

Yo, here's the next chapter of Climbing Together. It was the winner of the Patron Only Poll in January.

This chapter doesn't cover the time out at sea and the arrival on Hainan, but I decided to push Vega's return back and introduce a few smaller tournaments before they meet with the next really important character. If you squint, you might see who it will be, LOL.

This has been edited by Hiryo and also edited by me with Grammarly.

Chapter 1# Hairstyling Annoyances

As a busy street was no place to have a reunion/meeting with your girlfriend's grandmother figure, the group did not object when, after an initial round of greetings, Ranma suggested they adjourn to a roof nearby. The group headed into a nearby alleyway and, once they were away from any watching eyes, or so they thought, made their way up to the roof.

Watching Mai get herself up there had been interesting to Cu Lonxi. After waving off the other two, the statuesque girl's face scrunched up cutely as she used her one good leg, and then pushed off lightly with the crutch in the other hand, showing that Mai's arms were almost as strong as her legs.

The rooftop they landed on turned out to be the roof of a really upscale apartment complex, with the rooftop entirely devoted to a suite of some kind, complete with a pool. There was no one in sight, though, so it made a perfect place for them at the moment.

Ranma and Cu Lonxi looked around, and their sentiment at the sight was the same, even if they expressed it differently. "Eessh, someone's loaded, I wonder how that happens in a Commie country when everyone's supposed to be equal or whatever?" / "Humph, I see that corruption pays as well as always."

The two of them looked at one another, then, as Shampoo and Mai giggled in the background, exchanged a nod of understanding.

Looking over at her granddaughter, and the way she was looking at Ranma, while also standing close to Mai in case she needed some help to move, Cu Lonxi snorted just a little bit. "Well, at least we are away from the public eye."

At that, Shampoo became a little more serious and formal, and after helping Mai into a pool lounge chair, looked across at her grandmother somewhat nervously. She'd had a moment to consider why precisely her grandmother might've sought her out, and to become concerned.

After all, she had been very open in her letters about sharing some of the secrets of their tribe's training with Ranma, and later with Mai. She well understood there could be some trouble, as while Ranma would probably get a pass because they were serious about their relationship, she hadn't sent any kind of update after their relationship grew to include Mai.

Contrary to Shampoo's sudden concern, Cu Lonxi had no issue with her sharing the Amaguriken or Bakusai Tenketsu training. Indeed, to Cu Lonxi, the fact that Shampoo had shared some of their clan's training with Ranma and Mai barely constituted a thought. She hadn't shared anything truly spectacular or secretive, only techniques to raise a person's basic abilities. "You're not in trouble, girl, so get that thought out of your head. I'm here because I was concerned about some of the less personal things you've mentioned in the letter coming home. Although first, I wish to get to know your husband here."

To her surprise, Ranma didn't even flinch at the idea that his relationship with Shampoo was that permanent, that certain. Instead, he simply looked back at her, then squatted down next to the chair where Shampoo and Mai were sitting together. There were only two such chairs, and he wasn't about to sit next to Cu Lonxi, just in case she got angry and he needed some space to react. *This old gal's giving me definite Master Oro vibes, like she's a lot more dangerous than she looks.* "What do you want to know?"

"Hmm, easiest question first, I suppose. Tell me about yourself, your school, and, more importantly, if you know anything about the individual who began your school, Happosai."

"That name's cropped up a few times since Shampoo and I started traveling together, although I never heard of him before that. My Pops never mentioned him, and I got no idea where he is or if he's still alive, so if your clan has beef with him or something, I'm not part of it," Ranma said firmly before going on more hesitantly, looking over at Shampoo then back to Cu Lonxi. "Unless some portions of the Aerial Style of Anything Goes come from your own teachings? I don't think they do; Shampoo's style isn't anything like mine..."

"Then that's that, I won't blame you for that fool's various issues. If you don't know about Happy, just tell me about yourself," Cu Lonxi ordered.

This caused Mai to blink, wondering precisely how Cu Lonxi knew Happosai enough to call him what cute be a cutesy kind of name, her inner romantic threatening to go out of control. She didn't say anything though, as Ranma began to describe his journey with Genma. This almost inevitably led to Cu Lonxi cackling and calling him and Genma both morons for not learning Chinese while traveling through China.

"Yet you at least have corrected that oversight now." She cackled again, more of a low, teasing chuckle than a guffaw as she looked over at Shampoo. "I presume motivation plays a factor, as always."

While Shampoo blushed a little bit, Ranma just nodded, seeing no point in hiding it, particularly not from Shampoo's relative. "Yeah, Shampoo is a much prettier and much better teacher than my old man could ever be."

"Hah, well said," Cu Lonxi chortled, while Shampoo continued to blush, although she did send Ranma a warm smile for his words despite that. "Well, with that out of the way, I suppose we can set aside getting to know you more for a moment, if for no other reason than to let my several times granddaughter to recover... and to figure out a way to explain why she welcomed a second wife into your relationship."

Shampoo yelped a bit at that, but Mai just snaked an arm through hers, staring back at the old, shriveled woman almost challengingly. Cu Lonxi, though, ignored that for now, looking between all three youngsters. *Best to shift the discussion. Keeping things hopping like that will keep these three from turtling up. I'm more likely to see any issues with their relationship that way, and learn more about the rest of what I'm here to investigate, too.*

"More importantly for the clan as a whole, your letters told us things about the outer world and certain goings-on in China, evil goings-on, that we as a people object to."

Both Mai and Ranma looked at her, and Shampoo shrugged. "I sent multiple messages home with that messenger service we found, as well as a copy of the movie and everything that happened with Yamazaki and our helping the police. There was so much to tell that just one letter really wouldn't have done enough, and since mail always arrives in batches, I figured what was the harm?"

"And you wanted to see all of your former rivals and friends back home see you take the first step to stardom in that movie?" Mai teased gently, tapping her elbow against Shampoo's.

"UGH, there is no way I would ever be a star," Shampoo protested with a mock pout. "They spend far, far too much time on makeup and looking pretty."

Knowing a fishing expedition for what it was, Ranma still decided to rise to that one. "Yeah, well, that's only for those who couldn't be pretty without all that time spent on themselves. You're already prettier than most actresses in the world, even without even makeup, let alone all that pampering."

At that, Shampoo beamed at him, and Ranma grinned back while Cu Lonxi snickered, looking closely at her granddaughter under the guise of her humor at their antics. *Hmm... she hasn't made the connection just yet between the slaving rings and the fighters that might've been taken captive there and her missing mother.* For a second, Cu Lonxi debated whether or not to share that bit of information, but decided against it. Shampoo, for all that she had matured greatly on this journey, seemingly, was still probably too hotheaded to be let in on that secret. *Besides, there is no trail to follow just yet. When there is, I will be the one to take it. No one harms my family and lives. No one!*

In an effort to shift her own thoughts, which had suddenly grown very dark and bloodthirsty, Cu Lonxi turned to Mai, who sat next to her granddaughter, taking her in for a moment. *Good God! If I met this one when I was younger, I might've tried to poison her for being too damned pretty.*

"Are you all right my dear? I understand that you started travelling with young Shampoo and my prospective son-in-law here, and that she has been teaching you as well. How did you hurt yourself, and why would a young woman of your beauty decide to go on a journey where you would be the third wheel?"

Grateful that it seemed that Shampoo had respected her privacy about the whole Andy situation, if becoming somewhat flummoxed by how quickly Cu Lonxi seemed to be changing topics, Mai explained why she had been so eager to join Ranma and Shampoo on their journey. Then she decided to bite the bullet and admit that she had also begun to have feelings for them, and that the three of them had entered a relationship relatively recently.

"Hmmm, well, I can't say that's unusual, but that does match the, what do young ones call them, the vibes I got from the three of you when I first showed up. Still, if you are going to become a daughter of the clan and not go through the official channels, I will be testing you in terms of combat skill and styles..."

Cu Lonxi's voice trailed off as Mai pulled out several fans from her boob window, all of which became fireballs within seconds, which she held up over her head and to one side away from Shampoo for a moment. She had been practicing to make that shift quicker, to light up her fans the moment that she could, rather than midair, and could almost make it seem now as if she was simply pulling fireballs out of her tits. "I look forward to your challenge, mistress. So long as you wait until I am fully healed anyway."

Recognizing that as a Yin technique, Cu Lonxi nodded in approval. Amazons learned about the Yin and Yang when they started to exhibit true ki control, although after that, many leaned into yang energy more than Yin. The Matriarch reflected that Shampoo would probably have learned about that by this point if she had stayed in the village, before waving Mai off. "Well, that's interesting. Shampoo hadn't mentioned much about your style in her letters. Do I take it that you and your school lean towards the Yin rather than the Yang energy? And what are your philosophies about such matters?"

This, yet another change of topic, segued into a very technical discussion of some of the techniques Shampoo had learned from Mai's school and some of the conversations they'd all had with master Oro back in Hong Kong. The mention of Master Oro made Cu Lonxi blink. "Truly, that youngster is still alive. Amazing, considering he's got to be about a hundred and fifty by now."

She seemed to glow for a brief moment, her scowl deepening. "And you say he's still tall and well-muscled. HOHOHOH, I wonder how he managed that. Few among us who achieve ki

mastery later in our lives can truly keep our youthful height, let alone anything else. OHOHOHOH...how fortunate for him...OHOHOHOHOH..."

"So would that make him older or just a little younger than dirt?" Ranma asked, unperturbed by either Cu Lonxi's mad laugh or her aura of jealousy. He then had to duck to the side, yelping as Cu Lonxi came up off her seat, whirling her cane towards where his head had been a second before he had moved. "GAH!"

It still nearly clipped his nose, and the air of its passage was enough to ruffle his hair, before she was standing on the top of her cane, shaking her head. "That's no way to speak about your elders, son-in-law. Describe this Master Oro to me in greater detail. I wonder if he is indeed the same one as the youngster I met."

Unfortunately for Cu Lonxi's jealousy, this turned out to be remarkably correct, as Master Oro, despite his hair going away noticeably, and his arm not having been impaired when Cu Lonxi met him, seemingly hadn't changed all that much. "Damn it all, some youngsters have all the luck," she grumbled, settling down a bit, not realizing that she had forgone her ploy of continually changing the subject to keep the trio on their toes.

"So it's true, then? Having a large amount of ki can truly negate the aging process?" Mai asked, somewhat bemused by the entire idea. It hadn't been one she had ever run into before meeting Ranma and Shampoo, and Shampoo had mentioned how old her grandparents were. *But it looks as if that was indeed the case, judging by Cu Lonxi's reaction.*

"It can indeed, although I'll warn you, immortality isn't all it's cracked up to be. Especially when it takes several lifetimes to build up their ki. You can't turn back to mother nature, though, which means you're stuck looking however you do when you first stop to age," Cu Lonxi grumbled some more, before shaking off her annoyance. "At that point, there's no telling how long you can live. I'm not the oldest member of the Council; the Chief Archivist is a good fifty years older than me. When I was young, China stood unrivaled in the world, or so we thought, despite those Dutch and British companies coming to our shores. I was still a teen when one of them set up at Guangzhou."

While Shampoo and Mai looked thoughtful and somewhat awed at her words, even Shampoo, who had known how old Cu Lonxi was before this, Ranma leaped at the chance to question her. Cu Lonxi's words about ancient times had him remembering their most recent adventure. "Then did you ever hear of two assholes named Qin Konglong or Qin Hailong? Or a style called Chixù Yǒng Dòng (Unrelenting Surge)?"

"I... where did you learn those names?" Cu Lonxi nearly demanded. "Konglong and Hailong were members of the Qin Dynasty. They were revered and powerful generals, whose personal cruelties eventually caught up to them. For some reason, they were then entombed to die on the Emperor's orders. It, it was rumored the Joketsuzoku were involved in their capture

and entombment, but that was centuries before relations between us and the lowlanders were codified and generations before my time.”

“Well, Grandmother, I think there might have been even worse going on there than, as you put it, ‘personal cruelties’ because we ran into them as jiangshi,” Shampoo said, grinning at the utterly gob-smacked look on her ancestor’s face. “That’s how Mai was injured.”

Cu Lonxi didn’t even need to growl, ‘Tell me everything’. The teens got the hint from her narrow-eyed gaze and the grip on her staff. This took nearly forty minutes, during which Cu Lonxi shook her head several times, then asked several dozen questions, pulling out more information. Eventually, she hummed, thoughtfully, hopping around on her staff for a moment. “I have a lot of questions about your usage of the Neko-Ken, son-in-law, but I will set them aside for now. The rest is... horrific and fascinating at the same time. It is good to know that old bat, Gentsai, has kept up the Dragon Spirit School.”

“Er, do you call him that because he’s actually what ya consider old, or because he’s batty?” Ranma inquired, his tone both polite and a bit worried. Cu Lonxi’s intensity during their story had kind of alarmed him.

“Hah!” The question seemed to calm Cu Lonxi down a bit. “Batty. Very batty. The Dragon Spirit school, on the other hand, is older than I am and primarily deals with, as you saw, exorcising spirits. Which, given the sheer amount of battles and bloodshed has occurred across Asia, is a necessity. The last time I heard about them Gentsai’s master was dealing with an issue on the border with Mongolia... I think it’s been a few decades.”

All three teens blanched a bit at Cu Lonxi’s offhand way of mentioning the term ‘decades’ there, but she went on thoughtfully. “From your story, I think those spirits were indeed using magic. Blood magic, as Europeans would call it, I think. But you and those two from the Dragon Spirit School, if you didn’t send them on to their well-deserved time in hell, certainly forced them to use enough energy that the Qin siblings won’t be back for a few hundred years at least. Without being there, I can’t be certain of which.”

And I certainly wouldn’t have wanted to face two powerful jiangshi like that, not without some preparation, anyway. I could deal with their bodies, but their spirits would be more difficult. I, too, would have been forced into a battle of attrition, drat it. Still, it is amazing these three were able to fight them off so well.

“Um, well, then elder, do ya know, er, that is, do you know anything about the Unrelenting Surge style? The jiangshi recognized it, but they didn’t tell me anything about it,” Ranma questioned, trying to moderate his language.

Cu Lonxi smiled faintly at his attempts, closing her eyes to search her memory for a moment. “I have heard Chíxù Yǒng Dòng, but only in writing. It was a reference term for a style that was old even when I was young. I couldn’t tell you where I learned it, and really, I only

remember it because some of the stories about the style stuck with me even now. From what the stories tell, I think you will be incredibly dangerous if you're able to master this, heh, Blue Wave technique of yours. I'm afraid, though, I won't be of any help there other than giving suggestions."

Ranma looked happy at that, but Shampoo quickly interjected, reaching into her own ki space. "On the topic of ancient writings, Grandmother, there was something else I did not put in my letters about our fights with the Triad. I present to you two items, which I believe will become treasures of our clan, and ask only that you help in translating the second one."

Cu Lonxi's eyes had narrowed at Shampoo's following Ranma's footsteps in becoming formal, if with better results, as it was very much not something her granddaughter enjoyed. Nor was it ever something Cu Lonxi had enforced between the two of them.

Now those same eyes widened in shock as she held out the two things that she had stolen from Yamazaki's collection. She took them, staring at them reverently through the glass. *Speaking of things from before our relationship with the rest of China was set in stone...*

While Shampoo could only make out a few of the Chũ Hán on the cover of the first item, Cu Lonxi could tell more, having worked with the Chief Archivist for decades on recovering and reading old manuscripts and records. Indeed, the name of this one had come up in several of those, and she recognized enough to make the connection. *The treaty of the Joketsuzoku: The rights and relations between the Han Imperial House and the Warrior Women... This, this could be a clearer, more in-depth history of the treaty we made with the Han, and our dealings with them. That is... that is beyond priceless!*

Setting it aside, she slowly shook her head as she looked up at Shampoo. When she spoke, her response was equally formal. "I am very grateful, daughter of the clan, for this find, and returning it to our clan will make your name resound with honor."

