

Hey everybody, here is the next chapter of Journey Gone Astray.

With this chapter, I am trying to cram a lot of 'getting to know you' stuff in a single chapter. There's a lot of talking here, and I hope that it all comes off as interesting, even without my normal heaping of combat to go along with it. I know in a lot of stories this kind of thing would be glossed over or happen in the background, but given how central the Kara/Ranma relationship is to the story, I didn't think it was a good idea.

This has been edited by Hiryo and a bit by yours truly via Grammarly.

And since Hiryo pointed this out, the // sign means someone is speaking a language that not everyone in the scene can understand.

Chapter 3: Getting to Know You, Super/Martial(Teen) Style

At around the same time that Cassie Sandmark's second-best friend was meeting her first friend in a rather dramatic fashion, Cassie was having issues. While she had been prepared for Man's World in a lot of ways, one area she had not been ready for was the appliances. The various appliances central to cooking, in particular, confused her a lot.

This was why Diana was now staring at Cassie, her gaze deadpan as they stood in the kitchen, their wet clothing hugging their forms in a most indecent manner. Not that the Amazon Princess was "What... did... you... do?" the older Amazon growled.

"It said microwave ready! How was I supposed to know you had to remove the aluminum tray first!" Cassie protested.

Diana twitched, a finger pointing to another area of the kitchen. "And the dishwasher?"

"I er... okay, there I will admit I just didn't close it properly. Or make certain the plates were latched in place. And I might not have followed the order for how much detergent to add," Cassie answered, shrinking in on herself with each word.

As she looked at her now melted microwave, the sudsy water all over the floor, and the rest of the mess that had been her kitchen before fire and sprinkler worked together to decimate it, Diana sighed. "Pizza it is then for tonight. And tomorrow, I will explain what the microwave really is for. For now, I suggest you start cleaning up." With that, she left, making no move whatsoever to help her young charge.

With a growl, Cassie glared around her before sighing and heading for the mop. *I hope Kara is having an easier time of rejoining Man's World than I am getting used to it in the first place.*

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Kara still looked embarrassed as the duo arrived back at the road where the tractor had smashed down on the road with such tremendous force. She was also looking at Ranma every few steps, her expression going from confused to thankful, *As if she were wondering why he wasn't shocked by her abilities and also thankful for that. Perhaps with a dash of 'who the heck is this guy' thrown in for good measure*, Ranma thought, amused.

This was in fact the case. *Why the heck isn't he panicking about my flying? About my, my sneezing him into the air? Heck, he's dealing with it as if someone being able to fly around is an everyday thing, or at least not all that out there. Wait, does that mean he's a hero of some kind? The Amazons didn't know anything about other heroes, and Cousin Kal hasn't mentioned any foreign heroes, but maybe?*

Beyond that, there was also something else bothering Kara, a niggling at the back of her mind that she was missing something. *Why do I think I've heard the name Ranma before? Drat it, I'm horrible with names. Even back on Krypton, I was bad with names. Heck, I barely remembered baby Kal-El's name.*

Stepping out onto the road, Ranma called Kara out on the odd looks she was sending his way, smiling over at her, trying hard not to scare the super-powerful and somewhat cute blonde. "You don't gotta worry about me. If you have some kind of secret identity or something, that's your own business. I'm not going to share it with anyone or anything like that. I'll make you a promise to that effect if it makes ya feel better."

"It's not that! Well, okay, a bit of it is that, and um, thank you. I, I suppose I can take your word with it, but I doubt my cou-er, other people I know will be happy about what happened or willing to take your word. For my part, I'm more embarrassed by how you saw me fly and my er, nearly killing you with the tractor."

"Eh, even if it hit me, I doubt a tractor would've killed me. Not unless it crushed both my head and heart, and I'm too tough for that." Ranma shrugged. "It'd be hell a painful, and it'd take me a while to heal from the damage it could do to me. And I'd be freaking starving afterward but meh."

Kara's eyes narrowed at the lackadaisical, almost lazy way Ranma talked, thrown by it so much that his actual words didn't register for a second. When they did, her eyes widened. "Then are you another hero or an alieEEE!!" She clamped both hands over her mouth, cursing internally. *Oh, well, isn't this a freaking cavalcade of errors!*

"Hah!" Thankfully for Kara, Ranma just shook his head. "Nope, I ain't a hero, and I ain't an alien. Heh, nor am I a magical guy, girl, or creature, just ta cover all the bases. I'm just a martial artist, one who discovered ki and how to use it consciously at a far younger age than most martial artists who even know about it do. Those two things are very separate, and both

equally insanely important to how strong I've gotten. That, and looking at the term 'that's impossible' and calling it good training."

"Uh, I see... I don't understand, but okay..." Kara said, hoping that Ranma would just skip over the whole alien thing, more than she wanted to actually understand what the heck he was talking about. *The last thing I need is someone connecting me to cousin Clark.*

No such luck, however. "And is there a reason that alien sprang to yer mind? Is that how you have your powers?"

"AKKK! Er, I mean," she paused, trying to think of how to explain Kara's powers herself and everything else without giving away the fact that she was related to Superman and exactly what kind of alien she was. *Drat it all, I'm not trained for this!*

"Just tell me this; are you here to conquer the world? Turn us all into blondes?" Ranma asked jokingly.

Surprised at that, Kara laughed, shaking her head. Looking at Ranma, she realized that he didn't seem to care about her alienness, just as he hadn't cared about her ability to fly. Deciding to make a joke of it, she stuck out her arms like a zombie she had seen in a strange movie with Uncle Jon. "BLONDE, join the BLONDE Swarm!"

Rolling his eyes, Ranma gave Kara a thumbs-up. "Hah, if it could let me fly, I might let ya take a bite outta my brains, or whatever. But yeah, I don't have a problem with you keeping your secrets. Now come on, let's see if we can move this thing without you needing to sneeze on it."

Kara blinked. *Doesn't he... no, he hasn't realized the full implications of my powers.* At that, Kara's earlier apprehension about a stranger knowing about her disappearing under a wicked grin. *He's only seen me fly and sneeze. Maybe he thinks I've got powers over wind or something. Heh, this should be good.*

Having knelt down at the side of the crater containing the tractor, Ranma didn't notice her change in expression, as he examined the wheels on the large machine and the crater itself. "Eessh, this is gonna take a bit of concrete to fix. It's a lucky thing this road isn't used all that often. Where does it go anyway?"

"Well, one way goes into Smallville, the local town. The other way...um, I think it is a really, really long way to the bypass or something? The highway that takes you to Nevada eventually," Kara seemed to hesitate, then shrugged. "I think, anyway."

Brow furrowing, Ranma tried to bring up what he knew of American geography, and murmured, "That doesn't sound right, but whatever." He then moved to the back of the tractor, looking over his shoulder at her as he crouched down, saying, "Well, if your powers

don't make you super strong or whatever, I suggest you move a bit. I'm going to try to see if I can lift it out of the crater. Wonder of wonders, it looks like the wheels and axle are okay, but--"

"Oh, I can help," Kara interrupted, her feeling of looking forward to this growing as she felt as if Ranma was making fun of her now. She moved to the other side and crouched down as Ranma did, but when he began to count, she simply lifted the tractor up out of the crater. To her, it barely weighed anything.

As the shadow of the tractor fell on him, Ranma's jaw dropped, and he kept gawking as Kara lifted the tractor over her head and moved to the side of the crater. *H, how!? I can maybe lift a car, maybe a bit more than a ton if I use my ki to reinforce my strength. But a freaking tractor like that, it has to weigh at least five tons! And she just deadlifted it without any buildup. Hell, it barely looks like she's trying. Suddenly, I'm really glad she wasn't trying to kill me. That's something I'd expect from Diana-nee, not a little blonde alien girl.*

Kara set it down, performing a little fist pump internally at the awestruck look on Ranma's face. "Hurricane sneezes you can handle but you draw a line at superstrength?"

"Superstrength at that level I draw a line at, especially coming from a twig of a girl," Ranma muttered. *Not even ki could make my female form strong enough to do that. Lift it a few inches, shift it, sure, but deadlift the damn thing over my head? No chance.*

"Wha!?" Kara squawked in outrage at what she could tell was an insult of some kind. "What did you just call me!?"

"Well, can you blame me!? I could maybe move it, but certainly wouldn't be able to do so easily, and you're not only thinner in the arms but shorter than me," Ranma waved wildly at the tractor. "Come on, girl, there's a limit to what ki can do for me and that is well beyond it." *Not beyond my new magical form, which I am still having trouble remembering. Still, it's damn impressive.*

Shaking his head, Ranma got his reaction under control and joked, "Hah, don't suppose you have any exercise tips for me?"

"Nope, it's all-natural," Kara shot back. She had gotten something from the strength training the Amazons had put them through, but not nearly as much as Cassie or the Amazons did. What such exercises had really helped with was an understanding of her growing strength under Sol's yellow sun and her endurance in terms of using that strength.

"Tsk, now I **am** jealous." Ranma pouted, only half-joking.

Chortling, Kara set the tractor down in front of the crater. This caused Ranma to look at it, and, forgetting his annoyance at cheating aliens for a moment, he hopped onto the tractor. "So, what were you doing with this thing, anyway?"

"Uncle Jon was about to show me how to drive it," Kara grumbled. "He said that if I learned how to drive a tractor, anything else would be child's play. He got out, told me to head up into the driver's seat, I sneezed, and you know the rest." She looked up at where Ranma sat in the chair, biting her lip in worry. "I don't suppose I'm lucky enough that it's going to be okay without repairs, am I?"

"Eh, let's see about that," Ranma answered, surprising her. He pulled the keys out of the ignition, which had cut off at some point during its midair tumble. He then moved forward onto the front of the tractor, pulling the engine housing up, frowning as he looked inside. "Hmmm...I've never worked on one of these. I worked on a boat engine and a motorcycle several times. Still, I should be able to figure things out."

Before that, Ranma had helped repair an old bathhouse generator and some things in China, but it was the time on Yamatai that had really helped Ranma's Martial Arts Vehicle Repair Style. *I ain't about to thank Lara for taking me along to that freaky island, though.* "But I don't think that's going to exactly carry over entirely here. Still, 'I'll see what I can do.'"

With a small push from her legs, Kara landed on the wheel's rim. Her eyes glowed red for a second as she stared not at, but into the engine coiling. "There's some kind of wire out of place, I think. A little circular thing larger at one end than the other is out of place, a pipe seems broken, there's a leak of some kind into the interior, and several small parts are out of place."

"... You just stared through the engine, didn't you?" Ranma said flatly, a shiver going through him at the possible implications. "Can, can you do that to me too?"

"Um, that depends on what you mean. I can see your skeleton, and I could see if you were wearing a gun or something like that, but if you mean just seeing under your clothing, then no," Kara replied candidly, understanding what Ranma was worried about and flushing a tiny bit at the implications, having heard the same question from Cassie.

Ranma breathed the faint sigh of relief. "Huh, that sounds useful. Again, I don't suppose that's something you can teach someone else?"

"Sorry, no. As far as I know, you have to be born with it," Kara added, with a wan little chuckle. *By which I mean, be a Kryptonian and then spend a lot of time underneath a yellow sun.*

With a shrug, Ranma stuck his hand inside his ki pocket, causing Kara to frown, not having seen anything inside of it. Her eyes widened a second later as he pulled out a set of tools, setting them to one side. "There's a martial arts construction technique to remove or put in screws, but I never saw the point of it. The rest is really good stuff, hugely applicable. I swear that school should be famous for what it can do, but whatever."

“How did you do that? Where did those tools come from? I should have seen them!” Kara exclaimed.

“Eh, short answer, this goes back to my ki comment. I can consciously control my own ki. I think one of my friends called it bioelectricity or something? Whatever. The important thing is I can control mine. For a longer answer, we’d be here a while, and I’d have to explain a few things to lead up to it.”

Again, Ranma’s accent threw her for a second, but Kara got the gist of what he was saying and shook her head. “I really don’t want that. I’m already going to be in big trouble with Uncle Jon for what happened with the tractor. The fact that you saw me using my powers is going to make that even worse.”

Ranma looked over at her as he finished pulling out a segment of the engine she had no words for, and Kara watched as his eyes slid down and to the side.

When Kara realized this meant he was looking down at the road, she sighed, muttering under her breath, “Drat it,” before saying louder, “he’s standing right behind me, isn’t he?”

“Somewhat old guy, just past middle age, looks pretty fit, dressed like a farmer, has glasses and white hair? Stands with a certain... what’s that word that means like respectability or something, but begins with a G?” Ranma snapped his fingers, trying to think of the word.

“Gravitas, although I wouldn’t say I’ve got anything so fancy, just gray hairs,” Jon Kent said, cocking his head to one side as he looked up at the teens standing on either side of his tractor’s front. Which itself was next to a large crater. It didn’t take him more than a moment to realize what had happened here, though the stranger was a definite complication he could live without. “I don’t know any Asians living around here. What’s your name, youngster?”

“Just passing through, sir. The name’s Ranma,” Ranma replied, quickly removing the engine block and handing it over to Kara. “Okay, so I can see the tank is battered, but not cracked; that’s good, but the side of the engine block is staved in, a piston is broken, and a whole mess of wires have been torn loose. The engine housing is also battered, and so are the cooling pipes and a bit more. Most of that can be fixed, I think...”

“I’ll be the judge of that, young man,” Jon said, moving to climb up, doing so quickly to peer at the engine block and into the housing before looking at his niece with a wry smile. “And I think we’ll leave off any tractor lessons for you until you do something about that allergy of yours, Kara. Now, would one of you mind telling me what happened here?”

“That’s all you, o tornado creator,” Ranma taunted, winking over at Kara before pushing his upper body down into the engine housing. His hands began to glow for a second, concentrating on his fingers as he shifted around, heating a bit of the pipe leading into the cooling system, softening the metal before gently pulling it back into shape.

Since this was blocked by the side of the engine housing to Kara and Jon, the pair didn't see it as Kara explained what had happened. Hearing that Ranma had seen Kara's powers, Jon frowned mightily, but he'd already figured that would be the case. "I don't like it, Kara, and you're going to need to tell Clark what happened the next time he's around. Still, what's done is done and there isn't anything we can do about it."

Not until Clark arrives and asks Batman or one of the others for some kind of memory erasure device, anyway, Jon added mentally. The heroes took their secret identities seriously, and Clark was really protective of both John and Martha, and Kara.

"I know, Uncle Jon, but I think I lucked out there. Ranma might've seen me, sure, but he has his own powers too!" Kara exclaimed. "He has something called ki, and he says he has super healing. He also seems pretty strong, like you just saw and has this weird expanding pocket thing."

"Among other stuff." Ranma pulled himself out of the engine housing, nodding to the two Americans. "Okay, so I think I did all I could with just my hands and ki in there. One part, the radiator, is just smashed through. I could maybe bend it back into shape, but that will take a bit. Kara, could you take a closer look at the engine block and tell me if there's anything wrong with it?"

Kara obliged quickly, while Jon peered into the housing, nodding his head as he spotted where Ranma had apparently welded things back into place. Other bits of metal also looked like they were cooling rapidly, and Jon wondered if Ranma had some kind of heat-vision like Clark and Kara did.

"It looks like it does have a few cracks in the interior, not all the way through, though. Darn, there's no way this is going to be fixable here, is it?" Kara asked, staring at the engine block in her hands.

"Eh, not really. I could take it apart, sure, but it'd probably take too much time to just be hanging out around here." Ranma gestured toward where Kara was holding the engine block out as if the four-hundred-pound piece of metal was a five-pound medicine ball. "I also think a replacement radiator would work way better than one bent back into shape. At least by me. You could probably do a better job on fixing the radiator, though."

"Yep, I could do it." Kara was eager to help anyway she could, forgetting about keeping the breadth of her powers secret. "Just tell me what to do."

"Here now," Jon cautioned. "As grateful as I am for your help with this young man, I have to say I'd rather make my own survey of it back at my farm."

Ranma nodded agreeably but added, "In that case, let's make sure the tires are all right, and the axles, so we know it's alright to move it. They looked all right from the side, but there might be something wrong underneath."

Jon nodded firmly, but when Kara opened her mouth, he waved her to silence. The two men hopped down and got under the tractor, where Jon grilled Ranma a bit about what he thought of the tractor and what they were seeing. His answers, combined with the work Ranma had already done, convinced Jon that the younger man knew what he was talking about.

They popped back out, and Jon said, "Well, it's good to be moved without doing more damage, at least. Let's get this back to the farm. There's no point in trying to repair it anymore here, especially since we might have a spare radiator somewhere in the barn. At least we could scavenge the old tractor for parts."

"Ooh, yeah, that sounds like a good idea. That only leaves the giant crater," Ranma said, staring at it. "I don't suppose you've got some power to melt the edges together, do ya, Kara? If we can do that and lay down more dirt underneath, that plus a bit of asphalt, we can probably repair it good as new."

Kara blinked at that, then she and Uncle Jon watched as Ranma seemed to pull various large bags out of nowhere, one labeled dry concrete and the other asphalt.

"Where did you pull that stuff come from?" Jon scowled, thinking this boy might be some magic user or something. He had heard Kara speaking about the magic that the Amazons routinely used, but also knew that magic was a threat to Clark and Kara, thanks to a few of Clark's adventures over the years since putting on the cape. Jon was also a Christian, and while he had reconciled himself with the idea of aliens easily enough, magic didn't sit well with him.

"I told you so. I'd guess it was something about this ki stuff Ranma mentioned. He said it was something like biological energy," Kara interjected helpfully, moving forward to hold a tub that Ranma had just pulled out of his pocket, somehow steady as he poured in the cement. "I'm more wondering about why you have that stuff on you rather than how." *How can come later.*

Ranma nodded. "That's right, it's the energy of the human body. I've built it up to the point where I can manipulate my ki consciously to a certain degree. One of the ways I can use it is to expand a set space, like a pocket, and hold stuff in there." He smirked over at Kara. "As for my always having stuff like that on me, you'd be surprised how often being able to repair things comes in handy."

"That sounds mystical, I suppose, rather than magical," Jon snorted, still frowning at Ranma, his shoulders still a little tense, worried now about whether or not Ranma could be an actual threat to Kara. "You sound Japanese, by the way," he probed.

“Eh, I guess I am, though honestly, I don’t often think of my nationality at all, I’ve spent so much time traveling around Asia.” Ranma eyed the other man thoughtfully. “Ya don’t look old enough to have served in WW2, so, Vietnam or the Korean War?” Jon blinked, and Ranma shrugged. “Ya got some burn marks on your fingers and upper arms. I’ve seen them on vets before. Beyond that, it was a wild guess.”

“Aye, Vietnam. I grew up on stories about the Pacific War,” Jon admitted. “I don’t know if I’ve ever actually talked to a Japanese person before, but I gotta admit the stories about how they fought the war stuck with me even after seeing what the Viet Cong were capable of. Heck, that just made those stories more believable.”

“World War 2,” Kara interjected, humming thoughtfully. “I remember reading about that vaguely in a book Clark gave me, but it didn’t cover much. Apparently, we’re supposed to in high school, so maybe something at that school will actually grab my attention. However doubtful that might be,” she added in a lower tone.

