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*Tail Kinker Presents*

## **Pale Horse**

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### *Disclaimer*

Ranma 1/2 was created by Takahashi Rumiko, and anyone who doesn't already know this won't understand this story anyway. Bleach was created by Tite Kubo; you don't really need to have seen Bleach to understand this fic, but just so you know, anything not Ranma related in here was created by him.

## The Technique

Happousai drew in a long haul from the pipe, and considered the young man seated before him.

"You know, Ranma, you've left me in quite a position. At the moment, it seems that I owe you one."

Ranma snorted. "If I'd known it would've done you any good, I woulda just let them keep on going." He gestured towards the old man's room. "All I saw was a horde of angry women ransackin' the house. I shoulda just showed them where you keep your stash."

"Nonetheless, you've earned my gratitude and my respect. And to repay you, so that I can go back to treating you like dirt, I'm going to give you this."

From his gi, Happousai drew an ancient scroll.

Ranma raised an eyebrow. "What exactly is this?"

"It's an ancient martial arts technique, that I learned from my master," said Happousai. "Only those with truly powerful auras can master this technique."

Ranma grinned, and grabbed the scroll. "I can learn this." He paused, and asked, "What exactly does it do?"

"It allows the practitioner to untether his mind from its earthly shell, and wander freely." Happousai casually blew a smoke ring at the ceiling. "Thus, you can use it to travel invisibly, gather information, and then return to your body."

Ranma snorted. "And you used it to spy on women in the bath, right?"

"This is why the School of Anything Goes is sought after by men of discriminating tastes!"

"Or none at all." Ranma unrolled the scroll a bit, examined the writing. "You mastered this technique?"

"Well...not yet." Happousai looked sheepish. "I was hoping that, when you've mastered it, you'd show me the trick?"

"Forget it." He re-rolled the scroll. "You ain't gettin' your hands on this technique; there wouldn't be a girl left safe in the world!"

"Ranma! Would you deny an old man his only pleasures in life?"

"Any chance I get." Ranma stood. "If Akane or anyone is lookin' for me, I'll be in the dojo."

-----

Ranma's tea had long since grown cold; he sipped it anyway, and continued to re-read the scroll.

"Man, I've been over this a dozen times, and it still looks like hen tracks."

He picked up his brush, added a few more marks to the fresh page before him, then leaned back.

"Ranma?" Akane leaned in from the door of the dojo. "Are you coming to dinner?"

"Naw, you can go ahead and start without me." Ranma waved a hand. "I've gotta figure this out."

Akane grinned. "You'll need something to eat, if you want to keep this up." She walked in, and set a bowl in front of him. "We've already eaten, but I saved you some."

"Thanks, Akane." Ranma picked up the bowl, and sniffed. "Your curry's gettin' better all the time."

"Thank you, Ranma!" Akane beamed widely.

"Yeah, I don't get sick at all anymore from eatin' it."

Akane's smile turned to a scowl, and she gave him a good swift kick to the seat. He didn't even blink, but continued to eat mechanically as he read.

Akane's eyes widened in surprise; she was well aware that Ranma normally took whatever she handed out. For him to be so completely absorbed in something, that he'd fail to keep that up...

"I think I've got it now." He set down the bowl, picked up his cup, and drained his tea.

"Ranma..." She sighed. There was little use in trying to reach him right now.

"Sorry, Akane." He turned back to her. "I think I've figured out the old letch's handwriting..." He pointed at the fresh page. "I've been copying it out, so I can read it better."

"What is it?" Akane leaned over, and examined the scroll.

"Happousai gave me this scroll, with an ancient technique on it to separate the body and soul." Ranma rolled the original, and set it to the side. "The idea is that the soul can wander around, then come back to the body."

"That sounds dangerous." Akane raised her hands to her lips. "If your body is just lying around, it could be attacked."

"Yeah, but the thing is, this technique sounds like it could be of some use in controllin' the curse."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You see, here..." He traced a kanji on the page. "This seems to indicate that it's not the soul itself, but a fragment of ki, that is forced out. You attach your senses to it, as a kind of rider."

"Okay." Akane scratched her head. "How does this help with the curse?"

"Well, ya see...the curse is probably bound up in a form of ki. So if I force out that bit of ki, without my senses..."

"You'd be ejecting the curse itself."

"Yeah." Ranma grinned, and gave her a thumbs up. "How's that for a good idea?"

"Suspiciously good." Akane frowned. "I'm not so sure it's sound."

Ranma looked stung. "What, you're sayin' that if I came up with it, it must be bad?"

"No, I'm just saying...be careful."

Ranma nodded. "Okay, fair enough."

Akane smiled. "It's nice not to fight once in a while, eh?"

"Do me a favour?"

"Sure."

"I'm gonna try this now. Can you just sorta keep an eye on me?"

-----

The technique required meditation, an art that Ranma had not studied seriously. Ranma arranged himself in seiza, and began to concentrate.

'Visualization is the key to success.'

He pictured his ki as he often had, a river rushing through his veins, intermingled with his very blood. He pictured the strains of the curse in his ki, and drew them together. Slowly, he began to push the curse from himself...

And screamed.

"Ranma!" Akane jumped to her feet as Ranma pitched face first into the tatami. She rolled him over, and was shocked to see blood trickling from his nose and mouth.

"Kasumi! Ranma's hurt! Help!"

-----

Ranma lay on the floor of the family room, a wet towel over his eyes.

"The bleeding was minor, it stopped shortly after I applied pressure." Kasumi was on the telephone, her voice worried. "I'm not sure what happened."

"It doesn't sound like a stroke." Tofu's voice was remarkably clear; probably because he couldn't actually *see* Kasumi.

"He hasn't regained consciousness." Kasumi's eyes fell to the page before her. "It seems that he was trying a meditation-based technique, one to separate his mind from his body."

"Not quite." Akane looked up from Ranma. "He was trying to use that technique to expel his curse."

Tofu could apparently hear Akane through the telephone line. "It sounds like he was less than successful. Tell him to talk to Cologne before messing around with his curse. It can only be dangerous to do so without any guidance."

"Even if you say so, Sensei, the fact is that he's still unconscious on the family room floor."

There was a pause, and Tofu said, "Try applying pressure between the third and fourth vertebrae. First left side, then right."

"Thank you, Tofu-sensei." She hung up the phone, and turned to Akane. "Please, roll him over onto his front."

"Are you sure, Sis?"

"Yes, please do it."

Akane rolled him over, and Kasumi knelt beside him. She felt the young man's neck, isolated the joint, and applied pressure, first to the left, then to the right.

Ranma grunted explosively, and she drew back. He jerked once, then pushed himself slowly to his knees.

"Oh, man..." He looked up at Akane. "What did you put in that curry?"

"Jerk!" She backhanded him across the forehead. "I told you to be careful!"

"I was tryin' ta be careful, but..." He shrugged. "Nothin' in the scroll said I should pass out like that."

Kasumi spoke up. "Tofu-sensei told me that you should speak to Cologne; she knows more about the curses."

"Yeah...good idea." Ranma sat back, and winced. "There any more tea, Kasumi?"

-----

Cologne looked down at the ancient scroll, then over to Ranma's more recent transcription. She glanced between the two a few times, then sat back suddenly. "Of course!"

"What?" Ranma leaned forward excitedly.

"Your handwriting is every bit as bad as Happousai's!"

"Argh!" Ranma threw up his hands.

"But I think I can understand what you were planning with this." Cologne chuckled. "A very bold move, Son-In-Law. I am surprised that you had the courage to pursue this course."

"So can it be used this way?"

Cologne shook her head. "I am sorry, Son-In-Law, but you haven't quite got it right. We of the Joketsuzoku have learned this technique, however, and only the greatest of our cursed Warriors can use it. Even Shampoo lacks the spiritual energy to master this technique."

"Oh."

"However, I believe that you have the ability to master it." Cologne grinned. "And I would be willing to help you, if you'd just agree to--"

"Forget it." Ranma stood up. "There's no way I'll marry Shampoo."

"Be reasonable, Son-In--"

"Reasonable? She showed up at my weddin', and started attacking the guests." Ranma scowled. "She tried to kill Akane, for cryin' out loud! You expect me to be reasonable?"

"Her actions were...unfortunate." Cologne sighed. "Very well. I cannot help an outsider, not with this technique."

"Fine. I can respect that." He turned to walk away.

"Wait."

He turned back, a puzzled look on his face.

"I cannot help you, but..." She looked down again at the scroll. "Son-In-Law, you have consistently amazed me. Your ability to learn any technique is, quite simply, astounding. I believe that if anyone, *you* could learn this technique." She glanced up. "I cannot teach you...but I can give you a hint. I will do so, just so that I can see you learn this."

"All right." Ranma sat back down again. "What's the hint?"

"Jushenkyou is more than cursed...it is haunted." Cologne drew out her pipe, and began to pack it. "The spirits that inhabit the Pools lend their form and their magics to the curse. But the curse also binds itself to your very soul. Attempts to eject it fail miserably, and can be fatal."

Ranma nodded. "I sorta figured that last part out already."

"But the curse also has its own soul, and you can draw that out safely using this technique, the way it was meant to be used." Cologne lit the pipe, took a puff. "In this way, you can use the astral projection, without fear of either soul or body."

"That makes it even safer than usual." Ranma flashed her a thumbs up. "So how do I learn the effect?"

"That, I leave up to my student to discover." She stood, and waved him away with the pipe. "Lunch hour is starting soon. Either get out, or grab an apron!"

-----

Ranma looked down at the cup of water before him.

"Safer when in cursed form?" He tilted his head, and considered. "If my astral form will be safer because of the curse, maybe I should use this first..."

"You're not seriously thinking of trying that again, are you?" Akane walked over to him, a look of suspicion on her face. "If you recall, it didn't work so well last time."

"I think I can handle it this time, Akane." He paused. "The Old Ghoul gave me some hints."

"Good for her. What did she get out of it?"

"I think she just wanted to see if I'd actually try it."

Akane blinked.

"Problem is, Akane...it's not a cure, or anything remotely like it." He sighed. "Best I'll be able to do is just what Happousai said...it'll let my spirit wander around invisibly."

"That doesn't seem like a lot of use."

"Oh, you never know." Ranma shrugged. "Spyin' on enemies before a match ain't exactly honourable, but sometimes it's what's gotta be done, right?"

"I suppose." Akane sighed. "Are you sure I can't talk you out of this?"

"No, but..." He paused. "Can you sit here with me, in case I pass out again?"

"Ranma..." She smiled. "Do you actually trust me now?"

"I guess...it's more like you're the first person handy, and since you're strong as a gorilla, you can carry me around if I--" He was cut off by a fist slamming into his face.

"If you're going to be like that--" Akane paused, and removed her fist. "I'm sorry, Ranma."

Ranma waved it off. "Don't worry about it."

Akane stepped back from him, and sat down. "I'll be here, if you need...anything."

"Thanks." He picked up the glass, and upended it over his head. The change flowed through him, rendering him female, and she set the glass down carefully.

"Okay, Akane, I'm startin' this up."

She closed her eyes.

*Draw out the curse, not force it out.*

She pictured herself seated in seiza, feet tucked underneath her and knees touching. She pictured taking a step back, out of her body.

Nothing.

*I need to concentrate my ki!*

Her brow creased, and she bore down on the thought.

*Just step back...*

She stepped back. And blinked.

Kneeling before her was...her male body. She looked down at her hands, noted that they were the same tiny hands that her female form always had. "So I'm female, but I'm also male, and sittin' right there? That means..."

She glanced over at Akane, to see her fiancée's eyes wide with shock.

"It worked." She glanced down again, and noted that she was wearing a black kimono. A baldric hung across her chest, and she realized from the weight that a weapon was suspended from it across her back.

She glanced back at Akane, who was unsteadily standing. Her hand came up, and pointed straight at Ranma.

"Ranma...you..."

"You can see me, Akane?" Ranma scowled. "Lotta good this will do me if everyone can see me."

"I..." Akane shook her head. "Yes, I can see you...but I can see right through you, too."

Ranma blinked. She glanced down again. "I seem pretty solid to me." She glanced around. "There a mirror in here?"

"On the shrine."

Ranma stepped over to the shrine, and looked into the small mirror. And gasped.

Her face was the same, but a long scar ran down the left side, cutting directly through the orbital socket. By some miracle, whatever had left the scar had missed the eye itself. Her hair was unbound; it fell past her shoulders, as it would without the pigtail, and its red was even more brilliant than normal. The weapon on her back appeared to be a nagimaki, a short-handled horseman's glaive.

"This musta been what she really looked like."

"I guess so." Akane had crossed the dojo, and stood next to her fiance's...spirit? Soul? Whatever she currently was.

"s kinda funny." Ranma sighed. "I spent the last year turnin' into this chick, and I had no idea about anythin' about her."

"She must have looked a lot like you, after all." Akane's voice was low. "After all, you look so much like your Mom when you're in girl form."

"I know." Ranma ran a hand along the scar, felt the abnormally smooth skin tissue under her fingertips. "I wonder where she got this?"

"No way to ever know, is there?"

"Guess not." She reached back, and grasped the nagimaki. "What about this...?"

She drew the blade from its restraint, and turned it end for end until it came to a ready position before her.

"I know this weapon." She examined it curiously. "It fits my hand perfectly, like it was meant to be here." She turned it, examining the blade. "It's not a beautiful weapon, but..." She shrugged, and resheathed it. "Well, it's almost anticlimactic. I've figured it out, but I--"

She stopped.

"Ranma?" Akane stepped closer to her. "What's the matter?"

"Him."

Akane turned...to see Ranma standing, eyes wide, and staring at...Ranma.

"You've got to be kiddin'." He stepped forward, and reached towards his female double. "Which of us is real?"

"I am, of course!" Ranma jerked a thumb towards her chest, and scowled at him. "Whoever you are, possessin' my body, you've got five seconds to get the heck out, before I beat you out!"

"I ain't possessed, or anythin' like that!" Ranma's scowl deepened. "You ain't me, either, 'cause I'm still not doin' that projection thing or whatever! You've gotta be the Demon, or the mirror copy, or--"

Akane was glancing between the two of them, looking more and more confused by the second.

"Time's up!" Ranma ground her teeth, set her feet, and launched a punch towards her male double's face. Ranma reacted by instinct, raising a hand to brush the punch aside, but the moment that their hands touched, the redheaded girl vanished with a *crack*, and only male Ranma remained.

"Wha--" He shook his head. "That was very messed up."

"You're telling me!" Akane stepped towards him, a scowl replacing her earlier confusion. "What the hell was that?"

"We were both me." He looked as puzzled as she was angry. "I can remember bein' in the girl's body. I also remember bein' in this one. We were both real, and when we touched...our memories merged again."

Akane's anger ebbed. "All right, I think I get it."

"Yeah, me too." He grinned. "When we separate, we become two individuals, and when we re-combine, we can share memories. This is way better than I'd hoped!" He raised a fist. "Ranma Saotome does it again!"

"I'm actually impressed," said Akane. "That technique might not be as useful as Grandfather Happousai suggested, but it is definitely interesting."

"Yeah." He looked down at his hands. "I wonder if maybe..." He glanced up, towards the iroha. "I know that Cologne said it can't be used to cure the curse, but maybe I can use it to...I dunno...control it, maybe?" His grin widened. "Of course, I can! If I can master this technique in a day--"

"Hey, genius."

He looked over at her, momentarily deflated. "Uh?"

She grinned. "Weren't you a girl before you started this? Or did you forget?"

His expression of confusion faded to delight.

## Shadows and Shades

Ranma stepped back from her male form. She checked her robes, baldric and nagimaki, touched the scar running down her face.

"It was easier this time." She glanced over at Akane, then down at her male form.

"Hey." Akane shoved Ranma's male body on the shoulder. "You can wake up now."

Ranma's eyes sprang open, and he stuck a hand out to the side to stabilize himself. He glanced over at his female form. "Whoa."

Akane nodded. "This could definitely take some getting used to."

The female Ranma scowled. "How much can it take for you?" She jerked a thumb towards the kneeling boy. "The only time I normally see him is in a mirror."

Akane giggled.

The female Ranma sighed. "We're gonna have to find out how far I can go like this. Ranma, you stay here."

"Sure thing, Ranko."

The female blinked. "Ranko?"

Ranma shrugged. "We're gonna have to call you somethin', right? At least as long as you're wanderin' around."

The girl considered this, then shrugged. "I can get used to it. 'Ranko' it is." She pulled the nagimaki off of her back, and leaned it up against the wall. "I better leave this here."

She turned, and walked towards the door of the dojo, but Akane's gasp caused her to turn. "What?"

The turn made the baldric shift on her shoulder, and she felt the weight of the nagimaki. She pulled it off her back, and examined it.

"This girl musta drowned still holdin' her weapon." She shrugged, and slipped it back into its sheath. "Guess I'll have to carry it around with me." She glanced over at Akane. "Can you do me a favour?"

"I guess."

"Just...hang back a bit, and keep an eye on me."

-----

Kasumi carefully set the glass pot lid on the counter, and scooped a small amount of soup from the pot. She sniffed, then tasted, and smiled. "Almost perfect."

Ranko walked into the kitchen. "Yo, Kasumi."

Kasumi dropped the spoon into the pot, and whirled, to stare at Ranko.

Ranko scratched the back of her head nervously. "I know the getup is kinda weird, but--"

"Is...someone there?" Kasumi's eyes were not quite focused on Ranko, but seemed to be looking past her. Ranko looked at her oddly.

"Yer' lookin' right at me, Kasumi."

"Odd..." Kasumi smiled. "I must be imagining things." She turned back to the soup.

"Imagin'?" Ranko walked up to her. "Yo, Kasumi, I'm right here!"

Kasumi continued to stir the soup.

"Yo, Kasumi!" Ranko scowled. "Why are ya actin' like ya can't--"

She paused.

"Maybe she can't."

She leaned closer, until her nose was nearly touching Kasumi's shoulder.

Kasumi reached over with her left hand, picked up the pepper, and added a dash. Her hand came within a millimeter of Ranko's robe, but still she seemed oblivious to her.

"Whaddaya know...I guess it's just Akane and my boy type that can see me." She leaned back. "Wonder why they can, and Kasumi can't?"

Akane walked in, a puzzled look on her face. "Hey, Ranko?"

"Yeah?"

Kasumi turned. "Ranko? I haven't seen Ranma in girl form today; he was still a boy at breakfast time. I thought that Ranma had given up using that name?"

"She has, Sis."

Ranko grinned. "She can't see me, Akane. It's just you and...well, me, I guess. Watch!" She waved a hand near Kasumi's face.

Kasumi started, and turned towards Ranko.

"Ack!" Ranko took a step back involuntarily.

Kasumi stared in her general direction. "Akane..."

"Yeah, Sis?"

"I'm not sure, but...I think I just saw something." She raised a hand to her lips. "Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something moving in midair."

"Maybe she can kinda see me, after all." Ranko studied the older girl.

Akane walked towards Ranko, and stared at her hard.

"What?" Ranko looked behind her, then back to Akane. "What's up, Akane?"

"I think you're right, Kasumi." Akane turned back to Kasumi. "I saw it, too."

"What do you think it is? Another demon?"

"No...I think it's a lonely ghost, of a long-dead girl."

Ranko blinked.

"Nothing to worry about, Sis...I don't think she's dangerous. Just treat her as another freeloading house guest."

"Hey!"

"Oh..." Kasumi smiled. "At least this one, we don't have to feed."

"Oh, man." Ranko threw her hands in the air. "No respect around here at all!"

- - - - -

"I'm tellin' ya, Ranma, it was seriously weird." Ranko was pacing the inside of the dojo. "It was like she could almost see me, if I snuck up on her or somethin'."

Ranma considered. "Maybe she's one of them medium types."

"Heh." Ranko smirked. "And here I always thought Kasumi was rare."

"You know what I mean, dolt!" Ranma shook his head. "Maybe she can see spirits."

"Maybe." Ranko frowned. "But she only saw me twice, and it was more like she...Ya know how we feel when someone's watching us?"

"Yeah."

"It was like that. She had the feelin' that I was there, but she couldn't really see me."

Ranma nodded. "So it's just me an' the Tomboy."

"Guess so."

"Probably, I can see ya because I'm your other half. And Akane...well, she was there the first time we did this, so maybe that's why she can see ya."

"Maybe." Ranko considered. "I'm gonna go for a walk."

"Where to?" Ranma jumped to his feet."

"Just out and about. Maybe to the school and back." Ranko turned and walked to the dojo door. "It might be just you and Akane, or maybe there're other people...I want to see if anyone else can see me. Tell Akane I'll be back in an hour or two."

"Want me to come with?"

"No." Ranko grinned. "If either Kuno or Kodachi can see both of us...well, do ya really want to go there?"

-----

A redheaded Japanese girl, walking through the streets of Nerima while wearing a black kimono and carrying a polearm, would normally draw some attention. But anyone who crossed Ranko's path seemed to look straight through her.

"I could get used to this." She watched Kuno wander straight past her, his eyes never leaving his path. She ran to catch up with him, jumped out in front of the samurai wannabe, waving her hands. She had to backpedal quickly, as he didn't slow at all. She stepped to the side, let him walk past.

"Kuno!" She yelled his name as loud as she could.

Kuno paused.

*He heard me?*

The kendoist's lips curved in a smile. "Ah, my pigtail Goddess' lovely voice. Forever it haunts my imagination, whispering its words of love and devotion."

"Ick." Ranko shivered. "So even doin' everythin' but slappin' him, and he still only thinks it's his imagination." She turned, and stomped away from him. "And he has a sick imagination."

She glanced up, to see three more people approaching. Two she recognized: Hiroshi and Daisuke. Not precisely friends, but the closest to such that she had. The third, a younger boy, maybe ten years old, she didn't recognize. She fell into step with them, noting again that she went completely unobserved.

"The only problem is, Hiro, that he'd pound us into goo for even imagining such things."

"I know." Hiroshi nodded. "But, hell. Who can help imagining? You gotta admit, Ranma's hotter in girl form than the rest of the female student body."

