roll, then halting her momentum, launched back the way she came with a kick. "You bastard, I'm going to enjoy removing your teeth the old-fashioned way!"

Ryu moved up behind Ranma, also staring up at the fight, while many of the other fighters did the same. "Is it just me, or does it seem as if Shampoo's a bit out of sorts," he murmured in a low tone, speaking Japanese as well, just in case.

"She's fighting angry, **really** angry. I don't think that it has anything to do with her outfit either." In comparison to the first one she'd worn, Shampoo's current outfit was much more modest except maybe the skirt and the amount of the uncanny valley it showed every time she kicked.

"Do you think it's got anything to do with the oldster trying to keep on touching her? I mean, it doesn't look as if he's touching, well, anything really private, but still..."

"Maybe. Doubtful, though." Ranma waited as the man grabbed her shoulder, not to throw her or use it as leverage or anything, just touching her lightly along the shoulder, before he was forced to roll under a blow from her mace, which she had retrieved again. The next second, he lost the mace he'd purloined from her, a blow from Shampoo taking him in the arm so hard that Ranma felt he probably had a broken bone. The fact that his arm hung loose at his side afterward was evidence of that.

However, the next second, it was Shampoo's face that slammed into the cage hard enough to daze her. That also surprised Ranma, considering their toughness training. *What the heck...*

For a few seconds, the man wailed on her side with the purloined mace as Shampoo slowly recovered her senses. *Gah, it, it's like he's sucking my ki away a little bit every time, and I, I'm getting angrier every time he does it! But there's a limit to his durability, too. So let's see who can take more damage, you fucker!*

With that, Shampoo twisted around and launched a kick that blocked the next blow, smashing the chui out of her opponent's hand. She then kicked out of the corner, slamming bodily into the man with a cry of fury before he could dodge. "Fuck you!"

He was still able to move with the blow, though. Dodging Shampoo's follow-on grab, he lightly ran a finger along 'Su Lin's' forearm as he rolled to the side.

"Yeah, there's something weird going on there," Ranma said, sweatdropping at the shriek of raw fury from his girlfriend. "Maybe he did something to his hands that made them extra yucky or something?" *Or maybe some kind of ki-draining technique?*

This was indeed the case. Every time this man had touched her, Shampoo had felt soiled, and not entirely, because it was another man touching her other than her Airen. No, there was something off with his hands, as if every touch was filled with slime.

Intellectually, Shampoo knew this was some kind of ki technique, a physical manifestation of the same kind of thought process that Ranma's 'Make Them Mad, Make Them Stupid' tactic followed. Yet after the first few touches, Shampoo no longer cared. She was too furious, and now Shampoo nearly forgot all of her skill and training to simply get close to the man and pound him flat.

If the man had as much durability and skill to go with the strange ki technique, Shampoo might well have been in trouble. As it was, he was already down one arm, unable to heal like Ranma, Mai and Shampoo had learned to do. The older man had a high pain tolerance to keep fighting with a broken arm, but that was it.

When the man accidentally touched her stomach for just a moment too long, Shampoo grabbed on and pulled him in. From there, it became a slugfest as the two of them rolled this way and that on the floor. A blow to the man's face wrecked his perfect goatee, and Shampoo grabbed onto his whisker, tugging hard into an elbow blow. The man tried to raise his one remaining arm to shield his face, but Shampoo slammed blow after blow into his stomach, then raised her hips and brought her knees down hard onto his thighs and lower stomach. The man gasped in agony and was completely open for the next blow, which slammed down into his temple, shattering it and leaving him whimpering.

Shampoo barely heard the gong sound and had to be pulled off the man by several toughs. "OOoweee, let that be a lesson, gentlemen: feminine fury is a force to be feared even against the toughest fighters! But we need to move on, so Su Lin, the S in S&M, will need to wait a bit before finding someone else to vent her anger on," the announcer hyping up the crowd, who roared and laughed at both Shampoo and the man's extremely painful outcome to the fight. It seemed as if most of the crowd had loved the mix of comedy and raw, blood-soaked violence.

"Yeah," Ranma muttered, shaking his head. "Something more was definitely going on there." *The art of the Feel Up? Weird.* He shook his head and watched as one of the locals was called out to fight the massive fat man with the ball and chain. "Well, whatever, Shampoo won. That's all that's important at this point," he whispered to Ryu, who nodded imperceptibly.

OOOOOOO

Above, in one of the private boxes, Ryuji was having fun, laughing and watching the fights with a bloodthirsty, almost ecstatic look on his face. "Ha, that's the fucking way. Damn, but that Su Lin gal, she's a feisty one. I wonder how much endurance she has, though? She took a lot of shots in this fight like a trooper, and I only saw a bit of blood around her mouth. That's enough to give a man ideas."

Yet one of the men he shared the private box with scowled angrily at the end of the Su Lin and Dapper Gentleman's fight, slamming a hand down onto his drink table. "I'd had quite a lot better on Dapper to at least reach the fifth round!"

"Well, you've never been as good at picking out martial artists. You've always been better at finding gunmen," Ryuji answered. "Heh, I heard some fighters tried to get in without paying over in the southern docks district."

"True. My man on the spot dealt with them well enough." The other man subsided, scowling angrily still but now more thoughtfully. "But speaking of martial arts-type shenanigans, are we any closer to finding out who was behind that raid on the bar yesterday? That is a **lot** of drugs the police found. Our foreign contacts, particularly over in Taiwan, are not going to be happy if we delay our shipments to them. And there's no doubt in my mind at least that the police would've never been able to successfully raid the place fast enough to find those drugs if not for the martial artists getting involved."

"Yeah, that Li bitch's task force is dangerous, but our bought men higher up in the force would normally have been able to stall that kind of thing long enough to move most of our assets. At best, they would've found some illegal alcohol and maybe a few underage gals," another member of the Triad's leadership in Hong Kong added.

That soured Ryuji's good mood a little. "We've identified at least a few of them. Fei Long, for one, and apparently, a few of his friends. It's why security was so tight today on this tournament, I figured that at least one of them would have tried to appear here, but I've been watching closely. None of their fighting styles match those reported at the side of the bar."

"None? I'm not doubting your skill Yamazaki, but I thought the same thing, that those martial artists type would want to get in on this tournament," another leading member of the triad said from Ryuji's other side.

"I thought at first that the two girls were the two girls reported at the bar. But their attitudes and general combat style don't match. Black-haired, not black and purple, trust me. I checked really closely when I went down to talk to them about wearing different outfits. Unfortunately, most of those reports were disjointed at best. And we don't have any recordings of the attacker's voices. I admit that Mu Dai girl might be the one the sheep called 'the one with the tits,' but that's about it." Ryuji laughed, and the other bosses laughed too, with one or two of them muttering about how they would like to get up and close and personal with one of those females, too.

Not that they would. Both of them were far too fierce. Mind you, that was a draw to some men. These men were among that number, if in a very different way. More than one of them was looking forward eagerly to what would be happening after the tournament began to wind down, and those two, like more than a few female contestants before them, could be

added to the night's intake. "I presume that you're planning to slip them some molly as well as the designated girls?"

"Of course, although bidding is still open on both of them, gentlemen. If any of you want to cough up the money to purchase them after they're properly broken in, be my guest," Ryuji snorted as if the question was idiotic.

The man who had lost money on the dapper gentlemen looked at him quizzically. "You don't want one of them for yourselves, Ryuji? I would've thought that they would be right up your alley."

Ryuji chuckled darkly. "They would be if I wanted to break them personally. But after that, I wouldn't be able to make any money off them. Besides, I need to take part in the tournament. That'll be enough for me." To Ryuji, there was little difference between fighting and fucking. Both were ways to prove your dominance over someone else and the only way of truly proving your superiority was to be the only one walking away.

"On a different topic," one of the others said, frowning a bit. "News reached me recently. The Spaniard is supposed to arrive here in Hong Kong."

Ryuji blinked at that, turning to look at the man who had spoken, a spark of real interest entering his eyes. "Really?"

"Apparently. Unfortunately, no one knows what The Spaniard looks like without his mask, but I have ordered my people at the airport and the ports to be on the lookout."

Ryuji nodded, asking to be kept in the loop, a bloodthirsty look coming to his face.

"Back to the topic of the bar, if we've got no leads on the martial artists who began that debacle, that's one thing. But a lot of our people were taken prisoner by the police. And with all the evidence on hand, there's no way we'll be able to get them out. Not unless we want to stage a breakout," Mr. Guns, the Triad's chief of gun running and gunmen, said.

"Too flashy. No," another man said, shaking his head firmly, "we might have better luck though if we wait until they're at the prison complex, then break them out from there rather than the police precinct they're being held in."

"That's not a bad idea. We have someone on the inside already. If one of our paid coppers can get a message to the prisoners to keep their mouths shut, rescuing them from the jail would send a positive message to our men that we'll look after them. But if they don't or won't keep their mouths shut, we'll need to send another message. Then make certain the word gets out we'll make anyone's families pay for their transgressions too," Ryuji said coldly.

In most other circumstances, that kind of talk would probably have gained shivers or looks of shock from Ryuji's listeners. Yet the Triad, which ruled Hong Kong's crime, was not led by squeamish people. Quite the opposite, actually, as most of them approved.

"What about Fei Long? It's obvious that all of that trouble started with him and his refusal to give us our rightful cut of the profits of his movie," another boss growled. "I wonder if it's time to go big there. Arrange an 'accident,' like a bridge falling on him, or his apartment complex suddenly proving to be littered with construction shortcuts, making it a death trap..."

Ryuji snorted. "Nice, but maybe a bit premature. Fei Long's a big deal, after all, we can't just kill him without there being a lot of waves. Way more than our agents in the police could stop. International type waves." The Triad leader who handled most of their espionage side of things, nodded firmly.

"I'd take care of it myself if I thought the prima donna would be able to actually put up a fight," Ryuji continued. "Instead, I sent some of my boys with one of our associate's men from Thailand. The fivesome Sagat sent to watch our shipment of antiquities to him wanted to prove themselves while waiting for the last bits of the relics he purchased from us to be gathered, and I figured sending two of them along with my boys would be enough for that prima donna. As you saw before, another decided to join the tournament. The others are up in my apartment, going over the items."

Everyone there nodded, then turned their attention back to the fights going on below. There were quite a good lot of good fighters down there today, and not one of them wanted to miss a second of the sport.

OOOOOOO

Fei Long grunted as he pushed himself up via a hand on the wall, wincing as his side, back, shoulder and stomach all ached, as well as his head. Most of those bruises and possible broken bones were all from where the two foreign fighters had struck him. The injury to his side was the only one that wasn't. Instead, it was a long cut made by one of the local toughs. *None of them on their own would have been even a challenge, although the foreigner would have been tough to deal with,* he thought woozily, not realizing that the foreigner had actually been hampered from the start by needing to fight with the locals. "Gonna need to work that gash into the movie somehow," he mumbled.

"Think about that after we get you to the hospital. Just be grateful that I decided not to wait on standby with my team and came to check on you." With that, Chun Li, slightly bruised along one side of her head, reached over and helped Fei Long around, grimacing as they passed the front door of the actor's apartment. There, two policemen lay dead, with two more in a nearby unmarked police car. Chun Li had been on her way over to Fei Long's to check in on him when the two police outside missed a call-in. "And you better believe you will be making an appearance at Wei Lo and the other's funerals."

"R, right," Fei Long muttered, shaking his head and concentrating through the pain his brain was currently feeling with some difficulty. "But um, that, that kick you did, smashing the door entirely off its hinges, taking out that one foreigner, then that twirling kick? Golden. Some of the best moves I've seen in a long while."

"Heh, I mean to one day be called the strongest woman in the world. If I can't already do things like that at my age, then I would never be able to reach that high. Among other goals of mine," Chun Li answered, still helping Fei Long along with one arm even as her own bruises started to remind her of their presence. Chun Li's other hand reached into her pocket, pulling out a police radio. "This is Chun Li. I need an ambulance and police response at..."

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Several more fights passed with the group of five getting through their individual fights with various levels of difficulty, as most of the local fighters were knocked out of the tournament one after another. That wasn't to say they went easily. Many of the remaining fighters used weapons, and all of them were tougher and stronger than the ones that came before during the two prelims. Yet it wasn't until the crowd of fighters in the waiting room had been sharply cut down that the five infiltrators began to run into real trouble.

Ranma was the first one to run into some difficulty. Astonishingly, it came against one of the other smaller contestants, the foreigner in the strange, colorful yellow mask that Ranma had noticed earlier.

"Let's start this round of the tournament right, folks! In this corner, the redoubtable masked man of Mexico, El Fuerte! And in the other corner, hailing from parts unknown yet still rocking that old commie trooper outfit, Ranma, the Wild Stallion!" the presenter shouted.

When the masked man started to spout something that sounded Spanish (Ranma thought it was Spanish, anyway) Ranma knew that the guy was from way farther afield than he was. Yet that didn't matter as much as the speed El Fuerte showed when he raced forward towards Ranma. *Huh, faster than I thought he'd be able to move with all that muscle on that small frame of his. And what the hell is with how he's charging me?*

The fact the Mexican was actually an inch taller than Ranma was something he very carefully ignored.

As El Fuerte closed, Ranma backed up, staying on the defensive for a moment, somewhat confused at the man's style. He was charging forward low on the ground, his arms outstretched in front of him, almost like a sumo El Fuerte but not quite, almost resembling the way a crab would charge at someone. When Ranma ducked to one side, the man followed him, almost grabbing Ranma's arm.

Fast! Ranma thought, twisting around that grab, then up into a spinning kick. El Fuerte dodged easily, grabbing at Ranma's leg. Ranma pulled his leg back just in time to avoid the grab but not in time to avoid a palm strike to his chest.

Still wanting to keep his use of the aerial style to a minimum, Ranma allowed the blow to hurl himself into the cage, where he reached behind his head and grabbed on with his hands, flipping himself up into a kick that caught the man on the chin, sending him stumbling. Ranma then flipped himself entirely up and kicked off, coming down onto the man, but he recovered faster than Ranma had expected. He also jumped upward, getting a surprising amount of air as his arms flashed up, grabbing Ranma's arms at the elbow, pulling him down and then twirling them around into a headfirst slam into the floor of the arena.

"OOOF!" Ranma saw stars for a moment, but only a moment, thanks to his toughness training. A kick caught El Fuerte in the center of his chest, sending him stumbling back before he could take advantage.

El Fuerte again recovered faster from the strike than Ranma had anticipated, showing a remarkable toughness. He darted in as Ranma rolled away but ate a low kick that took his legs out from under him. He used this to lunge forward with his arms outstretched towards Ranma, showing a remarkable ability to shift the momentum of the strike and remain in the air, his fists flashing out almost at Amaguriken speed.

Ranma batted his hands aside, his own speed rising to match his opponents. A moment later, as El Fuerte's hands were smacked to either side again, Ranma went for a one-two punch combo on the man's face, feeling his nose break and blood begin to pour out from the bottom of his mask.

Yet El Fuerte was undaunted, returning that last punch with one of its own as the two of them tried to grapple at one another's arms for a second before a kick from El Fuerte sent Ranma back a bit. El Fuerte then tried again to pull Ranma in, and was able to this time, his elbow coming up in a sharp blow that just barely missed Ranma's neck. It crashed into his collarbone, doing no real damage.

A fact that astonished El Fuerte almost as much as the headbutt that Ranma smashed into him a second later, gaining some distance. "¿De qué diablos estás hecho, Genma? (What in the world are you made of, Genma?)"

Ranma's arms flashed forward, punches flashing into the other fighter faster than he could block. He tanked some of them, but most of them sent him stumbling. He still tried to grab at Ranma's hands, but Ranma pulled his punches back too quickly for him to do so, and El Fuerte quickly realized this, too. A second later, his offensive style changed. One hand continued to try to grab at Ranma's punches as they came in, but the other began to return fire, forcing Ranma to either block or take the shots.

One blow actually got through Ranma's defenses before he could adapt, catching him in the eye and causing him to wince and fall back slightly. Even with the toughness training, his eyes were still a vulnerability. The man then leaped into the air, launching himself forward into a spinning, twisting tornado of an attack feet first. "Guacamole huracán (Hurricane)!"

The blow caught Ranma in his chest and he hissed in pain, the additional torque giving the kicks almost as much impact power as a spinning drill, dulled admittedly, would've had. He was hurled backward into the side of the cage and bounced forward into another high kick from El Fuerte as he came out of that attack. However, Ranma was able to get his arm up in time to block that strike, and even as it landed, he shifted to the side and then came back into a shoulder charge, which caught the Mexican in the side before he could turn. He tried to grab onto Ranma even so, but Ranma broke his grip, grabbed his head and slammed it sideways into the cage.

That technique would not have done much damage if the man's face had already been battered. His hiss of pain, as his broken nose impacted the metal links, showed it did have some effect, and Ranma then was behind the man, forcing him to twirl around with a wild haymaker. This cost El Fuerte.

"Got ya." Instead of retreating, Ranma grabbed his arm and brought up his other hand, slamming a punch into the man's forearm just below the elbow as El Fuerte's arm was overextended. He hadn't seen the Mexican wrestler fighting dirty or crippling his opponents, so Ranma wasn't about to cripple him. But that blow did break El Fuerte's forearm, and the man hissed in pain before breaking Ranma's grip, finishing his turn with a wide sweeping blow from his other hand, followed by a series of kicks. However, the kicks weren't as well coordinated as the man's punches had been, and Ranma rolled away, putting some distance between the two of them.

