

A Ranma 1/2 Fanfic Series: "Ranma Gets A Clue"

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Chapter split into two chapters, and re-written slightly: 2007-12-30.

## Chapter 11, "The Plan"

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### Notes:

Here is the newly split up chapter 11. There is now a chapter 12, which was split off from this chapter, and made into its own rightful chapter. The old chapter 11 tried to do too many things at once. The new chapter 11 is rightly focusing on only a major topic now.

Both this newly edited chapter 11, and the newly edited chapter 12 have been slightly re-written to better shape them as their own chapters. No major re-write has been done though. So, if you have read it before, you will not find anything particularly surprising.

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Morning at the Tendou dojo was usually an interesting affair. Sometimes one could see a rather large Panda attacking a buxom red-headed girl, who was frequently without a shirt. Much to the delight of many of the telescope and or binocular owning residents nearby. Sometimes you could smell the most heavenly scents coming from the Tendou kitchen, and other days those scents would be marred by what could only be described as ... composting? Oft times one could hear the sounds of fighting coming from within the walls of the Tendou estate, and most of the residents of the Nerima district knew better than to hang around there for very long. All in all, the Tendou dojo was a rather rowdy place, except for today.

Ranma and Akane were still sound asleep in Akane's bedroom. Kasumi was in the kitchen making her morning tea, and smiling to herself with an inner glee. Tofu was in the sitting room reading the morning newspaper with Soun. Genma was snoring away in his room as was Nabiki, and Happosai ... well Happosai was being quiet, weird, but quiet.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Happosai was quietly humming to himself with his mini-ironing set on his lap. On the kitchen table was perched an enormous pile of women's panties and bras. Kasumi, as easy going as ever, noticed them, and made a mental note to sterilize the table very ... very thoroughly later, but decided not to press the matter. Happosai was in pervert heaven.

Smiling peacefully, Kasumi asked the distracted Happosai, "so grandfather Happosai, were you out late last night?" Happosai sighed in answer, "panties."

"Oh my, that's quite a collection you have there ..." again the answer came, "paaaaaaaanties." Arching an eyebrow, Kasumi smiled and said sweetly over her tea cup, "your hair is on fire." Happosai nodded dreamily and whispered reverently, "panties."

'Thought so,' Kasumi grinned to herself.

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In Akane's room, Ranma rolled over and hugged Akane close to him. She snuggled back into his body in return, her arms were held close in tight to her chest as she lay on her side, and Ranma's arms overlapped hers to enfold her tightly. Her back was to him so Ranma was happily hugging her in his favorite "spoons" position.

They were both semi-awake, but neither one of them really cared to break the mood by sitting up, or speaking, the bed was soft and warm, and although they hadn't admitted it to anyone yet, they were basically committed to each other, and had accepted that. They just hadn't quite gotten around to saying it to each other yet.

The long minutes of half sleep passed and Akane's room started to grow warm from the sun's glare through the window. Suddenly three low taps came from Akane's door, and Nabiki's voice sang out melodically, "you two love birds better make yourselves seen pretty soon, or daddy is gonna find out, and you *know* he will have a priest in here in 5 seconds to marry you if he catches Ranma in your room, 'Kane-chan."

Akane rolled over in bed and met Ranma's panicked eyes and whispered to him, "as obnoxious as she is, she's right and you'd better hit the window Ran-chan." Akane referred to him with his second most common pet name ... the first most common being, 'hey idiot.' Ran-chan was the name Ukyou called him. Akane had *never* called him by a nickname. "That is, if you are all better now from your boo-boos, Ran-chan?" Akane asked sweetly and crinkled up her nose in her cutest smile and kissed him on the nose.

The events of yesterday were coming back to Ranma and he sat up abruptly and felt around his torso for wounds, and found none. Glancing at Akane, all he got was a shrug, then a push.

Looking up at her from the floor Ranma put on his best pouty face. "Not even married yet, and already you're kicking me out of the bed, Akane?" Ranma teased. Akane blushed and chucked a pillow at his head, which Ranma absorbed with an audible, "oof."

"Don't joke about stuff like that, Ranma!" Akane admonished him as she attempted to pull off a serious face as Ranma started to mock cry from his seat on the floor, he was **so** cute sometimes!

"If daddy heard you saying something like that, coming from MY room, we really will be married today, you dork. Now grab your stuff and hop out the window before someone

catches us, you goober!" Akane punctuated her lecture with another well aimed pillow, this one got him square in the mouth, which he had open in mock bawling. Coughing up the pillow, Ranma gave her a, *you are gonna pay for that with some serious tickling*, look, grabbed his stuff and jumped out the window. A second later a loud splash could be heard out her window, and Ranma's indignant cursing in a now very female voice... "Why in the hell do they even have this stupid pond anyways...!? Son of a ...! I **hate** water!" The curses faded as Ranma made her way towards the house.

Giggling, Akane rolled out of bed and started to get dressed for the day. One would think that after this long, the moron would have learned where the koi pond was by now.

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Grumbling to herself Ranma yanked open the porch door and entered the morning breakfast area. Plopping down with a frustrated oath, Ranma yanked her shirt off and started to squeeze the water out of it. Grinning her evil grin, Nabiki eyed Ranma from across the room and grinned. Ranma ignored her. Soun glanced up from his paper with his custom toothbrush in his mouth, but only seeing Ranma in her usual display of an utter lack of feminine modesty he went back to the news. Genma in panda form slothed into the room and yawning emptied a kettle of hot water onto his "son's" head.

**"Yeeeoow! Hey, you blubber-buttid idiot panda, it's *hot water*, not scalding! Ya trying ta *kill me*?!"** Ranma yelped from his back as he lay panting in shock on the floor.

Genma, not even missing a beat, held up a sign with scribbled lettering that read, 'and get out of my seat ya ingrate.' Which he followed up with a punt to Ranma's rear-end, sending him flying.

Ranma went sailing into the yard and landed head first in the garden, sitting there upside down he growled, "okay, that's it." With a battle cry Ranma leapt at his panda-formed father and connected with a full power side kick to his head. Genma jumped up from the floor and held up a sign reading, 'you asked for it,' and lunged at Ranma, their fight soon had them rolling around outside and soon everyone was ignoring them, except for Nabiki, who eyed them from her perch in the corner of the room on her beanbag.

"Good grief, you'd think one of them would have killed the other by now." Nabiki muttered before going back to her morning manga.

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Up in a tree, across the street from the Tendou estate, Ukyou watched the whole scene with a dispassionate glare. Her business here today didn't concern Ranma-honey, not directly

anyway. It was time to end it. It was time to force Akane to release her hold on Ranma and his honor, and she was just the girl to do it.

Hopping down from the tree, Ukyou checked her bandoleer spatulas and her giant battle spatula strapped to her back. Setting her shoulders and taking a deep breath, Ukyou steeled herself for the coming battle, not just a battle with fists and weapons, but an emotional battle as well ... this was going to be intense. Clenching her jaw, Ukyou started to march to the Tendou dojo's front gate.

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Shampoo of the Amazon warrior tribe of Joketsuzoku China smirked from her rooftop perch three houses down from Ukyou's tree. This was going to be interesting. Waiting until she was sure Ukyou wouldn't notice her, Shampoo stealthily moved to a closer location to get a better view.

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Reaching the Tendou gate, Ukyou paused for a moment debating whether to hop the fence or knock. She opted to hop. Clearing the fence top, Ukyou landed in a crouch and unsheathed her battle spatula. Peering out from the crop of bushes she had landed behind, Ukyou changed her strategy and resheathed her battle spatula and decided to wait for the enemy to show her face.

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Akane yawned on her way down the stairs for breakfast. It had taken her a good five minutes to yank that stupid door open. Silently she vowed to make Ranma fix it later. Entering the family dining room, Akane glanced out the sliding doors to the peaceful presence of nature. No matter what was going on in her life, she could always stop and watch nature and feel better about everything. The wind dancing in the treetops and the grass, making them sway to a hidden melody. The chirps and songs of the various creatures that lived around their home. The smell of the outdoors, especially yummy smells like chimney smoke, and the fresh smell right after a rain shower. Smiling to herself, Akane took a seat at the table with her back to the doors and the sun on her back. Ranma, sitting across from her, smiled a quick, secret smile. Akane smiled back.

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Seeing Akane enter the room, Ukyou had immediately yanked a fistful of throwing spatulas

from her bandoleer, to skewer her with. But reluctantly put them back. She was better than a sneak attack from behind. Sighing to herself, Ukyou stood up proudly and started to walk to her destiny.

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Seeing Ukyou stand up out of the bushes along the far wall Ranma froze as his heart leapt into his throat. Narrowing his eyes, he watched her approach. Ukyou was in motion, the plan was about to start. He hadn't realized that Mousse would have been able to get her to move *so soon!*

Ukyou let her steady gaze come to rest on Ranma for a moment, in that brief glance she shook her head slightly and returned her glare to Akane, signaling that although her purpose here was for a fight, she wasn't going to attack Akane without warning. Sighing and dreading what was about to happen, Ranma reached over the table and grasped Akane's hand lightly. Whispering insistently he warned her, "Akane, you better swallow that and turn around, I think Ukyou wants to challenge you."

Her eyes going wide, Akane gulped her current mouthful down and set her shoulders into her "serious and proud warrior" position. Then she decided to insult Ukyou by taking the time to take a final sip of tea and wipe her mouth daintily with her napkin. Ukyou watched her from behind coldly, and cataloged the insult away.

Finally swinging her legs around to drape over the porch, Akane calmly met the gaze of Ranma's oldest friend, the only girl in the world that maybe, just maybe, might be closer to Ranma than she was. Akane, in her usual professional and graceful manner blurted out, "well?! What do you want, Ukyou?"

Ranma buried his head in his hands behind her. When was she going to learn that she wasn't nearly as good as she seemed to think she was? When was she going to learn that meeting every situation with a "can-do" attitude was useless if the fact remained that you *couldn't* do it! When was she going to learn that although martial arts could be about violence and brute force, it didn't always have to be?! Ranma sighed again and pulled his head up to watch Ukyou's reaction.

Behind Ukyou, the sky was clear and blue. Only a few wisps of clouds were visible, and the temperature was a comfortable breezy one for early morning. But for some reason as she started to speak it seemed to get colder and the wind seemed to still and the sky seemed to gray.

"Akane ... I have had enough. I am tired of the games, I am tired of the fighting, I am tired of the bickering, I am tired of the jealousy and I am quite frankly getting tired of you. I have gone easy on you a number of times in the past because you aren't as strong as I am, and

because you don't have as much training as I have, and your skill in the art isn't very impressive. But your callous attitude to this whole fiancée business is getting old, and your arrogance is becoming insufferable. I may not be able to win Ranma's favor by beating you in a fight, but I will win back some of my family's honor! So here it is, plain and simple. I challenge you! I am not bringing Ranma into this at all, this is for bragging rights. If I win you have to admit publicly that you lost to me, if you win I'll do the same. We gotta deal, sugar?"

Akane's face went crimson and her jaw dropped open, then she clamped it shut with blazing determination. She'd show her. She'd show all of them just how good of a martial artist she really was!

"Fine then, I accept your challenge! Lemme go get into some clothes and we'll finish this!" Akane snapped then ran out of the room before anyone could say anything.

Ukyou casually unsheathed her battle spatula and leaned on it, calling out to Akane as she left the room, "take your time sugar, I'm in no hurry." Smiling, Ukyou let her eyes travel over the faces of the people still in the room.