"And what a body!" Daisuke laughed. "I'd love to get just one hand, just a finger, down that--"

Ranko gritted her teeth, and launched a punch at the back of Daisuke's head.

"Ow!" Daisuke pitched forward, tumbling to an ungraceful heap on the pavement.

"Huh? You trip?"

"No, something hit the back of my head." Daisuke stood up carefully, rubbing the back of his head. He glanced around, puzzled. "Felt like a baseball, or a brick, or something...I don't see anything, though."

"Maybe it was Ranma."

Ranko blinked, and stepped back.

"Yeah, could be...even imagining things like that could get me hurt." Daisuke's eyes glazed over again. "If only we could convince him to wear a school uniform...cold water would wreck the shirt in a hurry--"

Ranko spun on her heel and marched away, before she was forced to give into the urge to draw the nagimaki and get medieval on Daisuke. She had gone perhaps ten steps before she realized that the little boy was walking with her.

She turned, and glanced down at him. He was painfully thin, and very pale. Perhaps the oddest thing about him, though, was the short length of chain protruding from his chest.

He smiled shyly at her. "You can see me, can't you?"

"Yeah." She leaned over a bit. "How come you can see me?"

"We're ghosts, aren't we?"

"Guess so." Ranko stood again, and glanced around. "There many ghosts around here?"

"Yes. Not as many as there are people." He looked more closely at her. "You don't have a chain."

"Hm?" She glanced down at her chest. "No, I don't."

"No chain--you're one of them!"

His eyes widened, and he turned and bolted down the street. Ranko watched as he ran straight through Hiroshi, then turned down a corner and was lost from sight.

"One of *them*?" She shrugged, then looked around. "Ghosts, eh?"

- - - - -

Elsewhere in the district, a small, black-haired girl paused as her pager went off.

The pager was in direct contradiction to the rest of her. Kimono, straw zori sandals, and katana did not mix with the pager. But she drew the pager from her obi, and considered it, then leaped from the street to the telephone pole.

- - - - -

Dusk had fallen; Ranko picked up her pace. She wasn't worried about street crime - she could crush any mugger like a bug - but she'd been gone for almost an hour, and she didn't want Akane getting worried about her.

She'd seen several other ghosts; like herself, they walked among the citizens of Nerima, completely unnoticed by the living. Now that night was falling, they were more obviously transparent, as though the light was being drawn out of them as well as from the sky.

Fewer living people were around; most were heading in for the night. She paused, however, as she saw Gosunkugi mooching along the street.

"Damn...if anyone else is likely to see me, it's him."

She ducked behind a telephone pole, hoping it provided enough cover. Gosunkugi didn't seem to notice her, but meandered past the pole, muttering under his breath.

"...evil spirits around..."

"Hm?"

She slipped out, and drew level with him. He had an unlit candle in one hand and a hand-written charm in the other, toying with them absentmindedly.

"I can feel them...evil..."

Ranko smirked. "Dunno why I was worried."

Gosunkugi stopped. Ranko blinked, and glanced over at him.

He was staring right at her.

"Evil spirit..." He dropped the charm, fumbled for his lighter, and lit the candle. He held it high, and took a step towards her.

"Evil one, begone!" He waved the candle in her general vicinity. "I see you, shade! Return to the pits of hell!"

"Oh, great." She backpedalled, anxious to get out of the light cast by the candle.

"Begone!" He stopped, and sighed. "That's the third one this week...I really need to learn how to do a proper exorcism..." He waved a skinny fist towards her, then turned and stumped down the sidewalk.

Ranko watched him go, puzzled. "Damn. He seemed almost competent." She frowned. "That candle...It seemed like he could see me in its light..."

She paused, at the sound of running feet.

Ahead of her was the young boy that she'd seen shadowing Hiroshi and Daisuke. He was running as though his life depended on it.

"Hey, kid, what--"

He tore past her, not slowing down at all. She watched him run off.

"Odd. Wonder what he--"

The air was split by an unearthly howl. Ranko felt her skin roughen with goosepimples, actually felt each individual hair on her head rise up, and she turned to look down the street.

She wished she hadn't.

The shadowy form, stalking methodically towards her, would have been three meters tall save for its hunched over posture. The massive fingers that brushed the pavement on each step sported five-centimeter claws. Moonlight shone clearly through the empty hole in its body, and gleamed off the pale, bonelike mask that covered its misshapen head.

"What in the name of..." The momentarily paralysis lifted, and she snapped into a ready position. "That's what he was runnin' from!"

The creature lifted its head, and howled again, a cry of hunger and pain.

"That far, no further." Ranko's scowl deepened.

The creature lowered its head, staring balefully at her, then with astonishing speed, leaped forwards and backhanded her across the street. She rolled, regaining her feet, and leaped towards it.

Her foot smashed directly into its ribs, but she might as well have hit a brick wall. Almost casually, the monster backhanded her again. This time, she turned it into a flip, landing lightly on her feet.

The creature turned, and began lumbering directly towards her again.

"Enough of this crap. *Kachuu Tenshin Amaguriken!*"

She leaped inside its guard, delivering a rapid-fire string of punches into its abdomen. Again, it felt like she was hitting something completely unyielding. The creature kicked, catching her leg, and one claw slashed across her robes, tearing them badly. She winced; any closer, and it would have torn her badly as well.

She leaped away, and the creature continued to trudge heavily towards her.

"I'm not hurtin' it. It took my best attack, and kept on comin'." She reached back almost automatically, and readied the nagimaki. "I'm gonna have to use this..."

-----

Atop a telephone pole, the small, black-haired girl watched the battle silently. One hand tightened reflexively on her katana.

*Shaolan...*

-----

Ranko brought the nagimaki down into the ready position, and scowled. "Come on, you big ugly--"

The creature moved, again with the unexpected speed. She parried its claw-rake with the glaive, and severed three fingers. The creature roared with pain. She grinned, pressed her advantage, and leaped past it, slashing a leg as she moved.

Again the creature howled. Ranko touched down, leaped into the air as a massive paw slammed into the pavement where she'd just been standing.

She was in a dojo.

She blinked, and looked around.

It wasn't the Tendo dojo; the iroha were in Chinese characters, not Japanese, and the shrine was missing. She heard the rumbling purr of a kitten, and forced herself not to look for its source.

"You need to target the mask."

She turned, to see another redheaded girl.

No, to see *herself*. As she was in spirit form...a redhead with long hair, much longer than her own, but with the same scar, the same robes, and the same nagimaki.

"Strike the mask. It is the only way to defeat it."

The creature roared again, and she rolled to the side, dodging another rake. She slashed down, severing the tendons across the back of its hand.

"Target the mask, eh?"

The beast seemed to know her target; one arm was raised, ready to parry a leap attack. She dodged inward, spinning to slash the knee; as the creature moved to counterattack, she leaped straight up.

The nagimaki passed through the bone mask as though through air, cutting straight through the creature's skull and out the top. She landed, the nagimaki finding its way effortlessly to its scabbard, and watched as the creature dissolved into a spray of black mist.

-----

The black-haired girl shook her head.

*I don't have time to follow her...but I can't doubt that my Captain will send someone to watch her.*

She leaped to the next telephone pole, continuing her mission.

-----

"Ranko!" Akane dashed forward as the Redhead staggered into the dojo.

"So tired..."

"What happened?"

Ranko collapsed forward, and Akane caught her.

"Kane...I saw ghosts...I fought one, a really nasty one..."

"There's blood on your glaive."

"I know...not mine." She smiled weakly. "I'm not hurt, though it was a close one."

Akane stared pointedly at the rip in her robe.

"I know...close." She tried to pull herself upright, failed. "But I'm so tired..."

"Ranma!"

"Yeah, Akane." Ranma reached down, picked up the smaller girl, and held her close to his body.

There was a shimmer, and she vanished. Ranma collapsed to the floor.

"Ranma!"

"I'm okay...just dizzy." He sat up slowly. "I've been in a helluva fight."

"With what?"

"I don't know exactly." He shuddered. "But it was definitely a bad guy."

"What did she--"

"I split it in half with my nagimaki." He grinned, almost a predatory snarl. "He won't be botherin' anyone else."

"So why was she--"

"I used up all my energy." Ranma looked down at his hands, flexed them into fists. "I guess I can only stay away for so long, and that time is shortened if I get into a fight."

"Oh."

"So I came back here, to recharge." Ranma glanced up. "You keep sayin' 'she', but ya gotta remember, Akane...once we come back together...it's all me."

## Curses Have Claws

Retsukawa Masami knelt before Captain Ukitake.

"Retsukawa. I have a mission for you. One of some sensitivity."

"I am ready to serve, my Captain."

"A rogue agent has appeared in Tokyo; we need more information before deciding to proceed."

"I understand. What actions am I permitted to take?"

Ukitake considered. "It would be best to observe, at first. If you can convince the rogue to accept you as an equal, you may attempt to assess her knowledge of the Society." He glanced down. "You are probably the best equipped of our agents to deal with this issue; I feel I can trust you to follow your instincts." He pulled a scroll from his tunic. "These records could assist you; the agent in question appears to be Shaolan, who died in the Middle Kingdom during the Zhou Dynasty."

Masami took the scroll with some reverence; the name Shaolan was still spoken with respect. "I shall report daily."

-----

Kuno would have mocked Ranko's grip on the shinai, for she was holding it precisely backward. However, for training with the nagimaki, the shinai was a decent substitute.

Across from her, Ranma stood, in a ready position. Akane watched from the side lines.

"Ready when you are, kid."

Akane raised a hand. "Begin."

Ranko leaped forward, aiming a strike for the head. Ranma dodged the shot by a millimeter, countered with a foot sweep. Ranko jumped over his foot, and struck again. The two sparred for almost five minutes, before Ranma's fist grazed Ranko's cheek.

"Hold."

The two broke apart, panting slightly.

"Not bad." Ranma wiped a trail of perspiration from his cheek. "You make for a pretty good workout."

"You too."

Akane snorted. "Much good it does you two to spar against each other. You both already know everything the other does."

"Not quite." Ranko held up the shinai. "I've got some skill with this, above what I knew as Ranma. The drowned girl's skill with the nagimaki seems to have carried over."

"Well, I can tell you something else." Akane frowned. "Neither of you two are as good alone as you are when you're fused."

Ranma blinked. "Yeah, I think you're right."

"Probably because I've got a fair portion of his energy," added Ranko. "It's hard to tell when we're fighting each other, though."

"I guess that makes sense." Akane stepped into the dojo. "Ranma. Wanna spar?"

"Sure." Ranma stepped back. "Same rules?"

"Except that I'm unarmed. Ranko, ref?"

"Sure." Ranko stepped to the sidelines, and raised a hand. "Begin."

The battle was not as lop-sided as was traditional between the two; Ranko noted that Akane's shots were more often parried than simply dodged. Ranma was definitely working up a sweat; it was almost ten minutes of constant exchanges of blows before a fist worked past Akane's defense and caught her across the ribs.

"Stop." Ranko stepped forwards, and laid a hand on Akane's shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah." She sucked in a breath. "Damn, you hit like a tank, Ranma."

"Sorry 'bout that...I had to take the opening when I saw it." He looked down at his fist. "I guess you're right, Akane...I'm not nearly as fast as I was, nor as tough. The technique is still there, but..."

"If you were to try Ryouga right now, you'd get smeared." Ranko scowled. "I ain't sure that I like this, pal."

"-You- don't like it? I nearly lost to the Tomboy."

"Yeah, I can see that buggin' ya." Ranko grinned. "At this point, though, you could train Akane without fear of causing her permanent harm. I don't think any of your ki attacks will function right now."

"Or yours. Right now, you gotta rely on that stick."

"I know." She set the shinai back on the rack, drew her nagimaki. She twirled it a few times. "It just seems more natural."

Akane frowned. "You aren't planning to go out again tonight, are you?"

"I dunno." She frowned. "When I killed that evil ghost last night, it was like...like I was meant to be doin' it."

"Ranko..." She stepped forward and grabbed the smaller girl's shoulders. "I'm a bit worried about you. If you die fighting one of those things, what happens to Ranma?"

Ranko shrugged. "Guess I'll just have to win every time, so we don't have to find out."

- - - - -

She had waited for nightfall this time; she'd not encountered the creature until well after dusk last night. Now, the streets were clear of both the living and the dead.

"There must be something great on TV. Do ghosts have TV?" Ranko glanced around. "I figured that I'd at least see a few friendly ghosts, but no..."

She leaped to the top of a nearby house.

"Guess I've still got the energy for roofhopping..." She glanced around, and spotted a familiar figure three blocks away. "Ryouga..."

She grinned, and leaped down into the street.

- - - - -

Ranko was not the only one stalking the Lost Boy.

Her mission was of paramount importance, but until she encountered the rogue, Masami had little else to do. So when she'd spotted this boy, and realized what he harboured, she'd decided to tail him. She'd leaped from rooftop to rooftop, keeping out of his sight; according to the scroll, the Cursed would be able to see her, if only faintly.

-If he's one of those cursed by Jushenkyou, he'll need my assistance sooner or later.-

So it was with some surprise that she saw the rogue drop down in front of the boy.

Ranko smirked. "Hey, bacon breath. Can ya see me?"

Ryouga paused. "Who's there?"

"It's me, pig-boy. Don'tcha see me?"

Ryouga stared right through her.

"Oh, man, he's just like Kasumi. One of those medium-rares." Ranko pulled her nagimaki off of her back, and walked up to the Lost Boy.

Ryouga took a step back. "Stay back."

She scowled, and gave him a poke with the butt-end of her glaive.

Something fell back from Ryouga, a form of cloud and mist. Ranko jumped back in panic, staring incredibly as it started to coalesce.

"What did I do?"

Atop the roof, Masami cursed, and grabbed the hilt of her katana.

The form solidified, taking on a vaguely humanoid shape. It was quite massive, easily six hundred kilograms, and the bone-white mask seemed to form the skull of a wild boar. Ranko blinked.

"That's his curse! I just knocked his curse right outta him!"

The creature didn't seem to take kindly to being expelled. It roared in anger, and kicked Ryouga across the street. He slammed into the far wall and collapsed in a heap.

"Oh, man. If it's strong enough to knock Ryouga out, I might be in trouble." She readied the glaive, and leaped towards the boar.

It backhanded her, knocking her back the way she'd come. She rolled, regaining her feet, and winced.

The creature raised itself to a more upright posture, bringing its hands together in a familiar cup. Ranko's eyes widened, and she leaped aside as the Shi Shi Houkodan smashed into the wall behind her.

"Okay, it's stronger than Ryouga, faster than Ryouga, and it knows his moves. I'm in trouble." She considered her own arsenal; the revised Amaguriken might be of use, but last time it had bounced off one of these demons with no effect. She lacked the ki to generate a Mouko Takabisha, and she doubted that a Hiryouu Shouten Ha would work.

"Guess I'll have to rely on the blade again."

She ran in, dodging a claw attack, and slashed the beast's arm in passing. A spray of blood followed her path, but the boar didn't seem to notice the injury. She backflipped over its counterattack, and rammed the nagimaki's blade straight into its arm.

That, it noticed. An earsplitting howl filled the night, and the creature slapped her aside. She slammed into a parked car, setting off its alarm, and slumped to the ground.

She shook off the stun, and shakily rose to her feet. The boar was lumbering towards her, its skull-like mask grinning obscenely.

"Okay, I hurt it somewhat." She tightened her grip on the glaive. "How did I kill the last one?"

"Aim for the mask."

She glanced behind, to see a tall, black-haired woman standing on top of the car. "Who the heck are you?"

The stranger's garb was identical to her own; a black kimono, straw zuri sandals, and tabi socks. She had a katana in one hand, resting across her shoulders.

"Introductions can wait. To dispatch the Hollow, you need to smash its mask with your blade."

"Yeah, I remember now. I told me that once." She turned back, and leaped for the creature.

The boar tapped the ground at its feet with one taloned finger. The pavement directly beneath Ranko exploded, knocking her leap off-course. She touched down, and immediately jumped away, as the pavement exploded again. Fragments of asphalt peppered her, one cutting her cheek. She rode the shockwave of the Bakusai Tenketsu, turning it into a high-angle leap, and dropped blade-first straight for the creature's mask.

The boar slapped her out of the sky, pinning her to the ground beneath its massive paw. It leaned in over her, vapour condensing from its breath.

"It's been a long time since I've smelled your kind..."

Ranko scowled. "Gonna be a really long time before you smell anything ever again!" But bravado aside, she realized that she was good and trapped.

A black and silver blur passed by; Masami's katana neatly severed one tendon, weakening the beast's grasp. The boar roared, and lifted its paw. Ranko rolled backward, feet over head, and leaped again into the air.

The creature sucked in a breath, and Ranko's eyes widened as she realized its intent.

*"Perfect Shi Shi Houkodan!"*

The crushing weight of massive ki caught her, forcing her down to the ground. She rolled again, turned it into a lunge, and her blade struck home, right through the eyeslot of the beast's mask. She recovered, and watched with satisfaction as it dissolved into black mist.

"One more beastie down."

She turned back to the car, but the girl was gone.

"Wonder who the heck that was?"

The silent streets offered no reply. She shrugged, and walked over to the crumpled Ryouga.

- - - - -

"Looks like you did all right this time." Ranma looked his double up and down. "Only one little scratch."

"With this kimono, you can't see the bruises. I ran into Ryouga."

"Oh, yeah?"

Ranko scowled. "He was carryin' one of those monsters inside of him. Nasty one, too. I knocked it outta him, and killed it. With a bit of help."

"Help?"

"Look, I'll just merge with you, okay? That way, you'll know as much as me." She stepped into him.

And found herself again in the dojo. Not the Tendo dojo, but the same one she'd seen the first time she'd fought one of the demons.

Her duplicate was there.

"Okay...what's going on?"

The redhead smiled. "You do our work naturally, without inhibition."

"You mean killin' those monsters?"

"Yes. But you lack the link to your weapon."

Ranko shrugged. "I seem to be doin' okay with it."

"You must listen to her."

"Who?"

Again, she heard the purring, and stiffened. She glanced to the right, to see a small white kitten sitting on her shoulder.

"Yaaahh!!!"

Ranma jerked upright, and brushed his shoulder.

"Cat..." He shivered, and glanced around.

He was back in the Tendo dojo, with no sign of Ranko. He glanced again at his shoulder with a final shiver, and walked off in search of his bed.

-----

Masami looked herself over in the mirror. Her features had been called attractive before, but she knew them to be too sharp for true beauty. Her hair, which she normally kept in a bun, was loose and reached well past her beltline; she picked a scarlet ribbon off the dresser and tied it back in a ponytail.

She preferred the stern garb of her office, but knew it would be out of place in modern Japan. The long black skirt and loose shirt looked reasonably decent on her. Her apparent age of nineteen put her outside the range of the uniformed schoolgirl, which suited her just dandy.

The scroll's information on Jushenkyou, combined with the re-integration she had witnessed the previous night, gave her a good idea on how to proceed. The boy appeared to be a martial artist; his double's obvious skill in battle led her to believe that he was a Master of his art. Her bravado in battle told her of the girl's desire to be the best.

No doubt an appeal to his vanity would be the best course.

-----

Ranma's breakfasts had become heartier since he'd taken up ghostbusting. He was on his third helping when there was a knock at the back door.

Kasumi rose from the table. "I'll answer that."

"Thank you, Kasumi." Soun rustled his newspaper. "So, Ranma. Akane tells me you've finally started treating her like a proper student."

"Yeah...She's a lot closer to my level recently, so I figured I can give her some real trainin'."

"The bond between a student and master is a strong one, boy." Soun looked over the top of his paper. "Perhaps in a few weeks' time, we can call for the priest again, hmm?"

"Dad!" Akane scowled.

"Look, Tendo..." He set down the bowl. "Me and Akane will decide when we're ready to get married, an' it ain't yet. We're still only seventeen."

Kasumi walked back into the family room. "Ranma...there's a girl here who says she wants to train under you."

There was a pause.

Ranma scratched his head. "Anyone we know?"

"I don't think so." Kasumi looked puzzled. "She doesn't look familiar. And she's not dressed like any kind of martial artist."

Ranma shrugged. "So where is she?"

"I sent her to the dojo. Should I make some more tea?"

"Yeah, good idea. I'll take a pot out there with me."

-----

Ranma walked into the dojo, and nearly dropped the pot.

"You!"

The girl smiled. "I see that you remember me."

"Yeah." Ranma scowled. "But I thought you were a ghost, like when I was walkin' around in my ghost form."

"I took on a faux body, so that I can visit you." She bowed. "My name is Retsukawa Masami. I am attached to the Thirteenth Division of Soul Society, under the command of Captain Ukitake Jushiro."

"Saotome Ranma, of the Satome Ryuu Musabetsa Kakotou." He returned the bow. "I assume that the story you gave Kasumi was just a way of gettin' to see me privately?"

"Not entirely; I think that there is much we can teach each other." Masami gestured towards the teapot. "May I have some tea?"

"Uh? Oh, sure." He knelt, placed the teacups on the floor of the dojo, and poured them full. "So what exactly are you doin' here?"

"I was ordered to investigate reports of a rogue Shinigami."

"Shinigami...you mean that literally?" He blinked. "Wait...you mean that that girl who drowned in the pool was a Death Goddess?"

"Oh, yes." She knelt before him, and picked up a teacup. "The Shinigami have two roles: To guide the dead to Soul Society - you might call it Heaven - and to fight the Hollows."

"You mentioned them before. That thing I fought last night...that was a Hollow, then?"

"Yes. They are spirits of the dead who remain on Earth, tied to things left undone. They start out as ghosts - we call them Pluses, as their karmic energy is

still in the positive - but eventually, their souls degrade and erode, until they become nothing more than the Anima. The life-force, driven by an emotional need that they can no longer control."

"And what's Soul Society?"

Masami sipped her tea, and stared into the distance. "Soul Society is home to many spirits, mostly good. It is also the home of the Shinigami."

"Makes sense."

"It is a peaceful place, for the most part." She looked down again. "As far as I have been able to tell, you harbour the soul of a fallen Shinigami. She died in China, fifteen hundred years ago, trying to undo a dangerous spell."