The fact Kara had not yet read ahead in that class was left unsaid. Jon understood. He hoped that social studies, at least would be able to give Kara something to concentrate on. That, and Language Arts. *Or else she might be quite miserable in high school, regardless of if she’s accepted by her schoolmates. Which, according to Martha, is a whole other bag of worms.*

Not understanding the full context of Kara’s words, Ranma shrugged. “The long and short of it is that Japan and America were on opposite sides. Japan was being a massive dickhead, wanting to conquer China. As if that wasn’t a horrible freaking mistake, given the difference in the size of our populations. Why the two went to war is something you could argue about, but me? I know how horribly my nation acted at the time. While a lot of my fellow Japanese still get annoyed whenever someone brings up the war and don’t like to acknowledge the things we did, I know Japan was in the wrong at the time, and it ain’t that big a deal to me. World War 2 is history, and frankly, if I were an American or Chinese at the time, I’d’ve fought us too.”

That seemed to take the old, older man aback, while Kara’s eyes narrowed at Ranma’s accent shifting again, and Ranma snorted, shaking his head. “Heh, I’ve been to China. I’ve been to Korea, Vietnam and other places, Old Man. While I can’t say the Commies teach everything about China’s history right--”

That won a bark of laughter from Jon, and Ranma went on with his habitual crooked smile. “Their textbooks at least mention a lot of the stuff Japan did in the war. And I honestly don’t think you’d recognize Japan these days. America tearing our spine out and beating us over the head with it changed a lot of our culture. Most of it for the better, I suppose.” He paused, adding, “Maybe. We don’t worship the Emperor anymore, just money, anime and advancement. Ancestor worship and family ties are still super important, too, and a version of the whole code of bushido is still around, though and obeying the government and your higher-ups is still huge.”

"Why do I think I'm only understanding half the terms used in this conversation, and none of the context?" Kara demanded, her hands on her hips as she stared at the two men.

"History stuff. Like I said, America and Japan were on different sides in the war, and the atrocities the Japanese and Germany did made it really easy to understand who the good guys and bad guys were." Ranma shrugged, dumping the concrete in. "Stir that while I remove bits of the rubble."

Jon, amused by the resources this Ranma fellow brought to bear and at the young man's attitude, took over stirring the concrete as it began to churn. With that, Ranma and Kara both turned their attention to removing the shattered chunks of asphalt that had been made by the falling tractor around the edges. Kara then showed off her eye-beam, melting the edges to merge together in places, prepared for the pothole to be filled.

"Wow, I can feel the heat off that, pretty damn impressive. I haven't felt heat like that since I had the Phoenix Pill," Ranma murmured, moving his hands near the beam.

This made Kara jerk her eyes away, the beam cutting off quickly. "Watch it! And what's a Phoenix pill?"

"Eh, old bit of... I suppose ya could call it alchemy? It made me develop an immunity to hot temperatures. I once was hit by a fire attack, and it only burned away my clothing. Doubt it would stop that beam of yours, though," Ranma mused. *Maybe my other form could take it? No way to tell, really. While I've trained with it a few times and figured out a few tricks, I haven't exactly been in a rush to learn its limits. After all, how the heck would I, and what would I run into that my Shazam form would be so much better than my normal one?*

"Where did you come across something like that?" Kara asked, blinking in surprise. *And why do I think every time he talks about something like that or his ki ability, there's a weird adventure behind it?*

"Eh, it comes from this group of Chinese Amazons I met and befriended," Ranma said as he set the next bit of asphalt down in place, missing the shocked look that crossed Kara and Jon's faces. "And ya might say I was forced to eat it because this old biddy named Cologne was a freaking troll of the first order... and still pissed at the fact that me and her granddaughter hadn't gotten together."

The last was mumbled under his breath, but Kara still heard it, which caused her to snicker a bit. The other idiom, though, demanded an explanation. "Troll? Don't tell me those are real, too?"

"If they are, I haven't met one. But considering I just met a living cheat code, maybe I'll eventually find those kinds of monsters are out there too," Ranma snorted, eying Kara.

“Hah, it takes one to know one, Mr. ‘I walk around with a pocket dimension’,” Kara retorted.

The two continued to talk as they worked to fill in the pothole, with Kara asking Ranma about the Amazons he had run into. Ranma was very open about the Joketsuzoku, but not his affiliation with the other group of Amazons he had met. He felt he should keep that a secret given Wonder Woman was a hero, and they seemed to always want to keep their civilian identities a secret. *I don't get why, but I know she ain't going around calling herself Princess Diana, so I suppose I should keep quiet about it.*

In turn, Ranma didn't get much information out of Kara. Jon mentioned his wife, and Kara called him Uncle, which was kind of confusing, since Jon seemed purely human, but that was about it on a personal level.

As they talked, the concrete went down first underneath, with the asphalt set on top, the bits of rubble melted together at the edges. The rest were filled in by the asphalt as it melted under Kara's eye beams, then the whole thing was flattened by Ranma. Once it was flat, Kara breathed over it, her breath so cold that when Ranma stuck his hand out into it, he could see icicles start to form on his skin. When they were done, it didn't look as if a crater had ever existed there.

“All done,” Ranma smiled and thrust his hand up towards Kara, who, after a moment's hesitation, realized what he wanted.

“Oh, right, high fives.” She reached up and clapped hands with Ranma, hitting his hand just a bit too hard for a normal person, although Ranma didn't notice, his hand barely moving.

“How long have you spent on Earth again?” Ranma snorted, lowering his arm. “I think every nation high-fives.”

Jon twitched at that, shooting Kara a warning look. He had stayed mostly silent, only interjecting when he sensed Kara was going to say something she shouldn't, seeing as Ranma had this down to a science. Instead, he mostly watched the two youngsters talk, feeling somewhat grateful Kara was able to interact normally with someone her own age, as Martha had told him she hadn't been able to when they went to the local high school.

Under his gaze, Kara just shrugged, answering Ranma's question, but not elaborating much. “About a year and a half? But most of that I spent on a retreat away from most civilization to get a handle on my powers.”

“Ah, that makes sense. I just call that training myself, heh, and I certainly wouldn't stop after so short a time. My Pops might have been a waste of space, but he was right about one thing: training is for life.”

"But you still don't have the power to lift tractors one-handed or sneeze and send them flying," Kara teased. For some reason, she greatly enjoyed the pout that Ranma sent her way at that.

As Kara began to giggle wildly, Jon asked, "By the way, Ranma, you didn't tell us what brings you to these parts. We're quite a way off the beaten path, you know." He wanted to know more about this young man. Ranma seemed nice and affable, if something of a rascal, reminding Jon somewhat of the Flash or Green Lantern, but he needed to know more before deciding they could trust Ranma with the secret behind Kara's powers.

Especially since if he ever meets Clark, it won't take long to put two and two together. Perhaps, regardless of what persona Clark's wearing at the time.

"Eh, I've just been traveling through America for a bit, been more or less following a straight line. I've been seeing the sights since I left my last job as a bodyguard," Ranma announced.

"Bodyguard? Is that because of that ki stuff? Can you do attacks or something like that?" Kara interrupted eagerly, her curiosity just as powerful as Jon's, if towards a slightly different topic.

Still, Jon was pleased when Ranma answered. "Eh, kind of. My actual ki attacks are limited; most of what it helps me do is internal. My ki gives me a leg up, and I've trained myself in the martial arts for a long, long time. My reflexes are insane, my speed way beyond what normal people can do, and my strength, well, before I met Kara, I was actually kind of proud about my strength."

"Speaking of super strength," Jon said, interrupting before Kara could tease Ranma about that, aware they were out in the open still. *I have to praise the lord that no one's come by so far.* "Could you carry the tractor back to our farm, Kara? Simply hanging out here for longer seems like a recipe for disaster."

Ranma watched Kara nod eagerly, and the two men looked on as she lifted the tractor up, watching for anything that fell off. The tractor creaked a bit, but while one of the axles was badly warped, nothing came off. Jon breathed a sigh of relief at that, then snorted as he looked over at Ranma, who had slumped down, poking the ground with one finger.

"Don't mind me, I'll just you know mope here..." he mumbled. "I can destroy mountains, get in and out of heavily guarded criminal bases, even slaughter undead oni by the dozen. And a little slip of an alien girl is stronger than me."

"Don't mind it, kid. There's always going to be someone stronger, after all," Jon patted Ranma on the shoulder, deciding he was indeed some kind of oriental hero, which made him at least a bit trustworthy. With that, and now reservedly pleased to see Kara making a friend out

of a stranger, Jon made a decision. "You seem a little handy with those hands of yours, boyo. Don't suppose you'd be looking for work, would you?"

Ranma broke out of his momentary funk to look up at the older man, shrugging as he stood up. "It depends on whether it's interesting. Like I said, all I'm doing at the moment is traveling. I mean, I want to see if I can find an old friend, but other than where she might be living, that's about all I can tell you about her."

Ranma didn't want to outright state that he knew Wonder Woman, figuring that, like the Amazons was a secret he should keep, although he knew by this point that Kara was probably in the same hero business. *Or at least just starting out? I wonder if they've got some kind of apprenticeship organization or something.*

"Well, look, you know about Kara's powers, and they are a major secret. Frankly, I'd be more sanguine about letting you go your way if I knew you better." *And maybe Clark will stop by, and if push comes to shove, he can erase your memory somehow.*

Ranma blinked, then nodded. "Ah, I get ya. You want me to work around your farm for a bit, get to know me at the same time, so you can figure out whether you want to trust me or not. I'm sort of uncertain what you'd do if I don't measure up, but whatever. Like I said, I don't have anywhere specific to go right now. Maybe Kara and I can spar too, that could be fun," he finished, grinning and cracking his knuckles.

Kara beamed and moved off through the tall cornstalks, shouting over her shoulder, "Come on then! The farms this way." *Sparring probably won't be all that interesting, but getting to know Ranma more sounds like fun.*

A moment later, she was flying, with the tractor still held above her head, and Ranma and Jon moved after her, Ranma pouting all the way to the amusement of the older man. This didn't stop Jon from plying him with questions. Despite that, he hadn't really learned much more about Ranma than he had already said by the time they got back to the farm. He knew that Ranma had a mother who he got along with well. In contrast, his father, who had trained him, and Ranma didn't get along all that well. He liked modern American and European Rock and didn't know a lot about modern American society, his main source of information being movies. Ranma was something of a self-taught history buff as well, but he hadn't dove too deep into American history except a few Civil War battles and it's role in the two World Wars.

To Jon's surprise, the first thing that Ranma did when they arrived back at the farm to find Kara tapping her foot on the ground as if impatient for them to arrive was to ease her away from the tractor. "Before we get to work repairing that thing more, let's see if I can lift it at all."

Kara snickered. "Don't burst a vessel or anything," she teased.

“I’d like to say I’ll make you eat your words, but let’s see if I can put my money where my own mouth is first.” With that, Ranma placed his hands underneath the tractor from the side. He breathed in a bit, and began to reinforce his muscles with ki for a few seconds before lifting with his legs, keeping his arms locked.

Grunting, Ranma lifted the tractor to chest height before needing to set it down again, gasping. “Woo, okay, so that was tough as heck. It might be possible to get to the point where I can lift it, but that would take a lot of dedication on just muscle training. Blargh. I’ve never seen just weight lifting as nearly as important as sparring or learning new styles. I should be able to do some work in that area, though.”

Seeing this solidified in Jon’s mind, Ranma was indeed some kind of oriental hero, and he decided to be blunt about it, asking, “So what’s your name?” Ranma looked at him quizzically, and Jon shrugged. “Your hero name, I mean? I doubt I’d know it if you only operate in Asia, but I might.”

“Heh, Kara said something about me being a hero before. Japan and the rest of Asia really don’t have heroes like you’re thinking of. We have wandering martial artists like me, although, I’ll admit that kind of thing is really rare these days. Most martial artists of any skill have settled down in one place, teaching crowds of students, letting their skills fade or just waste away. Sad. But not what is gonna happen to me. I’m nowhere near where I wanna be in the Art yet, heck, I don’t think I’ll ever be satisfied just stayin’ where I am.”

Ranma shrugged his shoulders, then gestured over to a nearby barn. “Now come on, let’s go see your old tractor.”

Jon nodded and led the way over to the secondary barn, the one he used for spare parts and old equipment. Hearing that, he was more confident than he was before about trusting Ranma, despite Ranma turning down the idea of his being a hero. As he watched him and Kara joke around with one another, Jon could tell the boy had a certain charisma, an easygoing air of friendliness and openness that was fun to see.

Moments later, he became more impressed with Ranma’s actual skills, as he easily took apart the old tractor, not asking questions about how it had been broken, even with the fist-sized warped area set into the side of it. That was why they had never gotten rid of it, the damage being too difficult to explain away. And then, admittedly, Jon had forgotten about it, much like a lot of the other junk in this particular barn, or up in their attic.

With Kara’s willing help, it took the trio about an hour to pull the parts needed out, and then Ranma walked her through fixing the cylinders in the engine block, after which Ranma got to work, repairing or replacing parts in the tractor. That took a bit more, as he wanted to test each part that had been jostled or dented, and the actual housing had to be straightened out, cracks melted back into one piece before being reshaped, and the axle repaired, the brakes replaced, and several other smaller bits straightened out or otherwise repaired.

When it came time to start the engine up, however, the tractor purred, and Jon cheered, clapping Ranma on the shoulder. "Well done, Ranma! That was an excellent job, both of you. Now, I need to head out to get at least some of the harvest in today. Ranma, you've seen where we store the broken equipment. See what you can do. Kara, you've got work to do, too. No idle hands on this farm."

"Right, Uncle Jon," Kara answered, ignoring Ranma's mutter of wanting to spar first.

Both of them were silenced a second later as Ranma's stomach growled like a full pride of angry lions. That, combined with Ranma's embarrassed expression, caused Kara to collapse into peals of laughter. "Ahahahaha!!!"

"Oy!" Ranma mock-snarled. "Stop making fun of me, or else I will tickle ya into unconsciousness!"

"I, hahaha, I'd like to see you try, Ranma," Kara giggled, before yelping as she felt fingers poking her back and side. Not hard enough to bother her or tickle, but enough to shock her out of her laughter, and she flushed a bit, realizing with a start that a boy had just touched her for the first time since she was a young girl back on Krypton and had played with some of the other children in a park. "Wh, how?"

"Hah! Not so fast, are you?" Ranma taunted, having crossed the intervening distance within a heartbeat and gotten close enough to touch Kara and away before she could react. *Her reaction time and situational awareness need work.*

Kara growled and flexed her fingers. "You know what? That spar idea of yours sounds like a good idea now."

"Here now, none of that. There's work to be done," Jon shouted from his perch in the tractor. "Kara, get the wheelbarrow. You still need to help repair those furrows you made the other day. Ranma, if you can keep your hunger under control for a few more hours, you can join us for dinner. My Martha always makes too much, so you can eat something then."

Sighing, Ranma kept his thoughts about Jon being a spoilsport to himself. A spar sounded a lot more fun than working on whatever old farming tools Jon wanted repaired. Still, he understood that Jon wanted to get to know him better, and nodded, pushing back his martial arts madness for the moment. "Sure. Should I prioritize farming equipment or something else?"

"If you know your way around leather, there are several bridles and so forth in there. Start with them as we're down to our last sets. Then move on to the spare thresher, the dozer and the various equipment. There's also a radio that broke just the other day, though it might be easier to repair than some of the rest," Jon suggested.

Kara's guilty expression told Ranma what had happened there, but instead of teasing her, he just nodded and headed into the barn.

OOOOOOO

When Martha Kent came out of the house that evening to fetch Jon and Kara for dinner, she had expected many things. She had anticipated Kara accidentally tearing the steering wheel out of the tractor and the two being late to come in because of it. Clark had done that twice, and he'd had the advantage of having learned to drive before that. Martha had predicted that Kara might accidentally put her foot through one of the pedals. Clark had done that once.

She had maybe thought that the darling girl's hay fever could have acted up at the worst possible moment. Clark never had that issue, thankfully, but it wouldn't be the first time Kara's sneezing caused trouble since she came to the farm.

Martha had not expected to find her husband leaning against the side of one of their horses, as animal and man watched an Asian-looking boy working to bend what looked like a few nails into a long spike. This he then used to poke at the interior of the radio Kara had accidentally broken the other day. Kara was also there, tying a feed bag around the horse's neck.

As Martha walked up, the Asian youth pulled his makeshift tool out of the radio, closed its side and pressed the power button, the previously rubber button having seemingly been replaced by a wooden peg. Instantly, the radio started belting out a song from the local country music channel, causing the boy to grimace and turn it off. "Okay, it's fixed, though I need to screw its side in place, but this thing stays off unless you all tell me a channel where they actually play good music."

"And what would be good for you then, youngster, some of that disgusting Korean stuff I've heard is all the rage in the cities on the West Coast?" Jon scoffed.

The young man snorted back. "I don't like that stuff either, old man, don't stereotype. Most of that stuff is either girl bands or the boy equivalent. That's not my style. Rock and Roll is, like I told you earlier."

Nearby, Kara had already turned away from the two men and was waving her hand at Martha. "Aunt Martha, meet Ranma. Ranma, meet Aunt Martha. We think he's an Asian superhero who's on a vacation, even if he won't admit it."

Ranma rolled his eyes but bowed from the waist to the older woman, as Martha had seen Asians do in some action movies to their elders. Since Jon had just agreed to tell him some war stories his father had passed down, and both he and Kara had told Ranma about Martha's cooking, Ranma was going to be on his best behavior. "Good afternoon, Mrs."

"You call her Mrs., but me old man. What's up with that?" Jon muttered, rolling his eyes as he stepped forward to give his wife a kiss on the cheek. "I take it dinner is ready, dear?"

A loud growl caused Martha to yelp, but Jon and Kara just began to laugh as Ranma sheepishly rubbed his stomach. "Er, sorry. My master decided it was time for it to be fed a while ago and has been denied for a few hours now."

Calming down, Martha chuckled at that, amused by the young man who seemed to have a good sense of humor and was good with his hands, if nothing else. *His presence, however...* She looked at Kara, one eyebrow rising, about to ask about that as Ranma said, "And I told you, I'm not a hero. I'm a martial artist. There's a difference."

"Like what?" Kara snorted. "I mean, all the stuff you said you can do, the stuff about dealing with monsters and rivals, that sounds like you're a superhero to me. You even said a wandering martial artist is like a hero in Asia."

"She's got you there, son," Jon snickered, causing Martha's eyebrows to rise. Looking at her husband, it seemed as if he had taken a liking to the young man, which was admittedly a point in his favor, regardless of his finding out about Kara's secret.

"I don't go out of my way to pick those fights or look for them. If I see a crime and it's the kind that hurts someone, sure, I'll step in and protect 'em. It isn't my job to protect everyone from crime, not unless the people can't do it themselves. I don't have supervillains after me, and I don't deal with anyone who wants to conquer the world. Most of my opponents come to me because they had a beef with me personally or my Pops, thought I had something they wanted or just wanted to prove that there were stronger than me. I'll admit the undead a-ho I recently helped to deal with were a different story but there I was doing bodyguard duty."