Genma was steadfastly ignoring her, leaning over the table shoveling food into his face. Typical. Soun was looking at her with the face he used when he was about to try to sound old, experienced and wise. She knew better now. Nabiki was watching her with those cool calculating eyes of hers. Ukyou could tell she was considering calling the police, or taking bets. Kasumi glanced her way a few times, but she had no malice in her eyes, she almost seemed like she wanted to offer Ukyou a seat and some breakfast, but she seemed to know that Ukyou wouldn't accept. Ranma looked ... resolved?

The silence hung for about five seconds then everyone started talking at once. "What do you mean you are going to beat up my little girl?! I, Soun Tendou, will not allow it! You must first beat Ranma before you challenge Akane. That is the rule of this dojo!" Soun started to rant.

"Ukyou dear ... would you like a cup of tea?" Kasumi asked hesitantly. Maybe all the years of fighting around Kasumi had hardened her to the fact that people fought her family members, and she had just decided to ignore it?

"This is... interesting, I wish there were people around to take bets. I would give five to one odds that Akane only lasts thirty seconds. Whadda say daddy? Ranma? Any takers?" Nabiki grinned.

Genma, not even bothering to look up, held up a sign that read, "Kasumi dear, could I have some more miso soup?"

Ukyou rolled her eyes at Soun, Nabiki and Genma. She politely turned Kasumi's offer down then laid her eyes on Ranma who hadn't spoken yet. The wind picked up for just a

second and the porch chime rang out. Quietly, Ranma spoke.

"Just don't kill her, Ukyou. Akane has had this coming for quite a while, but ... I can't allow you to kill her, okay?"

Ukyou nodded her agreement. Minutes passed and just as Ukyou was getting ready to go find Akane, she came thundering down the stairs. She had thrown on her old yellow training gi and her red belt and head band. She looked as uncute as ever and she glared at Ukyou.

Stomping into the courtyard Akane whipped around and planted her feet in a traditional ready stance. Dipping her left shoulder down and leaning back on her right leg she set herself in a stance that she could duck from, or kick from or punch from, depending on the situation. Glaring at Ukyou, Akane held her stance. Smirking self-assuredly, Akane stated, "ready when you are U-chan."

Ignoring the insulting use of her nickname given to her by Ranma himself, Ukyou casually walked down the steps of the Tendou porch. Adding to Akane's anger, Ukyou unstrapped her bandoleer and her battle spatula, and placed them on the ground. Meeting Akane in hand to hand combat without her weapons was rubbing salt in an open wound, her actions said she didn't even need her special weapons to beat Akane. Akane vowed to make her pay for that.

Stopping about five steps from Akane, Ukyou folded her arms and crossed her legs in the most casual of stances, calmly she met Akane's furious glare with an unemotional gaze of her own. She didn't glare and she didn't have all of her muscles clenched in anger.

Ranma moaned and buried his head in his hands again. **The idiot!** Here the fight hadn't even started yet, and Akane was already losing, holding yourself in that kind of stance, with anger boiling through you, making your thoughts jumbled and unfocused, and having all your muscles clenched making your body tired, Akane was proving just how much she didn't know. This was going to be embarrassing. All Ukyou had to do was act the part of the proverbial bull fighter, and dodge Akane's wild enraged attacks and hit her as she passed.

Ukyou simply looked at Akane, she didn't stomp the ground, she didn't pace, she didn't flex her muscles, she simply watched and waited. Finally Akane couldn't stand it anymore, with a battle cry of, "here I come!" She leapt at Ukyou.

Running at Ukyou at full speed, Akane pulled her arm back and prepared to punch. When she was almost on top of her, Ukyou casually leaned to the side and stuck her right leg out, Akane, going full boar, tripped over the leg and went sprawling in the dirt. Rolling out of it and spitting dirt, Akane leapt at Ukyou again.

This time Akane closed the distance a little slower and directly on Ukyou's center, so Ukyou was forced to use her hands to block and counter Akane's wild punches.

Unlike Ranma, Ukyou did **not** just avoid Akane's wild shots. She blocked them, and **hard**. Hammer fisting Akane's wrists and nerve centers again and again as Akane lashed out, Ukyou beat her attacks away, when Akane would swing full force with a hook punch, Ukyou would duck under it and sucker punch her in her solar plexus. Akane started losing speed and momentum and went for more power, throwing full force chops and jabs and hook and round punches at Ukyou, Ukyou was forced to do more ducking and parrying, and less all out blocking.

That, however, gave Ukyou the advantage of the counter shot. As Akane would jab in, Ukyou would partially block her strike and partially lean away from it, as she did so she would use her blocking hand as a ramp and pathway to Akane and she would deliver blow after crushing blow to Akane's midsection as Akane tried to hammer home her offensive. Finally, Akane made a big mistake, starting her attack from two steps away, Ukyou had time to line her hips up properly, as Akane stepped in to deliver a full force back punch, Ukyou ducked under it, grasped Akane's punching arm with both arms, as she at the same time pushed her hip and buttocks into Akane, and crouching down, twisting, and pulling as Akane involuntarily wrapped around her, Ukyou took Akane's momentum from the punch and turned it into a vicious throw.

Akane went sailing up and over Ukyou, and landed hard on her back in front of Ukyou. Ukyou, retaining her hold on Akane's wrist, twisted it into a painful shiatsu wrist lock, then Ukyou knelt so her knee was laying across Akane's neck, slowing putting her into a choke hold. Akane was helpless and beaten and everyone had seen it. Ukyou hadn't even broken a sweat, Akane was drenched. Leaning down to look dispassionately into Akane's eyes, Ukyou whispered, "you lose." Then, smirking, Ukyou let her go and stood up. Turning around, Ukyou saw Ranma standing behind her, sadly shaking his head back and forth. Not ready to confront Ranma just yet, Ukyou calmly walked to her gear and put it back on. Then walked to the front gate and let herself out.

Akane just laid there on the ground. Soun sat at the table with his chop sticks still in on hand, but the piece of pickle he had been about to eat had slipped onto the table. Soun's mouth was wide open in shock. Nabiki had her hands over her mouth, her eyes were wide and she looked ... worried? Kasumi just watched, she seemed neither shocked nor all too concerned about it. She knew how much damage Akane could and couldn't take. Genma had even stopped eating and looked on sadly in panda form. Akane had just been humiliated, and publicly. There was no telling how she would react to this.

Soun started to try to comfort her, "Akane, ... don't you worry, we'll train you for your re-match and you'll be able to ..."

"No! No she won't, mister Tendou. Akane, right now and as she is, even with your training,

could never defeat a martial artist such as Ukyou. Until she learns better, this will keep happening to her over and over again." Ranma stated plain and seriously, cutting Soun off in a curt voice.

Jerking herself upright, Akane whispered. "You bastard. You choose now, now of all times to belittle me and insult me and my skills? What kind of an unfeeling monster are you?" She asked him in shock.

Sadly, Ranma replied, "in the world of serious martial arts, Akane, I am as serious as they get. In my world, and Shampoo's world, and Mouse's world, and Ryouga's world, and even in Ukyou's world, defeat could always mean death. Defeat means being helpless, it means letting your opponent get the best of you. Ukyou walked in here today knowing you, and knowing how to beat you. She played you like a drum, and you reacted exactly how she wanted you to act. Whether or not you choose to accept that fact, you do have to admit she beat you, in a fair fight, and because of that, you have shamed the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts."

Everyone on the porch gasped for breath. Ranma's statement, while true, was terribly cruel and not what the situation called for. What was he doing? They had seemed to be getting along fairly well as of late. Why would he suddenly revert back to taunting and teasing Akane?

Akane just sat there for a little while. The breeze played with her hair, and her shoulders heaved as she tried to regain her breath with dignity. What was the matter with him? Had he no sympathy? No respect? No caring feelings for her at all? Where the special moments that they had been sharing a farce? Was he really this heartless? Slowly, as Akane asked herself these questions her anger built and her resolve hardened. She would show him, she would make him fight her for real!

Ranma just stood there, he knew what was coming and he was ready for it. Purposefully, Akane stood up, brushing herself off and straightening her clothing. Finally, Akane swung her gaze onto Ranma. If looks could burn you to a cinder, Ranma would have been toast right then.

"Die, Ranma!" Akane screamed from the very depths of betrayed rage and fury. Her words carried all of her hurt and her disappointment. If she could just get him to fight her for real! If she could at least match him, maybe not beat him, but at least match him, that would help to sooth her shattered perceptions of her Martial Arts skills.

Again and again Akane swung at him. Kicking and punching and chopping and flailing angrily. Ranma dodged as he always did, sometimes with little ducks or with slight leans to either side. Sometimes flipping over and behind Akane. But through it all he kept his eyes on Akane, and his expression was that of someone doing something distasteful, something they

didn't want to do but had to.

His pity was the last thing Akane wanted to see right now! Steadily, as Akane attacked him, Ranma lead her back away from her family, and closer to the wall. Closer and closer they came, until finally Ranma was able to hop up on the wall. Akane was hard on his heels. He wasn't running away this time!

Hopping down off the wall Ranma started to jog through the Nerima streets. Akane matched his pace and went faster, soon they were both sprinting. Street signs, cars, people, stores, trees, they all flew by Akane. Her single minded purpose right now was to catch Ranma, and to make him pay for humiliating her! To make him fight her for real.

Akane failed to notice the city fading away and the woods that Ranma so often went to with his father to train in, started to spring up around them. Soon they were dashing through the brush and high trees of the woods. The sunlight filtered down through the treetops in lazy dusty motes, and the woods seemed to breath with the gust of the breeze. A small clearing loomed up ahead, and Ranma veered towards it, and started to slow down. Reaching the center of the clearing Ranma stopped and turned around and faced her, then planted his hands on his hips and waited.

Akane staggered into the clearing on lead feet. Now that they had stopped she was out of breath. She hadn't realized how long they had been running. Only serving to infuriate her, Akane noticed Ranma was standing straight and tall, and he wasn't breathing hard at all. Clenching her fists in frustration, Akane screamed, "will you just hold still and fight me for real, Ranma?!"

Quietly, Ranma responded, "okay, Akane, for you ... I will fight you for real ..." he left off leaving something unsaid, and if Akane had bothered to look, she would have noticed that Ranma's eyes were wet with held back tears.

'It's for her own good.' Ranma told himself over and over again as he readied himself emotionally for what he was about to do to her ... 'May the gods have mercy on me.'

Grinning insanely at his promise, Akane cinched her red belt tighter, and flexed her muscles in one big full body stretch, then planting her feet firmly in the dirt, Akane bent her knees just as she had seen many movie stars do, and jump kicked towards Ranma. Her power was stunning, her form was perfect, her heart was in it, but her skills were lacking.

With a sad look on his face, Ranma side stepped Akane's mid air kick, which to him looked like she was moving in slow motion, and twisting his body into a vicious back knuckle to her kicking leg's calf muscle as she sailed by. Akane went down with a gasping whimper and crumpled behind him. Ranma kept his back to her and let his tears fall silently. He could at

least spare her the indignity of looking at her on the ground. The tears came in a steady stream. He wept because he knew she was going to get back up.

Gasping at the pain of what he had done to her, Akane was in shock. Her leg was screaming at her and she rolled herself up into a little ball and rubbed her muscle trying to work it back out of the pain. She was so shocked at Ranma actually fighting her for real, actually trading hits with her, that her mind locked on her goal, to get up and fight back.

Slowly, Akane lifted herself up off the ground. Turning around she saw Ranma with his back to her. The bastard! His insulting attitude was unbearable! Growling, Akane shook out her leg and started to run at Ranma in a full charge, intending to tackle him about the waist and knock him to the ground.

