

# Is blood thicker than Shampoo?

A FanFic by the RanMaFan based on Ranma 1/2, a masterpiece by Takahashi Rumiko.

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Plot : What happens when a controversial character in Ranma 1/2 makes an appearance? What happens if this person is related to Shampoo.... through blood? Can she help Ranma and Akane get together again after a fight? An unknown force is at work, what will happen now?

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Legend : (C) beside a name means (Cursed Form).

{xxx} means new chapter.

(XXXX) During speech indicates a minor action of some sort, or a translation, or the editor's voice. :)

"xxx" sometimes appears, as a thought form. Otherwise, used for sentences.

\*xxx\* Are for certain sound effects. Also to emphasise words.

*Italics* are for past events that are shown "on screen", and for emphasis on certain words.

<xxx> During speech means a thought form during the sentence.

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{Something strange in the neighbourhood....}

It's a typical busy day at the Neko Hanten, as hungry customers move in and out of the Cat Cafe, chatting, betting, thinking, but all hungry. And as usual, Shampoo is busy serving customers, and is currently balancing a half dozen bowls on her arms and head, carrying bowls of ramen, beef noodle soup, and fried noodles towards a table full of boys just out from a school day at Furinkan.

Shampoo : "Here you go. Ramen, beef noodle soup, fried noodles."

Shampoo throws the bowls on her arms into the air, and as they come down, she catches them one by one and sets them down, but misses one. It nearly lands on one of the boys, who tries to avoid the bowl, but Shampoo catches it..... barely. She quickly sets the bowl down, and apologizing, backs off, turns around, and bumps into another customer. She spins around and starts apologizing to him as well.

Shampoo : "Oh! Dui bu qi! Dui bu qi!" (Dui bu qi = Sorry!)

Quickly, before she causes anymore damage, she quickly brushes past the surprised man and runs off behind the cashier's counter. Cologne watches her as Shampoo squats below the counter out of sight and slap herself a few times while shaking her head, as if trying to shake off something.

Shampoo : "Stupid Shampoo! Wake up! What wrong with Shampoo?"

Cologne watches with concern, then decides to step in to help her great-granddaughter. She hops off the counter behind Shampoo, and taps her shoulder with her staff. Shampoo turn her head around.

Shampoo : "Sorry, great-grandmother. Shampoo go back to work now."

Cologne : "Hold on there, little one. I noticed you've not been yourself today. Come on... out with it, what's wrong? You don't normally mess up at work like that, something's troubling you. Is it Ranma?"

Shampoo shakes her head again, as she looks at the floor idly. She shuffles her feet until she's facing Cologne fully.

Shampoo : "No.... not Ranma. Really, Shampoo fine. Shampoo go back to work."

Cologne : "Oh no, you aren't. If you start messing up again, we'll start losing business. Just stay here and manage the bills. I'll do the serving today. But I want to talk to you at the end of the day, alright?"

Shampoo : "Ok, great-grandmother."

Cologne : "Right. Come on."

Cologne hops back up onto the counter, she hops off on her staff towards one of the tables to take orders.

Shampoo stands up and looks tiredly at the cashier's machine. She sighs, and lets her shoulders slump.

Shampoo : "Shampoo wish Ranma here, hug Shampoo."

Meanwhile, somewhere else....

Ranma is facing Kuno in an empty lot, both of them wary of the other. A breeze blows, sending paper scraps flying across the twos' feet. Kuno isn't armed with his sword, for a change. Or, at least, he isn't armed with his sword against the male Ranma anyway.

Ranma : "Hey, Kuno sempai. You wanted to talk to me? Why here?" <Strange, where's his sword?>

Kuno : "Hmph. Normally, I would never talk to such villains, but this is different. Saotome Ranma, you and I know that there have been other girls chasing you, much as I find this disgusting, and that you are not worthy of the great Tendou Akane or Pig-Tailed goddess...."

\*Biff\*. Ranma gives Kuno a hard left swing. Kuno takes the punch but doesn't move. Ranma looks disinterestedly at Tatewake Kuno, still staring at Ranma.

Ranma : "If you wanted to say something important, do it, or I'm outta here!"

Kuno : "Very well, I shall... as you say it, 'cut straight to the chase'. Recently, I have noticed that the girl you call Shampoo, whom I have no interest in whatsoever, has been asking around for you recently. The blue haired lady even once thought I was you... much as I find this amusing, but repulsive."

Ranma suddenly looks surprised.

Ranma : "M...m... matte, Kuno sempai! Did you say... 'blue hair'?" <Since when did Shampoo get blue hair?>

Kuno looks irritated at the interruption, but sighs it away, disgustedly.

Kuno : "Must I suffer your dreadful manners? Oh, whatever. Yes, I did say 'blue haired'. Now, let me continue. Saotome Ranma, you must go find this girl and clear up this mess soon, before she finds the fair Akane and does her harm, for I know that the two have an animosity. Did you hear me, Saotome Ranma?"

But Ranma isn't listening anymore. Instead, he is busy musing over the interesting turn of events.

Ranma : <Is it really Shampoo? Since when did she have blue hair? I know It looks blue now and then, but even that idiot Kuno can tell the difference between blue and purple. So....>

Kuno : "**Ranma Saotome! Did you hear me!?**"

Kuno screams into Ranma's ear with a megaphone, breaking Ranma's line of thought, and nearly his eardrums too. Ranma rubs his ear and tosses his pigtail behind him as he answers Kuno's question, a persistent ringing in his ear.

Ranma : "Right, right, I heard you! I'll go find this blue-haired Shampoo now, all right!? Seeya!"

With that, Ranma leaps onto Kuno's head, and from there begins his trip towards the Neko Hanten to look for the Shampoo he knows will be there.

At the Neko Hanten, Shampoo is busy collecting money from the customers she nearly spilled the noodles on. She bids them goodbye, and watches as they walk out the entrance. Seconds later, she turns around to collect money from another paying customer, when a commotion outside catches her attention.

\*SCREEEECH!\* \*blam!\* "Sorry!" "Ranma! What are you doing!?" "Sorry, too busy now! Gotta go!"

The doors to the Cat Cafe fly open, as Ranma stumbles in, panting and sweating heavily from a long run from the far-away lot. Shampoo's eyes shine as she sees him, and she leaps in joy. She quickly jumps over the counter and hugs Ranma tightly. A slight crunching can be heard. Ranma's eyes grow wide as Shampoo hugs him with all her might.

Shampoo : "Shampoo so glad Ranma come! Long time no see, Shampoo miss Ranma!"

Ranma : "Erm... \*erk\*... Shampoo... can you please let go? You're squeezing the life out of me...."

Shampoo quickly lets go as she realizes that she nearly crushed her love in half. Ranma takes a few quick breaths to get the blood in his body going again, then looks around to make sure Akane isn't around. Satisfied, he points to an empty table, indicating that they should sit.

Ranma : "Come on, let's sit down there. We have got to talk."

Shampoo : "...really? Shampoo so happy!"

Shampoo practically leaps up and down in joy as she expects something important from Ranma. Cologne, currently off duty, hops over to see what is going on. She spots Shampoo still grinning and daydreaming about all the possibilities of that one seat, and at Ranma, who is looking impatiently at her. She taps him on the shoulder, and he screams, spinning around.

Ranma : "Ah! Oh, it's you, old ghoul."

Cologne : "Well, if it isn't my great-grandson-in-law come visit Shampoo? And who's and old ghoul?"

Ranma : "Hey, I wouldn't have come here if I didn't have something important to do, outside of eating."

Cologne : "Oh, and what is it this time? Come to propose to her? Where's your ring?"

Ranma : "Hey! Watch your wrinkled mouth, granny! I came here to talk about something else! Not proposals!"

Cologne : "Oh, really? Well then, that can wait until later, can't it? All right then, go sit there. We've only got an hour until closing time anyway. Come on, Shampoo. We can talk to Ranma later."

Shampoo, lost in her world of married life with Ranma in that little sandcastle of hers floating in the air, suddenly snaps out of it, incidentally getting covered in sand from her shattered castle. She dusts the sand off and looks at Ranma, winking at him as she runs into the kitchen.

Shampoo : "Ranma no move, Shampoo get Ranma something special!"

Ranma sighs, shrugs and resigns himself to Shampoo's attention. He walks over to take a seat at the table, and impatiently drums his fingers on the table. Shampoo skips over from the kitchen with a massive bowl of soup noodles garnished generously with spring onions, beef strips, shredded chicken, mushrooms, fried onions, fried fish cakes, some fish, and practically everything that could be found in the kitchen of Neko Hanten. Ranma's eyes grow wide as he looks at the steaming bowl of soup and noodles, and his mouth waters uncontrollably. Other patrons turn around to look at the 'special customer' jealously, wondering why he's the only one with such a huge bowl. But then, their attention is forced away from the bowl as Cologne hops into the line of vision between the customers and the bowl.

Ranma looks at the steaming bowl of noodles, and at the delicious ingredients, but suddenly remembers something.

Ranma : "Say.... how do I know you don't have any black magic mushrooms in there.... or some love potion... or a super weakness noodle or other strange food item in it?"

As Ranma asks this question, Shampoo suddenly looks hurt. She puts on her most adorable pout.

Shampoo : "What? Ranma no trust Shampoo!? Shampoo hurt!"

She quickly reaches over to take the bowl of noodles back, but is quickly stopped by Ranma. He grabs her wrist as she reaches over to pick up the bowl, and Shampoo looks at him surprisedly. Ranma quickly withdraws his hand.

Ranma : "I... didn't mean that!"

Shampoo : "Ranma didn't mean what? Ranma didn't mean to not trust Shampoo!?"

Ranma : "No! Er.. no, I meant yes.... er... in... no... a sort of.... oh, I just wanted to say I trust you and I'll eat the bowl of noodles to prove it, but don't get any ideas! All right!?" <There IS such a thing as a free lunch after all!>

Shampoo : "Ranma want to trust Shampoo!? Maybe Ranma really like Shampoo after all!"

Ranma : "Argh... just go back to work...."

Shampoo quickly complies, and skips back behind the counter, leaning her elbows on the counter and her head in her hands, looking at Ranma from her position. Ranma doesn't notice however, as he is too busy stuffing his face with the noodles. She slowly starts building sandcastles in the air again, as she begins daydreaming about starting a family with Ranma....

Soon enough though, it is closing time for the Neko Hanten, and Ranma is still busy finishing off the bowl of noodles as the last of the patrons leave through the door. Cologne and Shampoo sit down at the table Ranma is sitting at, watching him as he finishes the last drop of soup in the bowl, then sets the bowl down, while giving off a rather loud burp.

Ranma : \*burrrP!\* "Ahh, that was good!"

Then he notices the two looking at him intently. He remembers something.

Ranma : "Oh, yeah, I wanted to tell you two something, right?"

Shampoo & Cologne : "Yes....."

Ranma : "Ok... let me see..."

Ranma assumes a thinker's position for a moment, then snaps his fingers. Cologne and Shampoo look at each other wonderingly.

Ranma : "All right... I remember. Today, I was talking to Tatewake Kuno about someone. He told me that recently, he saw... you (pointing to Shampoo) with blue hair, running around Nerima asking where I was. He even said that you mistook him for me once. Is that true, Shampoo?"

Shampoo and Cologne look dumbfounded at Ranma's sentence. They look at each other, then at Ranma, then at each other again. Cologne examines Shampoo's hair closely.

Cologne : "Hmm..... strange, Shampoo's hair is still purple to the roots..."

Shampoo : "Since when Shampoo mistake stupid boy with wooden sword for Ranma? Shampoo never change hair colour before."

Ranma : "Well, Kuno claims to have seen YOU with blue hair running around asking for me. I don't think that she would be you though.... you always seem to know where I am." <Rather painfully, I might add.>

Cologne appears to consider this very seriously. Just then, the phone rings. Shampoo runs over to pick it up.

Shampoo : "Hai, Neko Hanten desu. Mmm hmm... ok!"

She puts the receiver back onto the wall-mounted phone, and nods at Cologne.

Shampoo : "Great-grandmother, we got delivery call from Tendous. They want seven bowls of ramen."

Cologne : "Ah well. Maybe we can finish this later then, great-grandson-in-law."

Ranma : "Don't call me that. Hmm... better go back now, or I'll miss dinner at the Tendous!"

Cologne goes into the kitchen to cook the order, while Shampoo and Mousse clean up the tables, Mousse staring shurikens, knives, and other assorted weapons at Ranma, all of which bounce off his thick hide as he walks through the door.

A few minutes later, Cologne comes out of the kitchen with several delivery boxes, and hands them to Shampoo.

Cologne : "Here you go. Don't be late."

Shampoo takes the boxes, and is about to walk through the door when she spots Ranma running down the street, his shadowy form lighted by the occasional street lamp, then turning a corner. She grabs her bicycle and cycles after him. Cologne watches Shampoo pedal off into the distance, and shakes her head.

Cologne : "Bad bodements.... I hope Shampoo doesn't meet her until I tell her...."

{Double Trouble!}

"Ranma! Wait for me!"

<Shampoo? Oh, stupid me! I forgot she's making a delivery to the Tendous! I must be letting my stomach get to my brain!>

Ranma slows down a little, as Shampoo comes running up from behind. He turns around to face Shampoo, her shadowy form visible as an outline in front of a street lamp.

Ranma : "Shampoo! If Akane sees me with you, even making a delivery, you know what she'll do!"

Shampoo : "Akane?"

Ranma : "Yeah, you know.... <Hey, she doesn't know Akane? Where's her bike....?> \*erk!\*"

\*crash\*

A bicycle comes crashing down onto Ranma's head, as Shampoo lands on just the right spot after taking a shortcut to intercept him. She leaps off Ranma, bike and all, as he peels himself out of the pavement and rubs the massive lump on his head, which currently sports an ugly tire mark.

Ranma : "Shampoo! That hurt! Don't.... huh? Shampoo?"

Ranma looks VERY confused. He looks both ways, at the two silhouetted figures standing besides him, both in the shadows. One is carrying three boxes and standing besides a bike, one is just standing there with two boxes.

Ranma : "..... am I seeing double... or am... or.... er...n..n.. nan da yo!?"

Shampoo #1 : "Ranma, what's the matter?"

Shampoo #2 : "Ranma, what you talking about? Who this?"

Then the two shadows look at each other, intensely. Ranma gets out of the staring match, and stands there, totally stupified as two almost identical figures face off in the darkness of night. He quickly ponders the two Shampoos.

Ranma : <Wait a minute. TWO Shampoos!?! Or am I going mad? But, even if I'm crazy, I won't have imagined Shampoo having good grammar.... and that voice.... sounds almost *normal*. A few octaves higher, but lower than Shampoo's.... or is it... oh, I give up.>

Ranma leaps onto a nearby wall and watches the entire affair from the safety of high ground, while maintaining secrecy.

Shampoo #2 : "Who you?"

Shampoo #1 : "Don't you remember me...?"

Shampoo #2 : "Shampoo say, who you?"

Shampoo #1 : "And Conditioner said, don't you remember me, sister?"

Shampoo #2 : "Shampoo got so many sisters, how to remember who you? Why you look like me?"

Shampoo #1 : "Shampoo, I am your sister in the truest sense. Through blood. I'm your twin."

\*crash\*

Ranma drops off the wall, head first, and lands on the lump on his head. He picks himself up, and rubs the bruise which is growing larger by the second.

Ranma : "...Conditioner? Oh, yeah, right. Shampoo's got a twin!?"

Conditioner steps into the light, practically a splitting image of Shampoo, but in the orange sodium street lamp, her hair looks the same colour as Shampoo's. Purple. Both are about the same height, although Conditioner is taller than Shampoo by one centimeter. Both are even built almost the same, except that Conditioner is slightly trimmer than Shampoo, and slightly bustier. Both are wearing cheongsams, (This is the chinese dress that you see some girls in Ranma 1/2 and in real life wear. Usually, it's got a split at the side from the waist down to reveal some leg... mostly red... and you get the idea.) have long hair tied in buns, and tons of hair ornaments hanging down from

them. The two are even wearing the same design of metal band, a coiled metal strip, around the right arm.

Conditioner : "Well well, sister, how you've grown."

Shampoo : "Conditioner...? I know no Conditioner. When you come to Japan?"

Conditioner : "Oh.... about a day or two ago. I've been looking for you, Shampoo. We need to catch up on old times."

Shampoo : "S...sister...? Shampoo got sister....?"

Conditioner : "That's what I'd like to confirm."

Ranma quickly runs up between the two. He stares straight at Conditioner, examining her and pointing at her at the same time, excited and flustered at the same time.

Ranma : "Ooi! So you're the one Kuno was talking about! No wonder he thought you were Shampoo! You practically..."

Conditioner gives him a hard right hook, then kicks him into the air, straight towards the Tendous' Dojo.

Shampoo watches as Ranma flies into the distance, screaming.

Shampoo : "....."

Conditioner : "I hate people interrupting me when I talk..."

Shampoo : "Ranma! You just KICK Ranma into air!"

Conditioner suddenly looks surprised. Then sheepish, and then she blushes in embarrassment.

Conditioner : "oops. So he was REALLY Ranma."

But Shampoo is already off and running, chasing the falling form of Ranma as he heads towards the Tendou Dojo.

Inside the Dojo, the family is busy as they wait for their order of ramen to arrive. Happosai is out on his party raids, and Nabiki is busy writing up her expenses books, IOUs, and profit and loss accounts. Kasumi is busy tidying up the house, while Genma, Soun and Akane are watching a documentary on China, currently featuring the Great Wall of China, Akane stroking P-Chan's head.

Genma : "Hmm.. if I could only go back to China to get cured."

Soun : "To get cured? Genma-san, I sometimes wonder if being a panda fits you more."

Genma : "Why's that?"

Soun : "You eat less rice and more bamboo, saves the family some food."

Akane : "Ne-e, father's right."

Both of them laugh as Genma glowers, while Nabiki finishes up her books. She passes the books to Kasumi as she is about to begin cleaning the upper floor.

Nabiki : "Ane-chan, would you mind?"

Kasumi : "Of course not. I'll leave them on your desk, alright?"

Nabiki : "That would be fine."

Nabiki turns around to watch the documentary with her sister, Akane, while Genma and Soun wrestle it out on the floor over that comment. Nabiki sighs in disappointment as Genma and Soun roll in front of them.

Nabiki : "Sometimes men can be SO immature."

Akane : "Or at least, some of them are anyway."

Nabiki : "Ranma seems mature enough."

Akane : "Ranma? Him, mature? hah! Don't count on it!"

Soun and Genma stop wrestling after hearing this comment, and look at Akane. They pick up quickly on Nabiki's cue, much to her satisfaction.

Soun : "Akane, Nabiki's right. Ranma IS quite mature, and so are you. You two should really stop fighting if you

want to prove it."

Genma : "Yes, my son may be a disappointment to me, but he is certainly a capable and responsible young man.

You two must learn to live together when you're married, understand?"

Akane : "Him? Mature, capable and responsible? I think even Kuno's more so than he is, stupid as he is! And he's the one always starting the fights! "

Nabiki lets out a sigh of disappointment, seeing that Akane's anger at Ranma hasn't changed since that afternoon. She decides to try a little something different. While watching television, Nabiki brings up plan B. Speaking to Akane indirectly while still watching the screen, Nabiki begins.

Nabiki : "Say, Akane... we haven't seen Ranma around today. Where do you think he could be?"

Akane : "Who cares? He's probably out there making out with one of his other girls! Ukyo... Shampoo.... who knows?!"

Nabiki : "Are you sure? Shampoo's most likely on her way here with our order, and Ukyo, if I remember correctly, is in Osaka, attending some sort of Okinomiyaki cookoff competition."

Akane : "Kodachi then."

Nabiki : "Yech, that's someone ANYBODY with brains wouldn't want to get close to."

Akane : "Does Ranma have brains?"

Nabiki : "He must have, if he's staying away from her." <Come on, Akane. Who're you kidding, gal?>

Akane : "He sure doesn't act like it..."

Nabiki smiles as her sister begins to show signs of cooling down. She turns to look at Akane, still watching television, and taps her shoulder. Akane turns her attention away from it and stops scratching P-chan's ear, who is lying on the floor, paying intense attention to the documentary as it covers the many springs of China.

Akane : "What now?"

Nabiki : "You know, you really shouldn't get angry at Ranma for 'accidentally' pushing you into the pool today."

Akane : "Why shouldn't I? I nearly drowned! I wish I could push HIM into a pool!"

Nabiki : "Well, you managed to stay afloat today, right?"

Akane : "Who said so? I only managed to paddle to the side before someone pulled me up! It's not something I've never done before!"

Nabiki : "Ah, but how far out were you?"

Akane : "er.... twenty centimeters..."

Nabiki : "See, you're improving."

Akane : "Yeah, right!" (Quite sarcastically.)

Nabiki grins inside as she catches the tone of affection hidden under all those layers of sarcasm and anger. She shrugs again, as she turns back to watch T.V. She feels her trim belly grumble a little.

Nabiki : "ah well... now.. where's Ranma, and our ramen?"

"Eeeeeeeeeeeooooooooooooowwwwwwwweeeeeeee!!!!"

\*SLOSH\*

Ranma comes flying down from the night sky, and lands with a colossal splash into the koi pond, causing a water column the height of the house to come flying up, and splashing back in, the resulting spray drenching everyone in the house. A dripping wet Akane comes running out of the house, giant mallet in hand, P-Chan following. She stares at the unconscious form of onna-Ranma floating in the water and screams.

Akane : "BAKA NA RANMA! WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?! TAKING A DIVE IN THE EVENING!?"

Ranma-chan quickly regains consciousness, and leaps out of the pond, kicking a thrashing koi back into the water as she does so. She walks up to Akane, and looks straight up into her eyes. Then she looks away, irritably.

Ranma (C) : "Akane, you'd better prepare yourself for a shock."

Akane : "Wha...."

Voices : "Here we are!"

Ranma (C) : "Too late."

Ranma and Akane run around a corner to see who it is, although Ranma already knows. They turn the corner to see a dripping Soun, Genma-panda, and Nabiki look at the two newcomers, astounded. Akane is similarly shocked, and sucks in a breath of air. Ranma-chan looks irritated at the two girls, then walks towards them.

Ranma (C) : "Hey, guys, meet Shampoo and her....erm.... sister, Conditioner."

{When two worlds....?}

"So, you're Shampoo's long lost sister?"

"Yes, I am."

The entire family with their two guests have dried off now, and are sitting in the living room, painstakingly mopped dry by Kasumi, eating their ramen. Conditioner takes the ramen from her boxes to share with Shampoo, while the rest eat the ramen from Shampoo's box. Conditioner is busy introducing herself to the group, and to her own estranged sister, telling them about herself.

Shampoo : "Why Shampoo no know got sister?"

Conditioner : "Why ask me? I didn't know I had a sister either until I met the Jusenkyo guide."

All : "Jusenkyo Guide?"

Conditioner : "Yes! I was visiting the Jusenkyo springs on a training trip! Then I met the Jusenkyo guide. The first thing he did was splash me with cold water! The nerve!"

Ranma looks at Shampoo, then at Conditioner, and then at the rest of the group, and nods.

Ranma (C) : "I can tell why. Did the guide ask you why you didn't change into a cat?"

Conditioner looks surprised at the question, but nods. She notes with concern the nasty purplish bruise on Ranma's cheek and chin.

Conditioner : "Why, yes, he did." <Who did that to HER?> "I also found out that the springs are cursed for real... fortunately not the hard way."

Ranma (C) : "Well then..... did you know that....." <Hope she doesn't....>

\*slosh\*

Ranma : "I'm not the only one here cursed by Jusenkyo..."

Conditioner gasps at the transformation in front of her, as she recognises the boy she sent flying just a few minutes ago.

Conditioner : "Oh my! I'm sorry, you're Ranma!" <Wow! He is SO kawai!>

Ranma : "About time someone recognised me."

Akane : "Should they? Your ego isn't large enough yet."

Soun : "Enough, you two! Please, go on, Conditioner."

Conditioner : "Alright. Anyway, the Guide was so surprised....."

*It is Jusenkyo, China. The legendary cursed springs training grounds. Conditioner and her fellow amazons are looking around, dropping their packs at the nearest convenient empty spot.*

Conditioner : "Well, here we are. Jusenkyo, the toughest training grounds in China, so they say."

Amazon #1 : "Very nice. How we train?"

Amazon #2 : "Hey, over here! I find strange hut! Maybe we ask person."

Conditioner : "Well then, why not open it and see?"

*The amazons knocks on the door. When they recieve no response, Conditioner kicks the door down and the three walk in. They find the spartan interior of the Jusenkyo Guide's house rather quaint, but nobody is home.*



Conditioner : *"Well, nobody's home. Let's go."*

*The three are about to leave, when the bubbly guide returns. He bumps into them at the doorway.*

Guide : *"Oh! Honored guests which are in my house, why did you break down my door?" <Not more crazy tourists!!!>*

Conditioner : *"Hey, sorry. We just came here to find out about these springs."*

Guide : *"Why honored guests want to know about Jusenkyo.....? Oh, hold on." <She looks familiar...>*

*The guide quickly runs off behind his house to grab a bucket of water from the well. Returning, he splashes Conditioner full in the face, much to the three amazons' surprise. Immediately, the other two amazons take defensive positions in front of their current(ly wet) leader, Conditioner. But, as the Guide steps back in fear of disembowelment, Conditioner waves them away, then steps up to the Guide herself.*

Conditioner : *"WHAT DID YOU DO THAT FOR!?"*

*The guide looks equally surprised, as the girl he thought to have fallen into the Spring of the Drowned Cat didn't change into a cat.*

Guide : *"Honored guest didn't turn into a cat?"*

Conditioner : *"OF COURSE I DIDN'T TURN INTO ONE! I'M NOT A FREAK!"*

Guide : *"Of course. But, my apologies. Come in, let me tell you about Jusenkyo."*

*The guide leads them into the hut, and gestures to the spartan wooden seats to sit. They sit, and the Jusenkyo guide walks over to a book shelf, and rummages through various tomes dated from different eras. He picks out the most recent records book and carries it over to the table. He opens it and flips over to the page that contains Shampoo's profile. He pulls out another page with multiple photos and looks at Shampoo's one, with the date and reference number. He picks up the photo, then looks at Conditioner. It is a black and white photo, and the closer the guide examines the picture, the more nervous he grows.*

Guide : *"Why cursed honored guest never change when she gets wet?"*

Conditioner : *"What do you mean?"*

Guide : *"Look here. I think she is you, but that cannot be."*

*The guide shows Conditioner the picture of Shampoo amongst the other recent cursees, and she gasps. The guide puts the collection back into the recently rewritten records book, after the last one was eaten by Happosai.*

Conditioner : *"She's.... me! Only she's not! She can't be! I never came here before!"*

*The Guide then calms Conditioner down. He begins his story about Jusenkyo, and about the curses. He tells of the many people who have visited the spring very recently.*

Guide : *"I noticed the increasing trend in crazy people coming here to train, and all the crazy people who did all fall into springs."*

*Conditioner and the other two amazons look nervous at the thought of being cursed by Jusenkyo. Conditioner tells the other two amazons to return to the village, much to the Guide's extreme relief of having to save the trouble of writing down more names.*

Conditioner : *"You two, go back to the village. We don't need to risk our bodies here. I have something to do."*

*The other two amazons make their way out of the hut and pack up. Watching them leave, Conditioner looks at the guide evilly.*

Conditioner : *"Tell me now, who was that person in the photo!?"*

*The guide answers without hesitation, and without fear.*

Guide : "Girl in photo is Shampoo. She move to Japan with great-grandmother. She is in Nerima, Tokyo . You want to find her, you go there."

Conditioner : "Tell me then, who is she? Why does she look so much like me?"

Guide : "That I can tell. You are her twin sister, related by blood. Jusenkya guides know many things about cursed ones even their own family don't know. Jusenkya Guide tradition to know everything about them."

".....So that was why I came here. To find my sister."

The group listens intently to Conditioner's story as she tells it. Nobody notices Conditioner paying special attention to Ranma. Then Shampoo speaks up.

Shampoo : "But Shampoo not know how old Conditioner is. How we tell older and younger?"

Ranma : "That's true..."

Conditioner : "Do we really need this?"

Nabiki : "Sensitive about age, are we?"

Kasumi : "Nabiki, don't fluster her. You know some womens' ages are their greatest secrets."

Ranma : "One more thing.... Conditioner, why go around asking for me?"

Conditioner : "Oh... er... that.... er... I asked.. the guide how to find Shampoo.. he.. er... told me that she was chasing you.... to kill you?"

Ranma : "Oh, that. It's... er...changed somewhat..."

Shampoo : "Shampoo find out Ranma boy, want to marry him! Shampoo love Ranma!"

And then, Shampoo hugs Ranma... again. Ranma desperately tries to pry Shampoo off him as he watches Akane get a mallet from under the table. He manages to get her off at the last moment.

Conditioner : "So... it seems that my sister was defeated by girl-type Ranma? Then she discovered Ranma was a boy? Interesting." <No wonder that girl looked so familiar.>

And with the incredible power of observation, Akane notices something about Conditioner. She puts her mallet back down and asks.

Akane : "Speaking of which, why is Conditioner's grammar so perfectly normal... while..?"

Conditioner : "Is my grammar normal? I thought I was the only one in my village who had a speech deficiency."

Everyone looks disbelievingly at Conditioner, who shrugs and smiles.

Conditioner : "I guess I'm both unusual and normal at the same time."

Akane : "Yeah, like some others here I know...."

Ranma : "Hey!" <oops....!>

Akane : "See? He admitted it."

Ranma : "Did not! I was just asking!"

Akane : "You should've asked it properly then."

Soun looks at Genma, and the two immediately know what's going to happen. Soun breaks out in tears as the two begin *another* argument.

Ranma : "Hmph! Tomboy!"

Akane : "Jerk."

Ranma : "Uncute."

Akane : "Pervert."

Ranma : "Mallet-head."

Akane : "....about to be malletted-head!"

Akane leaps up from her seat at the table and grabs a massive hammer from somewhere, then pulls it back and begins the downwards swing. Ranma manages a little \*yip\* before is hits him full force in the.... it didn't connect.

Conditioner grabs Ranma by the pigtail and swings him around, while he's still holding his bowl of ramen, and instead, the mallet slams through the floor of the living room, and makes a gigantic hole in the floor. However, the effort isn't wasted, as Akane feels the hammer strike something soft and fleshy.

Voice : "ouch!"

Akane lets go of the hammer and it tumbles away into the darkness underneath the house. Looking into the hole, Ranma and Akane see Gosunkugi under the table, a massive bruise on his head, candles on his head squashed, and holding a voodoo dolls of a blue haired Shampoo and a pigtailed Ranma together, about to strike nails into them. The others soon come over to join them while Kasumi cleans up the mess.

Ranma : "Hey, Gosunkugi. Don't you think that's a little old?"

Gosunkugi : "Er... hi, Ranma! I was er....."

Ranma : "If you're trying to voodoo me and Conditioner together so you can have Akane, forget it."

Just at that time, Kasumi walks over to peer into the hole.

Kasumi : "Oh my! It's Gosunkugi. Are you all right?"

Gosunkugi : "Er... yes... I am."

Kasumi : "Why not come up here and have some dinner with us? We've got an extra.... oh, we don't anymore."

Gosunkugi : "No thanks... I was.. er... just on my way out."

Ranma : "Then let me help you!"

Ranma grabs Gosunkugi by the collar, pulls him out, and boots him right out the doorway. Ranma calls after him.

Ranma : "And don't come back!"

Akane watches empathically as Gosunkugi disappears into the distance, then lands in the dog pound. \*ouch\* Then, looking at Conditioner, she enviously notes her muscle-toned, very full figure. An idea pops into her head.

Akane : "Say, Conditioner, you want to go a round with me?"

Conditioner looks at Akane, and assesses her. She looks at Shampoo, who nods. She nods.

Conditioner : "Alright."

They disappear into the dojo quickly. And return just as quickly, Akane somewhat battered and Conditioner none the worse for the wear.

Conditioner : "That was easy."

Just then, Happosai comes hopping in from nowhere. He lands on Ranma's head, felling him, then onto the table, where Genma and Soun eye him nervously. As usual, Happosai's got a huge bag full of 'goodies' from his raid.

Happosai : "Haa haa! What a haul! What a haul!"

Soun : "The master's back!"

As Happosai does a little cheer over a night of successful panty raids, Conditioner looks at Happosai with strange curiosity while Ranma picks himself up and rubs the bruise on his head which has been growing in size over the past few minutes. Kasumi and Nabiki calmly ignore this commotion, and eat their ramen off the table.

Conditioner : "Who is this funny old man?"

Ranma : "Conditioner, I think you'd....."

Happosai hops around to look at the blue-haired stranger, then he grins maliciously.

Happosai : "Wowwee! A blue-haired busty beauty! Come, let me welcome you to the Dojo!"

Happosai leaps towards Conditioner, who leaps backwards in disgust as she notices the old hentai is aiming for her chest. Shampoo just sits there, not knowing what to do, as she watches Happosai sail over towards her sister.

\*SLAM!\*

Ranma lands on Happosai's head with both feet, burying Happosai's face into the floor. Then he picks Happosai up by the collar and stares him straight in the face.

Ranma : "You dirty old pervert! It isn't enough if you molest other girls, you gotta have this one too!?"

Happosai : "Why did you stop me, you unfaithful disciple!? I just wanted to welcome her!"

Ranma : "Welcome her my pigtail! If you want to take advantage of them, just say so!"

Happosai : "Well, you aren't going to stop me!"

Happosai grabs his pipe and uses it to make Ranma let go of him, then toss Ranma through the roof of the Dojo, where he disappears into the night sky as a star.

Conditioner & Shampoo : "Ranma!"

They run over to the hole in the roof and look out into the sky, hoping to see some trace of him. Nothing. Instead, as Conditioner looks, she suddenly feels something grabbing her from behind. She looks behind her, and with as much disgust as her sister, notices.....

Happosai : "Welcome to the Tendous! Wow! You're better than Ranma!"

Conditioner : "YOU DISGUSTING HENTAI! LET ME HELP YOU TO THE WESTERN HEAVEN!"

She grabs Happosai off her back and split-kicks him straight out of the same hole in the roof Ranma went through, and watches as he disappears into the distance, towards the west. Just then, they feel a massive vibration as something crash lands on the roof of the dojo. Shampoo and Conditioner run out the door and leap onto the roof, hoping it'll be Ranma. Soun is crying as he starts tallying up the cost of repairing the house.... again, as bits and pieces of plaster and wood drop off the ceiling, the walls crack, and the floor shakes unsteadily.

Soun : "Will it never end?"

Nabiki : "Hey, sis. You want to go up there and see how Ranma's doing?"

Akane : "No. That baka has two other girls to tend to him. I'm going to bed. Good night!"

With that, Akane walks off, yawning, to her room upstairs. Nabiki looks on as Akane disappears up the staircase. Kasumi just goes to the storeroom to get the vacuum cleaner to clean up the mess.

Kasumi : "Nabiki, would you mind calling the repairmen for me?"

Nabiki : "All right, sis."

Upstairs, in Akane's room, Akane is trying to get some sleep, as she lies on her bed, hugging a teddy. However, in the darkness of her room, while her sense of sight dulls, her other senses sharpen, and her hearing is one of the most sensitive senses now. In her room, she can hear voices coming from the roof of her house, though strangely nowhere else can she hear the commotion going on.

Voice #1 : "There he is! I hope he's alright!"

Voice #2 : "Ranma always alright! He never lose fight!"

Voice #3 : "Uhhhhh....."

Voice #1 : "I think you'd better reevaluate his abilities."

\*do\* \*do\* \*do\* \*do\* \*pit\* \*pat\* \*do\*

Voice #2 : "Ranma! You ok?"

Voice #3 : "Unghh...."

Voice #1 : "I don't think he's alright. You want to go get some blankets so he won't feel cold?"

Voice #2 : "Why need blanket? Can hug him, both keep warm! And no silly Akane here!"

Voice #1 : "I was afraid of that. Come on... I'll get some blankets. We can stay here with him."

Voice #2 : "Why you want to stay?"

Voice #1 : "What's wrong? He tried to help me!"

Voice #2 : "hmmph! Conditioner go get blankets."

Akane can hear this entire exchange clearly from her room, and the more she hears it, the angrier she becomes. Or was that jealous?

