

Out of sight, out of mind

Chapter 8

“You can’t afford me, Herb...”

Late at night Deep in the Bayankara mountain range

Wheezing, Nabiki fell to her knees.

“No more... I can’t go any further tonight...”

“But, honoured guest...!” Plum insisted.

“No.” Her tone was final. “We camp here tonight. My suitcase is heavy, and as you said, we’re nearly there. I don’t want to arrive late at night tired and looking like this.”

She pointed at herself, showing the small scratches on her arms, muddy hands and shoes, as well as a sweaty face. She put her backpack on the earth and opened out the tent she had inside.

“Okay, but not start fire, forest dangerous as is.”

“Why...?” Nabiki paused in her actions. “What’s out there?”

Plum had the same expression as her own self at times, her eyes scouring the surroundings for anything out of place. “Nothing... Yet.” She smiled and instantly the dark mood was lifted. “We go sleep now, yes?”

“Yes...” Nabiki didn’t want to make her more nervous, knowing that the child was holding in the fear on her own. “Help me with this...”

For the next few minutes, the distraction helped ease their worries, and soon enough the small tent was laid out and propped up.

“Nice and simple, should keep the wind and rain off us at least...”

She dumped her at one entrance, throwing her sleeping bag inside and was getting ready to change before glancing at Plum.

“You don’t have anything with you, am I right?”

She was confused and merely laughed to herself, putting a hand behind her head. Nabiki sighed, but smiled and opened her suitcase, removing a pair of neatly folded thick pyjamas, and a woolly fleece.

“Go inside the tent and put this on over your clothes, you should be able to hide your legs in it.” She tossed her over the fleece, and wasn’t surprised when she did that.

She started by removing her top. *Man, I never thought I'd be babysitting way out in the middle of China...* She shivered as the wind whistled by. *Okay, enough thinking, I'm nearly nude in the middle of a forest on a mountain, God only knows what's lurking near us... I might as well sleep and forget until tomorrow...*

Not wasting another moment, she was all ready in her warm purple and green outfit. She quickly snuck into the tent after stowing away the dirty clothes, and bringing the new ones for the next day inside with her. She saw Plum sitting and hugging her knees close to her chest, beneath the giant warm fleece. She could tell the girl was uncertain about something.

"What's wrong?"

"Ah!" She started, then calmed down. "Nothing, honoured guest."

Not buying it, Nabiki arched an eyebrow and smirked. "If I can believe that a man can turn into a panda, then I'll believe just about anything." She paused. "However, I don't believe you, why are you lying?"

She looked at her, the eyes filling with tears again. "Plum is afraid. I not camp in forest ever. Took roads and taxis when travelling. Alone and dark..."

Nabiki closed her eyes in mild pity, and went over to hug the child. "You're not alone, I'm here, and we're only going to sleep, nothing is going to happen, you'll see." Mentally, she crossed her fingers at that last point.

Reluctantly letting go, Plum nodded and sniffed away the tears. Nabiki got into the sleeping bag, and then realised that her companion had none on her.

"Well, are you coming in or what?"

"With you?" Receiving a nod as a reply, Plum hesitantly inched closer. "Sleeping bag look tight."

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "Come on, we haven't got all night." Her tone wasn't mean, just kind.

Accepting this, Plum watched as Nabiki shrugged off the loose cover, and allowed the girl to slip inside. Zipping it up so that their necks weren't restricted, they found a comfortable position for the both of them, Nabiki behind the foetal Plum, cradling her gently.

The warmth from both their bodies soon brought sleep upon them.

Next day Around 9:15am

The tent was undisturbed, the wind sending some leaves to fall and rustle over the opening. The sound of the scratching woke up Nabiki. Immediately, she knew where she was, and repressed a shudder. *I just realised, I've never camped in my life... what*

possessed me to set up tent miles from civilisation... She looked down and saw Plum still fast asleep. *Might as well wait a bit, it looks cold outside...*

After around half an hour, Plum began to stir, and Nabiki helped her wake up by nudging her slightly. "You awake?"