With the reflexes of a cat, Ranma spun about at the last moment and with unrelenting force chopped both her wrists hard in outward sweeping circular motions, right in the nerve centers there. At the same time, Ranma brought his right knee up and jammed it into Akane's midsection. Without her hands to stop her motion, and as fast as she was going, Akane ran right into the knee to her gut. She didn't even have time to tighten her muscles to absorb the impact. With a whoosh, her breath left her and she was again on the ground.

Laying there choking and gasping for breath, Akane drew upon her inner power, her stores of strength she had built up during her years of training. Dimly she started to glow red with the power of her Chi. Ranma looking down on her, saw it and felt it, and stayed where he was. Ranma wasn't using Chi or Ki based martial arts, and her Chi was hardly a concern for him.

Cursing under her breath and dry retching, Akane rolled over to her knees and pushed herself up to glare at Ranma. Through her tears of pain, Akane couldn't recognize Ranma's tears of emotional agony.

Slowly, Akane stood up, then gathered herself into her best stance, left foot forward and jaw clenched and ready, left hand held shoulder level and open, right hand held by her right ear and closed. Vowing to at least make the fight a draw or die, Akane launched herself at Ranma.

Punching fast and furious she launched a last desperate attack at Ranma. Ranma's heart broke as he saw her fists raining towards him, glowing with the angry red power of her Chi. To his eyes, her fists were moving so slow they were almost going backwards.

Slapping away each of her punches with his own hands, Ranma didn't even use his "Chestnut Fist" technique. He didn't have to, his basic speed was more than enough to

counter her out of control, clumsy attacks. Grimacing inwardly with what he was about to do, Ranma crossed his index and middle fingers and flexing them so they were bent just a little, but rigid, Ranma then jabbed them into her pressure points all along her arms and wrists.

Over and over again Akane drove at him, punching with a fiercer resolve than she had even punched before, and over and over Ranma slammed his counter strikes into her arms, so hard her whole body shuddered. Soon, Akane's left arm wouldn't move no matter how hard she tried, then her right arm failed her. Desperate, Akane kicked out with her right leg to Ranma's solar plexus. Not even pausing, Ranma brought his right hand clenched into a hammer fist in a sweeping pendulum arc and knocked her kick away so hard that her whole body spun out and away with it. Twirling crazily into the dirt, Akane landed hard, face down. Lifting herself up slowly on her left arm, which was now working a little bit, she barely had time to yelp before Ranma kicked her arm out from under her viciously. She again slammed into the dirt.

This couldn't be happening! This couldn't be happening! **This couldn't be happening!** Ranma wouldn't hurt her like this! Would he? Suddenly, Akane was afraid for her life. In her mind, Akane replayed what he had said just a few minutes ago at the dojo ...

*'In my world, and Shampoo's world, and Mouse's world, and Ryouga's world, and even in Ukyou's world, defeat could always mean death.'*

... **Death?**

Ranma kicked her arm out from under her to close in for the kill strike. The force of his kick rolled her onto her back, her arms were useless. Jumping up and spinning midair in 180 degrees, Ranma landed hard with his feet scraping against her hips to pin her down, then kneeling hard on her stomach Ranma grabbed her hair and drew his fist back preparing the death blow.

**"Ranma! Stoooooop!"** Akane screamed in fear for her life as Ranma drove home the killing punch to her windpipe. He wasn't going to stop in time, she was about to die. **Oh god, oh god, oh god!**

Freezing his fist exactly where he had planned to ... Ranma stopped.

Akane's eyes were clenched shut in terror, and her face was dirty. Terrified tears leaked from her eyes and pioneered small wet trails down her cheeks. Ranma relaxed the sitting hold he had on her, and rolled off to the side of her and let himself cry. He felt like throwing up, so he did.

Minutes or seconds passed, it was hard to tell which, and Akane slowly opened her eyes. Glancing over to where Ranma was, she finally saw his body language and his tears, not to mention the mess he had just made. He sat with his shoulders slumped and his knees drawn

into him for emotional shelter. He held his head in his hands and cried openly. Slowly the question dawned on her, and the insistence of it grew, she had to know ... **why?**

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Smiling sadly in a treetop a good distance from the two of them, Mousse nodded to himself at seeing the first step of the plan completed. It had been ugly, but it had been necessary. Now the healing could begin, the false bravado could cease, and the end could come about. Truly Ranma's sacrifice for Akane today was legendary. Maybe Akane didn't understand that right now, but what Ranma had just sacrificed of himself was something most real Martial Artists would never dream of sacrificing.

Touching his right fist to his heart in a silent salute and bowing his head, Mousse wished Ranma and Akane well. Taking a small mirror out of his sleeve, Mousse flashed it three times in Ranma's direction, the size of the mirror and the trees around them made Mousse's signal almost impossible for anyone else to see. Grinning sneakily to himself, Mousse shimmied down the tree on his way to lead his tail on a merry chase through out Nerima. Now phase two of the plan needed to be set into motion. Idly, he considered notifying the national guard and the police department of what was coming, if ever there was going to be a nation wide disaster, with the capacity to wipe out Japan, it was coming up soon. The battle for Ranma had begun.

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Shampoo narrowed her eyes suspiciously as she watched Mousse leaving his tree. She hadn't been able to get close enough to see what he was watching without him noticing her, almost as if he had planned it that way ... Shampoo wanted to see what had happened to Ranma and Akane's fight. The stupid violent girl had probably bopped her husband once again ... aiyah! ... this whole situation was so stupid! If husband would just accept Amazon laws and move back to China with her, he no would have to deal with too-too violent girls anymore. He would be property of Shampoo, and law says, no can hurt property ... growling in frustration, Shampoo moved to follow Mousse, he was up to something, Shampoo knew it. She would come back later to fix husband's boo-boos.

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Akane gaped at the grief and regret she saw in Ranma. She was seriously confused, but she knew her duty. She had lost two major duels in the name of the honor of the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts in less than an hour.

She managed to croak out in a shaky voice, "okay, you win. I lost ... I lost for real ... so I'll leave now. You can have the dojo, and I will just ... I will just go away ... " She bit her lower

lip as the reality of what she was saying sank in, but she had to, her honor was gone. She had lost, and lost badly!

Glancing up with red rimmed eyes he managed a small smile. He didn't say anything, but he looked at her reverently, like he was looking at something precious he might never see again.

Hesitantly he scooted over to her side. Akane flinched away from him. Slowly, he brought his right arm up and around her, and gently he pulled her close to him in a hug. Hesitantly, Akane let him pull her close to him. What was he doing?

With his eyes locked on the ground between his legs, Ranma slowly started to whisper to her, "do you see ... do you see now why I don't fight girls for real? Do you understand now why I don't like fighting for real with almost anyone? Do you understand now why I let you smack me with mallets and frying pans when I do something wrong? Now do you understand?" Akane just glanced at him, but kept silent. She understood but wanted to let him keep talking.

"I hit you hard today, but I didn't use even close to my full power or strength. The truth is, all I really did was let ya defeat yourself ... the old man may not be good for anything else, but he can train ya in the Arts, and I have learned a lot of stuff in the years I have been training, that I doubt you have ever even seen ..."

"I'm not sayin' this because I am stuck up, or because I wanna gloat. I'm just tellin' ya this because ya need to understand what it means to be a black belt in the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts. Ta be a black belt in our school, means you accept any challenge at any time, and you lay your life on the line each time. I know pop and Mr. Tendou are always goin' on about being a true Martial Artist and stuff, and their level of paranoia and weirdness is pretty understandable seein' as they trained under the old freak an' all ..." Ranma trailed off as he realized he was rambling.

"Okay, point taken already, I said I would leave, what more do you want from me? Why do you have to rub it in on top of everything else?!" Akane whispered. The emotional hurt of this moment was more painful than her physical wounds. This was the same Ranma that just last night she had been thinking of her soul mate, hah! What a fool she had been.

"The point I am tryin' ta make ... is that I want ta train ya. We'll stay out here and we'll get ya ready. I want to help ya get as good as I think ya can be ..." Ranma trailed off helplessly gesturing vaguely with his hands. This wasn't going as well as he had envisioned it back on that rooftop with Mousse when they had first thought up this crazy plan.

Akane just sat in a stupefied silence. Train her? Ranma was offering her a chance to be trained, for real? Akane hadn't made it to black belt yet, but she hadn't really been that concerned about it. She had always been able to beat up most anyone that ever caused her trouble, even that idiot Kunou ... until Ranma, and the super powered freaks that followed

him, came along.

She had always just relied on her brute strength, not the color of her belt. She knew that the color of the belt was mostly a status symbol, however the belt was also a symbol of achievement and skill, and that real martial artists had no use for belts or special patches on uniforms or trophies, but then again, Ukyou and now Ranma had just demonstrated that her sheer raw strength wasn't going to solve all her problems for her. What should she do? Ranma was offering to treat her as his student, to show her the things he knew, could she really pass up this chance? Even though it would mean having to call him master?

Ranma's tears had dried and he sat on the dirt floor of the clearing watching Akane's thought process. She squinted her eyes up every now and then, or furrowed her brow, or squinched up her nose. She was so *cute* sometimes. With a heavy heart, Ranma once again regretted what he had been forced to do today. He might never be able to regain what he had had with Akane. Out of the corner of his eye, Ranma caught Mousse's signal and breathed a sigh of relief. Shampoo was being led away from them, so now Ranma could lead Akane to the area he had picked out for her training, it had everything they needed, not to mention all their gear and food.

Standing up, Ranma offered Akane his hand like he had done not all that long ago when he asked her to practice on that special morning. Unlike that morning, Akane winced in pain and bit her lower lip to keep from crying out as Ranma had to then help her stand up. Bowing his head in his own personal agony, Ranma picked Akane up into his arms and started to walk with her to the camp site. The weight of her to carry was but a small penance in the long slippery slope he had to climb to atone for what he had been forced into today. Akane was tense in Ranma's arms briefly, but exhaustion and pain soon changed her mind and she settled in to be carried to wherever he was taking her.

--

Tatewaki Kunou walked along the well worn sidewalk on his way to school as he always did. This morning, as with most mornings, his thoughts were occupied with visions of the pig-tailed girl and Akane Tendou. These pleasant thoughts were interrupted frequently with images of the hated visage of his sworn enemy for life, Ranma Saotome!

"One day ... **one day**, Saotome ... **I shall smite thee mightily**, and then Akane and the Pig-Tailed girl **shall be mine!**" He cackled to himself insanely. However in mid cackle he was suddenly cut off as the weight of a foot was implanted upon his skull then rebounded off. Quickly looking up to see whom he was about to kill Kunou spied the robed fool, Mousse, bounding away from rooftop to rooftop, having just used his head for a stepping stone.

"Come back here and stand knave! Hast thee not honor enough to do battle when thou hast wronged another warrior?!" Kunou shouted after Mousse.

"Return I,- " OOFing with the weight of another foot upon his brow, Kunou was again interrupted. This time he spied the lovely but deadly Amazon hellcat running away from him in pursuit of the other one no doubt.

Shaking his fist after them and shouting "Curs!" Kunou rubbed his now tender head and proceeded towards the school grounds. One of these days ... one of these days he was going to heap his retribution upon all the low born fools who had dared to insult his family.

Muttering vile curses upon **both their houses** ... Kunou proceeded to march to school. The sound of his traditional wooden samurai sandals clapping on the pavement had a soothing effect on him, and soon the wondrous visages of his two goddesses again graced his thoughts.

Upon entering the gates to the school Kunou's footsteps immediately swung towards the kendo club's dojo, he wanted to do a brief workout before classes to work out his tensions. With his thoughts in the sky and his mind on his fantasy women Kunou proceeded to plow right into Ryouga Hibiki, who coincidentally was still looking for the way back to Akane's house after Ranma had ditched him at the crazy girl's house.

