

A Ranma 1/2 Fanfic Series: "Ranma Gets A Clue"
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Chapter 3, "The Tickle Wars."

From a distance any casual onlooker who saw the two figures standing on a nearby rooftop would simply dismiss them as city workers. However if you lived in Tokyo's Nerima district and recognized the two, you would probably turn down the first street going in the opposite direction. One does not cross by the site of a soon to be battle. At least that was what usually was happening whenever one of these two figures was spotted in public.

The figure in red seemed to be listening to the white robed figure nodding his head from time to time as he did so... then he nodded his head a final time and shouted something unintelligible like, "thanks", and turned and leapt to a nearby roof, breaking into a run as he did so. A casual onlooker would simply shrug and go about their business. This was Nerima after all.

Ranma hopped down off of the rooftop and sprinted his way to school. Now that he had a plan in mind, Ranma meant to act on it. He just managed to get into the gates of Furinkan before they closed. Well not really in the gates; sort of over actually.

Pausing, Ranma stood on the right side pillar of the gates. The early morning breeze was blowing his hair and clothing around. The wind started low and ran funnel-like currents up his body, whipping his shirt tails around and blowing his hair into his face. Looking up Ranma noticed that the sky was getting darker and, when he sniffed the air, it didn't smell right.

The air smelt like the misty interior of a wet cave, an ill omen indeed. The hairs on his arms prickled like an electric current was running through the air. Running like he did, Ranma had actually managed to make it to school right behind Akane. His breath caught in his throat as he watched her making her way towards the schools entrance.

Tatewaki Kunou was not known to be a reasonable person. At the moment he held himself with a bearing that cast the illusion that he had just stepped out of ancient Japan. Hardly an era ruled by reason. He stood on the steps leading into the high school with his arms crossed, leaning against one of the pillars for the archway with an imperious expression on his face. His bokken was tucked into the proper position for a real sword in the sash he was wearing.

The wind was playing with his hair and clothing as well. Whipping it into a frenzy for a time only to let it go moments later. The effect was chilling in that it appeared Kunou could call the

winds to help him punctuate his own self important words.

Glancing up again Ranma saw clouds gathering seemingly trying to choke away the sun. Deprived of the sun's rays the Earth started to grow colder. An icy blast of wind lanced through Ranma's clothes and made his spine tingle. Ranma started to chant silently to himself, 'rain rain go away, come again another day...'

Kunou started his self important monologue as soon as Akane came within ear shot, watching him warily. Drawing himself into what he thought was a noble pose, Kunou tossed his head back and dragged his fingers through his unruly hair. The effect of which was immediately lost to the wind. Directing his gaze to a point off into the horizon only he could see he began.

"The noble scion of the house of Kunou has a mission this day." Lightning struck behind him, so close that the thunder clap seemed immediate. Kunou unfazed, continued to speak.

"Akane Tendou thy honor has been defiled and 'tis my duty to set matters straight." Glancing up to Ranma's perch Kunou pointed to him with his bokken and sneered.

"This cur has stolen into our stead, defiled the honor of numerous young maidens, and has proven himself unworthy of asking for your hand in marriage!" Lightning struck again and the thunderclap was again immediate.

Ranma, already tired of this little speech, and REALLY wanting to get indoors before it started to rain, made a move as if to jump kick the annoying kendoist in the head. However Akane glancing in his direction caught his intended actions, cleared her throat to draw his attention and froze him in his place with THAT look. Her message was clear, do NOT interfere. Ranma studied his proud fiancée for a second, clenching and unclenching his fists, causing his knotted muscles to strain all up and down his arms, but he nodded and held his ground.

Akane was standing facing Kunou. Her feet planted firmly a shoulders width apart. Her grip around her satchel was white knuckled and, with the wind and cold playing over her, she looked like any warrior princess out to do battle on a field destined for legend. Ranma almost felt sorry for Kunou. Almost. Shifting his gaze back to where Kunou stood, Ranma got a little worried. Young men were coming out from behind gates and doors, stepping out from behind the bushes and trees, it was an ambush! Most carried some piece of sports equipment. The smarter ones wore protective padding as well. Kunou continued to speak.

"Whilst I admit the cur Saotome has bested me in combat before, due to his use of the black arts, I hereby decree this day that I will stand for it no more. I say let Saotome prove his worth and fight for her hand.

Akane's steady gaze narrowed into a glare. Ranma's hands clenched into frozen fists as he grit his teeth. If you listened quiet enough you could almost hear him growl. This was

NOT what Ranma had expected this morning. But fine, if Kunou wanted a fight, he would get one. He had thought Kunou and all these other idiots had stopped this foolish behavior long ago.