Shampoo's formality broke into a sunny grin, and she nodded. "I knew that was important!"

"It is indeed. If only for the history within. I rather doubt we could use it to force the Chinese Communist Party to make concessions, but it will be important to us," Cu Lonxi agreed with a chuckle, pulling the second item towards her.

This one was more pertinent, if not as historically fascinating. *HAH, 'Swinging a Polearm Like You Mean It', ah, Lu Bu such an odd character. And yet, if this is some kind of training manual... yes, it could be very important indeed.* "This, too, is important. I doubt it will be as helpful as you might think, Shampoo, as Lu Bu was not a very good, straightforward writer. But you could still learn something from it, I think."

"I was looking at ways to preserve them, as well as trying to find a way to translate them, although I will say I had far better luck on the first than the last, when I was ambushed by those two jiangshi," Shampoo admitted. "Part of why I wanted us to stop in a big city like this was that I might have more luck finding someone who can help with that."

"No need. I can preserve both of these manuscripts, and can even start doing so through the glass, which modern scientific methods wouldn't be able to," Cu Lonxi waved that off. "Translating, though, and bringing out the letters given how faded they are, is going to be far more difficult. I will probably need to transcribe them entirely to start."

"You're able to imbue an object with ki through another medium like that?" Ranma was surprised. "Glass is a lot thicker than a pair of gloves or something similar."

Deciding to shelve any more serious talk for a moment, Cu Lonxi hopped to her feet for a second, moving over to the doorway leading into the actual suite from the pool area. She didn't sense anyone inside, and she also didn't see any kind of security cameras, but she wasn't about to open the door. She knew from movies that opening doors and the like often set modern security devices off.

Still, that didn't matter. Instead of opening the door, Cu Lonxi tapped her staff against the glass of the doorway for a moment, then gestured Ranma over. "Punch the glass, son-in-law."

Shrugging, Ranma did so, and the others watched as his fist bounced off like he'd hit a thick metal wall.

"Moving ki from one item and through that medium into another is difficult and needs quite a bit of concentration. It isn't something most people could use in combat, but it can be useful at times. I will copy out the training manual if I can, but copying both of these items out will be my priority, I am afraid," Cu Lonxi continued. Returning to the lounge chairs, she made the two items disappear up her sleeves. "What are your plans going forward? How long are you planning to stay here?"

"We're not really planning to stay here for very long, Grandmother," Shampoo apologized. "We don't have very many specific plans, but..."

Cu Lonxi listened intently and hummed thoughtfully. She wasn't happy about how much time they spent on the ocean, given the limited space for true training, and urged them to shift to another form of transportation once they arrived in India. But until then, it made sense, as the Islanders, specifically the Malaysians, had some interesting weapon-based combat skills.

"I can give you a few names to look up on Heinen Island, young and old women who make a habit of watching for martial artist type news. Over the centuries, many members of the tribes who have left our territory have spread far and wide throughout Asia. Mostly because

they'd met a local man and wanted to move in with her family, but still, such people have agreements with the tribe to be on the lookout for others and help any tribe member moving through the area."

Mai blinked at that, her eyes narrowing slightly, as it sounded very much like the Amazons had set up an information network. She didn't say anything, though, as Cu Lonxi suddenly smirked, falling back to her old tactic of changing the subject. Not because she was trying to throw off the teens any longer, but because she wanted to watch their reactions and laugh. "By the way, if all three of you are involved and you're all going on this training trip for however long it interests you, what about children? Have you done anything to prevent that, or hah, have you just decided that celibacy is the way to go?"

The crudeness of her question and the leer she gave Ranma caused him to blush and start waving his arms to either side of him, almost as if he was about to combust. Shampoo was no better off, exclaiming "Grandmother!" and staring in horror.

However, Mai was made of sterner stuff, and she simply laughed. "That would be a pitiful way of dealing with that particular problem, I think. Shampoo and I have both had shots, although we'll probably need another set when we're ready to leave Hainan. Just in case. Ranma is very... energetic."

While both Ranma and Shampoo squeaked again and looked as if they wanted to be anywhere else but there, Cu Lonxi looked at Mai, one eyebrow rising in query, and Mai smirked. "I've been trained in the Shiranui style my whole life, Elder. And part of that is based on seduction and mid-battle flirting. Teasing like that isn't going to get any kind of rise out of me."

"That's a pity," Cu Lonxi drawled, "At least my granddaughter and your mutual boyfriend here are giving me enough amusement. Still, I am pleased that you all took precautions. The road is no place for children, let alone pregnant women."

"No place for children? You don't say." Ranma snickered while trying hard to fight down his blush and not succeeding for a few moments.

"Erm, but more seriously, do you have any other ideas about how we can train on the ship? Did you see it when we arrived? It's not very big, and we have limited space. That's why we're going to spend a few weeks at least on Hainan."

When given the dimensions of their ship, Cu Lonxi admitted that was tough. "That little space is going to be a killer in the long-term. What training were you going to do in Hainan?"

"Toughness training, Grandmother," Shampoo answered.

"Good choice. You won't ever lose your toughness unless you just stop training and fighting altogether, but given what you told me about Yamazaki and the other martial artists

you've met, toughness training is very necessary. I... I have fought in the past many martial artists who could simply shrug off my best blows and even special attacks, then keep coming. A certain level of toughness is necessary to face such beasts."

The way she said beasts caused a shiver to go down all the teens' backs, but Ranma decided not to let the conversation become serious again, just yet. "Huh, I'm surprised you're not going to tell us that with enough ki mastery we could expand one of the rooms on the boat," Ranma mused, only half joking, and half seriously disappointed.

"Unfortunately not, even a master of ki could not do something like that to so large an area. You would need at least four people, each of them funneling ki into specific portions of the room on a continual basis, and not only would that be draining, but it would be impossible to maintain over time," Cu Lonxi said. "The same principle applies to your own weapon space, or even Mai's, heh, boob window."

Cu Lonxi cackled a little at that, shaking her head. "Clothing like what you're wearing would've never been seen in public back when I was young, young lady, or perhaps my clan would've come up with something similar. Regardless, you all must have noticed that if you don't wear an article of clothing for more than a day, your ki space starts to shrink unless you've pumped enough energy to make it last longer."

Ranma nodded as did Mai, having run into that problem several times. Shampoo also ran into a few times, although her ki space wasn't nearly as large as the other two. She only kept a few specific items in them, including her two chui. That thought caused her to scowl a little, and she was about to ask her grandmother if perhaps she had a few spare weapons on her from back home when the meeting between the quartet was interrupted.

Another person had been nearby for some time, listening as best he could from a nearby rooftop. His need to stay hidden had forced him to keep his distance, so much so that he hadn't been able to hear much of the conversation, but he could at least watch their body language. Or he would have, if Mu Tse, Shampoo's childhood friend and current stalker, wasn't as blind as a bat without his glasses. Which he didn't wear at all times for some reason.

Though, he did so now, as he leaped across to the one where Ranma and the others were. Landing behind Shampoo before she or any of the other could react, Mu Tse pulled her into a hug from behind, his arms wrapped around her waist and arms, pinning them to her side. "Shampoo my love! I have found you at last, and---"

Despite, or perhaps because of recognizing the voice that had just shouted into her ear, Shampoo did not take kindly to being assaulted like this; she lashed out fiercely backwards with the headbutt, with a shout of, "Stupid Mu Tse! Why are you grabbing at Shampoo, huh!? You know I hate that!"

The headbutt nearly broke Mu Tse's nose and was enough to send him reeling, his grip on her arms loosening just a tiny bit. That bit of leverage was enough, and with a show of strength that Cu Lonxi had to whistle appreciatively at, Shampoo broke Mu Tse's hug in a way she wouldn't have been able to a year ago. Idly, she wondered if her granddaughter's entire style had shifted, and was looking forward to seeing more of it, as Shampoo whirled around, launching a punch that Mu Tse barely blocked.

Treating the punch as if it were but a love tap, Mu Tse grinned in what he thought was a charming manner. "I am sorry, darling, I'm just so happy to see you." The watching Mai had to admit he was at least handsome. He was taller than Ranma or Mai, dressed in a white cheongsam with long flowing sleeves, glasses, and black slippers. He had lustrous black hair, which hung loose down past his shoulder and wide shoulders that matched Ranma's.

"How could I not but take you into my arms and--" Mu Tse cut off as a kick lashed out, landing on his chest and sending him skittering backward. He would've fallen into the pool if not for the fact that he was able to get his feet under him for just a second and flip into the air. He then tossed down a surfboard that he landed on lightly, before hopping off to land to the side of the pool.

Mai whistled. "That's fantastic control of ki space, he's got to have it organized to a fare-thee-well, and very good balance too. So, this is the boy that was always chasing after you back home, right, Shampoo?"

Shampoo nodded, while Ranma growled, cracking his knuckles. He hadn't liked watching the boy manhandle Shampoo even for a second, and had noticed the older teen's hands had most decidedly been moving up towards private property before Shampoo broke his grip. "The blind guy, right? The guy who tried to go from friend to lover only to fail so badly it should be in the encyclopedia as an example of how not to do it?" he asked, his voice a little colder and angrier than it would normally have been.

"Excuse me! I will have you know that my relationship with Shampoo is perfect! She is simply playing hard to get, and would've already stopped playing hard to get if it wasn't for you and your dishonorable ways! You're running away from a fair fight, then luring her in and away from our people! Well, now, she doesn't have to put up with you anymore, I will—"

"Do nothing!" Shampoo growled. "And stop glaring at Ranma! Ranma hasn't done anything to me that I don't want him to." *And boy, does that cover a lot of territory*, she thought, unable to stop herself from remembering the nights the three of them had shared together aboard ship and the romantic moments she had shared with Ranma before Mai had joined the relationship.

Or should that be permanently? Looking back on it, her joining us that night seems more like a final step than a surprise. The way Mu Tse's expression and attitude changed when he

looked at Shampoo was almost funny in and of itself to the watching object of that last thought, but his words only served to bring Shampoo's anger back with reinforcements.

"My love, please, don't speak like that!" Mu Tse exclaimed. "I can prove to you that I am a far better man than this foreigner when I defeat him. Your hand and affections will be free for me to earn once more, and then we can go home and—"

"NO! Setting aside anything else, I'm enjoying traveling and seeing the world, it's been the most fun I've ever had, and it's let me grow stronger—"

"Well, then we can travel together, it'll be romantic, travel across country into Vietnam and beyond," Mu Tse interjected, acting as if that was Shampoo's primary objection. "I've saved up a good deal of money on this trip. You'd be surprised how much money lowlanders will toss your way when you can perform deeds, they can't explain outside of calling it magic. Why, I've enough to buy a good-sized car and more!"

Watching this from the side, Ranma had to nod his head in acknowledgement of that idea. *Huh... come to think of it, the three of us could pull in a lot of cash as street performers. Say what ya will about the guy's inability to take a hint, but that's a great idea.* However, it was also very clear to Ranma, and to Mai, who his eyes tracked to for a second to see the same understanding there, that Mu Tse was missing the point.

"Come, Shampoo," Mu Tse nearly crooned, his hands out in near supplication. "I am sorry that staying in our village wasn't enough for you. I even understand why. We're young, but we, you and I, our connection goes back to our childhood! How could a few years trying to kill this pigtailed Jiangren then traveling with him for a short time undercut that?"

While Ranma and Mai's gazes turned into glares at that insulting term, which was a slur meaning thief, bandit or scum dating back to World War 2, Shampoo was the one who exploded. "NO! Our **childhood**, yes, Mu Tse. When we were kids, you were my best friend, but that was all you were. When we grew up, you kept on shouting your love for me, running after me, claiming, I was yours to all the boys—"

"Because you were, you are! A precious flower, one whom I will always treasure—"

"I was never yours! I was and am my own person! And that there, right there, that and your blindness, changed you from friend to annoyance!" Shampoo roared out, taking a step forward to jab a hard finger into Mu Tse's chest.

For a moment, she'd been tempted to accompany that finger with one of her acupuncture needles. She'd been working on sleight of hand with Mai the past few nights and could have palmed one from her ki space. But the thought came too late, unfortunately. "Your blindness was just part of the problem. Your spouting your love to a tree or rock was horrible, but attacking anyone who got close to me, trying to claim me as yours without ever actually

challenging me, that was far worse! But now, Ranma and I are together, and nothing you do will change that.”

Once more, Mu Tse ignored the bits of what Shampoo was saying he didn’t want to acknowledge as he grabbed at her hand, holding it almost as if he wanted to bring it up to his lips to give it a kiss. “That was just me showing you my sincerity, and okay, my glasses sometimes fell off, but of course, you’re your own person, you’re the most beautiful girl in the village. You’re just confused now. This foreigner is bamboozling you, as he did in getting you to chase after him in his female form! And look, he’s even convinced you to let this other girl travel with you! How can the two of you be together if he goes searching for other women to bring along on your journey? You would be far better with me, my love, my Xian.”

Fighting back a shiver at having anyone but her lovers say her name like that, something in Shampoo’s mind almost visibly snapped. “You’re not listening! You never do! Well, fine.” Stepping back, Shampoo pulled her hand out of Mu Tse’s grip, again surprising him with her raw strength before she brought her hands together and bowed lightly. “I, Xian Pu of the Joketsuzoku, line of the Matriarch Cu Lonxi, challenge you, Mu Tse, of the line of Ma Ron. If I win, you will give up this foolish quest for my hand permanently.”

Mai and Ranma exchanged another glance, this time an incredulous one. *Well damn, that’s the nuclear option, isn’t it? I think Shampoo was underselling things in her retelling of this Mu Tse guy’s pursuit of her if she’s that pissed at him.*

Shampoo had told Ranma and Mai alike all about Mu Tse’s pursuit of her, and at the time, it had, well, it had half-bothered her, half just wanted to make Shampoo roll her eyes. But that had been before she and Ranma had met in that cave. Before she and Ranma had traveled together, courted and grown. To hear Mu Tse speak now, the way he spoke to her, didn’t really listen, and more than anything, refused to acknowledge her own feelings, infuriated Shampoo.

*Besides, he’s talking about Mai like she’s some harlot or something that I just allowed Ranma to bring along so he could cheat on me with her. We’re a triangle, and I wouldn’t have it any other way, the Joketsuzoku warrior thought fiercely. Built on time, devotion, understanding and listening, not just mad claims to **own** one another!*

Mu Tse stared, flabbergasted, then shook his head wildly. “No, no, my love! I’m, my anger’s not angry with you, but with this Jiangren who has turned your head! I won’t hurt you, when it’s obvious your head’s not on right.”

“You keep using that word, man, and I’ll take my pound of flesh from you, sure,” Ranma drawled, his fingers twitching, before he smirked. “Not until after Shampoo’s knocked your head about first, though.”

“A challenge has been issued, and I, as an elder, have witnessed it,” Cu Lonxi stated severely, causing Mu Tse, who had been glaring at Ranma from around Shampoo, to stare at her

in shock. But Cu Lonxi was glaring at him sternly. While his leaving the tribe's territory was one thing, getting here like this meant he had either followed her or somehow learned where she was going to in order to ambush Shampoo and her new lover(s). Furthermore, the insinuation he made towards Mai was unworthy of a male warrior brought up in Joketsuzoku tradition.

"Elder, you, you can't be serious!" Mu Tse protested. "Shampoo is simply besotted with this outsider, surely—"

"My Granddaughter has become a blooded warrior on this journey, Mu Tse, just like you did" Cu Lonxi said almost gently, causing Mu Tse's eyes to widen in shock for the second time in under a minute as he stared at Shampoo, who nodded firmly. "You cannot back down from a challenge appropriately given as you would if you were still both trainees. If you back off, you tell Shampoo you are looking down at her, not just as a woman, but as a member of the tribe and a warrior."