"Mmm... Yes. Was warm sleep." Her eyes were still drooping.

"Good." Nabiki slowly lowered the zip and felt the cold from the mountains. *Hmm, perhaps some snow has fallen? It is winter after all...* "Okay, I'm going to get dressed in the tent, then I'll give you some privacy. We can leave after that."

Leaving Plum in the bag, Nabiki felt around for her clothes that she and promptly changed, ignoring what she felt as awkward shuffling behind her. *Guess she's embarrassed with me doing this near her...* Once done, Nabiki left the tent and began to pack up the rest of her items, having already taken out the sleeping bag. Hearing the sounds of fidgeting, she could tell Plum was still dressing. Once it was over, she came out and held out Nabiki's fleece. She shook her head.

"No, it's still cold at this time, wear it for now until it gets warm."

Not wanting to disrespect her elder, Plum put it back on, but was glad at the extra heat it generated. Following Nabiki's instructions, they lowered their temporary home and were on the move again.

3 hours later

The woods were less dense now, snow had landed on some parts of their journey, resulting in slower movements from the twosome. Plum was consistently keeping to below her maximum speed, as Nabiki had two bags to carry. They had crossed one mountain, taking the easiest, but coincidentally, longest route.

Now they were in a valley between two more mountains on either side. A small stream flowed, giving the sound of water rushing over pebbles to the already wide variety of animal and bird noises.

Plum stopped at a particular point. She held her arm out to her side, fingers splayed outwards. Nabiki understood the silent signal and halted immediately.

"What is it?" She whispered.

Plum stepped backwards, all the while her eyes keeping lookout and darting across the trees in front.

"This point on," She drew an imaginary line across the soil, "Musk territory." She looked back, her eyes blazing for some reason. "Plum cannot take you further."

There seemed to be little difference in the land. "How do you know?"

Plum didn't lower her guard for a moment. "Magic in air. Trees ahead marked by dragon king."

Nabiki just shrugged. "That's fine, I can go on my own from here." She started moving forwards before remembering something. "You can keep my fleece, I have plenty with me. Run home quick before it gets too dark; I know that you run fast without me holding you back."

"Okay..." Plum turned and sped off, but paused halfway to the trees. "Thank you for fleece, Plum won't forget you, honoured guest."

"Nabiki." The girl in question replied. "I'm barely a guest, and have little honour, so call me by that name, Plum."

"Okay, thank you for taking care of Plum... Nabiki." She waved quick and jogged into the shadows.

Chuckling to herself, Nabiki strode on towards the forbidden forest.

Ten minutes later

Her skin felt as if it was being tickled by dozens of centipedes crawling over her, each tiny impression on her flesh making her more nervous. *Guess it must be the magic in the trees...* She stopped to look at one and placed a hand on it, and wasn't too surprised when the feelings magnified upon contact.

She wasn't making any effort to disguise her entry, breaking twigs and her suitcase colliding loudly with trees and fallen logs also helped. Soon she felt the strange new sensations added on to those of a more familiar force that she recognised.

I suppose being around a group of martial artists helped me detect it a little... Akane helped a lot too, the way she got angry around Ranma.

Nabiki stopped and looked to her left. "Whoever you are come out." She paused and turned her head right. "Both of you."

Yep, no doubt about it... The two warriors stomped out into plain view. I found them by their ki... Shame I can't fight at all, or use any even a tiny bit.

They levelled their spears at Nabiki, who sighed and slightly raised her arms. "Do I look like a fighter?" She nodded her head at her travel gear.

They didn't budge. "Why are you in the High Kingdom of the Musk Dynasty?"

Nabiki lowered her arms. "I wish to have an audience with Prince Herb."

"Impossible, no one is to see him, especially a female commoner like you."

She smirked. "Perhaps the Princess would like to say that to me herself."

