

I do not own DC – I at least try to be consistent and upbeat, nor am I Rumiko Takahashi. I can write romance without thinking I'm catching cooties or something.

A Journey Gone Astray (Temp Name)

This fic has been around for a long while on my Patty on page, where it will, by the time you see this, have four chapters. Yes, it just updated due to ATP coming to an end, finally, along with Making Waves. Next to be pushed to the finish line will be **FILFy**, starting in September... I hope.

Those of you familiar with the lore will note that I am making a hash of much of Wonder Woman's history (I am not the first to do so) and Ranma's timeline. I make him older when meeting Ukyo and make him older again when he learns Neko-ken too. I will state now, as it doesn't come up in this chapter, that I do something similar to the origins of Captain Marvel.

Wonder Woman's absence from the world serves a purpose, because I really don't want to even try to mention a lot of the older heroes from the Justice Society of America, and my reasoning for the changes to Captain Marvel's background is even easier: his origin(s) suck and are too corny to use. Hence, I will come up with something else in the future. The same can be said for Cassie Sandsmark, whose origin I also mangle to a certain degree.

I am also not going to try to follow DC Prime Earth or any of the other known 'timelines'. The reasoning there is few of them make sense and this fic isn't a fix-everything fic like ATP evolved into. This fic is to A) have fun, B) world build lite, C) cause chaos in DC. I am **not** going to follow the DC timelines, nor will I try to introduce **anything** like the number of characters I have in ATP, except possibly in passing, like the 'enemy of the week' variety.

So if you want to point out I am wrong about something or other, or about how the Justice League was built or anything like that, keep my goals in mind LOL.

This has also not been edited over much and is NOT the final chapter. I will be sending it and the other chapters to Hiryo to go over, updating them on Patty on. I am posting this here because, as stated above, it's rejoined the Ranma poll rotation. When it wins, I will post a chapter here. Yes, this means that the chapters over on Patty on will almost certainly remain ahead of what is available here.

And if any HP fans, head on over to AO3. I've updated King of Champions **and** Death's Avenger.

Despite it not being the final chapter, though, I hope you all enjoy this!

Edit 9/25/25 – This chapter has no had the **Hiryo** touch, and been Grammarlied.

Oh, and just so everyone is clear:

BOLD – emphasis

Italics - thoughts.

Italicsized underlined – vessel names.

//something// - a spoken language that someone in the conversation can't understand.

Chapter 1: Strange Tides Bear Even Stranger Flotsam

"I still don't get it, Pops. Why the heck are we takin' Ucchan's food cart? Are they going to meet us later or something?" From his perch on the top of a traditional yatai, a food cart, eight-year-old Ranma suddenly beamed. With a move that was far too fluid and fearless for a young boy, Ranma hopped off the cart's roof and landed on his father's large shoulder, patting the man's bandana-covered head. "I know! You told 'em you'd help them move it since his dad's sick, and we're gonna meet up later, right?"

His feet moving faster than most could have followed as he kept them racing away from the camp they had shared with the Kuonjis, Genma had opened his mouth to shout at the boy, fully aware of the shouting, annoyed Ukyo trying to catch up to them on her short, young legs behind them. But now he just smiled, grinning happily at his boy. *Perfect!* "That's right, son. Unfortunately, the Kuonjis are too proud, and Ukyo just doesn't want to admit they need help."

Ranma nodded at that with a grin. He knew Ucchan, and that made a lot of sense to him. *Heck, he's way too proud to admit defeat despite all the times I've beaten him, so I can have some okonomiyaki. Then again, taking some okonomiyaki after I beat him always makes it taste better anyway,* he chortled to himself. "Right. Where are we going to meet them, Pops?"

"You'll see, my boy, let me have some secrets," Genma said, and then his eyes hardened as he gestured back to the cart with one hand, the other still holding onto the cart's pole. "Now get back to your balance practice."

"Right, Pops," Ranma said, hopping back onto the cart with the same ease he'd leaped to his father's shoulder, uncaring of the fact, it was several yards above the ground in a way no eight-year-old should ever have been able to show. But Ranma was not a normal eight-year-old. He turned, balancing easily on one foot right at the tip of the yatai's roof, waving behind him. "Bye, Ucchan!! We'll see you soon! Hope your dad gets better!"

As they sped out of sight, Ukyo stumbled to a halt, gasping and still shouting, her voice lost in the wind of Genma's speed and the rattle of the cartwheels to Ranma's ears. "Get back here, you jackasses!"

Behind her, her father came around the corner and wheezed to a halt, staring past her at the two thieves, looking far worse for wear than his daughter. "Dammit! I should never have trusted Genma! Curse the Anything Goes School, they've always played fast and loose with other people's property."

"What are we going to do, Papa? Not only did they leave, but they stole our yatai," Ukyo questioned before pausing. "What the heck is that about anyway? It ain't like either of them can cook. That's why Ran-ch...Ranma was always sniffing around for meals."

Wincing, Umami Kuonji thought for a moment, both about how to answer his daughter's question and what to do about this betrayal in his weakened state. *Damn Genma, he was supposed to take Ukyo with him, not just the yatai! It's clear now that he never intended to honor our agreement!*

In one million universes, Ukyo's father would have told his daughter that stealing the car like that meant that she would have to be the one to get it back. That it was a sign that the Saotomes had stolen her dowry after Umami had promised her hand to Ranma, on pain of never becoming a true woman again. Left behind by her fiancé and a father whose illness would soon take a turn for the worse, Ukyo would be doomed to eight years of cross-dressing and other attempts to set aside her femininity in her quest for vengeance.

In this one, perhaps jarred out of that reflexive decision to place the blame entirely on the Saotomes without actually doing anything himself by Ukyo's shift in address, Umami chose a far more prosaic response. It wasn't one that most martial artists would have thought of, but with his livelihood currently being carried away through the night, it really was the only way Umami could reach that could help solve the problem in the near future.

"We're going to call the police, daughter mine. Martial artists might not like to resort to that, but at times like this, it's necessary. Come on," he murmured, picking up Ukyo and setting her on his shoulder.

"...But if the cops catch up to 'em, what's going to happen to Ranma?" Ukyo asked hesitantly, frowning a little.

Her father frowned at that. "Showing sympathy now?"

"Yeah, to put up with his old man," Ukyo blustered, before going on more worriedly with something near and dear to her heart. "How the heck are they going to be able to eat anyway?"

Her father boomed in laughter at that, before becoming serious. "Don't worry, if all goes according to my hopes, we can just convince the courts to give **us** Ranma instead. But first, they have to be caught."

A day and a half later, Ranma frowned a little as he cocked his head, staring at where his father was arguing with several police officers. While young, Ranma knew that the police were good guys, if a little too nosy. Why they were arguing with his Pops and gesturing to the now-empty Kuonji yatai, he didn't know. Curious, he inched closer, listening intently.

"And I tell you, he gave it to me as a dowry! His young daughter and my son are supposed to marry when they come of age," Genma blustered.

Why the old man was calling Ukyo Mr. Kuonji's daughter, Ranma didn't know. *I thought daughter was just another name for a girl. But Ukyo's a guy, right? So am I wrong about what daughter means?*

"Mr. Kuonji reported the cart stolen, sir. If you are so certain that he gave it to you, show us the paperwork," one of the officers barked back, tapping his truncheon's handle where it rested in his belt. "If not, we'll have to take both you and the cart back to clear this mess up."

"And I'm telling you, I don't have the paperwork any longer. I sent it ahead to our place of residence in Tokyo," Genma growled back.

"Then call ahead and get it sent back," the police officer answered firmly. "Until then, you're not going anywhere."

Genma tried to prevaricate, tried to complain about how that would look, but the officers didn't let up. *Damn it, I should never have stayed here this long. But that dojo master, his ideas on training the boy's hand-eye coordination were too good. And his wife's food is too good too.*

Finally, Genma nodded, knowing what he had to do now. "Very well, take the wretched thing. It's been slowing us down anyway."

"Returning the property is only one part of it, sir. Stealing it in the first place is a crime too, you know," the policeman answered tartly, before Genma's hands blurred. That policeman crumpled to the ground after a single punch that doubled him over.

The watching Ranma could relate. His Pop's fists **hurt!**

The other policeman tried to bring his truncheon up towards Genma's face, but Ranma could've told him it was useless. Genma simply blocked the blow and returned a slap to the face that sent the man flying back, unconscious.

That was enough for Ranma, and he ran forward towards his father. "Pops, what's going on? Why did those cops talk to you like that? What's a dowry? Why did you call Ukyo a daughter?!"

"Enough chattering, boy," Genma growled, grabbing Ranma and placing him over his shoulder as he raced away, leaving the cart behind.

"But what about the cart? I thought we were supposed to meet up with Ucchan again!" Ranma demanded, still trying to get his mind wrapped around what was happening, even as his head bounced off his father's back, trying hard not to breathe in. *Essh, Pops is really stinky today. When the heck was the last time he washed this gi?*

Like any eight-year-old, Ranma's attention span was limited, but this mystery kept him asking Genma question after question as they ran. Then other police appeared, shouting for Genma to stand down, to surrender himself.

Genma didn't bother listening, but Ranma did, and slowly, his eyes narrowed. "P, Pops! Did you steal that cart?!" he shouted, with all of the anger and righteous indignation a child could possess.

The older Saotome didn't answer, busy running through the streets away from the police, grumbling under his breath so low that even Ranma couldn't hear. "Ungrateful bastard! Here I try to pledge my son to him in good faith, and he goes to the police of all things when I decide to take the dowry ahead of time? I swear, no one has any respect for wandering martial artists anymore."

Not hearing any reply to his question, Ranma got his father's attention in the tried and tested Saotome manner: by punching Genma as hard as he could. Of course, hard for an eight-year-old wasn't much, but he kept on punching and kicking Genma's back until the older man growled out, "Stop that, boy! I'm trying to concentrate. The port has to be around here somewhere..."

Above them, thunder began as a storm rolled in, but Ranma ignored it and the patter of rain coming down as he continued to punch his father's back and shoulders. "Answer me, Pops! Ucchan's my friend! Why would you steal from him, er, her, or Old Man Kuonji?!"

"I did it for you, boy! Or did you notice how well we ate yesterday? All that food in the cart served us well, didn't it?" Genma barked back, before smirking. "Besides, I asked you which you preferred, Ukyo or okonomiyaki, and you chose the food."

As he spoke, Genma couldn't see Ranma's face scrunching up in fury, but he certainly felt the little fists going into overtime on his back, as his son shouted out, "No! That's not right. Fighting for food is fine, stealing it isn't, and stealing the yatai is just wrong! That cart's like, like their dojo, you don't steal someone's dojo!"

Growling again, Genma was about to reach back and toss the boy to the concrete to make him walk, but then a high-pressure water hose lashed out from a side street where the police had set up a barricade in an effort to corral him. Rolling with the strike, Genma turned,

seeing that the police had called in a riot squad tank, its high-pressure water cannon now tracking them. Genma leaped up and over the arc of the water, landing and continuing on his way, reading the signs as he passed and making for the port. *Time to move on, I guess. Pity, I was looking forward to dinner.*

Soon, Genma saw the port ahead of him and grinned even as lightning boomed. Yet at the same time, Ranma had resumed his attacks on Genma's back. "Forget it, boy! What's done is done. And you want to be the best martial artist, don't you? To do that, you need to be prepared to sacrifice a few things, like friends. And maybe, look at what is really stealing and what isn't."

He tossed Ranma forward headfirst into the small boat, then hopped in after him, grabbing up the paddles. He began to row forward strongly, soon leaving the wharves behind. *Now, if that tap gave the boy a concussion, maybe we can put all this behind us.*

But no more than a few hours later, just as Honshu appeared in the distance, Ranma recovered. Instantly, he hopped to his feet in the boat and began to jump up and down with each word, angrier and more frustrated than he had ever been in his young life, and not knowing how to deal with it as tears appeared in his small eyes. "What the hell, Pops! Where... Grah!!! You, you've always been talking about honor this and honor that, and the martial arts masters you've taken me to always talk about the same thing. But now you say I should look the other way when you steal?! That's not right! Take us back!"

Thunder boomed in the distance, and Genma took a second to realize that maybe putting to sea in this kind of weather was not a good idea. Especially with the boy jumping around like he was. "Stop that boy, you're going to have us over!"

"Take us back! Take us back!" Ranma wailed, continuing to hop up and down like a mad rabbit in the middle of the boat.

"And run right into the police after getting away clean?" Genma scoffed. "If I did that, our training journey would end far too soon. No, we'll keep going. Besides, running away from the police is also a time-honored tradition of our school. So maybe you can look at this as some kind of advanced..."

Genma's words were drowned out by a peal of thunder, which struck from out of the air to crash into the waves nearby, followed by a wave that nearly had them up and over. The next one did have the boat tipping onto its side, dumping both Saotomes into the water.

The balding martial artist clung to the boat, but Ranma couldn't grab on in time. He was flung out into the dark ocean, disappearing underwater before Genma could see where he landed. "Boy!?"

For a few moments, Genma stared through the rain and waves toward where his son had been, pulling the raft behind him as he moved in that direction. But he couldn't see him. "SHIT! BOY!!!" Genma bellowed. "Ranma! Where are you? **Ranma!**"

Yet for all his shouting, Genma heard no response. Staring around as his grip tightened to the point the raft's side began to crack under his arm, Genma tried to think, then stared ahead of them. Honshu. Ranma could see Honshu out there. *If he couldn't see me or... or is too angry to want to accept my help, he'll make for land. Although what he'll do then... well, the brat doesn't know enough to make it on his own, and if he goes to the police, it might just let me find him faster.*

The next few days would prove Genma to be very wrong. For days, Genma kept up the search, but there was no sign of his son. Despite this, Genma didn't give up hope. His boy was too tough to die like that. That was what he kept telling himself as he kept searching as the days turned into weeks. He stayed in the area, always on the lookout for news, always staying out of sight of the authorities, just in case the police had called ahead, hoping the boy would show up somehow.

And as for Ranma? Ranma's journey had just taken a marked detour.

OOOOOOO

The first thing Ranma heard when he slowly started to regain consciousness was a female voice. The voice sounded confused but also annoyed, yet he could still tell it was that of a woman. That was about all he could say, since the words themselves made no sense to him, not being in Japanese.

That voice and the ones who followed were actually speaking ancient Greek, but Ranma had no way of knowing that. Nor how much trouble he was in currently

"//You know the rules, sister! Any male who washes up on our shore is to be killed. We Amazons must remain separate. That is the word of the gods themselves, and that is why in the centuries since we retreated from Man's World, there have only been a handful of such instances.//"

"//All right, you do it then,//" another female voice said as Ranma slowly became aware he was lying on sand and that it was a lot warmer out now than it had been during the storm. "//I'm not going to do it. Male he might be, but he is just a child! He can't be more than eight or seven at best.//"

The first voice fell silent at that, and a third voice spoke up, sounding a bit more thoughtful than the others, like some of the martial arts masters as they thought through their critiques on his style. "//No child has **ever** washed up on our shores, male or female. Could it be that seeing his innocence, Lord Poseidon decided not to claim him?//"

Another silence followed as Ranma shifted his legs lightly, realizing his body felt okay. *I don't know what they're saying. Where am I? Best to keep quiet, play dead for now until someone starts talking in Japanese.*

After a few seconds, the silence ended as the three voices let out loud snorts, chuckling, “//No.//”

“//Indeed not. The Lord of the Deeps is not known to look kindly upon anyone in his domain, innocent or no,//” a fourth voice intoned. It sounded as if the woman was trying to make herself sound like those teachers Ranma had occasionally been forced to listen to when he was forced to go to that weird school place. “//No, chance alone somehow contrived to bring this child here.//”

“//That's all well and good,//” the first voice said, somewhat waspishly. “//But what should we do with him?//”

Ranma didn't like the sound of that voice, and as that thought hit him, so too did the memory of the storm he'd survived come back to Ranma. As it did, he wondered where his old man was. *Maybe I should've listened to him when he told me to sit still, but he and me are still gonna have a talk about Ucchan's yatai.*

With that thought, he groaned, sat up and looked up at the speakers, blinking in confusion, the sunlight beating down on him. Around him stood four women staring down at him. All of them wore armor and held weapons, spears and swords for the most part, although one had a bow and arrow. The armor looked cool, although much like the revelation with Ukyo, seeing women carrying weapons was kind of weird. *Didn't Pops always say women are weak? Why're they carrying weapons?*

The four women all had different colored hair done up in different styles. One had very short red hair, so short that Ranma could only see a frizz of it from underneath her helmet. Another had long brown hair going down to her rear, and Ranma wondered why anyone would want it that long. *Wouldn't it get in the way in a fight?*

The other two were a little more normal, although one had silver hair. Ranma always thought silver hair was a sign of old age, but he couldn't see any wrinkles on her, and she stood as straight as the others. *Weird.*

Ranma's suddenly sitting up seemed to have stunned the quartet of women, and Ranma waved at them. “Hi, I don't suppose you know where my Pops is, would you? I got a bit of a bone to pick with him.”

“//Huh, he doesn't speak Greek,//” one of the women muttered.

“//Obviously not! Look at him, he looks like an Oriental. Like Sister Rei Fan.//”

“//Still, if we can’t understand him, and he’s awake now, we should probably take him to see the Queen.//” With that, the speaker twirled her spear until the butt end was facing towards the child, then thrust it out, intending to hook his neckline with it.

She succeeded in this, but Ranma then grabbed onto the stick, scowling at her. “Hey, that’s not nice.”

Twisting away so that the butt of the spear left his clothing, Ranma leaped over the startled woman, landing on the sand beyond the semicircle, taking a brief second to take in the amazing view all around. This place made any beach Ranma had ever seen look boring in comparison, with tons of rocks, lots of white sand, and what looked like a jungle deeper inland.

Blinking, the spear wielder whirled and, without thinking, thrust her spearhead towards him. This caused the other three to shout out, “//Agni!//”

But Ranma dodged, made a face at her, his hands by his ears as he waggled them and stuck his tongue out. “Neh, neh, you’re too slow!”

“//I do believe he’s insulting you,//” one of the other women said with a laugh, her shock disappearing into amusement.

The short-haired girl, however, was too serious to take part in such frivolities. “//Oh, let me.//” With that, she too thrust her spear butt towards Ranma’s legs, intending to trip the child up.

Ranma hopped up, landed on it, then hopped up again, and landed on top of her head. She grunted very slightly as Ranma wasn’t yet a master of redistributing his weight, so it could not be felt and stumbled a bit as Ranma perched there. “Heh, nice view up here.”

A second later, Ranma was off, as one of the others whirled around, bringing her sword up and arcing towards Ranma. The flat part admittedly, but Ranma’s movements had shifted the women’s perception of him. No longer was he just a child in their eyes. Rather, he was someone who could be a threat.

Ranma hopped over their heads again and then raced off towards the nearby forest. “All right, you meanies, I’ll just find Pops myself!”

The women made to race after him, but by the time they reached the jungle, Ranma was gone. There weren’t even any footprints left; it was as if the jungle had swallowed him.

“What was that?” Agni murmured. “I mean, a young child moving like that? It wasn’t natural.”

"I agree about the 'what.' It certainly wasn't a child, not moving like that," the short-haired woman answered grimly. "The boy might be some kind of, of sending of the war god, Ares."

"I don't know, Danica. He didn't attack us. The youth seemed more concerned about protecting himself. If he were an avatar of Ares, would he not be thinking about violence rather than escape?" the long-haired woman answered, frowning thoughtfully.

"Regardless, we need to find him. Come on! Spread out and find a trail. Someone so small surely can't have gone far."

However, the speaker was very wrong in this assumption. Ranma could indeed go quite a way, and finding the tracks of a small child jungle of their island was not easy. After some time spent going in different directions, the four scouts came back together, all of them reporting they hadn't spotted a single track.

"One of us has to go tell the Queen, while the others report to the company commander," Danica muttered, annoyed.

"What should we tell them? That he's a boy, or he's a threat?" Agni answered.

"That, I don't know. Just tell them what happened, I suppose. Let the higher-ups make the decisions."

All three of the women around Danica nodded at that, and after a few short finger games, they had decided on who would tell the Queen. Another was quickly chosen to head to the nearby garrison, where a small company of Amazons was stationed to react to threats from the sea. Meanwhile, the others went back to their current duty of patrolling the beach.

High above them, Ranma watched the four women talking, trying to figure out what they were saying as he clung to a tree branch. Glancing to one side, he looked over at a giant boa constrictor he was sharing the tree with. The snake was eyeing him speculatively, but Ranma showed no fear, as he stated, "It's like what my Pops always says. People don't look up."

He shrugged his shoulders, then, just as the snake decided that yes, this little creature would make a good snack, Ranma leaped away, bouncing off through the forest like a monkey. He even made the monkey noises, grinning to himself as he played. Being in the air like this, moving like this, that was why he loved martial arts so much. For all the pain and bruises that training gave him, moments like this made it all worthwhile. "Now let's go exploring like the monkeys do, ook, ook!"

For the rest of that day and into the night, Ranma explored the jungle, grabbing up the odd fruit he found occasionally, eating it and moving on. He saw a few actual monkeys, a few of whom tried to chase after him, but Ranma left them behind quickly. And thanks to his training,

Ranma only fell a few dozen times and was always able to catch himself before hitting the ground.

But just like falling off a fence or a rooftop, this didn't stop Ranma from getting right back up and continuing on. Even the bumps and bruises he took didn't stop Ranma from grinning and getting right back up and trying again. He only stopped at a waterfall or a particularly awesome-looking tree. Ranma just loved nature too much, and this was just fun.

"Still, if I'm not in Japan, where am I? It looks like I am near the middle of the world, what did that one sensei call it... the equa something?" Ranma murmured, leaning back against a tree trunk and biting into a pear. "But those women, were they martial artists? The police and the rest of the normies don't use swords or spears these days, right?"

He cocked his head thoughtfully, then shrugged and, deciding that the moss was a nice enough bed, leaned back and closed his eyes. One thing his father had taught him was to always sleep whenever he could. He'd also said that in the woods, sleeping more often but in smaller clumps was a better idea. The young boy had already had one heck of a day. Thus, Ranma was asleep within minutes and slept for several hours uninterrupted.

The next day, Ranma's stomach started to rumble, and he decided to start scavenging for food before continuing on his exploration, still completely entranced by the jungle. While a part of him knew he should be searching for his father, the young boy was having too much fun just exploring his new environment for that, and wanted to keep doing so.

As he went, Ranma didn't realize he'd been going uphill for a while until he stopped staring ahead of him. There, the forest changed, going from a jungle to a forest, the trees and terrain changing. Ranma didn't realize the change was a little too abrupt to be wholly natural, but he could certainly see the trees starting to change.

Around midday, the first sign of civilization appeared in the form of a road. From where Ranma came out of the forest, it led around the hill over the horizon in either direction. One way seemed to angle further up toward a mountain, while the other way seemed to go kind of back the way Ranma had come, but in a wide circle. On the other side of the road, the forest gave way to tall grass.

"Hmm... follow the road or go across it?" Ranma gently hopped in place for a moment, then shrugged, closed his eyes and, ignoring the voice in the back of his mind telling him to find his father with ease. This island was too cool to care about his father. He twirled in place. "Eeny, meeny, miney..."

Ranma's deliberations were interrupted at that point by the sound of metal striking metal reaching him from the right. It was accompanied by cries of pain and louder, more warlike roars from both women and something else, something deeper than a normal human's voice.

"Is, is that a cow's moo or a battle cry?" Ranma muttered, staring towards the noise in confusion. As cries of pain joined the rest, Ranma's young face firmed.

While Genma's recent actions had made Ranma question his teachings, those teachings had still caused an impact. And one of the teachings Genma had passed on was that a martial artist had a duty to protect others. Normally, a master would've said something like 'within reason,' or 'once you've achieved mastery.' Or even, 'once you're a certain age.'

Genma hadn't.

And so, at all of eight years old, Ranma heard the sounds of battle and ran towards it.

Darting forward, Ranma paused at the end of the tall grass, hiding there for a moment as he watched the events taking place in front of him. On the road stood a group of women warriors, several of them clad in armor, wielding shields and swords, while other women were behind them, trying to fight back without their own weapons to hand, against a group of...

Well, they stood on two legs, but other than that and the fact they had hands, Ranma thought they looked like bulls crossed with men. He'd never seen anything like them, and for the first time, Ranma quailed a bit at the size of the weird creatures.

The next moment, he watched as one of the women was smashed off her feet by one of the bulls. It raised the blade high above his head, and Ranma instantly saw that none of the other women were in a position to defend the woman, who had been knocked down. There were just too many of the bull creatures.

While Ranma didn't know what was going on, that sight made Ranma decide he did know what side of this fight he was on. "Humans vs monsters, yeah, no way I'm gonna take the monster's side of things, especially if they're outnumbering the humans and all the humans're girls."

