

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

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Stories Archived at: <http://www.asayogure.com/rgac>

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Chapter 12, "Balancing The World With Harmony - The Beginning And End Of An Age"

Notes:

Well, this is it, the **entirely re-written** ending chapter to Ranma Gets a Clue, which I started way back in 2001, and I am just now getting around to finishing after promising for so long to do so (**see! I did** keep my promise! Hah! \^o^). I will probably never touch this story again. It needed to be finished properly, but looking at my writing from so long ago is now painful to me -- which is why I only actually rewrote just this one chapter, instead of doing that with all of the chapters. What I know now about writing, compared to what I knew then, is depressing.

Anyway, unlike with the new chapter 11, I really have actually **re-written** this entire chapter. There are entirely new (large) sections to this new chapter, which was broken off from the old chapter 11, to make its own chapter (where it belonged in the first place). The lead up to the climax is now fleshed out and not just a few lines saying briefly what they did, and where they went, and the climax has now been re-written to better reflect my writing style as it is now (not completely, I didn't start from scratch, I just edited things as best I could, or re-wrote small sections of things where appropriate), and also to tie up some loose ends a little better. Some sections have been left more or less alone, except for the hundreds of comma and tense errors I am trying to fix, and the multitude of minor errors I am correcting. I am also rewriting the major battle scene in the center of the story to clean some of that up. This chapter is by no means perfect (is anything ever **really** perfect?) -- but it is as perfect as you are going to get from free fanfiction on the Internet with no actual formal editing process ^_-

Nabiki sat in the family room doing some calculations in her ledgers. Genma and Soun were playing a game of Go in the corner, and Kasumi was in the kitchen making dinner. Just like an average evening in the Tendou household went. Except Ranma and Akane were conspicuously absent, and Dr. Tofu was sitting at the table reading that book of his yet again.

It had been many many weeks now that Ranma and Akane had been gone. Nabiki wasn't worried, because daddy wasn't worried. Since her daddy would be the first to be freaking out if Akane was missing and he didn't know where, she assumed he knew something which she didn't, and just left it at that. She would find out eventually, she always did.

Kasumi stepped into the family room then with a large pot of rice. She set it carefully on the table as announced, "dinner's ready," in the same sweet voice she always used.

With eyes perking up and bellies growling, Soun and Genma raced for their places at the table while Kasumi left to get the rest of the dinner. Tofu slapped his book closed on a hasty paper bookmark, and jumped up to help her.

Nabiki strolled to the table and casually took her place. She would never understand why daddy and Mr. Saotome were always such goobers at meal time, it wasn't like they were going to run out of food. Kasumi entered the room again with Tofu in tow, and finished setting the table. Just as everyone was sitting down, a loud crash sounded from the back door in the kitchen, followed by laughter and voices.

The men at the table all jumped into battle stances. Then the telltale voice of female Ranma could be heard coming from the kitchen, in a rather annoyed tone of voice, arguing with someone. Then they heard Akane's voice.

"Honestly, I don't know what it is with you and water." Akane joked.

"Ha ha, very funny. I swear tomorrow I am filling in that stupid koi pond with concrete!" Muttering to herself, Ranma grabbed a kettle of hot water off of the stove and dumped it over herself.

The entire family ran to the kitchen doorway to peek inside and see for themselves that Ranma and Akane were actually back. They rounded the doorway, and there they were. Ranma was now soaking wet, but looked the same, and Akane was perfectly dry, but looked different some ... how ... her belt!

"Oh Akane! You did it! Daddy is so proud of you!" Soun exclaimed as he raced to his daughter and tackled her in a very excited hug.

"Thank you dad, dad ... dad I can't breath." Akane choked out.

As the rest of the family crowded around Akane to congratulate her, Tofu yanked Ranma aside and whispered to him, "we need to leave immediately if not sooner. As it is I am worried we may be too late." Ranma nodded in understanding, and agreed they could use the cover of darkness to make it out of town without being seen tonight.

As soon as the commotion around Akane died down, Tofu cleared his throat and then announced, "well the time has come everyone. We need to go to China. Akane and Ranma are already packed, and I am ready to go as well. So, the rest of you need to grab what you need then meet us at the front door."

Nabiki and Kasumi just sort of shrugged and headed up the stairs to pack. If there was one thing they were used to in this family, it was weirdness. Genma and Soun nodded in a knowing way, and headed off as well. Only Akane stood her ground.

"China?! But we just got back! What do ya mean we're going to China?!" She demanded.

"Just think of it as your first official actions as a black belt." Ranma quipped.

"Yes but-" Akane started to question him.

"I know, you need a better explanation than that, but Tofu can explain it better than I can, and we need ta get going. I'm goin' ta run upstairs and get some stuff before we go, so ask him any questions ya have. I don't really understand all this either, ya know." With that

Ranma dashed out of the room and up the stairs, and Akane started to grill Tofu with questions, while the rest of the family packed. So, Tofu told her the story he had just told Kasumi the other evening, watching her eyes grow ever wider as she listened.

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That night, the entire family snuck out of the house and caught the train to the coast. Ranma sat next to Akane and they both slept. Her head lay nuzzled on his shoulder, and his arms encircled her warmly. Their snuggly behavior raised the eyebrows of both their fathers, but they chose to say nothing at the moment. Although both of them secretly hoped that they had finally come to their senses.

Nabiki and Kasumi filled out the rest of the seats in their compartment. In the adjoining compartment, Genma and Soun snored away blissfully after tucking the kids in. Happosai was nowhere to be seen, and presumed to be either following them, or busy raiding panties, everyone hoped for the latter. Dr. Tofu alone stood watch in the hallway, which was fine by him, as it allowed him peace and quiet to study his notes. He checked in on the compartments every so often, but Ranma & Akane were in with the girls, and Soun and Genma could handle themselves if an ambush came in through the windows. So, mostly, Tofu read.

In the morning, the train pulled into the station, and everyone yawned as they gathered their gear. Nabiki seemed to be the most put-out of her comfort zone, and therefore complained the loudest.

"If we don't get food **now** I am leading a mutiny against whoever is leading this crazy expedition!" She grumped to Soun, Genma, and Tofu repeatedly. They stopped at the nearest café and grabbed some breakfast on their way to the marina. Nabiki huddled in a corner for warmth next to the heater duct in the wall. Everyone else seemed to be more or less in good spirits. The only ones in the group *not* used to traveling and training conditions on the road were Nabiki and Kasumi. Nabiki was clearly showing how displeased she was. Kasumi, on the other hand, was as unflappable as always, and also with Dr. Tofu. So she was fine.

Ranma and Akane were being strangely quiet. Either sitting and talking quietly, or practicing martial arts together whenever they got one square meter or more of space to use. Now that Akane was an official black belt of the Anything Goes school, and an equal to Ranma (at least in displayed belt rank), she seemed to be *much* more relaxed around him, and everyone else. Whatever it was that the belt meant to her, it obviously had fixed something she had felt she had been lacking, whether she knew it or not.

When everyone was done eating, and the bill paid for, they all turned their heads to Dr. Tofu, expecting him to lead, as he had last night. He smiled over his steepled fingers as he braced his elbows on the table and peered over them, his glasses glinting importantly.

"I bet you all are wondering how, exactly, I was planning to get us to China this time? Well, fear not, it won't be as bad as the last time we all ended up rowing there after we sank

Kunou's boat."

That was all he said about it. After that, they got up and followed him to the docks in the marina, where they were treated to a pleasant surprise. Tofu had a full sized luxury yacht ready to go. Complete with crew and everything. Everyone raised their eyebrows and looked to Tofu to explain the extravagance, with sweat drops running down their faces.

Tofu, hand behind head in embarrassment, explained, "well ... you see ... I have helped a lot of people out over the years. A **lot** of people. Many of them old, and suffering from aches and pains that modern medicine can't do a whole lot about. When I am able to help them, they tend to be **very** grateful. So grateful, in fact, that my name keeps popping up in estate wills for some reason. I donate most of it to charities and free clinics. But I kept this yacht. Somehow, I had a feeling that some day we all might need to be going to China again."

They boarded the yacht and were each assigned their own spacious cabins; there were more than enough for one for everyone. Akane and Ranma brushed hands longingly as they parted for their own adjoining cabins. They had grown accustomed to sleeping together, and now it would be somewhat weird to be sleeping in different rooms. Nobody seemed to notice their discomfort though.

Once everyone had been assigned a cabin, and their gear had been stowed, they all went top side to enjoy the yacht. There was a small swimming pool, a jacuzzi, ping pong, video games, a t.v. room, a 2 on 2 basketball court, and a fully stocked bar.

