

A Ranma 1/2 Fanfic Series: "Ranma Gets A Clue"
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Chapter 10, "The Protector"

Ranma felt queasy as he walked along the city streets ... away from that crazy girl and her even crazier father! Was every woman in the world interested in marrying him? Discouraged, and rather intimidated, Ranma let his mind drift as we walked, trying to make the shaky feeling in his legs and the pit in his stomach go away.

The morning air, already brisk, was growing colder. The air was still heavy with dew and contained that special mix of flavors that tantalizes the senses, and seems to refresh you.

Dark clouds were creeping up the morning skyline, shading the sun slowly as if a tree leaning in the blowing wind was being pushed in front of it. Shivering suddenly from the lack of the morning's heat, Ranma glanced skyward. The clouds were growing darker as they slithered across the heavens in inky black trails. 'I have the weirdest life sometimes.' Ranma lamented to himself as he noticed the sky, which seemed to be predicting rain.

Quickening his pace to a jog, Ranma hopped up on the railing along the water canal. The soft splashing sounds the water made as the wind picked up were lost to his hurried mind. Glancing both everywhere and nowhere at all Ranma tried to get himself to relax as he ran. Generally as far as his life went, this was a pretty tame day on the Ranma-scale. Only one small fight, and one crazy girl and her family ... so far.

As he ran, Ranma worried about the path his life was taking, and worried even more about how he was handling things, so he missed the warning bell. A bicycle bell wouldn't give cause for alarm for most people, unless you happened to know Shampoo... and she knew you.

With her customary, "Nihao! Airen!" Shampoo jumped up onto the railing with her delivery bike still under her and proceeded to land on Ranma's head, bike and all.

"Shampoo ... what are you doing on my head? Again!?" Ranma growled, at the same time noticing that Shampoo was wearing some kind of heavy perfume that was starting to make him dizzy.

Scrunching up her face in irritation Shampoo wondered for the millionth time why this was so difficult, the men in her tribe never gave her this kind of trouble, Shampoo cut Ranma off, "stop stupid talking Ranma. Shampoo very busy now. Now be good husband and give dutiful

wife big kiss." Shampoo chimed happily in her sing song voice as she leaned over her handle bars to grin at Ranma upside down-like. Ranma sighed and shrugged his shoulders hard enough to dislodge his unwanted baggage.

Flipping end over end in the air Shampoo landed graceful as a cat, still sitting on her bike. Huffing, Shampoo pouted, "When husband be **real** man and take Shampoo to wife? Shampoo getting tired of waiting. Maybe Shampoo get rid of other girls, other obstacles, then husband no have more trouble to deciding ... " Shampoo suggested slyly as she glared at Ranma with a dangerous gleam in her eye. Taken aback and rather surprised, Ranma gulped and waved his hands back and forth in a warding gesture.

"Now let's not get carried away Shampoo. There ain't no reason to start getting rid of people, it ain't gonna solve nothing." Ranma's tone of voice was growing harder as he spoke.

"Shampoo think so, Shampoo think she start with weakest one first!" With that Shampoo whipped around on her bike and raced off in the general direction of the Tendou residence, trailing a cloud of dust.

Seriously worried now, Ranma started to jump off the canal railing to head her off, when his foot slipped out from underneath him!

"Sonofa ...!" Ranma yelled on his way down into the water. The icy surface of the canal water was shattered from its calm existence with the invading body of one now very female, and very irritated Ranma.

Sputtering and splashing around in the canal, Ranma grit her teeth and jumped clear of the water. Landing over the railing in a low squatting position on the street, breathing heavily and dripping very cold water. With her crimson hair plastered across her face Ranma growled and set off over the rooftops.

Ranma hopped over fences, buildings, people, cars and animals like they weren't even there. Fairly worried now, Ranma raced to stop Shampoo from harming Akane. Genma and Soun were home. But whether or not they would be able to recognize that Shampoo was about to kill Akane would be doubtful. Even if they knew, Shampoo wasn't exactly an easy person to stop.

Bounding over the Tendou Dojo gates Ranma sprinted towards the main house, calling wildly for Akane.

"Akane! Akane look out! Shampoo is trying to kill you! Akane! Akane where are you?!" Ranma screamed as she threw open the patio door and entered the house.

There sitting at the breakfast table was the family ... Akane included, and Shampoo. Sitting

and talking peacefully. Leaning back and stretching Shampoo patted her belly.

"Aiyah! That good cooking. Killed hunger all gone. You is very good cook Kasumi Tendou, give even Shampoo run for her money." Shampoo grinned and stood up. "Shampoo feel much better now, but is delivery, have to go." Passing where Ranma was standing dumbfounded Shampoo winked and leaned in close to whisper, "next time ... Maybe husband do what dutiful wife ask of him, then no have to worry when run home ... remember Shampoo own you ... husband ..." Blowing warm air softly into Ranma's ear Shampoo took her leave of the Tendou residence.

Sweat dropping, Ranma fell over with an exasperated groan as her knees gave out. Akane glanced up and took in her fiancée's latest appearance.

"Honestly Ranma, do you go looking for water?" Akane chuckled quietly to herself and went back to eating. Ranma's goofiness could wait for later.

Emotionally and physically drained Ranma sighed and crawled up the stairs, and into her bedroom. Her senses returned to her enough that she could stand up as she entered the Tendou guest room. Just as she did so Genma came bounding through the door, holding his belly and burping. Turning her head to regard the invasion to her oh so brief peace and quiet, Ranma, standing in a growing pool of icy water, scowled at him.

"Hey boy. Thanks for standing watch last night, you're a credit to the school of Anything Goes Martial Arts!" Genma grinned and slapped the boy on the back. Making a fist hard enough to crack his knuckles, Ranma growled, "yes, but you aint! You lying coward!"