With an angry shove, Ryouga pushed Kunou away from him as he snarled, "hey watch it you idiot!" As was usually the case when he was lost and confused, Ryouga was cranky.

Not to be outdone by a filthy commoner, Kunou snapped back, "fear not peasant, I shall smite thee momentarily."

"Whatever you say, Samurai boy, I could use a good stress reliever, and seeing as Ranma ain't here to beat up, you're just as good as anyone else."

Kunou sneered down at the slightly shorter Ryouga and laughed the insults away as he drew and readied his battle boken, "I will not be drawn into a battle of wits with an unarmed opponent."

Ryouga, growing angrier by the second, growled, "come on, rich boy ... show me how soft fancy living has made you!"

With a righteous fire blazing in his eyes, Kunou growled, "silly peasant, I have met many people in my days, and you are not among them. If you insist on trying the blade of Tatewaki Kunou, then have at thee!"

With that, both Ryouga and Kunou leapt into battle, and just as quickly two tiny little feet came crashing down, one on each head, and with a thunderous crash and an insane laugh it bounded away.

"Whoo hoo hoo hoo! Panties! Panties! I got panties! Red ones, blue ones, white ones

and pink ones, you name em I got em! Whoo hoo hoo hoooooo!" Happosai cackled as he happily skipped away from the two duelists he had just flattened.

With his face in the ground Ryouga deadpanned, "I know that voice... "

Kunou joined in, "... and he shall **die!**" Leaping up, the two young men started to sprint after the old pervert, when they were again trampled!

The herd of girls wielding brooms and rakes, baseball bats and clenched fists raced after the old man with outraged shrieks.

"Give me back my panties you old freak! I don't have any more! ... "

"Come back here and die old man! ... "

"I swear to god, this time I am sticking the broom up farther! ..."

"How in the world did he get **my** panties?! I brought my dad's safe from home to keep them in!"

The herd of furious young girls went thundering after the old pervert, and Ryouga and Kunou were again face down in the dirt.

"Kunou ...?"

"Yeah ..."

"I'm ...I'm gonna go to the nurses office now ..."

"Are you now peasant ...?"

"... um, yeah, so ... I'll um ... finish this duel ...as soon as I get a kidney replacement ..."

"Not if I get there first ... and replace my kneecap you won't." Kunou wheezed from the ground before he collapsed again.

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Up in her third story classroom, Ukyou having just witnessed the latest spectacle that always followed Happosai, was rolling around the floor clutching her stomach in a hysterical fit of laughter.

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Back at the Tendou household, Kasumi was getting ready to go to the market. Daddy was off crying somewhere, Genma was still at the table eating, Nabiki was in her room working on a book she was calling, "Investment For Morons," which she swore would take the "For

Dummies" market by storm.

Kasumi stood in the kitchen reviewing her list one more time, and getting ready to go get her coat, she didn't even see Tofu walking into the kitchen with that book of his he had been reading the past few days. Predictably, Tofu plowed right into Kasumi, unpredictably he didn't turn into an "Insta-doofus."

"Oh ... Oh, Kasumi ... how clumsy of me, I am so sorry ..." Tofu apologized with that same eerie look in his eyes he'd had since she had been struck by that big gorilla the other day. She couldn't say that the new Tofu didn't excite her a **lot** ... but she wished he had been able to get to this point with her without having to go through something like that. Maybe ... maybe just spending time with her would do him a little good, maybe her good mood and positive outlook on life would rub off on him a little.

"Dr. Tofu ...?" Kasumi started out. She always hated these opening few lines of conversation, she always felt clumsy and out of her element, this was supposed to be the **boy's** problem ... oh well.

"Yes, Kasumi?" Tofu answered her, meeting her eyes when he spoke. Something he had never been able to do before, "the incident."

"I'm going to the market now, would you like to come with me? I just don't feel all that safe these days in the city, not like I used to anyway." Kasumi lied. She still felt perfectly safe, but she knew he couldn't refuse to escort her if she asked him to be her protector ... silly men.

"Of course, Kasumi, I'll go get my coat." Tofu replied. Not with the eager response of a boy with a crush on a girl being asked to go with her somewhere, but the resolute response of a man who had a job to do. She needed to swing him back just a little bit back towards the, "boy with a crush" area, he was getting just a little bit *too* serious, even for her.

Tofu reappeared in the kitchen with his nice white silk Chinese jacket buttoned up over his undershirt he usually wore around the house, that in combination with his western style pressed black slacks gave him a very elegant, yet somewhat menacing appearance. Regardless he was *gorgeous!* Kasumi had to really fight herself from just hanging on his arm and kissing him, *lots*.

Wrapping her jacket around her shoulders and grabbing her shopping list and purse from the kitchen table, Kasumi approached the door and waited as Tofu gallantly opened it for her. There were quite a few western concepts Kasumi had picked up on, and liked, and that was one of them.

Kasumi set the pace for their walk, and a leisurely pace it was. Unlike the few times she had gone to market with Ranma, Tofu was not a ball of energy looking for somewhere to go. When she walked with Ranma he seemed almost nervous to be around her. His usual defense for pretty girls was teasing and tormenting them, however he *never* did that to her,

and so he usually was silent, he really only seemed to like to talk with her in the privacy of their kitchen in the mornings when no one else could overhear. So Ranma would run ahead of her, and behind her, he would do a walking handstand on the railing to the aqua-duct as she walked, he would practice his forms, in short he would do most anything *except* walk alongside her.

Kasumi really didn't blame him for his actions, after all she was older than he was, and he was nervous around girls, and the odd way his father had brought him up hadn't helped matters certainly.

Tofu, in comparison, walked *exactly* beside her, and even held her hand from time to time, he seemed restless, but not uncomfortable around her. His eyes were pacing back and forth across the street, covering the bushes and the rooftops and every other place a possible thug could be hiding. Kasumi wasn't nearly as slow as the martial artists in her home might think she was, she knew how surveillance was done, and how fighters acted and prepared themselves, just because she didn't practice the art anymore, not since she was eight anyway, didn't mean she didn't remember it.

Kasumi could see that Tofu was in full "guardian" mode. So she decided to try to get him to open up a little bit now, on the mostly empty street, rather than wait until they got to the more crowded market.

Starting it off and hoping he would get the hint, Kasumi asked, "so, Dr. Tofu, what do you see in your future? A house? Kids? A wife?" Blushing slightly, Kasumi bowed her head a little and waited for his response. Frustrating her once again, Tofu decided to answer her questions with questions of his own.

He pointed out the trees lining the sidewalk in the full grasp of fall, and gloriously displaying the vivid colors of red, orange and yellow, and asked her, "Do you like this time of year? I do. I like everything about autumn. I like the crisp air, I like the holiday season, I like the pretty colors of the leaves, and later their crunch underfoot. I like the sound of kids playing in the street, and the eager anticipation and electric energy that seems to grip people during the fall."

Kasumi nodded, she also liked all those things. Her favorite things in life revolved around family, home and the hearth. Warmth and comfort and good company were all wonderful things to her ... of course, a husband would be nice as well ... someone to share her cold bed with on those long winter nights would be delicious. Smiling to herself, Kasumi licked her lips just thinking about it, then blushed as she realized that Tofu was watching her.

They had stopped their walk along the sidewalk, underneath one of those beautiful trees. The sunlight filtered down between the leaves and lit up the tiny dust motes floating to the earth in their eternal motion of life. Kasumi's breath came to her in shorter gasps with the magic of

the moment, and the nearness of the man she loved. Tofu stood there next to her, waiting and watching her. Neither pushing nor pulling her, just waiting. He was *such* as wonderful man!

Tofu watched Kasumi as she slowed her walk then stopped all together under the tree they had been walking under. She seemed to be daydreaming about something, and she was smiling about something? Watching her, Tofu again looked at her cheek, the cheek he had allowed to be struck by that animal ... every time he looked at her beautiful face all he could see was the way it had been on that day as she lay on the ground unconscious after that monster had hit her. He could have stopped it! He should have! Beating himself up inside, Tofu reached over and pulled her close to him, and held her, more to hide his tears of anger and frustration from her, than to hug her.

Suddenly, Tofu reached over and embraced her! Pulling her close to him, she could feel his steely arms around her, so strong, my god he was so strong! The smooth feel of his shirt against her cheek, resting on his very muscled chest felt very nice, and she could even feel his heart beating! He smelled like a man, not like a boy, she could smell the faint wisp of the shaving cream he had used to shave this morning, and his musky, and somewhat flowery, aftershave as well. It was all just too much for her already over loading emotions. Nuzzling her cheek into his chest and snuggling into him, he hugged her closer, and she gasped at his firm yet tender hold on her, even now holding her like a gentleman, not trying anything sneaky like a teenager would do. Sighing happily, Kasumi tilted her chin back and stretched up onto her tiptoes, and searched for his lips.

Tofu held the woman he loved close to him under the beautiful tree, with the sparkling sunlight dancing across his face and on the ground as well. Kasumi leaned into him and even nuzzled his chest as he hugged, and *god* that felt good! Trying to shut off his tears, Tofu hugged her closely and she responded by stretching up on her toes and nuzzling her cheek to his, moving her lips closer to his, responding to her in kind, Tofu nuzzled her cheek back and moved his lips closer to hers, and they met, and they kissed.

Kasumi let her lips brush his and he moved his lips to meet hers, his lips were warm and soft and just a little bit scratchy around the edges. Her first kiss! She was having her first kiss! And it was with Doctor Tofu! Melting into him, Kasumi let go her final restraints and kissed the man she fully intended to make her lover.

Tofu kissed the woman he loved, despite the tears of regret and shame running from his eyes. The kiss was soft at first, almost like she was exploring him, was this her first kiss? While he was certainly no dating machine, Tofu *had* been on a few dates in his time, and he had kissed a few women, but he had never wanted any of them like he wanted Kasumi! As the seconds stretched onward Kasumi's kiss changed from the innocent first kiss a young girl might give, into the passionate kiss of a woman kissing the man she loved. Opening her mouth, Kasumi explored him for the first time, and Tofu's tears started to dry up as he fell deeper into the moment. He was kissing Kasumi! The girl he had loved from afar for the

longest time. The girl, turned woman, who now seemed to love him back! As his emotions raced faster, Tofu embraced the moment and her love and literally swept her off her feet, picking her up and cradling her close to him as he kissed her back passionately.

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They stayed that way for quite a while, and those that happened to pass by whispered amongst themselves that it was about damn time, but didn't dare to interrupt them.

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Night fell on Nerima, and Akane and Ranma didn't come home. Soun paced worriedly back and forth in front of the phone, and Genma sat on the front steps watching him, and offering words of encouragement when appropriate. Nabiki watched them from the back porch quietly wondering about a great many things. Tofu and Kasumi were in the kitchen laughing and making dinner. Rolling her eyes, Nabiki muttered, "I wonder if Akane actually brained him for real this time ..."

Sitting up straighter, Nabiki saw her daddy talking with Mousse. Mousse seemed agitated and leaned forward to whisper in Soun's ear, and kept glancing over his shoulder every few seconds. Soun had stopped his pacing, and was quietly nodding as Mousse talked to him. Before Nabiki could even get up to attempt to eavesdrop, Mousse patted Soun on the back and leapt up and over the wall, gone almost as soon as he had come. Nabiki narrowed her eyes suspiciously. Something fishy was going on. As she watched, daddy and Mr. Saotome leaned their heads together and excitedly whispered about whatever Mousse had said. Nabiki shrugged it off, if there was one thing she had learned about Ranma, it was that weird things happened around him.