Akane : <Ranma, you playboy! I wouldn't be surprised if one of them came to get the blankets from me....!!!>

\*tap\* \*tap\* tap\* \*tap\*

Akane spots Conditioner hanging outside her room upside down, her hair splayed all over the balcony floor as she hangs on the roof ledge by her feet. Akane switches on her bedroom light and jogs over to open the balcony door.

Conditioner : "Hi, Akane. Your balcony was the first one I saw when I looked over the side, so I thought maybe you'd have some spare blankets...?"

Akane : "First balcony you saw? Ranma's landed just above my room?"

Conditioner : "Looks that way. Come on up with some spares if you don't believe me."

Akane quickly packs some blankets and tosses them onto the roof, then climbs onto the roof with the help of Conditioner. The moment she gains her bearings and looks up, she spots a battered and bruised Ranma being hugged by Shampoo. Ranma's bruise has grown to match the size of his head.

Shampoo : "Mmmm! Shampoo keep Ranma warm!"

Conditioner joins Akane seconds later as she carries the blankets in her arms. Both girls' eyes begin glowing green. Very, VERY luminiscent green.

But instead of bringing up mallets to smash Shampoo and Ranma, both girls decide to hurt the other party later. Instead, they jog on the roof over to where Ranma and Shampoo are. Conditioner tosses two blankets at Ranma and Shampoo, who intercepts them.

Conditioner : "Here. He'll keep warm under this. You too. You can stop hugging him."

Shampoo drapes the blanket over a badly injured and incapable of moving Ranma, and then walks over to her sister, ignoring Akane.

Shampoo : "Sister jealous that Shampoo have Ranma?"

Conditioner : "Maybe."

At this moment, Akane interrupts. She clears her throat to get their attention, and it works.

Akane : \*ahem\* "Excuse me, but shouldn't you two be going... home now?"

Conditioner : "I don't have a home here yet."

Akane : "Why not go with Shampoo to meet... your great-grandmother? I can stay here to take care of Ranma."

Shampoo : "Shampoo no want to leave. Shampoo want to keep Ranma company."

Akane's temper is wearing dangerously thin now, as her.... 'veiled attempts' to get Shampoo to go home peacefully begin to go down the drain. Just then, Conditioner comes to the rescue.

Conditioner : "Come on, Shampoo. We've got some missed time to catch up on..... we've only met half and hour."

Shampoo : "But Ranma...."

Akane : "Look, I'll stay here and keep watch on him, alright? He won't come to any harm. Promise."

Shampoo looks reluctant to leave, but seeing that she has no other proper reason to stay, agrees grudgingly.

Shampoo : "Alright. Shampoo go. Conditioner coming?"

Conditioner : "Right behind you."

As Akane watches the two leap off the roof and leave the compound, she lets go a sigh of relief of having those two gone. She turns around to face Ranma, whose head has suffered too many repeated blows lately and shut down for the day. She sighs again.

Akane : "Ranma, Ranma, Ranma.... what would life be without you?"

She picks him up, slings him over her shoulders and drags the blankets along.

{Shampoo, this is your sister!!!}

The two sisters leap over the wall of the Tendous' and quickly set off. Not knowing where to go, Conditioner naturally follows Shampoo to wherever she's going. The two run down alleys and streets, Conditioner running up besides her newfound sister.

Conditioner : \*puff\* "Hey, sis!"

Shampoo : "Yes?" \*huff\*

Conditioner : "Where are we going?"

Shampoo : "Where Shampoo live."

Conditioner : <Obviously.> "Erm, just exactly where is that?"

Shampoo : "Neko Hanten."

Conditioner : "You know, I really want to..."

Shampoo : "Is Conditioner always so talkative? We talk later, run now!"

Conditioner : <Oops. Too much of my big mouth again.>

The two continue in silence as they run, and as they turn a corner, they see the Cat Cafe in front of them. Shampoo pushes the doors open and steps in, much to Mousse's delight. Cologne is eating a bowl of noodles, watching a television show on Miss Nippon '97, wishing she were young again. Mousse walks up to Shampoo, arms wide open, waiting to embrace Shampoo.

Mousse : "Ahh! Shampoo, my love! Welcome back! I was....."

\*biff\*

Shampoo : "How many time Shampoo have to tell Mousse? Shampoo no like Mousse! No Mousse love!"

Undaunted, Mousse gets up again as Shampoo walks by him, his glasses broken. Conditioner follows, and is the first thing Mousse sees in his blurred vision.

Mousse : "Shampoo! Come on, at least we can wash dishes together!"

As Cologne turns her head to see Shampoo walking in, she wonders who Mousse is talking to.

Cologne : "Shampoo, back so soon? I expected you to be chasing Ranma."

Shampoo : "No, great-grandmother. Shampoo bring long-lost sister back."

\*crash\*

Cologne nearly falls off the chair from a heart attack. Instead, she just drops the bowl she's carrying. Conditioner is busy punching Mousse's lights out as she makes her way towards her sister.

Conditioner : "And \*biff\* for \*whack\* the \*pow\* last \*phwock\* time \*blam\* I \*shick\* AM \*bonk\* NOT \*slam\* SHAMPOO!"

Conditioner kicks Mousse away as he opens his arms to embrace her. Finally, realizing he's never ever... 'seen'... a blue haired Shampoo, Mousse quickly grabs a pair of spectacles from his robes and puts them on. As his vision adjusts, he realizes it's just a blue-haired Shampoo.... standing besides a purple-haired one. He drops his jaw and spectacles and bigsweats as he looks at two basically identical faces.

Mousse : "...S...s...TWO Shampoos!? Is my vision finally going for good!?"

Mousse keeps rubbing his eyes and looking at the two with another pair of spectacles over and over again, trying to convince himself that he is not seeing double or that he is going mad. Conditioner watches on with interest, while Shampoo looks at him indifferently.

Conditioner : "Are ALL men crazy over you like that, sis? Or is this one special?"

Shampoo : "Only this one. Come on, we meet great-grandmother."

Shampoo and Conditioner turn around to face the withered old matron, who is looking at them fearfully. Sweat is forming on her brows, and she doesn't wipe them off. Shampoo and Conditioner don't notice, however, and Shampoo cheerfully introduces the two.

Shampoo : "Sister, meet great-grandmother, Cologne. Great-grandmother, meet long-lost sister, Conditioner."

Conditioner : "Hi, great-grandmother." (icily. VERY icily.) <yup. it's her.>

Cologne : "H..hello Conditioner." <uh oh. She's here....>

Shampoo, totally oblivious to the fact that Conditioner is staring poison daggers at Cologne, cheerfully goes on to show her sister around the Cat Cafe.

Shampoo : "Come, Shampoo show sister around Cat Cafe! So sister no like Ryoga, get lost in own home!"

Conditioner, deciding to ignore Cologne for the time being, allows Shampoo to grab her arm and lead her around the cafe and living areas. Shampoo proudly shows her sisters the sights of the cafe, while Conditioner listens attentively.

Shampoo : "Here, we have kitchen. Mousse work here, cook food, clean dishes. We make Neko Hanten special... secret ingredients. Only o-ba-ba know."

Conditioner : "Really? Wow. Say, what do you do, sis?"

Shampoo : "Shampoo waitress. Shampoo serve food, take order. Maybe Conditioner can also work here?"

Conditioner looks wonderingly at the question.

Conditioner : "I'll consider it."

Very quickly, Shampoo jumps for joy.

Shampoo : "Wonderful! Shampoo can have sister work with her!" <More time to chase Ranma!>

Then she begins to hesitate.

Shampoo : "But, Shampoo only meet sister short time. Shampoo not know anything about sister... maybe we talk about each other? We learn about each other. Know sister."

Conditioner : "Fine by me! We really need some catching up."

Shampoo : "We go take bath together?"

Conditioner : "Er... sure!"

Shampoo : "Wait, Shampoo go tell o-ba-ba first."

Shampoo runs down the corridor in front of the living room, and turns the corner, leaving Conditioner to look the place over. She notes every single detail, from the small crack in the corner of the wall, to the cobweb on the ceiling above her.

Meanwhile, Shampoo finds her great-grandmother sitting on the table, looking through a very old and very weathered book slightly larger than herself, muttering to herself. Shampoo stealthily sneaks over behind Cologne, and peeks over her shoulder. She sees some strange writings, and many strange pictures. One of which is a diagram of a human body with various pressure and other points labelled in clear detail. Cologne is muttering too softly for Shampoo to hear, and Shampoo cannot read the strange script, so she simply walks in front of her great-grandmother.

Shampoo : "O-ba-ba..."

Cologne nearly tears the book in half in her shock, but quickly stuffs the oversized book under her robes *a la* Mousse. She wipes a big sweat off her brow, and looks at her great-granddaughter.

Cologne : "Yes, great-granddaughter?"

Shampoo : "If no more delivery, Shampoo go do sister bonding?"

Cologne : "Er.. fine, fine! Go, go... I'll take care of things here... go on, go!"

Shampoo wonders what is it about that book that worries her great-grandmother so much, but shrugs it off and decides to ask her later. Instead, she nods and skips off around the corner. Cologne lets go of her held breath and sighs. She takes out her book again and starts flipping pages.

Cologne : "If I don't find that spell soon..."

Back in the corridor, Conditioner sees Shampoo skipping around the corridor. Shampoo quickly reaches her sister, and nods.

Shampoo : "Bathroom this way."

Shampoo walks down the corridor, and around another corner, her sister following. Standing in front of a swinging windowed door, Shampoo gestures to her sister.

Shampoo : "In here."

Shampoo opens the door, and steps in, waits for her sister to come in, then shuts the door. The changing room is a small, ceramic tiled room much like the one at the Tendous'. In a corner, a towel rack holds three towels. One white, one purple, and one green one. There are two laundry baskets to one side. Opening one, Conditioner notices that it contains only two dirty robes, and she notices that they are the kind Mousse was wearing. She bends over to try picking one up to examine it, when Shampoo puts a hand on her shoulder.

Shampoo : "No touch Mousse's robes, you not know what happen. Mousse always do own laundry. Look."

And for a demonstration, Shampoo takes a long, wooden pole and prods Mousse's robe with it. Immediately, the robe comes to life... almost, as metal claws, shurikens and sawblades pop out from all the little nooks and crannies in the robe to set to work on the wooden pole. Conditioner leaps backwards in shock, as she deftly avoids the shurikens that fly from his robes. To finalize the point of the "don't touch Mousse's robes" rule, Shampoo drops the pole into the laundry basket, and it is slowly turned into sawdust, as the saws and claws do their work. As soon as the pole is completely reduced, the saws and claws retract into the robe, and a small vacuum cleaner pops out from somewhere to suck up all the sawdust.

Shampoo : "See? No touch Mousse's robes now. Put laundry in other basket."

Still jittery from that encounter, Conditioner nods her head nervously. She unbuttons her cheongsam and takes it off, tossing it into the open basket. Shampoo follows suit, after closing Mousse's personal laundry basket and locking it. Looking at her sister, Shampoo notices that she's not taken the time to go buy some proper underwear, and instead just wraps cloth strips around her breasts and uses a homespun loincloth. In comparison, Shampoo is over-pampered, wearing translucent lacy purple bras, and a less-translucent pair of panties. Shampoo notices something else too, though. Looking at her sister's bdy, she notices that while (much to her envy) her abdomen is very, very well toned and shaped... there is something seriously wrong. Shampoo notes with a little uneasiness that her sister... has no navel. Just a small depression. Shampoo quickly dismisses this though, as she remembers about something her aunt Ginko had back then in her village that removed those unsightly navels. :-)

Following her sister, who wants to wash her hair, Conditioner undoes her hair to let the mass of tied up hair to cascade down along her back, the buns consisting of hair much longer than the main body of hair. Shampoo whistles in admiration at her sister's ability to compress even more hair than she can in her buns. Tossing their hair ornaments into a corner, the two strip down completely. Shampoo grabs her towel off the rack, but then realizes that her sister doesn't have a towel, and from the way she is looking at Shampoo, she obviously expects Shampoo to provide her with one. Learning from her previous lesson, Conditioner avoids the white towel which has



Mousse's name on it, and stays away from Cologne's towel. It smells too strongly of medicine for anyone to bear, actually.

Shampoo : "Oh, sorry! Wait here, Shampoo go get towel for sister!"

She quickly wraps her towel around herself, still exposing quite a bit, and jogs out the bathroom. While Shampoo is still somewhere else in the shophouse, Conditioner decides that she could enjoy life here in Japan.

Conditioner : <After all, I've found my sister, and there's this really kawai guy I'd like to meet later... if Shampoo doesn't get him first.> (Smiling.... evilly?)

Before long, Shampoo returns with a long, blue towel just right for Conditioner. She tosses it to her sister, and then closes the door behind her. As they walk into to the actual bathroom itself, Conditioner decides to ask her sister something that had been bugging her for quite a while.

Conditioner : "Say, Shampoo... what did Ranma mean when he said... 'I'm not the only one cursed by Jusenkyo'?"

Shampoo looks at her sister incredulously as she closes the door behind her and hangs her towel up besides the door, Conditioner tossing hers onto the hooks for a perfect three-point landing. She sits down on a plastic stool while she decides how to answer this question. Conditioner pulls up a seat besides her and begins by splashing herself with some heated water from the tap. Still waiting for Shampoo to answer, she grabs one of the many, many unopened bottles of shampoo on the shampoo rack above the taps and empties the entire bottle into her hair... in which the shampoo is just enough to wash it. Suddenly, as Conditioner is halfway through scrubbing one of her locks of hair, Shampoo snaps her fingers.

Shampoo : "Conditioner no be scared. No faint."

She stands up, walks towards the shower unit, and picks up the shower head. Then she faces her sister.

Shampoo : "Watch."

She turns on the cold-water tap and douses herself with a cascade of ice-cold water. Before her sister's eyes, Shampoo sprouts purple fur all over her beautifully naked body, and a pair of cat ears pop up on her head. Her body starts to change rapidly, a tail popping out from behind, entire body shrinking in size. Her head slowly grows whiskers and changes shape, human ears shrinking, disappearing. Limbs contorting, fingers receding into paws. All this takes place within a few seconds, yet seems like hours to a very bewildered and shocked Conditioner. Soon, a small, purple cat that is her sister stands before her on all fours, very wet and very cold.

\*meeeeoow\* \*shake\*

Conditioner blinks her eyes a few times to make sure she's not seeing things, then shakes her head, trying to get the weird feeling of insanity creeping up on her out of her head. Then she looks at the cat again, now shaking itself dry, and bigsweats.

Conditioner : "Alright. I've got kitty-chan for a sister. I can take it." <Alright.... be calm, don't scream, don't faint...>

Neko-Shampoo trots over to the hot-water tub just nearby, and hops up to the taps, using two paws to turn the hot-water tap on. As the water pours out of the tap, neko-Shampoo hops under the cascade and transforms again one more time in front of her sister, who is taking it surprisingly well for a first timer. Without a word, Shampoo walks over to her respective seat and sits down, an unopened bottle of shampoo in her hand. Conditioner just blinks at her sister, whom she just saw turn into a cat before her eyes, and then back into a human again.

Shampoo : "Now you see. Also got other cursed ones, like eternally lost boy, and Mousse."

Conditioner : "...I know the guide told me you were cursed.... but...."

Shampoo : "Nothing Shampoo no mind, actually. Useful for making Ranma listen to Shampoo too...." (Grins.)

Conditioner : "I see. Ah well, come on then, sis. I'll help you scrub your back."

Shampoo : "Ok."

Outside, in the restaurant itself, Cologne finally finds the page she is looking for in her yellowed, ages-old tome. Cologne cackles to herself, as she slowly translates the wordings on the page into understandable sentences.

Cologne : "Ahh... here we are. This spell... I really shouldn't have tried it without proper supervision. Now look what happened... ah well, I'll cure this problem soon enough."

She looks at the reagents needed for another spell, and grabs an independent list of ingredients, ticking off the ones she has around here somewhere. Ticking off twelve of the fifteen reagents, she discovers that the three missing ones are the rarest ingredients required for the spell.

Cologne : "Sigh. I really should've kept that mind-control black magic mushroom. Now I've got to go get another."

She quickly pulls out a travel brochure to China, and marks down three obscure towns. She scribbles the reagent name on each town, then tears the unused portion away. She hops off the table, and begins to move towards her room.

Cologne : "Mousse.... Mousse!"

Cologne turns around to see Mousse still bleeding from the nose and standing there like a drooling statue, after seeing a scantily-clad Shampoo run out to ask for a spare towel. She hops up to him and taps his shoulder. No response.

\*BASH\*

She slams his head with her staff. Still no response.

Cologne : "hm.... this'll take some effort."

So, in her best impersonation, she mimicks Shampoo's voice.... perfectly.

Cologne : (Falsetto) "*Mousse, oh, Mousse!*"

This quickly breaks him out of his stupor. Looking desperately around, Mousse hopes to catch another glimpse....

Mousse : "Oh, it's you, old bat. What is it?"

\*bop\*

Cologne : "Who's an old bat?! Oh, nevermind. Mousse, when Shampoo comes out of the bath, tell her I went out on a business trip, and I'll be back in a few days. Got that?"

Mousse : "Er.... sure."

Cologne : "If you don't tell her, I'll find out, and if I do....."

Mousse : "Alright, alright! I get the idea!"

Cologne : "Good. I'm leaving now."

Cologne hops off to get some essential equipment ready for her trip. As Mousse watches, she disappears and reappears in a few seconds. Opening the door, she turns around one more time.

Cologne : "And keep an eye on Conditioner!"

Mousse : "I get the message. Go already!" <And don't come back!>

Cologne disappears into the darkness, the door closing behind her. Mousse immediately begins to fantasize about another Shampoo.... this time even more scantily clad.....

In the bath, the two sisters are sitting in the hot-water tub, washing off any last specks of dirt before ending their bath. They are discussing about their lives so far, and about some sisterly things to get acquainted to one another as sisters once more. So far, it's been interesting.... then Shampoo brings up an important point.

Shampoo : "So, Conditioner live in another part of Joketsuzoku village, no see Shampoo?"

Conditioner : "Looks that way. Strangely enough, the only person I remember from my childhood during my raising was your great-grandmother. Apart from my friends, that is. I don't remember my parents, or you, or any relatives in the village I was familiar with."

(Note : 'Friends' in the Joketsuzoku village equals to sparring partners of the same sex. At least, that's what I think.)

Shampoo : "O-ba-ba? Cologne? How you remember her? I thought she with Shampoo all the time."

Conditioner : "That's what's so strange. I remember enough about her to make me hate her guts, but I don't know why. And I remember her so vividly."

Shampoo : "Hm... maybe great-grandmother do something bad. But Shampoo no think she can be bad. Maybe she do something special."

Conditioner : "Why not ask her and find out?"

Shampoo : "Ok!"

The two finish their soak, then get out of the bath and dry themselves. It takes them a remarkable short hair/towel time ratio to dry their hair. Dressing up quickly, the two begin bundling their hair as their walk out the bathroom. Walking into the restaurant where Shampoo last saw her grandmother, Mousse is there, glasses fogged up like Dr. Tofu's, lost in his hentai thoughts. And to top it off, Mousse didn't even finish clearing up the dishes. Shampoo walks up to him and raps his head. A drop of spittle runs down the side of his mouth.

*\*knock\* \*knock\* \*knock\*... \*knock\* \*knock\* \*knock\*..... \*knock\* \*knock\* \*knock\*..... \*knock\* \*knock\* \*knock\*.....*

Shampoo : "As Shampoo expected. Nobody home."

Conditioner : "Let me try something."

She steps in front of Mousse, and waves a hand in front of him. No response. She wipes his glasses, but they fog up again immediately. She nods in confirmation of her suspicion.

Conditioner : (Whispering to Shampoo) "Watch this."

In front of a surprised Shampoo, she slowly proceeds to undo her collar button, and then unbuttons it, loosening her collar and exposing her collarbone. Still no response from Mousse. Then she proceeds to unbutton her blouse button by button, stopping short at the midpoint of her act to show some remarkable cleavage. Mousse begins to twitch a little. Finally, Conditioner walks up to Mousse's side and whispers into his ear in a slightly higher-pitched voice, much like Shampoo's now.

Conditioner : "Shampoo want Mousse tonight....."

*\*kaboom!\** Mousse's head explodes and his nose gushes blood, even more than Ryoga in one of his bleeding fits.

His glasses quickly clear up, and he starts hopping up and down in excitement. Conditioner quickly buttons up again, and knocks his head with a bonbori. (Where'd that come from?) Mousse immediately grabs Conditioner and hugs her, lost in his joy. Conditioner tries to break free, with no success.

Mousse : "Wow! Shampoo wants me tonight!? Where!? Where!?"

*\*biff\* \*punch\* \*kick\* \*slap\* \*crunch\**

Conditioner quickly beats Mousse off her, and slaps his face a few times.

Conditioner : "Wakey wakey wakey, rise and shine, sonny boy!"

This works well enough for Mousse, who quickly snaps out of his euphoria and suddenly notices where he is and why he's there. He looks at the girl he hugged earlier on, and quickly looks behind him, at the real Shampoo.

Mousse : "Oh... er... was I...?"

Shampoo : "Yes. Nevermind that, Mousse, where great-grandmother? Where she go? She not in bedroom."

Mousse decides that telling her the truth might not be so bad, considering that with that ancient prune gone, he can redouble his efforts to win Shampoo over. He lies anyway.

Mousse : "She said.. she would be going to China for a while... to get some stuff for our kitchens! She... er... said that she would be gone about... er .... two weeks! Yeah, that's it, two weeks!" <That'll work! Cologne DID say : 'Business trip' anyway.>

Shampoo appears to consider this, but quickly dismisses it. Instead, she picks him up by the collar and starts shaking him back and forth, Mousse sweating.

Shampoo : "Mousse not telling whole truth. How long?"

Mousse : "I... said..... two....."

Shampoo : "Shampoo know not two weeks. How long?" (Shaking him harder.)

Mousse : "A..f..e....w...d..d....day...y...y...y....s..... n...n...n...ow...ca...can...y....you....l...let...me.....go..o..o..o?"

Shampoo acknowledges Mousse's reply and lets go of him, dropping him to the ground like a sack of potatoes. Mousse is busy activating his anti-robe-shaking device to counteract Shampoo's interrogation methods, and is busy crawling away to find a safe spot to avoid Shampoo for the moment. Shampoo turns to her sister and shrugs.

Shampoo : "Look like Cologne not here for a while."

Conditioner : "Nevermind. I can live without answers for a while longer. In the meanwhile.... why not clean up this place first?"

Shampoo nods, and the two begin cleaning up the place post-haste, balancing a dozen plates in a hand each, then bringing them into the kitchen, and dumping them into the kitchen sink. They find Mousse under the sink, still trying to get the shaking out of his head. Shampoo looks at Conditioner, who shrugs nonchalantly.

Conditioner : "You're the boss here."

Shampoo taps Mousse on the head, and he turns his head up, looking at an unsteady and continuously vibrating Shampoo. Shampoo uses her you-know-I-want-something smile for this occasion.

Shampoo : "Mousse mind washing dishes for Shampoo? Shampoo like."

Mousse immediately snaps out of his vibrating agony, and steadies his head.

Mousse : <Did I just hear what she just said!?!> "Yes! I mean no! Er.... I mean I don't mind!" <She did! She did!>

Shampoo smiles at him again, then nods.

Shampoo : "Arigato, Mousse!"

Mousse immediately pops up from under the sink, and starts washing the dishes with a passion. While he's busy washing them, Shampoo nudges Conditioner and points towards the living quarters.

Shampoo : \*yawn\* "Late now. Go bed."

Conditioner : \*yawn\* "Right behind you."

The two yawning sisters leave an overexcited Mousse to his dishes, as they make their way towards the bedroom. They enter Shampoo's bedroom, a nice little spot in the house with a great view of Nerima.... and the Tendou Dojo. Conditioner notes with interest the little telescope pointing out of the window directly towards it. She also notes with a touch of jealousy that Shampoo has over a dozen pictures, photos, and posters of Ranma hung up all over her room, on her desk, besides her bed, and on the ceiling. And on each picture, in Shampoo's handwriting, the words "Ranma, Wo Ai Ni...♥♥♥" (Wo= I, Ai = Love, Ni = You) followed by a signature of Shampoo. And as sleepy eyed Shampoo looks around, she notices that there is only one bed.

Shampoo : \*yawn\* "Hm...Conditioner no bed.... Shampoo go get spare futon." \*yawn\*

She sluggishly moves over to a wardrobe and opens it, rummaging inside it. Conditioner notices that the sheer amount of clothes, jewellery, and other items in the wardrobe are enough for an entire performing troupe. Finally, from some dark corner, Shampoo drags out a futon and finds a nice, cozy spot to lay it out on.

Shampoo : "There. Pillows included."

She unfurls the futon, and some inconceivable fluffy pillows pop up from inside with a \*fluff\* sound. Conditioner walks over and lies down on it, testing its integrity. Satisfied, she lies down on it and piles the pillows three high to support her head. Shampoo climbs onto her own bed, and pops her head over the side, directly over her sister, Conditioner. A stray lock follows her over the side, and Conditioner playfully swats it away before Shampoo recalls it over the bed.

Shampoo : "How Conditioner like futon?"

Conditioner : "Oh... it's nice. I've had worse."

Shampoo : "That nice. So, how Conditioner day so far?"

Conditioner : "Wonderful. Oh... er... by the way.... I wanted to ask you something. About Ranma. If you don't mind."

Shampoo : "Shampoo no mind."

Conditioner : "Just what is it about Ranma that you like so much? Is he really that cute?"

Shampoo : "Oh... that! Shampoo tell sister story...."

And Shampoo proceeds to tell her sister about her life story between Ranma and herself. By the time she's done, Conditioner has fallen asleep, and Shampoo is about to wander into slumberland herself. Just before she retires for the night, she watches the serene face of her sister sleeping... practically her mirror image. She blows her sister a flying kiss for sister-bonding, and falls asleep.

{One day at a time.}

\*pitter\* \*patter\* \*pitter\* \*patter\*

"EEEEAAARRRGHHH!"

"Osage no onna! Come to me, my beautiful pig-tailed goddess! I share show thee the salvation and the light from the darkness of that demon, Ranma, if you *will just date with me!*"

"IN YOUR DREAMS, BOKKEN-BOY!"

It's raining in Nerima, as Ranma-chan is busy fleeing Kuno on the way to school. Akane watches on, wearing a raincoat and carrying an umbrella, as she watches the scene from a distance. She shakes her head and sighs.

Akane : "Poor Ranma. He's got Kuno chasing him as a girl, and Kodachi, Ukyo and Shampoo as a guy. Lucky I'm not like them. But it's good he can recover so fast. I was afraid I'd have to change him before the rain did that."

As Akane watches on, Ranma-chan is turning around to give Kuno the customary kick to the chin to send him into a very speedy orbit, when she is saved the trouble. In a flash, Kuno suddenly disappears, to be replaced by a shadowy raincoat-wearing, umbrella holding figure with very long hair in buns.

Conditioner : "Hi, Ranma. Thought maybe you'd like a little help dealing with this nutcase."

Akane comes running up to Conditioner and Ranma-chan as Conditioner steps off an unconscious Kuno's head. Akane spies Conditioner suspiciously.

Akane : "Conditioner? What are you doing here? Or are you here to chase Ranma too?" (Deadpanned.)

Conditioner looks surprised at Akane, and feigns disappointment.

Conditioner : "Oh my. So touchy. No, I was just passing by on my way to school. With this."

As Conditioner pulls out a small sheath of papers stating her enlistment into Furinkan High, Akane and Ranma can feel their jaws drop all the way to the floor as they hear this.

Akane & Ranma (C) : "...???!!? YOU? Go to SCHOOL?"

Conditioner : "Mmm hmm. Why not? I may be an amazon from Joketsuzoku, but that doesn't mean I can't be educated. Besides, I knew I'd find my sister here, and I'd be staying a while, so...."

Ranma (C) : "Strange... I thought all the amazons from Joketsuzoku were either out for someone's blood or else wanting to make someone related by blood. This is a first."

Conditioner : <Obviously, you'll have to undergo some manners training....> "There's a first time for everything... I guess."

Ranma (C) : "Hey! We're gonna be late if we don't move it!"

The three rush off to school, leaving a vapour mist behind them.

At school, they actually make it with much time to spare, and while Akane and Conditioner dry out in the hallway, Ranma goes to get some hot water to change back. While Akane and Conditioner are busy putting their raincoats into plastic bags to hang in their lockers, they begin to hear snippets of conversation from gossiping boys and girls passing by the two. Akane notices that Conditioner is wearing some of what appears to be Shampoo's clothes, or else some that LOOK like hers.

Voice #1 : "Hey, you hear? There's a transfer student coming in today."

Voice #2 : "Yeah. I heard she's that strange blue-haired girl who's been asking around for Ranma lately."

Voice #3 : "From what I heard, sounds like she's interested in him."

Voice #4 : "Hey, wait a minute guys! Isn't she the one who's always landing on Ranma with a bike?"

Voice #5 : "Maybe. But her hair's blue, not purple."

Voice #1 : "So what? A girl can't dye her hair?"

Voice #3 : "Look at the VOLUME of her hair, you think there's enough dye to do the job?"

Voice #1 : "True. You think she could be that girl's sister?"

Voice #4 : "More so, which class is she going to?"

Voice #5 : "Is it THAT important?"

Voice #4 : "Hey, if I'm gonna try my luck with her...."

Akane and Conditioner look at each other as they turn around, half confused, half amused. Just then, that particular group of gossipers turn to use their own lockers, and the moment they do so, they spot the topic of their conversation.

Boy #1 : "Oh. Here's the transfer student."

Boy #3 : "Oops. Do you think she heard.....?"

Conditioner looks very insulted with the comments. Rather indignantly, she replies.

Conditioner : "Who wants to date jerks like you? I'm only interested in Ranma!"

The group of boys look very surprised, as does Akane. But she catches Conditioner winking at her in a secret sign, which Akane understands immediately. The boys however, look amongst themselves for a while, muttering. Then they come to a conclusion.

Boy #1 : "Damn that Ranma, he's always getting all the good girls! Boy, I wish I had his luck."

Ranma : "Don't count on it, guys. You don't want to know what I go through everyday."

Ranma pops up from behind the boys, still steaming from the hot water he's just poured on himself. The guys all yelp and scatter, then reassemble near their own lockers. Some of them begin to mutter amongst themselves again as Ranma and the other two girls move.

Guy #1 : "Hmph! He's got Akane, Ukyo, the Pig-Tailed Girl, and just about every other girl chasing him, and he STILL won't share any of them with us!"

Guy #2 : "Doesn't Akane mind?"

Guy #3 : "Yeah, right. Wouldn't surprise me if she approved!"

Ranma manages to catch snippets of this as he walks down the corridor, and before he turns a corner, he shouts out behind him.

Ranma : "Enough is enough guys. I don't need any MORE scandals behind my back. And for the last time, I don't KNOW any pig-tailed girl!"

In class 2E....

Kuno : "What? You say that there will be a new transfer student in this class?"

Nabiki : "Yep. She's coming now, in fact. You may have met her."

Kuno : "Hm.... I, the great Tatewake Kuno of Furinkan High, the Blue Thunder, have never heard of such news yet. Why is it that such news never reaches me?"

Nabiki : "Give it a break, Kuno baby. You never pay any attention to the goings on around you."

Kuno : "But the great Kuno needs no attention, he will know what he needs to know."

Nabiki : "Yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever you say. Now, come on. We've got a few spare minutes. Want some of these...?"

Nabiki pulls out several envelopes, some labelled "Osage no Onna" and the others labelled "Tendou Akane".

Kuno mulls over which ones he wants first, then he points at the envelopes on the right.

Kuno : "I wish to see the pictures of my Pig-Tailed goddess first."

Nabiki : "You got it."

Nabiki puts Akane's envelopes back into her bag, and pulls out several \*lewd\* pictures of Ranma-chan in various states of undress and various activities. She hands them to Kuno, who examines each one feverishly.

Nabiki : "You know the price. 3 for 1000 yen."

Kuno : "I'll take them all. These masterpieces of my Pig-Tailed Goddess hard at her divine work are enough motivation for me to keep fighting that villianous fiend, Ranma Saotome, until I finally win her from him."

Nabiki : "You want the ones on Akane too?"

Kuno : "The works. How much?"

Nabiki : <I knew he'd take them all.> "9000 yen in all. Take it or leave it."

Kuno pulls out his very \*fat\* wallet, which Nabiki eyes greedily, and hands her nine 1000 yen bills. Sitting down to examine his pictures carefully, Nabiki returns to her seat, looking at the other students and thinking about how to get some cash from them. Just then, someone enters the class.

Everyone's attention is fixed to the newcomer.

Teacher : "All right, class, settle down now. We'll be starting our lesson today from chapter 23. Take out your textbooks."

The class groans once, then settles down to get their books out. Just as they do, however, Nabiki notices the teacher gesturing to someone outside the class. As the mysterious person walks in, Nabiki gasps.

Nabiki : <Conditioner!>

The pretty, blue haired amazon walks into class, still in her chinese clothes, and still bearing a \*striking\* resemblance to Shampoo. Kuno also gasps, as he matches the footprints on his head to the shoe shapes on her feet. Of course, having many, many months of experience from various footprints embedded in his face and head, Kuno can easily tell whose footprints belong to which person.

Kuno : "The strange, blue-haired Shampoo! The woman who stomped on my head in an attempt to foil my attempt from claiming the Pig-Tailed Goddess! Why!? Why her, in this class!? Why me?!"

Nabiki notes with interest Kuno's distressed attitude towards Conditioner. She is now standing in front of the class, while the teacher is introducing her.

Teacher : "Class, this is Conditioner. She's the new transfer student over here, and I want you all to welcome her warmly. All right? No jokes, no pranks, do I make myself clear?"

The teacher receives a rousing 'YES!' from the guys in the class, and a normal 'Yes.' from the girls. As expected, Nabiki quickly takes the opportunity to raise her hand.

Teacher : "Yes, Tendou Nabiki?"

Nabiki : "Sir, I think we have a spare seat here...." (Gesturing towards the empty seat besides her place.)

Teacher : "All right then, Conditioner, you may sit there."

Conditioner : "Thank you."

Conditioner goes to take her seat, and Nabiki immediately smiles secretly as she notices all the boys staring at the blue-haired bombshell.

Nabiki : <Time to start earning money.....>

At the end of school, everybody is struggling at the food vendors' stores, as usual, to buy their lunches. And, as usual (most of the time anyway), Shampoo is there, waiting for Ranma with something 'special' for him. As soon as the bell goes, a dustcloud is seen as Ranma speeds towards the canteen, hoping that he won't miss the last bun or drumstick. Akane is on her way out from school with her friends to watch a movie, when she spots Shampoo riding into the school compound on her bike, bamboo steamers stacked three high in one hand.

Akane : "Shampoo! She wants to feed Ranma again!? The nerve!" <I'm going to remember to mallet him this time!>

Akane begins to simmer as jealousy begins to take over, but her friends step in to stop her.

Friend #1 : "Akane, Calm down! Don't worry! You know Ranma would never betray you for some other girl!"

Friend #2 : "Yes! You two are fixed fiancées anyway. There's no way he could break that promise!"

Friend #1 : "And, he doesn't like Shampoo all that much anyway!"

With their quick thinking, Akane's friends manage to calm Akane down somewhat, and thank God that Nabiki took the time (and their money) to teach them how to think fast in situations concerning Ranma and Akane so that their outings will not be ruined. Instead, Akane nods calmly.

Akane : "Alright, I guess you two are right. Come on, let's go watch that movie."

The two wink to each other, and quickly follow Akane out the school gates.

Inside the school compound, Ranma has just reached the canteen vendors' stalls. He is running from store to store, pushing past happy and contented, grumpy and bruised, or happy but bruised students in a desperate attempt to get something to eat.

Ranma : "Nothing? All out!?"

Vendor #1 : "Sorry, sport."

Ranma : "What?! All out!?"

Vendor #2 : "yep. Sold out in five minutes."

Ranma : "You gotta have SOMETHING! Scraps even!"

Vendor #3 : "Nope. The guys paid me 100 yen a crumb!"

As Ranma asks the last store vendor, he is flatly rejected as the vendor tells him the same thing all the others did. Sold out. Desperate now for food, Ranma knows that since Ukyo is still in Osaka, that means Ucchan's is not an option.

Ranma : "Food food food... where... ah! Neko Hanten! Now where's that Shampoo....?"

Shampoo : "Ranma! Nihao!"