"I, I refuse, I cannot—"

"And if you do not accept," Cu Lonxi went on inexorably, "you will have to agree to her demands. Or else break the Code of the Clan."

For a moment, just a moment, Mu Tse looked as if he was going to force Cu Lonxi to spell it out, to tell him what that would mean for him and for his family back home in the village. But after a second, looking as if his world view had taken several sharp hammer blows in a row, he nodded jerkily. "I, I accept."

As Cu Lonxi's gaze turned into a glare, remembered the need to be formal, and clasped his hands together, bowing as he intoned "I, Mu Tse, of the line of Ma Ron, current Master of the Hidden Weapons School of the Joketsuzoku, accept this challenge. If I win," he went on more calmly, "Then Xian Pu of the House of Cu Lonxi will accept my suit."

"Agreed," Shampoo stated, before Cu Lonxi could point out that, as the challenged between two blooded warriors, Shampoo didn't need to agree to any counter-bet. But after a second, Cu Lonxi just nodded, verbally agreeing to the terms. *Judging by the differences I can already see in my granddaughter, I think Mu Tse is in for quite the wakeup call.*

That wakeup call had not yet arrived, however, and Mu Tse took two steps to the side, almost off the edge of the pool, to point at Ranma. "You! This is all your fault! Without you, My Shampoo would've accepted our love for one another eventually! I challenge you, Jiangren!"

"I accept," Ranma answered easily, snickering internally. *As if Shampoo is going to leave him with any ability to fight. And I sure as hell am not going to force us to stay here in Xuwen for longer than we need to. That'd be stupid.*

For a moment, Ranma remembered how his feud, if it still could be called that, with Ryoga had started. Was Mu Tse stubborn enough to come after him for vengeance if he left before Mu Tse could have his duel? *Ugh. Best to stay, I suppose.* “But only after ya fight and recover from Shampoo.”

“The match between Xian Pu and Mu Tse will occur tomorrow. I will set it up at a temple I’ve been spending time at in the city,” Cu Lonxi declared forbiddingly. “This is a formal challenge, and it will be overseen by me, as a representative of the Elder Council. As such, I need to have time to set it up, and it might start raining later today anyway. There will be no chance to meet or interfere with one another until then. Understood?”

“So long as I have your word you won’t turn around and send them somewhere else for your own reasons, Old Ghoul, I know you’ve never liked my pursuing ShampooOOO!” Mu Tse yelped as Cu Lonxi’s staff caught him upside the head. “OOW, er, right. I, um, okay.”

With that, Mu Tse twisted to face Shampoo, going down on his knees, and pulling a rose out of his ki space, presenting it to her as if they weren’t going to fight a bloody brawl the next day. “Until then, my love!”

With that, and before Shampoo could do more than blink, Mu Tse whirled around and launched a kitchen sink at Ranma, followed by a wave of knives and cutting fans. “Take that, outsider!”

“Gah!” Not expecting to be attacked like that, Ranma was bowled off his feet into the pool by the kitchen sink. Even as he floundered, though, Mai whirled out her fan, smacking Mu Tse’s hurled fans to the side of the pool with a single sweep of her own. “Thanks,” she quipped, showing no worry for Ranma, who had already kicked through the water towards the steps leading into one edge of the pool. “I always need more knives, fans and what-have-you.”

That caused Mu Tse to frown a bit, looking almost affronted. But he pushed through it and, with a laugh, leaped away, not seeing how Shampoo had just tossed the bouquet of roses off the other side of the roof. “Are you alright, Airen?”

“Hah, yeah, I’m good, I guess,” Ranma grumbled, walking out of the water, grumbling a bit. *Thank goodness ki spaces have to be opened, or else I’d have lost my pants there. I don’t have that much volume in my pockets.* She smirked suddenly. “Actually, this might be a good thing. Like this, we can share beds if we make use of this place. And it’s better not to be tempted, right?”

“Mmm, and you think that you’re being a girl is going to stop us from doing stuff?” Mai hummed in amusement. “More than my leg?”

“Eh, that and the old gal there bein’ here, yea.” Ranma smirked, ducking her head as Cu Lonxi’s cane nearly caught her. “Ha, I could call ya ghou! like Mu Tse did, it fits!” Ranma shouted even as she began to jump backward away from a few knives. “Too slow!”

“Did you notice how he changed the subject there?” Mai whispered to Shampoo, who had moved to sit beside her again.

“Yep. If not for my grandmother’s presence, I’d think we should give Ranma some more positive reinforcement,” Shampoo agreed in a low tone, leaning in to hug Mai with a faint scowl on her face from the earlier confrontation.

“Eh, wait until we’re back on the ship. Then we can break out a few of my special swimsuits.” Mai had bought a decent amount of clothing, both for herself and Shampoo, and even Ranma, back in Hong Kong that neither of her lovers had yet seen. She was far more of a clothing maven than the Joketsuzoku and the pigtailed martial artist. She also went into clothing-based teasing way more than Shampoo.

“Enough of that,” Cu Lonxi barked. “Shampoo, get over there and start sparring with your husband-turned wife.” Ignoring Ranma’s shout of ‘Oy! I’m still a husband, damn it’, she addressed Mai. “As for you, my dear, tell me more of your style as I heal that leg of yours. Given how you’ve said you’ve been dealing with it for a few days, I think that’s enough time to teach you some circumspection, yes?”

While that line confused Mai a bit, she eventually got it as, with a yell of pure glee, Shampoo jumped towards their currently redheaded lover. “Ah. To learn to always dodge or something, I guess?”

“Indeed. Far too often, when people start on the path of using their ki subconsciously to heal, they start to act like they are somehow unbeatable,” Cu Lonxi agreed sagely. “That way lies stupidity and eventual death. Now, let’s see that leg of yours. I believe I also demanded more information about your combat style. After all,” she winked, “I should get to know my new daughter-in-law just as much as my son-in-law, hmmm?”

For the next few hours, Ranma and Shampoo were put through their paces by Cu Lonxi in the form of sudden attacks, hurled furniture, her dreaded cane, and, worse, her voice, bellowing out corrections and taunts. “Is that what you call footwork, granddaughter!? Have you forgotten everything I’ve taught you? And you, girl, that rope dart is useless if it becomes your only weapon! Work to add it to your footwork and attacks rather than using it to supplant your attacks entirely.”

Despite her barked words, most of which were a lot more detailed than those taunts, Cu Lonxi was exceedingly pleased with what she was seeing. Shampoo’s changes in style were somewhat in line with what she had expected to see: an Earth-based style that relied on good defense, high, if limited mobility and heavy hitting, which Shampoo had been leaning towards

for a while, but now seemed closer to perfecting. Now, Shampoo's style included several stances, techniques, and tricks learned from Mai, making it far more versatile.

Her exploration into Yin techniques was well on the way, in Cu Lonxi's opinion and was proceeding far faster than Cu Lonxi had ever seen in anyone else her age, or even close to it. Shampoo's use of acupuncture needles and her growing skill in mixing an extremely heavy style into one that could be markedly more precise were also fascinating, and Cu Lonxi greatly approved of Shampoo's growing interest in Mai's school.

All of that she would have approved of already, without Ranma and his style being added in. The fact that he and Shampoo were two sides of a very interesting coin, one Earth-based Amazon technique, while the other one was Anything Goes Aerial Style with new and increasingly added bits, was fascinating.

More than that, she also questioned Ranma about anything goes in general, trying to get a handle on Ranma's general nature without Shampoo's... glowing review. The news that there were now three female practitioners, or rather, in Cu Lonxi's mind, two practitioners and one wannabe, out there of Anything Goes was bizarre considering Happy's tendencies, but also somewhat delicious irony that Cu Lonxi savored like the finest wine, and she also approved of Ranma's personality and drive.

Ranma was well on his (currently her) way to mastering her ki in a way that someone so young should never have been able to. Ranma's foundation was admittedly a little bizarre to Cu Lonxi, admittedly, and haphazard, which was why she pointed out several tiny mistakes and a single larger problem. But really, Cu Lonxi didn't spot any truly lethal issue there, and didn't correct nearly as many issues with Ranma as she did Shampoo or even Mai when she started to join the other two. Cu Lonxi was interested to see how Ranma would continue to grow with minimal help from her.

In return, Ranma asked her some questions about the philosophy of life energy and the dark energy that Master Oro had talked to him about.

"My people do not use the term Dark Hado for that kind of ki-deep madness, and the fact that Master Oro has either created that term or learned it from someone else is worrisome, pointing to it being a larger problem than I ever thought," Cu Lonxi admitted. "We Amazon's have been around for several thousand years, but we have never been expansionist or exploratory by nature. Even so, we have indeed run into have few practitioners of the Art whose ki had seemingly become bestial or corrupted."

Cu Lonxi grimaced, remembering a time when she had just become a blooded warrior. "And at one point, the corruption leaped from one person to another. Master Oro was right to warn you of that son-in-law, but your blue wave technique, reversing the flow and blasting it back into an enemy's face rather than absorbing it? That could become a natural deterrent to such corruption."

She then smirked. "Now, get out there. Three-way fight, and I'll be cutting in and out, and heaven help any of you who make the same mistake twice!"

As she pushed the group, Mai was the trio's trickster. Long-range and midrange were where she did best, highly mobile and adaptable. Shampoo was earthbound, but equally mobile as the other two. She preferred to hit hard, even if it meant taking hits, and had, as she had already noted, an interesting bunch of tricks herself. While Ranma lacked in the long-range attacks, save for a few ki attacks that were only middling in her opinion, thus far anyway, he was devastating in close range. While Mai was a skirmisher and a long-range fighter, with a startlingly wide bag of yin-based tricks.

Jumping from Mu Tse's leftover float to the other side of the pool to get away from a pincer attack from his lovers, Ranma paused for a second. "Oh, wow. Okay, it looks like it's gonna start pouring gals. Glad we got into port when we did, that sky reminds me of our time in the cave, Shampoo."

Staring in the same direction, Shampoo had to agree. "You're right, Airen, it looks like it's going to pour. Should we find a room for the night, or do you think we can break in here?" They could use tents as had been their earlier idea, but while being in a tent and listening to a nice drizzle on the canvas was pleasant, being in a tent during a storm like the one the sky was promising was another matter. Particularly if it had the wind and lightning like the one the trio had sailed through the past few days.

"Well, no one else seems to be using it at the moment, so..." Ranma moved over, not to the door leading inward, but to the side of the pool area where it meant the protective wall. There, she clambered out, using the Clinging Gecko Technique to reach a window.

Cu Lonxi chortled, hopping over to watch as Ranma slowly heated up a small area of the glass. She then had to wait until it cooled before reaching inside and unlatching the window. Getting it open after that was easy, and a moment later she was inside, with Cu Lonxi following.

This left Mai and Shampoo sitting where they had been, one wary eye on the sky as thunder rumbled in the distance. "So, by the way, um, you, you were way more furious than I thought you would be towards Mu Tse, I mean, I expected violence, not shouting like that. Are you okay?"

"I, it was the contrast, I guess, between how he speaks about and **at** me compared to how you and Ranma speak about or **with** me," Shampoo admitted, slumping in a way that had nothing to do with physical exhaustion. "I won't take back my words or the challenge. Mu Tse needs his head kicked about to understand that I'm not the same woman I was, and that even if I was, I would never consider him as husband material. I already have one of those, and I will not have another."

“MMM.” Mai wordlessly affirmed, grinning over at the girl. “That’s a sentiment I can get behind. Although if we ever settle down, I might have some demands about where we do it, yeah? I don’t know if I could do without internet access or phones. Let alone running water.”

“Hah! I will have you know that nearly every house in the village has running water. Our sewer system is quite modern,” Shampoo said loftily, before both girls fell to giggling.

This was interrupted by the door leading into the large suite opening. Ranma smiled at them both, gesturing them inside. “Come on, this place hasn’t been used in a while, but everything is where it should be. The only security is by the door leading out to what I assume is a private elevator, so we’ll have to come and go via roof-hopping. But with that storm coming in, any port in a storm, yeah?”

“I’ll examine the kitchen,” Mai decided. “Shampoo, you want to go shopping quickly? There’s a corner market along the way we came, and you’ve been doing all our grocery shopping.”

Shampoo sighed, staring up at the sky, then nodded. “If we’re going to be here for a few days and making this place our own for now, I suppose that’s a good idea. I just hope I can get back before the storm hits.”

She didn’t. But being greeted by warm towels and the helping hands of her two lovers, and hearing Cu Lonxi’s offer to cook for them all, made the effort worth it. After all, Shampoo would need her strength tomorrow.

OOOOOOO

Hidden among the catch of the fishing vessel he’d stowed away on, Genma couldn’t quite hide his frustration, an irritated scowl coming to his face as he shifted position, trying, and failing, to ignore the smell of frozen fish. That, and yet another unlucky moment in his quest to force his son to once more walk the path of honor.

The reason for that was the fact that Genma had discovered, far too late to do anything about it, that the vessel he’d snuck aboard to go to Hainan wasn’t really going to the island. By that point, he been stuck out in the middle of the ocean. As good as he was when it came to finding his way on land, out on the ocean, with no kind of markers or anything similar to go by, he probably would’ve been lost. He could easily tie a compass to his head and use it, but at that point, he’d had no idea where he was in relation to anything else.

This had forced Genma to use drastic measures. In this case, that meant cutting many of the ship’s fishing nets. That had forced the ship to make for port well before they would have otherwise.

Now the ship was finally pulling into port, and Genma had to be ready to make a break for it. The only question was when. *Where and how to continue my journey will come later. I just need to wait for the right moment to get out of here, when the fishermen start moving the catch.*

Unfortunately, while his hiding place had worked against the fishermen who entered the loading area, there was one big issue with it. While this little out-of-the-way area had been completely buried in racks upon racks of fish, quickly, there was also a viewport right behind him.

“WH... is that someone in there? That, he’s wearing white, not blue, that doesn’t look like the uniform you all are wearing,” a customs official said. He’d come down to check with captain of the ship, as they weren’t due back for a few weeks. Nearby, a claims inspector was also waiting impatiently, a clipboard in hand.

Of course, he also said all this in Chinese, which Genma barely knew a few words in.

“Wait, what?” The captain blinked, then looked to where the customs officials were pointing, before his eyes narrowed dangerously. “Son of a bitch! We **do** have a stowaway! Fucking, I knew that the damages to our nets was too uniform! Lu Chen, arm the crew! I want to have a word with that stowaway.”

The crew gathered, many of them angry and furious.

The surge of men into the cargo bay took Genma by surprise. A billhook thrust out over the top of the stacks of fish and ice-filled crates, seeking Genma’s head. “Get out of here, you bastard!”

Yelping, Genma ducked, his reaction time saving him from what would have been at least a very painful strike if not a murderous one like the furious sailor had thought. Genma’s fists and a leg crashed out at the same time, smashing the stacks of containers all around him. The sailors at the front of the mob who had been moving the racks howled as they were smashed off their feet by flying containers, taking several of their fellows with them.

Then Genma was charging forward, his feet crashing down and leaping up and over six sailors, smashing into and through three who had stayed back at the short ladder leading into the hold. They went flying, with one flying up through the hatch to land on the deck, followed by the stowaway.

The customs official was the only one armed with a pistol, and he had stayed on the wharf, more amused than anything else by the event, only to now watch in shock as a large foreign-looking man barreled through several of the sailors, hurling them off their feet and over the side of the ship. He hastily grabbed at his gun in its holster at his side, but was then smacked off the pier and into the water by the flying form of one of the sailors, crashing into him.

“Bah, guns,” Genma grunted before ducking a shoulder, a hatchet or something slashing through where it had been. Another one sliced at his leg, making Genma wince as he raised his leg and then ducked to the side, allowing another billhook to barely miss his shoulder by an inch. “Good grief, no wonder sailors have such a fearsome reputation.”