Nabiki, sporting a slinky bikini was didn't leave very much to the imagination, headed straight for the jacuzzi, and snagged a crew member by the collar as she went, giving him drink and food orders and he was dragged behind her. Kasumi poked her head into the kitchen, which she was told was called a "galley" on a ship, and asked if she could help. Nobody wanted to say no to such a pretty girl, so they made room for her by kicking out the youngest chef. Akane and Ranma settled into the t.v. room and snuggled next to each other on the couch under a blanket. Dr. Tofu got a couple of games of ping pong in with various crew members, between reading sessions with his notes. Soun and Genma, as if anyone even needed to ask, found the bar, and had to be carried out when it ran out of alcohol, leaving a very shocked young bar tender gaping in disbelief behind them.

When night fell, they all retired to their cabins. Ranma and Akane once again parting ways with a slight brush of their hands, and longing looks. Dr. Tofu and Kasumi also parted ways, but with held hands, and a shared kiss. They were openly dating now, but Dr. Tofu wouldn't dream of asking to share Kasumi's bed just yet. Much to Kasumi's secret despair.

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They reached mainland China 10 hours later. The yacht crew found a nice natural harbor, and rowed everyone to shore in the yacht's shore boats. They were instructed to stay in the harbor and wait for them for at least 2 weeks. If they didn't show up after that, then they were instructed to alert the Chinese government about them, and to head for home.

It was now mid morning the next day. After they had been rowed to the damp sand of the beach at a low tide, they all trudged up to the dry sand above the tide line and dropped their packs as everyone turned and looked at Tofu expectantly for what to do next. A chill wind blew out of the north and ran up Ranma's spine as he looked at Tofu, which he took to be a bad omen.

Tofu looked back at everyone puzzled, then asked in a huff, "what are you looking at *me* for? I have never been to Jusenkyou. Ask the two training wonders over there how they got there last time! I have gotten everyone as far as I can get them, for now. I need to study these notes."

The group, as one, turned and glared at Genma, who promptly ran back down the beach and dunked himself in the water. Panda Genma then sat on the beach, trying to look cute, and held up a sign which read, "I'm only an innocent little panda. Please ask someone else for directions." As everyone started to growl, and roll up shirtsleeves to administer panda beatings, Ranma piped up.

"As much fun as I know it is to beat on my no good pop. I actually **do** know the way to Jusenkyou. Trust me. I didn't fall into a cursed spring and start changing into a girl, without learnin' the route that would get me back there someday, to undo the damage. Follow me." Ranma said with a grin as he shouldered his pack and waved them after him. Spirits immediately reverted to happy. Except for Genma's, who now held up a sign to their retreating backs, which read, "who're you callin' no good?! Ya ingrate!"

Gathering their packs, the family set off on their long hike to the valley of Jusenkyou. They were going back at last.

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Many, many, ... many hours later, as they trudged up yet another hill, Akane muttered, "are we there yet?"

"Now, don't you start. We just got Nabiki to stop asking that question." Tofu said over his shoulder as he walked and consulted what looked like a map in that book of his.

Walking behind Akane, Nabiki stuck her tongue out with a very loud, *thhhppppbbbbbbb* sound, and Ranma rolled his eyes. Maybe bringing the *entire* family had been a mistake. But then again, the safest place for them right now was around the senior fighters of the school.

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Peering over a rather large boulder, Shampoo smirked to herself. They were on her home ground now. Silent as shadow, she ran down the hillside she was watching them from. She wanted to get ahead of them, so she could reach the site of the trap she had planned.

Unknown to her, someone else was following her quietly in the shadows, in the distance.

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Reaching the bottom of the latest hill they had climbed, Tofu called a halt for a lunch break. They continued walking to a nearby clearing to settle down for a break, when a rumbling sound brought their eyes to the side of the hill they had just descended. Looking up, they saw an avalanche of rocks and boulders tumbling down towards them.

"Take cover!" Tofu shouted, as he grabbed Kasumi and ran in the opposite direction of the avalanche. Ranma grabbed Nabiki and followed him, while the rest of the family ran by themselves. Taking cover behind larger rocks, or in the nearby ditch lining the road they were on, they rode out the avalanche, until all that was left of it was the cloud of dust it had brought with it.

Coughing and dusting himself off, Ranma stood up from the ditch he had tossed himself and Nabiki into, standing her up on her own shaky legs as he did so. At the same time he could see a dark figure slowly walking down the hillside from over Nabiki's shoulder.

Emerging from the dust, strode the figure of Shampoo. Her face lit up when she saw him. "Ranma, you come Shampoo's country. This mean you ready take Shampoo to wife yes?" Shampoo asked as she continued to walk towards them.

"Shampoo ..." Ranma started to answer her when Akane climbed out of the ditch she had jumped into.

"So you're the one behind that avalanche! I should have known! **Well** ... what do you have to say for yourself?" Scowling, Shampoo turned to address Akane.

"Shampoo say, she miss you again, but maybe third time the charm, okay, Akane?" Shampoo asked with a sneer.

"Shampoo ... that's not funny, you coulda hurt someone, badly." Ranma admonished her.

"Aiyah, but husband no could be hurt by simple rocks. Shampoo just playing with you." Looking generally confused, Shampoo beamed up at Ranma with eyes full of love.

"That's it I have had it! Shampoo, I challenge you!" Akane shouted. By now the rest of the family had assembled, and were watching. When Akane said that most of them looked at Ranma in doubt. Ranma simply shrugged his shoulders. It was going to come to this sooner or later, might as well get it done and over with now. He had trained her to the best of his ability, and now it was up to her.

"Shampoo agree ... on one condition, if Shampoo win, then too-too violent girl promise to leave Ranma and never see again, is okay?" Shampoo grinned, confident that she could win any fight against Akane.

"Agreed, but if I win then you have to do the same, okay, Shampoo?" Akane grinned back.

"That fine with Shampoo, violent girl can think whatever she want think, that no make it true." Shampoo smiled as she took up a battle stance and waited.

Ranma watched his former student and future wife face down a truly dangerous opponent for the first time since she had become a black belt. Of course, no one would know that she was now a black belt, because none of them were wearing their gis or their belts.

Akane matched Shampoo's stance and they both waited. This time though, unlike the fight with Ukyou, Akane let herself relax like Ranma had taught her to do. She forced her emotions to drain from her as she'd been taught, in order to find her center. That had been her first lesson when her sparring training had started.

Finally unable to bear the wait any longer, Shampoo made the first move and charged Akane with a quick kick, punch combination. Putting her training into practice, Akane ducked and dodged out of the way of both strikes, using far less energy than it would have taken to block them.

Again, Shampoo charged her and Akane spun around and met the attack with an agile grace she had never before possessed, dodging and weaving out of the way of Shampoo's new attacks.

Growing frustrated, Shampoo stopped for a second and analyzed Akane's moves. She was fighting like Ranma! Well fine, Shampoo knew how to counter that style, at least with a weaker and lesser opponent like Akane.

Walking up to Akane, Shampoo stopped just out of arms reach, and started to focus her ki for an attack. Akane, quickly seeing what Shampoo was doing, decided to go for the easiest counter, and promptly dropped down in a swift motion and swept Shampoo's legs out from under her, breaking her concentration on her ki attack.

Back-flipping out of the sweep, and back to her feet, Shampoo landed and growled, "violent girl get better, Shampoo see that now. Okay then, Shampoo use technique of Amazon tribe. Shampoo was go easy on you early, but now, you make Shampoo mad!" With that, Shampoo jumped at Akane and grabbed her shirt in a throw.

Before Akane could counter the move, she was rolling into the ground. So she just went with the roll and popped out of it, upright again. But Shampoo wasn't going to leave Akane any time to be satisfied with herself. Before Akane had even finished standing up, Shampoo was on her again. She was so fast! Looking to Ranma for help all she got was his steady gaze on her, and a look in his eyes that said, '*you can do it.*'

Steeling her resolve, Akane slapped Shampoo's hands away from her this time, and started to use the Shiatsu techniques Ranma had shown her. Shampoo would lash out at her with a kick or a punch, and Akane would jab a pressure point as she blocked it every time.

Feeling Akane hitting her pressure points, Shampoo muttered to herself and changed tactics yet again. Running towards Akane, she faked a punch then flat out tackled Akane.

Knocking her to the ground and pinning her, Shampoo quickly flicked a series of pressure points along Akane's arms, then vaulted off of her before Akane could kick her.

Using her kick as momentum, Akane rocked herself back to her feet and tried to raise her arms into a guarding position. The pain that slammed through her when she tried to move her arms was so unbelievable that it made her gasp.

Smirking, Shampoo asked, "Aw, did Shampoo give you boo-boo? If you want, Shampoo accept your surrender now, that way too-too violent girl able to walk home again, yes?"

Growling, Akane braced herself in a battle stance, even without the use of her arms, she could still move and kick just fine. Locking eyes with Shampoo she yelled, "lets just finish this!"

Casually wiping some sweat away from her eyes, and blowing her hair out of her face, Shampoo grinned like a feral animal and strode to her opponent. She gathered her internal chi as she walked, to channel into a punch that would end this once and for all.