The left guard was outraged. "How DARE you insult his Majesty!" He brought the spear right under Nabiki's chin, and she had to raise her head to prevent it from impaling her neck. "Men have died for less."

"If you kill me..." She spoke calmly but sending her powerful gaze toward his eyes. "Then my family will find out, as will Ranma Saotome." She grew more confident after seeming them flinch. "And when he's angry... Let's just say that this time, Prince Herb won't survive."

Seeing that the man still didn't move, she sighed inwardly and then ended the discussion with a simple question.

"Who do you think defeated Saffron?"

One hour later

Looks like my bluff worked, I guess that they didn't know he's gone missing...

She was in a guest room of sorts, in a palace embedded in the side of a mountain, and noted the lavish ornaments and furniture. She freshened up in the en-suite and had been given a small meal, though this itself was expensive.

I wonder if I'm more than a guest? She recalled Ranma's story about how they selected women to be wives. I doubt it... But I can't be too sure... She patted her satisfied stomach and lay back on the soft couch. Herb... He's probably the most dangerous person I have to meet... I don't know what happened after he left, so I can't tell if he's upset or hiding some sort of grudge...

The door opened and an attendant informed her that he was ready.

Too late to turn back now. I'll face him head on...

Five minutes later The Royal Throne room

The two large oak doors opened to reveal the room in all its splendour. The red carpet ensured that her footsteps were muffled against the stone floor. Taking a quick glance around, she was reminded of an old Catholic church out the outskirts of Nerima. High ceilings with arches and columns down the sides. Somehow, sunlight streamed in from both sides of the hall.

Ignoring this bizarre impossibility, she walked up to the steps, looking up at the top to see two guards, different to the border patrol, these looked feral. Between them lay two tall seats, one currently occupied by Herb.

"This is most interesting..." He had this odd smile on his face. "Why are you here Nabiki Tendo?"

"I have a feeling you know..." She walked up the steps in an assertive manner.

The two guards bristled but Herb held up a hand. "It's okay Lime, Mint."

Nabiki sat down in the throne next to him. "Where's your wife? Weren't you having a marriage interview last time?"

"Looks like I don't need to go to that any more." He gave an evil grin. "By wanting to see me and then sitting there, you automatically become mine."

She paled. *Oh shit... I knew that the Joketsuzoku had that law that Ranma was tied under... I never thought other weird rituals would apply in the Musk...*

Nabiki darkened her tone. "You could never afford me, Princess Herb." She scored a small victory from his eye twitching. "Marry me and you'll suddenly find yourself penniless."

He stared emotionlessly at her, then held a hand to his face, laughing to himself.

"What's so funny?!" Nabiki, again, didn't like being in the dark.

He removed his hand, revealing a mirthful smile that reached his eyes. "I apologise for my conduct. What you fear is untrue, you are not my wife." Seeing Nabiki fuming still, he went on. "It has been a while since I had the opportunity to joke with someone other than my perverted bodyguards."

"Hey!" Mint cried out in protest, the wolf-boy wasn't happy.

"Well, you are quite perverted..." Lime went on, the tiger-man grinning and showing his fangs at the same time.

"What?!" Mint removed some of his throwing knives. "You're the one who tries to peek at Herb while he is bathing!"

"Why you..." Lime cracked his knuckles and both their ki flared outwards.

Herb slapped his head lightly. "Not again..." Lime and Mint began fighting somewhere in front of the thrones.

"So... Where is your wonderful wife?" Nabiki asked, finally assured that she wasn't newly married to him.

"She is away in her home country dealing with some administration."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "And you're still a prince I take it. Where's the king?"

Herb chuckled. "My father is still around, though I rarely see him. I believe he's somewhere in Japan granting a wish today."

Not wanting to pry any further, Nabiki returned to her original subject. "Do you know why I'm here?"

"It depends..." He paused and looked at her, his red dragon eyes frightening her slightly. "... on what you're going to do afterwards."

Nabiki narrowed her eyes. "Cut to the chase, tell me, where is Ranma?"