An ice chopper nearly took him in the side, almost emphasizing the point, but Genma twisted his body aside just in time for that to miss too. His fist flashed out to catch the man in the shin, knocking him clear out with a single tap. Well, a tap from Genma, anyway. The fact that the man flew back, boneless, was immaterial.

Leaping off the ship, Genma raced down the docks. However, several dockworkers heard the commotion and came to see what was going on. Many, seeing some of their acquaintances knocked down by the stranger, then charged at him too. Crowbars, more billhooks, bits of metal piping and other makeshift weapons were used in abundance, and Genma was forced to fight his way clear until he could leap up onto a rooftop heading deeper into the town.

Hiding on a rooftop well away from the docks, Genma shook his head. *Good grief, what was that one weird dagger thing about? It looked almost like an ice pick, but was far, far deadlier looking, all curved and serrated edges, ugh!* Shivering, he set that thought aside and began to make plans. He would lie low for the rest of the day, then head down into the city, staying well away from the port area for now. First, he needed to find a map and the name of this town. Then Genma would need to find a ship going to Hainan.

The first took him barely a few minutes, as convenience stores had maps of the town, which, of course, had its name. Genma’s ability to read Chinese was only a little bit better than his ability to speak it, but when the town was the only thing on the map, the header at least was easy to understand. After that, it was only a matter of seeing where that name was on a larger map. Observing the port took longer, and it was pushing evening of the next day before he found a ship whose passengers were talking about Hainan enough to indicate that it was probably going there.

This was helped by an Englishman among them, as that was the only other language Genma could indeed understand besides Japanese. The man had a rather pretty young woman of Chinese descent on his arm, perhaps another reason why he was in the country. “So, this is the famous Golden Mean? And what makes this particular gambling den so interesting, my dear?”

“Because it passes through international waters to get back into Chinese waters, all gambling that occurs aboard it is covered by international law, which means it isn’t covered at all. You don’t have to pay taxes on it,” the Chinese woman answered simply in the same language. “Once we get to Hainan, we’ll also be able to travel straight from there to Hawaii.”

Genma, of course, didn’t know enough about international law or anything else the woman had talked about, but it certainly sounded plausible, and hearing that and seeing the

man board, made it clear that this was the ship he wanted. That was good, though the armed guards stationed at the boarding ramp did not bode well.

Still, Genma was a past master at getting into places he had no business in. And it was quite clear by the way the guards were lazily waving people aboard that they had been at this job for quite a while. Yet at the same time, there was no other way to board the ship. At present, there was only one boarding ramp, and it was still too bright for him to try to simply jump aboard elsewhere along the length of the ship.

Grumbling quietly to himself, Genma kept that ship in his line of sight as he moved forward, then, when he found an area unwatched near the edge of the docks, slipped into the waves. This transformed him into his panda bear form, but despite what most people might think, bears, even pandas, could be good swimmers if they had enough muscle, and Genma had that muscle.

Swimming under the water, he clung to the side of the wharf right near the ship. watching as passengers continued to come aboard. As that flow slowed, Genma ducked underneath, quickly swimming underneath the ship to the other side, where he latched on, his claws digging into the metal. There, Genma remained as the ship went through the process of taking on borders, and then slowly pulled away from the docks.

Several hours later, in the darkest portion of the night, while they were well away from shore, Genma slowly climbed up the side of the ship. The small cruise ship had a single deck with balconies, and he climbed in through one of them, not even needing to break the door open to do so. Inside, he quickly took a hot shower, then headed downward.

Soon, Genma was ensconced once more in a ship's cargo area, hidden this time among the piles of luggage. That evening, he was able to sneak out occasionally to grab some food from the crew's mess hall without being seen, and Genma felt everything was going his way for once.

It stayed that way for a day and a half until his luck ran out. Just as Genma was about to make a run for the galley again and had pulled himself out of his hiding place among the luggage strapped to the cargo area's back wall, two crewmembers came in, one of them holding a small piece of paper while the other one was looking around frantically.

Genma froze, half in and half out of his hiding place, staying as still as possible, hoping that the man wouldn't see him even as he flicked the light switch on, and rushed to the left-hand side from where Genma was currently nearly dangling, half in and half out of the suspension net designed to make certain that none of the luggage shifted over much at sea. *You can't see me, you can't see me, I am invisible...*, he chimed mentally.

For a few seconds, both of the men raced on, then one slowed, his steps stopping as Genma watched. The other one continued on his way, shouting jubilation as he saw a sign he

was looking for and began to rummage through some of the luggage there, repeating some kind of mantra under his breath in Chinese that Genma couldn't understand.

However, Genma's attention was not on that man; it was on the one who had slowly stumbled to a stop. That worthy slowly turned, one foot still raised until he was entirely turned towards Genma, whereupon he set it down.

The sailor and Genma stared at one another, both of them just gawking like statues for a second, one frozen into immobility, hoping that this wasn't going to happen, and the other one simply incredulous. Eventually, as the man continued to stare, Genma, moved by some impulse, hesitantly raised a hand and waved.

The man almost automatically raised a hand to wave back before his hand stopped halfway in the motion, and his mouth opened to shout.

Genma instantly pushed off with his one leg still tied to the side of the ship, leaping forwards. He crossed several yards in what to a normal person must have seemed an eyeblink, and his hand clamped down on the other man's mouth before he could scream.

The sailor's companion, too busy doing whatever it was with one of the passenger's bags, didn't notice until he turned around, his hands full with some kind of small plastic box. His expression, which had been triumphant, shifted, and he stared before shouting out in Chinese as loudly as he could. "Intruder, thief! StowawAAAKKK!"

The shouter found his friend hurled toward him, slamming into the man with the box and sending both to the ground as Genma bolted out of the cargo area. "Damn it, what have I done to deserve all this bad luck!? I'm just trying to find the boy!"

Several sailors in the engine room nearby heard that shout even over the noise of the engines, and three of them headed out to investigate, whereupon they saw Genma fleeing down the hallway. A few others came out of rooms at the same time, also answering the shout, and two of them were security guards. Even off duty, the security guards were armed with pistols, and they brought them up, shouting out, "Dòngjié, freeze, khyags!" repeating themselves in several languages.

The fact the guards instantly opened fire on Genma was somewhat unfair in Genma's mind. "When you shout something like that, aren't you supposed to wait a second to see if you're listened to?" he yelped, before ducking to the side and into a room, his fist fleshing out into a man who had just come out of the hatch there.

He was one of five who made this bunk their home, but the other four were bowled over by the first man's body hurled back into them, and then Genma grabbed at the stand of one of their beds, tearing it up and out of the deck and roof, hurling it like a spear towards one

of the security guards. That worthy barely yelped before the bit of metal crashed into him with punishing force, hurling him back along the hallway.

His fellow, who had been busily trying to reload, slammed home the magazine and raised it, but by then, Genma had crossed the intervening distance. Once more, his fist flashed out, taking the man in the throat. He fell, gagging, but Genma had pulled his punch. His neck wasn't shattered by that blow; he'd live, even if he was going to gag for a few minutes.

Then Genma was flipping up and over the falling man, using his back as a pivot, and pushing him to slide down the corridor into two other men behind Genma who had come out of another room to chase after him with makeshift weapons.

What followed was a pell-mell race through the bottom of the ship. More security guards got involved, and this time, they came with machine guns, a far more serious threat than pistols. Doors were blasted apart, a waiter's table was used as a shield, and several friendly fire incidents occurred until Genma was able to get up onto the same floor he had ironically come onto the ship from.

Recognizing it, Genma smashed open the door of the first guest room he came to, his eyes widening a bit at the sight of two men and a woman on a bed, before he raced past them, shaking his head. "Disgusting, you three ought to be ashamed!"

Then he was blasting through the glass doorway out onto the balcony, revealing a rainstorm outside, the noise of which hit Genma and the three in the bed like a physical force. Without pause, he leaped out into the ocean as several machine guns opened fire behind him.

Several of the guards raced onto the balcony, firing down into the water, but Genma disappeared, deep into the waves. And the ocean here wasn't clear enough that they could see the panda bear through those waves. It was in reality the same storm that was due to hit Shampoo and company later that day. The waves were choppy, and the sea heavy, but the overcast sky and the torrential rain made it impossible for the guards to see as Genma pushed rapidly away from the ship.

One of the guards shook his head, resolutely not staring towards the bed where all three of the individuals who had been 'having relations' when they barged in were hiding themselves, staring out instead over the waters where the stowaway had been a moment ago. "So that was a martial artist, right? They are just as weird as I've heard."

"Yep. And just as hard to put down, too. I can't believe that asshole was dodging our fire for so long," the speaker's fellow guard grumbled.

"Is it just me," a man behind them said, staring over their shoulders for a second. "Or, or did it look like he almost became bear-shaped for a second?"

The rain had already begun the change even as Genma had flung himself over the safety railing.

The woman of the trio on the bed, the only one who hadn't bothered to hide herself, oddly, exclaimed, "You saw that too?! Thank goodness, I thought that was the weed talking."

This caused a good bit of awkwardness to begin back on the ship, but while he wasn't dealing with any of that, Genma did not have an easy time of it swimming through the ocean. The heavy waves flung him about, lightning crashed, and the sky was so dark that Genma could barely see more than a few yards in front of him whenever he came up for air. But he had dealt with worse on the trip back from the mainland to Japan, and Genma fought through it.

Eventually, as the storm abated and the sky lightened up with dawn, Genma could see something in the distance, a hump over the horizon, and began swimming towards it. That hump soon became an island, and Genma breathed a whuff of relief.

At first, he was concerned for a few moments that he would be spotted coming ashore, but as Genma got closer, that worry abated. Whatever angle he was coming at the island from, it seemed it wasn't near any of the population centers.

Hainan was nearly as densely populated as other portions of China. The island, though, had contained its population centers far better, as Hainan was mostly an agricultural, tourism- and specialty-based economy. To anyone who had taken the time to actually read about their destination, it would have come as no surprise that Genma was able to come ashore without seeing any sign of habitation.

Genma hadn't. The now-divorced Ex-Saotome simply thought his luck was finally turning.

Trundling his way out of the water, Genma shook himself, grumbling a little bit as his panda form shed water in every direction, his nose wrinkling a little. For some reason, even Genma could tell that wet panda stunk, and was made worse by the scent of the brine.

Glancing around, Genma saw he had come ashore in a quite nice area. A large palatial beach, the type of which would've been the go-to destination for locals if it wasn't for the fact that it was backed up by what looked like endless jungle and a sloping mountain in front of him, cutting this beach off from the rest of the island.

Still, it was something of a surprise to him that there wasn't in fact anyone inside, not that Genma was complaining. "I've had enough of getting shot at or attacked randomly, thank you," he grumbled to himself in panda as he moved towards the shore.

As he did, his hand flashed down to try and spear a fish, but it darted away just in time to avoid his claws, causing Genma to grumble a little as his stomach began to grumble in turn. "I am a little hungry. Maybe I should break out my fishing rod?"

Like his son, albeit for an entirely different reason, Genma had mastered ki space. He kept several items, such as fishing rods, pots, signs, markers and other things, on his person at all times. Indeed, because he very rarely changed his clothes, the cost of doing so was much lower than it was for Ranma and his companions. They had to invest in multiple ki pockets across different outfits, while he did not.

Not that that was the reason behind that choice. Genma just didn't care much about changing his clothes. So long as it wasn't falling off his body, his gi was good enough for any occasion. While he cared about the finer things in terms of booze and food, clothing didn't matter in the slightest.

The water was around his waist when Genma noticed several crabs scuttling around the area. They were large, those crabs, most of them anyway, about as big as his two paws put together. There were at least fifteen of that size he could see, with perhaps as many as seven or others currently curled up in their shells along the shoreline, and dozens of other, smaller crabs.

Any other person might well have remembered Madam Rose's warning about crabs. Any other person might well have thought, 'This is quite a nice scene, perhaps I shouldn't ruin such an amazing, natural view.'

Those people were not Genma.

"Those will do for brunch," he said as soon as he was on the shore. The small crabs scuttled away from him, their larger fellows, however, simply didn't seem to care about him one way or another, staying where they were or going about their business as they had been when he first spotted them. They continued to do so as he dug a quick fire pit, then headed into the jungle and came back with some wood to toss onto it, starting the fire quickly and heating up some water.

Once in his human form, Genma decided it was time to eat. He darted to one side, grabbing up one of the larger crabs, killing it quickly. The next attempted to use its pincers on his hands, but Genma was quick enough to avoid the attack, killing it similarly.

Soon, he had a third, while many of the smaller crabs were scuffling away from him. The larger crabs seemed aware of his presence now, also moving away in a different direction from the smaller ones. He ignored them as he put his three catches beside the fireplace, cracking their shells expertly, and beginning to pull out the crabmeat.

As he did, several of the smaller crabs apparently got over their concern quickly and began to investigate his food even as he cooked segments of it. He swatted them away, but the little creatures attempted to nip at his fingers, and he scowled, crushing several.

There were so many of them that he took his eye off the cooking skewers. One of the larger crabs moved towards it with deceptive speed, grabbed one of the sticks and pulled it away from the fire, beginning to eat the meat stuck on it.

"You little!" he shouted, smashing that crab into the ground, shattering it and spreading bits of crab everywhere. He harrumphed, taking away the stick from its still-intact claw, sticking it back where it had been. "Honestly! These things are entirely too small to have that much sass."

This was not the end of it. Indeed, it wasn't even the start.

As Genma attempted to bite into the first of the crab skewers he created, more crabs came. He defended himself quickly, smacking them down, then one of them bit him on the rear, and he roared, coming around and stomping that crab and several others to pieces, only realizing after he had done so that his attacker had been one of the larger crabs he'd seen so far. Several others, including a rock the size of his leg that he thought was just, well, a rock, became aware at that point, scuttling towards him, claws the size of his panda form's paws snapping.

Genma hurled the makeshift skewer at it, only to watch as the crab quickly ducked into its shell, taking the hit on its shell rather than into its mouth where he'd been aiming. One claw rose, blocking another skewer as it charged forward, its other pincer raised and clacking. "What the—YOOOWW!"

So bemused he had been by that one crab, Genma hadn't realized another one, barely half the size of that one, had come up behind him, nipping at his rear again. He twisted, but the thing was on his rear, and he really had to reach down quickly to try and grab it, trying to pull it away. But the thing had surprising strength, and another one quickly grabbed onto his foot, claws catching his big toe, causing them to hop up and down, his hand flashing from one to another. He smashed them both, but still more nipped at his feet, causing him to almost dance a jig.

This brought his attention away from the larger crab, which had been charging him until it rammed into his knee from behind, causing Genma to collapse to the beach. At that point, hundreds of tiny crabs began to swarm, pincers snapping. He rolled, crushing dozens of them, but still more came, and he put his hand out to the side of a rock, which suddenly came alive, its surface having been covered by tiny crabs, which rolled over his hand and up his body even as the rock itself turned and large claws shifted out from under the giant grab, the top of its shell equal with his shoulders.

Two more supersized crabs, these larger than the one that had bowled him over but not as large as the boulder-sized one, attacked. One of them grabbed onto Genma's arm with his pincer, causing him to yelp in real pain as the strike actually drew blood, while the others continued to latch onto Genma with their tiny pincers.

Genma found himself on his back again, as still more pineapple-sized crabs charged in from every direction. The entire beach was now covered with crabs, as more poured out of the jungle and the ocean.

"Damn it all, when will my bad luck end!" Genma wailed to the sky as still more giant crabs piled in on top of him.

OOOOOOO

The next day, Mu Tse waited calmly at the temple where the duel was set to take place. Or at least, he seemed calm on the surface. Underneath that, he was a whirl of anger, frustration, annoyance, and his typical desires, his love for his Xian Pu. He understood, looking at it, that Shampoo felt as if Mu Tse had impugned her honor by saying she was so weak as to be under the control of a foreigner. Yet at the same time, Shampoo should've known that Mu Tse only had what was best for her in his heart.