Akane also started to channel her chi. She needed something to keep Shampoo away from her for long enough for her arms to work again. Unconsciously, Akane started to build a chi shield.

Reaching a distance close enough to Akane to strike, Shampoo brought her arms up into a guarding position, and started to glow red with her battle aura. To her disbelief, Akane started to glow yellow with her very own battle aura, and Akane's was brighter!

Growling, Shampoo launched herself into a devastating punch. A punch that had been taught to her by none other than her great grandmother herself, Cologne.

The two energies of the girls met and burst into a brilliant flare, Akane's shield vs. Shampoo's punch. Shampoo's confident grin turned into a scowl of determination, then disbelief as her energy ran out, yet Akane's seemed to grow, if anything. Shrieking in outraged disbelief, Shampoo threw everything she had into this last desperate attack. The energies of the two girls flared up again, violently. With a final yell, Akane's yellow aura surrounded Shampoo and exploded. The impact threw both girls back violently.

When the bright light of the explosion cleared enough to see, they saw that Shampoo had landed roughly a few meters away, while Akane seemed to have just sat down on the ground where she had been standing. Ranma rushed to her side, looking with worry down on his former student.

"Akane! Akane are you okay?" Ranma asked anxiously. She looked up at him proudly and grinned.

"I beat her Ranma, I really beat her, all by myself too!" Akane said as she kicked herself back up to her feet.

Before Ranma could respond though, Shampoo shouted, "**no!** Shampoo refuse give

husband up to you! **Die!**" Shampoo shouted as she stood up, and began to charge Akane. Before she took three steps though, her knees buckled under her and she slumped to the ground.

Appearing out of nowhere, Cologne hopped up from behind Shampoo, with a grim expression on her face.

"What the ... old ghoul?" Ranma exclaimed.

"Yes, me. Always me, isn't it, Ranma?" Cologne said tiredly. For the first time that he could remember, the old ghoul called him by his name, and not "son-in-law."

"I saw Shampoo here lose to Akane in an honorable fight, with the wager on the fight being that the loser must stay away from Ranma forever." Seems that Shampoo was over confident, and Akane here... seems to have gotten some additional training since the last time I saw her. You didn't show her the rising dragon punch yet, did you Ranma? That is not a technique to be shown to new black belts." Cologne chided him. Ranma shook his head no.

"Good. Well anyway, Mousse told me what is going on so I will leave you to it. If I am right, then your family is the major key to all of this. I bet not even Tofu knows which one of you will be the one to solve this mystery ... oh don't look so shocked, Tofu, you think I haven't seen that book you're always carrying around? That boring thing was required reading among our tribe's elders." Cologne smiled sadly. "I always thought it was a bunch of lies made up by someone who had clearly drunken too much wine. Apparently I was wrong."

"You know, Ranma ... Shampoo really does love you. I will try to get her to accept her fate from now on. But I cannot guarantee *anything*. She never really sought you as a husband because of our laws, you know, that was just a convenient excuse. She sought you as a husband because she *loves you*. She had plenty of opportunities to force you to marry her. That is what one usually does in the situation she was in. They knock the poor guy out, drag him back to the village, and force him to marry under a guard of armed Amazons.

But Shampoo wanted you to come to her willingly. Sure she tried a few games with you, but for the most part I think she was just playing with you. Shampoo has never known a man as strong as you, and I think it delighted her to have someone to play with that wouldn't end up in the hospital every time." Ranma nodded his head sadly in understanding. He wished he could have found a solution to this whole thing that didn't result in heartache for so many people.

"Anyway, I will take her back with me now. I know Mousse is waiting anxiously back at camp for her return. He was the one that alerted me to this whole thing, which is why I was here to intervene. If Mousse showed Shampoo his true power, and stopped her now, then she would again be under Amazon law to marry. As I know you already know, he doesn't want her like that, anymore than she wanted you like that. So anyway, I have said my peace. Good luck to you all, and go with all haste. You are quite near the Jusenkyou valley you know, it is only about a half day's more walk in the direction you are headed." With that, Cologne gathered Shampoo up in her arms and bounded away before anyone could ask questions or even really move.

Looking down at the ground, Ranma sighed and thought about poor Shampoo, and how she would feel when she woke up. But now wasn't the time for that. He was sure that this was far from the last they would be hearing from Shampoo.

The group agreed to a one hour rest to eat and recover from the sudden events that had just, literally, fallen on them. Then they were back to marching again. As Akane walked alongside Ranma, she finally got up enough courage to ask him what was on her mind.

"So ... who have you chosen Ranma? I know it's not Kodachi, or Ukyou and apparently not Shampoo either ..." Ranma sighed and looked at her, then looked away.

"You know how I feel Akane, but not right now, okay? I feel real weird right now." Smiling, Akane just nodded and grabbed his hand as they walked. At least she could hold his hand and help to cheer him up.

Hours passed and the group stopped twice more for water and rest. Until, finally, Tofu said the magic words they had been waiting for, "there it is."

Tofu pointed up ahead to a crack in the wall of the mountain they had been marching towards, and a small wooden sign driven into the ground, which was scrawled with both Chinese and Japanese and read, "This way to the famous Jusenkyou Springs!"

A collective sigh went up from the group as they made their way into the pass, and down into the valley. Where, hopefully, they would get some answers.

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From a nearby cliff, a lone man, dressed in black, ducked his head back out of sight and set his binoculars down next to him as he touched a series of keys on the data pad on his wrist. A short thin wire extended from a headset he was wearing, it beeped a go-ahead signal. He spoke into it softly. It was powerful enough to pick up the tiniest of whispers.

"The targets are entering the valley, over."

"Understood, return to base. Out." Nodding to himself, the man clad in black slipped down the cliff side on a rope that had just recently been set up there. He had no idea what was going on, and he didn't really care. He had just been told to watch for a group entering the Jusenkyou Springs area matching their descriptions.

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The little group finally made it down to the valley where the springs were. Ranma grinned ear to ear and looked for the guide that had been there last time. All he needed to know was which one was the spring of drowned man. Then he would finally be **free** of this stupid curse of his! Looking around hopefully, Ranma failed to see the guide. Eventually, crestfallen, he

turned to Tofu.

"You can read Chinese, can't you Doc? Which one of these signs says '*Spring of Drowned Man?*'" Ranma begged.

"Later, Ranma, first things first, okay?" Tofu answered him distractedly as he looked up briefly from his notes. "I need to find the cave mentioned in the text." Tofu muttered as the rest of the group set their stuff down and relaxed.

"Hey Ranma ... I see some Chinese guys heading this way, is one of them the guide you want?" Nabiki shouted over to Ranma as she pointed in the direction of a cloud of dust heading their way.

Looking up in alarm, both Ranma and Tofu swung their gaze towards the incoming horde of people.

"They seem to all be wearing the same uniforms as those guys from the '*Jusenkyou Preservation Society*,' that attacked you guys a while back. But they don't seem to be very happy, do they?" Asked Tofu.

"Nope, sure don't." Replied Ranma as he assumed a ready stance in front of Nabiki and Kasumi, along with Genma, Soun, Tofu and Akane while Nabiki and Kasumi took a few steps back, just to be sure.

"I don't suppose we can talk about this, do ya fellas?" Ranma asked glibly, but the large group of guards continued to charge.

"Ya know Ranma, you might want to take this a little more seriously. Don't you remember Kenny?"

"Oh yeah... I forgot about that." Ranma replied as everyone else sweat dropped.

Yelling as they closed in for the fight, the Jusenkyou Preservation guards slammed into the group of fighters from the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts, and Tofu.

Genma grabbed two by their necks and rolled backwards, kicking them over his head.

Soun went from guard to guard, ducking under their swords and staves and kicking and punching them unconscious.

Tofu simply stood his ground with a calm expression on his face, jabbing out with his hands and feet every time the neck of a one of their attackers came into reach, paralyzing them with his shiatsu based attacks.

Ranma and Akane fought back to back. Their ki mixing together and bonding as they fought. So far they had lucked out and none of the members of the "Muscle Sword Clan" had shown up.

When the last of the guards had been knocked unconscious, or rendered immobile, they all

relaxed a little bit and Ranma even quipped, "payback's a bitch aint it?"

Tofu smacked Ranma upside the head, and chided him, "don't get cocky! I am sure that isn't the last of them." Tofu then went back to frantically searching through his notes for the cave that was supposed to be here. The manuscript had insisted it was around here somewhere. While they waited, the sun slowly crept towards the horizon.

When it started to grow dark enough that seeing was becoming a problem, Soun and Genma called for a break so they could unpack the flashlights.

"Why can't we just stop and sleep for the night?" Nabiki asked.

"Because I would rather be a moving target than a sitting target, myself." Ranma joked, earning him yet another smacking, this time from Nabiki, causing Akane to raise an eyebrow at her.

