

Purr-fectly Normal Behavior

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based on Ranma ½ by Takahashi Rumiko &
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“What an adorable cat!” cried out the woman.

“Well, will you look at that,” said her companion, “Is that a Siamese? I thought all Siamese were short haired?”

“No, I think the breed is called Balinese, dear. They are different from Siamese,” the woman knelt down and extended her hand to the longhaired white cat with black paws and ears, “She’s beautiful, she must be a show cat. Look someone’s even put hair ornaments in her fur. Hello there, are you lost?”

Shampoo glared at the woman. After all she had been through this morning, was she now expected to put up with this humiliation as well? The woman tried to scratch Shampoo’s head and she decided that enough was enough. She hissed at the woman and dropped into the best fighting stance she could muster with four, fifteen-centimeter long, legs.

The woman snatched back her hand and quickly stood up, “Oh my!

The man put his arm protectively around her and said, “Stay away from that thing Dear. Vicious animals like that shouldn’t be allowed to roam wild in the streets.” They both hurried off as Shampoo continued to glare after them.

“*You have no idea just how vicious I can be mister!*” she thought in fury. Shampoo turned back down the unfamiliar street and stalked off. This was swiftly becoming the worst day of her life, it had started off bad and was growing worse by the moment.

Cologne had been up all night working on some spell or other and from the way she had yelled at Shampoo and Mousse all morning it had obviously not gone well. Shampoo had tried to remain calm as Cologne ordered her to do one trivial task after another, but she was already worked to a frazzle when Ranma and Akane walked in off the street. Delighted that her Airen had come to take her on a date at last, Shampoo had greeted him warmly with a big hug. As usual he had not returned her affections and then the Angry Girl had attacked her.

Shampoo felt wholly justified in responding to the unprovoked attack, but her Airen had once again dishonored her by scooping Akane into his arms and running off with her over the rooftops. Shampoo had taken chase and after half an hour was just about to catch them when Ranma dodged a diving grab that sent her flying past them, crashing through a hedge and sliding head first into a koi pond in someone’s backyard.

She had dragged herself from the pool, her fur drenched, only to hear Ranma complaining to Akane that Shampoo must have given up the chase. Incensed that her Airen would think of her as a quitter she crashed through the hedge to confront him, but that had been a mistake. Ranma took one look at Shampoo's cat form, screamed in fright and disappeared into the distance with Akane hot on his heels.

Cold, wet and frustrated, Shampoo had soon realized that she was also lost. The frantic chase across the rooftops had taken so many twists and turns that she couldn't be certain if she was miles from the Nekohanten or just a few blocks away. Asking for directions in her current form was out of the question and unless hot water was to start falling magically from the sky she was stuck as a cat until she could find her way home.

After several hours of walking through unfamiliar neighborhoods and fending off the advances of more than one tomcat, she had turned down a street that looked vaguely familiar. She estimated that it was around three o'clock and if she didn't find a landmark she recognized soon, she was going to be late for the dinner rush as well as having missed all of lunch. She had just passed a school building that looked somewhat familiar when she was suddenly lifted from the ground.

Shampoo found herself being crushed in a vise like death grip. What horrible hell-beast had penetrated her defenses so easily? Why was it even now squeezing the life out of her? Was this the end of the Amazon legacy? No! She had to fight back in any way that she could. She let her claws slide out and lock into place as she tensed her body to spring at the first sign of weakness. She was ready... ready to kill whatever vile evil had taken hold of her...

"Hello Neko-chan!"

Shampoo blinked her eyes, "*What?*"

"My name is Yuzuyu. Neko-chan is a pretty kitty."

Shampoo retracted her claws and breathed a sigh of relief. Going by the sound of the voice the girl was no more the four or five years old.

"Pretty... kitty... pretty... kitty... pretty... pretty..."

The death grip across Shampoo's chest relaxed a bit as the little girl bounced up and down in time to her singing. Shampoo realized that even though the girl was holding her at chest level, Shampoo's hind paws were touching the ground every time she bounced. The girl couldn't be much taller than Shampoo was long. Still singing the same cadence, the little girl started carrying Shampoo towards the entrance of the preschool.

"Yuzuyu show Neko-chan to teacher."

Shampoo was not looking forward to that. In her experience adults were not as kindly towards stray cats as children were. She looked through the doors and standing in the

school's genkan was a young woman wearing a smock with her black hair done up in pigtails. As they approached the woman turned around and looked at them.

“Yuzuyu-chan! What do you have there?”

“Yuzuyu has new friend Neko-chan.”

The young woman knelt down in front of them. “Well hello there Neko-chan,” then she scratched Shampoo between the ears. Shampoo wondered if her red cheeks were showing through the fur. “Yuzuyu-chan, that's not a very polite way to hold Neko-chan. Why don't you put him down and I'll show you the right way to pick up a cat.”

“Um... Take a good look woman, I'm a girl.”

“Okay!” the little girl said. She lowered Shampoo to the floor, but never really let go of her.

Then the teacher reached out and put one hand under Shampoo's chest and another behind her back legs and lifted her up, “This is how you do it Yuzuyu-chan. Do you think you can do this?”

“Yes!” cried the little girl.

The teacher put Shampoo back down and for one second she had the opportunity to make a run for it, but a funny thing happened. Something inside Shampoo didn't want to get away. Before her better sense could override the strange feeling, Yuzuyu had her arms wrapped around Shampoo again and was lifting her up. This time she held Shampoo more gently, “Is that better Neko-chan?”

Shampoo swiveled her head up to look at the little girl's face for the first time. She had huge watery brown eyes, a small button nose and light brown hair in pigtails held by red ball ornaments. The human part of Shampoo's brain instantly provided a description, “Sooo cute!”

“Yuzuyu-chan, do you know how to pet Neko-chan?” asked the teacher.

The little girl nodded enthusiastically and with her right hand began stroking Shampoo's fur from head to tail. Unconsciously Shampoo's tail relaxed and flopped down over Yuzuyu's arm. It just felt so good to have her fur stroked like this.

“He likes you Yuzuyu-chan,” said the teacher.

“He does?”

“Yes, try scratching him gently between the ears”

“I'm a girl you moron!”

“Like this?” Yuzuyu's tiny fingers began to massage the soft spot at the base of Shampoo's left ear and she reflexively moved her head towards the motion. Yuzuyu giggled and then wrapped her arm around Shampoo again.