With that, Ranma charged forwards, scaling the back of the bull man like it was a tree. The bull man felt this, but couldn't dislodge Ranma before Ranma was sitting on his head, pounding tiny fists into his eyes. The bull man screamed and stumbled forward blindly. As he did, Ranma grabbed his horns, wrenching his head to the side. He wasn't nearly strong enough to do actual damage, but he jerked the creature's head around so hard that when it blinked its eyes open, it was crashing into one of its fellows.

Ranma then hopped off, using the aerial style to land on the shoulder of the bull about to kill the woman. "Just like jumping from one tree to another, Ranma, remember that," he nearly shouted to keep his courage up. A battle was a whole different thing from moving through the jungle, and this adventure of his had just taken a decidedly deadly turn.

A kick to the jaw sent the creature stumbling to the side, although Ranma noticed his kick didn't actually hurt the thing all that much. *Darn it, it's like fighting my Old Man. I need to aim for the weak points to do anything.*

Still, that kick sent the monster's blow missing the woman on the ground by a hair. Then Ranma was hopping up onto its head, doing a little dance as he drove his feet into its forehead and face, including its extremely sensitive nose. Ranma noted that attack and the hits to the eyes worked best. After a blow to the nose, the creature lost all willingness to fight, dropping its sword and reaching for its nose in agony.

The woman on the ground instantly stood, driving her sword up and into the creature's guts, blood spurting everywhere in a way that made Ranma pale in shock and disgust. But Ranma pushed his shock and desire to throw up down and dodged anyway, hopping onto another bull, then another. *Remember what Pops said, walk it off, whatever it is, walk it off!*

His small size worked to Ranma's advantage in the chaos of the melee. The bull-men didn't realize they had to take him seriously until his little fists hammered into their eyes or noses. Three times, he smacked a bull on the nose, just enough to distract the bull-man from his current opponent. The bull-men were disorganized by Ranma's madcap jaunt through the melee, enough that the women rallied, pushing them back.

Still, there were too many of the bull-men, and soon Ranma eventually found himself smacked out of the air by a lucky blow from a sword. That sword could have cut him in half if it had hit him cleanly, but it was the flat of the blade catching Ranma in the chest after it had been almost wrenched out of the bull's hands by a furious attempt to disarm him by one of the women.

Regardless, Ranma found himself sprawled out on the ground and knew from experience with his father that his ribs were going to be bruised.

Gasping, Ranma groaned, looking up at the bull guy who had just smashed him out of the sky, then rolled forward under the creature's reach before pushing off the ground into a handstand, kicking out hard. Both of his feet crashed into the bull-man's privates, and the creature let out a keening wail, stumbling back and going to his knees, dropping his weapons and cupping his very private pain.

All around the bull guys who saw this winced, but Ranma rolled back up onto his feet, grinning through his pain. "What, you never been hit below the belt before? I'm a kid, and you're a whatever. I'm not going to fight fair! Anything Goes, Hehehe!"

He was then nearly struck by another blow from another bull guy. Jumping backward, he dodged that only to almost run into another spear strike. A desperate tuck let him roll underneath it before Ranma was able to get back into the air, staying there for a few more

moments. But Ranma knew they were losing, since the women cheered, as there was a roar of horns nearby.

On the heels of those horns, several horsewomen came over the rise, crashing into the bull-men, their lances going home in many of them. All of them were armored in half-plate armor covering their legs and thighs, letting their lower legs and arms free, and many carried shields as well. The exception, the woman in the lead, was a black-haired woman who lacked even a helmet, and when her lance stuck in the head of one bull-guy, she hopped up off her horse, lashing out with twin swords that she carried on her back.

That was a technique that Ranma had seen in manga, but never in real life and certainly never to this level. As he watched wide-eyed, the woman sliced cleanly through several of the bull-men, the blood flowing everywhere, guts and other things going splashing, shocking Ranma white. If not for the fight still going on, Ranma might have lost his lunch at the sight.

Diana, Princess of the Amazons, was annoyed and worried. There were more and more minotaurs these days, and although incursions of their ilk kept her people sharp, they shouldn't have been able to bypass the watch on their territory so easily. *That smells of Ares or someone else in the pantheon wanting some fun. That, or complacency, and I am not certain which would worry me more. Darn it, I wanted at least fifty years before I had to return to war, but even here on the Isle, I am still not removed from it.*

As she thought that, Diana was hacking her way through the minotaurs, bellowing out commands to her followers to help the wounded among the defenders of the small caravan. That caravan carried mead, grapes and wine. The groves near the minotaur's territory were some of the finest on the island.

Her attack continued unabated even as she took in the battlefield, giving out orders to each warrior in turn if she saw the need, until she saw the little boy. At first, Diana thought it was a simple girl from the farms, but she knew most of the youngsters by sight. This one was not known to her, and the way she, or rather, **he**, moved was not in keeping with the Amazon style of warfare. *So that is the rumored boy I heard about.*

She watched as he was struck by a hammer, causing him to cry out in pain and fly through the air. But he seemed to roll with it, showing an astonishing amount of durability for one so young. He was limping now, but he seemed to still want to fight, whereas any normal Amazonian child would have been squished in no uncertain terms. *Impressive!*

A few moments later, Diana had slain several more minotaurs, and with that, the battle seemed to be ebbing away. Out of the corner of her eye, Diana saw that the boy seemed to feel it. He hopped out of the battlefield, dodging a few more attacks, moving to a nearby wagon and hopping up onto the seat at the front. One of the other women, who had been using the wagon as a stand, seemed to say something to him, but from where she was, Diana could not hear it over the sounds of battle.

Looking back at the older-looking woman who had tried to speak to him, Ranma shook his head, adding a shoulder shrug for good measure even as he winced from his wounds. "I can't understand ya, sorry."

She was the one that Ranma had protected when he'd first joined the fight, and now she was armed with one of the Minotaur's weapons and a shield from one of the few fallen women. Ranma looked at the bodies of the two dead women, his face twisting into a grimace as he felt a little sick for some reason. Nor was the sight of the bull-men's bodies any better.

It was all Ranma could do to not throw up, but that would be showing weakness. And the one thing Genma had smacked into Ranma's head more often than walk it off was not to show weakness.

Yet, Ranma had never seen someone die before. He knew what it was, his Pops and all the masters Ranma trained with had always been very careful to show that martial artists like them couldn't hit non-martial artists as hard as they could one another. And he had actually seen a funeral once. But that was way different than seeing human bodies, let alone the bull-men's bodies.

There were only two women dead. Four of the others were injured severely, but Ranma's intervention had prevented things from turning out even worse.

The woman who had tried to talk to him looked confused, then shook her head with a sigh and a shrug. She then looked around, and seeing the fight was ending, reached into the back of the wagon, pulling out what looked like a sandwich.

At the sight, Ranma's stomach gurgled for an entirely different reason. Resolutely turning his back on the sight around him, Ranma bowed several times to her as he took it, splitting it and handing half back. She laughed, waving it off, saying something in her language again that Ranma still couldn't understand, and Ranma instantly began to eat the sandwich, concentrating entirely on it to try to ignore the battlefield around him.

Nearby, Diana turned from organizing her horsewomen to chase down the stragglers. Now she moved up, smiling at the woman as she gestured to Ranma. "//Is she one of yours, then? I'll admit I haven't been out to the farms recently, but she doesn't look like any of the young ones I've seen there before, Amita.//"

Amita blinked, staring at Diana, then shook her head. "//Nope, she's not one of ours. I thought she was from Themyscira until I realized she doesn't speak Greek. At that point...//"

Blinking, Diana realized what was going on and shook her head with a chuckle. "//Hah! If any of the youngsters in the city could fight like that, I would know of it. Indeed, from what I saw, this young one uses an entirely new style. I rather think that **he** is the young boy rumored to have been brought to our shores.//"

Amita blinked at the emphasis on the male gender pronoun, staring at the youth once more, before the farm mistress patted Ranma on the head. He looked up, smiled widely and blinked as Amita reached forward and patted his chest. He frowned at that, asking something in his language. “//He can’t speak our tongue, and is definitely a boy,//” Amita announced dryly, shaking her head at Ranma, then looked over at Diana. “//What should we do?//”

“//I don’t know,//” Diana answered honestly. “//No man-child this young has ever washed up on our shores before. I do not feel it would be honorable or right to follow the letter of the law here.//”

That letter of the law was that any male outsider who somehow came to their island was to be killed. *But that rule has been set aside before*, Diana mused with sad fondness as she was reminded of her dead lover, Steve. *And I doubt that it has ever occurred to anyone, at least I hope not, that the male in question would be such a young boy.* Curious, she tapped Ranma’s hand, where he had gone back to wolfing down the sandwich.

Ranma looked up and blinked, staring at the sight of the woman who had led the cavalry so close.

The girls who had tried to stick him with their spears on the beach had been good-looking. Several of the women from the caravan were decent-looking. This woman blew all of them out of the water. *Wow, she looks like a painting!*

The dual-sword wielder was taller than any of them, her shoulders wider, her legs longer. And while Ranma was far too young to understand the term drop-dead gorgeous, her face was kind of compelling for some reason. He had trouble looking away, especially from the eyes, a liquid kind of brown that came off as both stern and kind, as they looked back at Ranma.

As the youth stared at her, Diana looked back thoughtfully. *He looks almost Japanese. That... I do not have fond memories of the people of those islands. Still, he is an innocent, and who knows what has happened since I retreated from Man’s World? And those eyes are quite expressive. Hmm, his wounds also don’t seem to bother him. A warrior born and trained, this one. Age first, I think.*

Ranma watched as she raised both hands, then counted out in her strange language. Ranma repeated it, then cocked his head, wondering why she was trying to teach him her language. She shook her head, then pointed at Ranma, and then began to count again.

Understanding now, Ranma answered, “I’m eight.” holding up the fingers to show it proudly, before trying to say the letter in the local language.

“//Good grief,//” Diana muttered, shaking her head. “//Younger than I thought, given his athleticism and his abilities. How did such a young boy get through the storms Lord Poseidon has set around our island?//”

The woman who had mentioned the youth's origins shrugged. "//Whatever his age, we can't just let him run around loose, can we?/"

//He saved me,/" Amita said, crossing her arms, glaring at the woman belligerently. //I would be dead along with many of my fellows if not for Ranma's intervention./"

Rolling her eyes, Diana patted her chest, then gestured to Amita. "Diana. Amita." Then she held out her hand towards Ranma.

Again, Ranma understood what the woman, Diana, was saying. He pointed back at her, grinning cheerily. "Diana." Pointing to the redhead, he repeated her name, before tapping his chest. "Ranma." He then held out a hand to shake as he had seen many easterners do.

Diana chuckled and, after shaking his hand, gestured around. //Let us see how willing he is to follow orders./"

She used gestures to order Ranma to help gather up the weapons of the fallen minotaurs. Not understanding why, Ranma made to protest, but looking around, he saw that everyone else seemed busy with that or other things. When he saw that, he nodded at Diana's arched eyebrow, hopping off the wagon.

At the same time, Amita led many of the women in checking over the donkeys, two other women began to look over the carts, and Diana and several others began to drag or carry the bodies of the minotaurs away into a pile. Their own two dead were placed with some ceremony into one of the wagons.

Thankfully, Ranma was no longer in danger of throwing up or fainting at the sight of the bodies any longer. The smell from the minotaurs as they were carried away, though, was another worry, and at one point, he stopped and began to cover his nose with one hand, slowing his work down.

As they all worked to clean up the battlefield, a lot of the women around Ranma looked a little concerned with him, frowning at him as he moved around. A few of the warriors who had arrived with Diana even glared at him with narrow eyes. The others, who had been among the women in the caravan, sent looks his way that reminded him of a gym teacher he'd once had when his Pops had been forced to send him to school. *It's like they don't know what to make of me.*

Ranma didn't get that. After all, they had a lot of martial artists here, and Diana to boot, who was obviously a master swordswoman, way beyond anything he'd ever heard of. But then he remembered a monastery his father had taken him to once. *Ohh, this might be like that monastery, the whole outsiders aren't welcome thing. Heck, that could be why those first four attacked me. But is the whole island a monastery? Wow.*

Soon, the wagons were on their way once more, hitched to very annoyed horses or being pushed by teams of warriors. From Amita's gestures, Ranma learned that the majority of the donkeys, which had been pulling them, had run when the minotaurs – another new word – showed up.

Turning away from where she had just smacked one annoyed donkey on the head, Diana gestured Ranma up onto the wagon in question, addressing her words to both him and the nearby Amita. "Let us be off. And when we get to Themyscira, I will take young Ranma to my mother, the Queen. She will be the one to decide his fate."

Badly battered from the fight and somehow unwilling to argue with Diana, Ranma complied. *At least this way, I will have time to recover, and if they try to treat me like a fish or something like those other four, I can always run away again.*

From his new perch inside the back of the wagon, Ranma watched Diana, whistling as she easily did the same work as four others moving another cart along, pulling the cart like she was a donkey without any apparent effort. She was not only faster and more skilled than the other women. Diana was **far** stronger.

Ranma wondered why, then had the fun thought that maybe it was some kind of martial arts technique or style that he could learn. *Now that would be awesome! I'd be able to throw my Pops around like he does me all the time! Hehehe!*

Ranma lost himself in that dream for a few moments before Amita pulled his attention to her. He watched as she pulled out a small jar, then made to rub something on the bruise that was currently developing on her face. When she held up the jar, Ranma took it, and after seeing her nod several times, opened it up, grimacing at the smell. But even so, he resolutely began to rub it into his injuries.

The gunk, whatever it was, seemed to work. The aches and pains from Ranma's various injuries, especially the hit to his side from a minotaur's hammer, seemed to fade. And soon, Ranma found his eyes closing, lulled by the rocking of the cart. How long he slept, Ranma had no idea, but he was roused by someone calling his name. Blearily, he poked his head up and found Amita looking back at him, gesturing ahead of them. Sometime during his nap, they had reentered the forest, but now they were coming out of it as they started to head up a hill.

As they left the forest behind them, Ranma gasped, staring at the city laid out ahead of them.

It wasn't a large city. Ranma could see where the outer walls curved to either side of his line of sight, which was way different than any city he'd seen in Japan, which Ranma knew meant it was smaller than any city he'd seen before. But it was still beautiful. Built into the side of a sharp, craggy-looking mountain, the city had tall, white walls surrounding the outside,

marked here and there by what Ranma thought of as castle bits, things he'd seen in books about Europe and other places.

Scattered over the walls were long vines on which hundreds of red and pink flowers bloomed. Behind that wall, several even larger towers rose in the distance, looking like the towers he had seen in some girly anime posters. Beyond them was what looked like an astronomy tower, something Ranma had seen in a manga about alien invasions. In the distance, the sound of the ocean came to him as well, along with the squawking of seagulls.

From nearby, Diana watched Ranma's face as he took in the city and smiled cheerfully to herself. The boy seemed somewhat intelligent and a good sort, judging by how willing he was to help and take part in the battle against the minotaurs and followed orders afterward. *Although that will make it all the harder, if Mother decides that we have to follow the letter of the law.* Diana didn't think she would, but it wrenched at her heart to even think of the possibility of slaying someone so young.

Soon, the caravan reached Themyscira's gateway, passing by the guards. On the other side, they entered the city proper, where hundreds of women moved, talked and went about their own business, a loud cacophony of busy, bustling noise. From there, they moved along a wide side street to an area dominated by stables. Other women came out to help as they arrived, and soon the unloading process had begun, starting with the bodies of the two honored fallen.

As they did, a cheerful voice shouted, “//Lady Diana!//”

Looking around, Diana saw her young protégé, Cassie, racing forward. Unlike her first apprentice, Donna Troy, Cassandra Sandsmark was actually related to Diana through a mutual seed donor, the god Zeus.

A philanderer by his very nature, Zeus had crept into the bed of a woman who had come to the Island of Women ten years ago. Why Helena Sandsmark, an archaeologist with a specialty in Egyptology, had come to the island was a tragic tale of misplaced faith and naiveté, but after more than a year on the island and finding love with the Amazon Laphelia, things had turned around for Helena.

Only for Zeus to sneak into her bed one evening in the form of Laphelia. During their lovemaking, Zeus had suddenly changed into his normal body, and before the woman could stop him or even scream, Zeus had finished the deed, impregnating Helena.

It had been rape, the clearest example of such since the Amazons had retreated to the Island of Women and Zeus had lain with Diana's mother ages ago. Helena had not initiated it, had not wanted the attention of the most powerful of the gods, and even tried to get away when Zeus had revealed himself, to no avail.

That act was why Zeus and the other male gods were no longer able to appear on the island at all. The powers of all of the goddesses and more than a few of the gods bent to keeping Zeus and his ilk out, both physically and mentally.

It had also come close to wrecking a happy marriage. And while Helena and her wife Laphelia were able to stay together despite it, Cassie had been given over to the city to raise as a whole. Neither woman wanted the memory of Helena's degradation around, and in something so personal, the queen would not overrule them.

It was sad, but Diana understood their reasoning even if she never blamed Cassie for the act that had created her, as her mother had never done with Diana herself. To Diana, Cassie was a bright-eyed, eager student of all things martial and a glum, unwilling participant of any other type of education, much like most girls her age.

The young girl had not been happy to be left behind when Diana and her flying column left the city on reports of the fight going on, but that annoyance seemed to be in abeyance now as she pushed her way through the crowd of workers. “//How did it go?//” she asked.

Diana laughed, picking up Cassie into a short hug, as Cassie waved at the other warriors whom she knew, who all waved back with faint smiles on their faces. Cassie Sandmark was quite well known among them, and most of them felt she was one of the best up-and-coming warriors of her generation.

A small, impish thought went through Diana's mind at that moment, and she looked over at Ranma, who was looking around the city in awe from where he had climbed up onto a signpost when no one was looking. *My word, I had best keep an eye on the youth, his ability to move and climb like that could lead him into mischief if we're not careful,* she thought before calling, “Ranma.”

Ranma blinked, turning away from the view to smile at Diana. Hopping down from his perch, Ranma did a little twirl in midair just because he could before landing gracefully.

“Ranma, Cassie,” Diana said simply. “//He can't speak much of our language yet, but he is your age, child, and seems a good little fellow.//”

“//Little fellow?//” Cassie murmured, staring at Ranma, her eyes going wide.

As Diana set Cassie on her feet, Ranma waved at her, suddenly feeling a little shy being near a girl his own age. Ranma hadn't been around many kids like that before. *So, is she like Ukyo, a martial artist despite being a girl or what?* Ranma was still having trouble wrapping his mind around that concept and the general idea that Ukyo was a girl, but after the battle earlier, he knew these women were just built different from any he'd met before.

“//Miss Diana, is he... I heard rumors about a young boy being seen on the island. Is that him!?!//” Diana exclaimed.

Diana laughed, nodding her head. “//Indeed.//”

“//Speaking of,//” her vice-captain said a little repressively. “//Princess, you should probably take the...boy... to see the Queen. Before you get too attached,//” she hinted.

Diana stiffened, glaring at the woman, but after a moment, nodded and held out her hand to Ranma. “//Ranma. Come.//” Ranma blinked, then shrugged, and took her hand, allowing Diana to pull him along through the city. With Cassie walking on Diana’s other side, the two children continued to exchange looks of interest as they followed the adult deeper into the city.

As they went, Ranma began to point out things, asking wordlessly what they were, repeating the words in the local language, adding to his vocabulary. As they did, a lot of the women around them noticed Ranma in turn, and a susurrations of rumors wound around them. Ranma didn’t notice, too eager to learn to care about the impression seeing a young boy was having on the crowd of women.

Which was mixed to say the least. While many of these women had never seen a man before, far too many remembered their pasts and how they had been hounded from Man’s World by Hercules and other men. Zeus’ actions with Helena, and, alas, Diana’s tales of World War 2 and what had happened to Donna’s family had kept that kind of prejudice alive. Whatever his age, Ranma was still a Man in the eyes of too many.

Both Ranma’s questions and the rumor storm followed the trio until they came to what could only be a palace. It was a very open one, with lots of different columns separating it from the rest of the city instead of a wall, but the road became marble at that point instead of cobblestones made out of granite. The people here also wore what looked like silk, or maybe really good cotton, in comparison to leather and fabric like elsewhere in the city. There were also a few guards around the place, whereas in the city, Ranma had only seen a few roving bands of city watch, none of whom wore metal armor.

Here, Ranma finally became aware of the stares sent his way, but he hunched his small shoulders and tried to ignore them as he walked beside Cassie. It had been Cassie who had been answering Ranma’s questions, literally biting her lip to keep from asking questions of the stranger, yet curious about Ranma, as Ranma was curious about everything around him.

Soon, they entered what could only be a throne room, and Ranma’s gaze was caught by the woman on the throne. She was one of the older women Ranma had seen so far, with visible crow’s feet around her eyes and mouth and a silver streak in her brown hair. But she was almost built as much as Diana was, and while she wore a long silk dress, at her side hung a sword, with a spear and shield on the wall behind her small, simple-looking throne. Her crown

was also small, and that and a band of gold around one sinewy bicep was the only sign of jewelry.

As he was making these observations, Diana had been explaining his presence to her mother, Hippolyta. “//So, you see, Mother, I really don’t think we should...//”

“//Hush, child, that much is obvious,//” the older woman said, waving her daughter off with a snort. “//Do you honestly think I would order the death of an **innocent**? No, the most I would do would be to order his memory erased by the priesthood and put him into stasis until we can figure out some way to return him to Man’s World.//”

At those words, Diana breathed a sigh of relief. That would not be pleasant for Ranma, but he would survive it. But then Hippolyta went on. “//However, you have not thought through his being here in the first place.//”

“//Er, his being here, Your Majesty?//” Cassie asked, while Diana frowned in some confusion herself.

Hippolyta shook her head. “//I think you need to work on strategy and philosophy with your young charge, and go over some yourself, Diana.//”

The queen laughed aloud as Cassie’s young face shifted into an expression of horror, with Ranma imitating her to one side just for fun. That caused Cassie’s look to go away, and whirling, she thumped him on the arm, which he returned, causing a chain reaction that had them exchanging shoulder punches until a cough from Diana made both of them look up at her.

Making certain there was no further roughhousing on offer, Diana turned back to her mother, “//You were saying, Mother?//” she asked politely.

“//Indeed. For you are quite right. No child, indeed, no child of **either** gender has ever washed up on our shore. When I first heard reports of young Ranma, I spoke with our archivist. The youngest child from the outside world to ever be welcome here was young Donna, when you brought her here personally, and she was thirteen. The youngest to come here through Lord Poseidon’s defense was a young woman who appeared on our shores about a hundred years ago, and she was sixteen at the time.//”

Diana nodded, remembering that tale, as well as who that particular woman was. She was now the head of the astronomy guild and also sat on the board of education, while Donna was second in command of the city guard at the moment. *I wonder how she will react to young Ranma? She was certainly apoplectic when Zeus’s latest misdeed occurred.*

But she set that aside, now seeing her mother’s point. “//So, you would say that such a young child showing up is an impossibility without some power or other helping it along...//” Diana mused.

“//Indeed. I believe there is something of the gods in this. Why and who remain unclear. I think we must bring this to Hera’s attention, and I have already sent a message asking the high priestess to prepare the communication mirror for me. But first, I want to learn more about our young mystery.//”

With that, Hippolyta reached to her waist and pulled out the long golden lasso that was there, letting out the coils so that it was slightly longer than it would be coiled up at her side. She then flicked the coiled end towards Ranma, who frowned, stepping back and looking at the Queen quizzically.

Hippolyta mimed taking the end of the rope, and when she flicked it again. Ranma caught it, then said aloud, “Er, is this a game? Because that wasn’t moving very fast. You’d have to be flicking it at me a lot faster than that to test my reflexes or something.”

Then he gaped, trying to stare down at his own mouth. “What the heck?”

“This is the Lasso of Truth, child, and among its powers, it can give the gift of languages. You will now be able to speak our language. But please keep holding the lasso for now,” the queen ordered. “My name is Queen Hippolyta, and I have questions for you.”

Ranma’s eyes widened. “Wow, real magic? Cool!”

“It’s not cool, it’s kind of hot today,” Cassie interjected, rolling her eyes.

Ranma blinked, staring at her, “Er, it’s way to say really interesting or fun, I think,” he explained, stumbling over his words. “So as long as I hold this, I can talk? In that case, I don’t suppose any of you can tell me where I am, right? Or have you seen my Pops? He’s kind of overweight, wears a dirty gi and small glasses? Er, I’m sorry about being washed up on your monastery or whatever.”

“I regret to tell you that you are the only male on the island, Ranma,” Hippolyta answered, calm in the face of Ranma’s rapid-fire questions as Cassie stared at him and Diana looked amused.