I always have, Mu Tse thought, closing his eyes as he remembered.

Shampoo was his only friend when they'd grown up. The other girls all looked down on him for wanting to be a warrior, while the other boys wanted nothing to do with him for much the same reason, jealous of his skill and the inheritance of the Hidden Weapons Style. Admittedly, the older women hadn't looked down on him much, but neither had they been friends.

Beyond his family, Shampoo had been the only one to cheer him on, to understand how important his family's style was to the clan, and to encourage Mu Tse to push the Hidden Weapons style to new heights, becoming a master of it beyond even his parents. They had trained together, had childhood adventures together, grown together, even when his eyesight started to fade.

It had seemed natural and right at the time when Mu Tse felt his feelings towards her changing. Shampoo was beautiful even then, fiery, bountiful, strong, her hair like a purple flare in a world going formless, her dedication setting her apart from most of their contemporaries, while her curves, rear and chest beguiled his senses.

Only, Shampoo had never come to that same realization. She had yet to look at him in the same manner, despite Mu Tse's acts of devotion and love. Admittedly, most of those acts had been...ill-aimed, but some had still landed. Yet Shampoo had not looked to him as a man, not once.

Still, that's all right, I know the reason why now. When I win, we can leave this Ranma character behind and go on our own training journey together! That's clearly the only thing that this boy has going for him. When it is just, she and I, I can start to show my true romantic feelings towards her, and she will come to love me in turn as we go forward and find adventures of our own, Mu Tse thought to himself. *And then, and then... we will hold hands as we kiss, and, and then, that chest, that rear, hehehe...*

Perhaps it was for the best that Shampoo hadn't stated in her letters that her relationship was going well, and that the depth of that relationship had not come up in the talk the day before with her grandmother. Not explicitly, at least.

Mu Tse was still in his very happy place when Cu Lonxi arrived later that day, having left the three lovers to their own devices for a few hours. The diminutive Matriarch took one look at the giggling boy and shook her head before going inside the temple to talk to the priests there.

An hour later, Ranma, Shampoo, and Mai arrived, talking as they arrived. Hearing the voice of his love, Mu Tse twirled, launching himself towards the first blob in his sight, his glasses having fallen off while he had been lost in Lala Land. "My love! Before we begin our spar, let's have a hug to commemorate your freedom from that foreigner when I win... my word! You've... certainly grown in amazing ways since we last hugged!"

Mai stiffened as the not-bespectacled youth crashed into her, his head pressing into her chest as his arms went around her. Quickly, those hands fell to a place that was very much not for Mu Tse to touch.

This wasn't on purpose; he simply mistook Mai for Shampoo. There was a certain height difference involved there. Although his comments on how much bigger Mai's chest was, something Shampoo still had a few twinges of amused jealousy about, was all Mu Tse.

Wrenching herself backwards, Mai raised a knee into Mu Tse's lower stomach, barely missing his boy bits, and not for lack of trying. *"Get off!" I hope being plagued by long-haired men isn't going to be a trend going forward. First Andy with all my misplaced affections for the ass, then that long-haired blonde assassin with the mask nearly killing Chun Li, me and Shampoo, and now this one. Different problems, sure, but all coming from long-haired men.*

Shampoo's chui, a gift from her grandmother, nearly cracked Mu Tse in the side of the head, along with a rope dart coming in from the other, but Cu Lonxi crossed the intervening distance faster than anyone there but Ranma could track, smacking their weapons away. Bouncing up and off Mu Tse's head, she sent him staggering backwards and away from the girls while pulling Ranma idly a few feet off the ground before letting the rope dart go.

"Enough of that," she said mildly as she stood in between the two groups, with Ranma grumbling at her feet. "I can't let the two of you concuss him before the match begins. Mu Tse,

put your glasses on, you fool! The two of you, take your places and... son-in-law, what are you doing down there?" she asked, her tone mischievous.

"Oh, nothing, just had a bit of a trip," Ranma muttered. *Damn it, this old bat is fast! I knew that before, but she must've been toying with us all when she randomly darted through our spars yesterday. And stronger too.*

Cu Lonxi cackled at Ranma's disgruntled expression, having already decided that the boy was quite fun to tease, before looking over at Mu Tse and Shampoo as she stepped forward, her chui in hand, a gift from her dear, loving grandmother. "Now, this is a match to unconsciousness or surrender. Any kind of weapons is all right, and it will happen in a marked territory."

So saying, Cu Lonxi gestured around, and all four youths started, realizing that Cu Lonxi had somehow, without even Mu Tse being aware of it, marked out a sparring ring on the ground of the temple. "There will be **no** crippling blows: no blows to boy bits, eyes, or girl bits, and no attempts to maim or kill. I can sense intent, and I **will** stop the fight if I sense anything like that. This battle will end with surrender or unconsciousness. Combatants, re-state your pledges, to have them witnessed formally by the judge of the duel."

The fact that she had already done so the day before was immaterial. Cu Lonxi had to hear those words from both Shampoo and Mu Tse in her position as judge. Once it was, if Shampoo or Mu Tse, as was far more likely in Cu Lonxi's mind, tried to go back on her or his word, whoever did would face the full wrath of the tribal council. And in this case, Cu Lonxi in particular.

"I, the issuer of the challenge, Shampoo of the line of Cu Lonxi, wish to stop Mu Tse from following me or any attempts to woo me," Shampoo said formally, bowing first to her grandmother then to Mu Tse, before taking a stance to one side of the ring.

"I, Mu Tse of the line of Ma Ron, wish to break Shampoo away from her so-called relationship with the foreigner Ranma," Mu Tse stated, bowing in turn, although he did not ready any weapons. Instead, Mu Tse spread his arms wide to either side, glaring over Shampoo's shoulder towards Ranma as his hands disappeared into his weapons space.

For his part, Ranma simply crossed his arms, staring back. He honestly didn't like the fact that this was becoming a match to determine his and Shampoo's relationship like that but had set it aside, knowing Shampoo wasn't going to lose, not with that kind of stake.

"Very well. The wager has been heard and witnessed by a representative of the tribal council, the judge of this match. Do you both understand that you will be held to the outcome of this match, regardless of your personal feelings on the matter?"

Both answered firmly, and here, Cu Lonxi knew that both of them were equally as likely to actually be held to that standard. It was very clear that nothing was going to separate Ranma

and Shampoo from one another, whatever Mu Tse thought. And frankly, Cu Lonxi was willing to wager that Mu Tse would never give up his pursuit of Shampoo after so many years spent chasing after her in his blind manner.

That was the end of the formalities, though, and despite her misgivings, Cu Lonxi raised a hand in the air, sitting comfortably on her staff outside of the arena to one side of the two combatants. "Begin."

Mu Tse began the match instantly, proving that he didn't need to aim his sleeves towards someone to direct weapons launched from the weapons space within, an interesting trick that both Mai and Ranma watched with some interest. Chains sprouted, then twirled and seemingly launched themselves towards the use of chains, which reminded both of them of their time with Master Nawa, and the way they moved and twisted matched some of the things that Ranma liked to do with his own rope dart.

Although using more than one was beyond Ranma. *And I can't keep it up for long, either.*

He said so aloud, and Mai shrugged. "I'm more interested in the fact that he can somehow aim those things from the moment he's shot them out of his weapon space. If I can figure out a way to make my weapons move like that, track in on someone... It's got to be a yin trick, doesn't it?"

Ranma thought for a moment, then nodded. "Could be, but maybe it's a medical thing from the Yang school? Homing in on a specific person's ki signature?"

"Maybe, but that's only half the equation, just like you're drawing in ki is only half of your Blue Burst," Mai disagreed.

"Hey!" Mu Tse shouted, even as his chains reached Shampoo and she began to block and bat them aside with her chui. "Taking ideas from my style isn't fair! What kind of martial artists are you?!"

"What part of Anything Goes is vague, dude?" Ranma said, quirking a thumb towards himself, bowl of popcorn from his ki space. It was a little cold, admittedly, but still good for all that.

Mai giggled, taking a handful as it was offered, even while her eyes didn't move away from the match in front of them. "My own style is designed to make the practitioners seem like ninjas that are more in keeping with the modern-day interpretation of that word than actual historical fact. What part of that implies that I'm going to play fair?"

"If you two can't keep silent, I will have you leave. You're distracting the combatants. Or at least one of them," Cu Lonxi warned, even though it was clear that Shampoo had also heard her to lovers, and had begun to chuckle even as she batted away Mu Tse's attacks.

Those attacks continued now as Mai and Ranma fell silent. Mu Tse controlled his chains in the same way that Ranma could his rope dart, and when two of them were smashed to pieces by Shampoo's chui, Mu Tse began to launch other things from his ki space. He seemed determined to keep the range open instead of closing. This came in the form of spears and other esoteric things, much like the sink he'd hurled at Ranma the day before.

Shampoo took it all, smashing, battering aside and even, at one point, tossing her chui ahead of herself to shatter a porcelain bathtub before grabbing a spear out of the air and whirling it. Her other chui dropped to her feet, using the spear defensively for several minutes.

Several of Mu Tse's attacks got through at this point, causing cuts to appear on Shampoo's forearm and face, a sight that made Mu Tse quail and nearly freeze, something that let Shampoo charge forward. "What are you doing, Mu Tse!?"

That shout and the fact that Shampoo hurled the spear he had been using back at him before grabbing up her chui, caused Mu Tse to leap away. This once more opened the range as the two fighters basically switched positions, with Mu Tse launching several more attacks in Shampoo's direction.

This time, Shampoo grunted as still more attacks got through, this time in the form of hammers of varying size. Her toughness training meant she was easily able to take all those strikes, and even when weapons with cutting edges hit, those points bent and couldn't penetrate her skin. Still, they left some wounds behind.

Mu Tse was able to launch things from his weapon space, and yes, control them to a certain extent, but he couldn't put too much impetus on that kind of thing on his own. He had, though, long since created various shooters that he kept inside his weapons space.

With Mu Tse keeping the range open, Shampoo was forced to break out some of her own new tricks. First, with one hand still gripping a chui and using it to defend herself, her other reached down into her own pocket and then out, launching small, almost invisible needles. The first one nearly took Mu Tse in the center of his chest, but he dodged at the last instant.

Another flashed past his cheek, drawing blood, and a third hammered into Mu Tse's shoulder, yet he was able to dodge and literally use a shield to shield himself from still more as Shampoo shouted, "Needle Blast!"

Shouting that, Shampoo launched seven real acupuncture darts, each of which her ki shifted into a yin configuration, copied, creating a dozen copies of each. They didn't hit with quite as much energy, but there were hundreds of them, and to Mu Tse, it felt like a rain shower of needles hitting his kite shield.

Having shifted to defense, Mu Tse's long-range attacks slowed, and Shampoo charged forward again. This time, Mu Tse wasn't fast enough to get away, and discarding his shield, Mu

Tse pulled out two swords to meet her charge. Shampoo pressed her childhood friend hard, trying to force him out of the ring, where she had tried to pin him again.

Yet Mu Tse was no slouch with any of the weapons he kept in his weapon space. He wasn't a master of any of them, but he was good enough that he only took one strike to the center of his chest and was able to roll with it, rolling literally to the side rather than being pressed out of the arena. A strike at Shampoo's foot nearly had her tumbling over the line in turn, but she took a step back, saving herself from the tumble, and also a blow to the head that whistled through, wearing her head would've been.

Shampoo's return strike shattered one of Mu Tse's swords, but he leapt up and away, launching the other sword at her from almost point-blank range, forcing her to duck rather than come after him. When she jumped after him, Mu Tse was already on the ground, lashing out towards her with a number of chains once more.

"How many of those do you have?!" she yelled as she blocked and battered them aside with all of her limbs. "Amaguriken!"

Had Shampoo not faced Ranma in midair combat numerous times since leaving Nerima, the number of chains coming her way would've probably overcome her. But even without her weapon, knocked clear out of her hand, Shampoo's hands flashed, and Cu Lonxi clenched a fist in delight at seeing the mastery of the Amaguriken that her granddaughter showed momentarily.

Chain links, spears, hammers, pipes, and more were smashed away from her as her hands and feet both disappeared, becoming blurs to Mu Tse's eyes for a moment until she was back on the ground. Even so, Shampoo couldn't press in and instead found herself pushed backwards a few steps until she was able to flip up a second hurled spear from earlier into her arms. The haft of the spear allowed her to better defend herself, whirling faster and faster, blocking chain, weird duck thing, a toilet, and several other odd bits and pieces from Mu Tse's weapon space, hitting them so hard that many were tossed out of the arena.

Ranma shook his head, one hand pausing in its constant eating as he stared. "Okay, while that's a decent strategy on our jewel's part, Mu Tse has passed at least **five times** his own weight in weaponry and other stuff. I can barely see where the arena's edge is, let alone the ground inside for the number of weapons and other things. Why the heck would anyone have that much stuff on them?"

"He's a one-man armory," May agreed, humming thoughtfully. "I suppose I can see the appeal of having so much stuff, if you don't know about the shadow copy technique. Still, that's an impressive amount of ki he's using to create and more, organize that space."

With that thought, Mai reached forward, gently touching some of the weapons that had just landed nearby, hissing a bit. "Is it just me, or is that colder than anything that comes out of our ki space?"

"What do ya think that'd mean?" Ranma asked quizzically, his own hand moving forward and touching the same sword, coming away with a nod, understanding why Mai had said that. He's kept a few metal things in his weapon space and had felt Shampoo's chui when she pulled them out occasionally. Even after extended stays in weapon space had never felt that chill to the touch.

Mai shrugged her shoulders, and the two of them fell silent again, watching as Shampoo seemed to be pressed back again as her spear came apart in her hands. But Mai, with her greater ki senses, could tell that Shampoo wasn't as desperate as she had been. No, she was doing something interesting. She's sending her ki into her legs and arms. *Shadow Arms, I think she called it?*

A few minutes later, Shampoo shouted, "Shadow Amaguriken!"

While the name was temporary, Shampoo's arms disappeared. At first, Mu Tse thought he was once more just not able to track her hands as precisely as before because of her speed. But that proved to be a mistake. Because while her arms blurred in defense, Shampoo's legs smacked out, their actual position hidden under a dozen shadow copies. Those copies barely lasted more than a few seconds, but that was enough for Shampoo to kick every weapon she could hit towards Mu Tse.

Mu Tse's eyes widened, but before he could defend himself, one of them slammed into his shoulder, the same one that had already been hit by a dart earlier, showing a hole in his defenses. Another, a kicked hammer, cracked into his stomach, doubling him over. This saved him from a sword that whizzed through where his head had been, and he rolled desperately to the side, dodging a chui, a flail, and a toilet seat.

"That's our girl!" Ranma shouted, ecstatic. That was a new trick, and he eagerly anticipated sparring against Shampoo when she used it.

The effusive cheer and pride in his voice brought a grin to Shampoo's face. There was no ownership inherent in the term when Ranma said that. There was simply pride in Shampoo's skill and delight at her progress, and she reveled in it.

Mu Tse, on the other hand, found himself staring angrily at Ranma, so much so that he almost forgot the battle until another piece of kicked debris, real shrapnel this time, smashed nearly took him in the head again. Only a last-second twitch to one side saved him.

Then, Shampoo was closing again. "Needle Storm!" she shouted, launching all her remaining needles and copying them in as much as she could with her yin-configured ki.

Mu Tse, however, had also gone through something like the toughness training. The strikes Mu Tse had taken so far weren't enough to put him down, and Shampoo's needle attack, launched even as she closed, did nothing more than her previous attacks have. The shadow needles evaporated, leaving nothing left, while the other needles stuck in his clothing, but couldn't penetrate his skin.

His shield, which he'd flipped up from the ground, was smashed to pieces in the next second by a hurled pot, and he was forced to remove it from his arm quickly, even as Shampoo's chui, grabbed up from the ground, came up to strike towards his chest. Mu Tse barely ducked aside, then once more his hands filled with weapons, this time two European-style short swords, which he wielded with considerable speed and dexterity, forcing Shampoo once more to rely on Amaguriken to keep up and fight back.