Shampoo comes running down the corridor towards him, a small cloth covered basket and the steamers balanced in both hands.



Shampoo : "Nihao, Ranma! Shampoo bring dian xin for you!"

Ranma : "errr... thanks, Shampoo. Let's go under the tree in the school lot, alright?" <Well, that saves me the trouble. I just hope Akane doesn't mind. I hope she doesn't see me, or it's mallets.....>

Conditioner : "Oh! There you are, Ranma! You too, sis!"

Conditioner comes running down the corridor to catch up with the two, as she spots them. Flanked on both sides by two gorgeous ladies, Ranma is particularly nervous about any rumours that might be going around at that moment. His fears are realised....

Voice #1 : "Say, isn't that....?"

Voice #2 : "Surrounded by TWO gorgeous babes too!"

Voice #3 : "Aw man! I wish I had those two flanking ME!"

Voice #4 : "Where's Akane? Wait till she sees this!"

Ranma : <Oh boy, I'm in it deep now!>

And indeed, all around him, the 'infamous cassanova' of Furinkan High notices various activities going around, like people cashing in on bets they made that Ranma would have more women around him, to girls gossiping about how many fiancés Ranma will have, to boys pointing and commenting on him and his girls and how envious they are. Ranma doesn't mind all these, instead, he is only worried that the rumours will reach Akane and.....

Kuno : "RAAANNMAAAA SAOOOTOMEEEE, YOU CURSED FOOL!!! HOW DARE YOU BEWITCH EVEN MORE WOMEN AND BETRAY THE FAIR AKANE AND PIG-TAILED GODDESS! As if having them to yourself under your cursed charm isn't bad enough, you have to capture these two as well!?"

Kuno comes rushing towards Ranma down the corridor in a massive dust storm, bokken raised over his head and charging at full speed towards Ranma with the intention of chopping him in half so he can have Akane and the Pig-Tailed Goddess to himself. (With the added bonus of these two amazon women to add, why not?) Tossing students left and right as Kuno charges, Ranma and the two amazons look at him with mild interest.

\*blat\*

Kuno flattens his face on Ranma's shoe as Ranma lifts his foot to intercept him. Shampoo and Conditioner watch on indifferently at this pompous fool as he makes a scene in the middle of school.

Ranma : "Hey, Kuno Sempai! Is this girl the one you were talking about?"

Conditioner : "Yech, how could I have mistook this.... *dunce!* for Ranma!?"

\*squeeeeeeee....\* \*POP!\*

Kuno pulls his face free from the constricting vacuum created by smashing his face against a shoe, and looks carefully at Conditioner, scrutinizing her up and down. He scratches his chin as he examines her hair, her face, and her dress. Finally, he looks at Ranma.

Kuno : "No. I do not believe this maiden is the blue-haired one I was talking about."

\*POW!\*, Conditioner lands on Kuno's head, leaving a pair of size 7 shoe prints on his head. (In terms of canvas shoes anyway, this should be fairly small.)

Conditioner : "Are you colour blind or just plain idiotic!? Is there any other girl in Nerima who has blue hair!?"

Ranma : <Geez! Kuno really can't tell the difference!> "Whatever, Kuno. Now, if you're quite done trying to rescue these two, we'll be off." <Man, I can't believe he is \*SO\* \*DENSE\*!

Kuno : "Ranma Saotome, you scum of Furinkan, I shall disembowel you and cut you from navel to.....oof!"

Ranma, Shampoo and Conditioner take turns leaping on and off Kuno's head and face on their way out, leaving multiple footprints of various shapes on him.

Ranma : "Sorry, Sempai! Gotta go! Seeya!"

The three walk out of the school doors at a brisk pace, leaving a dazed and unconscious Kuno on the floor. Nabiki comes along at that moment, and spots Kuno on the floor. She smiles as she spots the bruises on his head and the footprints on his face.

Nabiki : "Right. 1000 yen for the effort of dragging you to the infirmary, plus 500 for the time wasted, and 700 for medical expenses. You want it, Kuno-baby?"

Kuno : "Noooo..... 850 yen.... 440 yen.... 600 yen...."

Amazingly, Kuno mumbles, in his state of delirium and unconsciousness, another cheaper price to Nabiki. She shakes her head in surprise, and quotes a more competitive price.

Nabiki : "Final offer, 940 yen, 470 yen, 650 yen. Take it or drag yourself there."

Kuno : "Agreed.... drag me there."

Nabiki : "First off... pay up.... here." (Taking the wallet out, and pulling out the appropriate amount.)

With one hand, Nabiki grabs an unconscious Kuno's collar, and drags him towards the school infirmary. With the other, she counts the money carefully.

Outside, under the tree so mentioned earlier on, Shampoo has placed the steamers and basket on the grass, and is busy unpacking the food and drinks. Ranma, amidst his grumbling tummy, is busy looking at Conditioner, who is currently refusing to let go of his arm.

Ranma : "Hey, er... Conditioner? Would you mind...? I still need this arm you know...." <Shampoo the second?!>

Shampoo watches on jealously as Conditioner reluctantly lets go of his arm. Ranma shakes his arm a few times to get rid of the prickly pins and needles feeling. Finally, Shampoo finishes preparing Ranma's lunch for him. Three steamerfuls of dian xin await Ranma's leisure, from red-bean paste buns to prawn dumplings. Shampoo busies herself with pouring Ranma a cup of chinese tea.

Shampoo : "Shampoo hope Ranma like Guanyin cha."

(Guanyin is the name of the tea, also a female chinese deity. Cha means tea.)

Ranma : "Don't worry! I'm so hungry, I'll eat anything!" <Except for those strange ingredients you gave me the last few times.>

Conditioner : "Say, sis... don't you have anything for me?"

Ranma, in the middle of chewing on a lotus-bean-paste bun, looks up.

Ranma : (With his mouth full) "mmpfh! Yeahff! Youh shouldhe havefh somethinfh ffor herfh!"

Ranma does the feat of speaking with his mouth full AND not spilling anything from it with remarkable ease. Shampoo, looking at her sister suspiciously, nonetheless picks up a char-siew bun and passes it to her sister, who eats it slowly. Looking at her sister sitting there, looking dreamily at Ranma eating, Conditioner decides to break her sister out of her stupor.

Conditioner : "Say, sister, won't you have anything to eat? Or have you already eaten?"

Shampoo : \*snap\* "Huh? Oh, Shampoo eaten. Shampoo wait for Ranma to finish, then Shampoo get date with Ranma."

Ranma : \*BlearGH!\* "Date!? You!? Again!?"

Ranma \*barely\* manages to prevent the food from spilling out his nostrils and mouth, instead splattering the uneaten portion of his pork bun (No, it's steamed so you can be sure Ryoga's not been used.) on his face, and choking on his bun.

\*hack\* \*cough\* \*ahem\*

Ranma : "I knew you'd want something in return! So, I guess I've eaten your food, so I'm obliged?" <That's the... what, fifth time I've been suckered in!>

Shampoo doesn't say anything, instead opting to smile sweetly and nod. Conditioner notes the crafty tactics used by her sister and files it away for future use. Not wanting to waste good food, and to make the best of a bad situation, Ranma quickly wolfs down the rest of the food lying before him, then downs three cups of tea, and burps, not rudely.

\*burp\* " 'scuse me."

Telling himself not to be taken in again the next time Shampoo brings food for him, like the past four times, Ranma lets Shampoo clear up the mess, tie up everything in a giant black rubbish bag, and toss it into the sun. Shampoo quickly takes Ranma's arm into hers, and tugs at him. He follows, resignedly. However, as he walks, his mind suddenly remembers something. Tugging on Shampoo to get her to pause for a while, Ranma turns around and spots Conditioner standing there, cherry blossoms raining down around and on her, watching the two disappear into the sunset, never to see..... (Ok, ok, we get the idea! Go on! -Ed.)

Ranma : "Hey, Conditioner! Wanna come with us? Double date!" <At least Shampoo'll have to restrain herself in the theatre with her around.>

Conditioner blinks her eyes once in disbelief, then shakes the flowers off her, and quickly skips over to Ranma's side, holding onto his other arm, giggling.

Conditioner : "Ranma's the best! Come on, let's go!"

Sweating and hoping he won't regret it (which he always does), Ranma allows himself to be practically \*carried\* off by the two amazons towards the nearest movie theatre, both sisters discussing about which movie they want to watch.

\*snap\*

Gosunkugi smiles evilly from behind some bushes as he looks at his polaroid photos, and a custom-made polaroid-negatives attachment. He looks at his collection and nods at the photos taken.

Gosunkugi : "So far so good, Ranma hasn't noticed. If Akane gets a look at these, she'll leave Ranma for sure!!!"

Gosunkugi begins dreaming in his fantasies of being with Akane... so much so that he doesn't notice the hand walking on fingers slowly inching its way across the grass towards his camera. When Gosunkugi turns around, he discovers, to his dismay, that the entire camera has been taken. Photos and all.

Gosunkugi : "Argh! Not again! I've got to stop buying those expensive cameras! They're always being stolen!"

On the busy streets in the commercial district of Nerima, Akane and her friends are looking around for the theatre which is showing the movie they have tickets for.

Friend #1 : "Where is that theatre!?"

Akane : "What was its name?"

Friend #2 : "Er... what was it?"

Friend #1 : "Oops... I forgot."

Akane : "Look at the ticket.... I'm sure you brought them."

Friend #1 : "Sure I did. Here.... oh. It's this...."

Akane and the other friend look at the ticket name, then look around from their spot on the street. No sign of the theatre whatsoever.

Akane : "Are you sure it's here? I mean, it's gotta be the easiest to find! The newspaper made it look so big!"

Friend #1 : "I'm sure... the directory listing said so. The theatre should be visible from anywhere!"

Friend #2 : "Let's ask that guy over there. Maybe he knows."

She runs over to stop a man wearing a bandanna carrying a backpack. Akane recognises Ryoga. But before she

can stop her friend from asking the Eternally Lost Boy, she is already there.

Friend #2 : "Excuse me, sir, but we're looking for this movie theatre....." (Pointing to her ticket.)

Ryoga : "er... that's easy. Look up." <Even I can't get lost here...!>

Akane's friend looks up. Directly above her, a GIGANTIC sign with the name of the movie theatre is blinking visibly in the daylight. In fact, Akane and her friends were standing right in front of the theatre. The three big sweat. They never thought to look behind them.

Friend #1 : "Er....."

Akane : "Forget it. We're here. Let's go in." <Ryoga syndrome strikes again.>

The three quickly rush into the movie theatre, leaving Ryoga stunned as he was about to ask Akane to go steady with him. Again. Instead, a small commotion behind him draws his attention.

"Will you two let me go now? I'm going to lose both my arms soon!"

"No, not yet anyway. Hey, here's the theatre! You decided what you want to watch, sis?"

"Yup. We go watch with Ranma whatever showing now!"

"I'll get the snacks. And the tickets. Wait here."

Turning around, Ryoga spots two girls in the arms of Ranma.... er... no wait, that's Ranma in the arms of two girls who look practically alike, minus their hair colouring.

Ranma : "Ahhh! Finally! I can move my left arm at last! Better, my left arm can feel again!"

Ryoga : "BAAKEEROOOU RAAAANMAAAA!!!! You're cheating on Akane again!?!? And this time, with TWO girls!? You really are unfaithful to Akane! DIE!!!"

Ranma spots Ryoga charging towards him with his umbrella, people leaping out of his way left and right to avoid being impaled. Shampoo looks at the Eternally Lost Boy as well, then leaps, pulling Ranma up with her just as Ryoga leaps and slams his umbrella into the sidewalk. A massive crater forms as a result, barely missing the water mains that run under it. Landing behind Ryoga, Shampoo and Ranma are about to give Ryoga a pressure point treatment when Ryoga turns, looking for Ranma.

Ryoga : "Ranma! Where are you!? You cannot hide forever!"

He turns around to look, and turns again to look for Ranma. In fact, he turns in circles (by his reckoning anyway), even looking up and down in case Ranma is standing on a street lamp or neon sign waiting to pounce, or ducking beneath him ready to deliver an uppercut.

Nothing.

Finally, giving up, Ryoga decides to search elsewhere for Ranma, walking off amidst a crowd of surprised civilians and muttering to himself.

Ryoga : "That cursed Ranma can really run fast! No matter, I'll smash his face in yet when I see him again."

Still in the same spot they landed in, Shampoo and Ranma look at Ryoga as he walks off, immediately lost.

Ranma : "Eh, Shampoo... how many times did Ryoga actually face us? To look for us?"

Shampoo : "Shampoo count none. Ryoga-kun always looking same left and right place all the time."

Ranma : "Geez, he got lost standing still!?!? That's new!"

Just then, Conditioner comes running back with arms full of popcorn and soft drinks. She hops up and down excitedly.

Conditioner : "Come on! The movie's nearly started! Let's go! I've got the tickets too!"

Ranma : "That was fast."

Conditioner : "When you're the only one at the queue just before the show starts, why not!? Come on, I've got the

tickets, and it's nearly started! You know we won't get in if it starts!"

Quickly, Shampoo pulls Ranma by his poor arm towards the ushers, currently collecting tickets. Conditioner holds a bucket of popcorn in her mouth as she passes the tickets to them. Quickly, they move in. At least, Shampoo and Conditioner do. Ranma is just being dragged around like a rag doll.

In the theatre, the three find their seats and sit down, Shampoo on one side, and Conditioner on the other. As usual. Finally, Shampoo lets go of Ranma's arm. Ranma quickly takes its temperature to make sure it's not dead, then flexes his arm to get the circulation going again. With some relief, he takes a bucket of popcorn from Conditioner in one hand, and a can of soda in the other, and slowly chomps on his popcorn.

Ranma : <Well, a free snack and drink AND a movie's better than a day out with Akane! Almost. Wait a minute... what's the title of this movie? Didn't Akane want to watch one too?>

Turning to Shampoo, who notices him immediately (besides.... she was looking directly at him all this while. The movie hasn't started.), he asks nervously.

Ranma : "er... Shampoo... what's this movie's title...?"

Shampoo looks very hopeful.

Shampoo : "Why you care? Shampoo on date with Ranma, can hug whole movie, nobody know!"

Ranma : "Please. Just... humour me."

Shampoo looks very disappointed. Anyway, she looks at the movie tickets her sister passed to her.

Shampoo : "Farewell.... My..... Sibling..... a love story... "

Voice : "Yup, Akane. It's called Farewell my sibling, a love story."

Ranma looks up. One aisle above him is Akane, who hasn't noticed him yet. He immediately goes into overpanic mode. Dropping his popcorn on the floor, Ranma tries to scramble out of his seat, but is held back by the pigtail by Shampoo and Conditioner.

Ranma : "EEEEEEEE!!!! I GOTTA GET OUTTA HERE BEFORE SHE SEES ME!!! LET GO!!!"

Dragging him back into his seat, and stuffing another bucket of popcorn into his lap, Shampoo and Conditioner think exactly the same thing. They speak simultaneously, using exactly the same sentence....

Shampoo & Conditioner :

"Why Ranma so scared of that Uncute and Violent girl? She no like Ranma, always beat him! But we like Ranma, no beat!"

Quickly covering their mouths up, Ranma looks up desperately, hoping that Akane didn't hear that. She didn't. He wheezes in relief, then lets go of the two girls' mouths. They look at him slyly, as he looks at them nervously.

During the movie, the two girls hold one hand each on their laps. Helpless, Ranma watches the entire movie with his hands gripped in two vises. Once in a while, one of the girls will offer him a popcorn or a sip of soda, which he has no choice but to accept. He even tries to escape once or twice by sliding out of his seat and crawling away, but even the slightest movement cause the two to pull his arms, pushing him back into his seat and eradicating any hope for escape. While the two sisters enjoy the movie, Ranma barely pays any attention to it, instead paying more attention to Akane's attention to the movie. Any slight movement by her, any slight action, nearly causes Ranma to die from heart attack, and for the duration of the entire movie, he sweats enough to fill an Olympic Grade swimming pool. Finally, as the movie is about to end, Ranma begins to loosen up a little and relax. In the process, he lets go of a sigh of relief.

Akane : "Eh? That sounds like Ranma! Is he here!?"

"SSSHHHHH!!!! This is the best part!"

Ranma practically faints after hearing Akane voice his name, and her suspicion. Fortunately, as soon as he hears the other patrons shush Akane up, he quickly lets go of a \*silent\* sigh of relief. Finally calming down enough to watch the movie, Ranma only manages to catch the "THE END" part before the credits. He silently curses himself for not enjoying the free show, but then another part of him mentions that being caught with the two girls on either side of him means the mallet.

"Hey, you should've watched that movie! At least Akane didn't notice you that time!"

"Yes, but what would happen if she did? You'd need me to make a fast getaway, right? And give an explanation as truthful as possible while I'm at it!"

"Argh, you are SO pesky, Good Conscience! Since when did Ranma ever need thought to get away?"

"That's right... but you know Ranma doesn't love these two! Sure, he likes them, but only as friends!"

"So? Whaddaya driving at?"

"Simple. He doesn't want to betray Akane. You should know that, Bad Conscience."

"Hah! What's wrong with a little outing anyway?"

"These two really... LOVE him! Anyway, you know that if Akane spots him, no amount of reasoning will save him from the Mallet if he stays around the place for long!"

"Well, you could go to work later, after he escaped! You contradicted yourself!"

"Er... oh... ah... right.... Oh, forget this argument! It's done anyway!"

"Right. Next order of the day, should Ranma try to leave these two girls....?"

Apparently, he has no choice. While the two finally let go of his hand, Ranma reasons that if he is seen by Akane leaving the movie theatre trying to escape from the two sisters, she will suspect something that will be confirmed by Shampoo and Conditioner leaping over the crowd calling his name. He reasons that by using the two as visual shields, he can hide between them if Akane looks his way. Much to their delight and a hint of disappointment, Ranma stays in his place between them. Soon enough, they make their way out of the crowd, Ranma praising one and all divine beings out there for making Akane not notice him with the two.

Instead, concerned with other matters, Shampoo decides to try to get Ranma to ask her out to lunch.

Shampoo : "Oh, Shampoo suddenly feel hungry. Shampoo always forget eat popcorn make Shampoo hungry."

Conditioner : <That was lame, sis! Try this!> "Oh dear... I have to go to the toilet!"

Before the two can stop her, she quickly makes her way towards the ladies' in the theatre. The two walk towards a movie poster and lean on it, waiting for Conditioner to finish her business. Suddenly, Ranma detects something.

Ranma : "Hiyaa!"

He punches through the poster he's leaning on, and pulls Gosunkugi out from the cavity behind it. He's gotten himself his trusty old camera again, and as Ranma shakes poor Gosunkugi, a tape recorder, a camcorder, spare tapes, cassettes and batteries, a box with three rolls of unused film and a piece of paper drop off him.

Ranma : "Gosunkugi, when are you ever going to learn? Stop spying on me! You won't get anywhere! Now, scram!"

Ranma gives Gosunkugi a punt which sends him into an office tower off in the distance, and picks up the piece of paper which Gosunkugi dropped. Reading it, Ranma breaks out into unstoppable peals of laughter, and as he wipes away his tears, Shampoo asks him what's so funny.

Shampoo : "Ranma, what so funny?"

Ranma : \*haa\* \*hee\* "... read... this!...." \*snort\* \*chortle\*

Shampoo does, and immediately rolls on the floor laughing, tears pouring out her eyes. After a short while, she picks herself up and wipes her tears away.

Shampoo : "Shampoo no see so funny thing since Beijing circus!" \*giggle\*

As the two break out into laughter again, Conditioner comes out of the toilet and spots the two clutching their tummies, laughing their heads off and their hearts out. Her jealousy rises a notch. Then another.

Conditioner : <What's so funny that Ranma's laughing with Shampoo!?! It's got to be bad news for me!>

She quickly jogs over to the two, and taps them on the shoulders. Their brains take a while to tell them to stop laughing and pay attention to the person who tapped them on the shoulder. Recovering first, Shampoo quickly rubs the tears out of her eyes as she looks at her sister.

Shampoo : \*giggle\* "Hi, sister!"

Conditioner : "What's so funny?"

Ranma : \*ho\* "Oh, that...! Look here...!"

Ranma shows Conditioner the piece of paper. Attached to it are a few photos and some words in Gosunkugi's handwriting.

*"Ranma Saotome,*

*I, Hikaru Gosunkugi, have managed to kidnap Akane and hide her in a secret place. If you wish to save her, you must confess your relationship with Shampoo and the blue-haired twin to her face!"*

Looking at the pictures, Conditioner facefaults. 6 ‡ 6

On one, a picture of Akane sitting in her chair in class has some crude black lines drawn around her arms, like a rope tied around her. In another, Akane playing softball in the school softball has some of the same black lines sketched all around her. In the final picture, Akane is standing by herself in front of a gigantic pair of comic-like gates, the HUGE words "TOKYO DISNEY LAND" directly above her. Behind her, many of the Disney characters are posing with Akane.... with more of the same black lines. In fact, to enforce the point that Akane is really tied up, he labelled each picture's ropes with an arrow and the words "No, this is not a black marker scribble. This is a rope tying Akane up. Do not attempt to rub off the ropes.". Conditioner rubs one, it comes off in her hand.

Ranma : "Now you see? Akane was just here too!"

Conditioner : "Ah, that Gosunkugi is a fool. Come on, let's go somewhere, anywhere! I'm starving after that stomach-emptyer!"

Ranma : "err.... come on, isn't this date over? I eat your lunch, we watch a movie together. That was the deal!"

Shampoo : "No, that WAS deal. Shampoo no want always watching movie, Shampoo want other things on date. or else so meaningless."

Conditioner : "Listen to her, boy. I don't like people who don't listen to my sister. New policy."

Ranma : <Damn, how'd I always get myself into these kinds of messes!?!> "Oh, all right. But you're paying."

Shampoo : "Ok."

Grabbing her bike (From Hammerspace no doubt.), Shampoo gestures to Ranma to get on as well. Not wanting to be left behind, Conditioner grabs her own bike and follows the two. Sitting behind Ranma, Shampoo wraps her arms tightly around his waist, hugging him and enjoying the feel of his back, taking in the smell of his body. Nervously, he begins pedalling down the street, ringing the bell.

\*ring\* \*ring\* \*ring\* \*ring\*

Cycling down the street, Ranma makes his way through crowds of people and cars, formulating a way to end the date as quickly as possible. His answer comes soon enough.

"Haaaaahaahaahaahaahaaaaaahaa!"

A shower of black rose petals rain down from high above, covering everyone on the busy street Ranma is riding on. But, instead of letting the petals touch them, Ranma, Shampoo and Conditioner immediately take cover under the nearest tarpaulin in front of a hotel. They watch as the pedestrians on the street begin dropping like flies, one by one, all snoring blissfully in their drug-induced sleep. Watching as the last person affected falls asleep on his feet, Ranma and Shampoo bigsweat. Then, a shadow crosses over the sleeping bodies, a telltale ribbon following.

Ranma : "Aw man! Kodachi, here!?"

Shampoo : "Crazy laughing girl in leotard come again, want to ruin Shampoo date with Ranma!"

Conditioner : "You two have such interesting friends."

Kodachi lands amidst the bunch of sleeping people, twirling her ribbon. And laughing like a mad fool. Shampoo takes a defensive position in front of Ranma, ready for a fight. Ranma looks a little surprised.

Kodachi : "Ranma-sama! There you are! Won't you be with me?"

Shampoo : "What crazy girl want with Ranma?"

Kodachi : "My, the amazon's here too? And....!?!?"

Kodachi stops in the middle of her sentence as Conditioner makes herself known. Stepping out from behind Ranma, Conditioner stares down Kodachi with her blazing purplish-blue eyes. Kodachi feels herself shrink under Conditioner's intense scrutiny, and begins to sweat. Finally, not wanting to try facing down Conditioner, she twangs the ribbon between her hands.

Kodachi : "Catch!"

She uses her ribbon to shoot something towards Conditioner. Before Ranma can intercept it, fearing a poison or some horrible doctored photo of him, Conditioner catches it out of the air. Ranma looks at the bundle, which fortunately, doesn't contain either one of the two things. It contains BOTH.

\*poof!\*

A cloud of smoke erupts from the small cloth bundle, a purplish sleeping cloud of Kodachi's concoction. Fortunately, Conditioner is already wearing a gas mask, and the smoke dissipates harmlessly into the air. She takes the photos out of the bundle with a latex gloved hand, then tosses the black-rose motified napkin onto the floor. The gas mask follows soon after.

Conditioner : "Feh, such old fashioned techniques don't work on the amazons of Joketsuzoku! Well well, what do we have here?"

She takes out some of Kodachi's doctored photos, and examines them. She turns them around, onto their sides, and even looks behind the photos. Ranma and Shampoo look over her shoulder, at the photos. They show Ranma earlier on, being held in one arm by Kodachi, a bush covering the other side.

Shampoo : "What this? Ranma no hold crazy gymnast arm before!"

Ranma : "And I wouldn't want to do so for the rest of my life!"

Conditioner : "Wait, there's more...."

Examining, at the picture Conditioner takes out an rupe (that long, microscope-like object you put on your eye to examine jewellery and such.) and examines the photo. She traces a line across the photo, and peels out the sticker on it. The bush is removed to reveal that his other arm is empty, holding one of Kodachi's bouquets.

Conditioner : "Ranma... did you...?"

Ranma : "Hold on a minute there! Let me look at that!"

He grabs the photo, and looks at it closely. Then he thinks back. Pointing at his arms in the photo, Ranma calls the two to look.

Ranma : "See these squeeze wrinkles on my arm?"

Shampoo & Conditioner : "Yes?"

Ranma : "Who do you think did this?"

Shampoo & Conditioner : "Kodachi?"

Ranma falls over for a second, then picks himself up. Pointing at the still-visible marks on his arm, he points to one of the handprints.

Ranma : "Look at this!"

To emphasize the point, Ranma takes a small brush and some silvery dust, brushes his arm, picks out the



fingerprint and places it on a black card. Then he takes Shampoo's fingerprint and compares it. A perfect match.

Ranma : "See? You do know Kodachi doctored those photos!"

Conditioner : "Looks pretty good to me." <.....say!>

Suddenly, Conditioner snaps her fingers.

Conditioner : "Sorry, you two! Gotta go! I've got something urgent to do!"

Before Ranma or Shampoo can ask her what it is, Conditioner disappears over the nearest rooftop. Looking around, Shampoo notices that everyone's asleep, or paralyzed. She looks at Ranma coyly. Ranma immediately knows what's coming.

Ranma : "M..matte, Shampoo! Now's not the time...!"

Shampoo : "Wo... ai... ni!"

She quickly hugs Ranma and doesn't let go. Squeezing him like a squeaky teddy bear, Ranma lets out a squeak everytime she hugs him too tightly.

Ranma : "Ek....ack....achkk.....please... let... go.... Shampoo....!"

Shampoo : "Ranma kiss Shampoo! Then Shampoo let go!"

She quickly puckers up and tries to get Ranma to kiss her. Ranma pulls his head back, and quickly starts formulating ways to trick Shampoo into letting him go.

\*BLAM!\*

Akane : "What do you think you're doing, Ranma?"

Letting go of him, Shampoo immediately gets up. She gives Akane a hard stare. Ranma gets up and looks surprised at Akane, who appeared out of nowhere.

Ranma : <Is she learning how to travel Hammerspace!?!>

Shampoo : "What violent girl want to do with Shampoo's Ranma?"

Akane : "YOUR Ranma!? Don't make me laugh!"

Shampoo : "What? Maybe violent uncute girl like Ranma, want him for herself?"

Hearing this, the two speak simultaneously.

Akane/Ranma : "Me? Like that Pervert/Tomboy? You must be kidding!"

The two immediately give each other evil stares, faces darkening.

Ranma : "I'd rather be with this cute amazon than with you, uncute tomboy!"

Akane : "Who'd like a sex-changing pervert, anyway? Only hopelessly naive girls could like you!"

Ranma : "At least naive beats violent, boy-type girls like you, waist like a cauldron, tighs like a log!"

Akane : "And they're the only ones stupid enough to like crazy, perverted, aquatranssexual, hentai, and girlish unmanly types like you!"

Ranma : "Hentai? Unmanly!? Who are you to say such things when you're so unwomanlike, so stupid and ugly!?"

Just then, Happosai comes hopping down from a building, carrying his usual stash.

Happosai : "Hee hee! Did I hear someone say 'Hentai', and 'girlish'? I love those things! Both of you are just....."

\*BLAM!\*

Akane/Ranma : "Who asked you!?"

Happosai goes flying into the sky, cloud trail behind him, dropping his stash of unmentionables into Shampoo's arms. Taking a bra out, she realizes that it's one of her favorites, but overpriced ones which she could not afford. Looking at the bickering couple, she immediately grabs Ranma's arm.

Shampoo : "Ranma follow Shampoo, Shampoo show Ranma new underwear!"

Ranma looks shocked, and blushes furiously. He is about to reject her offer, when Akane opens her big mouth.

Akane : "Well? Your favorite, lovely naive amazon is about to show you something! Don't you want to go see a girl prettier than I, pervert!?"

This immediately destroys any hope of Ranma's rejection to Shampoo's offer.

Ranma : "Hmph! Why not!? Beats listening to you, ugly! Come on, let's go, Shampoo! Can't wait to see a real girl!"

But, this is not the response Akane had expected. She just blinks a few times, after hearing Ranma's jibe. The words slowly sink in.

".....ugly! .....can't wait to see a real girl.....!"

Akane : <Am I really ugly!? Does Ranma really think so!? Do I really act so boyishly!? Not a real girl's behavior!>

She begins to tear, as Ranma is pulling Shampoo along with him. Shampoo gives Akane a nasty raspberry. But, as Ranma hears Akane whimper a little, he stops. He turns around and looks at Akane, kneeling and crying on the floor. Something in his heart breaks at the sight of Akane being so pitiful, and he wants to go over to comfort her. But, as usual, his stubborn pride stops him. Instead, he acts in his usual, pig-headed way.

Ranma : "Pheh! Go ahead and cry, tomboy! You won't appear to be a girl even this way!"

This is too much for Akane. She stops crying immediately, and Ranma regrets his last sentence.

\*KAAAPOOOOOWWWW!\*

"EEEEEEEEOOOOOOOOWWWWWWEEEEEE.....!!!"

Akane : "THEN LET ME HELP YOU TO SHAMPOO'S PLACE!"

She gives him a kick so powerful, Ranma leaves a trail of broken teeth and a small trail of blood behind. Shampoo looks on as Ranma flies off into the sun, disappearing as a star. Then she looks at Akane, still tearing, and smiles.

Shampoo : "See? Ranma no like you, only like Shampoo!"

Then, turning back to where Ranma last flew off to, Shampoo begins her quest to find Ranma. She leaps onto a rooftop, and from there onto another higher one. Soon, she disappears as a speck into the distance, leaving Akane on the sidewalk. She slams the sidewalk with a punch that does more damage than Ryoga's Bakusantenketsu, then slowly trudges home, in tears.

{The first victim. Strange Advice.}

"AAAAaaaiiiiiieeeeeee.....eeeeeee.....eee!!!"

\*CRASH\*

Ranma comes flying down from his long-distance air-trip to land, on a rooftop. Head-first. Balancing on his head, Ranma rocks around a little before gaining his bearings, and looks around from his unique position.

Ranma : <Hmm... there's the dojo, there's Furinkan... ah! There's the movie theatre.... hm.... there's the old lady's house, wonder who she's splashing now?.... there's the Kunos', Neko Hanten.... then.... I must be....>

In the building itself, Doctor Tofu is busy tending to a patient when the place is suddenly rocked by a massive

crash, bringing down bits and pieces of tiles, plaster, and other, less desirable, things on the ceiling. Dusting himself off, then dusting his patient off, Doctor Tofu looks at the small lump in the ceiling, and notes its shape.

Tofu : "Be there in a minute, Ranma! Hold on!"

Back up on the roof...

*"Be there in a minute, Ranma! Hold on!"*

Ranma : <Yup. Doctor Tofu's. Wonder if I can get him to stop this bleeding?>

Ranma spends the rest of the 55.43215 seconds thinking about his argument with Akane, going through all possible apologies, jibes, spites, retorts and other responses when he sees two shadowed figures on the rooftops. He can hear their conversation just as they pass by him, without even noticing.

Shadow #1 : "Come on! You've got to make me those photos!"

Shadow #2 : "Haa haa haa! You? What makes you think you're worthy of Ranma? He's mine and mine alone!"

Shadow #1 : "Alright then, if you'll make me these photos, I'll leave him alone because he'll be with me in the photos, just the two of us, without anybody to disturb us."

Shadow #2 : "And what if you don't stop seeing Ranma?"

Shadow #1 : "I promise, I won't see him."

Ranma notes the crossed fingers and toes.

Shadow #2 : "Works for me. Alright, I'll do it. But you'd better keep your word! Meet me tonight at the Kunos'. I'll be waiting at the main gates. Haaahaahaahaahaahaa!"

Watching the second shadow jump off the top of a roof, then suddenly drop out of sight screaming, Ranma considers his options. The first shadow quickly looks around, then leaps off the roof towards the Neko Hanten. Ranma's internal clock notes.... 0.000021 seconds left until Tofu makes his appearance.

"Hello, Ranma! How's your relationship with Akane coming along?"

Ranma : "YEAAARRGH!"

Ranma leaps into the air, on his head, screaming. His pigtail is straightened out, the end spiked out in fear. Doctor Tofu looks on as he lands on his feet, apologetic.

Tofu : "Sorry to scare you, Ranma. I managed to treat my earlier patient with some time to spare, so I came up early. Come on down, I'll fix up those nasty bruises."

In his office, the good doctor looks at Ranma's bruises and cuts, most of which were picked up on the way to his clinic. He is poking around, careful not to make Ranma feel too uncomfortable, and pulling out a few things here and there.

Tofu : "Hmmm.... you got a few claw marks here.... a piece of glass there.... oh dear, where'd you get that giant bruise up your chin? Hold on, I'll get you some antiseptics to clean these up first."

Walking over to his medicine cupboard, Tofu begins rumaging through his assortment of medicines and balms. Still searching through his cupboards, Tofu speaks behind him.

Tofu : "Ranma, did you get into another fight with Akane? That shoe mark looks familiar."

Ranma : "Yeah, tell me about it. She got jealous again."

Tofu : "Jealous? Ranma, you really shouldn't take in other girlfriends, you know. Akane's a good girl, it's natural she should get jealous. I'll bet you two argued again."

Ranma : "Yup, that uncute tomboy really gets on my nerves."

Tofu : "You know she cares for you, just don't hurt her feelings for you. Besides, since you two are already engaged, why not get along?"

Ranma : "If Akane listened to your advice, we would. And besides, this arrangement was not our idea."

Tofu : "Even so, ever wondered whether you were the cause of all this?"

Ranma : "No."

Tofu : "*Here we are....*"

Finding what he wants (think carefully about this sentence and Tofu's last sentence), Tofu plucks out a small brown bottle, half-full of some strange liquid. Taking out a few cotton swabs/buds, he opens the top of the bottle and sits down besides Ranma.

Tofu : "Hold still, this'll hurt a little."

Dipping the swabs into the liquid then applying them to Ranma's cuts, Tofu uses the purplish antiseptic to cleanse the wounds of any infection. Ranma flinches now and then as Tofu touches a sensitive spot, or the medicine goes to work. After applying the medicine to the last wound, Dr. Tofu takes out a few bandaids and applies them over the wounds.

Tofu : "Now, Ranma. You'll want to apply some general antiseptics to these once every eight hours. They should heal up in a few days. In the meanwhile... let me see what I can do about that bruise."

Examining the bruise, Tofu nods his head.

Tofu : "Right, hold on tight, Ranma. This could hurt a little."

Ranma : "Uh oh...."

Tofu flexes his fingers with a few "pop"s and "crack"s, then proceeds to bend and break Ranma's body in various places. While doing so, Tofu decides to get Ranma's mind off his pain.

Tofu : "Ranma, why not make up with Akane? You know she can be rather sweet."

Ranma : "Ergh..... me...? Make... ack.... up with that..... grugh.... tomboy?"

Tofu : "Now, now, Ranma. You know your pride is something I cannot cure. Try to understand it from Akane's point of view."

Ranma : "Haaagh.... even if I want to.... gurrgh!.... how do I? graaagh!"