"Jushenkyo."

"Yes. The cursed springs were created by Hollows, and anyone who falls into a pool ends up picking up a Hollow and carrying it with them until the day they die." She looked up at Ranma. "All but you."

"Why me?"

"I'm not entirely certain. But for whatever reason, you instead picked up the soul of Shaolan, formerly a Lieutenant of the Fourth Division. We could not free her from the pool in which she drowned, and feared that she would become a Hollow. But I can see that she has not."

"Lucky for me."

"Yes, and no. You retain none of her knowledge; her Id washed away many years ago. But the traits you picked up lead you to fight the Hollows, and allow you your link to your zampakto."

"You mean the glaive."

"Yes." She grinned. "I can help you master your skills, and allow Shaolan to return to Soul Society."

Ranma considered this.

"Assumin' for the moment that I want to go to this Soul Society place...what do I have to do in return?"

"You can train me, to begin with." Masami smiled. "I'm always willing to learn more of the combat arts."

## Mistakes and Misunderstandings

Masami crashed heavily to the mat.

Ranma straightened up, and grinned. "You're gettin' better, I gotta say."

"You call this better?" Masami stood up painfully, gasping for breath. "All that has been happening is that you have been tossing me around the mat like a rag doll."

"Yeah, but you've already forgotten. You need to learn how to fall as much as you need to learn how to throw."

Masami crossed her arms. "I placed very highly in my primary martial arts training, and that included learning how to fall properly."

"I believe ya. Really, I do." Ranma shrugged. "Maybe I'm just more of a perfectionist than your last teacher."

Masami considered this. "Maybe you are a better martial artist than he was."

"Oh, that goes without sayin'."

Masami shifted to a ready stance. "Again?"

"Naw." Ranma shook his head. "You're a quick learner, but you're startin' to lose your wind. First kata. Akane, respond."

"Hai, sensei." Akane jumped to her feet and took her place opposite Masami."

"No meter. Begin."

Masami moved through the kata at full speed, noting with surprise that Akane matched her moves perfectly. The kata was painstakingly choreographed; a mistake by either partner could cause injury to either. The kata was fifty-four steps, and at full speed, Masami was sweating even more heavily by the end. Akane, on the other hand, appeared as fresh as at the start.

"Good. Grab some tea, you two."

Masami dropped down to the floor, and picked up her teacup. Ranma sat opposite her.

"What can you tell me about the kata you just performed?"

Masami considered. "There were no moves in it more difficult than the simplest beginner moves."

"Yes." Ranma nodded.

"Despite having done it only a few times myself, it worked seamlessly with Akane." She frowned. "It seemed that she was compensating for the errors I was making."

"Good."

"And by the time I was done, I was aching all over."

"I wondered about that. You look to be about nineteen, but you told me that you were closer to one hundred and fifty. When did you last seriously practise the Art?"

Masami considered. "That would probably be before I died."

"...Died?"

"Yes. I joined Soul Society about nine years after I died. I was killed at Goryokaku, during the Boshin War."

"Oh." Ranma looked nonplussed. "I didn't think they let women fight in wars back then."

"With this body, it was easy to convince others I was a man."

Akane snorted.

Ranma shrugged. "Well, whoever your sensei was, he laid a solid foundation to work with. But I'm guessing that this fake body you're wearin' isn't properly conditioned."

"No...it's a new issue."

Ranma nodded. "I don't know if it'll do you any good in the long run to condition it, but you're gonna have to in order to progress any further."

- - - - -

The knock at the door caught Kasumi's attention. She turned from the counter, and opened the door.

"Oh, Ryouga!"

"I made it...it only took me half a day!" His expression of elation turned to one of confusion. "Uh...I thought that the front door opened into the genkan, not the kitchen."

Kasumi smiled. "You made it here quickly, but you came to the wrong door. Tea?"

"Oh, thank you. Is Ranma here?"

"Yes. He's in the dojo at the moment. Once you have finished your tea, I will take you there."

-----

"Akane, I need to ask you to excuse us for a short time."

"Okay." Akane stood, and glanced over at Ranma. "Be careful while I'm gone...you've managed to go almost a full month without acquiring a new fiancée...I'd hate to see you break such a winning streak."

"Like I go lookin' for 'em."

"You always seem to find them....Maybe you should start looking, and then you'd have no problems?" She picked up the empty teapot and left.

"Aah..." Ranma waved a hand in her direction. "Always gotta be the smartass."

"Ranma." Masami set down her cup. "This next part is only for the ears of we Shinigami. I think that it is very important that you accept the training that I will offer you. You see...Soul Society does not take kindly to rogue agents. If you do not agree to join us, or to give up your powers...it is likely that you will be slain."

Ranma frowned. "You can just make the powers go away?"

"Yes. But if you recall, when your spirit is separated from your body, neither is at your full strength. Removing the powers of Shaolan from you will cripple you..." Masami considered. "No, it would be more accurate to say that, while you would remain a formidable warrior, you would not be as powerful as you are now."

"So you're sayin' that I gotta work for you guys, or you're gonna try to kill me." Ranma's scowl deepened. "Ain't anyone ever heard of live and let live?"

"You may have difficulty understanding our ways. If your power is not bound to the will of the Gotei Thirteen...you could prove a terrible monster."

-----

"Kasumi, I've brought back the--" Akane broke off, and grinned at Ryouga. "Hi! It's been a while."

"Yeah..." Ryouga stood up. "Thanks for the tea, Kasumi." He turned to Akane. "Can you take me to Ranma?"

"At the moment, he's busy with Masami."

"...Masami?"

"Yeah, she showed up looking for him yesterday. Something about a long-standing arrangement or something. They seem to be doing well, even though she's a few years older than him."

Ryouga's eye twitched.

"They had to quit for a while, because Masami can't handle everything Ranma can dish out...she was covered in sweat. She was also starting to get kinda sore, because she's never really done anything like this before. And you know how hard Ranma is...he worked her over pretty good."

"THAT BASTARD!" Ryouga dropped the teacup, and bolted for the door.

"Oh..." Kasumi watched him run out. "I do hope he realizes that that door goes to the hall, not the dojo."

With some puzzlement, Akane wondered, "What did I say?"

-----

"BASTARD!"

Ranma glanced away from Masami. "Oh, hey, pig boy. What's up?"

"Pervert! Letch! Animal!"

Ranma scratched his head. "I'm guessin' you're angry with me, as usual? What didn't I do this time?"

Ryouga pointed at Masami. "Not only have you collected another fiancée, but you have bent her to your vile desires?"

"You been takin' lessons from Kuno?"

"How dare you toss Akane aside for another woman...and an older one, at that?"

Ranma shrugged. "I ain't tossin' Akane aside...I got plenty of time for her too. In fact, sometimes she helps out."

"Uh?" Ryouga's expression shifted from rage to confusion.

"Yeah, it really helps sometimes to have two chicks around. 'Specially when one of 'em's as strong as Akane...makes the trickier positions an' maneuvers easier. And considerin' that Akane's really good with holds and grabs--"

A single vein on Ryouga's forehead popped into stark relief. "You...I'LL KILL YOU!" He leaped forwards.

And was promptly grabbed and slammed face-first into the mat of the dojo. Masami straightened up, and glanced over at Ranma.

"Was that correct?"

"Perfect, student. It helps that he was too mad to see straight." Ranma knelt down beside the Lost Boy. "Look, Ryouga, I don't understand why you're so mad. So what if I took on a student?"

"...Student?"

"Yeah. Didn't Akane mention?"

"No." Ryouga sat up slowly. "Maybe I should have asked."

"Ya think?"

"Ranma...Something happened to me last night. I don't really know what, all I remember is waking up from a bad dream."

Ranma glanced over at Masami, who waved a hand.

"But I woke up on the porch of my house, and it had rained...my clothes were soaked."

"Wait. You were wet, cold water? And still in your clothes..." Ranma's eyes lit up. "You were cured?"

"Somehow, yes, but I don't recall how."

Ranma glanced over at Masami again, who nodded slightly.

"Cured..." Ranma grinned. "Well, do me a favour. If you figure out how, let me know, okay?"

"Sure. But..." Ryouga stood up. "Now that I am a whole man again, I intend to tell Akane how I feel about her."

"Right," snorted Ranma. "You've tried that how many times? All that ever happens is she says something—anything--and ya lose your mind again."

"If I need to, I will challenge you for her, Ranma."

"Ryouga...If ya manage to tell her, and she decides she'd rather be with you, I'll gift-wrap her for ya, okay?" Ranma looked disgusted. "I can promise ya that, because I know that neither is ever gonna happen. Now, it's almost dinner time, and I gotta finish up with my student."

"Dinner?" Ryouga blinked. "Kasumi was making lunch when I was in the kitchen."

"And how long did you run around the compound until you found the dojo?"

"Uh..."

"It's nearly dark, Ryouga. Do me a favour. Go home."

-----

Ranma seated himself before the shrine.

"What to do..."

He glanced at the pictures on the shrine. He hadn't met any of the people there...With the exception of one picture of his grandmother, they were all Tendos, and with the exception of Soun's wife, they had all died before he was born.

"Can't ask you guys for advice...If you've met a Shinigami, you ain't gonna be able to tell me about it."

He heard the door open behind him. "Have you decided?"

Ranma glanced over his shoulder. "Ya know, ya landed all this on me at once. Ya might give me a day or two to think about it."

Masami smiled. "Perhaps it would be best to give you more to think about. Night has fallen; If there are more Hollows in this town, they will shortly begin roaming."

"Yeah...Ryouga's Hollow said I smelled good."

"Hollows can smell a Shinigami from a long distance. They are also attracted to people with large amounts of spiritual energy."

"You mean like the people in this house. Pops, old man Tendo, Akane..."

"Even Kasumi is above average in this regard."

"I kinda guessed that. She could almost see me."

Masami knelt before him. "If you wish to help them, you will have to make a choice."

"I..." He sighed. "Look, it's all happenin' too fast, all right?"

"There is a Hollow in this house, right now."

"What!?" Ranma jumped up. "Where?"

"Your father has a Jushenkyou curse, does he not?"

"The Hollows cause the curse?"

"Yes." She stood. "This is why Shaolan was sent to Jushenkyou. As a master curse-breaker--" She broke off, as Ranko stepped cleanly away from Ranma.

Ranko grinned, and drew her zampakto. "So Pops is possessed by a Hollow, and if I kill it, he'll be cured."

"Yes."

Ranma rubbed his forehead. "Give a guy a little warnin', next time, Ranko."

Ranko glanced down at the glaive. "Shaolan was a curse-breaker, eh?" She glanced up, and grinned. "Let's keep that part of her alive."

-----

Alone among the Cursed, Genma actively enjoyed his alternate form.

At the moment, he was sprawled in the front yard. His favourite tire – usually used for a disguise, but an entertaining toy for the simple minded – lay nearby, but he was content just to enjoy the evening breeze. A half-eaten bamboo stalk was lying across his furry chest, his paws were tucked behind his head, and he stared up at the stars in the night sky.

Ranko walked up to him. "Yo, Pops. On yer feet."

The panda ignored her.

Masami chuckled. "You realize that right now, he cannot perceive you."

"Crap." She glanced over at the older Shinigami. "But you're wearin' that fake body, right? He can see *you*."

"True."

"Good. You tell him to get up."

Masami shook her head. "No. This is your task."

"Fat lot of help you are." She sighed, and turned back to the panda. "So he can't see me, an' he can't hear me." She took a step to the side. "But I remember that when I punched Daisuke, he sure felt it."

She delivered a sharp kick to the side of the panda's head.

Genma growfed, and sat up.

"Chance!" Ranko swung the nagimaki, and caught the panda across the back of the head with the haft.

Genma instantly reverted to human, and was pitched forward into the dirt. The shadowy form was knocked a lot further, billowing against the far wall before it started to coalesce.

"Strike now, before it forms!"

Ranko leaped forward, her zampakto extended to lunge, but was just a hair too slow. A massive fist slammed into her side, knocking her sideways and into the bushes.

Masami sighed, and reached for her katana. Her hand encountered air.

"Oh, no...In this false body, my zampakto is bound away!" She turned. "Ranko! You are completely on your own – I am unable to fight in this form!"

"Great." Ranko pulled herself out of the bushes. "Holy crap, this one is big."

The mist had solidified; the resemblance to a panda was limited to indistinct patches of grey. But it towered over them, four or five meters tall, and still in a stooped stance. Its bone-white mask covered half of its face, and the eyes behind gleamed with a dull intelligence.

"This one is strong, Ranko...exercise caution."

"Don't gotta tell me twice." Ranko scowled, and started to circle the Hollow. "Ryouga's Hollow had all his attacks, so I gotta expect that Pops taught this thing everything he knew. Not that that'd take long. Think he's got his weaknesses, too?"

"Most likely."

"Then I gotta – whoa!" She leaped to the side, as the creature swung both fists at her. The impact left a crater the size of the koi pond.

"Pops was never this strong!" Ranko leaped in, slashing at the beast's arm. The creature parried the attack flawlessly, then backhanded her into the wall.

"Ranko!"

The Hollow heard Masami's cry, and turned towards her. Dropping to all fours, it began to lumber slowly towards her.

"Shinigami..."

Masami blinked. "Even with this faux body, it can smell me." She took a step back.

The beast reared up on its hind legs, both front paws rising to slash. Its ten-centimeter claws gleamed dully in the light of the sodium street-lamps.

Ranko landed square on the creature's back, and drove the nagimaki into its neck.

The bear-thing twisted sideways, trying to reach her. She clung to the zampakto. "I got this thing buried half a meter in its neck, and it's still fightin'?"

"The mask!"

"Crap. Forgot." She pulled the blade clear, but lost her footing and was tossed to the ground.

The Hollow turned, and swung a paw at her; she barely managed to roll out of the way.

"Get clear, and come at it again!"

"Nope. Pops was never an in-fighter."

She dodged another attack, and then moved straight in, until she was directly underneath the beast's head. She leaped straight up, leading with the zampakto, and slashed through its chin, straight through its entire head, until the blade cracked the mask from the inside.

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"One less curse!"

Ranma grinned. "Pops is gonna be sore when he wakes up."

"Angry, or injured? I think it's gonna be both." Ranko grinned. "This is gettin' easier all the time." She staggered a bit.

"Yo, you look like you're about done."

"I got some energy left." She sat down. "No need for me to go away just yet, is there? I mean, Masami's been spendin' all her time trainin' you."

"We're the same person. Did you forget?"

"No." Ranko shrugged. "But I just don't feel like goin' away yet. The night's still young, plenty of Hollows left to kill."

Ranma sighed. "So you wanna stay a girl all the time now?"

"Huh?" Ranko scowled. "Forget that!"

"Unless you rejoin your counterpart, you will remain in female form." Masami looked down. "You are still part of him, and he of you."

"But—"

Ranma stepped forward, and touched her forehead. With the usual sudden crack, she was gone. He shuddered, and glanced over at Masami.

"I'm getting' worried about this."

"She is showing a disturbing level of independence, for one who is merely a reflection of yourself."

"I don't think she is anymore."

"Oh?"

"Yeah...she wasn't so worried about bein' stuck a girl as she said."

-----

Ranma set the bowl down on the table, and dropped his chopsticks into it. He glanced over at his father, sitting morosely beside him.

"Man, that was good. I'm surprised that you weren't tryin' ta steal mine."

Genma grumbled, stood, and wandered off.

"Oh, dear." Kasumi sighed. "You would think he'd lost his best friend."

Ranma snickered. "I think the panda was his only friend."

"Surely Father--"

"Yeah, I guess...he couldn't really cheat at shoji playin' against the panda, could he?"

There was a knock at the garden door, and Masami stepped in. "I am sorry for disturbing you at this hour."

"Yo, Masami. I'm glad you showed up." He jumped to his feet. "Let's go."

He led her through the kitchen, to the back door, but paused before they reached the dojo. "Look, about this whole Shinigami thing..."

"Have you reached a decision?"

"Not really. But I don't know what's gonna happen with Ranko." He sighed. "For her sake, I'll take you up on that training."

Masami smiled. "Excellent. So today, I shall be your master."

"Hai, sensei." Ranma glanced up, and shuddered.

Her smile had turned very cold.

## Within and Without

Ranko opened her eyes, to find herself in her Inner Dojo.

"It worked..." She stood up, and looked around. "But where is she?"

"Who, me?"

Ranko turned, seeking the voice, but saw nothing.

"You turned too far."

She whirled again, reaching for her glaive, but her hand closed on empty air.

"Looking for this?"

A different voice this time, more familiar. Again, she turned, to see Shaolan holding her glaive.

"Hey! My nagimaki!"

"Whose?" Shaolan smiled.

"Well...ours, I guess."

"Of course," said Shaolan. "But still, I think from recent events that I have more right to hold it than you. To begin, it was mine for four hundred years. Further, it is still technically mine."

"Didn't I just say that?" Ranko scowled.

"She hasn't even given you her name, has she?"

Ranko blinked. "Name? It has a name?"

"Yes, she does." Shaolan's emphasis on the female pronoun was hard to miss. "You've been treating her like a simple piece of metal and wood, and so you have been wasting her talents. And your own."

"My own, eh?" Ranko scowled again. "Seems to me that any talents I have for this business come from you."

"Yes." Shaolan tilted her head. "We've been together for more than a year now. In that time, we have moved closer together, but your determination to stay male has kept us from becoming one. Trust me," she said, raising a hand, "I understand why you keep the distance. If I could choose another form, it wouldn't be male."

"How can you say that, if we're the same person?"

"Because we're not!" Shaolan tossed the glaive to her. "Not at all!" She turned, and stalked angrily towards the far wall. "I would not mistreat her like you have, I would not want to be *male*, and I certainly would not be shirking my duties as Shinigami."

"Hey!" Ranma took a step forward. "I've been goin' out and fighting those things every--" He stopped, and glanced down. "When did I become a guy?"

Shaolan whirled. "You've always been a guy. It's all you ever wanted! To be a 'Man Among Men!' Remember?"

"But..." He looked confused. "In here, I've always been a girl."

"You cannot even understand a simple concept...In here, you are you, and I am I. Separate, distinct persons. Along with her. Out there, in your so-called 'real world', we are the same." She sighed. "That is, before you started to reject me. And her."

"I didn't--"

"Nonsense. Don't try to lie to me, Saotome. I know you too well."

"Dammit, you're not making any sense!"

"No? Look at your zampakto."

"Uh?" He glanced down, to find that he was holding a small white cat.

"AAAHHHH!"

Ranma bolted upright, sweat running in rivers from his face, stumbling, and crashed into the shrine.

"C-c-cat..." He shuddered, glanced around, and realized that he was back in the Tendo dojo.

"Oh, man, that's a good way to wreck a decent meditation..."

He hurriedly set the pictures back up on the shrine.

-----

Kasumi opened the front door. "Oh, Retsukawa-san. Welcome back." She paused. "Is today a lesson day for you? You were here only yesterday."

Masami nodded. "Sensei and I decided it would be best to have lessons every day for at least the next week."

"Ah. He has certainly taken a stern tack with your training."

Masami blinked. "Wind from the aft, and he wishes to change direction?"

"I'm sorry...I am a bit confused."

"Then we both are, and we'll discard it as a communication gap. May I ask where Sensei is?"

"The dojo."

"Thank you. It was good to see you again."

-----

As Masami entered the dojo, Ranma was just putting the last photo back on the shrine.

"Masami. Good. Just the girl I wanted to talk to." He stood, and turned. "I was just meditating, and I found myself in a place I've never seen. A dojo, but not this one. I've seen it twice before. -She- was there."

Masami nodded. "We each have a private place; there, we can speak to our zampakto, and learn more about it. It differs for each person, this place. As you gain more experience, your zampakto can appear in the real world as well."

Ranma frowned. "Doesn't it anyway?"

"The avatar of your zampakto, I should say. His spirit."

"His? Mine's a girl, apparently."

"That is not unheard of. The former Captain of the Twelfth Division had a female zampakto."

"I guess it kinda makes sense for me." Ranma shrugged. "I get the feeling that my zampakto's spirit, or whatever, is Shaolan."

"No. Shaolan's avatar is separate from your zampakto. I have seen this." Masami smiled. "Your zampakto will reveal herself when she thinks you are ready."

"Okay." Ranma glanced around. "Damn, old man Tendo figured it was wrong to put a clock in here...You got a watch?"

"No, but as I passed through the kitchen, I noted that it was almost seven o'clock. Night will soon fall in earnest, and we can begin your training."

-----

"Why did we leave by the back gate?"

Ranko snorted. "You ain't seen any kind of interrogation until it comes from Kasumi or Nabiki."

"I do not believe that I have met Nabiki."

"She's scary. They call her the Ice Queen. And gatherin' information is what she does best." Ranko shuddered. "She'll blackmail, threaten, extort or use less savoury means to gain information."

"Ah. But surely Kasumi--"

"Don't ever try lyin' to Kasumi. She sees straight through it."

"Oh."

"Plus, if she asks a question, you've just gotta answer. It's the way she is."

Masami smiled. "Perhaps we should recruit them. Intelligence could make good use of them."

"Oh, no." Ranko turned to face Masami. "You leave them alone. I don't wanna see Kasumi goin' through what I am."

"Nabiki, then?"

"Leave her alone if you know what's good for your Soul Society. She'll take over in five years. Ever heard of, 'Power corrupts?'"

"Yes. I believe it ends, 'and absolute power is actually pretty neat.'"

Ranko sighed. "Great. What are we doin' tonight?"

"Standard Hollow patrol. And if we meet any ghosts, I shall be teaching you about Soul Burial."

"What the heck is 'soul burial'?"

"Have I forgotten? I should have told you of this much earlier. Our primary duty as Shinigami is to assist the souls of those departed to Soul Society. I have heard this called, 'sending them to heaven,' in your language." Masami grinned. "Even those Hollows that you have defeated returned to Soul Society."

"Really?" Ranko looked puzzled. "They go around, eatin' souls, and you send 'em to heaven for that?"

