

Out of sight, out of mind

Chapter 7

“Very tragic legend... Yeah right!”

The next day

Nabiki woke up at her usual early time, though for the previous week she hadn't bothered, and got dressed quick. Half-jogging downstairs, she saw that Kasumi had already cooked breakfast.

“Oh my, Nabiki, you're up early!” She was surprised for once, since her sister's mood hadn't been good lately.

“I know, I may have some good news...” She rummaged through her bag to find all her necessary bank books, passport, and other menial items. She moved closer to Kasumi after finishing up. “He may still be alive.”

“Really?” She seemed happy at the news. “How?”

“I don't know, but I have to try to find him...” She yawned once and began to place some food in her bowl. “I'll go to school today to finish up some stuff, and then I'll go travelling...” She paused. “I really don't know how long I'll be away for this time, it might be a long while...”

Kasumi was quiet and sat down beside her. “Are you sure, Nabiki? The school will not be happy, they might even fail you. Father will be upset too...”

“I know...” She lowered her head. “Daddy is the problem, he'll probably cry that I'm running away for real this time. Without some of my money either, the house might...”

“Oh, there's no need to worry about that!” The eldest daughter brightened.

“Huh?” Nabiki registered what she said. “Why not?”

“Well, it seems that father and Mr Saotome have had lots of interest in the martial arts dojo, and the courses they do each day bring in enough to live on, and more!”

That is good news... Nabiki mused. *Could Ranma have suggested it to both of them, not just as an alternative for the forgotten marriage arrangement, but to earn money for our family?* She started, her hand twitching involuntarily. *Then... What were my plans? What did he want me to do?*

“Well, in any case, I'll be leaving a small amount here...” She passed a book to Kasumi. “The account is in my name, but you have the other signature to take out money if things get tight.”

“But, this is too much responsibility Nabiki!” Kasumi was shocked to say the least, particularly after seeing how much yen resided in that name.

“I trust you the most sis. Daddy might need something to get drunk on, or splurge, I know that you’ll keep your spending respectable.” She gave her a kind smile. “Please keep it secret, I don’t want anyone to force you to use it, unless you feel it’s necessary.”

She begrudgingly agreed. “If you say so.” She hid the book in her apron, to be stored away later. “Where are you going to search first?”

Nabiki knew the response, so worded it carefully. “I’m going to Jusenkyo.” Hearing the gasp and incoming scolding, she didn’t stop. “I already know how dangerous it is there from Mr Saotome, so I’m taking some precautions.” She gave a grin. “Besides, I have to go there, it’s the most likely place he’ll go to.”

Kasumi was silenced, but had tears in her eyes. “You will be careful, won’t you? I don’t want you to get hurt, or worse...” Nabiki was quiet, knowing how death was a possibility. What she didn’t count on was Kasumi speaking on. “... you could get cursed as a panda.”

Face faulting, Nabiki laughed to herself from the comfort of the table surface. *Maybe she didn’t even think I could die alone in China...*

Getting up and patting down her uniform, she picked up her school bag. “Please don’t tell anyone else about this. I’m going to leave a note for everyone here, and say that it arrived as a letter at night, so no one suspects you.”

Unwillingly, she became sad, as Kasumi was the only person she’d spoken up to, the one who held the least connection to Ranma, and yet, one of the closest for having lived with him for a year. She gave her a big hug.

“I’ll write every now and then, to let you know how I’m doing. Since you’re the first one up, you’ll always get them...” She sniffed back some tears. “I’m going to miss you sis, you’re the only one who understands what I’m going through...”

“I know...” Kasumi cried into her younger sister’s hair. “I’ll miss you too.”

They pulled apart. “Be safe, Nabiki.” Kasumi gave a brave smile. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

Nabiki opened the front door, pulling out a hidden suitcase from the side table, and turned back, winking. “I should hope so! Thanks, sis.”

As they separated, Nabiki walking out into the cold winds, both realised that much time would pass before they would see each other again.