The night came and the world stilled, as if it was holding its breath. No dogs barked, and no wind blew, but the chill of the night was very present. The entire Tendou household slept uneasily that night.

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"Again! ... Harder! ... Again! ... Faster! ... Again! ... Move it! ... Again! ... Get up! ... Again! ..."

Ranma shouted to Akane on the very first morning of their training together. He had let her sleep in the tent he brought along last night, warm and cozy in a sleeping bag and everything. But now the real training had begun, and as far as he was concerned, she was the student and he was the teacher.

She wasn't his potential future wife right now, she wasn't a girl whom he had seen heal

someone with what could only be called magic. She was just Akane, a red belt in the school of Anything Goes Martial Arts, and she was under his instruction as a high ranked black belt in their school.

Dumping cold water on her as soon as the sun had cleared the horizon Ranma gave her the first lesson of the day, to train yourself to wake up, **before** someone could do something like that to you. Of course, it didn't always work, and sometimes you would ignore the training, but it was a valid technique nonetheless.

Sputtering, Akane had sat bolt upright in her sleeping bag and started to yell at Ranma, "are you crazy, why in the ..." Her shouts were suddenly cut off as Ranma chucked her training gi and red belt at her head.

"Get dressed, Akane, you got one minute before another bucket of water is heading your way." Ranma said in a neutral tone. Unlike his father, Ranma had no intention of making Akane fear him in order to train her. He was just being firm.

Akane debated refusing to do as Ranma ordered for a second or two, but she was now **wide** awake, sitting in a soaking wet sleeping bag and wearing soaking wet pajamas. Going back to sleep was surely not an option now. So, grumbling to herself at her stupidity to accept Ranma as her trainer, she stood up in the tent, which turned out to be just a little bit shorter than she was, so she had to crane her head down a little bit.

She managed to clear the tent with two seconds to spare by Ranma's count. Smiling he put down the bucket he had been holding. Grimacing, Akane noticed that Ranma had fifteen more buckets lined up behind the one he just set down. He had been prepared, that was for sure.

So the training had begun. Taking a deep, refreshing breath, Akane stepped out of the tent with her training gi on, and her red belt cinched proudly upon her waist. Finally, looking to Ranma her mood seemed to slip a notch on the peppy-meter. She still remembered the harsh lesson she had been taught yesterday, and she still didn't know exactly how to feel about it. But that was beside the point for the moment. She had work to do today, and obviously Ranma intended her to be able to take full advantage of the day's sunlight.

So they started right in on the first drill. He grabbed a "focus pad," a simple hand held pad that is padded on both sides and looks sort of like a flat overgrown pear held upside down by it's neck, and split from the top down to the handhold. The purpose of such a pad, is, if struck from the broad flat side with the right kind of kick, or punch or chop, the two top parts of the pad will slap together and make a loud smacking noise. Ranma had decided to start Akane off with a simple drill.

"Okay, Akane I want you to do the following combination. Right back leg round kick, plant forward, spinning left side kick into a right back hand ridge hand strike." Ranma then held the

pad out in front of her vertically at about her chin level. Forcing her to strike high.

Akane sized the target up, adjusted her stance, then with a screaming battle "Kia!" tore into the pad with a full force back leg round kick. Her aim being way off she hit the handle instead of the pad, and the jolt forced Ranma to release the pad, letting it fall down along his wrist to the safety strap there.

Sighing, Ranma with a flick of his wrist snapped the pad back into his hand and simply stated, "Again!" And so it went, over and over Akane kicked at the pad. Sometimes she would land her strike on the pad, sometimes she would hit the handle, sometimes she would just flat out miss. But not once did she get the two pad halves to clap together, as is the point of using a focus pad.

After around one hundred sets, Ranma called break and ordered Akane to take the pad. Switching roles, now Akane held the pad in front of her. Ranma told her to raise it up as high as she could. Rolling her eyes at his show-off attitude, she complied. Letting out his breath, Ranma stared at the pad, then barely even giving her any warning with his hips or arm movements his back leg lashed out and slapped the pad, causing it to make the loudest cracking sound she had ever heard a pad make. Ranma, leaving his right instep on the pad surface, with his kicking form on display, started to instruct her as to what she was doing wrong.

"One of your biggest problems, Akane, is that you are overconfident, and you rely on strength far too much. I chose this drill to illustrate that. Let me ask you, how hard do you think I kicked that pad?"

The question confused Akane, it couldn't have been very hard. She knew Ranma was just as strong, if not stronger than she was. But then again, the pad had popped, and loudly ... but she hadn't felt the impact at all in her hand. "I would say you hit it at about medium power, Ranma." Akane guessed.

Frowning and shaking his head sadly, and still holding his leg in the same kicking stance he replied, "I hit it full power, Akane, I hit it so hard, that if that had been your head you'd be dead right now."

"I ... I don't understand, if you hit it full power, why didn't it knock the pad out of my hand, why didn't I feel it in my hand?" Akane frowned as she tried to figure it out.

"Well, I could go the way that pop taught me and make you figure that out, but seeing as we are not doing conventional training I will tell you. Technique number one you must learn today, is the technique of strike recoil. That means that the instant you make contact with your target you pull your strike back. That is how you get the focus pad to pop Akane, not by smashing the two halves together and driving through them, but by smacking one half and pushing it forward in the same instant as you pull your strike back in the opposite direction. This not only allows you to have lightning fast strikes, but it also prevents your opponents

from grabbing your strike and throwing you, or holding you. It also transfers all of the power of your strike into your target"

Relaxing his kicking stance, Ranma took the pad from Akane and tied it tightly with some twine to a nearby tree branch. Looking back at her Ranma simply stated, "make it pop, Akane." Nodding her agreement, Akane set to work at making the pad pop.

Ranma walked over to a medium sized rock and, propping his elbows on his knees and leaning his chin on his palms, Ranma watched her practice. She had all the grace of a tap dancing buffalo, but she was learning. She was still flat out missing the pad sometimes, and that usually caused her to fall down or stumble. The whole tree was shaking as Akane wailed on that pad. All the while Ranma shouted instructions and orders to her.

"Again! ... Harder! ... Again! ... Faster! ... Again! ... Move it! ... Again! ... Get up! ... Again! ..."

Akane worked both legs through the morning and into the early afternoon before Ranma called break and let her rest and eat. Panting exhaustedly, Akane slumped to the ground in her now soaking wet uniform. From a pitcher he had filled up at a nearby stream, Ranma poured her cup after cup of water. Then, smiling at her, Ranma handed her a rather large sandwich. The kind he usually made for himself. Akane wolfed it down.

Finished eating and drinking, Akane laid back into the grass and closed her eyes. Listening to the wind and the sound of her own labored breathing, Akane tried to find her inner peace.

Ranma, noticing her meditations, decided that it was time for another lesson. Getting up and walking over to a dirt patch of the forest floor, Ranma stood and waited for Akane to get up.

Minutes later, Akane did sit up and looked about for her teacher. Spying Ranma a short distance away, she walked over and asked, "So now what ... master?" Akane kinda had to choke out the Master part.

Smiling, Ranma replied, "You don't hafta call me master, Akane. We aren't doin' that kinda trainin'." Letting his smile fade, Ranma started right in on her second lesson of the day, balance.

"Akane, where are you?" Ranma asked her seriously.

"I dunno, near Nerima in the woods I guess." Akane voiced an unsure answer, not understanding what kind of answer Ranma wanted.

"True ... but, do you remember when Cologne trained me to use the "Rising Dragon Punch" technique, Akane?"

"Yeah ..." Akane *snerked* as she tried to hold in a laugh remembering the embarrassing

photos Ranma's dad had shown to get Ranma to lose his cool.

His face remaining impassive Ranma continued, "Well now I want you to think of what that training can mean besides how to control losing your temper or your cool ..." Trailing off, Ranma waited and watched Akane as she thought about it. After a while, Akane just shrugged.

Ranma then walked right up to her, so close they could kiss if they wanted. He smelled like a man, musky and sweaty, but also with the sharp tang of his hair shampoo and the soap he used mixed in with that and the odors of his recently washed clothing.

Akane gulped at Ranma's closeness. Ranma snapped a long twig off a nearby branch and stuck it into the dirt near where Akane's feet were. Then walking out and away from her in a circle, dragged the stick in the dirt leaving a swirl that radiated outwards from Akane. Ranma again took up station where he had originally stood and asked her again, "Where are you, Akane?"

"I ... I'm in the center of a spiral ... but, I don't really understand what you mean, Ranma?" Akane scrunched her nose up in confusion making that cute face Ranma loved.

"Of course you don't, Akane, because you have never thought of the art this way. Imagine that the center of the spiral is where you are now, if you cannot cross the lines of the spiral, what would you have to do in order to get to me?" Ranma asked.

Looking down, Akane saw that Ranma had ended the spiral he drew right at his feet. "I guess I would have to walk along the line until it got to you ..." Akane started.

"Describe the path you would take, Akane." Ranma ordered.

"Well ... I would have to start out in small circles, then as the spiral gets bigger I would take bigger and bigger steps and have more room as it spreads out, eventually I would reach you ... oh ... I get it!" Akane cheered.

"Go on." Ranma smiled.

"Well, I guess what you're saying is that the spiral is the study of the art, and each student must start in the beginning, which is cramped and seems to take a long time to get out of. But as you get better and progress further you have more freedom on the path, and while not getting any easier, the path does get broader, so I can ... choose my own path I guess?" Akane bit her lip as she glanced at Ranma.

Beaming, Ranma smiled back at her and said, "Exactly. That is the first part to balance. Every student needs a teacher, and all teachers need students. As the student improves so does the teacher. What a lot of people don't understand about the art, Akane, is that unless your heart, mind and soul are in agreement with you, your art isn't going to go very far." Ranma sure sounded a lot smarter when talking about stuff he really understood, Akane mused.

"Okay so now what, Ranma?"

"Now we work on your endurance, Akane." Ranma sighed, not looking forward to the injuries coming up next. Walking over to the tree where the focus pad was still tethered, Ranma lead Akane to the back of it. Pointing to a spot on the rough barked tree, Ranma instructed Akane on her next lesson.

"I want you to punch the tree right here, Akane. I want you to alternate right and left punches, and I want you to punch it hard. I want you to punch until your arms won't punch any more. When you are done call me and I will come look at your progress."

Looking at Ranma like he was asking a baby to say "goo," or a puppy to chew slippers, Akane went to work. This would be easy, she broke bricks with her hands all the time at home, didn't she?

Sighing at the look of confidence on her face, Ranma walked away and left her to her training. Walking down the dirt trail leading away from their camp, Ranma made his way to the meeting place.

Peeking around a shrub on the trail down to the large rock by the stream where he was to meet Mousse, Ranma spied nothing. Pausing, Ranma whistled the warning sound he and Mousse had worked out. An answer sounded from near the meeting place. Waiting, Ranma watched for a mirror signal. There, behind the tree near the large rock, a mirror flashed three times, then two times then four times. The signal.

Reassured, Ranma walked down to meet Mousse. Stepping out from behind the tree, Mousse hopped up on the rock and sat and waited for Ranma to reach him.

"So ... how's it going, Saotome?" Mousse asked.

"All right. She is learning, slowly, but she *is* learning. I figure if I can train her out here without any distractions for a few weeks she will be ready. She basically already is a black belt, she just needs to fine tune what she already knows and she will have earned it."

Nodding, Mousse looked Ranma up and down grimly before he spoke, "How are you doing? I saw the end of it you know, that must have been rough."