This wasn't for Ranma's own sake. He wanted to see if this guy would have the smarts to bow out now that he was down an arm. Earlier in the tournament, that had been the case with some of the fighters before this newest round of battle. More than one winner had decided to bow out thanks to those kinds of injuries even if he could keep fighting, despite the money and the screaming, shrieking crowd edging them on.

Unfortunately, El Fuerte seemed to be feeling the bloodlust from the crowd like a lot of the other fighters were. Ranma could see him think about it as he looked down at his arm, then over at Ranma, but then he shook himself and charged forwards. "¡Aún no! ¡Un brazo roto no es suficiente para detener a este luchador! (Not yet! A broken arm is not enough to stop this wrestler!) Habanero Estrellarse (dash)!"

Shaking his head, Ranma muttered in Japanese, "Well, you get points for stubbornness, El Fuerte, and far be it from me of all people to say that stubbornness doesn't count for something. But..."

When El Fuerte rushed to meet him, he then swayed to one side, the side on which El Fuerte had already lost the use of an arm. He twisted around, his remaining arm swinging around to hit Ranma, but the move was desperate and uncoordinated. *He hasn't ever trained to fight without one of his arms before.*

One leg was a little too forward, and Ranma changed the angle of his next attack, his first punch instead becoming a block, followed up by his other hand coming down with all the power of a sledgehammer onto the Mexican's thigh before he could either move it out of position or raise his leg into a kick. The blow didn't break bones, but it certainly bruised. Then Ranma was rolling, coming up again and moving in again on that side.

This continued for two more strikes to the man's leg. When El Fuerte tried to pivot for a third time, that leg gave out on him. Completely overbalancing him, this left El Fuerte wide open for a kick that caught the man in the side of the head at an angle to catch the head just above the neck. This sent El Fuerte to the side, where he landed, and did not get up again.

After a ten count, the announcer spoke up once more. That was actually the only thing about this entire tournament that Ranma actually liked. The announcers did not try to give a play-by-play like he'd seen occasionally in tournaments on TV, only acting more like a cheerleader for both sides, shouting, 'Wow' or 'Would you look at that' and such.

Ranma moved over to his opponent, putting two fingers against the masked man's neck just in case. He didn't think he had hit that hard, and Ranma was pretty much an expert when it came to pulling his punches, but better safe than sorry. The man groaned a bit, twisted around and gave Ranma a shaky thumbs up, to which Ranma grinned. Amidst cheering, booing and even some mocking laughter from the crowd, the announcer made an offhand comment about "Sportsmanship is all well and good, but the walking poster child for Mao's Revolutionary Army shouldn't expect to see much of that from anyone else in this tournament."

Ignoring that, Ranma handed the injured man over to one of the fixers, hoping that El Fuerte would be able to communicate in Chinese enough to get himself to a hospital for that broken arm. The language barrier was a bit too much for Ranma to overcome, especially considering that he might have just given the masked man a concussion, and he was slurring his words, or at least Ranma thought he was. *I doubt that any Spanish word has what sounded like six M's.*

Regardless, Ranma was forcefully pushed in the direction of the waiting room again, entering just as two more fighters exited. The trio of fighters exchanged glares, or in Ranma's case, a sneer, before the two passed him by. *Maybe the fixers have a point about not letting fighters out here for long.*

Luckily, just as Ranma entered the hallway leading to the waiting room, he did note some other men from the audience coming over to the wounded fighter, gesturing him to come over and sit with them. Since they had the same skin color, Ranma wondered if they were his

sponsors or something similar and stopped worrying about it. *Although that sounds kind of wrong if I put it that way.*

The next fight gave the crowd as much blood and guts as they could have wished, something that had Ranma, Ryu and Ken all exchanging surreptitious glances while Shampoo and Mai did the same in their own waiting room. Both men had brought swords to the fight, and one of them had been nearly disemboweled before the fight ended. His body was being dragged away as they watched, waiting for the next two names to be called, leaving a trail of blood on the arena floor and then out into the hallway.

Looking around, Ranma saw that not a single fighter there looked at all uncomfortable or surprised. At this stage of the tournament, they were fighting for real money, nearly a million yuan. That was enough to set someone up for months, maybe even years. Ranma felt that he might be able to live on that money for at least a decade, and it was evident that that and the sheer joy in fighting were more than enough for any of the warriors in the tournament. *Well... all right then. I ain't gonna go out of my way to hurt someone, but I guess if they are tough enough to force me to that level, then I can't afford to hesitate.*

Of the five, Mai was the next to be called out, and she also had a couple of close calls. Currently, she was wearing what, beyond her makeup, looked like an American Southern Girl outfit. Short Daisy Dukes barely covered her rear, putting almost all of her thighs on display, paired with cowgirl boots and a plaid shirt. The plaid shirt, a short sleeve, was at least two sizes too small and was visibly straining to keep her breasts contained. Worse for the men in the audience, it was clear that Mai's mammaries were swinging free, without any bra to aid the beleaguered shirt in its efforts.

The Shiranui heiress faced off with a kukri wielder from India and had been handling him handily, although he had cut her outfit several times, much to the enjoyment of the crowd. Yet even as she began to finish the fight, he got in a lucky shot on her face, the pommel of one of his daggers slamming into her eye, giving her a very nasty bruise.

Ryu was the next of their little party to fight after two more intervening fights. His opponent was Abigail with the ball and chain, the one with the name that had Ken nearly in stitches: Abigail. While Ranma knew English, he didn't get why that name was weird until he overheard the large black man, whose name was Birdie, laughingly shout about how Abigail was a girl's name.

That was almost horrifying, considering how ugly Abigail was. He was about eight feet tall, taller and fatter than Yokozuna Honda was. His head was small, his face marked by strange mask-like tattoos over his eyes and nose, with a choker that looked like that given to a guard dog on his. His mouth was large for the size of his head, although he did at least have good teeth. This was more than offset by his paunch, which looked like the penultimate example of a beer belly. Regardless of the massive muscles on his arms, shown off by the Muscle T he wore,

Abigail looked fat and heavy, maybe even heavier than the wrecking ball and chain tied around his waist that he used as a weapon.

Ranma watched the fight closely, leaning forward intently along with Ken beside him. Since there were less than a dozen fighters in the waiting room with them at that point, this didn't seem all that unusual. In fact, most of them were sitting on benches watching the fight in a row. Only two were taking the time to drink some water, but otherwise, the rest of the group was intent on the battle. Everyone there knew that they were getting down to the real warriors now, and any insight into an opponent to come was a good thing.

The battle started out spectacularly as Abigail roared and hurled his ball forward. Astonishing Ranma, the chain connecting it to his waist enlarged, mimicking a ki technique Ranma and the others who went to Master Nawa's school could do, letting the ball cross the whole arena. *Huh, with metal to boot. That's harder than rope or cloth. Impressive. Not enough, but impressive.*

This startled Ryu as well, but not enough to stop him from moving, and he rolled to the side, watching the ball slam into the side of the cage with such force that it shattered several of the links there, bending the cage's side out of shape, much to the shrieks of shock and the light from the crowd. Even the people directly in front of it had been shrieking in shock more than anything else, caught up in a rising bloodlust even as a few of them fell out of their chairs howling in pain from shattered links catching them in the face in one case, and the chest in several others.

Before the large man could pull his wrecking ball back in, Ryu darted forward, slamming several hard blows into the man's stomach. The layers upon layers of fat there acted as armor to protect him. The next second, Ryu pushed off a rising knee, lashing out into the face of the man with a punch.

That was a good tactic, yet it quickly showed that the man's durability actually didn't have much to do with the layers of fat on his stomach when he took that blow easily. One arm moved to try to grab Ryu in a bear hug while the other continued to haul in his wrecking ball even as Ryu pulled his arm back from the strike.

Ryu was too fast and flipped away through the air, landing in front of the man just in time to dodge to the side as the wrecking ball returned to him, passing through where Ryu had been standing. He kicked off the ground into a spinning kick that took the man in the upper arm but did no real damage.

This continued for a bit. Ryu would dart in and slam hard blows into Abigail, the sounds of the blows like thunderclaps even over the rising shouts of the crowd, but doing no real damage to his opponent, who, Ranma thought, had to have gone through some measure of toughness training. Whether on purpose or not he didn't know, but he was taking those blows like a trooper so far.

In return, Ryu had to dodge every blow from the other man. Abigail seemed almost completely without any kicks or punches, but he did use his knees occasionally to block or redirect Ryu's blows, while his main offensive strength came from his ball and chain and trying to grab Ryu and hold him still. Many a time he also used the chain to block Ryu's shots or try to entangle him.

In the arena, Ryu scowled as he backflipped away from a descending blow from the chain, then twisted around a ham-fisted attempt to grab him, flowing through and around an attempt to use the chain to entangle his legs, rising up into the air and slamming a blow into the man's face again, before kicking off the man's chest before he could retaliate. He grabbed onto the ceiling of the cage for a brief moment, then redirected himself downwards away from the man, thinking hard.

"Nothing I'm doing to this ass is getting through. I'd hoped to wait on this, but..." Scowling, Ryu clapped his hands in front of him, concentrating for a moment. The next second, his hands began to glow with blue energy from his tips all the way up to his elbows.

This broke the announcer's normal rounds of 'Woo, check that out' and 'oh so close' that he had been making as he shouted, "Look at that, folks! It looks as if we've got our first showing of qi energy! As the true martial arts aficionados among you might know, life energy can be controlled and directed if you're strong enough in will and body! It looks as if contestant Ryu isn't some nobody from the hicks like we all thought!"

OOOOOOO

High above the fight, Ryuji leaned forward, staring hard. "Now, isn't that interesting? I hope he can survive. It's been a while since I've fought another qi user."

"There weren't any reports of the threesome from the other night using that kind of attack, was there?" One of his fellow bosses muttered, also leaning forward in interest. In the last tournament, only two fighters besides Ryuji had been able to use ki and had the staying power to make it to the final round. Similarly, in the time before that, there had been several fighters, two of whom had been women, who had been able to use the esoteric energy yet had similarly not made it to the end of the tournament.

Although, admittedly, not because they had taken too much of a pounding previously and had bowed out. Instead, one of them had been called away, simply leaving the tournament entirely, while the other one had... found herself becoming merchandise instead of an attraction.

"Speaking of, how goes the auction for Su Lin and Mu Dai?" One of the others said as Ryuji shook his head in a negative to the last question. The speaker was one of the few members of the Triad who was actually married, and he had no interest in female fighters, preferring more mature, homebody-type ladies, although he had to admit that Mu Dai's chest at

least put her in the same category as his own wife. He was simply interested in who was going to win that prize because the last time he'd looked into it himself a few matches ago, the bidding war had risen to some truly astonishing numbers.

While the other leaders of the Triad turned away from the action to look into that and other business going on in the other VIP boxes, Ryuji did not. He watched on avidly as Ryu closed in hard.

OOOOOOO

This time, when Abigail brought down his ball and chain, Ryu ducked just enough for the wrecking ball to miss him, bringing his fist up into the place where the chain met the wrecking ball. Enhanced with his qi, that blow shattered the chain, sending the ball crashing into the middle of the arena. Then Ryu grabbed onto the flailing edge of the chain, letting himself be pulled in.

An attempt by Abigail to flick the chain around Ryu's wrist failed, and he then reached up for Ryu, trying to grab onto him once more. Nevertheless, Ryu released his grip on the chain, twisting around that attempt. A second later, he was back on the ground, and two blue fists hammered one two three blows into the bruiser's stomach, finally causing a cry of pain from the man as he doubled over, the enhanced striking power of his ki giving Ryu the ability to finally hurt his opponent.

However, Abigail wasn't out of the fight yet. As he fell, he grabbed at Ryu. This time, Ryu wasn't able to react in time and found himself lifted up off the ground into a bear hug. Abigail squeezed hard, and Ryu felt himself being compressed, pain spreading through his body. Yet his legs were still free, and concentrating through the haze of pain, he redirected his life force into his knee, slamming it into Abigail's upper chest with bone-breaking force.

Over his own groaning, Ryu could hear a crack of some bone in Abigail's body breaking at that blow. Instantly, Abigail released him with a howl but then caught Ryu with a wild side sweep from his forearm that slammed Ryu sideways before he could drop to his feet.

"UGH!" Ryu flew through the air, rolling with the strike, somewhat dazed but more than up for the fight, as he pushed himself back to his feet. For his part, Abigail flailed backward, grabbing onto the cage with fingers that could barely fit through the links as he grabbed onto it to keep himself standing.

Ryu darted in again, but Abigail wasn't as out of it as Ryu had anticipated again. The sheer durability of the man seemed to take Ryu continually by surprise. His chain flipped up, flashing sideways towards Ryu, forcing him to duck, and he ate a kick to the chest again that hurled him backward again into the opposite side of the cage. Ryu gagged as he slammed into it, then fell forward onto his knees, more dazed from that kick than he had from the forearm

blow a moment ago. *It isn't as bad as taking a shot from that ball and chain would've been, but...*

Even as that thought went through Ryu's head, Abigail came off the side of the cage, charging forward, releasing his chain to the ground and grabbing up the ball from the center of the arena where he had fallen, pulling it out of the shallow dent in the concrete it had made. "RAGGHGH!"

With that bestial roar, the massive man hurled the wrecking ball bodily towards a gaping Ryu, who ducked to the side even as the people behind him on the other side of the cage also scrambled away. Just like before when Abigail had started the fight, that toss slammed the ball through the outer edge of the cage, where it crashed into the first two rows of the watchers to their shrieks of fear and the laughter and hooting and hollering of their betters further up the amphitheater.

No one was injured from the actual wrecking ball since everyone in the landing zone had seen that coming time to scramble out of the way. However, there was now a giant hole in the cage there, and several people had once again been hit by shrapnel. And once more, no one was moving to help the spectators, leaving it to them to see to their own wounds or try to leave if they could under their own power.

More importantly to Ryu, that removed the most dangerous object from the arena.

Abigail charged forwards like a rhino, his arms outstretched to either side as if to engulf Ryu, a far more ungainly and brutish charge than the one El Fuerte had tried on Ranma. The man might as well have been moving in quicksand, given how slow he was.

Ryu easily rolled to the side, then kicked up lightly as Abigail attempted to catch him with a kick in turn. This put him to the side of the massive man and Ryu darted around Abigail, who turned surprisingly quick on his feet, lashing out with a wild slap that Ryu had to duck under. Two hard strikes from Ryu's qi-infused fists followed, followed by a kick, but Abigail dodged the kick, which had been aiming towards one of his legs, and to the astonishment of Ryu, actually jumped up over that kick to do so, his own foot lashing out in a kick that caught Ryu in the center of the chest, hurling him backward again.

This time, Ryu had some trouble pushing himself to his feet. He didn't think anything was broken, but Abigail's sheer power was going to leave bruises on bruises for days. *If I want to continue in the tournament, I need to end this now!* With that, he slammed his qi-infused hands together, bringing them back into his body and then thrusting them forward, pushing hard at his qi as he did. "Hadoken!"

The ki blast that rocketed from his hands reminded Ranma of some of the attacks he'd seen from Terry Bogard, although far more condensed and faster to boot. Ranma didn't think he would be able to dodge that thing from further away than three yards at least.

There was no way Abigail was going to do the same thing. The strike embedded itself into Abigail's fat stomach, practically caving in his stomach to the sound of shattering bones and blood bursting from the man's mouth as he was carried back through the hole in the cage he'd already made with his own wrecking ball. "GAOOO!!"

Luckily, the crowd had not gone back into the area with a wrecking ball, and Abigail's back slammed into it without crushing anyone between them. His eyes rolled back into his head, and he fell forward face first, boneless to the ground.

"What a match! What a match, folks! That's what you can expect in this, Hong Kong's premier underground fighting tournament, both qi and some spectator participation. The winner is Ryan Sugimoto!"

That had Ranma quipping to Ken, "Wait, so there's more than one tournament around here? I'm feeling annoyed right now."

The American didn't respond, simply staring at where his friend had simply raised his fist once to the crowd and then marched out of the arena, ignoring his opponent, unlike Ranma. Not that Ranma blamed Ryu in the slightest for that. Abigail had gone out of his way practically to cripple the last opponent he faced, shattering both of their legs in such a way that bones had been sticking out. Ranma figured that guy had probably died. The amount of blood the man had lost had looked more than a little life-threatening.

Although there, Ranma's code set him apart from what a normal person might've been feeling at that knowledge. Instead of feeling sympathy, concern or horror, Ranma was simply grim about it. This was a tournament, and a tournament that they'd all been told could have fights to the death if such occurred in the arena. A part of Ranma hoped that the Triad would at least try to save the crippled fighter's life, but the rest of Ranma understood that the dude had taken his chance for either honor, thrill, money or glory and had lost. That was all there was to it in Ranma's mind.

That thought was uppermost in that mind in the next two bouts, both of which ended in death to the loser. The large black man, whose name was Bailey, also seemed to have some ki. When he used it in his hair, his hair had become a whirling saw that practically cut his opponent in half, much to the delight of the crowd. If there was something they liked more than simple blood and guts, it was esoteric techniques.

However, the next match of this tier of the tournament, which might be the third to the last, Ranma wasn't certain, was the most interesting to Ranma because it called up Ken and one of the other fighters he was the most leery of, a tall, extremely fit man who to the best of Ranma's knowledge had said not a single thing the entire time they'd all been in the waiting room together.

Ranma had seen him fight before. He fought using a Thailand combat style called Muay Thai. Ranma had seen it before, although never to the skill level that this man exhibited. Muay Thai users mainly fought through the use of elbows and knees, incorporated alongside punches and kicks, in a way that none of Japan's own styles could match, emphasizing brutal striking power. The guy had crippled every opponent he faced before this and seemed to be coasting in neutral too.