Ranma felt she could use a good fight just now. But decided against it, she was too wound up, and things would just get all ... crazy-like.

"Get out, I'm changing old man!" Was all she said before she shoved Genma from the room, and slapped the door shut and locked it.

"What in the ... **boy!** You open this door! Your father needs his morning nap!" Genma howled from the hallway as he smacked the door frame with his hand repeatedly.

"You stay out there you pervert. I'm not done changing yet!" Ranma retorted.

"But you're a boy for crying out loud Ranma! What is this all a..." Genma started to protest when the door slid open. Ranma was in her bath robe and still had a rather displeased look on her face. She also smelled a lot like, rain gutter water?

"I'm a girl right now you dirty old man, so just deal with it. You can go take your stupid nap now old man, I'm gonna go change back." Ranma said over her shoulder.

"Well that's more like it ..." Genma started to say to himself, until he turned around. -- Piled neatly on his futon were Ranma's wet and dirty clothes. "Ingrate son of mine..." Genma muttered as he sweat dropped and slowly slid the door shut behind him.

Ranma took a quick shower, not even bothering to wait for the water to warm up, and an even quicker bath, just a dunk in the warm water to change back into a boy. Toweling off hurriedly there was still quite a bit of warm water clinging to him as he slid the bathroom door open and started towards his room, and promptly had to backpedal, because Akane was standing right in front of him, looking at him quizzically and almost ... sadly? She had her hands clasped tightly in front of her and had her shoulders hunched forward, a sure sign of someone not sure of themselves.

"Ranma ... " She began. "What's going on with you? You were supposed to be up on the roof standing watch, I went up there at first light to bring you some breakfast ... but ... you weren't there. I ... I guess you went to Shampoo's or Ukyou's for breakfast ... I ... I understand." She said, with a slight shudder in her voice.

Ranma just couldn't help himself, he knew she was just curious as to where he went, and wanted assurance that he valued her more than the other girls. But he also remembered the cold night last night, and her painful silence as the family railroaded him up there, using his honor against him. He couldn't help it, he resented the family, and he resented her a little bit as well.

"I uh, went to ... a special restaurant of ... you ... you just wouldn't understand Akane. No one understands." Ranma replied in a whisper, looking at some point over her shoulder. His voice was catching in his throat. Was he was going to cry?! What was the matter with him?! He didn't want Akane to see him cry.

"I do so understand! Look I heard you arguing with your dad a minute ago, and I know our idiot fathers forced you to stand on the roof last night, but if you were arguing about our engagement with your dad. I understand, both our fathers are idiots, they both do stupid stuff now, and they did lots of stupid stuff in the past, but it's okay now isn't it? It's getting a little better isn't it? We ... we're getting better aren't we?" Akane asked timidly, hopefully.

Suddenly Ranma felt trapped. He had the old man behind him, pushing him to marry this girl. Her father also encouraged him at every turn, to the point of practically throwing him into bed with her if he could. Now even she was standing in front of him saying it would be okay. 'It will be okay,' she had said, suddenly everyone knew what would be okay for him. What about what he wanted?! What about what he thought was okay?

Did he love this girl? Was she the one who was meant for him? He had heard it said that everyone on Earth had a perfect match waiting for them somewhere, they just had to find them. But, he hadn't found her, he had been led to her. Was that enough? Or was it just wishful thinking?

Realizing that Akane was still standing in front of him, and also noticing that his vision was starting to blur, Ranma blurted out in a choked voice, "You don't understand me either, Akane. Not really. No one does. Oh and thanks for sticking up for me last night. I enjoyed the freezing cold up on the roof." Brushing past her down the hallway to the stairs, his footsteps

silent as a ninja's, as always, Ranma didn't look back and Akane didn't watch him go. As usual Akane couldn't hear him go, and as usual Ranma never saw the tears streaming down her face.

'*Damn it!*' Akane mentally screamed. 'I thought we were finally getting somewhere. I thought we were finally connecting!' Storming down the hall to her room, Akane slammed her door so hard it cracked the wood frame, then locked it. Then Akane thundered into her room, kicking off her clothes, and changing into pajamas as she went. Resorting to the emotion that served her best in these types of situations Akane got angry, she turned on her stereo, loud, then fell on her bed.

For a minute she bashed at her pillows, sheets, blankets and even the wall with her fists, knees, feet, and anything else handy. Railing against these inanimate objects with her anger and frustration and the torment of her soul. Kicking and screaming she howled her injustice and pain to the uncaring walls. It was a wonder she didn't cave the walls in.

'**Why?** *Why can't he just love me?* Why does everything have to be an issue with him? A challenge? Why can't he just let me inside of his walls and be with him? Why does he keep pushing me away? Is it my fault? Do I make him do it? Is he acting this way because of me?' Akane thought pitifully to herself in the aftermath of her fit as her strength left her. Then, clutching a rather large pillow to herself, and wrapping her legs about it, she let herself cry. Long drawn out sobs that echoed even over her music. Her shoulders shaking and her head buried deep into the pillows' warm forgiving surface. Hot tears sprang around her tightly clenched eyelids.

Her breathing came erratically as she cried, short heaving gasps, followed by an almost coughing breath that punctuated itself with short minor versions of itself. Then she would snuffle and manage to control herself for a second, only to think of his unkind words again and more tears would leak out. Soon the pillow was soaked with them.

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Resorting to the last trick he had, Ranma used the "Saotome secret technique: runaway until you know what to do." Ranma ran down the stairs and out of the house. He didn't care where he ran, he just ran. As he ran, tears streamed from his eyes as well. But he was in control of himself enough to control his breathing, and to be able to move while he was crying.

He just had to get away. Be alone and think for a little while. He should feel awful for treating his family poorly and snapping at Akane like that, but it was almost as if he felt nothing. Did he feel nothing? Well obviously not. This pain in his chest hurt. But not like a punch or a kick hurt. It felt like someone had reached down his throat and was squeezing his heart.