Again he moved as if to jump on Kunou, and again Akane sensed it and shifted her glare to him. He stopped only because he knew he would never hear the end of it if he insulted THIS young woman's pride. Kunou finished his speech. "So it shall come to pass, that I shall bring about your downfall this glorious day Saotome!"

With that the rest of the young men sprinted forward into battle. Akane with a silent thought of, 'oh no you don't!' Was not about to let Ranma fight for her, and she moved to stand between the oncoming horde and Ranma's perch. Ranma tensed as he watched. Silently he begged her to move. 'Oh please, oh please, oh please, they really need a head kicking. Oh please, oh...' If it wasn't so potentially dangerous Ranma would have laughed out loud with how bizarre the whole situation was. Somewhere up there, he just knew a god or two was just laaaaaaughing their ass off. Akane simply stood and eyed them as they charged with cold disdain.

As the first of their numbers leapt to try to get past her she nimbly side stepped them and lashed out twin back knuckles catching them in their noses. She dropped her satchel and spun away from them. She then leapt into the midst of the surging crowd, and punched and kicked herself a path out of the press of idiotic bodies. The crowd was forced to turn and fight her, or chance getting struck from behind.

Ranma stood and watched crankily as his fiancée struck down another two would-be attackers. 'I could handle this juuust fine. But will she let me take care of my business, nooo. But just watch and let me try to interfere in her business and . . .WOMEN!' He muttered angrily to himself.

His hands still clenched into fists at his sides, he grumpily watched Akane use a good portion of Furinkan's male student body as target practice. 'At least she hasn't managed to get hurt. Yet. Soun'll rip my leg off and beat me to death with it, if I let his "little girl" get hurt. "Little girl" my ass.' Ranma thought unhappily. 'Story of my life I suppose.'

So, silently, he watched her from his perch and grudgingly admitted that she was getting better. Much better than when he had first met her. Grinning slightly as he noticed that her footwork was almost exactly in sync with the kata that he had showed her this morning. His worry decreased as the number of attackers dwindled steadily. He even laughed out loud when about twenty of the attackers turned and hightailed it out of the courtyard. Realizing that she was no easier to beat now than she had been the long time ago that they had been foolish enough to do this.

Ranma was amazed with how well she had picked up the kata he had been showing her earlier and how quickly she had learned to apply it. It gave him a warm feeling to know that he had been the one to teach her.

Two minutes later the courtyard was littered with the slightly broken bodies of a good portion of the male student body of Furinkan High. Ranma was about to leap down and join Akane when he noticed that Kunou was still standing. Standing by the gates he leveled his bokken at her as he spoke.

"Truly this boorish lot deserved their fate. To attack one as lithe and dangerous as thyself, quickly and unthinking, hath brought about their own pitiful downfalls, now, these fools may see what their folly hath wrought. I, however, hath waited and watched thee Akane Tendou. En sooth I doth believe thou art now quite spent. Shalt the serpent dance with the mongoose this morn moi cheri?" Kunou then grinned the grin of a serpent. Ranma tensed up again.

He sprinted towards her with his bokken held high. Shouting battle cries for the honor of days and ideals long since past. Akane, for her part, didn't even pause as she executed the finishing move to the kata. A jump spinning outside crescent kick that she viciously whirled into Kunou's temple with the knife edge of her foot, the kick carried her past Kunou and Akane landed gracefully in a low crouch, her back to her vanquished foe. To Kunou's credit, he did manage to stay standing a few seconds before he fell, the bokken skittering across the ground in a clattering testament of his defeat.

Pausing a second, Akane surveyed the damage. Then, throwing a quick thumbs up to Ranma she retrieved her satchel and headed off to class. Late for class, but with an obviously happy gait to her step.

Sighing to himself, Ranma hopped down from the post and waded through the wreckage. The schools massive janitorial staff was already carting off the broken shrubbery and destroyed sports equipment. They also had a routine to follow every day, and it usually started with garbage duty. Frequently the destruction was caused by Ranma these days. But either way it didn't matter to them. Ranma grinned a little as he stood and watched some of the first guys stagger to their feet. Most of them muttering curses and favoring certain limbs. Passing by Kunou, Ranma bent down and grabbed his bokken for a trophy.

The wind died down a little just then. Looking up Ranma caught sight of a single bird in a nearby tree branch, and as he watched that bird broke into a cautious song. A good omen indeed. Maybe today wasn't going to be another trip to hell.

Laughing now, Ranma was a picture of grace and speed as he slipped past the comatose Kunou and jumped up into a tree and then ricocheted off a few benches and buildings and jumped-flew right into his homeroom window. Landing with a forward somersault and a plop only rubber soled Chinese shoes can make, he quickly hid the bokken and his gear under his

desk.