If that bastard isn't a ringer, I don't know what is. Him and that dude with the weird blades. Admittedly, the blade user seems to be better known to the crowd here, but still. Despite the fact that the Thailand fighter hadn't shown anything spectacular, Ranma didn't think he was someone that could be taken for granted.

As for the man with the blades, well, he was a psychopath. Like the foreigner, he had crippled his last two opponents, laughing all the while as he cut into them. In fact, Ranma wouldn't have been all that surprised if both of those fighters had later died of their wounds, just like the fighter whose legs Abigail had broken.

Ken looked over at the man he was going to fight, who looked back at him very briefly before moving towards the door.

The two fighters made their way to the ring, with Ken entering first, smarming it up for the crowd, which hooted and hollered as he did. The other fighter simply entered, looking around at the damage in a thoughtful manner, before taking a stance, one leg raised, his hands held close, protecting his upper body and face.

When the announcer signaled them to start, the two fighters moved towards one another, Ken darting in, his own hands up in front of his face as he closed the distance quickly. The other man took his time, positioning himself right on the other side of the large dent that Abigail had made when Ryu had shattered the chain holding his wrecking ball.

If he thought that the poor footing would slow Ken down, he was mistaken. Ken ducked to the side, lashing out with a roundhouse punch, before halting the attack and launching a straight jab, hoping to throw his opponent off with the feint. It didn't work, and one of the man's elbows blocked the jab, even as his leg came up in a kick. Ken blocked it but couldn't block the follow-up elbow jab as the man darted into his guard. The strike slammed into his chest with punishing force, and if Ken wasn't as durable as he was thanks to Master Gouken's training, he might well have broken some ribs.

As it was, it sent him staggering back, and he was forced to block a rising knee that would've caught him in the lower stomach, pushing off the attack into the air, where he launched several attacks of his own. All of Ken's punches and kicks were blocked or deflected before one blow got through as Ken returned to his feet, crashing into the man's jaw with enough force to shatter a tooth.

The man stumbled backward but turned that stumble into a twist, bringing up his knee again as Ken made to follow up, thinking the man would've been dazed from his previous strike. He wasn't, and Ken paid for it, taking a knee to the side that nearly doubled him over. He could literally feel his ribs grating against one another.

Let that be a lesson to you, Ranma, Ranma thought, frowning as he watched the fight. These fighters are really durable. Not to the point you might be, thanks to the toughness training, but maybe at Ryoga's level the last time I fought Pig Boy. Few of them can match your speed, but durability is gonna be an issue going forward.

Ken moved with the blow, bringing his fist around and then lashing out with a kick. These attacks were blocked and deflected, respectively, although the last one allowed Ken to get in a palm strike shot straight to the man's chest. The Thaiander fell back but was forced to dodge a low kick that would've struck him in the side right where he'd already taken a strike from his opponent's elbow. The two of them circled for a few moments, both of them now silent and serious.

In the locker room, Ryu frowned a bit. Looking around, he noticed that none of the fighters were nearby. One of them was over by where the water bottles were, and another was seemingly taking a piss rather than watching the match, given the rather loud noise coming from the bathroom area. "Ryu and I don't do so well when we're faced against opponents that use new styles we haven't studied before. Master Gouken always emphasized knowing oneself over analyzing your opponent. This could be tough for him."

Ranma agreed with a nod, having noticed that Ryu had some of the same issues in the last fight. He'd seemed to struggle with figuring out how tough Abigail was, something Ranma knew he would have had issues with. Before that, Ryu had been thrown by another fighter's long-range dart skill. The fighter kept his distance, even climbing up the side of the cage and clinging to the ceiling to launch attack after attack with a rope dart much like Ranma's own until Ryu caught it and pulled it out of the man's hand.

Ken and the Thaiander continued to probe one another for a few moments in the center of the ring, trading small blows and jabs. Ken eventually thought he had his opponent pegged and closed in hard, blocking several jabs and then elbow shots to try to return his own.

Before he could take advantage, the Thaiander ducked below one of his strikes, going low on his body. Grabbing at one of Ken's legs before he could back away, he slammed his elbow hard into the side of Ken's knee, causing Ken to gasp in agony, then rose into another elbow strike to Ken's chin, which caused Ken to see stars for a second. He moved with the blow enough to deaden some of its force but not all of it, and his opponent got in another elbow strike to Ken's chest.

When he moved to use a knee strike and turn on Ken's chest, Ken deflected it, returning a two-punch combo to the man's face, which rocked him back. Ken then flipped into a flip kick,

coming up underneath the other man's chin. The Thaiander ducked backward just in time to avoid the kick, and when Ken landed again, he ate another blow to his knee from the side, which caused him to nearly crumple.

Two more hard elbow strikes to the knee and head had Ken reeling, but he blocked the next one and responded with a double palm strike into the man's chest, which was so strong it tossed him away through the air to slam into one of the undamaged walls of the cage. The man fell to his knees for a second, but Ken was in no position to follow up. Like Ryu, he'd gone through quite a bit of training that toughened his body up, but the other man's strikes were really powerful, more powerful than his body type would suggest. *Damn it, my year of being away from Master Gouken and Ryu is really hobbling me here!*

This left the momentum in the Thailand fighter's corner, and he used it, charging forward, kicking up a bit of rubble from Ryu and Abigail's fight, sending it hurtling towards Ken. Ken smashed it, but the man followed up quickly, grabbing Ken's outstretched hand before he could pull it back in. The nest elbow blow was blocked, though, much to the Thaiander's surprise, and Ken twisted around so that he could once more slam a palm strike into the man's face, shattering his nose and sending him stumbling backward.

Grimacing, Ken used his battered leg to push up off the ground into a kick that caught the man in the center of the chest, stumbling him back before having to duck around another kick from the man. As he did, one hand glowed blue, and he cracked it into the man's side with enough force that he could feel bones break under the strike.

The Thaiander stumbled sideways but was able to get his knee up and into Ken's own side again, causing air to woosh out of Ken's body. He then ducked down low to the ground, and another elbow strike to Ken's leg had him practically collapsing. As he did, Ken grabbed onto the man's forearm before another elbow strike could come in, slamming that elbow with his other qi-infused hand with enough force to shatter bone. Ken's ki attack dissipated, but the damage was done.

The Thaiander cried out in pain, and Ken's hands slammed into either side of his head even as he collapsed to the ground himself, his leg finally giving out. That discombobulating strike stunned the man enough for Ken to land another kick from the ground into the man's side, sending him reeling away, where he fell to his knees and hands.

For a moment, neither fighter was able to get to their feet, and when Ken finally pushed himself to his feet, he was extremely wobbly, his side throbbing badly, some blood pooling from his mouth and his knee a mass of agony. He could barely put any weight on that leg, let alone straighten it out.

Even so, he was doing better than his opponent, who was even slower to get to his feet. By the time he did, Ken had enough time to concentrate on his own ki attack again. It was the

same color as Ryu's, something that the watching Ryuji noticed, but it was much smaller and far less condensed.

Still, when it slammed into the Thailer, it did the job. He was hurled back, striking the massive wrecking ball that had yet to be moved headfirst. There was a loud crack, and he fell boneless to the ground, causing Ken's eyes to widen in shock and no small amount of horror. *Fuck! I, I didn't mean to, no, control, keep it under control, Ken, your character wouldn't care if another fighter died. Don't show anything!*

This quick internal monologue worked, and 'Jason' thrust a fist up and turned slowly, one leg practically dragging as he played to the crowd. Inside, though, he felt shock rising within his brain at the fact he had just killed someone. A part of his brain tried to assuage his guilt for the moment that this man very definitely had been a blight on the Art, but it didn't stick.

Keeping up appearances, Ken exited the arena, but as he stepped over the cage entrance, he nearly stumbled. That caused Ken to shake his head at one of the fixers as he hurried over to help Ken along. "I'm done. That fight fucked up my leg something fierce."

The fixer nodded, having seen the same thing in the fight and anticipated it. As the fighters had all been told before, they were allowed to exit the tournament at any time due to injuries.

"I've seen a lot of betting going on out here. Can I stay out here and gamble a bit?" Ken asked, moving on quickly and hefting the pile of cash he'd just been handed.

"If you want to. Don't go above the first three levels, and if you can find a place to sit, you're welcome to, now that you're out of the tournament. Bother the richer watchers or the bunnies, and you're out on your ass. Place a bet with the bookies and pay the house fee, or else you're out on your ass." Left unsaid was that only the richest guests could wager directly against one another, and if anyone who wasn't allowed to do so tried and was found, things would go poorly for them.

"Got it," Ken agreed and twisted his route to one side, moving to sit in a vacated seat near the wrecking ball, trying hard not to look at the dead body on the floor nearby. He didn't totally succeed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Jason Vorhees has to bow out due to injuries after that amazing bout." Considering that most of the crowd was already able to see Ken moving around the area, limping badly, that didn't come as a shock to anyone, and the announcer went on smoothly. "That means that the winner of this next fight will have an automatic victory in the third bracket of the tournament! So let's give it up for whichever of these lovely ladies that might win it all! Ladies and gentlemen, our next contestants, the twin roses that have graced us with their presence this day, Su Lin and Mu Dai!"

In the waiting room, Ranma and Ryu fought hard to keep grimaces off their faces. Although both of them had realized this was an inevitability if they kept on winning in the tournament. *And frankly, Ranma thought, suddenly reminded of their larger mission, it isn't as if any of us have been able to do any snooping around while we've been forced to fight at the same time. Heck, there haven't even been breaks between the brackets.*

Ryu's thoughts mirrored Ranma's, and he subtly gestured with a finger towards a corner of the TV where Ken could still be seen limping through the crowd as he approached one of the bookies. "He still had one of those super-thin cameras, right?"

"Camera and a listening device in his jacket pocket. I slipped it in a few fights back. Not a phone, though. No signal down here," Ranma answered, also speaking low and in Japanese, reminding Ryu of something that Mai had told them when the two girls joined the men in the waiting room.

While one of the two ringers that Ranma had registered in the crowd of fighters had been dealt with by this point, there were still two other fighters in the waiting room with them, Birdie and the local who had been introduced as Blades by the announcer. Birdie seemed to be a typical martial artist-type thug despite the fact that he came from the UK and probably didn't have any ties to the local crime scene.

Although he was certainly ruthless and a murderer. Blades on the other hand, gave all the impression of a local, even more than the Thailand fighter had. Just like the other two, Blades had gone out of his way to kill or cripple his opponents.

"Well, maybe this way, Shampoo and Mai will be able to snoop around while the fights are still going on," Ryu said philosophically, thoughtfully to himself as he thought about how battered Ken had been. *That Thailander's style, Muay Thai, Ranma called it? That looks amazingly interesting. We might want to head there to see if we can learn some of it when we're done here in Hong Kong. I wonder what he could have done if he had more than simple reinforcement qi.*

Ranma nodded, although internally, he was really worried about what was going to happen.

For their part, Mai and Shampoo were actually ahead of the boys at this point. While the three of them had gotten almost completely absorbed in the tournament, the pair of girls, having already rubbed elbows with the business side of things, had never forgotten the mission Chun Li had set there. That and the fact the other girls only came back into the changing/waiting room a few times, and the fact the place didn't have any listening devices or video recorders let the pair make plans as to what would happen if they were set to face one another.

For Shampoo, her part was easy enough. She'd already taken a battering in one of her previous fights, the Dapper Gentleman having proven that he could at least dish it out along with whatever weird ki technique he was using. To emphasize this, Shampoo wore a tight bandage on her arm, which went well with her angel costume. Like the first costume Mai had worn for her initial bout in front of the crowd, Shampoo's latest costume was all white, yet there the similarities ended. This suit had a skirt that flared out above the knees, a white crop top blouse that was made of two parts, which were tied together along her sides, and what looked like fake wings that you could remove. In her unwounded hand, Shampoo held one of her chui. Completing the look with white combat boots, although part of Shampoo **really** wondered where in the world the idea of white combat boots had come from, Shampoo looked like a strange cross between a sinner's idea of a holy angel and a soldier.

Mai, on the other hand, had fallen back on an oldie but a goodie. She wore a simple kimono, but the kind that a geisha would wear, showing quite a bit of cleavage and allowing for a wide range of movement. It had the benefit of matching her makeup's color scheme while also hiding most of her legs from view except when Mai was kicking or running, where the uncanny valley effect came into play with a vengeance. In her hands, she held two knives as she walked out behind Shampoo, both girls glowering at all and sundry as they had throughout the tournament to make it clear that they did not enjoy being put on display like this.

Not that the crowd showed any signs whatsoever of caring about their opinions on that score. In fact, those people among the crowd who noticed at all thought it gave the two girls what a Japanese person would call the tsundere touch.

Now, seeing the two women walk out together, the crowd shrieked and shouted louder than ever. Seeing them smashing men to the ground was all well and good, but a catfight was way better.

When the match started, both women raced toward one another, with Mai taking the opportunity to hurl one of her daggers ahead of her at the last second, just out of chui range. Despite that, Shampoo dodged, as Mai had known she would. To someone who had trained against Ranma, a hurled dagger was small change. Mai then leaped up and over a strike from Shampoo's chui, lashing down towards Shampoo's head with her remaining dagger, only for Shampoo to bring her chui up again to block the blow with the shaft, hurling Mai away. However, as she did, Mai performed a flip in midair, one of her legs showing from underneath her outfit up to mid-thigh for just a second. At the tip of her shoe, a dagger suddenly flicked out, catching Shampoo's angel costume, but not actually cutting into Shampoo, rather leaving a sliced-out cut right above one of her breasts through her top.

"Wow! Would you look at that, folks! The members of S&M show no hesitation to throw down despite being friends, or is it sisters among the Amazons? Well, regardless, we're in for one heck of a treat!" the announcer shouted, as the crowd cheered things like 'cut it off', but most of the crowd simply shouted in delight, desire mixed with bloodlust making for a heady combination.

Landing, Mai had to backflip away from a strike from Shampoo's chui, and while on her back feet, she lunged forward into a double kick, but Shampoo again got her chui up in time to block the blows. Mai seemed to hover in midair for a moment, her legs kicking out as if she were on a bicycle almost, and Shampoo found herself skidding backward.

After setting her feet, Shampoo flexed and twisted, swinging her chui to one side, carrying Mai's legs with it, causing her momentum to falter. This opened Mai up for the first devastating strike in the fight, which crashed down into her chest before she could move to defend herself or try to dodge. Caught in midair like that, she didn't quite have Ranma's mastery of dodging.

The blow slammed Mai into the ground, driving the air out of her lungs and causing Mai to groan, but it did not, as the announcer shouted, break her ribs. Both girls had been very careful only to show a segment of their overall durability before this, and now Mai hammed it up a little, rolling onto her side and clutching her side for a second. She then turned this into a roll again as Shampoo attacked once more, creating a third crater in the floor of the arena where Mai had been a second ago. Coming out of the roll, Mai tracked Shampoo and let loose a kick, catching Shampoo in the side despite Shampoo's attempt to shift around the downed Mai, hurling her away to crash into one of the cage walls.

Mai then got to her feet slowly, favoring one of her sides, even as she took a stance, dagger held ready to stab, having kept a hold of the weapon despite the earlier strike. Meanwhile, Shampoo had tried to block that blow with one of her hands, training seemingly getting in the way of reality. Now, she was holding the possibly broken arm close to her body, wincing, somewhat overdramatically in Mai's opinion, as she moved forward.

The next few moments, the two of them traded blows back and forth, with Mai dodging and ducking away from Shampoo's chui and Shampoo going for strong, powerful yet controlled blows, pulling her chui back into the defensive too fast for Mai to capitalize. Several times, Mai's dagger sliced her clothing but missed Shampoo's skin except for a small cut across her thigh and another to her forearm. Shampoo was just too quick to shift her position a tiny bit to avoid the incoming attack.

The sight of more skin showing and the blood got the crowd riled up even more, and even as they fought, both Shampoo and Mai had to hold back shivers of disgust. *If all underground fights are like this, this really isn't worth it, regardless of how much learning we can do*, Mai thought.

Mai dodged and finally saw an opening, punching upwards into Shampoo's arm as she was just a little too slow to reverse the flow of her strike. She couldn't get her dagger up in time, but the palm strike caused Shampoo's arm to go dead below the elbow, and she hissed before kicking out, catching Mai in the chest and sending her backward. However, when she tried to pick up her chui, she was forced to dodge as Mai hurled her dagger, nearly pinning Shampoo's hand to the floor of the arena. Then Mai was on her, and several sharp blows caught Shampoo

in her already battered hand and forearm, causing her to cry out in pain, followed by a strike to the head that sent her reeling backward.

At that moment, Shampoo began to fight her Amazon instincts a little. Both of them knew that they shouldn't look to harm one another seriously, especially Mai. Mai didn't have the ki healing that Shampoo did, whose skill with that technique was not nearly as refined as Ranma's. Yet her Amazon side really wanted to win this fight.

Still, Shampoo was able to push down on those instincts, and when the next opportunity to make a mistake came, she did so. A strike went over Mai's head, and Shampoo found herself grabbed in a bear hug, and then slammed headfirst into the floor of the arena as Mai performed a suplex.

Shampoo got her hands up in time to block it and then turned it into a roll, breaking Mai's grip on her, grabbing one of Mai's hands at the same time, and then trying to pull it into a hold where Mai would have to either give up or lose her arm in turn. This failed, as Mai tackled into Shampoo's hold on her, bringing the other 'Amazon' down to the floor of the arena, where the two of them started to grapple.