'Why do I feel so bad now after I yelled at her?' Ranma thought. 'I never feel like this when the old man and I fight.' Ranma thought as he ran. Finally slowing to a jog, then a walk, Ranma looked around, and realized he had no idea where he was. This area of Tokyo looked

kinda old, and dark. It smelt like old rubber and trash. The buildings looked rather worn down too. Where was he?

Dazed Ranma continued to walk, sniffing occasionally, with his hands in his pockets and his head down. He didn't really care where he was anyway. He needed to think.

From the shadows of an alley Ranma had just passed, a band of about six older teenage boys watched Ranma go by. Street tough and large for their age, they made most of their spending money by beating up dorks like the guy in the Chinese pajamas that had just passed them. That and they got the added bonus of a work out. Nodding to each other they slipped out of the alley and started walking behind Ranma. Others on the streets quickly crossed to the other side, they knew what was about to happen. But it was best not to get involved. The poor boy.

Ranma knew they were behind him of course. But he didn't really care. He was too self absorbed with his worries to care. Just a couple of guys following him, they could follow him all they wanted, as long as they didn't bug him.

Smiling, the members of the little band unlimbered an assortment of weapons, from lengths of heavy chain, to lead pipes and knives and even a pair of metal nunchaku. The largest of the group trotted up to Ranma and poked him in the back with his knife blade.

"All right kid, let's make this easy. Give us your money now, and we'll leave ya 'lone. Or, we can just beat it out of you." He added with a snicker.

'Wow,' Ranma thought, 'I really must be in an out of the way part of town, for these morons to attack me ... nobody besides the craziest martial artists attack me ... I thought Japan was supposed to have a low crime rate ...' Ranma thought idly as he tuned around.

Turning around Ranma held up his hands palms out, non-threatening. "Sorry guys, but I didn't bring my wallet with me, do you accept I.O.U.s?" Ranma quipped.

Eyes downcast in mock deference and politeness, the defacto leader of the group smiled, "wrong answer punk." Swinging his hand in an over handed attack, trying to bring the butt of his knife to bear on Ranma's skull, the bully leaned all of his might into it. He was, therefore, a little stunned when the kid casually held up a hand and caught and *stopped* his arm. The bully strained as he tried to move his arm, but it was like his arm was encased in steel. He couldn't move it up or down. Then the kid wiggled his fingers, and suddenly he felt a sharp pain shooting through his wrist like some one had just jabbed a fork in it. Losing all control of his hand the knife fell out and clattered on the sidewalk.

People had stopped on the sidewalk now to watch this. Most of them knew of this gang of

bullies, and seeing them get what was coming to them would be a welcome change from living in fear of them.

Shrugging, Ranma glanced at the rest of the gang. None of them moved, sighing he turned to walk away again. His mind was too crowded to deal with this right now.

Filled with rage, the gang leader grabbed a rock from the ground and heaved it with all his might. Sailing the short distance to Ranma's head it impacted with a terrific cracking against the building wall to the right front of Ranma. Ranma had, of course, heard the small missile incoming, and moved his head the few centimeters needed to dodge it. Unfortunately for Ranma, the rock managed to rebound off the wall, and into a window sill, and rocket right back at his head again. Ranma's legs crumpled under him and he collapsed. A collective sigh went up from those watching, too bad, the kid would probably be beaten to death now. Yet none of them moved to interfere.

'Ouch.' Ranma thought in the murky ether of semi-unconsciousness. That had hurt. 'Now why did they have to go and do that?' He asked himself. 'Now I have to beat'em all up.' He sighed. However when he felt himself being pulled to his feet and he still hadn't seemed to have regained his sense of balance or self, he knew he was in trouble. Solid head shots always did this to him, he needed another 20 seconds or so to snap out of it.

Dangling Ranma off the ground, the leader held him by the shoulders and shook him. "I am gonna enjoy beating the crap outta this one." He gloated to his comrades.

'Gotta ... gotta snap out of this ...' Ranma shouted to himself. 'Have to defend myself, honor of the Anything goes school depends on it.' Ranma strained to shake himself into action, but nothing happened. His limbs wouldn't respond.

The leader maneuvered Ranma around into a full nelson hold, and pulled him upright, and called to his cronies to come play. Gleefully they advanced on Ranma and proceeded to slam into him over and over again. Punching him in the kidneys, smashing him in the stomach with vicious kicks, punching him all about the face until he was bleeding everywhere. His body desperately wanted to fold in on itself to protect itself, or lie down or something, but the one holding him, held him up straight.

Ranma knew he was in real trouble, these morons could very well kill him. He *needed* to protect himself. These animals needed to be taught a lesson, they needed to be brought to justice. Protection ... justice. These two things swirled in Ranma mind and started to take on a life of their own.

Somewhere deep inside of himself Ranma felt something very powerful stirring. Something he had felt before, but now it was something almost tangible, and it was growing sharper and stronger, he knew that it had always been there, but now it almost seemed like he could call it

to himself. Slowly Ranma started to swim out of the ether. Calling upon reserves of strength he didn't even know he possessed and he acted.

Using a principal of the art known as purposeful compliance, Ranma let the one pushing down on his neck with his arms wrapped under his arms to push him down more, by ducking his head down sharply. This threw his attacker totally off balance. Then quickly reversing the motion into purposeful defiance Ranma slammed the back of his skull into his attacker's nose as the now off balance gang leader fell forward, lending his forward momentum energy into the strike -- a force which Ranma's attack borrowed and multiplied with his opposite motion.