The implications of that went right over Ranma’s head, and he shrugged. “Oh well, he’ll be around eventually, I guess.”

“Perhaps...” Hippolyta answered, not lying but certainly not agreeing either. “However, child, we have questions. For one thing, how did you wind up on our island? What is your full name, and more importantly, how are you able to fight so well that my daughter made a note of it?”

"I'm Ranma Saotome, student of the Anything Goes School of Indiscriminate Grappling, Aerial Style," Ranma answered. "It's a martial arts school and I've been training in it since before I could walk."

"That explains why you were fighting in the air so much," Diana mused. "I had been wondering. You're quite agile."

Ranma shrugged, looking a little embarrassed at the praise. His father was stingy with compliments like that. "I guess, although I'm nowhere near as strong as you are. That's kind of annoying, because I've always been told women are supposed to be weaker than guys, although I suppose that's because of our ages."

Cassie's eyes narrowed, and she held up a fist. "What, you think you'd be stronger than me?" she challenged.

Hippolyta interrupted whatever reply Ranma might've made by clapping her hands. "Enough Cassie, you can test your mettle against one another in a moment. So, you are a student of your nation's martial arts. I suppose that makes some sense. But how did you wind up lost at sea, child? Had you taken up fishing?" she teased gently.

Drooping a little, Ranma looked away, almost unwilling to answer, but compelled by the magic of the lasso. "I suppose that's my fault. We were in a boat, traveling from one of the islands to another, but I can't remember which ones. There was a storm. I didn't want to go. I wanted to figure out what the heck was going on. Then there was lightning and this wave, and I was off the boat, and then I woke up, and these ladies were standing over me. One of them tried to pick me up something with her spear butt, and well, I didn't like that and ran off," Ranma said, shrugging.

"Remind me to speak to Marybelle and the others. Spear first, ask questions never is not a policy," Diana murmured.

"I will. But Ranma, tell me more about what you wanted to figure out," Hippolyta ordered, looking back at Ranma. She felt it would be a good opportunity to get a better feel for Ranma's personality. He seemed a kind, forthright sort, and inquisitive as all young folk were. But she wanted to know more. Was he some kind of danger to her people? Or did he represent someone who could become so?

Ranma's nose scrunched up, but he was once more compelled to answer, although he didn't realize that. "I really don't know what was going on. I'd made a friend, Ukyo. Every day she tried to defend her family's food cart for me, we'd spar, and if I won, I'd get some food. If I didn't, I'd have to carry her around for a day."

"Hehehe, sounds fun," Cassie giggled, and Ranma nodded, before going on.

"But then one night, my Pops, he and I left. With her food cart. I thought maybe we were takin' the cart, because her Pops was sick and then..." From there, the whole story came out, with Hippolyta asking questions here and there.

Afterward, she leaned back in her throne, thinking. It was clear that, while Ranma was an innocent, his father was not. A good trainer, perhaps, but not a good man. *So, it might be for Ranma's own good that he is here with us instead of his father. But that still begs the question of how he was allowed to arrive here.*

Regardless, that wasn't a question that Ranma was going to be able to answer. "Well, I think that was all for my questions." She gestured to a nearby woman, who stepped forward. "Let this priestess of Isis touch your tongue and cast a spell on you, and you will be able to speak and learn our language quickly."

Ranma nodded and stuck out his tongue obligingly, wincing a little as the woman's long nail pressed into his tongue. For a moment, there was a weird, hot heat that seemed to build in his tongue and up into his mouth, then it was done and the woman was standing back.

"What weapon do you practice?" Cassie spoke as this was going on, not noticing Diana frowning at her. The young blonde girl was still hung up on the idea that Ranma thought that he might be stronger than her.

Ranma shrugged, holding up his hands, and the moment the woman removed her finger from his tongue, said, "These."

"Only unarmed combat?" Diana mused, making a mental note to punish Cassie later. Hippolyta allowed people to speak their minds, yes, but speaking so rudely in front of her, or indeed speaking while one of the priestesses was casting a spell, was still quite rude. "You haven't evolved to using weapons yet?"

"Nah. Our school, that is mine and my father's, is a weaponless style. I asked him once, and apparently, there's another branch of the school that deals with weapons, but I don't know anything about it. Not that it'd take me long to get armed in a fight, like I showed in the battle with those minotaur things." Ranma shrugged. "Weapons are targets too."

Diana hummed thoughtfully at that and nodded. It did make some sense, given Ranma's emphasis on speed and agility anyway. "Speed and agility can only carry you so far, though," she warned, but Ranma just shrugged, smirking at her in the way he'd seen his father do whenever someone called him out on that point.

At the sight of that smirk, Diana decided that the youth needed a bit of a wake-up call. "All right, mother, are you done with Ranma at this point?"

"For now. I will have to put this question to Hera, but for now, he can stay with you and Cassie. Judging by his actions thus far, I rather doubt that we can trust him to behave himself if left on his own," Hippolyta remarked.

"Nope," Ranma agreed cheerfully. "Although if you expect me to sit down and go to class or something, that's not gonna happen either."

"I know, right?" Cassie exclaimed, thumping her shoulder against Ranma's, setting aside her annoyance with his earlier words about women being weak. "History and writing and stuff are so boring!"

Ranma nodded in agreement, while Diana tried hard not to look at her mother, who had a profound sense of déjà vu going on and a wide smirk on her face as she looked at her daughter with raised eyebrows. "The circle ever turns," she said cryptically, causing Diana's face to flush, knowing she had been very lucky that Donna had been as interested in education as much as training. But the moment ended as Hippolyta waved her and the two youngsters off. "Away with you."

Moments later, Ranma found himself standing across from Cassie in a training area. "All right, this is an unarmed combat contest, no hits below the belt, throat or eyes. You must stay in the training area. But beyond that, anything goes."

Ranma grinned at hearing the name of his martial arts style, and then sent a bow Cassie's way. Blinking, Cassie did the same, although that wasn't part of the Amazon training method. In the next second, the two of them charged forwards. Ranma leaped into the air a second before they would've hit, lashing out with a kick, which Cassie blocked. She tried to grab his leg, but he pulled back too quickly, bouncing off her block and flipping through the air to land nearby.

Cassie charged his current position, and then, when Ranma took to the air again, performed a slide, ducking underneath the punch and kick combination that he had launched towards where her head had been. Then, pushing up off the ground herself, she whirled into a helicopter kick.

But while in midair, Ranma flipped, putting his feet his hands on her leg, and bringing his own foot towards her face. Cassie quickly got a hand up to block the blow, but was still sent tumbling to the earth. She moved with it, avoiding Ranma's follow-on stomp, and blocked the next two punches before Ranma overextended, and she was able to grab his arm. She pulled him in, making no effort to throw or toss him; instead, she pulled him into an elbow jab, following up with a punch to the ribs.

Ranma grunted as the hits registered, wincing at the strength of them. *Damn, she hits way harder than any of the other kids I've fought, even that teen who tried to pick on me or that*

Card Trick King guy. And I'm still kinda sore from the hits I took from the minotaurs. Not that Ranma was going to admit that, of course.

A sweep kick upended Cassie, and Ranma pulled his hand out, flipping himself away and over several times to gain some distance. The two of them circled one another for a few seconds, Cassie smirking as she knew she'd gotten the better of that exchange. Ranma, however, soon pasted on a smirk on his own face, wondering if he should try to use the taunting technique against Cassie.

But he decided against it. *Ucchan never liked that kind of thing. Maybe girls just don't know it's a technique, meh, silly if they don't.* Regardless, he didn't think either Cassie or Diana would like it if he tried to win a match that way.

Instead, not taking his eyes off Cassie, he asked Diana a question. "You said the entire training area, right?"

When Diana nodded, Ranma flipped himself away several times, as Cassie charged until he was outside of the original circle and bouncing off a wall of weapons, then off a second rack holding shields.

Cassie tried to keep up with his movement, but Ranma redirected himself once again, coming to ground behind her. A series of punches landed on her back and shoulder before she could turn, and when she tried to go for a grab again, the last blow turned out to be a feint. Ranma redirected that strike into her chest, causing her to stumble back, and Ranma leaped up again, instead of following up straight away, throwing her attempt at a punch off wildly as he lashed out with a kick.

However, once again, Ranma had overextended. Cassie grabbed his leg and hurled him to the ground in the middle of the training area once again. He rolled with it, but she followed up too quickly, and this time, didn't bother with punches or kicks. Instead, she charged into him, going for a grapple hold.

Ranma tried to get out of it, wiggling this way and that, and when that didn't work, he tickled her, which did. She let go of his arm with a whoop, and Ranma rolled away, turning to bring a kick around aimed at her chest.

His foot was once more grabbed, as was Cassie's attempt to punch back, but not by one another. Instead, both children found themselves in the air with Diana holding them, who had crossed the intervening distance faster than either child could track. "That's enough. I've seen what I needed to."

Cassie pouted, looking at Ranma. "That was a dirty trick!"

"Which one?" Ranma asked quizzically. "The tickling, or the bouncing out of bounds and using that stuff?"

"All of those," Cassie answered sternly, a ferocious scowl on her little face.

"In a real fight, my young apprentice, there is no such thing as fair. And as for you, Ranma, I think we know that your strength and speed need work." With that, Diana turned to head towards one of the corners of the training area. "Your agility is amazing, and your ability to take to the air is impressive; it certainly throws off your opponent, even someone as well-trained as Cassie. But that is not something you can assume. You also had a lot of tells, and you were not quick enough to pull your punches and kicks back after they were blocked."

Ranma nodded eager agreement, hopping to his feet, pulling Cassie along as he hurried after Diana. Cassie looked as if she wanted to keep on pouting, but the good-natured humor of Ranma, despite the bruises she could see forming, and the smile on Diana's face made her feel a little foolish. Soon she was smiling along with Ranma, as Diana began to give them a few exercises to work on.

What followed was the hardest day's training Ranma could remember in his short life. Diana kept them at each exercise until they were sweaty and panting, and obviously had taken into account way more of Ranma's physical abilities in that spar than most could have. After all, most would not assume that a child should be able to lift ninety pounds, more than half his own weight, in rocks, whilst doing twenty Hindu squats, followed by two hundred jumping jacks, push-ups, sit-ups and so forth. All while Diana was performing the same exercises with two giant boulders tied to her shoulders.

The exercises didn't stop there. Ranma was re-taught how to throw a punch, how to block, and right before breaking for lunch, began to learn how to fight while pinned in place. "Most of your abilities to throw Cassie off in that spar came from how maneuverable you are. But that kind of thing can only take you so far. You need to be able to learn how to fight without it, or against opponents who are more maneuverable than you," Diana said, more than once, as Cassie proceeded to beat Ranma into the ground.

Ranma had pouted throughout that entire spar. He **liked** the aerial style! He liked bouncing around like a jack rabbit and the expressions that people wore when he did it. But Diana was very firm. "As long as you are here, we will train you in the Amazon way, and in the Amazon way, you train for everything, not just the best circumstances."

"I'd rather train in forcing those circumstances," Ranma muttered, although he didn't really understand what circumstance meant.

"That too," Diana answered, smiling down at him. The boy had impressed her so far. There was no sign of his becoming angry, bitter or annoyed, only a desire to get better. "But for now, we will continue with this exercise. Until you can take a full punch from Cassie and keep

fighting,” she added, getting down onto one knee, reaching forward to touch Ranma gently on the side and chest, where more bruises had been added to the already existing ones.

“Diana, I was pulling my punches!” Cassie huffed, although she looked a bit guilty. “Really, I was.”

“I know, but Ranma isn’t as durable as you are.”

Now it was Ranma’s turn to huff, then he shook his head. “And my old man always says that women are weaker? Eesh. What was he thinking?”

“Perhaps in Man’s World they are child, but not here among the Amazons,” Diana said, although her eyes had narrowed.

Ranma simply shrugged, then looked at Cassie. “You held back?”

Cassie huffed in amusement, throwing her shoulders back. “Of course I did! I’ve been training with Mistress Diana for two years now as her apprentice. She is one of the greatest warriors in the land.”

Ranma could well understand that, but... “Two years? And you’re that strong?” Whatever small hesitancy Ranma had towards adopting Diana’s training went out the window at that point. Now he was eager to see how he’d do if he were trained by Diana for a bit.

By the time the sun went down, both children were sweaty, their hands dull with pain and blistered. The fact that every time they were doing strength training, Cassie had carried half again as much weight as Ranma could galled him, but he said nothing, just pouting a bit of his own weakness, eager to close the gap.

If Ranma had been older, perhaps seeing Cassie outperform him in strength, pure speed or endurance would have annoyed Ranma. At the moment, Ranma was a seven-year-old kid, and he knew for a fact that he wasn’t the best. He wanted to be, and that meant continual improvement, so he simply saw Cassie as someone he had to grow to match.

“Well! I think we’re done for the day,” Diana said, taking off the large boulder she’d been carrying and tossing them aside to crash to the ground nearby. The Amazonian princess didn’t have a single hair out of place despite pacing the two children in every exercise bar their spars.

“Thank you for your instruction, Mistress Diana,” Cassie said from the ground where she lay out next to Ranma. She waited a tick, then, hearing nothing, she poked Ranma in the side with an elbow.

After a second, he muttered the same before flipping himself back to his feet, having rested on the ground for a few minutes and recovered some of his energy. Cassie, who was just as tired, blinked at that but allowed him to pull her to her feet as he asked, "So, what now?"

"Now we head to the baths, of course," Diana chuckled. "Or do men not care about how they smell after a day's hard work?"

Ranma nodded, following along. Again, if Ranma were older, perhaps he might've been a little body-conscious, or simply confused. As it was for Ranma, he didn't see a problem with sharing a bath with a nearly adult woman and a girl his own young age.

"Is that what makes girls, then?" he asked, moments later. Currently, he and Cassie were sitting on large rocks in a small heated pool, washing themselves down with some soap, naked.

Cassie blinked, looking up at him, then caught what he was saying. Looking down below his waist, she laughed. "It looks like a little mouse."

"Hehehe," Ranma laughed too, making squeaking noises, which caused Cassie to giggle, shaking her head as she also stared down at her own body. Ranma did the same, cocking his head thoughtfully to one side as he tapped his chest, looking between Cassie and the nearby Diana. "So, you've got bits I don't up here and you're missing bits down there that I've got."

Cassie nodded thoughtfully, shrugging her head before looking back at Ranma's addition. "Is that why the legends say men can go to the bathroom standing up?"

"Only number one," Ranma replied instantly. "Otherwise, we have to sit down."

Nodding, Cassie pouted, patting her own chest. "But then, I don't have bits up here yet."

"They'll grow, Cassie," Diana said softly snickering, thankful that someone else would be in charge of giving Cassie her biology lessons when it came time for her to learn about the differences between males and females. As it was, both children were too young for it to matter. "You're young, child. Neither of you will finish growing for more than a decade, perhaps more."

"YEP! I know I've grown an inch in the last year, maybe I will be as tall as my Pops when I stop growing." Ranma frowned a bit then, gesturing to his hair. "I just hope I don't go bald like he is or as faaATT!!"

At that point, Cassie dunked some water on him. Ranma wasn't one to take that lying down, and he splashed her, the two of them getting into a small splash fight until Diana broke it up, shaking her head. After a hearty meal, where Ranma showed a distinct lack of manners until

Diana smacked him upside the head, the two kids were sent off to bed, with Cassie and Ranma sharing a bed for the night.

"He's a bright child," Diana reported to her mother that night. "Extremely competitive, quite combative, but no more so than many of our own warriors. Indeed, few have the same drive to become better than Ranma seems to possess. I've also learned a good deal about his past and the training journey he and his father were on. Although the rest of his knowledge is severely lacking. Ranma's father is not one I would trust with anything, let alone guiding a young child."

"That... that might be good in the long run for Ranma. We will see."

"You mean the Goddess is allowing him to stay?" Diana was pleased by that. Ranma's irreverent humor and new way of looking at things amused her a lot, and his competitive nature had seemingly lit a fire under Cassie, who had been feeling lonely of late, given how the other children either resented her closeness to Diana or put her on a pedestal for the same reason.

"Aheh, for now," Hippolyta responded, chuckling wryly. "You see..."

Flashback:

"I'm sorry." Hera, Sky Mother of the Grecian pantheon, stared through the glass at Hippolyta, her chosen Queen of the Amazons. Hera was a middle-aged woman with sharp eyes, brown hair in ringlets, and a face made to both smile and snarl in equal measure, with a thin mouth and high cheekbones. She was not beautiful, but she was striking, and was one of the three central goddesses the Amazons looked to: Hera, Athena and Artemis.

She had been somewhat surprised when her chief priestess had sent her a prayer saying Hippolyta wanted to speak with her. But what the woman had just told her, well, it was patently impossible. "What did you just say?"

"I, I said a young boy, only seven years old, has appeared, washed up on our island. He says he is Japanese, but beyond knowing that is somewhere in the Orient, I know nothing about them beyond what my daughter has told me of the world war she was involved in decades ago. Yet he somehow wound up on our island. You, you did not see this?" Hippolyta asked querulously.

"Just because we are omnipotent does not mean we are omniscient, child," Hera replied, her eyes wide, causing the queen to shiver.

It was interesting to see a goddess shocked, perhaps even amusing. But it was also frightening. Gods and goddesses should not, in Hippolyta's opinion, be shocked into staring at you like you had just grown two heads.

"What is his name?" Hera asked finally, slowly pushing aside her shock.

"Ranma Saotome, he says. Ranma of the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts."

"That school... I've heard of that martial arts style," Hera mused, causing Hippolyta to blink in surprise now, while a scowl had formed on Hera's face. "Let me look at something for a moment."

Hippolyta nodded and watched as Hera turned away from the mirror she used to communicate with her mortal followers. She whispered into a green oak leaf, cupping it in her hands for a few seconds before gesturing. That gesture sent the leaf flying off like a dagger through the air.

After a moment, whispers seemed to reach Hera's divine ears, the noise audible through the mirror but as simple gibberish, and she blinked in surprise. "So that could perhaps...hmm...this demands more research," she announced, turning back to Hippolyta. "My priestess will summon you to the temple tomorrow morning. I will have more information for you then."

End Flashback

"She was shocked?" Diana asked, somewhat bemused. "That is, well, rather amusing, but also worrisome. She was not shocked by Steve's arrival, after all, or my return with Donna."

"I thought the same, but perhaps we are overthinking it," Hippolyta rejoined, frowning. "The boy is Japanese, which perhaps means that he is under the auspices of another pantheon. Thus, the Goddess Hera would lack any knowledge of him and need to do research."

Diana blinked, then nodded, as it did make sense. "I believe that the faith of the Japanese in the war was called the Shinto faith. The emperor of the time was seen as a demigod. But whether it is the same now after he was proven to have feet of clay, I do not know."

"Exactly. Regardless, there is nothing we can do on that score. I would say continue as you have begun for now. But also make certain to drill some manners into the youth's head," the Queen warned. "Our sisters will eventually accept a child even if he is male, so long as he is respectful. If Ranma has too many flaws, then they will tip the scale the other way."

The next morning, Hippolyta looked up from having breakfast with Cassie, Ranma, and her daughter and a few other friends as the priestess of Hera's temple was announced. "Your Majesty, the goddess Hera summons you."

"Well, we may be about to get answers as to why you are here, Ranma," the queen mused, looking at the young boy.

“Why? I thought you were asking about how? And who’s Hera?” Ranma asked, silencing several of the other breakfast goers with what they thought of as rudeness.

“I said what I mean,” Hippolyta answered with a wink, causing him to pout at how she hadn’t answered his questions. “Diana, do follow up on what I mentioned last night about teaching him some manners, would you?”

Ranma scoffed. “Blah, manners. How are those supposed to help me in a fight?”

“They’re supposed to help keep you **out** of fights, silly,” Cassie laughed. “After all, if you insulted Lady Hippolyta, she’d be within her rights to challenge you.”

Ranma’s eyes lit up, then he frowned, looking at Cassie. “...You’re talking about like in those old-time movie duels, to the death and everything, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.” Cassie nodded, trying to keep her face locked in a serious expression even as the urge to giggle rose inside her. When Ranma simply stared at her, she finally lost it, giggling. “I’m kidding, none of us would do that, although a few of the older warriors here might be willing to hurt you a bit if you offend them too much.”

Ranma thought about that, and then about how Diana had done all of the exercises that she’d put Cassie and Ranma through the day before, with her own, far, far heavier weights. He then made one of the smartest decisions in his young life. “Erm, Miss, er Mistress Diana, I think I’d like to learn manners, please,” he said, trying to sound perky and happy.

The tone didn’t quite come off, but the sentiment was there, and Diana smiled as Hippolyta bit back a chuckle, leaving the room. There was something about the youth, his lively sense of humor, his dedication to combat and just his general cheerful nature that brightened up the day.

Moments later, Hippolyta found herself standing in front of the Mirror of Hera, as the goddess appeared. “Goddess, you called for me?”

“I have information about your young mystery. First of all, you should know that the reason why this youngster survived the protective maelstrom and even came to you at all is because Ranma is a chaotic font.”

Hippolyta’s eyes narrowed instantly, her hand dropping to her side where she would normally be carrying a sword, as she took the word chaos to mean the same as evil.

Yet Hera shook her head. “Stop. Chaos in and of itself is not a bad thing. It is how creatures, people and even societies evolve. A Chaotic font is someone who is inherently born with the ability to create chaos, to cause the laws of chance to go awry. That is partly how he survived. He is not himself dangerous to you or Themyscira.”

"The other part of what allowed the young boy to survive..." Hera smiled, actually a rather wry smile, to Hippolyta's confusion, "is a secret I will keep, I think. For now, anyway. It is so minor a part of Ranma's tale at the moment that it probably doesn't matter in the long-run. And yet... coupled with the chaotic font factor, it might eventually."

"You are speaking in riddles, my lady. I thought you stopped that in the fourteenth century," Hippolyta pointed out, rather deadpan.

"Allow a goddess her fun, my dear it won't hurt you or yours. It just means that something in the future might... change in ways unforeseen. Which I find most delicious." Hippolyta continued to look at Hera in as deadpan a manner as she could, but Hera did not elaborate, changing the subject back to Ranma's presence on the island. "However, I am afraid that he cannot stay on your island for long. Young Ranma has a destiny he must fulfill. I will speak with Poseidon, and between the two of us, we will get him back to where he belongs."

"Should I tell young Ranma that, holiness?" Hippolyta asked hesitantly. "About his having a destiny, I mean?"

Hera shook her head firmly. "No. From what we have seen of what little of Ranma's future is set in stone, he is the type of contrary individual to say nay if everyone else said yea. Tell Ranma he has a destiny; he will run a thousand miles to get away from it."

She frowned, thinking, then shrugged her shoulders, the tops of her shoulders briefly appearing in the mirror. "Tell the boy that it is by the will of the gods that no man can set foot on your island. It is, after all, the truth. And besides, he does have a father to get back to. He, too, has a role to play. One is much more set in stone than his son's. Still, he can stay with you for a few months. Hmmm... four to be exact. After that, it will be nearly impossible to let the two of them meet up once more in the proper manner."

Hera then smiled. "But perhaps we can do something else after he leaves... After all, just because the boy has a destiny he needs to fulfill, does not mean that we cannot stack the deck."

Hippolyta looked at her goddess quizzically, but the image of Hera simply smiled thinly. "Tell Diana to push the boy," she said simply. Then, she frowned slightly, staring off, her eyes going multicolored for a moment, unearthly in a way that caused Hippolyta and the nearby priestess to tremble for some reason as they looked upon the divine using her power. "Both of them. Cassie Sandsmark has the blood of Zeus as well. She and this Ranma fellow both should be able to handle it."

Something about the way she said that made Hippolyta wonder if Ranma's blood, or rather lineage, was just as interesting as Diana and Cassie's. But she set aside her curiosity, as it was clear that Hera was not going to answer. She simply bowed, and by the time she lifted her head, the image of her goddess was gone.

As Hippolyta turned away, however, the Sky Mother's voice reached her once more. "Push, Hippolyta. Push them both. The world still turns, and there are things beyond the borders of your island and that of Earth that might eventually end up impinging on both realms. Push them, and Diana. Her time to return to Man's World is closely approaching as well."

OOOOOOO

After a hearty lunch, Diana, Cassie and Ranma returned to the training area, only to find Hippolyta herself waiting for them, clad in the full regalia of an Amazonian warrior. "Mother, I did not expect you here," Diana stated.

Listening to her, Ranma thought there was something wrong with the way Diana spoke. Almost as if she were worried.

Hippolyta smiled. "It occurred to me, Diana, that perhaps in training the young ones, you might have lost the edge you gained from having been out in Man's World. If that is the case, it is something that should be corrected quickly, don't you think?"