Despite Shampoo's best efforts, her chui was sent flying out of her hand, but she grabbed up a dao from where it was sticking in the ground, bringing it up to block his own strike, and then slashing not at his body, but his long sleeve, slicing it in half. This opened up his robe from wrist to elbow, and he cursed as odds and ends began pouring out from the cut into his ki space.

Desperately, Mu Tse raised a foot, a kick that Shampoo ducked back from.

From the hem of Mu Tse's pants came a wrecking ball, which crashed into Shampoo, hurling her backwards with a cry of pain.

"Impressive Weapons Space mastery," Cu Lonxi murmured, shaking her head. "Few indeed would think of using the bottom of their leggings like that. He truly is very good at what he does. If only he would agree to have eye surgery. And... is that something else under his clothing? Is he wearing some kind of armor now?"

"Indeed, old woman! Behold, the true heights weapon space can achieve! Anything under my clothing can become an aperture to a prepared weapon space. I am armored now, Shampoo! You can't win. Surrender, please! We'll keep traveling, just you and me. We can leave the foreigners together. They'll be happy with one another, and you'll be happier with me. I swear it!"

Before going through the toughness training, being struck by a giant heavy metal ball like that would've broken bones at best, and would probably have knocked Shampoo unconscious at worst. Now, Shampoo simply stumbled back, then, as the wrecking ball lost momentum, dropped her sword and grabbed it, hurling it out of the arena over Mu Tse's head. "No! I am my own woman, Mu Tse, and I have chosen my Airen!"

The simple firmness in her voice shocked Mu Tse, and before he could dodge away again despite his armor, Shampoo was in his face. This time, she was weaponless, and while Mu Tse didn't remain weaponless for long, a blow got through his defenses before he could recover.

Having heard what he'd said, the blow didn't land on his chest, but rather Mu Tse's face, smashing into his chin with bone-jarring force. A pair of daggers and then two more short swords again, time several nunchucks and escrima sticks filled Mu Tse's hands, but Shampoo smashed them even as they appeared, pressing him back hard, not letting him open the range again.

Shampoo took blows in turn, several to her legs, thigh and body, and one time she even almost went to one knee, but she rose, breaking through Mu Tse's defenses to land another blow on his chin.

Try as he might, he couldn't block all her blows from getting through. He could barely keep up with the Amaguriken thanks to his own training, but he couldn't tell a fake blow from a real one as Shampoo used the Shadow variant.

With no time to plan or retreat, and with their footing badly impaired by the amount of stuff that had poured out of his torn ki space, Mu Tse was unable to regain any kind of momentum in the fight. Shampoo slowly beat him into submission, and finally, a blow got through that caused Mu Tse's eyes to roll back in his head, and he collapsed to the ground unconscious.

Stepping back from her former opponent and trying hard not to put her feet wrong on the pile of junk that had grown under them, Shampoo breathed deeply, shaking her head. That had been harder than she expected, although Shampoo didn't think that she had been in danger of losing at any point. Even the surprise wrecking ball hadn't been enough to put her down. *Still, I think I need to figure out a way to hit even harder. That took way too long.*

She cocked her head quizzically as she held up her fists. "Airens, what are your thoughts on gauntlets? Leather gauntlets, maybe, infused with ki, or iron knuckles, enhanced further to give me some hitting power?"

Both of them gave her thumbs up, and Cu Lonxi nodded proudly. Shampoo would probably always be a weapons user first, but being able to brawl with the best of them even without weapons would definitely help her overall style. "Winner, Shampoo. If you three could grab all of this stuff and pile it up over there, please, and stay away from Mu Tse? I'll wake him up when you're done."

While Ranma grumbled that Cu Lonxi made no effort whatsoever to help them, Mai and Shampoo set to work with a will, talking excitedly about the match. Eventually, they roped Ranma in as well, analyzing what they had seen.

It'd been very interesting to be sure, and the trick of adding momentum to anything that came out of the ki space was something they'd already been working with from Mai's school. Directing it, that was something entirely different, and Ranma was interested to see if he could do it to such a level.

Once the pile of stuff had been moved elsewhere and the damage to the temple area had been repaired as much as possible, Cu Lonxi passed along some more money to the priest inside. With him appeased, Cu Lonxi woke Mu Tse up with a burst of healing to his head. Well, his skull, jaw and badly loosened teeth. Even as he began to wake up, Cu Lonxi pointed out to the others that she couldn't have done anything for the missing tooth if it had been smashed entirely out of his head. "However, since it was simply broken, I can heal that damage. Now, Mu Tse, I know you're awake. Up with you."

Mu Tse wanted to protest, but he did not; instead, he simply stood, staring at Shampoo with admiration. "I, I accept the loss. Truly, you are as magnificent as I always knew you would be! I will accept the terms of the match, I will give up my current pursuit of your hand."

He then turned to glare at Ranma, whose eyes had narrowed. Something about Mu Tse's wording seemed to trigger a memory, but he couldn't quite bring it to mind as Mu Tse pointed a finger at him. "However, my demand to challenge you still stands, foreigner!"

"Even if you beat Ranma, which I don't think you will, nothing will change, Mu Tse. He and I are together. I was never yours to lose," Shampoo warned.

"If ya want ta fight me, sure, but I'll want ya healed up first. Cu Lonxi, did you heal him up entirely or just enough to get him on his feet?"

"I healed his tooth entirely, as well as his broken jaw, so he could speak the words. He doesn't have a concussion; the boy's always been hardheaded. Yet he's got bruises galore I didn't bother with. I think it will still take him a few days to get back to normal. To serve the demands of honor, you should give him at least three days to heal. And if you accept this challenge, I won't be training you in those three days," Cu Lonxi asserted.

While Cu Lonxi could get away with training Shampoo after so long as she was Cu Lonxi's descendant, Ranma was only Shampoo's husband by choice, not part of the clan by birth. As such, Cu Lonxi couldn't offer much help when it came to a match between a clan member and a foreign husband. The line was thin there, but it was there.

"I understand, Elder," Ranma answered firmly, while Mai and Shampoo surreptitiously exchanged low fives. Having Cu Lonxi around the night before had definitely put a crimp on their nighttime fun. "Will the priest allow us to use this place again in three days?"

"Yes. I already asked the priest about using this space for another challenge, and so long as we pay for the use of the temple in advance, we're good," Cu Lonxi said, snickering to herself as she looked at the two girls, who looked back at her innocently as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. *Horny girls! You're not fooling me at all. I was young once, I know what that's like!*

Luckily, the two girls' reactions went straight over Mu Tse's head, and he nodded firm agreement. "My beloved Shampoo might have beaten me, but if I can force you to leave her side, that hardly matters, Jiangren."

"Wait a minute," Mai began, holding up a hand even as Ranma growled. "Yes, it will, you just gave up your pursuit of Shampoo. Even if you force Ranma to give up Shampoo in turn, that doesn't mean you two will get together."

"Indeed, it does not," Mu Tse said firmly, staring just a little at Mai before looking over at Shampoo as a certain sinking feeling and a memory from his time in Nerima came back to Ranma. "And I gave up my current pursuit of you, my love. I instead have a newer, even more ardent desire for her, and can thus pursue her once more when the pigtailed one is out of the picture!"

With that, as the others stared on, stunned, Mu Tse whipped out a bushel of roses, presenting them to Shampoo, before leaping up and away, heading out of sight quickly. "Until then, my love, wait for me!"

"... Elder Cu Lonxi, you've been around for several hundred years by your own words. May I ask a question?" Mai asked politely, staring after the long-haired master of hidden weapons, while Ranma simply shook his head, slapping his forehead several times, muttering 'idiot' under his breath, and Shampoo stared down at the roses, her own face slowly reddening with anger until her skin was the same kind of hue as the flowers.

"Certainly, child," Cu Lonxi answered, torn between shaking her head at Mu Tse's attitude, having called that one hundred percent and cackling in amusement. Regardless, the match to come would be quite fun to watch.

"What is it with martial artists and crazy going hand in hand?"

Finally releasing a cackle, Cu Lonxi shook her head, turning to hop away from the temple. "Child, if you ever find the answer to that question, you will truly have solved the foremost mystery of the ages!"

The three lovers were left behind, staring after Cu Lonxi, and Mu Tse's alike, before Ranma's eyes trailed to the side and the pile of junk they'd gathered. "So what do we do with all this?"

"Leave it. Mu Tse will come back and collect it all," Shampoo said firmly, sighing and leaning into Mai's side with a forlorn expression on her face. "He's always doing that, running off and leaving stuff, then coming back sheepishly later to clean up. Gah... and here I thought I was rid of him."

Chuckling, Mai patted Shampoo on the head and directed her feet towards the entryway into the temple area. "Come on, let's go get something to eat. Then, I think you deserve a pampering day, Shampoo. That'll make you feel better.

It did. And whether or not that pampering continued into the night was no one's business but theirs.

OOOOOOO

The day of the match, Ranma brought up his opinion of Mu Tse and the fact that it was unlikely he'd stop coming after Shampoo even if he lost. "He reminds me of Kodachi, the crazy rhythmic gymnast martial artist we met in that restaurant... was it right as we started out or after we left the Martial Arts construction guys? Well, anyway, Kodachi tried the same trick once when I was back in Nerima. Although Mu Tse's flowers weren't hiding a paralytic gas, at least."

"Grrr... I remember her. That crazy lady who attacked us on our first go out and eat type date, and I think it was right as we started out, although I could be wrong," Shampoo mused, her anger dissipating for a moment as she realized that she and Ranma had been together for more than a year at this point. *That... that makes me feel good, just thinking it. And Airen didn't object to Grandmother calling him son-in-law either! EEEE!!*

"That's the one. Anyway, the point is, Mu Tse might show up eventually on our trip, right? On the one hand, he's got some interesting tricks, so we can learn from sparring with him at least. On the other hand..."

"UGH," Shampoo grumbled, her thoughts quickly shifting to the far less pleasant topic of Mu Tse, but she couldn't disagree. Shampoo had also seen some interesting tricks from Mu Tse, and if not for the training she'd done since leaving the village, knew the man would have beaten her easily. That galled Shampoo on a deep, elementary level, but she couldn't deny it.

"I have to agree. Mu Tse is bound to show up again eventually, no matter how hard you beat Mu Tse down, Airen. Do you think he heard about us wanting to go to India eventually when he first showed up? We were telling Grandmother about our future plans moments before he interrupted. And I know he's gotten into the habit of waiting and listening to conversations before announcing himself. Even when he's pestering me."

"Eventually is a long time, Shampoo," Mai shook her head. "Besides, India is huge. Even if we spend months there exploring and searching out martial arts styles, temples and what-have-you, I would rate Mu Tse's chances of finding us there as very low."

Ranma snickered. Leaning lightly over, he pulled Mai into a sideways hug, kissing her fondly on the cheek. "I am so glad that you didn't decide to tempt fate and say it was impossible or something."

Snorting at that, Mai leaned her head lightly against Ranma's shoulder. "Well, if I had ever had any doubt that tempting fate was a real thing, meeting you and listening to all the troubles you ran into both before and after you met Shampoo, would have cured me of it."

"Still, maybe we should not take my grandmother's advice and ditch the ship when we reach India. Instead, maybe we should take it directly to Africa after we are done in India," Shampoo proposed. "Egypt is supposed to have a lot of old ruins and suchlike, right? Maybe they also have some records of ancient Egyptian martial arts."

Ranma frowned a little at that, although he didn't pull away from Mai, leaning his own head on top of hers as he thought. "I don't have a problem with it, so long as you're aware that once we leave Asia, we might start running into problems from local authorities. We've got those passports thanks to Mai and the MAB, but I think I remember reading something about a lot of Muslim countries having dress codes and what have you, especially for women. Mind you, I love the idea of going to Egypt and seeing a sphinx. Or maybe sneaking in and exploring the pyramid at night, tryin' to see if you can find anything the local archaeologists haven't."

"Mah, but you're sending me mixed signals, Airen," Shampoo teased. "On the one hand, you're concerned about the local laws and everything, and on the other, you encourage us to break them."

"I never said we'd follow the local dress codes or what have you, I just wanted ya to think about them in case you weren't," Ranma protested mildly. He let his eyes trail down Shampoo's body for a second. She was still dressed in a silk chemise from the night before, and, he knew, nothing underneath. "If you think I'll ever **not** want to look at your body, you're crazy."

"Good answer," both girls cooed, winking at one another, before Shampoo went on more seriously. "I just wish we could have spent the past few days training directly with my grandmother. If not for Mu Tse, we could have, and that one day she did train us... Well, I don't think I'm the only one who's feeling a difference in our combat abilities."

"She didn't teach us anything big, but she pointed out a lot of little mistakes and errors that were creeping into our styles because of how much stuff we've learned so far." Ranma nodded firmly, who had not liked to learn the defenses of his legs suffered when he used his rope dart, or that when using his Blue Wave skills, he tended to tunnel vision in on one enemy.

Those were only two examples of the mistakes Cu Lonxi had pointed out to him, let alone his two lovers. "But yeah, I agree that having a few days to train with her would've been far better than even having so much more space to spar and train like we do here."

And we still haven't seen hide nor hair of whoever actually owns this suite, Ranma reflected ruefully. Mind you, I did kind of barricade the door with the spare sofa, so they wouldn't have been able to enter anyway, but I gotta guess that this place was someone's

second home or whatever. Sad. Then again, Ken was able to literally give us enough money to buy our little yacht, and then there were the Kunos, too. They could easily afford this place.

Regardless of that, he made a mental note to clean up the place inside and out and to repair the window. Just because no one seemed to be living here full-time was no excuse to leave it in poor repair. Indeed, it would be better for them to leave it as spotless as possible.

"The problem is this," Shampoo said, pulling out several folded-up pieces of paper, the first of which she quickly unfolded to reveal a poster. A poster for a fighting tournament in Jakarta set to start in three weeks. "Since we already decided we wanted to spend at least a week or more on Hainan training up with the toughness training, I think we need to push on a day or two at most. Tournaments are the fastest way for us to find true opponents after all."

Mai hummed in agreement. They had discussed this several times before, and all of them were in favor of it. The street-fighting scene was big and had already helped Shampoo and Ranma find an honorable opponent like Yokozuna Honda, and the fights they'd run into in Hong Kong, despite the deadly nature of Ranma's clash with the Mad Dragon, had been exhilarating. *And a good source of cash if the local criminals are involved, which they almost certainly will be. There's no greater calling than stealing from criminals, heh.*

With Ranma beaming agreement, Shampoo pulled out another two flyers, one in Manila and the other in Bangkok, which was the one she pointed to most excitedly. The one in Manila was in six weeks, the other in seven. "There's also this one. They just started advertising it."

"And Thailand is where some of the goods from Yamazaki's cache were being sold. So, if we don't find trouble in Jakarta, we'll find it in Thailand. Fine by me." Ranma grinned, and Shampoo pulled him across the table into an enthusiastic kiss, complete with quite a bit of tongue action. While Ranma wasn't the sort to go around looking for trouble, after all, trouble more often than not found him, especially when he was searching for martial arts techniques and styles, but Shampoo was a patriot, and if the Yamazaki had indeed already sold a lot of historical artifacts to someone in Thailand, she very much wanted to get them back.

"Have you mentioned that to your grandmother? I'm not saying we should try to convince her to come along. For many reasons," Mai said, enjoying the view of her two lovers making out, and eagerly looking forward to her own moment. *Although it would be hotter if it were Shampoo sprawled across the table, or if Ranma were in his female form.* "But, warning her that we might find more ancient artifacts and so forth might be a good idea, especially when we're in a foreign country that'll almost certainly confiscate them if we tried to hand them over to the authorities. The whole idea would be to get them back into China, after all."