“Don't squeeze Neko-chan too tight,” cautioned the teacher.

“Okay!” Yuzuyu hugged Shampoo and buried her face into the soft white fur at her neck. Suddenly, Shampoo felt something strange come over her. Deep in her chest a rumbling began that she didn't know how to control. She didn't know if she *wanted* to control it. Within seconds she was purring and she was enjoying it!

“Neko-chan makes funny noises.”

“He's purring, that means he really likes you.”

Shampoo glared at the teacher, “*How many times do I have to tell you that I'm a girl?*” but it came out as “Nyow!”

A worried look came over the teacher's face. “Okay Yuzuyu-chan, I think it's time to put down Neko-chan and get ready for Kippe-san to take you home.”

“Kippe-onii-chan! Yeah!”

Without warning Yuzuyu dropped Shampoo and went running off back into the school. Shampoo just stood there, shocked by the sudden change in mood. The teacher looked at the cat and frowned, something in its eyes had disturbed her. “Okay you, shoo!” She reached over and pushed Shampoo towards the door.

“*Easy! I get the message.*” Shampoo stuck her tail in the air and walked slowly out the door, making sure to mark it with a head rub on her way.

Shampoo continued on her way down the street, still trying to get her bearings. The preschool had looked vaguely familiar and if she could just find one more landmark she recognized she should be able to figure out where she was.

She tried to put the incident with the little girl out of her mind, but it kept coming back to pester her. Why had being held by that little girl felt so good? Her curse had always been a bad thing, something she hated. Hating her cursed form, no matter how useful it was sometimes, had been the only thing keeping her sane throughout this whole ordeal. How could any sane human being actually enjoy being a cat?

And yet, Yuzuyu had hugged her. She was always trying to hug her Airen, but did he ever hug her back? Ranma only ran away from her when she was in cat form. She certainly got no such affection from her great-grandmother as a girl or a cat. Mousse would hug her if she asked him to, but the idea creeped her out. The Angry Girl was always hugging other girls, even that Big Spatula girl, but did she ever once think of hugging Shampoo? Did *anyone* ever want to hug Shampoo?

Suddenly, looming before her, Shampoo spotted a convenience store she recognized. She glanced back down the street to the preschool and it too now looked familiar. *“Yatta! I know where I am!”*

o o o

Mousse was busy cooking ramen as fast as he could. Cologne was on the warpath because Shampoo had not shown up for work that afternoon. He had already managed to drop three orders and trip over five customers while he was attempting to play waiter, so he was not looking forward to another excursion into the dining room.

Even so, when the sullen cat ambled into the kitchen and rubbed against his leg, he was not pleased. “Where the hell have you been? Cologne is fit to be tied.” He tossed a towel into the corner and picked up the kettle. He waited as the cat hesitantly approached her rendezvous with hot water. “Hurry up Shampoo, I’m busy!”

The cat crawled under the towel. Mousse poured the hot water over her and turned away. Shampoo quickly dried her hair with the towel and then wrapped it around herself.

“So,” Mousse said, “what held you up this time?” He waited for a smart remark, but none came. He turned around and found Shampoo standing by the rear door with a gloomy look on her face. Mousse was taken aback. He had rarely ever seen his Shampoo this sad before. “Are... are you okay?”

Shampoo looked at her myopic friend, “Shampoo fine, go find clothes in morning. Probably not there, get stolen again. Nice jacket... Shampoo really... liked.” The young Amazon ran from the kitchen.

Mousse couldn't be sure, but he could have sworn Shampoo was crying!

o o o

The next day Shampoo spent the morning searching the restaurant for some reason to go to the store. She finally resorted to hiding a couple of soy sauce bottles under one of the booth seats in the dining room. Cologne was suspicious, but the customers often swiped the soy sauce from the tables so she sent her great-granddaughter off with a stern warning to be back on time or else.

Shampoo had no trouble finding the convenience store again and in human form it hadn't seemed quite so far away. She only bought one bottle of soy sauce and that was just to get the plastic bag with the store name on it. She would bring out the hidden bottles once she returned to the Nekohanten.

Outside the store, she stood and looked down the street at the modern façade of the preschool. *“This is just silly,”* she thought, *“A girl that age will have forgotten all about me*

by now.” She sighed and tried to come up with even one good reason for taking the long way home that went past the preschool. Then she heard the distant sound of crying.

She walked down the street and the closer she came to the school, the louder the crying became. Finally she heard a familiar voice scream, “Yuzuyu wants Neko-chan!” Shampoo quickened her pace and stopped just short of the front gate. Peeking over the fence she could just see the front doors and the two teachers kneeling there. Yuzuyu's crying was much louder now.

Suddenly she heard the sound of running footsteps behind her and with the lightening speed of the Amazon martial arts she scaled the fence and climbed into one of the trees before the tall blond boy running down the sidewalk had even noticed she was there. With her battle senses activated she quickly evaluated this adversary and he was no threat. He was barely jogging and yet he was out of breath. He was thin for his age and he ran as one not used to athletic pursuits.

She watched as he turned into the courtyard of the preschool and heard Yuzuyu stop crying. Shampoo inched her way through the branches of the tree making no sound whatsoever. She found a position where she could comfortably watch what was going on and saw the teachers talking to the young man.

“Kippe-san we're sorry. Yuzuyu found a stray cat out here yesterday and now she is upset that it is not here again today.”

“That is Kippe-san?” whispered Shampoo to herself.

“Oh, I see. Well that can't be helped I guess.” The boy knelt down in front of Yuzuyu, “So, what's with this face? Is this any way to greet me?”

Yuzuyu sniffed and said, “Neko-chan went away. Neko-chan hates Yuzuyu!” Something icy cold stabbed at Shampoo deep inside.

“Now then, is that so? Are you sure Neko-chan didn't just have to run an errand today?” Shampoo started at that, she looked at the plastic convenience store bag in her hand with wide eyes.

Yuzuyu sniffed again, “Maybe... maybe Neko-chan come back tomorrow?”

“Well, we'll just have to wait and see. How about we stop by the store and get some caramel on the way home?”

Yuzuyu brightened, “Yeah! Yuzuyu likes caramels Kippe-onii-chan buys!”