"Urk." Diana winced, wondering if perhaps her mother had decided she had gotten a bit big for her panties in some fashion. She didn't think so, but Diana supposed if she had, she'd be the last one to know. "Very well, mother. Shall we begin?"

That evening, Cassie and Ranma stumbled into the bathroom, staring at where they were supposed to wash themselves before dipping into the hot water. They looked back at one another, and then Ranma shook his head. "I don't think I can feel my arms," he admitted.

"Me neither," Cassie said, looking down at the towel that was around her waist. "Getting out of my clothing was torture. And my legs are aching so much I don't know if I can even make it over to the bath."

Ranma nodded, and then, to Cassie's astonishment, stiffened his shoulders. She blinked as he turned to her, lifted her into the air, causing the little girl to squawk in outrage. "Put me down!"

"Nope. You took those hits to the legs. I can see the bruises. My legs are fine, at least."

"And if I poke you in the ribs, you won't collapse?" Cassie huffed, although for some reason, her heart was going a little pitter-pat as she slung an arm around Ranma's shoulders.

Ranma shook his head, grinning down at her. "Nope, not going to say that. So if you do, we're both going down. And that would hurt."

"Mutual destruction then," Cassie giggled, as Ranma moved over and into the bath, where he slid her in first, and then slowly lowered himself into the water, groaning in delight at the feel of the hot water against his sore, bruised body.

Behind them, Diana and Hippolyta had also entered the baths. Diana looked noticeably much worse for wear than the day before. Hippolyta had been very... purposeful... in sparring with the younger woman. Hippolyta hadn't had it entirely her own way, but every time Diana had seemingly gotten the upper hand with her greater speed and strength, the Queen pulled out some small trick or style change that threw her daughter off her game.

They had seen the little by-play between the children and chuckled to themselves, although Hippolyta had an odd expression of annoyance on her face before she cleared it away. *Stop that, Hippolyta; they're both very young for that particular bit of male-female nonsense to be an issue. And it isn't like Ranma will be here for long.*

"So, mother," Diana asked as she slid into the water beside the older woman, "what was this round of testing me about?"

"Orders from Hera," Hippolyta responded. "We can keep Ranma around were four months; after that, he must be returned to Man's World. Hera will have worked with Poseidon in creating a method to do so that will not weaken the barrier. You will be leaving the island soon after as well. I mean to see you leaving us stronger than you are."

"Setting aside the issue of my future bruises, that is not going to go down well with Cassie," Diana murmured. "The two of them have become quite close over the past two days. To say nothing about Cassie's reaction to my leaving, although there, at least, Donna can continue her training."

"I know. But it must be done."

Diana nodded and said no more about it, watching as the kids talked quietly about the training, commiserating about one another's pain more than anything else. They were both quite young after all, so while the children could shoulder the training, the purpose of much of it went over their heads. Then, with a sigh, she gestured them over, if Ranma was going to leave them, it would be best to be upfront about it. "Come over here, you two, I have something to tell you."

To young people, four months was a lot of time, so neither really reacted to this revelation at the time. Regardless, those four months progressed similarly. Although occasionally Cassie and Ranma would join Diana in exploring the island, under her supervision, the majority of their time was spent training, with Hippolyta joining to spar with Diana every three days. Those matches grew to be major draws for the citizens of the city and proved welcome breaks for Cassie and Ranma.

Both of them grew in leaps and bounds in terms of strength and speed, while Ranma also took some of the Amazon's style into his own. In this manner, he incorporated more palm-based attacks, as well as knife strikes and even many wrestling moves, holds and binds. In turn, Cassie and even Diana learned a bit about Anything Goes by watching Ranma spar, though not that much, since Ranma obviously was still learning it himself. Still, he was already very good at manipulating the momentum of attacks, which was something that Diana at least could understand and make use of.

Of course, they did occasionally have adventures beyond the scope of their training. Twice, Ranma and his new friends fought with the minotaurs, caught out by them as Diana led them on long cross-country runs. Beyond those battles, Ranma met other denizens of the island. Astonishing many, he got along kind of well with the small sphinx colony, who seemed to delight in having someone who had no idea about their various riddles. He also had a lot to share with them, which the creatures also enjoyed.

The harpies, he could have done without, though.

"That's a big bird up there," Ranma said, putting one hand above his eyes as he stared up into the sky at what looked like a large bird above them.

Diana turned from where she had been arguing with a nearby farmer about the price of a bottle of wine. Her mother's Inauguration Day was coming up, and Hippolyta greatly enjoyed the wine of this particular farm. The farmers added some kind of cinnamon aftertaste to it in some fashion that Diana didn't understand. She too looked up, while Cassie nodded, agreeing with Ranma as she put both of her hands above her eyes to stare above them. "There's more than one now, although they're not moving like birds," the young blonde girl murmured, cocking her head to one side. "They could be..."

Diana interrupted her young charge, a faint scowl on her face even as she spoke calmly. "Harpies coming in."

Ranma turned to her quizzically, about to ask what a harpy was, when he got the answer. Six of the birds flew down out of the sky, screeching out so loudly that several people in the farmer's market clapped their hands over their ears. Others didn't look as surprised, having already taken precautions by pulling hats down or already raising their hands. Several of the merchants even used something that looked like wax to protect their ears.

Now they set prepared bags onto strangely large bird perches. Seeing that, Ranma supposed these harpies were friendly, but loud.

Two of the harpies dropped bits of gold into a bowl set to one side as they grabbed up items from a few stalls, reinforcing this idea. The others circled around above them, but then two of them seemed to pause before diving down on Ranma, Cassie and Diana, who had turned

back to the wine merchant. A second later, Ranma felt something grab onto his shoulders, lifting him into the air with a cry of, "Look, sisters! Look what I have found."

"You haven't found me, you're just lifting me!" Ranma shouted as he grabbed at the talons of the creature holding him, preparing to fight.

Up close, the harpies turned out to be weird bird-women. The one carrying Ranma had a face and upper body of a woman, her hair shifting into feathers somehow that Ranma didn't understand. She didn't have arms; instead, she had wings, and her feet were talons, which were currently gripping Ranma's shoulders, as she flapped, driving herself further up into the air.

But if she expected Ranma to be terrified and just go along with things, she had another thing coming. Instead, he was just getting annoyed. *I like the idea of flying, sure, but under my own power, darn it.*

The other harpies all crowded around, staring at Ranma in shock. "A man! A man, here on the Isle of Women? That isn't allowed, is it?"

Another hummed thoughtfully. "Perhaps... perhaps he's too young, sisters. Perhaps he doesn't count as a man..."

'Yet!' screeched one of the others, flapping her wings, and coming close enough that her chest almost brushed Ranma's face. Ranma didn't respond except for kicking out at her, causing her to screech in laughter as she winged away.

But then, Ranma flipped, grabbing the talons that were around his shoulders. Performing a perfect handstand, he kicked upwards into the face of the harpy holding him. The harpy squawked in outrage, and her talons let go automatically, allowing Ranma to kick out again, pulling himself up on his hands to slam two feet into her face and chest.

Then Ranma hurled himself sideways, latching onto the neck of the harpy who had been teasing him, getting onto her back and locking in a chokehold that Diana had taught him.

"AKK!" the harpy squawked. "How did you do that!? Why are you not afraid! You're thousands of feet above ground!"

"Anything Goes Aerial Style for the win!" Ranma answered cheerfully, staring all around him with the delight of the truly fearless. "Now, as cool as it is to be this high, I think Diana is going to be pissed if you don't bring me back down, so why don't ya do that, okay?"

The little boy cheerfully continued to choke the woman underneath him, his strength far more than she had anticipated, cutting off any response. The harpies around began to entreat him to go with them peaceably, but whatever carnal pleasures were, they didn't sound all that tasty to him, and he didn't see how harpies could teach him anything or make good food. So,

after a few minutes and several warning spears hurled up at them from Diana, the harpies reluctantly began to fly downward.

"But he's a man," one of the harpies said to Diana moments later, shrugging her shoulders as she glared at her younger sisters of flight. "You can't exactly expect them not to be interested."

"I still don't get what the big deal is between men and women anyway," Ranma muttered, turning away to look at Cassie, who also shrugged her shoulders. "I mean, you've got bits that I don't, I've got a bit you don't. So what?"

"I know, right. Heh, it sure hasn't made you any stronger than me," Cassie teased, to which Ranma grumbled. He had yet to win even one strength-based sparring match, and rarely even got through them without being on his face in the dirt.

The older harpy and Diana exchanged a glance, then said as one, 'You'll know when you're older.'

The now pouting kids turned away, with Cassie grabbing Ranma's arm and tugging him deeper into the crowd. "Come on, I saw some candied apples. They looked most tasty."

"You don't have to tell me twice. Food is way more important than whatever the differences between men and girl boys and girls are anyway," Ranma answered.

"How long is he going to stay?" the older harpy asked quizzically.

"Four months."

Staring between her own youngsters, who were still staring after Ranma with expressions of shock and longing, and Cassie's firm grip on his arm, the old harpy simply nodded. "Probably for the best." To which Diana could only laugh dryly.

Other than that and a few other adventures...

"No, Ranma, you can't take the lion home," Diana said, rolling her eyes slightly. "Unless you want to take time out of your own training in order to train him? Besides," she pointed past Ranma at the lioness charged out of the jungle towards them, roaring. "I think his mother might object."

...Most of Ranma's time on the island was spent training. He and Cassie continued to build on their friendship until it was very rare to see one without the other.

However, all good things come to an end, and although they had known that Ranma would have to leave, when it came to it, it came as a shock to the youngsters. That day, Diana

didn't come to rouse them for training. Instead, they were allowed to sleep in, and when she did appear, she took them to see her mother, who announced that Ranma would be leaving them that very day.

After getting over their shock and shouting a bit, Ranma scuffed the marble under them, scowling slightly. "I still don't get it. I, I'm happy here, I mean, I'm kind of missing my Pops, but not much. And, and, I'm learning a lot! I don't understand why I can't stay and learn and keep training with you all for as long as I want. This, this place has been a **home** to me. I never had one of those! I don't want to go!"

He turned pleading eyes on Diana. "I mean, I've not made trouble... Mostly. Right? That small riot the other day in the city market wasn't my fault. It was that runaway horse! And it's not my fault that the harpies keep on coming around trying to bother me, either. The monkeys were just weird, I'll admit, but hey, the sphinxes only come by to ask about riddles..."

"You're not being sent away because of what you will have done, Ranma," Hippolyta said gently, even as her lips twitched at his recount of everything he'd been involved in the last week alone. "You are being sent away because of what you will be doing in the future, as well as our own laws. While you are young, you are still male, and no male can stand on our island."

Ranma scoffed at the idea of destiny or him having some duty to fulfill. He wanted to stay with Diana and Cassie, especially Cassie. It was really, **really** nice having someone around who he could have fun with, someone his own age and who shared his interests. And now he was being sent away because he was a guy? That was just so wrong!

Beside him, Cassie was also the exact opposite of happy. Indeed, she spent most of the morning trying to convince Diana that the queen was wrong. That Ranma could stay on the island. Both of their protests fell on deaf ears. Within a few hours, despite one attempt by Ranma to get away, they were down by the docks.

There, a small boat made out of shells all fit together awaited them, with two merwomen in the water nearby. A few fisherwomen were talking to them idly, trading well-cooked fish in packets for pearls and various types of seaweed, but that stopped as the queen and her group arrived.

"My lady!" One of the merwomen pushed herself out of the ocean on her tail like a dolphin, bowing from the waist towards Hippolyta. "Lord Poseidon has calmed the currents around the island. It will not last long, however. We should be going."

With Hippolyta's hand firmly clamped on his shoulder, any attempt to escape or hide away in the rest of the island had been thwarted before he could begin. Now, she hefted Ranma into the air, sitting him down on the boat. Once he was in place, the older woman looked at him with a smile, gently wiping away tears that Ranma hadn't even known were falling from his face. "I realize you don't understand why we are sending you away. But look at

it this way, Ranma. Our island is quite small, and you are near the end of what kind of adventures you can find here. There is a whole world out there waiting to be explored, where you will find more adventures for yourself."

Ranma continued to cry. "I, I still don't understand why I'm being sent away just because I'm different than all of you, though!"

"You will understand in time, child, as I said. It will be an interesting time for you, puberty," Hippolyta said, leaning over him and pulling him into a gentle hug, kissing the top of his head. "Farewell. And face your destiny with your back straight and eyes clear."

Diana took her place before Ranma could say anything, and Ranma had to remember his father's words about crying to stop himself from bawling, although nothing could stop his tears from slowly dropping down his face. "Be well, Ranma. And do remember that sometimes not fighting is just as important as your skill in doing so when you must."

Ranma tried to cling to Diana's hand, but then she was gone, lifting Cassie up to the side of the ship to hug him in turn. Ranma had gotten used to hugs and touches thanks to Cassie in the past four months, and he leaned into the hug now, his arms going around her.

The two friends quietly cried for a time, until the merwoman spoke up, her voice respectful but firm. "Lady Hippolyta, we must leave. My Lord Poseidon's currents will not be stilled for long."

"Get stronger, okay?" Cassie whispered through her tears. "I will too. I'll miss you!"

"I'll miss you too! And, and maybe we'll meet again, maybe you can leave and find me if I can't come back," Ranma suddenly exclaimed, the idea coming to him just then.

Even as Cassie exclaimed about how that sounded like a great idea, Diana winced and pulled Cassie away, already not looking forward to that talk, as the kids continued to exchange farewells. They were still doing so as the odd vessel began to move. Cassie stayed there, waving after Ranma until he disappeared from sight.

OOOOOOO

Ranma didn't really remember much of his voyage away from the island. Years later, he would like to put this down to magic. However, the reality was that he was too busy bawling his head off once no one was around to see him and generally feeling sorry for himself to take notice of anything around him.

Regardless, the odd-looking boat would probably have garnered a lot of attention, if, moments after leaving a massive storm front without even noticing it, the strange boat made out of shells didn't start to come apart under Ranma. He looked at it carefully, then around, and

spotted some land nearby. Well, nearby for a ship. For a going on nine-year-old? Normally, that kind of distance would seem a daunting, perhaps impossible task.

He looked back at the boat, crossing his arms, annoyance flaring in him and banishing his previous depression. "So, this is where you're going to dump me?" As if in answer, a large crack appeared to one side of him, several of the shells falling away, disappearing into the water below.

Ranma scowled and then prepared to leap out. "I don't know who Lord Poseidon is, but I can already tell he's a dick!"

At that, the tiny ship gave up the ghost, coming apart entirely. When Ranma surfaced a moment later, he shouted, "That didn't do anything to change my feelings!"

Grumbling, Ranma swam on towards the nearby land, coming ashore several hours later after having smacked an inquisitive shark in the nose. He lay out on the beach, gasping in air, thankful beyond words for Diana's training. If not for them, he might not have made it.

After a few minutes' rest, Ranma pushed himself to his feet. This wasn't one of those beaches where you could go swimming. In fact, this bit of island was actually kind of nasty, with lots of jagged rocks all over the place, and a cliff on two out of three sides. There was a path, and lots of beer bottles around, along with other things Ranma didn't recognize that looked like weird balloons, so someone used it.

Looking to one side, Ranma saw other things left behind and idly wondered what the little rubber things were, before shrugging that off as unimportant, turning to stare out at the ocean. He remembered Cassie, Diana, and the fun they'd had, then sighed. There was nothing for it now. *I can't go back, so I, I gotta go forward.*

With that, the young boy squared his shoulders and began to troop away from the small beach, wondering aloud, "Now, how to find my Pops?"

This actually turned out to be relatively easy. The place Ranma came ashore was, despite his opinions on Poseidon's cavalier attitude when it came to Ranma's life, quite close to the target goal. In this case, that meant getting Ranma back to his father.

Four months on, Genma was still in the area, searching for his son. Lots of wanted signs for the man had sprung up around the area, but he still hadn't been caught and was still holding out hope that Ranma was around.

When Ranma realized why his father would still be around, he smiled a bit, thinking *Well, he might be an ass and might have a lot of hard questions to answer, but at least he cares, right? Now, if I was my Pops, where would I be?"*

With that in mind, Ranma found the cheapest bar he could and then climbed up onto the roof. There, hidden among the air conditioners and the neon sign of the place, was his father. Ranma instantly moved to hop onto the fat man's stomach, but Genma grabbed him out of the air, slinging him aside, before slowly waking up. "W, what the?"

"Ah, right, Anything Goes Sleep-Fu, forgot about that," Ranma muttered, rubbing at his back where he'd landed. "Er, hey, Pops, you're looking fatter than I remember."

"W, where have you been, boy?" Genma huffed, trying very, very hard to not look pleased at his son's return. "Do you know how much trouble I'm in sticking around here?"

"No, but I do know how much trouble you are in for stealing my friend's yatai," Ranma said, crossing his arms. "You wanna talk about that again, huh?"

Genma grumbled a bit, but nodded, willing at this point to say anything he could to get on his son's good side so he wouldn't run off again. "You're right. I was wrong, boy. I wanted to feed us for a few weeks off that thing, but it was too much effort. And before you ask, I've already sent money back to them," he said virtuously, lying through his teeth.

Despite his time on the Isle of Women, Ranma was still a very precocious eight-year-old mentally. He couldn't tell if someone was lying to save his life, and he simply nodded his head at this, then crossed his arms, staring at his father rebelliously. "No more thieving," he ordered. "That isn't what martial artists are supposed to do, Pop. And I wanta send Ucchan a note, apologizing for it."

He then conceded. "Stealing food directly is okay, but not important stuff like jewelry or money or yatais."

Scowling, Genma nodded. "Right, boy. I'll not do it again." *At least, not when you're watching.* "As for the message, we can stop at some point and use a postcard for that,

Nodding, Ranma dropped his imperious expression, now looking like a confused young boy again. "So, where do we go now? We can't stay here for long, not with all the wanted posters with your face on 'em around here."

"Well, first boy, you're going to tell me what you are up to," Genma shot back.

Ranma stared at him, then grinned. "I went to a magical land with these giant bull creatures, and these women with wings and claws. They tried to kidnap me, I hid out for a while and then got away."

For some reason, Genma found himself believing his son and shook his head slightly. "If you've only been hiding, rather than training, we'll have to see where you are. I hope you didn't stop training without me to push you on, boy. Remember, the road to being the best..."

“Is slow and painful, and you can backslide any time,” Ranma retorted, repeating something Genma had said many times. “But this isn’t the place to spar, Pops. And like I said, we should get out of here before your stupid face is spotted.”

Ignoring the taunt with ease and mentally noting the boy needed a lot more work in his ‘Make ‘em Mad, Make ‘em Stupid’ technique, Genma nodded. “Good thinking, boy.” He cracked his shoulders and neck, then gestured. “Let’s get a move on.”

He watched as Ranma, instead of moving to him, leaped across to the nearby building. “At least he’s been keeping up with his leg exercises,” Genma murmured.

About four hours later, the two of them were deep into a national park, heading out to the other side away from where they had entered. Near the other side of the park, they paused to spar, and Genma took in the differences in his son’s style and abilities with the eyes of a master. He’d added several things to his style that Genma had taught him, shown in his palm strike or chops, and he also used grapple techniques.

But the boy’s also faster and stronger, Genma thought as one of Ranma’s blows actually got through Genma’s defenses and stung a bit when it hit his stomach.

The cuff that caught Ranma’s ear sent him sprawling, but even so, Genma had to nod in approval. “Good work, boy! You not only didn’t backslide, you’ve also gotten stronger and faster! We’ll start sparring in the air from now on, I think, and then, we’ll continue to work on your hand-eye coordination.”

And, he thought to himself, I think it might be time to look up some of my old techniques. The boy’s grown so strong he’s almost ready for it.

A few weeks later, Genma was doing just that, sitting beside a fire, as he looked through several dozen old training manuals he’d accumulated over the years. Nearby, curious as to how Genma had been carrying so many in such a small bag, Ranma stuck his head and upper body into the backpack Genma routinely carried, exclaiming, “Holy heck, it’s cold in here, how is this possible!?”

“Your vocabulary’s gotten larger, too, boy,” Genma murmured. “Did those bull people try to talk to you?”

The boy’s movement in the bag stilled for a second, then he popped out, shaking and shivering. “It’s colder in there than it is out here, Pops! As for my vocabulary, the harpies tried to talk to me a few times. I couldn’t always get away clean, but I got really good at figuring out places they couldn’t go.”

Again, something about that bothered Genma, but after the things he had seen under the Dreadful Master, the idea that there were harpies and minotaurs out there wasn’t exactly a

stretch. "The coldness in that bag, that's the side effect of an advanced technique you're not ready for yet. I'll tell you when. It's got nothing to do with your physical abilities," he added hastily, holding up the big hand, waving Ranma away, and the attack Ranma had launched automatically at the very idea that he wasn't ready for something.

That was a good sign, really. The boy was still more inclined to charge first, think later. "If you try that technique too early, you might lose control of it, and the drain could kill you. No, I think you're going to be ready for something else. Something that's supposed to be an unbeatable technique."

Three weeks later, cat Ranma stared mournfully out at the big pond. He yowled forlornly, missing the she who smelled of sweat and metal, and the big one, who always smiled and patted his head and smelled of roses and lavender after they'd had fun play-fighting. They were much better than the fat patriarch, who smelled of sweat and booze. But they were out there, past the big waters, and Ranma had no way to get to him.

With another last forlorn yowl, cat Ranma turned away, wondering if he could find another squirrel somewhere to chase. That was always good to pick up his mood.

OOOOOOO

As Diana was once more allowed to leave the Island of Women, much to the tears of young Cassie, Hera turned her attention elsewhere for just a second. Tugging on a subtle spell laid upon a sleeping head years past, she smiled thinly. The spell she had laid on Ranma's mind was still there. It was subtle, that spell, merely making the memories he had made on the Island of Women remain in his mind without any of the degradation memories normally suffered from, or, given his training, blunt trauma. It would help him in many ways, especially his mind and drive.

Good. I think in the future that this young man will prove to be more than anyone can expect, even with his status as a chaotic locus. Perhaps he will prove more of a hero and symbol than that other youth who is usually bestowed with the power of the ancient wizard, Shazam, in this dimension. Billy is a good youth, but Ranma is a warrior born. That is more important for the times to come than being closer to some foolish ideal of a perfectly good person.

OOOOOOO

Scowling Genma watched his now twelve-year-old son bounce down the hill and then up the next ridge as if it were level ground. *The boy is growing too quickly. At this point, it's getting worrisome.*

Ranma was much, much better at his age than Genma had been, something that Genma was proud of. But it was getting to the point where the boy was beginning to question him. *That won't do. I need something to gain further control over him, or at least give me some time*

to train myself up to my peak, so that way, I can at least keep him from rebelling too much. He thought for a few moments, then, as his 12-year-old son turned and shouted at him to hurry up, smirked suddenly. *I might know just the thing.*

“Change of plans, boy,” he said when Ranma rejoined him, holding out an old pamphlet.

He tossed it to Ranma, who grabbed it, reading it quickly, hoping it was about something that would take him back near the ocean. Even now, years after he was on the Island of Women, Ranma remembered those days as the best in his life, and the castle of Hippolyta as his first real home.

The pamphlet held no such thing, but Ranma still frowned thoughtfully at it, surprised. “Aikido? I thought you said aikido was too soft to work with Anything Goes?”

“I did, and I meant it, boy. But, O-sensei is not only the creator of that martial art, but a master of the mental side of things.” Genma sighed, looking away, “I’ll admit, son, I made a mistake with the Neko-Ken. But mistakes can be corrected if you find the right means. I might not know much about the mental side, but O-Sensei will. And at this point, you’re good enough to match anything he throws at you.”

Ranma stared at the pamphlet, then at his father, before nodding firmly. His voice was gruff with emotion as he muttered, “Thanks, Pops.”

It wasn’t getting him back to Cassie and Diana-nee, although he had finally begun to figure out why the difference between boys and girls was important. But it would solve the other issue facing Ranma right now.

Genma rolled his eyes, thumping the boy on his shoulder. “Enough of that! Let’s get a move on. From here, it’ll be a few days. The faster we are, boy, the faster you can say goodbye to the Neko-Ken.”

It took over a year of meditation and training, although mostly meditation. But the impossible had been accomplished.

Genma and the aged creator of Aikido, the man known as O-sensei, stared as Ranma sparred with half a dozen of the man’s best students. “While his learning via books and the mental side of things wasn’t all that much faster than a normal person’s, Ranma’s kinesthetic learning curve is truly something to remark upon,” O-sensei murmured to himself, sipping a cup of tea. “He’s come a long way, Genma. Although, why you waited so long to bring him to me or one of the other soft style specialists...”