"The zampakto cleanses the Hollows of their sins committed after death. Then, the purified soul can travel to Soul Society." Masami stopped walking, and turned to face Ranko. "It is important to recognize that a Hollow is a being driven purely by instinct. It cannot help itself from performing such evil deeds; its attachment to the world of the living, and to those things it was closest to in life, leads it to commit its crimes. *It is not the Hollow's fault.*"

"Okay, so they're blameless."

"Not entirely, but still, it would be the heart of cruelty to destroy them for doing what they must."

She looked about to say more, but her pager buzzed. She pulled it from her pocket, and glanced at the screen.

"We have orders. A Hollow will appear three hundred meters north and one hundred meters east."

"The school." She turned and ran. "C'mon!"

-----

"Rough day, eh?"

Akane nodded. "I know. The sooner we get the last of these sets built, the sooner I can actually make it home in time for dinner for a switch."

"I hear you." Yuka mopped her brow with the back of her arm. "Sleep is something I only hear about recently."

"I gotta get out of here, before Sayuri decides we have time to paint another backdrop. See you tomorrow."

"Bye." Yuka turned and ran off.

Akane didn't feel up to running; she started down the sidewalk towards home.

*Between drama club and training, I have no free time anymore... She sighed. I just hope that Ranma's not too angry that I had to skip training today.*

There was a howl nearby, one that she had become familiar with recently. She turned, looking for the source, but saw nothing.

"Oh, no..."

She ducked closer to the boundary wall, hoping to stay concealed.

"Where the heck is Ranko at a time like this?" She glanced around nervously, uncertain she'd be able to see--

"There!"

It was difficult to make out, harder to see than Ranko, but she could make out the outline. Animalistic in movement and presence. Thoroughly dangerous, she was sure.

And from what Masami had said, impossible for her to fight.

*If Ranma had said it, I might have tried. But Masami...*

The Hollow was lumbering towards the school; as it moved, she found that she could make out at least six limbs, two held upright, four for walking. She glanced around worriedly.

*How is a Shinigami like a cop? There's never one around when you need one.*

-----

Ranko leaped over the boundary wall.

"Man, look at the size of this one!"

The Hollow was easily three meters tall, and twice that in length. Four long limbs supported its mass, and two arms, longer than the legs, were folded near its chest. Almost a mantis, but for the bone-white skull with its vaguely human shape.

Ranko pulled the nagimaki from her baldric, and glanced down at it.

"So if you're alive, and you want to help me, this might be a good time."

The weapon was silent. Ranko snorted. "Figured as much."

The Hollow had paused, and now stared fixedly at Ranko.

"Oh, yeah, these things like the way I smell." Ranko grinned, and snapped the glaive down to a battle stance. "Maybe I can use that to my advantage."

But the creature turned, and began lumbering towards the school again.

"So this time you ignore me?" Ranko ran forward, and swung the glaive.

The creature pivoted, so fast that she could barely see it move, and snapped a serrated blade-like arm towards her. She dodged to the side, and stabbed with the nagimaki.

Only to see the tip skid harmlessly across the beast's exoskeleton.

"Oh, not good at all."

She leaped up and over it as it struck again, and landed on its back. A weak point between its wings beckoned, and she slammed the blade down. The creature howled, and bucked, knocking her off its back.

She landed and rolled, coming to her feet, and ran towards it again. The Hollow struck again, this time with both arms, but she dodged between them, leaped, and cut through the mask with one quick strike.

She touched down behind it, as it dissolved into black mist, and sheathed the nagimaki. "Piece of cake."

"It was a weak Hollow; you should not become overconfident." Masami walked through the main gate.

"That was a weak one?" Ranko blinked. "It was awfully big."

"Do you honestly think that size matters?"

"Hey, I'm a guy, remember?" Ranko smirked.

"A good point." Masami rolled her eyes. "At any rate, we have no further orders in this area; I doubt that there are any ghosts nearby."

"Where to next, then?"

"I think that your idea of freeing the Cursed from their affliction is a good one; at the very least, it is unhealthy to be harbouring a Hollow. Who else in this area is Cursed?"

"Well, we got Ryouga and Pops. In this area, that leaves Shampoo and Mousse in this area. Plus, Taro wanders through often enough, and generally causes some serious property damage." Ranko considered. "There's others, but they aren't nearby; Rouge, Herb, Lukkousai, Kiima...probably others that I don't know. Kiima and Herb are in China, and I've got no idea where Rouge and Lukkousai are."

"So of the two you mentioned, who is the more dangerous combatant?"

"Shampoo. Easily. Duck-boy sucks."

"Then we shall proceed after Mousse."

"Why Mousse?" Ranko blinked. "Shouldn't we deal with the nastier one first?"

"You are not yet ready."

-----

The Nekohanten was locked up, and every window was dark.

"Damn..." Ranko frowned. "They don't normally close this early."

"Perhaps there is a reason why they are closed."

"I dunno, but still, I can tell no-one is in there." She closed her eyes. "I can feel Hollows, now, and Shampoo and Mousse should stand out pretty strong, but..." She opened her eyes again, and sighed. "Nothin'."

"How far can you extend your senses?"

"Not far."

"Try."

Ranko nodded, and closed her eyes again. Reached out, and felt a trace of corruption.

"North of here...I don't know how far."

"Let's go."

Unnoticed by the two Shinigami, Akane slipped from the shadows and ran after them.

-----

Mousse was asleep, head tucked beneath a wing, in the park fountain. Ranko looked down at the sleeping duck.

"When I knock the Hollow outta him, he's gonna turn human. Can't have him drown; he's an annoyin' pest, but not really a bad guy." She glanced over at Masami. "When he turns human, can you pull him outta the fountain?"

"Unless he's a very large man, I should have no problem."

"Well, you might. He's gonna be naked."

"...Naked?" Masami looked worried.

"Nice to finally break through that cold front. Yeah, his clothes ain't cursed, and they don't really fit him in duck form."

Masami fidgeted. "To lay hands on a naked man, one I don't even know..."

"Would you rather let him die?"

"No." Masami steeled herself. "Let's get this over with."

Ranko raised her zampakto, and brought it down on Mousse. There was a searing flash of light, and she was knocked backward.

She rolled, regaining her feet, and looked up. "Whoa..."

The Hollow, like the last two, was resolving itself from fine black mist pouring out of Mousse's body. But this time, it was coalescing fifteen meters in the air. She steadied herself, raising the zampakto, as the Hollow's form took on that of a giant bird of prey.

"Uh...Masami? Can we fly?"

There was no answer; Ranko could only assume that Masami was too busy to reply. She scowled, and leaped into the air, but could not come in reach of the Hollow.

The beast laughed, a deep booming chuckle, and dove towards her. She slashed at it as it passed, but missed badly, and the creature struck her a curled claw, knocking her backward. It pounced towards her, and she jabbed at it with the nagimaki, trying to force it away. It dodged, and struck with its beak; she parried with the glaive, but was forced backward.

"Not good; I haven't got an opening to counterattack."

The creature struck again with the talons, and this time, Ranko was out of position to parry; the massive claw knocked her to the ground, pinning her.

"NO!"

Akane burst from cover, a long branch held like a staff, and dealt the creature a crushing blow. It howled in rage, and twisted to snap at her. She dodged to the side, swinging again, smashing the makeshift cudgel into its mask.

Ranko managed to free one arm, and used it to jab the creature between two large knuckles. It howled with pain, and she pulled herself free. "Akane! I'm up, get the heck away from it!"

Akane was looking a bit stunned. "I hit the mask...why didn't--"

"You can't fight this!"

She scowled at her. "Don't keep trying to--"

The creature struck.

"NOO!!"

Akane gasped, as the Hollow bit down savagely on her arm. Blood welled up through the cloth of her jumper. Ranko leaped forward, and swung the nagimaki as hard as she could. The creature twisted away, dragging Akane with it, and the nagimaki buried itself in its breast.

The Hollow released Akane with a howl of pain, and launched itself into the air. Ranko knelt beside Akane. "Are you okay?"

"Of course not, moron!" Akane growled at him between gritted teeth. "That damn thing bit my arm, then nearly pulled it out of its socket."

"If you can still snarl at me, you'll live." Ranko stood, and turned towards the Hollow. "I'll take care of this thing right now."

The Hollow dived, and Ranko rolled to the side to dodge, then watched helplessly as it regained altitude.

"I can't reach it way up there!"

It dived again, and Ranko ducked, raising the nagimaki to slash as it passed. She hit nothing but air, and the creature climbed back out of reach.

"It can keep up these slashing passes all night, and eventually, it's gonna get lucky." Ranko stared at the Hollow circling above him. "Yo, Akane. Think you got enough left in you to lend a bit of help?"

"I've still got one good arm." Akane stepped up beside the Shinigami. "What do you need?"

"I got two words for it."

The Hollow came about, preparing for another dive. It never got the chance.

Propelled by Akane's brute strength, Ranko flew straight up at it. With no chance to parry or dodge, the Hollow was easy prey. Ranko's glaive smashed directly through the mask, and it fell halfway to earth before dissolving to fine black mist.

- - - - -

Ranma leaned back, and inspected the bandage. "You're lucky, Akane. Much deeper, and you'd have had problems with that arm."

"It damn near bit it off," growled Akane. "What more problems do I have to worry about?"

Ranma began ticking them off his fingers. "Chronic pain, impairment of movement, severed tendons or ligaments, dislocation."

"I get the point." She sighed. "Where the heck did you learn anything about medicine, anyway?"

"You learn more in the Art than just how to break bodies. You learn how to put them back together, too." He grinned. "After all, it might be you who needs the repairs."

"Okay." Akane flexed the arm. "Ow. Any ideas, Doctor Saotome, when I'll be able to use this arm again?"

It was Masami who answered. "I think you will have more pressing problems, and soon."

"Oh?"

"A wound from a Hollow, on a person of sufficient spiritual power, can be infectious."

"I can get some Polysporin--"

"Spiritual infection cannot be cured by Earthly medicine." Masami's face was grave. "I hope you are stronger of will than the Hollow that struck you. For you are in danger of becoming tainted by the Hollow's spirit."

Akane's eyes widened. "You mean I'll become a Hollow?"

"Those tainted by a Hollow invariably become Hollows almost immediately after death. But there is a greater concern." Masami put her hands on Akane's shoulders. "The spiritual infection can affect you long before death, turning your

heart black. You will harm those around you, especially those you love, and become a terrible force of corruption."

"Those around me...like my sisters, and Ranma?"

"You will cease to care about them, and will cause them horrible pain."

Tears welled up in her eyes.

"No..."

## Tainted

"Hold!"

Ranma raised a hand, and the two girls broke apart. Masami was breathing in shuddering breaths, and a red mark on her cheek would be browning up quite nicely. Akane, on the other hand, looked as fresh as when she'd begun.

"C'mon, Ranma. I wasn't even working up a sweat!"

"We got company." Ranma gestured to the door, where a young woman was standing.

She was an odd-looking thing, even for Nerima. Her hair was a silvery purple in colour, and she was dressed in black hakama and kimono. The look on her face was almost one of fear.

"I came to see Masami. And to see Shaolan."

Ranma rolled his eyes. "Listen, lady, ya can't just go around talkin' about this sorta stuff, okay? Not even in Nerima."

"I have some scrolls that you requested, Masami. And my Captain wanted me to meet with you, Saotome."

Ranma looked the newcomer over. "With me, or with her?"

"I should tell you the truth. I need to speak to both of you."

"We're the same person."

The woman tilted her head. "Then why did you make the distinction just now?"

"Because this is all gettin' to be too damn confusin'." Ranma sighed. "Want some tea?"

-----

"Kotetsu Isane is the second in command - I believe your word is Lieutenant - of the Fourth Division of the Gotei Thirteen. The Fourth Division is, as I already mentioned, primarily made up of healers and support staff. They are not front-line warriors, but important to any major operation."

Isane smiled. "You do us justice. Many, especially those in the Eleventh Division, feel that we are an unnecessary waste of manpower."

Ranma considered this, then asked, "What do you know about Jushenkyou?"

"A terrible place. It gives me nightmares."

"You and me both," snorted Ranma.

Ranma snorted. "Unnecessary? No army can survive without support or docs."

"I did not say that I agreed with them," said Isane with a smile. She sipped her tea, then continued. "In addition to healers and support staff, we also number a few curse-breakers. Since magic has become less popular on this realm, we have fewer in that calling than before."

"Shaolan was a curse-breaker, right?"

"Yes. And one of the best." Isane nodded. "When she died, the Fourth Division took the Orchid as its symbol in her honour."

"Oy." Ranma paused. "My Chinese ain't so good. 'Shaolan' means Little Orchid, right?"

"Yes."

"When I'm out and about as a Death God, that part of me uses the name 'Ranko'."

"Orchids again," mused Isane.

"Not the way I think of it. But that other part of me..." He sighed. "The part that wants to be Shinigami..."

Isane drained her teacup, and set it down. "Now, about these scrolls. Masami, may I ask why you are requesting information on the Impureza? This seems to be more our department than yours."

"At the moment, it is both. But I have a Fourth Division Shinigami already on site to assist." Masami glanced pointedly at Ranma. "I thank you for the trouble of delivering them personally, however."

Ranma frowned. "Impureza?"

"I will discuss it with you at a later time."

"No, I think now is good." He turned to Isane. "What is an Impureza?"

Isane sighed. "They are not fortunate, that much is certain. Humans who have been tainted by the psychic venom of a Hollow tend to become darker, more sadistic, and generally unpleasant. They can cause their souls serious damage due to the way they act."

"So if...someone were tainted like this, they become evil?"

Isane shook her head. "Not so much evil; they definitely become selfish, and lose contact with the emotions and motivations of others. Only their own matters to them."

"Not overnight, though?"

"No, it can take years."

Ranma considered this, then asked, "What do you know about Jushenkyou?"

"A terrible place. It gives me nightmares."

"You and me both," snorted Ranma. "What I was thinkin' is, all the Cursed people that I've freed from their Hollows. What are the odds that they're these Impuwatsits?"

Isane considered this. "There is a possibility, but I would doubt it personally. Generally, the Hollow needs to transfer energy between itself and its victim to infect them. Even then, it only happens one time in about ten."

"However, I would agree that it would be best to be sure. Who in this district has been cursed?"

Ranma began ticking them off on his fingers. "Pops; Mousse; Shampoo - we haven't dealt with her yet; me, but you know the score on that; Ryouga--"

He winced.

Akane looked up in surprise. "Ryouga had a Jushenkyou curse!?"

"Damn..." Ranma thought quickly. "Remember that night he attacked me in the middle of the night? When you found me talkin' to the dog? I thought that that was Ryouga, but it was just the neighbour's dog."

"Oh." Akane nodded.

"Yeah, the whole feud between me an' him is because he figured it was my fault he was cursed."

Akane chuckled. "I never knew that Ryouga could turn into a dog."

"Dog?" Masami looked puzzled. "Then why did his Hollow look like a pig?"

There was a dead silence, broken as Akane's teacup shattered in her grasp.

"Did you say...pig?"

"Yes. One of our officers on a routine patrol saw the fight." Masami scratched her head. "She said that the beast definitely resembled a pig."

Ranma raised his hands. "It's not what you think!"

"You always called him P-Chan, or pig-boy...You objected to him sleeping in my bed--and Ryouga had that crush on me--"

Ranma blinked. "You knew about that?"

"You could see it from space!" Akane stood up, a glower shadowing her face. "You knew! You knew that he was P-Chan, and you never told me!"

"I promised not to!"

"Why?" Akane's eyes glistened with tears. "Why the hell *wouldn't* you tell me, promise or no? You are--were--my fiance!" She turned and stomped off.

"Akane, wait!" Ranma jumped up and ran after her.

Isane watched the two leave, then turned to Masami. "Is this usual here?"

Masami nodded.

-----

Shampoo dropped the cloth on the table with a snort of disgust.

Whatever had cured Mousse of his curse had also left the blind boy quite ill; with him curled up in bed upstairs, and her great-grandmother off running some errand, it left her the only person in the restaurant. Between the rushes, such as now, she could handle it, but she fervently hoped that Cologne would return before lunch.

The bell rang over the door. Shampoo assumed her most welcoming smile, and turned. "Welcome to--" She cut off. "You!"

Happousai grinned up at the Amazon. "Glad to see me?"

"You go away! Not welcome in place of Amazons!"

"Now, is that any way to speak to your master?" He pulled a small ivory disk out of his robes; Shampoo noted that it was ornately carved, and was instantly wary.

"Catch!" He flipped it to her; she batted it aside, but the instant it touched her skin, she was wracked with pain, as though she were absorbing thousands of volts of electricity.

Her screams were almost drowned out by Happousai's cackles of glee.

-----

"Akane, please listen to me for once!"

Akane whirled to face him. "You've kept this from me for almost a year! What else haven't you told me? Maybe you're really a girl who turns into a boy?"

"I wanted to tell you, but--"

"But you considered a promise to a low-life like Ryouga to be more important than your fiance!"

"Ever heard of bushido?" Ranma scowled. "This was Ryouga's weak spot; I couldn't tell *anyone*."

"But you let him sleep in my bed, you let him watch me change - I told him everything!"

"Stuff you couldn't tell me."

"Yes! I--" She paused.

"You see?" Ranma sighed. "Akane, when this whole thing started, we weren't gettin' along too well, and we were still fightin' our Pops on the whole engagement thing."

"But--"

"Akane, you just had your say. It's my turn."

It was the first time she could remember that he'd ever cut her off like that. She clamped her mouth shut and waited.

"First. I didn't *let* him do anythin'. If you recall, I was constantly tryin' to keep him out of there. Remember? You hit me a lot because of it."

"But--"

"Second." He raised his voice, to cut her off again. "I dropped plenty of hints. Like you put it, you could see it from space!"

"But I--" She paused, the tears now flowing freely from her eyes. "Didn't you care? Didn't it matter to you that Ryouga, with that crush of his, *was sleeping in my bed with me*?"

"Didn't I just say that?"

"I..." She choked back a sob. "I told him everything, Ranma. Everything about how I felt, when you made me angry."

"And he'd try to pound me over it later."

Her features hardened. "At least *he* stuck up for me! At least *he* never lied to me or insulted me! Maybe I would have been better off if I'd listened to *him*, just *once!*"

-----

"What a haul!"

The howls of angry women receding behind him, Happousai bounded along the wall, a large sack of silky treasures over his shoulder. He chortled. Liberating such darlings was even easier today, what with--

The walking stick caught him square across his forehead, knocking him off the wall. He picked himself up, and glared at Cologne.

"Haven't you already learned to leave me alone."

Cologne held up a scroll. His eyes widened.

"So that's what this is about."

Cologne's voice was trembling with anger. "It took me three days to completely decipher this scroll. What on earth possessed you to give this to Son-In-Law?"

"He can handle it--"

"No! No-one can handle *this!*" Cologne hopped down off the wall. "You have no knowledge of Jushenkyou! When I finally learned what this technique will do, what it will set loose on this world--"

"You are quite wrong, my dear." Happousai drew his pipe from his robes and carefully lit it. "I know exactly what effect this technique will have on the boy. And the best part is, you helped him learn it!"

"More fool I. I should have fully transcribed the scroll for him. Instead, I may have doomed him, and many of those around him."

"Now, now...you win some, you lose some." Happousai made a careless wave with the pipe. "But don't give up on the boy yet. You see, you don't really know as much as you claim about Jushenkyou."

Cologne's eyes narrowed. "I have guarded the Cursed Springs for the last hundred years. If anyone else knows--"

A trace of fire crept into Happousai's eyes. "And I have spent the last three thousand years learning all about them, at the most intimate level."

"Three--"

A hand struck the back of her neck, precisely targeting between two vertebrae. Her entire body seemed to light up with pain, and she collapsed helplessly to the ground.

Shampoo knelt next to the old woman, and smiled coldly.

"Out cold, but not dead."

"Good." Happousai drew another mouthful of smoke before continuing. "Keep her restrained. We may yet have a use for her."

- - - - -

Akane stalked into the dojo, and glared at Masami.

"There is no need to stare," said Masami. "I have done nothing wrong."

Akane deflated. "I guess not." She sat down opposite the Shinigami.

"Akane, I am growing more concerned. The taint of the Hollow is growing stronger. Your physical abilities are boosted, but so is your anger and depression."

She scowled again. "My anger, and what you call my depression, are growing because I've just found out that my so-called 'fiance' has betrayed me."

"No. He has not."

"Just like any woman around Ranma. Quick to jump to defend him." Akane stood again. "No need to waste my time talking to you; you're just another bimbo ready to crawl into bed with him--"

Masami was on her feet in a flash, and her hand lashed out almost of its own accord. The echo of the slap was loud in the dojo.

Akane stared at her in shock.

"Have I managed to get past your rage? Is it Akane listening to me now, and not the Hollow?" Masami's voice was cold. "You want to hear me say that I am attracted to Ranma. I am. It is hard not to be. He is handsome, fearless, honourable and kind. In so many ways, he is a most admirable individual."

She scowled. "You--"

"I will do nothing about it. Attraction is one thing. Ranma loves you." Masami scowled. "We can treat your infection. With your assistance, we can probably remove it entirely. But you must want it gone. Do you understand me?"

"And what if I don't want it gone?"

"Then it will consume you. You will lose Ranma, and everyone else you hold dear. You will lose yourself as well." Masami's voice was becoming colder by the second. "Every time you feed your anger, every time you give yourself over to fear, rage or self-doubt, the taint becomes stronger."

-----

Ranko stepped away from her male body, and turned to the two girls.

"Akane...what the heck happened to your cheek?"

Akane scowled at the floor.

"Oh, right, you're still not talking to me." She turned to Masami. "Standard Hollow patrol tonight?"

"No." Masami shook her head. "Isane gave me some interesting information just before you left. A powerful martial artist, with a Jushenkyou Curse, came to the district this morning. She senses multiple Hollows within him; probably, he suffers from more than one Curse."

"Taro."

"We will be proceeding to this individual, and then we will watch you battle him."

"We?" She glanced over at Akane again. "Does this 'we' you're talkin' of include the Tomboy?"

"Yes. I think it is important that she see this."