As the crowd roared in delight, the two women seemed to wrestle for a moment, one going for a grab, the other one trying to break it, each of them trying to lock in a hold. That this caused numerous wardrobe malfunctions was both a good thing according to the crowd and part of the girl's plan. Give the audience and, more importantly, the Triad bosses a bit more sexiness just prior to bowing out of the tournament so they wouldn't try hard, or hopefully at all, to force the girls to keep going.

Not that they were the only ones. Even Ranma, despite knowing how much both girls hated being forced to wear those outfits in front of such a crowd, could not help but stare as Mai's kimono was pushed further down her body, revealing still more of her cleavage as she strained against Shampoo's arm, or how amazing Shampoo's legs looked when they locked around Mai's waist.

Finally, Mai, despite what the crowd thought were broken ribs, with her greater strength (size, really) was able to get behind Shampoo, locking a chokehold around the shorter girl's neck. Shampoo tried hard to break out of it, flipping them both up to her feet and then slamming Mai back into the cage numerous times.

Even as blood spurted from Mai's mouth where she had bitten her cheek hard enough to draw blood, Shampoo didn't seem able to break Mai's hold over her neck, and slowly, as the crowd watched, Shampoo seemed to succumb to unconsciousness.

This left Mai, seemingly quite a bit more battered than Shampoo minus her arm, the winner, something the announcer shouted to the heavens. *All going according to plan, then. Now, just let me get this kimono off! Thank god for Shiranui-Style ki glue, or else this kimono*

wouldn't have survived. This was a ki skill that Mai had learned early on, the equivalent of Anything Goes Clinging Gecko. It let Mai keep her clothing in place regardless of how much bounce or other moves she did.

Since their connection had been established since the start of this tournament, it surprised no one in the crowd that Mai waited for a moment as the victory was announced, then began to slowly poke Shampoo in the cheek, waking her up from her unconsciousness before helping the other girl to her feet. As the crowd looked on, the pair of women wobbled over to one of the fixers, where Mai shook her head. "I'm done."

Shampoo nodded, taking up the explanation for her seemingly stoic, habitually silent companion. "That's right. We've earned enough money here, and Mai certainly doesn't need to worry about permanently injuring herself by pushing too hard."

"Are you sure? You'd be going on to the round of the tournament! Heck, you might even get a free period in the next bracket. Head straight to the semi-finals!"

"We Amazon's do not rely on luck," Shampoo said, shaking her head. "We entered this tournament to test our limits. We now know that there are stronger, more durable fighters out there, and that's enough for now."

Mai nodded in agreement, and the fixer scowled a little. He tried hard to convince Mai to stay in the tournament, but Mai continued to shake her head, eventually grabbing the money she was due from the last fight out of the man's hands and pushing him away from them. With Shampoo walking beside her, she walked towards the women's locker area, ignoring the fixer's attempts to shout after her or another fixer's attempt to get in their way. That worthy found himself plucked off his feet and tossed over Shampoo's shoulder with one hand, much to the laughter of the crowd, who were still watching, waiting for the next events.

Seeing this, the original fixer they had been talking to decided to give up. Using a radio, the fixer called his superiors and told them what had happened before racing over to the announcer, who winced a little but shrugged and made the announcement. As the crowd booed and jeered, he followed that announcement up with a rote declaration, saying blandly, "Ladies and gentlemen, as you have seen, the arena itself is taking quite a bit of damage. We will now take a brief break to let the arena get repaired. For those of you who are VIPs, please head back upstairs to the club, where you can continue to enjoy refreshments, drinks and entertainment, although you will have to wait at least thirty minutes if you are looking for any of our bunnies, as they too need a break. For you poor assholes, unless you have the hundred thousand yuan entry fee, this is a good time to get some food for yourself somewhere else or maybe a trip to the bathroom. The bathrooms at least, we'll provide for you."

That earned the announcer some boos, jeers and laughter, but took the edge off of the disappointment the crowd was feeling about not being able to see Mai in action again.

However, this had another consequence. Just as the pair of women had finished undressing and started to refill the ki sustaining the ki pockets in their original outfits, the battle bunnies began to exit the arena. They were joined by more than a dozen more girls from the club above, and as they filed in, they filled the women's changing room with their chatter.

The two girls who had previously been sitting on a bench beside the lockers containing the various costumes looked at one another, and Shampoo hissed, "Bad timing!"

As the pair looked around, several of the women began to move to talk to the two fighters. While none of the bunnies or dancers from the club had the temperament to become fighters, that didn't mean they hadn't liked the sight of two women kicking so much male ass. Looking at them, Shampoo just knew that they would be dragged into a discussion that may just go on for a bit too long if the guards were also supposed to make sure that defeated fighters left the arena.

Thinking quickly, Mai had an idea that, later, a part of her would come to regret, but at the time, it seemed a fine idea. Grabbing Shampoo, she hoisted her to her feet. "Come on," she said in her best Chinese. "I want to shower!"

The look in her eyes and the eyebrow waggling she performed when speaking this line gave it an added layer of meaning, and several of the girls who were close enough to start talking to the 'pair' of Amazons paused. Some began to giggle, while others blushed, although Shampoo's blush exceeded theirs by an order of magnitude.

She tried to keep control of herself as Mai dragged her along. Soon, Shampoo found herself being pulled into the shower area, where Mai hissed out, "Get into one of the stalls. The sound of the shower should at least allow us to talk to one another without being overheard and maybe will convince the fixers or whoever not to bother us until the room empties out again."

At that, Shampoo began to regain some control of herself. *It isn't as if this is the first time I've seen Mai naked. We bathed together all the time at Musubime Osoroshi and routinely changed in our room there together while Ranma had a blindfold on or made herself scarce.*

Seeing Mai start to pull off her bra and panties, Shampoo did the same, only to freeze as Mai bent forward just a bit to push her panties off, revealing her toned pert rear to the Amazon girl. A moment later, both of them froze as Shampoo, having just turned the shower on, backed away, her back and rear pressing into Mai to get out of the cold water just as Mai turned back toward the shorter girl.

Both of them shivered a bit at the contact, and Mai felt her nipples start to harden as she looked over Shampoo's shoulder, looking down at the other girl's chest before she could stop herself. While Shampoo wasn't near to Mai's own size, her breasts were still a good handful, capped with light purple-colored nipples surrounded by large areolas. They stood

proudly, firm and high in a way no normal woman's breasts would ever be able to match. Between the twin mounds, Mai could look straight down along Shampoo's washboard abs to wear Shampoo kept a small, purple mound over her womanhood, the carpet not matching the drapes currently.

At that, Mai forced her eyes away, shivering a bit, hoping that Shampoo would put that down to the chill coming off the water coupled with the touch of the tiles underneath their feet. *God damn it, this is not the time to start feeling anything toward Shampoo, especially following my thoughts earlier this evening. Damn it, I'm such a mess,* Mai castigated herself.

Shampoo was in no mental position to notice anything unusual about Mai, her blush from a moment ago having come back magnified to the level it was making her cheeks practically the color of an apple. Unlike Mai, Shampoo was by this point no stranger to the idea she could find one particular female body attractive, yet to find herself pressed so closely against another woman's body, a friend whose beauty Shampoo had long since acknowledged was frazzling Shampoo's brain something fierce.

The feel of Mai's large chest pressed against her back, without any clothing between, was giving Shampoo a far different feeling than in the fight earlier when Mai had been pretending to choke Shampoo out, to say nothing of the sheer feel of their skin rubbing gently against one another. This was very much like the times she'd been with Ranma in his female form, only even there, clothing had always been involved, separating them.

This was all made worse by the fact that over the past few weeks, even before they had arrived at the Shiranui Dojo, Shampoo had found herself far more aware of Mai, and it left her unbalanced. Not just on the physical level either, but on the mental and emotional one. So much so she had helped Mai through her post-breakup depression, yet at the same time, when Mai had begun to recover, Shampoo had felt relief. Not just relief at Mai moving on, but also the fact that she was doing so in the first place, a weird feeling Shampoo had put down at the time as simply thinking Andy wasn't worth Mai's affections. Now, she wasn't so certain.

The two of them stayed there, pressed against the side of the shower stall, neither able to think of something to say or what to do with their hands for several minutes. Thankfully, the water began to produce a bit of steam, and Shampoo hastily stepped forward into it, groaning in delight as the warm water hit her sore body. "MMM... nice. Even if this doesn't work like you hope, Mai, having a shower after the day we've had is really nice."

Shaking her head, Mai smirked, leaning back against the stall's wall and reaching forward, keeping her voice low as she spoke in Japanese. "W, well we certainly have earned it. And we've not even begun to address the main reason we're here. I don't doubt our friend will do what he can to canvas the crowd, but that won't be enough to pin the Triad to the wall." Even in Japanese and with the shower covering her words, Mai was careful not to mention anyone specifically, just in case.

Although, frankly, the effort was probably wasted. The site of the two girls getting into the same shower stall had caused several of the other girls to stare, laugh, or chuckle, but none of them came into the shower area themselves. Instead, more than a few of them turned to one another, holding out hands. "I told you they were into one another!" one said.

Another said, "See, Amazons equal lesbians! I've said it several times before. Pay up."

One of the women who had lost her wager on this point shook her head, philosophical about losing and handing over the money she owed the person with aplomb. "Well, at least those two are way better looking than that pink-haired monstrosity from six months ago. Ugh, all that muscle and so few womanly feature. While I sympathized with how the audience booed her, I can also understand why. And those two seem exclusive to boot, whereas that girl was..."

"She asked about your nail polish, Fu Xi. Don't hold it against that Marisa woman that she accidentally asked you to polish her rail because she couldn't speak Chinese," another woman snickered, shaking her head.

At that moment, the door opened, and two fixers stuck their heads in. The two looked at one another, and then the older of the two nodded to the younger. That worthy nodded and shouted, "Come on, ladies! You're needed on the upper floors, and we do not pay you to stand around and gossip. Your break time's up in five. Don't worry; some of the VIP guests have ordered food, and as always, you all can have whatever is on hand if they're willing to share."

Many of the battle bunnies grumbled about how they weren't getting paid enough for what they were doing, and more than a few of them looked apprehensive, while the dancers that had come down from the club for a break or to change into one of the various outfits nodded in understanding, even good cheer in many cases. All of these girls were from poor backgrounds, and the food that the richer guests ordered for themselves was both more filling and of better quality than they could get themselves.

The only exception to the semi-happy dancers was one of the girls who had been assigned a specific outfit that night. She was one of the chestier girls there, but even so, she was running into difficulties. "Who the hell wore the American Southern Girl outfit!? The shirt's been stretched so badly. There's no way I can wear it now."

That caused a round of giggles and even more laughter as the girls started to rush around the room, hurrying to get ready as the fixer shouted at them from the doorway. Meanwhile, the other one was looking around in some confusion, wondering where the two girls he was here for specifically were, not having seen them leave.

None of the girls noticed several small circular cutouts below the lockers shifting, pulled down and out of position, leaving small holes in their places. This was quickly followed by nozzles being poked up by men in a special room below. The four men on this duty then twisted

a nozzle on the gas tanks they were all carrying, which released a scentless, invisible gas into the ladies' changing room.

At that point, the younger fixer, with far better hearing than his older fellow, heard the sound of the shower and stared over the heads of the girls, his eyes narrowing. "Who the hell thinks they have time to get a shower?! Whoever's in there, I'll..."

One of the girls near the doorway shook her head quickly, holding up a finger to her lips, giggling. "I wouldn't do that unless you want your teeth removed. That's Su Lin and Mu Dai in there."

For a moment, the man stared at her, then his eyes went far away, and a dreamy little smile appeared on his face before he shook himself as the older fixer smacked him on the shoulder, entering the room quickly. "Well, it's good they haven't left, and I've got a proposition for the two of them. The rest of you, you heard the man, clear off."

Walking through the changing area and mostly ignoring the amount of well-formed feminine flesh on display, the older man moved into the shower area, hoping that the warm water and, more importantly, the steam coming off of it wouldn't dissipate the gas that was slowly being pumped into the room. He didn't know enough about the nature of that gas beyond what it did to guess, but he hoped it would be the case.

Mai had been telling the truth when she had told Ranma and Shampoo once that she had been basically immunized against most drugs out there, both injected, drunk, and in gas form. Even as Mai made to join Shampoo under the water, she sniffed the air, her eyes widening. In addition, as the older man made his way through the changing area, she hissed, "They pumped a libido-enhancing gas into the room! Play along with me and keep your head under the water!"

Shampoo had barely a second to widen her eyes before Mai stepped in towards her once more, pressing their now chests against one another as if they were hugging. If someone was looking from below, they would see their feet intertwined, which was the point. Yet, with their breasts pressing against each other and with their bodies now quickly becoming wet, Shampoo found her body responding once more.

This was heightened a moment later as Mai threw back her head and let out a moan. "Oh yeah, baby! Mmmm..."

For a second, Shampoo stared, a part of her praising Mai even now for remembering to speak Chinese there, while the rest of her brain was stuck between aroused and shocked. However, hearing footfalls beyond the stall, Shampoo quickly realized Mai was putting on a show. She did the same, pushing her head back into the stream of water so that it filled her nostrils. "Mmmm... love this... you know that fighting gets my brook flowing..."

Outside, the man paused, a wide grin appearing on his face. He looked over towards the women, shrugged his shoulders and backed away, heading towards the door, whispering, "You know what, I think I'll wait a bit to give them the Boss's offer."

Moments later, the room emptied, and the man reentered, his earlier, semi-affable smile gone now, replaced by a predatory look. An older man who had been a fixer for the tournament long before Ryuji Yamazaki took it over, he'd always enjoyed putting on an act for the girls, acting like an affable, laid-back elderly gentleman with little interest in the young flesh. He especially liked tricking those girls who were going suddenly to find that they had entered an entirely new profession.

Girls from Hong Kong would find themselves a little more horny than normal as they danced up in the club area, which would continue once the tournament resumed, even once the girls stopped acting as dancers and became battle bunnies again. The gas was supposed to last for at least two hours, making the women mildly more susceptible to touch. Many a VIP member would be getting lucky tonight, a special service of the club, which the girls would gain no more money than normal from.

The others, though? Those girls who didn't have the benefit of being locals, and thus were safe from persecution due to the fact that if too many local women went missing, it would bring the heat down that the Triad's bought and paid for police officials wouldn't be able to keep a lid on? They would soon find that the food they had eaten here in the locker room or up in the club was laced with another type of drug, a slow-acting knockout drug. The next time any of them woke up, the girls, Korean, Japanese, and out-of-towners, would find that their circumstances had drastically changed for the worst.

Very few people in government, regardless of what municipal level, cared about immigrants, legal or otherwise and even better, a goodly portion of the young women employed tonight were illegal immigrants. No paperwork to take care of, no one in the city who would miss them when they were gone. They simply come from North Korea, Cambodia, Vietnam or elsewhere, looking for a better life in Hong Kong. It was not the first time such girls have been taken advantage of, and it would not be the last.

Right now, the man had the two largest such prizes of the night to collect. *And maybe sample*, the old man said as he stripped his clothing off eagerly. *The drug should have made those two horny enough that even if they are rug munchers for preference, it won't matter worth a damn!*

Not being involved in the physical side of things, the man hadn't realized that the men who had been pumping the libido-enhancing gas into the room had stopped, closing the small apertures and moving away. The gas was expensive as hell given how hard it was to make so that it was invisible in the air as well as scentless. This, coupled with Mai being immune to the gas in the first place and Shampoo keeping her face under the water, even as she continued to

pretend-moan sporadically, meant that even in the best-case scenario, the twosome in the stall hadn't been influenced by the gas nearly as much as the older man was hoping.

Crossing to the doorway from the changing area into the shower room, Shampoo poked her head out, and the man grinned, standing at attention as he moved towards her confidently. "Hey ladies, up for some real fun?"

"Pervert!" Shampoo hissed as she hurled a towel in his direction. Having learned this trick from Ranma, who in turn had learned it from watching Ryoga use it, the towel left her hands having turned into a solid object, almost like a blunt spear, which slammed into the man's head, hurling him ass over kettle. Hitting with enough force to cause a concussion in a non-martial artist, the man was unconscious before he hit the floor, which was probably a good thing considering his still-hard penis was the first the first thing to make contact with the floor. The pain of that would have had him screaming if not for the brain damage Shampoo had just given him.

"Nice shot," Mai chortled as she turned the water off and followed Shampoo out of the stall, trying hard not to stare at Shampoo's rear as she did. The two of them looked at one another, then down at the naked old man, before giggling, shaking their heads in unison. "Ugh, what was he thinking, oh yeah, trying to take advantage of the gas, bastard. Maybe I should remove that little needle of his."

"Hehe, at that length, look like someone already did. And I doubt any among of Passion Gas or whatever would be up to that challenge," Shampoo snickered, then scowled. "Ugh, but now we have to dump the body someplace, right?"

"Yeah. Let's drag the moron into the stall we were in. With any luck, we'll be done investigating and calling the police in before he wakes up." Mai laughed again. "Or will have lost his short term memory thanks to that hit and be more than willing to make up his own story of what happened."

As they dragged the older man into the stall, neither girl willing to touch more than his wrist, Mai filed what had happened in the shower stall away for later thought. *Yes, later, after we're done with this whole mission from Chun Li and everything else. Then, I can take a step back and figure out what the hell I'm feeling towards my two best friends. And maybe... maybe what to do about it.*

For her part, Shampoo just decided to move past the moment entirely, putting down the raw attraction she felt towards Mai to the fact that she and Ranma really needed to start exploring his female side more. *And going further, period! I need some... what was that one phrase Cu Rler used when her husband returned after a month away? Oh yes, I need some nookie!*

Even though both had pushed aside the earlier moment into prepared mental boxes, this did not stop either girl from checking one another out discreetly, even when they thought they weren't doing so, as they moved out of the shower area into the changing room. There, they quickly changed back into the clothing that they had worn when the pair arrived, thanking the gods that the little bit of recharging they had done to their disparate ki spaces had let them survive long enough to be recharged now. That would have been awkward.