"I'll talk to her," Shampoo agreed after reluctantly pulling her lips away from Ranma's. "We might want to figure out a way to get in contact with her quickly, or better yet, ask her if there are any local Amazons in Thailand already."

"Yeah, well, I think we've done enough planning for the long-term for now, girls," Ranma said, begrudgingly turning his eyes away from Shampoo's gorgeous face to look at the clock on the wall. It was pushing late morning, and the duel between Ranma and Shampoo's stalker was due to begin that afternoon. "Come on. The sooner I beat Mu Tse into the ground, the sooner we can talk to your grandmother and move on."

After a very, very thorough and pleasurable shower, the three of them retraced their steps from several days ago to the same temple where Shampoo and Mu Tse had fought. There, they found Cu Lonxi already waiting for them, having marked out the same circle as before. She was sitting beside one of the priests who had previously remained inside the temple during the match, the two elderly people enjoying a cup of tea as the three lovers arrived.

The older man nodded politely to them, and they bowed in unison before moving to a position to one side of the ring. There, Ranma began to meditate as only he could, moving into a slow kata as he waited. Mai and Shampoo lay out some popcorn and drinks, and then leaned against a tree, talking quietly amongst themselves.

Ranma didn't have to wait long. Mu Tse was extremely eager to get this over with and thus separate Ranma from Shampoo, or at least he thought that was how it would go if he won. The fact that Mu Tse had already shown a way to get around such an edict, if the person beaten was dishonorable enough, didn't enter his mind. "Hah, it's good that you didn't try to run. I would've thought that you would already be out at sea with your tail between your legs as you fled like a dog."

"Why would I do that? Shampoo already beat your ass, so I figure I can do the same," Ranma smirked as he stopped his kata and turned to stare at the long-haired, slightly older youth. "Besides, you seem the obsessive sort and I don't want another crazy after me for allegedly running away from a duel."

While Mai and Shampoo laughed, knowing that story, Mu Tse simply grew incensed. "How dare you call me crazy! And if I came after you because you walked away from a duel, you'd only have yourself to blame. I'd hunt you to the end of the Earth for that, even without adding my Shampoo and your demands on her into the equation."

"Not really fighting the crazy label there, my guy," Ranma said, hopping forward and over the line denoting the ring. "Let's get this party started."

Cu Lonxi snorted at Ranma's attitude, knowing that, like Happy, getting under your opponent's skin was also part of the Anything Goes style. Ranma had seemingly moved away from using taunting and name-calling, but that didn't mean his jabs were any less effective, unlike Mu Tse's attempt to do the same.

She went through the same process as with the previous fight, making sure that both of them had stated what they wanted, which, in Ranma's case, was for Mu Tse to leave Shampoo

alone. The look on Mu Tse's face when he heard that was a furious one, but it was within Ranma's rights. When Mu Tse objected, she pointed out that "Ranma and Xian Pu are in a relationship, one that has already been consummated." *Probably many, many times.* "That makes him an honorary member of our clan and thus gives him the same rights as a Blooded Warrior under our own code."

The 'Unlike you' hung in the air for a moment as Mu Tse snarled, then looked over to Shampoo, and paled when she didn't gainsay the term consummated. He then turned an even more furious expression on Ranma, his fingers twitching even as they slowly crept up into his sleeves. "You will pay for defiling Shampoo!"

"Can you call it defiling when I wanted it wholeheartedly?" Shampoo drawled, shaking her head. She wouldn't normally be so cruel even to an old irritant like Mu Tse, but once more, Mu Tse had spoken as if he had some special rights to her, as if he had to okay her decisions. That incensed her now just as it had when he first showed up, thanks to Shampoo having her long-standing relationship with Ranma and even her relatively new relationship with Mai as examples of how real relationships worked.

Mu Tse might have said something that even Cu Lonxi would have had to take umbrage with that point, but she slammed her walking staff into the ground, causing a tremor through the ground for a moment. The move made Shampoo freeze, and she leaned forward interestedly, staring hard at her grandmother's staff for a second, but with the technique already over, she couldn't discern what she had done there. *Was that just the strength thing, or something different?*

Smirking internally at Shampoo's sudden interest, Cu Lonxi growled, "Silence! I will go through the rules **again**, just to remind you now that your tempers are up." As she did, she thought, *Yes, granddaughter, I am going to show you some true Earth-based styles soon. With the work you've already put into connecting with your yin energy, they should come to you smoothly, if not quickly.*

When she finished, Cu Lonxi demanded that both men verbally agree with the rules, only hopping back out of the ring when they did. The moment she did, Mu Tse began his attack, not even waiting for her to call the match started, but she had expected that and didn't call him out for it. Primarily because Ranma was ready for it.

As Mu Tse sent chains and a bear trap from his outstretched sleeves, Ranma also flung out his rope dart from his own key space. One end of the rope dart wrapped around his forearm, while the other darted forward almost like a snake. The two attacks met midair.

The sheer amount of chains that Mu Tse had launched should have meant that Ranma's rope dart would have been beaten back quickly, but it wasn't. Instead, Ranma's rope dart lengthened and shifted in every direction like a rubber band, fighting off those chains for several

seconds as Ranma grimaced a little, moving it under the power of his will by shifting the ki within the rope slightly to fling the rope dart this way and that. *Damn! That is tough!*

It was also taking **far** too much concentration to combat Mu Tse's chains. *I don't think I could concentrate even on a single flung weapon if he got one past my rope dart.*

With that, Ranma quickly charged forwards, reclaiming energy he'd put into lengthening the rope dart as he did before he jumped into the air. This let the chains surround him for a moment, but here, his mastery of Anything Goes Aerial Style came into play. Every time Ranma put a foot on a chain or tapped it to dodge it, he could use that momentum to stay in the air.

Working on the basics he had basically remade after Cu Lonxi's list of errors and mistakes, Ranma's rope dart now became an extension of his body, twirling this way and that, not under the control of his mind, but of simple physics. It defended his neck and back several times from spears and other weapons that Mu Tse launched from his sleeve to join the number of chains that were currently trying to bind or batter Ranma. It didn't fully replace Ranma's defenses, but merged with his defense in a way that, according to Cu Lonxi, Ranma had neglected.

Instead, he'd been nearly switching entirely from one style to another. When his rope dart was out, he used it as his primary defense and offense, to the point of forgetting some of his Anything Goes style. It wasn't obvious, but to a Master like Cu Lonxi, it had been a glaring flaw. Just like how Mai's footwork had needed work, along with how she had developed problems switching from midrange to close range smoothly.

But a true martial artist doesn't do that, he thought as he battered aside a blade with one hand and kicked the spear away with a foot. *They merge their styles into a **real** whole. I'll need to work on merging the Blue Wave techniques more with Aerial style... like right now,* Ranma thought, grinning suddenly as he began to gather his ki in his limbs and create the pulling sensation of Undertow.

The grin incensed Mu Tse, but he couldn't do anything about it, and for several minutes, it looked as if Ranma was entirely on the defensive, although Mai and Shampoo knew their lover well enough to tell that this wasn't the case. Yes, Mu Tse was pressing him hard, but he'd had several instances already where Ranma could have taken advantage and closed. Instead, he was smashing every weapon that came at him along with the chains, sending the weapons out of the arena, denying Mu Tse further access to them.

At least, that was as far as Shampoo could see. Mai, with her greater ki senses, could see something else. She leaned in, gulping down the bit of popcorn that she had been eating to whisper in Shampoo's ear. "Remember how we talked about how Mu Tse was controlling those chains through his ki? Ranma's draining him a little bit of key every time he touches one of those chains. It's not a lot, but that has some implications."

Shampoo's eyes widened, and she nodded, leaning against Mai, watching avidly as her husband fought for their relationship. She thrust a fist up, shouting, "Go, Airen!"

Smirking just a little bit as Mu Tse's concentration wavered at that shout, Ranma rolled in midair to avoid a hurled set of daggers and a chain with a very nasty barb at the end. Tapping one hand down on top of the chain as it passed, his other hand was flung out, sending his rope dart not at Mu Tse, but at a surprise that Mu Tse had launched into the air away from Ranma several moments ago, hoping that Ranma hadn't seen it. The kitchen sink was smashed out of the air, and thanks to the angle of the hit, it fell down toward Mu Tse.

The master of hidden weapons didn't notice until the sink slammed into him. "Gah," he grunted as it drove him to his knees, his concentration on his chains broken, even if the hit hadn't done all that much real injury.

Ranma dove down towards him, getting close now. Mu Tse was able to get to his feet to meet Ranma, but found himself nearly overwhelmed as Ranma attacked, his fists and legs already moving at the same speed as the Amaguriken technique. Mu Tse could barely keep up, just as he had been barely able to with Shampoo, and Ranma was a good bit faster even than Shampoo. This meant that more strikes got through, slamming into Mu Tse's chest, shoulder and thigh, causing him to grunt in pain.

After a second, Mu Tse was able to dodge his head to one side from a blow that would've smashed into his chin, and shifted around a kick that would have taken him in the side. His attempt to grab Ranma's leg and wrap it up with chains failed spectacularly, though, as Ranma pulled back too quickly, and his attempts to lash out with the twin swords at Ranma were blocked by Ranma's rope dart. The rope of the dart stopped the extremely sharp edge of the blade easily, thanks to the ki reinforcement Ranma had learned from Master Nawa. At the same time, the end of the rope dart came up, swirling. He aimed towards one of Mu Tse's sleeves, but Mu Tse raised a leg and got a foot up, aiming it towards Ranma even as he stepped backward.

Just like what had happened with Shampoo, Mu Tse showed once again he could use any entrance or exit under his clothing as a weapons space. This time, though, instead of a wrecking ball, a blast of what looked almost like a shotgun crashed over Ranma. Such was the momentum of the grapeshot that it caused Ranma to hiss and hold an arm up in front of his eyes to protect himself.

It wasn't regular grapeshot, though. It was simply small slivers of metal, and Ranma realized with a start that Mu Tse had used Shampoo's acupuncture needles. They had been molded with tiny lead balls like regular grapeshot, then fired out from his ki space at incredible speed like someone had managed to store a dozen shuriken in a blunderbuss.

Several of those bullets were moving fast enough that they could actually cut into his skin, and Ranma wondered idly how fast Mu Tse could really launch something from his weapon

space if that was possible. *The guy really missed the boat when he decided to go big and flashy; he thought, shaking his head momentarily, even as he took a step back involuntarily from the impact of so many strikes hitting his chest at once. He could do a lot more damage going small and deadly, make himself into an unlimited bullet platform or something.*

The pigtailed martial artist's reaction was mild compared to that of his Joketsuzoku lover.

"ELDER! I thought that the usage of guns was forbidden!" Shampoo yelled, standing up so abruptly she sent Mai sprawling. *"Mu Tse is cheating!" FUCK, but if Mu Tse had used that attack on me, I'd have been shredded. My toughness training would have kept me in the fight, but it would have been much harder.*

"Quiet, child," Cu Lonxi barked back. "Mu Tse did not use a gun, nor did he even use modern bullets. He simply released a lot of tiny darts at incredible speed. Which is well within the bounds of the rules." *Even if I am astonished at how far he's taken the ability to launch things at speed from his ki space. If there weren't a simple way to deal with ki spaces in general, that would be worrisome.*

Ignoring the byplay, Mu Tse whirled into an attack with a glaive, the edge of it seeking Ranma's neck, but Ranma ducked under it, battering the glaive upward. Yet still Mu Tse roared, coming in hard.

This left Ranma somewhat confused, as he had expected Mu Tse to, like the day before, try to keep the range open. *Maybe he realized my defense is harder to get through than Shampoo's? ...No, he's got some kind of plan. This guy is tricky,* Ranma reflected, even as his injuries healed as the others watched.

Seeing that, Cu Lonxi's eyes widened. She had heard of how quickly Ranma had been able to bounce back from his match with the Triad leader, Yamazaki, and had thought that Master Oro had helped things along, or Ranma hadn't been all that injured despite what Ranma Mai and Shampoo said. Now, seeing several dozen cuts and bruises visible on Ranma's body heal within a minute of the injury, she understood. *He's already developed his ki healing to that height? That honestly makes me jealous.*

She watched for a few moments until her eyes flew wide again. But not if something Ranma was doing. No, this time it was Mu Tse who had surprised her, and not altogether in a good way. *He's moving into a spiral!* Cu Lonxi realized, as Mu Tse allowed Ranma to drive him backward around the arena. *How? Did he somehow figure out the trick to the Hiryyu Shouten Ha that one time Lo Ton was practicing with it a few years ago?*

That speaks highly of Mu Tse's ability to learn and to add elements to his own style that do not technically fall under the Hidden Weapons School. Although with that technique, he'll make the tornado even deadlier, she reflected, watching with interest. *Although if he thinks it's simply moving into a spiral and then exchanging a punch, then nothing is going to happen. If*

he's worked it out, I will admit to some surprise, but not enough to forget that he learned such a technique without being given permission to. He will still need to be punished for that.

That punishment wouldn't amount to much if indeed Mu Tse showed some ability with the Hiryyu Shouten Ha. The Joketsuzoku were not ones to punish accomplishing something like that overmuch. If he didn't, however, he would be punished far more harshly for foolishness.

Mu Tse did, in fact, know the secret of the Hiryyu Shouten Ha. He had not only seen Lo Ton use it but had been close enough to hear her explain the technique to her daughter, who had just become a bloodied warrior. No one in the village took notice of Mu Tse when he wasn't running after Shampoo, something he had long since learned to use to his advantage occasionally.

Not that it was always on purpose, admittedly. Mu Tse had spent a lot of time going after Shampoo and he really hadn't understood how much of a buffoon he acted while doing so.

Despite knowing how to use the technique, Mu Tse had a devil of a time calming himself down to the almost Zen-like, cold state needed by the individual creating the spiral. Luckily, he, like everyone else who used ki space, knew that ki spaces were cold. So, he simply kept the ones in his leg openings open as he moved into the spiral. The other half of the equation was a crapshoot, and Mu Tse knew it.

I just have to hope that Ranma's battle lust and desire for conflict are enough to launch the technique, he reflected, as Ranma pushed in hard. Several of Ranma's blows got through his defenses every few minutes, and they hurt like blazes even with the toughness training Mu Tse had forced himself through. *I've never gone into taunting and making fun of my enemies, and I don't know enough about this foreigner outside of his relationship with Shampoo to have enough fuel for such in any event. I suppose I could make fun of his cursed form, but he's had it for so long, surely that wouldn't work, right?*

Unaware that in another universe, it would have taken Ranma far, far longer except for his cursed form than it did in this universe with Shampoo and then Mai's gentle help, Mu Tse continued to create the spiral and hope. *If it doesn't, I'm going to be nearly out of tricks, and I get the impression this Jiangren hasn't used any, even with his rope dart.*

Mu Tse didn't actually launch the little weighted needles. He had created a shooter for them and then emplaced the one shooter specially in the weapons space he had created for the hem of his pant legs over the past few days. It was one of many such shooters that he used. While he could indeed use ki to direct his chains where he wanted them to go, that was a far cry from launching them, or, say, his glaives and other weapons, out at speed. And Ranma had smashed so many of his weapons out of the ring that he didn't have any more shooters armed by this point.

For his part, Ranma recognized that Mu Tse was up to something, but he couldn't figure out what. *Unless he's trying to freeze the ground or something? Whatever it is, it's letting me beat on him a little bit, and I can wear him down quickly if this trick of his takes too long to set up. Why is he moving in a spiral, though?* While he had also seen that, unlike Cu Lonxi, he had no idea why Mu Tse would be doing so.

Mind you, knowing what Mu Tse was up to, Ranma could have cut off his pursuit and screwed Mu Tse over. But Ranma was feeling pretty good about how this fight had gone so far. He'd been able to practice a lot of the small pointers that Cu Lonxi had given him, and even Mu Tse's big trick hadn't mattered much. Ranma's speed and strength, along with his toughness training, were just too much for Mu Tse to get through.