He grinned at those who were openly gawking at him, as he took his seat. Those that were staring were apparently still not used to having someone jump INTO a third story window. Akane, who was sitting across the aisle from him, muttered, "Show off."

Ranma was just thankful that the teacher hadn't arrived yet. He really did not feel like another session of "water bucket sentry duty". Akane took that moment to look up from her book and give him "the look", the look that only women close to you can give and which men to this day do not know what it is supposed to mean.

Homeroom flew by for Ranma seeing as he slept through it. Akane, on the other hand, was busily scribbling notes and shooting exasperated looks at her fiancée. 'Honestly', she thought, 'it's not like he doesn't get enough sleep at home as it is.'

At the end of class the bell rang and Ranma shot out of his desk already running for the door, completely forgetting his book bag and the prize bokken . . . he had to throw his weight onto his heels in order to stop short of running into Akane though, who was waiting for him in the doorway. Puzzled, Ranma stepped out of her range and looked at her quizzically. She was looking at him thoughtfully.

"Yo Akane, whatcha want . . .?" He asked.

"Ranma..." she began. Ranma eyed her warily. If this was about him taking the first bath today he would have none of it, it had been his turn and . . .

"Ranma, I . . . want to thank you for not interfering today. That meant a lot to me." Akane seemed to literally stumble on the words. Ranma looked at her funny and then shrugged.

"Yeah well Akane, I was pretty surprised you beat them so quick, but I figured you could handle Kunou, you are at about his skill level. Look I gotta go, ok? I'm gonna miss gym..." He trailed off. He turned to leave but Akane's hand was suddenly resting on his shoulder.

"Ranma, why do you sleep through class? Don't you care if you get a good education?" She had assumed her best Kasumi stance, and was trying hard to look scolding, but understanding.

"Hey look Akane just cuz you are good at school and like to play the "perfect" student, don't mean I gotta, I hate school." He protested. Ranma left that last statement hanging in the air. She watched him set his jaw firmly in his 'don't mess with me' expression. Then he crossed his arms in front of his chest as he leaned against the door frame. Akane caught his body language message loud and clear.

'Back off,' he was saying in the best way he knew how. However Akane was not one to back away from a fight. Looking away from him for a second she put her arguments and her fighting spirit in check with a deep breath...and turned back to him.

"Yes but Ranma if you only applied yourself, I'm sure you could..." As she looked back to where Ranma had been she found she was only speaking to a Ranma-less door frame. "How in the HELL does he DO that?!!" She practically screamed as her self control left her, drawing stares from some of those in the hall, and sympathetic looks from others.

As she started to walk away to her next class she muttered to herself. "I swear it's like trying to talk with a damn puppy, he won't hold STILL!" She continued to grumble to herself as she made her way through the crowds.

Ranma let go of the ceiling and plopped back down to where he had been standing. Grinning to himself, he chuckled and silently thanked Kodachi for showing him indirectly how to do that. With that, he turned and hopped out the nearest window. Hitting the ground, he sprinted across the school grounds trying to make his favorite class, PE, in time.

So intent was he on reaching his class that Ranma failed to notice that the wind had died down, and the cool air was now still and quiet, his little bird was nowhere to be seen either. Definitely a bad omen. Back in the classroom, the girl who sat behind Ranma bent over and picked up his satchel and the bokken.

'I should probably give this to Akane or someone, or maybe I can find Ranma ...' her thoughts trailed off as she blushed mightily at the thought of Ranma thanking her for her trouble and giving her one of those smiles that were known across campus to make women swoon... 'Yes I think I'll go look for Ranma...' she thought as she shouldered the pack after placing the bokken through the straps so she could carry it all at once. Taking a step she promptly fell over backwards.

'Good lord what does he have in here? Bricks?' Grimacing with a determined scowl the girl set about dragging the pack out the door, drawing a few curious stares of her own.

Jogging into the schools athletics area, Ranma noticed that the Kendo club was already out and stretching. The girls track team was out and jogging and the general area was crowded with students geared up for PE. In other words...Ranma was in his element, and he was also LATE! Jogging towards the boys locker room. He suddenly heard scuffling sounds coming from the roof of a nearby equipment building.

With barely half a second to brace himself, Ranma threw his arms up crossed in front of his face, just blocking the kick sailing towards his head. Quickly Ranma leapt back and letting all the air out of his lungs with a *whoosh* of surprise. Sizing up his unexpected opponent as he did so. And so Ranma came to be gazing rather crankily at Ryouga.