Their makeup was gone from the time they'd spent in the shower, but neither girl felt that was important right now as they finished changing, contemplating what to do. "So, where to now? Follow the girls up to the club that the announcers mentioned?"

"Only as far as we have to. I don't think either of us could get away with entering the club, even if we tried to dress up as one of the battle bunnies," Mai warned, setting one of the super thin cameras into her belt and stuffing the listening device and the phone into her boob window.

Shampoo had already done the same thing with her expanded pocket and now made her chui disappear into her second pocket quickly. Shampoo had left the other chui out in the arena after having 'lost' to Mai. That thought brought a tingle down her spine as she looked over at the other girl, but this feeling Shampoo simply put down to a desire to challenge Mai again in the future, nothing more carnal. Both of them had won spars against one another numerous times before, but that one had felt somehow a little more important for some reason. That was Shampoo's story, and she was sticking to it.

"But I will bet you that there are other hallways around here, other ways for girls to be sent directly up to some of the VIP boxes. How much do you want to bet that one of those will lead us directly to a private elevator or something similar for the big bosses?"

Thinking about it, Shampoo agreed with that, and the two of them headed out of the room. Mai led the way, better at spotting cameras than Shampoo, and the pair headed in the opposite direction of the arena.

Mai's thoughts on the layout of this place were soon proven as they came to an intersection, with one intersection ending in a door at the far end, marked with a gold VIP nameplate. The other headed in the opposite direction and probably wound around the arena and then up a few floors to the club area. Mai wondered idly if the club itself was a legitimate business or, like this place, was built entirely beneath the ground, hidden within the bowels of the city's underbelly.

"The worst thing about doors like that is that you can't tell if there are cameras or anything else on the other side before you open it," Mai mused aloud, scratching at her chin thoughtfully. "I could get it open. I've got some lock-picking techniques. But I don't know if there's any security on the door or behind it like a camera pointed directly at the thing."

“Find a vent and crawl through the vent work?” Shampoo asked, shrugging her shoulders.

Mai shook her head quickly. “No. Ductworks aren’t built that big normally, and I doubt they would be in a place like this. I’ve seen those American movies too, and trust me, they’re not nearly as real-life as you might think.”

“What, Hollywood has lied to me? How dare they,” Shampoo snickered. Mai laughed at that as Shampoo thought about what they should do. “Let’s continue as if we were going to the club for a little more. Maybe we’ll find another offshoot. Maybe a kitchen or something.”

The two of them hadn’t gone more than a few yards when they heard something ahead of them. A man was humming to himself under his breath, the sound of wheels accompanying the noise as he got closer.

The two women glanced at one another and then quickly backed away, moving back around the corner toward the women’s changing area. The squeaking wheel and the humming man followed them, then made to pass by before Mai’s fist rocketed out like a hammer, slamming into his temple with enough force to knock him out, dropping him like a marionette with his strings cut.

Shampoo moved forward to grab the trolley he had been pushing as Mai’s hand flicked back down. Catching him by the shoulder, Mai pulled him sideways into the corridor with them.

The man was dressed in a white outfit, complete with a chef’s hat, and Mai looked down at the trays, picking them up one by one, looking at the remains of the meals within. Each was very different, and she shook her head at the sight of one of the extremely rich-looking dishes in particular, of which only a few slices had been left. “What in the heck is this? I don’t think I’ve ever seen meat quite like this before, and it looks raw, too. Sushi, I can understand, but raw red meat?”

Mai took a look, then shrugged, turning her attention back to the folded paper that she just found in the man’s pocket. A paper with a long list of names, including her and Mai’s assumed names. “Horse sashimi. Expensive and very much an acquired taste. But look at this.” Mai held the paper out to Shampoo before going back to rifling through the man’s pockets. “A list of names. Some of them have plus signs next to them.”

Shampoo’s brows furrowed as she looked at the list, noting that both she and Mai had pluses beside their names, along with question marks and the Chinese lettering for delivery with another question mark. “Delivery, delivery of what? What does plus mean?” Scowling, Shampoo looked through the covered servers again, finding more food underneath the white table mat that draped over the cart all around, hiding the bottom layer of the cart. The food here looked a lot simpler like it was for the help, rather than the VIP guests, and Shampoo saw several dishes that matched what had been available in the girl’s changing area.

Among those plates and covered containers were small vials of something else. Pulling one out, Shampoo held it out to Mai. "Do you have any idea what this is?"

Mai dropped the man's wallet back onto his stomach, holding up a pair of keys that had been tied to his belt buckle, handing that over and taking the vial from Shampoo. She examined the color before opening it and taking a sniff before quickly pulling back. "That's some kind of knockout agent. If someone ate even a small thimble full, they'd probably be out for at least a day, maybe more within a few hours. If we put that together with the names, then..."

"The plus signs. Someone was going to knock us out, but they didn't know where to deliver us to yet..." Shampoo worked it out, her voice coming out in a hiss as she fought back a growing rage. "The others, the girls with their names there, they've got both pluses and delivery times. This isn't just a den of drugs, criminal dealings and everything else. It's part of a slave ring!"

That bothered her a hell of a lot more than the drugs Ranma had found the other day or the fact the Triad was trying to extort money from people. The fact people died in the tournament barely registered to Shampoo at all.

"Agreed." Flipping the sheet up to look underneath, Mai examined the other vials, cursing a bit. "Damn! Some of these are empty. If they were used on this food, then some of the girls with plus signs next to their names must've already been knocked out. We'll need to come back down this way, or... or could they have been taken directly to someplace else? Blast it, this is getting complicated."

Shampoo frowned pensively, then nodded her head in agreement. "If we maybe had a map of this place, then we could figure out where to go to free the girls. As it is, maybe the VIP segment has a personal connection to the club or wherever they've been drugged?"

"An elevator or something," Mai agreed with a nod, grabbing up the man. "Since we still don't know if there are any cameras behind that door, let's strip this fool. A few of the breast bands I used earlier and covering up your hair, and you might be able to pass for a boy at a glance."

Mai ignored the huff of affronted annoyance from Shampoo, emphasizing the words 'at a glance,' before going on to say that they could shower stalls along with Mr. Pervert. "I doubt that any of the girls will shower until after everything is over."

Soon, Shampoo was dressed as Mai had indicated, and the taller girl hid underneath the cart's white table mat, feeling as if she had suddenly become the star in a spy movie. Shampoo pushed her along, opening the door and then heading through, noting that there was indeed a camera pointed towards the door. Yet, it did not swivel or move, and soon, the pair were past.

Directly behind it was an elevator. Here, Shampoo used the second key on the small keychain that they had found, and a moment later, the elevator opened. Mai clambered out from underneath the tarp, and both girls looked into the elevator, then up at the elevator's ceiling. "So, have action movies lied to me about how easy it is to get on top of an elevator, too?"

Mai shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

She held out her hands cupped, and Shampoo instantly stepped into them, finding herself quickly pushed upwards, where she was able to easily push aside one of the tiles in the elevator tram's roof, pulling herself up and outward. After lashing a bit of rope around the cart and letting Shampoo pull it up to hide it on the roof of the elevator car, Mai leaped up after her, landing on the opposite side, and the two of them found themselves in the elevator shaft. There, they began to climb up a ladder set to one side of the shaft, heading upwards.

"So, should we check each level as we go?" Mai asked as they climbed.

But Shampoo shook her head firmly, trying hard not to look up at Mai's rear above her. "No. We'll leave the VIP boxes alone for now and keep on heading upwards. The amphitheater was four stories, and the VIP boxes, the ones with the one-way glass we saw, were up on the top floor. So unless we want to start fighting the VIPs, rather than gathering evidence, we should avoid it."

And frankly, Shampoo wanted to avoid the Mad Dragon. Something about him set her teeth on edge even now, and she wanted no part of him whatsoever.

Mai shrugged, and the two of them continued climbing, with Shampoo keeping track of how far they had gotten. From her estimate, there was a two-story difference between where they began and where they saw the next door. Then, there was a large, five-story area without any doors. This was followed by two more, and then five more stories without any doors before they came to a door that both women hoped would lead to someone's personal home above all the action. It made sense to them that a Triad boss would want a suite directly over their domain, where they felt the strongest. Given how Chun Li had told them how important the tournament was, it made sense that too would be close by where the Mad Dragon made his home.

Here again, they were faced with the door dilemma, as Mai put it, once more not knowing what kind of security could be on the other side of that door or attached to it. However, this time, there was no way around it. Maybe if they had come in with the elevator, they could perhaps have simply opened the door and used a mirror or something to glance out before moving forward. As it was, they had to force open the door.

By the time they did, two men had turned from what they had been doing something elsewhere in the large room that the elevator exited into. It was around the same size as the

arena below, although obviously, the interior was done in a much nicer style. If that is, you felt that weapons and old Chinese artifacts were chic. Because those things dominated this room at the moment. One entire wall was decorated with various daggers, which would have been enough to tell anyone who knew of the Mad Dragon's tendencies to collect such things whose area this truly was. Beyond that, Mai could make out a pair of glass doors leading into a bedroom, a large cabinet full of expensive-looking liquor bottles, a massive TV and a sofa to match, along with numerous pieces of exercise equipment pushed against the wall at present.

There was no kitchen or anything else, just the two rooms and perhaps a shower and bathroom area that she couldn't see, which connected to the bedroom. The bedroom's wall, directly opposite the elevator, was a mass of glass, showing a view of the city around them. Directly in front of them, the sitting room had been turned into some kind of antiquities museum. It wasn't normal, judging by the equipment pushed to the walls, the placement of several bits on top of the other pieces of furniture, and the fact some were put on top of wooden crates, but the artifacts filled the room.

More important to the two girls was the fact that Mai couldn't see any security cameras, and the two men who had been deeper into the room were already charging towards them by the time the elevator door opened. They were tall, extremely well-muscled men with their hair shaved down to a bare fuzz, much like the Thailander that Ken had fought down in the arena before their own match. In fact, their stances were almost exactly the same as Ken's opponent as they came forward.

One lashed out low with a powerful kick, the other going low with a slide, trying to divide and conquer.

Shampoo was able to block the kick with her chui pushing into the strike and trying to upend the man while Mai launched Shadow Fans at the other man, halting his charge. He shifted around into a spin, lashing out with a roundhouse kick, trying hard to force the girls backward into the elevator shaft, but both Mai and Shampoo ducked, and Shampoo's chui slammed into the man's knee hard enough to shatter most normal men's bones. This man took it, stumbling only a bit as he flipped backward. He said something in what the girls assumed was Thai, and the other man also backed away.

They split, coming at the girls from either direction, one of them throwing what Mai recognized as a smoke bomb towards them. Seeing that, she launched one of her fans towards it, exploding the smoke bomb in the air between them. This didn't stop the men, and they raced in, expecting the girls to be blinded.

Here, though, the fact that Shampoo had fought Mai so often since traveling with her came into good stead. Shampoo leaped upward, lashing down with her mace to slam it into the foot of one of the Thailanders, while Mai found herself in close with the other man. She blocked several hard elbow and knee blows but found herself pushed backward, almost to the point of being pushed entirely into the elevator shaft.

Jumping over another low kick, Mai reached up, grabbing the sill of the elevator entrance. There she flipped herself upward, dodging another kick, then lashing down with a series of blows from twin fans, using them and blocks to remain in the air over him, pushing him away, then flipping further into the room, launching a fan towards him that burst into flame as she did, another spiritual-style ki attack taking the man by surprise.

“Aghgh!” the man screamed as he tried to dodge while lashing out with a punch, hoping to dissipate the fireball, maybe. This failed, and the man was soon rolling on the ground, trying to put his sleeve out as it had caught fire, along with a bracelet on his wrist, while the rest of his hand had been burned badly. Evidently, the man’s durability did not stand up against element-style attacks.

Shampoo was kicked in the chest, and the man who did so whirled around her, Lashing out with an elbow blow that forced Mai to block just as she landed, throwing her off balance. But even so, Mai was able to grab his arm, and a second later, Shampoo’s chui slammed down on the wounded man’s head, smashing him into la-la-land.

Clear of the doorway into the elevator shaft, now it was Mai and Shampoo’s turn to split apart, coming at the remaining man from two directions. This forced the Muay Thai fighter to continually give ground until his back slammed against the wall. There, he grabbed several daggers from the wall, hurling them at the women one after another.

“Really?” Mai drawled, smacking a dagger that had been threatening to smack hilt first into her chest. “I’d say give up, but I doubt you can understand me anyway.” Two more daggers were hurled her way and two in Shampoo’s way, but they didn’t get through.

Then, the man surprised them both by shouting and tossing two more smoke bombs towards Shampoo before charging towards Mai. His knee lit up with reddish energy, a color of ki Mai recognized as anger, as he launched himself forward, moving faster than he had previously, coming close to the speed Shampoo Ranma and Mai habitually fought at.

From her boob window, Mai withdrew her manriki, and even as she stepped backward, avoiding the first glowing knee, the end of the manriki hammered into the follow-on punch, smacking it away. She wasn’t quite fast enough to block an elbow strike that followed, the blow striking her in the shoulder and opening her up for another hammer blow into the side of her face, the man’s moves taking her by surprise, as she had never faced a Muay Thai fighter before.

However, the Muay Thai fighter once more overestimated how much his smoke bombs would help keep Shampoo off his ass. Moving through the various boxes and makeshift plinths containing artifacts, Shampoo’s chui crashed into the man’s back sending him stumbling and causing his anger ki to flare over his entire body. Shampoo twitched away, fearing the man was about to perform something like Ranma’s Blue Burst.

Before he could, Mai slammed her manriki into the man's stomach, then, reinforcing the strike with her own ki, crashed the other end into the side of his head, breaking his jaw and causing him to stumble. His ki light blinked out as the pain of his wounds caused his anger ki to falter, leaving him open for a roundhouse strike from Mai's manriki, which finally caused the man to fall to the ground unconscious.

Shockingly, the other man was already stirring, trying to push himself to his feet despite his ravaged hand. Yet the man was only able to raise his remaining hands away from the floor in defense for a second under Shampoo's assault until a blow from the Amazon's chui laid him out unconscious once more. "These men were tough, able to take so many blows from our weapons like that."

"Eh, I think their striking power was much more dangerous than their durability," Mai grumbled, shaking her head and wincing occasionally at the bruises that she had taken in those last few moments. "What were they doing up here anyway?" Shaking her head and then at the crates that the two men must've been standing by when they heard the elevator door opening under manual power. "This... what is all this?" Mai hadn't really had time to look too closely at the odd stuff scattered throughout the room, only noting that none of it looked like it would.

"Antiquities, old scrolls, artifacts," Shampoo said, moving over to look down into one of the crates, her eyes widening in shock. She knelt down, gently reaching inside it and rubbing a finger along what had to be a very well-preserved piece of armor from ancient times. Even more important to Shampoo was what was beside it, a small scroll, yellow and gray with age, unrolled and pressed into a glass container of some kind. "This, these are pieces of Chinese history. The battle of... An original telling of the Battle of Chibi (Red Cliffs)..." She breathed out, taking out the scroll quickly, staring at it avidly.

A part of Shampoo wanted just to steal it for herself, to read at her leisure. Another part of her was **furious** that it was in some kind of personal museum of some Triad boss instead of being open to the public. *Mind you, the communist government really isn't all that big about the ancient past, but still, something like this, surely they would make an exception.*

Setting it aside she moved over to one of the already closed containers, opening it with some difficulty, not wanting to damage whatever might be within. That was a good thing because what was held in that were old-looking clay bowls. They were antiques, too, but they didn't hit as hard as the scroll had to Shampoo, and she slowly put the lid back on it, looking around them.

Shampoo wasn't the only one feeling just a little bit awed at a few of the old antique things they were senior. Mai had moved over to several other bits that had been on display. A few caught her attention, but not nearly as much as several scrolls did, protected behind glass containers, although only a few were opened and pressed flat between the glass. Instead, the majority were in small glass tubes, with their titles visible given how they were placed into the padding or on the makeshift pedestals.

A few of those titles were incomprehensible to her. The writing had faded to the point she couldn't make them out. But several had been restored sometime recently, some archeologist or other having gone over the writings with some kind of chemical to bring back out ink enough to let Mai read them, something she was a little better at than speaking Chinese in the first place. "The Wisdom of Li Er, and the Hubris of Man..."

Hearing that, Shampoo let loose the squeal of a die-hard fan who had just heard his idol was going to be in town. "ReALLLY!?" She rushed over, and began avidly to scan the scroll, fingers itching to shatter the glass, to pull it open, but stopping herself.

For several minutes, the two ladies lost themselves in contemplating the various preserved scrolls, going from one to another in delight, while at the back of Shampoo's brain, the anger she had been feeling continued to grow, ready to overwhelm her shock and awe at what she was seeing.

One scroll in particular grabbed Shampoo's attention. It was one of the older scrolls that had yet to be treated to allow its writing to be more easily understood. Nevertheless, she could pick out a few words from the title. The symbol her clan used to indicate themselves, the Joketsuzoku, and another being the name of the first Emperor of the Han Dynasty, Gaozu. "I, I need to take this," she murmured, her hands reaching before she could stop them. "This is too important to my people for me to just leave here or let someone else stuff it into a museum. Even if it's just an explanation of our interactions, of how we won our lands from the great Liu Bang, it would be important, but I'd wager it covers far more than that."