Ranma shrugged. "Beyond that, a hero has to be held to a certain code of rules and regulations, as well as the laws of whatever nation he's living in. I follow my Code, and I created it personally. I don't bind myself to any law unless I think it makes sense. And I really don't care a toot about fitting in or secret identities."

While that was quite a deep comment, oddly so to Kara, who began looking at Ranma with narrowed eyes, Martha had her mind on something else right now. Specifically, Ranma's presence there.

"With all this talk about heroes and such... why am I getting the impression that some secrets have come out which shouldn't have?" Martha nearly growled, looking at a suddenly wincing Kara. "Kara..."

"I, I couldn't help it, the tractor, I sneezed, and he was right there, and um..."

"And what were you doing when he saw you?"

"I, I was flying..." Kara admitted, hangdog.

"Young lady, honestly! We have told you time and time again, don't just fly around all the time! Who knows who could see you!?" Martha continued in this vein for several minutes until her husband interrupted.

"Now now, it's not like we can go back and change the past, honey. And so far, Ranma seems to be somewhat of an odd duck himself," Jon joked, winking at the young man, whose work ethic, at least, he had come to respect, despite Ranma's fixation on the martial arts. That wasn't quite the same thing as trusting him with Kara's secret, but it was a step in the right direction, and Ranma had at least already seen to all the leatherwork for the horses, a chore Jon had not been looking forward to, on top of fixing the radio.

"I suppose, but you're still in the doghouse, young lady," Martha grumbled. "I think a loss of TV privileges and taking away some of those fantasy novels you like will serve as punishment."

"Yes, Aunt Martha," Kara answered meekly. "But um, can Ranma, that is..."

"Ah, that's true." Martha turned to almost glare at Ranma just as much as she had Kara. "I suppose we should keep you around for a few days at least, Ranma, just to get to know you. I'm sure you're a nice enough boy, but that's a different thing than trusting Kara's secrets to you." *And I don't know what we're going to tell Clark. Someone finding out about Kara so randomly is just horrible luck!*

"I already promised to keep it a secret." Ranma shrugged, tossing off the promise like it didn't matter to him, which it really didn't, before going on in a wheedling tone of voice, "But I was told dinner would be in the offering, too..."

"Hah, you have a one-track mind, you know that?" Kara snorted, recovering some of her sass.

"Hah yourself, I'll have you know I have a three-track mind. Eating, having fun and martial arts. And what have I said about making fun of me, huh?" Ranma mock-threatened.

"Oh, please, I'm ready for you this time, I..." That was as far as Kara got before Ranma was in her face, and she barely dodged the finger coming towards her nose. Her eyes narrowed, and she shook her head. "Okay, you're kind of fast..." *Geez, he's not as straight-ahead speedy as Clark but he is **quick!***

"Kind of fast, is it?" Ranma snorted, bringing up his hands as he started to channel ki into his arms. "This time I'll really try then."

“Bring it!” Kara snorted, then she was dodging as Ranma closed the distance again, his arms going so fast Kara was having trouble tracking them.

Staring between them as they began to dance around one another, Martha thought that, despite the danger Ranma knowing about her powers represented, seeing Kara opening up like this was nice. *Especially to a young man, given the disaster that was Kara’s first impression of the local high school.*

The two of them had gone into school to drop off some of Kara’s built-up schoolwork several weeks back. Martha had insisted that Kara go around and explore the school while she went shopping in town. In so doing, she had met several students, some there for sports training, others for makeup classes, both boys and girls.

While Martha didn’t know what had happened, Kara had met Martha in the parking lot looking as bewildered, bothered and alone as Martha had ever seen her. Kara hadn’t told her much since, but it was clear she had developed a certain disdain and wariness towards normal teenagers and had become far more reluctant than before to put in the work needed to go to school. It was very plain that Kara, a teenager of an entirely different and far more advanced society, didn’t have much in common with the normal human teenager. Martha wanted to put some of that down to normal teenage angst, but she also knew that Kara was a very different person compared to Clark at the same age, and she wasn’t certain that Kara would ever be able to be happy and fit in at the same time.

Shaking such thoughts off, Martha looked around, then frowned, looking back at Ranma. “Where’s your bike, young man? Or your car, I suppose, if you can drive, you look old enough to have a license.”

Ranma shrugged his shoulders. “Eh, I might like to get a motorbike eventually. They’re kind of cool, but I don’t actually need one. I can run faster over longer distances than most bikes can go, and I can keep going way beyond the point where they’d need to stop for gas. Besides, just driving would be boring, so I’ve spent most of my time in America running along on my own two feet.”

That caused Martha’s eyes to widen in surprise, then narrow, and she looked over at Jon for more of an explanation, but it was Kara who spoke up. “That’s part of why I think Ranma’s idea of what a martial artist is matches up more to the American idea of heroes, Aunt Martha. Above and beyond his speed and other physical abilities, he can do things with this ki stuff that are just amazing. Ranma, show her that ki space thing.”

“Kara! We were just talking about secrets! I don’t know what we should do about his learning your secrets. Just because you keep his is not enough of a guarantor of safety.”

“Wait, what? I don’t keep most of my abilities a secret,” Ranma interjected, reaching into his pocket and pulling out two tubs of ice cream that should never have been able to fit in

there, setting them down in front of a now goggle-eyed Martha. "I've never tried to hide what I can do. The trick is to just, well, not care about other people's opinions. I know it sounds egotistical, but there you go. And you can consider these offerings in exchange for dinner."

"That might be fine for you. From what you're saying, you're something of a drifter, so I rather doubt you have any family that could be targeted by criminals. Other heroes do," Martha shot back sharply, pushing through her shock at what Ranma had just done, while Kara was staring at his pockets in some shock.

Ranma's eyes went flat and cold at that as Kara turned her attention to the ice cream, reaching down to pick up one of the ice cream tubs. She then took her hand away, shaking it out, her blue eyes lighting up with scientific interest. *That thing is chilled like it had been shot into outer space! I am getting more and more interested in this whole ki thing.*

"Well, if anyone went after my mom, then they would learn that I'm not a hero, like I've been saying. I'm a martial artist. And if I'm pushed to it, I'm not going to hesitate to pull out the lethal card. It isn't a card I'm all that happy about using, regardless of circumstances, but that doesn't mean I won't if I have to," Ranma said, his eyes going hard for a moment, before he snorted. "And as for my Pops, he can handle himself. What he can't fight, he can get away from."

John nodded in satisfaction at that, understanding what Ranma meant by that, and seeing that he put quite a bit of thought into that response. Kara looked a little put-off but eventually nodded. She'd spent the last year and a bit with the Amazons, and they had taught her that sometimes, killing was unavoidable. Indeed, she remembered a lecture from the queen about that.

"While your abilities and strengths mean that killing can be far too easy for you, Kara, that cannot mean that you shirk from killing if you must. I know this is a sad thought for one so young, but you chose to become a warrior when you decided to use your great powers to defend those weaker than yourself, as my daughter did. Sometimes, that means that you need to kill, Kara. Your powers can give you greater options where regular Men or even Amazons would be forced to it, but eventually, you will be faced with no other choice. Never take delight in the death of your enemies, but do not let the horror of causing death stop you when, in doing so, you can save the lives of others," Hippolyta had said at the time.

Well, that and a lot of other things. That conversation had been one of the hardest Kara had ever been a part of, but looking back on it, she felt it might have been one of the most important, too. *I know Clark bends over backward not to cross that line, and I know why, but the queen had a point, too. Sometimes, taking someone's life to save someone else is inevitable.*

"... Well, regardless, it's best you come in and clean up before dinner, or it'll get overcooked before we sit down. Thank you, Ranma. The ice cream will be a welcome treat. Haha, we'll actually have to eat one of those tubs tonight whole, as I don't have space in the

fridge for both,” Martha said, deciding to keep observing the young man in front of her, before getting on the phone with Clark, as she had honestly been thinking about doing earlier. Only Jon’s approval of the youth had stopped her.

That and Kara’s interest in him. That conversation just now had gone in some strange direction, but it had given her more of an insight into Ranma’s personality, and while Martha couldn’t say she approved of everything she saw, she did approve of enough for now to not bring down the big hammer.

Despite the tension on Martha’s face and the somewhat hangdog look on Kara’s as she sat across from him, Ranma smiled happily at the vast spread of country food that waited for them on the kitchen table. *Well, it looks like one stereotype about farmers is accurate, and it’s the best one: country folk believe in large meals.*

As the meal went on, his fulsome praises for Martha’s cooking seemed to do just as much as the actual conversation to wear down her attitude to him from wary welcome to pleasant. That conversation centered around Ranma’s education, what he was currently doing and how he and Kara had met in greater detail. The fact that he had somehow stopped the majority of the falling tractor’s momentum midair astonished Martha and Jon both, while the fact Ranma didn’t have any desire to go on to college bothered them.

“What would your parents say about that young man?” Martha admonished when that came up.

“Eh, my mom knows and approves. There isn’t anything I want to learn that can be taught in college. As for my old man, he’s the one who taught me to put The Art above everything else,” Ranma shrugged. “As horrible as some of his teaching methods were, I took that lesson to heart.”

“Well, if you’re not a hero now, you could be one in the future, right?” Kara mumbled between bites of her chicken, which Martha admonished her for.

Ranma shook his head at that. “What is up with you and pushing the whole hero thing? I realize you’re probably gonna be one or are already one or whatever. But it doesn’t seem all that great a gig to me. I mean, I don’t really have a problem with superheroes, not most of them anyway. They seem to do a lot of good. But it isn’t for me, always needing to be on call, to keep your real personality hidden, follow all the local laws and so forth.”

Ranma went on, waving his hands to either side of him as Kara had earlier, trying to lighten the subject. “And come on, have you seen what some of them wear? I know that sounds really girly, but seriously. For example, that Superman guy wears his underwear outside his pants! Why has no one told him that’s not right?”

This worked, as Kara burst out laughing while Jon and Martha both winced, remembering their own discussions about their son's choice of superhero apparel. Seeing that, Ranma decided to keep going. "And then there's that Robin kid, who apparently goes around sometimes with Batty-mc-scary? Don't get me started on what he wears. The boy looks like a freaking clown! And who chose the name Robin, anyway? That's about as terrifying as a toddler going 'oogah, oogah' at you."

While Ranma hadn't run into Robin during his time in Gotham, thankfully for both of them, he had seen some images taken of the youth occasionally as he battled alongside his mentor. "If he's supposed to be showing that Batboy has a warm and fuzzy side to him, it doesn't work. It just makes me wonder about letting a fully grown guy go around putting a young boy in that kind of outfit and then having sweaty spandex-clad fun with him."

By this point, Kara was smacking the table, barely remembering to keep her strength in check as she guffawed. "Oh, God! Do people really see Superman and Batman like that? That's hilarious!" As she got her chuckles under control, however, she muttered, "And definitely makes me rethink some aspects of my costume."

Ranma heard her, but, very politely, did not inquire further, even though it followed his guess that she was a hero or would become one in the future.

At that point, the conversation shifted to how Ranma had learned to be so handy and what he could do around the farm. Martial Arts Construction got a raised eyebrow, but with Jon and Kara both telling Martha about how well Ranma had repaired the tractor and the road, she believed it and mentioned several things around the house that could use a look.

From there, Martha mentioned Kara and her reading, and it came out that while Ranma spent barely any time reading, when he did, his choices were similar, with high fantasy and science fiction dominating. From there, Jon and Ranma got into an argument about if AC/DC or Led Zeppelin was better while the two ladies rolled their eyes. Then Martha and Ranma talked about cooking, of all things, with Ranma once more praising her food.

As the meal began to end, Martha was surprised to realize that she had almost completely forgotten the elephant in the room, the fact that this young man knew Kara's secret. Just then, though, the alarm on Ranma's cell phone went off, and Martha looked up, frowning a little. She didn't like things that interrupted mealtimes, but Ranma was a newcomer, and she could make allowances for a first offense.

Before Martha could say anything, Ranma spoke. "Sorry, but with the time difference, I had to set up an alarm on my phone to tell me when I could call my mom."

Martha's frown turned into a smile at that, while Jon also nodded, having heard a bit about Nodoka already. "I take it you're close to your mother? Given how you mentioned her before, I had thought so, but..."

“Hah, yeah, well, with my old man, it’s a no-brainer as to the parent I’m closest to. Like I told Jon, I respect my Pops, but I don’t want him within punching range. I mean, the whole reason why I was doing that bodyguard job I mentioned before was because the Japanese government bought out all of the debt my Pops had created in our name and ordered me to do it. And that was a big freaking number. Worse, the money angle is the least of the issues he’s caused.”

“Ouch,” Kara winced, as did the married couple, before Martha gave Ranma the go-ahead to call his mother.

When he called, Ranma’s naturally switched to Japanese. “//Hi, Mom. Are you sure it’s all right for me to call you so early? I know it’s, like, seven o’clock or something over there--//”

“//Ranma, you should know it’s fine. I’d also urge you to work on your math more; it’s eight here. Regardless, I’m always happy to speak to you, whatever the time of day//” Nodoka interrupted him firmly. “//It isn’t as if I’m doing anything in my old age.//”

“//Ugh, what’ve I told ya about calling yourself old, Mom? You’re still good-looking enough that if you wanted to, you could find yourself a guy... hopefully one who isn’t martial arts mad or a sleaze who will mysteriously disappear if I think he isn’t good enough for you and gives him the shovel talk,//” Ranma shot back.

Ranma also knew that Nodoka’s comment about not having anything to do was false as well. Nodoka was a dojo master herself, teaching kendo. In fact, in terms of kendo skills, she was actually a lot better at sword-swinging than Kuno had ever been in Nerima.

“//Flatterer. But what have you been doing, Ranma? Are you still traveling across America?//”

“//Yep. Um, in fact, would you mind if we spoke in English? I know you can speak it, but if it makes you uncomfortable or something, we don’t have to. It’s just I’m kind of in the middle of dinner with this farming family named the Kents. I’ve been helping out today, so they are putting me up for the night, and I don’t want to be rude.//”

“//Oh, that’s perfectly fine! In fact, if you think you’re being rude just talking to me like this, you can put the phone on video call. I don’t mind.//”

Ranma didn’t do that just yet, but he did switch to English so that the others at the table could follow what he was saying. “Thanks, Mom. Given the meal I just got fed, I didn’t really want to come off as rude. Mrs. Kent here cooks as good as you or Kasumi, if in a very different style.”

“//My word, that is high praise indeed coming from a gourmand like you,//” Nodoka teased. Then she abruptly changed the subject, startling Ranma as he was about to take a bite. “//But are you staying with this family? Do they have a daughter your age? Is she cute?//”

Ranma coughed, shaking his head as the food went down the wrong tube for a moment, switching back to Japanese as he flushed, trying not to catch Kara’s eyes across the table. “//Mom! I’ve told you; I’m not interested in that kind of stuff.//”

“//I never mentioned stuff, Ranma, I was just asking if they had a daughter, that’s all//” His mother said, and Ranma could almost picture her teasing smile, despite not having changed the call to a video call yet. “//Is there any reason why your mind jumped to that?//”

She then let off for a moment, continuing in English now. Her accent was much more noticeable than Ranma’s, but her words were clear enough despite that. “And if these good gentlefolk have allowed you to stay with them, I would like to thank them. I know you’ve said before that you’re fine with sleeping out on the road, but I worry. Having a roof over your head is simply better.”

Ranma rolled his eyes as if he didn’t quite agree with that, then looked over at Martha, asking, “Is it alright if I put it on video call? My mom wants to thank you all for putting up with me.”

“Hah, she should,” Kara snickered. “Your sense of humor alone makes it a chore.”

“Eh, six out of ten. Your timing is perfect, but you should have said it in a deadpan tone. And it would have hit harder if ya hadn’t been laughing at my jokes before I called Mom,” Ranma snarked, causing Kara to snort.

“That’s perfectly fine, Ranma,” Martha answered, smiling brightly. Seeing Ranma’s changing body language, Martha had already gotten a small sense of what this woman was going to be like, and it would be very interesting to learn more.

A moment later, Nodoka’s voice rose from the cell phone that Ranma had set beside his plate while he went back to finishing his food. Her image appeared a moment later, smiling out at the Kents, taking in all of them as Ranma aimed the phone at Martha and Jon.

“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Kent. I would like to thank you for putting up with my son. I know his manners aren’t the best, something I tried my best to change since he and I found one another again, but it is an uphill battle, unfortunately. That dratted martial arts trip his father took him on taught Ranma so many bad habits it isn’t even funny to contemplate. I can only thank the other masters he met on the road for letting him retain what sense of normality that he has, let alone his sense of decorum and general manners.”

Ranma scoffed, shaking his head. "Mom, come on. I know my Pops really shouldn't have taken me away for so long, and we should have kept up communicating with you, but there was a point to it. Without that training journey, I wouldn't be nearly as good as I am. I've studied under dozens of masters, and sure, they taught me manners and things. Especially O-sensei. But what they taught me about the Art is more important. I've also seen parts of the world I never would have otherwise and..."

"And made enemies in several of those places," his mother interrupted, scolding him lightly.

At that, Ranma paused, seeing as there really wasn't anything he could say since that was more than true. For every group he made friends with, he'd made enemies too. The Musk and Phoenix tribes were certainly no friends of his, and while he'd made peace with Ryoga eventually, there was Taro, Kumon and a certain elephant-riding prince to consider.

"Oh, it's quite all right," Martha said, smiling happily. "Young Ranma's been a good help around the place already and has volunteered to help repair some of our appliances and things that haven't been working as well as they should be, to say nothing about some other handyman projects around the house."

"And maybe put up a new barn, which will be more fun," Ranma admitted, smirking at Kara. "I'll teach you some training exercises I can do when we work on that."

"You're on," Kara smiled, looking forward to spending more time with her new acquaintance, despite having already spent half the day with him.

On the phone's screen, Nodoka's eyes lit up, while Martha smiled at Kara's competitive nature, shaking her head. She winked at the other woman, then reached out and carefully turned the phone so that Ranma and Kara appeared in it. "As I was saying, Ranma's been a help around the place already, especially in picking up young Kara's mood. She has been moping around the place for the past few weeks. Your son's arrival seems to have perked her up quite a bit."

"Aunt Martha!" Kara stammered, understanding what the older woman was implying despite her admitted lack of social understanding regarding humans. "It's not like that! And I'm not bored around the place, I'm just... just..."

"Bored with your schoolwork, dear, and somewhat frustrated about your cousin's plans for your future? I understand, and we haven't called you out on it, but even you have to admit that you are more lively today than you were yesterday or the day before, when you just sort of went through the motions of helping Jon and then retreated to your room when you got the chance to stare at the ceiling. This has been a nice break for you from worrying about the coming school year and your fellow students."

Kara pouted a bit and deliberately turned away, looking over at Ranma. "So who's Kasumi, Ranma? You mentioned Akane before, but not Kasumi."