"That, I do not know." He began to watch the fight again, catching one of Mint's knives before it reached Nabiki. "Since the day Ranma defeated and saved my life, I have been indebted to him." Herb peeked at Nabiki from the corner of his eye. "I do not believe you know this, but he and I have been in contact occasionally since that day."

"That is news to me..." She jerked her thumb at the bodyguards. "Don't tell me you sent them."

"Of course not." He 'hmphe'd'. "If I sent them alone, I would be summoned as to why they molested women while there..."

Sounds like Happosai would have met his match...

"I used more subtle means, and we were both able to communicate frequently." He gave a predatory and knowing smile. "He informed me of his plan to leave forever, and I must admit, it was ingenious."

The sounds of the fight grew louder, and an anger cross pounded visibly on Herb's temple.

He stood up. "You two, stop this foolish nonsense. You are both equally perverted, and as you know, are punished by me daily for acts against my cursed form." He swished his cape. "Miss Tendo and I are retiring to my private quarters for the time being. We do not wish to be disturbed, unless I ask for you."

Lime and Mint bowed but still gave each other the evil eye. Herb walked off and Nabiki followed him into a hidden side door, and was dazzled by the extravagance of his personal room. A roaring fire was present and above the mantelpiece were the locking ladle and the open-water kettle.

They sat in front of the fire in chairs carved out of old dark wood, with deep red cushions. Resting her arm on the armrests, she felt her body tingle. *I see... these were carved from the magical forest...*

Herb started the talk. "I have not received any word from Ranma since the day his plan went into fruition. While it had gaping flaws at one point, he realised how to patch them all up in one day."

"Can you tell me about them?" Nabiki pressed.

"He was scarce on details, I think even he didn't really know what to do. One thing was certain though, his fiancées and rights to him have been erased." Herb smiled, the fire playing against his face making shadows that were inhuman and lizard-like. "He even stated that the Joketsuzoku were taken care of."

"What?!" Nabiki sat up. "Did he destroy the village...?" She looked at him closely but could still tell that he was immensely powerful. "Or... did you?"

He chuckled. "Nothing so dramatic, a simpler solution was reached." A look of contemplation passed over his features. "I had to commend him on everything, but he voiced concerns over certain parts, and the general disappearance."

"I know..." Memories of his mother came back to Nabiki. "Despite solving everything, he had to leave his friends and family, and wipe himself out of their lives."

"I was... worried..." Herb seemed to have trouble expressing his anxiety over someone else other than himself. "That was the ultimate solution, even I would hesitate before undertaking that task. To leave everyone you knew and have them forget you forever is not something I would do lightly."

Nabiki nodded and thought more about it. "Ranma was really stressed after the wedding 'problem'..."

Herb smirked. "Yes, you ruined it yourself, an impressive achievement."

"Yes... well..." Nabiki blushed, both with equal sharing of pride and guilt. "Seeing how Ranma acted since then, he wasn't himself... He didn't even want to fight any more..."

Herb removed his smile. "It was not your fault. Had the wedding gone through, he said that it would have been worse or everyone, perhaps this Akane girl would have died at the hand of one of the other claimants."

"That's possible..." She lowered her head and began to rub her fingers unconsciously.

"Did you see his grave?" Herb asked.

Nabiki nodded. "Back then I didn't know if he was still alive, and at that moment he died, for real, in my mind."

"I can assure you he is alive and well. I know that after the plan was taken care of he visited Jusenkyo for the cure, as have I, only to find that they stopped working." He stopped talking, as if unwilling to let some information out, but he released it. "He never tried to visit me, but one of the scouts spotted him heading to Mount Phoenix..."

They were both silent at this, knowing what transpired there. "But... why?"

Herb shrugged. "Even I was mystified..." He looked at Nabiki. "Would you like a drink? The heat may be too much for you, but as I am descended from dragons it doesn't bother me as much."

"Yes..." Her throat was parched. "Some water would be handy."