Ryouga just smirked and clenched both of his hands into fists as he slowly walked through the early morning fog that was still drifting in from the wet athletics' fields. The cloud vapors swirled and streamed out of his way, almost as if he were wading through an intangible river.

His stride towards Ranma was causing his traveling cloak to twirl and weave behind him so as to make him look like some caped lord from ancient times traveling with a deadly purpose to his journey. Ranma's mind didn't even pause to wonder where the fog was coming from.

In silence Ryouga started to circle and size up his greatest foe in the early morning mist. Ranma, wearing a smirk of his own, took the time to look Ryouga over. His shirt was torn and obviously well worn, almost threadbare.

The leg bindings that usually wrapped around his calves to taper in the cloth, were shorter than usual, looking like the cords had been cut for some reason or another. His hair was longer as well. Granted, it had always been somewhat shaggy, but now it was almost touching his shoulders giving him a dangerous unruly air. Silently Ranma ticked off the months in his mind that Ryouga had been missing...the total came to about 3 and a half.

"So Ryouga...what did I do to you this time? Did I pick an apple that you wanted from some tree? Did I beat you up in a dream? Did my great grandfather look at your great grandfather funny? Did I eat bacon this morning?" He said that last comment with a barely contained smirk.

Ryouga did pause for a second, looking slightly confused. You needed a REASON for attacking Ranma? Yeah right. It was a simple fact. Ranma was there, and therefore Ranma was the enemy and to be attacked and beaten at all costs.

But to Ranma's surprise his normal verbal baiting of Ryouga wasn't working. Ryouga just kept walking and stopped about 3 meters from Ranma. It was then that he made eye contact with Ranma. Ryouga's eyes were of a man with a grudge to settle. Well fine if Ryouga wanted to fight, then Ranma could use a good workout, it had been awhile since he had one anyway. Normally he would just fight with him here and now, but there were a lot of people around, and if there was one thing he was learning from living in Nerima, it was that people tended to stop to watch a fight, and the last thing he needed was for some kid to get hurt at school because he was fighting. Akane definitely would never let him hear the end of that. Besides he was LATE!

Ranma suddenly snapped his fingers saying, "ah ha," you could tell Ranma had just gotten an idea. You could almost see the little cartoon light bulb going off above his head. As Ryouga pulled his battle umbrella out from his back pack, Ranma did the exact same thing that had stopped him back when he had first shown up at Furinkan. Holding out his hand he said,

"Yo Ryouga, long time no see...wah cha been up to?" Ranma asked. Ryouga simply swatted the hand away and swung his umbrella. Ranma caught the weapon in mid air and held on. Ryouga simply swung Ranma with the umbrella, which caused Ranma to slide back about a meter in the dirt, he had forgotten just how strong Ryouga was.

"Say Ryouga I can see you are kind of angry, how would you like to work out your aggressions?" That one got through to Ryouga a little.

"What are you talking about?!"

"Yeah well, here's the thing, I'm already late for my favorite class. And while I would love to kick your bacon butt up and down the school I would rather not miss this class. So maybe we could postpone our little match here. If you'd like you can come with me. I will just tell everyone that you are a transfer student." Ryouga, however, looked doubtful.

"You want me to come to gym class with you? Whatever the hell for?" He said looking at Ranma like he had just sprouted pink and purple elephant ears on his head.

"Well, um ... yeah sure why not. This week is American Sports week, and it is rather interesting. Besides, you are the strongest person in this school next to me and it would be kind of fun to try some of those sports with someone I don't have to worry 'bout breaking. That is if you aren't afraid that I am better than you."

With that said, Ranma turned on his heel and continued on his way to the boys locker room. He knew that for pride's sake Ryouga would be right behind him. As he entered the boys locker room though Ranma got a sinking feeling in his stomach. Water was flying everywhere and high school boys were running all over the place apparently having some kind of a water war. Ryouga simply shouldered his way past him, popping open his umbrella as he went. One poor guy made the mistake of running into Ryouga. As he bounced off of his chest, Ryouga simply picked the kid up by his shirt with his left hand and placed him out of his way.

Ranma caught the kid before he stumbled into a wall and let him go. The kid kind of went skidding off towards the bathrooms as though he needed to go really bad all of the sudden. Ranma just continued on, muttering under his breath,

"Jeez isn't he cranky today."

Ranma started to walk behind the other guys that were heading out the back door which led to the schools outdoor fields. Ryouga followed, his fists were still clenched and he was walking like a soldier on his way to war. Ranma with Ryouga in tow joined the rest of the guys congregated on the field and Ryouga became the instant center of attention. Which considering the state of mind he was in, probably wasn't the best of ideas.