Stunned, the attacker loosened his grip, but not all the way. Twisting and using his hips Ranma thrust his right hip into the attacker's groin region, pushing his attacker back a step and creating distance between them, then lifted his right leg up and swiftly back kicked his attacker's left knee out, then recoiled the motion and snap-side kicked the right one as well. With his attackers grip now gone and falling, Ranma whipped around and smashed a vicious back knuckle strike at the attacker's temple. Dropping him with the motion he had caused from the two broken knees.

Standing there reeling slightly Ranma glared at the rest of the group. They had a beating coming as well. With a shout they all rushed him, knives and clubs and chains all swinging. Ranma turned into a whirlwind of motion and grace. Parrying knife and club attacks into the other attackers, he watched almost as if he wasn't the one doing it, as the would be attackers attacked themselves. Two went down immediately from knife wounds.

Then Ranma's hands were moving. Using many techniques Tofu had just taught him, Ranma lashed out in the spirit of Justice and protection. Smashing his ridged fingers into sensitive areas of their necks and arms, legs and groins. The pressure points, when used in succession like that, multiplied their effects, and effectively caused their nervous systems to shut down. Soon, the only one standing was Ranma.

With his breath heaving, Ranma started to stagger away. When he heard a frantic woman's shout, "my baby! Where is my baby?!! Please, **help!** Anyone?! Where is my baby." 'What now?' Ranma thought in irritation. Glancing down the street to where a movie theater was letting out, Ranma saw a young woman in her late twenties or so, swinging around wildly and screaming frantically for her daughter, "Rina! Rina! Rina where are you?!" The mother called.

Grimacing with the pain, Ranma hopped up to the nearest rooftop, and looked around. There at the edge of the crowd and quickly disappearing, was a man holding a kicking and screaming little girl under his arm as he ran. Breathless Ranma hopped down from the building and started to run. Then a little faster, then a little more. But the man had quite a lead already, and Ranma knew he wasn't going to be able to catch him, but he ran on anyway. Running much faster than most young men his age ever would be able, he still

wasn't able to hit his top speed.

The man was getting away. Funneling everything he had into his run, Ranma sprinted. Slowly he started to gain on the man. A fire was spreading at his side, and something warm was trickling down his leg, but Ranma ignored it. Faster and faster Ranma ran, his arms pumping furiously and his legs flying over the ground. Jumping over a curb, Ranma's toe caught the edge, normally not enough to even phase him Ranma went tumbling, hard, into the pavement. Rolling to a stop, Ranma tried to pop back up onto his feet, and promptly fell over again as an incredible pain stabbed him in on his right side, clutching the area with his hand, Ranma tried to stand again, getting up on one knee Ranma lost his balance, and had to put both hands on the ground to steady himself.

Leaning back into a sitting position Ranma noticed he had left a bloody hand print on the ground. Glancing down to his side he saw that maybe one of those knife blades had gotten through his defense after all? Shrugging Ranma tried to stand again. "Feh, I've been hurt worse than this before." Ranma muttered under his breath as he grit his teeth and tried to stand. This time the pain hit him so hard it knocked him onto his back. A crowd was starting to form.

'**Nooooo!**' Ranma's mind screamed to him. '**Get up!**' He told himself. 'Get up and run **you wimp, you coward, you weakling!** Get up and save her, **now!**' Shame swept over Ranma and he tried to get up again and couldn't. Ranma's mind howled at the injustice of it all. If he hadn't been beaten to within an inch of his life just a minute ago, he could protect this girl.

'*Protection ... justice.*' Those two words stabbed at his heart as real as any knife blade could. He was a protector. Not like those corny cartoons on TV with the dorky character howling about justice and protection as they made stupid poses and chanted little songs to themselves, the real thing. Justice ... and protecting those that cannot save themselves. For some reason that meant a lot to Ranma right now.

The powerful urge inside him stirred violently and started to expand. With a large crowd gathering around him now Ranma curled into the fetal position and cried out in pain, mind numbing pain. It **hurt!** Needles of fire-like energy stabbed at him, and threw him at their mercy.

Protection! Justice! Those thoughts burned in his mind like an inferno. He **needed** to protect this girl, he had to stand up, he had to run after them. '**Stand up!**' He screamed to himself. '**Get up, now! Be a man and save her!**' He slapped himself mentally. Staggering to his feet Ranma clutched his side as a sharp pain ripped through it again, this time tearing something, glancing down he saw blood oozing through his fingers.

Gritting his teeth Ranma tried to stand again, up on his knees he saw the man round a corner and was then out of sight. The frantic mother oblivious to what Ranma knew,

screamed again, "my baby! Where is my baby?!" The mother's shouts, the pain inside him, the white noise from the curious crowds' insipid comments, everything floated into and around Ranma, and ... something inside of himself bent, with each cry of the mother, with each intake of breath Ranma drew through his wheezing lungs, with every stupid sound the crowd made it bent a little more, then snapped. A barrier in his heart shattered over something old and terrible and suddenly the world seemed to be going in slow motion as a flash of light danced across Ranma's vision, the crowd of people seemed to literally stop.

Protection, justice ... Protection, justice ... Protection, justice ... Protection, justice ...
Protection, justice ... Protection! Justice! ... Protection! Justice! ... PROTECTION!
JUSTICE! ... the thoughts swirled around his mind, stabbing him everywhere, he **had** to do something.

Falling to his knees Ranma surrendered to the overwhelming awful powers that were trying to grip him, trying to gain control. Then all hell broke loose.

Suddenly on his feet with his arms outstretched, Ranma's eyes closed and he screamed words, which had no meaning. Face pointed heavenward he called out with strange words no one alive had ever heard before, again and again he cried out. Clouds appeared overhead, quickly and unnaturally, rolling in on powerful currents of cold air to blot out the sun. The wind chilled and thunder rumbled. Calling again and again to the heavens Ranma stretched his arms heavenward and turned his hands palms up. With crackling energy lightning struck his outstretched right hand. Once, twice, then both hands simultaneously.