As she spoke, Shampoo's earlier moment of anger came back to her, the fury breaking through her awe. She straightened, a snarl on her lips that made the ones she had worn earlier that day at various points seem tame in comparison. "What in the FUCK were they doing with this? Where were they sending it?!" she nearly howled.

"Hmm... if well, we know these two aren't locals. Then, they might be with another syndicate the Triad is doing business with. A foreign one," Mai guessed, looking at Shampoo warily.

"Fucking vultures!" Shampoo hissed like an angry cat, stomping over to one of the two men who had chosen a very inopportune moment to start groaning. He was the man who had shown some anger-style ki, but that would not help him now.

Shampoo raised her mace and slammed it down into his head and she didn't stop there. The next second, she lashed down again, her chui smashing into the man's shoulder and hip. Twice more, it landed, leaving the man awake from the pain once more and his shoulder mangled before Mai was there, grabbing Shampoo and pulling her around. "Shampoo, stop it!"

"No! This cretins, they, they are stealing our culture, our shared history as Han People! It doesn't matter where it was coming from, they are stealing it!" Shampoo shrieked, showing a

side of her that Mai had honestly never expected to see. She knew that Shampoo was proud of her Joketsuzoku heritage, but hadn't realized it expanded to being proud of Chinese history as a whole.

What Mai didn't realize, because it had never come up in conversation, was that the Amazons had long believed they were some of the first to rally to the Han Dynasty, that they had been a pillar of the Golden Age of China. Even before that, the Joketsuzoku had occasionally appeared in Chinese history. Shampoo was the daughter of the Matriarch and had been raised to believe that preserving their past was incredibly important. To see evidence that other Chinese were willing to sell historically important documents that had somehow survived into the modern day, let alone the other relics, to foreigners was infuriating.

"Come on, Shampoo, we knew these assholes were scum already," Mai soothed, pulling Shampoo harder away from the man as the normally purple-haired girl tried to lash out at him again, the mace slamming into the ground just beside his head, causing the man to whimper trying to twitch away. "Shampoo, please, this isn't you."

Growling Shampoo tried to break out of Mai's grip, twisting away from her. This just let Mai get her arms under Shampoo's armpits, her hands then linking behind Shampoo's neck, at which point Mai heaved backward, pulling her away from the other man. "Shampoo, stop! You can't just beat them to death!"

"Watch me!"

"No, I care about you too much to let you do that. I won't let you have blood on your hands like that," Mai growled. "You're not the sort to kill in cold blood, Shampoo. The fight's over. Neither of them is a threat. You can't just execute them!"

For a few moments, Shampoo tried to break out of Mai's grip, but eventually, she calmed down. "I... you, you're right, Mai. Sorry. I kind of lost it when I saw that scroll with my clan's name on it."

"Hey, we all have buttons no one in their right mind should try and press. For me, it's people insulting my cooking," Mai answered glibly, releasing Shampoo but keeping a hand on her shoulder. "Sometimes we just lose control. It's the role of a friend to keep us from making mistakes."

May was surprised a second later as Shampoo turned towards her, pulling the taller girl into a hug. "Thanks. You're a fantastic friend, Mai."

"N, no problem," Mai tried hard not to stammer as the hug brought back to her mind the moment they'd had in the shower. "I've no doubt you'll pull me back at some point when I go crazy or am in danger."

“Too right.” Shampoo was also reminded of the moment in the shower, and she stepped back quickly, looking down at the groaning man at their feet with a blush. He seemed to be trying to reach into his pocket for something, and she quickly knelt down, chopping him in the neck. If the blow was a bit harder than it should be, that was something only she would know.

After that, she ruffled his pockets, pulling out a radio and then went over to the other man, doing the same thing. Straightening up, Shampoo carefully did not look in Mai’s direction, pulling from her waist the super-thin camera. “Now come on, let’s take a lot of pictures, search around for anything hidden and then send them off to Chun Li.”

“Right, let’s get a move on.” Idly, Mai pulled out one of the cell phones Chun Li had given them, smiling widely as she noticed that she had a few bars. “And would you look at that? We’ve got signal up here.”

“Tell Chun Li what’s going on. I’ll take the pictures,” Shampoo ordered, then frowned a bit, looking over at the elevator and then into the bedroom. “Um...”

“I’ll keep an eye on the elevator. Do you think there’s something else here? I have to say all of the relics and stuff look like they were just placed here while they were being prepped for transfer.”

“I’d wager the Mad Dragon wanted to at least have a look at them before sending them out to whoever purchased the priceless,” Shampoo hissed, shaking her head before calming down. “I’d say that there’s going to be at least a safe or something.”

“Just remember security features and such. A deadman’s bomb if you enter the wrong code, a wireless signal, that kind of thing,” Mai reminded the other girl before turning her attention to the phone, texting Chun Li with the info on the possible sex slaves and the use of drugs the two girls had overcome. Then she started to take pictures beside Shampoo, casing the whole room, taking pictures of everything. Then, while Shampoo headed into the bedroom, Mai pulled out some rope from her boob window and, dragging the pair of Thailanders together, tied them both up very thoroughly, arm to leg and then around the waist.

A final piece of cloth from the bed would do to stuff their mouths, and Mai came into the bedroom in search of one just as Shampoo began to cut out a portion of the wall with a small hatchet that Mai recognized as coming from the rack of weapons in the changing room. “What are you... is it like that hiding place Ranma found?”

“Nope,” Shampoo said almost chirpily, leaving her anger behind her for now. “This is a safe. If I can’t get through the front, then I’ll go through the back.”

Shrugging, Mai moved over to her, pulling out one of her fans and opening it. Using her ki to add a cutting edge to it, she worked alongside Shampoo, speeding up the process a good

deal, although wrenching the safe out was a bit harder, thanks to the need to work on their handholds a bit. Within ten minutes, they had the safe out.

Laying the safe out with the hatch down, Shampoo and Mai cut into the back of the safe, revealing gold bars, stacks of yuan, a few CDs, a laptop, and what looked like several keys and passports. "Nice! I'd wager what's in here plus everything else will be enough to put the Mad Dragon in prison for life."

"Or have him executed. China has the death penalty for a lot of things, you know," Shampoo said with a certain amount of anticipation.

After taking pictures of the things in the safe, the pair was off. They spent a few minutes moving the various exercise equipment and the large sofa in front of the elevator door, which was quite hard considering they wanted to block it from the other side, and there was less than a foot of space for them to stand on as they hauled the stuff into position. Eventually they were done and began heading down the elevator shaft, leaving the two men tied up in the bedsheets behind them, a secret safe open, its folders out in the open, the emergency funds still there, ready to be taken as evidence.

"So, head back down to the tournament or search for the girls?" Mai asked.

"Search for the girls," Shampoo answered promptly. "What did the police text back?"

"They're moving into position now but waiting for Chun Li to arrive along with some more firepower. Didn't say what kind of firepower or where it was coming from," Mai answered with a shrug. "But yeah, finding the drugged girls sounds like a good idea if we can. I just hope they weren't all shipped out already."

OOOOOOO

"Pleasure doing business with you," Ken said in his best Chinese, smirking as he took another local's money. The man scowled back at him, but Ken held his eyes for a moment before snorting and moving off through the crowd.

Instead of replacing the broken seats that had been destroyed during Abigail and Ryu's fight, the people who had repaired the arena had simply removed all of the bleacher-like seats below the mid-tier customers. This led to the poorer locals needing to stand around in a crowd as if they were at a rock concert if they wanted to watch the last few fights. It also put more distance between them and the mid-tier guests, the men and women who could pay for all of the other amenities on offer during this tournament or who were regular patrons of the club above. Many of them had left, thinning out the crowd that had previously been separated into their numerous smaller boxes.

That didn't matter at all to Ken. He had taken several interesting pictures during his travels through the crowd so far, **very** interesting indeed. Several people, a few of whom were now gone, he'd actually recognized, although thankfully, they could not recognize him in turn, thanks to his disguise. *Which is very good indeed for Mister O'leiro and his wife, given what happened at that French gala last year.*

Beyond the Frenchman and his wife, who had quite a few connections to France's ruling political party and military sector that Ken had met personally... and in the wife's case, intimately, he had recognized one Japanese industrialist, one American powerbroker, and several Greeks and Italians. He wasn't certain about that last one. Ken knew he had met the man but couldn't remember where. Only that it had been at a soiree that his parents had thrown for the rich and powerful at one point on their yacht in the Mediterranean.

Ken shifted his thoughts to more important things as he glanced out of the side of his eye toward Ryu as his friend limped out of the arena having just won what was going to be his last match. He'd faced off against Ken's fellow American, the mohawk using Birdie, and had come out on top but had been forced to pull out all the stops again, his Hadoken and almost all of his other ki-enhanced attacks.

Birdie had also used quite a few strange qi-based attacks, including the one he'd already previously shown, adding a cutting force to his mohawk and using it as a buzz saw, doing the same to his karate chops at several points in the fight. Because of that, Ryu was bleeding profusely from a cut that went across his body from shoulder to hip and was even now wrapping his torn shirt around it as a makeshift bandage. It had only been a last-second dodge away that had kept that strike from being mortal. The fight had been brutal from the get-go, and Ken's friend had paid for it.

This means there isn't going to be a next round unless the Mad Dragon steps in. Ranma and the others did say he likes to take part. It'll be him against Ranma then, Ken thought, shaking his head at the fact that luck had gone against his friend, pitting him against the far more dangerous Birdie, then the local enforcer, blades.

Ranma's fight with blades had been almost a direct contrast to the one between Birdie and Ryu. Where Birdie had almost been as immobile an object as Abigail, Blades had been a fast speedster, bouncing all over the arena. Ranma, however, had been able to match his speed easily, at least from what Ken could see, and when Blades had broken out the energy attacks, they simply hadn't hit Ranma, his ability to read his opponent allowing him to stay one step ahead of the other man even though Ranma hadn't evinced any ki of his own. Instead, he had simply battered the other man with fists and feet until Blades had been overwhelmed. *Blades didn't have nearly as much durability as Birdie.*

As Ken had supposed, Ryu was in no condition to continue and told one of the fixers that as Ken turned fully in that direction. This time, unlike with Mu Dai, the fixer didn't argue. The

man simply nodded and headed over to talk to the anchor as Ryu stumbled past him, heading towards the waiting room.

Ken was about to make a point about how much money he'd earned in his wagers before going after Ryu when the crowd began to quiet down. Looking around, Ken spotted one of the one-way glass walls on the fourth floor above them, shifting, sliding to the side. People began to point as a man stepped forward from the depths of the booth.

"It's him!"

"He's here!"

"It's going to happen again, oh yeah. You think what we've seen so far has been good, just wait for the Mad Dragon to step into the arena," one man roared, drawing more attention to the man who had moved to stand in the middle of the open window.

Even from where he stood among the group of onlookers nearest the arena, Ken could sense this bastard was dangerous. It was in his body language, the sneer on his face, and something deeper, something that Ken couldn't quite put into words but could yet feel. *Like a coiled danger deep within him. Or perhaps something spiritually wrong with this psycho?* Ken wasn't certain, but from the way Ryu stiffened up near the fixer, he also felt it and had even begun backing off slightly, almost looking as if he was going to hightail it despite his numerous wounds. There was no doubt in Ken's mind that Ryu wasn't up for a fight.

Good luck, Ranma. You might need it, Ken thought, even as he twisted around so that he could point the camera at the VIP lounge behind the large, dangerous man. *Pity this thing doesn't have a zoom function.*

For his part, Ranma also felt it, his eyes narrowing. *So that is the big bad that Chun Li wants us to take down huh? He certainly feels off. He also feels, I don't know, strong? Kind of weird to think that I could figure that out from this far away, but that's the impression I'm getting.*

Like Ken, Ranma hadn't fully developed any kind of ki-sensing technique, although he was a bit further along than Ken, hampered only by the fact that he hadn't found anyone able to teach him a specific technique like that. Nawa and the Master of the Construction style hadn't known anything about it, and Jubei had only helped Ranma understand the difference between the Yin and Yang sides of ki and the need to balance them.

Ranma turned to the fixer that he'd been standing beside him after he had finished his match. He had been told not to head back to the locker room, and had refused an offer of food or drink, standing to one side of the entryway towards the changing room instead, watching Ryu and Birdie's fight with interest. As Ken had supposed, the match with Blades hadn't really taken

all that much out of Ranma, so he was more than willing to step up to the big bad. "Let me guess, prize for winning tournament is match with that bastard there?"

The fixer gulped, then nodded, not noticing how Ranma's Chinese had degraded as the presenter made that statement official. "Ladies and gentlemen, since contestant Ryan Sugimoto has decided to step down due to injuries, that would normally mean that contestant Genma Wudang has won the tournament. But I think he looks like he could go another round, don't you?"

The man with the microphone waited as the crowd roared and shouted, cheering for more blood. "I think we all deserve support excitement! A tournament ending with a whimper isn't what you all paid good money to see, is it?"

"No!" came the roar from every throat.

Watching this, Ranma could only shake his head. *I've seen the power of, what did Nabiki call them, herd mentalities, before this back in Nerima with Kuno's stupid declaration and the challenges every morning to Akane. But this is a whole other level.*

"That's right! This is Hong Kong's premier combat tournament, and we don't do things by halves. Luckily for us, we also have a local champion! Those of you who have been here before know him and know what he can do! The Mad Dragon, Ryuji!"

Playing it up to the crowd a little, Ryuji leaped from where he had been staring down at Ranma from the opening into the booth he and the other Triad leaders had been using, which closed quickly behind him. Yet not before Ken, who'd been watching diligently, was able to take some more pictures though. He couldn't see everyone from this angle book, but he'd gotten at least two faces other than Ryuji. *Hopefully, with whatever the girls have been up to, that will be enough.*

Ryuji landed on the other side of the cage, entering it and moving forward, not even removing his fur coat, standing with one hand in a pocket, thrusting his hand up in the air lazily as he looked first around at the crowd, his expression that of a king staring down at the measly peasants of his kingdom. When he turned to Ranma, the superior, dismissive look shifted into a cross between someone looking at something they'd found underfoot and a sadist staring at his next victim.

Ignoring the look sent his way with ease, Ranma glanced towards the entryway leading into the changing area. Ryu had stumbled into the wall beside it and was now slowly dropping to his rear, having done all he could for his wounds, considering that the tournament didn't have medical help on hand, obviously. He was out of it, but more importantly, that door had slid shut so that if Ranma had wanted to try to escape, he'd have had to head to one of the spectator entrances, which themselves were guarded.

Honestly, that wouldn't have stopped Ranma if he wanted to get away, but it seemed as if the locals were thinking he might try. If this Ryuji guy had a reputation, those who knew about it would be willing to try to run away rather than fight him. Ranma, on the other hand, didn't have any idea what he was capable of beyond a vague feeling of unease. *And really, while I agreed to help Chun Li investigate this ass and the Triad, fighting him and people like him was the real reason I wanted to be part of this tournament. Let the others handle the investigation side of things.*

Waving off the fixer who was about to say something to him, Ranma moved towards the cage, opening it as the presenter shouted about how he was either courageous or stupid, willingly getting into the arena with Ryuji.

"As if you all would've let me," Ranma said in Chinese, shaking his head as he looked at the other man, who was at least a foot taller than him. *And wider in the shoulders, and with a greater reach both with his long arms and feet. I'll need to close.* "Besides, I don't know him." He looked over to Ryuji, smirking a bit as he addressed him directly, concentrating on his Chinese to make certain he didn't screw up the words as usual. "Your folk seem ta think you're all that. Let's see if you are."

"I'm wondering the same thing about you. You went to a lot of trouble to dodge most of the attacks sent your way. I think you'll fold like a wet paper towel when I get my hands on you," Ryuji retorted as he stalked towards the center of the arena, left hand still in his pocket.

Ranma moved forward as well, and when the announcer shouted start, it was Ranma who threw the first punch. This was not normal for Ranma, but he wanted to switch it up, assuming that Ryuji would think that he would take the defensive to start the match, as he had in every other bout.

However, Ryuji was ready. Smacking Ranma's blow aside, he then tried to grab him by the head, using his longer reach to good advantage. Ranma ducked under that and then had to twitch aside as a knee came up, aiming towards his head. He was forced then to block the follow-on kick, as Ryuji proved to be just as fast as Ranma was at the moment.

The disguised martial artist found himself flying backward but flipped midair. Bouncing off of the cage wall he lashed out with a kick which Ryuji blocked with a fist, the strength of that block tossing Ranma further into the air. He used the momentum to remain there for a second, lashing downwards with kicks and punches, most of which Ryuji, tanked with the forearm of the one arm he was using. *What is up with that? Is he like Oro, there's something wrong with his arm? Or is it something else?*

As Ranma kept attacking one of his strikes got through to Ryuji's head because of that lack. Yet it barely rocked the man.

The next eyeblink Ryuji's hand flashed up nearly grabbing Ranma by the leg, forcing him to pull his feet upwards, flipping himself again. Kicking off the wall at a higher angle, Ranma shot past Ryuji, bouncing off the ground and twisting around into a roundhouse kick that again Ryuji blocked. This time, he grabbed Ranma by the foot, pulling him into the air and his body taut, parallel to the ground, opening his chest for a headbutt of all things.

This was not like a normal headbutt. Instead, Ryuji showed that he also had some ki techniques. Gathering it into his forehead, he slammed it down into Ranma's mid-drift, causing, of all things, an explosion. The explosion sent Ranma slamming back down into the floor of the arena, which cracked and shattered underneath his impact.

To Ryuji's surprise, Ranma took the blow with barely a grunt of pain, lashing out with a kick of his own as he struck the ground, which slammed with punishing force into Ryuji's lower leg. Ryuji grunted a bit at the impact himself but didn't release his hold on Ranma's leg until Ranma's rope dart flashed out of his sleeve. Since Ranma had learned how to give impetus to something coming out of his ki space, the thing came out like a viper, flashing up towards Ryuji's head.