Thirty minutes later Furinkan High School

The school secretary was speaking to Nabiki, both talking rather animatedly.

“A sabbatical? But you’re just 18!” She insisted.

Nabiki wasn't backing down. "Yes, but my education cannot be satisfied by this school, I'm going travelling to learn more about the world that way." She sighed. "If you wish, you can strike me from the class list."

"I understand about wanting to do that for the absent Saotome, but with your grades..."

She didn't need to continue, Nabiki already knew. *My grades would push the school up the rankings, they need me to boost their reputation...*

"So, let's call it even, Ranma Saotome no longer attends, but I'm taking an extended leave for personal reasons." Her visage darkened. "Remember, all the teachers are to know this, and no one is to mention Ranma's name to anyone in my family, Miss Hinako, Principal Kuno and Hikaru Gosunkugi."

The secretary paled, knowing that Nabiki had some juicy gossip and tape recordings of her and the new young supply teacher. "... I understand, but why all the secrecy?"

"It's none of your concern." She stood up. "Just make sure it's done."

Walking out, she saw Akane in the corridor. Nabiki was about to hide, before realising what she was holding.

Or whom, to be precise.

"Don't worry P-chan, we're nearly at class now." Akane stopped, seeing her sister giving one of her evil grins. "Umm, hi Nabiki..."

"Hi Akane." She gave a knowing glare at the pig half-nuzzling in Akane's chest area. "Interesting pet you have there..." The pig froze, and the dark skin whitened. It turned round, its fearfilled eyes connecting with Nabiki's own pair.

Nabiki fake-smiled happily and hooked her arm in Akane's elbow. "Tell you what, let's give P-chan a wash, he looks a little dirty from his... long travels..." The squealing began, but Nabiki had a hold on its back legs as she opened the door to the girls toilets.

Akane was happy by this, nodding. "He always runs away when I try to clean him..."

"Hmm, the muck looks a little ingrained, so..." She plugged the drain and opened a tap, the heat rising and visible in the mirror. "... a nice hot bath will do the trick!"

She passed the squirming P-chan to Akane, who held onto him with both hands, unaware of its tears pouring over his snout.

"Look P-chan!" She turned him to face the steaming water. "You ready?"

Not seeing its wildly shaking head, she submerged the pig, as Nabiki walked out of the room chuckling to herself. *Well, he did get lost when I told him not to...*

Hearing the subsequent screams, smashing and cursing, she reached the ground floor, where one of her lackeys was standing.

“Natsuko...” Nabiki gave her a small booklet. “You can take care of the betting from now on, until I return. Keep up the gossip gathering and rumour starting when necessary.”

She accepted it. “When are you coming back, boss?”

Nabiki put on her coat and backpack, meanwhile getting ready to drag her suitcase which was under the stairs. “No idea, I’ll be gone a while. Enjoy running the show for a bit, and I’ve put some interesting bets in there for you all to try out tomorrow.”

She wheeled the case out and gave a short wave. “Bye!”

Leaving Furinkan, she couldn’t help but look back. A loud explosion on the second floor was followed by Ryoga, now clothed somehow, flying out and crunching into the tree. Kuno ran out, strangely without his bokken. Crying out for his servant, Sasuke jumped over the school wall and threw him his weapon. Kuno then started fighting Ryoga.

Laughing, Nabiki made her exit amongst the mayhem.

Two hours later Tokyo Narita Airport

So... They buried an urn with ashes inside. She had just got off the phone with the funeral parlour that made the plaque. Which means... no body...

Feeling the hope rising inside her, she grinned. *Well, here goes...*

Giving her boarding pass to the attendant, Nabiki carried her pack onto the plane.

Goodbye, Japan... For now...

Beijing Airport 3 hours later

Nabiki, still behind the security gates, was tired. The flight managed to drain her, after all her preparations and sorting out the financial affairs back home, she couldn’t take a few hours sitting still.

Can’t believe I have another long flight still to go...

Meandering around the airport, she reached the connecting flight desk, and waited in the lounge for her next plane.