Tofu : "Oh... I don't really know. Spend a few days as a girl, or a boy. Find someone you can talk to as a girl, ask them how it feels to have their feelings hurt by their fiancées. I don't know if you can actually get someone to make you feel the same way Akane does sometimes. Maybe you should try. Get out of town maybe. It's up to you. It should give you a new perspective on life."

With this, Tofu gives Ranma a final chop to his neck, eliciting a gasp of pain and a rather colourful response.

Tofu : "There, feel yourself, see if any part still hurts."

Ranma feels himself, and feels no pain anywhere. He nods at Tofu.

Ranma : "Nope, I'm fine."

Tofu : "Good to hear that. Right, I gave you all the advice I could, now go and try to make up to Akane, all right?"

Ranma : "Right, right, I heard you." <Maybe I should....!>

Then, Ranma suddenly remembers something. He digs into his shirt, and fishes out a book on medicines and herbs that can be used in cooking.

Ranma : "Hey, doc. Kasumi wanted me to return this to you."

Tofu : "K...Kas..Kasumi...?"

Immediately, Tofu's spectacles fog up. He stands there like an idiot, mouth open, his mind lost in a joyous bliss. Ranma waves a hand in front of him, and no response. He wipes Tofu's spectacles, but the vapour refuses to leave. Suddenly, Tofu goes into action. He walks over to Betty, his skeleton.

Tofu : "Thank you, Ranma, for bringing this book back. May I have it?"

A short wait.

Tofu : "Ranma?"

Ranma : "Right here behind you, doctor."

Turning around, Tofu smiles an idiot's smile.

Tofu : "Ah, yes. Thank you, Betty."

Ranma : "I'm Ranma!"

Tofu : "Whatever..."

Ranma : "Here, take back your book! I'm off!"

Immediately, Ranma dumps the book into Tofu's arms and quickly runs off before Tofu can practice some strange medicine on him. Like the time he twisted Ranma's head to one side.

Speeding out the doorway, Ranma realizes that it is already getting dark. He decides to return to the Dojo immediately. He breaks out into a full run as soon as he realizes his stomach is also a little empty.

Back at the Neko Hanten, Shampoo has just returned from an unsuccessful day of looking for Ranma. Mousse quickly runs up to her, a nervous wreck.

Mousse : "Shampoo! Where were you today!? I had to run the entire restaurant myself!"

Shampoo : "Short-sighted Mousse no make Shampoo angry, Shampoo already very angry. Shampoo date with Ranma not complete, Ranma run away."

Mousse immediately shuts up, knowing that an angry Shampoo means a dangerous Shampoo. Instead, he meekly clears up the dishes and carries them to the kitchen to wash. Shampoo sighs tiredly, then decides to wash off the day's woes. However, as she looks around the shop, she realizes her sister is not around. She calls into the kitchen.

Shampoo : "Mousse! Conditioner no come home yet?"

Mousse : "Er... no! I didn't see her today! No idea where she might be!"

Knowing that even if Mousse did see her, he would have mistook her for someone else, Shampoo sighs again and walks towards the bathroom.

Shampoo : "Where sister go....?"

\*click\* \*klong\*

Opening the door to the changing room, Shampoo just slams the door behind her and gets out of her sweaty clothes, glad for the relief. Admiring herself completely naked in the mirror, Shampoo wonders.

Shampoo : <Why? Why Ranma no like Shampoo, only like violent girl Akane? Is it Shampoo no violent enough? Or Akane got something Shampoo no have? Shampoo definitely cuter than Akane! What missing?>

Deciding to ask Ranma that herself the first chance she gets, Shampoo enters the bathroom proper for a good, long, hot bath.

At the Kunos' main entrance....

Shadow #1 : "You got my pictures?"

Shadow #2 : "Hmmm! I've managed to fix your pictures into the ones with Ranma on them."

Shadow #1 : "No sleeping potions, or poisons on the photos or anywhere?"

Shadow #2 : "You have my word. Remember yours."

Shadow #1 : "Pass them here."

Shadow #2 : "Catch."

The second shadow uses something thin to shoot the small cloth bag towards the first shadow. It grabs the bundle with a mechanical claw, using a remote control. The bag opens up with a puff of greenish-purple smoke. The, taking out each photo, the claw sprays something on each one, then puts them back into the bag before finally passing them to the first shadow. The second shadow watches on with interest.

Shadow #2 : <This is no ordinary person, that's for sure. It'll take a little more effort!>

Then, taking on a pleasant demeanor, the second shadow asks.

Shadow #2 : "Is everything in order?"

Shadow #1 : "Yup. Right, I'll leave Ranma alone, from now on, to you, right?"

Shadow #2 : "Right."

Shadow #1 : <Unless I get rid of you!> "Then..... I'll do so....."

The second shadow relaxes, but barely. This is enough for the first shadow. Using this chance, the first shadow strikes.

Shadow #1 : "NOT!"

It leaps over to grab the second shadow by the neck, and presses a few points, paralyzing the second shadow. Grabbing a coil of rope, the first shadow goes to work, tying up the second one, gagging it at the same time.

Shadow #2 : "MMmmM! MMmmpphh!! Gmmnnggh!"

Shadow #1 : "Shut up."

Giving the second shadow a hard right hook, the first one knocks the second shadow unconscious. Then it carries the bundled package off, humming a tune.

Shadow #1 : "Darlin' just for me matteru wa, kokoro ni zoku zoku agetai....."

Back at the Dojo, Ranma has reached the living room just in time for dinner. Snatching his bowl of rice away from Genma-Panda, Ranma gently rubs one of his tender bruises, wincing. Akane just swallows her rice like a ravenous wolf chomping on some fresh meat, ignoring Ranma. As Kasumi places a bowl of soup on the table, she looks at Ranma's bandages.

Kasumi : "Oh my, Ranma, are you alright?"

Ranma : (Looking up from his rice bowl.) "Hmm? Mmpgh, yeahh!"

Kasumi : "Did you return my book to Dr. Tofu?"

Ranma : (Not looking up from his bowl.) "Yeph!"

Kasumi : "That's nice. You know, those bruises look suspiciously like Akane's. Did you two get into a fight again?"

This time not even bothering to answer, Ranma just nods. Akane looks up though, and stares evilly at Ranma for a moment, then goes back to swallowing her food.

Nabiki : "Sis, that's not eating. That's called forcing food down your throat. Slow down! Just because you got angry at Ranma doesn't mean you have to kill yourself by choking!"

Ranma : "Leave her alone, Nabiki. She won't choke herself to death, her throat's too thick with muscles to do that. No, her muscles will do the job of crushing the neck for her wonderfully when she does choke."

Akane ignores Ranma, much to everyone's surprise. In fact, she even ups the speed of her swallowing. Genma watches in admiration at her ability to glomp down food faster than himself. Kasumi looks on with concern.

Kasumi : "Akane, do slow down. You're going to get indigestion like that."

Akane suddenly stops in the middle of putting a vegetable into her mouth, the leafy portion still sticking out of her mouth. She looks at her sister, then nods lethargically. She begins to chew her *rice*.

\*CRUNCH\* \*CRUNCH\* \*CRUNCH\*

Kasumi : "Not so loud, Akane. Please?"

\*crunch\* \*crunch\* \*crunch\*

Kasumi : "Thank you."

For the rest of the night, the Tendou family eats in peace. Genma keeps a careful eye on Ranma as he reaches out for the last fried shrimp on the plate with his chopsticks, but sees that Ranma isn't paying attention. He quickly nabs the shrimp and goes into his eating/fighting position, yet still doesn't draw a response from Ranma. Tapping Soun on the shoulder, he holds up a sign.

Genma : "Soun, you notice something about Ranma tonight?"

Soun considers the entire dinner so far, and his observations of Ranma.

Soun : "Hmm? I see he hasn't fought with you for the food....."

Soun stops in midsentence. He begins to sweat, and looks at Ranma, Genma following. Ranma is just mellowly picking at his rice grains one by one, eating without much interest, and it's only his fifth bowl. The two look at each other wonderingly. Then Soun reaches over to pick up a spring roll and put it in Ranma's bowl. Expecting him to at least eat it, the entire family sans Akane nearly faints at what he does.

Ranma : "Here, pops. You eat it. You need it more."

He tosses the roll over to his father's bowl. Then, finally, giving a sigh of frustration, Ranma gets up.

Ranma : "Hey, I'm done eating. See you guys later. g'night."

Everyone's eyes follow Ranma, even Akane. They watch as he walks up the staircase to his room, scratching his head. Genma and Soun bigsweat, wondering what's wrong. Soun grabs Genma's panda-equivalent of a collar and starts crying.

Soun : "Genma! What's wrong with your son!?"

Genma : "I don't know! But I know him giving me something to eat means something is SERIOUSLY troubling him!"

But, not wanting to waste good food, Genma quickly gulps down his bowl of rice. He looks around as everyone is at a loss at what to do, and decides to finish their food for them. But, as soon as he reaches a paw over to Soun's side, the entire family immediately goes back to their food in a flash. Genma sighs dejectedly, then holds out his bowl to Kasumi for a refill.

In Ranma's sleeping quarters, Ranma is lying on his futon trying to sleep, but thoughts of what he did to Akane fill his mind. As he thinks about what happened, he swears he can hear his own mind talking to him.

*"Hey, whaddya do to Akane? She's not happy with you, that's for sure."*

*"Of course! But how would I know what I did!?"*

*"Think, you proud fool! What did you do that would hurt Akane!?"*

*"That tomboy gets hurt at everything! How would I know!?"*

*"Argh! You ARE proud! THINK! Maybe something today that happened!"*

*"Hmm..... maybe..... me being seen with Shampoo by Akane? But that happens all the time!"*

*"Is there anything else you two might have done?"*

*"We argued. But we always argue!"*

*"Getting warmer... but still cold. Alright, pop quiz, hotshot. In that argument, what did you SAY to her that is usually not in one of your other pointless arguments?"*

*"Er..... let me think. Hold on, you're my mind, why not YOU tell me?!"*

Ryoga : "Because I'm NOT your mind, you stupid a\$\$!"

Ranma nearly leaps out of his skin as he turns to look besides him, at Ryoga. Ryoga is currently boiling a kettle of water to cook some cup noodles. Regaining composure, Ranma sits up and stares at Ryoga in the darkness, the only light that of the moon and Ryoga's burner fire.

Ranma : "What's your problem, pig-boy!? Sneaking up on me and all that!?"

Ryoga : "How would I know!? I was trying to find Akari's, and I ended up here!"

Ranma : "For once, you found the Tendous' getting lost."

Ryoga : "Enough of that, Ranma! I saw the whole scene today from the top of the movie theatre! What did you do to Akane that made her kick you into the sky? I'd rather kill you here, but that would mean damaging the house Akane lives in, and that wouldn't be good."

Ranma : "Hah, you couldn't beat me on your best day and my worst! Anyway, porky, I have no idea what I could have said to her!"

Ryoga : "Don't call me 'porky'!..... you..... strange sexless creature! But that's besides the point. Maybe this'll help refresh your memory."

Ryoga takes out a tape recorder and presses the "PLAY" button.

*".....hmph! Why not!? Beats listening to you, ugly! Come on, let's go, Shampoo! Can't wait to see a real girl!"*

Ranma listens with intense concentration. Ryoga presses the stop button, and looks evilly at Ranma.

Ryoga : "So? How was that?"

Ranma : "Doesn't mean a thing to me."

**\*CRUSH!!!!\*** Ryoga slams his kettle on Ranma's head. Then he puts it back to boil the water a while longer.

Ryoga : "BAKA NA RANMA NO BAKERO TO OTOKO DE WA ARIMASEN! You stupid idiot! Didn't you think that Akane would treasure her womanhood and beauty!? To say that she's ugly and that you can't wait to see a real girl means you're insulting her very existence! NOW DO YOU GET ME!?!?!?"

He grabs Ranma's collar and shakes him back and forth, baring his evilly sharp canines. Ranma grabs Ryoga's arms and stops his shaking, then nods.

Ranma : "Yeah... I think I got you. You know, I think.... I'll go take Tofu's advice."

Ryoga : "Tofu? What'd he tell you?"

Ranma : "You'll find out when the time comes. For now, take your time to cheer Akane up for me, alright, Ryoga? I'm sure you want to see her happy again too."

Ranma gets up from his futon, then walks into the opposite room and leaps off the balcony. All this happens while Ryoga watches from his spot on Ranma's bedroom floor, Ryoga's mouth hanging wide open as Ranma's last words ring in his head.

*"....take your time to cheer Akane up for me, alright, Ryoga?....."*

Ryoga : "Ranma, you fool! What do you think you're doing!?"

**\*SPIIISSHH!\***

Ryoga : "YEOW! HOT HOT HOT!" <Left the water boiling too long!>

Ryoga quickly settles in for a cup of noodles for dinner as he ponders Ranma's sudden change of heart, all the while thinking about what he should do to cheer Akane up.

**\*SLOSH\***

"brrr... cold!"



In the bathroom, Ranma-chan has just splashed herself with some cold water, as per Tofu's advice. Dripping wet, Ranma picks up her backpack and hefts it onto her back. She drops a waterproof, Happosaiproof note on the bathroom sink. On the mens' underwear, scribbled in dark, permanent marker ink is her message.

*"Dear dad and Tendous,*

*Sorry to leave so suddenly, but I have some soul searching to do. Don't try to look for me, I will be back. As for Akane, please tell her I'm sorry, and I'll try to make it up to her when I return.*

*-Love, Ranma*

*Saotome."*

Nodding in approval, Ranma caps the marker and puts it in her backpack. Then she sneaks out of the Tendou's household via back door. Nobody sees her leave, not even one of Nabiki's hidden cameras, which is busy taping Akane working out in the dojo at the moment.

\*squeeee\*

*"I'd better oil that door first chance I get, or Shampoo's not going to be happy."*

At the Cat Cafe, Shampoo is sitting at one of the tables catching some shut eye in case a call comes in for a late night delivery. Hearing the door squeak open, Shampoo is up suddenly, rubbing her eyes.

Shampoo : "Restaurant closed! Come back tomorrow!"

Voice : "Psst! Shampoo! It's me!"

Shampoo is up immediately. Looking at the silhouetted figure in the doorway with a massive backpack, Shampoo recognizes Ranma's girl-form. All traces of sleep vanish in a heartbeat.

Shampoo : "Ranma? What you doing here, with that? Ranma moving in with us?" (With a *touch* of hope.)

Ranma (C) : "Shhh! Not so loud! Mousse might hear you! But, no, I'm not moving in with you. Not permanently anyway. I'll be here a few days, so if you don't mind....?"

Shampoo : "Shampoo no mind at all! Shampoo so happy Ranma come! But.... Shampoo no know why Ranma in girl-type body? Want hot water?"

Ranma (C) : "No thanks, I'll tell you later."

Shampoo : "Ranma follow Shampoo, Shampoo show Ranma room!"

Practically hopping up and down in happiness and excitement, Shampoo skips towards their guest room, Ranma following. Mousse pops out from the kitchen a second later, carrying a small oil can to oil the door. As he's oiling the door, testing the hinges, Conditioner comes in, slamming the door open and smashing Mousse against the wall. The door swings back to click shut, leaving Mousse a mangled wreck in the wall, where his glasses drop off his face.

Mousse : " At least the doors don't squeak anymore. unghh....."

Conditioner looks around for a while, then scratches her head.

Conditioner : "Where's Shampoo?"

Then she hears her sister's voice wafting in from around the far corner.

"....Ranma sleep here! Ranma sure no want hot water?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Ranma hungry?"

"A little."

"Eat dinner!"

Conditioner bigsweats as she sees Shampoo holding Ranma-chan's wrist running around the corner which leads to the main living quarters, Ranma-chan practically flying. Conditioner measures 18 CM off the ground with her

measuring tape.

Ranma (C) : "Eeeyooww! Not so fast! I'm not THAT hungry!"

Plonking Ranma into the chair she was sitting in, Shampoo quickly leaps over the counter into the kitchen and the smells and sounds of cooking are heard immediately. Conditioner looks into the kitchen, then back at Ranma. She walks over and draws a seat, sitting down opposite Ranma. Ranma looks at Conditioner with curiosity. For want of anything else better to do, Conditioner asks Ranma.

Conditioner : "You're really Ranma? Cursed by Jusenkryo?"

Ranma (C) : "You saw me change, Conditioner."

Conditioner : "Tell me, Ranma, what is it like to change? At a splash of cold and hot water."

At this strange question, Ranma is caught off guard. Her mind goes to work immediately, working through her many transformations, recalling the feelings and sensations.

Ranma (C) : "Oh... er... that..... I don't really know how to describe it. Since I feel the water more than the change, I mean. I guess I've grown used to it."

Conditioner : "But, what you can feel, what is it like?"

Ranma (C) : "That..... I guess I can tell you I suddenly feel like I'm so much shorter in an instant, which is a little... disorienting. Then I do notice my chest pressing against my shirt, although I generally don't notice my breasts that much."

Conditioner : "Uh huh, and?"

Ranma (C) : "Do we really have to go through this? I... er..... ah..... you really want to know that last part?"

Conditioner : "Hm..... I'll have to think it over."

Grinning mischevously, Conditioner pretends to give the question intense thought. A second later, she looks back at Ranma.

Conditioner : "I'll be nice, no need to answer that. I wanted to ask my sister, but I'm afraid she might take offense."

Ranma lets off a sigh of relief, then wipes the sweat, which had been collecting on her brow, off. Conditioner decides to pursue another question instead.

Conditioner : "Ranma, tell me this. What's it like to be chased by so many girls?"

Now this is something Ranma can relate to. Resting her cheek on her palm, she begins to deadpan her voice to show her irritation. She takes a deep breath and speaks her answer in one long sentence.

Ranma (C) : "Now, that, I can easily answer. Horrible. Simply horrible. Imagine being stalked at all hours of the day by at LEAST three girls. Kodachi, Ukyo, and no offense to your sis Conditioner, Shampoo. Everyday they chase me, everyday they do all sorts of things to get me. Everyday, one of them comes up with a crazy scheme to try to get rid of the other three, I can't stand it! Even Akane isn't spared their wrath, and once in a while another girl comes along to try to win my heart. Every once in a while, a GUY comes along and tries to win my heart, since they don't know about my curse! And that idiot, Kuno, CAN'T know about my curse! We show him in his face, and he doesn't accept it. We tell him, and he doesn't accept it. We try to beat it into him, and his thick skin prevents it from going in. Sometimes I think I was cursed from the day I was born." (DEEP breath again.)

Conditioner listens to Ranma's woes with concern, nodding now and then as she pours it out. Finally, after Ranma finishes her last word, Conditioner considers the answer.

Conditioner : <Hm.... seems Ranma's life is already tortured enough as it is! But... he's so.... cute! I want him to be MY boyfriend! It's not right like this....! I can't be like the rest! I'll take the hard way!>

As she ponders this, Shampoo comes out of the kitchen with a massive bowl of noodles and a pair of chopsticks. The smell can be detected from the counter, and is enough to make Ranma's stomach grumble immediately. Again. Conditioner looks behind her to see her sister approaching the table. Then she gets up.

Conditioner : "Hey, Ranma, I'll be off now. Enjoy your stay here."

Ranma (C) : "Thanks." <You know.... talking to her really made me feel better....>

Conditioner gets up and leaves for her room, while Shampoo walks over. She puts the bowl in front of Ranma, then sits down in a chair besides him. She takes the chopsticks and grabs a length of noodles, offering them to Ranma.

Shampoo : "Ranma eat, Shampoo feed!"

Guessing that it's alright this one time, Ranma takes the offered food and eats. Shampoo giggles in delight as Ranma finally accepts an offer to feed him/her, and takes her time, offering Ranma a sip of water, a piece of pork, (she didn't ever dare to put black pigs into the wok again after that Ryoga incident) a length of noodles. Finally, after dinner is over, Ranma looks very contented, much to Shampoo's delight.

Shampoo : "Ranma like? Had enough?"

Ranma (C) : "Yeah, I'm full. That was great!"

Then, Shampoo decides to ask a question which had been bugging her for a while since Ranma came.

Shampoo : "Why Ranma come Cat Cafe, stay for a while? Why want to stay girl form Ranma? Violent girl Akane chase Ranma out again?"

Deciding to tell Shampoo before it's too late, Ranma quickly gives a memorized response.

Ranma (C) : "Not really..... Shampoo, you remember that argument Akane and I had today? Well, after she kicked me away, I landed at Dr. Tofu's. He suggested I try to get to understand Akane's feelings, get a feel of what it is to be in her shoes if I wanted to make up to her. I thought that maybe after all the things I did to avoid you, you'd feel plenty upset, so I decided to come here and ask you. So, please, will you help me, Shampoo?" <Why'd he ask me to stay in my girl form anyway?>

Shampoo : <So Ranma still care for violent girl with mallets? Hmph! Shampoo no like! But it Ranma who ask.... ah, Shampoo make exception.> "Shampoo think about it."

Ranma (C) : "Excellent! Shampoo, you're wonderful. But don't get the wrong idea."

Shampoo, who was already halfway through her flying hug routine, managed to stop just in time as Ranma said that. So, instead, Shampoo blackmails Ranma.

Shampoo : "Shampoo know! If Ranma kiss Shampoo once, Shampoo help!"

Ranma looks unsurprised by this request, expecting it all along. But she still can't bring herself to do it.

Ranma (C) : "Is there another alternative?"

Shampoo : "Ranma date Shampoo again, full day?"

Ranma (C) : "Done deal. Tomorrow?"

Shampoo : "Yes! But Ranma no run away, or Shampoo no help!" <Haa! Shampoo so happy!>

Ranma (C) : \*sigh\* "What do I have to lose? All right, I won't." <Alright, so I might lose my life....>

Looking at the clock, Ranma decides to retire for the night. Standing up and stretching, Ranma-chan rubs her sleepy eyes.

Ranma (C) : "Well... it's late. I gotta get some sleep if I'm going to have to date you tomorrow..... good night."

Shampoo : "Good night, Ranma!"

Giving Ranma a flying kiss, Shampoo clears up the table and waits for any late-night delivery calls.

Shampoo : "Why great-grandmother have to put 24 hour delivery service? Shampoo so sleepy!" \*yawn\*

Walking down the corridor, Ranma-chan considers the price she has to pay for some help from Shampoo. Then, thinking about previous times, she decides that asking Shampoo was actually a waste of time, since Shampoo

never seemed dejected whenever a plan failed.

Ranma (C) : \*groan\* "I just asked for empty assistance, didn't I? I don't think Shampoo will have anything to tell me...!"

"Pssst! Hey, Ranma! Over here!"

Turning around to look into the darkness, Ranma asks.

Ranma (C) : "Huh? Who's that? Conditioner?"

"Come on, Ranma! I got something you might want!"

Ranma (C) : "This isn't a trap is it?"

"No it isn't! Now come on!"

Shrugging her shoulders and throwing caution to the wind, Ranma follows the source of the voice down the corridor, to end up in Conditioner's own room, which Shampoo so kindly provided after clearing up the mess in the abandoned storeroom. Conditioner is sitting on her bed, waiting for Ranma.

Conditioner : "Hello, Ranma. I overheard you asking Shampoo for help?"

Ranma (C) : "Yeah."

Conditioner : "Come on, sit down."

She pats the spot on the bed beside her, and looks at Ranma. She walks over and sits. The bed is surprisingly sturdy, and comfortable. Looking at a mirror image of Shampoo makes Ranma think twice about whether she is talking to another Shampoo, or someone different. Before she can pursue this line of thought, Conditioner sighs.

Conditioner : "You know, Ranma, sometimes I think my sister can be too stubborn at times."

Ranma (C) : "Yeah, tell me about it."

Conditioner : "You really want me to?"

Ranma (C) : "Go ahead."

Conditioner : "Here goes...."

"Since yesterday, while it's only been slightly more than 24 hours since I met my sister, I've noticed a fair amount of things about her. Like, she always seems to hang onto you, like a leech, refusing to let go. I know she likes you and all that, but this kind of obsession is something new with our tribe."

Ranma : (C)

"Yeah, I know."

Conditioner :

"Anyway, I think she really, really likes you, Ranma. While the rules of our tribe state that any amazon defeated by a male from outside the tribe must marry him, Shampoo is beyond that. It seems she is truly in love with you, Ranma. I know you and Akane have a marriage engagement made by your fathers against your will..."

Ranma (C) : "How'd you know that?"

Conditioner :

"I heard it from Nabiki. Let me continue. Shampoo is a really nice girl. She would make a good wife too, you know. She'll listen to your every command, do anything for you, love you, never argue with you, never beat you. What I don't understand is, why do you stay with Akane? She appears rather violent, petty and short-tempered. my sister never seems to get angry at you, would be willing to kiss you anytime, and listens to you always."

Ranma (C) : "Well, I don't know. Akane and I never seem to get along with each other, yet we never seem to be able to part either. I think.... I.... that tomboy...."

Conditioner :

"Hey, Ranma, don't start calling your fiancée names. I know talking to me may be like exposing your greatest secret, but you have my word of silence on this. Don't hold back, and don't let pride hinder you. Pour it out, you'll feel better. I know."

Taking a deep breath, and letting it out in a dejected sigh, Ranma rests her chin on a palm, eyes downcast. Conditioner looks on, waiting. Finally, Ranma decides to pour her feelings out.

Ranma (C) :

"Oh, all right. I think we're in love too, in our own strange way. But, yes, I'll admit it. My pride always makes me think of myself before those dear to me. I don't even have the courage to admit that I expressed my feelings in front of a conscious audience."

Conditioner :

"Hmm..... I know you're risking a lot here, telling me all this, but I'll try to help. It's all right to try to hide your true feelings for others, everyone does. You feel embarrassed, and that others might make fun of you, right?"

Ranma (C) :

"Yeah... well..."

Conditioner :

"But, your pride is another thing altogether. You know you're hurting Akane, you know that she really likes you. Why do you do it? Do you feel good doing it? Do you ever think about what you're saying? Ever think about what Akane thinks of what you say? Truly, what would you feel if someone said that to you?"

Ranma (C) :

"I don't know! I want to stop myself, but I'm afraid that if I do, Akane'll make fun of me! You know how much I think of myself, you know that if one starts, the rest will follow, I'll lose all face! How do I face society like this!? Heck, what if the other girls interested in me catch wind of it? They'll be after mine and Akane's head! Anyway, that's what I came here for. To know what it is to feel like to have such insulting things said to me."  
<Why'd Tofu tell me to stay in my girl form!?!>

Conditioner ponders this for a while, then smiles, slapping Ranma on the back, not too hard.

Conditioner :

"That's your ego at work here. Don't worry, you! If you stop making fun of Akane, she'll not retort! She won't start making fun of you. Who knows, she'll probably like you even more! And, even if others do start, it'll die down once they see you two are really hitting it off! And if they don't..... you have me."

Ranma's face lights up a little.

Ranma (C) : "Really? I won't lose face?"

Conditioner smiles lopsidedly and flashes a rougish grin.

Conditioner :

"Nope. And you get to have a better relationship with Akane. But, one thing."

Ranma (C) : "What?"

Conditioner :

"You have to keep your pride in check. Admit your faults if you can, no one will think lower of you. In fact, I think they will see you as a more honest being, more worthy of respect since you are willing to admit your mistakes instead of covering them up and hurting more people's feelings than you have to."

Ranma (C) : "You really think so?"

Conditioner :

"Yup! Remember, the most important thing is that you should stop being so selfish, and start thinking about others' responses to what you say. Sometimes you might have to guess too, so be careful."

Her face lighting up, Ranma-chan looks hopeful. She flashes a brilliant smile at the prospect of really making up with Akane. Somehow, Conditioner has an aura of trust which even Kasumi doesn't have, the kind of person you can talk to, yet trust her not to betray your secrets. It is this feeling which convinced Ranma to air her problems to Conditioner.

Ranma (C) : "Thanks, Conditioner! You know, I could kiss you, but...."

Conditioner : "I understand. Besides, you're still not in the clear yet. I'm only one person's opinion. You should try to learn from my sister too, she has a rather unique perspective of things."

Ranma (C) : "How's that?"

Conditioner : "She's a little naive, as you might know. Oh, sure, she's a little devious, but she trusts you implicitly. If you told her to do something, she'd think you're thinking the best for her, and do it. That's her degree of trust. Remember, she thinks you're THINKING the best for her. Don't let people's trust down. That's the important thing."

Ranma (C) : "And I thought she was just obsessed."

Conditioner : "I did mention that earlier on. Just.... try not to make her get the wrong idea. But I still think my sister is the right choice for you."

Ranma ponders this for a moment, then nods.

Ranma (C) : "You really sound concerned for her. Alright, maybe I'll try to understand Shampoo. Maybe that way, I'll know Akane as well. But what about you?" <Oh, you're right. Shampoo isn't all that bad too.>

Conditioner : "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Nodding in satisfaction, Ranma gets off the bed and looks at Conditioner.

Ranma (C) : "You know, if I had you for a sister, I'd be very lucky. Shampoo should know that. Just don't tell her I said it."

Conditioner : "You got it." (Grinning.)

Ranma turns to leave the room for her own temporary quarters, but just before stepping out the door, she turns around, walks over to Conditioner and gives her a quick peck to the cheek. Conditioner blushes furiously.

Ranma (C) : "Oyasumi Nasai, Conditioner-sama! You're great!"

Ranma walks out the door around the corner, leaving a red-faced Conditioner to herself. NOW she begins to look exactly like Shampoo, eyes glittering and all watery-like. She pinches herself once.

Conditioner : <He likes me! He likes me! He really likes me! I'm not dreaming too!>

This reconfirms her resolve to at least get Ranma to date HER once, as she pulls out the photos of Ranma and sticks them on the walls and ceilings for the rest of the night, humming a tune.

Conditioner : "...anata no yubisaki ga, izanau ROMANSU, u--n---me-i-- goto.... kitto Fallin' Love...."

Elsewhere on the deserted streets of Nerima, a shadow is busy forcing a door open.

Shadow : "Open up, open up...." \*click\* "Ah! There! Get in, you!"

Grabbing a writhing bundle of ropes, the shadow tosses it into the open doorway and shuts the door behind it. Dusting its hands, one could almost see its smile.

Shadow : "That's taken care of that, now.... for the others. Moahaa haa haa haa haa haa haa.....!!!"

{A *REAL* date with Shampoo.}

It is still dark, early in the morning.....

Fortunately for Ranma, it is a Sunday morning, which means no school and therefore no suspicions.

At least, not until Ranma goes out with Shampoo.

Shampoo pops her cheery face into Ranma's temporary lodgings, all smiles and cheers.

Shampoo : "Zhao an, Ranma! Today Ranma date with Shampoo!" (Zhao an means good morning in chinese)

She bigsweats as she sees Ranma-chan sprawled on the futon, drooling a little, sucking her thumb. She tries her morning greeting again, and this time, Ranma stirs a little.

Ranma (C) : "Unnghhh.... mom, is it time to wake up already....? I don't wanna go to school....!"

Shampoo : "Aiyah! Why Ranma sleep like dead person!?"

Eliciting no response from Ranma, she takes out a megaphone.

Shampoo : "***Ranma, wake up! Today date Shampoo!***"

Seeing Ranma roll over and continue snoring, Shampoo decides to wake Ranma up the hard way. Running out to her bathroom, Shampoo grabs a bucket and fills it with the coldest water she can find. Lugging the deadweight to Ranma's room, Shampoo gives Ranma a final warning.

Shampoo : "Ranma.... kuai(4) dian(3) qi(3) quang(2)!" (kuai + dian = hurry up, qi = get up, quang = bed!)

No response.

\*SLOSH\*

"***YEEEEAAAAHHHHHH!!! COOOOLD!!!!***"

Ranma wakes up suddenly, shivering and wrapping herself in her arms. She looks around and spots Shampoo giggling away, watching the comical appearance of Ranma after that 'bath'.

Ranma (C) : "Hey, whaddya do THAT for!?"

Shampoo : \*giggle\* "Ranma no wake up, Shampoo help Ranma wake up!" \*giggle\*

Ranma (C) : "You could've shouted at me!"

Shampoo : "Ranma no think Shampoo do that?"

To show proof of what she did, Shampoo tosses the megaphone into Ranma's arms. The brand reads :

" R.T Hammerspace® Technologies :

The BEST in Hammerspace® technologies! Product No. 1981131615-O

X «-- Press here to repeat last message. "

(Oh, the product number is a little special. Happy translating! A = 1, B = 2, C = 3.... etc.)

Pressing the 'X' button, Ranma gets a blow drying job.

".....***Ranma, wake up! Today date Shampoo! .....***"

Tossing the megaphone out the window, Ranma nods, now completely dry from the force of the wind created by the soundwaves.

Ranma (C) : "Oh, all right! I got you! But, you want to start the date NOW!?"

Shampoo nods, smiling her sweetest smile at Ranma.

Somewhere in one of Nerima's marketplaces, Kasumi suddenly feels jealous about something she can't explain, then forgets it as she stops at a vegetable store.

Ranma (C) : "Oh, all right. Let me get changed first, all right?"

Shampoo nods again, eyes twinkling. She skips out of the room back to her own room, where a total and complete fashion show begins in front of the mirror as Shampoo parades around in one of the many different dresses and cheongsams she has. Flashes from photographers appear mysteriously as she walks down an imaginary catwalk, trying on the many different dresses in her wardrobe.

".....Ranma, wake up! Today date Shampoo!....."

Conditioner : "...huh...?"

Waking up on the cold, hard floor, Conditioner realises that she fell asleep while busy hanging a poster of Ranma up on the wall. Sitting up, she sees that she was sleeping on the life-sized poster, directly besides Ranma. Smoothing out the cloth, Conditioner shrugs.

Conditioner : "Well, at least Nabiki made sure the cloth was good."

Grabbing a nail from the floor besides her, she flicks it into the wall and tosses the poster up to hang with a three-point landing on the nail. Nodding in satisfaction, she looks around her room, rubbing the gunk out of her eyes to clear her vision. Not as cluttered with Ranma stuff as Shampoo's, but enough, Conditioner grins.

Conditioner : "Hmm... today's my sister's big day with Ranma. Well, I guess I shouldn't spoil their fun. Maybe I'll help poor Mousse out at the restaurant."

Yawning and stretching herself, Conditioner walks to the bathroom and decides to wash off a night's weariness. As she walks into the bathroom and strips down, she spots a small bag on the towel rack. Cautiously opening it, she looks inside and spots a dozen or so photos of her and Ranma. Recognizing the work, Conditioner scratches her head.

Conditioner : "Hm? These look like Kodachi's work! But I don't remember asking her for these!"

Shrugging and tossing the photos to one side to be dealt with later, Conditioner walks into the bathroom and begins a hot morning bath.

Outside the Cat Cafe, a shadowy figure runs down an alley, to the safety of an abandoned warehouse as the morning sun approaches.

"Ok, I'm coming out Shampoo! But please don't break my arm today, alright?"

"Alright! Shampoo promise!"

"And no killing of Akane if you see her!"

"Er.... maybe."

"And NO KISSING!"

"Aiyah! Why Ranma so demanding!? Just come out!"

"Alright, I'm coming!"

Walking out the door, a handsomely dressed..... Ranma-chan walks out the door. Shampoo, dressed in a *simple*, full-length, 100% pure silk, red-and-gold-with-dragons-and-phenixes-for-a-motif cheongsam, tons of pure gold jewellery and just enough make-up, looks at Ranma incredulously. She shrugs and grins sheepishly, and adjusts her green-with-a-red-star cap.

Ranma (C) : "Sorry, couldn't find any hot water." <I don't believe I'm doing this!>



\*splosh\*

Ranma : "Thanks."

Shampoo : "Ranma start date now?"

Ranma : "But it's 6:00 in the morning! Where can we go this early in the morning!?"

Shampoo : "Park?"

Ranma : "Fine. Let's go." <What can one date with Shampoo do anyway?>

Clapping her hands in joy, Shampoo hangs onto Ranma's arm, not too tightly, and walk down the corridor. Unlocking the restaurant doors, Shampoo closes it behind Ranma, then points to her bicycle. Getting the idea, Ranma goes over and kicks up the support strut, then swings onto the bicycle's seat. Shampoo hops on behind him and wraps her arms around his muscular chest, her feet dangling off to one side.

Shampoo : <Shampoo in heaven!>

\*ring\* \*ring\*

Ringing the bell, Ranma begins pedalling down the street. Avoiding the early morning traffic of marketgoers, Ranma takes a longer, but less crowded route to the park. He passes Kasumi as he rides, who doesn't see him as her back is turned towards him. Passing her, Ranma lets out a sigh of relief, the bigsweat on his head drying off.

