

Out of sight, out of mind

Chapter 9

“Thanks for everything...”

Several seconds later

Nabiki nodded again. *Yes, it finally makes some sense...* She looked to Herb and smiled at her.

“Thank you... It's been bothering me for a while now. Though it doesn't explain why he left.”

Herb gave her a dubious stare. “Ranma spoke highly of your intelligence, can't you figure that out?”

“Well...” Nabiki thought back again. “With his old honour gone, he could... get rid of all the engagements... Almost...” She sighed. “That's why their memories of him were lost. Shampoo had no honour link to him, except the Kiss of Marriage, Kuno and Kodachi were just insane, as were the others who knew him...”

“Well done.” Herb clapped lightly, but not in a patronising way. “He knew that after the wedding things would remain the same, a force of attrition, no single person giving way to the other to claim him as their own.” They sat in silence for a few minutes, then she picked up a log and threw it into the fire expertly. “After Saffron died, Ranma officially, and unwittingly, became the strongest person alive... No one has ever killed him before, not even my father...”

“That's some compliment...” Nabiki mused aloud.

“It was meant to be, he is an opponent to be feared now, the power and will needed to kill a demi-god is greater than you can imagine. He was even more dangerous with his incomplete transformation...” She watched the flames lick over the fresh piece of wood. “Those who have tried in the past always perished, or just got away with their lives, as my father did all those years ago.”

“In the end, he did it to save Akane...” Nabiki explained.

“He informed me of that... Love defeats all obstacles in its path.”

“Even immortal phoenix demi-gods?” Nabiki smirked back.

Herb chuckled. “I suppose so...” She looked up at an ancient grandfather clock. “It is getting late... Would you like to join us for dinner and stay the night?”

Nabiki mulled it over. “Okay, but I'll be leaving soon. If you don't know where Ranma is, then I'm going to have to find out everything I don't know about him.” She stared at the dragon princess. “And I have to meet all his most powerful opponents... One of them must know

something..."

Herb shivered under that intense gaze. She could tell that Nabiki was a woman to fear in her own right, as her determination and never-give-up view of the world mirrored that of the god-killer. Her tenacity was more deadly than any martial artist. What made her so dangerous?

"So..." She swallowed once, allowing the single drop of sweat to glide down to her navy blue eyebrow. "Who are you planning on meeting next?"

The Tendo smirked, showing her fang. "Kirin."

Herb gave a returning smirk, with both fangs visible, and a hint of malice. "Of Nekonron?"

"Who else has that name? Since we're in the neighbourhood I thought of Mount Phoenix, but I don't think they'll be too happy with their Lord dead." Nabiki went on. "Nekonron is in China, and he was one of the first to kidnap Akane and make her his bride. Well, try to at least..."

"When do you leave?" Herb inquired.

"I'm hoping for tomorrow, but I don't know how far it is from here..."

"One of my perverted guardians will be more than enough to get you there safely." She stood up. "In the meantime, rest, you've travelled far and deserve a decent respite. I'll escort you to your chambers, where you may change into something more suitable for our dinner tonight."

Nabiki got up and followed Herb into the throne chamber, past her two inept guards and then to the familiar corridor.

"Here." Herb opened the door to Nabiki's room. "One of my assistants will inform you of the time of the meal and then will accompany you there. Have a pleasant stay, Nabiki Tendo."

"Thank you, Prince Herb." She bowed respectfully and walked in after she acknowledged her bow with a nod of her own.

A few hours later Dining hall

Nabiki for once failed in her mental calculations, the sheer amount of wealth of the dinner set made her eyes goggle. *If I take just my plate and cutlery, I'd be set for life!* However, she knew that sneaking anything out was an impossibility, and a risk she did not wish to take. *I've been treated well here, and I may even have a new powerful ally in the making...* She was at the head of the table, it being around five metres long and two wide. *Where are the others though?*

As if in reply, the door opened behind her, but her curiosity wasn't such that she'd publicly act childish by looking over her shoulder. On her left sat Mint, his ears flicking themselves when he saw her sitting in the large chair. Lime sat on the right, his maw open with a tiny amount of

drool leaking out from between his sharp teeth. She was worried for a second, but noted his nose twitching constantly, meaning that he was looking forward to the meal.