"Okay. You're the sensei." Ranko unlimbered her nagimaki. "So where's Pantyhose?"

-----

The butt of the nagimaki knocked the Hollows out of Pantyhose. However, it was not two, as Ranko had expected, but five. Ranko backed off worriedly, as they began to coalesce around her.

From the top of a nearby building, Akane and Masami watched the scene below.

"Those five will not remain separate for long; they are too used to working together."

Akane stared in horror. "They're gonna clobber her! I gotta help her!"

"No."

The five forms merged into one, and stretched vertically, until they stood ten meters tall at least. Massive wings stretched out from its back, ten arms

reached out in all directions, and the white mask was adorned with two long, wicked horns.

Akane turned to stare at Masami in shock. "What are you saying!?"

Ranko leaped into the air, dodging a claw attack, but was promptly blasted to the ground by an energy attack.

"Did you not turn away from him? Did you not tell him that you were no longer his fiancée?" Masami's voice was cold as an Arctic wind. "Did you not call him traitor, uncaring, liar?"

Ranko picked herself out of the dirt, shook herself off, and raised the nagimaki before her. A second energy blast rippled around her, but failed to connect directly, as though the glaive was shielding her.

"You--you heard me?"

"Quite easily." Masami pointed down at the battle below them. "Do you see that Hollow? It is a Menos Grande - a smaller one, but still very dangerous. They come into being when too many Hollows gather in one area."

Three more Hollows moved into the battle area; Ranko leaped forward and cleanly split its mask, destroying it. The other two ignored her, however, and merged with the larger Hollow.

"Some kind of super Hollow?"

"Yes. They feed voraciously on other Hollows, increasing their size until they can become almost invincible."

Ranko scowled, and jumped in closer to the Menos Grande.

Masami continued relentlessly. "This is the path before you, Akane."

Ranko twisted to the side, dodging another energy blast, and let the turn pull her back towards the Hollow.

"This is where your anger, jealousy, all your negative emotions lead."

The creature raised one massive foot, and stepped on Ranko.

"These emotions feed on each other, and grow."

Ranko grasped the glaive firmly over her head, and the Hollow's foot would not descend to crush her.

"If you let that part of you consume you, this is what you could become."

She slashed, severing half the creature's foot, and was drenched in its blood.

"A monster."

Akane shuddered.

"You have two choices. Let Ranma help you now..."

Ranko leaped backward, her feet touching the tree behind her.

"Or let Ranko help you later."

She leaped into the air, and with one firm strike, cut the Menos' head clear in two.

-----

Akane leaned back against the dojo wall, then collapsed to the floor. Her eyes overflowed with tears.

Masami knelt beside her, and wiped a tear from her cheek.

"That you can still weep tells you that the Impureza has not won."

"I can't let that happen to me," Akane sobbed. "I've gotta...gotta let him know that--"

"No. You don't need to let him know." Masami smiled. "You just need to know it yourself."

Akane looked up at Masami. "I'll do it...I'll help you clear the taint from my soul. I want to be free of it. I hurt him so bad..."

"I will help you."

"Thank you." Akane's voice was almost a whisper.

"Look strong, now. They are coming." Masami stood and turned to face the door, as Ranma and Ranko entered.

"Looks like it was a hell of a fight, Masami." Ranma grinned. "I can't wait to remember it."

"I think you will appreciate it." Masami glanced over at Ranko. "You need to recharge; I think it's time to re-integrate with your other half."

Ranko scowled. "No."

## Defiance

There was a long pause, then Masami cleared her throat.

"Ranko. You can maintain your spirit form for only a limited duration in this world. Without a proper tie to the Soul Society, that time is much shorter than you think."

"What makes you think that I don't have that tie?" Ranko's arms were crossed in front of her, and her face was set in its scowl.

"Because I would see it."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. You're the great Shinigami."

Ranma spoke up. "Look, you're forgetting something here. You're still me. Remember?"

"Yeah, and that's half the problem." Ranko turned and scowled at him. "I'm startin' to like bein' my own person, okay?"

"But if Masami is right--"

"If!"

"We gotta trust her, Ranko, she knows more about this than us."

"No." Ranko shook her head. "I'm not buyin' her story. She's been here for a week. Why hasn't she been fadin', or whatever happens?"

"She told us that. She has a fake body."

"Good." She turned to Masami. "Can you get me a fake body?"

Masami blinked. "That...wouldn't be impossible, but it would be quite difficult. Only a Lieutenant or higher can do so."

"Then I'll ask Isane."

Masami nodded. "That might be a good idea."

"Hey!" Ranma turned in surprise. "Who's side are you on, anyway?"

Masami glanced over at him, and quietly said, "I am on the side of Soul Society. Never more nor less. You know that." She turned back to Ranko. "You will still need to integrate with him. But keep your mind fixed on your feelings. You both need to understand this. I will send a message to Lieutenant Kotetsu, about acquiring a faux body for you."

-----

Ranma sat down at his usual place at the table. Beside him, Akane glanced over, then turned back to her breakfast with a sniff.

"Look, Akane, how many times do I gotta apologize?"

"You don't need to, Ranma. I've forgiven you. It was at least half my fault anyway." She scowled. "But I've got a full clip of mad to use up, and P-Chan isn't anywhere to be found."

Soun set down his newspaper. "Why would you be mad at P-Chan?"

Akane's scowl deepened. "Did you know that Ryouga was cursed?"

"Yes."

Akane jumped to her feet. "What!?! Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Because I wanted you to learn on your own." Soun sighed. "Trust me, it was very difficult to watch that twisted young man use you as he did. It was equally hard to watch him use Ranma. But if I had intervened, you would have learned nothing."

"You and Ranma both!" Akane threw her hands in the air. "Did anyone else know?"

Nabiki spoke up. "Actually, I think you were the only person who didn't know."

"And what was your reason for not telling me?"

Nabiki shrugged. "Ryouga kept making his payments."

Akane stared at her sister in shock.

"Kasumi knew, too." Nabiki rolled her eyes. "I mean, it really says something about your powers of observation if you missed something that Captain Oblivious picked up on."

"Why wouldn't *she* tell me?"

"Ryouga asked me not to." Kasumi set down the breakfast tray.

"Just that? You'd betray your sister because--"

"I had told him that I disapproved greatly, and that if he ever did anything more than just sleep in your bed, you would find out."

"But he did do more! He watched me change, he listened to my secrets--"

"That was your own fault." Kasumi's expression turned stern. "Like Father, I wanted you to find out on your own. And I wanted Ryouga to see the pain that this would cause you, when you finally found out."

Akane sat down, deflated. "So you all let him go on doing this, because it would hurt me?"

Soun nodded. "Sometimes, the only way to help one you love is to let them be hurt."

-----

"Good morning, class!"

Ranma's night-time ghostbusting career notwithstanding, it was still Monday, and that meant the start of a new school week. He watched glumly as Hinako-sensei bounced around the front of the class.

*Man, history first off today...not a good start to the week.*

"Today, we'll be taking a look at the siege of Goryokaku, and its effects on the end of the Boshin Rebellion."

*Masami died at that battle, before she became a Shinigami.* Ranma perked up. "Hey, Teach. There any women who fought there?"

There was a bit of a murmur; most of the students seemed surprised that *Ranma* of all people should request instruction.

Hinako-sensei shrugged. "There may have been. Japanese society was still very sexist, but considering how intense the fighting became, I wouldn't be surprised. But we have no records of such."

"Thanks." He leaned back again, ready to zone out, when something caught his eye. Something cold and dark...

He glanced up at Hinako-sensei again, but saw nothing.

*My nerves are gettin' to me...seein' Hollows in the middle of the day, in a classroom.*

He glanced back down at his notebook...and heard the rattle of chain. This time, he didn't look up, but tried to see it without looking...

Hinako-sensei didn't generate much of an aura in her smaller form, but what he could see of it was streaked with purplish-black lines.

*She's not Hollow-ridden, that's for sure...maybe she's Impureza?*

-----

"Impureza?" Masami considered. "There is no hard and fast way to detect them, but from what you tell me, I think we can assume that she is so. You are certain it was not a Hollow?"

Ranma shook his head. "I'm certain."

Masami glanced back down at her scroll. "She isn't cursed by Jushenkyou...where would she have become Impureza?"

"No idea." Ranma rubbed at his lip with a finger. "She's got this ki-draining attack...maybe she absorbed it from a victim?"

"That is possible."

Akane walked in, carrying a teapot. "What's up?"

Ranma glanced over at her. "Good, tea. We need it right now."

"Apparently," said Masami, "Your teacher is Impureza."

"Really?" Akane looked surprised. "She doesn't seem evil or anything. Just a bit spiny."

"Yeah." Ranma poured a cup of tea. "I learned from Happousai--"

Masami shuddered, her hair standing on end.

"I see you've met him."

"You know that horrible monster?"

"Yeah. Among other things, he was the one who altered Hinako-sensei's meta-thingy--"

"Metabolism," supplied Akane.

"Yeah, that. Anyway, he made her into a ki vampire, and tricked her into helpin' him steal underwear."

"That would explain where she became Impureza."

"Anyway, he showed me how to shut down her powers temporarily." Ranma turned to Akane. "Sorry, but I gotta demonstrate. Do you mind standin' in?"

Akane shrugged. "It's okay."

"I just didn't want to get clobbered, is all. If I'd done this without askin', or demonstrated on Masami--"

"Really, it's all right."

"Okay. I just don't want you to think I'm gonna make a habit of grabbin' your--"

Akane darkened. "Hurry up before I change my mind, and clobber you for even thinking it."

"She's got five pressure points. Three here--" He spaced two fingers and one thumb around Akane's left breast. "And two on the back." His left hand went around behind Akane; one finger and his thumb touched her back. He pulled his hands away quickly, and blushed.

"Don't ever do that in front of anyone else." Akane crossed her arms over her breasts, and muttered, "I wish I'd been wearing a heavier shirt."

Ranma turned back to Masami. "Every time I tried to shut Hinako down, the Tomboy here would smack me."

"I can understand why." Masami nodded. "It is an...intimate grasp." She considered. "Did you expel any ki when doing this?"

"A bit."

"Next time, make it a lot more." Masami tapped the scroll. "As we know how her metabolism was altered, we can adjust it back with a hard enough blast of energy."

-----

"Please, Dad?"

Soun considered. "The last time that she was here, you objected to her presence considerably. It cost us a lot of money to repair the damage that you did to the house."

"It's important." Akane did her best kawaii-pleading look.

Soun sighed. "All right." He picked up the telephone and dialed.

"Hinako-sensei? This is Tendo Soun. May I ask you to visit us tonight?" He paused, then looked at the receiver. "She hung up!"

"She's not coming?"

"No, she's coming. The last thing she said was a very emphatic 'yes'." He set the receiver down. "I still don't know why you asked me to do this. Do I have your promise not to attack her while she is here?"

Akane nodded. "I'll be good as gold." She turned, and hurried to the gardens.

Ranma looked up. "She on her way?"

"Yes. I had to promise Dad that I wouldn't attack her here."

"Fine." Ranma jumped to his feet. "We'll get her before she arrives."

-----

Akane shook her head in disgust. "I just plain don't believe this girl's nerve."

Hinako was not in her smaller form, but in her more adult shape. This was easily explained; in one hand was her goldfish bowl, the Betta inside putting out enough fighting spirit to keep her empowered.

But it wasn't only the goldfish bowl. Draped over her arm was a kimono, large enough that it could only be a gift for Soun. And in the other hand was a rose.

"Flower...fish...cloth. All three of the traditional dowries," Ranma chuckled. "Looks like she's goin' for broke."

"Not with *my* father." Akane cracked her knuckles.

"Don't worry, Akane. We'll put paid to her once an' for all. Your Pops ain't gonna be too interested in her when she looks younger than you from now on." He waved her forward. "Distraction time."

Akane jumped down off the roof, then ran towards Hinako-sensei. Ranma moved more furtively, using the Umi-Sen-Ken to mask his ki presence.

Hinako paused as Akane approached. "Tendo-chan." She smiled. "Here to stop me from visiting your father?"

*Dial for shock, Ranma said.* Akane grinned widely. "No, Hinako-sensei. Last time, it seemed you were forcing your presence on my father. This time, he asked to see you."

Hinako's eyes widened.

"So, I just wanted you to know...If it works out for you two, I'll be so happy for you!"

Hinako's jaw dropped. "Tendo-chan--"

Ranma struck from behind. His left hand bridged the points on her back, and his right hand came around the front to grasp--

Hinako grabbed his wrist, and he gasped as the thorns bit into his skin.

"Really, you two." Hinako's smile turned ugly. "And here I thought you were finally growing up." She twisted his wrist, but Ranma executed a break-hold, and jumped clear.

Hinako whirled to face Akane. "Happo No-Yen Coin Return!"

"Akane, look out--"

The blast of ki caught Akane dead on, knocking her back and into the wall. Hinako's body shrunk to that of a teenager, and she slowly turned to face Ranma.

"Now then, little boy..."

"Who's *little*?" Ranma leaped forwards.

Hinako raised a hand; between two fingers was a five-yen coin.

"Happo Five-Yen Satsu!"

-----

The Dojo again.

Ranko glanced around. "What the heck--in the middle of a fight, I zone out?"

"That attack was very dangerous to us."

Ranko turned, to see Shaolan standing near the door, arms crossed.

"There's a counter, but I had no time to use it."

Shaolan smiled. "Even with your counter, she could switch to the Fifty-Yen Satsu, and still drain you."

Ranko blinked. "You know about--"

"Fool! We're the same person." Shaolan uncrossed her arms and stomped towards Ranko. "You keep forgetting this!"

Ranko scowled. "That's because *I don't wanna be you!*"

"Then why do you continue to fight Hollows?"

"They're evil! Isn't that a good enough reason?"

"No...because it's false." Shaolan sighed. "You will never be a true Shinigami, unless you accept me. And her."

"Her?"

Shaolan pointed behind Ranko. "Your zampakto."

Ranko's hair rose on end, and she turned...to see the white kitten.

"If you want to win this battle, you will need her with you."

"I can't..." Ranko shook her head. "You know that I can't even go near her. After what Pops did to us, how can you ask that?"

"To you. It happened before we became one."

"Well, it's all the same, isn't it? We're the same person, like you said." Ranko backed a step away from the kitten. "And since it's gotta be me fighting Hinako, I can't--"

"You can." Shaolan stepped up to her, placed a hand on her shoulder. "If you do not want to be me, I can understand that. But if you wish to fight Hollows, you will need to be me."

"I'm a man!" Ranko stared in horror at the cat. "And I can't even touch..."

"Do you not realize that our merging has changed me as well?" Shaolan's voice dropped. "I can feel your fear, but I know what lurks behind it."

"Neko-ken..."

"Exactly. Is that not your most powerful weapon?"

"But it's not controllable!"

"That is because you fear it." Shaolan turned to face the kitten. "You are rejecting your most powerful weapon, as well as the source of all your powers as a Shinigami, because of fear."

Ranko calmed her breathing, and looked down at the floor. "But the fear is what makes the Neko-ken so powerful."

"No." Shaolan shook her head. "The fear drives you away from the Neko-ken, until the Neko-ken bursts free. When was the first time you actively used the Neko-ken?"

"Cologne." Ranko blinked. "The Phoenix Pill. I got Shampoo to trigger the Neko-ken...I embraced the fear..."

It was as if a light dawned on her.

*"I embraced it!"*

She knelt, and held out a hand. The kitten jumped into her arms. She could feel the madness building, but she hugged the kitten to herself.

Shaolan smiled. "Be one with her."

-----

"Happo Five-Yen Satsu!"

Ranma fell back, his battle aura draining away. Ranko leaped away from him, up and out of the path of the attack.

Hinako, restored to full size, turned to face her.

"Saotome...how..." she stammered in confusion.

Ranko grinned, and readied the nagimaki. "Surprised?"

"Somewhat." She smirked. "I'm not sure how you did this trick, or why--"

"The *why* is easy. Hinako-sensei, you have been touched by evil, and I plan to cleanse it from you."

"Evil?" She laughed. "Happo No-Yen Coin Return!"

Ranko raised the nagimaki, and blocked the blast. It rippled around the blade, deflected in all directions but towards her.

"Not bad, little girl." Hinako pulled a coin from her belt. "But I can see that you are nothing more than a projection of ki."

"Somewhat more than that." She jumped forwards, but was forced to dodge as Hinako directed a Fifty-Yen Satsu at her. She sidestepped, and closed.

Three fingers found the pressure point on her front; two on her back. Ranko unleashed a torrent of power into her, then leaped clear.

Hinako staggered, fell to the ground. Ranko smirked. "Piece of cake!"

Hinako got back up.

"Honestly, is that the best you have?" She smirked.

"What--" Ranko's jaw dropped. "Even if it didn't cure you, it should have sealed your techniques!"

"Wrong. Happo Fifty--"

-----

"The power from your body isn't enough to drive the Hollow energies from her. You hold her, but have not yet embraced her."

-----

"-Yen Satsu!"

The momentary lapse caught Ranko flat-footed, and she felt her essence begin to drain towards the pint-sized teacher. She gritted her teeth.

"No..." She closed her eyes, and focused on the zampakto. "I need your help..."

The glaive vibrated faintly in her hand.

"Koneko!"

The nagimaki flared, and extended. Ranko grabbed it with both hands, as it grew to two meters, tipped with a half meter of blade.

Hinako's hand dropped. "No!"

Ranko opened her eyes. "The blade, of course...it is designed to destroy Hollows." She brought the naginata down, pointed the blade at Hinako. "The touch of the blade will drive the Hollow energy from your body."

Hinako sniffed. "Even if you say so, how are you going to strike five points at once with that, especially with two of them on my back?"

Ranko grinned. "Koneko...purr."

The blade growled, and shimmered.

"Ever hear of a vibro-blade? Five thousand vibrations per second...and I only need five."

"Happo No-Yen--"

Ranko leaped in, and swung the glaive. The blade blurred, splitting into five, and she slammed it into Hinako's chest.

Hinako screamed, her body wreathed in black energy. Ranko pulled the glaive free, and the energy poured in ribbons from the five wounds, fading to black mist seconds later.

-----

Ranko pulled her hand away from Hinako's chest. Though the woman's clothing was ripped, the skin underneath was completely unharmed.

Hinako's eyes fluttered. "Wha..."

"Easy, Sensei. You're still weak." Ranko sat back on her heels. "Luckily for you, Koneko remembers the healer's arts."

"I..." Hinako sat up. "You stabbed me!"

"Yeah." Ranko sighed. "It was the only way to clear your body of the evil energy."

"But..." She felt her chest. "I'm not dead?"

"No." Ranko grinned. "I sealed your wounds."

Hinako glanced around, noticed the two unconscious teenagers. "Did I...hurt them?"

"A bit. Akane's tough, she'll be back up and around soon. But Ranma..." She sighed. "You drained him pretty bad. I'll need to help him."

She stepped over to him, and touched his cheek. There was a sharp crack, and she was gone.

Hinako looked at the two, then down at herself.

"She said that she cured me..." She stood up unsteadily. "I'm..."

Her hands moved of their own accord, up and down her body.

"I'm fully adult!"

She turned to a nearby phone booth, and raised her hands.

"Happo No-Yen Coin Return!"

Nothing happened.

"Yahoo!"

-----

Soun and Kasumi looked up as the threesome entered. Soun set down his book and stood.

"Ah, there you are. I was beginning to wonder--"

He broke off, as he took in their bedraggled state. All three had damaged clothing, though Hinako was wearing a kimono over hers. Ranma looked very tired, and Akane was walking painfully.

"Oh, Akane..." Tears welled in his eyes. "You promised me--"

"Tendo-san." Hinako stepped forward. "Please, do not scold Akane. She and Ranma did me a great service today."

Soun looked down at her, as though seeing her for the first time.

"Hinako-sensei..."

Kasumi frowned. She opened her mouth, but Akane caught her eye, and shook her head.

"Sis...?"

"C'mon, Kasumi. Let's go upstairs. I'll tell you all about it."

Ranma watched them walk off, then turned and went to the dojo.

-----

Masami looked up as Ranma entered.

"Eventful night?"

"Yeah." Ranma sat down and picked up a teacup. "We cleared her."

"Good."

"Yeah..." He touched a finger to his lip. "The Hollow energy...if it's removed, will that affect the person immediately?"

"Yes, though often not in a great way. It usually takes time for the personality to reassert itself."

"Odd." He sipped the tea. "Hinako seems like a whole different person now."

"Truly?" Masami tilted her head. "Or maybe it's the first time you have really met her?"

"Could be...normally, we end up fighting." He shrugged. "By the way, about the fake body for Ranko..."

"Have you two reached a decision?"

"The four of us have." He looked up. "We will be needing it."

## A Heart In Pain

"I will not be gone for long." Masami had changed back into her Shinigami uniform, and wore her zampakto belted at her waist, blade down. "Merely to requisition a Gigai, and to consult with Captain Unohana of the Fourth Division as to a means to control your Hollow, Akane."

Ranma nodded. "We're gonna try to take on Shampoo while you are gone."

"Be cautious, Ranma," said Masami. "Shampoo is not an opponent to take lightly."

"You know her?"

"I sensed her, when we were seeking Mousse. I fear that she is the most dangerous opponent you will ever face."

She turned, and opened the dojo door, but rather than the Tendo yard, it showed an Edo-style courtyard. She stepped through and closed the door.

Ranma blinked. "Akane...did you just see...?"

"A castle?"

"Yeah." He stepped forward, and opened the door.

Kasumi lowered her hand. "Oh, did you hear me coming? Breakfast is ready."

-----

Shampoo dropped the box. "Is not in here."

"Dammit..." Happousai growled. "I know the old bat has it."

"Maybe is back in village?"

"A device of this amount of magical power?" He snorted. "No, she'd keep it with her at all times."

"Maybe is on her person. She keep Phoenix Pill around neck."

Happousai glanced over at the bound Amazon leader. "This could require a strip search." He shuddered. "Shampoo, I leave that to you; you know the old ghouls' best hiding spots."

"If you tell me what you are looking for, I might just hand it over." Cologne's voice was weak.