The boy straightened up and addressed the teachers again, “Sorry about that, I'll talk to her on the way home.”

“It's okay,” said the teacher with the black pigtailed, “I shouldn't have encouraged her yesterday. Sorry.”

“Say good bye Yuzuyu.”

“Good bye teacher!”

Shampoo waited until the boy and the little girl had walked past before she dropped out of the tree onto the top of the fence. As silently as she could, she tracked them back to the convenience store and followed them inside. They went straight for the candy aisle while Shampoo pretended to examine hair care products in another. When Yuzuyu had picked out the candy she wanted they went to the counter to pay and Shampoo drifted to the magazine rack by the window.

The boy also had brown eyes and the blond hair didn't look all that natural. There was definitely a family resemblance to Yuzuyu so he probably was her older brother. She noted with interest the several ear piercings he had, that was something she rarely saw the students from Furinkan High with... even the girls!

From behind a magazine she watched as Kippeï knelt outside the store and unwrapped a caramel for Yuzuyu. Then they walked hand in hand down the street in the opposite direction from the Nekohanten. Shampoo sighed. She supposed they lived just outside the Furinkan district so he must attend a different high school. The uniform was certainly different.

There was the sound of a throat being cleared behind her and she turned to find the proprietor of the store staring at her, “Are you going to buy that?” he said nodding at the magazine in her hand. She actually looked at it for the first time and discovered that it was an adult magazine.

She tossed it at the man and cried out, “Pervert!” He turned red in spite of himself and she quickly made her escape.

o o o

The next afternoon Shampoo sat in the middle of a small stand of bushes behind the fence across the street from the preschool. The laughter of happy children playing in the schoolyard floated in on the wind and mocked her fear. Beads of sweat broke out across her brow as she stared at the hateful thing she held tightly in her left hand. It was only a bottle of cold spring water, but Shampoo held it like a live hand grenade for which she had lost the safety pin.

Why had she bought such a thing in the first place? She had stood in front of the vending machine a full ten minutes before putting the 100-yen coin into the slot with shaky fingers. She had waited until no one was in sight before pressing the button and snatching the bottle out of the delivery bin. Then she had run away quickly before anyone could witness her shame.

It was a simple enough thing. She knew that Ranma did it all the time, she even suspected that Ryoga did it too when he needed a cuddle from the Angry Girl, but she was different, she was an Amazon warrior and should be above such weakness. Still... memories of being held in the little girl's arms had haunted her dreams for the past two nights and the sound of Yuzuyu's tears rang even now in her ears.

“The best way to dispel a fear is to face it directly.” She carefully put down the bottle of water and began to unbutton her blouse. She folded it carefully and placed it under one of the bushes, then worked her way out of her silk pants. She looked at her under garments and decided that if she was really going to do this it made sense to fold them up too. Sitting there naked, Shampoo felt more foolish than at any other point in her life, but even so she had difficulty picking up the bottle of water again.

She twisted off the cap and sat staring down into the little bottle. She could drink this now and nothing would happen. She could pretend that she had just been thirsty and go home with no regrets, right? She closed her eyes and raised the bottle over her head. It remained there motionless for several agonizing minutes before she found the courage to tip it forward...

Yuzuyu sat forlornly on the front steps of the preschool, her head slowly scanning back and forth across the schoolyard. When Shampoo came sauntering through the front gate, it was like the sunrise had come into the little girl's face. She jumped up and ran to the cat with her arms flung wide, “Neko-chan!” Shampoo surprised her by leaping into her arms, but Yuzuyu recovered quickly and soon was hugging the slightly damp kitty with all the affection Shampoo had remembered.

Shampoo rubbed her head into the little girl's shoulder as Yuzuyu rocked back and forth from sheer delight. “Yuzuyu missed Neko-chan! Yuzuyu loves Neko-chan!” Shampoo couldn't get enough of this, she forgot she was an Amazon warrior, forgot that she was engaged to Ranma and trying to kill his girlfriend, she even forgot her curse as she luxuriated in the wondrous sensation of being hugged by a five year old.

One of the teachers noticed Yuzuyu kneeling out near the front gate and went to investigate. As usual her ride had not shown up yet, Kippe-san seemed like a responsible young man, but all the teachers wondered if taking care of Yuzuyu might be stretching the teenager a little too thin. As if in response to her thoughts, Kippe came running into view just as she got to the spot where Yuzuyu was kneeling.

“Good afternoon Kippe-san,” said the teacher. She looked down at Yuzuyu and saw the cat in her arms, “Yuzuyu-chan, your ride is here. Is that Neko-chan you have there?”

Ignoring the teacher in her excitement, Yuzuyu looked up at her cousin and shouted, “Kippe-onii-chan! Look! Neko-chan is back!”

Kippei smiled and nodded to the teacher and then knelt down next to Yuzuyu. "So this is Neko-chan is it?" The boy reached over and scratched Shampoo's head and she leaned into his fingers gratefully.

"Um hmm," nodded Yuzuyu, "Neko-chan is Yuzuyu's good friend!"

"She is? Well then it's a pleasure to meet you Neko-chan. May I hold her Yuzuyu-chan?"

"We think it's a male cat," interjected the teacher.

Kippei lifted Shampoo out of Yuzuyu's arms and held her up facing away from him. In spite of being terribly embarrassed by this, Shampoo obligingly lifted up her tail. "Well, I'm not the world's greatest biology student, but I don't think this is a tomcat."

The teacher leaned over and looked too. Shampoo closed her eyes and tried to imagine herself on a warm beach somewhere far far away. "I do believe you are right Kippei-san. It looks like Neko-chan is a girl cat after all."

"Neko-chan is a girl kitty?" asked Yuzuyu. When Kippei nodded she shouted, "Yeah! Neko-chan is a girl like Yuzuyu!"

This long overdue revelation made Shampoo very happy. Especially with Kippei holding her cradled in his arms where she couldn't help but smell his sweat, it smelled of good clean soap and his own sweet odor. She liked it instantly. Kippei began idly petting Shampoo's head as he asked the teacher what she knew about the cat.

"We've never seen it before the other day. It could be a stray," she said.

"She seems harmless enough," he rubbed her ears and she purred more loudly, "Here you go Yuzuyu. Say good bye to your friend, we have to be going home now." Kippei handed Shampoo back to the little girl who hugged her tightly.