The sizzle and heat of the energy blew the crowd surrounding him back. Again and again lightning struck his hands, and instead of killing him as it should have done, he seemed to suck the energy into himself. The wind rose up and swirled about him. Faster and faster, making a living wall of motion. The wind carried away people's hats and odd pieces of clothing, but Ranma stood untouched in the center of the chaos. The wind was not a normal wind, it had form and motion and substance, like it was alive. It swirled about him so fast that the crowd was forced to back up even further, or face being cut down by it.

When the wind abated there stood Ranma, arms at his sides now and breathing heavily, head hanging down to his chest. Standing upright but swaying violently from side to side like a marionette without a puppet master left on a hook to blow in the wind, he suddenly snapped his eyes open. They were swimming with quicksilver light. His body was literally glowing white from his intense focus on his need for vengeance, justice and protection. Tinged at the tips of the glow was a blue radiance.

Holding his right arm out Ranma uttered a single word of the bizarre language, and the world went silent. Again Ranma said the word, then again, louder and louder he said it all the while holding his arm out. Slowly a streamer of white energy flowed out of his outstretched hand. Snaking it's way in the direction the man had went the ribbon of light grew larger and

brighter, then rapidly gained momentum, shooting around people and buildings, now the ribbon of light energy darted in the direction the man had gone. Out of sight now all that was visible was Ranma swaying back and forth chanting the single word and the pulsating ribbon of light streaming from his outstretched hand.

In the distance a thunderclap worthy of the Gods sounded, then silence ensued. Calmly Ranma stood his ground. Quietly chanting the word over and over again. A minute passed then the cord of light seemed to grow almost solid, at the edge of the square a man appeared, with a little girl under his arm, he was being pulled backwards, and his feet were dragging noisily across the ground, his limbs were locked in place, only his eyes seemed to be able to move, and they were darting around frantically.

Snapping his arm back like he was cracking a whip Ranma yanked the man to him. Sailing across the square on unnatural currents of power the man jerked to a stop in front of Ranma. Holding his other hand out, Ranma commanded something in the bizarre language and the man's arm holding the girl raised obediently. Crying, the girl dropped to the ground, and quickly raced to her mother. The frantic and tearful mother enfolding her into her like she was trying to absorb her, and embraced her little girl again.

Ranma's eyes were locked on the unblinking eyes of the would-be kidnapper. The kidnapper looked afraid, but like he was trying to be macho at the same time. Coldly he stared back at Ranma. Ranma smiled a feral grin.

Raising both hands skyward, palms up and clawing, the man did the same on invisible tendrils of power. Then shouting his cries of vengeance Ranma made breaking motions with his hands, and the man's limbs began breaking. Then Ranma made a violent throwing motion, and the man now with two broken arms and legs went flying across the street, and collapsed, broken and near death.

The power raged inside Ranma. It cried for blood. It **needed** to kill. Betrayers ... parasites ... the refuge of the world preying on the weak and innocent. Those who would shatter another's life to fulfill their sick dreams and desires. They all needed to die. Rage gripped Ranma now as he stalked towards the man, to finish him off. Like a wild animal with a kill in sight, and the blood of the kill already sampled, the power cried out to finish it. Advancing a step in the would-be kidnapper's direction Ranma's brilliant white aura started to glow red around the edges instead of blue. When suddenly he felt a slight weight about his waist gripping him tightly.

"Thank you for saving me mister." The little girl sobbed, slurring her words as little girls do, ignoring the fact that this person was glowing weird colors and was doing odd things, and rubbed her nose on Ranma's knee as she sniffled.

All thoughts of death and destruction fled Ranma as the innocence of the little girl invaded

his mind. Sinking down to his knees Ranma gathered the girl into his arms and held her while she cried. Permitting himself a small breach of control, Ranma let his tears roll down his cheeks as well as he held her head to his chest and cried in her hair. The stress of what had just happened finally hit him and Ranma started to go unconscious.

As he slumped forward a brilliant flash of white light swept out of him and another thunder clap sounded, this time right over the square. The light struck everyone in a radius of one kilometer in the eyes. The light muddled their immediate memories as to make them indecipherable.

The mother of the little girl maintained enough sense to be able to recognize Ranma as a protector and not a threat to her little girl, and went to call an ambulance for him, she knew her girl was safe with him.

A short while later Ranma's head snapped up as the growing sound of an ambulance grew nearer. Like the ebb and flow of the sea, the obnoxious tone of the ambulance siren dug into Ranma's nerves like claws on a chalk board. Jerkily standing up Ranma deposited the little girl back into the arms of her waiting mother and began to walk, or more accurately stagger, away. The mother made as if she were going to try to stop him, but one look at those troubled cloudy eyes of his was enough to change her mind.

The air had the odd smell of charcoal and the sea after a storm. Seeing as he was in Tokyo that was even more bizarre. As he walked, the sky continued to grow overcast and a chill wind picked up. The wind darted into Ranma's clothes as if to remind him that all his physical power still meant nothing to the wind.

Ranma felt ... weak? His arms and legs were shaking and he had no energy. Limping home Ranma took a street parallel to the one he had wasted that gang on, if they were up and about right now, they would probably try kill him, and in his current state they just might succeed.

Stubbing his toes into the pavement as he short stepped his walk home Ranma's mind raced. He was fairly sure he had just done something odd. The evidence was very similar to that from when Akane healed Nabiki. He couldn't remember anything, and things that shouldn't have been able to happen, had happened. And to top it off he felt very drained, but unlike Akane, he didn't seem to be able to recover as fast as she had, when she had been acting all weird like this.

Crossing a small low bridge that spanned one of the many channels in Tokyo, a wave of dizziness swept over Ranma causing his nausea to reach it's limit and then cross it, his knees gave out, and sick to his stomach, he crawled over to the edge of the bridge, throwing up into the water and all over the bridge.