Barely having time to sit back, the speaker announced in Chinese, Japanese and English that her gate was open.

Great...

Heaving herself up again, she was off to her newly declared exit.

Several more hours later
Xining

Nabiki lethargically dragged herself out of the airport.

Argh... My contact will be here tomorrow... I need to find somewhere to stay... Looking around, she couldn't figure out which way to go, so decided to ask, in broken Chinese, using her pocket dictionary.

Soon she was deposited outside a respectable place, and after giving a wad of yen (expensively converted there to Chinese Renminbi) she had a room for one night.

The Province of Qinghai... This is where Jusenkyo is hidden... She had in her hands the booklet that Genma used to take Ranma to China. *The exact location is hidden... Only those who possess a great strength, or wish to use the grounds, can find it alone. Even with help, that person needs either one or the other above conditions to be allowed in.*

She went under the covers, peeling off her outer clothing in the process, seeing as there was no need for pyjamas here.

One more day it seems...

The next day
9:07am

Nabiki checked her watch for the tenth time. *Late... Dammit, it'll take all day to reach there from here...* Sighing, she ran a hand through her hair, staring off into the morning crowds and market stalls. *It doesn't matter in the end, this isn't going to end soon, or be solved fast... I need all the information I can get about Ranma that I don't already know...*

Hearing some controlled footsteps, Nabiki stepped back, on her guard slightly and looked down at the person.

"Is you..." The figure bowed. "... Honoured guest?"

"You took your time..." She growled back. "Where've you been?"

"Sorry, traffic bad." Panting briefly, the figure held out a hand. "Plum take you to Jusenkyo."

"Thanks..." Nabiki smiled. *At least I'm getting on track now...* Following the short girl, Nabiki made it to a battered old car driven by a taxi driver. Putting her case in the boot, they were off.

Two days later
Late afternoon

Nabiki rested against another rock as Plum shook her head. "Japanese not fit for walking."

Sending a glare her way, she swallowed her pride and stood up again, powering off ahead. *Bloody taxi... Only took us halfway... Then we had to stop at another inn. One of the main roads was blocked off, so the new taxi had to go around a different route...* She sucked in more oxygen and strode up another small incline. *This is my third day in China... I'm getting a little sick of it already...*

A musty breeze battered at her face, forcing her to hold her hands in front of her eyes. *What the hell...?* Not letting this get her down, she steadily walked into the wind, and almost stumbled forwards as it stopped suddenly. Lowering her arms, she cast her eyes over the view.

Plum walked up beside her and smirked.

"Look like you allowed in." Throwing a smile she declared loudly. "Welcome to Jusenkyo!"

Nabiki could already tell there was magic in the air. The distant bamboo poles over the individual pools hovered above a thin layer of fog, or mist, she wasn't sure yet. *It looks so peaceful... But...*

She swallowed as they both descended the hill onto the path that led there. *It's dangerous... I didn't come here to 'train'. I know what these pools do if you fall in... I'm not coming all this way only to get cursed... God knows what I'll become...* Images of the goose that laid the golden egg, or a magpie passed by her eyes, but then she realised that it was unlikely that she'd be that lucky. *Probably something to counteract my intelligence or scruples...* Thoughts of worms and other lower life forms, and then of kind, selfless versions of herself made her shudder. *If I became a worm, or gave all my money to charity, I'd have to kill myself...*

"Jusenkyo very tragic place..."

Oh crap... Nabiki hadn't realised that they were now at the outskirts of the ponds. *Looks like the water receded...* Delving into her pack, she pulled out her special water waterproof coat and suit, putting it on over her normal clothing.

"What that for?" Plum asked, interrupting her monologue.

"Precautions." Now fully suited up and sealed, she set her jaw beneath the strange helmet. "Take me to the Guide, please."

"Certainly, honoured guest."