O-sensei trailed off, staring off into the distance, letting his silence act like a black hole, pulling at Genma’s words and brain. Genma had been very careful up to this point to never be in the older man’s presence for long, and O-sensei had gone along with that. Yet now, as he

watched the proof that showed he had nothing left to teach Ranma when it came to the physical side of the Art, O-sensei felt he deserved some answers.

Soon enough, words flowed. Genma admitted that even now, he probably wouldn't have come to O-sensei if not for the fact that he wanted to get back on his son's good graces. And that he thought perhaps O-sensei could give him true mastery of the Neko-Ken.

"Which I have done. That and more. The youth has learned everything I've been able to teach them. Ranma is truly a martial arts savant. You have nurtured someone incredible," O-sensei interjected, his voice calm and measured.

"I've made a monster," Genma grunted, still admitting more than he should. "While the boy's been training with you, I've been training myself. I haven't had to do that since I left the Dreadful Master. But if I don't, the boy will leave me behind in a few years."

"And is that so bad a thing?" O-sensei asked gently. "You would not be the first master overtaken by his student in skill. Indeed, many of my own students have surpassed me in many ways. It is one of the greatest achievements a teacher can strive for and is proof of their own training more than anything else can be."

Genma huffed, then glanced sideways at the older man. "You're not going to ask me about the Dreadful Master again?"

"No," O-sensei mused, shaking his head. "I do not believe I will. You say he is imprisoned, hopefully dying. That is good enough for me." For once, the older man's gentle face hardened into a cold, almost snakelike expression. "That will teach him not to fondle other people's wives," he growled. "My son-in-law still wants to find him and spit him with a fork. Yet that is a match I know would go poorly for my family. Let the diminutive stain on martial arts stay forever buried."

"Hear, hear," Genma muttered, watching as his son created energy blades, slicing a staff held in the hands of one of the other students into pieces. "I think I'm going to take the boy soon," Genma said, then blinked, staring down at his tea and wondering if some kind of truth serum had been poured into it.

But O-sensei simply chuckled. There had been no such thing, but the Silent Hunger technique was often good at pulling out hidden truths. "Of course you will. For such like you, Genma, sitting in place for so long is a kind of torture in and of itself. Still..."

The old, thin man, who looked like an aged grandfather more than anything else, reached out with a seemingly frail hand to tap the back of Genma's hand. Yet that touch struck with the strength of a bear's paw, and Genma bit his lip to keep from crying out. When O-Sensei gripped Genma's wrist next, it was with a grip of iron. "I am quite fond of your boy.

He's bright, inquisitive and driven. And has a very active imagination. He still tells the story about his time with the harpies and the minotaurs, you know."

"Yes, I've tried to stop him from doing that; he gets strange looks all the time because of it," Genma answered through clenched teeth. *Damn it, Genma, you forgot the first rule of martial arts: always be afraid of old martial artists! They get that way by outliving or killing their enemies!*

"True, yet as I said, I am fond of him. I would be most distressed to learn that anything truly negative has happened to them. Life is fraught with peril, but such perils should always be of one's own making or found as one grows, should they not? Rather than being passed down from parent to child. Honor is one thing, trouble another."

"I understand," Genma said, stammering and cursing the boy's weakness for this. *If he had only been able to learn the Neko-Ken the first time without this soft mental shit, I wouldn't be in this position!*

"Good." O-sensei removed his hand from around Genma's wrist, smiling beatifically as he picked up his cup, bringing it to his lips and sipping daintily. "More tea?"

Days later, Genma scowled as he plopped into the barstool next to his son, who was watching the TV with interest. "What are you watching, boy?"

"Something about the news, Pops. Some guy in spandex is running around America fighting these superpowered criminals."

Genma blinked, turning from where he had been haggling for a new portable heater, moving over to stare through the TV, looking over at the shop clerk. "Is this supposed to be the news or some manga?"

"It's the news, sir. Where have you been? Everybody knows about Superman," the other man scoffed.

"Superman," Ranma and Genma both deadpanned, then looked at one another and laughed, shaking their heads. "I could figure out a better name for myself in two seconds if I wanted to go around in spandex than that. Course I wouldn't go around in spandex, let alone with my underwear on the outside," Ranma quipped.

The clerk chuckled at that, and moments later, the two of them exited the bar. "So, where to now, Old Man?"

"Bhutan, my boy. There's a sect there called the... the something Shadows. I think they might have some interesting training for you."

Months later, a tall, middle-aged man with an air of age and strength in equal measure stood up from his deck. This was the leader of the League of Shadows, a man named Ras Al Ghul, and he was not happy with what he had just heard, something that made the man who brought this news to him fearful. "What do you mean, Ranma is gone? Young Ranma is one of the greatest students we have had here, and I ordered he be watched and his food doctored to force the indoctrination to stick faster than normal. He makes the Wayne boy who escaped us twelve years ago seem like a rank amateur! Everything we tossed at him, Ranma has cheerfully lapped up and asked for more. And you say he has escaped us not a **day** before he was to face his final test?"

"Master, I am simply telling you the facts," his chief trainer replied, fearful but respectful. Ras was not known to kill his own followers. Punish for stupidity, yes, but not kill. "Something broke the outer wall, there are signs of a struggle, and then, one pair of feet leading away."

Growling, the old man clicked his fingers, and soon, holographic projections appeared from every wall, showing recordings from the highly advanced and extremely well-hidden series of video cameras. As the two men watched, a rather fat, bald Japanese man appeared, climbing up the outer wall of the fortress monastery deep in the Himalayas, where the League of Shadows trained their assassins. As they watched, he seemingly reached the outer wall of the room Ranma had been given, a penitent cell repurposed to hold him and others like him. Then the man smashed the wall down with a series of blows, and, moments later, he was carrying his son out, heading back down the mountain.

"That's his father, Genma. We booted him off the mountain less than a month after the boy and Genma climbed up here in the first place," Ras murmured. "We had watchers on him to make certain he did not return..."

A series of phone calls later, Ras Al Ghul turned back to his chief trainer. "None of our watchers are responding. Send some of our men down the mountain. If the Dark Horse has slain my men, I will go after them both personally."

But Genma hadn't killed anyone. Indeed, the watchers had recovered by the time Ranma and Genma had reached the town at the foot of the mountain. By that time, Genma had somehow broken the mental indoctrination Ras' people had instilled in Ranma, as the youth was traveling with him willingly.

"So, another has taken our training and gotten away. Still, this one isn't going to be fighting against us. At least, not for a while. It isn't the worst disaster we've had to face," Ras muttered, scowling. "Send the word out through our contacts. I want them found."

Thinking about it logically, Ras knew that was probably not going to happen. His reach in Japan was minimal at best at this point, thanks to the yakuza employing superpowered individuals among their enforcers and being so well-integrated into the society. No, Genma and

Ranma were both gone for now. *But I will not forget this slight, Saotome clan. I will remember, and I will have my vengeance.*

OOOOOOO

“When rumors went about that Wonder Woman was back, I didn’t really believe them. But here you are, a hero from World War II in the flesh.” Diana turned from where she had been standing on a rooftop, watching police carry away the criminal Cheetah, a pensive frown on her face, to look over her shoulder at the hero called Batman. *Hmm, interesting. Why do I think as if all the current heroes here in America are going to stop in and see if I am the ‘real’ thing?”*

Diana had met the hero called Superman just four days ago and came away with a respect for his abilities, if not his skill. Still, he was a young man who was very obviously doing what he could, and what more could be asked of anyone?

Staring at Batman, Diana understood instantly that this man was a very different sort of hero. Where Superman wished to show himself as a symbol of peace and protection, much like Diana did, Batman was a creature who lived on creating fear in the hearts of villains. “Are you a fan then? I have to admit that I am somewhat bemused at times by how many fans I seem to have.”

“Why have you returned to what you call Man’s World?” Batman commanded bluntly.

Narrowing her eyes angrily at his rudeness, Diana crossed her arms and glared at him. But to her surprise, Batman did not back away, simply staring back at her intently. *And is that distrust I see? Some distrust of a stranger, I can understand. But this seems more specific? Does he fear what I might do with my powers? That would make good sense, but would be quite foolish given my previous uses of it.*

“I retreated from Man’s World originally because I required rest and recuperation. I understand that you have been most active as a hero since you appeared ten years ago. But let me tell you that something is soul-searing in warfare that cannot be described to anyone who has not been there before. I am now back because I have to be. Man’s World will be facing many different crises, some of them their own making, some not. My Queen and our gods have decreed that I need to be here.”

Batman’s response was scathing. “So, you are not here of her own volition? And you expect us to trust you?”

“I am here because I wish to be, just as much as because of my orders. And ask for trusting me, I gather that you do not trust easily.” Diana shrugged, gesturing back down to the handcuffed Cheetah. “Very well. Judge me by my actions, however, and not your own fears or pre-conceived notions.”

Once more, the two heroes locked gazes, and after a moment, Batman was the one to look away. As he did, he took a step back. "I **will** be watching you." With that, he took a step back off of the roof, disappearing into the dark alleyway below.

Diana moved after him slowly, staring down where he had been, unsurprised to see there was no one in the alleyway below. Shaking her head wryly, she lifted into the air, flying off through the nighttime sky. "Well, I suppose that being a hero takes all sorts."

OOOOOOO

It's finally happened, Genma thought to himself, staring glumly into the fire of the Saotomes' latest campfire. As much as I have trained, Ranma has caught up to me. No longer were they sparring as disciple and master. They were sparring as equals. And depending on terrain, and a myriad of other factors, Ranma could win three times out of every four. Worse, the boy has shown no interest whatsoever in heading back to Japan. He wants to explore the world.

Ranma saw no need to ever stop training and was always interested in finding new styles to incorporate. He was also smarter and somewhat more educated than Genma had ever thought the boy would even be interested in, let alone become.

On the one hand, that made Genma very, very proud of his son. But on the other... *If this keeps going, my retirement plans are ruined! I need to find something to let me get control of the boy. And what the hell is this promise to get stronger, he mumbles about when he thinks I can't hear him? He's been doing it for years, and I've never gotten a straight answer out of him.*

Thinking back, he thought for several moments, then remembered a story his own master told him once about a magical training ground.

Several weeks later, Ranma stared after his father in shock as he moved out into the training area. "Damn it Old Man! Screwing around with magic is never a good idea!"

"Does that mean you're scared, boy?" Genma taunted from where he was balancing on a bamboo pole over one of the cursed springs.

"Sirs are very strange." The guide, a fat man wearing a Chinese Soldier's off-duty uniform, blinked at Ranma's question. "Most say magic no exist."

"Yeah, well..." Ranma shrugged as he remembered the Lasso of Truth, the heated pools of Themyscira, the shell ship and a few other bits of magic he had seen on the Island of Women. "Let's just say I got some experience with magic."

"Then sir will not go?" the guide asked. "Once step into Jusenkya, it be too too late."

"Huh?" Ranma looked at him, idly sending his Old Man the finger as he taunted Ranma once more. "What do you mean by that?"

"Whole place cursed, not just springs, sir. To come to Jusenkyo is to get curse. It no matter what want."

"Boy, come on, I'm getting bored out here, and you're acting like a scaredy cat! I thought the Neko-Ken made you a tomcat, not a little pampered kitty."

"Oy!" Ranma barked back, before suddenly, a wild idea occurred to him. It might've been eight years since the last time he'd seen them, but the memories he'd made with Cassie and Diana were still the clearest he had from before the Neko-Ken training. And they were still friends that he wanted to meet again.

After all, it wasn't like he'd made any friends since. He'd met Masters that he quite liked, such as O-sensei and others, and had made friendly rivalries with a few older journeymen. But friends? No. Ryoga Hibiki, a boy he'd met a few months back, might've been a friend. But his own ego and his family's direction curse got in the way of that. *And my ego too, I suppose, I coulda let him have some bread, but no, I couldn't let him win, not even once.*

Shaking his head, Ranma concentrated back on the sudden wild idea he'd just had. Although he knew now why boys weren't allowed on the island, he really wanted to see Cassie and Diana again. *And if this works, maybe I can do just that...* "Hey, you know what any of the springs are?"

Turning back from watching Genma leap to another bamboo pole, the Jusenkyo guide blinked. "Guest ask what?"

"Well, it seems as if you'd know what kind of curses are which, right?" Ranma questioned in a low whisper, a wild, almost gleeful idea appearing in his head. "And keep your voice down."

The guide stared for a second before answering. "Er, well, some. But..."

He was interrupted by Genma's impatient cry of, "What are you waiting for, boy? Get up here!"

But Ranma ignored his old man until the guide had answered, pointing out over a few of the springs whose curses were well known. When he stopped on one that was called the spring of the drowned girl, Ranma stared at it. Then, as Genma began to taunt him, Ranma growled, seemingly losing his patience and leaped out onto the bamboo sticks.

Genma was waiting and attacked ferociously, annoyed by Ranma's waiting on the sidelines. "What the hell was that, boy? Have you become a little girl who can't hack it, huh?"

Biting back a retort of 'not yet,' Ranma dodged through a series of his father's attacks, taunting Genma back, seemingly furious and now impatient with the whole thing. Ranma kept up that attitude until he was near where he wanted to be. Hopping from one of the bamboo poles, he made certain the next one was the one he was searching for, and then landed, turning to face his father as he stood on the bamboo pole stuck into the Cursed Spring of Drowned Girl. *If I can't get back to Themyscira as a guy, he thought to himself with a laugh, I'll be going back there as a girl!*

When his father leaped to attack him again, Ranma hopped upwards, lashed out with a kick, as Genma's foot smashed into the top of the bamboo pulled underneath them. And Ranma, after smacking his father out of the way towards another spring, fell in.

Genma stuck his landing easily, snorting as he shouted, "You're going to have to do better than... that... boy..." his words fell off as he stared at the redheaded young girl who had just pulled herself out of the spring. "Oh shit!" *The magic is real, and holy fuck, she looks like a young Nodoka...wait, Nodoka!*

While Genma had thought the magic here might let him gain some control over his son, he had thought the boy would be turned into something harmless, and then could just be controlled by a douse of hot or cold water. Not only did a human form negate that, but this particular form made a certain promise Genma had made at the tip of a sword spring to mind. *I don't wanna commit seppuku!!* he mentally whined.

But then Genma had other problems as Ranma flipped herself out of the stream, touching down for a brief moment. Then he was launching himself at his old man, her face scrunched up in rage. "What the fucking hell, Old Man! Did you know these curses were real?! And you still brought us here!?"

"N, now calm down, boy, I..." Genma tried to talk his son-turned-daughter down, but Ranma ignored him, and despite Genma's frantic efforts, Ranma's feet crashed into his leg, unbalancing Genma. He was able to leap to a nearby bamboo pole. But he flubbed the landing so much that all his weight came down at an angle. The pole snapped, and for just a second, Ranma frowned, her fake look of anger fading into confusion as for just an instant the sound of bamboo snapping sounded like someone chortling maniacally.

Then it was Ranma's turn to gape as his father burst out of the water and charged her. But as the giant panda leaped toward her, Ranma regained some equilibrium, and she shouted, "Well, Old Man, at least you don't have to deal with much of a weight change, right?"

That seemed to prick Genma's pride, and the panda roared, coming after the redhead all the harder as she raced toward the side of the cursed springs, inwardly gleeful. Today had been a good day. *Now, I just need to study some geography, and something about sailing maybe, and maybe I'll be able to get back to Diana and Cassie's island!*

OOOOOOO

Ryoga stood on top of a hill overlooking the cursed springs of Jusenkyo, clutching in one hand the same pamphlet that. "Finally! Finally, I'm here. Ranma, you will pay for running out on our honorable duel! Running away like that after promising to meet me in my family's backyard for one final match to decide our rivalry once and for all, I..."

Voices nearby interrupted Ryoga's monologue, and he scowled. "Damn it, does no one have any respect for the dramatic anymore?"

Staring down, he saw a redheaded, short and very stacked girl racing ahead of a panda. Thinking the redhead was running from the bear, Ryoga was about to attack the panda, endangered species or no, when the voice of the girl floated up to him. "Come on, Pops, you know we need to check these Amazons out. What if they have new techniques we can learn?"

As Ryoga watched, the panda pulled out a sign on which words had been written. Ryoga couldn't read them from here, but it was evident the panda was not a simple panda. He stood there watching until something in the cliff face below him shifted, and Ryoga found himself falling backwards through the air towards the springs. He shouted, "Curse you, Ranma! This is all your fault!"

But because he hadn't been attacked or hit, Ryoga was able to control his fall and landed between two of the springs. And then, his footing slipped, and Ryoga stumbled back into one of the springs.

Watching this from nearby, the guide smiled, a green light coming into his eyes before it disappeared, and he rushed forward, pulling the small Siberian Husky out of the water of the spring. Staring at it, the guide shook his head and moved to pick up the dog's pack, only to find it far too heavy to lift. He had to drag it over to his cottage, muttering all the while, "Customers always so strange. Never listen. To come to cursed springs is to get cursed. Is simple. Only wisest most noble priests ever not get cursed. Whole place is curse, not just springs. Fools..."

OOOOOOO

"You throw a punch like someone who has never been trained at all," Diana observed, crossing her arms as she stared across at Superman, who she had just tried to lay out after redirecting one of his punches. He was now touching his jaw gingerly, and she quipped, "Not used to taking hits, either?"

"I've taken plenty of punches, some of them hurt, but I suppose you're right. I've never actually been trained in combat or anything like that. Batman offered at one point a few months back, but we could never figure out a time to both of us to get away for the kind of intense training he wanted to do," Superman admitted.

“Understandable. But that didn’t mean you can’t do any training.” With that, Diana ordered Superman to take a certain stance across from her to do the same. It was a martial arts stance that she had learned since entering Man’s World, but it was a good basis for most hand-to-hand combat training and would help Superman build up the mental side of things. “Now, this is how you throw a punch,” she teased gently, stepping forward and throwing out a series of punches, each of them looping into Superman’s hasty defense.

By the time they were done, Superman was gasping, while Diana was sweating heavily. “Your endurance is quite phenomenal, at least. I just don’t want you to get into the habit of taking blows when you can’t dodge. It fits your Man of Steel persona, but it can bite you in the rear if you run into someone who is just as strong as you or more so.”

“Not to disparage your skills or words, Wonder Woman, but how likely is that? It hasn’t happened yet, and I have been active for several years now,” Superman replied, his voice respectful even as Clark tried to downplay Wonder Woman’s worries.

Clark respected Wonder Woman a lot. Indeed, all of the small but growing group of interconnected heroes that were slowly putting together an actual, organized entity did. Even Batman did, although he didn’t trust her motives, but that was normal for Bruce. He didn’t trust anyone.

“True. And you have done a magnificent job. I am not denigrating your abilities or accomplishments. But as a hero, you should also strive to be better than you are personally, not just as an individual, but as a fighter. That is why I am constantly training myself, after all. And given Green Lantern’s recent arrival, can you truly say that it is beyond the realm of imagination that there is an alien race out there that could match your strength? And have you been tested against magic?”

The last remark made Clark cut off whatever he wanted to say. He stayed silent, however, for an entirely different reason, watching as Wonder Woman drank from a bottle of water. Some of it dripped down her chin and then down her perfect, arched throat, her throat visibly working as she drank. While he had gotten used to life in Metropolis, which was very different indeed from life on the farm, this was still one of the most sensual sights Clark had ever seen.

He shook himself, staring ahead of him at the far wall of the training area here in his fortress of solitude. Clark had opened it up to the Justice League after the Martian Manhunter asked him about it, and since J’onn J’onzz was the one who was mostly here besides Clark himself, it had worked out pretty well. Diana was a recent guest, but one that Clark was happy to have around. “Er, no, I can’t say as I have. In fact, until recently, when I met Zatanna, I didn’t think magic was real.”

“Then you should perhaps be warier,” Diana answered, shaking her head. “Dodging rather than taking a hit is always a good idea. Especially when it comes to magic”

"Hmm... the problem is, when I'm on the clock, so to speak, I don't have any time to train. And my guise as a civilian rarely has days like this, when I can get away from it all," Clark mused.

Diana nodded. "I can understand that. My own identity is that of an antiquities and picture analysis expert." When Superman made a noise, she answered, "I'm trained to spot counterfeit antiquities, modified or cropped pictures, and other things of that nature. But that means I can mostly make my own hours and keep up with my training in my civilian persona. That is always easier, I feel."

"Huh. Well, I would have to find a trainer, I guess," Clark mused. "I wonder if Batman could ask around for us."

Staring at Clark for a moment, Diana thought for a moment, then shrugged. "If not, I would be willing to let our alter egos meet. My persona as Diana Prince is a black belt in Judo, Aikido and is a practitioner of Krav Maga. Would that do?"

Blinking, Clark took a moment to realize that Diana had just trusted him with her civilian persona, something Clark knew she hadn't for the rest of the growing League beyond J'onn. "I, um, yes, that would be good. Er, I'm currently living in Metropolis, although I doubt that is any surprise. My alter ego is Clark Kent, and I work at the Daily Planet."

"Huh, interesting. That should work," Diana mused, nodding. "I have some business in Metropolis coming up, actually. It would be easy to meet you then. And this way, I can train against someone superior in strength and speed to myself as well."

Clark nodded, and then Diana began to dissect what styles would work best in someone with Clark's strength and what kinds he should add to his skillset. All in all, while it wasn't restful, it was certainly an interesting time for both, as what had once been admiration and mutual respect began to morph into friendship.

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As she and her father-turned-panda entered the village, Ranma just looked around, frowning faintly as she felt eyes on them. *Is this because of the whole outsider thing, or something else?"*

"You has excellent luck, Sirs," pointed out a local guide they had hired recently. "The local Amazons are having their yearly champion festival now. Each age group fight one-on-one fights, have champion, yes?"

"Ooh, that sounds fun," Ranma nodded eagerly, while Genma nodded eagerly for an entirely different reason. To one side of the area where the tournament was occurring was a

large buffet-style packed high with food. Genma instantly moved in that direction, but Ranma didn't.

With his time on Themyscira, Ranma was far better able to hunt for his food than he might otherwise have been, just travelling around with Genma. And he, currently she, had also protected that food from Genma for the past few days. Now, as the panda rushed over to the free food, Ranma stayed behind, leaned against a nearby side of a building, before blinking, staring up at a group of ancient gargoyles perched on its roof. "What the heck? Someone has really bad taste in sculpture around here."

To Ranma's astonishment, one of the creatures above her moved, the stick it had been holding coming down towards her head and Ranma ducked with a yelp.

"We're not statues, Outsider, and there are some of us who can actually speak your foul language."

"Gah, sorry," Ranma muttered, her teeth flashing in a smirk as she crouched down, staring at the oldsters, now wondering how strong they were. "I'm not used to women who look like they're garden gnomes or the source of that old Baba Yaga myth."

"Are you actively looking to get smacked, brat?" the same old woman cackled. "If so, why don't you enter the tournament? You're sniffing around someone well out of your weight class with us."

"I didn't think it was open to outsiders," Ranma said with a shrug.

"It isn't," said one of the others, glaring at the first. "In fact, judging by your age, that bracket's champion is about to be decided. This old crone is just trying to confuse the issue."

Ranma blinked, then looked over to the challenge log, and saw a girl her own age, moving through a series of attacks. She indeed was Ranma's age, and kind of cute, but not as gorgeous as Ranma's memory of Diana. But her opponent made Ranma cock her head to the side, frowning. "Are we sure that the other girl is my age? Or, er, human?"

"Don't judge a book by its cover, brat, you thought we were statues after all!" cackled the second one. She sounded like she was having a good old time right now, while some of the others looked to be grumbling. "And it looks like my granddaughter is about to win handily."

Soon the old woman's prediction proved right, and then the crowd of oldsters began to move off, heading towards the victorious girl, still muttering as other winners of various ages moved in the same direction. That this direction was towards the food table was lost on Ranma as she followed them, scrunching her face with an annoyed expression. She was not exactly impressed with what she was seeing, and as she walked, Ranma muttered low under her breath. "Man, only a little village instead of a city, I haven't seen any minotaurs, harpies or

manticores, and none of them seem to be wearing armor either. Looks to me like China got gipped when it comes to Amazons."

However, one of the elders was still close enough to hear Ranma's mutter, and now she blinked, turning to stare at the young redhead. "I'm sorry, you just spoke as if you've run into other Amazons."

Scowling internally at being overheard, Ranma shrugged. "Let's just say I had a really interesting adventure when I was young. It um, it was a heck of a lot of fun."

"Let's not," one of the elders spat. "She's obviously prevaricating. But if there are other Amazons out there, we must know of it."

"True," the one who had been looking proud earlier mused, her aged eyes locked now on the redhead, while something seemed to be going on over by the winner's table. Whatever it was, though, the mystery the redhead had just let slip was far more interesting.

But before they could say anything more, there came a shout. Looking over to where it had come from, Ranma saw her father had begun to eat what appeared to be the prize of the tournament. Ranma groaned. "Seriously?!"