Kasumi : (Shouting behind her.) "Will you be coming back today, Ranma?"

Ranma's face facefaults, eyes turning into bean shaped lumps and face turning a deep purplish red, nose shrinking. He pedals even faster, kicking up a dust cloud as he cycles at an incredible speed for a while, before slowing down. Finally, the park in sight, Ranma turns around to ask.

Ranma : "You want to walk in, or cycle in?"

Shampoo : "Whatever Ranma want."

Ranma : "We'll walk. There's the bicycle parking area!"

Cycling in, Ranma parks the bicycle in one of the many empty spaces, and the two get off. Shampoo pulls a chain and lock out from behind her, then locks her bicycle up.

Ranma : "Well, where do you want to go now?"

Shampoo : "Anywhere Ranma want to go."

Ranma : <I was thinking about Jusenkyo to find the Nannichuan, but.....> "All right, we'll just walk around for a while until breakfast time."

Shampoo : "Works for Shampoo."

Offering (finally!) a hand to Shampoo, who gladly accepts it, Ranma starts down a gravel path towards the park proper. Listening to the many birds chirp and sing for their mates, and admiring the many wildflowers blooming in the morning mists, Shampoo feels like she's in Cloud 9. She snuggles up closer to Ranma, resting her head on his arm as the two walk over a deserted bridge spanning the length of a large stream, Koi leaping up and down in the refreshingly cold water. Ranma looks at Shampoo, who looks so happy and contented that they are out on a real date and not a forced one, and actually feels a twinge of regret and guilt. Shampoo simply hugs his arm and mutters "Wo de ai ren" every once in a while. (Wo + De = My, Ai = love, Ren = Person. My loved one.)

Ranma : <Gee, I didn't know Shampoo loved me this much! Conditioner was right, she does love me with all her heart! Well, guess if I stop thinking about myself and start enjoying this date.....>

While pondering this event, Ranma absent-mindedly strokes Shampoo's hair, admiring the feel of the well-cared for and soft hair. A whiff of her hair's scent wafts into Ranma's nose, smelling strongly of the wildflowers blooming around them, as well as something he can't quite describe, a kind of soft, but attractive smell. He decides that he will enjoy this date, Akane or not.

Ranma : <If only Akane were this meticulous about her appearance, she'd be more likeable.....>

==

Somewhere in the Dojo, Akane is busy brushing her hair, trying on some make up, wearing some designer clothes, generally trying to look her best, for no particular reason....

After a while, she just takes off the black, low cut, backless dress she was wearing, tosses it onto the floor, and sighs, plopping down onto her bed. She buries her face in her hands, sobbing a little.

Akane : "Ranma..... where are you.....?? Where are you, indeed.....?"

==

Back in the park, the two have crossed the bridge and are walking down the continuing path, under the cooling shade of the willow trees. The path splits into two, a small signpost with some words written on two arrows pointing down each lane. The first one reads :

*"Lover's Lake, for that perfect date."*

The other one reads :

*"Guesser's Glade, for that unknown fate."*

Looking at the two, Ranma and Shampoo look at each other.

Shampoo : "Which way we go, ai ren?"

Ranma : "Hm.... oh, this is your date. You decide."

Shampoo looks at the two signs. She points down the Guesser's Glade lane.

Shampoo : "Shampoo want to know what fate will be."

Ranma : "Ok, we'll go there."

They walk down the path, trying to peer into the strange darkness it is shrouded in. Walking into the darkest part of the path, the two suddenly feel disoriented.

A scream. An inhuman one. Shampoo clings onto Ranma, refusing to let go, half-crying.

Shampoo : "Ranma! What that!?! Shampoo scared!"

Ranma holds Shampoo tightly, looking around in the impenetrable darkness.

Ranma : "I don't know, but don't be scared. I'll take care of it. We've been in worse, remember?"

Listening to his reassuring words, Shampoo looks up at the only person visible in the darkness.

Shampoo : "Shampoo no scared with Ranma. Ranma protect Shampoo."

Another shriek, this one getting closer. Turning towards the source, Ranma pushes Shampoo behind him. He takes up a combat ready stance. He shouts into the darkness.

Ranma : "Whoever you are, come on out and fight!"

In response, a cacophony of screams, shrieks and moans, mostly inhuman, ring out all around them. Shampoo just screams in fear and hugs Ranma as tight as she can.

Then, silence.

The first thing the two notice is that they don't feel lost anymore. Suddenly, the darkness recedes like a shadow being introduced to the light. The two look around, and realize that they are back at the intersection of the park.

Shampoo : "What happen, Ranma?"

Ranma : "Beats me. But, it sure wasn't for fun!"

Shampoo : "Ranma so brave, protect Shampoo!"

Ranma : "Oh, er... that... I would've done it for anybody!" <Except maybe Kodachi.>

Shampoo : "Ranma bad liar. Shampoo know Ranma love Shampoo, protect her."

Ranma : "Oh, all right. I won't argue with you. But I wonder... what happened back there?"

Voice : "Maybe I can answer that for you!"

The two spin towards the source of the sound, and see a strange, old man walk out of the darkness of the path leading down to the glade. He is wearing a white singlet, short pants, slippers, and a hat which casts a shadow over his eyes, which seem to be nothing but whites. A feeling of Déjà Vu hits the two, as if they've seen him somewhere before.

Old man : "Oh, don't worry. I'm not that guy from the Couple-Breaking cave. I'm his older brother."

The two nod stupidly, as he strokes an incredible long and white beard. He must've been at least 40 years older from the look of his face. (*45 actually. -Ed.*)

The old man cackles in a jolly way and walks up to the two.

Old man : "Hey, you two walked down that lane right?"

Nods.

Old man : "heh heh, well, not many people have really walked down that path in the many years it's been there. The survivors claim it's haunted."

A few evil cackles and chuckles from the old man, as the two look at him, bigsweat forming on their heads.

Old man : "Anyway, you two wanted to know what happened? Let me tell you. Come, sit."

Pulling out a table, a few chairs and a pot of green tea, the old man serves the couple a cup of tea each. They sit, and the old man begins his story.

"A long time ago, when this park was first built, this glade was the first major attraction. Oh, the people came and came, in never ending streams, just to see the marvels that my great-grandfather built here. The most attractive work of his was the path itself, a sheltered walkway covered in vines, flowers blooming. Even in rain, the path would stay as dry as a bone. Lovers would come one and all, just to take shelter here too. Oh, even people who had never met would fall in love under that path. That was why they called it Lover's Walk, the dryer alternative to Lover's Lake. In fact, the Walk was so beautiful and its power of love so great, that my great-grandfather stupidly did something he shouldn't have. He claimed that, should any loves be broken here, it would become a cursed and haunted place, where couples who entered would either show their undying love for each other, or else become part of the collection of spirits who dwell there, waiting to make others join their ranks."

Ranma : "Sounds like the cave alright."

"Let me continue, young one! Anyway, as I was saying, you two are the first in many years to venture into this place, and let me tell you, you are the first ones in many years to come out alive. All the other foolish couples I've seen go in have never come out, and I do meet their spirits once in a while on my walks. They make lovely chatting companions though. Where was I... oh, yes, the Cave and Glade. The couple-breaking cave was my great-grandfather's second work, this one had the same curse, which came true the same way. Now, the two of us have to pay the price for making the curses come true....."

Ranma : "Nani!?! The two of you were the reasons behind the haunted Cave and Glade!?"

"Yeah, yeah, don't rub it in. I've got all eternity as it is already. Anyway, you two have been the first two living souls who have ever walked out there alive in at least a decade, and I'd like to thank you. By coming out alive, you have managed to set the spirits trapped in there free, and allow them to go to Heaven! You don't know just

how terribly dreadful it is to hear them moan and groan about their woes day after day, night after night for the past few decades. You've done me a great service too! I've not had living company for quite a while, and I'd like to thank the two of you for letting me talk to you two. Well, that's the story behind the Glade."

Getting up from his seat, the old man turns around to leave, but before he does, he tosses them a card. Shampoo catches it and the two read it together.

*"Thank you for visiting the Guesser's Glade.*

*Oh, do invite me and my brother for your wedding dinner, all right? We've not attended one in quite a while, and would like to see a happy couple once more in our lives. We're sure we can close our locales down for the day, and prevent anymore couples from getting broken up or dying for one day. It's rather dreadful, doing the same thing for years on end. See you. Sayoonara!"*

Shampoo grins as she reads the card, and turns around to hug Ranma.

Shampoo : "See? Even strange old man say we get married!"

Ranma : "Slow down, Shampoo! This is only a date! And it's only just started! Don't start getting ideas in your head about us getting married already!"

Mostly ignoring what Ranma said on the most part, Shampoo just keeps hugging Ranma, giggling. Sighing and shrugging the best he can with Shampoo on him, Ranma just points to the other side.

Ranma : "Come on, Shampoo. Let's go to the lake."

Shampoo : "Alright!"

Giggling all the way, and making Ranma feel a little more than just a little unsure as to whether he should have agreed on the date.

Ranma : <Ah, what the heck. Shampoo deserves at least one day of happiness for trying!>

They reach the lake, a pristine, shimmering blue lake dotted with water lilies and other floating plants. The morning sun reflects its light off the surface, making the lake look like some massive mirror. A few swans paddle here and there, a duck or two flying overhead. (None with spectacles, fortunately.) Shampoo tugs at Ranma's arm.

Ranma : "Hm?"

Shampoo : "This place... so beautiful. Shampoo glad we come here. Shampoo want to walk here for a while."

Looking at the lake, Ranma has to agree. He can't remember the last time he came to the park, but the lake is certainly the one thing he won't forget if he did. The path they took to the lake stretches down the lakeside, rows of sakura trees (cherry blossoms), willows, oaks and other trees growing along its side, providing the perfect shade. Benches are placed at regular intervals, as are the park lamps which have switched off as the approaching sunlight brightens the day up. A thin mist covers the surface of the park, a refreshing coolness. Taking a deep breath of fresh oxygen, Ranma savors the smells of morning in the park. He turns to Shampoo, similarly enjoying the place.

Ranma : "Let's walk the entire length of the lake, all right, Shampoo?"

Shampoo : "Of course!"

And they do. The path they take is littered with cherry blossom flowers, yellow-red leaves, jasmines, and other various plant matter. A few bikers pass by the two on the cycling path besides them, looking for a short while at the supposedly loving couple enjoying a good morning at the lake. Joggers too, are savoring a morning jog in the coolness of the park. 'Ohayos' are exchanged between them, as Ranma and Shampoo complete half the lake's circumference. A few older bikers who come to the park often pass by them, and look at them incredulously.

Biker #1 : "Say, isn't that the couple who's always picnicking here, and then do nothing but sit there, collecting flowers on their heads?"

Biker #2 : "Looks like, chum. Well, for once, they're not picnicking, nor sitting there waiting."

Biker #1 : "Good to see them exercise for once."

The group exchange a few guffaws as they ride past the couple, who blatantly ignore them. Finally, they finish walking around the entire lake, and find themselves back at their starting point. Looking at the sun, Ranma notes that it's roughly around 7:34. The time he and Akane would normally be rushing to school, arguing. Thinking about Akane though makes Ranma miss her even more, much as he wants to say he's wrong. But then again, he also wants to tell himself that he's not enjoying this date with Shampoo so far, with no success.

Ranma : <You know, Shampoo ain't so bad either. But then, I.... still like Akane more.>

At that moment, Ranma notices something he normally wouldn't miss.

\*grrooowl.....\*

Ranma : "Aw man! It's breakfast time and I'm starving!"

Shampoo looks at Ranma, flashing him a brilliant smile, showing off all her pearly white teeth. She points to an empty field near the lake.

Shampoo : "We go there."

Ranma : "Huh? What....whoaa!"

Grabbing his arm and pulling him there, Shampoo puts him down gently on the grass. Then she squats besides Ranma, who is sitting down, legs stretched out in front of him, and watching her. She pulls out a picnic basket from behind her, and opens it.

Shampoo : "Shampoo make breakfast for Ranma!"

She pulls a picnic blanket out from the basket, flaps it open, and sets it down. Then she proceeds to take out more food than the basket should have been able to hold, and setting them down on the blanket. Ranma looks amazed at the food she has prepared. They are all his favorites. Looking at Ranma, Shampoo looks happy.

Shampoo : "Shampoo know Ranma like these, so Shampoo spend whole night making."

Ranma : "Oh... ah! I don't know what to say...." <Except, THANKS!>

Shampoo : "Ranma no need say anything, Shampoo do this for ai ren."

The same old bikers pass by them, and let out a collective sigh.

Biker #3 : "There they go again, picnicking. My money's on them collecting flowers again."

They pass by the two, now sitting on the blanket. Shampoo is offering Ranma a rice dumpling, while Ranma is wondering what Shampoo should eat. He settles on a meat bun, and he offers it to her.

Ranma : "I'll eat this if you'll eat that."

Nodding, Shampoo takes a bite out of the bun at the same time Ranma bites into the dumpling. They look at each other's slightly messy faces and smile lopsidedly. Then they dig in.

After a while, Ranma's belly actually feels full for a change, and as he sits on the blanket waiting for his stomach juices to do their job, Shampoo snuggles up over to him. She tickles his nose, and he blows her finger away, snorting irritably.

Shampoo : "Shampoo want to ask Ranma question."

Ranma : "Hmm?"

Shampoo : "Does Ranma love Shampoo?"

This is the, what, twentieth time she's asked him so far? (*No, this is the fourteenth. -Ed.*) Hearing this question, Ranma is still tempted to say 'No', which would still be true, as far as he was concerned. But, instead, Ranma decides a softer approach, to see Shampoo's reaction this time. After all, he really can't bring himself to hurt her feelings again.

Ranma : <Wonder if.....?> "Shampoo, I would be lying if I said 'Yes', but I would be lying if I said 'No' too. I can say I do like you, as a good friend and girlfriend, but I can't really say I love you as you love me. Please don't get me wrong, I've got strong feelings for you too."

Shampoo is surprised at Ranma's refreshingly different answer to her question. She sits up and turns around. Replaying what he said in her mind, Shampoo thinks. Hard.

"....do like you....good friend....can't really say I love you.....strong feelings.... too.... "

She sighs. Ranma expects Shampoo to do something like keep pursuing the question, or hugging him. Instead, she just sighs again, draws her knees up to her chin, and sits there, unmoving. After a while of this, Ranma's curiosity finally gets the better of him as he can't stand the waiting. He crawls over to her and taps her shoulder.

No response.

He tries to look at her directly, by positioning himself in front of her. She turns around. He tries again, she turns around again. Finally, he decides enough is enough. He uses his sternest voice to talk to her, although his attempt fails miserably, and he simply ends up sounding concerned.

Ranma : "Shampoo, if you don't look at me, I'm going to become very angry."

He squats behind her and waits, tapping his foot. Finally, he decides to grab her shoulders to make her face him. Reaching his hand out, Shampoo suddenly moves. She spins around and grabs him, hugging him tightly.

Shampoo : "Wo de ai ren!"

She snuggles her face in his chest, while a very shocked and surprised Ranma just kneels there and waits for Shampoo to finish hugging him. Finally she does, and when she lets go, Ranma can feel the familiar prickling of pins and needles running up and down his body, as the blood recirculates through his body. Giggling, Shampoo uses her fingers to stretch his mouth into a parody of a smile.

Ranma : <At least she's all smiles again. Wonder what can make her sad?>

Shampoo : "Ranma smile for Shampoo!"

She pulls her fingers out of his mouth, and Ranma smiles weakly for her. Shampoo nods.

Shampoo : "We continue date now?"

Ranma : "Sure." <Well, so far so good.>

Getting off the blanket, Ranma and Shampoo hold out opposite sides of it and fold it up together. After throwing the garbage into a nearby bin, Shampoo stuffs the reusable items back into the basket, and puts it back to whence it came from. Noticing the sun rising through the clouds now, Shampoo looks at the park's clock. 9:02 AM. Still early.

Shampoo : "Now we go where?"

Not really planning hard for this date, Ranma has trouble thinking up of a suitable place to go. Putting a finger to his mouth, Ranma thinks through all the locations in Nerima they can go to.

Ranma : <Movies? Nah, memorized all the lines already. Shopping? What shops'll be open? Another walk? I'm not to walk into another strange place. The beach? Who knows who'll be there! Where to go..!?!?>

Shampoo : "Ranma want to go skating?"

Ranma : "Skating!?"

She pulls out two pairs of ice skates. Thinking back to the time he took part in the martial arts ice skating tournament, Ranma shudders a little.

Ranma : <Sanzenin and Azusa had better not be there. I don't think I want a rematch between them.>

Shampoo : "Go ice skating? Shampoo want to learn."

Ranma : "What!? You don't know?"

Shampoo shakes her head. Ranma slaps his forehead with a hand, then runs it down his face.

Ranma : "Oh, whatever. Come on, let's go. I'll pedal."

Shampoo : "Luan-ma zhen hao!" (Luan-ma is Ranma in mandarin, zhen is real/really, hao is good. Ranma's so good!)

Returning to their bicycle, Shampoo takes a key out of her hair and unlocks the chain and lock. Shrugging, Ranma rings the bell and pedals off. Aiming for the ice skating rink, Ranma takes a longer route to it, just to eat up the time through the day. Reaching the building, Ranma looks at Shampoo as they get off the bike. He points at her cheongsam.

Ranma : "You going to wear that into the ice skating ring?"

Shampoo looks at herself. She shrugs.

Shampoo : "Shampoo think she wear enough."

Ranma : "It's your body temperature."

Walking through the main entrance, Ranma prays that Akane won't be there with her friends, so early in the morning. The skating rink has just opened its doors to the public, and Ranma and Shampoo are the first two through the door. Shampoo shivers the moment she enters the ring, the cold eating at her. Ranma looks at her, a little concerned.

Ranma : "You sure you don't need anything to keep warm?"

Shampoo : \*chatter\* "W..w..what...a...about... Ranma?"

Ranma : "Shampoo! You know I can't keep you warm AND skate at the same time! Wait here. I'll get you something."

He walks over to the skating shop over by the corner, pulling out a wallet to buy something warmer for Shampoo. (You'd be surprised what these places sell.)

Ranma : "A scarf and a sweater please, for my.... er..... <Shimatta!> girlfriend over there."

The shop owner leans over the counter to look at where Ranma is pointing to. A pretty young thing with purple hair is standing there, shivering. He raises an eyebrow in skepticism. Turning around, he goes over to his warm clothes section and pulls out a sweater, a scarf, and a pair of gloves. He also pulls out a warm looking skirt. Ranma looks at the price list and bigsweats.

Ranma : <But I can't let the shopkeeper think I don't care for her!>

The shopkeeper dumps the entire stack onto the counter. Ranma takes out all his money, counting the coins in his palm.

Shopkeeper : "Hey, don't need to pay so much. 25% off. You need to take better care of your girlfriends you know. 7800 yen."

Pulling out three quarters of the dollar notes in his wallet, Ranma puts the money in the shopkeeper's hand and carries the load off. He carries the clothes to Shampoo, still shivering, and puts the load in her hands.

Ranma : "Here. Get changed. I don't need you freezing yourself to death for me."

Nodding, Shampoo goes into the ladies' changing room. Ranma stands outside, tapping his foot. Finally, Shampoo comes out of the ladies' room, dressed in some warmer attire. Ranma whistles.

Ranma : "Well, well, dressed to kill, are we?"

Shampoo admires herself. She grins.

Shampoo : "Ranma like? Then Shampoo like! Come, Ranma teach Shampoo to skate!"

So their lesson begins. Remembering what Akane taught him, Ranma teaches Shampoo the basics of balancing on the paper-thin-edged blades. She learns fast, but takes her time to do so. The hours go by quickly, and it is nearly afternoon when the crowds start pouring in. Keeping an eye on the door, Ranma continues Shampoo's skating lesson.

Ranma : "Alright... you balanced? Right, lean a little.... not too much.....leg out...."

"Ranma? Ranma! What a coincidence to meet you here!"

Spinning around on the ice, Ranma turns to look at the person calling him, the voice reminding him strongly of someone he met a long time ago. A familiar guy's voice.....

Sanzenin : "Hello, Ranma Saotome. I see you're teaching your partner how to skate? Getting ready for another Tournament?"

Ranma stares at Sanzenin as he skates over to him, Azusa in tow. He slaps his head. He watches as Azusa immediately runs off towards a corner as she sees something adorable.

Ranma : <Oh no. Not again!> "No, Sanzenin. I'm not training my friend over there, I'm teaching her. We're out on a date, alright? So don't bother us, although I'll gladly challenge you again if you want." <Has he kissed his 1000th girl yet?>

Looking at Shampoo, trying to balance by herself, Sanzenin smirks.

Sanzenin : "Heh, well, Ranma Saotome, what happened to Akane? Did she leave you?"

Ranma : "No such thing! What's wrong with taking someone else out on a date even though you're engaged anyway!?" <Damn that pervert!>

Shampoo : "Ranma! Shampoo about to...."

Shampoo slips, and frantically scrambles to regain balance. Sanzenin skates over before Ranma can stop him and helps support her. She looks at Sanzenin curiously. Then back at Ranma.

Shampoo : "Ranma friend or foe?"

Sanzenin : "A little of both."

Shampoo : "Aiyah, another one! Ranma make friends no good for sure!"

Ranma and Azusa come skating over, as Sanzenin lets Shampoo go. She slips a little, then manages to regain a rather unstable balance. Azusa knocks Sanzenin on the head with her mallet, lightly. She is holding a small ribbon in the other hand. Sanzenin sighs as he holds Azusa off for a while, then skates over to the most upset looking girl and apologise. Then try to kiss her and get slapped for it. Returning with a red hand mark on his face, Sanzenin nods to Azusa.

Azusa : "Time to practice!"

Sanzenin : "Later then, date of Ranma."

Ranma holds Shampoo's shoulder and moves her off to one side as skaters in hockey masks come skating past them. Shampoo looks at one curiously.

Shampoo : "What they doing?"

Ranma : "Getting beat up again."

Stopping a safe distance away, Ranma and Shampoo watch the spectacle from afar, as does everybody else. As



usual, the two perform marvellously as a team. Their current record has gone down to 8.59 seconds. Ranma nods in admiration of Sanzenin's skill. Shampoo just watches in admiration.

Ranma : <He's still doing quite well after that crushing blow to the head a few months back. Hey, considering the abuse Azusa gives him, I'm surprised he's doing something at all!>

People start clapping a little after the show, and are busy skating back in as the hockey masked people help each other off the ring. Mikado Sanzenin comes skating up to Shampoo and Ranma. Ranma shoots Sanzenin an evil look.

Ranma : "You aren't going to kiss her, are you?"

Shampoo : <Ranma want to be only person to kiss her?>

Sanzenin : "No. I've already kissed 1000 girls."

Shampoo : <Oh. Darn.>

Ranma : "Who's the unlucky 1000th one?"

Sanzenin : "A girl named Ukyo. And she isn't unlucky."

**"WHAT!? UKYO!!!?"**

Sanzenin : "She gave this to me after I kissed her on a visit to Osaka."

He holds out a bent giant combat spatula, the handle arched and the head itself with a dent with a remarkable resemblance to Sanzenin's entire head, face included. Azusa spots it, and starts hopping up and down, flowers coming out with her words.

Azusa : "oooooh! Cute! Cute! Cute! Cute! I want! I want! I want! Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!"

Sanzenin holds the spatula away from her, as she reaches up to try to grab it. Then he keeps it, and is subsequently knocked on the head by Azusa. First, her fists. Then, a bucket. A chair. A table. Then her mallet.

Sanzenin : "STOP THAT, YOU...YOU..... DUMB GIRL!"

Azusa : "But... but I... want that cute big funny-shaped spatula!"

Sanzenin : \*sigh\* "I want to keep that as a souvenir of my thousandth kiss. Here, you can have this." <Lucky I came prepared.>

He passes Azusa a miniaturized version of the bent spatula, specially made for her. She hops up and down for a while, then decides to name it.

Azusa : "I'll call this Charlotte, to replace that Charlotte I lost.... to Akane. Charlotte the bent spatula, I love it!"

Shampoo whispers into Ranma's ear while watching the entire spectacle.

Shampoo : "All Ranma friends and enemies so weird?"

Ranma : "No, they're the only ones so far."

Then, remembering what they're here for, Ranma grabs Shampoo's wrist.

Ranma : "Come on, Shampoo. You've still got a lot to learn."

Watching Shampoo falter and stumble, Sanzenin skates over to her, while Ranma watches as he supports her by the arms and waist.

Sanzenin : "Tsk, tsk, Ranma! You shouldn't hurry her like that! Come, let me."

Shampoo knocks Sanzenin's hands off her, as she glares at him.

Shampoo : "Shampoo no want 1000 girl kisser to help. Shampoo want Ranma only."

Then she turns back to Ranma and gives him a cute, loving look. He shrugs.

Ranma : "Ah well..... I guess I can let bygones be bygones. Shampoo, maybe Sanzenin over there can help you."

Shampoo : "But Shampoo...."

Ranma : "I'll follow you, alright? I'll be by your side too."

Shampoo considers this for a moment. Sanzenin nods.

Sanzenin : "My offer still stands. As a form of..... friendship."

Shampoo shrugs, guessing she has nothing to lose.

Shampoo : "Ok, since Ranma say so."

Sanzenin offers a hand, which Shampoo takes. As Ranma stands to one side, he feels a pang of jealousy. He slaps himself a few times.

Ranma : <!!!!?? What am I thinking!? I can't be jealous! I love Akane, not Shampoo!>

Watching the two skate, Ranma follows soon after. Sanzenin is putting Shampoo through the basic steps of ice skating, how to twist in mid-skate, turn, and stop. All this time, Ranma watches from besides Shampoo as he follows the instructional course as well.

Sanzenin : "...now you try it..... good!..... yes.... yes.... you got it!....."

Shampoo finally gets the hang of it, as Sanzenin gives her some excellent coaching lessons.

Sanzenin : "I'm going to let go now. Try to do a few loops. Ready?"

Ranma skates up besides Shampoo. She looks unsure, and looks to Ranma. He nods knowingly. She nods at Sanzenin.

Sanzenin : "GO!"

He lets go. Shampoo balances, then kicks off. Ranma follows besides her, as she slowly makes a large loop around the ring, laughing and enjoying herself immensely. Ranma's heart warms a little, hearing her laugh in true joy for once, and he wonders why he feels this way.

Shampoo : "Waah! Shampoo can skate! So happy!"

In fact, to show off, she slows down as she comes around back towards Sanzenin, and attempts a spin. The two watch as she balances on the tip of her right blade, then, arms extended, she swings them and twists her body.

\*Clump!\*

Shampoo : "Ouch!"

Shampoo slips, and lands on her rump with a slightly painful \*bom\*. Ranma quickly skates over and helps her up. Rubbing her buttocks, Shampoo complains something about slippery floors in chinese.

Shampoo : "Zhen tao yan! Bing zhi di ban zhen hua!" (Lit. Trans. = So unlikable! Ice floor so slippery!)

Hearing her complain, Ranma scratches his head wondering what she just said.

Ranma : "Huh?"

Shampoo : "Shampoo say floor slippery, no good."

Ranma : "Shampoo, the floor IS supposed to be slippery, or else you wouldn't be able to move."

Shampoo shrugs it away, meaning that she just said it for the sake of saying it. The Golden Couple skates over to the Purple and Red Couple.

Sanzenin : "Well, practise a little more then....."

Shampoo : "Shampoo."

Sanzenin : "Shampoo. Well, good day then. We've got another tournament coming up. Gotta practice. See you."

Then, without another word, the two immediately skate off, leaving Ranma and Shampoo staring on behind them for a while. Looking back to each other, Ranma raises an eyebrow as he realizes he's still holding Shampoo.

Ranma : "Well? Want to go on skating?"

Shampoo : "Ok."

But as soon as Shampoo puts her right foot out, she shrieks a little. Immediately, Ranma knows what's wrong.

Ranma : "You've sprained your ankle, Shampoo!"

Shampoo : "You think Shampoo no know that?"

Sighing, Ranma cracks a few knuckles while supporting Shampoo.

Ranma : "I'll have to carry you."

Which is more than Shampoo could have hoped for in any one date with Ranma. Eagerly, she gets onto Ranma's back as he squats, then wraps her arms around his neck tightly.

Ranma : "\*URK\*!....Shampoo.... loosen.... up.... your.... grip!...."

She realizes she's strangling Ranma, and quickly lightens her grip. Taking in a deep breath, Ranma skates to the edge of the ring where the entrance/exit is, and with Shampoo still on his back, take off his skating shoes and put on his more comfortable cloth ones. With Shampoo on his back, he leaves the building and gets onto the bike, where she lets go and sits on the bike's back seat.

Ranma : "I'll bring you to Tofu's. Hang tight. But not too tight."

He cycles off just as Akane and her friends walk into the building, Akane never noticing the pigtail disappearing around the corner on the bike followed by a shock of purple hair.

==

Back at the dojo, Nabiki is counting her money in her room made from a recent sale. Finishing with the book keeping, she bundles the notes up and put it into her personal drawer, locked with a combination lock which combination she changes weekly. Leaning back in her chair and stretching, Nabiki begins thinking about the other money making opportunities she can make out of Conditioner.

Nabiki : "Ahh... these amazons are rich. Wonder why she came to me in the middle of the night though? Had to charge her a midnight fee, not that I'm complaining though... made a lot of money there. Well, here's another girl crazy over Ranma, which means more profits to come.... and with the photos I'm snapping of her, those guys'll pay me through the nose to get them! Haa! A wonderful opportunity indeed."

Looking at her clock, she realizes that it's nearly 3:00 PM. Getting off her seat, she stretches herself.

Nabiki : "Time to go down and see what can be done around the house...."

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Outside Tofu's Clinic, Ranma is busy piggy-backing Shampoo into the building, Shampoo smiling and snuggling her head against his body all the way, making Ranma feel about as comfortable as sitting on a bed of needles as he thinks about what Akane will do to him if/when she sees him.

Walking into the clinic, he spots Tofu sitting at a table reading a book on romantic tales. He coughs. Tofu puts his book onto the table.

Tofu : "Oh, it's you, Ranma! Have you got a cough? Oh, what's wrong with your....?"

Putting Shampoo down on a chair, Ranma looks back to Dr. Tofu.

Ranma : "No, I don't have a cough. And that girl is Shampoo... one of the girls who's been chasing me."

Looking behind Ranma at the purple-haired amazon, Tofu nods.

Tofu : "Ahh. I see. Hm, what happens to be the matter with her, may I ask?"

Ranma : "Ah, you see, we went ice-skating.... and then she kind of slipped and hurt her ankle."

Tofu : "That'll explain the warm clothing. Alright, I'll see what I can do."

He walks over to Shampoo, who greets him in chinese and he replies as fluently. Poking around on her ankle to find the exact spots of injury, Tofu finds the source and sets to work, taking off Shampoo's skating shoes and massaging the ankle.

Tofu : "This isn't exactly a very bad sprain, but you're not going to be able to walk for a while...."

Shampoo : "That mean Shampoo no can work? No date Ranma?"

Tofu : "Nope and..... nope. You'll need about a week of rest. There, I'll just bandage it up now and you'll be fine."

Walking off to get some bandages, Tofu leaves the two to themselves. Ranma looks at Tofu's clock. 3:10 PM. His belly is complaining.

Ranma : "I missed lunch! Man, I'm hungry! I didn't notice the time go by!"

What he doesn't notice too is Shampoo, whose face is currently downcast and dark. Then she sniffs a little, and suddenly breaks out crying, tears running down her cheeks and onto the floor. Ranma suddenly looks at her in total concern. He moves over to her side quickly.

Ranma : "Shampoo! What's wrong!? Is it your ankle!?"

Still crying, Shampoo shakes her head. She buries her face in her hands and whimpers. Ranma thinks hard.

Ranma : "Is it because..... <can't be happiness, she's just sprained her ankle.... hold on...!!!>.... you can't keep on dating me today!?"

For once, Ranma has guessed right. Elsewhere, people sitting in a theatre start cheering for no apparent reason, even as the villian in the movie kills the good guys.

Shampoo nods, still crying.

Shampoo : \*sniff\* "Shampoo....\*sniff\*... now no can.... \*choke\*.... date Ranma!... waaah!!"

Ranma tries to comfort her, as he thinks of something to say, He is patting her back and saying "There there now." trying to get her to stop. She just lightens up her crying.

Ranma : <Where's Tofu with those bandages!?!> "Come on, Shampoo. You're a big girl now, you shouldn't cry."

Shampoo : \*sniff\* "But... Shampoo wait so... \*sniff\*...long for proper....\*choke\*... date, and now....\*sniff\*.... Shampoo stupid....\*sniff\*... spoil for Ranma!"

Ranma's mind goes into overdrive mode, lightning bolts flashing through his head as he comes up with a hundred different responses. One lightning bolt makes it through completely.

Ranma : "There now, Shampoo. We can still date, you know! I'll have to carry you, and there'll be fewer places we can go, but that won't spoil our fun, will it?"

This does the trick, and Shampoo's crying quickly subsides. Slowly parting her hands for her, Ranma looks under the mess of hair covering her face and puts on a funny face, pulling the sides of his mouth open with a finger and sticking his tongue out.

Ranma : "Come on, Shampoo. Smile for me, you don't look cute if you don't! And you don't want to be like Akane!"

Ranma waits, and waits. He forgets to let go of his mouth or put his tongue back in. Suddenly, Shampoo responds and looks at Ranma with reddish eyes. Then she grins, and giggles. She playfully swats his face and looks up, pushing the hair sticking to her face from the tears back.

Shampoo : "Ranma make Shampoo happy, use funny face. Shampoo happy now, no like violent Akane!"

Ranma remembers he's making a funny face, and lets go. But his face doesn't revert to its original state. He tries slapping himself, to no avail.

Ranma : "Not again!"

Tofu : "Ranma, you really know how to make a girl happy sometimes. If only it applied to Akane."

Tofu speaks up from the doorway he disappeared behind a few minutes ago, as he watched the entire event from the doorframe. Pushing himself off the frame, Tofu walks towards Ranma with bandages in hand. He looks at Ranma's face.

Ranma : "Hey, Dr. Tofu! Can you...?"

Tofu : "First things first. Your face won't stay like that forever."

Saying that, he turns around and wraps Shampoo's ankle, tightening the bandages and sealing them. Then he turns around to look at Ranma, whose face hasn't changed back yet. He sighs, then cracks a few knuckles. He walks over to Ranma and begins twisting his head and face into various positions/expressions, Ranma going "ouch" now and then. Finally, Tofu steps back and dusts his hands, admiring his handiwork.

Tofu : "Nah, I like your original face better."

True, Ranma's face now looks like he was beaten up and disfigured, without the bruises. Shampoo looks at him and laughs out loud, and cannot stop. Tears roll down her cheeks, tears of laughter uninhibited.

Ranma : "What's so funny! Doc! I want my original face!"

Tofu : "Patience, Ranma. I'll have to get a photo of you. I can't remember your original looks after all those times you come here beaten up."

Hearing this, Ranma watches as Tofu turns around and begins to move. He gets desperate.

Ranma : "DOCTOR!"

Tofu : "Oh, all right."

Grinning like a big fool, Tofu turns around again and sets to work on Ranma's face. Finally, he gets it right and Ranma can feel his mouth where it should be. Shampoo can't stop laughing, and is rolling on the couch she's sitting on, and barely manages to stop herself from dropping onto the floor. Ranma looks insulted.

Ranma : "Shampoo.... it isn't all that funny...."

Finally, taking a deep breath to calm herself, Shampoo wipes the tears from her eyes and looks at Ranma.

Shampoo : "Ranma want to continue date?"

Tofu : "You two are on a date? What happened to....?"

Ranma quickly shushes Tofu up and brings him into a corner. Speaking in hushed tones, Ranma tells Tofu.

Ranma : "Tofu, you know what you asked me to do the other time?"  
Tofu : "Yes?"  
Ranma : "Well, I decided to ask Shampoo there since she's got the most experience...."  
Tofu : "Because of you?"  
Ranma : "Yeah, well, don't rub it in. Anyway, she wanted me to date her if I wanted her help...."  
Tofu : "And here you are, because of some accident?"  
Ranma : "Yup. Please don't spoil it. Don't tell Akane. Alright?"  
Tofu : "Oh, all right. But your intentions had better be right."  
Ranma : "They are. Don't worry. Anyway, I swear I'll make it up to Akane, alright?"  
Tofu : "Alright, alright. Just this once though."  
Ranma : "Thanks, doc, you're the best!"