Seeing that, Martha chortled and went back to talking to Nodoka as Ranma shrugged. "She was the oldest of the Tendo sisters I mentioned. And the fact I didn't mention her more is kind of a sign. Kasumi is a nice girl, but she didn't really have a, well, a personality, you know? I couldn't tell ya if that was natural, or if she had just been fit into the mold of the whole housewife surrogate mother kind of thing too early."

"Ugh," Kara shivered. "The very idea of that disturbs the hell out of me."

"Too right on that. The strangest thing is, I lived there for two years and beyond her daily duties and the fact that Kasumi had a lot of books in her room, I couldn't tell you a thing about what she did when she wasn't working around the house. I could also count the times she wasn't smiling that little peaceful motherly smile on one hand. So weird."

"So, you think this training journey is why you're faster and stronger than normal people?" Kara quickly changed the subject, shivering at the very idea of being forced into a mold so hard that it was all that was left.

She wondered idly what Martha and Nodoka were talking about, but set that aside to ask Ranma more questions about his training, hoping to learn some of the techniques he had shown her. The ki space looked amazing, for certain, something she definitely wanted to learn. "What kind of training did you do? Are there any specific exercises you think could help me?" Kara questioned, deliberately reusing the words Ranma had used back when he commented on her strength.

Ranma smirked, having already noticed that, while she was super strong and possibly superfast, Kara's reaction time didn't seem as well-trained as it should be. *Whatever else, her brain is closer to human-level than her physical abilities when it comes to taking in information.* She could move her body fast enough to react to a lot, but it seemed to take her mind a moment to tell her she should.

Better for him, Kara seemed to also have a slightly inflated view of her invulnerability if her earlier reaction was any indication. "Yep. Heh, actually, there's one we can do just sitting here."

So saying, Ranma held out his hands, flat towards Kara. "This is a simple game for training your reaction speed. Slap my hand before I can dodge or slap your hand in turn."

Kara's eyes narrowed, but she held out her hands in turn like Ranma was doing as Jon watched on. Kara's hand flashed, faster than Jon could follow, but Ranma had already pulled his hand out of the way, and his fingers tapped down on the back of her hand as it passed where his own had been a moment ago. "Better luck next time."

He then was suddenly holding a pair of chopsticks, twirling them in between his fingers. "This is another one, see if you can grab the chopstick out of my hand. I won't try to do anything but dodge."

Kara's eyes narrowed in concentration, and both hands came into play now. Her hands flashed this way and that, trying to grab the chopsticks out of Ranma's hand as he moved them around, avoiding her with a lazy little smile on his face that seemed to act like a goad, infuriating Kara further.

"I think that's enough to show ya what my training can offer," Ranma smirked as the chopsticks smacked into the back of her hand. "Like I said, you need to work on your reaction time," he said dryly, and her scowl deepened further.

"Children, not at the table," Martha interjected now, interrupting the proceedings as she held in a chortle with difficulty.

She twisted the phone so the camera faced the youngsters, as Ranma decided to throw his Pops under the bus once more. "Eh, at least I waited until near the end of the meal and didn't make the food the target. When I was younger, I would go hungry if I wasn't fast enough. Here, I figured that would be a waste of good food."

"And where is your father now?" Jon asked, scowling at the idea of someone making their son go hungry like that. Indeed, every time the man had come up in the conversation had made Jon dislike him more. This was just the final straw. "I just want to talk... with my shotgun as a translator. Lead is the universal language."

Ranma shook his head. "I got no idea, and I don't want to know. The Japanese government had me doing odd jobs related to bringing in a few criminals and bodyguarding Lara, like I told ya. I have no clue what they had in mind for Pops to work off his debt."

Turning back to Kara, he turned the conversation back to the original topic. "But anyway, there are lots of little games like that we could play to help you train up your hand-eye coordination better."

"My hand-eye coordination is perfect!" Kara protested.

"Nah, see, that's where most people get it wrong. Speed in doing whatever you're doing isn't really hand-eye coordination. It's doing what you want to do the instant you think it. Reaction time is the key, like I said."

When Ranma and Kara returned to their own discussion, Nodoka asked quietly, "Martha-san, I hate to presume, but I don't suppose Kara-chan is single, is she? Only, I would love Ranma to settle down with a nice girl, and Kara seems a good sort. And you said he seems to bring something out in her despite having just met."

Martha cackled. Well, she wouldn't call it a cackle, obviously. But Jon, who was still working on his own ice cream, certainly would call it a cackle and a darn good one, too. "Nodoka, my dear, you and I are going to get along just fine. I don't know if I'll go that far just yet, but I like the side of Kara that your Ranma has pulled out. Now, what was that recipe you mentioned before? Oh, and what are those terms you added to our names?"

At the other end of the table, Ranma shivered, looking around as he wondered aloud, "Why the heck am I getting a number twenty shiver?"

"Number twenty?" Kara questioned, trying hard to hide a blush behind one hand. She had heard Nodoka's question, as well as Martha's response and had watched Martha's expression as she spoke. *We just met, for goodness' sake!*

"Oh yeah, a number twenty shiver, maybe a twenty-one. Someone just walked over my grave, but in a totally non-threatening manner. Just in a way that will make my life more complicated. That shiver's one of the weirder ones."

As Kara gave Ranma a disbelieving look, Jon stood up and began to clear the table, a frown crossing his face as a thought occurred to him. "Ranma, you haven't explained why you're here in the US. You explained what you were up to now, but not how you came to be in the US in the first place."

Ranma shrugged. "I was bodyguarding this investor scientist guy. Honestly, looking back on it, I couldn't tell ya which he was. He mostly acted like an investor when I knew him, and was kinda snooty too. But he seemed to understand much of the science behind what he was investing in and spoke to the scientists as equals. So, I got no idea. Anyway, he was going to be in Gotham for that, and the government had decided that city was so dangerous they needed to assign me to him as a bodyguard."

"Bah, knowing what I know of Gotham, that makes a lot of sense to me," Jon grumbled. "Honestly, the amount of crime there despite the local heroes' work is insane."

"I saw on the news recently that the Joker died, so maybe that will help the overall level of crime. It's to be hoped, anyway," Martha sighed, having listened to this conversation with half an ear, shaking her head and turning from her ongoing talk with Nodoka for a moment. "I could never live in a city at all, but Gotham would be my absolute last place to even visit, despite the architecture there being something to see, apparently."

"Er... yeah," Ranma decided not to go into detail, lest the Kents be Batboy fans. "Anyway, eventually, my work with him was finished, so I left him as he boarded his personal jet."

"You didn't want to go back to Japan?" Jon was confused and a bit appalled. "You made that kind of a decision on the fly like that?"

Ranma shook his head. “Nope. Oh, I thought about visiting my mom, but I was honestly kind of worried the government stooges would’ve tried to rope me into something else. Or some other trouble of my Pop’s would’ve come home to roost before I could get away again.”

“Before you ask, Kent-san, I had no problem with him staying in America for a time because of that concern. Indeed, I had two martial arts masters come by recently looking for Ranma and had to point them toward the government. Who, let us be honest, would indeed try to manipulate Ranma for their gain above and beyond their previous agreement?” Nodoka interjected from the phone, ending with a long sigh.

“I’ll head home eventually. Maybe kidnap Mom from her job and run off to see Europe?” Ranma joked, causing Nodoka to laugh, while the Kents all winced at the idea of governmental interference. “In the meantime, I was hoping to see a few sights, maybe learn a few martial arts styles here in America, if any exist that aren’t dumber spinoffs of something I’ve already learned. But mostly, I just wanted to travel. As much as Mom thinks that my Pops and my training journey were bad, I’ve always liked traveling.”

Nodoka sighed melodramatically at that, but so did Kara, her lips twisting into a jealous moue. Ranma caught it and looked at her quizzically, but he didn’t say anything, seeing Kara’s lips shift to press together in a very straight, dangerous-looking line. Instead of poking the bear, he hopped to his feet and joined Jon in cleaning up.

After dinner had been cleared up, Jon and Ranma moved around the exterior of the farmhouse for a bit, with Ranma giving his opinion on some of the wooden boards, the roof, and the exterior lighting. There honestly weren’t any changes there except for one board used right above a second-story window that had begun to curl, showing it hadn’t been dried properly before use. While Jon and Martha ran a tight ship, there were a few areas Jon and Martha didn’t have the expert knowledge Ranma did, and then there was the barn full of inexplicably broken tools and other things that Clark had accumulated.

They did have access to Kara’s ears, though. Kara could tell that a few of the pipes needed replacing, even if she didn’t have enough knowledge to tell when something was wrong unless she mentioned a specific noise and the two experienced farmers recognized it. That was why Martha knew they needed Ranma’s help on the inside of the house.

After getting a far milder lecture about keeping her powers a secret from Martha than she expected, Kara was allowed to head up and take a bath. By that point, Jon and Ranma were done outside and had come in to air out the small guest room on the first floor. That was the first time Jon had been in there in several months, and he frowned, staring upward. “Drat, more warped wood.”

Following his gaze, Ranma nodded. “That looks more like water damage than green wood, though.”

From above them, there was a sound like a 'THUNCRACK!' and Ranma's eyes widened as a portion of the ceiling collapsed downward and hastily began to block or redirect bits of wood away from a shocked Jon. Water from a tub splashed over him at the same time, transforming Ranma into a girl, which was just par for the course in the now-redhead's opinion, as the tub itself crashed down onto the spare bed.

The fact that the falling tub was accompanied by a shout of, "Oh, not again!" and being greeted with the sight of Kara hovering above where the flooring had just collapsed wearing a towel when he cleared his eyes of water was something new. The background song of "I'm a bitch, I'm a lover..." ringing out in the background, was also an odd addition to Ranma's thrice-weekly sudden soaking.

The angle she was falling should have given Ranma a literally to kill-for view of Kara's thin, cream-colored legs. But since this Ranma had lived through Nerima with all his boy bits intact, the now female Ranma quickly turned her head away, shaking her wet hair as she said dryly, "I take it that your issue with the piping was a bit more serious than you thought upstairs? Also, I called that water damage, so hah, hah, hah."

The deadpan female voice coming from below caused Kara to blink, looking down into the hole to see Jon and a strange redhead there, both of them having turned away from her. Letting out an 'eep,' Kara backed away from the hole until only her head was in view, staring down through the hole in the floor, as Jon also rapidly backed away from the redhead, his face slack and stunned.

"W, who the heck are you?" I didn't hear anyone come in, and where's Ranma? Concentrating on her hearing, Kara's brows furrowed as the mystery deepened. I'm only hearing Aunt Martha, Uncle Jon and this girl's heartbeat. What the heck?

"Er, maybe ya should go get dressed and come down before I give that explanation?" Ranma said, still resolutely looking away from the girl, not knowing she had already backed away from the hole out of sight.

While Kara did so reluctantly, leaving the tub to one side of the hole, Jon kept staring at Ranma, and Martha, who had heard all this, joined them from the kitchen where she had been putting away the last of the utensils, having cheerfully been talking to Nodoka the entire time. The two of them got along quite well and were very interested in one another's cooking styles. Martha didn't do much with rice, but she had tried cooking with soy sauce, and both of them enjoyed fried chicken.

Poking her head in, Martha did not seem surprised by the curse, staring up at the ceiling instead. "I told you those floorboards were squeaking when I got into the bath, Jon. As good as Kara is at controlling her strength, sometimes she just steps a little too hard, and that kind of damage accumulates. I don't want to make her feel bad, but..."

"I can replace that easy," Jon and Ranma said as one, the man turning to the redhead, crossing his arms and going on, as Ranma hung her head, "But you will really need to explain what just happened, Ranma."

"Your mother mentioned your curse to me. I have to say I'm not certain I would have believed her if she wasn't so serious," Martha mused, holding up the phone so that Nodoka could see as well, walking around the still bedraggled-looking redhead for a moment as Ranma tied up her hair again after wringing it out. "You are a petite little thing, aren't you?"

And if I'd had curves like that when I was a teenager, I think I would've been a very happy girl. For about a month, maybe, before all the issues with it cropped up, Martha mused internally.

"Curse? Like magic?" Kara asked, walking into the room in her pajamas. This was a flannel outfit with a top and bottom; the bottom was loose around her hips and went down to her ankles. The top covered her just as much, but a few buttons on the bottom were undone, showing a flat, semi-toned stomach and belly button. "You're really Ranma? I suppose that would explain why I can't detect 'his' heartbeat anywhere but what the heck?"

Even though the outfit wasn't all that sexy, for some reason, Ranma couldn't stop herself from flushing a bit as she looked at Kara. *Damn, she makes that look good! Wait, why the heck am I reacting to seeing her stomach and stuff? I've seen way more from Lara, let alone in my time in Nerima.*

From the phone, his mother noticed the redhead's blush and hid a smile behind her hand, saying nothing. Internally, though, she squealed. *YES. My son has a pulse at last. I really was getting worried he was as asexual as his father turned out to be after I got pregnant.*

With difficulty, Ranma locked his eyes on Kara's face, then shifted over to look at Martha and Jon. "Um, yeah, it's magic." She then regained some of her equilibrium, looking back at Kara with an eyebrow rising in query. "Although, I'm surprised an alien girl leaps to that conclusion without me going into a major explanation. It's nice not to have to try and convince ya magic's real on top of the actual curse, though."

In trying to reply to that, Kara was somewhat hampered by the fact that some secrets really were not hers to share, so she simply replied with a bland, "I've run into magic a time or two since waking up here on Earth. It was a shock at first, but I got used to it."

On top of the Amazons, some of Diana's abilities and their island, Clark's run into enemies who use it and magic has proven a huge weakness for us. Thankfully, that was a weakness they had known about well before Kara arrived on Earth, and the Amazons had been very quick to promise Kara a chest plate in the future that she could borrow if she ever ran into a magical enemy. Come to think of it, they never specified how they would get such to me here in Man's World. Huh. Surely, they wouldn't use Lady Diana as a gofer?

On top of that problem, the idea of borrowing such in the first place implied that Kara would have time enough to prepare to do so instead of making it a part of her regular superhero costume, which was a little too warlike for Kara's tastes and her cousin's. The last thing Clark wanted to do was for the pair of them to seem too threatening. Still, for the Amazons, who were decidedly leery of giving out arms and armor, considering what that might lead to if such things fell into the wrong hands, to offer such had been an honor Kara could not refuse.

Shaking her head, Kara turned to her aunt and uncle. "Er, before Ranma explains his curse, I, I'm sorry. I was listening to music, and I wasn't thinking when I put my foot down in the tub I..."

"It's all right, dear," Martha said, shaking her head. "A certain someone we both know ran into some of the same issues when he was younger. You might be having more trouble with it, admittedly, but we understand the reasons behind that."

"And like we were just saying, those wooden slats look warped." Hopping up, Ranma took up Kara's previous position and glanced into the zone between the floors before dropping back down and looking over at Jon. "The bath pipe looks eroded, just like the pipes bringing in water into the house, but this one's been leaking into the area between floors for a while. I can see water stains on at least a dozen unbroken boards."

The older man frowned. "I don't have enough floorboards on hand to deal with it right now, but I was already heading into town in the morning for piping, what's a bit more of that and some wood? Do you have any ideas for reinforcing the floor?"

"Metal crossbars, maybe? An insulating layer between floors, too, but that's more of a major project and would obviously need to cover the whole second floor instead of just the bathroom," Ranma mused. "Beyond replacing the pipes, obviously."

"Er, before any more discussion about that, I'd like an explanation on the curse, please. I know this is my fault, but I'm staring at a petite redhead, where I should be staring at a guy who is taller than me," Kara said, staring at Ranma, as she jumped down to rejoin the others.

Kara stood at five feet six inches. Judging from what she remembered of her mother, she probably wasn't going to grow much more in terms of height but Kara hoped her curves would get better. Ranma's male body was taller than her, whereas his female body was much shorter, and her bust was a bit smaller. The top of Ranma's wet, red hair barely looked to come up to Kara's throat.

Knowing that Ranma was always somewhat annoyed by the need to explain his curse, Nodoka took up the tale from where she was still watching events from the phone screen in Martha's hand. Kara listened to the explanation of the curse with half an ear, staring at Ranma

thoughtfully, high-end mathematics starting to blur through her mind. "Exactly how tall are you in your male form? Do you know your weight in both forms?"

"Er... five feet nine, I think? I might be a little taller now. I haven't checked since before I arrived in Nerima a few years ago," Ranma confessed, wondering where Kara was going. "As for my weight, no idea. I know I weigh more in both forms than I look, though, because of my muscle density."

"And in this form, you're shorter than me. Even if you are almost as busty," Kara murmured. "But fat doesn't weigh as much as muscles. Hmm... I don't suppose I could ask you to weigh yourself?" she finished, a pout on her face. "I know magic is inexplicable, but matter transference like that, the amount of power needed would be incredibly high!"

"I'd be okay with that; but in return, I want a spar with ya. A real one, not just you blocking my tickle attacks," Ranma announced firmly. "I am fine with working around the place, let you all get to know me so ya know ya can trust my word and everything. But I wanna spar at least three times a day as long as I'm here."

Kara snorted. "If you want to be thrashed so often, I will certainly oblige you."

"Hah! I look forward ta showin' ya training beats out raw physicality every time," Ranma retorted, throwing her hair back arrogantly.

"That sounds like a bargain to me, but that is for tomorrow. It's dark out, and indoors is no place for that kind of thing." Martha stepped in quickly, before her lips twitched into a sly smile. "Are you comfortable staying in that form for the rest of the night, Ranma? If you are, I wouldn't mind putting you up in Kara's room for the night, provided you promise not to change back into your male form. It would certainly be more comfortable than in here with that hole in the roof and everything else."

That caused Jon to choke a bit, and he looked at his wife somewhat scandalized. Martha shushed him with a look, while on the other side of the world, Nodoka bit back another giggle.

"Aunt Martha!" Kara blushed heavily. "Whatever Ranma might be now, he is a guy inside... er, right?" she ended more hesitantly, staring at Ranma for a second. "Your preferences or whatever don't change?"

"Kami, no! Why do some people think that? I've never understood where that idea would even come from!" Ranma exclaimed, waving her arms wildly around her. "My mind stays the same for the most part; it's just my body that changes. My taste buds change a bit, I'll admit, since those are a bit of a gray area. There's a reason one of the tubs of ice cream I keep in my ki space is mint chocolate chip. Chocolate is just amazing in this form."

That Kara could honestly agree with. Chocolate had not existed on Krypton, and it had been an **amazing** treat for her when she was woken up from stasis. Right now, though, she had something else on her mind. "See what I mean?" she demanded, looking over at Martha.

"Therefore, you don't trust him?" Martha shot back archly. "Why have you been so friendly then?"

"It's not that I don't trust him. I, I kind of do." *Even though we've only known each other half a day, Ranma seems about as straightforward as a spear, and he's so open and... simple isn't the right word, but I don't know what is. He reminds me a lot of Cassie for some reason, which is weird, but there you are.* "It's just, you're always going on about propriety, right? Just because he turns into a girl doesn't mean he isn't a guy who would be in a girl's room."

Hiding an inner snicker, Martha announced it had been just a joke, before ordering the others to start cleaning up as she bid farewell to Nodoka, handing the phone back to Ranma when she finished. The younger redhead spoke to her mother in Japanese for a few moments before they ended the conversation. "That phone is quite a marvel. Jon and I have been getting by with flip-top phones, but if that is the latest type of smartphone, I might have to budget them in sooner, rather than later."