"Well aren't you a sorry sight." A scratchy wizened old voice crooned. Too drained to even venture a come back Ranma simply nodded and continued to throw up, his whole body shuddering now as the nausea took him.

"So you finally touched it didn't you? You finally let the power have control didn't you? I knew this day was coming, but I never would have guessed that you would have been able to use the power at such an early age ... remarkable." Cologne declared.

Watching her out of the corner of his eye Ranma continued to dry heave. The fact that Cologne always seemed to know things ahead of Ranma, and things she should not know in the first place was keeping in step with her knowing about this ... this, whatever this was. Laying down flat on his stomach, Ranma reached down and scooped some of the rushing water into his hands and dipped his face in it, rinsing and refreshing himself and at the same time changing into a girl for the second time that day. Standing a few seconds later with a little more dignity Ranma turned to face the old ghoul and demand some answers.

She was no longer there. Shrugging Ranma stuck her hands in her pockets and continued walking. "It's better this way anyways, she always makes things worse." Ranma said to herself.

"The time of prophecy is at hand son-in-law!" Cologne shouted from down the street behind him, turning slowly, Ranma saw her silhouette black against the late morning sun. "A battle is coming soon son in law, one that I doubt you are ready for. I will return to help you soon, prepare yourself for your ultimate test!" Her grave words echoed loudly and clearly across the distance between them like it didn't exist. With that she turned and vanished down the rooftop, as only Cologne could do.

Taking a deep breath, Ranma pressed the palms of her hands into her eyes, trying to keep her mind inside. What on earth was everyone talking about? Prophecy, power, magic, battles? She was just a sixteen year old Martial Artist for crying out loud!

Deciding to deny things for the time being, Ranma picked up her pace and started to run home, the landmarks were starting to look more familiar, he had a general idea of what section of town she was in, it was the same section that Nabiki had been assaulted in. Nabiki ... assaulted. Who **had** assaulted her anyway? Ranma re-affirmed her decision she had made when Kasumi had been attacked. Whoever was messing with her family was about to be sorry, she and Tofu together could take on just about anything.

Reaching the Tendou dojo Ranma paused on the street outside. Akane was in there. That meant she would have to deal with that whole situation again if she went in there. Because if Akane was crying, Soun would be crying, and if Soun was crying Genma would be looking for her. Glancing at the shadow lengths in the garden, Ranma judged she had only been gone about an hour. Sighing to herself Ranma steeled herself to Genma's ranting, and Soun's

blubbering.

Inching the courtyard gate open Ranma peeked her head inside. Nothing. There was no movement, no sound, no sign of anything. Getting slightly worried Ranma opened the gate all the way and walked into the garden, her senses on edge, straining to detect danger before it found her. Her head swiveled from side to side looking for things out of place, and her steps and stance took on a battle poise.

Sliding open the patio door with a soft swishing sound and a snap as the door slid into the wall lock, Ranma looked for signs of danger. There were none. A flash of white on the dining table caught her eye, walking over to the table Ranma picked up the note, in Nabiki's ledger perfect writing it read:

"Saotome:

*We went out of dinner and a movie. Akane wouldn't answer her door, and her music has been on loud all morning. I think you **know** what that means. You better fix things before daddy finds out. I'll keep them busy until late. Tofu is still sitting with Kasumi, or reading that dumb book of his, so you should have no interruptions.*

*Your future sister in law;
Nabi-chan*

p.s. you ever call me that in public and I will be forced to kill you."

Crumpling the note up Ranma walked into the kitchen and tossed it into the garbage. Quickly putting a kettle full of water on high flame onto the stove Ranma popped the fridge open and rummaged around for a snack. Dumping the hot water over his head, then wiping his head off with a dish towel, Ranma continued to fix his snack. If he was going to walk up those stairs and confront Akane ... he might as well die with a last meal.

So Ranma fixed himself a "small" snack. Chuckling to himself Ranma thought, 'Saotome super secret Snack Technique: how to fix and eat enough food for three in less than five minutes, without disappointing Kasumi by leaving a mess in the kitchen.' Wolfing his food down made him feel a little better, and it seemed to restore some of the energy he had lost when he ... no! He wasn't going to think about that.

Sighing mightily to himself Ranma pushed his chair back from the table with a noisy scrape and shuffled out of the kitchen and up the stairs, hands in pockets and head held low ... this wasn't going to be fun.

Arriving outside of Akane's door Ranma could indeed hear her stereo up to full volume. Pausing a moment to collect himself Ranma knocked on the door. Waiting a few minutes Ranma knocked again a little louder. Still no answer, shouting her name Ranma slammed on

the door with his closed fist. Why did she have to make everything so difficult? His anger getting the best of him Ranma hit the door a little too hard, and with a loud breaking pop, the door caved inward.

Ranma froze, there laying on the bed was Akane, she appeared to have cried herself to sleep, and before she had let herself drift off, she had undressed! Laying atop the covers in her underwear, what little clothing she had on was in serious disarray from squirming around while both crying and sleeping. Sitting up on the bed, propping herself up with one hand behind her, and pulling a blanket to cover herself, Akane drowsily, but with a definite hint of anger in her tone of voice asked, "what do **you** want?"

Oops. Ranma had made a little boo-boo. This was one of those situations you always hear about people getting into, and you always assume will happen to someone else. Unfortunately, we are all someone else to everyone else.

Dumbfounded Ranma stood staring at Akane. Why did the sight of her semi-naked do this to him, he had seen his female side plenty of times, and it was better built to boot. Stammering, Ranma tried to apologize for the door and his perverted viewing pleasures.

"I ... um ... look Akane, it's not what it seems, I mean ... I ..." With a loud sigh, Ranma hung his head and muttered,

"Look I'm sorry okay, I didn't mean to yell at you earlier, and I didn't mean to break your door down, or peek at you, I'll just go now Akane, I know you hate me."