Ranma walks over to Shampoo, and offers her his back. She complies all too willingly, hanging onto his back as he piggy-backs her. Tofu sees them off, waving and wishing them the best. Then he turns around and returns to his book.

With Shampoo on his back, Ranma walks over to where he parked the bike, and helps Shampoo onto the back seat before getting on himself. Cycling down the road, Ranma remembers his stomach.

Ranma : "Hey, Shampoo, you hungry?"  
Shampoo : "A little."  
Ranma : "Want to go eat some ice-cream?"  
Shampoo : "Ok."

Ranma cycles around a corner in the road, towards the ice-cream parlour just as Akane and her friends turn a corner to walk on the same street Ranma was on a second ago. Looking for the signboard of the ice-cream parlour, Ranma spots it just a short distance away, and pedals faster, his stomach urging him on. Shampoo on his back, Ranma props the bike against the wall of the shop and walks over to the glass front doors. The ice-cream proprietor inside spots Ranma.... and more importantly, the purple-haired amazon who wrecked his shop a few months back. He begins to bigsweat and chew on his nails as Ranma opens the doors and walk in. In fact, everybody who was at the parlour when Shampoo came in looking for Ranma's head begins to back away from Ranma and Shampoo, not recognizing the male Ranma, but remembering the purple-haired girl all too well. Finding an empty seat, Ranma plops Shampoo down and sits down opposite her. The proprietor himself walks over quickly with a menu, paper and pen, eager to please the girl at least so his shop will be spared. He lays the menus down in front of the two VERY respectfully.

Proprietor : "Irrashaimase, o-kyaku-san! What can I do for you today?"

Shampoo looks at the menu, and not too familiar with all the items, looks to Ranma for advice. He is examining the menu, and orders a banana-split deluxe. Putting his menu down, Ranma looks at Shampoo, who is already looking at him.

Ranma : "Nan desu ka, Shanpuu?" (What is it, Shampoo?)  
Shampoo : "Shampoo not know entire menu. Want Ranma to suggest for Shampoo."

Ranma looks uncomfortable here, not expecting Shampoo to go so far in this date. He loosens his collar, then quickly looks at his menu again.

Ranma : "And a.... whipped cream chocolate-mint delight for my.... date here."

Nodding, the proprietor quickly walks off to get the order made, post-haste. While waiting for them to arrive, Ranma looks at Shampoo uncomfortable.

Ranma : "Shampoo, you know I willingly agreed to this date, but please don't make things harder on me than it already is."  
Shampoo : "But, Ranma, Shampoo really not know menu. Japanese still bad."  
Ranma : "Oh."

The two sit in uncomfortable silence as their orders arrive, much to the other customers' dissatisfaction. Looking at his ice-cream disinterestedly, Ranma begins playing with it instead, what Shampoo just said making his appetite die down.

\*plop\*

Shampoo : \*giggle\* "Hee, Ranma look funny!" \*giggle\*

Ranma wipes the cream off his nose as Shampoo giggles at the mess she made on his nose. He licks it, and grins evilly at her.

Ranma : "Naughty, naughty you!"

He picks a cherry off his ice-cream and flicks it at Shampoo, who intercepts it in her mouth. Watching her smile, Ranma is reminded of Akane when she was happy, which wasn't very often. This only makes him more determined to make sure he makes it up to Akane soon. Finally, with this in his mind, he digs in eagerly to his ice cream, making sure he doesn't miss a drop. He orders another one, while Shampoo hasn't even finished half her ice-cream. As he eats, Ranma remembers something. It doesn't take much to get Shampoo's attention.

Ranma : "Shampoo? You remember the last time you came here?"

Shampoo : "No."

Ranma : "Remember the time you came here to kill me?"

Shampoo : "Oh. Shampoo sorry."

Ranma : "Hey, don't say that! We couldn't really blame you, you know. Anyway, I thought maybe this would be an interesting place to bring you to, to remind you of the time you wanted to kill me instead of date me."

Shampoo realises the humour and irony in this sentence, and nearly laughs, forcing herself to swallow her ice-cream before she allows herself a short, controlled burst.

Shampoo : "Hai, Shampoo remember time.... but this time, Shampoo no break wall, kill Ranma. This time, sit with Ranma, date Ranma. Shampoo silly then, no silly now."

*\*BLAM\**

"Koko wa... DOKO KA!?"

The wall in the far corner, exactly where Shampoo broke through the last time to kill Ranma, explodes into a massive dust cloud, showering everyone in front of it in powdered concrete. Ranma slaps his head.

Ranma : "Oh, great. Ryoga's found his way here!?"

Ryoga looks around him, wondering where he's landed himself in again. Then he notices everyone staring at him in irritation, their ice cream and themselves coated in a grayish substance. Then he looks at Ranma.

Ryoga : "Ranma?"

And Shampoo.

Ryoga : "Shampoo?"

A lightning bolt zaps his head, not hot enough to burn his bandannas. He looks at the two people, staring back at him. He glows blue.

".....RANMA AND SHAMPOO!? RAAAAANNNMMAAAAA!!!! I'LL KILL YOU!!!!!!!"

Ryoga leaps forwards towards Ranma, fist drawn back. The ice-cream parlour proprietor is on his knees, saying his prayers.

Ranma : "WAIT, RYOGA!"

Ranma screams this as Ryoga punches. Ranma moves his head to one side, avoiding the fist. The wall behind him has a nasty hole in it, and the next-door shop owner looks through the hole to see what is going on.

Ryoga : "You leave Akane, tell me to cheer her up for you, and now here you are with another girl!? And one you keep claiming to not like!?"

Ryoga kicks, and Ranma leaps out of his seat to land behind Ryoga, Ryoga's kick splintering the chair Ranma was sitting in. Shampoo quickly leaps out of hers too, to Ranma's side.

Shampoo : "Ryoga no hurt Ranma, Shampoo protect."

Ranma : "Shampoo! Don't get in his way....!"

Ranma pushes Shampoo out the hole Ryoga made in the wall, then uses his arms to grab Ryoga's arm as he does an uppercut.

Ranma : "Ryoga, can't we talk this over?"

Ryoga : "NO!"

Ryoga pulls his arm free, and kicks at Ranma's head. Ranma quickly backflips out of the shop, and leaps to the rooftops. Ryoga follows him out, and sees Ranma leaping onto the roof.

Ryoga : "I'll kill you, Ranma!"

{The Battle, first.}

On the roof, Ranma looks behind him for any sign of Ryoga. Seeing nothing, he turns around and begins to run, when he remembers something.

Ranma : "Where's Shampoo?!"

Shampoo : "Right here, ai ren!"

Shampoo lands behind him and hugs him. Ranma remembers he just saved her from Ryoga.

Shampoo : "Luan ma jiu wo, wo ai ni!" (Ranma saved me, I love you!)

".....RRAAAANNMMAAAAA!!!!!!"

Ranma : "Shampoo, now's not the time to love me. Get away somewhere safe, NOW!"

Shampoo nods, and as Ryoga leaps onto the roof, she runs off and leaps onto another roof. Ryoga faces off Ranma now, in the setting sun.

Ryoga : "Ranma... you playboy! You make Akane unhappy, leave me to cheer her up, and now you're with some other girl, being unfaithful to Akane!? If you don't want her, you could at least have the courage to tell me!"

Ranma : "Whaddaya MEAN, I don't want her!? If you'd just listen to me...."

Ryoga : "It's already too late. Time to die."

Ryoga leaps forwards, leg extended. Ranma hops over Ryoga, and lands behind him. Ryoga drops to all fours as Ranma does a roundhouse. Ryoga sweeps his foot to trip Ranma, and Ranma vaults over the sweep kick, coming down with a flying kick. Ryoga hops away just as Ranma's foot breaks a hole in the ceiling. The two hop away from each other, and stand at a combat ready stance.

Ranma : "Ryoga, I really don't want to do this!"

Ryoga : "Then apologise to Akane!"



Ranma : "I'll make it up to her, I swear! But not now!"

Ryoga : "Then it'll be never!"

Ranma : "No! I don't mean that!"

But the words fall on deaf ears as Ryoga leaps forwards, arm extended to grab Ranma's neck. Ranma backflips several times, as Ryoga punches the rooftop which he was standing just a few seconds ago. The ice-cream parlour owner downstairs is busy calling his property manager to sell his shop as he is pelted by plaster and wood. Upstairs, on the roof, Ranma is busy kicking Ryoga's body several times in a single second. Undeterred, Ryoga quickly grabs Ranma's outstretched arm and slams him into the roof. Ranma rolls away as Ryoga follows up with several bandanna shurikens. Ranma elbows Ryoga's face, drawing blood from his nose as Ryoga staggers back. Ranma stands at ready, breathing heavily.

Ranma : "Had enough?"

Ryoga just roars and leaps forwards, giving Ranma a strong, leaping roundhouse kick to the face. It's Ranma's turn to stagger as the blow dizzies him for a while, then he shakes the dizziness off. Ryoga leaps again and swings a fist at Ranma, who deftly dodges it and gives Ryoga an uppercut into the stomach as he passes overhead. Winded, Ryoga falls to the floor, but gets up again, grinning as he wipes a trickle of blood from his mouth.

Ryoga : "Forgot my Bakusai-Tenketsu training? Come on, give me your best shot!"

Ryoga pulls out a few more bandannas, his belt, and ties them into one long cloth-band. Then he strikes out with it, like a whip. Ranma leaps over it as it hits the rooftop antenna behind him, the antenna falling off the rooftop a second later in several pieces.

Ranma : "Ryoga, please listen to me!"

He decides that Ryoga is too lost in his anger as Ryoga gives him a punch to the chest, cutting off his air supply for a second. Kneeling now, Ranma looks up at Ryoga as he stands over him. He tastes blood in his mouth.

Ranma : "I guess I'll have to beat some sense into you, pig-boy!"

He leaps away as Ryoga cuts a neat hole in the roof with his cloth-band, and building up the confidence to win, Ranma lets loose a Moko-Takabisha.

Ranma : "MOKO-TAKABISHA!"

Ryoga looks on as the chi-fireball races towards him. He suddenly glows green as he dips his head down. Ranma regrets his decision immediately.

Ryoga : "*SHISHIHOKOUDAN!*"

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The ice-cream parlour is creamed as a massive green column of chi energy emanates from Ryoga. The column can be seen at the Tendou Dojo, as Akane is reading a cookbook. She looks up.

Akane : "Ryoga! Ranma **MUST** be there!"

Tossing her book to one side, Akane runs off towards the column, leaving the rest of the household stunned.

==

At the Neko Hanten, Conditioner is busy cleaning up a recently-vacated table when a green glow nearly blinds her. She looks out the window, and spots a column of green energy coming from nearby. Mousse is looking at a plant, thinking it's the source of the light. She quickly tosses off her apron and runs out the shop towards the column, hoping her sister isn't there.

-=-=-=-=-

Back at the rubble, Ranma is busy extricating himself from the rubble Ryoga's perfect Shi shi Hokoudan just created. He sees that Ryoga is, as usual, untouched by his attack. However, he is in horrible shape from the fall off the top of the building. Both get up, dust and rubble falling off their shoulders as they do.

Ranma : "Damn! Ryoga's THAT depressed!?"

Shampoo is looking down over them as she stands on the nearby roof, shouting down.

Shampoo : "Luan ma! Ni hai hao ba!?" (Ranma! You're still alright right?)

Ranma ignores this question as his heart is set on beating some sense back into Ryoga.

Ranma : "You've made a BIG mistake now, Ryoga. Time to show my full power."

Ranma glows blue a short moment, then leaps towards Ryoga, who is too slow to intercept him, and gives him a Kachuu-Tenshin-Amaguriken in the chest and stomach simultaneously.

Ranma : "Try a Tenshin-Amaguriken Double attack!"

Ryoga takes the punishment, then looks at Ranma with dead set eyes as Ranma retreats to rest. He grins evilly, his fangs gleaming.

Ryoga : "That hurt. Almost."

Ryoga leaps over and slams Ranma's face into the rubble as Ranma is too tired to stop him, having exhausted all his energy in that double. Then, still pinning Ranma down, Ryoga punches Ranma in the stomach repeatedly.

Ryoga : "This one's for Akane, this one's for all the humiliation, this one's for hitting me into Jusenkyo, this one's for my misery, this one's for all those defeats, this one's for all the times you hurt Akane's feelings, this one's for all the times you tricked me, this one's the one for calling me pig-boy all the time, this one's for the times you called me pork-boy...."

And as Ryoga finishes his 10th punch, (*9 actually. -Ed.*), he draws in a deep breath as Ranma coughs up blood.

Ryoga : "***And this one's for everything else!!!!***"

Ryoga glows bright green as he draws his fist back, a miniature Shi shi Hokoudan forming at his fist. He sends it flying down as Ranma tries to ward off the blow, feebly.

"STOP, RYOGA!"

Ryoga stops his fist a millimeter away from Ranma's heart, as the chi energy dies down. Ranma coughs weakly. Ryoga turns around to face the familiar voice. Akane comes running up to them, tears in her eyes.

Akane : "Ryoga! Why are you....?"

Shampoo comes landing down besides Ranma as Ryoga lets go of his face. She cradles his head in her chest, hugging him and crying, muttering his name over and over again. Ryoga stands up to face Akane, shock showing clearly on his face.

Ryoga : "Akane! What are you....?"

Conditioner : "Ranma! Shampoo! Are you two....!?"

Conditioner reaches the scene of the fight seconds later. She ignores Ryoga and Akane, and runs directly to where Shampoo is still holding Ranma in her arms, bandages in hand. She kneels down besides Ranma and gets Shampoo to hold Ranma still as she tends to the worst of the wounds.

Akane : "Ryoga, why were you fighting with Ranma this time!?"

Ryoga : "Akane, Ranma cheated on you! He left you for Shampoo over there!"

Akane : "What!? He... he... he said in his message.... he'd make it up to me when he came back....."

Akane feels the tears welling up in her eyes as she comes to a revelation of what Ranma could have done. Then, looking at the bloody mess that was Ranma, she looks back at Ryoga.

Akane : "Did Ranma tell you he wanted to make it up to me!?"

Ryoga : "Er.... that....."

He remembers what Ranma said in the heat of their battle.

*"I'll make it up to her! I swear!"*

He hangs his head in shame.

Ryoga : "Yes, Akane-san....."

Akane : "....never mind that now! We have to get him to a clinic!"

Shampoo and Conditioner nod simultaneously as Ranma coughs up another half-pint of blood. Conditioner gets up, hands bloody, and walks over to Akane.

Conditioner : "Akane, you're right. Ranma's suffered massive internal injuries. He can't live unless he gets some medical attention now. His injuries are beyond my skills."

Akane looks over her shoulder, to see Ranma's chest wrapped in bandages to slow the internal bleeding. She nods.

Akane : "I'll call Dr. Tofu! He's the best in Nerima!"

Tofu : "I'm already here!"

Tofu comes running down the darkened street carrying a first-aid kit. The street lights begin lighting up one by one as the sun sets below the hills, Mt. Fuji visible over the distance. He quickly kneels over Ranma, and checks his vital signs.

Tofu : "Hmm... good, good, the bleeding has been slowed. Whoever did this must have great medical knowledge."

Conditioner : "Thanks. Can you do anything?"

Tofu : "Hm.... I'll have to bring him back to my clinic. I don't have what I need here. Hurry, I need someone to help carry him there."

Grabbing a pair of rebars and some cloth, Shampoo makes a makeshift stretcher, in which she and her sister put Ranma onto. Tofu nods at their volunteerism.

Tofu : "You'll need to hurry. He won't last long. Akane, Ryoga, join me if you can later."

Ryoga and Akane watch as the three quickly run off down the street. Ryoga trembles in an undefinable emotion. Akane looks at him, as the tears run down the side of his cheeks to drip onto the floor. Ryoga lifts his hands to his face, and looks at them under the new sodium street lamps. They are red with blood.

Ryoga : ".... I nearly killed him.... for real.....!"

Ryoga just stands there, unmoving, as he looks at his blood-stained hands. Akane stands behind him, wondering what to do.

"Akane! Are you there!? Are you alright!? Akane!"

Akane : "Oto-san! Father! I'm here! I'm alright!"

Soun, Kasumi, Nabiki and Genma come running towards the two, concerned looks on their faces. Kasumi looks at

the mess.

Kasumi : "Oh my, what a mess. Oh my! Is that blood!?"

She points to a dark, reddish stain on the debris. Soun and Genma look over her shoulder. They nod.

Soun : "Blood! Whose blood!?"

Ryoga turns around, clenching his fists, at his sides.

Ryoga : "Ranma's."

All of them look at Ryoga, stunned. He holds his hands up for them to see.

Ryoga : "Ranma coughed this up. On my hands."

Soun and Genma turn around to be sick, as Kasumi looks on, very worried, and Nabiki stares in utter amazement.

Nabiki : <Kuno'll want to know that Ranma can be defeated....>

Ryoga just looks down, downcast, and clenches his fists even more tightly, adding his blood to Ranma's. Then, picking up his dusty backpack and umbrella and dusting them, Ryoga begins to walk off.

Akane : "Ryoga! Where are you going!?"

Ryoga : "Somewhere isolated. I think I'll need to think myself over."

Akane watches as Ryoga walks off. Then Soun walks over to Akane.

Soun : "Akane! Is Ranma alright!? More importantly, WILL he be alright!?"

Without turning around, Akane just mutters softly.

Akane : "I don't know....."

Kasumi : "Akane, where's Ranma?"

Akane : "At Tofu's....."

Soun : "Then what are we waiting for!? Let's go!"

Grabbing Akane by the arm, Soun has to drag her towards the clinic as she stares off to the spot Ryoga disappeared to. No one notices the single tear roll down her cheek. No one notices the pair of gleaming white eyes up above them, on the roof, belonging to a long-haired shadow, staring down at them.

{The second victim.}

"Ima wa, koko ni doko ka!?" (Now where am I!?) yells Ryoga, getting lost as soon as he is out of the line of sight. Looking around him, he realizes that he is in an unlighted, tree-covered area. Guessing that he had been walking for quite a while, he sets his pack down. Looking at his hands, the blood now caking, he decides to deal with one thing at a time.

Ryoga : "Water, water, need some water.... where to find water in a forest?"

Knowing that washing his hands won't be enough to transform him, Ryoga finds a tap right besides him.

Ryoga : "Who put that there?"

Shrugging and complimenting his good luck, Ryoga switches it on and washes his hands clean. Then, filling a kettle full of water, he takes a bunsen burner out and begins boiling the water. Watching the fire burn, Ryoga begins to reflect on what he did a few minutes ago, though by his reckoning, it's been a few hours.

Ryoga : <Damn! Did I nearly KILL Ranma!? I know I always SAY I'll kill him, but.....!>

A sigh.

Ryoga : <Ranma didn't seem himself today. He wasn't the totally cocky fighter I knew! I even beat him! This is not something that could happen. Not by a long shot. Then.... what was it that happened today!? Or am I really improving!?!>

Ryoga flexes his still-wet hand, looking at it and the lacerations his own fingernails caused. He shakes his head.

Ryoga : <No! Ranma was definitely occupied with something else. Did he really mean what he said, that he would make it up to Akane? Or was that just an excuse to be with Shampoo?>

He shakes his head, clutching it and sobbing a little.

Ryoga : <I let my feelings for Akane get in the way, again! If she hadn't come around, I would've killed my only real friend! If you could call him one.>

Finally, he decides that he is in the most part, wrong. Then, staring back at the flames, Ryoga decides to apologise to Ranma as soon as possible. He pulls out a bouquet of flowers and looks at it. A card is attached to it.

"Dear Ranma Saotome :

I'm sorry for beating you up so badly over Akane. Please accept it.

P.S : I beat you! Haa haa!

-Ryoga Hibiki."

Taking out a pen, Ryoga scribbles out the P.S part and adds some other things.

"Dear Ranma Saotome :

I'm sorry for beating you up so badly over Akane. Please accept == my apologies. You're my... only real friend.... I think. Don't take it to heart. Get well soon.

== : = ===== ! == ==!

-Ryoga Hibiki."

Nodding, Ryoga puts the bouquet back and stares into the flame, contemplating his future plans.

Ryoga : "Least I know he isn't totally undefeatable..."

A flicker of the fire. Ryoga is up immediately, umbrella in hand, looking around.

Ryoga : <There wasn't a wind I could feel. Something made it flicker.>

Looking around, all he sees are shadows. He closes his eyes, and listens hard.

\*shish\* \*shish\*

"....there!"

Ryoga tosses his umbrella in the opposite direction, knocking over his kettle, but leaving the bunsen burner untouched.

Ryoga : <Shimatta.... WHA!?!>

A shadow suddenly detaches itself from the rest of the shadows, and lands in front of him, its outline visible in the light of the fire. Ryoga stares at what appears to be a Shampoo made of blackness.

Shadow : "Well, well, if it isn't the one who hurt Ranma..."

It flashes him an evil grin, fangs gleaming. Ryoga grabs his umbrella, and gets into a combat ready position, baring his own fangs, which, to the shadow's envy, are twice as long as it's own.

Ryoga : "If you want something, just say it!"

Shadow : "Oh, I want something alright. Just be a good little human and stand there."

Ryoga : "Like real! Take this!"

Ryoga leaps towards the shadow, umbrella extended. The shadow simply slides to one side, and as Ryoga crashes into the underbrush behind it, it slides back to face him. Ryoga, struggling to free himself from the branches, suddenly feels himself being lifted bodily off the ground. He turns to look, and sees the shadow holding him up with one hand.

Shadow : "That was easy."

Looking at the struggling Ryoga trying to hit its head with his umbrella, the shadow giggles. Then it uses its free hand to twist Ryoga's neck with a sickening crunch. Then, it looks around to make sure nobody saw it, blows out the bunsen fire, and disappears, carrying everything with it in its spare hand.

{The Challenge.}

"Will Ranma be all right, doctor!?"

"Shampoo know should have help ai ren! All Shampoo fault!"

"Don't blame yourself, Shampoo. He did tell you to leave, right?"

The four people are at the clinic of Dr. Tofu. The good doctor is working feverishly to stop Ranma's internal bleeding, while Shampoo and Conditioner are outside, in the waiting room. Shampoo is crying, her sister trying to comfort her, to no avail.

Shampoo : "Shampoo know all her fault, no help Ranma! Now Ranma going to die!"

Conditioner : "Sis, don't say such things. The doctor's a good one, he'll be able to save Ranma, I know it."

Shampoo : "But why Shampoo no courage to save ai ren?"

Conditioner : "No, it was because of your love that you listened to him. He knew you would get injured in the fight, that was why he told you not to interfere. He cared for you."

Shampoo : "But....."

Instead, Conditioner puts a finger to Shampoo's lips, silencing her.

Conditioner : "Shh... hush, sister. We can't do anything now. Let's just sit here and wait, alright?"

Shampoo nods silently, her tear-rimmed eyes reddish and sore from too much crying. Then she quietly goes back to brooding silently, blaming herself non-stop. Conditioner, on the other hand, is simply biting nails and chewing her hair as they wait for news of Ranma.

"This is it! I hope Ranma's alright!"

"Hurry, we might be able to....."

Conditioner : "The Tendous are here."

Looking up, Conditioner sees the Tendou family and Genma run through the doorway, frantic. She stands up to greet them.

Conditioner : "Tofu's in there, treating Ranma as we speak. Don't disturb them."

Just as she finishes saying this, Tofu comes walking out of the operating room, wiping the sweat off his brow. Everyone crowds around him, shooting off questions at him. He holds his hands up, and the questions die down. Kasumi stands way back, knowing what Tofu might do if he sees her.

Tofu : "Now, everyone, don't crowd me. I'll answer your questions now. Ranma is still alive, and in stable condition. He needs his rest and medicine now, so please don't go in and disturb him. Don't worry, you can all go home and rest. I'll call you when he's feeling better. For now, he needs to stay here."

Everyone looks at him for a while, and he looks back at them. Kasumi lets out a sigh of relief. Tofu hears the sigh, and his glasses fog up. Everyone moves off, muttering as soon as they do. Tofu walks up to Kasumi, the only person still there, smiling.

Tofu : "Oh, er... hi, Kasumi."

Kasumi : "Good evening, Doctor Tofu."

Tofu : "How are you?"

Kasumi : "I'm fine. I just wanted to know about Ranma."

Tofu : "Ranma? Oh, Ranma! Fine lad, he. Don't worry, he'll be fine... although I don't know where he is now. Anyway, have you eaten dinner yet?"

Kasumi : "Yes, I've already eaten, thank you. Please, I must be disturbing you from your work. I'll be going now."

Tofu : "Oh, er... please, won't you stay, for a while?"

Looking behind her, Kasumi sees everyone standing outside the clinic gates, looking at the two, nodding their heads. EVERYONE.

Kasumi : "Oh...my... oh, alright. You must be hungry...."

Tofu : "Oh, no.... I just ate lunch."

Kasumi giggles, covering her mouth. Then she takes out a small picnic basket.

Kasumi : "Here. I brought you some dinner. Hope you like it."

Tofu : "Dinner? Oh, er... that. Thank you, Kasumi!"

He proceeds to take the cloth off the top and wear it like a bib. Then he looks inside and looks at the small plastic container containing some rice and vegetables. He opens the lid, and his glasses fog up some more. Then he starts taking bites out of the box, rice, plastic and all. Kasumi stops him.

Kasumi : "Oh my, doctor, that's the box you're eating too! The plastic isn't very good for your health."

Tofu : "Oh? Oh! My apologies."

He pokes his throat and coughs up the plastic bits, then proceeds to eat the rice and vegetables with the box's cover as a spoon. Kasumi giggles at his comical demeanor.

==--==--

At the Neko Hanten, Shampoo and Conditioner have returned from a wonderful turned horrible day. The two sisters sit down at a chair at the nearest table to the door and sigh. Shampoo looks at her bandaged ankle, then realizes something.

Shampoo : "??? Shampoo ankle hurt, how come can walk?"

She unwraps the bandages and notices that under the bandages are some medicinal herbs which give off a strong but tolerable smell. She deduces that the herbs were put there by Tofu to help her healing process along. She silently thanks him for this little boon, recognizing the herbs to be rather expensive and rare. Conditioner rubs her eyes wearily then stretches herself, yawning.

Conditioner : "Ahhh! I think I'll skip the bath and go straight to bed."

Shampoo watches as her sister walk off towards the back of the restaurant, and disappear around the corner. Then she herself yawns loudly.

Shampoo : "Shampoo think Shampoo get sleep too. No use worry about Ranma now."

She slowly trudges towards her bedroom, sleep on her mind and in her movements. In her bedroom, she drops into her bed and is about fall asleep, when she hears some crying coming from the room beside hers.

".....sniff... Ranma.... you silly fool! Why get beat up so badly!?... "

She recognizes the voice of her sister. She feels a tinge of jealousy, but shoves it to the deeper recesses of her mind.

Shampoo : "Sister like Ranma too?"

Taking a drinking glass out and putting it to the wall, Shampoo hears.....

"...Ryoga, I'll get you for beating Ranma up!!!..... Watch your back... I swear I'll return the beating!.... "

Shampoo listens on wonderingly as she hears her sister half-cry, half-swear at Ryoga. Then something else interrupts.

*\*crash\* \*tinkle\**

".....!!! What...!? You!? Who are you!?... "

".....don't worry about who I am.... I'm here to give you something. Here, catch!.... "

".....what is this!? Who are you...!? Hey? Where'd you go?... "

Shampoo quickly puts down the glass, and with all weariness forgotten, runs out her room towards her sister's. Inside, she sees that the window panels have been smashed, glass shards scattered across the floor, her sister staring at a note, and pictures of Ranma all over the room. Ignoring the photos, Shampoo walks over to her sister and taps her shoulder. She looks up from the scrap of paper she is holding.

Shampoo : "What that?"

Conditioner : ".... I don't know exactly. Read it for yourself."

Shampoo takes the note from her sister and reads it.

*"Hey, Conditioner! You wanted revenge on me for beating Ranma up? Come on then, meet me at lot 12 tomorrow after class and I'll see whether you can even touch me! And bring your sister too if you think you're not good enough to even touch me! haa haa haa!*

*-Ryoga Hibiki."*

Shampoo re-reads the note one more time, then passes it back to her sister who simply crushes the note and tosses it behind her into the bin in the corner, a spot anyone else would be hard-pressed to even get close to. Shampoo hmphs in contempt.

Shampoo : "That mean meet lost boy one week from now. He always lost, never find way in one day."

Conditioner : "I don't care. I'll wait until he DOES turn up. I don't care how long it takes. I'll get him! I'll pay him back for beating Ranma up!"

Shampoo realizes that her sister has had a crush on Ranma from the day she met him. Sure, Shampoo hates Ryoga's guts now too, but she knows that even trying to find Ryoga to challenge him would mean using the GPS (Global Positioning System) to locate him, and even so the system might sometimes be unable to find him. Patting her sister's shoulder, Shampoo looks at her as Conditioner turns her head towards Shampoo.

Shampoo : "Sister like Ranma?"

Conditioner nods.

Conditioner : "Yes..."



Then she remembers that Shampoo also likes Ranma. Her eyes open wide.

Conditioner : "Oh... I forgot! You... love him, don't you?" <DAMN DAMN DAMN!>

Shampoo : "Yes."

The two look at each other for a while, the night silent. Shampoo speaks first.

Shampoo : "Well, Shampoo wish sister good luck. Shampoo go bed now. Good night." \*yawn\*

Conditioner watches as Shampoo walks out the door, closing the door behind her.

In her room, Shampoo plops onto her bed, bouncing as the springs move up and down to support her weight.

Grabbing a bolster and hugging it, Shampoo rolls onto her back and closes her eyes, mumbling.

Shampoo : ".....nazenazenazenazenazenaze....." (whywhywhywhy...etc.)

She feels a storm of jealousy rising up within her, as she realizes that her own sister has a thing going for Ranma. Shampoo thinks of all the times she and Ranma shared together, not all of them happy times. Then she compares them with the times she's seen Ranma and her sister get together, and realizes that while she loves Ranma and always tries to show it, Ranma is more receptive to her sister, who takes it slow and steady.

Conditioner sits back down on her bed, resting her chin on her palms. She heaves a sigh, thinking. Then, sick of coming up blank, she just shouts, just soft enough so as not to disturb the others, while running her hands through her hair forcefully, pulling her head back, then just letting go and letting them slump.

Conditioner : <I try to be nice. I try to help people, I don't want much in life. I do my best, and what happens!? The one guy I try to care for ends up in a hospital! Why can't life treat me fairly!? I don't even know why I hate my own grandmother!>

With this strange thought, Conditioner just lies down on her bed and starts thinking about the reasons why she hates Cologne's guts. She thinks back to her village days, about her life during her childhood. She expects at least a partial recollection, but the results surprise her. She remembers every single thing during her childhood, from her duties as a child to what she did in her spare time. However, the bad thing is that while she can REMEMBER, she cannot see the details clearly. All she has is a hazy, general recollection of the memories, as if her memories were partially stripped away. Concentrating hard, she is still unable to recall anything clearly. Except for one thing.....

*It is a dark cave, one of the many dotting the mountainsides surrounding the Joketsuzoku village. Conditioner is with two others, one about her height, and one slightly taller, on a staff. She is confused, unsure. Many times she has asked the taller one on the staff why they are here, what they are doing, but all she gets is a simple but frustrating "Wait and see.". She keeps walking, one foot in front of the other, her mind a blank except for the constant reminder of the darkness all around her.*

*And the fear.*

*A flock of bats, disturbed by the sound, start shrieking and flapping their wings, flying in a frenzied panic. Conditioner and the other person start screaming and shielding themselves from the bats, screaming in fear for their lives as sharp claws belonging to equally scared creatures scratch and tear at them. The one on the staff simply stands there, untouched by the bats. Suddenly, it is over. Conditioner and the other person look up, and see nothing. Smoothing themselves out, they continue on their journey.*

*A light.*

*A light at the end of the cave.*

*"Here we are," says the figure on the staff. "Wait here, don't move." it instructs. The two nod. The figure on the staff hops towards the light, while Conditioner and the other person stand there, faces shadowed by the stalagmite in front of them. It isn't long before the figure comes back. "Come," it says. "We shall begin." The two nod, and walk down towards the light. Conditioner turns to look at the figure besides her for reassurance, as does the other. In that face, Conditioner sees a black shadow, so familiar yet she cannot recall it. "Now, stand here in this circle and don't move." the figure, back facing them, says. They comply. The figure takes out a small pouch and a tome, slightly yellowed with age. Sprinkling the greenish-yellow powder all around the circle, it mumbles some magical intonations. Then, standing in the middle, with Conditioner and the shadow facing each other, the figure, a Cologne 10 years younger taps the ground thrice. Then a bright*

*light erupts from the ground.*  
*Screams, a mad scramble to escape the cave before it collapses.*  
*Darkness.*

"Unhhhh.... Shampoo soooo sleeeeeepppyy....." mutters Shampoo as she walks into her room. Looking at the warm clothing Ranma bought for her, Shampoo sits on her bed, feeling it. Then cries herself to sleep.

Next morning.....

"Bye, sis! I'm off to school!" yells Conditioner as she takes off, out the doors of the Neko Hanten in her school attire, a schoolbag slung on one shoulder. Shampoo and Mousse, who are busy preparing the restaurant for the day's business. Shampoo sleepily waves a hand and goes back to putting the chairs down onto the floor.

Akane, at that moment, is rushing to school by herself, hoping that Kuno won't turn up somehow now that Ranma is in Tofu's clinic, recovering.

Akane : "I'd better bring him something after class! But now, first things first, I gotta avoid Kuno!"

"Ooh! Tendou Akane! The fair and beautiful maiden, chained and shackled by the demon Saotome Ranma! I shall free you from his clutches... just date me!" yells that all too familiar voice.

Akane : <Shimatta! I HAD to say it!>

Turning around to look, she spots Kuno running after her in his school uniform, looking at a sheath of papers, reciting bad poem after bad poem.

Akane : <Since when did Kuno start turning up so.....!?!>

Looking at the school clock in the distance, she realises that it's still very early, and remembers why. So, she ups the pace of her running, hoping to avoid Kuno in the early morning school crowd. No such luck.

Kuno : "Tendou Akane!"

Akane : "Get lost, Kuno!"

Kuno : "Has that evil oni Ranma possessed you with his vile magicks!?"

Akane : "If he did, it's better compared to what you can be as a fiancee anyday!"

Kuno : "So he DID bewitch you! I'll.....\*huack!\*"

Conditioner : "Sorry, Akane. I was busy picking up some spilled homework."

Conditioner leaps onto the back of Kuno's head, then kicks his back as he stumbles backwards, sending him head-first into the school wall. Conditioner skips over to Akane, paper in hand.

Conditioner : "Not too badly winded, I hope."

Akane : "Nope. Owe you one. What's that?"

Akane points to the sheet of paper in Conditioner's hand. Conditioner looks at it and looks shocked. She quickly stuffs it into her bag.

Conditioner : "Oh, er nothing! Just some of my homework! eh... heh heh..."

Nodding at Akane, Conditioner quickly walks off into the school compound, leaving a confused and wondering Akane behind.

In class, the teachers teaching classes 1-F and 2-E notice a trend amongst two of the students. They both spend more time looking at the clock on the wall more than the blackboard or at their textbooks. In addition, the 2-E class teacher notices the newcomer continuously reading a crumpled piece of paper as if her life depended on it, while the one in 1-F just notices Akane not paying very much attention at all.

Break time, and Akane is in the school canteen sitting by herself at one of the seats. Her friends gather around her

and sit down.

Friend #1 : "Akane, what's wrong? You look like you've got something else on your mind."

Friend #2 : "Yeah, what is it? And where's Ranma? We haven't seen him today anywhere."

Friend #3 : "Did something happen to him? Is that why you're acting so strangely today?"

Waiting for a response, the four girls sit in silence, watching Akane, whose face is downcast. She takes a deep breath and shudders. Then she looks up, face all full of false cheer.

Akane : "No, it's nothing. I just hit him too hard last night. He's sleeping it off today."

Her friends know better than to believe her so readily, but they don't pursue the point. Instead, they just get up and move to another seat, near Akane, watching her concernedly.

"Tendou Akane!"

Akane : "Not again!"

Kuno comes running up to Akane, but this time not spouting bad poetry, declaring his love for her, or claiming that he will defeat Ranma one day. Instead, he just applies the brakes and screeches to a halt in front of Akane. Letting the smoke clear, Kuno looks frantic, which makes Akane more than just a little concerned.