Taking one step at a time, Nabiki and Plum walked to the small house where the Guide lived. While Plum was running through the thin strips of land between the pools, without a care in the world, Nabiki placed secure, measured steps, on the stable earth. Keeping an equal distance away from the surrounding water, she avoided the really narrow parts, and traced out a long and winding route to the house.

Breathing out loudly, she went right by the house and removed the helmet, dabbing away the sweat that had built up. Removing her new outfit, leaving it by the doorway, she knocked.

The man who opened the door was a familiar figure, though she had never met the man, hearing his description from several of the cursed victims back in Nerima gave her the impression that she had. Bowing deeply to him, she spoke.

“My name is Nabiki Tendo. I’m here to talk with you, if I may?”

“Please come in, honoured guest.” The corpulent Chinese man moved backwards to allow her inside.

Sitting opposite one another, Plum on the Guide’s left, Nabiki began her questioning.

“Has Ranma Saotome been here?”

“Boy who fall in Nyannichuan?” He was scratching his head. “Yes, he come here over one week ago...”

“... To look for the Spring of Drowned Man?” Nabiki completed the sentence for him, whilst at the same time experiencing joy, her heart pounding harder from the confirmation that he is still alive.

“I tell him Jusenkya out of order. Springs no work now, need one year for Jusendo source to fill. Nannichuan same, but I not know where it is.”

“And... How was he?” *Is he still the same? I don’t know anyone else who’s seen him since that day...*

“He not mind about Nannichuan. He leave quick after.”

I suppose that it must be right, he wasn’t too fussed about his curse... She recalled the time they all went to a festival, a couple of days before he vanished. ‘She’ wore a nice kimono which her mum picked out, and even put a little bit of makeup.

Nabiki stopped in her thoughts.

In fact, Ranma spent a lot of time with me that night... She won a toy for me at one of the stalls, and laughed a lot, I haven’t seen her that happy for a while... Something was troubling her. I can’t get over the hunch that she was guilty somehow, and making up for something...

Nabiki realised she was being stared at by the twosome. “Something wrong, honoured guest?”

“No, nothing... I don’t suppose you know where he went?”

“No, he just leave alone.” He paused and held up a finger, remembering something. “Ah, he ask me to remove name from visitor list.” The Guide picked it up from the table and showed her. Ranma’s name had vanished beneath that of his father’s.

No surprise really... He still doesn't want anyone to find him...

"Thank you..." She stood up and felt at her shoulder. *It hurts a bit... Still stiff from all that walking...* "One last question... Which way is the Musk?"

They both sat there in shock, their jaws dropping. "No, miss!" The Guide was waving his hands frantically. "Is very dangerous like Joketsuzoku..."

"Do you know the way there?" Nabiki butt in.

"Y-yes..." He fidgeted in the seat. "I no can leave here." He looked to his daughter. "Plum, take honoured guest to Musk border."

"But...!" She was scared now.

He turned back to Nabiki. "You go alone into Musk. Plum no can go, she my only daughter."

Nabiki recognised the paternal love as her patted the younger girl's head, her pigtailed bouncing from her shaking.

"Okay, that'll do." She held Plum's hand as her expression softened. "Will you help me there, please?"

Plum looked up, tear globules at the edges of her eyelids. Nodding vigorously, they vanished. "Yes!"

Nabiki opened the door, seeing for the first time, a safe path from behind the house past all the pools.

"Let's go then!"

They began their new journey towards the Musk territory, the distant mountains beckoning beyond the misty ground.

Author's Notes

Another chapter over. Giving Nabiki a curse would've made the story more complicated, predictable, and unnecessary. She was only there for information after all. It's probably been overdone too, how many people visit Jusenkyo and leave, without a curse? Not many I imagine.

I bet you can imagine what the next chapter will involve. Suffice to say, new information will come up regarding Ranma, not anything as easy as 'where he is', but something about his character and disappearance. It might not mean much to some of you, but it'll be true to the canon. No new clues about this are in this chapter, but it's already been mentioned before.

The usual impressions, review, critiques, etc are appreciated. Thanks in advance.

- J