Kara hid a scowl at that. While Clark was more than willing to send his parents money, they had turned him down every time he offered, not willing to live off him. The Kents were well off, but not rich and it would only take a few bad harvests to really hurt them. Above and beyond what she saw as the pair just being silly, the agrarian economy annoyed the Kryptonian. She knew Earth was extremely primitive by her standards, but to have a significant segment of their economy ruined by something so beyond their control as the weather was bizarre.

"They are fun. I like being able to play games on that one a bit and accessing the Internet too. There are even some apps that let you share your location with people, or figure out where you are on a map," Ranma said before chuckling. "But I'm kind of new to phones too, so don't ask me how that part works. I went most of my life without knowing anything about technology at all. I can repair a car engine, but wouldn't know the first thing about how a computer works."

She then gestured to herself. "Seriously, though, if you all are uncertain you want a young man you've only just met under your roof, I can go sleep in the barn. Or I can stay in this form when I sleep down here on the sofa." The small bed that the Kents kept around for guests had been a casualty of the falling tub, and Ranma had been too busy deflecting debris from Jon to save it. The tub's weight had shattered one of its legs, and the mattress looked like it had been soaked by what water remained in the tub.

Looking in that direction, Kara hastily moved over, lifting the porcelain bathtub, which had somehow survived in one piece thanks to the mattress cushioning its fall. Holding it over

her head, Kara raced out of the room, saying over her shoulder, "I'll clean up the bathroom if you clean the guest room."

Watching this, Martha shook her head, then thanked Ranma for the offer, before requesting he indeed stay in his female form. "As much as I teased her about it, I do think that you staying in that form would be a better idea, as long as you're under our roof," Martha said apologetically. "Until we get to know you better, at least."

While she said that, by this point, Martha honestly felt Ranma was trustworthy based on observations and her talk with Nodoka. There was nothing like talking to a boy's mother to get a feel for his character. However, she knew that Clark would eventually get involved, and since Kara had come on the scene, he had let his male overprotectiveness out at inopportune times. When that happened, Martha wanted to make certain she could honestly tell Clark there hadn't been anything inappropriate about putting Ranma up during his/her stay with them in the easiest way possible.

And yes, I know lesbians are a thing. But Kara's never struck me as one, nor would it occur to Clark, I don't think. Not right away, anyway, Martha admitted ruefully.

Ranma nodded, understanding that Martha and Jon were still concerned about his trustworthiness, still very leery about Kara's secret getting out. "I'm fine with that. It wouldn't be the first time I've spent a night as a girl."

Smiling in thanks at Ranma's words, Martha began helping Jon and the redhead work on cleaning up the guest room. Soon, the room was cleaned up, and Jon and Martha left to watch some TV in the main room. This left Kara, who'd hopped down through the hole, and Ranma alone. The door to the guest bedroom was open, however, and the pair were visible from where Martha and Jon sat on the couch.

Kara took one look at the show the married couple was watching, made a face, and then looked over at Ranma and the chair he had made from the bed's mattress against the far wall. That, plus a series of bean bags he pulled out from his ki space allowed for two chairs or one odd bed, and she walked over to one such bean bag, slumping into it as she said, "Well I'm not tired yet and I have so many questions it's not even funny."

"So long as it isn't about the monthly monster or anything like that, I'm more than willing to play twenty questions," so saying, Ranma slumped into her own seat, kicking her feet out along the floor, smacking them against Kara's.

Kara kicked back, smiling a bit as she remembered times, she and Cassie had sat around at night just like this in Themyscira. "Twenty questions might be underselling it," she admitted ruefully. "I've made a friend here on Earth my own age, but she's not American, and her society is very different than here in the States, so I have a lot of questions about culture, clothing and things of that nature."

She scowled looking away shyly. "I tried to talk to some students who were taking part-time classes over the summer, but... it didn't go so well. Apparently, reading several years ahead is enough to make me a nerd, whatever that is. When I demanded an explanation, no one was willing to explain, and they just kept on going on and on about sports, and how I should go out for a cheerleading team instead of spend time with books, or silly questions about who I thought was more attractive on TV and other junk like that."

She then shook her head, Ranma's earlier words registering. "Wait, what's the monthly monster?"

"A nerd... well, if you're an alien, I suppose our science stuff is a downgrade from what you're used to, so it makes sense ya breeze through it. The term nerd is supposed to be insulting, but honestly, I think it just comes off as if the person using it is jealous of the other person's brains." Ranma shrugged her shoulders, scooting around a bit to get comfortable, before pulling out a deck of cards and doing some tricks with them in her hand as she shuffled them. "As for the monthly monster, that is what I call my period."

"OOohh." Kara grimaced a bit. "Yeah, I can definitely see that. I had barely begun to have my period back on my home planet, but we had these really nifty pills called Zolarathemu that helped a lot with them. When I had my first one here on Earth, it wasn't pretty. Um, I don't think any of us handled it very well; although, my cousin panicking about it was kind of hilarious."

"Yeah. You don't want to talk to a guy about that kind of thing at all, unless you're looking for pity or to freak them out, and this is me saying it," Ranma snorted. "That pill of yours sounds cool. I've heard of some things like that, but I'm always leery about pills and stuff unless I can understand what goes into them."

"I've looked at similar pills here on Earth, and they do have some side effects, and they aren't nearly as effective at controlling the actual bodily changes. That's kind of par for the course when it comes to medicine here on Earth. You all are still giving birth from your body instead of in-vitro for goodness' sake."

Kara began waving her arms wildly to either side, a look of fear on her face. "I was shocked when I saw a pregnant woman for the first time! That was way more astonishing than the chaos the big cities called traffic, but don't get me started on traffic laws. I mean, you have the technology, why are you still building cars for the road rather than the sky? Oh wait, no one could be trusted with that technology, because all of you humans are so primitive you don't care about your own rules! The sign says thirty-five, go thirty-five!"

Kara's minor rant caused Ranma to laugh, and the Kryptonian joined him after a second, showing that most of that had been a joke; although, she'd been very serious about the in-vitro thing. Ranma picked up on that, saying, "I think you'd have a lot of mothers who'd agree with you on that but you'd have to come up with the tech."

At that, Kara's eyes widened and she looked at Ranma in surprise, but Ranma simply shrugged her shoulders. "I'm serious, in a lot of the world, women still have a lot of trouble living through that kind of thing. I've run across a lot of villages in the back country where that's true even in China and South Korea, let alone elsewhere." Ranma then shivered. And only half-theatrically. "Mind you, that ain't ever gonna be something I ever need to worry about personally. The very idea of a guy even touching me, in this form or my normal body, makes me want to both shiver in terror and then tear the spine out of the stupid moron who does it let alone anything else."

The fact that I lost my first kiss to a guy and wasn't allowed to snap his neck like a dry twig still bothers me! Ranma grumbled internally.

Alas for Ranma, even with all of the changes to his training and abilities, his first meeting with Mikado Sanzenin and his kleptomaniac partner had not been a highlight in his time in Nerima, to say the least. On the other hand, Mikado had been forced to eat his food with a straw for several months afterward, and still tended to shriek in fear whenever he saw the color red.

Not being able to follow Ranma's thoughts, Kara stood up abruptly, zooming upstairs so fast she left a gust of air in her wake, and had Aunt Martha shouting, "No flying indoors!" behind her. She was soon back, hastily writing that idea down on a piece of paper. "I think I could actually do that!" she said enthusiastically. "I certainly know enough about stasis pods, and in-vitro technology is an offshoot of that. The trouble would be the embryonic fluid. Figuring out the right chemical balance, that would certainly be time-consuming. I'm more an engineer than a chemist, but still..."

She began to mutter at that point, putting more notes down, but Ranma interrupted her before she could get too deep into it, flicking a bit of debris she and the Kents had missed from the bed at Kara's forehead. It hit, and Kara glared up at him, even though the piece of wood hadn't hurt, obviously. "What?"

"You're the one that wanted to play twenty or more questions. If you're just going to start writing down stuff from a single suggestion I made, tell me and I will find something else to do," Ranma retorted.

Realizing she was being kind of rude, Kara winced, and apologized quickly. "Sorry, I just wanted to write that down quickly before I forgot and then kind of got lost in my own head. Whatever else I end up doing, introducing that kind of technology somehow could be a great idea. But um, like I said, I've got a lot of questions. Um, going by what you just said earlier about not talking periods with men, is there some taboo about talking fashion with them? There wasn't among my race."

She shook her head ruefully. "Frankly, why are there so many differences between men and women in human society? When I was trying to speak to the teens at the local high school,

it almost felt like I was speaking to representatives of entirely different cultures when I spoke to a boy or a girl.”

“Okay, so first I’m not the one to talk about normal high school. I didn’t go to school all that often growing up, like I told ya when I mentioned my training trip with my Pops. When I was in high school in Nerima, not a day would go by without someone trying to attack me, interrupting class by smashing down walls or the door. Freaking Ryoga, almost as bad as Kuno for not caring about his surroundings,” Ranma added under her breath before shaking her head and going on.

“I also really can’t help you much with normal interaction with people, or tell ya the whys about why men and women are so different. That sounds like something you’d need a philosopher for. Heck, even when it comes to normal society, I barely paid attention to cliques, rumors, or anything like that. But I can give you my opinion on culture stuff like clothing and music. I recently got into music myself, like Jon and I were talkin’ about. It’s kind of cool.”

Ranma then pointed at Kara, wagging a finger at her. “Just remember that I’m going to be asking you questions too, you know?”

“So long as I don’t have to answer, that’s cool with me.” Kara tried out using the colloquialism she’d heard so often on Earth, deciding that it made some sense unlike many of the others she had heard since returning to the USA.

Ranma nodded, and completely unsurprising to Kara, the first few questions out of the redhead’s mouth were about her training, what kind of styles she was learning, and if she had any more powers that Ranma had yet to see. The only one she didn’t answer was that last one, simply smirking at Ranma and teasing the redhead with a, “Wouldn’t you like to know?” even if, by this point, only her extreme speed remained a secret, as she’d used her breath and eye beams in front of Ranma already.

In turn, setting aside her questions about culture and clothing and things of that nature, Kara asked Ranma more about where the curse came from. When Ranma explained Jusenkyo, Kara grew worried. The nature of the various curses and the idea of a place so insanely magical worried her. Worse, while the mathematician and scientist in Kara had been amazed before with the amount of energy transference inherent in Rama’s gender change, that was nothing to how horrified she became at the idea of some of the human-to-animal curses. *Where does the mass go!?*

Despite her mind threatening to break as she thought about Jusenkyo, the conversation about fashion was equally interesting for Kara, when they segued into it more than forty minutes later. Between them, Ranma and Kara discovered that she didn’t really like the idea of dresses for the most part. Skirts were okay, so long as they didn’t impede her range of movement, something Ranma deeply approved of. She also preferred lighter, friendlier colors

to the black or dark red that Ranma favored or even the earthy tones she had seen so often on the Isle of Women, with yellow and light blue being her favorites.

Beyond that, both of them quickly realized that Kara didn't care all that much about what was fashionable or not. That was proven as she quickly became bored after asking Ranma only a few questions from a magazine she'd read, and through mutual agreement, they decided to move on.

Questions on culture were a bit different, yet Ranma, as she had said, wasn't as much help so it didn't last as long as the one about colors and so forth. That conversation shifted into talking about anime for a time, the only thing of Japanese culture Kara had seen, before Ranma turned the conversation back on Kara, asking her more questions about her training, seemingly appalled by the fact that she wasn't learning specific styles, rather simply learning how to fight. While that worked to a certain degree, having a specific style you could use or call upon in any situation was more helpful, in Ranma's opinion. There had to be a balance there, just like Ranma had learned there needed to be a balance between his physical and mental training when he studied under O-Sensei.

In turn, Kara raised several dozen questions about Ranma's ki powers, which Ranma answered easily, if not deeply, warning Kara that learning about ki was a lifetime's study and really dangerous, inquiring about Kara's powers in turn. The idea that it came from the sun – an admission that caused the clandestinely listening Martha and Jon to wince - was weird to Ranma.

The redhead's deadpan, "So you're like a kind of super plant person then, aren't you? I mean, it's plants who take in the sun and turn it into other stuff, right?" earned the redhead a pillow to the face, and a laugh from Kara while also setting the two secret listeners at ease despite the silliness of her response.

Eventually, the conversation turned to Ranma's travels, and Ranma, carefully leaving out significant bits, described some of the places she had seen.

At that point, Ranma saw Kara's face fall, and she cocked her head thoughtfully as she looked at the blonde alien. *And isn't it weird to think that aliens look just like cute humans? Weird.* But right now, Ranma had more important things to think of than how strange evolution could be or how oddly attractive a simple set of flannel pajamas could be. "What's up?"

The blonde scowled a little, "It's nothing." Ranma just kept on looking at her, and she sighed. "It's just, I think I'd like to travel to, and not just by flying everywhere, either. I mean really seeing stuff, having fun doing it." *Rather than just traveling for business, I suppose you could say, like Clark does.*

"Why can't you?"

Kara's scowl deepened. "Color me silly--"

"What color would that be?"

Kara lightly kicked Ranma on the leg for his interruption, an attack that would have possibly broken the bone of any normal person, but Ranma simply smirked at it, and she went on. "I mean, but with my powers come obligations. I want to be a hero. That's not a huge secret given you already know about my powers and stuff. But because of that, I also need to understand humanity, and for that I need an alter ego. Other heroes also say alter egos are necessary to unwind too and that my work as a superhero shouldn't consume me."

Like it has Batman, according to Clark, Kara added mentally.

"Ya don't sound so sure about that? About you needing to have an alter ego, I mean."

"Um, I..." Kara looked at Ranma's neutral face and sighed. "I mean I understand why, it just feels as if I'm, I'm setting myself up for a jacket that isn't going to fit now matter how I try to make it fit. I love Aunt Martha and Uncle Jon, and I understand why it has to be like this, why everyone thinks I need an alter ego and everything, but I just don't know if I'm going to ever fit in with normal human society, not after my first fifteen years of life were spent in an entirely different one."

And then I spent a year with the Amazons, which was a great idea, and I'm way better at controlling my strength and way more coordinated than I was for sure. Still, even making friends with Cassie didn't really help me understand what normal is among the rest of mankind.

Kara had been the daughter of two scientists. They weren't warriors or anything like that. Kara had never had a day's martial arts training in her life before coming to Earth. Heck, she had only ever smacked someone once before that if you didn't count childhood squabbles. But there was a big difference between Amazonian culture and normal human culture, regardless of what nation you looked at when you said that.

While the listening Jon and Martha kept quiet with some difficulty at how worried and torn Kara sounded, Ranma looked at her in silence for a moment, then said, "Well, I'm kinda sorry that my talkin' about traveling makes you sad, but if you're asking my opinion on what yer doin'..."

Kara interrupted Ranma, kicking her again on the thigh with a little more power, causing her to grunt, but otherwise not react to a slap that would possibly have caved in a small house. "Drop the hick accent, drat it! You're not fooling me, there's a brain in there, I know it and there's no reason to hide it from me."

Ranma laughed at that and went on in a much smoother American accent, the difference as startling as a New Orleans accent when compared to one from New England. "All

right, I'll drop the accent then. But that doesn't change what I was about to say. If you just want my opinion, I'll give it to you, but I'm not going to try to make the decision for you. It seems to me that too many people are already doing that."

That caused both Jon and Martha to wince unseen in the other room, but Kara merely blinked, then slowly nodded, understanding her point. "Okay, you'll have to unpack that a bit."

"What do you want in life?" she asked bluntly.

Her brow furrowing, Kara looked at Ranma quizzically. "What does that even mean?"

Ranma held up her hand, the hand then flashing toward Kara's face so fast she couldn't dodge again, a finger bopping the blonde's nose. "What do you want in life?" she said again, pulling her hand back just in time to avoid it getting punched by Kara's wildly flailing arm, the glare she gave Ranma causing the redhead to grin cheerily at Kara before becoming serious.

"Seriously, what do you want from life? Earlier, you said you want to become a hero, and you're fine with that, that it's expected that you need to have an alter ego to fit in, so that you could live among normal human beings, get downtime and understand how normal people think or whatever. Personally, I always thought normal is overrated, and in fact, I think you've got the best bits of being normal right here: a loving family, a home overhead and good food."

"How did I know that was going to come up," Kara muttered, rolling her eyes at that last part.

"I'm serious. You've got a home, people who love you, and everything that comes with it. That'll ground your idea of right and wrong and is a great thing to have. I know my own sense of morality is kind of skewed," Ranma admitted, shrugging her shoulders. "But beyond a sense of right and wrong, don't let yourself be tethered by other people's goals or aspirations. Don't be normal if you want to be something else. Don't just go along to get along, that's dumb..." she paused, then smirked. "And might just be Un-American. Mind you, this is a Japanese guy saying it so..."

Kara snorted at that, then questioned hesitantly, "Do, do you really think that's a good idea? I, I'm not a normal human girl. I, I'd be lying if I said most of the other teens I met weren't really boring frustrating, and, and small I suppose in a lot of way. But my family is really certain about this, and so are all of the other heroes they went to for advice about it. I mean, every hero has a normal kind of alter ego."

Of course, the would-be Supergirl didn't know what most of those alter egos were. She had just been told by several of the heroes she had met before being sent to the Amazons had said they had them. The only ones she knew were her cousin and Diana. *And come to think of it, Diana Prince isn't exactly normal. She's a museum security consultant and expert on Greek antiquities. And that last name, good grief.*

“Eh, I can’t say that I know much about that. I sure as heck don’t need downtime since the Art is my passion, and I never take days off. But if ya need one, who says ya need to have a normal one? Why not be a genius girl? Or, if you seriously need time off the clock, ignore what’s happening around you, dye your hair brown, and blend in for a few days. That’s easy.”

“Ugh, you just went from really insightful to sounding really dumb again. Still, you’ve given me a lot to think about,” Kara said, her expression easing for a moment, before she shook her head. “Let’s move on, from the serious talk. Tell me about some of your fights. I know you’re dying to.”

While John and Martha stopped listening so intently to the youngster’s conversation, Ranma grinned and did so quickly, deciding to forgo her own round of questions for now. Several of these pushed Kara’s ability to accept what Ranma was saying. Some were so strange Kara had to call Ranma out, saying they should have become known worldwide. In reply, Ranma simply shrugged her shoulders and said, “How?”

“What do you mean, how? Not a day goes by without some superhero being caught fighting some supervillain on camera, and you have a smartphone yourself. Surely someone would’ve been recording those fights!” Kara exclaimed.

“Technology like that gets broken all the time, for one thing, so few people even had cell phones as far as I know. Beyond that, most of the bigger fights I’ve mentioned happened well away from civilization, so the only people recording would’ve been the people doing the fighting. The ones that did happen where that wasn’t true, well, I suppose I can think of a few fights that should’ve been recorded. My martial arts gymnastics match with Kodachi for one, a few of my fights with Kuno and Ryoga, a few large-scale challenges. But that was in Nerima. That kind of thing was normal there, so why would anyone record it?”