Finally, Herb arrived and sat the opposite end of the table, sitting down whilst regally spreading the cape about, Nabiki did a double-take.

“Before you ask, yes, I am still in this form.” Herb's soprano voice was unmistakable. “I elected to eat in this fashion for tonight, seeing as you are a guest who is used to Jusenkyo curses, not to mention tolerant and understanding.” At this point, she glared at the two Musk warriors, who shirked backwards.

“Thank you, Prince Herb. I'm honoured to be here.” Nabiki plied her trade well, and knew when to press people for information, but also when to fall back to create new avenues for expansion and form alliances with new forces.

The dinner commenced, and Nabiki, for once in her life, did not miss Kasumi's cooking.

The next day

Now rested and content, Nabiki walked into the dining hall as the day before and sat next to a male Herb, who still sat at the head, and ate breakfast.

“You've been very kind to me, Herb.” She spoke after taking a bite from her toast. “Are you sure I'm not your wife?”

She winked at him and he chuckled to himself. “If only...” Seeing her raised eyebrow he explained. “Ranma spoke often about you and your schemes.” Nabiki looked away. “He was aware of you taking photos of him, and that some of the funds went to supporting the house.”

She snapped her head back. “He knew?! All this time?”

Herb merely smiled. “From my reports, you were able to detect the border guards even though they were hidden. Ranma found you the same way...”

“My ki...” She cursed silently to herself. *Damn, I didn't think about that...*

“Naturally, he allowed you to take some normal photos, but made himself scarce when you tried the more risqué ones...” Herb didn't go on seeing his guest grow redder.

“I... I didn't mean to -”

“It matters not.” He interrupted. “Ranma wasn't upset, he was worried about the repair bills more than you can imagine, given that his body was the cause for most of them.” The dragon prince poured some more orange juice for her. “Let it go...”

Opening her mouth, but finding no words to say, she glanced at the glass in front of her and took a long sip from it. “He talked about me?” She blurted out afterwards.

“He spoke about everyone, his life was... interesting to say the least.” Herb grinned, but dropped it fast. “Still, it's over now, for him.”

Nabiki patted her stomach, reassuringly full from the spread. “I'm done now. Which direction is Nekonron?”

Herb held up a hand. “Don't worry about that, Lime knows the way. It's south of here if you really want to know...” Herb smiled kindly at her. “I've appreciated your company these past 24 hours.”

“That's... very generous of you...” She was awed at the efforts he made to help her. “Thank you...” She almost stood up but recalled something. “Oh, is it possible to post something back home? My older sister is the only one who knows where I left for, and I haven't had the chance to write or call her.”

Herb got out of his chair and moved to a side table, which had an ornate wooden statue on it. “I'm not a simpleton by any means. I know that you wish to pursue a cooperation of sorts between your family and my people, or, more specifically, you and I.” He picked up the model of a bird and placed it in front of Nabiki. “However, I too feel that it would be beneficial to both of us to continue this professional relationship further. As a token of my seal of approval, I am giving this prized treasure to you.”

Nabiki picked it up and held it in her hands. *It's heavy... And tingly, so it was carved from that forest again...* She looked at it from all angles and could tell it was made with extraordinary detail. The value would be worth it both for the craftsmanship and also the special wood it was made from. Herb saw the scrutinising look in her eyes, the ways she was thinking of how to sell it.

“If you wish to sell it that is your choice. Yet, it contains a special ability.”

He stroked the spine of the bird and the wood faded away to become feathers, claws and a beak. It gripped on to Nabiki's finger tightly and waved its wings about, startling her greatly.

“It... It... It's alive?!”

She was looking at its eyes, which were looking around the throne room for any predators or prey alike. It was in the form of a typical brown sparrow. She suddenly felt the animal's tiny ki merging with hers for a few seconds.

Herb reassured her. “It now knows the location of every place you have visited, as well as the people who live there.” Nabiki looked up at him, eyes still gawking in shock. “Give her your letter and she will deliver it to whomever you wish.”

Taking out the letter from her pocket, she tentatively held it up and the sparrow grabbed it in her beak.

“She's very clever, and will make sure that the person receives it alone, they too will be given the same ability, but only to reply to you. She'll remain a statue while waiting for the reply.

She understands what you say as well.”

“Are you sure she can handle it?” The sparrow narrowed her eyelids, as if in mild annoyance at her being underestimated. “She’s small, can she make it across the sea?”