The kids started to crowd around Ryouga, at first he just ignored them and started to stretch and perform a modified version of Tai Chi. But Ranma could tell that the guys were starting to get on Ryouga's nerves with their insipid questions.

"Hey aren't you that guy that got hit in the head with a soccer ball?"

"No stupid he's the guy that sells umbrellas out front!"

"Hey are you listening to me man?! I'm talking to you here! Sheesh, maybe that soccer ball to the head knocked the sense right out of him."

Ryoga grabbed a nearby fist sized rock while he was stretching. Without breaking his pattern, he casually crushed it and dropped the rock fragments and powder by the kids feet. The students warming up fell silent as they crowded around the site of the expected fight. Ranma was trying to decide if letting Ryoga beat up the entire PE class could in ANY way be blamed on him, knowing Akane . . . most likely. Even though it would probably be a great way to let Ryoga work out his anger . . . naaaah. With a sigh Ranma turned to face the assembled crowd as he stepped in front of Ryoga, Ranma spoke so most of them could hear him.

"Okay guys listen up, this is Ryoga and he's a transfer student, he is kind of cranky right now so why dontcha leave him alone okay?"

There was a general stirring in the crowd, but before any more trouble could be started a shrill whistle blow cut through the air. Striding into their midst came their coach, obviously oblivious to anything out of the ordinary.

"Okay men line up for roll call!", he trumpeted into the now still air. There was a crazy scramble as all assembled tried to form up into the rows and spaces that had been designated as their own at the start of the semester. Ryoga simply stood where he was with his arms crossed and a glare in his eye daring anyone to annoy him.

However, the coach didn't even seem to notice him. He just took him as the student that was supposed to be there and continued down the line taking roll. Then with another of those annoyingly shrill whistle blasts he bellowed out,

"Okay men take a knee." With that he started to get into the rules of the American sport known as "futtobooru" as it was pronounced in Japanese. Ranma paid attention with half an ear as he watched Ryoga making sure he didn't kill anyone. Yet.

When the coach had almost finished speaking, he summarized the rules once again. "So basically what you do is take a team and try to get the ball down the field and into the scoring zone, following the rules that I just mentioned. Now, let's have our two students with the best grades in this course be the first team captains, they will get to pick their teams first, after they are done the rest of you can form into teams for our little elimination match . . . Ranma and Nakajima stand up please. Okay you two start picking your teams." Nakajima spoke first.

"I choose Ryoga."

"I choose Daisuke." Ranma chose second. And so it went until all the teams had been made.

What followed next was one for the history books. Ranma, acting the as the defensive line for his team would hold Ryouga back until the quarterback could toss the ball. Flags got thrown on almost every play, as it was explained to Ryouga that no he could not do drop kicks, and no, uppercuts were also not allowed. All the teams soon gained a healthy respect for Ryouga, if you want to call cringing terror respect. When Ryouga got the ball he would just run over any of the people that got in his way, like a run away freight train, working out his anger and depression. It sometimes took up to six guys to tackle him. But as he worked off some of his anger and depression, he started having so much fun, that he got into the game despite of himself.

Ranma would make plays with his quarterback and have great fun faking Ryouga out and catching the ball over his shoulder as he ran, only to be tackled by Ryouga with enough force to carry him the rest of the way down the field.

The look on the coaches face as he watched the two was priceless. You could practically see the yen signs in his eyes as he imagined being their manager and negotiating contracts for them back in the USA. One by one Ranma's and Ryouga's teams took on all the other teams. Until only their two teams had the least amount of loses, one each to the other. Lining up to see which team was better, Ryouga stared at Ranma and grinned an evil grin, Ranma grinned back.

Suddenly the bell rang signaling the end of class, every single student on the field except for Ranma and Ryouga sprinted for the locker rooms, wanting to be free from the humiliation as soon as possible. Ranma and Ryouga trotted back in from the now soggy and torn field in tremendously finer spirits.

"So Ryouga, you feel better now? Or would you still like for me to kick your butt up and down the school like I promised?" Ryouga took the joke for what it was and laughed quietly.

"Yeah sure Saotome, be sure to invite lots of people, we'll sell tickets..." Ryouga failed to notice Ranma's sudden cringe, Ranma could just see Nabiki in a ticket booth shouting,

"Come one come all, see the battle of the century...", quickly he looked around, his eyes darting frantically to see if Nabiki or one of her minions were within earshot. Satisfied Ranma followed Ryouga back into the locker room, a small part of his mind wondering how Ryouga had managed not to get lost yet. Since neither one of them had actually broken a sweat, they didn't need to shower so they headed out of the locker room.