"Okay! Good bye Neko-chan!" She crushed Shampoo to her chest and kissed her on the head. Shampoo then reached up and licked Yuzuyu's chin, the little girl started giggling, "Scratchy!" She set Shampoo down again and gave her one last long stroke down the back, then stood up and took Kippei's hand. "Bye, bye!"

Shampoo sighed and looked longingly after the little girl and her cute brother. Her battle sense awakened and reminded her that she was not alone. She glanced back at the teacher who stood with her arms crossed defensively looking down at Shampoo. She looked deeply into the young woman's eyes and saw fear. "*Afraid of cats are you? Too bad because this cat's here to stay for a while.*" She sauntered out the gate, turned towards the Nekohanten and thought about how she could get away around three o'clock tomorrow.

A week later Shampoo was cleaning the tables at the Nekohanten, a job she normally detested, but this afternoon she was smiling and humming softly to herself. Cologne

noticed her great-granddaughter's odd behavior and suspected the girl was up to something, something Cologne needed to investigate.

o o o

Shampoo stepped out of the jewelry store clutching a small box in her hand, a look of triumph spread across her face. She took off down the street running, she didn't want to be late for work again.

It had taken every free moment she had over the last week to find someone who could do this on such short notice. It had also cost her all of the meager tip money she had collected in the last couple of months, but it would be worth it if her plan worked. She thought about her tip money, she had heard once that it was commonplace in America for people to tip their waitress. She wondered ruefully why this was the one thing from America that had not yet invaded Japan?

She rounded the corner near the Nekohanten and ran straight into someone wearing a red silk shirt, "Excuse please!" she said quickly.

"Hey, watch where yer goin' ... Huh... Shampoo?"

Shampoo faced her Airen and the Angry Girl. Ranma as usual braced himself for Shampoo's glomping attack, while Akane dropped into a fighting stance. But Shampoo did not glomp her Airen, instead she looked at him with new eyes. What was it about him she had really been attracted to anyway?

Certainly he was a superb martial artist and it stood to reason he was in top physical condition, but did that alone make him attractive? She looked him over from head to toe as if she were seeing him for the very first time. Black hair... every man in Japan and China seemed to have black hair. Pigtail... was that really a becoming style for a young man? His face looked so much like his girl form that it was creepy. Ears... hmmm... he might look cool with a piercing or two, but who was she kidding? This was Saotome Ranma, man amongst men! He was so paranoid about anything girlish that he would never even consider it. He wasn't that tall and those Chinese clothes he liked to wear were about a century out of style.

Kippe-san on the other hand was tall, blond (even if it was probably dyed) and had a way of looking cool even in a school uniform. And Kippe was kind, look at the way he cared for Yuzuyu! Ranma was nothing but an arrogant jerk. Even Shampoo could see that he treated the Angry Girl like the dirt on his shoes most of the time.

Ranma opened his eyes and looked at Shampoo quizzically. The tension in his body eased a little and even the Angry Girl eased off her ready stance a bit. When Shampoo still failed to attack either one of them, Ranma looked at Akane and shrugged his shoulders. "Hey Shampoo, ya alright?"

Shampoo didn't know what to say or what to do. Her emotions were all confused, "Airen... come... take Shampoo... on date?" and for once it was really a question. One she was asking herself rather than Ranma. Shampoo shook her head in confusion and ran past them down the street.

Ranma and Akane stared after her. "Wa'da ya suppose that was all about?" asked Ranma.

"I'm not sure," replied Akane, "do you think she's sick or something?"

"Or somethin'!"

o o o

Once again Shampoo sat naked in the little copse of bushes across the street from the preschool taking inventory of her supplies. She of course had her bottle of cold spring water, which she now bought from the convenience store down the street at half the price of the vending machine. She also got her Styrofoam cups of hot water there and her collection of unused tea bags was growing steadily. There was a yellow plastic washtub from the 100 Yen store, a towel from the kitchen and a cardboard box to keep it all in.

She set the box on its end and put the washtub halfway inside of it. Then she removed the lid from the cup of hot water and balanced it carefully on top of the box. She had gotten this idea from watching Mousse bump into tables at the Nekohanten, invariably all the water glasses would fall towards him. At first she thought this was just the action of his curse, but after some experimentation with glasses of hot water she determined that it was simply physics. All she had to do was return here after her visit with Yuzuyu, step into the tub and bump her head against the back of the box. The cup would tip forwards and 'splash' she was a girl again. So far it had worked every time.

Turning her attention to the small jewelry box, she opened it and took out a black elastic band from which a small silver pendant dangled. She had found the band at a novelty store, the sign in the window promised that it could expand up to ten times its diameter and never lose its original shape. The pictures had shown it being used as a bracelet, an armband, a necklace and a headband. If things went well today, she might just return to the store and let them know it made a nice cat collar as well.

With a big smile she turned the little pendant over and over in her palm. On one side were engraved the Chinese characters for her real name, Xuam Pu, and on the other side the Katakana of the name she was known by in Japan, Shampoo. She stuck her fingers into the elastic band and pulled it over her head. It caught on her hair a couple of times, but once it was settled around her throat it was comfortable enough, if just a little tight.

With her clothing neatly folded and placed in the plastic bag from the convenience store, she casually picked up the bottle of water and dumped it over her head...

Her meetings with Yuzuyu had fallen into a set routine. Shampoo would wait until most of the other kids had been picked up before sauntering into the schoolyard. Yuzuyu would

scoop her up into her arms for the first big hug and then set her down again so that they might wander around the playground together. Anytime Shampoo felt the need for attention, all she had to do was rub up against Yuzuyu's leg and another hug was quick in coming.

Today they had settled into the sand box where Yuzuyu was busy piling up sand into a large mound while Shampoo decorated it with paw prints. She was just thinking it was about time for another hug when one of the teachers called out from the front of the building, "Yuzuyu-chan! Your ride's here!"

Yuzuyu clapped her hands together to brush off the sand and shouted, "Coming!" Then she scooped up Shampoo and ran off towards the front gate. Shampoo reviewed her plan, she would wait until Kippeï picked her up as usual and then do everything she could to get him to notice the nametag. Soon 'Neko-chan' would be a thing of past. However, when they rounded the corner of the building they saw the teacher standing by the gate with a tall woman in a tailored suit with a very short skirt. Yuzuyu stopped in her tracks and said quietly, "Onee-chan?"