"Hm. Never considered that option. All right.

"I am looking for the Crumbling Orb."

Cologne shrugged. "Never heard of it."

"Oh. Carry on, Shampoo."

"I'm not lying to you! Why would I? I don't even know what this Orb is!"

Happousai sighed, and seated himself on the floor. "Since I can see your aura, I might be able to discern the truth from you.

"The Crumbling Orb is an artifact of considerable power. Its primary ability is to cause the breakdown of a target's willpower. His emotion and instinct will fuse with his reason and intellect.

"Human beings exist in a state of balance between their instincts and their reason. Spiritual beings, such as myself and the lovely Shampoo here, do not. Because this wall exists, we can draw power from one side or the other, but not both."

Cologne chuckled. "So it's just a power grab for you. What makes you think I have it?"

"Because a student of mine once spoke with the inventor of the Crumbling Orb. He had sent it to China with a Shinigami called Shaolan. She drowned at Jushenkyou."

"Ah." Cologne chuckled. "So you think it went to Jushenkyou, and I would have picked it up?"

"When I was there, there was no sign of its spiritual energy. I would have felt it." Happousai lit his pipe, drew some smoke before continuing. "So someone removed it. Your tribe guards Jushenkyou. You are the most powerful member of that tribe. Ergo, you must have it."

"I hate to burst your bubble, but if you can sense its power, why keep up this facade? Surely you must realize that I don't have it?"

"I cannot sense it, this is true." He sighed. "And from your aura, I can see that you might just be telling the truth. I guess we can kill you now."

"Are you certain that that is wise?" Cologne glanced over at Shampoo. "No matter what control you have over her, killing me in front of her, or ordering her to kill me, may break it."

"You think so?" He turned to Shampoo. "Disrobe."

Shampoo smiled seductively, and began to undo her dress. Happousai turned back to the Matriarch.

"You see, the control I have over your granddaughter is both more subtle and more powerful than you can imagine."

Shampoo dropped the silk dress at her feet, then unsnapped her bra. Cologne gasped, as she saw the hole. A perfect circle, just above her left nipple, that ran clear through her body. Daylight was visible through the other side. There was no blood, no damage; it was not a wound, merely an absence of flesh.

But the hole would have run directly through her heart.

"Shampoo is a creature of instinct at the best of times. But right now, only instinct remains. The wall of her willpower is battered, and slowly crumbling, and she will soon be a force to be reckoned with." Happousai smiled evilly. "And that power is under my control, for it was I who unleashed the devil within her."

Shampoo stepped out of her panties, kicked them aside. She knelt before the old pervert and stretched seductively. "Is what Master ordered?"

Happousai chuckled. "Very nice, Shampoo."

For the first time in a very long lifetime, Cologne began to fear for her life...and her soul.

-----

"Ranko." Akane laid a hand on the girl's arm. "We need to talk."

"Sure, Akane." Ranko leaned the glaive up against the wall. "Whatcha wanna talk about?"

"Ranma."

Ranko scowled at her. "Did he put you up to this?"

"No." Akane looked down. "But I'm worried about him."

"Why? He's gettin' what he always wanted. I'm gonna be gone, as soon as I get the faux body. No more curse for him. Finally, he can be a 'man among men'." She practically spat the last three words.

"I thought that you wanted your independance!" Akane's eyes were wide.

"Do you know what it's like, bein' hated like he hates me?" Ranko shook her head. "Of course not. It's worse than havin' a brother who hates me. We've been the same person for so long. Seventeen years."

"He's only been cursed a year--"

"Where do you think I came from? Huh? Do you think I just came into bein' when he fell into the spring?" Ranko's eyes flashed. "I've always been part of him--until now."

She looked down. "Since we used that technique, I've been becomin' different. I've been driftin' away, from him and from you." She looked back up, and Akane was startled to see tears in her eyes. "It hurts a lot, to leave you guys behind. But it's gonna happen, no matter what I want."

"So is this how it is? We're going to end up hurting you, so you run away?" Akane crossed her arms in disgust. "That sounds like your father speaking."

"So? Do you see a better way?"

The door slammed open, and Ranma stalked in, his eyes blazing. Akane whirled to face him, her hands flying up to her mouth.

"Akane, can't you leave well enough alone?"

The hurt was plain in her eyes. "Ranma...I was trying to help--"

"I know. I'm sorry." He sighed, and turned to Ranko. "Look, Ranko--"

"Don't call me that!" She almost screamed the words. Ranma blinked.

"Don't call me that, please." Ranko was crying freely now. "I'm not Ranko any more. I'm not Ranma anymore, either!" She collapsed to the floor, rubbing her eyes with her hands.

"Aw, geez..." Ranma knelt before the Shinigami, placed his hands on her shoulders. "Look at me."

She looked up, her eyes red and puffy from the tears.

"Remember, we decided together that you were gettin' your own body. I asked Masami myself, remember?"

She nodded timidly.

"So don't go all girly on me just yet, okay? We still gotta deal with Shampoo."

"Okay." She sniffed back the tears. "Just...I don't wanna re-integrate again. I want my own body, and I don't want the pain of leaving you again."

"No matter what happens, you don't gotta leave us." Ranma smiled at her. "You're more than welcome to stay."

She shook her head. "No, Ranma...I will need to leave." She glanced over at Akane, then back to him. "You know full well the problems I'll cause here."

The two of them stood. Ranko turned, and picked up her zampakto. She glanced over her shoulder.

"Let's go. I feel the need to kick some ass."

- - - - -

Only one light burned in the Nekohanten, in an upstairs room. Ranko leaped up to the window, and carefully peered in.

"It's the old ghoul. She's been tied up."

Ranma nodded. "Can you open the window?"

"Just need a bit more leverage..." She adjusted her feet, then shoved the window open with one hand. "Got it!" She slipped in.

Ranma turned to Akane. "Only one way to get you up there."

She nodded. Ranma picked her up, and tossed her to the window. She caught the frame, and Ranko pulled her in. Ranma leaped up, alighting on the windowsill like a bird.

"Son-in-law..." Cologne smiled at him. "I can't tell you how good it is to see you right now."

"We'll have you free in just a moment, Granny." He knelt, and paused. "But before I do this...Ya gotta promise that you'll give up on me marryin' Shampoo."

"I'm not precisely in a position to argue. But I do ask one thing."

"What's that?"

"Please...try to avoid killing her."

Ranma blinked. "Sure." He grabbed the ropes and pulled.

Nothing happened.

"Damn...these are really strong!"

Ranko squinted. "They're Hollow-infused. You won't be able to break them." She readied the glaive. "Step aside."

Ranma shuffled out of the way, and Ranko sliced the ropes with her zampakto. Cologne sat up, rubbing her arms. "Son-in-law..."

Ranma raised a finger.

"Sorry. Old habits." Cologne sighed. "Ranma. Though I thank you for freeing me, I fear that you may be too late to save Shampoo. Happousai has bound her with Hollow magic." She glanced over at Ranko. "I know your kind."

"I guessed as much, seein' as how you can see me."

"The last thing Shampoo said before leaving was, 'Obstacles are for killing'. I believe that she is hunting Akane, but she may be headed for the Tendo home."

Akane gasped. "My sisters!"

"They may be safe from her. It is most likely that she is nearby. Following you."

Ranma stood. "We need to get into the open. Sorry, Akane, but you gotta be live bait."

"I'd prefer the term, 'on point,'" muttered Akane.

-----

They found Mousse near the restaurant.

His clothes were badly shredded, and every weapon normally concealed within them lying broken around him. His belly had been slit; he was using one hand to try to hold it shut. The other hand was missing at the wrist.

Ranko knelt by him, and touched the wound on his belly. She drew on the power of the zampakto, and felt the slash close under her hand.

"Someone find his hand."

"Over here." Akane looked nauseous. "How could she do this to him."

"Get it into some ice, fast. Don't barf on it. Ranma, call an ambulance." Ranko sighed. "If they can get to him in time, they can put the hand back on. I can't; it's still outside my power."

"Saotome..."

"Quiet, Mousse. Don't strain yourself." Ranko's eyes well. "She must be really far gone...Why the hell didn't we deal with her first?"

"Saotome. Please." Mousse grabbed her kimono with his remaining hand. "Save her..."

"I intend to, Mousse."

"Amazing." Cologne shook her head. "She carves him up like a roast, and still his only thought is of her."

"Makes you wonder why you kept after me, eh?" Ranko stood. "I've done all I can. We need to find Shampoo and stop her, before she really loses control."

"Is already done." Ranko turned, to see Shampoo. She was naked, but covered with fine hair, white save for fingers and feet, which were the same shade of purple as the hair on her head. Her ears had lengthened, as had her canines, and her fingernails had grown longer and thicker.

The most startling element of her transformation, however, was the pure white jian leaning against her shoulder.

"That's no ordinary blade..." Ranko's glaive slipped into the ready position. "Everyone! Shampoo's got a zampakto! Do *not* let it hit you!"

"Shampoo surprised. Master not tell her Ranko is Death Goddess." She smiled, revealing a mouthful of pointed teeth. "Smell good; wonder how taste?"

"Koneko--purr!" The glaive doubled in length, and the blade shimmered.

Shampoo leaped forward, swinging the sword. Ranko parried, her blade howling against the metal of the jian. Shampoo whirled inside the blade's reach, and lashed out savagely. Her foot caught Ranko just above the solar plexus, driving the breath from her and knocking her back ten feet. Shampoo leaped from the kick, twisting in air to land directly behind Akane.

Without conscious thought, Akane lashed out with a back kick, but Shampoo parried it with her off hand, then swung the sword at Akane's head. Akane dropped below the arc of the swing, and pivoted through a foot sweep. She connected solidly, knocking Shampoo's feet out from under her.

Shampoo touched down on her off hand, propelled herself away from Akane's followup axe-kick. Ranko leaped into the air, the glaive singing as it passed through the air, but Shampoo was already on the move again. Ranko cursed, parried the jian with Koneko's haft, then brought the blunt end around and caught Shampoo across the temple.

Shampoo spat, cat-like, and slashed at her with her left-hand claws. She caught Ranko across the face, carving four parallel furrows along her cheek.

Ranko grabbed her wrist, executed a flawless knockback throw, and was dismayed to see the cat girl land on her feet, almost as though she'd planned to be thrown.

"Stupid Ranko. Give Shampoo room to play."

*I guess she was plannin' to be thrown.*

Shampoo stood up straight, pointed the sword at Ranko.

*"Mouko Takabisha!"*

The torrent of energy that blasted from the blade was far greater than anything Ranko had ever achieved with this attack. Ranko raised her glaive, raising a defensive barrier almost on instinct, but it was not enough. Not nearly.

Her defenses crumbled, and she was blasted backward and through the plate glass of the restaurant window. The cat girl shouldered the blade, and turned back to Akane.

"Akane turn now. Obstacles is for killing."

Akane scowled, and stepped into a ready stance. "Bring it, kitty."

Shampoo hissed, and lunged forward, leading with the blade. Akane snapped through a spin kick, knocking the sword off target, followed it up with a jab at Shampoo's face. Shampoo brought the blade back, parrying with the quillons, then snapped it around, catching Akane across the back and drawing.

Akane gasped, as the sword sliced her back painfully. She snapped up a knee, catching the Amazon square in the groin, then brought the foot down in a stamp kick square on her knee. Shampoo howled, then leapt away.

Akane blinked.

*No way - she should have a broken pelvis and shattered kneecap!*

"Akane get better." Shampoo bared her fangs. "Will not any more."

Akane scowled, and brought up both hands. A ball of purple energy formed between them, and flashed to impact into Shampoo, knocking her further back.

She glanced down at her hands. "Did I just use a ki attack?"

Ranko pulled herself out of the shattered restaurant, wincing at the pain of a thousand small cuts. Then gasped as she saw the turn that the battle had taken.

Shampoo was on the defensive, dodging wildly as Akane fired blast after blast at her. "Oh, no..."

"Ranko." Cologne was following the battle worriedly. "If Akane keeps up that level of output, she will very soon tire."

"Did she get hit?" Ranko squinted. "Yeah, across the back. Damn...more Taint."

"Shampoo's energy reserves are much greater than Akane's, or even your own." Cologne looked up at her. "If you are to defeat her, you will need to bleed off more of that energy."

"Maybe I can try the Happo Five-Yen Satsu?" Ranko shook her head. "No, you need an altered metabolism for that."

Cologne held up a packet. "Use this."

"What is it?"

"Boxwood dust. Hit her with this, and it will absorb some of her ki."

"Got it." Ranko grabbed the packet, and leapt back towards the fray.

Shampoo saw her coming, and launched a Mouko Takabisha at Akane.

"Oh, hell--"

Akane raised her hands, desperately trying to ward off the blast, but her own attack fizzled weakly against the onslaught. She was blown backward, carving a furrow through the earth, her clothes catching fire.

"AKANE!!"

Ranko hurled the packet with deadly accuracy. It smashed into the cat girl, exploding in a puff of dust. The dust cloud boiled, burning off as it absorbed her frightful battle aura, and Shampoo came flying out of it, teeth bared and sword ready to strike.

Ranko swept the glaive, knocking the jian out of her grasp and straight into the air. Shampoo grabbed the haft of the polearm, riding the backswing and turning it into another jump. She touched down on a nearby wall, and held out her hand.

Her zampakto fell straight into her open palm, and she snapped it back to a ready position.

Ranko gulped.

Shampoo jumped down to the ground, glanced over to the frantic Akane. "Violent girl not know to stop, drop and roll?"

"You are dead." Ranko's face had turned ugly. "Promise or no, I am going to kill you."

"Hmph." Shampoo glanced over at her. "Shinigami yet to lay hand on Shampoo. Shampoo no fear."

"Koneko--purr!" Again the glaive sang. Ranko leveled it at the cat girl, and stalked forward.

Shampoo chuckled, and moved forward. No human could have seen her at the speed she moved. But Ranko was no longer human.

The blade of the glaive met the blade of the jian, and cut straight through it.

Shampoo gasped, stared stupidly at the broken blade in her hand.

"Bad time to pause."

She pivoted, the glaive held in tight, and drove it straight into Shampoo's chest.

"NO!"

The howl of anguish echoed throughout the street. Ranko pulled the glaive clear, and jumped away.

Shampoo collapsed backward to the ground, and a shadowy figure rose from her body. Long arms reached out, trying to hold itself into her, but to no avail; the form was already beginning to break up. In seconds, it was gone.

-----

"He's badly beaten, but aside from the severed hand, in pretty good shape overall." The paramedic finished strapping Mousse into the gurney. "Get him in, and get him to Emergency post-haste." He turned, and walked over to the other casualty.

"How is she doing?"

"Whatever it was that stabbed her, it punctured her lung, damaged one breast, but managed to avoid severing any arteries. She's still breathing, and her heart is still beating. If she survives to reach Shock-Trauma, she should make a full recovery."

"What the hell happened to these two?"

"Some kinda axe-murderer, maybe?"

"I dunno." He knelt, brushed a lock of purple hair out of Shampoo's eyes; despite the horrific wound, the girl's face was peaceful, almost serene. "Completely naked, but only the one stab-mark. No defensive wounds. CSU is gonna have a ball with this one."

From a safe distance, the foursome watched the paramedics load the two Amazons into the ambulance.

"She switched back as soon as I hit her...I think we can trust that we destroyed her Hollow." Ranko sighed. "I just hope she's okay."

"Me, too." Ranma looked down at his feet.

"Fat lot of use you were, Ranma!" Akane cuffed the back of his head. "Where the hell were you during the fight?"

"Akane." Ranko glanced over. "Don't be so hard on him. Neko-ken, remember?"

"Oh..."

"Well, that's all the cursed folk on the list, anyway." Ranko glanced towards the rising sun. "Another day integrated for me. Just one more. Then we got one last fight."

"Happousai?"

"Yeah." Ranko sighed. "And I got a bad feelin' that it's gonna go a lot harder than this one."

## Love and Pain

Akane knocked on the door of the dojo. "May I come in?"

"Of course." Cologne's voice sounded more like dry twigs and leaves underfoot than normal. Akane slid open the door and stepped in.

"I brought a pot of tea." She knelt, and set it next to the Amazon Elder.

"Thank you." Cologne looked at her curiously. "I find it interesting that you have gone out of your way to be kind to me the last few days."

"Well...."

Cologne smiled. "You may feel free to speak as you need to."

Akane visibly relaxed, and said, "With Shampoo no longer a rival, there's no need for me to be unpleasant, especially not to a guest."

"I thought so." Cologne chuckled. "You realize, of course, that I can only relax my claim on Ranma, and by extension, that of the Tribe. Shampoo may continue to pursue him on her own."

Akane chuckled. "Still, without your backing, she may be more manageable."

"Perhaps."

"By the way." Akane dug into a pocket. "I picked this up while we were in the Nekohanten. Do you mind if I use a bit?"

Cologne stared at the small bottle in Akane's hand. "You -do- know what that is, do you not?"

"Yes. I've seen Shampoo use it often enough." She stuck the bottle back into her pocket. "I've got a bit of a use for this."

"As long as it's not for Ranma, I do not mind."

"Oh, no." Akane grinned. "I think it'll go nicely with pork, though."

The door opened again, and Akane and Cologne looked up. For the second time, Akane was shocked to see an elaborate Meiji-era courtyard behind, before Isane closed the door.

Masami bowed to Akane. "We have returned."

"Welcome back."

Cologne cleared her throat. "I assume that this is a social visit?"

"Not entirely, but we have no business with you today, Elder."

"Oh. Good."

Isane chuckled. "I can understand your fears. You have kept off from meeting us for a very long time."

"Yeah, about that." Akane grinned. "Can you tell me how old she really is?"

"Now, Akane." Masami raised a finger. "It is not polite to inquire as to a lady's age."

"Well, as needs be...I must go back to the restaurant. I shall return before nightfall, but I need to assess the damage." She rose, picked up her staff, and hopped from the dojo.

Masami watched her leave, smiling slightly. "I do wish I knew how old she really was."

"Is Ranko here?" Isane looked a touch uncomfortable. "We have brought something for her."

-----

Isane set the box down before the redhead. "It can be very difficult to acquire a gigai without telling people who it is for."

"A whatzit?"

Masami smiled. "I believe you were calling it a fake body?"

"It's in the box?" The rogue Shinigami leaned over. "Kinda small, ain't it?"

"This is a proto-form gigai." Isane smiled. "All your own. But you will need to imprint it, Ranko."

"Right. Thanks, Isane. It means a lot to me. But please, don't call me that anymore." The martial artist formerly known as Ranko sighed. "I decided not to keep that name. Too many painful memories."

Isane blinked. "As you wish. But we will need to call you something."

Akane piped up. "How about Akina?"

"Spring Flower?" The redhead shuddered. "Way too girly."

"Well, from 'Small Orchid' to 'Orchid Child'...flowers do seem to be your motif." Masami shrugged. "And you *are* female."

Isane spoke up. "I might suggest that since we cannot call you 'hey, you' all day, that you settle on a name."

"I need more time to--"

"Akina' it is."

Petite hands were thrown in the air. "Fine! For the moment, you can continue to call me Ranko!" She sighed. "I don't like it. I won't think of myself as Ranko any more. But if you need a label, so be it."

"Very well." Isane tapped the box. "Shall we proceed?"

"Yeah." Ranko grinned. "This, at least, I'm lookin' forward to."

"Unfortunately, it cannot be you who brings it to life."

Masami spoke up. "I know that this will not please you, but your spirit form cannot generate the energy needed to animate the gigai. You will need to re-integrate with Ranma."

"No!" Ranko shook her head. "I'm doin' this so I don't have to, remember?"

Masami sighed. "I know that you would rather not. But you do not have the required energy."

"Hey, my energy is far more than either of you two, even in my weakened state." Ranko scowled, and crossed her arms. "You know that, and you know that I can tap a lot more on demand."

"It is not a question of quantity, but of quality. You will need the energy of a living body to bring the gigai to life."

"Fine!" Ranko turned to Akane. "Ranma's probably still wolfen' down breakfast. Can you go get him?"

"Sure thing...Akina."

She scowled. "I'm still your sensei, girl! I can still PT you until you puke!"

-----

Ranko touched Ranma's cheek, and vanished with a crack. Ranma staggered, and sighed.

"Masami, you got no idea how much she hates this."

"I think I do." Masami's voice was cold. "The fact that you no longer refer to her as yourself tells me how much you have rejected her."

"It ain't rejectin'! She's just not me anymore." Ranma knelt next to the box. "So what do I have to do?"

Isane indicated the box. "You must be the one to open this. Remove the proto-form gigai, and breathe in through its mouth until it begins to move. Then Ranko must enter it. It will take her form, and she will animate it from now on."

"Got it." Ranma flipped open the box - and stared.

"You have got to be kiddin.'"

Akane giggled, as Ranma pulled from the box what appeared to be an inflatable doll.

"This ain't funny! There's no way you're gonna get me to do this!"

"Ranma." Masami's voice dropped ten more degrees. "You are the only one who can do this. If it is not done, the gigai could be taken over by a Hollow."

"Fine!" Ranma steeled himself, then leaned over, and blew gently onto the inflatable doll's lips.

"No!" Isane scowled. "Didn't you listen to me? It must be completely filled with the Breath of Life! Mere air will not work, and certainly not in such tiny quantities. Breathe into it, and allow your energy to flow with the air."

Ranma glanced up at Akane. "You ain't gonna mallet me for this, are you?"

Akane was too busy giggling to answer.

"Guess not." He leaned over, wrapped his lips around the doll's mouth, opened his channel to his ki, and blew.

This would be precisely the wrong moment for anyone to walk in. So of course, Ryouga did so.

"Akane? What's so--" He cut off, as he took in the scene before him.

Akane.

That new student of Ranma's.

Another girl, one he didn't know, but dressed as to be undressed in a hurry.

And Ranma, inflating a rubber doll.

"RANMA! You animal! Prepare to--"

"No!" Masami jumped up. "You must not--"

She collided with the Lost Boy, spinning both on the spot.

The gigai drew in a shuddering breath.