The mobster ducked to one side, releasing Ranma and trying to grab the rope instead, wondering where it was attached to and what kind of mechanism had launched it out, but Ranma had already pulled the rope back, flipping himself away. Lashing out again with the rope dart, Ranma changed the angle of the attack too quickly for Ryuji to react. As Ryuji's hand flashed through where the rope had been a moment ago, the metal dart zipped in, opening up a long, but shallow gash along his cheek.

Ryuji barely flinched at the hit, his eyes widening in delight instead. "You made me bleed," he murmured, nodding his head slowly as if in approval, as one finger rose to swipe away the blood. He had still yet to remove his other hand from within his pocket, making Ranma wonder and worry about why. "That's impressive, at least. It's been three tournaments since someone actually made this fun for me!"

With that, Ryuji charged forwards with all the grace of a bull but with the speed of a furry demon on the hunt, far faster than he had been moving before.

Ranma was astonished at his speed but was able to compensate for it, blocking then redirecting the next few punches and kicks pushed back by the taller man, his greater range holding Ranma at bay for a few moments. *Fuck me, why am I so god-damned undersized!?*

When he tried to grab Ranma again, Ranma broke the attack, then dipped forward into his own range, lashing out with a kick that took Ryuji in the side before he could block it. Instead of following up as Ryuji had thought, lashing out to where he thought Ranma would be, Ranma kicked up into the air again and then lashed out with a punch that took Ryuji in the side of the head.

No longer was Ranma holding back. He had been holding back on his strength and speed up until fighting Blades. But against that sociopath and this one, Ranma knew he couldn't afford to hold back at all. That blow was powerful enough to shatter a three feet across slab of concrete, yet it did little damage, simply rocking Ryuji's head and causing him to stumble a bit. *Fucking Hell!*

Even off-balance, Ryuji was able to launch his own attack, punching up towards Ranma. "Annoying gnat!"

At first, Ranma wondered what Ryuji was doing, since Ranma had already pushed himself higher into the air and away thanks to the returned momentum of his own strike a second ago, well out of the larger man's range. Then he felt a familiar shift in the air pressure, causing Ranma's eyes to widen but before he could react, a gust of air pressure slammed into Ranma, hurling him up and into the roof of the cage with punishing force.

Grunting in pain, Ranma grabbed on, clinging for a second with his fingers while launching his own air attack down at Ryuji with his legs. "You're not the only one that can do air pressure attacks!" That was a technique that Ranma didn't make much use of, but he had first seen it back in Nerima from Kuno and had known how to do so without a weapon for a while thanks to the time he and Shampoo spent learning Martial Arts Construction.

He followed it up with the rope dart, expertly shifting it in various directions to attack from behind Ryuji before pulling the dart back just before Ryuji could grab it, the weapon disappearing back into his sleeve. This covered him for a second as Ranma flipped himself away from Ryuji, landing across the arena from him.

The two began to circle one another, a sneer on Ryuji's face despite the blood slowly dripping down from the cut to his cheek and another on his forearm from the rope dart.

I can't get a read on him at all, Ranma thought, somewhat shocked and more than a little worried as he analyzed the last few moments. Ryuji didn't have any kind of style or form from what Ranma could see, thus negating a large portion of Ranma's ability to read his opponent. Worse, in terms of raw speed, power and reaction time, Ranma had to admit the older man was well above him. *Well, let's see how he deals with Amaguriken!*

With that thought, Ranma darted forward before needing to duck away as Ryuji kicked up some of the broken bits of concrete from where he had slammed Ranma into the ground moments before. Ryuji lashed out again with a punch, kick, kick combo, but Ranma ducked around each blow, twirling in to attack the side of his body that Ryuji seemed reluctant to use for some reason. Ranma had no idea why, but at this point Ranma wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Yet Ryuji seemed just as aware of the weakness this gave him as Ranma was. As Ranma's second strike flashed in, his fist came under his arm, pushing through his fur coat and grabbing

Ranma's hand through the coat. Twisting them around, he then kneed Ranma hard in the head faster than Ranma could dodge, and Ranma was astonished at the power of the blow, which caused an explosion on impact, Ryuji showing again that he had some mastery of ki. And not incidentally broke Ranma's nose.

Ranma flew backward, flipping in the air with the hit, but landed on his feet and wiped away the blood from his broken nose, setting it in place with a quick wrench of his fingers, his ki healing doing the rest. "Well, that could've gone better."

For his part, Ryuji frowned a little. His opponent's strikes weren't much up to this point. The rope dart trick had surprised him, cutting his cheek and forearm like it did, yet those were superficial injuries, and the younger man's blows weren't really powerful enough to get through Ryuji's durability.

In return, though, Genma Wudang was also startlingly durable. Ryuji had honestly believed what he'd said at the start: that Ranma would be down for the count after a few blows. Astonishingly, even Ryuji's qi-assisted strikes didn't seem to bother Ranma all that much. "I suppose I need to up my game a bit. Ha... haha...hahahah..."

As he laughed darkly, Ryuji's body glowed red, a deep, crimson color, reminding Ranma of anger ki, yet somehow even a darker red. *Ki tainted by hatred, maybe? Or a need for violence? Could someone harness his own, I don't know, killing intent?*

Ryu and Ken were also wondering the same thing, frowning as they watched from their disparate positions. The crowd didn't care at all, simply howling in delight as they assumed this strange energy meant the action was about to get even more intense.

Regardless of what that color signified, what it did become patently obvious as Ryuji charged forward faster than he had been moving previously, leaving two small craters where his feet had been a moment ago. This forced Ranma to dodge to the side as a punch flashed through where his head had been a moment ago, blocking a kick, then a knee, then another punch with difficulty, his own body pushing into Amaguriken level speeds to keep up with his opponent even as his forearms and lower legs started to protest, flaring with pain from every strike.

Yet thanks to his training with the Amaguriken, Ranma was soon moving faster than Ryuji again, although not enough to really take advantage of it. Moreover, Ranma couldn't come close to matching the raw physical strength of the taller man. Ranma had already known this man was as strong as Yokozuna Honda, but now it felt like every deflection was in danger of breaking his arms in a way even Edmund hadn't been able to make him feel. *Fuck! Strength training, ugh. I hate concentrating on just one thing like that, but going forward, I am going to either need that or some other edge...* That thought brought to mind his conversation and training with Jubei, but Ranma set that aside for the moment.

To most of the watching spectators, it was as if both of them were moving in a blur by this point, their limbs disappearing occasionally as they crashed into one another, their bodies staying still for a few seconds, then shifting to another position as if they had teleported. The only exceptions were Ryu and a young blond man in the mid-tier booths. Even Ken, watching, had some trouble keeping up with them. Yet he could tell that Ranma was starting to feel it.

Indeed, Ranma was. He had a good amount of ki, or at least, he had thought he had, until he ran into Ryuji. But now, Ranma was using that ki to keep up with his opponent's speed and just enough of his strength to give Ranma a fighting chance. Thankfully, his durability training was serving him in good stead. Ryuji had landed several strikes on Ranma's body and chest, despite the fact that Ranma was now in the air again, using the aerial style to his best effect, and while they hurt like blazes, his bones had yet to break, although he could feel large bruises appear then be fought back by his ki healing.

In terms of offensive, he dodged nine out of ten punches, lashing out with his own, which were blocked or deflected only half of the time. Occasionally he brought out his rope dart to tie up or stab at Ryuji, but nothing much had come from it. The main problem was his blows just weren't doing enough. *Time to take a page out of my opponent's book. It's gonna cost me, I'll probably only be able to keep this up for at best half an hour, but it might be the only way forward.*

"GRAHHH!" Ranma roared, lashing out with a kick that caught Ryuji in the head. But this time, his foot was coated with blue-white energy and slammed into Ryuji with all the power of Abigail's wrecking ball.

Ryuji stumbled, shaking his head as if a little groggy, but when Ranma tried to capitalize, he ducked and then twitched his shoulders in a way that released his coat somehow, the coat blocking Ranma's follow-on punches as he attacked from above. Ryuji twisted around, kicked up, and grabbed at Ranma before he could move out of range after having dodged the kick. The mobster had astonishingly gotten used to Ranma's midair skill far faster than any opponent Ranma had ever seen before. Ryuji pulled him into a kick, then slammed Ranma down into the ground, where Ryuji began to wail at 'Genma Wudang' with kicks and punches from his single arm.

The lack of a second arm hampered him just enough, to give Ranma a chance of getting out of there without being pummeled like dough. He ducked, blocked, and tried his best not to get hit. However, in this short exchange, the equation between them shifted entirely in Ryuji's favor, and Ranma grunted again and again, his blows got through and his ki healing started to lose ground, as well as his body's toughness training.

Pushing upwards, Ranma smacked aside one of Ryuji's punches, redirecting it into the ground as he blasted out a ki blast from his hand, which slammed into Ryuji's chest. Ryuji was lifted off of his feet and away from Ranma, and Ranma quickly flipped upwards, drilling two more punches straight into Ryuji's chest while Ryuji was in the air, hurling Ryuji away this time.

Ryuji slammed into one of the corners of the cage but came to his feet easily as he landed, spitting out a gob of blood to one side. "Not bad."

Ranma stared back at him, his hands up in a stance, no longer gleaming blue with his ki. The damage his attacks had done wasn't worth it.

He watched as Ryuji dusted himself off with his working hand, his other hand still in his pocket. "You're good, Genma, but you lack a killer's instinct."

Ranma fought the urge to roll his eyes that, then twitched as once more, that reddish aura appeared around Ryuji, and he was charging forward. The next second, he was striking at Ranma even harder than before, and Ranma's durability began to fail. *Fuck me, I think I bit off more than I can chew here!*

OOOOOOO

While Ranma and Ryuji were locked in combat, Shampoo and Mai had a scare as they headed back down the elevator shaft. They were almost through the four or five-story no-door zone that separated the club from the underground tournament area when the elevator started up below them, rattling towards them. Far more rattling than normal, considering the fact they had stowed the food cart on top of it.

Mai's mind wandered a moment, wondering what would happen if that thing hit the ceiling of the shaft. Would the ceiling of the elevator tram give way, or would some kind of emergency switch happen, or would the cart just be crushed? *It would make an almighty racket whatever happens. Not that it matters right now*, she thought, looking over at Shampoo.

Shampoo nodded, gesturing upwards, and they quickly began to climb up the ladder again, the elevator gaining on them until Mai kicked off, then began to bounce upwards, no longer conserving her energy by going the normal way. Shampoo followed suit, and soon, they were pressing themselves back into the open area between the outer elevator door and where the actual elevator tram would be a floor above where the two of them supposed the club started. *This has got to be the topmost floor below the second dead zone we noticed between the club and the penthouse.*

The elevator doors opened below them, and Mai and Shampoo glanced at one another, communicating nonverbally as to whether or not they should duck into the tram after whoever was moving around, or not. With a shrug of their shoulders, the girls decided to stay put. After what seemed an eternity, the elevator started up, then, with a lurch, began to go back down. The two women waited a second, then followed it back down, breathing sighs of relief.

Dropping down on top of the elevator top, Mai listened intently for a second as the elevator once more began to go below what Mai supposed was street level. It stopped soon

after that, still too high up to be at the VIP level of the arena, let alone where Mai and Shampoo had started their activities.

Making an executive decision, Mai signaled to Shampoo, then removed a panel from the roof of the elevator box, ducking down into it. Around her, four men stood, standing between three gurneys on which three young women lay unconscious. Before any of the men could do anything, Mai was lashing out, her hands full with her fans, slamming him into heads with enough force to crack bone. With the evidence of the slave ring laid out around her, Mai no longer cared to pull her punches and within seconds, three men fell dead.

Shampoo dropped down below her, finishing off the last man, the only one that Mai couldn't quite reach from where she was standing. She grabbed him by the back of the head and hurled him sideways, headfirst into the side of the elevator tram. When he continued to groan afterward, Shampoo thoughtfully did so again and again until he stopped, then dropped him down to the ground.

Mai looked at the girls, opening their mouths and sniffing their breath for a moment. "Drugged, just like we thought." She took a few pictures of them and the faces of the men they'd knocked out, then looked at the open doorway, which led down a utilitarian hallway thoughtfully. "How much you want to bet that hallway takes us to where they're keeping the girls for... out-processing, I guess you could call it?"

In response, Shampoo pulled out her chui and led the way downward. Mai followed fans in both hands, open and ready to either shield or attack of need.

The hallway began to shift into a curve, but as it did, there was a double door. The two girls looked at one another, then Mai shrugged. "I think we're well past the point where we need to be subtle."

Shampoo grinned, then charged forward, lashing out with her mace towards the center of the double doors. Both doors were blasted off their hinges in a welter of shrapnel, which slammed into several men on the other side of the door.

Two of them were dressed similarly to the men in the elevator they'd already dealt with: good suits, a uniform of a kind that was probably for the strip club or whatever it was. The other two were wearing full-body kevlar and had machine guns strapped over their chests.

It didn't matter as all four of them went down screaming as pieces of wood slammed into them. Not hard enough to kill, but certainly hard enough to bruise, and in a few cases, maim, tearing off an ear here, and slamming into a thigh with enough force to nearly take the man's leg off. Mai followed up, slamming her fan down one after another into their heads with enough force to give them each a concussion, leaving them to bleed out or whatever on the floor as she looked around the area.

The room was large, rectangular, with nothing on the walls or anything, looking much like an underground warehouse. In two rows to either side of the doorway, which made Mai very thankful that Shampoo's attack hadn't created too wide an arc of shrapnel, were eight other girls. All of them were unconscious, laid out on individual gurneys just like the ones that they had seen in the elevator.

Counting them quickly, Mai pulled out the list they'd found on the chef or whatever he had been, eyes flicking down it rapidly. "We're missing four of the girls with plus signs next to their name. Do you think they're further down the hallway, delivered to specific people, maybe?"

The two girls had worked out earlier that besides the plus signs, one of the destinations was mentioned beside eleven names. The other four each had individual destinations. Well, Mai and Shampoo's assumed names had also been on the list, complete with plus signs next to them, but no destination just yet. *I'd guess if we had been fed that knockout drug, we'd have ended up here.*

"The Triad must keep these girls for themselves, the others must have been bought by customers that could take delivery of them right here," Shampoo spat both those terms out like they left a bad taste in her mouth, shaking her head.

Mai nodded, flicking out the camera. The two girls spent barely a minute taking pictures of everything, then raced out the door, heading further around the curve of the hallway. That curve led upwards, and soon, they found themselves facing another door, although this one looked more like the door to a garage.

In front of it were two more men, both of them armed with machine guns. They stared at the two girls, and one of them quickly pulled up his gun and began to fire without even shouting at them to surrender or anything like that.

The other whipped out a radio, but Mai's hurled Shadow Fan slammed into his hand before he could finish pulling the radio up even as Mai's real fan began to deflect the bullets, while Shampoo did the same with her chui somewhat desperately. Despite the almost comical size of the chain's head, it didn't exactly work as a shield, forcing both of them to fall back a bit. Neither of them was willing to test to see if they were machine gun proof like Ranma had with pistols the night before, but luckily, the gunman's aim was high, aiming for their heads and letting the girls get used to the rhythm.

Grimacing, the man who had lost his radio pulled up his own gun, at which point Mai, instead of continuing on the defensive, hurled a fan forward, the fan becoming a fireball in midair. Shampoo rushed forward behind it as both men ducked to one side. The fireball's appearance startled them enough that they stopped firing for a second.

Before they could start up again, the fireball slammed into the garage door behind them, dissipating on the metal, and Shampoo was close enough to reach them. The chui crashed into one man's head, shattering his skull and sending him dead to the floor, while her other kick took the other man in the side, hurling him into the wall.

However, the sound of this fight had carried through the door.

As Mai opened it, and Shampoo prepared to race through, she was forced to duck to the side as a hail of gunfire met them from several dozen men standing behind or in front of various limousines, expensive-looking cars, and a few trucks. The men had taken up positions facing the door, putting the various vehicles between them and the loading bay, or whatever it was.

"The four missing girls!" Shampoo shouted. "They've got to be in one of those cars, right?"

"Probably. The question is, how are we going to get close with these fuckers!?" Mai shot back, ducking again as a bullet spanked off the side of where she had been hiding to one side of the garage door. The gunmen had pinned the two women down and were too far away for any but Mai's long-range attacks to reach and firing too quickly for them to try to overcome.

Experimentally, Mai hurled a shadow fan along the floor without looking, trying to aim from memory under the nearest car. She missed and cursed. "Either we need to work more on toughness training so we can absorb bullets like that, or we need to figure out some kind of long-range attack."

Shampoo grabbed the machine gun from one of the two men they'd previously taken out, blind firing back towards the men deeper into what she recognized now as some kind of underground parking lot. "Needs must."

Grimacing, Mai did the same, but neither of them had much experience with guns, and their aim was necessarily bad anyway, thanks to needing to stay undercover. Worse for the pair of them, Mai knew that all of this activity would probably have already been communicated to the Triad.

However, once more, the noise of this firefight carried. This time that helped the two beleaguered martial artists. Upstairs, in the official parking lot for the strip club named Delightful Dreams, five trucks full of riot police had arrived and were hurrying into the club alongside Chun Li's task force of eighty policemen. They were followed by two platoons of People's Republic Army infantrymen. Among them, Chun Li strode along with several specialists trained to look for hidden doors, override elevators and various electronic security experts.