Shrugging, Ranma looked down before he replied. "It had to be done. I'm not happy that it took what it took to get her to see reason, and I'm sure I will be paying for it for a long time to come now, but ... it had to be done. How about Shampoo? Did you finally ditch her?"

Grinning, Mousse shook his head no. "She is about twenty minutes behind me, tracking me. I think she thinks I have learned some new technique, and I am not sharing. But I doubt

she will give up for a few more days actually ... oh by the way I spoke with your dad and her dad last night. I didn't give them any specifics, but I did tell them that you were training her."

Nodding at the not unexpected news, Ranma looked around quickly before whispering, "the plan is going well. I dunno what you said to Ukyou to get her to attack Akane, but she was really mad when she showed up ... next we need to build her confidence level up. I will have Akane in town near the Kunou house in about a week, around say, dinner time. Can you arrange for Kodachi to be in the same area, and if at all possible, cranky?"

"Can do. See you then man, fight the good fight." Mousse clasped forearms with Ranma in a brief salute among fellow warriors, then looking around them quickly, Mousse mouthed silently, 'she is getting closer, I must go, see you then.'

With that, Mousse leapt into the tree tops and started moving quietly away from the direction of their camp site. Not that it mattered all that much, Ranma planned on moving it every night.

Shrugging, Ranma started to head back to camp. By his judgment, Akane's arms should feel like rubber about now. It was approaching late afternoon and the breeze was picking up a little bit, carrying with it the fresh organic smells of the forest.

Stepping back into the clearing that was their campsite, Ranma could see Akane's endurance was waning fast. She was now standing squared in front of the tree, her shoulders limp and her knees were sagging a bit. Her punches had eroded the trees bark to the softer wood pulp underneath, and she had punched that wood pulp flat and smooth. Her punches were coming much slower now than when Ranma had left, and her breathing was ragged.

Watching her for a second, Ranma smiled and called out, "break!" Without even acknowledging him, Akane simply stopped punching and slumped down to her knees, and then flopped onto her back with a weak, "oof."

Looking her over, Ranma saw many of her knuckles had cracked and were now bleeding, and looking again at the tree he could see red stains intermixed with the pulverized wood pulp. Smiling grimly on the inside, Ranma remembered his first experience with the tree with pretty much the same results. Of course his trainer had been Genma, and Genma had left Ranma punching while he went off fishing, and had subsequently fallen asleep while do so.

Ranma had punched that tree all day, and into the night, until he simply couldn't move anymore. When he was at that point he just fell over and slept. Exercises like that had helped his endurance tremendously, but had also taken a terrible toll on Ranma. He now hoped to teach Akane the same lessons he had learned, but maybe finding a happy medium in which to do so.

Bending down and picking up his fallen student, Ranma carried her back to the small clearing, walking slowly enjoying the warm soft feel of her body cradled in his arms. Looking for a good place to lay her down, Ranma decided the patch of grass near the stream would work well. Its quiet babbling would be a soothing melody in the background. He carried her to the stream side where the silky crowns of grass, as delicate as a spider web and even dotted here and there with a vibrant wild flower, swayed and danced and shimmered with the whim of the wind, acting out their own unique and special place in the universe.

Ranma gently laid her down on nature's natural bed of spongy ground covered with soft grasses. Moaning a little, Akane opened her eyes slowly to take in her surroundings. Making a motion as to use her arms to prop herself up, Akane flopped right back down into the embrace of the earth.

Smiling, Ranma took a few pieces of cloth from his pockets and walked over to the stream and rinsed them off in the cool flowing water, just cold enough to make his fingers tingle when submerged. Then walking back to his fallen student, Ranma gently wiped the already drying blood from her knuckles, and then used the other strips of cloth to bind her hands to heal. As he worked, Akane just watched him. He wasn't hostile at all, he wasn't mean, and he didn't belittle her. What was going on? The other day she had been taught probably the harshest lesson of her life, that she wasn't as good as she thought she was, and that humility could be a good thing in certain situations. But the question kept coming back to her, 'why?! Why? Why? **Why?**' What had prompted Ranma to teach her that lesson? He certainly had been given plenty of opportunities in the past to teach her that lesson, why now?

"Why, Ranma? Why are you doing this?" Akane whispered before she even really realized she was giving voice to her inner speculations.

Without even looking up from his work Ranma replied, "because I think you are worth the pain of trying, Akane. I think that in the end, all of this will turn out all right if only ..." He trailed off, seeming like he was almost afraid to speak further.

As she watched from her grassy bed, Ranma's gaze of a tender loving care-giver hardened a bit. But the hardening seemed to affect him more than anything, almost like he was fighting himself? Then he spoke in a slightly more gruff tone of voice.

"Don't think that you are done for the day, Akane. No student of mine is allowed to be babied. Rest here for a little while, then I expect you back in the practice area." With that said Ranma trudged back up to their camp area. With questions flying through her mind and no answers, Akane decided to just lay back and rest, who knew when she would get to rest again.

So, her training continued. Akane eventually got back up and trudged into camp, and Ranma was there waiting for her. They trained for the rest of that day, then when it started to get dark they broke down their tiny camp and moved it, setting it up again as soon as they found a new spot, and ate dinner, and collapsed into bed, well Akane did anyway.

Of course as soon as one day ended another one began, or so it seemed to Akane. Ranma now woke her up by sneaking to her bedside and flicking her nose. If he managed to flick her nose, then she failed the morning test. If she managed to snap awake in time and either dodge or block the attack, then she passed the morning test. Then the training would continue.

Sometimes Ranma would set out impossible tasks for her to do, such as 2000 pushups. Akane would get herself mentally pumped up for the task, only to make it to three hundred or so pushups and have her traitorous arms collapse beneath her. Laying there face down in the dirt breathing heavily, Ranma would only watch her with those beautiful blue-gray eyes of his. Eyes that seemed to be asking her a question every time they came to rest on her. Eyes that asked her if she got it yet? Did she understand? Were his efforts to train her worth it?

One day Ranma even made her wade out into the stupid cold stream and told her to stand there in her battle stance. When the cold of the river finally got to her she started to shiver, but Ranma's cold eyes just watched her. Finally he commanded her to, "stop the water." Just like that, "stop the water." Not really knowing what he meant by that, Akane tried to obey. Kicking and punching the flowing water, chopping and just plain holding her arms out, Akane tried to, "stop the water."

Of course no matter how she attacked the water, it just flowed around her. No matter how much she pushed the river it moved past her. No matter how much she wanted to stop it, the water didn't care, and had no intention of stopping. All the while, as Akane fought the water, Ranma just sat and watched her, hoping she would get the message, that she might start to understand what he was trying to show her.

Finally, Ranma called her out of the water. Shivering, and with her uniform plastered to her body, Akane stumbled out of the water and collapsed onto the water bank. She had no idea how long she had been in there, but she couldn't really feel her legs, and her muscles were very cranky with her.

Smiling down at her, Ranma chucked a towel at her and started to walk back to their camp, over his shoulder he mentioned, "I'll get a fire waiting for ya, Akane, don't be too long drying off."

From the stream bank, Akane watched him go. Too tired and cold at the moment to even

snatch the towel off of her head. Finally harnessing her internal reserves of strength and stamina she forced herself up and walking, heading for the fire Ranma had promised her.

Scrubbing her hair dry with the towel, Akane entered their camp site. Sure enough, Ranma was kneeling down in front of a ring of mid-sized rocks surrounding the makings of a good fire.

As Ranma cracked two rocks together to spark the tinder into flames, Akane watched him as she continued to towel dry her hair. Finally Ranma rocked back onto his haunches and sure enough a small blaze was catching hold of the tinder. Ranma slowly nursed the fire into growing with progressively larger pieces of wood, until he could finally place the large heartwood log on the fire that would burn throughout the night if he let it.

Shuddering gratefully with pleasure as she neared the flames, the warmth of the fire seeped into Akane as she just stood there, clutching her towel around her shoulders like a shawl. Ranma took up a seat on a nearby rock and watched her with a somewhat more interested gaze than normal. Blushing a little bit, Akane realized that her white uniform was basically transparent when wet. Shrugging because there was basically nothing she could do about it at the moment, Akane let the heat of the fire continue to warm and dry her. Finally, Ranma spoke.

"Didja understand why I had you fight the water, Akane?"

"You like to try to drown your potential wives?" Akane answered glibly. Noticing Ranma didn't smile back at her comment, Akane swallowed nervously then nodded slightly. "I think I understand why you had me do that."

"Tell me."

"Well ... fighting the water seemed to be to me, like a hopeless battle ..." Looking up at Ranma, Akane waited to see if she was totally off base, he just smiled and waited, so she continued. "I tried kicking and punching it, and that didn't work, I tried holding it back with my body and that didn't work, and all the while, the cold and heavy force of the water wore me down ... so I guess you were trying to show me ... that martial arts doesn't need to be about brute force and violence all of the time?" Finishing up, Akane looked up at Ranma with hopeful eyes, and was rewarded with his warm smile.

"Exactly! That is *exactly* what you were supposed to learn from that drill. Ya know, Akane, it took me *months* to figure that out. Pop would never tell me why I had to do things, he just chucked me into the water one day and told me to stop it. Of course I was so mad that I wasn't really thinking about what I was doing I would just kick and thrash around in the water until he told me I could come out. But, yes, the point of that drill is to show you that the spirit of the art is unrelenting force. If one way doesn't work, you go the other way, if the fight cannot be won, don't fight it! And the easiest way to win a battle is to wear your opponent down, just like the water wore you down with the force of it's current, and it's cold."

Beaming at her, Ranma opened his arms inviting her to hug him, and Akane hesitantly walked into his waiting arms. Still a little bit damp, but tired and cold nonetheless, and besides, Ranma was sitting on a blanket, which he then pulled up and wrapped them both in. For a time, they just sat and watched the fire. The bright glowing coals, the ghostly wisps of vapor and heat near the base, the cracking flames licking the wood, the smoke wafting into the near-nighttime sky, the sound of the pops and snaps and cracks of the wood being consumed by the flame. It was a very magical moment, and neither one of them wanted it to end. So, Akane snuggled back into Ranma and Ranma cradled Akane and they both lost themselves in their thoughts. Akane thought of all she had learned in such a relatively short amount of time, while Ranma worried that the next battle that Akane had to face tomorrow, was a battle she might not be ready for, but there was only one way to find out wasn't there?

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Mousse looked out the window of the Nekohanten restaurant again. He had been watching the sun dip on the horizon for the past hour now, and soon it would be time for him to slip away and get Kodachi in position to battle Akane ... theoretically anyway. In his experience things seldom went exactly as the plan had called for. Looking around subtly for any signs of the old mummy or Shampoo, Mousse slipped into the back hallway, and listened to the door to Shampoo's room. Faintly from inside he could make out both Shampoo and the mummy talking in Mandarin ... something about dress sizes, and what height a leg slit in a dress was the perfect height to catch a husband? Shaking his head forcibly to knock the image of Shampoo's sexy legs out of his mind Mousse quietly slipped down the hallway and out the back door. As soon as he had cleared the restaurant grounds, Mousse leapt to the rooftops and started to sprint in the direction of the Kunou estate.

Deciding that the best way to lure Kodachi outside was a simple ruse, Mousse snuck around the estate looking for her and carefully stepping over, around or under the myriad set of booby-traps on the Kunou grounds.

"No, you fool! I said the **purple** bath slippers! Not the **puce** ones! I swear, Sasuke, I honestly don't know why we feed you!" Came the shrill voice of Kodachi from the courtyard around the corner. Smirking quietly, Mousse flattened himself to the wall and waited for Sasuke to leave.