Suddenly, her finger and arm became a lot heavier, and Nabiki was again stunned. *No way! The sparrow’s an... an...*

“An eagle, yes.” Herb chuckled. “She can adapt to any environment and pick her choice out of the most common birds in the area. She might be a sparrow or even a pigeon by the time she reaches Nerima.” The bird nodded in reply. “There’s more to magic in this world than Jusenkyo.”

Something clicked together in her brain. “Is this what Ranma used to speak to you?”

“Yes, but you don’t know where he is, so writing to him won’t work.” He smirked at seeing her expression falter. “She will naturally home in on you as well, wherever you may be. You can amend your letter now if you want...”

Nabiki took this opportunity to do so, and summarised the bird’s abilities should she be needed.

“This gift, is too much...” She knew that selling this would be insanity now, a free, reliable and secretive postal service to anyone she knows, not to mention a magical creation. “Why?”

Herb shrugged. “Why not? As I told you our alliance is now complete. One day I may contact you with my own for help when I need it.”

Nabiki nodded and stared at the bird, which looked back at her. “What should I call you?” *Hmm... She didn’t like to be made fun of because she looked weak as a sparrow...* “What about Akane?”

The eagle gave a negative screech and shook its head. *Hmm... Well, I guess I could ask her...* “Is Ranko good enough for you?”

It cocked its head to one side, deep in thought, before it nodded and screeched happily. “Okay, Ranko it is...” *Well, it likes to change forms often...* “Please deliver this to my sister, Kasumi, in Nerima.”

Ranko bowed before launching off her arm and heading upwards into a small opening, and then out of the palace.

“How long before she gets there?” Nabiki asked, still amazed that she has a new pet with unique powers.

“While she remains out of human sight, her speed will increase rapidly. I’d say about a day from here... She’ll keep hold of the letter until then...”

She again nodded dumbly in reply as Herb escorted her back to her room. “Lime will be with

you soon, and if he tries anything..." Herb starting letting his ki out, his red eyes glowing with power. "Let him know he will be punished." Nabiki smirked, and planned to do all she could to get him in trouble.

30 minutes later

Outside the palace Lime was placing Nabiki's suitcases in the two wheeled taxi. He was grumbling to himself about being the horse.

"Well... Better you than me!" Mint laughed at his colleague.

"Hmph! It's only because I'm a whole lot stronger than you. Your weak little body could never pull this carriage."

"Grr..." As predicted, they both riled up before Herb's ki flooded the area.

"Cease this at once!" He bellowed. "Get back to work, now!" His burning crimson eyes scared them witless, and they both toiled hard on the maintenance.

"Just a couple more questions, Herb." Nabiki moved closer to him, keeping their conversation private, though she seriously doubted that Mint would miss hearing them. "Two more things have been worrying me lately."

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow whilst some clouds in the sky began to loom closer.

"In Nerima, there is a permanent snow cover since Ranma left, I can't help but feel it was due to him leaving."

Herb scratched his chin, his eyes searching for the answers in the middle distance. "From my... experiences..." He glared at his two loyal guards. "Those cursed by the pools at Jusenkyo all attract cold water during their lives. However..." He looked down at his open palm, and clenched his fist tightly in anger. "Nyannichuan and presumably Nannichuan, if anyone we knew was cursed there, have a hundred times the level of the others..."

As if wanting to illustrate his point, the heavy dark clouds above released their burden upon the earth. Nabiki sighed and brought out her umbrella too late, now covering her and the female Herb for the rest of their conversation. She looked at the princess with sad eyes.

"And..." She choked back a sob as Nabiki placed her hand on the shorter shoulder. "Maybe, nature is trying to correct itself when the main cause for rain has left. Though I'm not sure when it'll finish... It usually rains here so my curse hasn't affected the local biomes, especially with me so deep in the palace." She was still hiding her face beneath her fringe.

"It's okay, Herb, I saw Ranma, it happened at least once a day. He was never happy with the constant changes..." She released her hold. "I know what you're going through..."

Herb gave a gratifying smile. "That means a lot to me..." She stood up straighter standing like

a man, inadvertently sticking out her chest. "What was your other question?"