Ranma then smirked at Kara. “The few exceptions to that rule were probably not recorded, though, because people were too busy running away like sensible people. Americans must not have as good survival instincts as Asians do to just stand around and record stuff when super-strong fighters are throwing down.”

Kara twisted that back into culture issues, sharing some of the issues she had encountered since being revived here on Earth. That had Ranma laughing like a hyena occasionally, but Ranma returned the favor with stories of ‘his’ younger years, talking about mishaps this time rather than fights or the places she had seen, which had Kara in stitches.

The talk was interrupted eventually by Martha knocking on the door frame and announcing it was well past the blonde girl’s bedtime. “Ranma, I know I’m not your mother, and I can’t make you go to bed, but Kara is living under my roof, which means my rules. Which means getting up early in the morning.”

"Aunt Martha, you know I don't need that much sleep! Can't I stay up and talk to him, er her, a little while longer?" Kara pouted pleadingly at the older woman. She had occasionally slipped in terms of pronoun use when addressing Ranma, which honestly made Ranma quite happy. After all, Ranma had been telling the truth earlier; regardless of her gender, Ranma was still male in his head.

"For someone who mentioned propriety earlier when I had my little joke on you, Kara, you're awfully quick to want to stay up without a chaperone now," Martha noted, causing Kara to blush but point towards where the very female Ranma was sprawled out on her side of the room, a deck of cards set between them and several cards flung about the place. The two of them had taken to playing random card games while they talked. The fact Ranma couldn't control her face to save his/her life had been hilarious, yet his knowledge of the card games had still let him win occasionally.

"Yes, I know Ranma is a girl, but she can turn into a guy with an application of hot water." Martha softened her face, coming over and giving Kara a hug even as she gently pulled at the girl, indicating she should stand up. "You can keep talking to your new friend tomorrow, dear."

Of course, even if she had tried to pull Kara to her feet and the girl didn't want to go, Kara wouldn't move, and both of them knew it. Yet Kara was a good girl, and shifted readily enough towards the doorway in Martha's eyes, reflecting that yes, Ranma was indeed a new friend. Nowhere near what she had with Cassie, but Kara could sense they might become equally good friends given time. "See you tomorrow, Ranma."

"Yep, I'll be up with the rest of ya, waiting for my first spar," Ranma retorted, her eyes glinting. "I'm interested ta knock that ego of yours down a peg."

Kara rolled her eyes but was still smiling at having made another friend as she exited the guest room.

OOOOOOO

While the Kents were heading to bed, Diana was busy in her own alter ego with Cassie, who was also having a few cultural issues, although not nearly as many as Kara, as Diana had made the simple decision that Cassie would be homeschooled up to the college level rather than enter normal high school like the Kents, or rather, Clark, had decided Kara should. While she understood the logic behind Clark's decision on that point, she felt that Cassie did not require that level of immersion into the local culture.

In fact, Diana didn't want Cassie to have that in the first place. Cassie was an Amazon. She didn't need to be too Americanized. Diana hadn't, after all.

Meanwhile, Clark was in uniform and meeting with Batman in his cave. "I had read the papers, but Joker really died in an accident caused by having his own weapon turned against him? That is, well, a part of me wants to say that's the definition of irony. Another part of me is sad to hear of anyone dying, but if it had to be someone, Joker is most definitely one of the candidates I'd choose. Even Lex Luther has more redeeming qualities than most of your rogue gallery, Bruce. With the exception of Mr. Freeze, maybe."

"I would put Two-Face up there as well, since before his mental break, Harvey was one of the greatest anti-crime lawyers in the city. Which directly led to his new persona," Batman sighed faintly, remembering his old friend Harvey Dent and wishing that he had been there to stop the acid assault that had so warped Harvey, body and soul, from occurring. Having a lawyer who he could trust completely to be on the side of angels would've been a magnificent thing in Batman's fight to clean up Gotham.

Turning back to the conversation at hand, Bruce shook his head. "I am still unhappy with how blasé the young meta-human was, and how little information I can find on governmental computers about him. I've hacked them top to bottom over the past few days, and I could tell you some things about both the Chinese and Japanese governments that could start World War III. I'm not going to tell you which side America would be on, because that would probably depend on how the information came out. But if there's any information to be found on young Ranma, I'm not seeing it."

Bruce let out a short hiss in frustration, running a hand through his hair, which, coupled with the preceding hiss, was a sign of annoyance that Clark had rarely seen in Bruce. "Then there's the way Saotome the younger disappeared entirely. I'm one of the League's best trackers, and even without my electronic devices, there's no way someone should have been able to give me the slip as easily as Ranma did. One moment he was there, the next gone. Could it be a part of his meta-ability? Somehow turning invisible, silent? I've dealt with people who can turn invisible before, and there should have been some means of detecting Ranma, but there wasn't. I just don't know enough."

"That is a bit scary, that someone with this Ranma's combat abilities can disappear like that," Clark mused. "You say he fought you to a standstill?"

Bruce grimaced at Clark's question. "Yes and no. Yes, he fought me to a standstill, but you well understand my physical abilities are only half of my skill set." Clark snorted at that, and Bruce allowed a wry twitch of his lips to appear on his face, knowing how much that was an understatement. "I wasn't prepared to face someone with his speed and power when I showed up to fight the Joker and Harley Quinn. If I had, the fight would've gone differently. Yet to be honest, even if I'd been able to I wouldn't have been able to keep Ranma in prison for long, even if I could have gotten his diplomatic immunity removed."

"But it would have made you feel better," Clark drawled, earning a glare from Bruce. Who, Clark began, he did not disagree.

“So it could be on local computers that are just not hooked up to the general grid? Or just not on computers at all,” Clark mused, turning back to the main subject at hand. “Do you want me to send over some questions to the Daily Planet’s reporters in Japan?” While its headquarters were in Metropolis, the Daily Planet was a worldwide news agency with branches in nearly every first-world country, respected for its adherence to facts over hyperbole. Clark Kent and Lois Lane were among its best reporters, and very well known among their fellows, so if Clark asked, the Japanese reporters were sure to give him something. “I could even go there myself, try to find a backtrail. I even have my cover story ready. The Japanese government recently announced the capture of a supervillain and his trial has already begun.”

“Dragon Man, I know. I was thinking about doing the same thing, but I’m needed here in Gotham. You also have that upcoming mission off-world anyway.” Bruce turned back from his computer to stare up at Clark, feeling both camaraderie towards the man and off-balance at the fact that someone who wasn’t part of his small band of street-level crime fighters was in his cave, a feeling he always felt when Clark stopped by.

But that didn’t mean he welcomed the other superhero any less. Indeed, now, more than seven years after Clark had come onto the scene, Bruce could safely say that the other man was his best friend.

“I’m still worried about that mission. Both the fact that we haven’t gotten as much information upfront about it from the Thanagarians as I could wish, despite the Green Lanterns Corps presentation to the UN, and the fact that you and Wonder Woman are both going along with the Martian Manhunter and Green Lantern.”

“I know, but Doctor Fate and Zatanna are both staying here, and I sent a message to Aquaman. He and his two followers are also going to be staying here, up here on the Watchtower, I mean, ready to act in our places. I could also ask Green Lantern if one of his fellow Lanterns would be willing to swing by, just in case. But these peace talks are important to the whole sector, and if the Corps needs to show a more powerful presentation to keep the peace during the talks, I’m all for helping.”

“The idea of a Lantern coming by to patrol the system is a good one, I suppose, and you’re right, if these peace talks can shut down the wars going on out there, it can only be a good thing on the intergalactic level. Not that it will matter much here on Earth, although the GL Corps offering to add a second ring-bearer to the sector afterward was enticing. They should have offered to have another Lantern step in to replace Hal while he’s gone but it is what it is.”

Bruce’s lips thinned a bit. “And then there’s always your supposed cousin to call on and Diana’s young project.”

The tone of Bruce’s voice told Clark he was still leery of Kara and dismissed Diana’s protégé as well. *Double standard, much, my friend? Or is it the fact that both girls have natural superpowers to go with their teenage minds that bothers you?* Clark mused, shaking his head.

“Kara might be more help than you think. She nearly beat me in a spar a few days ago, thanks to the Amazon training. As for Cassie, the same might be true if she is anywhere near as strong as Diana. Still, we’ll all have those communicators the GL reps made for us. So long as we have access to Hal’s ring, they can reach across solar systems. Getting back here will take longer, but still.”

“That’s the only reason why my objections to all of you leaving were not more strenuous,” Bruce grumbled. Their conversation was interrupted by an alarm and a video appearing on the large computer screen in front of the pair, showing a robbery in progress in downtown Gotham. “Duty calls. Get out of here, Clark. Just remember to check back with us every few days when you’re gone. We’ll be doing the same.”

Clark nodded and was gone by the time Batman slid into the driving seat of his car.

OOOOOOO

Bruce was not the only one contemplating the Joker’s death, and who had caused it. Indeed, it would have appalled and further worried him to know who else was examining that event.

Ra’s al Ghul stared at his chief spy in the New England Territories of America, cocking a wry eyebrow. “Truly, those rumors that the Joker is dead were accurate? I was suspicious of them, given how quickly it was reported in the news and how often that man has been involved in similar events, only to turn up alive. But you’re telling me those rags the locals call news agencies were actually accurate for once?”

“Yes, sir,” his informant said, shrugging his shoulders. “The Joker was connected via DNA to his original rap sheet, back when he was simply Jack Napier. What’s more, his whole gang has begun to come apart. Some of them have gone crazy, acting out horribly, as should be expected, and others going into hiding. A few are laughably even trying to leave the criminal life behind.”

“Excellent, and dare I hope it is perhaps a sign of more to come? Does this mean that Batman is no longer so foolishly allowing criminals to go free when they should rather be slain out of hand?” Ra’s sneered a bit, shaking his head. If there was one thing he hated, it was the idea of people assuming that just because someone was insane meant that they should not be held accountable for their actions.

“It wasn’t the Batman, sir. The Joker was slain by a random bodyguard who was at the party guarding his principal, an investor named Matsumoto, who our Japanese branch has had some interest in. He was being protected by this young martial artist, who turned the Joker’s acid spray against him.”

Ra's blinked, frowning a little. "Truly? As much as I disdain the man, the Joker was a capable fighter for a normal person. His brand of insanity made him extremely unpredictable."

When his informer nodded, Ra's began to laugh quietly. "Magnificent, that is honestly quite hilarious. Can you tell me more about this young martial artist who did the deed? I refuse to think he is some nobody, after all."

"We have the security camera's recordings of the fight, sir. The Joker hadn't bothered to disable them." When Ra's nodded permission, the man worked the controls on a nearby computer for a few moments and an image popped up on a large screen set into one wall.

The video began to play, and a few seconds later, Ra's snapped his fingers quickly, and his operative stopped the video. "Zoom in."

A moment later, Ra's gazed at the image of the young martial artist's face silently for a few fulminating seconds. *The young horse, the wayward youth who was taken back by his father, it can be no other. Fascinating.*

"This youth is known to me. Continue."

The video played out, and Ra's sat in silence, his operative knowing not to interrupt his musings.

Unlike Batman, Ra's had watched Ranma at several points in his adventures thanks to having far more contacts in Asia than the Justice League combined. He even knew of the Chinese Amazons and had even been to their village a few decades ago. When he had learned about Jusenkyo, though, he had left quickly, understanding the implications of it far more than the locals seemed to. They were even more of a chaotic mess than his own Lazarus pools, and even his one-night stand with a young woman there had not been enough to keep him near them. *But if Ranma is now free from the influence of his father and the Japanese government...*

He rang a bell four times, and a second later, six men entered, bowing from the waist, staying in the bow until Ra's rapped his finger on his desk twice, signaling they could stand straight. When he did, he gestured to the three on the left. "You three and your fellow from New England, look at these images. Memorize them."

A few taps of a button, and a series of images showing Ranma's face and features from multiple angles showed up. He left them there for a moment, and as the men nodded one after another, he continued. "I wish a report to go out to **all** of our agents in America. They should be on the watch for young Ranma. Do not engage him, I repeat, they are **not** to engage him. In point of fact, do nothing out of the ordinary, simply report any sightings. He could be useful in some form, but we will need to be very careful about how to direct or approach him, the choice of which I will make when we have more information on his personality."

Once the representatives of his various American-based spy networks nodded, Ra's turned his attention to the other three. "I want our agents in Asia to be on the lookout for his father."

The various images of Ranma were replaced by a single image, the latest one his people had gotten of Genma prior to his and his son being 'recruited' by the government. "I understand what the Japanese government is doing with them, and I even approve. They are a very practical organization in many ways. But that is no means a reason to assume that we, in turn, cannot make use of him at some point. Perhaps far more easily than his son."

OOOOOOO

True to Martha's warning, life on the farm started well before the sun was up. Despite the early start, Kara hopped out of bed eagerly. After greeting Martha in the kitchen, she found Ranma awake in his room as well, having taken a moment to change back into his male body. While Jon headed out to start checking the animals, Martha began making breakfast, and Ranma smirked at Kara, gesturing outside with a jerk of his head. "Come on, one of us has a meeting with some humble pie."

Kara rolled her eyes, but didn't disagree, and a moment later, she stood across from Ranma on the grass outside the farmhouse.

As she did, the young man took a moment to notice what the blonde wore in the slowly rising light of dawn and the lights shining out from the farmhouse. Kara had chosen to wear a pair of exercise shorts that hugged her waist, thighs and bum tighter than the jeans she had been wearing the other day, coupled with a T-shirt with the words 'Can't Touch This' on the front of it.

It made her look both cute as a button and sexy in a tomboy kind of way, causing Ranma to wonder if this was what Hiroshi and Daisuke had been talking about when they mentioned Ranma in his female form and why the whole school had been so gaga for Akane, something he had never understood at the time. *If they weren't such horny idiots, I might think I owe them half an apology. Kara pulls off the tomboy look way better than Akane ever could.*

For her part, Kara frowned, seeing Ranma hadn't taken any kind of stance, instead letting his arms hang loose at his side as he bounced lightly on his feet. "Are you sure you're taking this seriously?" *Just because he's funny and... er... kind of cute, I guess, doesn't mean I'm not going to make him pay for not taking me seriously!*

"We'll see, won't we?" Ranma quipped, smirking that special smirk he had that had always served as a goad to his rivals throughout his life. *Heck, it even worked with that chief samurai-oni bastard back on the Island o' cannibal idiots.*

It worked here too, as, without another word, Kara charged forwards. Her arms were up, protecting her upper body before she entered Ranma's range, a light jab flashing out fast enough to send a shockwave of wind in every direction.

Kara knew that she was fast. She had often gotten the drop on Cassie during training with a fast charge to start, and thought that maybe Ranma really wasn't taking this seriously, despite having seen her strength the day before. *If he thinks I'm not as fast as I am strong, he needs a bit of a wake-up call.*

Holy hell, is she fast! Ranma yelled internally, but even as he thought that, he was already moving, jumping straight up. A second before her blow landed, Ranma was in the air, and his foot kicked out into her head, crashing into Kara's face, causing her to blink in surprise. Even though the blow didn't hurt, it was quite clear that if the two of them were equal in strength, it would have laid Kara out.

Yet, Kara had been trained by the Amazons in their school of hard knocks, and even as Ranma's next blow landed in the form of a side kick to the head, she with the blow, her hand coming up in a punch to catch Ranma's leg.

Hastily, Ranma pulled his leg back, twirling around into a third kick while still in midair. Kara blocked this kick with her forearm and launched a quick punch, but somehow Ranma turned the point of impact to his advantage, flipping up and over Kara's head, raining down several blows.

"Okay, how the heck is he doing that?!" Kara grumbled to herself. While Kara could see them coming, as she had realized when sparring with Cassie, it was a different thing entirely to react in time to block such strikes. Her mind just wasn't able to keep up with the information she was seeing.

On the other hand, Ranma's strikes lacked the power that Cassie had been able to put into her strikes, which meant they were well below the point where they could actually hurt Kara. Yet even as she got used to his speed and started to block his strikes more, the martial artist was able to somehow redirect his blows at the last moment.

Maybe I was the one who wasn't taking this seriously, Kara thought as a blow crashed through her defenses into the side of her head. "Time to change tactics."

"You know, saying that aloud is kind of silly," Ranma quipped.

"Quiet, you, you gnat!" Kara grumbled, barked back, even as she grinned at him. "Fine, you're quicker than me if I keep to this level of speed but what if I up the ante!?"

Actually, that wasn't her plan. Kara had determined to keep her strength and speed at what she thought Ranma's were. That way, she could actually learn from this spar rather than

just overwhelm Ranma with her raw stats, despite a small, ignoble part of Kara wanting to do just that. *Cousin Clark never overwhelms Batman when they spar; if he did, he wouldn't learn.*

She didn't count the one spar she had seen between Clark and Diana after returning from the Isle of Women. That had been... different. Different in a way that made Kara feel kind of uncomfortable at times, watching them for reasons she didn't quite understand. Ways that made her unwilling to join a flushed, sweaty Diana in the showers after, despite having also worked up a lather herself that day.

Instead, Kara really did try to change her tactics. Rather than simply blocking or redirecting, she tried to grab at Ranma's arms or legs and pull him in. That didn't work either, as Ranma seemed to realize what she was doing. Even stranger was that, every time their blows struck one another, Ranma somehow used the momentum of that contact to remain in the air, dodging all around Kara as she remained on the ground.

For his part, Ranma was becoming more impressed with Kara's training than he had been initially. It was clear by this point that she had a good grounding in combat, her teachers probably emphasizing sparring over form. *She ain't used to fighting someone who emphasizes in dodging like I do. I can tell I'm frustrating her, but her basic stance, speed, reaction time and footwork are all good. Not a lifetime's work good, but she's had at least a few years of solid training. But there is something weird here. Her style, it, it kind of remindsSSSS **CRAP** is she strong!!*

Ranma's thoughts shifted as Kara forgot herself for a moment, letting loose with a much stronger punch. Even as it barely made contact with Ranma's arm, the bone there broke, causing Ranma's ki healing to go to work automatically. The next blow nearly blew out his ears as it flashed past his head, breaking the sound barrier. *GAH! Fine, let's see if she likes this!*

In reply, Ranma's hands disappeared almost to even Kara's sight, and her head was suddenly rattled by hundreds of impacts as a sound like a machine gun blared all around her. "OWWOWOWOW, what the hell!?" The blows didn't hurt a lot, more like so many air pellets hitting a normal person, but there were so damn many of them landing, and pellet or no, it still hurt getting hit in the ear and eye. "Stop it, you!"

Fine! If he wants to just sort of stay in the air like that, I'll show Ranma what real aerial combat is! I should've thought of that sooner but there we are.

With that, Kara hurled herself into the air, lashing out with a quick punch as Ranma dodged her lunge. Again, Ranma was able to dodge the majority of her strike, although it almost looked like his arm went limp for a second from her forearm grazing it even as her fist missed its target. Then Ranma's other hand grabbed her arm, and he flipped himself up. His feet hammered into the side of her head with a mule kick as he flipped through the air several times to land on the ground well away from her.