"As crass as he is ... Ranma is right, it really isn't a great idea to try to make camp here. Not with all the unfriendly people around." Tofu muttered before returning to his notes and scribbled maps.

"If I am right, the cave should be up in that area somewhere, in the cliff side maybe." Grumbling, the group headed in the direction Tofu pointed, sweeping their flashlights back and forth over the area in front of them cautiously, as they went.

Tofu stopped suddenly in front of a seemingly solid wall of rock and knelt down to examine some scratches in the rock wall while consulting his notes. He then looked back at the wall, then to his notes again, then grinned.

"It's here." He whispered excitedly. Everyone else looked blankly at each other, assuming the others knew what he was talking about. However, before anyone could ask him what he meant, he was in motion.

"Well ... here goes nothing." Tofu stated, and without another word, stood up and walked right at the wall. Wincing at the seriously broken nose the doctor was about to have, Ranma averted his eyes. However, the bone crunching crack of a breaking nose never came. Looking up, Ranma saw the same scene as before, except Tofu was conspicuously absent. Suddenly Tofu's head appeared out of thin air, sticking out of the air.

"Ahhhh!" Ranma yelled. Stepping fully out of the cave, Tofu looked expectantly at Ranma, then asked, "Well come on everyone, what are you waiting for?"

Still breathing heavily from fright, Ranma yelled to his retreating back, "Don't **do** that! You scared the hell out of me!"

Chuckling, Tofu walked back into the cave. The rest of the group timidly followed behind him, still not used to walking through solid rock. Upon stepping into the cave, Ranma turned around and looked the way he had come, only to see a regular cave mouth behind him.

'Weird ... I guess it only looks like that on the outside.' Ranma puzzled to himself as he

took up the rear of their little party.

The cave floor started to slope downward and along both walls were fashioned very old looking wooden beams, worn so smooth with age and use that their surface almost felt like glass. They had obviously been setup as some sort of railing, for some reason.

"You guys might want to make yourselves ready for just about anything. There's no telling what we may find down here." Tofu whispered.

The slope finally started to level off and spilled out into a vast underground cave chamber of some sort. The ceiling of which was so high, that the beams from their flashlights wouldn't penetrate it's darkness.

"I gotta bad feelin' about this ..." Ranma muttered.

"Me too boy . . what say we head up top for some dinner?" Genma replied as he started to back up towards the tunnel they had just descended. Before Ranma could answer him though, a cold voice answered instead from the darkness.

"*Please ... do stay!* I have been expecting you." The cold voice boomed across the cavern.

Setting his book and his pack on the floor, Tofu stuck his hands in his pockets and smiled. "So I have finally found you ... whoever you are. Would you care to tell me *what* you are, exactly?" Tofu asked as he pushed his glasses up on his nose, then crossed his arms across his chest..

"No ... not really." The voice answered from the darkness. "But maybe you have seen me before?" The voice asked as the sound of footsteps carried across the cavern air. As he emerged from the darkness of the cavern, they saw a man ... a sinister looking man swathed entirely in black. He was tall and wore a traveling cloak askew over his left shoulder, clasped at his throat with a symbol of a silver dagger. The cloak did not stir, though a wind in the cave was blowing.

As he drew closer, they could smell what seemed to be dried tree bark wafting from him. He looked to have lived a rough life, and his muscular build and callused hands suggested he was adept in the fighting arts. His hair was disheveled and his knee-high boots were muddy. He was smiling, but the smile seemed, *wrong*, somehow. Both Tofu and Akane, upon seeing him, shouted in unison, "**you!**" Laughing, the man feigned shock and a mocking gasp as he held his hands over his heart in pantomimed fright.

"Yes, *me*. I take it you have seen me in a vision have you, children? Well good, then I need not bother with false pretenses. You have stumbled upon us at a rather bad time and I am afraid you are not welcome here. So I am going to have to have you dealt with." The man smiled as he turned his back to them and started to walk away.

"Oh, and just with what army are you planning to use to '*deal with us?*'" Ranma demanded as he cracked his knuckles in preparation for a good fight.

"Why ... this one of course. Go to it men." The man in black said as he snapped his fingers and walked back into the darkness. Looking unimpressed, Ranma started to chase after the man in black when a low rumbling sounded. Setting their flashlights on the ground, the group backed into each other, trying to see where the sound was coming from. Out of the darkness, rough laughter started to sound from all around them.

Slowly, a large number of swarthy looking men stepped into the ring of light their flashlights were throwing off from the ground. They were all tall, they were all muscular, and all of them carried rather large Chinese swords. In their center stood someone Ranma would rather not see again ... Kenny, of the Jusenkyou Preservation Society, of the Cult of the Muscle Sword, and those with him also seemed to be carrying their swords like Kenny did.

"Um ... Ranma ... I think we're in trouble." Akane whispered.

"No kidding." Ranma whispered back as he braced himself for what was coming next.

"Get them!" Kenny shouted in the deep guttural voice that Ranma remembered, as he pointed his own sword towards them and charged.

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"Where in the hell am I now?!" Came a very familiar shout from behind Ranma and company which, thankfully, also halted the advancing Clan of the Muscle Sword attackers in their tracks, as they paused to analyze the newcomer.

Ducking out of the same tunnel that they had come from just moments before, appeared Ryouga. He was filthy, covered with dust and dirt and something green was oozing off his boots.

"Oh ... Ranma, there you are! It's about time I found you, ya coward! I challenge you!" Ryouga yelled with his usual gusto.

"Yeah, well, that's great, Ryouga, but all these guys challenged me and Akane to a match first, so you'll have to wait in line." Ranma quipped as the members of the Muscle Sword Clan began to close the distance again.

"I hate waiting." Ryouga muttered as he turned to face their now common foe. "Besides, any enemy of Akane's, is an enemy of mine!"

With an enthusiastic battle cry of determination, Ranma and company met their attackers with their combined might and fought them. At first the fight seemed to be going more or less as the one they had fought earlier. But the swordsmen were more resilient than the earlier group of fighters. They kept getting up after getting thrown or punched. While their numbers weren't increasing, each time one of them got up, it seemed like another fighter was entering the battle. The effect was an efficient drain on their stamina, which was starting to cause Ranma's group to make fatigued errors.

Dodging swords left and right, Ryouga unlimbered his battle umbrella and knocked the swords of his attackers away. Spinning suddenly, Ryouga met a sword that had been heading for his back with the heavy force of his umbrella, shattering it.

"Attack me from behind will ya, c'mere!" Ryouga shouted as he chased after the now unarmed man. Then he had to almost trip over his own feet to back pedal from an attacker he hadn't seen coming from the other side of the unarmed man, who was now right on top of him.

Tofu fought with his back to the wall, and Kasumi behind him. A fierce determination shown in his eyes, and his battle aura flared a brilliant blue as he lashed out again and again striking down anyone that got anywhere near him and Kasumi. But his hands were being held a lot lower in his guarding stance, than they had when the fight had first started.

Soun and Genma were doing the same thing, guarding Nabiki behind them. Genma used his massive size as he dodged the swords of his attackers to either grab them and throw them, or just run over them. Soun moved smoothly and with a very determined expression on his face as he blocked, kicked, and punched frantically, driving his attackers back. Both men were sweating heavily now, and had to keep wiping their eyes with their sleeves whenever they could. It was getting hot in the cave!

As the fight wore on, every now and then there would be just too many attackers, and someone would get cut. Tofu got cut first. As he turned to check on Kasumi, an attacker's sword managed to get through his guard and slashed a deep cut into his shoulder. Groaning at the sudden wound, Tofu whipped his head around to find his attacker winding up for another swing, and drove his foot into the man's groin with terrible force, dropping the attacker where he stood.

Genma was the next to be cut. As he faced down three attackers, he managed to tackle the first two, but the third slipped through the rush and spun around Genma to slash at his back. It didn't cut very deep, but he started to bleed from his cut shirt as he whipped around and slammed the swordsman into the wall, and away from Nabiki, who was now crouched down in fright.

Ranma and Akane fought back to back again, sweating under the intensity of the workout they were getting. Ranma looked slightly worried, but it was anyone's guess as to what exactly he was worried about. Akane on the other hand seemed to almost be enjoying herself. She threw her attackers away from her, punching and kicking and moving much better than she had ever moved before. She felt a surge of power and a giddy feeling that called out to her for more, more, *more!*

She threw yet another attacker away from her, and as he got up and started to run away. She growled, "oh no you don't," and ran after him, leaving Ranma's back unguarded. Ranma immediately felt her absence and looked over his shoulder to see her running after the fleeing swordsman.

"Akane! Come back here!" Ranma yelled after her, before he had to quickly turn around and catch the arm of yet another attacker, to keep them from slicing him.

"Akane!" Ranma yelled after her, as he struggled with the swordsman, but she was lost in the melee, off chasing the man who had last attacked her, into the darkness.