"A thousand pardons mistress! I shall fetch thy purple slippers immediately!" A door could be heard opening quickly and the small thumps of running feet in a hallway soon after.

Seizing his chance, Mousse inched closer to Kodachi's position and whispered, "Kodachi ... Kodachi my love ...?" Mousse heard a small gasp from Kodachi, then an earnest reply came,

"Ranma? Ranma my love? Have you finally come for me?" Trying desperately not to snicker, Mousse replied, "yes my darling, but you must first find me ..." trailing off, Mousse quickly hopped up to the rooftop, and flattened himself against a small arch, using all his skills of concealment to hide himself.

"I come, my love, to prove myself to you! Oh! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Hooooooooo!" Kodachi cackled as she sprang from her courtyard palace into the trees and to the walls of the Kunou estate, darting thither and yon looking for her love, and calling out to him in extreme passion. Mousse's face was turning red from the strain of trying to keep from laughing.

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"Come on, Akane! Hurry." Ranma shouted to his wife-to-be over his shoulder as he jogged in the direction of the Kunou clan's home.

Panting, Akane replied, "but why are we in town, Ranma? We aren't done training yet, and we just ate an early dinner, and I'm tired ..." Akane complained.

"Yeah I know, but we just gotta go see someone real quick, then we'll get back ta trainin' ya." Ranma explained.

"Ranma! Ranma Sweetums! Where oh where are youuuuu?! Come to me, lover boy! Come to thy love, Ranma darling!"

Pausing, Ranma listened to the sound of Kodachi's voice, then, grinning, headed in her direction. Akane looked puzzled, but followed nonetheless. Running straight past the Kunou estate, Ranma made sure that he ran by the wall Kodachi was currently perched on and kept on running, with Akane hot on his heels. Grinning to himself, Ranma thought, 'this is gonna be goooooooooood.'

"Ran- " Cutting herself off in mid-call, Kodachi saw the love of her life sprinting past the Kunou estate ... strange, why would he be running from her ... **Akane!** The devil-girl, she was chasing her beloved Ranma! Growling to herself, Kodachi jumped down off the wall and sprinted after them.

"Don't worry, my sweetums! Kodachi will save thee!" Dodging around a corner, Ranma jumped into some bushes and waited. Akane came around the corner next and slowed to a stop. Looking around puzzled, she opened her mouth as if to call out for him when Kodachi galloped up and rounded the corner at a full sprint and plowed right into Akane.

Brushing herself off huffily, Akane growled, "hey! Watch where you're going you nut case."

Squaring off against her, Kodachi produced her trademark rhythmic gymnastic competition ribbon, and started to twirl it in a threatening manner. "And just who are you to speak to me in such an insolent manner? You are nothing but a common peasant." Kodachi sneered.

Looking Kodachi up and down, Akane started to fall back into her old ways of handling conflict, but managed to grab a hold of her new training just in time. Standing in a relaxed posture, she put her hands in her pockets and just smirked at Kodachi.

"You can call me whatever you like, Kodachi, I know I'm not a worthless peasant like you seem to think everyone is. And I also know that you're no better than I am."

"Insolent wretch! We will see how sure you are of those words when I ram them down your throat!" Kodachi cried as she leapt into the air snapping her ribbon viciously at Akane's head.

Falling into her training, Akane moved with the motions Ranma had shown her, inching her head just slightly out of the way of the ribbon, then back again, fast enough to make it appear that she hadn't really moved at all.

Kodachi the Black Rose, landed on a tree branch and immediately produced a fistful of clubs, which she proceeded to throw at Akane.

Akane held her ground and simply moved herself ever so slightly out of the path of the clubs. Not even bothering to block them, she just flowed around them, like the river. From her tree branch perch, Kodachi scowled.

"I see someone has been training you, girl, very well then I shall have to use my full abilities to teach you a lesson."

'Here it comes ...' Ranma cringed to himself. Kodachi was about to use her full speed and agility to attack Akane. Akane would either manage to fight her off, or she would end up unconscious on the ground. Biting his lower lip, Ranma waited.

Tucking her ribbon back into her leotard, Kodachi snapped a spiked club into each of her hands as she hopped down from the tree. Glaring at Akane for just a minute, Kodachi then charged with a shrill battle cry!

Akane braced herself and waited, unconsciously she started to tense her muscles and harden her stance like she always used to do. Kodachi leapt at Akane and swung her right club at Akane's head so fast you could hear the wind whistling around it.

Ducking under the club attack to the left of her attacker, Akane shot a right elbow to Kodachi's ribs, then stutter-stepped back out of range. She was doing okay, but with the intensity of the battle, Akane was starting to fall back on old habits.

Swinging through her strike, Kodachi spun into a whirlwind attack, striking over and over again towards Akane with her spiked clubs forcing Akane to block. Just as Ranma had shown her she snapped her chops and palms into Kodachi's vulnerable pressure points as she blocked her. Snarling, Kodachi put everything she had into the attack and Akane's defense started to falter.

Knowing she had to finish the fight soon if she wanted to win Ranma shouted from the bushes, "**Now**, Akane, use it now!"

The shout distracted Kodachi for just a second and in that space of time Akane brought her right back leg up and round kicked Kodachi full in the solar plexus and recoiled the strike back just as fast. The kick knocked the wind out of Kodachi and, dropping her clubs to the sidewalk with hollow metallic clatters, she slumped to her knees.

"How ... how could a lowly peasant like you beat one such as I in joined battle? It isn't possible ..." Kodachi muttered before she slumped over and was reduced to moaning as she caught her breath.

Peeking out from his hiding place, Ranma spied Mousse leaving the Kunou grounds down the street. Noticing Ranma, Mousse gave a quick thumbs-up sign and a wink, then was gone.

Before Ranma could get out of the bushes to congratulate Akane, there came a clapping sound from across the street. Standing up tall from where she had been hidden, was Ukyou.

"So ... you are training her now, Ranma? It took you awhile but it looks like you have finally chosen haven't you?"

Ranma's heart froze in his chest. This was it, this was the confrontation he had been dreading. Standing up slowly from the bushes, Ranma met the very angry and hurt gaze of his closest childhood friend. "Ukyou ... I ... I never ever meant for you to get hurt at all. I ... I dunno what to tell ya, Ukyou, kick the crap out of me if it'll make ya feel better, but I don't love you like that. I love you as my friend, and as someone that understands me, but that's all ..." Trailing off, Ranma forced himself to maintain his gaze into Ukyou's pain filled eyes.

Jumping down from her rooftop, Ukyou landed and started to walk slowly to where Ranma stood. Her hands were clenched at her sides, and tears were starting to fall from her eyes. No battle aura surrounded her, but her hurt and anger were obvious to anyone that could see her.

Akane started to move in front of Ranma, intending to fight her off, but Ranma stopped her with a quick hand gesture to hold her ground. Any punishment Ukyou handed out to him now, he figured he deserved. Getting the drift, Akane sighed loudly but took a few steps away from them and turned her back to give them a small measure of privacy. Grinning slightly, she decided to busy herself with hog-tying Kodachi with her own ribbon.

Stopping so close to him that Ranma could smell her, and could feel the heat of her body, Ukyou continued to gaze into his beautiful eyes for minute after minute, not really saying anything, those beautiful eyes of his ... eyes that she could see didn't love her the way she

wanted them to.

Whispering so quietly that Ranma could barely hear her, Ukyou started to say her peace. "Well I guess this is it then. I guess I have to give up now don't I ..."

"Ukyou I'm - " Ranma started to say. Putting a finger over his lips, Ukyou shushed him.

"Don't ruin my noble sacrifice with empty promises, Ranma ..." When she said, "noble sacrifice," Ukyou smiled for a minute like she always used to. Making the moment seem all the more surreal.

"We both know that you have chosen *her*, Ranma. Regardless of whether you have told her or not, we both know she is the one for ya sugar. I know you know that I love ya, Ranma-honey. I know you know that I would have done just about anything to be the one to win you. Maybe even killing for you ... but I guess desire isn't always enough to get what you want is it?" Ukyou asked the question to no one in particular as she smiled sadly, and the tears fell quietly from her eyes. Choking back his own tears, Ranma kept his gaze on his oldest and best friend, he owed her that much at least.

"So ... now what, Ukyou? I know that Mousse goaded you ta fight Akane, but now that I am training her I really can't letcha fight with her anymore ..." Ranma looked down guiltily for a moment then, it sounded so conceited to say something like that.

"I know, Ranma-honey. I didn't even really fight Akane because of what Mousse told me, I fought her to make myself feel a little better, maybe even a little superior. I know it's small and petty, but there ya have it. I did it basically to prove to myself that I had at least *something* she didn't have. But I don't really want to fight her now. I'm actually happy for her. I really am, Ranma, she's a good person, and she deserves to be loved by someone like you. She has had just as hard and weird a life as I have, and if I have to lose to someone I am glad it's her at least..."

"Oh, Ukyou ... I'm so sorry ..." Ranma whispered as his tears finally started to fall. It was just *too hard*, too hard to do this. Seeing her like this, the pain that he caused, Ranma almost started to want to go back on his decision ...

"No, it's okay, Ranma. She won ya, fair'n'square. I want you to follow your heart, just like I'm following mine."

"U-chan ... I wish there was something ... something I could do for you ..." Smiling ever so slightly, Ukyou reached behind her and unsheathed her battle spatula.

At the sound of a weapon being drawn, Akane looked over her shoulder. But Ranma seemed calm, and Ukyou didn't seem to be overly emotional, or even really angry so, shrugging, Akane returned to looking away, and gloating ever so slightly over her now hog-tied and gagged sparring partner.

Ranma met Ukyou's gaze as she drew her battle spatula. 'Here it comes.' Ranma thought. 'Well, unlike last time I guess I hafta grin'n'bear it.' Ranma winced as he braced himself for a pummeling.

Then Ukyou did something she had never done before, she held the weapon out to Ranma hilt first and offered it to him. "Here ... take it. I want you to keep it with you always, that is what you can do for me. That's what I want you to promise me, to carry this with you always, and to remember me..." Ukyou handed it to him as her voice broke.

"U-chan ..." Ranma whispered. So awestruck at what was happening that words escaped him, Ranma simply took the spatula and held it. Finally, Ukyou looked up into his eyes for a final gaze, then slumped into his arms softly and nuzzled his chin with her cheek, letting her tears fall on his, mixing them together. Slowly, Ukyou wrapped her arms around her lost love and pulled her mouth up to his and kissed him. Not hungrily like Akane did, but very soft and sweet. Very much aware that this would be her first, last and only kiss with Ranma.

Ranma, for his part, froze at first, this could easily dissolve the uneasy peace of the moment very quickly. But Akane seemed to be holding to her unspoken promise and hadn't turned around to look at them yet ... so Ranma let her kiss him. Draping his arms around her awkwardly since he had a very large spatula in one hand, Ranma tried to hug her a little bit before she broke away.

Licking her lips sadly, and with a small glimmer of a smile starting to ease onto her features again, Ukyou bowed to Ranma and saluted Akane's back. Then turned around and started to walk away. Ranma sadly watched her go. He raised his hand once, and opened his mouth to call her back ... but then sadly let the hand drop again, and slowly closed his mouth. No words could make this better.

After some time, Ranma could no longer see her anymore. He turned around to see how Akane was doing. Smiling, he saw that Akane was now perched atop Kodachi's squirming, hog-tied body with a rather self-satisfied smirk on her face.

"So ... what should we do with crazy here?" Akane asked innocently.