The purple-haired girl Ranma had been watching had been the one to shout and was now glaring at the panda, looking very annoyed. Then she spotted Ranma, and recognizing her as an outsider, marched over, shaking her chui in Ranma's face. She said something in Chinese, sounding extremely angry, while a few of the other champions corralled the panda, trying to get it away from the table and failing.

"Whatever you just said, I don't care. I ain't dealing with this. Let my old man deal with it."

"Old man?" murmured the elder who had just spoken, then she whirled like a top, barking out an order. "Shan Pu, stop!"

Shan Pu, who had been about to issue a challenge to the redhead about what her panda had been doing, paused, staring back at the elders. "Grandmother? What's wrong? That outsider's pet ate our prize, more than half of it! That glutton..."

"Child, shut up," said another one of the elders, and while Shan Pu's grandmother glared at the woman, she still turned away, looking over at Ranma.

"You called that creature your Old Man. Does that mean you two have been to Jusenkyo?"

Ranma nodded. "Yep, that's my old man, Genma."

“Which means you really are martial artists, not just an outsider with a mouth,” mused the surly one who had barked at the purple-haired girl. “What style do you use?”

“Anything Goes.”

There was a sound from the elders, a low growl like a herd of lionesses suddenly spotting prey. “That name is known to us,” the one who had stopped the young girl from speaking said coldly. “You are young, but have you heard of a Grand Master of your school?”

Ranma shook his head, then frowned. “Funny, but now that you mention it, my old man doesn’t call himself the Grand Master but has mentioned another school a time or two. Weird, I just realized that.”

There was a quick talk between the elders, and Ranma sidled up to the purple-haired girl. “Er, you have any idea what they’re saying?”

Shan Pu looked at the redhead blankly, and Ranma groaned. “Right, I need to work on learning languages. This is just stupid.”

The other girl seemed to take umbrage and snorted in anger, pushing her chui into Ranma’s face. But Ranma pulled it out of her grip and crushed the end of it to a sound a tortured metal, tossing the ruined chui to the ground. “Okay, I just said I ain’t gonna clean up my Pop’s problems. That doesn’t mean I’m gonna let you push me around, little girl.”

Several of the elders cackled as Shan Pu’s face went red, understanding Ranma’s tone at least. But her grandmother stepped between them by hopping up onto the shaft of the ruined chui, thrusting her stick in Ranma’s face as she held up her other hand in front of her daughter’s face. “Enough! Granddaughter, the original dishonor is on the panda, who is a victim of Jusenkyo. Tell us what your father looks like, girl.”

Ranma shrugged. “Hot water’ll change him back. I figure that a picture’s worth a thousand words, right?”

One of the other oldsters nodded, and Ranma watched in interest as she picked up a cold mug of water. Her hand began to glow, and Ranma’s eyes widened. “Huh, that doesn’t look like magic. Is that a ki technique? My old man taught me how to use ki space, and I’ve developed a few ki attacks, but nothing heat-based.”

The least abrasive of the old crones looked at the redhead thoughtfully. “You already know of ki, hmm? Interesting, does that have anything to do with those Amazons you mentioned?”

Ranma suddenly smirked. “Hey, I got a deal for you. I will tell you everything I know about Themyscira if you can teach me some martial arts techniques.”

Several of the elders scoffed, but two of them, the one who had stopped the confrontation from the now confused-looking Shan Pu and the other who had been needing her, both whipped around to stare at Ranma in shock. "Wh, what was that name, girl?"

"Themyscira," Ranma repeated, grabbing the hot mug from the old woman who had heated it and tossing it unerringly over the heads of the crowd around her, the mug dumping the water over the panda's head.

Genma yowled in pain, shouting out, "What the hell, it doesn't need to be that hot, Brat! What do you think you're doing?"

Staring through the crowd at the extremely unattractive older man, Shan Pu shivered, looking over at her grandmother. "Thank you for protecting me from my own ego, grandmother," she said, bowing formally, one hand pressed into the palm as she thrust them forward.

Her grandmother nodded, but the other elder was still staring at Ranma and spoke up before the other one could. "You have been to the sacred island?"

"Yep. Kind of accidentally, but yep. Although the island isn't named that, the city is." There, Ranma switched to the version of Greek that the Amazons on the island spoke, the knowledge of which Ranma had kept after leaving the island. "And I can even speak the lingo, so you know I am on the level here."

From the shocked gasps from the elders, Ranma knew she had hit on the right tone. For the elders of the Joketsuzoku, there was a lot to unpack here, and they began to talk amongst themselves.

Genma hadn't been following any of this, and stumped over to Ranma, reaching a hand for the short girl's shoulder. "Boy, come on. We've seen what these Amazons are like, but we need to move on." With his last attempt to control Ranma having backfired, Genma wanted to introduce the boy to his friend Soun Tendo and tie him down via the honor agreement between their families. *The boy will still deal what honor demands, at least.*

"Shush, Old Man, I'm wheeling and dealing here," Ranma answered, her small fist hammering out to hit Genma's gut, doubling him over before he could say anything. "So, do we have a deal? You teach me some ki moves, and about ki in general, and I tell ya about Themyscira and the Amazons there."

Shan Pu frowned and made to speak. She and the rest of the crowd, most of whom couldn't speak Japanese, let alone ancient Greek, also had no idea. But the elders knew it, and while there was a lot to unpack here, well, it wouldn't be the first time the Joketsuzoku had made a deal with an outsider.

“Boy... we need to get going, damn it! We’re under a timetable, unless you want to swim back to Japan again? Besides, what do you think these women could teach you that you couldn’t learn elsewhere?” Genma was not getting a good feeling from the Amazons, especially the old crones staring almost hungrily at his boy (currently girl).

“You!” barked one of those old crones. “You are a practitioner of the Anything Goes School, yes?”

“WH, what’s it to you, old ghoul?” Genma stammered, only to become terrified as the old woman turned to him, a fierce battle aura appearing around her as her hair started to stand on end. “EEP!!!”

“My name is Ke Lun, Matriarch of the Joketsuzoku, and you will treat me with respect, male!” Ke Lun snapped. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the redhead had taken a step back, but was now looking at her with interest, not fear. *Boy or girl, that youngster is fascinating. And her ki is already at the same level as many of our blooded warriors. Incredible, Hmmm... perhaps we could try to get him together with Shan Pu. Yes...*

But before Ke Lun could speak, her chief opponent on the council, Librarian Be Dea, spoke up. “You, male, do you know the name Happosai?”

“AAAAYIEEEEE!!!!” Genma shrieked, and turning, tried to run. “EEEEEE! I’m sorry! I’m not to blame for anything he did, I can’t pay it, no, no, he comes when called!”

He didn’t get far before several of the blooded warriors and two of the other elders jumped on him. “And you say you haven’t heard of him, child?”

Ranma shook her head. “Why, is this Happosai guy scary? That would be kind of interesting. Or...” Ranma slumped, looking a bit sad. “Don’t tell me... did he steal something from you all? God, I hope not, please tell me that kind of thing isn’t part of our school! My old man used to do that, but I got him to stop for fear o’ me running away when I was eight.”

“Hmmm...” All the Elders had enough ki sense to detect if someone was tense, annoyed, or if their heart was pounding. Ranma felt sad to them, and he wasn’t lying. “Wait a moment, young one.”

For a few moments, the elders conferred, sending the crowd away as they did so. Ranma waited nearby, speaking to the guide, interested enough in both the Amazon’s ki techniques and what the heck the connection was with his School, to wait while the elders conferred. She asked a lot of questions about the Amazons and became somewhat weirded out by a lot of the customs.

By the time, the elders had conferred and decided what to offer and what to demand, Ranma had a few demands of her own. But these were martial artists, and there had to be

something seen first. "If you know ki attacks, child, you must be a good warrior. Show us. Fight my great granddaughter, Shan Pu, and then we will talk," the old woman, whose name sounded like Cologne to Ranma, ordered.

"Yeah, fine. But I don't want anything to happen out of this, ya know? No kiss of death or marriage. I ain't gonna be told who I marry, or anything like that, and I don't want to have some crazy woman chasing after me."

Ke Lun tsked, while Be Dea snickered and nodded, along with several of the other Elders, as Be Dea moved forward. They had been worried that Ke Lun's ploy would succeed, and access to you would let her further build on her dynasty. The Matriarch was already too powerful; letting her build her family into another generation would not be a good idea. "Very well, young one. Fight Shan Pu, show your skills and we will talk."

Ranma nodded and then proceeded to easily dominate not only the one called Shampoo but the next ten warriors the Elders sent at her. The redhead made a point of showing a few of the styles he had learned from the Amazons and a brief glimpse of her ki claws. That was enough to convince the Joketsuzoku of Ranma's strength.

Hours later, the elders had broken out the good smoke, and Ranma sat among them, still in her female form, or rather again in her female form. They'd asked him to transform twice, and there had been another heated debate, but Ranma's insistence that he wasn't going to stay meant that the Amazon elders could only make the best deals they could, instead of the deal they wanted to.

Ranma would receive as much training as he could in two months. In return, Ranma would share the training he had gone through with Shampoo and several others of his age group, along with two Blooded Warriors, while telling the Amazons about their distant sisters. He would also promise to contact the tribe if he ever met or heard news of Happosai, who had indeed stolen numerous old treasures from the Amazons. And above all, from Ranma's perspective anyway, she would not be subjected to any of the weird local laws, the elders had vowed that.

Meanwhile, Genma would be fed and kept in some luxury. But unlike Ranma, Genma had trained directly with the hated Happosai, and moreover had not impressed the Amazons in any way.

Over the next two months, the Elders heard Ranma's tales about the Amazons, about their strengths and the heights they had reached away from Man's World and were pleased with that part of the tale. Yet in another way, they came to regret their decision. Ranma proved to have a truly insane learning curve, and within those two months, he learned several of their most secret techniques. He even modified how the Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken could be learned, making it easier. After all, water was much easier on the hands than fire. This ratcheted his stock in the clan even higher, since others could learn in the same manner.

But the biggest shock came when he learned how to use the Hiryou Shouten Ha.

Of course, during those two months, Ranma not only made acquaintances among the clan but also enemies. He became friends with Shampoo and the two Blooded Warriors, Tiger and Panther, who treated him like a favored nephew. And he made enemies with several others, who resented an outsider, known to be a male despite staying in his female body most of the time, learning so much of their style despite what Ranma shared in turn. And because of Ranma's semi-friendship with Shampoo, Ranma became an enemy of the heir to the Hidden Weapons School, Mousse.

Unfortunately for the other young man, he was not in Ranma's league, despite all his tricks. Instead, he became, to Shampoo's delight, the first one to feel Ranma's mastery of the Hiryou Shouten Ha.

Really, Mousse didn't need to worry. As much as Ranma liked the Amazons, he never made any bones about wanting to move on after his two months with them. He still had a whole world to explore after all. Just like Queen Hippolyta had told him. And when those two months ended, Ranma left with his father.

After leaving Joketsuzoku territory, Ranma transformed back into his male body, gleeful that he could stay this way for a while now without any issues. The Amazons had been adamant that he stay in his female body outside of the small house he had been given. "So, Pops, that was a fun little break. I got a few new high-end techniques, and you've got to feed your face for months without worrying about money or anything. Now, where to?"

"I told you, boy. We're heading back to Japan," Genma grumbled. "And you better be willing to share some of those techniques."

"So long as you agree to help, if Happosai ever shows up," Ranma answered impishly, grinning as his father seemed to freeze, shivering and ducking his head as if afraid saying his master's name would summon him. He snickered for a few moments before shaking his head. "As for heading back to Japan, I still don't get why you're so set on us heading back, but it works for a destination for now. I just hope we can find something there for me to learn."

"Don't worry about that, boy. You'll discover something to do in Nerima, I'm certain," Genma answered, hoping that the meeting with Soun and his family would go well and the boy would finally realize that it was time to settle down.

OOOOOOO

A bare three weeks later, Ranma finally learned why they had come to Nerima, and he wasn't happy about it or about how he had been walked in on by the youngest sister in the bathroom a moment ago. *Gah, I had to deal with that from Perfume and the others for months*

after they learned I was really a guy. I don't need that again. And what is with all this marry stuff?

"Now hold on a minute," he growled, crossing his arms as he glared at all four of the Tendos. "What's all this stuff about marrying?"

Soun Tendo, the man who was supposedly the equal of Ranma's father in terms of creating his own Anything Goes style, looked over at Genma, one eyebrow rising. "You didn't tell him?"

"No, I wanted to get him here without fighting every step of the way," Genma muttered. *Or just running away. The boy's threatened that a time or two, and he's too damn independent to make me think he wouldn't do it in a heartbeat.* Aloud, he said, "And getting my boy to do anything that he doesn't want to do is like pulling teeth."

"I'm stubborn like that," Ranma announced with a shrug. "So, explain it to me."

Once more, Soun looked over at his friend, but Genma just made a motion to him. Grumbling, Soun once more explained the marriage agreement between the two families, which was to unite the two schools.

Listening to this, Ranma could see a few problems right away. Looking over at the girls, he saw the older two pushing Akane forward and decided to nip that in the bud now. *Thank goodness O-sensei and a few of the other masters taught me how to haggle.* "I don't know what the heck you three are going on about; it isn't your choice who is involved in this whole marriage agreement thing."

"W, what?!" Nabiki squawked, and even Kasumi frowned, her eyes narrowing as she looked at the young man of her. *Emphasis on the young,* she thought, shaking her head. He seemed somewhat polite as a girl, but the curse was immensely off-putting, as was his cockiness in either form.

Ranma simply ignored them, shaking her head is his head. "Your old man just said pick one, and she'll be your fiancée. So the choice is mine, not yours." As both older girls paled, and Soun made to open his mouth, Ranma pointed at Akane. "And what the hell is this pervert talk, huh?"

"You turn into a girl! That makes you a pervert!"

"So, all girls are perverts?" Ranma asked, one eyebrow rising in surprise. "Wow, that explains why Nabiki over there was feeling me up earlier."

“Wh, no! Who, who knows what you’ve... don’t do it! Besides, you saw me naked!” Akane began weakly before finishing strongly as Nabiki smacked her forehead, looking away from Ranma.

“You walked in on me! From where I sit, that makes you the pervert!” *Although, it wouldn’t have been the first time I bathed with a girl.* That had rather been the norm when he was with Cassie, and he had turned down several dozen offers of a hot (emphasis there) bath with Shampoo and several of the others.

“It’s different for girls!”

Rolling his eyes, Ranma waved her off, and Genma took the opportunity to jump in. “Ah, you see, Tendo? They are already arguing like a married couple. It’s perfect!”

“Indeed, Saotome. I think my girls had the right of it. Akane is the best choice. They have so much in common after all,” Soun nodded in sage agreement.

Fighting the urge to facepalm, Ranma instead smacked his hand on the table, interrupting Akane’s shouting at her father and her sisters’ attempt to pile in. *Bah, so much for Akane being a friend, and Kasumi being a nice girl. Seems just as quick to foist problems onto other people as my old man.* “And another question is, why the heck is this important?”

“What are you talking about, boy!” Genma roared, turning on his son and reaching out to grasp his shoulder. “This is a matter of our family’s honor!”

Ranma smacked the older man’s hand away, rolling his eyes for the second time in this conversation. “Yeah, so ya said, Old Man. But the point is ta unit the schools, right?”

“...Yes...” Genma said slowly, his eyes narrowing as he wondered where his son was going with this.

“Well, Akane didn’t use anything that wasn’t from Judo, and even that not very well, so does this Tendo School have anything to offer?” Ranma answered simply.

“Wh, of course they do, boy!” Genma spluttered, while Soun and Akane both exploded in fury.

“Of course, my school has something to offer!”/ “Not very well!? How dare you!”

But Ranma was unmoved. “Then show me.” Ranma hopped to his feet, his movements fluid, swift, and he moved around the table to the doorway leading out to the backyard and the dojo beyond, faster than Nabiki or Kasumi could track. Even Akane had some trouble with it. “Come on. Show me something interesting. Maybe I’ll consider this idea worth my time then.”

Even while snarling at Ranma's arrogance, Genma understood this was in keeping with the boy's attitude. He loved to learn the Art, and if there wasn't anything here to learn, then he would not see the point, honor oath or no. *And if he ever finds out the real reason we ran from Ukyo or about the other agreements I made in our family's name, we are going to be screwed!*

Akane hopped to her feet, anger twisting her features. "Fine! Just as long as you don't hop around like a coward again, I'll show you just how strong I am!"

"It's called not wanting to get hit, Akane. It ain't cowardice," Ranma fought the urge to roll his eyes again. *I don't wanta get into the habit of doing that so often.* "And I wasn't talking to you. I already beat you." Ranma instantly caught the table Akane had suddenly hefted up and hurled at him, setting it down gently. "And throwing shit at me doesn't change my mind."

Ranma had been pushing himself for years with the desire to become the best he could be, Diana's words spurring him on. He had been around hundreds of people over the past nine years, both on the island and after, and talked to many who felt that practicing the Art and getting better with it was a way of life, just like he did. Akane's words and attitude annoyed Ranma a lot, and her calling him a coward pricked his pride something fierce. *She's way stronger than she looks, but she doesn't seem anywhere near as strong as I remember Diana being, and besides, strength isn't everything; she's got no control and no style.*

When his friend made no move to help him, Soun huffed. "We, well, I suppose that your, your concerns make some sense. I admit that, that after my dear wife's death, I..." at that point Soun began to cry, a waterfall of tears spraying out from his eyes as he did.

"Gah!" Ranma ducked out of the way desperately, rolling forward and coming to a rest beside Kasumi. *No way am I going to let myself be turned into a girl by tears! That'd be as humiliating as the time Cologne had Shampoo explain pads to me. Ugh. If I had known about the whole monthly monster thing, I would have thought twice about this form, wanting to get back to Themyscira or no.*

"Does this happen often?" he asked, crouching there between the three girls. Kasumi had pulled out an umbrella and was using it to ward off the tears. "By the way, nice use of ki space there."

"Thank you, and yes, this happens more often than we would like," Kasumi answered with a sigh.

Through his tears, Soun continued to explain how he had let himself go since his darling Kimiko's death and hadn't trained Akane or himself since. Ranma was kind of sympathetic, having seen a lot of married couples on the road but he wasn't so moved as to let the Tendo School off the hook.

"Fine. In that case, I'm not choosing anyone until I know that this whole joining the school thing is worth it. Get back into shape..." he looked over at Kasumi and Nabiki. While he didn't like how they had pushed for Akane to be the one to marry him, he felt they had their heads screwed on right. "How long do you think?"

"Two years or so, boy. You need to finish high school, and we can do that here in Nerima. I've already made plans for that," Genma spoke up quickly. *That way, we can both browbeat the boy into it and get my old friend into shape. He has to have something that could be worth his time, blast it! My easy retirement demands it!* "And it will let you get to know your future bride, whichever of these three you choose."

Nodding thoughtfully, Ranma remembered how much Diana pushed for him and Cassie to educate themselves. Since then, his schooling had been really erratic, but her words about the intelligence of a fighter mattering far more than the strength staying with him. *Still don't see the point of physics or math, though.* "Alright, that makes sense, so long as they don't try to milk me for their sports teams."

"Hmmf! You're thinking too highly of yourself! The girls' teams have me already, and there are dozens of martial artists in the area to prop up the men's sports," Akane huffed, although she also looked interested at having her father actually train her.

"Excellent! In that case, I suggest that you start taking the girls out on dates. Why, you could take Akane out tonight, get to know the area and..." Soun began, his tears nowhere in sight now.

"But I do have one question..." Ranma interrupted, causing Soun to frown at his apparent rudeness. "If the schools are rejoined, what would this new school be called, Sautome or Tendo?" he finished innocently.

"Why of course it would be the Sautome/Tendo School!" both men spoke up and then turned, staring at one another, whereupon they began to argue.

With that, Ranma snuck out to the kitchen, followed quickly by the three girls.

Nabiki smirked at Ranma. "Well played."

"Thank you," Ranma answered, bowing to her mockingly. "I try. Although I doubt that it will stop them from making trouble."

Alas, Ranma's prediction proved far too accurate. Within three hours, the two men decided that Ranma was too immature to know what was best for him and began what would become, as long as Ranma was in the Tendo Dojo, a daily occurrence, trying to push him and Akane together. Akane, with her anger issues and desire to be taken seriously as a martial artist, was far easier to control than either of the other Tendo daughters.

But Ranma pushed back, adamant that the Tendo School needed to show it was a real school before he would consider being tied down.

And of course, this was Nerima. Trouble came here like other places got rain, a process that began the very next day.

The next morning, on his first day going to Furinkan High School, Ranma stared at the goings-on in front of him, cocking an eyebrow. "What in the heck is this all about? I mean, I don't know anything about romance or anything like that, but I'm pretty sure that girls usually won't want to date someone just because they beat them in combat, especially if the fight is a hundred to one."

"Oh, Ranma! Just head into school, don't worry, this happens all the time," Nabiki got his attention from a second-story window, waving her hand.

"Seriously? Why?"

"I'll tell you later. Let's just say that while you might be used to crazy stuff, you don't have a monopoly on it," Nabiki answered quickly.

Ranma moved around the ongoing combat, noting absently that maybe this was one of the reasons why Akane's combat style was so unpolished. Even for a judo user, she telegraphed her moves a lot. Yet here, Ranma could see that facing opponents below Akane's own basic physical abilities allowed the girl to trick them into predictable responses to her attacks.

Before he could enter the school, Ranma was interrupted by someone flinging a rose in his direction. He turned his head aside, watching it sail through where he had been standing to land on the ground, brows furrowing. "Now I feel like I'm in that silly Sailor Moon show." He turned to the young man who had tried to throw the rose at him, shaking his head slowly. "Sorry, dude, I don't swing that way."

"Foul varlet! That rose was a challenge, not a request for an assignation. You seem to be too acquainted with the beauteous Akane, walking to the entrance of this sacred establishment with her. I wouldn't know why." Ranma was about to open his mouth, but the other young man held up a hand, commandingly. "But hark, is it not good manners to introduce yourself first. Quail and tremble, for you behold the Blue Thunder of Furinkan High! Tatewaki Kuno, aged seventeen."

As the man spoke, Ranma sensed several people up on the roof of the school building. When he glanced that way, he saw them using some kind of prop to create the sound of thunder in the distance. "I'll give that a seven out of ten, not bad," Ranma said, giving the guy a thumbs up. "It would be better if you had an actual sword rather than a bokken, and while you're not exactly in uniform, you're not really dressed like I imagine someone with a title to, you know?"

For a moment, everyone stared at Ranma, then Nabiki began to break out into laughter, shaking her head from side to side, while the newly introduced Tatewaki frowned pensively, then nodded. "Thy words do have some merit, one such as I should always work to produce the correct ambience when I introduce myself. However, you have not answered my questions."

"She was just showing me around. My old man and I moved in with the Tendos and..."

At that point, Tatewaki lost his temper instantly, and he charged forward, his sword up and striking in a typical kendo fashion. "Under the same roof as fair Akane! I will not allow it! I strike!"

Ranma instantly charged forwards as well, one hand up and striking into the sword. Several of the people watching shrieked in shock at this move. "Is he an idiot? He's going to lose his hand at least!"

Even Akane, who had by this point finished off her own fight, was looking on in startled surprise. "You idiot, Kuno is a lot stronger than he looks. Dodge it!"

However, Ranma's hand did not connect to the incoming strike. Instead, his hand almost disappeared from the sight of everyone there, and a sound like a machine gun rang out. The bokken exploded as if it had been hit by several dozen bullets, and then Ranma was in Kuno's reach. He grabbed the man, hurled him over his shoulder in a perfect shoulder throw, slamming Tatewaki headfirst into the ground, and then grabbed Tatewaki in a chokehold.

With that, Ranma began dragging him along as he resumed moving towards the school, while Tatewaki tried to tap out on his hands frantically. "Sorry, but I was told by my Pops that I need to check in quick, so I really don't have any time to spar."

Behind him, Ranma left an entire school of astonished people, including Akane, who was shaking her head as she stared at the shattered remnants of the wooden sword. "What just happened?"

A few hours later, Ranma was astonished to see Kuno bursting into the classroom, a new wooden sword in hand, as he launched himself forward in the same kind of strike he'd used earlier. "I will not allow it, I will not allow your engagement to fair Akane to stand! Your foul sorceries will avail you not in..."

Before Kuno finished speaking, Ranma had flipped up out of his chair. Kicking off the classroom's ceiling, Ranma came down into Kuno's range so fast that he couldn't redirect his strike. Ranma's fingers lashed out faster than anyone there could track, catching Kuno in the forehead. There was a sound like a woodpecker pecking at a particularly dense tree, and Tatewaki's eyes rolled up into his head, with Ranma leaping clear as he collapsed. On his forehead was the kanji for 'Baka' writing in bruise.