Frantically beating aside sword swinging maniacs left and right, Ranma tried to follow her, but his progress was seriously slowed. Growing more and more angry and frightened, Ranma's battle aura started to glow a pale white, and his attacks started to become charged with the power of his ki.

Punching yet another attacker out of his way, Ranma growled, and looked for Akane in the darkness. Flaring into full existence, Ranma's brilliant white battle aura shone into the darkness and illuminated the cavern. He finally saw her with her back against the wall, fighting a losing battle against half a dozen attackers all at once.

Ranma's guardian instincts kicked in and he roared, "**no**," in a voice ringing with power, which echoes off of all of the cave walls over and over again. He channeled his fear and anger together into a single ball of energy inside himself. Then, holding his hands out as focusing points, he let go of his control and unleashed a crackling energy wave that swept through the cave outwards from him.

The energy wave passed through his friends and family safely, but on contact with an attacker - it lifted them up and threw them out of it's way like blades of grass upon a summer's wind.

Panting and sweating heavily, Ranma stood slightly slumped after his outburst. He dragged his suddenly very heavy head up, to tiredly look around the cave for Akane. The rest of the family took the time to shake themselves off, and tend to their various wounds. Genma was even sitting down and patiently letting Nabiki wrap a bandage around his cut back, while Kasumi tended to Tofu's shoulder. It was a good thing they had brought lots of bandages.

Dashing to where he had last seen Akane, Ranma froze in his tracks as he gasped and his heart leapt into his throat. Akane lay under a pile of bloodied bodies, and she wasn't moving.

"Oh, **no**! Akane! Akane, **no**!" Ranma yelled as he dived for her. Quickly, he pulled her out from the press of bodies and laid her on the cold stone floor gently. He then tried to wake her up by patting her cheeks softly.

"Hey ... hey, Akane ... Akane wake up!" Ranma yelled as he patted her cheeks. "Akane ... Akane!" Ranma yelled more frantically as he started to shake her, but she stayed just as limp.

Walking up behind Ranma, Tofu put his hand on Ranma's shoulder softly and said, "Let me see, Ranma." Nodding, Ranma laid her down softly and scooted back to allow Tofu to examine Akane.

Tofu lifted her eyelids to check for dilation, he held her wrist and her neck, and felt for a pulse, and he pressed his ear to her mouth to listen for breathing. After a long moment, which felt like an eternity to Ranma, Tofu let out a low moan of sorrow, as he shook his head sadly.

Tofu immediately tried to resuscitate her using CPR techniques, and he even tried stimulating her nervous system by pressing the shiatsu points he knew which *could* bring her

back, if she wasn't too far gone already. Akane's body shuddered slightly when Tofu pressed her shiatsu points, but she didn't start breathing again. Shaking his head sadly and wailing, Tofu laid her back down and turned to the family.

"I'm sorry but it's too late ... she's ... she's too far gone now, there's nothing more I can do without hospital equipment." Tofu declared.

"**No!** There must be something else!" Ranma yelled as he violently shoved Tofu away and dived frantically for Akane. He buried his face in her neck and hair and sobbed pitifully as he immediately pulled her body closer to him and started mimicking what he had just seen Tofu doing.

He pinched her nose closed then placed his mouth on hers and breathed into her three times. Then, locking his elbows and finding the right place on her sternum, he pressed ten times in quick succession. Over and over again he repeated the motions, all the while screaming as he sobbed to Akane, "hang on ... hang on, **Akane**, come back to me ..."

The family watched in horror as Ranma worked desperately to save her. Ryouga slumped against the far wall over the cave and wailed while clutching his hair and tearing it out. Genma sat silently on the floor and prayed to the gods for a miracle. Kasumi buried her head in Tofu's chest and looked away, and Soun fell to his knees watching in desperate hope with tears streaming down his cheeks like unchecked rivers. Nabiki covered her mouth with her hands, and tears flowed freely and unashamed.

"Come on! Come on, **Akane!** Don't you dare quit on me now! *Don't you dare!* Fight! Fight, damn you! **FIGHT!**" Ranma screamed as he started to hammer on her chest with his fists, trying to get her heart beating.

"Ranma ..." Tofu started to say as he eventually leaned forward to try to pull Ranma away from her.

"Get your hands off me!" Ranma screamed as he paused for less than a split second to use his incredible speed to whip his hand around and hit Tofu so hard that he staggered back a few steps. Ranma's eyes flashed a dangerous quicksilver as he batted Tofu away from him, and his irises started to glow in an unearthly manner, making Tofu gasp. The magic was asserting itself in Ranma now!

Ranma immediately turned back around to Akane, and resumed trying to beat the life back into her as he sobbed.

"**Noooooo** ... Akane, **NO!** ... NO! I won't let you! **I won't let you go** ... do you hear me?! **I won't let you go!**" Ranma screamed as he beat on her chest and blew breath into her mouth over and over again. His tears streamed down his face and fell on hers, while a steady glow started to spring up around Ranma's body. This time it wasn't a battle aura. This time it was a white, almost silvery glow.

'*Your fault, your fault, your fauuuuuuult!*' Ranma's mind sang to him.

'*You failed, you failed, you faiiiiiiiled!*' It sang.

'No! No! No!' Ranma screamed back at it.

'*Protection and justice. Protection and justice. Protection and justice.*' His mind taunted back. Those words stabbed at his heart and soul more painfully than any sword ever could.

'*Protection and justice. Protection and justice. Protection and justice. Protection and justice. Protection and justice. Protection and justice. Protection and justice. Protection and justice.*' Ranma's mind screamed at him as he worked desperately to save Akane. The shrill words in his mind **hurt!** Like a thousand stabbing needles they lanced into his heart and soul demanding satisfaction.

Reaching inside himself, and grabbing onto the outrage and terror he felt, Ranma held on to it, and started to bend it. Whatever it was within himself that he had grabbed, burned his mind like living fire. Taunting him with a power he wanted, and singing of his failures.

With the words, '*protection,*' and, '*justice,*' floating in his mind over and over again, and the pain of thousands upon thousands of needle sharp stabbing pains throughout his body, and the desperate need to save Akane from a fate she didn't deserve, Ranma reached into himself and grabbed onto the source of that terrible pain and white hot light in his mind's eye. He held on to it, demanding that it bend to his will ... and the world froze to a halt as a white light flashed across his vision ... vaguely he was aware of the faraway sound of his voice chanting strange words in a language he had never heard, and couldn't even recognize ... but he was to focused on Akane to care.

Silent and unmoving, she lay cold on the cave floor, almost like she was just sleeping. She laid there because she had wanted to help him, because she loved him. She laid there, because she had wanted to help protect the family, because she had wanted to prove herself as a martial artist. With a roar of outrage, Ranma laid his hands over Akane's heart and **DEMANDED** that the power inside him do **SOMETHING**.

Shielding their eyes from the incredible glare coming from Ranma, his family backed away from him trying to keep a safe distance from what was going on.

The magic finally bent, and shaped itself to the steel will of it's new master. It called a wind from beyond their world, and the wind swirled into the cavern and quickly converged on Ranma. Twirling and howling around Ranma, the wind danced and moved with a life of it's own. Bringing with it the scent of a mountain spring, and the fresh smell of the first flowers of the year, the wind spun around it's master faster and faster until it solidified into a solid wall, blocking from view from the rest of the world what happened next.

Raising his hands to the heavens, Ranma called the wind to him, demanding it's healing powers serve him in the language of the magi of ancient times. Calling the healing powers into his body, Ranma bent it to his will with the powers and language of the magi. Then, placing one hand on Akane's chest, and one on her forehead, Ranma commanded the power to flow into Akane. With a brilliant flash of light, the energy in Ranma's body surged into Akane's as the wind swirling around them both instantly died down.

With a gasping breath, Akane's chest rose and fell for the first time on it's own since they

had found her. Staggering, Ranma stepped back from her almost as if he was afraid he might hurt her accidentally.

Leaning back against the nearest wall, Ranma pressed his hands to his forehead and leaned his head into the cold stone of the wall. When he finally put his hands down, he blinked several times like his eyes itched. Looking in the direction of Tofu and the others, he smiled hesitantly. He looked the same as he always did, except his eyes were still flashing with quicksilver light.

Whispering, Ryouga called out, "Ranma ... man ... you have *got* to teach me that technique someday!"

Grinning, Ranma replied to his suddenly partially bald friend, "just as soon as I figure out how I did that I'll letcha know."

Soun finally allowed himself to exhale and sit back down solidly on the ground again, as his muscles slowly unwound themselves. He wept quietly to himself and thanked the gods over and over again. Genma looked up from his prayers and grinned. Tofu looked stunned but was grinning ear to ear as tears of joy sprang up in his eyes. Nabiki and Kasumi both screamed with relief and sprinted to where Akane lay, now breathing, if not conscious, to tackle her with hugs.