"Hello Yuzuyu-chan!" the woman shouted. Shampoo gave her the once over, but she was just average looking and her only outstanding feature was her lime-green fingernail polish. As she walked up to them she said, "Put down that cat Yuzuyu and let's go home."

Yuzuyu didn't seem all that happy about it, but she did what she was told, "Good bye Neko-chan!" she said as she set Shampoo down, "Good bye teacher!" and they walked out the gate and off down the street.

Shampoo was devastated. She had been planning this all week. She had waited for her day off just so she could enjoy this. All she wanted was to hear Yuzuyu and Kippeï say her name, even just once. Of course she could always try again tomorrow, but it was just so disappointing! That's when her Amazon blood kicked in, "*I can't give up yet!*" she thought. She ran to the gate and saw the pair quickly disappearing down the street. She glanced at the clump of bushes behind the fence across the street where hot water and a human form waited for her. Then she made up her mind and bounded off after Yuzuyu.

o o o

They walked for about twenty minutes without stopping. Shampoo noticed that Yuzuyu had tried to slow down when they passed the convenience store and again when they passed a small park with a playground, but the woman seemed intent on getting home as quickly as possible.

Shampoo marveled at the big homes they passed along the way, to think that such a nice neighborhood existed so close to the Nekohanten without her knowing about it. She and Mousse would have to spread some fliers around over here to try and draw a better clientele into their struggling restaurant.

Soon they came to a stop in front of a substantial if unremarkable home and Shampoo was able to catch up with them. They were standing looking down the street at someone approaching from the other direction. It was Kippeï and when Yuzuyu recognized him she screamed, “Kippeï-onii-chaaaaaan!!” and raced off towards him at full speed. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her back to where the woman was standing.

“Thanks for picking her up nee-chan,” he said, “I just couldn’t get out of cleaning duty today.”

“No problem,” she said humorlessly, “but don’t make a habit of this. Yuzuyu-chan is your responsibility and don’t forget it.”

They turned towards the house and Kippeï glanced up the street to where Shampoo was sitting, “Well, well. Look who came home with you today Yuzuyu-chan, isn’t that your friend Neko-chan from school?”

The little girl released her strangle hold on Kippeï’s neck long enough to look up the street too. Then she suddenly became a squirming mass of arms and legs as she shouted, “Neko-chan! Neko-chan followed us home!” Kippeï set the little girl down and she ran off to gather up Shampoo in a big hug. She trotted back a few moments later with the big cat in her arms. “Look onii-chan! Neko-chan came home with Yuzuyu! Neko-chan is Yuzuyu’s cat now!”

“Now just hold on a minute Yuzuyu, let’s not get carried away here!” Shampoo thought nervously.

Kippeï and his sister exchanged glances, but it was Kippeï that responded, “Yuzuyu, just because Neko-chan followed you home doesn’t make her your cat. She already has a home somewhere near the school.” He knelt down next to the little girl and started scratching Shampoo’s neck, “If you keep Neko-chan, her real family will worry about her. See, she even has a collar with a tag,” his hand followed the band around Shampoo’s neck and started fingering the pendant.

“Yatta!” thought Shampoo, *“All he has to do is read the tag, tell Yuzuyu my name and I might be able to make it back to the school while the water is still hot.”*

Yuzuyu’s face was a portrait of disappointment, her eyes were watery and she sniffled before saying, “Yuzuyu just wants to play with Neko-chan.”

Kippeï looked up at his big sister, “Well, nee-chan? It wouldn’t hurt to let them play together for a while, would it?”

Shampoo looked up at the woman and noticed that her cast-iron façade had softened considerably with Yuzuyu about to cry, “Well... okay, but *you* will clean up any mess that it makes. Understand?” She pointed an accusing finger at Kippeï.

He swallowed hard and turned back to Yuzuyu, “Okay, you can play with Neko-chan for a while, but then she will have to go home.”

“Yeah!” cried out the little girl with glee as she bounded through the gate and up the steps to the front door.

Kippei’s sister gave him another withering glance. “What?” he said, “She never followed *me* home nee-chan!”

o o o

Shampoo and Yuzuyu played in the room she shared with Kippei for the rest of the afternoon as an apparently endless parade of relatives poked their heads in the door to meet Yuzuyu’s new friend. Despite all of her attempts to get him to notice the nametag again, Kippei resolutely ignored it and continued to call her ‘Neko-chan’.

At one point Yuzuyu pulled out some crayons and paper and started drawing pictures of ‘Neko-chan’. Shampoo was impressed with the little girl’s drawings, they actually looked like her cat form, right down to the hair ornaments and the silver name tag around her neck.

Eventually Kippei’s mother had stuck her head in the door and called them all down to dinner, now Shampoo sat on the floor in the middle of the living room surrounded by three generations of Yuzuyu’s relatives.

“What sort of cat do you think she is?” asked Kippei’s mother.

“She’s a Siamese,” said the grandfather authoritatively, “you can tell by the markings.”

“Really?” said Suzuko, Kippei’s nee-chan, “I always thought Siamese cats were short haired.”

“They are,” said a young boy walking in from the hallway, “This breed is Balinese.”

“How do you know that Satsuki?” asked Kippei with skepticism.

“I just looked it up on the Internet,” said Satsuki, “The Balinese is a variation of the Siamese from Southeastern Asia, but this particular cat is from China.”

“How do you know that?” asked Suzuko.

“*Yes, just how do you know that?*” thought Shampoo, “*Are you people sure this kid is only twelve?*”

“From her nametag, it’s in Chinese characters and it says ‘Xuam Pu’,” Satsuki said with a deadpan expression.

“Since when do you read Chinese?” shouted Kippeï, “No... wait... don’t tell me. The Internet?”

Satsuki nodded, “But you don’t need the Internet to know what her Japanese name is, it’s written in kana on the back of the tag.” Then he walked off into the kitchen.

Kippeï leaned over and looked at the nametag hanging from her neck, “Shampoo?”

“*Yatta!! Finally,*” thought Shampoo triumphantly, “Nyu!”

Kippeï’s mother laughed, “Well I guess that’s her name all right. Yuzuyu-chan, from now on you’ll have to call your kitty Shampoo-chan.”