"It's a bit weird really..." She put her spare hand to her head, idly playing with a few hairs and twirling them between her fingers. "I don't know really how else to put it, but it looks like time has sped up without Ranma... I look away from a clock and read a page or two, and then it's dark outside...I don't even know..."

"Fifteen days to be exact." Herb gave her a mysterious look. "Since the day you found him missing, the date on his gravestone." She looked up at the sky. "You even missed Christmas with your family..."

"Two weeks..." Nabiki mumbled. "So, what do think about my problem?"

"It's fairly straightforward, without Ranma time goes faster. Perhaps another effect of Nyannichuan, or it could be something simpler. Time flies when you're having fun."

"Well, I'm not the one having fun!" She growled back.

"It seems like everyone else in Nerima is, maybe you're just caught up in that..."

Lime strode up. "Herb the carriage is – wow, you look stunning –OOF!"

Herb retracted her ki-strengthened elbow and kicked at Lime's body on the ground. "See to it that Nabiki Tendo arrives at the palace of the Seven Lucky Gods, safe and unharmed." She glowed briefly at the last part.

"Yes... Herb..." Lime groaned out, before being dragged, his face leaving marks in the soil, to the front of the carriage by Mint.

"Goodbye, Herb." Nabiki climbed into the sheltered cabin. "I don't know if I can ever repay you for all the help you've given me."

"I'm sure it will one day, with our new friendship." She smiled at the Tendo and moved back under the main archway as Mint walked up. "Hot water, now." She directed at him.

Mint extracted a thermos and popped it open, the steam rising from inside it, as Lime trundled off down the beaten path towards another series of mountains. Pouring it over herself and sensing the change, he gave a smirk to the departing people, and then a laugh that grew louder.

"What's wrong Herb?" Mint was disappointed in that he wouldn't get to 'comfort' the female version by hugging her.

"It's okay, Mint..." Herb looked on into the distance at the taxi. "There's nothing as amusing in life than the irony of fate."

Around about 1pm

They had stopped at a small cave to rest for lunch. Lime has already sniffed out the surroundings to make sure there were no predators, other than him, near to them. He had already made a meal with some of the meat provided by the Musk, cooked over an open fire.

“So...” Nabiki chewed off some of juicy meat and swallowed, to continue. “Why’s Herb so mad at Kirin?”

She pulled back at hearing the growl emanating from Lime. “Because of the Hidden War.”

“War?!” This was the first Nabiki had heard of it. “You went to war with them?!”

“It wasn’t just us!” He bit into his slab of meat a little too maliciously. “Mount Phoenix, Togenkyo, the Seven Lucky Gods, the Joketsuzoku, the Musk, and finally... Beijing.”

Nabiki’s jaw dropped. *No wonder we never heard of it... If they covered it up, there’s no way information would leak through their fingers...* “So, who won?”

“Don’t speak of it so casually, many warriors died on all sides...” He went back to his meal and ignored her pointed looks for him to continue.

Nabiki sighed. *Damn, that was getting interesting for a minute...*

An hour later

Lime huffed and puffed his way up the mountain, taking care to avoid the steep cliff edge to the left. Nabiki couldn’t talk to him as he was too tired pulling, and needed his breath in order to live. *Might as well take a nap, got nothing better to do...*

Laying her head back, her eyelids covered the view of the landscape, and soon she returned to a world of sleep.

And to dreams of Ranma.

Author’s Notes

Well, I promised the festival scene in this chapter. Turns out I’ve been having too much fun writing it, and it made this chapter longer than necessary. Thus the next chapter will hopefully be nothing but that flashback/dream, and it should come out sooner rather than later.

As you may have noticed, when Herb changes, I refer to him as ‘she’. While this may confuse you, I made the differences clear as to who exactly is speaking. I liked this method, as saying ‘he giggled’ doesn’t fit with the mental image, hence my change. Hope this doesn’t bother you too much.

Yes, I may be drifting away from canon with the introduction of the bird, but I personally felt it was a nice touch. How else would Nabiki ensure that Kasumi knows where she is, and how to contact each other? I've also amended the gravestone to coincide with the real date back in 1997 (I was just two days off, perfectionism at its worst). I lost track of time myself, so I created a timeline exclusively for this story just to see where I'm at.

Thanks for all the reviews, and I hope that this story is still nagging you with bare clues of the truth. Critiques and plot guesses are welcome.

- J