The hollow sound of clapping echoed across the cavern. Growing louder as he walked closer, the man in black sneered as he stepped into the boundary of light that their flashlights created.

"Well done young man, well done. I wouldn't have thought that an ignorant little child such as yourself would be capable of standing up to the Muscle Sword Clan, let alone besting them. And calling your lover back from the dead on top of it all, using your stolen powers of the magi, I commend you, truly I do." The man in black grinned as he pulled out a small roll of paper and began to read in a mocking tone.

"And so it came to pass that the creator wrought mankind with a small vestige of his powers. He made the sky for and of their eyes and gave them the earth to sustain them. As the earth and air shall hold and nurture them, so shall they turn their backs to him and forget him whom hast delivered their bounty unto them. So shall he take back his gifts from his chosen, and in the ages to come, shall forget them. Thus their loss of faith and the corruption of their souls when they serve and pursue selfish ends. This shall herald the end of an era as mankind rends their own world asunder. Lo it shall then come to pass that the creator shall take back his gifts and turn his back to those who would avert their eyes from him. Man shall henceforth lose all knowledge of the ancient arts save for a small remnant of the faithful who shall preserve this knowledge until such a day that mankind proves itself once again worthy of his benevolence. But lo, all shall not be lost in this time. 'When the hour is nigh for mankind's total destruction, a warrior-savior shall be born in their midst as mankind's final chance.' He shall be pure of heart, but unrefined in word and deed. Thus he shall have to prove himself in the eyes of those he loves, and hates, as one beyond reproach in his quest for justice and truth. In the time before the darkness to come, he shall walk the earth seeking to better himself and awaken the old powers within himself and his

charges. Let it be known that he who walks with the powers of harmony shall soon awaken the knowledge of old and so shall he be mankind's final hope and redemption. So it is written and so shall it come to pass."

Looking up from the paper, the man in black chuckled and crumpled the paper in his fist before dropping it to the floor. "Honestly, the scribes over the ages certainly did get carried away with that one, didn't they? For pity's sake they never even mentioned *me* in there. Truly I have been slandered, don't you agree?" The man smiled as he placed his hands on his hips.

"What do you want?" Ranma asked coldly as his guardian aura flared back to life.

"Oh ... the young magus seeks to challenge his better?" The man in black taunted.

"I dunno what a magus is, but I won't let you hurt my family, man, so we have a problem if that's what you are plannin' ta do." Ranma stated as he drew himself into a battle stance.

Silently echoing his motions, Tofu, Genma, Soun and Ryouga matched his movements. Nabiki and Kasumi took the time to move to pull Akane back a ways from the confrontation, and shelter her as best they could, as she was still unconscious.

Grinning almost sadly, the man in black threw back the cape on his left hip to reveal the strange looking hilt of a sword. The hilt glowed a soft silver glow, and the silver of the metal swirled with different hues of red, green and blue.

"Actually, little pup, I really couldn't care less about you or your family. You see, I have much bigger things to take care of right now. The fact that you and your family have managed to stumble into all of this, and even managed to slow us down a small bit, doesn't change that."

The man in black said as he looked them all over one by one, measuring them and weighing them with his gaze. His gaze settled on the young new magus. Strange that one so young, and without any training whatsoever, was already able to command the magical auras of the magi, and to command them in the language of the magi. He must be an adept, bred into the magic by nature herself, but no matter, he would soon deal with them all and go back to the matter at hand.

"Don't you see, little pup, I am working to make this world a better place. You yourself just used your magic to save that girl you love, did you not? Well that is what I intend to do, I intend to bring back magic to this dimly boring world." The black-clad man said as he raked his fingers through his equally black hair.

"And how are you planning ta do *that*?" Ranma demanded.

"Simple, young pup. I am going to resurrect my lord and master, the dark mage."

"No! You cannot do that! Do you know the evil that you would bring to the world?" Tofu interrupted with a startled gasp.

"Evil? Who are you to say what is evil and what is not? Were you there when my master walked the earth? Were you there to see the great works he wrought? Where were you when my master was cut down unjustly, right as he had been about to establish a new world order where chaos and uncertainty were abolished? Where none lacked for a job, and everyone had a place. Evil? I think not. You know very little indeed, whoever you are."

"The ancient texts say the dark mage was a murderer of incredible evil. That he slew hundreds of children just to make his staff of power! That he crushed whole cities just because they slighted him." Tofu argued.

"Is that so?" The black-clad man asked. "Well we shall see, won't we. Let's ask an eye witness about what she saw, shall we?" Without waiting for an answer, the black clad man lifted his right hand, palm up, towards Ranma. Then, hooking his fingers in a summoning motion, the black-clad man's hand started to glow with a sickly greenish fire. Calling forth the power of his magic in the language of the magi, the servant of the dark mage gestured towards Ranma. He made sharp, ripping, summoning motions as he chanted something.

Making a motion as if to charge him, Tofu and the rest of the fighters started to move forward, causing the man in black to pause for a moment. He snapped his head in their direction, his eyes glowing red, and flicked his hand at them as he quickly muttered something. He then turned his attention back to Ranma, leaving Tofu, and the rest who had been charging with him, frozen in place.

Calling out in the language of the magi, the dark servant pulled something from Ranma. He pulled on an invisible cord with his eyes glowing red and a green aura of power surrounding him. Finally, shouting the final word of the spell, the dark servant smiled as Ranma's body seemed to blur.

The ghostly transparent form of a young girl stepped out from him. She was a girl of average build who held herself in a regal manner, she was perhaps no more than fourteen to sixteen years old, with long dark hair and what appeared to be a beautiful sapphire gown that would have been at home at any ballroom dance. Her face was obviously Chinese and her eyes blazed with hatred.

"I present to you your, *girl half*, young magus." The dark servant grinned.

"My what?" Ranma asked.

"Your girl half, Ranma." The girl said as she turned to look at him sympathetically.

"Whoa whoa whoa." Ranma cried as he stepped away from her rapidly, making warding motions with his waved hands. "Happosai already tried this trick once on me, and I aint fallin' for it again." Ranma protested.

"No, Ranma. The incense that Happosai used to bring forth your '*girl half*,' as you call me, was only able to bring out your female desires. The desires all men have, but just bury down far too deep to even be aware of them. The spirit that Happosai called from you was nothing more than yourself, basically." The girl explained.

"So ... who are you?" Ranma asked.

"I'm ..." The girl started to say, then hesitated.

"Go ahead, little Princess, tell the young magus who you are. Tell him of your failure and your shame." The dark servant sneered.

Glaring at him, the Princess drew herself up to her full height and announced. "I am the daughter of the Wise King, who was the light of our nation. He who was the guardian of the commoners and protector of this land. I am the Princess heir to the throne of the silver rose, and I am the daughter of a nation betrayed." The Princess exclaimed bitterly.

"Oh Princess, you are so melodramatic. If your general hadn't betrayed you, someone else would have. You know, not everyone was dancing on fields of rose petals under your father's rule." The dark servant taunted.

"Bastard! If your master hadn't spawned you from the bile of a common toad and the festering sewage of his land, then maybe my country wouldn't have had to suffer." The Princess spat.

"Temper temper, Princess. After all, you represent the greatest nation this world ever knew, until my master recreates this world in his image that is." The dark servant smiled.

"I killed you once, you bastard, and I can kill you again!" The Princess shrieked as she gestured to the sword at the dark servant's hip and called to it in the language of the magi. Responding instantly to its creator's call, the sword leapt from the dark servant's scabbard to her waiting hand. Holding it tightly in her white knuckled fist, the Princess stared the dark servant down.

"Ah yes, I had forgotten you were the one that created that blade. Impressive. Of course, the only reason that it is still around is because you summoned it wrong, you know. If you had cast the spell correctly it should have disintegrated after a few hours, but in your haste I believe you cast the spell for, 'all hours,' instead of, 'some hours,' as was standard for that spell at the time. Which, of course, meant that the sword could never be destroyed, unless someone equal in power to you cast the counter spell to unsummon it. Interesting effect, don't you think?" The dark servant asked as he started to glow with a much brighter green aura.

Turning to Ranma, the Princess tossed the sword to him and yelled, "use the sword, Ranma! It can cut through any shield he raises!" Looking on in frustration, the Princess watched as yet another man ran to fight this dark abomination for her. If only she could touch this mortal plane directly! She was pushing things as it was, interacting with magical objects she had created. Touching that magical aspect of the mortal plane just now, had sapped her of some of her remaining strength, causing her proud posture to slump a little bit.

Running at the black-clad servant of evil, Ranma thought to himself, 'what am I doing? I don't even know how to use a sword.'

Smiling, the dark servant spun on his heel and dodged Ranma's clumsy attack, and

shouted a command in the language of the magi, which summoned a bolt of green energy to shoot at Ranma, which struck him full in the back, sending him sprawling.