That blow had actually rung Kara's head a bit, and she growled as she charged down towards him. "Come back here, you!"

"Whatever happened to not using all your powers against me?" Ranma quipped, as he rolled to the side, then kicked off the ground into the air once more, dodging a kick from her, which Kara followed with a punch that again Ranma was somehow able to dodge.

"I'm still not using all my power! I don't think even you would be able to dodge my heat beam, after all. How the heck are you dodging so well anyway!? *Cassie couldn't dodge like this. In fact, the only one I've seen able to dodge even half as good was Queen Hippolyta. But with her, it was more... more pinpoint, I guess?*

The vastly more experienced queen had dodged Kara's punches by no more than a few centimeters. She could read Kara so well that she could put forth the least amount of effort while always being somewhere else whenever Kara attacked.

She said she could read me somehow. Is Ranma doing the same thing? Even Diana couldn't dodge me as well as this!

"You have a lot of tells. For one thing, your eye is always trying to track your own blows rather than mine, which is just silly. For another, regardless of your training, you're still trying to think your way through every punch and kick," Ranma mused, using the momentum of another blow from Kara to flip through the air once more to gain some distance, clapping his hands together in front of his face, the traditional signal for a timeout as he landed.

When Kara complied, he went on. "And for someone who can fly, you're remarkably stationary even when you do. You need to start moving around in the air more fluidly if you're going to fight in the air like that, bounce around, dodge up and down, don't treat the air like you're standing on solid ground."

Kara winced. "I've heard that first bit before. My sparring partner always said I was trying to overanalyze everything, that I needed to build up a feel for a fight's flow. The second... that one I have to put down to the fact I've got very little experience using my ability to fly in a fight at all."

Ranma blinked at that, but was happy that Kara had had someone to advise her before this. "More importantly, I think you need to start learning actual styles. Maybe that will help you with your overthinking problem. And yes, I know that normally overthinking things isn't really a problem, but in a fight, instinct, observation and thought all need to interact seamlessly."

Running one hand from her neck through her hair, Kara eventually nodded, not noticing how Ranma's eyes had tracked the movement for a moment, a faint flush on his face, thankfully hidden by the poor light as the sun had yet to fully rise over the horizon. "I can see

that, I suppose. And because I started training so much later than you or my regular sparring partner, I haven't had enough time to build up any kind of combat instinct."

"Exactly, but don't beat yourself up over it. Your observation skills are pretty good. You started to adapt to what I was trying to do to you several times," Ranma praised, causing Kara to flush a bit, oddly pleased. "You tried to go for grapples, which is a natural defense against a mobile combat style, and throughout the fight you mostly kept your strength down to the level you needed to actually learn something. Even so, we desperately need to work on your reaction time, get your mind used to keeping up with your eyes."

Kara grumbled a bit, scuffing the ground with a foot. "Gah, all that and you're my age too. I wouldn't believe you if I hadn't run into people who could react faster than I could."

The Flash could react faster than she could, she knew, and her cousin could as well. *Although, it isn't nearly as obvious as it was with 'Call me Wally, Cutie,' ugh.* And occasionally, Clark's reaction time left much to be desired, too. *Or is it situational awareness with him? What is the line there, I wonder?*

The two were interrupted at that point by Jon walking out onto the front porch. "Come on, you two, it's breakfast time. Who won?"

"As if you weren't watching from the door, Uncle Jon," Kara scoffed, smiling at the man in thanks as he held the door open for them. It had felt nice to know he was watching out for her, even if, after fighting Ranma, she didn't think a normal person would be able to do anything to him, not really. *Maybe with a sniper rifle at range, or a few dozen grenades? But he shook off my hits like they were nothing.*

Moments later, Ranma was once more sitting down to a meal fit for his stomach's bottomless nature. He gleefully began to eat, explaining between bites some exercises that Kara could do on her own time or as they helped around the farm to improve her hand-eye coordination and reaction time. She responded with her own ideas and lots of questions about his own training. While combat itself didn't interest her enough to become a passion like it was for Cassie and Ranma, she enjoyed it to a point and knew she needed to strive to always be better.

Martha listened intently, watching the two youngsters interact with a faint smile on her face. *I wonder if this version of Kara is how she was while on the Isle of Women she went to. If so, it's a marked change from the bewildered, disillusioned girl I met up with back at the truck that day at the local high school. I wonder if we're really doing the right thing by trying to push her into the mold of a normal high school girl? That conversation she'd had with Ranma last night was quite telling.*

Even before hearing Kara and Ranma's discussion later that night, Martha and Nodoka had talked about Ranma's own upbringing and life. Somewhat dismayed at how open and

unguarded Ranma was about his beyond-normal abilities despite his good humor and what she had seen of his character, Martha had wondered if Nodoka had ever made an attempt to fit Ranma into a more normal lifestyle.

When Nodoka admitted she'd tried at first and had gotten a lot of pushback and stopped, Martha had asked whether or not she regretted her inability to do so. Instead of answering, Nodoka simply expressed how proud she was of Ranma as a martial artist and that he was his own person despite his father's horrible influence.

"Make no mistake, if I had known half of what my husband was doing on that training trip, I would have done my utmost to drag both of them home and divorce the lout to raise Ranma on my own. But somehow, Ranma seems to have survived and taken on only the best of the lessons that Genma tried to instill in him. Does Ranma conform to what modern Japanese society is like? No. He is a kind, gregarious young man with a heart of gold and a firm sense of honor, and while I would prefer that he broaden his horizons beyond The Art; even if he did, I doubt he would suddenly become normal. And I am fine with that as I approve of far more of his personality than I can disapprove of," the younger woman had said, before laughing. "Now if only he always remembered table manners and did away with his silly 'hick' act."

The fact was, Martha was worried that any attempt to push Kara to conform to normal society was going to fail, or worse, harm the girl. Clark was fantastic, perhaps the best son she could ever ask for, but he'd had his entire life here on Earth fitting in, building a life from the ground up with Martha and Jon to guide him.

Kara had come to Earth at fifteen, and her life on Krypton, the society Clark had never known, had made a mark on her. She had taken to some things, lessons of right and wrong, lessons about a hard day's work, about respecting others and so forth very well, but her education was wildly all over the place in comparison to a normal teen's. She had been appalled by the internet and its openness, its lack of direction. She had been appalled by the lack of structure a normal teen would face in high school, to say nothing of the lack of direction and immaturity of her fellow teens.

I think Jon and I need to sit down with Clark and discuss this further. The last thing we want is to have Kara start to resent us all for pushing her to be something she can't be.

Eventually, Jon steered the conversation away from martial arts and exercise to what he wanted the two youngsters to do around the farm that day. For Kara, a goodly portion of that was preparing the second floor. He and Martha had decided between themselves before falling asleep last night that they should maybe get the entire second-floor's floor renovated, especially after the disaster last night.

"I'm willing to trust you with the repairs to the bathroom, young man, given what I've seen you do with those hands of yours." Why Martha chuckled at that eluded both teens, but Jon continued on, his own lips twitching. "But I'll make the final decision on whether or not

you're actually capable of such a big job from what you do there. I can go into town and buy the necessary wooden beams and the other resources we need, and then, if you're not up to it hire a contractor to help me with the rest if I have to."

"I've put up walls, put down foundations and even repaired whole houses from being at the center of martial arts fights. Replacing a floor is nothing to me," Ranma answered firmly. His pride was a little pricked at Jon's tone, which was what Jon had hoped for.

"Good. In that case, you two can start mending the outer fence. A few of those fence posts were damaged in the recent storm, and we need to lay down some electrical wiring as well to keep the animals in. I'll be back by midmorning with the supplies you need for the repairs." While the Kent farmstead was mainly a wheat farm, they also kept animals: a small dairy herd of ten, a few horses for work and traveling around the farm, lots of chickens, and, of course, a few cats to keep out the vermin. The cows were a relatively new addition, and thus the need for an electrical fence. "From there, Kara, I'll want you to work on..."

Jon took most of the meal to explain the workings of the farm. There was always something around the farm for a handyman to get to grips with, but the majority of what he wanted Ranma to look into, beyond the work on the farmhouse, was to empty out the barn they had used to store the bits and pieces of appliances that Clark and Kara had accidentally ruined over the years, finishing his work from yesterday while helped to put down a new electrical fence underneath the physical one currently keeping the animals inside.

"So long as Kara and I have some time to spar between jobs, I'm fine with whatever you need," Ranma announced when Jon finished, to which Kara nodded agreeably, eager to both learn more from Ranma and happy to have his help. She had to admit to being a bit of a klutz when it came to things like putting down wire... or using tools at all, really. Low-tech stuff like that always threw her, even more than the idea of fighting hand-to-hand had at first.

After breakfast, Jon let the animals out to range, then headed off to town, leaving Ranma and Kara behind. Martha told them to start on the fence first, and the two of them quickly got to work. First, Ranma would remove a section of the fence, while Kara followed up, digging a trench with her eye beams. This, Ranma was quick to point out, was "Cheating of the highest order."

"Sour grapes," Kara teased.

Ranma promptly turned around and demanded they switch jobs for the next segment of fence. Once Kara removed the last post, Ranma held out a palm. "Moko Takabisha!"

The attack came out, blasting a long furrow in the ground. It was a bit too wide, admittedly, but Ranma felt the honor of martial arts had been restored as he snorted at Kara. "You were saying?"

"More of your ki stuff, I suppose?" Kara answered, her brow furrowed. Weird, it looks almost like a mix of a solid-state strike and a moderately heated bolt of energy, judging by the sides of the ditch. How bizarre... I really do need to think about this ki stuff in more depth. He did say that it was fueled by his life energy, and he had to eat a lot after using it up. That means it's quantifiable, unlike magic. That could be a fascinating study.

As they kept working, though, Kara noticed something about the animals. At first, they seemed wary of Ranma, their ears flattening, the horses stamping their hooves at him, while the cows mooed loudly and moved well away from where the two were working. But this seemingly faded over time.

The cats around the farm also seemed immune to whatever was bothering the other animals. One of the cats the Kents kept around to take care of the vermin around the place walked straight up to Ranma and rubbed against his lower leg, purring despite being a rather standoffish, solitary creature from what Kara had seen of it before.

"The animals seem to like you," she said, cocking her head to one side. "It took them far longer to get used to me. No matter how human I look, I still smell alien, apparently."

Ranma shrugged. "It's sort of a side effect of a martial arts technique I was taught. "Both the cat liking me, and the other animals being leery of me at first."

"Everything comes back to martial arts with you, doesn't it?" Kara giggled. "You are a little obsessed."

Ranma shrugged. "Being a little obsessed is how you get good at something." Ranma then moved over to one of the posts they had emplaced. His other hand glowed for a moment, a light blue, and Kara gasped, staring at it, her eyes narrowed as she wondered how he was controlling the shape of his ki like that. There was no change in Ranma's heartbeat, no change in anything in his body she could detect.

Then that strange light formed into several claws at the end of Ranma's fingertips, which Ranma began to use to peel away the wood as if his claws were sharper than the sharpest whittling knife. "Okay, that's kind of amazing. They look almost like claws."

"That's because the technique was called Neko-Ken, or Cat Fist in English." Ranma shrugged. "You don't want to know the training my Pops put me through first to master it. The training for it was bizarre, like mind-breakingly horrible. It took O-Sensei months of effort to fix things so I wouldn't run at the sight of cats, let alone make it into a usable style."

Kara frowned, staring at the energy around Ranma's hand, setting aside the feeling that Ranma was not joking or using hyperbole when he said his mind had been broken during that training. "Where exactly are you... I mean I can't see anything, no kind of energy within you or a source for that power, not now and not earlier with that bolt of energy you demonstrated..."

"You said that your eyesight is like X-ray vision, right? Not heat, like those night vision goggles soldiers use?" Kara nodded at that, and Ranma shrugged. "Ki doesn't have anything like a central point where it gathers, no matter what the idiots who think chakra points are a thing might think. It's just the energy of the body pulled out and made into a physical thing, and it only has heat if the user adds it in."

Kara reached over and took Ranma's hand, pressing a finger into one of the claws before Ranma could pull his hand away. "Damn girl, don't touch them!"

Hissed, raised her finger to her face, Kara stared at a tiny bit of blood that had appeared there. "I, I have impervious skin. I've seen, that is, I've had bullets bounce off me before," Kara stammered, shocked but still remembering to keep her connection to Superman a secret. "That shouldn't have done anything!"

Ranma shrugged. "The cutting edge of my ki claws is kind of based on my imagination, in a way. It's a very weird line there, but pretty much if I think my ki claws should be sharp, they're going to be insanely sharp."

"I really want to test that, yet at the same time, I really don't," Kara muttered, staring at her finger, then licking away the blood, shaking her head slightly.

She didn't notice Ranma blinking at the sight, then flushing a bit and looking away. *Okay, yes, accidentally sexy is definitely one of my turn-ons*, he thought, snorting as he recalled a somewhat drunken conversation with Lara during their time trapped on the island of zombie annoyances about that kind of thing.

The fence was the only job that Jon had told Ranma and Kara to look into that morning, as Ranma would need to wait for more materials to start the second-story repairs. So, they had a bit of a break before he returned from town.

This time, Ranma had some stipulations. He would fight purely defensively, forcing Kara to come to him, while both stayed in the air. That confused Kara at first, but that confusion faded the first time Ranma once more used the momentum of her strike to flip around to the side, showing no sign of losing the battle with gravity any more than she was.

"How the heck are you doing that? I can't tell what is more amazing, the whole ki thing you can do or your ability to mark 'not applicable' when gravity comes calling. I mean, I can fly, that's part of the power I get from the yellow sun, but how are you doing it!?" She growled as Ranma once more moved around her. *Drat it, I should be more mobile than he is up here, but GRAAAAH!!!*

"More than a decade of training in the aerial style, studying momentum, angles, how to shift my body weight and how to manipulate all of them at once," Ranma explained, even as he winced as Kara's fist grazed his forearm. The more she got frustrated, the more Kara's self-

control faded, and the harder it was to keep up with her basic speed, let alone strength, and it looked like Kara had started this spar already annoyed. "My mastery of the Art is like old man Jon's mastery of farming, or Martha's mastery of cooking. Lots and lots of little bits coming together into a single whole."

Kara nodded, remembering a similar speech from Donna about swordwork being a blend of hand-eye coordination, upper-body strength, footwork, control and speed. That reminded her of when Ranma had mentioned meeting Amazons in China. Calming down and deciding to bring that up now, she asked, "By the way, you said you knew Amazons at one point, right? That you learned a lot from one of them? How do they stack up against you?"

She figured that was as good a way as any to discern whether or not the Chinese Amazons had any connection to the Amazons of the Isle of Women. At this point, Kara wanted to talk to Ranma about her training on the island, what Kara had done there and learned, maybe even break out the small stabbing dagger Cassie had given her as a going-away present. But until she knew he knew about at least the Amazons, that wouldn't happen. *Secrets, secrets and more secrets, drat it.*

"Urgh. Cologne proves the old theory that the elderly are super dangerous, because they outlive all their opponents. She wasn't as strong as me, wasn't as fast, but if you think my dancing around you like this is annoying, imagine a wrinkled old wicked witch type in miniature, say about two and a half feet tall, who bounces around on a cane like a pogo stick doing the same thing," Ranma grumbled a bit at the memory while also dodging Kara's strikes.

She's really good about linking her attacks, but being in the air is still taking too much of Kara's attention, and she isn't nearly as mobile as she should be. "Her training was incredible, and I could say she and I are kind of friends, but the first few times I trained with her were seriously annoying."

Kara's eyes crossed as she tried to picture this, but there were a few problems with doing so. While she had seen the Wizard of Oz, she was having trouble picturing a dwarf version. Beyond that, there was something else she had to ask about. "What's a pogo stick?"

"Something you will never need, considering you can fly," Ranma quipped in reply, snickering slightly. Kara tried to take advantage of his seeming distraction, but instead Ranma was able to dodge her attack and return a punch to her head that nearly caught her in the eye, as so many of his super-fast attacks had during their morning spar.

Both the spar and the conversation continued for a bit after that, but soon the timer Kara had set up before the match went off. Returning to the farmhouse, the two parted. Kara headed up to remove the bits of furniture still inside the bathroom on the second floor, including the sink and toilet, bringing tools to undo where the pipes connected to them.

Unfortunately for her curiosity, Kara had reluctantly decided that the Chinese Amazons had no connection to the Isle of Women Amazons, seeming to be far too weak in terms of sheer physical ability, if not skill. That annoyed her a bit, but she couldn't do anything about it. *Those really aren't my secrets to share. And why does that annoy me so much? His name, something about Ranma's name in conjunction with the Amazons is still bothering me.*

Meanwhile, Ranma headed into the small barn to start repairing the appliances there for now.

They both came together with Martha for lunch, where they were joined by Jon, who arrived barely twenty minutes before. He came back with the truck laden with the wooden slats needed for a full rebuild of the second floor, but not the bits needed to replace the water pipes, and then went on to work the field for a bit, something he would ask Kara to help with. "I ordered the pipes, but we'll need to wait for them to be delivered here tomorrow."

He looked at Kara, pulled out a small bag, handed it to her and went on as she peered inside, an embarrassed look crossing her features. "And I also bought that mask for you, Kara. Hopefully we won't have another Allergy Moment."

After lunch, Jon joined Ranma, watching the younger man remove more floorboards and track down more water damage, then completely remove the wrecked slats and start removing the ruined bits of pipe. Once he was certain Ranma knew what he was doing, Jon headed out to the fields.

With Kara there to fly the tractor's storage bin back to the barn every time it became full, the two of them were able to clear most of the wheat fields that day, although they would be back tomorrow to bail the stalks left in the field once the wheat had been harvested. It was something that Jon had gotten used to when Clark was around. Thankfully, it seemed the mask he had bought Kara worked to keep her allergies at bay.

After the field was done, Jon went over the work two youngsters had done on the outer fence that morning. He found it very well done, although he wondered where some of the stakes had come from, since it looked as if Ranma and Kara had replaced more than he had expected. The electrical line was also well in place underground, something he had not anticipated they could do in a single day, and he resolved to thank them later. When he returned to the farmhouse, he let the two of them have another spar, which apparently was Ranma's equivalent of a break.

What Kara thought about it, he didn't know, although he felt that Ranma's ability to keep up with her had seemingly lit a competitive fire within Kara. *What are we going to do with that girl? I really thought she needed a better grounding being... well, human rather than Kryptonian, and that going to high school would be a part of that. But given how advanced she is in science and math, and, frankly, how much more intelligent and emotionally mature Kara is than a normal teenager, I don't know if that's the case any longer. Clark had friends; he had*

aspirations and goals for high school. Kara doesn't have any of that. Indeed, I don't think she's really thought about the direction she wants her life to take, beyond being a hero.

While Jon was thinking about her, Kara was launching a kick at Ranma and grumbling a bit. "I can't tell if you're getting anything out of these spars."

He had convinced her that she needed to work on her footwork and kicking more, so both of them had their arms tied behind their backs. While Kara had to admit it was surprising how much more agile and fast Ranma was in his female form, which he had assumed for this spar, the fact that Ranma didn't seem at all put off by only relying on her legs annoyed her greatly, as did needing to try harder to keep up with the much shorter girl.