"So Ryouga . . . see ya after school or something man?"

"No thanks Saotome, I have things to do...don't worry though I'll be back to kick ya around a bit later...see ya!" And with that he leapt up onto a nearby roof and then another, and soon he was gone.

"Oh well," Ranma thought, he never sticks around much anyway and besides I am sure we would have ended up fighting eventually. The rest of the day passed without many incidents

to speak of.

As he was walking Akane home that day, Ranma broke his attention from the fence he was walking along to look at her. She was maybe half a step ahead of him and seemed to be lost in her own thoughts. The early evening wind was swirling her glossy black hair around. The setting sun catching and highlighting it as though she were a painting. Her hands were held loosely in front of her, clasping her satchel. Ranma couldn't help but notice how the cut of her school uniform made her very feminine curves stand out.

The slender slope of the nape of her neck, the firmness of her calves and legs in general and the way the jacket top accentuated her tiny waist, which in turn highlighted her very curvaceous hips. All in all Ranma in the most private corner of his mind thought, Akane was the most attractive girl he had ever met. He would love to tell her that actually, but he had no idea how to. At least not without insulting her or sticking his stupid foot in his mouth as he always did. The only way he knew how to approach a problem was physically.

Which is why he took such great pains to tease her, he knew she would become riled, and he knew she would try to fight him, which meant he could touch her. A fair price to pay he thought. But now was not a time to fight so he contented himself with admiring her from afar, for the time being.

Akane chose that particular moment in time to look back at Ranma, and caught his lingering stare. Embarrassed, Ranma looked away. Turning his gaze heaven ward he let the filtering sunlight play along his face and basked in it's warmth. Akane simply brushed his look off as a coincidence, and kept up her gait. Soon they had reached the Tendou home. Ranma headed up the stairs after shucking off his outdoor shoes at the entryway and exchanging them for his indoor slippers. Entering his room, Ranma changed into his training gi, then headed back downstairs to look for Genma and start his afternoon training session.

Heading over to the porch, Ranma found Genma and Soun doing what they usually did in the afternoons -- playing shogi on the porch. The wind picked up for a second and the wind chime rang, at that moment a fish in the koi pond jumped. The sunlight glittering off of it's iridescent scales. That fish still lived in that pond was in and of itself amazing, since either Ranma or Genma were somehow or another always doing headers into it.

Genma looked up from the board to Ranma and groaned. Soun took the opportunity to rearrange several of the game pieces while he was distracted.

"Sorry boy but I'm not feeling too well today...I think I ate a bad mushroom or something, you'll have to go practice by yourself today." And with that said he turned back to the game and immediately grasped his head with both hands as he sucked his breath in sharply. As Ranma headed away, he could hear Genma saying...

"Do over, come on Tendou, do over..."

Ranma headed over to the dojo in somewhat more muted spirits. As he entered the training hall though, he could see Akane in her trademark yellow gi cinched up with her red belt. She was practicing the kata he had shown her this morning. Ranma just leaned up against the west wall in the doorway letting the sun warm his back, and watched her. Well, actually he was watching her more than her form per say. He did, however, notice that she had actually managed to remember most of the kata's steps as well as the intended rhythm to it. She ran through it eight times before she finally noticed that Ranma was in the dojo with her.

Blushing, she turned away from him. "How long have you been standing there Ranma?" She asked with a sense of dread. She just knew an insult was coming. He would always make fun of her and belittle her skills. Or he would seem to be being nice to her and she would lower her guard. Then he would shoot an insult her way and knock her self-esteem down a notch or two. However she gave her thoughts pause here. 'That was not how Ranma had acted this morning was it? No. She allowed herself to dare to hope, was he changing?'

However, Ranma either didn't hear her or chose not to respond. Either way Akane breathed a sigh of relief. Ranma was still standing there looking at her, staring actually. Not only was he staring at her, but she could see his gaze was traveling all over her. Suddenly feeling a mental draft, Akane decided to break the mood and go over to a side wall and stretch.

Out of the corner of her eye Akane watched as Ranma walked out into the center of the room and assumed a black belt, high crane stance. Maintaining his silence and commanding a certain sense of dignity, he began to practice. As Akane watched, Ranma proceeded to get into HIS workout.

He was totally focused and in his center. He was so seriously into his training, that he was oblivious to his surroundings. The sharp plant of his feet on the hardwood floor, counter set perfectly the sounds of his measured breathing. His motions continued to shift from that of what looked like a half air born, half ground speed training kata to what looked like single partner sparring.

'Of course.', Akane realized. Ranma usually sparred with his father about this time. He was running through the routine he usually ran through with his father. 'Where was Genma anyway?'