"Ranma!" Akane yelled at him as he turned to leave. "Get back in here!" She said a little quieter. Obeying, Ranma stood back in her doorway. "Close the door and come inside you goofball." Akane rolled her eyes and chastised him. Glancing at the door hanging crazily on two of it's original three western style hinges, Ranma shrugged, and forced the door back into the now slightly warped jam, an awful squealing, scraping noise emanating from it as he did so. Turning back around Ranma stared at Akane's toes, since she was still almost naked.

"Come here Ranma." Akane ordered. 'Oh boy here it comes.' Ranma thought as he braced himself for a smacking. "Sit down on the bed Ranma." Akane ordered him again. His ire rising slightly Ranma let her order him around, he was the one who had wronged her first.

"Ranma ..." Akane began. "I ... I'm sorry I didn't stick up for you, and I'm sorry I stuck my nose in where it didn't belong, you had every reason to get upset with me." Akane stated in a cold distant monotone, as if she had given up. "I know you don't love me, I don't know who you do love, but I won't get in your way anymore. We can pretend to be engaged to please our idiotic fathers, but I won't try to interfere anymore, okay? You don't have to hate me anymore, or resent me, I release you."

Her words struck him to the core. She released him? She knew he didn't love her? Pretend to get along with him?! No, no, no, no, no! This wasn't supposed to happen at all.

Quickly Ranma turned to look at her, was she testing him? To see how he would react if she didn't behave rationally, to see if he loved her no matter what? 'Why do women do these things?' He wondered. Totally oblivious to her state of dress now, Ranma grabbed her hands, causing her to drop the blanket, and exposing her even more, neither one of them seemed to notice.

"Akane, you cut that out! You know that I I ... lo ... like you. What is going on in your fool head?! Why do you think I hang around this place still huh? Not to make my old man happy you can bet on that." Biting her lip Akane looked away. "Besides, with your cooking, I must be building up a serious resistance to poison attacks, it's even training." Ranma joked, slapping Akane on the back, trying to lighten the mood. Growling Akane slugged him, then quickly slumped her shoulders and leaned against him sighing in defeat.

"Yes but ... I ..."

"Yes but nothing Akane ..." Ranma said quietly.

"Ranma do you ...?" Akane left her question unanswered, hoping Ranma would fill in her blanks. Ranma gently cupped her chin in his hand, and slowly turned her face to look at him.

Reluctantly she dragged her eyes to meet his, and to her surprise she saw it, she saw him let his guard down ever so slightly, she saw kindness and caring, and worry and I-love? ... or something like that anyway? In his eyes. He wasn't lying, he really did care for her.

"Oh Ranma!" Akane's voice caught as emotions she had just spent the better part of an hour trying to bury jumped up into her throat.

SLAP

The echo of her slap was louder than the stereo. "You insensitive jerk! Stop scaring me like that!" Rubbing his jaw in complete surprise, Ranma decided he had deserved that. Her stereo was getting on his nerves though, so quickly hopping off the bed Ranma walked over to it and turned the volume down to a human level.

Then he walked back over to her bed and sat down gingerly at the edge, acutely aware of her lack of clothing again, and the fact that they were basically alone in the house for the rest of the day.

Akane didn't seem to mind at all though. "Ranma!" She yelped at him. Swinging his eyes to her he saw her pointing to the spot on the bed beside her by the wall. "Get over here you stupid pervert jerk." She said in a light teasing tone of voice.

Hesitantly Ranma complied, wondering what she wanted. They were far too young for ...

that! Sitting stiffly beside her Ranma waited for her to take the lead. He was always waiting for the girls to take the lead, he was such a ... such a ... wimp! ... in some matters anyway ...

Akane watched him out of the corner of her eye, grimacing to herself as she saw him wrestling with his doubts and insecurities. Akane patiently waited for him to take the lead for once in his life. But after a few minutes it was obvious he still wasn't ready for much of anything. Sighing, Akane leaned into him, wrapping him in a big bear hug, and promptly jumped away from him.

"Ranma! You're hurt! What in the world ..." Akane looked at her hand in horror, coated in Ranma's blood.

"Oh ... that ... I forgot about that." Ranma said with hand behind head in embarrassment. "I uh ... got in a little, um, fight when I went for my walk earlier." Ranma said uncomfortably.

"What is the matter with you?! Why didn't you ... why didn't you have Dr. Tofu fix this the second you walked in the door you big idiot! Are you trying to kill yourself?!" Akane glared at him as she dashed to her closet and grabbed a T-shirt to use as a bandage, and dashed back to the bed, tearing Ranma's shirt off she gasped as she saw the wound.

A six centimeter gash across his side, already with some puss around it and clotting with dark angry colored blood, the surrounding skin was very swollen and infected looking. Akane's hand darted to her mouth in horror as she recoiled from the wound. She hadn't been prepared for ... that.

"What ... what happened to you ...?" Akane finally managed to ask. Her breath was coming in short panting gasps now, like she was hyperventilating. Her knees felt weak, and the floor seemed to be rising up to meet her.

Ranma was hurt, he could be dying. She had to save him. She had to get the doctor! Dashing to the door Akane yanked with all her might, and almost dislocated her shoulder. Ranma had lodged it in there good!

Glancing over at Ranma, Akane's heart almost stopped, he was bleeding from the wound freely now, and it was dripping down his side, leaning against the wall his eyes were half shut and he seemed to be breathing very slowly!

Panicked beyond reasonable thought Akane jumped onto the bed and slapped him, hard. "Don't you dare die on me Ranma Saotome! I'll kill you before I let you die on me!" Emotions took control of Akane as she slumped against him and wrapped him in a tender hug. "It's gonna be all right Ranma. You just lay down and rest and I'll go get the doctor ..." Akane whispered in his ear, Ranma nodded imperceptibly, his strength was fading fast all of a sudden, he needed to sit down and have a talk with his body about doing things like this to him at the worst times.