“Shampoo?” the little girl looked confused, “Neko-chan is Shampoo-chan?” All the adults nodded and Shampoo walked over to rub her head on Yuzuyu’s toes. The little girl giggled and shouted, “Shampoo-chan tickles!”

Everyone laughed and stood up to go into the kitchen for dinner. Shampoo followed them in a daze. Her plan had worked! From now on Yuzuyu would call her by her own name. She sat down and daydreamed of walking into the schoolyard on a sunny afternoon and hearing “Shampoo-chan! Shampoo-chan...”

She was shaken from her reverie by a pair of slipped feet standing right in front of her. She followed the legs up to find Kippeï’s mother looking down at her, “I’m sorry Shampoo-chan, but we don’t have any cat food, so I hope this is okay,” she bent down and put a bowl of milk and a plate with a big slab of raw tuna right next to Shampoo, “Help yourself.”

Shampoo gazed in wonder at the huge chunk of tuna, “*Cologne would insist on making ten orders out of a thing like this!*” she thought as she eagerly wolfed it down.

“Mother,” said Suzuko, “do you think it’s a good idea to feed the cat.”

“Oh, I don’t see how it could hurt. Besides, she’s a guest.”

o o o

By the time the family was finishing their meal and dispersing through the house, Shampoo was curled up in the middle of the living room fast asleep. Feline bodies were great when it came to agility and speed, but they have very little in the way of stamina. Shampoo had been on the move since three that afternoon and now that she had a full stomach her eyes would not stay open.

Yuzuyu picked her up so gently that Shampoo almost didn’t wake up in time to hear Kippeï call out from upstairs, “Yuzuyu! Don’t forget to take your bath!”

“Okay!” cried out the girl enthusiastically as she marched up the steps with her arms full of very nervous cat.

Ten minutes latter Shampoo stood in the bathroom eyeing the little girl suspiciously. Yuzuyu had chased her down and dragged her in here, now the door was shut and Shampoo was getting uneasy. Moisture from the steamy bath filled the air and soaked into her fur, she just prayed that it wouldn't be enough to trigger the change.

She heard a noise outside the door and was distracted just long enough for Yuzuyu to grab her and jump into the tub. Shampoo yowled in horror as her hind legs slipped into the hot water. Then she sat there with her eyes tightly shut as she waited for the inevitable scream, but Yuzuyu didn't make a sound. Shampoo opened her eyes to find her human self sitting in the bath facing the little girl whose eyes were as wide as saucers, transfixed by the young purple-haired woman suddenly sharing her bath.

Shampoo noticed that Yuzuyu's eyes were fixed on a spot at her throat. She touched the spot with her hand and felt the little silver nametag. She smiled and Yuzuyu smiled back.

"Shampoo-chan?" whispered the awestruck little girl.

Shampoo nodded and then placed a finger to her lips to silence the child who seemed about ready to burst with excitement. Instead Yuzuyu jumped up and wrapped her arms around Shampoo's neck. "Shampoo is a magic kitty!" she whispered loudly, "Yuzuyu loves her magic kitty!" Shampoo hesitantly folded her arms around the little girl and suddenly there were tears in her eyes as she hugged Yuzuyu tightly.

After a minute like this, Shampoo composed herself. She knew the situation she was in and knew what might happen if she were caught in here by one of the adults. She let go of Yuzuyu and the little girl slid back into the water. She continued to stare in wide-eyed wonder at Shampoo as the young woman reached out of the tub to place the washbasin under the tap and filled it with cold water.

Shampoo contemplated what she should say to Yuzuyu now that she had the chance, but in the end she decided to remain silent. Yuzuyu was at that tender age where it was still perfectly possible for a magical cat to turn into a pretty girl, so why spoil her fantasy with words. Yuzuyu's big smile was all Shampoo needed to see right now anyway.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door and it started to slide open. With a speed that defied human detection, Shampoo leapt out of the tub and had the washbasin of cold water dumped over herself before Kippe's mother could stick her head through the door.

"Yuzuyu, you didn't bring Shampoo into the bath with... Oh no!" Yuzuyu was sitting in the bath with a big grin on her face while sitting next to the tub was the most bedraggled soaking wet cat she had ever seen. "Oh Yuzuyu, you shouldn't take Shampoo into the bath, cats don't like water you know."

As if to refute that claim, Shampoo shook herself down from head to tail sending water flying all over the room. Yuzuyu dissolved into giggles and Kippe's mother laughed until her side hurt.

o o o

When Shampoo had gotten into the bed with Yuzuyu, her intention had been to wait until the little girl fell asleep and then quietly make her exit, but her short stint in human form had done little to reenergize the cat and she was asleep herself long before Yuzuyu closed her eyes.

When she awoke a couple of hours later, Shampoo found herself not only wrapped in Yuzuyu's arms, but Kippeï's as well. She struggled for a few minutes and managed to free herself without waking up either the little girl or the boy. Now she sat at the foot of the bed and regarded the two sleeping siblings.

When Shampoo had first spotted the sign on the door that said this was Yuzuyu and Kippeï's room, she had naturally assumed that there was a futon stored somewhere that the little girl would sleep on, but looking at them now it was clear that they slept in this one bed every night. Shampoo pondered the close rapport between these two, it seemed out of sync with Kippeï's relationship to his other siblings.

The whole family seemed to be very quarrelsome by nature except where Yuzuyu was concerned. They all appeared to go out of their way to see that her every whim was catered to, even to the point of letting a strange cat into their home. It was true that the little girl was much younger than her siblings, but that should only get her so far.

Shampoo shook it off, it was getting late and she really needed to be going. She jumped down from the bed and was thankful that Kippeï had left the door ajar. After bounding down the stairs, she was trying to decide where an open door or window might be found when she heard voices in the kitchen. Walking in to investigate, she found Suzuko at the table with her mother.

"...and I haven't heard from her since then. Frankly I'm a bit worried about my little sister," said Kippeï's mother.

"I'm more worried about what this is doing to Yuzuyu. The longer her mother stays away the stronger her connection becomes to Kippeï and our family," said Suzuko, "and now there's the cat on top of it all."

"You really don't want her to keep the cat, do you Reiko?"