Akane watched from the wall as Ranma ran through his routine, going faster and faster. His hands were going so damn fast she couldn't even see them, making her all the more jealous of his skill and speed. And it only got worse! He kept going faster and faster, and his movements got smoother and better. It made her so mad that he could do that and she

couldn't! He was bouncing around the room like some kind of insane grasshopper! And she wanted to as well!

When he finally stopped. Akane was standing in front of him holding out a package. Wiping the sheen of sweat from his brow Ranma took the package from her with a quizzical look on his face.

"And what do we have here Akane?", he asked, unwrapping the package that said on the outer wrapping "Wild Stallion Professional Martial Arts Supplies." Akane had her hands clasped behind her back and was sucking her bottom lip in nervously, waiting for him to finish unwrapping. Looking surprised, Ranma held up a pair of heavily padded hand pads and a pair of equally padded foot pads.

"Okay Akane I give up what is this for?"

"So we can spar silly!"

"Why do I have to wear pads huh? I'm not afraid of getting hurt."

"They're not for YOU idiot. They're for me. You say you don't like to hit girls right? Well this way you can hit me and I'll hardly feel it. You can use your full speed and actually spar with me, and I'll be able to learn from where and how you hit me!" She beamed at him. Ranma actually started to open his mouth to argue with her but she silenced him with "he look." So, shrugging his shoulders, he put the pads on. Akane took up a ready stance before him and they both bowed.

"All right then, here I come!" With that shouted challenge Akane charged at Ranma full speed, throwing the best she could at him. Ranma wove back and forth through her attacks but he still had yet to lay a finger on her. He was falling back on his old pattern of evasion, and Akane would have none of it, so she decided that injuring his pride was the way to go. Backing off, she put her hands on her hips and taunted.

"What's the matter Ranma! Can't seem to lay a finger on me today?!"

"Hah, you wish Akane, I could beat you with one arm behind my back!"

"Oh really?! Well why don't you shut up, stick your arm behind your back... and come over here and try me for real?!"

Ranma did shut up. He looked at his fiancée and thought, 'what the hell. . . might as well give her what she wants, she is asking for it anyway . . .' And with that thought he crossed the space between them rather quickly and threw a round kick at her torso which Akane easily blocked. She countered by dropping to a knee and attempted to sweep Ranma as he landed. Ranma barely had time to back flip to safety. Rebounding off his hands Ranma re-evaluated his opponent with new respect. Very rarely did Ranma have to make those kind of evasions.

Openly grinning now, Akane and Ranma both met each other in their mock combat as they did everything else together, full of pride, passion, and barely contained emotion. This was actually fun for both of them. It was probably one of the only things they could do together that allowed them to touch each other, not have to say anything, and both of them knew what they were doing, and didn't have to look awkward or clumsy. Or to bare any feelings that might get hurt. In effect, they were playing with each other.

When they had both had enough, they stopped and bowed to each other. Then Ranma went back to the west wall where he had left a towel and Akane wandered off to her gear. As Ranma slumped down against the wall and began to take the pads off, he saw a pair of legs enter his field of vision. Ignoring her for the moment so he could take off the sweaty pads was a grave mistake in judgment. He heard her say just before she did it,

"Ya know I have always wondered if you were ticklish." With that said, Akane began to mercilessly search for Ranma's ticklish spot. Unfortunately for him, he had lots! He began to laugh and tried to fight her off. But, as he found out, and as any ordinary person who has ever been the victim of a rogue tickler can tell you. Once you start laughing, and especially if you are tired, you are basically helpless.

Unfortunately for Akane, Ranma was no ordinary person. With great strength Ranma brought his own hands into play. Pinning both of her slender wrists together, he began to tickle her tummy and used his body weight to force her down. Akane squirmed like some kind of deranged fish, squealing with delight. She managed to get her hands free and shot a sucker punch to his stomach muscles.

Stumbling out of the dojo and into the crisper evening air, they shrieked across the Tendou's lawn. Letting the wind carry their dreams, and the soft grass caress their feet. Akane in the lead as Ranma would occasionally catch her and tickle. She would in turn tickle him and get a kick or a punch in and he would let her go, so he could chase her again... until she would let him catch her again.

Their commotion caused everyone in the household to come outside to watch Akane kill Ranma again. Soun was hell-bent on killing Ranma. Again. For whatever grievance he had caused with his baby this time. What the family saw stopped them all in their tracks. Nabiki rounded the corner and all she could think to say was, "What in the . . ." As Kasumi came outside she clasped her hands next to her cheek and sighed, "Oh how sweet they're playing with each other!"