Spitting blood and dust out of his mouth and pushing himself to his feet, Ranma gripped the sword in his right hand and walked towards the dark servant this time. Trying to judge how and when his opponent would move next.

Getting into range, Ranma took a few test swings with the sword at the man, but the dark servant simply shot the dark green energy at the blade each time. Suddenly, moving with inhuman speed, the dark servant charged Ranma and triple punched him in the face, neck and solar plexus, dropping Ranma like a puppet with his strings cut.

Sneering, the dark servant grabbed Ranma by his hair and hauled him to his feet. "Oh no, you don't get to end it that easy, boy. For causing me this much trouble, you get to suffer." To punctuate his threat, the dark servant dropped Ranma and kicked him as he landed. Wincing, the Princess clenched her fists in helpless anger.

"What's the matter, boy? You seem a little ... *unbalanced!*" The dark servant gloated as he stalked towards Ranma, causing Ranma's mind to race, trying to think of a way to fight this monster.

Balance! The prophecy had said that the warrior-savior had to stand in the face of evil, while *balanced!* It had said that unless he was balanced in harmony, that he would fail! He needed his balancing factor, but what **was** it that would balance him? Nobody else here could do what he could do. Nobody else here could fight magic ... magic!

Akane! He had the power to protect and avenge, while she had the power to protect and heal! The revelation slammed into Ranma with a shock like cold water. Akane was his balancing factor! Of course, realizing this, and getting her to wake up were two entirely different things.

Rolling onto his side, to face Akane, Ranma called out to her desperately. Across the cavern, Akane stirred as her sisters tended to her, and tried to shield her from the battle raging before them. Again, Ranma called to her. But, while she stirred, she did not rise.

Reaching Ranma yet again, the dark servant kicked him viciously. Sailing even further from Akane, Ranma tried desperately to think of a way to get to her. Finally seeing a way she could help, the Princess shouted, "the old tongue Ranma, call to her in the language of the magi!"

With precious little energy left, Ranma dug down deep into himself and searched for that white hot bundle of energy he needed. Seizing it, Ranma cried out in pain as it lashed out at a master it didn't quite respect yet. Ignoring the pain, Ranma grasped it tightly and as the magic flowed into him he cried out in the old tongue of the magi, "*Akane! Akane, wake up! Wake up, you have to help me! I need you!*"

Getting suddenly worried, the dark servant darted his gaze to Akane then back to Ranma. Snarling, he closed on Ranma and drew a large dagger from his boot. He was going to end this right now. He lunged for Ranma and slashed with his dagger at Ranma's neck.

Exhausted, broken and bruised, Ranma raised an arm to try to block, but he knew it would not be enough this time. Ranma waited for the killing stroke and cried out for Akane in anguish. He was about to fail her again.

"ENOUGH!" Akane shouted from across the cavern, her voice ringing with her own magical power, freezing the dark servant in his tracks.

Quickly looking over to her, the dark servant cursed at what he saw as he stepped away from Ranma into a guarding stance.

Akane walked slowly towards Ranma, her body flared with an aura of the newly reawakened power inside her. It glowed a yellow so bright, that it was nearly white.

This was it, he was out of time. It was now or never. He either finished these two before they figured out how to link their power together, or his entire plan was about to come crumbling down around him. The man in black rolled his eyes back into his skull and started to chant a spell. His green aura immediately flared brighter with each word of the spell.

Akane reached where Ranma laid on the ground, panting from his wounds, and exhaustion. Gently, she reached down and grasped him by the shoulder briefly, sending wave after wave of healing energy into him.

Suddenly feeling quite well, Ranma smiled and accepted her hand up. Then, hand in hand, the two of them turned to face the dark mage's servant.

"Ranma, here!" The Princess shouted as she kicked the sword to him. The contact with the physical world costing her even more of her energy, making her fade in color somewhat, and slump down a bit more. It slid to a rest at his feet, and Ranma bent down and picked it up slowly, as soon as his hand touched the blade, it started to glow. It changed from a dull silver to a liquid silver, to a white so pure that looking at it hurt their eyes.

Ranma and Akane's auras mixed together and swirled back and forth. Not fighting each other, but instead intertwining and strengthening on each other. With their hands held tightly together, they pointed the sword at the dark servant and started to chant their own spell, a spell of imprisonment and binding.

Finishing the chant for his spell, the dark servant raised his hands and pointed them at the two, releasing his terrible energy at them. He had chosen the powerful spell of disintegration.

Ranma winced as he raised the sword in his hand to block the spell, hoping it would work. The dark green energy raced in and met the blade of white energy with a sound like a white hot piece of iron makes when meeting a vat of water in a smith's forge. It squealed against the power of the sword which the two lovers were channeling into it, as the dark servant's spell fought to get through.

Locking eyes with each other Ranma and Akane lifted their joined hands together and pointed them at the dark servant. They whispered the final words to their spell, and released a torrent of power at the dark servant. Which finally pushed his spell away, as their combined one overpowered it.

The dark servant quickly cut off his spell as he tried to throw up shield after shield made from his dark power. But their joined spell ripped through them like they weren't even there.

It slammed into his chest with enough force to drive him into the wall behind him, wrapping him in white energy that glowed both blue and yellow as he fell back. It then shrank in on itself, until it ripped a hole into the fabric of their universe and dragged the now trapped and bound servant of the dark mage into it, sealing itself as it went with a screaming howl. Their spell of binding and exile had worked. A fate many would call worse than death. But, in a way, the dark servant might end up happy in the banished lands. That was, after all, where his master was.

As soon as the spell left them, Ranma and Akane's eyes cleared back to their regular eye color, and their aura's left them, causing them to stagger. Their shoulders slumped as their unearthly power faded away, and they dropped the sword to hang on each other to stay upright.

Standing calmly where she had been summoned, now fully visible again, and standing proudly as before. The departure of the dark servant seemed to have re-energized her. The Princess bowed formally to them before saying, "Thank you both. It is finally over. When I cast my spell all those ages ago, to have the magic ripped from this world, I made a mistake and didn't allow for the possibility of the dark mage's resurrection. With this final chapter written into history, I think my promise can be fulfilled, and I can rest now. You will no longer be haunted by my presence, Ranma." The long dead Princess smiled as she bowed again and then saluted with her hand to her heart. Faintly at first, then rapidly, a group of men materialized around the Princess. They all looked at her with loving eyes, and bowed to Ranma and Akane as well, before kneeling before their Princess with tears in their eyes.

Then more and more people started to appear in the cavern. Men that looked like soldiers, men that looked like bakers. Women that looked like ladies of a court, and girls that looked like scullery maids. Turning around in a full circle, Ranma and Akane looked on in awe as more and more of them appeared. Hundreds, thousands, maybe even millions. Then, as one, the people of the betrayed & fallen nation saluted and bowed to Ranma and Akane.

Finally, appearing next to his daughter, the spirit of a wizened old man with a flowing white beard and long unkempt hair faded into vision. The spirit of the dead King hugged his daughter, then bowed solemnly to Ranma and Akane. He then gestured to those still frozen in the grip of the dark servant's power, kindly freeing them from their bonds. Smiling with gratitude, they all faded from view just as rapidly as they had appeared.

Ranma dragged his head up exhaustedly and surveyed the now empty cave, then muttered, "let's get out of here." He and Akane then slung their arms across each other's shoulders and limped towards the cave entrance, supporting each other.

Following their lead, the rest of the group staggered to their feet, or helped others to their feet, and followed them out. "Do you know what just happened?" Nabiki asked Kasumi as they both helped the wounded Genma up the long path to the surface. Tofu seemed to be doing fine with his wound, and needed no help.

"I have no idea," she replied with a shrug.

Ranma and Akane reached the cave mouth first, and stepped out into the early morning twilight before sunrise. They then turned to wait for the others. Looking back, they saw that whatever had concealed the cave entrance from view before, was now gone. So they could see everyone as they slowly appeared in the tunnel, coming up the slope.

Ranma smiled and pulled Akane into a hug as the sun started to peak over the hills into the Jusenkyou valley, shining upon a new day, and a new world.

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They rested for a short while before Ryouga finally got up and waved to the group with a forced smile. "I need to get going now. I am sure I will see you all real soon, but I promised this old lady I would deliver her mail to the post office you see ... and that was at least four or five weeks ago. So, I have to find a mailbox soon or she'll kill me ..." What he didn't say was that he knew it was over. Akane was hanging on Ranma now, like a lover. She had eyes only for him. And nobody had even told her yet that he had brought her back from the dead. When she found that out, there would be no way anyone else would be able to win her. It was time to give her up. So, when he waved goodbye, he silently let go of his longest kept desire for Akane. It was over, and Ranma had won.

The small group smiled and waved goodbye to Ryouga and wished him well. His help had come at a truly opportune time. Ranma and Ryouga locked eyes as he waved, and shared a secret meaning between the two of them. They both nodded slightly, understanding what was in the other's heart.