"It's not that I don't want her to have a pet. It's that I'm afraid when Miyako-oba-san returns for her, a pet will just be one more string tying Yuzuyu to us. The more there are, the harder it will be for us to cut the cord when she has to leave. Besides, the cat obviously belongs to someone else. That silver nametag didn't come from any cheap pet store."

Understanding dawned for Shampoo. Yuzuyu was not a sibling here, but an abandoned child taken in by caring relatives. She walked back into the hallway and looked up the stairs. Was it any wonder they all treated her with special care? She loped back up the stairs

and slid back into Yuzuyu and Kippeï's room. Jumping up on the foot of the bed she looked again at the sweet little girl who had lost so much and the young man who had opened his heart for her.

Shampoo sank her claws into the sheets and stretched out her front legs luxuriously. This had been quite a day, one she would always remember fondly. Her hindquarters dropped into the soft folds of the comforter as if it had a mind of its own. She really hated to leave this oasis of calm and caring people and return to her hectic life of martial arts and ramen. She rested her head on her forepaws and contemplated her life. Ranma was a pretty nice guy after all. She liked Kippeï, but not *that* way. Her eyelids became heavy and her tail twitched nervously. "*Tomorrow,*" she thought with a yawn, "*I'll get Airen to go on a date with me. And this time nothing will stop m...*"

o o o

Shampoo awoke some hours later and instantly knew that she was in trouble. The house was quiet and dark as she wandered from room to room looking for a way out. It seemed unthinkable that on a warm spring night, a house in Japan would be closed up like this, but central air conditioning had definitely come to this part of Tokyo. Cologne was going to kill her for being out this late and what was worse, she really, really, really had to go to the bathroom!

She had thought about trying to use the toilet, but it had turned out to be Western style and the lid was too heavy for her to lift. She had also checked the tub, thinking that she could change and then use that nice Western style toilet before letting herself out, but the tub had been drained, probably because it was full of cat hair.

Now she sat next to the front door contemplating the one option she had left. It was extreme, it was dangerous and it was ugly, but what other choice did she have? She raised her head and yowled at the top of her lungs. The sound reverberated through the house like a ghost on a rampage and she cringed at the thought of these nice people being subjected to it, but she did it again and again until at last she heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

It was Satsuki and he was still fully dressed, "Leave it to this family to go to bed without putting the cat out. Sorry about that Shampoo, lucky for you I was still up," He reached over and pulled open the front door, "I guess we won't be seeing much of you once you get back to the restaurant."

Shampoo's eyes widened and the fur began to stand up on her neck. Her Amazon training took over and she calmed herself, never show your enemies that they have rattled you.

"Quite a coincidence that there happens to be a place called the 'Cat Café' just over in Furinkan with a Chinese waitress that just happens to be named 'Shampoo'. They serve pretty good ramen there, but don't worry I've never actually seen 'cat' on the menu... yet."

Shampoo stared up at the strange boy. His face was unreadable, just how much did he really know? This kid would fit in well at Furinkan High, perhaps as a new boyfriend for Kuno Kodachi?

Shampoo slipped quickly out of the doorway and didn't look back until she heard the door close. Then she stopped and gazed back at the house, it was a nice house filled with warm and caring people. She wondered if she would ever see it or them again.

She sauntered through the front gate and froze instantly. Across the road, dozing under a street lamp sat Mousse with his back against the light pole. Setting beside him was a familiar looking cardboard box with a yellow plastic washtub sticking out of it. Standing next to Mousse, swinging a handful of unused tea bags and looking very much awake was her great-grandmother, Cologne. At that moment Shampoo was grateful that she had already relieved herself on the lawn.

o o o

Shampoo sat at the table wearing a clean robe and wrung warm water out of her hair with a towel. Cologne had been more than liberal in her application of hot water when they returned to the Nekohanten. Shampoo thought the old woman might just be trying to drown the girl's cat form rather than change her great-granddaughter back into a human.

Cologne sat across the table from the damp teenager and glared at her, "How could you do this Shampoo? How could you bring such shame to your tribe?"

"Shampoo sorry great-grandmother," the girl hung her head until it almost touched the table, "Shampoo not think..."

"That's the problem!" shouted back Cologne, "You don't think! One day you are supposed to lead our people, but how do you expect to do that when you can't even run your own life? This is disgraceful Shampoo, you are embarrassing your people and yourself."

Only years of warrior training kept the tears from Shampoo's eyes as she replied meekly, "Shampoo just not want be lonely any more. Not hurt anybody, honest."

"Not hurt anyone?" shot back Cologne, "What about Ranma? Don't you think this will hurt him?"

"Ranma not need to know!" Shampoo looked stricken. She was truly frightened of having Ranma discover her moment of weakness.

"Don't you think he might notice when you ran off to marry that untrained weakling!" Cologne was red faced with anger and nearly screaming.

"What?" Shampoo tilted her head and looked at her great-grandmother like she had just said that the moon was made of ice cream.

The look on her great-granddaughter's face deflated Cologne's anger a bit, "You know, that blond haired skinny boy you have been running around with as a cat for the last couple of weeks..."

"Kippeï?" A smile crept across Shampoo's lips, "Great-grandmother think Shampoo in love with Kippeï?" Unable to hide either her relief or her amusement at this, Shampoo actually started giggling.

This was *not* the reaction Cologne had been expecting upon confronting the girl with her apparent infidelity. With a bit more trepidation she continued, "Well... yes, if that is his name. Do you intend to end your engagement to Ranma in favor of this... Kippeï?"

Shampoo was really laughing now, "Shampoo not love Kippeï! Shampoo like Yuzuyu!"

Now Cologne was confused! She was also beginning to crack a smile, her great-granddaughter's laughter was contagious, "Then will you marry this Yuzuyu instead of Ranma?"

At this Shampoo rolled with laughter, "Shampoo... not marry... little girl!"

Cologne suddenly realized the mistake she had made, but she was also perplexed. What possible use could Shampoo have for the little sister of the blond haired boy? "Shampoo, what do you mean you *like* this little girl? What exactly have you been up to great-granddaughter?"

Shampoo looked at the puzzled expression on the elder Amazon's face and settled down a little, "Yuzuyu like Shampoo in cat form. Give hugs and pet Shampoo a lot," the more she thought about the reasons for having spent time with Yuzuyu, the more miserable her expression became, "Shampoo lonely all time. Yuzuyu feel like only friend..."