"Now, Ranko!" Isane leaned forward. "Before this boy can interfere!"

Ranko melted away from Ranma, and reached for the gigai.

Ryouga managed to toss Masami away, and lunged forward, but tripped over the still-giggling Akane.

Ranko touched the gigai, and with a crack, vanished. The gigai immediately assumed her form.

Ryouga fell forward, and landed face-first in Ranko's chest.

Her unclothed chest.

Ranko scowled. "You pig!" She grabbed him by the hair, and threw him across the room. She sat up, scowl undiminished.

Ranma gulped, and turned away.

Ranko looked down at herself. "Anyone got a spare kimono?"

- - - - -

Ryouga drifted back to consciousness with the sound of a wind chime in his ears. Something soft and damp lay across his eyes; he pulled it off and sat up.

He was in the Tendo family room. The blanket that had covered him had fallen as he sat up. The cloth in his hand was a simple facecloth, soaked in cold water; He glanced down at it.

"Was it all a dream?"

He gingerly felt the back of his head, and winced as his hand brushed the lump left from his impact with the dojo wall.

"No, I guess not."

"Are you awake?"

Akane had walked into the family room, carrying a tray. On the tray was a pork bun and a glass of water.

"Yeah. What was going on in the dojo?"

"Ranma was learning a new technique. I can't really say anything more about it, except that he wasn't being a pervert. For once."

"No? Well, if *you* say so..."

Akane set the tray down on the table, then picked up the tumbler and turned towards him. "I brought you - oops!"

The glass of water flew towards him, and dumped the contents all over him. Ryouga's pulse rate rose into the hundreds.

*I'm dead! I can't dodge, and Akane's gonna see me turn into P-Chan!*

He opened his eyes, and remembered that the curse was gone. He struggled to bring his breathing back under control.

"Oh, Ryouga, I'm so sorry!" She knelt, picked up the facecloth, and started mopping his chest. "Oh, I'm such a klutz!" She paused, and looked up at him, one hand still on his chest. "Good thing you don't have a Jusenkyou curse, eh?"

He was certain that she could feel his heart, still pounding against his ribcage like a jackhammer. Come to think of it, her hand was still on his chest...

He slid backward quickly. "I'm fine! Quite all right! I'm not made of sugar!" His laugh sounded very forced in his own ears.

"Okay, if you're sure." She turned back to the tray. "I was going to eat this pork bun myself. I made it myself, and even Nabiki said it tasted all right." She turned back, and held it out to him. "But since I just soaked you down...please, take this as an apology."

*Akane's own cooking! Can heaven be far behind?* As casually as he could, he said, "Sure, Akane. Thanks. I forgive you, it was an honest mistake."

Akane waited until he'd eaten the pork bun, then rose. "I've gotta go run some errands. I'll be back later."

-----

Akane stepped into the kitchen, and grinned.

The pork buns were not entirely her own work; Kasumi had made them earlier, with Akane's contribution being only the stirring of the filling. Plus, of course, her own secret ingredient added to two of them.

*Now, I'll just take the other up to Shampoo. After all, hospital food is terrible, she'll be dying for anything else to eat.*

"Hey, Akane. Did you make these?" Nabiki waved a half-eaten pork bun. "I thought it was one of Kasumi's, but it's not quite up to her standards. For you, though, it's pretty good."

Akane gaped.

Nabiki munched the rest of the pork bun, then glanced towards the door. "I saw you and Ranma hauling an unconscious Ryouga into the family room. I was wondering when you were gonna get revenge on him."

"...I think I just did." Akane shook her head. "Can you do me a favour, Sis?"

"Hm?"

"Can you avoid Ryouga for a while?"

"Forget it. He still owes me money." Nabiki turned and walked towards the kitchen door. "Besides, the financial report is about to come on TV."

Akane watched her sister leave the kitchen, then turned and bolted for the dojo.

-----

"Ranma!"

Ranma and Ranko turned as Akane burst into the dojo.

"Yo, Akane. What's up?"

Akane gasped for breath, holding her side. "Ryouga...Nabiki..."

"What about 'em?" Ranko's expression was stern, and she reached for her glaive.

Akane managed to get her breathing under control. "I gave Ryouga Passion Spice...was going to give some to Shampoo...but Nabiki ate the pork bun, and she's in with Ryouga right now."

"Whoa." Ranma held up a hand. "Just a sec. Why did you give Ryouga Passion Spice?"

"I was gonna get him to fall in love with Shampoo."

"Passion Spice doesn't produce love." Ranko shook her head. "It only produces lust."

"Plus, Shampoo's on the other side of town, so--" Ranma paused. "'Other pork bun?' You were gonna give Shampoo the other?"

"Yes."

Ranko dropped her face into her hand. "Lord preserve us."

"Passion Spice causes the person who takes it to lust after the next person of the opposite sex that they see." Ranma sighed. "Takes a few minutes to work, probably longer if you cooked it into something."

Masami commented, "You seem to know a lot about this."

"Trust me, we've eaten enough of the stuff." Ranma turned back to Akane. "Where are they now?"

"Family room."

"They won't be for long. Ranko, you better stay here. Akane, c'mon."

-----

They hadn't gotten very far. Ryouga's shirt was crumpled up on the floor, and he was clumsily trying to undo Nabiki's blouse when they arrived. By unspoken decree, Ranma grabbed Ryouga, and Akane grabbed Nabiki.

Ranma dragged Ryouga out to the garden, and tossed him in the pond. This, of course, did little besides getting the Lost Boy wet. Ryouga staggered out of the pond.

"Nabiki, my love!" Ryouga clenched a fist. "Akane, you bitch, I will make you pay!"

Ranma shook his head. "Ryouga, that's more screwed up than normal, even for you."

"Ranma! You're gonna hurt for this!"

"As much as I'd love to let Akane's revenge go full course, I don't wanna see Nabiki get hurt over this."

"Since when did you not want to see Nabiki hurt? This is probably your way of getting even with her!"

Ranma shrugged. "She ain't actin' under her own free will."

"She is! She declared her love to me--"

"She's been doped with Passion Spice. She'd declare her love for Gosunkugi when under that stuff."

"Enough lies!" Ryouga charged forward.

Ranma sighed, and started leading him in the spiral.

-----

Akane dropped the furiously squirming Nabiki on her bed. "Look, Sis. I'm sorry, but when you ate that pork bun, you accidentally ate some Passion Spice. I'm really sorry it happened, but I need to keep you away from Ryouga until it wears off."

"Are you crazy?"

"Well, I meant to give Shampoo that pork bun--"

"Not about that!" Nabiki shook her head. "Have you looked at that boy? How could you hate your own sister enough to pull her away from such a chunk of beef?"

Akane smirked. "C'mon, Nabiki, you could have any boy you wanted, and you know it. Hell, you snagged Ranma right out from under my nose. In fact, I think I said I'd gift-wrap him for you."

"That's not the point!" Nabiki threw up her hands. "Look, I know you're sour because of the whole P-Chan thing, but honestly, the boy just has some repressed hormones. I was going to help him out with that!"

There was a muffled boom from outside. Nabiki dashed to the window, to see Ryouga taking a flight on Air Ranma.

"Ranma used the Hiryou Shouten Ha on my Ryouga!? Bastard." She stepped back, clenching her fists. "I'm going to make that boy -pay-!"

"Excuse me."

She turned, to see Akane glowering at her.

"Ummm..." For a moment, she was at a loss.

"That happens to be my fiance you're threatening." Akane stepped forward.

"I'm sorry." Nabiki looked down.

"And if all you were out for was a piece of action, why are you so mad at Ranma right now?"

"I..."

"I'll tell you why. Because you took some Passion Spice. It was a mistake on my part. So if you want to take this out on anyone...take it out on me."

Nabiki sniffed. "But I...I love him so much!" She looked up, and Akane was shocked to see tears in her eyes.

On impulse, Akane grabbed her sister and pulled her into a hug. "Don't worry. He'll be back."

Nabiki hugged her back. "I know. In about a week."

- - - - -

Akane stepped into the dojo. "I think we got everything contained."

Masami whirled, strode up to her, and grabbed the front of her shirt. With almost no effort, she lifted her into the air - about six inches of air between her toes and the floor - and slammed her into the wall.

"Did I not warn you?"

"Uh?!" Akane boggled; the fire in the Shinigami's eyes was all the more disturbing given her normal cool demeanour.

"Every time you give yourself over to a negative emotion, the Hollow grows stronger within you! At this rate, we will be lucky if you still exist in a week."

"I--"

Masami cooled, and dropped her. She turned, and stalked back to the center of the dojo. "Every time I think that maybe you can control this, you do something to prove me wrong."

"Actually," offered Ranko, "the Tomboy tends under normal circumstances to be violent, angry and impulsive."

"This is what I fear." Masami sighed. "She is already filled with negative emotions. The Hollow venom would be particularly effective against her."

Isane nodded. "We should proceed with the treatment now. Before it gets any stronger. Otherwise, she will be violent, angry, impulsive, methodical and malicious."

"A blend of Akane and Nabiki?" Ranko shivered. "That, the world does not need."

Masami turned back to face Akane. "The treatment that Lieutenant Kotetsu has found must be varied to the individual, and most times will not work. The Lieutenant believes it will work on you, however, and has prepared the necessary charts."

"Good." Akane sighed. "What's the catch?"

"The catch is twofold. First, the purging of the Hollow venom is not painless, either physically or emotionally. This procedure will hurt very, very badly.

"Second, the Hollow venom will most certainly leave a permanent emotional scar upon you." Masami stared into her eyes. "There is no saying what form this will take, but if you are strong-willed, the effects may be minor. And they will not become worse over time.

"Is this an acceptable trade-off?"

Akane thought back to the inadvertant chaos of the last ten minutes.

"Oh, yes."

"Then prepare yourself, Tendo Akane." Masami's face grew cold and impassive. "For tonight, you will endure the worst hell you have ever known."

## Storm of Tears

"Are you prepared?"

Akane swallowed nervously. "I really don't know. I've never done this before."

"Neither have I." Masami glanced down at the chart before her, then back up to Akane. "We need four corners for this, not including yourself. And you will need to be nude. Will you have a problem with this?"

Akane glanced nervously at Ranma. "Well...he's already seen me nude once before." She looked back at Masami. "For this, I can stand it."

"Very well. Ranko, lock the door."

Ranko slid the door shut, and closed the lock. "Done."

"Lieutenant? It's your show."

Isane took over. "Ranma. East seat."

"Uh...which one is east?"

"By the shrine. Ranko, since you balance Ranma, I'll want you on the west. I need the north, so Masami, if you would take south?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Akane, please strip down and lie in the center."

Akane glowered at Ranma, then slowly removed her clothing. As she did so, she noted Isane moving around the Corners, lighting candles.

"If Dad hears of an open flame in here, he'll flip."

Isane raised an eyebrow. "Do you think I asked Ranko to lock the door in order to protect your modesty?"

Akane shrugged. "Maybe I did. Silly of me." She strode to the center of the Corners, and lay down.

Isane knelt before her. "This will require acupuncture. Are you all right with this?"

"I want the Taint gone. I hurt Nabiki so bad..."

"Keep that regret within you." Isane pulled a small packet out of her obi, opened it to reveal six long needles. She pulled them free, selected one, and rubbed the point between her fingers.

"Brain." She carefully touched the needle to Akane's forehead, twisted a bit. Akane felt nothing but the slightest pressure.

"Feet." Isane moved to the other end of her, ran a needle into her left heel.

"Throat." Back to her head, and Akane felt the needle press into her neck.

"Womb." This one went in just above her pubic hair; she shivered involuntarily, even though she felt nothing.

"This last one is really going to hurt." Isane looked down at her. "And the pain is not going to go away until we are done."

"I understand."

"Heart." The needle entered her right breast, just above the aureolae. She felt nothing, until Isane let go of the needle.

Then the pain came like a tidal wave, and she screamed.

Isane moved above her head, out of her field of view. "Hands, all!"

The pain continued to wash over her, beyond anything she'd ever felt. Isane's chanting faded out in a wave of red.

-----

She was in the garden.

The air was completely silent, with no traffic noise, no insects, not even the sighing of the wind. The grass under her bare feet was pale grey and lifeless. She glanced over at the sakura tree that stood near the pond, and saw that it, too, was white and dead. The stones near the pond were stained in red, as was the far wall.

With a start she realized that she was still wearing nothing, not even the needles. She started to panic, then realized that there was nobody about.

Not a trace of life was evident to her eye.

"Hello?"

Her own voice was somehow muffled.

"Ranko? Masami? Isane?" She turned on the spot. "Ranma?"

Nothing.

She turned and walked to the dojo door. She grasped the handle, expecting to find it still locked, but was surprised when it opened easily.

The foursome were not within. Inside was only one person. A girl.

She was a fair bit shorter than Akane, though she stood with her head bowed, making it difficult to determine her exact height. Her hair was long, but lank and lifeless. Like Akane, she was nude. Her breasts were small, her arms and legs painfully thin, and her ribs easily visible. Water dripped from her hair and ran in ragged rivulets down her ashen, bloodless skin.

She looked up, and Akane's breath caught in her throat. Despite the large sunken eyes and lipless gash of a mouth, it was obvious that this was...Akane.

"Please...help me."

"No..." Akane shook her head. "This can't be."

"Please, Akane...I need your help." The girl took a step towards her, and stumbled, falling to her hands and knees. She dragged herself across the dojo floor, wrapping a hand around Akane's ankle.

Akane tried to will herself to pull the foot away, but could not make herself do it.

"Please...I beg you...I need you to help me."

She could not help herself, did not know why she knelt next to the girl. "How can I help?"

"School..."

Akane gathered the girl up in her arms, and walked towards the compound gates. Still, the air was silent. Not even her feet, crunching the dead grass underfoot, made any noise at all.

The only sound she could hear was the screaming in her own mind.

- - - - -

The trees in the schoolyard, and the grass underfoot, was just as dead as those in the Tendo yard. The boundary wall and bricks of the school dripped red as rain lashed against them. The sudden shock of lightning overhead illuminated a single figure on the cobblestones ahead.

Kuno.

"Tendo Akane. Such a pure and delicate flower of womanhood."

Akane carefully laid the girl on the ground, then stood and snapped into a fighting stance. The fact that she was standing before Kuno, dressed only in rainwater, mattered little at this point.

"I've beaten you many times before, Kuno. This time will be no different."

"I speak not to you. Your very presence is a blight on this fair town."

Akane blinked.

The Kendoist knelt next to the girl. "Fair Akane, your beauty grows more every day."

"I'm over here! That's not me, I am."

He looked up at her with scorn in his eyes. "Be silent. Your muscular frame hides a diseased mind."

The girl reached up and caressed Kuno's cheek. "My protector, my saviour...How I adore you."

Akane's scowl deepened.

"Beauteous Akane, let us retire to my private mansion."

"Kuno, no!"

He glanced up at her. "You cannot stop me. You never could. At any time I wished..." He set the tip of the boken between the girl's breasts. "I could take what I wished..." He slowly dragged the tip down the girl's torso. "For you know that I am superior to you." The tip of the boken came to rest on the girl's crotch.

Akane stepped forward, and one foot snapped up, connecting with the side of Kuno's head. The upperclassmen slumped to the ground, his head leaking blood on the wet pavement.

Akane stared at the lifeless body in shock. "Why did I--"

"He would only two-time us. You know that."

Akane looked down at the girl. "Did you make me..."

"No." The girl shook her head mournfully. "I could never make anyone do what I want. Not even if it was something that they really wanted. Like to kill him. Can we go to the Nekohanten?"

Wordlessly, Akane picked the girl up and left the courtyard. She glanced behind, to see the colour washing out of Kuno's body, until he was as pale as the girl in her arms.

-----

Akane paused in her run; the girl was heavier than she seemed. She set her down on a street bench, and paused to catch her breath.

"Not bad, Akane."

She whirled, to see Ryouga standing nearby, leaning against a crimson streetlamp. As with Kuno, he was in his usual attire, minus the overshirt. His black tank-top clung to his muscles like paint.

"Of course, it's not like I haven't already seen it all." He smirked.

"Pig!"

"Not anymore." He raised his arms in the rain. "You see? All cured."

"You used me! Betrayed me! And Ranma, as well!"

"Ranma?" Ryouga sniffed. "He was in on it all, remember?"

"Only because you trapped him."

"And he was far from the only one, if you recall." Ryouga's expression turned ugly. "Besides, how can you claim innocence? Remember? You told Ranma, you knew I loved you. But still, you pushed me away. 'Best friend.'" He said it with a sneer in his voice. "You did all you could to set me up with Ukyo, with Akari..."

"I wanted you to be happy!" Akane screamed at him. "I had no idea that you were P-Chan!"

"Well, you've made me very happy, indeed."

Nabiki stepped out from behind the lamppost. Akane blinked in surprise.

"Sis?"

Ryouga stepped around behind Nabiki, and reached around her; Nabiki raised her arms above her head as he began to unbutton her shirt. "Oh, yes, Akane, very happy indeed." The shirt dropped to the ground, landing in a puddle with a wet plop, and Ryouga began to caress Nabiki's breasts.

Nabiki smiled at her. "Thank you, Akane. Without you, this would never have happened."

"No!" Akane grabbed the girl, and turned and ran off.

Ryouga's mocking laughter chased her all the way down the street.

-----

The girl was riding piggyback now.

Before her, the Doctor's clinic stood. She paused at the gate. She'd been welcomed here so many times, but now it seemed...forbidding. Almost repulsive. The coppery walls stood in stark relief to the dead white bushes in the gardens. The door hung on its hinges like an open wound.

She strode in; perhaps the Doctor could help the girl.

"Doctor? Doctor Tofu?"

The Doctor was seated at his desk, the front of his gi stained with blood. A single candle illuminated the work area. His pen scratched ochre letters on the vellum before him.

"Doctor? This girl, she..." Akane trailed off; the Doctor was ignoring her. Or simply not seeing her at all.

"Doctor Tofu?" The voice behind her startled her, and she turned to see Kasumi.

Tofu looked up. "Kasumi! How nice of you to drop by."

Kasumi swept past Akane, stepped up to the doctor. "I was hoping I'd catch you here."

"Of course; where else would I be right now?"

"I was afraid that you'd gotten away by now."

"Never! I've been waiting for you."

"Good." Kasumi sighed, and ran a hand through her long hair. "I've been worried about Akane."

"Sis! I'm right here!" Tears started to well in her eyes. Why couldn't Kasumi see?

"She is here often. She always seems to need something from me. An injury repaired, a helpful word...nothing important."

"I'm sorry she is such a bother to you."

"I'm always willing to help out your sister." Tofu stood, and walked around the desk. He gently took Kasumi's hand. "Whenever you're around me..."

"I know..." She smiled sadly. "But soon, we can be together."

"And then I'll take you away from all annoyances."

The two turned and walked from the office. Akane watched them leave, a lump forming in her throat.

"Doctor? Why can't you see me...?"

"It's her hair. He likes her hair." The girl's voice was quiet in her ear. "Maybe if you grow your hair long like hers..."

Akane shook her head violently. "That didn't work."

"It wasn't enough. You need to be more like her."

"But I'm not like her!"

"He knows."

Akane choked back a sob.

"Akane."

It wasn't the girl; it was another voice, coming from the next room. A familiar voice.

She turned, and glanced at the door.

"Oh, God, no." The tears were flowing thickly now, and her voice caught. "I can't go in there."

"You know this room."

"I can't go in!"

"You're right. You couldn't before, and you can't now."

Akane gritted her teeth, and stepped through the door.

She stood at the edge of a raging maelstrom.

The waves crashed higher than her head, lashing at her feet. She stepped backwards, her feet digging into the russet sand of the beach. The girl was an oppressive weight now, pulling her down, but she struggled to remain upright against the wind and rain.

In the waves, she spied a figure. A tall woman, with brown curly hair and kindly face.

"Mother!"

The woman was foundering badly. Akane took a step towards the water.

"No, Akane." Her mother shook her head sadly. "You cannot help me."

"I have to...you'll die!"

"You cannot go where I must."

The girl's whisper in her ear was strangely loud against the wind and crashing waves. "How can you save her?"

"I can go out there--"

"You know you can't."

"I can!"

"You couldn't even go in the room where you knew she was dying." The girl's voice was as mournful as before. "You knew she was dying, that you couldn't help her. If you couldn't then, how can you now?"

"Mother!" Akane reached out a hand, took a step forward, but the girl's weight pulled her down at last, dragging her down to the sand. She watched with horror as her mother's form was lost among the waves.

"Nooooo!"

The waves crashed around her, and she found herself in the sea. The girl was like an anchor, drawing her down to the depths, and her breath burned in her throat.

A hand like a steel vice clamped around her arm, and pulled her free from the waves.

She landed on the floor of the dojo, coughing water on the tatami.

Ranma leaned over her.

"You okay, Akane?"

"Yeah..." She coughed again.

"Good." Ranma straightened up. "Not a bad bit of rescuin', if I gotta blow my own horn."

Akane glared up at him.

"Lemme know if ya need anythin'." He leaned back against the wall.

Akane stood slowly, the girl still clinging to her back like an anchor. She took an unsteady step towards him.

"Why even bother with him?"

The girl again.

"You killed Kuno. He won't be bothering you anymore. Ryouga and Nabiki seem happy together. Leaving them alone was the right decision."

Akane squeezed her eyes shut, praying that the tears wouldn't come again.

"Tofu just looked straight through you. Same as he always does. And, of course, your mother. We both know there was nothing you could do. Am I right?"

"No..." She shook her head.

"What has he ever done for you? He belittles you, he's arrogant and condescending, he's a pervert to boot." The girl's voice had turned mocking. "And like you said last year, he's a couple all by himself."

Ranko stepped through the open door.

"Ranko!"

The girl glanced over at her. Her scarlet kimono and fiery hair glinted in the candlelight, and the chalky scar on her face seemed to mock her.

"He doesn't need you. He has her."

Ranma pushed away from the wall, walked towards the redhead. She smiled up at him.

"We've been together for more than a year..."

"Your body and soul, all mine."

The redhead stepped closer to him, laid a hand on his cheek. "And now I have a real body..."