Akane : "What is it, Kuno Sempai? You look worried."

Kuno : "Of course I am! Me, the great Tatewake Kuno, age 17, Blue Thunder of Furinkan High School have never been so worried before in my life! Tendou Akane, my sister is missing!"

Akane : <That's good news.> "Why tell me?"

Kuno : "Because....."

He gestures to Akane to come closer so he can whisper into her ear. He mutters a few words which make Akane's eyes open in surprise, and her jaw drop.

Akane : "N...n...nani? You say.... Kodachi may have run off with Ranma?"

Kuno : "Much as I agree to it...."

\*Squish\*

Akane sticks a foot into his face, a very annoyed look on her face.

Akane : "Kuno, Ranma will never go out with Kodachi, much less run off with her. Besides, I know where Ranma is."

Akane removes her foot from Kuno's face as she realises he's still speaking.

Kuno : ".... she should have at least left me a letter telling me that, so that I won't be so worried. Now, I have no idea what might have happened to her. She's been missing three days."

Akane ponders this.

Akane : <This is serious! Kodachi wouldn't just... *disappear* like that without at least telegraphing it first!>

Just then, Conditioner walks up to them. Kuno steps back, as he realizes Conditioner as another potential head stepper.

Conditioner : "What's going on, Akane, Kuno?"

Akane : "Oh, nothing. Just Kuno stating that his sister has been missing for three days."

Conditioner : "No love poems?"

Kuno : "I save that for coming to and leaving school hours."

Conditioner : "Say, you know, I got this small bag of doctored photos last... friday was it? Anyway, it was three days ago at any rate."

Kuno : "Photos from my sister? At your place?"

Conditioner : "Don't ask me. I found them in the bathroom."

Kuno : "My sister doesn't usually leave photos in peoples' bathrooms.... someone must've....."

He gives Conditioner an evil glare.

Kuno : "Did you....."

Conditioner : "Heck, no! I didn't do anything! I just got the photos one day! Don't look at me like that, you!"

Kuno nods, and turns around.

Kuno : "Very well. I shall commence my search for my sister today. If any of you wish to own up, do so. I..."

\*smash\*

A mallet from Akane and a bonbori from Conditioner find their mark on Kuno's head, sending him flying out of school, as the teacher notes down on his attendance book : "Leaving school early."

Akane : "I don't believe how idiotic Kuno can be at times."

Conditioner : "I don't believe how Kuno even managed to get through his first year at elementary school."

Just then, the school bell rings, notifying them that break is over. Conditioner and Akane quickly run off towards the classes as do the other students. However, as Akane follows Conditioner down the common corridor, she spots something sticking out of her pocket, which then flies out and lands at her feet. Akane stops abruptly and picks up the paper, then looks up to call Conditioner, but she has already disappeared. Walking down the corridor into her classroom, Akane reads the scrap of paper.

Akane : "RYOGA HIBIKI!?"

Akane suddenly calls out as she walks into the classroom, scaring everyone in it, including the teacher.

Teacher : "Miss Tendou, please take your seat. Classes are about to start."

The teacher here finished teaching class 2-E just before break, and sighs in defeat as he notices Akane also falling prey to the note-reading fad which seems to be going around the school. He continues to teach the lesson to those who bother to listen.

In class 2-E, Conditioner quickly searches her pockets after taking a seat in the class, and covers her mouth to stop herself from screaming.

Conditioner : <The challenge sheet! It's gone!>

But she quickly calms herself down as she takes a carbon copy of it out from under her desk, and begins reading it.

At the end of school, Conditioner is running out the school gates in a dust storm, leaving behind her a group of coughing, gagging and sneezing students. Akane, from her classroom, spots the dust cloud, and quickly runs down the many levels to follow Conditioner.

She spots Conditioner turning a corner as she leaves the school compound, and quickly follows, reading the note as she goes.

Akane : <Lot 12? That's behind the school, isn't it? But Conditioner is going to have to wait.... Ryoga probably isn't going to turn up for a week!>

At the lot, someone in a yellow tunic wearing a bandanna sets his bag down. Then he sticks his umbrella into the ground.

Ryoga : ".....hm.... this is the place alright. Was harder to find than I thought...." <In this body.>

Eyes gleaming, Ryoga sits down to wait for his opponent. It doesn't take long, as Conditioner appears around the corner. He gets up, grinning and showing his canines, which glint in the sunlight.

Ryoga : "Here she is."

Conditioner comes running into the lot, leaping over the fence rather than go through it or through the spacing in it to allow people in. She lands a small distance away from Ryoga.

Conditioner : "Well well well, Ryoga, you're punctual."

Ryoga : "Yes...."

Conditioner : "You wanted to challenge me to give me a chance to avenge Ranma?"

Ryoga : "Yes.... and I've needed a challenge since then. After defeating Ranma, no one seems difficult anymore."

Conditioner : "Well then, prepare for a challenge such as you've never seen before."

Ryoga : "Come on."

Akane comes running around the corner too, but stops and runs behind the wall for cover as she looks at the scene unfolding before her. Conditioner throws her uniform off to reveal her amazon combat armour.

Ryoga : "No holding back?"

Conditioner : "No. This'll be a fight to the end."

Ryoga : "So be it."

{The Battle, second. The third victim. A secret, told.}

Ryoga and Conditioner stand in their combat stances, Conditioner taking up a more or less common karate stance, while Ryoga takes up a very strange combat stance. As Akane watches, Ryoga seems to be hanging his right arm limply, and the left seems to be held at waist level, his entire body bent over to half height, knees bent. Conditioner looks surprised, but forgets it as she comes over with a flying roundhouse. Grunting with the effort, Ryoga swings his right arm up to parry the kick, and immediately spins his left side around, catching Conditioner squarely in the abdomen, winding her and sending her onto her knees as she lands. Looking up, she spots Ryoga flexing his arm.

Conditioner : <Damn, he's good and fast all right! But I'm better!>

Getting up, Conditioner somersaults backwards, then runs towards Ryoga. He stands there, unmoving, save for the swinging of his arm. At the last moment, she slides, leg out towards Ryoga. As she slides close to him, she spins, trying to sweep him off his feet, but instead he just plants his arm INTO the ground and Conditioner winces as her leg connects with a rock hard pillar of resistance. Ryoga cackles as she supports herself, limping slightly.

Ryoga : "Anything else to show me?"

From the corner, Akane stares in amazement.

Akane : <Ryoga..... he's not only there..... but he's winning! But it's still early. Nothing's confirmed!>

Limping backwards, Conditioner looks at Ryoga, who is apparently overconfident in his power, and feels her leg. She winces as she realizes that the bone itself has bruised, but quickly applies some first-aid acupuncture therapy.

Conditioner : <How to defeat him!? I can't lay a finger on him!>

But, despite this, she tries again. Taking out a pair of bonbories, she slowly edges towards Ryoga in a prepared stance, waiting for him to move. He does.

Changing positions suddenly, Ryoga charges towards Conditioner, roaring. She quickly slides over to one side and raises a bonbori in preparation for a free strike on Ryoga's head as he passes by, unable to stop himself. But, as if expecting it, Ryoga quickly drops to the floor, sliding with momentum, and sweeps his foot along the floor. Conditioner tries to use the same tactics Ryoga applied and sticks her bonbori into the ground, but Ryoga just shatters the concrete mace with his sweep as his foot continues on its path. Conditioner barely manages to hop up in time, but the tip of her foot is hit by the sweep, and she is sent falling down towards the floor. She rolls just as she hits the ground, gaining some distance from him. Conditioner is breathing heavily now, as she assesses her position.

Conditioner : <Damn! That guy's too strong AND fast! I'll have to outthink him!>

Throwing her bonbori at Ryoga as he gets up from his sweep, Conditioner follows suit. Ryoga smashes the mace with his Bakusai-Tenketsu but ends up getting smashed in the face with a flying kick from Conditioner as she appears through the dust cloud. Staggering backwards, Ryoga wipes his nose as Conditioner retreats a small distance again.

Ryoga : "Not bad."

He looks at his fingers, covered in blood from his bleeding nose, and licks it off, savoring the taste, and both Akane and Conditioner feel like retching.

Ryoga : "Nothing like some good blood to get the fighting spirit going, eh?"

Conditioner : "You're sick!"

Ryoga : "No, my dear. Merely slightly unwell."

Conditioner : "You're going to feel a lot worse later! Haah!"

She leaps towards Ryoga again, foot extended. Ryoga quickly drops to the ground, and reaches up to grab Conditioner's foot as she sails overhead, but Conditioner retracts her foot just as she closes in, and instead grabs Ryoga's arm as she sails overhead, and as she lands, she uses the momentum of her jump to pull Ryoga into the air and then into the ground a small distance in front of her. Ryoga rolls and grunts with pain as he lands, getting into his combat stance again. He grins.

Ryoga : "Getting better."

The two begin a running battle around the lot, as the two exchange roundhouse kicks, uppercuts, jabs, knees, sweeps, and other special techniques. At one point, Conditioner barely manages to defend against Ryoga's palm slap, and as the palm hits her arm, she quickly grabs his arm with her free hand and does a backwards somersault, kicking his chin and drawing blood from his mouth. Staggering back, Ryoga wipes his mouth and grins.

Ryoga : "Getting much better here. Watch this."

He quickly leaps into the air, and suddenly drops from the sky, heel down. Conditioner tries to retreat, but her long hair is pinned down by his heel even as she rolls away. Her hair being pulled out by the roots as she is still rolling, Conditioner screams in pain as she finishes her roll several dozen strands of hair short.

Conditioner : "AAAH!! ITAI! (Pain!)"

Rubbing her scalp, she feels the familiar warmth and stickiness of blood running down her neck and into her clothes. Looking at Ryoga with eyes on fire, Conditioner bares her teeth. Ryoga, looking at the hair he just helped uproot from Conditioner's head, grins. He picks up the lock of hair and examines it.

Ryoga : "A pity. It was such nice hair too."

Conditioner : "You. Shall. Pay. For. That. !!!!!!!"

Grabbing a sabre and dagger, (*Conditioner paid a lot to buy a weapons shop in Hammerspace. -Ed.*) Conditioner screams an amazon war cry as she runs up to Ryoga and starts swinging with wild abandon.

Conditioner : "Qu(4) si(3) ba(4), ni(3) zhe(4) ge(4) wang(2) ba(1) dan(4)!" (Go and die, you bastard!)

Ryoga easily avoids each and every strike as he leaps, somersaults, and hops away from each swing. As Conditioner stops for a breather, Ryoga removes his belt and a bandanna, holding one in each hand. Wringing them, he straightens them out and starts spinning them, ready for another round.

Ryoga : "You want weapons, you got weapons."

Conditioner seems to have regained her breath, as she runs towards Ryoga again and this time, she attacks him with precise strokes and slashes, not wanting to waste any energy. Ryoga easily parries and blocks each attack

with his cloth strips, which are as hard as rock in his skilled hands.

Ryoga : "Pheh, you're nothing."

Conditioner : "We'll see about that!"

Conditioner quickly turns her sabre around so that she is holding it like her dagger, blade facing her body. Then she swings both like a pair of tongfers without the handles, with skill unseen by Ryoga in his travels. She goes for a slash to his face, which Ryoga blocks easily, but she quickly takes the chance to stab at his heart. He realizes that he's been duped, and immediately brings an arm down to shield the stab, but receives it in his arm instead, the dagger's tip poking at his chest through his arm. Gasping in pain, Ryoga kicks Conditioner hard in the stomach to get some breathing room, and quickly pulls the dagger out of his arm.

Ryoga : "I was wrong."

Licking his wound, Ryoga takes some herbs out from his pockets and applies it to his wound, and before Akane's and Conditioner's bewildered eyes, the blood stops flowing and the wound closes up. Sucking the blood from his sleeve, Ryoga smiles evilly as he crushes the dagger into powder in his other hand.

Ryoga : "Looks like I'm going to have to show my full power now."

Ryoga bends over, arms crossed over his chest, shaking. Conditioner steps back, wary for any tricks he might pull. Suddenly, the ground begins to shake, and the sky turns dark. Conditioner quickly gets to all fours to maintain her balance on the bucking earth. Looking at Ryoga, she spots a dark shadow rising from his body for a moment, then return into him. Ryoga straightens again, eyes glowing and a very dark green aura surrounding him, the green his characteristic battle aura colour, but dozens of shades darker.

Ryoga : "Now, you shall pay the price."

Ryoga vanishes, and as Conditioner gets up, looking around in circles for signs of him, he suddenly appears above her, and lands on her shoulders.

Ryoga : "Got you!"

Holding her neck with one leg in a death lock, Ryoga hangs by her neck as he swings downwards behind her, head to the ground and grabs her feet with both arms, tripping her. With Ryoga at the bottom as the two fall down, Ryoga uses his spare leg to apply incredible pressure to Conditioner's back, as she begins screaming in pain and pops and cracks can be heard as her spinal cord protests this inhumane treatment, and Akane begins to feel sick as she watches Conditioner's body bend into an angle nobody's body could achieve naturally.

Ryoga : "Now you die. HHAAAHH!"

**\*CRACK\***

With a final kick, Ryoga snaps her back. Conditioner lets out one final whimper, then falls limp. Akane barely screams in absolute terror, but a hand suddenly appears from behind her and applies some acupressure, rendering her unable to move or speak.

Ryoga : "Eh? Who was that?"

Looking at the corner which Akane was a moment ago, Ryoga sees nothing. Shrugging, he drags Conditioner's limp body across the lot and out of sight.

"SSSSHHHHH!! Tendou Akane, if you value your life, you'll be quiet and listen!" berates a familiar, grandmotherly voice in a dark, quiet corner of Neko Hanten.

Cologne stares at a terrified Akane with serious eyes, and she tries to nod despite her immobilized state. Nodding, the withered (BONK! Who's withered!?) old matron releases Akane. Slung on one shoulder is a yellow coloured bag, and some strange herbs can be seen sticking out of it.

Akane : "I...I....I...j..just... saw Ryoga.....k...k.ki..."

Cologne : "Shhh! I know that, Tendou Akane. But, please, bear with me for a while. Something is seriously wrong, that I know for sure. But I'll explain as we go along! Hurry! To the kitchen! We haven't much time!"

Nodding to Shampoo and Mousse, who goes to lock the door with some of his wonderful devices, Cologne leads Akane and Shampoo into the kitchen, where a stash of ingredients have already been stacked into a small pile. Adding the contents of her bag to the medicinal pile already there, Cologne instructs Shampoo to go get a clay pot.

Cologne : "Akane, I know while your cooking is horrible, we need a horrible cook right now."

Akane : "Please! What is going on!? Why all this secrecy!? What about Ryoga!?"

Cologne : "There's the clay pot now! Pass it here Shampoo. Thank you!"

Placing the clay pot onto the massive fire, Cologne pours some vile, brownish black liquid into it. Then, passing gas-masks to the other two in the room, she instructs Akane to do some..... work.

Cologne : "Akane, start cooking up a medicine."

Akane : "What!? I don't even...."

Cologne : "Just do it! That's why we need your skills as a chef! The more worse the medicine tastes, the more effective! And if you want to know what's going on, I'll explain it to you now. Just cook!"

Akane nods. She begins tossing in ingredient after ingredient as Cologne tells the story to her.

Cologne :

"About ten years ago, I was still young.... more or less..... and I wasn't yet as skilled as I am today about the magical arts of our village. Ten years is a long time to us amazons when it comes to learning magic, but not very long otherwise. Anyway, back to our story, when I had my first great-grandchildren, I was so happy that we would have more proud warriors to make our village proud, as well as our country. However, that wasn't enough for me. As I watched Shampoo and Conditioner grow, I realized that even with these two, the slowly dwindling population of our village would require more warriors to win themselves husbands so that the village would remain strong, as others were. Looking at the two prodigies of our clan, I decided that that was what I would do. I would provide the village with two more warriors, of my creation."

Shampoo : "Shampoo thought oh-ba-ba wanted to show off more powerful granddaughters?"

Cologne bigsweats. She continues anyway.

Cologne :

"Looks like my potion didn't work all that well with Shampoo. Anyway, I searched day and night amongst the arcane volumes within our village library before finding what I needed. It was a spell book, one that had the spell of creating people, ones requiring a body, a catalyst, to create a partial duplicate, which would be different enough in its own way. The two would share some memories, and some attributes, but that would be it. I thought that if I could create another pair of twins who were already powerful for their age, we could strengthen our tribe. Boy, was I foolish. Without proper training in the spell, I immediately set about preparing the required glyphs, symbols, memorizing the spell words and acquiring the ingredients. Then I brought my two beloved granddaughters into the cave which I was preparing for the spell. Little did I know that what I was attempting was one of the most difficult spells in the history of our village."

Akane : "So what happened?"

Cologne :

"Oh, the spell worked.... kind of. The problem was, it was too powerful, and it only worked on one of them. The entire cave was destroyed, along with most of the mountainside. I managed to rescue my grand-daughters, but I thought it better to remove from their minds the memory of the tragic accident. I gave the two some amnesia potions which would remove their memories of a certain date and time, which I would say to them. However...."

Akane : <Another mistake.>



Cologne :

"I made another mistake. I gave Conditioner a nearly total blackout amnesia potion..... which when mixed with the bad experience she had had the unfortunate side effect of making her hate the guts of the one who gave her the potion. I was so scared at that time about being punished by the village elders that I didn't read the labels properly. Shampoo was successful, but I quickly brought Conditioner to another part of the village and gave her to aunty Ginko to care for. I wanted to apologise to Conditioner, but.... I was too ashamed. Old people do make mistakes, but not one at my age so easily!"

Akane : <Village ELDERS!? She's nothing compared to them!? Amazing.> "Don't worry, aunty. We all make mistakes. I would've done the same thing if I were just as scared..."

Shampoo : "Clumsy Akane ALWAYS make mistake, no worth Ranma."

Akane : "You want to contest that?"

Akane is already folding up her sleeves, and Shampoo has no sleeves to fold up, so she pushes the skin on her arm up, and the two stare sparks at each other in anticipation of a fight which Cologne breaks up.

Cologne : "You two stop fighting, NOW! We have no time for such petty squabbles! We have another objective here! Akane, go back to cooking your medicine. I'll continue my story."

The two grudgingly return to their work, Akane continues tossing ingredients into the vulgar solution forming in the pot, while Shampoo helps Cologne with some charms and spell readying as Cologne speaks.

Cologne :

"Well, anyway, after the smoke cleared and I returned to the site, I searched the rubble and realised that Shampoo, Conditioner and I weren't the only ones who were in that cave when the spell went awry..... from somewhere, I realised that rocks had been smashed and by brute force, even though I was sure nobody else was in the cave when we went in. Looking at the smashed rocks, I noticed that they were coated in some black substance that looked like and felt like blood, but nothing else."

Akane & Shampoo : "Black substance like blood?"

Cologne :

"Yes.... when I went back to the village to consult the local hermit, he told me that such a spell would always have the risk of failing in even the most well-prepared rituals, and that a..... shadow duplicate, shall we call it, would be created in place of the more or less identical twin. It would be.... stronger, faster, smarter even, and in every way it would be like the original, only better. However, the one thing it would lack would be features. While it would possess the same features and shape of its.... original body.... it would be a black shadow, living in the shadows unable to survive at any time before sunset and after dawn without fading away. He was about to say something else too, but lost his voice at the last moment from shouting too many 'Yam Sengs' the previous night at a party."

(Yam Seng is a chinese phrase people say at toasts to wish long life and good health. Oh, you're supposed to stretch the Seng as long as possible until you run out of breath. The longer the Seng, the better the luck. Or so it says.:) )

Akane : "Did you prepare your ritual well? He did say..... and you did say it was....."

Cologne : "Well, yes. Actually, I didn't really take care when I was CASTING it, because I accidentally wiped away one of the runes of binding....."

\*peng\* (Which is a chinese dialect word for "flip over and fall down". It's hokkien.)

Cologne :

"Don't go falling down all over before I finish my tale! But by and by, that's all I know. But I also know that if we force this medicine down the shadow's throat, or even get it to SMELL the medicine, it'll die. Phew! I can smell it even through this gas mask!" <Provided we actually FIND this shadow!>

"I'm back!"

Conditioner walks through the doorway.... or anyway, the doorway created after smashing through the door. The three look at Conditioner and immediately throw their gas masks and equipment out the window. Unfortunately, Akane also tosses the medicine out the window. The three grin nervously as she passes by. She looks at the three strangely.

Conditioner : "Hi, sis. Hi, Akane. Hi grandma. Why're you three looking at me so strangely?"

The three stammer, nod and grin again, big sweating.

Akane/Shampoo/Cologne : "N..n..nothing....er....go on!"

Giving the three of them a final strange look, Conditioner shrugs and walks off towards her room. The moment that happens, Akane muffles her shriek and runs out and around the Neko Hanten with her mits on, as Cologne and Shampoo look on. She returns a second later, ingredients and all, wheezing and panting.

Akane : "THANK GOODNESS IT LANDED ON KUNO'S HEAD!"

Looking at each other with bewildered faces and shrugging, Shampoo and Cologne whip out another batch of gas masks and put them on, working on the medicine. In addition to that, they get Mousse to use his vacuum cleaner in reverse mode to drive out the medicine's smell so the restaurant won't smell. Then suddenly, Akane remembers something that she forgot during the sudden entry of Conditioner and during Cologne's story.

Akane : "Chotto! Didn't..... Ryoga break Conditioner's back....!?"

..... \*ZAP\*..... a lightning bolt flies through Cologne's and Shampoo's head.

Shampoo : "Conditioner.... back broken, die?"

Cologne : ".....!? Yes.... you are right!"

The three blanch. They begin working at light speed, moving faster than light can catch them. In seconds, they finish what would have taken a full day to complete. Panting, wheezing and gasping, the three stop as soon as the medicine is ready and all spells prepared, falling to the floor in an exhausted pile. Suddenly, Akane gets up.

Akane : "Cologne.... you don't supposed the shadow.... could go after Ranma?"

Cologne : "Should it? I only know it's dangerous, but what it deeds it will do is beyond my knowledge!"

Now that this has been mentioned, the three feel their fear of the shadow rise a few dozen notches higher. Akane nods, and takes off her apron and mits.

Akane : "Anyway, I gotta go to Ranma! Someone's gotta protect him, even if I don't stand a chance to touch Conditioner, let alone her shadow."

With this, she quickly runs out the window, the gas mask the last to go as she disappears through the door and off poor Mousse's flattened body. He groans once, adjusts his broken spectacles, then decides to pass out for the rest of the day.

\*tat\* \*tat\* \*tat\* \*tat\* \*tat\*

Akane rushes full speed towards Dr. Tofu's clinic, kicking up a dust cloud behind her. She reaches the clinic near late afternoon, wheezing even more from the exertion of the run added to the exhaustion in the kitchen of Neko Hanten. Knocking weakly on the door, she barely manages to open it, and stumbles in. Tofu is busy patching the last few wounds on Ranma, who is wearing his chinese pants and shoes, but is topless. Ranma spots Akane red-faced and sweating.

Ranma : "Eh, Akane! Nani o, desu ka?"

Akane : "Oh! Ranma! You're still alright!"

Ranma : "If you can call this alright."

Akane looks at the bandages across his chest, around his abdomen, and on his head, a bandage covering his right eye. Tofu finishes with the last bandage on his arm, then pats it and turns around to face Akane. What he doesn't notice is that Ranma's body is jerking like he was shocked by 100 megawatts of electricity from that pat.

Tofu : "Ah, Akane-san! Come to see Ranma-kun then? Don't worry about him, he'll be fine in a few days, just don't let him get into any fights."

Akane has by now walked over a chair and has taken a seat. Getting her wind back, she takes a deep breath, then gets up and speaks in a frantic tone in Tofu's face.

Akane : "But..... that's exactly what I've come to tell Ranma. Something bad has come..... something really bad, and now, we've got to be on our guard or else we could be its next victims!"

Tofu and Ranma look at each other, then at Akane. Tofu pushes his spectacles up, the light reflecting off them.

Tofu : "Akane, what are you talking about? Come, sit down and explain it to us."

Tofu offers Akane a seat near Ranma's clinic bed, and he himself sits down, a serious expression on his face. Ranma, too weak, injured and currently nice to look bored, also looks at her with a serious expression.

Tofu : "Go ahead, Akane, we're listening."

And taking another deep breath to steady herself, she tells the two about everything she saw from the time Ranma entered the clinic until the time she started her story, talking about Tatewaki's missing sister, the challenge of Ryoga and Conditioner, Ryoga's unusual battle style, the killing of Conditioner, the story of Cologne, the shadow on the loose that is presumed to be somewhere in Nerima. The two listen to Akane's story with deadly seriousness and note down every word. However, Ranma looks surprised at the mention of Ryoga's battle style, his needless killing, and Tofu to the mention of the blood.

Ranma : "Matte, Akane! Did you say that..... Ryoga fought with a limp arm?"

Akane : "Yup."

Ranma considers this. He recalls his lore lessons from some time ago, from someone when his father wasn't looking.

In China.

Ranma : "Loose arm? It sounds familiar.... like..... some sort of insane guy was reputed to use it once. He was so unstable his style was never the same, although the pose..... was the same. In fact, it was like an epidemic of skill.... as when he was finally found dead one day, another person acquired the skill. Someone who was never really connected to the guy, but was liked by him. A girl. She hunted those who were reputed to have killed the guy out of fear. She never even held anything more dangerous than a chopping knife in her life, and there were stories that she used her bare hands and..... killed those men. Like Ryoga!"

Then Tofu speaks up.

Tofu : "Black blood? I've heard tales of this strange occurrence before. Once, when I was still an apprentice.... I too went to China. That was when I was called by my teacher to examine the corpses of three people, one *young* girl and two boys, their necks or backs.... brutally broken and shattered into coarse dust. I noticed traces of black blood around the place, and on the sharp sticks the children carried for protection. It was unlike anything I've ever seen before. It would not congeal, it had no smell, it would not even glint in strong sunlight, and had.... no taste. I spat it out immediately though, because it felt like something evil was in it. I had heard of a strange black figure prowling around the place.... and the group of children was one person missing. There was supposed to be another boy with them. He vanished. He was rumoured to have been seen multiple times around the village, but nothing more."

The three look very worried at this prospect as the stories link up very well in relation to Cologne's story. Ranma is busy putting on a sleeveless blue shirt, moving his bandaged arm as little as possible. Akane comes over to help

him do so, then Ranma looks at Akane with hurt in his eyes. Not the physical type.

Ranma : "Akane, I'm sorry."

Akane : "For what?"

Ranma : "Hurting your feelings, of course!"

Akane : "Since when!?"

Ranma : "Baka! Those few days ago, when I was on a forced date with Shampoo of course! I'd really like to make it up to you! I'm SORRY!"

Akane : "Who's a bak....."

Then she realizes something. Ranma just apologised, no prompting needed. Tofu is busy leafing through a book hardly worn from years on the bookshelf, but pages yellowed with age. What he doesn't notice is Akane and Ranma kissing each other behind his back. Very passionately.

Tofu : "Hm..... shadows.... shadows.... black blood..... black blood..... unnatural skill? Hm..... ah, here we are. Ranma, Akane, look here."

He waits patiently, and only hears some deep breaths begin taken, some soft moans. He clears his throat. The two are at his side in a flash.

Akane & Ranma : "Yes, Tofu-sensei?"

Tofu smiles inwardly, then points to his book. More precisely, at a diagram in his book. Similar to Cologne's, but detailing the weak and strong spots on the body instead of the vital, but not necessarily weak, points, on the body.

Tofu : "Look here. I've found a page with information pertaining to this shadow we seem to know so much about. See this red spot here? The book says this is the shadow's strongest point, and that any damage to it will reduce its overall energy. Enough will destroy it."

Ranma smiles and grins at the prospect of an easy weak point.

Ranma : "Wonderful! All we have to do is hit it really hard and....\*GURNK\*!"

Tofu raises his pointed finger up to silence Ranma and emphasise a point, but.... (yucks) ends up in Ranma's nose. Akane sticks a tongue out and her eyes dilate to a line and dot, as Tofu wipes the mess off his fingers with a tissue.

Tofu : "Not so easy. This point is INSIDE the body, and normal punching won't work. You've got to get it when its defense is down. Very down. Here are the other weak points on the body, but when I say weak, I don't mean baby weak, I mean points which are only so much .....| ..... less powerful than the rest of the body."

Ranma and Akane stare at each other, dumbfounded. Tofu slaps his book shut, creating a dust cloud that leaves them all choking and sneezing. Tofu apologizes for the tome's dustiness.

Tofu : "Sorry, that book was a gift from one of the villages in China where I treated the sick for free. They insisted I take it or feel pain."

Taking a carbon copy out from out of the closed book and handing it to Ranma and Akane, Tofu points at them.

Tofu : "Here's a copy of that page. You'll need it. Good luck."

The two look at it and nod back at Tofu.

Ranma : "Don't worry, I'll.... er.... we'll get rid of it!"

Akane : "I'll get rid of it. You can't fight yet."

Ranma : "Says who!? I can.... \*OUCH!\*!"

Akane prods his ribs. He wipes away the tears and nods.

Ranma : "Alright, you win. But what am I gonna do!? Sit around and watch you get creamed!?"

Akane : "I'll have help."

Ranma : "Sure, sure. Come on, let's go find our help."

Akane : "This way. Come on, you!"

Akane drags Ranma by the pigtail along the floor, then into the air as she breaks out into a run. Tofu watches them speed off. He sighs, takes off his glasses to wipe them clean, puts them back on, and nods.

Tofu : "You'll need it."

{Shock, the revelation!}

".....huh? Where am I.....?"

"The river Styx, you might say."

"....here? Again? Am I dead this time for sure?"

"No, not yet, grandson. You must return to the land of the living once more. And don't come back here until you're at least 70 and with many children who will carry on the Hibiki bloodline!"

".....how do I get back to the living world? I've got the directional sense of a cabbage!"

"Ah.... just wake up then!"

"EEEEAAARRGGHH!!!!" yells Ryoga as he gets up from the grass floor he was lying on. Then, he suddenly feels his entire body ache, as if he slept an entire night on a bumpy, rocky surface. Looking around him, he scratches his bandannaed head and wonders.

Ryoga : <Where am I!? The last I remember, I was.... black figure.... wait, I remember!>

He suddenly recalls the night he was attacked by some strange black figure who moved unbelievable fast. Then he remembered having his neck broken! He feels his neck, and the pain shoots through his entire body like a hot fire-bolt. He winces.

Ryoga : <Ouch. That hurts. Whatever happened earlier on, that thing sure knew how to bring me back to life....>

Then he suddenly remembers everything ELSE that happened when he was.... not himself. The shocking images.... of Conditioner fighting him, of him licking his own wounds and blood.... of him killing Conditioner. The only bright thing in his memories is not getting lost for almost ONCE in his life.

Ryoga : <NO! It can't be! I.... really killed someone!>

Suddenly, he looks around again and notices Furinkan high in the distance. He remembers the lot, where he stopped remembering things after he....

Ryoga : <No! It wasn't me! It was.... that.... thing!>

After the not-Ryoga dragged Conditioner's body into the bushes.

Pulling a bandanna off his head, he begins wringing it nervously and crying.

Ryoga : <I killed someone! I KILLED SOMEONE! I *KILLED SOMEONE!*>

"Hooii! Akane, matte da yo!" (Akane, wait!)

"Nan desu da yo!?" (What is it!?)

"Ano hito wa.... Ryoga-kun desu ne?" (Isn't that person..... Ryoga?)

"IIIIIEEE!!! HAYAKU, NIGERU!!!!!!!" (NOOOOOO!!!! RUN AWAY!!!!!!)

Ryoga looks at the two, as Ranma holds Akane's uniform by the waist as Akane struggles to run away. She is screaming in absolute fear as Ryoga walks, half-dazedly, over to the two. Ranma peers at him from his one good eye, ready to fight if needed, but it seems that Ryoga is in no mood to even lay a hand on him. Ryoga pats

Ranma's shoulder.

Ryoga : "Eh...? Ranma.... hi. Sorry about what happened.... last night?"

Ranma : "Yeah, you're lucky I'm a very fast healer and Tofu's a very good doctor." <Eh? Ryoga ain't that blood-thirsty monster Akane told me about.>

Akane is still screaming and attempting to run when she suddenly stops. She turns around to look at Ryoga, who returns the look and face is filled with pain.

Akane : "You're not really the Ryoga who killed Conditioner, are you?"

Ryoga : "I don't even know which Ryoga I am now!"

He begins crying. Akane takes his bandanna and starts wiping his tears away, as Ranma watches jealously.

Akane : "... there now.... don't cry! You're a guy! Otoko da yo! Get a grip on yourself!"

Ryoga : "I... KILLED..... someone!"

Akane : "...but..... if you killed Conditioner.... why is she still walking?"

This causes him to take in a sudden and deep breath, nearly choking him on his own tears. He takes his bandanna back and rubs his eyes, then looks at Akane disbelievngly.

Ryoga : "She's still moving!? That means....."

Ranma : "She's still alive, yeah. Akane, why didn't you tell this to us earlier on?"

Akane : "Gomen, I forgot."

Ranma : ".....nevermind! Let's get to that old bat and help her get rid of this strange shadow!"

\*BOP\*

Cologne : "Who's an old bat!?"

The three look around and see Cologne standing there with Shampoo, flask in hand. Ranma suddenly looks dazed, the place where Cologne hit him.... incidentally it's one of the more seriously injured parts. Cologne splashes some cold water on him to wake him up.

Ranma (C) : "brrr...! Samu-I! Whaddya do THAT for!?" (Cold!)

Cologne : "Why I hit you or splashed you? I hit you to for calling people names. I splashed you to keep you conscious and attentive... girls seem to be more attentive than guys."

Ranma (C) : "Not true!" (Sticks a tongue out.)

Cologne : "Anyway, now all we have to do is wait until dark when the shadow will appear and then we can force this stuff down its throat. If we can catch it."

Ranma (C) : "Pheh, I've got something better.... here, look at this."

She shows Cologne the scrap of paper Tofu gave them. Cologne examines it, then nods.

Cologne : "Very good, grandson-in-law. If we can use both, it might completely destroy it!"

Ranma (C) : "But who's going to fight it? I'm in no shape to, Shampoo's sister couldn't defeat Ryoga, Akane can't fight well....."

Akane : \*Ahem\*

Ranma : "Ok, she can fight, but not enough..... and you, old mummy? Why not?"

Cologne : "Who's an old mummy!? Well, I can't really destroy my own creations! The spellbook states that the spellcaster can't destroy its own creations."

Ranma (C) : "Well, we've got to think of SOMETHING!"

Akane : "Why not come over to our place and have a drink while we consider?"

Everyone starts nodding and chattering, agreeing to Akane's plan. They bustle off towards Akane's place, Shampoo fussing over Ranma's bandaging, Ryoga trying to convince himself that something strange is going on, Cologne and Akane discussing how best to get rid of the shadow. Reaching the Dojo, Soun and Genma are both playing a game of Shogi, when the two hear them arriving. Soun turns and looks at the crowd of five people, and

shouts to Kasumi in the back yard, suntanning, to go get some tea ready.

Soun : "Hoi, Kasumi-chan! We've got some guests!"

Kasumi : "Hai, otosan. I'll go get them some tea."

The crowd parts around the two shogi players then gathers again at the table, as Kasumi comes around the corner with a tray with eight cups and a teapot. Soun and Genma move over to join them.

Soun : "Ranma! Glad to see you're getting better! Say, what's going on now? Why so many people?"

Genma (C) : "Yes, Ranma, what is going on?"

As Kasumi serves the tea, everyone settles down, then Ranma tells them the story so far, with Akane, Shampoo and Cologne adding their own stories to the happenings going on around them. The rest listen intently, Kasumi going 'Oh my' at the mention of the killings by Tofu.

".....so, Tofu said he saw some black blood..... as did Cologne..... some children killed....."

{The fourth victim. Battle, third.}

At the Kunos', Kuno is busy, both shouting at Sasuke to help search Nerima for his sister, as well as searching the compound for her.

Kuno : "Hurry, you worthless servant! Hurry and find my sister or you shall get no food tonight!"

Sasuke : "Yes, master!"

\*riiing\* \*riiing\*

Something in Sasuke's clothes rings. He leaps over to Kuno, busy looking under the floorboards, and offers him the phone.

Sasuke : "Master, your handphone."