However, even as several of the infantry officers barked orders, Chun Li held up her hand. "What's that noise?"

All the officers also paused before their eyes widened at the sound of gunfire, muted but still audible. None of them were exactly experienced, but they had all been in training games before and could recognize the sound.

“Where is that coming from?!” Chun Li barked. “Spread out. It can’t be coming from that far away.”

Moments later, several of the policemen figured out the sound was coming from an area set to one side of the entryway into the underground parking area. The sound seemed to come from an area about a single car’s length across, and when the specialists began to work on it, they found it was only a thin layer of concrete. “Probably attached to a pulley or winch system to move it out of the way, either back into a recess or up like a hatch,” one of the men reported.

Moving backward, Chun Li made room for one of the bomb experts, who placed a small satchel charge on top of the area indicated and then ordered everyone away. The satchel charge exploded, and the concrete entryway shattered, the pieces falling down onto a slope heading further downward.

“One platoon of infantry with me,” Chun Li ordered. “Officer Shen, you are in charge of taking over the club. Make sure that none of the clientele escape. We’ll question them all as well as any workers.”

The infantry officers grumbled about how the policewoman was taking charge and putting a platoon of them under another police officer. Despite that, half the infantry followed the gorgeous woman down and onto a ramp leading further downward, coming out moments later onto a second, hidden parking area and into a firefight.

The gangsters were to a man caught completely flat-footed. Worse for them, the infantry opened up on them even as Chun Li shouted, “Police, freeze!”

The Infantrymen were not on this mission to take prisoners; they were there to add heavy firepower to the police force and Major Heider had been clear on his orders to them. If anyone was armed, they were to be put on the ground. He didn’t care so much about political points or getting credit. When the major had seen the list of possible crimes and atrocities the Triad in Hong Kong had been doing, he just wanted them shut down hard.

As the hail of fire washed over them, the surviving gangsters tried to turn, but they’d all been facing towards the entryway deeper into the underground base, and more fell quickly. Those that didn’t, fell to the ground, tossing their guns away and holding their hands above them, all fight going out of them at the sudden reversal.

In return, the infantry began to slacken fire, and the police with them charged breaking into groups of two to arrest the various gangsters, although Chun Li broke off from doing that when she spotted Mai and Shampoo sticking their heads out from either side of the garage door

leading deeper inward. She hurried over to the other women and began a quick back-and-forth, which ended with her shouting up a fire team of infantry to go with her. That one would secure the high-rise apartment complex where Shampoo and Mai had taken pictures of the antiquities and relics with a few policemen. This left enough people there to control the hidden parking area and the prisoners, while a runner was sent back upstairs to call in still more police, pulling them from Shen's forces.

The first fire team and Chun Li would follow Shampoo and Mai down into the tournament area, hopefully, to capture all of the VIPs before they could somehow rabbit despite the influx of police into the building above them.

OOOOOOO

Both the pair of fighters and most of the crowd in the amphitheater were completely ignorant of what was going on above their heads. A few of the rich moguls in the special VIP booths weren't once the firefight in the hidden parking area began, though. These men and a few women quickly began to try to escape, while others, even a few in the mid-tier area, did the same, turning around and heading towards exits.

Those in the VIP booths, alas for them, would not succeed in this. They instead ran right into Chun Li and her force.

Back on the floor of the amphitheater, Ken noticed this mass exodus and wondered if that meant the police had arrived. Around him, the majority of the crowd didn't seem to be responding, though, their attention glued to the fight going on.

One other man was also aware of what was going on. The same blonde that had been staring so hard at Shampoo and Mai's fights whenever they had been in the arena had been watching the battle between the pigtailed unknown and Ryuji with an almost lazy air to him even as the battle continued to escalate.

That attention wavered as a buzz went off in his pocket. Reaching in, he pulled out a small, extremely high-tech-looking radio. Surreptitiously hiding it in his hand, he held it up to an ear, then just as calmly put it back, stood up, then made his way towards the door for the mid-tier VIPs, joining several other men there.

While my face is on no police file, it is best I abscond from here, and be caught in the club above, if that. I believe that the police are about to take care of one of my missions in the city. Which will leave me only one more to accomplish. Excellent, the killer known as the Spaniard to the Triad thought, flipping his long blonde ponytail back over his shoulder, thinking of the two beauties that had been in the tournament, as well as the beauty whose life, like a rose in a garden, he would pluck shortly.

None of this mattered to Ryuji and Ranma.

For more than thirty minutes, Ranma and Ryuji had gone at it hammer and tongs, the second-longest fight of the night so far, with only Birdie and Ryu's fight having gone longer. However, it was only Ranma who was showing the strain. Ryuji's simple toughness and physical abilities were simply on a whole other level than Ranma's. He was all instinct, no style, nothing Ranma could grab at to gain an advantage, and he seemed as at home at fighting an aerial opponent as he would have a ground-based one, negating a large advantage Ranma had over many of the other tough opponents he faced. Ryuji's general toughness had also forced Ranma to use his ki far more profligately than he had ever had to do before to keep up with him. His rope dart had been used a few times, gleaming blue as it stabbed towards one of Ryuji's eyes, but only getting a gash along the side of Ryuji's brow, which bled profusely.

The blood from that wound closed that eye, admittedly, yet even the pain of that strike and the bleeding was negligible to Ryuji. He simply began to laugh loudly, almost manically as they continued to fight.

For his part, Ranma knew that he was only still in this fight because of his ki healing. His durability was largely overcome by this point, and each new strike that got through broke bones. He could feel his ki wavering now, and Ranma knew he was starting to slow down, starting to falter. Ranma could lift a car, punch through a foot of metal and move faster than most people would be able to see. Yet Ryuji was faster, stronger and more durable than him. *This fucker is a monster!*

This beatdown was made even worse by the fact that Ryuji hadn't even taken his other hand out of his pocket yet. He was literally beating Ranma into a paste with one arm almost tied behind his back!

In return, Ranma wasn't without tricks, and he'd made Ryuji pay for it. One eye was useless thanks to the wound to Ryuji's forehead yet it was on the other side of the hand he refused to use. He was also limping a little from a few strikes to the knee and thigh, and Ranma had thought he felt a rib break, but he wasn't certain. None of which was slowing Ryuji down enough to give Ranma an advantage.

Yet even as he was rocked by another blow to the face that broke his jaw and hurled him backward and up into the side of the cage, Ranma was still thinking. Still analyzing and still planning.

Kicking off the wall, he rolled underneath the kick combo that Ryuji launched his way, then ducked to one side as Ryuji launched a punch down towards him, a punch which became a grab which Ranma dodged. He slammed several blows into Ryuji's stomach, chest and side before flipping backward, catching him with a spin kick to the jaw.

None of this seemed to matter to Ryuji, even as he lost a tooth to the kick. He simply laughed through every hit, punching out and then landing another blow to Ranma's chest as he came out of the spin kick. "Hahahahaha!"

Ranma was hurled backward again, only this time he couldn't land as gracefully, slamming back first into the bottom of one of the cage's walls, blood bursting out of his mouth as he hit, ribs broken and something inside bursting. Even as he felt his ki healing go to work overtime, Ranma was forced to roll aside from a stomp that shattered the concrete where his head had been a moment ago. Getting to his feet was tough, and he took several more blows on his forearms and elbows that broke bones in turn before a strong strike got through that sent him stumbling again, more ribs breaking.

This time, Ryuji didn't follow up, and Ranma's next attack flashed through where he had thought Ryuji would be. The sight of the minuscule ki attack, barely the size of Ranma's fist, caused Ryuji to laugh wildly. "This has been fun, kid. But it's time for you to die! You challenged this lion in his jungle a little too early."

Ranma snarled, gathering himself up for one more trick as he felt his ribs refusing to knit together as they should, his ki so depleted his body could no longer heal itself. Blood dripped from numerous cuts, including one from his side where a broken rib was sticking out. "I'm, I'm still standing, asshole!"

Ryuji bellowed laughter and charged forwards, a haymaker slamming into Ranma's chest. Yet even if it did, for once, for the first time the fight, Ryuji's instincts failed him. Ryuji should've pulled his punch back. He should've wondered why Ranma didn't try to block that blow or redirect it as he had so often or even dodge, as he had done far more often. Instead, he simply stood there, thrusting his chest out at the precise moment that the punch crashed into it, concentrating internally. "Undertow!"

This was a technique Ranma had been working on since talking to Jubei about his Blue Burst while Shampoo was trying to cheer up Mai after she and Andy had officially ended things. That technique, as he and Jubei had agreed, was actually performing three different functions: one, stealing ki from his opponent; two, drawing in from the world around Ranma, and three, allowing the accumulated ki out in a wild burst. This time, Ranma concentrated, and, faced with an opponent he had no hope of beating in a normal fight, he broke the technique down in a way that would have taken true masters of the Art weeks to do, if they could even think of doing so in the first place. In addition, used only one portion of it at a time.

Ranma's internal ki acted as a siphon almost, reaching out to grab at Ryuji's own ki at the point of contact. This acted almost like a magnet pulling at another magnet, locking the two combatants together.

It held Ryuji there, the power of his punch dissipating into Ranma's body, doing nothing, simply strengthening that connection, holding Ryuji there. Scowling, Ryuji wondered what Ranma had done and tried to pull his punch back while simultaneously lifting a leg to kick at Ranma. The kick was blocked by Ranma's hand, and his other fist came down hard, slamming into Ryuji's calf.

Ryuji couldn't lift his fist away from Ranma's chest, and Ranma grinned like a tiger, pushing forward so that Ryuji's arm bent slightly, letting Ranma into his own punching range as his hands and feet began to glow blue-white, Ranma's ki reserves slowly recovering thanks to draining Ryuji's, while Ryuji suddenly became aware of this. Before he could do anything about that or even try to, though, Ranma's first punch slammed into his jaw, followed by several more at Amaguriken speed. "Fucking fall!" Ranma roared.

Growling, as he lost two more teeth and felt a bone in his cheek break, Ryuji finally pulled his second hand out of his pocket, showing that it was not stunted or weak at all. It had simply been an affectation of Ryuji that he had been using it before. Now he did, shouting out, "If you want to go down swinging, Genma, I'm happy to oblige!"

Now he once more began to pummel Ranma, who found himself stuck in place. He was still draining Ryuji of ki, which he seemed to have a nearly bottomless amount of, to heal himself, but in turn, his ability to duck and dodge was sharply curtailed. Not as much as Ryuji's, and he was giving as good as he was getting, but even so, Ryuji was still just tougher and stronger than Ranma. *It's a race, if I can pull enough ki to take away that red aura thing or he can pummel me down despite my ki healing.*

This was the sight that Chun Li, Mai Shampoo and the infantrymen found as they burst into the amphitheater. The group had split again, with two infantrymen and Chun Li moving to secure the Triad members in their VIP booth, having already captured everyone else in the VIP booths and hustled their newest prisoners out back the way they'd come. The others moved with Mai and Shampoo down towards the floor of the amphitheater via the hallway that led past the ladies' changing room.

Now, as Chun Li knocked out the Triad leaders, the fire team of infantrymen on the floor spread out, shouting out, "Surrender!" The two men above them didn't bother with adding their own voices to that, instead firing into the ceiling to emphasize their fellow's words. The PRC troops were more than willing to fire into a crowd of people, especially criminals, but Chun Li had ordered them at least to try to take prisoners first.

Several of the fixers tried to pull out guns, only to be gunned down mercilessly by the police and infantry. As they did, the two infantrymen down on the ground turned their attention onto the fight, only to watch Ryuji twist away from Ranma, still connected by one hand against Ranma's chest.

Since Ryuji had never had any actual training, while he could use his love of fighting to use his frankly monstrous amount of ki, he couldn't do so consciously. To fight against Ranma's Undertow technique, he would have had to do so in order to cut the connection between them.

Yet even with Ranma draining him for five minutes, Ryuji still had **way** more ki than Ranma had at the start of the fight. From his free hand, Ryuji created a wave of crimson energy

but instead of using it on Ranma, he decided that the troopers were more of a threat, sending the crimson wavy their way rather than at his opponent.

Expanding as it flashed out from Ryuji's hand and forearm, the wavelike blast of energy seared through the cage all along one side like a plasma torch before continuing on towards the infantrymen and the three women, as fast as the bullets from the riflemen. When it hit, the blast almost entirely disintegrated several of the infantrymen from the waist up. Thankfully Shampoo and the others behind them were able to duck or leap upwards over the attack, as it continued on until it crashed into the wall of the amphitheater.

The attack was so wide across that it also slew several of the crowd around the entry Shampoo and the rest had come through. That, coupled with the sudden arrival of police above at the other entrances, caused people to finally break out of their delight at the carnage. People instantly began running, diving to the ground, surrendering, or rushing the police in an effort to escape, all while everyone in the crowd seemed to start screaming and more guns began to fire, both from the mobsters and the police.

Taking all this in, with an even more manic laugh than usual, Ryuji turned back to Ranma, his free hand still glowing red. "Sorry to cut this short, but its time for you to die, Genma!"

Ranma had been practically thrashed within the past few minutes of close-in combat. Even as he siphoned off ki from his opponent, his ki healing had barely been able to keep up, and now Ranma's ribs, jaw, and at least one bone in his leg were broken, along with bones in both forearms despite his ki healing, which at least had repaired his innards. Yet still he had stood, concentrating only half on the fisticuffs, the rest of his mind on keeping Ryuji locked in place. While he had come up with the technique, he couldn't do it easily.

Now, Ranma grinned through a bloodied mouth at the older man, using his final trump card. "**Blue Burst!**" he howled, releasing his control of his ki.

Instantly all of the energy within Ranma's body that he had siphoned off of Ryuji blasted outwards, a burst of blue and white energy that looked like a miniature sun going off in every direction with a *FWOOP* sound.

The wave of ki converted to kinetic energy slammed first into the arm that had previously been glued to Ranma first, then the rest of Ryuji's body. As it did, the impact shattered every bone in the arm from his fingers up to his shoulder to the point they exploded out of his arm while his body was hurled away through the air.

"ARGGHH!" Ryuji howled in agony even as he was flung away. Slamming into the cage with far more force than Abigail's hurled wrecking ball head accomplished, he burst through it to crash in among the rapidly fleeing audience.

Ranma stood in the center of the arena, staring after Ryuji for a moment. Then he slumped forward, falling onto his face, completely unconscious, his ki gone, his body finally shutting down.

His opponent, however, wasn't done. Somehow, even though Ryuji's arm was simply a ragged mess of flesh and broken bits of bone barely hanging together, leaking arterial blood everywhere, the Mad Dragon pushed himself to his feet, laughing manically. That same red energy that he had been using throughout the fight coiled around him once more, showing he **still** had ki to spare. "HAHAHah, **magnificent!** Magnificent, punk!"

Reaching into his pocket once more, Ryuji pulled out a dagger, which also began to glow with that evil red energy. A instant later, he lashed out at the people around him, the dagger flaring with energy, sending cutting blades of dark red ki in every direction, killing more than fourteen people as they tried to flee, trampling their fellows to try and get away from him.

At the same time, Ryuji kicked out, smashing two of the fleeing civilians up over the cage towards the two infantrymen that Chun Li had led into the booth he and the rest of the Triad leadership had been in. The bodies slammed into the pair, hurling them off their feet. "Still not enough to take me down, though, Genma! I'm goN--!"

That was as far as he could get before several dozen shadow fans and a hurled chui crashed into him from the front while a Hadoken lashed out from his side, with Ken following up from the other side, his fists glowing blue as he launched himself through the dissipating crowd. Chun Li also flipped upwards and over the cage. Having jumped upwards just as Ryuji sent his makeshift projectiles towards her and the two men with her, she now fell feet first towards the older man, her foot leaving a greenish trail behind it as Chun Li brought it crashing down on top of Ryuji's head. "Kikoshō!"

To her shock, Ryuji took it, not even staggering. He simply grinned manically up at Chun Li around her foot.

He stood there even as the multiple strikes to his head from different angles **finally** overcame him. As the policewoman watched, the mob boss's eyes rolled back in his head, and he lost consciousness, his dagger still clutched in his sole remaining hand.

Although, if that was because of the trio of ki-assisted strikes or blood loss from the wreckage of his arm, Chun Li honestly didn't know nor care. Looking at the wreckage of the people that Ryuji had killed in those few seconds, Chun Li had to fight with herself to care whether or not the man lived or died, let alone what finally knocked him out. "Medic! Get the medic out here," she shouted, fighting back both instinct and desire to just let the man die, her devotion to the law winning over that. "Stabilize him. He's got a lot to answer for, and I'll be damned if he dies from bleeding out before his execution."

And if not, hopefully, we will have picked up some of the other Triad leadership here too, She thought, before turning to stare at where Ranma had collapsed in the arena, seeing Mai and Shampoo hurrying over towards him. *Whatever happens to Ranma and the others, that alone will make this worth it.*

End Chapter

So... yeah. LOTS of action a good amount of romance stuff too. By the time the trio leaves Hong Kong, Mai will be ready or will already have joined the trio.

As for the fights. I didn't want to show all of them. I decided to only show a few for each character, and I didn't want Ranma to fight Ken or Ryu in this tournament. Fighting in front of Oro will help Ranma and his opponent a lot more. I know some of the characters were less impressive than they would be in SF or KoF canon, but I figured that since they are a few years younger, that made a bit of sense.

Ryuji VS Ranma. Ranma was very much NOT winning this fight. He simply had a really nasty trick Ryuji could not counter or overcome. Without the distraction, Ryuji would have won. If Ryuji had taken him seriously from the start, Ryuji would have won. Without the others getting to him fast enough, Ryuji would have killed Ranma. It's a loss, and Ranma will know this when he wakes up.