The nuisance dealt with, Ranma reached down, hefting him into the air, and then, smirking evilly, looked out the window. "There's a pool out there, right?"

The teacher finally spoke up, shaking his head quickly. "No! Take Kuno to the nurse's office. I am not going to allow you to just toss him out the window with a word and a prayer."

Ranma snorted, then shrugged and waved at Akane. "Good luck explaining things. Although I gotta wonder how this idiot learned about our fathers' idiocy."

Behind him, Akane groaned and vowed vengeance as she ignored the teacher, the entire classroom crowded around her desk, babbling questions. Even her best friends betrayed Akane, shouting out about how it was so unfair that she got an in with the new hottie. *If only they knew!*

Thanks to Ranma's quick thinking on dealing with Kuno, it took several weeks of going to school for his other form to come out. Unlike with most curses, Ranma accepted his as a price he had to pay, and so didn't try to avoid spending time in it. As the Amazons had warned, this kept him from being impacted by the water-attraction part of the curse.

Throughout those two weeks, Ranma had been adamant about how he wasn't going to marry anyone, not until the Tendo School showed itself as something worthy of his attention. It was extremely arrogant of him, but Ranma had a point. If all the Tendos brought to the table was the fact that they had a dojo, well, Ranma could walk into any dojo, beat the master, and claim it for his own. He'd have students in a few days once his abilities became known. And if there was no real Tendo School, then there could be no merging of the two schools.

Much like Genma and Soun were now trying to talk him around on a daily basis, none of this seems to percolate into the consciousness of any of the people at school. The Hentai Horde at least seemed to understand that he wasn't a threat to their pursuit of Akane and continued their assault on her. But Kuno seemed to think that Ranma's continual beating of him so easily that he couldn't even get an attack off most time was a sign that he was using sorcery to not only beat Kuno but seduce Akane as well.

So Kuno kept on attacking at least twice a day, and one time, he finally got lucky, surprising Ranma when he wasn't able to attack him before he could get an attack off.

Dodging to one side, Ranma watched from about three inches away as the air pressure attack crashed into the water stand he'd been drinking at, near the track area. The concrete and stone of the stand shattered as the attack struck, and Ranma nodded in appreciation. *That was a pretty good air pressure strike, not bad at... oh shit!*

Ranma's eyes widened as the water pipes underneath the waterspouts first, sending a battering ram of cold water his way. "Dammit!"

Seconds later, a now very wet, very red-haired young woman grumbled in annoyance as she wiped away the water from her face, glaring over at Kuno. "All right, I've had it! I... What are you staring at?"

"Wh, what foul sorcery is this! Where that poltroon Ranma stood, now there is a fair maiden? Which is the truth, nay, say better, this form must be the truth. For such beauty is a wonder that cannot help but be real! Tell me, oh beautiful tigress, what that accursed Ranma has done to enspell you into his presence like this."

Trying to parcel out what that was about, Ranma shook her head and darted forward. "It's a curse, moron! My male body's the real deal, this form is the curse form and I turn into this form when exposed to cold water. I turn back with hot. Which I will do right after kicking your ass!"

Even as Kuno attempted to attack in turn, his weapon was destroyed, and then one of his knees collapsed from a kick. A roundhouse blow crashed into his jaw, breaking it, and Ranma then grabbed his foot, twirling the swordsman above her head. "I have had enough of you attacking me! Let's see how good your endurance really is!"

With that, she hurled Kuno towards the school, where he landed through the window into the nurse's office. "And stay there!"

He looked around at the school, then pointed to Nabiki. "Go to her for any answers you want on my form. But if anyone tries to perv out on my female form or splashes me with water deliberately, I will take a price in broken fingers." The time with the Amazons had allowed Ranma to realize the need to be somewhat modest with this form, and he well understood that no Amazons would deal with that kind of thing.

But later that day, Ranma ended his day on a high note, watching TV with Kasumi, staring intently at the image on it. "So that's Wonder Woman. What's up with her blurred face? I mean, I can't even make out details on her body, let alone what style she uses."

"I rather imagine that most men would be far more interested in her body rather than the martial arts style she uses," Kasumi answered gently. "As to how she blurs it, no one seems to know."

The two of them had hammered a somewhat strained friendship together over the past months. Kasumi didn't like how immature and one-dimensional Ranma seemed to be, while Ranma didn't like how Kasumi seemed fine to be a slave to her family, not understanding she enjoyed it. But they got along better with one another than any of the others in the household after Ranma had told Nabiki off as a "Money-grubbing would-be yak who better wise up before she pisses off someone without a sense of honor."

"So magic." Ranma nodded. "Gotcha."

Kasumi opened her mouth to protest that, then shut it with a click. "That wouldn't necessarily be the strangest thing I've ever seen," she admitted.

"Considering you're sitting next to the strangest thing you've ever seen, I'll take that as a compliment," Ranma snorted, causing her to laugh quietly.

"Why the interest in Wonder Woman Ranma?" Akane asked, scowling over at him from where she was doing homework. The two of them were not friendly, and they routinely butted heads on a lot of things. But Ranma's stance had completely undermined the whole agreement, so there wasn't much added tension from the whole marriage thing either. It didn't work all the time, but it kept them from being pushed. In turn, that kept them semi-civil to one another.

Ranma shrugged. "She reminds me of someone I once met," he answered simply, confusing both his listeners.

OOOOOOO

Clad in training armor and holding a blunted blade, Cassie stared across the training ground at five opponents. This was called the melee, a yearly test for the learners at stage two of the Amazon's combat school.

Watching from the sidelines, Donna Troy kept a frown off her face with difficulty. She had once trained with Diana in Man's World and had been brought back to the island when Diana retreated from the world at the end of World War II.

Unlike Cassie, Donna had no interest in leaving the island again. She had been made into an orphan during World War II and had been forced to survive as any young girl had to in war-torn Yugoslavia. If she ever saw a man again, it would be far too soon in her eyes. Donna much preferred being on the island, and even when Ranma had arrived years ago, she'd had no desire to be even in the boy's presence, let alone anything else.

Here on the island, she had been trained to such a degree that she could step into any number of jobs, although there weren't any actual empty positions available on the island. That was fine by Donna, though. Today, she was taking the part of the second-tier learners, those girls who had yet to become seventeen, and thus had not had to formally choose their way in life yet. But many here would make that choice soon.

This melee was supposed to be six people fighting one another, but in the past two years, all of the others had attempted to gang up on Cassie. While many of the trainers saw this as simply good tactics since Cassie was the most skilled of all six of the youngsters, Donna knew the truth.

The truth was that her fellow trainees despised her. They hated the fact that even with Diana gone, now for several years, Cassie's status as the best of them had not changed. She had

kept training just as militantly as under Diana, and was head and shoulders above any of the others. *Heck, she's good enough to win two out of five spars with most of the guard, let alone the youngster. Only me, Hippolyta and a few of the others win against Cassie without effort. But that doesn't make it any lonelier for you, does it, Cassie?*

Of course, Cassie was aware of all that, too. Nor was the other youngsters ganging up on her the worst part in Cassie's opinion. Most of her fellow trainees talked about Cassie behind her back, thinking that she wouldn't hear them. It was solely because Zeus had fathered Cassie on her mother that Cassie had superhuman abilities.

That hurt Cassie, but she knew it wasn't the truth. Diana had always told her that strength and ability meant nothing without training, experience, and a desire to become better. She'd tried to explain that to one or two of her fellow trainees, but none of them would listen. And lately, any time she tried to talk to any of them, Cassie had been snubbed.

Shaking her head, Cassie set aside that idea for now. *I can try to make friends with them afterward, but this isn't the time to think maudlin thoughts.*

And this year marked a difference. This year, all of them had been bloodied in battles against the minotaurs, and the rules of the match were a little different, something Cassie was going to take advantage of. "I just want to make sure, Mistress Donna. The entire training area is our battlefield, not just the circle?"

Donna Troy crossed her arms. Looking at Cassie thoughtfully, then around at the area. It was true that there were patches of grass, sand, stone, and even a series of rocks made to look like a slope, to say nothing about the various training equipment, weapons racks and the well near the entrance to the training area. *Hmmm... clever girl, she means to use the terrain against the others. I know for a fact several of them haven't trained at all in the different environments beyond stone and sand.*

"That's right. You can also use any of the weapons here. They've all been blunted, I made sure of that, and you can move around the area freely," Donna answered loudly, so the other trainees could hear. "The watchers, or I will call you on any fouls," Donna added, gesturing up to the series of benches that watched over the training area like an amphitheater.

Cassie smirked suddenly, plastering a look on her face that Ranma would have recognized, as she flicked her sword out and held it parallel to her arm, her other arm thrust forward. In her other hand, she pulled out her sheath, holding it like a second sword. "Thank you."

The rest of the youngsters shuffled their feet, talking quietly as Donna moved over to the other youngsters, checking each of them, testing their weapons, and making certain that all of them understood that this was not a match to the death, but first blood or unconsciousness. How they were supposed to draw blood with blunted weapons was up to them.

When that was done, she moved into the middle of the ring and held up her hand.
“Trainees ready? Fight!”

As Donna leaped toward the viewing area, Cassie charged, instead of retreating as she had in the previous years. *Things are going to be different this year!*

The trainees did not balk and instead moved to encircle her quickly. Cassie ducked under one blow, took another on her shield, and then twirled around, bringing her sword down and into the leg of one of her attackers. That girl yelped in pain, and that pain grew even more as Cassie leaped up, placing her feet onto the other girl’s shoulder, pushing up and away. By that point, she was behind the others, and they turned, trying once more to encircle her.

But Cassie backed away so quickly, and all they did was push her directly to where she wanted. The area where several stone weapon racks waited. This move surprised the other trainees, who had been thinking as Donna had, and had moved to block her route to the other small combat zones. This let Cassie get situated between the weapons racks.

“Damn it! She’s made it so that we can only come at her from two directions,” grumbled the one Cassie had already struck. “And only a few of us can face her at a time.”

“So what, we can still take her from front and back, and remember, all weapons, right? Some of you go get spears!”

The others agreed, and soon began to move even as Cassie shouted, “Or you could, you know, fight one another instead of blatantly coming after me still. You know, like you’re supposed to be?”

None of the other trainees bothered to reply, and soon, the group of six had split into three-woman teams. One was armed with a sword and shield, and the other two with spears. *Goddess Artemis, they couldn’t make this any easier. Welcome to Anything Goes, first rule: fighting happens in three dimensions, around, above and below.*

With that, Cassie retreated, seemingly pushed by the group attacking from her front, looking over her shoulder as the other group got into position. Then, when she was halfway down the weapons rack, a stone rack about ten feet tall and thirty long, Cassie sprang her trap.

As the watchers looked on in surprise, Cassie jumped up, kicking off one of them, lashing down at one of her attackers, the blunt end of her sword thrusting down into a shield. Then she bounced to the other, dodging the upthrust spears. A second later, Cassie jumped forward, landing behind the spear wielders who had been attacking her from the front.

“Oh, no, she’s behind us!!” one of them shouted before going down with a cry of pain as she was crumpled under a blow to her ribs from Cassie’s blade. A thrust from her sheath took

the other spear wielder, and then Cassie was once more bouncing between the weapons racks, completely throwing off the attackers' abilities.

None of them had faced Cassie before, while she was using the aerial style, which Cassie had tried to build from the lessons Ranma had passed on. She didn't know a lot of it, and couldn't redirect herself in midair, use the momentum of the attack from an enemy, or land light enough to not disturb someone. But even so, she was able to fling herself from one side to another like this and stay in the air for a bit longer than any of the others could understand was feasible.

And now I can close with spear wielders, who really don't have enough space to use them! she thought gleefully, as she landed among the trio who had been pushing towards her rear. Of course, the other trainees didn't stop fighting just because they had fallen into Cassie's trap, and several of them landed blows but eventually the last of them fell.

When Donna called the match, Cassie dropped her weapons and reached down with both hands, pulling one of the other trainees to her feet. "Well fought! You tried to adapt well. Just remember that sometimes the rules change, and the battlefield always matters in..."

She broke off as the other young girl pulled her arm away, sneering at her and moving around to help the others up. "Don't get so haughty just because you can beat us with the strength you gained from being a daughter of Zeus the Adulterer!"

Cassie winced and raised her hand, but none of the others looked at her as they tromped off, and she let it fall to the side, clenching into a fist of air as she turned away, trying hard not to let her tears show. *Well, what did I expect?* she thought morosely. *Their beating me didn't make them think I was any more like them, so why would beating them all? I am so done with all this!! Why can't I have a rival like Ranma, who knows it isn't personal?*

OOOOOOO

A month after Cassie pondered about her dearth of good rivals or even friends her own age, Ranma was trying to figure out why he had a rival of his own. Yet it seemed as if his first guess as to the cause was off because, as the last of the bread products smacked off of his face, Ryoga charged, roaring, "You think I chased after you for so long because of bread!"

"I don't know, but come on, man, what else were we fighting about?" Ranma quipped as he dodged the thrusts from the large umbrella. A glancing blow sent him stumbling, and he nodded in appreciation. *That thing must weigh quite a bit more than it looks. This could actually be fun, unlike dealing with Kuno-aho.*

"You bastard! Don't you remember running out on our duel?" Ryoga bellowed.

“Not really? I remember waiting for you behind your house in your backyard,” Ranma taunted even as he continued to dodge, “but my Old Man knocked me out and dragged me away before you showed up.”

“Don’t give me excuses like that! You ran!”

Ranma grabbed the umbrella, holding it still. Ryoga was strong, maybe stronger than Ranma if he had trained to become so rather than emphasizing his speed as Ranma had. But he might as well have been moving last, for all that Ranma could read him like a book.

“Dude, I stayed there for four days! And it was in your **backyard**! I realize you and your family have that direction curse, but how could you get lost by simply stepping out the back door of your house? Especially after you went to the trouble of writing up a formal challenge and telling me you wouldn’t take a step out of your house until I arrived?”

There were some mutters at that from the watching students of Furinkan, but Ryoga was beyond hearing. He pulled his umbrella back, thrusting forward one more time, but Ranma ducked under it this time, kicking upward. The umbrella came out of Ryoga’s grip, and then Ranma was inside his reach, punches and kicks landing, some of which Ryoga blocked while trying to return the favor, only for Ranma to dodge around Ryoga’s strikes like smoke.

He ignored Akane’s shout of, “Ranma, watch out, he must be super strong!” and Akane watched, feeling vindicated as Ryoga clamped onto one of Ranma’s hands and pulled him in.

But Ranma went with it, his elbow catching Ryoga in the throat. Ryoga stumbled back and was then upended by Ranma’s leg sweeping under him. He rolled away from the follow-on leap that would’ve planted both of Ranma’s feet in his face, and got to his feet, pulling at his bandanna. As he did, the bandana stiffened, becoming almost like so many boomerangs. The first bandana was hurled forward, but Ranma dodged it, watching as it slammed into the distant wall of the school building with enough force to embed itself halfway into the wall.

Looking back at Ryoga, Ranma was about to taunt him again when he saw Ryoga pulling off several more bandanas from around his head. This prompted one of the watchers to wonder, “How many of those things does he have?”

Ryoga hurled them at Ranma with both hands, with one of them moving past him to nearly hit Akane. Her scream, and the scream of the other watchers who suddenly found themselves too close to the action, galvanized Ranma to charge forward even as Ryoga’s indiscriminate attacks damaged several trees and the sports shed. Within moments, he had pummeled Ryoga back away from the audience and through a fence that separated the soccer field from the pool area.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ryoga saw the gleam of the water and panicked. “Oh no, you don’t!”

Ranma watched as Ryoga's style became almost entirely aggressive, ignoring any attempt at defense. He tried to push Ranma back, and then he dodged to one side, rushing towards the outer wall of the high school. "Curse you, Ranma, we'll finish to some other time!"

Scowling Ranma pulled a blunt shaft of wood from his ki-space. Normally, the staff would have a spearhead, but Ranma had removed it for the purposes of training. Now he tossed it at Ryoga, tripping him up so that he crashed headfirst into the outer wall rather than leap over it. Before Ryoga could get away, Ranma was on him, using a trick he had learned from Diana to lock in a chokehold, knocking the other young martial artists unconscious. He then dragged him back to the onlookers, dumping him in front of a few of the seniors. "I think that forcing him to work on repairing the damage to the high school is a great idea. What do you say?"

OOOOOOO

More than five months after her confrontation with the other second-tier trainees, Cassie sat on top of the balustrade of one of Themyscira's defensive towers, staring out across the sea, a disconsolate look on her face. *Another month without friends. Without Mistress Diana. This is so, so annoying!* Fighting an urge to grab up a nearby stone and hurl it out into the ocean, she instead held it in her hands, slowly crushing it into powder. *Darn it all! I am proud of my abilities. I am happy that Mistress Diana took me on. But this, this loneliness is... it is getting to me. Why couldn't the others be like young Ranma?*

Although the eight years since their meeting had eroded many of her memories of her childhood friend, the mysterious 'boy' from beyond the island, Cassie still looked at that time fondly. Mainly because none of the other young aspirants had ever come close to being as friendly, never mind the fact that she had grown up around most of them and only known Ranma for four months.

None of them had her drive and resented her closeness with the royal family. That created a very confrontational atmosphere, which made her yearn for Ranma's easygoing, if still very competitive, nature. The confrontation a few months back wasn't unusual; it only stood out as the first time Cassie had won that kind of match.

Which has only made it worse. Now, every time the other trainees see me, they either turn away, try to trip me up if we're on the training ground, or play malicious pranks on me. And the Queen can't help, nor can the trainers. No one can order the others of my age group to be nice to me, let alone to set aside their own pride and anger at me. It's true what Her Majesty says; it sometimes is very lonely at the top.

She continued to stare out over the ocean until, with a gasp, she saw something shining in the distance. It was the gleam of sunlight off golden armor, and it could only mean one thing. Cassie hopped to her feet and turned, racing along the parapet and then down into the city,

shouting 'excuse me' in a near-continuous stream as she ran through the bustling city and toward the palace, nearly knocking several people off their feet as she ran.

Cassie didn't care. Diana had come back, she had come back from Man's World! Her big sister was back. Without slowing down, Cassie careened through the halls of the palace out into the small sparring ring out the back, shouting out, "Mistress Diana!"

It was a very good thing that Diana was as strong as she was, or else the small missile that only vaguely resembled a teenage girl would have bowled her over. As it was, she caught the girl and twirled around with the shorter Cassie in her arms, smiling widely as she hugged the other girl tenderly. "Hello, Cassie. I missed you, too. You would not believe how long it took me to start making friends out there in Man's World."

"Really," Cassie drawled even as she tightened her arms around the older woman. "Like I had it any easier. Don't get me wrong, I am forever grateful to the Queen that she took over training me, but it definitely made my life even harder."

But pressure builds diamonds, my dear, Diana thought, chuckling and ruffling Cassie's hair. "Then perhaps, you will be doubly grateful for my arrival this day. Kara, come over here."

It was only then that Cassie noticed that Diana wasn't alone. With her was another young woman of Cassie's own age, with blonde hair a little lighter than Cassie's own. She was a little more built up top than Cassie, much to Cassie's faint annoyance, but she looked a little less powerfully built or in shape, and was looking around with wide innocent eyes, having been talking to the Queen before Diana called her over.

"Kara, this is Cassie, my apprentice. I think that the two of you will get on tremendously. And I believe that training you together could be most fascinating..."

OOOOOOO

"Hotcha!"

Ranma looked up from where he had been arguing about joining the schools again with his father. "What in the heck..." his voice trailed off as a diminutive creature hopped past, heading towards the Tendo Dojo, with Kodachi and several others from her school in hot pursuit, along with more than a few from Furinkan. "Kodachi, what the heck's going on?"

In contrast to his relationship with Tatewaki, which remained antagonistic, Ranma's relationship with Kodachi was actually somewhat friendly. Meeting first with Ranma in his female form, Ranma had complimented Kodachi's abilities and had then refused to step in as his female persona to fight the younger Kuno in Akane's place. After all, Ranma had no desire to be milked for her athleticism by the various clubs at Furinkan, whatever the reason. But

because of her father's training and Ryoga's, Akane had pushed Kodachi hard in that match, with the Rhythmic Martial Arts gymnast barely winning after a somewhat clean match.

In a strange reversal of what had happened with her older brother, it had been several weeks before Ranma's curse was shown to Kodachi, and after a few chilly days of anger caused by her concerns about how Ranma might use such a form, Kodachi had decided her friendship with the redhead was worth more. There had been a few times when she tried to flirt with Ranma's male form, but that seemed to be more because there were so few men around that met her requirements than any kind of heated desire.

Which, in Ranma's opinion, was a very good thing. While Kodachi was a nice girl, Ranma wasn't interested in settling down any more now than he had been when he'd arrived at the Tendo Dojo a year ago. Worse, Kodachi seemed to be a high-maintenance sort of girl to Ranma.

"Ranma! That little creature stole all of our bras and panties. We've been chasing him since, and he has stopped at several other high schools, including Furinkan!" Kodachi answered, slowing down and nearly getting run over by the wind behind her, until she hopped up onto a lamppost nearby.

"Yeah, so help us catch him!" Akane growled as she led her own group of girls past Ranma.

While his father had seemingly frozen in horror, staring straight ahead of him for some reason, Ranma nodded and leaped up onto the nearby rooftop. "Right! I'll try to get ahead of him, so be ready to pounce when I cut him off."

Nodding, Akane and Kodachi continued on their way, quickly catching up to the front of the mass of furious girls and even some women. It was evident that high schools had not been the pervert's only targets. But crossing in a straight line over several streets, Ranma was able to get ahead of him, although he wondered why he was making for the Tendo Dojo.

Regardless, as the creature sped across one crossway, Ranma leaped down, lashing out with a kick that caught the pervert in the massive bag he was carrying, causing it to explode and send bras and panties everywhere.

It also deadened much of the force of Ranma's kick, and he flipped away, landing on the nearby street sign. From there, he tossed several cloth shuriken at the little creature who had stumbled to a halt and had turned around, staring aghast at the now floating bits of linen and silk and other items.

Despite not being able to see them, the pervert somehow twitched aside, smacking one of the cloth shuriken up into the air, while wrapping a small pipe around the other, somehow canceling the ki within, which had kept it acting almost like metal. "You bastard! How dare you do that to my pretties!?"

“Sorry, Sir Pervs-a-lot, did I ruin your fun?” Ranma smirked and made to charge forward, only to pause, then kick off the ground to get away as the diminutive pervert tried to attack them in turn, moving faster than he had anticipated. But that hadn’t been why Ranma had just dodged.

The women coming up behind the pervert was. A ribbon latched around the pervert, pulling him back, and then one of Akane’s ki hammers crashed down, and Ranma left the scene quickly, coming cheerfully to himself. “Now that, he had coming.”

Hours later, that cheerfulness disappeared as Ranma crossed his arms, staring at where his father and Soun were both kowtowing to the diminutive pervert, as if he were Amaterasu as he sat on a large tower of cushions. “What the hell is wrong with you two? Why the heck are we not reporting this little pervert to the authorities?”

“That’s what I said!” Akane and Nabiki both said, while Ryoga, in his Siberian Husky form, growled agreement from beside Akane.

Ranma’s eyebrows twitched as he stared at the Siberian Husky, grinding his teeth in annoyance. But Ryoga had made him promise not to share his secret with anyone before Ranma knew he had used it to befriend the Tendo sisters. And as far as Ranma knew, the guy hadn’t really done anything pervert with it, including running away whenever Akane or one of the other girls tried to give him a bath whenever he was around. That might have something to do with Kasumi believing that, as a stray, Ryoga’s dog form should be neutered, but it could also be that he just understood that would be a bit too far.

“Shut up, boy! And get down here too!” Genma growled, grabbing at Ranma’s shoulder and trying to pull him down to his knees. But Ranma kicked out, taking one of Genma’s legs out from under him, then broke the grip, hopped up and pushed his father down headfirst into the ground, before sitting on his back, staring at the diminutive creature. “Alright, what kind of blackmail do you have over these two? This is kind of impressive.”

The creature cackled, pulling out his pipe. “I see you haven’t educated your boy, Genma. In anything but martial arts, anyway. You haven’t told him about the history of our school? Why, it’s like you are ashamed of me.”

“Never, Master!” Soun responded quickly. “It’s just, we struggle with, with describing your magnificence.”

“All right, kissass, that’s enough of that,” the ancient creature said, shaking his head. “My name’s Happosai and I’m Grand Master of the School of Anything Goes. I’ve come here to decide which of these two lumps is going to be my heir.”

Ranma had heard that name before. *This is the guy Elder Cologne and the Amazons wanted to be told about!* Even as his father attempted to grab him, Ranma remembered that agreement and decided he would be making a certain long-distance call later that night.