Once Ryouga had departed, it was time for them to leave as well. Tofu started to lead the way, when suddenly Ranma dragged the group to a stop with a yell.

"Wait! We can't leave yet!" Ranma hopped up and down excitedly, and pulled Akane along with him as he started to run towards the many springs in the training ground. Yelling over his shoulder, Ranma said with glee, "I'm not leaving here until I get rid of this stupid curse once and for all." Akane laughed and dropped his hand.

"Ranma, wait!" She laughed, causing Ranma to dig in his heels and stop short.

"What?" He responded impatiently. "Can't it wait? I have kinda been waiting for this for a couple of years now, ya know..." he said as he started towards the springs again.

"Just a second, come here a minute," she said as she took off her pack and rummaged around in it for her canteen. Holding it up in the air for Ranma to see, Akane got Ranma to raise his eyebrow at her as he looked at the canteen suspiciously.

"Want ta see my girl side one more time, do ya?" He joked.

"Shaddup and c'mere a minute," she said as she reached out and grabbed the front of his

shirt and yanked him closer to her. Then, with a smile, she held her canteen over his head, and dribbled a little bit out over his head.

Male Ranma stood there, looking confused, and wiping water out of his eyes. He was still male, even though he had just been doused with cold water.

"You forgot what the Princess said to you, didn't you?"

"Apparently ... "

"She said *she* was your girl half. When she was yanked out of you like that, the curse was broken, and now that she has passed on to the other side with the rest of her people, she is gone, so I don't think you'll change anymore."

Ranma blinked at her in surprise, then startled everyone with a loud, "whoop," of joy. Taking off in a flash, he did cartwheels, back flips, somersaults, and hand stands in a weird celebration dance, before he bounded back to Akane and hugged her in joy, before throwing her up in the air in celebration, causing her to squeal with excitement for him. He then dashed to the nearest stream, away from the Jusenkyo springs, and jumped in it. He emerged a second later, soaking wet, and still a guy. Genma shook off Nabiki and Kasumi's arms and ran after Ranma, shouting with glee. He dived into the stream beside his son ... and a giant panda surfaced.

"Hey ... what the ... Akane?" Ranma puzzled upon seeing Genma's curse still in effect.

"Don't look at me, all I know is what that Princess told you. If she was your girl half, and she is now gone, then *your* curse is broken. But nobody pulled the panda out of your dad, so I guess he still needs to go dunk himself in the spring of drowned man."

Grumbling to himself in panda speech, Genma hauled himself out of the stream, and lumbered towards the magical springs, yanking the hot water tea kettle off the fire as he went. Kasumi had started it when Genma had started his run for the water. She just had a feeling it might be needed.

Quietly, almost reverently, they followed Genma towards the springs. As he searched for the one he needed, Dr. Tofu translated each time he pointed to a sign in Chinese.

"Spring of drowned elk."

"Pass."

"Spring of drowned elderly cat."

"Pass."

"Spring of drowned beaver."

"Pass."

"Spring of drowned muscular child."

"Pa- ... wait ... no, pass." Being muscular would have been nice, but living through childhood again wasn't a pleasing prospect. Finally, they found it.

"Spring of drowned man." Tofu translated for the final time.

Without hesitation, Genma leapt in. He emerged still a man, although now very wet.

Tromping with determination, he marched up to Ranma and held his hand out. Ranma slapped his canteen into it with equal ceremony. Genma paused for a second, staring at the canteen, willing the curse to be broken, and then dumped the contents over his head.

He didn't change.

The whole group whooped and cheered for joy. Now everyone was cured, and everyone could go home. Ranma twirled Akane around in a little dance, and kissed her openly in front of everyone, and Genma slumped into the arms of Nabiki and Kasumi -- he was still wounded after all.

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From a hill a small distance away, Ryouga locked his eyes on the spring which Genma had just emerged from. Without blinking, or moving his head even the slightest fraction of an inch, he waited for the group to depart. As they did so, he stood up from his hiding place, and sprinted towards the same spring, and salvation. For once, he managed to get where he meant to go.

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From another hill, even further away, Cologne set down her looking glass and contemplated all she had just seen. Clearly they had won, and clearly the curses were now broken. She wondered if Shampoo would be able to resist going back to him, now that he truly was 100% a man again. Mousse had better make his move soon.

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The trip back was fairly uneventful. They found the yacht where they had left it. Ranma and Genma decided to swim out to it, for no reason other than they could. The rest of the group waited for the shore boats, and boarded in the usual manner.

The journey back found everyone doing mostly what they had done on the way to China. Nabiki held court in the jacuzzi, keeping at least one crew member at hand at all times, to take drink orders, food orders, or to rub lotion on her. Ranma and Akane cuddled in front of the t.v. again. Soun and Genma had made a quick shore trip before they left and came back with a cart load of Chinese rice wine. The poor bartender winced as they started hauling it aboard. They spent the entire trip back trying to see if they could finish it before they made it back to Japan, they almost did. Tofu and Kasumi spent a lot of time on deck, holding each other, and staring out to the sea, holding hands, and whispering to each other. Ranma and Akane's new found affection for each other hadn't gone unnoticed by the group, but they all were wisely playing things cool for now, hoping things would work out.

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Back in Nerima, Ryouga walked into yet another store front and yelled, "**where in the hell am I now?!**" He was dressed the same as always, except he was now sporting a rather dashing new bandanna, tied over his hair.

"You're in my store, so shaddup will ya!" Ukyou Kuwonji yelled back from behind her cooking counter. She no longer wore her battle spatula, but she still had her bandoleer of sharp cooking spatulas strapped across her chest.

Sighing, Ryouga walked up to the counter slowly. "Hey, Ukyou ... you wouldn't happen to know where a mailbox is would you?" Ryouga asked quietly as he sat down on one of the stools.

"Sure, sugar, hand it to me and I'll place it in my outgoing mail for today." Ukyou answered as she served up a hot Okinomiyaki to a waiting customer.

Smiling gratefully, Ryouga reached into his backpack and pulled out a small bundle of letters. They were bent and worn with age, their edges blackened, and the stamps were faded. Raising her eyebrows curiously, Ukyou took the letters and stuck them in her mail pile, then went back to her cooking.

Unsure of what to do now, Ryouga just sat there. Finally, he mustered up the courage to ask, "so what are you up to these days?"

Ukyou smiled sadly as she worked, "moving on with my life, Ryouga ... moving on."

"Me too ... me too ... mind if I hang out here for a while?" He asked with a sad smile of his own. "I don't really have anywhere else I need to go today."

"Sure, sugar, stay there and I'll whip you up the special of the day ... on the house." Ukyou added with a wink.

"T-thank you." Ryouga stuttered.

"I have to warn you though, that if you start to make this a habit like Ranma used to, then I will have to make you wash dishes for me or something." She joked.

His face turning red, Ryouga blushed and shook his head no violently. "Oh don't worry, I doubt I could even find this place two days in a row..."

"Oh ... is that so ... " She replied back, starting a conversation which lasted well into the night, and well after all the other customers had left. They joked and laughed, and let a lot of their pent up emotions, frustrations, regrets and sorrows out on each other. In turn, they also strengthened one another. When it came time for bed, Ukyou offered him the use of her guest bedroom, which he hesitantly accepted.

The next day they picked up right where they had left off, but with a new lighter feeling in their chests, as if a great weight was slowly being eased off, and being replaced with something else entirely more wonderful.

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Ranma and Akane spent a lot more time together after, "the incident," as they came to call it. Akane had been told of her resurrection by Ranma on the way back from China. After that, there was just no separating the two of them. Akane had absolutely no recollection of the event, of course, but there were too many eye witnesses for her to doubt that it had really happened.

Tofu also spent a lot more time over at the house chatting with Kasumi, dating with Kasumi, and basically joining the family. They all knew a marriage proposal was on the horizon.

No one really wanted to talk about what had happened in China, and that was fine. Ranma and Genma no longer changed with hot or cold water, and that was cause for many more days of celebration once they got back. Apparently cartwheels and drinking weren't enough of a celebration. Soun and Genma happily spent many nights singing and dancing, and generally annoying the family.

Happosai, on the other hand, mourned for weeks when he found out he could never again fondle the female Ranma. He even built a little shrine to the dearly departed female Ranma, with pictures he had bought from Nabiki. After a few days of their return though, the female Ranma in the pictures slowly faded, as female Ranma was magically erased from the universe. When Happosai discovered this, his cry of, "nooooo," was almost as soul wrenching as the same cry mirroring it from the Kunou estate, across town.

Slowly things got back to normal around the Tendou Dojo, and eventually unless someone brought it up, most everyone forgot about, "the incident."

However, if Ranma was really upset, or Akane was really worried, if you looked fast enough, you could sometimes catch a glimpse of something silvery moving across their eyes. Apparently, the end of the curse, did not mean an end to the magic.