Maybe that was why she had stopped holding her strength back as much. The loud crack of a broken bone that occurred when their legs met in midair showed the results of that, and her eyes widened in shock.

Before she could apologize, though, Ranma had already twisted around and launched another kick towards Kara, causing Kara to back away through the air again, dodging the kick but not returning one of her own. She had finally figured out that if she just broke contact in midair, Ranma's ability to stay there with her ended quickly and now watched as Ranma landed on the leg Kara knew she had just broken. But instead of collapsing, Ranma simply fell lightly, and when she spoke, there was only a little grunt of pain to Ranma's voice.

"I am actually. You might not think it, but you are really fast. That, and ya hit like a freight train. So, my ki healing is also getting a workout, like it just did to fix my leg. I won't learn any new styles or anything like that unless I can figure out how you're doing that whole flying thing. But it's still a good matchup for me."

And if I can get used to fighting stronger opponents in my normal bodies, then I won't need to break out Shazam's power, which I am still really leery of doing. That, and I hate the idea of needing to rely on it. It's magic, and while I might have manipulated my trip to Jusenkyo to get cursed for a reason, I still don't like magic in general, to say nothing about needing it in the first place. While not normally making a big deal of it (at least in his mind) Ranma was quite a bit arrogant about his skills and abilities. To admit that she needed her Shazam form in a fight was something he would hate.

"That's precisely the opposite way it is for me, then. I'm not getting anything physical out of this. It's all mental," Kara said, somewhat pleased to hear Ranma was learning something from this and very pleased to see the redhead able to heal herself so easily. "And I'm sorry about the hit just then."

"Bah, just don't cave in my head, and we're good, girl. My ki healing can do a lot, and I've learned to push its speed to an incredible degree, but even then, having my skull get

crushed isn't something I'll be able to heal from. Ki healings kept me from getting too many concussions over the years but that kind of trauma would be way too much."

Snorting, Kara cocked her head to one side, staring at Ranma. "Are you really comfortable in that form? I don't think I could ever be comfortable as a guy."

Ranma shrugged, and seeing as the spar was seemingly over, broke the ropes around his wrist before moving over to a small teapot. Heating it up with ki, he poured it over her head, returning to his normal body. "I will admit that it's caused me a few problems along the way, and it taught me a lot more about, you know, the whole woman thing..." he paused to let Kara snicker at his wording before going on, "then any man should know. But I deliberately chose this curse for myself when Pops had us train at Jusenkyo. I still don't know why he sought it out like he did, but I got what I wanted out of it for sure."

"Wait, what? You wanted to be a girl? But you already said you don't like guys, so why?" Kara wasn't going to jump to conclusions like a certain young Tendo had, but she was very confused at the moment. *Maybe he thought all the other choices were worse and felt he couldn't get away without being cursed?*

When Kara voiced that thought, Ranma shook his head. "Nope. There's a place I want to go, and to get there, I have to be a girl. I was kicked out because I was a boy, but I figure they'll have to let me in if I can turn into a girl, even if I don't stay that way."

That finally, **finally**, allowed Kara to make the final connection her memory needed to remember where she had heard the martial artist's name before, and she gaped at Ranma. "Wait a minute, wait a minute! You're that Ranma?!" Before Ranma could comment on that patently obvious statement, Kara moved on, pointing at him wildly. "The, the Ranma that Cassie always talked about from years ago! The boy who wound up on the Isle of Women!"

Ranma gaped at her, and Kara whooped, throwing a fist into the air. "You **are**!! Oh man, Cassie is going to **flip**!"

"You... you know Cassie?" Ranma stammered.

"Know her, Cassie's my best friend!" Kara laughed gaily. "She told me about you, about some of the adventures you two went on when we were hanging out several times. Is it true you somehow got an entire horde of monkeys to attack you at one point?"

"Yeah, we kind of startled them when they were up in the trees, and for some reason, they really didn't like my taunting them," Ranma muttered, still staring at Kara in shock. Then his hands began to twitch. "And it's taken you this long to realize that the Ranma that Cassie mentioned and I were one and the same? Are you that bad with names, or did you just think my name was common in Japan or something?"

Blushing Kara looked away, embarrassed. "I'm horrible at names, okay? I could barely remember my cousin's name when I met up with him again here on Earth, let alone his new one. Do not get me..."

That was as far as she got before Ranma's finger poked her in the side. This didn't do anything and she smirked at him. "Forgot about my durability for a second there, did you? Your threat of tickling me is patently impossible," she taunted him. "Hmmf, maybe I shouldn't tell you more about how Cassie has been since the two of you met, or how she might be coming to America with Wonder Woman someday soon."

Even though she knew Ranma would probably be acquainted with Diana as well, until he mentioned her, Kara was going to keep that secret for a moment.

That was as far as she got before one of Ranma's fingers began to glow with ki, shaping into a claw. Before her eyes could widen in shock at what she thought would be a violent attack, one of those fingers poked her in the side. This did nothing but startle her, causing her to let out a small yip. She swatted at Ranma's hand, but he had already pulled back.

Kara looked down at her side and found that her skin hadn't been pierced at all, and she frowned at Ranma, who wagged his fingers, now all of whom were glowing with ki. "I told you that the sharpness of my ki claws is based on my imagination. If I don't want them to be sharp, they won't be. Now, what was that about you not being ticklish? I attack!"

Before Kara could back away, Ranma pounced, tickling her from all sides, using ki not only in his claws but to heighten his body's speed as his arms moved Amaguriken quick. Kara yelped again and tried to dodge, breaking the rope around her wrists as she did. But caught on the back foot, Kara didn't think of just flying away.

She quickly discovered that yes, she was quite ticklish, and soon her gales of laughter peeled out, interspersed with, "Gah, no, stop! Eep! Stop it, this is so undignifiedDDDD!"

In the doorway of the nearby farmhouse, Martha stood watching this giggling a bit. She was close enough to have heard the entire conversation, and although she was still a little thrown by the curse, why he had seemingly chosen to be cursed made her think better of him. And frankly, the sight of the two young friends simply having fun together like this was enough to warm her heart, given the past few weeks when Kara had become more and more morose as the school year drew closer.

The sound of the house phone going off behind her caused Martha to turn, and still watching out the window, she picked it up. "Kent residence."

"Hi, Mom," a male voice said from the other side. "How are you, Dad, and my cousin doing down there?"

"We're doing quite well. Kara is through the work she needs for school, although Jon and I are both kind of concerned about her on the social side of things," Martha confessed. "Her allergies are also a bit of an issue. Controlling super strength while sneezing remains impossible."

Clark sighed and opened his mouth to say that Kara would find friends to fit in with, but then paused, his ears picking up something in the background through the receiver. "What is that noise I'm hearing in the background?"

"Kara is getting to know a contractor that Jon brought in for some work around the place. Unfortunately, Kara doesn't have as good a handle on controlling her strength all the time, and it's added a bit to the wear and tear around here. While she wasn't able to make friends over at the local high school, this young fellow seems to have brought her out of her funk at least."

Martha decided not to mention Ranma by name or his curse. For one thing, she wasn't certain how Clark would act even knowing a random young man was becoming friendly with his little cousin. She had detected more than a bit of overbearing male protectiveness toward Kara a time or two before this and didn't want Clark to overreact. As for the curse, Martha felt it was so unusual that there was no way anyone would believe it if they didn't see it for themselves. Martha had only half-believed it the night before, when Nodoka told her about it before seeing the curse in action.

As she spoke, Martha could almost feel the grimace on Clark's face. When Kara had first fallen into her glum mood right after visiting the school, Clark had stopped by to try to jolly her along. It hadn't worked very well. But when he spoke, he didn't address that; instead, he spoke about how Kara was getting along with a guy, proving Martha's concerns on that point.

"And you say this is a young man? Perhaps Jon and I should have a talk with him. I'm also kind of concerned about anyone beyond the Amazons getting close to Kara before she has a better handle on controlling her strength around people who aren't super-strong themselves. Don't tell her I said this, but I think while her training with the Amazons was a good thing in a lot of ways, they did fall short of what I hoped they'd achieve there."

"Perhaps, but I think that was simply a miscommunication there. Kara certainly knows how to fight far better than you did when you first took up see heroing, and by the way, we will be talking about your costume again in the future, young man. I was in town the other day, and I heard more comments about how Superman needs a costume change. According to them, wearing your underwear on the outside is never a good thing," Martha teased, changing where she had heard that comment from to not add fuel to the fire.

As Clark sputtered indignantly, completely derailed, Martha went on. "Besides, I do not think you need to come down and speak to the young man in question. He seems to be a very good sort who hasn't tried to look at Kara's rear or chest at all as far as I can tell. And I've been

on the watch for it. I've even talked to his mother, and if that's not a good sign, I don't know what is."

Clark was so off-balance by Martha's earlier joke at his expense that he didn't realize that Martha hadn't mentioned the name of the young man in question yet, which again was very deliberate. After all, Ranma wasn't exactly a local name, and the last thing she wanted was, for Clark to come down and act overbearing, as she was worried he would. *That would end in disaster.*

Even from barely a day getting to know him, Martha was certain that kind of thing would get right up Ranma's nose. No, it was best that the two of them meet in person, and Clark could make his own judgment on Ranma as an individual, rather than see him (currently her) first and foremost as that boy near my cousin.

"Just so long as you are sure that there's nothing romantic or anything like that going on between them. I won't lie and say I'm concerned about Kara being taken advantage of by some boy, but I'm similarly concerned about what might happen to him if she forgets her strength," Clark finally replied.

"There isn't anything romantic going on. They are not developing crushes on one another as teenagers are so often want to do; Kara is far too levelheaded for that. Unlike you and Lois when you met her for the first time," she drawled, causing Clark to twitch again. "I think they're becoming friends, and that is something Kara needs going forward."

And friendship is a far better basis for later romance than the instant attraction you felt toward Lane, Martha added internally, a faint scowl on her face. Her opinion on Lois Lane had changed over the past year. At first, she had been cautiously approving of the relationship. She had been concerned about how different Lois was in comparison to any other girl that Clark had ever spent time around, yet at the same time, Martha had approved of Lois as a woman who had become quite famous in a field dominated by men.

However, it was very obviously not a relationship of equals, and after hearing more about their relationship, Martha realized, as Diana had, that Lois seemed far more in love with Superman than Clark Kent. Which was a travesty in Martha's mind. Why, she hadn't even agreed to come and meet Jon and Martha yet, saying it was a waste of time at their age! The nerve!

Martha's frown didn't stay on her face, however, as she watched the youngsters break off their little tickle fight, with Kara finally having gotten the upper hand, getting the young man in a headlock that he couldn't escape. Their talk couldn't quite reach where Martha was now on the phone, but whatever Ranma had said put a grin on Kara's face, then a pensive expression as she let him up.

"I suppose you're right. And while I know I come over a little too overprotective, I just worry. I'm glad you and Dad are there for Kara. Give her my love and my love to Dad as well. I'm afraid I won't be around for a while. I'm heading out-system on a mission with Wonder Woman, Green Lantern and Martian Manhunter. A war is going on in a nearby star system, and we've been asked to step in as peacekeepers."

"You stay safe out there," Martha ordered. "I don't want you or any of your friends coming back hurt."

"We'll try our best, Mom," Clark chuckled. "And I will make a point to stop by when we get back. I get the impression that some time on the farm will do me some good by that point."

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In Star City, Diana was also preparing to leave Earth. In her case, this meant issuing a stern set of instructions to her young charge. These included the normal things a parent would say to their teenage son or daughter when leaving them alone in the house for a long period: not to spend the money she was leaving on anything but food; not to open the door to strangers; and to keep up her studies in history.

Kara had taken it upon herself to teach Cassie more about math and science during her time on Themyscira. Thus, she was already up to the level of a normal seventeen-year-old in those areas.

Then there were a few just because Diana knew Cassie. "There's a city map over there. Take it with you whenever you leave the house. Your sense of direction is horrific and won't get any better until you start memorizing landmarks around here. And don't go looking for fights. I don't want a repeat of what happened when those young men tried to flirt with you the other day. You can't just go around stuffing young buffoons into trash compactors, no matter how much you feel that putting trash with trash is appropriate."

Kara pouted a bit but shrugged her shoulders and agreed to remember. "I promise I won't, Mistress Diana."

"And yet you're still calling me Mistress," Diana said, gently popping the other girl on the nose. "Still, I'll allow it this time. You can practice your lasso inside the training area, but not the sword for now. I don't have enough dummies for you to practice with. You can practice your forms, but not strikes with the sword."

"Understood."

"And no more use of the Internet either. I don't trust the adult lock I put on it, and there are many, many things out there that you are not ready for. Good grief, I wasn't ready for them when I discovered them," Diana grumbled, shaking her head. "While understanding the nature

of men means that some of that was quite obvious, it doesn't make me any happier about what can be found there."

Diana was pleased to see Cassie actually shudder a bit at that, nodding her head rapidly to the older woman. "Yeah, no way am I going on there again without someone else around. Even their music videos are weird. I mean, some of them are great, and I love the videos of concerts and orchestras, but some are just wrong. And what the heck is up with how little women wear in a lot of them?"

The older Amazon nodded at that and pulled the other girl into a hug, which was quickly returned. "I'll see you when I get back. And when we do, I'll ask Clark to tell me where the Kents live, so you can spend some time with Kara, all right? I think that would be good for both of you."

Cassie nodded enthusiastically at that, and Diana pulled out of the hug, ruffled her hair, and left quickly, wondering to herself if she wasn't making a big mistake leaving Cassie behind. *Still, I have to do it eventually, and getting her used to being on her own can only be a good thing, right? Right?*

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Ranma spent several days on the major project on the farm, replacing the second-story floor and repairing various items Clark had broken over the years, before helping Jon put up a third, smaller barn just for their horses so they could expand from four to six. So successful was he that it gave the Kents several items they could now sell in town. As for the bathroom and second floor, the eroded or broken plumbing was replaced, the floor reinforced, and insulation added between the floors.

The work was so well done that Jon had to shake his head in amazement at how well Ranma could work with just his hands and the bare minimum of tools. He'd even taught Kara how to do a few of the different exercises for martial arts construction in that time, using her hands as hammers, which was great for self-control and technique, shaping the pipes with her strength, and several other things of that nature.

Throughout that time, Ranma had shared more of his adventures with Kara and the Kents, including the meeting with the undead he and Lara had run into, which horrified both Kents to a degree, though they were very thankful the undead had been dealt with and that it had been an isolated incident. In return, Kara had shared her time on Isle of Women, telling Ranma how much Cassie had missed him, and the news that Cassie might be brought into Man's World soon.

That only emphasized Ranma's desire to get back on the road and head to Star City to see if he could find his 'Diana-nee,' a name that had Kara giggling when she first heard it, and Ranma explained the honorific. Alas, while she knew Diana did indeed live in Star City, she

didn't know where, nor did she have a phone number to call. All the Justice League members were very clear about keeping their civilian identities away from one another, with only Diana Prince and Clark Kent knowing one another, and that only as acquaintances. Plus, Diana didn't actually have a house phone number.

Eventually, all the work Jon needed Ranma's help with around the farm was done, and after breakfast on his fourth day on the farm, Ranma announced he was leaving. This didn't surprise either Jon or Martha, and they had already put together a large bag of food and some money. The money was hidden among the food, as Jon suspected Ranma would be a little annoyed by it. Beyond that, the time had allowed them to get to know Ranma as they had wanted, and they no longer had any misgivings about trusting him.

"Well, Ranma, I can honestly say having you around has been fun and interesting, although I could do without you and Kara here causing shockwaves when you exchange punches during your spars. I hope you can find Miss Diana as you want to, and young Cassie too, of course."

As Martha spoke, Kara looked down at the floor of the front porch, scuffing it with her foot in annoyance. She really, **really** wanted to go with Ranma, but she couldn't quite work up the courage to say so. The Kents had put up with her and tried to help the displaced Kryptonian teen understand human society as best they could. Jon, in particular, had helped her create, as Ranma had mentioned, her idea of right and wrong. Both Kents had borne through the issues Kara ran into in controlling her strength and abilities without much complaint. With all that, Kara couldn't just toss their plans for her aside.

Then Jon continued, and Kara's head whipped up. "I think having you around has been interesting as well, Ranma, and I speak for both Martha and me when I say we can trust you to watch over Kara while she helps you find your friends."

"Wait, what?/What!?" Ranma and Kara shouted, speaking over one another as they stared at the married couple.

"Kara has been missing Cassie something fierce, and I heard you both talk about how Kara wants to see the world. This way, she can at least see a bit of America in your company, and after all, if she runs into anything she can't handle, Kara can always fly back here," Jon answered blithely before becoming serious as Martha reached over and pulled the younger girl into a sideways hug.

"Your Uncle and I have been talking about it, and we think we were wrong in pushing you into trying to be a normal teenage girl like Clark was a normal boy for a time. If you think you can make a life for yourself in some other fashion, well, traveling with Ranma to see Cassie will give you a second opinion from someone your own age about what you should do going forward and will also give you a taste of what traveling is like. Take a few weeks before school starts to think about whether or not school is really for you, darling, or if it was just a bad first

impression. You'll always have a home here. That ain't gonna change if you don't go to school," Martha said, still hugging Kara.

Ranma looked at the family and cheekily thought for a moment about asking what was in it for him to bring Kara long, but decided against it. Kara had become a friend these past few days, and he knew that she and Cassie were close as well. *I liked traveling with Lara, so traveling with another girl wasn't that big of a hardship. It, um, it doesn't hurt Kara's also cute... shouldn't really think that, but there it is.*

"Thanks, Aunt Martha, Uncle Jon! I promise I won't cause trouble!" Kara exclaimed.

Ranma winced at that but said nothing again, just shaking his head behind Kara's back as she gave the Kents hugs once more before stepping outside, letting the trio have their farewells. Kara joined him quickly, smacking him lightly on the shoulder to indicate they could leave. Ranma nodded, bowed farewell to the older couple, then led the way towards the road at a jog.

Despite having stayed behind to exchange more words with her aunt and Uncle, Kara caught up with him easily, lightly jogging alongside him, causing Ranma to notice she was still wearing the same clothing she had earlier, although she had a bundle on her back. Evidently, Martha had packed a bag to get along with. Indeed, her backpack was a far newer model than the one he had been given, which held some of Martha's cooking in it.

As they raced along, Ranma held out a hand. After a second's confusion, she handed the bag over, and he stuffed it into his knapsack to join his own supplies and the bag of food.

When he was finished, Kara asked, "So, are we going to just run all the way to Star City?"

"Why not? It's good endurance training for me, at least. Not certain you, little Miss Alien, will get anything out of it. But hey, at least this way, you'll be able to see the country, right?" Ranma joked back.

Rolling her eyes, Kara put a little more speed into her steps, racing ahead of Ranma and then turning backward, running backward as she joked, "Well then, come on, slowpoke!"

Ranma growled and sped up, racing after her as she continued to laugh, and the two youngsters raced on, heading towards Star City and their mutual friend.

End Chapter