"Well, we can't leave her like this, it might be a long time before someone finds her. Lets drop her off at her front door, then get out of here." Ranma replied with a little bit of humor returning to his voice. It was good to see Akane so pleased with herself. Although he just knew that Kodachi would never leave this alone in the future, but that was okay as long as Akane could handle her.

So, together they carried Kodachi to the front gate of the Kunou estate, and Ranma quickly scribbled a note on a scrap of paper and stuck it between part of the ribbon that had her tied down. Then Akane rang the bell and they both dashed off into the early twilight. A moment later the gate swung open and Sasuke peered outward.

**"Mistress!** Oh mistress what has been done to you?" Kodachi answered in a muffled growl.

"MMM! Mhh, mmmh mmmh!" To which Sasuke could only guess as what she meant.

"Fear not mistress, your loyal servant Sasuke shall save thee ... wait a minute, what's this ... a note? ... it says ... that you were trying to bite people at the market, so they had to restrain you?" Looking up from the note Sasuke eyed Kodachi in a slightly less than impressed manner. Growing more and more furious, Kodachi growled.

"MMM! Mhh, mmmh mmmh!" Shaking his head as he started to untie her Sasuke replied.

"Oh mistress ... if you were hungry you should have ordered me to fix you dinner ... it would have been much easier on your ego ..." Finally getting free of her bounds, Kodachi shoved her helper away from her and sneered, "I'll ego *you*, ya little twerp, c'mere!" Kodachi shouted as she lunged for Sasuke, who nimbly leapt away.

"But mistress! I have done nothing wrong, I - "

"Shut up, fool, and die!" Kodachi screamed as she gave chase.

"But mistress! ... " And so the Kunou household reverted back to pretty much normal. As Ranma and Akane headed back to the woods, to complete the final leg of her training, to prepare her to fight Shampoo.

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In the Tendou household, Doctor Tofu was staying up late as he usually did these days, and studying that book that lately he lugged everywhere with him. Sitting on the back porch with the book cradled on his knees, he muttered to himself as he read, and made notes on a separate pad.

"... Elemental ..."

"... The dark one ..."

"... death of magic ..." He muttered to himself as he furiously scribbled notes on his notepad, made diagrams, and translated certain section of Chinese into Japanese.

Kasumi watched him from a small distance away for a little bit before she walked out to the porch and sat next to him. The night time air was chill, and a small wind blowing made goose bumps stand up on her arms.

Letting the silence hold for awhile, Kasumi finally cleared her throat rather loudly, prompting

Tofu out of his stupor to look up and acknowledge her. Kasumi then softly asked him what she had been wondering for weeks now.

"Doctor ... what's going on? Why do you study that book so relentlessly, why are crazy people attacking my family, and my home? Why is Ranma out there somewhere in the wilderness training Akane? What's happening?" Kasumi asked with a stubborn tilt of her chin to punctuate her question. She wanted an answer this time.

Shutting the book slowly and setting it aside, Tofu adjusted his glasses, which shimmered for a second from the light shining out to the porch from inside. Then quietly he spoke.

"Well, Kasumi ... I don't really know how to explain it exactly. The book you see me studying all the time claims to be a book of ancient history, and also of prophecy. It talks of our world in ancient times as a world of magic and wondrous things. But also a world of terrible evil, ravaged by those that would abuse such power."

"It says that a mighty battle was fought somewhere in China a long time ago, and that the most powerful nation at that time came under siege from the forces of a very evil being, called the 'Dark One' or Huàide púrén which literally means in Chinese, servant of evil. I know it sounds kind of corny to call him the dark one, but that is the best I can do to translate how they generally refer to him as in the book. They almost never use his true name, nor what his true name means. Anyway the battle ended and left the nation destroyed, the king dead, and his daughter the princess killed not far from the castle in a valley. A valley that our friend Ranma has been to it seems."

"You don't mean . . . ?" Kasumi asked as she put a hand over her mouth in fear.

"Yes, I think the valley of the accursed springs, or Jusenkyou is the valley the princess died in, and this book says her last command as a princess of the high order of magic she inherited from her father, was to take magic from our world."

"But ... aren't those springs magical? Don't they change the people that fall into them?" Kasumi asked.

"Exactly." Tofu answered in a grim tone of voice, letting the reality of the situation sink in to Kasumi.

"So ... what is happening now then?" Kasumi ventured.

"Well ... I think for the answer to that to come around, we need to trace the triad that attacked Nabiki back to China, and find out. But my guess is that someone or some group has figured out how to resurrect magic in our world, and is now working on bringing this, 'Dark One,' back to our world. Which would explain the attacks on our family, and the strange changes in Akane and Ranma and the rest of their little gang." Tofu stated in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Oh my." Kasumi said quietly.

"Yeah, no kidding." Tofu agreed. "So I guess our next step is going to have to be to go to China and find the people, or person responsible for all of this. Which means I guess we have to go get Ranma and Akane."

Kasumi nodded quietly and scooted closer to Tofu. She didn't really understand everything that was going on, but she trusted that he would take care of it, he always did.

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Ranma snuck next to Akane's bedside swiftly and silently. Kneeling down next to her bed he readied an extra-vicious nose flick. Disappointed that she was going to fail her morning test once again.

Reaching down towards her nose, Ranma readied to flick. At the last instant, as his finger was about to fly, Akane's arms shot up and latched onto Ranma's arm with surprising speed and strength.

"Ya know ... that is **not** my most favorite way to be woken up in the morning, Ranma." Akane growled, her eyes still shut in feigned sleep.

"Yeah well, it's better than a full out tackling like pop would do to me in the mornings, so consider yourself lucky." Ranma said as he smiled proudly at her achievement.

Getting up and ducking out of the tent Ranma smile grew even wider, he was very excited about today. Today was the day that he had been waiting for. Shouting over his shoulder as he moved Ranma said, "ya better get up Akane, I got a bucket of water with your name on it out here!"

Grumbling, Akane complied inside the tent, muttering vile things that she would like to do to the mean man that woke her up at such inhuman hours each and every day. Cinching her red belt around her waist, Akane stepped out of the tent and froze.

Grinning, Ranma was kneeling on a white square of cloth, laid out very carefully on a patch of fairly flat grass. Around the cloth were lit candles, that still glowed fairly bright in the pre-dawn light. In front of Ranma lay a small rectangular package wrapped in waxed-oil cloth, a package she had seen in his pack a few times during the past weeks of training, but had never really thought about to ask.

Uneasily, Akane walked over to the patch of grass and looked down at the setup. "Okay, Ranma ... I give up, what are you doing?" Akane asked perplexed.

"It's time, Akane, time to give you what you have deserved for quite some time now. If you

wipe your feet on the grass and come kneel here with me we will get this started." Smiling, because Ranma was smiling, Akane did as he asked and then knelt in front of him.

"Akane ... I have never had the opportunity to do this before, so forgive me if it isn't exactly as you envisioned ... but here goes nuthin'." Ranma said as he pulled out a rather elaborate looking scroll case and set it next to the rectangular package.

Akane just sat and watched. This had a familiar feeling to it, but she couldn't quite place what Ranma was up to yet.

"Akane ... it is with great honor and pride that I do this today. If you would do me the honor of removing your belt, and folding it in half, half again and half one more time please." Ranma smiled and waited.

Akane scowled at him, but since he hadn't asked anything unreasonable, she figured she could humor him. It beat doing two thousand pushups, any day. Setting her belt in front of her like she had been instructed, Akane arched an eyebrow and waited.

Grinning, Ranma gradually removed the covering from the rectangular package, slowly revealing it's contents little by little. Finally, he laid out in front of him a black belt. A brand new black belt with the name "Tendou Akane" stitched in beautiful red Kanji characters on one side of the belt's tip, and "Anything Goes School of Martial Arts" on the other tip.

Gasping, Akane put her hands to her mouth in shock. Her black belt! It was her black belt! "My god ... Ranma ... I don't know what to say ... do I even deserve this ... ?" Akane whispered.

Smiling, Ranma continued with the ceremony that his father had done for him many years ago, and he still remembered very well. As a matter of fact, he was basically reciting what Genma had told him back when he had gotten his black. It was the same speech Genma had heard from Happosai back when he had gotten his black belt.

"Tendou Akane as your duly authorized instructor of the school of Anything Goes Martial Arts, it is with great pleasure that I ask you to take your black belt oath."

Nodding quietly as tears streamed down her cheeks unchecked, Akane just sat and watched in awe.

"Tendou Akane, I hereby charge you with the awesome responsibility of being a black belt of our school. If you accept this charge you are hereby honor bound from this day forward to obey the laws of this school, and defend it if necessary. Do you agree to this?" Ranma's gaze seemed to drill through her, this was a **very** serious promise he wanted from her."

"I - I ... promise ..." Akane managed to choke out.

"Tendou Akane do you hereby swear that you will uphold the tenets of the school of Anything Goes Martial Arts from this day forward, including accepting any challenge at any time, putting your life on the line if necessary, and protecting the name of the school and all those affiliated with the school of Anything Goes Martial Arts?"

"I swear." Akane whispered.

"Then it is with great pleasure that I ask you to bow down to your old belt, signifying goodbye, please." Ranma instructed.

Looking down at her very well-worn red belt with tears in her eyes, Akane slowly bowed down to it, as Ranma matched her bow, resting her forehead on it for a few seconds. Then straightened back up.

Reaching over, Ranma then switched the two belts in place before speaking again. "Now would you please bow down to your new belt, signifying hello."

Again Akane bowed, and again Ranma matched her bow. When she straightened up they sat in silence for a second just enjoying the moment. Finally, Ranma spoke.

"Now, Akane you get ta do something that many people never get ta do in their entire lives, you get ta put on your very own black belt which you have earned, and are entitled to wear. I would advise you to put it on slowly, you only get to do this for the first time, once." Smiling, Ranma then just sat there and watched her.

Timidly, Akane reached out for the belt. Holding it in her hands, Akane unfolded it slowly, looking at it and feeling it for the first time. Then, slowly, Akane started to wrap her new black belt around her white training gi.

When she had knotted the very stiff and new heavy black belt around her waist she looked at Ranma again. He was beaming. "One final piece of ceremony Akane." Ranma said as he held up the elaborate scroll case, and opened it. Sliding out a rather large ornately decorated scroll, embedded with the seal of the school of Anything Goes Martial Arts, and it read in very beautiful kanji, which looked suspiciously like Kasumi's writing:

[Tendou Akane, on this day we confer upon you the  
solemn responsibility of being a black belt  
in the school of Anything Goes Martial Arts.  
We are all very proud of you.

-Signed:  
~Saotome Ranma  
~Saotome Genma

~Tendou Soun

~Founding Father, Grand Master Happosai]

Handing her the scroll, Ranma stood and bowed to her. Standing up on shaky legs, Akane set her scroll down and bowed back. Then lunged forward and hugged him.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, Ranma!" Akane squealed as she hugged him. Smiling, he hugged her back.

"Don't thank me for anything, Akane. You sweated blood and cried real tears to get that. You did all the work, and you have earned it. As a matter of fact both your pop and mine have been wanting to give you your black belt for awhile now -- that's why the scroll is all ready. They just hadn't thought of a good time to do it, or how to go about finishing up your black belt training. So, I asked them if I could do it, before the whole day with Ukyou, and they thought it was a great idea.

"Oh, Ranma ..." Akane let the words die, the moment was too pure to try to over analyze it. What was in the past was in the past, and while she still didn't understand everything that was going on, she could deal with it at another time.

"Let's go home, Akane." Ranma smiled as he let her go. Grinning back at him, Akane proudly put her red belt back into her pack and started to help break down camp, greatly anticipating her return to home with her new black belt.