Several months later, Happosai and Ranma squared off for the fourteenth time since the ancient pervert had arrived. Ranma had spent most of that month away from the Tendo place because he refused to kowtow to the Grand Master, and their clashes had done so much damage to the house that Soun had been forced to kick Ranma out. Ranma had spent some of it camping and the rest with Doctor Tofu, so he hadn't really had much trouble. However, that hadn't stopped Happosai from coming after him, both to force Ranma to admit that he was the old pervert's heir, and also to get his female side into some silky darlings.

Currently, Ranma was in male form despite Happosai's best efforts, and he was attacking grimly. Happosai was one of the few opponents that Ranma had ever met since leaving the Island of Women, who was even faster than he was, and he was way, **way** more skilled. Any attempt Ranma made to hit the ancient pervert was deflected, and any attempt to grab was twisted around and used against Ranma.

The only thing that Ranma had going for him was that Happosai was occasionally predictable, easy to rile up, and had no technique to Ranma's ki claws in deadliness. Ranma had already destroyed several of the old pervert's pipes, shredded his bag and nearly taken his eyes out in their fights.

Ranma hadn't used any of the Amazon techniques beyond the speed technique on him, and Ranma had called it something else when he did. The reason for this was currently arriving on the scene in the form of several diminutive women just as ancient as Happosai himself.

Between one blow and the next, Happosai turned aside from facing Ranma, shock on his features as he suddenly felt a battle aura flare up nearby. "What the!"

Of course, Ranma instantly took advantage of this, landing a hard kick to the back of the diminutive creature, which sent Happosai flying. "Don't look away from the fight, you old fart!"

Before he could land or even right himself in midair, Happosai found himself attacked as several of the elderly Amazon leaders attacked from every direction, led by Cologne. "Happosai, we will have what you stole from us!"

Several hours later, Ranma stared over the destruction of much of the area, shaking his head and looking down at Cologne, who had just placed several large cuffs on Happosai, grimacing as his dozens of cuts and bruises made themselves known, along with at least a few broken bones. *Fuck, but Happosai brought out all the stops when he was cornered!* "What are you going to do with him?"

“Jusenkyo. We will let the cursed springs decide what to do with this one. We’ve been able to recover everything Happosai stole, and no one died in this rampage, so it isn’t to the point where we would kill him out of hand. Much as I would prefer that,” Ke Lun grumbled, also dealing with her own wounds, as were the other elders. *I’m getting too old for this.*

Ranma breathed a sigh of relief. While he hated the pervert, he didn’t want the old guy killed, certainly not after the fight was already over. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to have some of your people stay around and help, would you? Rebuilding all of this is going to take a few weeks, even for me.”

Ke Lun looked at Ranma thoughtfully, then slowly decided to not use the pills of true love. Ranma was very much a wild, untamed horse, and any attempt to bridle him with magic would probably not only alienate him but also not work. “Don’t worry, my granddaughter, a few others and I will be staying around. Not for long, but long enough to help rebuild what we’ve just destroyed and to connect with the wider world for a bit.”

Shampoo appeared from one side, leaping through the rubble to land nearby. She had heard the last of what her grandmother had said and winked at Ranma. “No let grandmother fool you. She and other elders, all hooked on daytime dramas. Want find them, download and return to tribe with many as can.”

Cologne shook her head, with a grumble and gestured both youngsters who were now laughing forward. “Enough of that! While we prepare to return with our prize, you two, start the process of cleaning up. Pur-Fum, me and a few of the other youngsters will return soon.” *Hopefully, at least one of them will catch Ranma’s eye. His abilities and skills are too useful to not try to tie into the tribe.*

Unfortunately for Ke Lun, just like with the Tendo agreement and all the other arrangements his father had made, Ranma wasn’t interested in any of the Amazons. Not that they weren’t pretty or anything, they just were lacking a little something. Nor was their time in Nerima peaceful enough for Ranma to build any romantic feelings. Be it strange princes, poorly released oni, cursed mushrooms, more fiancées, Genma being stupid and Soun or Kuno equally so, there was always something going on.

And eventually, this included one problem that called all of the Amazons and Ranma back to China, coming as it did in the form of a flying group of Phoenix people...

OOOOOOO

While Ranma was having one adventure after another, on the Island of Women, things were relatively calm.

Cassie and Kara did not hit it off right away despite Diana’s hopes. Cassie was somewhat jealous that Kara came from the outside world and had been brought to the island for training

purposefully by Diana. Moreover, for the first time, she fully understood the jealousy of the other young trainees of her raw physical skills, as Kara was both faster than her and a bit stronger. Plus, Kara could fly. Which was just annoying.

But as they trained alongside one another, that sense of jealousy faded quickly as Cassie came to understand two things. First, when it came to combat, Kara had no training whatsoever. And by the third day of training, Cassie also knew that Kara was an almost painfully shy girl, one with a nasty personal history. Not in the same way that many of the women who came to the Isle of Women did, wounded in heart, body and soul by men. Rather, Kara's past was marked by events that, perhaps not as vile were literally world-shattering.

Because Kara was an alien. One whose homeworld had been destroyed in the planetary version of a natural disaster.

At first, Cassie didn't believe it. "Pull the other one!" Cassie shouted in laughter when Kara shared that during a four-minute break between sessions, pointing at the other blonde. "You're telling me that aliens, creatures that evolve on entirely different worlds, look exactly like humans? Yeah, right."

"It's true, though!" Kara protested, setting her glass of cool water down on the wall nearby. "I do come from another planet, just like Superman. Surely you've heard of him? He's my cousin."

"Only because Diana told me about him," Cassie shrugged, although her laughter had faded, and she cocked her head thoughtfully. "But really, you come from another planet?"

Kara had responded in the affirmative, and for some reason, Cassie decided she believed her. "You'll have to tell me about your planet," she paused, seeing Diana walking towards them, grimacing, "but later. Back to work!"

Groaning, Kara complied, and the two blonde teens pushed to their feet, moving towards Wonder Woman.

In turn, Kara Zor-El was somewhat ambivalent about being there at all. Kara understood she needed training, but was afraid that the primitive nature of the Amazons would get in the way of that. Yet while the training was hard, living on the Isle of Women wasn't as horrible as she had feared. Diana's cajoling, velvet glove covering an iron gauntlet approach pushed Kara without ever really making Kara feel as if she was being picked on or singled out negatively.

Added to that, the island's raw beauty reminded her of a few trips her parents took her on to parks on Krypton, and it wasn't like the Amazons didn't have niceties either. Magic was weird, but some of the things, like the heated public baths, were great.

And Cassie, like Diana and Queen Hippolyta, was not the primitive that Kara had feared. They lacked scientific knowledge, but that was not the same thing. Cassie didn't lord her status as a local over Kara, or her relationship to Diana, either. And that relationship didn't imply any special privileges either. Indeed, Diana and Cassie worked together to push Kara out of her shell, something Kara, displaced in time and space from a world now destroyed, knew she needed but had been subtly fighting ever since waking up on Earth.

Slowly, the two girls grew closer, and not three weeks after Kara arrived, they had become friends. After two months on the island, it was odd to see Kara without Cassie somewhere, whether it be training or free time.

About six months into Kara's stay, the two of them returned early from an endurance run around the island. Donna, who had taken over their training, had ordered them to run around the island and back several times, to, in her words, "See if it's possible to exhaust either one of you!"

Turns out, that was indeed extremely hard, although thanks to the issues they ran into over the run, it did happen. "At least the minotaurs didn't bother us after that first circuit," Kara muttered as the two girls walked away from their trainer, having handed in their weights and weapons.

"Heh, I have to wonder after the beating we gave them if they will just run the next time they see a blonde," Cassie teased. "What you did to that one minotaur, with his own horn, ouch. And for my part, I think the monkeys were worse."

"Ugh, he shouldn't have grabbed me like that," Kara shivered. "Ugh. And don't mention the monkeys! Honestly, I know you humans are supposed to have evolved from them, but at least you all stopped flinging poo at some point in that evolution. What purpose do monkeys serve, honestly?"

"Did you just say the word poo?" Cassie snickered.

"Aunt Martha's shadow looms regardless of where you are," Kara replied solemnly.

"Heh, come on, let's head to the baths." Cassie took Kara's arm and pulled her along, not that Kara protested.

"So," Cassie began as she pulled off her training shift, placing it in the laundry bag. "What do you think of life here on the island now that you've gotten used to it? Still missing Man's World and this technology of theirs?"

Kara laughed, shaking her head. "Please! What you call Man's World is still really primitive compared to what I think of as technology. So now, I don't think I miss it. I miss Aunt

Martha's cooking and the variety of food available, but even that is kind of a silly thing, you know?"

"Not really, but I'll take your word for it," Cassie shrugged. "I can't cook for my life, so I just eat whatever smells good."

"Neither can I, but that doesn't mean I can't recognize good cooking," the other girl answered with a chuckle. "Remember, I come from Krypton, a highly advanced culture. On my planet, most of the cooking was done by robots."

Cassie hummed thoughtfully. "Robots, you've mentioned them a time or two, but what exactly are they?"

Lips pursed, Kara tried to explain. "Think of magical servants but powered by technology and science instead of magic," she answered after a moment.

"That sounds really useful. Have you thought about making some of your own?"

"I didn't study that while I was at school, I studied programming, although I suppose I could branch out really easily if I wanted," Again, Kara had to explain the term programming, but most of it went over Cassie's head, making her realize not for the first time, that in a lot of ways, the outer world had really passed the Amazons by.

*Not that I would want it any other way, of course, Cassie added. While we might not have technology, these computer things, or anything else like that, we have natural beauty and peace among ourselves, which Man's World doesn't have, and adventure, just like what Kara and I had on this run. Or the times with Ranma, which were even more fun. That huge pearl we found in our diving competition was really cool, and Queen Hippolyta still has it in pride of place, but the time we met the sphinxes was just as fun. Although I could have done without the times the harpies came around, or how he somehow used a silly singing song to infuriate the monkeys so much they bother **me** every time they see me...*

The memory of an entire army of monkeys attacking her and Ranma when they were so young caused Cassie to shudder, and Kara looked at her quizzically. "Are you all right?"

Cassie waved her hand airily. "Nothing, just remembering the first time those monkeys became such a problem."

"Another memory from your time with this Ranma person?" Kara teased.

At that, Cassie blushed. "I don't talk about him that much, do I?"

"Not so often, and don't worry, I think it's sweet that you had a friend like that."

With a shrug, Cassie pulled her shorts off, tossing them down to lie alongside her shirt. "You've seen what I deal with when the other trainees are around, right?"

Kara winced. She had, and now, because of her own relationship with Diana, the fact that she was an outsider and her friendship with Cassie, Kara faced much the same bitter looks and resentment. The only saving grace in her place was that there were no rumors about her past or parentage, as there was about Cassie.

As Kara stripped, she missed Cassie's glance in her direction, specifically the Kryptonian's chest. Cassie knew that, despite being far stronger than she looked, her body was more of a sprinter's body, which meant her curves weren't much to write about. In contrast, Kara had those curves. Where Cassie had barely B cup breasts, to use the American system, which had been adopted on the island since Diana's first foray out into Man's World, Kara had low C-cup at the very least.

They were bigger and somehow more interesting-looking than Cassie's own. She wasn't certain how best to put it, but it was there. Kara also had a butt that put most girls on the island to shame, perfectly formed and perky. *Whereas I don't really have a butt at all.*

"So I've told you what I miss about the outside world, what do you want to see in the outside world? And don't give me that story about how you're happy here, I know before we became friends that you weren't. And if you ask me, I think Diana knows it too," Kara said as she pulled her shirt over her head.

Cassie blinked at that, the question breaking her out of her staring at the other girl, cocking her head thoughtfully to one side. "Hmm..."

The two of them left the changing room, entering the baths, and as they did, Cassie watched her friend's eyes, noting how they lit up and grinned to herself. For all that Kara sometimes bemoaned the lack of showers, how there was no TV (whatever that was), and radio, Kara had fallen in love with the public baths.

The two of them moved into the water, and leaning back, Cassie in turn failed to notice her friend staring at her body for a second while Cassie gave the question her undivided attention. "Well, if we set aside the whole idea of strong opponents, I think I'd like to explore."

Kara nodded, turning aside from staring at Cassie's bouncing chest for a second, wondering why that sight had grabbed her attention. "Yeah, you and Diana always want to push yourselves, to become better or stronger. I didn't understand it at first, but I guess I do now." That kind of thinking had not come easy to Kara, the daughter of two scientists on an incredibly technologically advanced world who had rejected their own warrior culture.

"Well, going back to what we were talking about before, I kind of want to find Ranma, I think. He was my only real friend before you came, and I think I owe it to him. A friend my own

age, anyway. I'd say Donna and Mistress Diana are our friends too, but they're not really the equal kind of friends."

"They're the kind you'd go to for advice, but not the kind you'd want to go on adventures and get into trouble with," Kara answered with a grin. While she hadn't had many friends of her own even back on Krypton, she had watched a lot of teenage dramas since coming to Earth. While that hadn't made Kara an expert or anything, it certainly given her a wider breadth of experience to, kind of, draw on than Cassie had.

"Exactly," Cassie nodded. "So yeah, that and well..." she frowned, thinking about it. "Maybe try out some of the sweets you've mentioned a time or two. This pancake concoction you've ranted about. Them and waffles."

"Then that settles it, Cassie," Kara laughed, hugging the other girl from one side, before pushing away, blushing faintly at the fact that they had pressed their chests together in a way that good girls shouldn't do. She moved into the deeper segment of the baths, preparing to dunk her head even as she said, "If you ever come out to Man's World after this, the first thing I'm going to do is introduce you to Aunt Martha's cooking!"

"Heh, I think I'll take you up on that," Cassie answered, laughing.

OOOOOOO

Diana Prince sat at a small round table with Clark and Lois, as the two reporters frowned, looking over images that they had scattered across the table. "I can't believe that in this day and age that communists are still able to just, just shut the borders and everything down! How the hell does that even happen?"

The pictures were of a recent disaster that had occurred in the depths of China. An entire mountain, Ho'o Peak (Phoenix Mountain), had suddenly exploded, with no information on how or perhaps who had caused the explosion. At Lois's request, Clark had asked for Diana Prince's help in trying to figure out if the pictures were doctored.

Thank goodness for magic, Diana thought, not for the first time. Diana Prince had no known connection to Wonder Woman, or Princess Diana, beyond her first name. No one had ever linked the two, not even the world's greatest detective, Batman. Diana had told several starting members of the Justice League about the connection personally, as she had told Clark. It had been interesting to see Bruce's jaw clench so hard at his inability to find out her secret, and probably good for the man to know there was a limit to his abilities.

"Can't the president ask Superman to go in and--"

"You know that's not how it works, Lois," Clark interrupted, shaking his head as he looked at the woman. Diana nodded, trying hard to keep a small scowl on her face as she too looked at Lois.

At first, she had approved of Lois Lane. Being a world-renowned reporter and a well-known writer was extremely impressive. Yet since their civilian personas had become friends, the woman had to be rescued not once, not twice, but **seven** times!

It's almost as if she enjoys being rescued by Superman. And while I know much more about Man's World now, the very idea that a woman should enjoy being rescued by a man, no matter how magnificent a specimen, is almost perverse.

"That would be simply another form of tyranny, enforcing our sense of right and wrong on them through force rather than indoctrination. The end result would be the same," Clark said soothingly. "Besides, from what I can tell from these recordings, they're telling the truth. It looks as if it's just a regular kind of disaster."

"Ho'o Peak (Phoenix Mountain) has been destroyed in a natural disaster. A mudslide of tremendous proportions caused by an illegal mining operation, coupled with a gas pocket explosion occurring due to the nature of the avalanche. The only individuals killed were the illegal miners; the damage has been contained, and no national help is required or requested--" at this Lois snorted, shaking her head as she repeated the Chinese Government's official stance on the matter.

Then she went back to pointing at the pictures in front of them. "Hah, and I've got a bridge in California to sell you. Plus, these are obviously doctored. Look, you can see significant segments of the close-up shots of the damage blurred out here and over here. I can smell a scoop! The Chinese don't want us to know something, something big."

"Perhaps, but that doesn't mean we're the right people to stick our noses into it," Clark opined.

"God Haystack, where's your ambition? Besides, if we can crack this mystery..."

"You would probably create an international incident," Diana interjected. "While this might be important, that doesn't mean you should run off and try to get involved, nor does it mean it would be important to us here in the US."

"Besides, I wanted to ask you how my cousin is doing. I know that school you sent her is an all-girls' school, but I worry," Clark said in a very obvious attempt to change the subject. It was equally obvious to Diana that he was also truly worried about Kara.

When Kara had first arrived, she had faced more than her fair share of suspicion from Bruce and a few other Justice League members. Clark and Diana had gone to Batman for the

girl, and then came a missive from Diana's mother, offering Kara Zor-El a place to train on Themyscira. That had removed some of the reasons why the JL members were concerned about the young girl, although Clark had objected until Diana had gotten Kara herself to agree to it.

"Kara's perfectly fine, Clark. She's been there for a bit over a year now, and her grades are magnificent. She's also made friends with my cousin, Cassie, as I thought she would. I think you would find her growth both academically and as a person to be very good," Diana answered warmly. "My mother speaks highly of her as well, and she is a woman who is very sparse with praise."

"Good, that, that's good. But, I trust Kara'll be able to come back home for the holidays this year? Ma and Pa miss her," Clark smiled. "I do too."

Diana nodded agreeably. "That can be arranged for certain. I will call my mother and tell her."

"That's all well and good, Haystack, and I'm happy you'll have your little family reunion. But let's get back to the important things. Like what our next scoop is going to be," Lois interjected, causing both her listeners to sigh at her one-track mind. "If we can't get to China to solve this mystery, then maybe we should look into the rumor of some kind of drug cartel being led by a Superpowered villain. I..."

OOOOOOO

Ranma sighed. The events at Ho'o were two weeks behind him, and two months remained before the two-year ultimatum that he basically forced on the parents was up. Because of that, the two fathers were getting more and more desperate to force him to choose one of the three sisters. Thankfully, Akane wasn't interested, Nabiki had moved out, and Kasumi was well... far too much of a wallflower to interest Ranma at all. She was nice, and okay, cute, sure, but that was it.

And it turned out that the Tendo School really didn't have anything to offer Ranma in terms of techniques or anything to make it stand out. Nothing Soun did was anything more than just a slightly refined version of what Happosai could do, and Ranma had proven several times that he was already nearly Happy's match. At this point, in fact, he could beat Genma four out of five times, and Soun had never beaten Ranma, not once.

Should I move on? Just leave the Old Man here? He is certainly happy enough to settle down, but I'm not. I still have an entire world out there, and I want to head to America and see if this Wonder Woman girl is Diana. Judging by the stories that Diana told us about her first time out in the wider world, I really think she is. Which would be just awesome!

Ranma was still thinking about what he wanted to do when he opened the door to the house, calling out, "I'm here." Ranma never really felt at home here, so he didn't announce himself with the traditional Tadaima (I'm home).

Kasumi's gentle voice came back to them. "Ranma, you, your father and mine have guests. Talk-type guests," she added after a moment.

Wondering what new issue was going to crop up now, Ranma made his way to the sitting room and found two government types sitting at the table drinking tea, while Kasumi sat next to one of them, and his father and Soun sat across from them, staring down at a check, as well as what looked like a bill.

Oh, that isn't good. Ranma slumped into a chair across from the two of them, crossing his arms. "Well, what did my old man sell me out for now?" he growled.

Both men shook their heads. "May I speak bluntly?" one of them asked. Ranma couldn't tell them apart, really, but since this guy was doing the talking, he figured he was the least senior of the two. Not that it mattered to him.

When Ranma nodded, the government agent went on. "Ranma Saotome, your government wishes to make use of your abilities. To this end, we have already acquired them by purchasing the various honor agreements, damages, and bills your father and you have racked up over the years. Before you say anything, some of that money has been racked up by you, not just your father."

"How much can I owe from dine-n'-dashes?" Ranma scoffed.

"Not much. But you owe quite a bit in terms of damages to public areas, plus soothing the Chinese feathers you ruffled in destroying an entire mountain. That last was not exactly a small task."

That made Ranma scowl, but he nodded. Fighting Saffron was one of the few times he'd been forced to kill another human being, and Ranma still felt a little guilty about that and the amount of damage that he had done to the Phoenix Tribe's home. *Even if they had been the ones to start things.*

"We also purchased the debt your old man has done, in an effort to make you work for us without his interference. Hence..." the man waved to where Genma and Soun sat staring at the bills the government had laid out in front of them.

The carrot now sufficiently explained, the government official brought out the stick. "Of course, if we didn't, your entire family would be indebted to various parties until your children were as old as your former Grand Master."

Ranma's relationship with his mother was one of the major bright spots in his life. Ranma's curse had come out quickly, as Ranma had met the woman in his female form without Genma anywhere near and had basically put all the blame on Genma. Given that Shampoo had been hanging off Ranma at the time, Nodoka had felt that Ranma was manly enough to ignore the honor vow, thankfully. She still made Ranma nervous occasionally, and she and Genma had divorced, but that was a small price to pay.

"We won't have you on retainer for too long," the official continued in a more soothing tone of voice before Ranma could object. "We want you to perform five actions for us. Three of them are along the lines of capture missions. I am certain you are aware of the term supervillains, but are you aware that Japan has its own homegrown variety?"

Ranma snorted. "You mean besides Happosai, Copycat Ken and Principal Kuno?"

The officials laughed, showing that they had read quite a bit of Ranma's file. "No, they don't count. Happosai is akin to a natural disaster, and he hasn't even appeared lately. Copycat Ken isn't nearly durable enough to be a real supervillain, and he's far less intelligent than he tries to appear. As for the Kunos, they are a local issue at best, unimportant on the grand stage."

Ranma nodded at that, gesturing the man to continue. He did so by opening three folders and pulling out pictures of three individuals. Each of them was not quite human-looking. "Huh... Creeper, another Oni? Joy. And Death Man? Seriously? Ugh, I'll admit the whole skull thing didn't really leave him any choice, but still. And Dragon King? You have to be kidding me."

"We assure you we are not. These criminals, in particular the first two, are extremely dangerous. We have enough to put all three away for life, and we will do so. But bringing them in is beyond the power of the police. And any attempt to bring in the army would be too cumbersome to capture them before tipping the criminals off."

The second official locked gazes with Genma, who looked back, looked down, and nodded. That was all that was needed, and the second official smiled thinly. While Ranma's sense of honor would not allow him to assassinate even super villains, Genma's honor was much more... malleable, and he had many of the same skills as his son. He was also willing to do what he had to in order to get out of the debt he had earned in his lifetime. Ranma would give the government supervillains to put on trial and send to jail publicly. Genma would remove others with no one the wiser.

Ranma and the others at the table didn't notice any of this byplay, as the other government official was still speaking. "And our slowly growing homegrown heroes are not nearly up to the level of this American Justice League. None of them has the experience, skill set and knowledge that you here in Nerima have developed."

"Why don't you ask the Americans for help, then?" Ranma asked.

“The Japanese government will not condone nor seem to support the Justice League until it is connected and controlled by the United Nations. And, doing so would be a stain on our honor. These are homegrown Japanese villains. They need to be taken care of by fellow Japanese.”

Ranma nodded. He didn't really consider himself that much of a Japanese. He spent so much time traipsing around Asia that he considered himself more pan-Asian than anything else. And he'd spoken to and met far too many survivors of World War II over that time to really put any stock in purely Japanese 'honor.' But he nodded anyway. This sounded interesting. “What about the other two jobs?”

“One of them is up in the air at the moment, so you won't be told about it until plans solidify on that front. But the fourth is accompanying an archaeologist, a British native named Lara Croft. Our government has funded several of her upcoming expeditions. Several will be in Japan, and several will not be, but we hope to protect our investment. Lara is an incredible archeologist and fighter, but she has recently been targeted by criminal elements of the superpowered variety.”

Humming thoughtfully, Ranma nodded. “Bodyguarding's fine, so long as the person I'm bodyguarding isn't a complete idiot. One of those people who, you know, see something shiny and goes 'oh shiny' and walks toward it without checking for traps, kind of thing.”

Both officials in front of Ranma laughed at that, and he smiled. He didn't like being on retainer like this, but at least the people the government had assigned to them had a sense of humor. *And this Lara person sounds like someone I can ask about the Isle of Women. That's good too.* Even now, Ranma was determined to head to the first place he had felt at home. *And if this deal gets me out of Japan after a while with my honor intact, I'm all for it.* “Alright, give me some paperwork to go over, and I'll get it back to ya after talking with my Old Man and my Mom. But right now, I gotta say, it sounds like you got a deal.”

End Chapter