As she held him her hand brushed his wound, and sparks felt like they leapt from her hand! Glancing down Akane noticed the skin around his wound seemed to be a little less swollen and red.

Curious Akane looked at her hand and found no trace of blood. "What in the ..." Akane muttered. Tenderly, Akane lowered her hand to Ranma's side, and cupped the wound.

Ranma sat up straight and gasped. Then yelped out loud, "ahhh! That hurts!" Terrified, Akane yanked her hand back and Ranma slumped back onto the bed.

Looking at her hand again Akane found no blood, and now it seemed to be glowing a faint yellow! Looking at Ranma's side again, Akane sucked her breath in sharply. The swelling had gone way down, and the redness was almost completely gone and the wound had closed about halfway.

Ranma was lying on the bed now, moaning and tossing his head from side to side in incoherency. The wound must have given him a slight fever as well ... or something like it.

Grimacing Akane closed her eyes and gently covered Ranma's side with her hand again. This time her hand seemed to almost fuse with his skin. Odd sounds seemed to be chiming in her head, almost as if she was hearing voices from far away, with her eyes closed she couldn't see anything, but her eyes felt ... funny, like they were heavier or something and she smelled ... she smelled ... the wind? Her room suddenly smelled like a late summer afternoon in a meadow, with the breeze carrying all sorts of exotic smells to her eagerly awaiting nose.

Ranma arched his back as Akane's hand touched his wound. The pain was incredible. His mind was almost at the point of taking a vacation it hurt so bad. Then suddenly it was taken from him. The pain the soreness, all of it, and not just from his side, his whole body felt like it was floating in warm soothing liquid. Opening his eyes Ranma looked up to see Akane kneeling next to him, her hand covering his wound and her eyes shut tightly. Her face was scrunched up in what looked like worry, and for some strange reason her hair was moving around like it was blowing in the wind, but there was no wind in her room ...

Akane was tired, so very tired. Trying with all her might to hang on to Ranma, to heal him and fix him, her strength finally gave out.

Just as suddenly as Ranma's pain had left him, so was Akane's collapse. Falling on to him Akane lay still for a few seconds. The second her hand left his side and their bodies came into contact Ranma's body felt like someone had snuck up on him and zapped him with a

huge shock of static electricity. Instantly he felt drained.

Rolling over onto her back, and off of Ranma's chest to lay beside him Akane suddenly felt very refreshed. Ranma glanced at her and saw for the faintest of seconds a swirling vortex of quicksilver in her eyes, then it was gone. Sighing heavily Ranma leaned back into his pillow and pressed his hands palm first into his forehead. This was getting all freaky-like.

"Akane ..." Ranma started out

"Y-Yes Ranma?" Akane answered hesitantly.

"You gotta find something else to drain after ya do that, I am not the energizer bunny." Ranma monotoned, smiling to himself.

"Idiot!" Akane growled and chucked a pillow at his head. Sitting up and looking at the bed, Akane was amazed to find it clean, without a trace of blood. Quickly looking at Ranma's side Akane breathed a sigh of relief to find him completely healed. Looking over the rest of his body, she saw all his other little cuts and bruises were gone too.

The small part of Akane's mind that demanded to know what the hell just happened Akane squished under a shield of denial for the time being ... she wasn't ready to even consider what she had just done. She just wanted to sleep very badly all of a sudden. Grinning like a happy fool Akane snuggled up close to her fiancée. He *was* her fiancée after all, there *had* to be *some* fringe benefits, and having someone to sleep with is very, very nice.

Sighing mightily, Akane buried her head into Ranma's neck, and snaked one arm around and behind his neck, and the other under his arm and around his back, then draped her leg over his knee, holding him as lovers will. Sighing deeply and taking in the smell of him, and feeling his deliciously warm and firm skin pressed against hers, she let his heart beat carry her to unconsciousness. She knew she could trust Ranma to behave himself if she wasn't initiating anything.

Ranma's mind was heading for a critical overload, Akane had practically enveloped him! Where had this come from?! One minute he was dying and she was saving him, the next minute she was wrapping him in a bear hug?

What was he supposed to do? Copying the way she had her arms around him, he encircled her neck with one hand, and draped her waist with his other, he left his legs still though, since the tremendous vise of her legs was gripping him very tightly almost as if she possessed him.

In her sleepy state Akane sighed or was that a moan? Ranma had heard about girls moaning, and had always wondered what it sounded like, then he jumped slightly as ten

sharp sudden pricks of pain lanced down his neck and back, as Akane dug her nails into him, marking him as her property.

It kinda hurt, but she was pulling him real close to do it, and being pressed into someone who is smaller than you and female, and seems to like you for some odd reason, is a very nice sensation. Akane smiled to herself as Ranma threw a blanket over them quickly and then hugged her back. He had accepted her in a way, she still hadn't gotten him to say he loved her, but she had a feeling that he would some day soon. He had come awfully close today.

"I wonder what will happen tomorrow?" Akane whispered to her lover. Her soul mate, whether he knew it yet or not.

"Tomorrow ... tomorrow Akane, we start the plan. Tomorrow all hell is going to break loose. By the way ... do you still have that pup-tent and your sleeping bags?" Ranma answered her, whispering in her ear with just the faintest of volume, she was the only one in the world who could hear him right now.

"I ... I think so Ranma, why ..." Akane answered back sleepily.

"You'll see." Was all Ranma said as he hugged her close and started to drift off into sleep. Satisfied for the moment Akane drifted off into a sleep that only lovers can enjoy, a perfect union with your soul mate, warm and safe in their bed, that lets you sleep the best sleep possible, even if it was mid-day.