This proved to be an error of judgment on Ranma's part.

Unhindered, Mu Tse finished the spiral, standing in the center of the arena. The instant he did, a badly battered Mu Tse launched an uppercut, a simple uppercut, without any weapon in hand, towards Ranma. The move was so choreographed, Ranma was already ducking away even as Mu Tse dropped his escrima stick to launch that blow, something that had already caused Ranma's eyes to narrow and take a step back, worried Mu Tse was about to unleash some weapons space-based trick again.

However, Mu Tse was correct. Ranma's battle aura was enough for the technique to work. "Hiryuu Shouten Ha!!!"

A tornado whirled up and around Mu Tse, grabbing Ranma up and tossing him into the air as it continued to grow to fill the arena while the pigtailed martial artist shouted out in shock. "ARGH, what the hell is this?"

He tried to fight the wind, only to find it was too powerful for him to overcome. Ranma could shift his position a little bit but that was all.

Nearly blown off their feet just by the change in air pressure, Mai and Shampoo alike stared. "What the hell!? Where was that the time we were fighting a few days ago?!" Shampoo growled, incensed. "And where did he learn something like that?"

"He must have tried to hold back, and it certainly isn't a skill from hidden weapons. Is it an Amazon technique?" Mai asked, shaking her head. "It almost reminds me of something that Natsume and Kurumi could pull off, hot and cold-based ki colliding in a set formation. We saw Mu Tse was making a spiral."

"He did," Cu Lonxi said, somewhat reluctantly, torn between pride and annoyance that Shampoo and Mai had grasped the secret of the Hiryuu Shouten Ha so easily. "It is called Hiryuu Shouten Ha. And yes, you have cottoned onto the secret, my dear. Well done, although I have to wonder how well your paramour is going to deal with it."

Even as the three of them had been talking, Mu Tse was launching as many weapons as he could possibly launch into the spiral of air. Weapons came out of his sleeves: swords, halberds, hammers, toilets, pipes, daggers. All of it he then hurled as quickly as he could up into the spiral from his safe position in the eye of the storm. Already, some parts of it were turning red from Ranma's blood.

If not for the fact that I already saw him use ki healing to an incredible degree, I would already be calling this much in Mu Tse's favor. The boy did well, Cu Lonxi acknowledged ruefully. He enacted a long-term strategy and went with it. He is certainly a worthy warrior of the clan... now if only he could be convinced to get eye surgery. And give up on my daughter. If he thinks even winning here will gain my Xian's heart, he has another thing coming.

The tornado couldn't last very long with just Ranma's battle-hungry fervor to power the hot-based side of the weather system. It petered out in less than four minutes, even as Mu Tse was still hurling odds and ends from his weapons space up into it.

Ranma appeared in the air, bloodied from head to toe, with much of his clothing shredded, but not all that actually battered. His toughness training had seen him through with simply dozens upon dozens of surface wounds, and they began to heal even as he picked off a passing halberd and launched himself downwards.

With the polearm, he deflected several more weapons. His rope dart had been quickly shredded, bar the head, in the tornado, leaving Ranma to improvise. He kept this up until he landed on the ground, then, ducking under a chain, grabbed it, and hauled.

Mu Tse tried to shut his weapon space, to cut the end of his last chain off, but he was too slow, and Ranma, some of his wounds already healing, darted in. Mu Tse launched a punch and then a rising kick, launching a wrecking ball from his outstretched foot like he had against Shampoo, trying to gain some more distance as he tried to come up with another strategy, his eyes wide and panicky behind his large glasses.

Ranma shifted around the kick and let the punch land, but when Mu Tse tried to pull his hand back, Mu Tse found it was practically glued to Ranma's chest for a second, which allowed Ranma to land a blow to his jaw that set Mu Tse's head ringing despite his toughness training. He growled, and a short hafted chui popped out of his wrist, the last of his weapons.

He brought it down on Ranma's shoulder, but Ranma blocked it with his forearm, even as Mu Tse's other hand was somehow released from Ranma's chest. Another hit landed, and this time, Mu Tse let loose a groan. Time and time again, every hit Mu Tse landed was held in place for just a brief second, allowing Ranma to retaliate with ease.

"Wh, what is this!? Am I suddenly a, a random thug in a Wuxia film!?" Mu Tse, who had a very limited ki sense beyond what was necessary to build up his reserves, couldn't figure out

what Ranma was doing, and his desperation grew, his attacks becoming wilder and faster as he tried to match Ranma's speed.

Ranma again caught his next punch with his Blue Wave technique, followed by smashing Mu Tse's mace out of his grip. Mu Tse desperately threw another punch, only for his left hand to join his right in being caught, stuck on Ranma's nearly bare chest.

"Sorry, but since ya showed me something big, I figure I should do the same," Ranma quipped, grinning through a still-bruised face. "Blue Burst!"

From his body blasted out the same powerful attack that Ranma had used on Yamazaki, only far smaller. On the other hand, Mu Tse was not nearly as tough as that worthy had been, and the effect, while not nearly as devastating, was still extreme.

Mu Tse was blasted off his feet and hurled backward. His ribs, forearms, and weapon were all smashed into so many pieces despite his toughness training that the pain of it meant he was unconscious before his back slammed into the dirt on the other side of the arena.

Ranma stared at him for a few seconds before shaking his head. "That was honestly a lot tougher than I thought it would be. That tornado thing, that was frustrating, and I really didn't like being stuck up there at all. Interesting trick though, hot and cold weather fronts." He looked over at Cu Lonxi, talking his head to one side. "What would you think if the three of us started to use a technique like that, Granny?"

"Ugh, granny? That's disgustingly irreverent. It's Grandmother or Honored Elder to you, son-in-law. But as you have already figured out how to do it like your lovers over there, I have no issue with you pursuing using the Hiryuu Shouten Ha. So long as you do not speak of it to anyone else and, hopefully, do not use the technique where it could be recorded. It is a Joketsuzoku-only technique, and if it does get out, I will know who to blame. Understood?"

She flared her battle aura as she said that, and all three youngsters rapidly nodded their heads, staring wide-eyed as Cu Lonxi's hair stood on end, and her entire body seemed to glow with reddish energy, more powerful and condensed even than Yamazaki's aura had been and far less chaotic feeling to the younger trio's ki senses. She let the technique pass quickly and nodded. "Good."

Cu Lonxi was far too intelligent to try to argue the point once Pandora's box was already opened, so she was more concerned about mitigating the damage. *And besides, Ranma is a member of the tribe because of his relationship with Shampoo, and Mai will make a fine addition. Ranma is already better than the clan would be happy to see in a male, but since Shampoo has grown alongside him, even that would be allowed.*

Shaking those thoughts off, Cu Lonxi looked back over to where Mu Tse was lying unconscious. "Winner, Ranma."

This time, when it came to healing Mu Tse, it took a good while. Ranma's last attack had really messed him up. Yet after fifteen minutes of pushing her ki into his body and pushing Mu Tse's own recuperation as much as she could, Cu Lonxi had healed him up enough to wake Mu Tse up, cognizant, if not happy.

At first, that unhappiness had to do with the amount of pain he was in, but after a moment, Mu Tse realized that he had lost, and snarled, trying to get to his feet, but found himself pressed back down into the ground by the top of Cu Lonxi's staff like it was a tree trunk. "You lost, Mu Tse. You put up a very good fight, and I will be talking to you about what other techniques you might have picked up by watching blooded warriors and elders around the village. You are in no way supposed to know about the Hiryuu Shouten Ha."

Cu Lonxi's tone softened as Mu Tse blanched. "But you used it well, and you don't seem to have fallen into some of the pitfalls with it. You will still be punished for spying, but not nearly as harshly. I think your family would be proud of your skills... if not your common sense."

Growling at that jab, Mu Tse reluctantly nodded, and Cu Lonxi allowed him to stand up. He did so, still glaring angrily at Ranma through his glasses, despite the fact that they were shattered, with only one of them having a few bits of glass left inside it enough for him to see more than diffuse blobs in front of him. "You! I will..."

The thump of Cu Lonxi's on the ground again caused a tremor that nearly had Mu Tse on his rear. "You lost," she repeated. "I will not have you chasing after Shampoo and her lovers. You gave your word. I will not allow you to continually use pretty words and phrases to try to get out of an oath made in honor. You will remain with me, and we will both go back to the village. As I said, you will need to answer for spying."

Which rather messes up my plans, damn it all. But I can't trust Mu Tse to go back on his own, nor am I willing to take him along on my hunt. Still... perhaps the bands hunters we've already sent out will report some more information. The only trail I know of is in Hong Kong, and that might not be enough to let me find my missing granddaughter.

Registering the plural form of lover there, Mu Tse's eyes widened, and he blushed a bit, staring first at Shampoo, then Mai, then Ranma, where his eyes hardened, then to Mai, where his blush returned. "What, but, but that's... The three of you! I... do I need to challenge them both for—"

"That is no longer in the cards for you. What have I been saying, Mu Tse!?" Cu Lonxi growled, tempted to smack the boy on the head, but worried that in her present frame of mind, she might not hold back enough and give him some brain trauma. *More brain damage anyway, judging by the way he's acting now and has been for a little under a decade.* "Besides, it isn't entirely unknown among the village for two women to be lovers or even for women to share a man." *If only for breeding purposes. This is a love match, and that would be a bit unusual.*

It might not have been entirely unknown, but it was certainly surprising to Mu Tse, and stumbling through the implications, he very clearly went to his happy place for a moment until Ranma flicked a tiny pebble up into his forehead. Not hard enough to do the brain damage Cu Lonxi was worried about, although that was more because Ranma was seriously tired and hungry right now rather than any largesse on his part. "Don't go there, dude!"

I don't know what would be worse: Mu Tse imagining himself in my position, or him imagining me as a girl with Mai and Shampoo. UGH. Either is enough for me to want to smash him upside the head until he sees stars, Ranma grumbled mentally.

"B, but Elder!" Mu Tse nearly blubbered, pulled away from his happy fantasies into cold, cold reality. "You can't be serious, you can't expect me to abide by the, this duel, when it allows him to, to keep defiling Shampoo!"

"Boy, you are on thin ice!" Cu Lonxi growled, grabbing Mu Tse and pulling his face down to her level by yanking on his jaw. "I allowed you to leave after your bout with Shampoo, even after you demonstrated you weren't willing to abide by your side of the agreement, but I won't allow you to do it twice. When we give our word, that **must** mean something, even for you. Besides, you're already in hot water with the other Elders and me after learning techniques that you were not allowed access to."

When Cu Lonxi got in his face like that, Mu Tse realized that he had better toe the line for now. *But I will have my vengeance! You can run anywhere in the world, Ranma, I will find you and free my Shampoo from your, your debased wiles!*

Seeing the youth reluctantly nod, Cu Lonxi sighed. "Now you three, get out of here. I'll see you later today. I will help this one clean up his mess here, and then he and I will have a long discussion before heading back to my hotel room. Where he will remain if he knows what is good for him." When Mu Tse grumbled at that, Cu Lonxi smiled thinly. "The alternative is deadening your spine from the waist down and leaving you like that. Thin ice, I said."

More than willing to let Cu Lonxi try and continue to get through Mu Tse's thick skull, the youngsters all nodded agreement, heading out. As they walked, Ranma looked over at Shampoo, pulling out a spare shirt from the ki space in his pocket. "So, what are the odds that we've seen the last of him?"

"If we can get out of the city in a day or so, we can probably leave him behind," Shampoo answered instead of directly responding.

Still, that was enough of a response for Ranma. *Honestly speaking, the guy has a lot of tricks up his sleeve and might make a decent rival, like Ryu.*

But Ranma did not want Mu Tse trying to butt in on his relationship with Shampoo, and, worse, he was worried that the guy's obsession would lead him down a dark path. *Like using*

magic or some of the memory-altering techniques Shampoo's mentioned a time or two that the Joketsuzoku have access to. Still, we can let Cu Lonxi handle it for now. Our course is set in the near future, he reflected. And whatever else, Mu Tse can't follow us out at sea.

Later on that day, they informed Cu Lonxi of their plans, showing her the three tournament advertisements that Shampoo and Mai had found, and she agreed. Although she looked frustrated as she did. "I fully agree that you need to head out if that's your plan for Hainan and beyond. I can sit on Mu Tse, but he's a slippery fellow, and while he's too battered now to cause trouble, he'll heal up quickly given enough time thanks to how much help I've already given him. I would've liked more time training with you, but you're right, tournaments like these will help you along far more than simply training with an old woman like me."

Shampoo narrowed her eyes at her grandmother's self-deprecating tone. "Really?"

At that, Cu Lonxi cackled. "Hahaha, I know that doesn't sound like me, but it's true. Given how far you've grown so far, I honestly only needed to point out a few minor errors creeping into your style. Now that I have, I don't think any of you will make the same mistake of not fully incorporating any new technique into your existing style again."

She pointed at her great-great-great-granddaughter, then at Ranma. "Indeed, you and Ranma already showed that you had done so with your use of your rope dart, Ranma, and your shadow techniques and enhanced punches, Shampoo. While training with me for a significant amount of time would be helpful, fighting real, and varied opponents will be far more helpful for you."

She then smiled thinly. "I will even be able to give you the name of a few former sisters of ours who have settled in Thailand. They'll be able to help you smuggle any artifacts you recover back to China. We don't have any such in Malaysia or the Philippines, let alone elsewhere, but on the continent, we have several such scattered around the smaller nations."

The three youngsters exchanged high-fives at that. Shampoo was very serious about hunting down those historical items, and Mai and Ranma were just as serious about helping her because it was so important to her.

But Cu Lonxi held up a hand, getting their attention again. "However, I'm afraid that the training manual you discovered will not be so easily translated. I was able to get it out of its case, and then copy it out entirely as best I could, but three days weren't nearly long enough for me to both copy it out and start the translation. If I can do so, I will send a copy to Thailand to meet you if I'm done by then, but eventually, you might have to come back for it."

Shampoo pouted, but nodded slowly, and Cu Lonxi shook her head. "Do not let it get to you. I am **exceptionally** proud of the way you have grown since leaving the village, Shampoo. I am equally proud of the life you are leading and the friends you have made. Go have fun and

continue to grow as you can, to climb to new heights as martial artists.” She cackled again. “Just remember, I do want to see children at some point. Just not too quickly.”

Both Mai and Shampoo blushed rosily at that, while Ranma gaped, then shook his head rapidly from side to side, causing Cu Lonxi to continue to cackle again. She waited until the three looked to almost have their balance under them again before continuing, pointing at Shampoo. “Now, granddaughter. If I only have a day with you, I mean to make the most of it. You seemed intrigued by my Earth Shake technique, and I will have you set on that path before you leave.”

OOOOOOO

The next day, Cu Lonxi watched them go, sailing away with the dawn tide after all three stayed up all night as she taught them what she could. She still hadn’t told Shampoo about the concerns of the tribe in terms of their missing sisters, including her mother. But that was all right. Hopefully, it would be Cu Lonxi who would find those answers. She very much did not want Shampoo, as headstrong as she was, to go looking for those answers. In the modern world with modern weaponry, that would probably lead her to get in overhead all too quickly.

Shaking that thought off, Cu Lonxi turned, then leaped up to a nearby building, smacking Mu Tse on the head where he had been hiding in the shadow of an air vent. He should have waited for her back at the hotel. *This boy needs some discipline and respect to be smacked into him. I think I will hand him over to Ti Ger, she was the one who was most vociferous on that score.* “Come, boy! We have a journey of our own ahead of us. You have a date with the elders.”

And I... regardless of what information our gatherers might have brought in, will leave again for Hong Kong. If this Yamazaki fellow still lives, I will have some answers from him about the slave trade, one way or another, the diminutive elder thought grimly.

End Chapter