"Mint! Lime!"

"Yes, Herb!" They both cried out, bursting into the chambers.

"Fetch us some water."

"Right away!" The bustled out and then began arguing over who should carry it. Minutes later they returned with a jug and two glasses.

"Thank you." Nabiki poured some and drank it down quick.

"Would you like a refill?" Herb asked.

"Go ahead." She held her glass out as Herb began to lift the jug.

"No, Herb! I should do that, a prince doesn't need to!" Lime began.

"No, let me!" Mint argued.

In the inevitable struggle for dominance, they ended up spilling the water over Herb, who transformed into her shorter figure.

"Herb... Your breasts are back!" Mint cried out.

"YOU IDIOTS!" Palm outstretched, he ki-blasted them out of the room and into the opposing stone wall.

Nabiki chuckled and then laughed out loud at the somewhat melancholic antics.

"I'm sorry, let me get some hot water..."

"No, stay like that for a while..." Nabiki smiled. "It makes it easier to talk..."

Herb wasn't happy, but sat down anyway. "I often asked Ranma for advice about the curse, and he told me to just accept it for now. The only change is biological, my mind thankfully stays the same."

"How does your wife see it?"

"She is quite understanding, and accepts it, more than I expected actually. She doesn't mind when I change, and says that it makes me special." She blushed. "Sometimes she prefers me to stay this way just so we can talk..."

"Ranma did that too, and he always loved ice-cream as a girl, said it wasn't manly to have it normally."

Herb chuckled, though her soprano voice made it come out as a giggle. Herb quickly suppressed it.

"You shouldn't worry about the curse, like Ranma you're pretty cute as you are now." Nabiki winked mischievously, getting the required blush from Herb. *He's just like Ranma used to be...*

"Ranma told me to train in this form, in case I come upon someone as this." She flexed her arm muscles. "I'm not as strong, but I'm faster, so my techniques are more based around speed while I'm female." She lowered her arm pensively. "Ranma is someone else though... He saved me when Horaisan collapsed, even though I tried to kill him. Without his help I may not be here now... He truly has a great warrior's honour..."

Nabiki stared off into the flames. "We all knew that, but his gravestone changed it all..." Sensing Herb's curiosity, she told her about the death certificate, epitaph and her own assumptions.

"I see..." She was smiling. "Clever..."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Herb was still holding that half grin on her face. "You saw it as Ranma dying, and his honour vanishing with him, yes?" Nabiki nodded. "But you already knew the most important fact about him, his honour. Isn't there something else about him you know?"

"Well..." She racked her brains, thinking back to all his outbursts and fights. "He never lost..."

"That's right." Herb held up one finger in emphasis. "Ranma Saotome never loses." She looked directly at Nabiki. "Do you really think he'd abandon his honour like that? I doubt it... Though Ranma Saotome as you knew him, is dead, what rule is there that says he can't be the same person afterwards?"

Nabiki was stunned, and was reminded of something Herb said earlier. "Like a phoenix..."

"Exactly. He 'died', and was reborn, again as Ranma Saotome." Herb sat back, satisfied. "He is still the same man, and according to his epitaph, still has the same honour."

Nabiki was amazed, the ramifications of everything began adding up into one insurmountable truth.

Ranma never changed... He still has his honour intact... So, what is he doing with it?

Author's Notes

Longer than expected, and more subtle clues have been implanted. Had a spot of inspiration and have added something else that I thought would play no part in the story, but now would become quite important.

Overall, I hope you appreciated my interpretation of the Musk, especially the main three people. Having so little of them in the manga, I tried to keep them true to their characters, but adding a little extra that you would normally expect from them given the time of their last appearance. I didn't mean to have so much Plum interaction, but as one of the latter (and sorely ignored) minor people in the manga, I wanted to give her a little more screen time.

Next chapter will have Nabiki still there as a guest, but I think now's about the time to reveal what went on at the oft-mentioned festival.

Here's hoping you enjoyed this addition to the story!

- J