Kuno snatches the phone away, and Sasuke waits patiently besides him.

Kuno : "Yes, you have contacted the great Kunos' residence, living area of the great Tatewake Kuno, age 17, Blue Thunder....."

Voice over the line : "*....cut the crap, Kuno! If you want to see your sister, I suggest you come over to Lot 17 and get her from me! If you can defeat me, that is!*"

\*click\*

Kuno : "Hurry, Sasuke! Fetch me my honored bokken! I shall go and rescue my demented sister from her vile kidnapper!"

Sasuke : "Hai!"

The two leave the compound towards the nearby Lot 17, Kuno running his hand over his wooden sword back and forth, in anticipation of a fierce fight, reassuring himself.

At Lot 17.....

Conditioner : "Pheh, these Kuno are really crazy. Lucky I don't have to deal with them much."

Outside the lot, Kuno turns to Sasuke.

Kuno : "Sasuke, stay here. If anything happens, get help. Anyone good enough to best my sister is formidable indeed. Hear me?"

Sasuke : "Yes, master. I hear and obey."

Kuno walks into the grassy lot, and spots Conditioner in the distance wearing a cheongsam. He shouts to her.

Kuno : "You! Are you the one who kidnapped my sister!?"

Conditioner : "Yeah! You want her, come get me first!"

Kuno : "Prepare for a sound beating! HAAAA!"

Kuno charges straight at Conditioner, who is simply standing there. Thrusting his sword through Conditioner's abdomen, he realizes that she isn't there anymore. The illusion he stabbed dissipates into inky blackness, then nothing. He immediately spins around, sword extended, expecting a sneak attack.

Kuno : "Show yourself, coward, and fight like a man!"

Voice : "If I were a man, I'd lose immediately."

Conditioner appears from above Kuno, ready to drop down on him. But Kuno has had a LOT of experience of this kind of head-stepping, face stomping attacks, and Conditioner's one is fairly slow-descending compared to some other times. Swinging his sword upwards in a rounded manner, he uses the momentum to roll himself away at the same time. Incidentally, instead of simply distracting the attacker and buying him some time, he strikes home.

**\*GASH\***

Conditioner drops to the ground, her lower right leg hanging onto her knee by a thin thread of sinew and skin. Blood gushes out, as Conditioner gasps. Kuno looks at his sword, stained with thick blood, and wipes it on the grass, which is already stained by the blood from Conditioner's wound.

Kuno : "How's that for power? Admit defeat now, and bring my sister to me, and I might let you live."

Conditioner : "....you....wished....."

She grins, then places a hand over the wound. The sinew and skin snap, the severed section falling to the floor and dissolving into shadow. Immediately, the leg regenerates, the stump sending out veins, arteries and flesh to reconstruct the severed portion. As Kuno and Sasuke watch in disgust, the half-severed leg is whole again in a few seconds, and except for some dried blood, nothing remains of her injuries.

Conditioner : "Come on, you want to kill me, go for the head! Haa haa!"

Kuno is too dumbfounded to do anything now, sweat pouring down his neck. But, in the end, sibling love/hate causes him to pluck up enough courage to attack again. He spots Conditioner waiting for him in a strange stance, right arm hanging down and left hand at the abdomen, waiting.

Kuno : "I will not surrender to one as inhuman as you, demon. Die! Feel the wrath of my mighty bokken!"

Kuno is fast, and with a much longer range than Conditioner can manage, which helps him gain a small advantage as the fight wears on. Here and there, Conditioner suffers a few nicks and cuts, all of which scab immediately, but she can feel the weariness of blood loss eating at her as the battle enters its most furious stage. Back-flipping a poorly aimed thrust, Conditioner begins thinking.

Conditioner : "No....time....to....regenerate blood!"

Kuno charges again, and strikes out again. Finally, deciding the Limp-arm style isn't enough, Conditioner reverts to her original stance, sidesteps the attack, and grabs Kuno's sword as he passes. Kuno stops in surprise, and tries to pull his sword out of her hand.

Kuno : "Stain not that sword with your impure touch, fiend!"

Conditioner : "Nice sword. But weak."

With a twist of her hand, she crushes the area of the sword she is holding into dust, and the destruction spreads throughout the sword, cracks forming. Then, it shatters into hundreds of wooden splinters and shards. Kuno shields himself from the attack, as Sasuke (outside the lot, still watching) pulls out another one and tosses it to Kuno.



Sasuke : "Master, catch!"

Kuno : "Got it!"

Kuno catches the sword, and begins spinning it like a helicopter's blades to ward off the rest of the incoming shrapnel. The last of the shrapnel deflected, Kuno looks at Conditioner, untouched by the storm. In fact, as he watches, her flesh wounds start disappearing one by one. Her eyes are closed, her body still, breathing slow. A perfect chance to strike.

Kuno waits.

Kuno : <It is dishonorable to attack an unready opponent.>

Conditioner opens her eyes, and sees Kuno charging towards her. She somersaults backwards as he slashes, a loud "pop" sound heard as he cuts a vacuum into the air itself and then the air filling in the vacuum. Conditioner looks on as she lands on one toe, waiting.

Conditioner : "Come on, your attacks aren't going to touch me unless you change styles, ne?"

Kuno : "Then feel my "Strike of the Sibling's Binding"!"

Kuno charges towards Conditioner, sword held behind him by his side, and suddenly he leaps into the air. Conditioner looks on with bored disinterest as the sun shines on Kuno's back and reflects off his sword.

Kuno : "CHOP!"

He comes straight down, sword glinting. Conditioner yawns. As he is about to strike her head and split it open, she suddenly falls onto her back and extends a foot. She catches the blade between her toes, through the shoe. Kuno's nose bleeds a little as he looks at a rather private region of Conditioner's, exposed by her drop. Conditioner notes this. Tossing Kuno into the ground, she runs up to his prone form and starts slapping him left and right.

Conditioner : "Hentai! Ecchi! Pervert! Sex maniac! Disgusting! Sick! Rotten good-for-nothing! Dare look at a girl's underwear like that!? I'll teach you!"

Kuno doesn't feel the slaps she applies, as his nose bleeds a little more. His face is one of ecstatic calmness, as he ponders what he just saw.

Kuno : <ooooh.....>

One particularly hard slap dazes him for a while, then he suddenly remembers something as he sees them floating above his head.

Kuno : <The Pigtailed goddess and Akane Tendou! I cannot let her kidnap them too! I must defeat her!>

Regaining some semblance of consciousness, Kuno begins feeling the power behind the slaps, and he uses his bokken to push Conditioner off him.

Kuno : "No! I shall not bow to you, fiend of the fiends! I shall defeat you this day or my name isn't....."

Conditioner : "Cut the crap."

Conditioner somersaults over to Kuno, a drop kick aimed at his face. It connects full force. Kuno is mostly unaffected. Wiping the dirt off his face, he looks intently at Conditioner.

Kuno : "I've had too many of those. Try something else."

Conditioner : "I think I will."

Conditioner vanishes in a flash of blackness, then appears behind Kuno. She presses various points on his neck and causes him to fall onto the floor, eyes blank, but breathing. Conditioner flexes her fingers.

Conditioner : "Now that the big one's been felled.... let's go for the small one."

She turns around to look for Sasuke, whose face is contorted in agony between running to get help, or helping his master.

"....anything happens, get help..... anything happens, get help....."

Sasuke, always the loyal servant, decides to follow his master to the last word. Just then, he spots Conditioner coming over to him, hand extended. He yelps, then hops back a few steps.

Sasuke : "Stay away, you!"

Conditioner : "Don't worry, I won't bite..... not yet."

Sasuke : "eeeEEEE!!!!"

He shoots some of his ninja-equipment webbing at her, which she cuts to pieces quickly. But Sasuke uses this to make good his escape, and as Conditioner looks on, she feels frustrated at the quickly vanishing figure over the rooftops.

Conditioner : "No matter, he is of no threat to me. Now..... let's bring Kuno to see his sister....."

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"HEEEELLPPP!!! RAAAANMMAAAA-SAAAMAAAAA!!!! MIISS AAKAANEEEE!!!! HEEEEELLPPP!!!!"

The people at the Tendou Dojo are discussing the final points of their attack plans, when Sasuke comes bursting through the door, filthy and desperate. Ranma and Akane stare at him as he runs up to them, panting.

Sasuke : "My...my... my master...K..k..Kuno...."

Ranma (C) : "Whoa, calm down there you! Get a grip on yourself! Sit down and tell us about it."

Sasuke nods, then walks over and sits at one end of the table. Ranma and Akane nod at him. He sips some green tea before continuing.

Sasuke : "As I was saying, my master, Tatewake Kuno, recieved a call today. I followed him to Lot 17, and there he challenged a girl.... a long, blue-haired girl. She claimed to know where my mistress master was."

Shampoo and Cologne look on in shock. Sasuke continues.

Sasuke : "This girl used one style the likes of which I had never seen. It was like she had a broken right arm and a bandaged left one."

Ranma (C) : "Like this?"

Sasuke looks at Ranma, who basically looks like that already, right hand limp and left hand at her abdomen, both bandaged..... he nods.

Sasuke : "Like that. And the strange thing was, she could.... teleport in a flash of blackness..... and she bled black."

ALL : "BLACK!?"

Sasuke : "Yes. The sun was going down, but I could tell. It was black."

\*silence\*

Everyone looks at each other for a while. Suddenly, a bolt goes through Akane's head.

Akane : "Yes! I remember now! I saw Ryoga bleed black too! When he was fighting.... Conditioner....."

Ryoga looks at himself, then his eyes grow wide as he looks at his arm. The arm he used to stop Conditioner's stab had the cloth cut and stained black. Everyone looks at him. He looks back at them and blinks, unknowingly.

Ryoga : "....I....don't....know....."

Ranma (C) : "Only one way to find out....."

Everyone knows what this means. They all immediately turn eyes, except Shampoo and Cologne, who look on with interest. Ranma-chan flattens her expression, but regains her normal one. Ryoga looks on, confused, then with shock and alarm as Ranma unbuttons her shirt..... and takes out an ecchi picture of Akane to show Ryoga. *(Alright! She only unbuttoned half her shirt, it was still a decent looking Ranma!! -Ed.)* His nose spurts blood. Ranma has already buttoned her shirt back up and is tearing the picture up, and nods.

Ranma (C) : "Hey, it's red."

Everyone breathes a sigh of relief and turns around again. Ryoga reaches over and grabs Ranma-chan by the collar.

Ryoga : "What's the meaning of this, showing me this kind of thing!??!"

Ranma grins nervously and puts up a peace sign, sweating.

Ranma (C) : "Come on, it was the only way! Would you rather have us cut you so you could bleed?"

Ryoga and the rest appear to consider this. They nod. Ryoga lets go of Ranma.

Ryoga : "Yeah, you're right."

Cologne : "Now that we've solved one thing, that Ryoga isn't bleeding black anymore and therefore not under the shadow's influence, we have one other thing to overcome....."

Ranma (C) : "What's that?"

Cologne : "We now know that the shadow can possess people."

Silence.

Ranma (C) : "...what?"

Cologne : "From all the evidence in the stories Akane and my grandson-in-law here have told me, as well as what I know by myself, I'd say the shadow is capable of entering a person's body and using that person as a vessel for survival."

Shampoo : "Oh-ba-ba no mean....."

Cologne : "We're not sure though.... the shadow wasn't supposed to be able to live in the sunlight. But if it can and did possess one of us, it could."

Shampoo : "Akane say she saw Ryoga break sister's back. Maybe....."

Ryoga : "... I remember something else!"

All of them look at him. He cracks some knuckles and begins to think.

Ryoga : "I remember that day I... defeated Ranma..."

Ranma shoots him a very deadly look. Ryoga ignores it.

Ryoga : "I was camping in the forest..... and I was boiling some water when something caused the shadow to flicker. Then the shadow attacked me.... the last thing I remembered that day was the shadow grabbing my neck.... then nothing."

Cologne thinks hard. But Shampoo speaks up before her.

Shampoo : "Lost boy mean shadow have to kill person to enter body?"

Cologne : "But it would mean the shadow would leave a dead body behind if it just animated it for its own use!"

Ryoga : "Apparently I'm still here, so I'm guessing....."

Cologne brainstorms hard, everyone else looking at her intently for all the answers. She snaps her fingers.

Cologne : "I got it! If the body has a life force, the shadow cannot replace it. But if it removes that life force and puts itself in, it would be able to heal itself afterwards, as Akane and Sasuke here testified, that would mean it only animates the body long enough to resurrect it!"

Shampoo : "Res..su...rect?"

Cologne : "Bring it back to life."

Ranma (C) : "Impossible!"

Cologne : "The spellbook I read from mentioned many unusual things the shadow duplicate could do..... this is one of the many unknown factors it is capable of, apparently."

Shampoo : "Now Shampoo sure sister possessed."

Cologne : "By the monster I created intended to duplicate Conditioner. Instead, it now IS Conditioner."

Ranma (C) : "Does that mean we have to find a way to get it out of the body now?"

Shampoo stamps the table with her palms, breaking holes into the table and floor. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she stares hard at Ranma-chan.

Shampoo : "No! Conditioner still alive! No say body! NO SAY DEAD!"

Ranma swallows and rephrases her sentence.

Ranma (C) : "Does that mean we have to get it out of Conditioner now without hurting her?"

Sasuke : "Excuse me and all pardons due, but hurting her wouldn't do much. I saw her regenerate an entire leg."

Just then, as the group are all sullen and pondering, Akane looks at the floor and notices the blood-red light.

Akane : "It's sunset....."

Cologne : "Soon.... the shadow might make an appearance if it isn't already in Conditioner."

At that moment, Kasumi, who left the discussion early, pops her head out of the kitchen and shouts down the corridor.

Kasumi : "Dinner'll be ready in a while. Please stay and eat."

Everyone does, and as Kasumi serves the dishes, everyone's ill mood disappears and is replaced with hungry enthusiasm. Dinner is over in twenty minutes, and everyone, now full, begin to look forwards to stopping the shadow before it gets worse.

Cologne : "Come, let us go and find this shadow. We can figure out how to....."

Ranma (C) : "AAAAIIIEEEEE!!!! GET OFF ME YOU HENTAI!"

Happosai : "Aahhh! So soft, warm and comfortable! Makes me glad you're my disciple!"

Akane mallets Happosai off Ranma. Ranma, stepping on Happosai's head, gives him an evil glare.

Ranma (C) : "You freak! Do that one more time and I'll....."

Happosai : "You ingrate! I leave for so long, and you don't even say hello to me when I return? Didn't you miss me!?"

Ranma (C) : "I only missed the opportunity to toss you into the sun when I had the chance!"

Cologne : "Hey, what's this argument about? Ranma, you're a man! Don't act like a girl!"

Ranma (C) : "I'm in my girl form now, so what!?"

Akane : "Say, wait a minute. Cologne, you did say Happosai was in your village once?"

Cologne : "That I did."

Happosai : "What's this about being in Cologne's village? Need something do you?"

Happosai pushes Ranma off him, and hops onto the table, smoking. He looks at Akane.

Happosai : "Well, what is it? I'm listening!"

Akane : <Ah what the heck.> "We've this problem, see... with a certain shadow...."

Happosai : "What!? A black image caused by blocking out light and you have a problem with that!?"

Akane : "WILL YOU LISTEN!?! This isn't an ordinary shadow, mind! It's a living one, caused by some spell...."

Happosai : "Oh, THAT shadow. Why didn't you say so earlier? Ah well. I know a lot about that, for sure!"

Ranma walks over to Happosai and picks him up by the collar, shaking him.

Ranma (C) : "Then tell us!"

Happosai easily hops out of Ranma's grip, and lands on the floor behind them. They all look at him.

Happosai : "Well, the way I see it, the shadow you people are talking about is powerful, but I know its weakness!"

All : "And what's that?"

Happosai : "Tell Ranma to wear this and I'll talk."

\*BASH\*

Ranma (C) : "And don't come back this time!"

Ranma heaves a sigh of relief as Happosai disappears again as a star into the heavens above. Everyone looks at Ranma, then they all shrug. Cologne is the first to get up.

Cologne : "Well, we're wasting time here. Come on, those of you who want to come help us follow."

Shampoo, Sasuke, Akane, Shampoo, Ryoga and Ranma all get up. Cologne looks at Ranma and shakes her head.

Cologne : "Are you sure you can fight?"

Ranma (C) : "If I can move, I can fight."

Cologne : "It's your neck, although I'll try to preserve it for Shampoo when you two marry."

Ranma (C) : <You wished. She's nice, but I like Akane more.> "Lead on."

Cologne hops out the gates of the Tendou Dojo, everyone standing up following. Soun watches as they leave and bids them a tearful farewell.

Soun : "Come back safe and sound!"

Genma (C) : "Bwoaaak!"

{The hunt is on!}

"Where do you think she is now?"

"What might an evil, blood thirsty shadow be doing now?"

"Er.... sleeping?"

"Ranma no right, Akane no right. Shampoo no know either, but Shampoo hope Neko Hanten."

The group is walking along the streets of Nerima, looking out for anything that might be black and moving. Ryoga has his hand tied via bandanna to Sasuke, who volunteered to help Ryoga not get lost. The group looks around nervously, wondering what the shadow might look like now.

Akane : "Ranma, I'm scared."

Ranma (C) : "Why's that, Akane?"

Akane : "The shadow... it's been killing people, then possessing them! You don't suppose it's using Kuno's body now?"

Shampoo : "Kuno? No, Shampoo know shadow no use Kuno. Sasuke say shadow no kill Kuno, mean no use to possess."

Ranma (C) : "A pity. I would've liked to seen a smarter Kuno."

Akane : "Ranma!"

Ranma (C) : "Just kidding. I like Kuno the way he is. Stupid, easy to fool and defeat."

The group, quietening down again, begins their search in earnest. Cologne divides the group into sections of two people each. Cologne with her great-granddaughter, Ranma with Akane, and Sasuke.... to Ryoga. Not that they have much choice.

Cologne : "Alright, remember, if you see either Conditioner or the shadow, don't be afraid to scream or shout."

All : "Got it."

Cologne : "Move out."

The three groups of two each move out along different avenues, intent on finding the shadow so that they can destroy it.

On a rooftop, watching Ranma and Akane, Conditioner watches with glowing eyes an a curiosity.

"....Ranma.... I'm scared...."

"....shh.... don't worry, I'll protect you!...."

"....what if the shadow possesses me!?!...."

"....You'd be cuter?..."

"....Ranma!...."

"....sorry, but I won't let that happen. Don't worry....."

"...I feel better already....."

Conditioner : "hm.... looks like this Akane likes Ranma.... but this isn't the male Ranma I like, it's a woman. Wonder where he went to?"

"....I'd feel better if you were a guy now. You'd be stronger...."

"....lucky Kasumi packed some hot water...."

Conditioner watches as the female Ranma changes into a guy under the street lamps, partially obscured by the steam cloud. Its eyes glow brighter, then dim again.

Conditioner : "Yes. She shall be the one I will use."

Conditioner shimmers, then seperates into a hundred horizontal lines that vanish.

\*tinkle\*

Akane : "!!? Huh!? Ranma!!"

Ranma : "....? Akane? What's wrong?"

Akane : "Thought I heard something....."

\*woof\* \*woof\*

A dog walks out from around the corner Akane heard the sound from. She lets out a sigh of relief. Ranma taps her shoulder and nods.

Ranma : "Don't worry. I'm here. Just scream if you see it, alright?"

Akane : "Ok."

The two walk down a street where the street lamps are malfunctioning and flicker on and off. As Akane walks behind Ranma, she feels a sense of dread. She looks behind her.

Shadows. Unmoving shadows.

She breathes a sigh of relief, and walks a little faster. She doesn't notice one of the shadows detaching itself from the rest and moving along the ground. They are turning a corner, as Ranma sees some people on the street.

Ranma : "Say, I'd better tell them to be careful about the stalker tonight. Alright, Akane? Akane?"

Ranma looks behind him, and sees nobody. He feels a sense of dread, and moves back towards the corner to see if anything has become of Akane. He bumps into her, and she falls down.

Akane : "Baka! Why don't you watch where you're going!?"

Ranma : "Sorry, Akane! I thought something happened...."

Akane : "It...it's alright.... just.... let me hold your hand. This night is giving me the jitters."

Ranma : "Alright."

Ranma extends his good arm, and Akane holds it, her face calming down a little. Ranma thinks she still looks a little tense, but knows it's natural for her to be scared.

Ranma : "Come on then, let's keep searching."

Akane : "Ok."

As Ranma walks, Akane following, he doesn't notice Akane's head droop limply behind her before a hand moves up to touch the neck, and her head snaps into place again, some soft pops and cracks can be heard. He also doesn't notice that the palm which Akane grazed in the fall is bleeding black.

".....uunngggh..... my back....."

Conditioner wakes up from her daze and looks around. She discovers that she's amidst a pile of garbage bags, a dog sniffing up her leg. She quickly shoos it away with a weak kick, then pulls herself out of the pile, dusting herself off.

Conditioner : "How'd I get here? What am I wearing.... oh no! It's my most expensive dress! It's gonna take me a month to clean it and deodourise it! Ouch, my leg hurts too! Yucks, I'm going to spend a lot of time in the bathroom to...night!"

As Conditioner examines herself, she begins thinking about how she got here and why. Vague memories appear in her head, but they quickly clear up.

Conditioner : ".....what in the world.....!"

She remembers herself challenging Kuno, then getting her leg cut off, and.... growing it back! She also remembers all the other strange things she did at the Neko Hanten and just a few minutes ago.

Conditioner : "...I snapped Akane's neck!?"

Ryoga : "HOOOI! THERE SHE IS! STOP HER!!!!"

Conditioner looks up in time to see Ryoga speeding towards her. She screams as she remembers the time Ryoga so mercilessly broke her back.

Conditioner : <Wait a minute, if he broke my back, wouldn't I be dead?>

But she has no time to ponder this as she tries to avoid Ryoga's attacks, much slower and different than the time she remembered fighting him.

Conditioner : "Wait, Ryoga! Didn't we already settle this during that fight in the lot!? You won, right!?"

Ryoga keeps punching and kicking at Conditioner, dragging poor Sasuke with him, as Conditioner attempts to reason with him. Conditioner handily avoids each and every attack, but the feeling of fatigue is too much for her. She doesn't notice the small can on the floor, and it rolls out from under her as she slips on it. She hits the ground hard, and Ryoga sees the perfect opportunity to knock Conditioner senseless. Pulling his hand back, he tries to punch, but feels a tug on it.

Sasuke : "Sir! Please wait! I can handle this."

Conditioner, dazed, is unable to move as Sasuke walks over to her and nets her. Then the two start shouting for Ranma and the rest. Conditioner's mind is in a whirl as she recalls what just happened. She sorts them out in record time, then realizes that something caused her to act in her inhumane manner. She realises that she hasn't been herself since the fight with Ryoga. However, she has no time to ponder this as the group comes running up to them.

Ranma : "Caught them, did you!?"

Cologne : "Well done! Now we can get some answers and destroy the evil!"

Shampoo : "Shampoo hope sister all right."

Conditioner stares at them all, confused. Then she looks at Akane, deadly calm and smiling at her. Maliciously. This is too much for her, who remembered doing some great sin of killing someone forcedly, then watching that person actually walk again, alive and well. She passes out.

".....look! She's.... the shadow's....stirring!"  
"....now we can get some answers!"

Conditioner slowly regains consciousness, and notices that she is on a bed with white sheets. She lets out a soft moan, then takes in a deep breath. She tries to move her arms and legs, but meets with resistance. Opening her eyes a little larger, she looks at her arms and legs, and realises that she's been tied to a bed, spreadeagled. The familiar design and colour of Ryoga's bandannas adorns the cloths binding her arms and legs to the bed posts. Looking up, she sees the entire group looking at her with eyes of suspicion. She opens her mouth to speak, and everyone backs off like she could shoot fire out of her mouth.

Conditioner : "w...water...."

Akane gets up and runs off to get it. Returning with a glass of the liquid, she slowly pours it into Conditioner's parched mouth. She drinks greedily, and after finishing, Akane gently sets it down onto the nightstand besides Conditioner. She realizes she's in her own room, except that all the posters of Ranma have been pulled down. Cologne hops over to her and looks into her eyes.

Cologne : "Speak, shadow. What did you do to Conditioner?"

Conditioner : "....? Nani? Who is this shadow? What is going on?! Why have I been tied here!?"

Cologne : "Out with it, shadow. No games this time. We know you're in her. Come clean, we might let you have a quick death."

Conditioner : "Great-grandmother! What's going on? Why're you asking me these strange things!? Have you all gone mad!?"

Cologne : "OUT WITH IT! THE SHADOW IS YOU, ISN'T IT!? TELL US THE TRUTH! WHY DID YOU COME!?"

Cologne's voice rises, loud enough for the entire block to hear her. She speaks in such a commanding and fearsome voice that everyone shudders at the voice. Conditioner is truly confused, and is weeping now in stark fear and ignorance of what is going on.

Conditioner : "*What is going on!? Why are you holding me here!? I don't know what I've done!!!!*"

But Cologne isn't convinced. Knowing the shadow can be a great actor, she keeps drilling Conditioner with questions. Shampoo watches on, horrified at her own great-grandmother's interrogation. She feels tears welling up at the sides of her eyes as she watches her own sister suffer. She wants to end her sister's suffering somehow. Shampoo is about to get off her seat and move to help shorten her sister's..... suffering..... when she feels a strong, firm hand on her shoulder. She sees Akane looking at her.

Akane : "No, it's for her own good. The shadow is stubborn, we know that."

Shampoo : "No, we don't."

Akane : "You'd better listen up. The shadow is crafty, we don't know what it could do. Best to let your great-grandmother deal with it."

Shampoo : "But Shampoo's sister suffering!"

Akane : "No! Remember, the shadow probably has her now! She probably won't even know what's happening!"

Shampoo : ".....my sister....."

But Shampoo understands the reason behind Akane's reasoning, and sits back down as Conditioner's crying increases now as Cologne begins to get frustrated at not getting a straight answer. Shampoo shuts her eyes and closes her ears to stop the torture on herself. Finally, unable to stand it, she runs out the doorway, crying. Ranma tries to stop her, but thinks better of it at the last moment.

\*sniff\* \*sniff\*

Shampoo : "Why!? Why shadow have to take Shampoo sister!? WHY!? Now even oh-ba-ba no can get shadow



out!"

She slides down along the wall, crying, shaking her head. Mousse comes by at that moment, glasses on, and sees Shampoo crying. He moves over to her, and squats down besides her.

Mousse : "Shampoo, what's wrong?"

Shampoo : "....."

Mousse : "Hm... I can guess, that old mummy's drilling your sister mercilessly, right?"

Shampoo nods.

Mousse : "Come on, you can let it out. On my shoulder if you want."

Shampoo does, grabbing Mousse tightly and crying on his shoulder. She weeps uncontrollably, shaking. Mousse tries his best to comfort her, patting her back and whispering some comforting words into her ear. At one point, he runs out of things to say, and looks at Shampoo's shoulder.

Mousse : "Shampoo? Are these black flakes yours?"

Shampoo stops crying immediately. She lets go of Mousse, pushes him aside, and stands up, looking at her left shoulder. Some black flakes of dried blood are on it. Mousse looks at Shampoo and knows his time with her is up, and scrambles away before she realises what she just did.

Shampoo : "**AKANE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**"

Shampoo screams the name as she runs into the room, face red and eyes burning with anger at the one named Akane Tendou. Everyone stops and stares at Shampoo as she stands ON the door, breathing angrily.

Akane : "Yes, Shampoo? Why are you so angry?"

Shampoo grabs one of the more visible flakes of blood off her shoulder and shows it to everyone.

Shampoo : "This come off Akane's hand."

Ranma immediately grabs Akane's hands and look at them. One of them is scratched, and the clotted blood is... purely black in colour. He pushes her away and backs off.

Ranma : "....no....."

Cologne quickly cuts Conditioner's bindings and utters a very quick and sincere apology. The entire group looks at Akane suspiciously. She looks calm, save an evil smile on her face.

Akane : "Found me out, did you? Well done. Well, nobody's going to be fooled anymore, hm? I guess nobody will love me too. Such a pity...."

Akane laughs evilly, then a little more towards the lunatic side. The ground begins to shake, then the entire building follows suit soon. Plaster and paint crack and fall off the walls and ceilings as Akane lets out a chilling laugh. In fact, the entire town of Nerima can feel the vibrations.

Ranma : "No! The shadow has Akane!"

Cologne : "This is bad. We have to do something!"

Ranma : "Ideas, anyone!?"

But even if one of them did, they didn't have time to say it before the entire restaurant is flattened by an explosion of dark chi. Amongst the rubble, Akane floats into the sky with a dark bubble around her, eyes glowing.

Akane : "Nobody wants me anymore.... nobody will live to want anyone else....."

From the rubble, Ranma and the rest extricate themselves, and look up at the floating form of Akane, her body now turning slightly insubstantial and dripping a black liquid like thin, watery blood.

Ranma : "AKANE! Are you there!? Can you hear me!?"

Akane : "The Akane you know is now mine to control. She cannot hear you anymore."

Within the bubble, Akane dissolves into a black liquid, and the bubble is now filled with some vile black liquid. Ranma watches on in hopelessness as the Akane he loves just.... melts.

Ranma : "...no.....NO!!!!!"

{The test. A new Akane?}

The liquid in the bubble boils and bubbles, then suddenly takes on a life of its own. The bubble pops open and the liquid splashes onto the ground, but doesn't soak into the soil.

Everyone backs off.

The liquid moves around for a while, then starts reshaping itself. Tendrils of black whip around a central shaft of liquid shooting straight up, now and then going through it. Finally, after reaching a certain height, the shaft stops and the top expands. Into the shape of Akane's head. The body follows suit, and Ranma sees a shadow version of Akane, black and with shape but without the colour or texture. Her clothes appear next, a billowing cape with two sharp 'horns' at either side, tied with black string around a sleeveless dress with a high neckline, and down around her body and leaving a split in one side at the legs, exposing one entire leg. Ranma whistles mentally in admiration of her figure, then slaps himself out of it. A pair of high high-heeled boots appear on her legs, two black studded bracers appear on each arm, a metal coiled band on her right arm. A pair of droplet-shaped earrings appear on each ear, and finally, her hair grows longer, reaching to her waist, and billowing in a controlled chaos behind her.

Dark Akane : "Well, how do you like my new appearance? Nice?"

The entire group looks at the truly dark shadow that is now Akane. She notices them squinting a little, then allows them to see her more easily by allowing her body to become reflective and glint with moonlight. They stop squinting. Shampoo and Conditioner, Ryoga and Sasuke, Ranma, and Cologne all stare at her in absolute awe, terror and defiance. Ranma is the first to speak.

Ranma : ".....you damned creature! Release Akane now!"

The shadow giggles, strangely warm despite its appearance, and looks at Ranma.

Dark Akane : "My, don't you understand? I AM Akane. The shadow is ME!"

Ranma is taken aback at this. He stumbles backwards, staring at Akane. He wants to scream, shout, pinch himself, something to convince himself that he is simply dreaming and that the shadow isn't the real Akane.

Ranma : <No! It is lying!> "You're lying! Let go of Akane, NOW!"

Dark Akane : "My, you've always been stubborn. Ranma, listen to me."

Akane floats over to Ranma, a slick, black, smooth skinned figure. She holds his cheeks with both palms, strangely warm.

Dark Akane : "When the shadow entered me, we discovered we were perfect partners. We both love you, we both wanted to get rid of the competition. What the shadow lacked, I had, and what I lacked, the shadow had. We also knew you loved me and no one else, which was why I was perfect. Don't you see? We were made for each other! Ranma, please. Don't leave me now. I have no one else to love. I am Akane Tendou, youngest daughter of Soun Tendou, fiancée to Ranma Saotome, future heir to the Tendou Dojo."

Ranma feels the warmth of her palms, the warmth of the same palms that Akane used in their school play once, in their version of "Romeo and Juliet", in the final kissing scene. In fact, he can even feel the ridges on her palm. despite their appearance. The healing warmth even heals all his wounds, and his bandages fall off with Akane's

command. He holds her wrists, and feels the pulse beating, the warmth and texture on her deviously smooth and cold appearance. He feels his heart, mind and logic tearing at each other, battling for control of what he should do. Everyone else is staring in absolute awe, especially Cologne, who is simply muttering "Amazing." over and over again. Suddenly, Ranma lets go of Akane's hands and pushes her back. She floats a small distance away before stopping.

Dark Akane : "What's the matter, Ranma-kun?"

Ranma is clenching and unclenching his fists, and is on his knees now, head down.

Ranma : <This is Akane..... this is not Akane..... this is Akane..... this is not Akane..... WHAT MUST I DO!?!>

As Ranma begins crying as his mind battles with himself, the others look at Akane, looking at Ranma with a measure of concern. They look at each other, then nod.

Ryoga : "GET HER!"

They leap at the same time, weapons ready to strike. Ranma looks up.

Ranma : "NOOOOOOO!"

But Akane doesn't look concerned. She just grabs her cape and flaps it open, dark tendrils flying out from it towards her would-be assailants. They all skillfully avoid, parry and slash at the tendrils, only to find that for every one that falls, two will take its place. Ranma watches helplessly as they attempt vainly to get through Akane's defenses and attack her, only to be speared by a dozen tendrils each. However, they do not die, nor does blood gush out of any wound. Instead, the tendrils simply pass right through them, lifting them physically and holding them still. Shampoo ends up in front Ranma, and as he watches, he can see the frost forming around her penetration points, as well as condensation in her breath as she breathes unsteadily and shivers in pain, fear and cold. She opens one eye and looks at him. Ranma looks at her, speared through the stomach and hanging as limply forwards as the other tendrils will allow.

Shampoo : "...n...no....R...ra...ranma.....n...no....."

Ranma looks at the Dark Akane, apparently unconcerned about the people hanging on her tendrils.

Ranma : "Akane! Let them go! You're freezing them to death!"

Dark Akane : "No, they won't die... they'll just feel cold. Anyway, why should I? These people all tried to kill me more than once, and all want either your life or your hand in marriage through force. Me? I try my very best not to do so, to win your heart the hard way, and what do *I* get!? Nothing. Nothing but pain, suffering, disappointment. Why should I let them go?"

Looking at Ryoga now as he passes by, he can see ice forming around the penetration points, and his skin turning an unhealthy shade of blue, as well as condensation so thick it doesn't dissipate for ten seconds coming from his ragged breath. Ryoga too, looks at Ranma with eyes of pain and pleading. He has been speared through the chest, and is simply hanging limp.

Ryoga : "...please..... do..... the.... right thing!"

Ranma looks at Akane, taking out all but one tendril on each of Ranma's friends, his heart warming as they begin to regain a more or less healthy skin colour and their breathing becoming less ragged and less condensation appears.

Ranma : "Because..... they're my friends. I care for them too. I care for Akane more, but you do know what friends are for, right?"

Akane appears to consider this. She nods.

Dark Akane : "I will let them all go, but only if Shampoo here agrees to stop wanting to marry you. Their fates

depend on this one girl."

Shampoo is again brought before Ranma, her eyes half closed in suffering. She opens them through sheer force of will and looks at Ranma with tears than slowly turn to ice as they roll down her cheeks.

Ranma : "Shampoo, please."

Akane brings Conditioner up to her sister and Ranma. Conditioner has been speared in the back, and is now bending backwards, unable to move forwards because of the pain. Akane sends another tendril out to spear her chest as she retracts the one in her back. Conditioner is too weak to even whimper now in pain, as she opens her eyes to look at Ranma and her sister.

Conditioner : "Wha....what...whatever you... f.. feel is.... right.... right....."

Shampoo looks at the two, then at Akane and nods weakly. Akane smiles, then the tendrils suddenly disappear back into her body. Everyone drops to the ground, gasping. Akane floats over to Ranma and smiles, kissing his forehead. She even had saliva, for goodness' sakes! Cologne, the first to recover, gets up and stares as Ranma calmly accepts the warm, passionate kiss.

Cologne : <The shadow.... has feelings.....! No.... we cannot destroy it, but we must get it out of Akane. And fast.>

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To be continued.....

Part 2 : To the light or darkness.

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Editor's Notes :

Ok, so this was a little too serious at times (people getting killed and all that), but I thought it would be the only way to get the story going. Also the part about Akane getting possessed was a spur of the moment thought I thought would be interesting, and apparently it is. This is the first time I'm writing a multi-part fanfic series too!

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