Cologne had watched the girl go from hysterical laughter to something close to depression in a matter of seconds. She reflected on what the teenager's life (for that is what she was after all) was like...

Alone in a foreign country with an old woman as her only link to the world she once knew, pursuing a young man who probably would never agree to marry her, pursued by another young man she doesn't like, constantly using her martial arts talent to defend herself from attacks she thinks are unprovoked, and working long hours at a job that pays her nothing.

Could Cologne really blame the girl for wanting a few moments in the arms of another person? Even if the other person was a little girl and she was a cat? "Shampoo I am glad you have finally found a way to use your curse to make your life a little happier, but you can't continue to shirk your responsibilities like this. You should also consider what might happen to this little girl if she finds out..."

From the look on Shampoo's face Cologne knew this had already occurred, "What happened Shampoo?"

The girl smiled weakly, "Shampoo is now magic bathtub kitty."

Now it was Cologne's turn to laugh, "Serves you right, one day soon you will learn that anything a child takes to the bathroom ends up *in* the bath!"

Both women laughed at this, it was the first time Shampoo could remember the two of them laughing together and it felt good for a change, "Shampoo will stop seeing Yuzuyu and go back chasing Ranma all time."

Cologne shook her head, "You may do whatever you wish in your spare time child, just do not lose focus on your goal. The sooner you secure Son-In-Law's proposal, the sooner we may return home." The old woman took hold of her walking stick and pulled herself up out of the chair. Turning back to Shampoo she added, "By the way I like that necklace, but from now on only wear it on your day off."

Shampoo fingered the nametag at her throat as her great-grandmother's words sank in. With a smile of gratitude on her face she said in Chinese, "*Thank you great-grandmother. I shall do that and I will not bring dishonor to our tribe.*"

o o o

Suzuko stepped through the front door and took off her street shoes. The house seemed very quiet for this time of the evening. Padding into the kitchen in her stocking feet she found her mother at the stove, "Where is everyone?"

Looking up from the wok filled with frying tempura her mother said, "Well, your grandparents are in their room watching television, your father went to the store for something, Kippe and Satsuki are upstairs doing their homework and Yuzuyu is playing with Shampoo."

"Oh that's right, this is Monday isn't it?" Suzuko reached for one of the finished tempura that was cooling on a rack and had her hand swatted away by her mother, "Why is it that cat only shows up on Mondays?"

"Because the restaurant's closed on Mondays," said Satsuki with a straight face as he wandered into the kitchen.

"Restaurant? What are you talking about Satsuki?"

The boy opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of juice, "The one her owner works at of course."

“You know who Shampoo-chan’s owner is?” Suzuko was never quite sure when her youngest bother was being incredibly intelligent or just exceptionally weird, “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“You never asked me,” he said while snatching a fried shrimp from the cooling rack and dashing for the door before his mother could swat him. “Besides,” he said from the doorway, “all you had to do was ask the cat.”

“What the...” Suzuko planted her hands on her hips and her face turned red, “Honestly mother, what is up with that boy?”

“Calm down Reiko,” said her mother handing her a fried shrimp, “Here, dinner will be ready in twenty minutes.”

Upstairs, in Kippeï and Yuzuyu’s room Shampoo lay curled in a ball on the bed while the teenager sat at his desk doing homework and the little girl sprawled on the floor with her crayons. With sleepy eyes she scanned the wall where Yuzuyu’s latest creations were on display, in addition to several pictures of a white cat with black ears and paws there were now several of a strange girl with purple hair.

In the latest of these the girl was wearing a golden crown, indicating Yuzuyu’s latest fantasy explanation for Shampoo’s bath time transformation. According to the five year old Shampoo was an enchanted princess who would one day be saved from her curse by a handsome prince. Shampoo wondered if there were some way she could get the little girl to draw in a black haired boy wearing a red Chinese shirt, but a yawn cut the thought short.

Satsuki stuck his head in the door and said, “Dinner’s almost ready, looks like tempura for the humans and tuna again for the cats.” He glanced at what Yuzuyu was drawing as he turned to leave. He stopped short and came back into the room. “Yuzuyu-chan, what are you drawing?”

The little girl looked up from her latest creation, “The magic princess going to the temple!” she cried out excitedly.

From the desk came Kippeï’s voice, “They showed her pictures of some temples in school today.”

Satsuki looked more closely at the drawing, “Why is her hair purple?”

The little girl glanced at the cat on the bed and then with a secretive smile said, “Yuzuyu likes purple hair.”

“Is this someone you know Yuzuyu?” Satsuki was now looking over the pictures tacked up on the wall. He honed in on one showing the purple haired princess in a bathtub.

“Get real Satsuki, she just likes purple.” Kippeï said turning from his schoolwork, “Last week she liked orange trees and the week before that green sunsets. She is only five you know!”

“Excuse me big brother, I just thought her drawing looked familiar,” Satsuki retreated to the door. There was no arguing with Kippeï once he sensed a threat to Yuzuyu. Besides he could get a closer look at the drawings later, “You two should get washed up for dinner.”

Kippeï stretched and turned his chair around, “You heard him Yuzuyu, go wash your hands.”

“Yes Kippeï-onii-chan!” cried out the little girl as she sprang to her feet and dashed for the door.

Kippeï got up and stepped to the bed, “You too princess,” he reached down and scooped Shampoo off the bed. He had no idea why Yuzuyu thought the cat was an enchanted princess, but for his little cousin’s sake he was willing to play along.

Shampoo was suddenly gripped by a huge yawn. Awakening to find herself in the familiar arms of a handsome teenage boy was not the worst way to come back to life. She settled more deeply into the crook of Kippeï’s arm as he began scratching her ears. She seemed to remember someone mentioning tuna for dinner, but that might have just been a dream.

She treasured these weekly visits with Yuzuyu and her family. The calm normality of this home was a comforting if somewhat stark contrast to her regular existence. Just the day before, her latest scheme to trap Ranma into marriage had failed miserably and already her great-grandmother was plotting another one. Yet here in Kippeï’s arms she was insulated from all that.

“In this house I am safe,” she thought, “The people here like me and don’t ask for the impossible in return. Yes, this is the only place I am truly safe!” Her gaze settled on one of Yuzuyu’s drawings of the Purple Haired Princess, *“So why are my battle senses tingling like something terrible is about to happen?”*

END

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