"Ranma!" She staggered another step closer.

Ranko's smile twisted in the firelight. "What of Akane?"

Ranma's smirk was as arrogant as ever. "She *was* my fiancée. As far as she's concerned, our engagement never happened."

*Keep that regret within you.*

"NO!"

She twisted, grabbed the girl's arm, and threw her from the dojo. She rushed forward, grabbed Ranma.

"Ranma, I'm sorry I said that!"

He looked down at her. "Akane--"

"Please, I'm so sorry, I should never have hurt you--"

The dojo was again brown and tan. Three other people were gathered around her and Ranma. And her breast hurt.

Isane gently pulled her away from Ranma, and extracted the needle still lodged over her heart. "It seems that we were successful."

-----

"Rage. Fear. Loneliness. Despair. Jealousy. All weapons of the Hollows."

"I nearly lost myself, didn't I?" Akane had redressed, more for the warmth than any remaining modesty. Her shivering had nothing to do with the temperature, however.

Isane laid a hand on her shoulder. "We may never know the whole story."

Ranma draped a blanket around her shoulders. "You gonna be okay, Akane?"

She turned, and hugged him fiercely.

- - - - -

Ranko turned away from the scene, and caught Masami's eye.

"She's strong. She'll come through this okay."

"I know." Masami nodded. "Anyone else would never have survived."

Ranko darkened. "You mean her life was in danger? And you two decided to go ahead with this anyway?"

"I knew she could survive." Masami smiled. "That young woman has the strongest will of anyone I've ever met. I had no fear for her."

Ranko considered the Shinigami, then sighed. "Guess so." She looked down. "But we still got Happousai to deal with, and I ain't expectin' Akane to help with that. We got no idea how powerful he is, or what he can do, but judgin' by what he did to Shampoo..."

"You have no idea how dangerous Happousai is."

"Eh?" Ranko frowned. "We've beaten him often enough."

"If he's truly awakened to his full power, you are in grave danger facing him." Masami's face was clouded. "Your reappearance gives me renewed fear that he has. The body that you call Happousai was never a grave threat, until he visited Jushenkyou."

"Huh?" Ranko's confusion was even more obvious. "He ain't cursed, I know that."

"Not by Jushenkyou," conceded Masami. "But that makes it much worse. The spirit that now lives in that body is far older than you know. Almost three thousand years old, and he spent most of that time in Jushenkyou."

"Have you never wondered why he knows so much about the cursed springs? How he knew of the technique that brought you back into being?"

"Well, after three thousand years, I expect--"

Masami cut her off. "Why do you think he's only now regaining his power? Why has he tried before to split you into male and female?"

"Because he wants to molest my female side!"

"No. He wants to kill you. *You*, not Ranma. Because Shaolan bound him to the Cornerstone, and left him trapped in Jushenkyou for almost fourteen hundred years. Because Shaolan nearly undid his greatest achievement.

"Happousai is one of the Espada, one of the most powerful of Arrancars. A Hollow of the greatest power. He knows Jushenkyou, because he created it."

## The Bitter End

Nabiki crossed her arms and stared at her little sister.

"I'm still more than a little upset with you, Akane."

"I'm sorry, Nabiki." Akane hung her head. "I never intended for you to eat that pork bun. I'm sorry I even made it."

Nabiki sighed, and muttered, "I wasn't so sorry. Not at the time."

"I know."

Nabiki threw her hands in the air. "Look, just stop apologizing, all right? Cope with the fact that I'm not pleased, and move on!"

Akane looked up at her sister. "What do you--"

"Two days ago, you would've broken my arms for coming down on you! Even a week ago, I would've gotten yelled at for my troubles!" Nabiki turned away from her sister and crossed her arms. "You managed to stop us before we did anything I'd really regret, and you're sorry. All right, fine. Now please..."

"Nabiki, did I do--"

"No." She turned back again, and glowered. "I don't understand you recently, Akane. You turned hyper-angry, but everyone around here is used to that. But now you..." She stopped, at a loss for words. "You're acting more like Kasumi than Akane. I don't know if I can take two of you in the same house." She grinned. "Two of you trying to make me feel guilty would be more than I can handle."

-----

"Nabiki's right." Ranma sat cross-legged in his room; Masami was seated across from him. "The Tomboy is actin' a lot different. Could that trick of Isane's be affectin' her?"

"It is possible." Masami's expression was calm. "If so, it would be most likely temporary."

Ranma shrugged. "Well, I'd say that we should just kick back and enjoy it while it lasts, but...I dunno. The Tomboy bein' nice is like one of the four Horsemen showin' up for tea."

"Why do you always call her that?"

"Hm?" Ranma blinked. "How can ya not? That girl's less feminine than your average brick."

"It is hardly charitable to refer to your fiancee in such a derogatory manner."

Ranma nodded. "That's right, you still don't have the whole story, do you?"

"Enlighten me."

"Akane and I were engaged before we met. In fact, I think we were engaged before I was even born. Neither of us were really happy with this, but couldn't take it out on the people who arranged it - our fathers. So we took it out on each other.

"By now, it's just habit. I call her Tomboy, she calls me Pervert. We're both just used to it now. You ever see her hit me for it?"

Masami shook her head.

"We stopped about two months ago. She stopped hittin' me, that is, and I stopped provokin' it. That's 'cause we kinda found out how we felt about each other. At a little place called Phoenix Mountain."

Masami looked up. "What happened at Phoenix Mountain?"

"She gave her life to save mine." Ranma stood up. "What can we do to bring back the Tomboy? I kinda miss her."

-----

Ranko blinked, and glanced around the Dojo. Sleeping in one corner was the white kitten, but other than that, the dojo was empty.

"Same old place. Where's scarface?"

"Looking for me?"

Ranko turned, to see...Ranko. Pigtail. No scar. No glaive.

"What the heck? Where's Shaolan?"

Her double was dressed in a tight-fitting halter top and very short shorts. "You keep pushing her away, remember?" The cocky grin turned sultry. "Just as well. Guys are better anyway, right?"

"Ah..." Ranko stared at her double. "Not sure how I should take that."

"Well, you've fought for so long to stay Ranma." Her double smirked. "You won't even give up that name. 'Ranko.'" Her voice was mocking.

"Just 'cause I don't have anything better."

"No, I think it's because you don't want to give up being male."

Ranko scowled. "It's what I know!"

"Really?" Her double cupped her breasts, and lifted them. "You've used these to considerable advantage, gettin' free snacks outta any guy you want." She pursed her lips. "Such a tease."

Ranko ground her teeth.

Her double smirked again. "Hittin' a little close to home?"

"You wish."

The redhead took a step forward. "You know, I really do wish. I wish you would give up on bein' a guy, because you're no damn good at it."

Ranko clenched a fist. "Be careful."

"Quite frankly, you're still stuck on bein' Ranma, and you haven't yet figured out that you're not him anymore!" The redhead reached forward and grabbed Ranko's breast. "This more than anythin' ought to prove it!"

Ranko slapped the other girl's hand away. The redhead grinned. "Hit a nerve?"

"I know what you're tryin' to do." Ranko scowled. "You're tryin' to make me into *her*."

"Might as well." The redhead sniffed. "After all, you can't be *me* anymore."

Ranko's scowl deepened, and she lunged forward.

And was promptly knocked sprawling.

"Poor little girl." The redhead smirked again. "Can't hold a candle to a real man in a fight. Even when the real man is really a girl."

Ranko snapped to her feet, and cupped her hands together. "Mouko Takabisha!"

The redhead dodged the attack. "Stupid. What can you do to me?" She stepped inside Ranko's range, and her fist slammed into her side hundreds of times in under a second.

Ranko staggered back, her side on fire. She coughed, and tasted blood.

"Bitch."

"Proud of it." The redhead leaped into the air, and descended, one foot forward. Ranko grabbed the foot and tossed her in another direction.

She landed, lithe as a cat, and turned to face her opponent.

"Better. But we both know that you're not up to your usual standards."

She started to run around Ranko. Ranko fired off another Mouko Takabisha, then realized what was happening, and cooled her battle aura.

The redhead stopped running. "Interesting. Without the clash of temperature, the Hiryou Shoutan Ha cannot form."

"Of course." Ranko smirked. "I may not be as powerful as I was, but this technique doesn't require power."

"The best you'll ever do is fight me to a standstill." The redhead crossed her arms. "And that's just as good as a win, to me."

"Is it?" Ranko shook her head. "I don't think you're tellin' me the whole truth."

"Really?" Her double grinned. "If you fall, I take over this body, and I'm free. You're nothing but a memory of a long-dead girl."

"You could be right." Ranko turned, and picked up the kitten. The tiny cat stretched, and nuzzled into her arm.

The redhead blinked. "What are you doing?"

"If I'm not really you, but you are..." Ranko turned, and walked towards her double. "Then I'm not ailurophobic. As you can see."

The redhead took a step back. "C...Cat..."

"But trust me, I know how far I can push you before you go Neko-Ken." Ranko smirked. "I'll keep you just this side of sanity for as long as this takes."

The redhead screamed, and vanished.

Ranko smiled down at the white kitten.

"Why was I ever afraid of you?"

-----

"Meditatin', eh?" Ranma paused, and let his hand fall from the dojo door. "I dunno if we should disturb her. She's probably talkin' to Shaolan."

Masami nodded. "I agree, but we do need to talk to her as soon as possible. It will be night shortly, and we cannot afford to give Happousai another night to run."

"I agree."

Ranko stepped right through the dojo door. It was still closed, and she didn't leave a hole in it.

Ranma blinked. "I hope you realize, Ranko, that that was really disturbin'."

Ranko grinned wolfishly, and reached behind her to ready Koneko. "We need to find Happousai. I think I know how."

-----

Genma was still rather unhappy about losing the panda. At the moment, he was staring at his food morosely.

Considering that Genma normally inhaled his food at a rate equalled only by his son, this was unusual.

Soun set down his magazine, and picked up his coffee. "Perhaps after dinner, you and I should play a game of shogi. The board has grown cold these last few days."

Genma merely grunted.

"Come now, old friend. Haven't you been searching for a cure for the last year?"

Genma looked up. "Yes. But never terribly hard. I felt certain, based on what we already knew, that the Cursed Springs were permanent."

"Already knew." Ranko's voice was flat and lifeless. Genma turned, with some surprise, to see Ranko and Ranma standing at the door of the family room.

Ranko crossed the room, and kicked the table, sending it through the shoji and into the pond. Dishes clattered to the floor, scattering food around the family room. She brought her glaive around, bringing the edge to just under Genma's chin.

"Spill it."

"What are you doing, boy?"

"Not 'boy'. As you well know." Ranko spat the words. "Tell me where you learned of Jushenkyou."

"What are you talking about--"

"Koneko--purr!" The glaive sprang to life, doubling in size and humming.

"Over a thousand vibrations a second, Pops. Might wanna start talkin'."

"I still have no idea what--"

Ranko swung the glaive, and neatly bisected Soun's coffee cup. Hot coffee splashed into the Tendo patriarch's lap, causing him to yelp. Ranko brought the glaive around again, until its blade was just by Genma's ear, its song filling his entire world.

"Try again."

"The Master!"

"I thought so. Where would he be now?"

-----

"Of course he's hidin' out in a bathhouse," groaned Ranko. "Why didn't I think of that?"

She was dressed in the black kimono and hakama that she had worn since her first separation; Her hair was unbound and her scar gleamed in the moonlight. Koneko was held lightly in her left hand.

Masami was also in full Shinigami uniform, her gigai left beside Ranko's in the dojo. Her zampakto was belted to her waist, and her pager was in her hand. At the moment, it showed one glowing dot on its screen: directly ahead.

Akane had switched to her fighting gi, and again, Ranma noticed that she seemed small and lost in it. He was worried; Akane had lost much of her fighting spirit when the Taint was removed.

Ranko stepped through the locked doors, then unlocked them from the inside and slid the doors open. "Looks clear in this room; I think we'll find him in the woman's section."

Ranma shook his head. "No women there. Why would he be there in preference to anywhere else?"

"Because it'd feel better to him." Ranko tapped her head. "Creature of instinct, remember?"

Akane stepped around the counter, glanced into the staff room. "Clear in here."

Masami consulted her pager. "Definitely the women's section." She pointed to the door. "Through there."

"Got it." Ranma stepped forward, only to be grabbed by Akane.

"Hold on. If there's anyone else in there, they'd probably appreciate seeing me first."

Ranma scowled. "If there's any women in there with him, they'll have other things on their minds."

"Just wait. Please." Akane turned, and opened the door.

"Dog-leg here...I'm going to the next door."

The other three followed her into the dog-leg. Akane pushed the second door open, and took a step forward.

The roar of an explosion filled the room, and Akane was catapulted forward, landing in one of the deep pools.

Happousai cackled. "A perfect shot!"

The other three rushed in, Ranma hopping over the crater in the floor. Happousai stood at the far end of the low pool, but Ranma's attention was on Akane. The deep pool only reached two meters, but that was more than enough water for Akane to founder in. He dived in after her.

"Ranma, don't split our forces!"

Ranko shook her head. "Akane swims like a hammer. We'll take care of him until Ranma can come help."

Masami nodded, and ducked back into the shadows. Ranko stepped out onto the water of the low pool, walking across the surface towards her opponent.

Happousai chuckled evilly. "Why, it's little Ranko, come to play."

The redhead held her nagimaki out at arm's reach, and it grew suddenly to its full length. The song of the vibro-blade filled the room. Her eyes flared dangerously.

"I am not Ranko. And you know this."

"Ah." Happousai nodded. "Finally, you realize."

"Oh, yes." Her face twisted to an ugly glare. "I am going to finish now what I started fifteen hundred years ago."

"Big words, little girl, but you'll need another fifteen hundred years to catch up with me!"

He tossed a lit bomb towards her, and she casually cut it in half. The two pieces fell, spraying gunpowder, into the water. She ran towards him, naginata held blade low, and swung upwards as she reached him.

He caught the blade of the vibro-glaive with his pipe, and pushed it casually out of the way, then leaped into the air and brought the pipe down on top of her head. Surprised, she sunk into the water to her knees. He whirled, catching the side of her face with the back of the pipe, and she staggered back, one hand falling from her zampakto. Her knees gave way as her vision doubled, and she fell to a seated position, releasing her glaive entirely. He sneered, and snagged the back of her head with his off hand.

"I remember this scar." He grinned. "Best one I ever gave. Who would have suspected that an old man's pipe contained a blade?"

He gave the pipe a flick, and it changed. The bowl merged together, forming a sickle-like blade. He brought the kama towards her left eye.

"Shall I give you a matching one on this side?"

Fifteen feet above him, Masami emerged from the shadows, plunging towards him with her zampakto on high. He snarled, whirled towards her, and waved a hand.

A bolt of crimson energy flared, catching Masami across the torso, and slammed her back into a support pillar. She fell three feet, landing on hands and knees.

"Nice try, girl, but I can smell your kind coming from miles away!" He laughed. "Even further when you're female!"

Masami tried to stand, but doubled over, one hand across her chest. She coughed, and a dribble of blood ran from her mouth.

Ranma laid the unconscious Akane face-down on the tiles, and scowled across the room. "All three girls down, and I'm here playin' lifeguard!" He cupped his hands together, and yelled, "Mouko Takabisha!"

The energy wave roared across the room, lighting Happousai up like a roman candle. When the glare subsided, he was standing, his gi somewhat charred, looking a bit surprised.

"I always thought you were smarter than that, Ranma. Don't you know you can't hurt a Hollow?"

"Sure gonna try." Ranma leaped clear across the pool.

Ranko climbed out onto dry land, the hot water of the pool leaving her soaked, but still female. Happousai now stood directly between the two Saotomes. He laughed again.

"You two don't have a prayer. I am the oldest surviving Hollow, last of the Espada. You're a second-rate Shinigami at best, and you," He gestured to Ranma. "Only mortal."

"I guess the Espada are about to become extinct."

Ranma stepped forward, snapping down an axe-kick. Happousai side-stepped the attack, and slashed at his ankle with the kama, only to turn aside at the last moment to parry Ranko's zampakto. Ranko moved clockwise around him, slashing again; Ranma did the same, to give her room. He suddenly realized her intent, felt the cold ki washing from her, and allowed his hot ki to fuel the effect.

Happousai's eyes narrowed. "Hiryuu Shouten Ha, is it? Not in here!"

"Ranma! He's right!" Ranko scowled. "Too much hot air from the baths!"

"Crap." Ranma snapped through a sweep kick, and Happousai jumped into the air to dodge. Ranma's other foot slammed into him, knocking him across the room.

A blow that would have killed any mortal man. But Happousai stepped out of his crater, and dusted off his clothing.

"I told you, boy..."

He threw the kama. Ranma tried to dodge, but the spinning blade tracked him, and slammed into his arm as he tried to parry.

"Only mortal."

Ranma screamed, as the blade seemed to sear his flesh. He carried the screams into the darkness with him.

-----

Akane, unconscious on the tiles across the room.

Masami, with at least one broken rib, curled up in fetal position by a wall.

Ranma, his skin showing greenish veins as some hellish poison coursed through his system.

The redhead adjusted her grip on her weapon.

"Just me left, Happousai."

He nodded. "I've been saving the best for last...Shaolan." He pulled the kama from Ranma's arm, and turned to face her. "Come to your death."

She lunged towards him, forcing him back. Five times, she stabbed at him with Koneko, and he parried as many times. She swung the zampakto around in a grand arc, and had it blocked and trapped. The zampakto shrunk back to its contained form, then expanded again as she released it. Again he parried, and again was forced back.

"You're runnin' out of room, old man."

"Not really." He feinted to the left, then moved inside her guard, slashing at her leg with the kama. She parried it barehanded, slapping the blade away from her, and turned to face him again.

"That's the problem with such a huge weapon." Happousai smirked. "It has a massive dead zone."

He moved in again, parrying her weapon and moving inside, this time aiming for her heart. She countered with a push-kick, forcing him away, then broadsided him with the blunt end. He shook his head to clear it, then dodged another swing.

"We can dance all night, little girl. I only need to get inside your guard once more."

"It won't happen." The redhead smirked. "You Arrancar always think that the mere possession of a zampakto makes you the equal of a Shinigami. But our link to the blade gives us one advantage."

"An advantage you never had, and certainly haven't had time to learn." Happousai feinted again, but did not press home. "And I've been learning to use my zampakto for three thousand years." He paused, and sighed along the kama. "So the dance ends now."

He snapped the kama up as he dashed forward, forcing the blade of the naginata into the air, and swung for her head.

And was parried.

He stared in shock. The naginata had reformed again, sliding back to encase her arm to the elbow. A long spur off the elbow formed a guard, that had parried his own zampakto. And the blade had segmented into four long, slender claws.

"Final release..." Blood drained from his face.

Shaolan slapped him backhanded with the claws, and the cyclone force knocked him back into the wall. He struggled to pull himself free, but Ranko was suddenly before him. She grabbed him, tossed him out onto the floor.

"Bankai!" She swung the backhand again, and even from three meters away, the cyclone force of the Hiryyu Shouten Ha slammed into him. A second time, he flew across the room and into the wall.

Shaolan leisurely picked up his kama, tossed it into the air, and slashed. It fell into five pieces. She strode across the room, to where he lay.

"Fifteen hundred years of nothing but training. Training *with* Koneko, not merely learning to use her. I don't remember the training, but Koneko does." She raised the claws to strike. Her face was expressionless.

"Ranko, please..."

"I told you. I am not Ranko."

She drove the claws forward, into his head.

-----

Isane looked up from Ranma's unconscious form.

"I managed to divert the toxins, and drain them from his body. That, plus a purification ritual to be handled tomorrow, will eliminate the chance of him becoming Impureza."

Shaolan nodded.

"And you patched up Masami. She will be on the sick roll for some time, but you most likely saved her life. She had a punctured lung, and most likely some other internal damage."

"I couldn't let her die." Shaolan shrugged. "I don't know how I did what I did, but...it seemed right. Like the time I healed Shampoo."

"So that leaves us with you." Isane stood. "You need to decide."

"I've considered it a long time, and I have decided." Shaolan reached behind, and pulled the glaive from her back. "I believe this belongs to a warrior of your Division, who died fifteen hundred years ago."

Isane's eyes widened in shock.

"Please." Shaolan held the nagimaki out to her. "I can't go back to Soul Society. I'd have to start all over again from the beginning." She smirked. "I'm too used to being the best."

Isane wordlessly took the weapon.

"For what it's worth, Kotetsu...I think you're doin' a great job. I'm glad you're fillin' her shoes." The redhead sighed. "But I gotta find my own destiny."

"Where will you go?"

Shaolan shrugged. "There's a little place in China where I got some unfinished business. Now that Happousai's defeated, maybe I can break the curse." She glanced around. "I'm gonna miss this place."

"You have the gigai. You could stay here."

"Oh, no." She shook her head and grinned. "You know what a chaos magnet I am. They'd be safer if I left."

"I suppose you're right."

Shaolan shrugged. "I don't know if I am or not. But if I am wrong...I can always come back." She turned, and walked to the door.

"Aren't you going to wait for them to wake up?" Isane frowned. "You should at least say goodbye."

"I hate goodbyes." She stepped out the door and turned the corner.

Isane followed her outside, but when she reached the door, Shaolan was gone.

- Epilogue -

Kira handed the scroll to Aizen.

"The complete, unedited report of Lieutenant Kotetsu. You will, of course, be receiving the edited version from the General later on."

Aizen unrolled the scroll, and glanced through it. Then back up. "Espada? Is this true?"

"Yes, Captain."

"So they still exist..."

"That was apparently the last one."

"But if one can survive..." He rolled the scroll again. "There must be a way to...encourage their development.

-----

Shaolan glanced around the alleyway. From the notes her father had kept, she'd expected to find a dojo, bave for a little girl sweeping the walkway, the alley was deserted.

The girl glanced up as she approached. And blinked.

"Lieutenant?"

"Not anymore." The redhead grinned. "I retired. I'm looking for Urahara."

"The owner?"

"Yeah. Tell him he has a new student, if he wants her."

- END -