Genma and Soun looked overjoyed and hightailed it over to a corner of the house so they could watch and not disturb. Nabiki shrugged and chalked it up to the absurd, and Kasumi, humming to herself, went back to her kitchen.

Dinner came and went with the whole household walking on eggshells around the two. While they had since calmed down and changed into their evening wear, they were neither hanging on each other like lovers, nor were they fighting. All in all not a bad arrangement. They looked like they had a wall up between them again as usual though. The rest of the family could see them sneaking embarrassed looks at each other, but they had yet to speak to each other since the early evening, as if afraid to break the spell. Kasumi was clearing the dishes from the table and most of the people had left the room, the TV in the background could be heard announcing that the nightly movie would be a ghost story. Soun and Genma scooted out of the room as neither of them liked that sort of thing, seeing as neither of them had an actual backbone. Nabiki had already retired to her room to see to her ledgers for the day, and Kasumi was in the kitchen cleaning up for the day. That left . . . just the two of them.

Akane gulped, mostly because she hated horror movies, but watched them out of morbid fascination anyway. Also because she knew Ranma was still in the same room with her. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him leaning on his side propping his head up with his hand. He was reading a manga, she couldn't make out the title, but she knew it was probably something dirty . . . 'the pervert', she thought.

Getting up, she went and turned the lights off. Then, returning to the table, she grabbed a blanket from beneath it and propped herself up against a few pillows. Settling in to watch a movie she knew would scare her to death.

Sighing, she reached up across her body to her shoulder with her hand and tried to ineffectually rub the kinks out of her already sore muscles. Although she would never admit it to Ranma, she had gone all out today, and now she was paying the price. She suddenly realized that Ranma had not left the room to find another source of light, when she felt his warm strong hands tenderly brush her shoulders as if seeking permission to touch her.

Smiling to herself, Akane responded by reaching back and removing the pillows, then scooting back until her head was resting on his chest. Ranma also smiled at her response and with great care started to caress her shoulders. Going not too fast but not too slow, and paying equal amounts of attention to her back and shoulders, he used all sorts of pressure techniques to work the kinks out of her muscles. He also managed to find a few knots as well. Those hurt like hell, but Akane bit her lip and said not a word. Ranma knew he must be hurting her though, so he did those areas the fastest and using the most efficient techniques to soothe the muscles as soon as possible.

They sat like that for the duration of the movie, with Ranma rubbing and caressing her shoulders and back. Every now and then, Ranma would get bored and would run a finger lazily from the base of her ear along the edge of her jaw. He had no idea how erotic that was to Akane, and Akane had to fight herself to keep from turning into his arms and kissing him until morning. He did however think to himself, 'God her hair smells great... she smells just like a flower.'

Eventually, his tender ministrations slowed to a stop as he noticed that the movie was over. She was slumped against him with all her weight, while her head lolled to the side. Grinning Ranma took his left arm and shifted her weight so that her shoulders lay across that arm. Then, sweeping her legs up in his other arm and cradling her body he stood up, he headed toward the stairs.

The house was already pitch black, and he heard no noise. Realizing that everyone was already asleep he quietly carried Akane up the stairs and towards her room. Using his foot, he opened her door and carried her to her bed. Grinning, he noticed it was bacon free. Absently he wondered if anyone sold pig traps. Using his foot, Ranma slid the covers aside and lay his fiancée on her bed. She usually slept in pajamas, but Ranma really did not feel like getting the beating he knew he would get if she woke up and caught him undressing her.

So he just lay her down and smoothed her hair out from beneath her head. Leaning in one last time to smell her hair, Ranma started to stand up to leave but found he was caught in a vise-like grip. Smiling beautifully with her eyes still closed, Akane pulled him down and kissed him on the lips quickly and then holding him so his lips were still millimeters apart from her own, she whispered in a voice so small that only he could have possibly heard her, "Thank you . . . my fiancée. . ."

Then, laying her head back down, she turned over in the bed, hugged the blankets close to her, and promptly fell asleep. Ranma left the room, his head spinning with her last words 'fiancée...the word had been used so often, with so many different meanings since he had shown up at the Tendou dojo, that he hardly ever gave it a second thought. Now it echoed in his mind over and over being repeated in her voice . . .' Slowly, he plodded to his room and his futon.

That night he didn't sleep all that much, but he did have a warm vibrating feeling centered in his chest, spreading out and tingling even to his toes. His hands were shaking with either delight or raw fear, he couldn't decide which, causing him to clasp them over his chest to still them. He could still smell her scent all over him as he lay on his futon in thought . . . 'I wonder . . .' he thought, 'is this what love feels like?'