

# Those Eyes!

## A FanFic by the RanMaFan.

Based on Ranma 1/2, a masterpiece by Rumiko Takahashi.

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Plot : A piece of Akane's past comes back to haunt her. A piece of Akane's life never revealed before, it just might be the undoing of Ranma's engagement to Akane. However, Mousse has his own personal "secret" with this piece of "history". Read on and find out!

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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.

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

\*xxx\* Are for certain sound effects.

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

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{Akane's woes, the concern for her.}

It is raining heavily in Nerima, Tokyo. Umbrellas are seen popping up all over the town to shelter those who own them, and those without umbrellas suffer its full effects before finding shelter. For some, the effects are a little worse than others, as we see here.

Ranma (C) : "Oh MAN! It just HAD to rain now!"

Akane : "Cheer up, Ranma! At least you don't turn into a duck when you get wet!"

We see our two favorite heroines running home to the Tendou Dojo on the way back from school.

At the genkan (front porch or entrance hall) of the Dojo, they are greeted by Kasumi, who is waiting for them patiently.

Kasumi : "My, you two are dripping wet! Come on, go take your baths and dry off!"

Kasumi is ushering the two towards the bathroom, when Akane suddenly remembers. Turning to Kasumi, Akane starts to complain.

Akane : "Hey! I'm not going to take MY bath with Ranma! I'm not going to show my body off to him!"

Ranma looks at Akane indignantly, and sticks a tongue out.

Ranma (C) : "Who said I wanted to take MY bath with YOU anyway? Tomboy!"

Akane : "*RANMA*!!!!!"

Kasumi barely manages to hold back Akane as she tries to go over and rip Ranma's head off. Meanwhile, Ranma is pulling faces at Akane.

Kasumi : "Now, you two! Don't fight! You're engaged anyway, so kiss and make up. You two don't have to bathe together, but I want no fighting, got me?"

Kasumi says this with such deadly seriousness that the two look at her for a while, look at each other, and hang their heads in shame.

Akane : "Sorry.... Ranma."

Ranma (C) : "Sorry.... Akane."

Kasumi is now smiling as they blush a little and look at each other.

Kasumi : "There, isn't that better? Come on then, Akane. Take your bath first. I've got something to ask Ranma."

Akane turns around and heads towards the common bathroom, while Kasumi leads Ranma to the front porch. It has just stopped raining, and the sun is shining brilliantly from behind the clouds. Birds are singing, and the water on the ground sparkles as sunlight reflects off them. Ranma has removed her shirt and is squeezing it dry. Kasumi sits down besides the still wet figure.

Kasumi : "Ranma, have you noticed something strange with Akane recently?"

Ranma looks up, looks confused, then looks at Kasumi, confused.

Ranma (C) : "Er.... I don't really know. Why?"

Kasumi looks up at the sky, a concerned face showing plainly.

Kasumi : "Oh, I don't know! I just think she's been a little strange lately. She's been quicker to apologize to you, less apt to get angry, she even spends less time in the Dojo training. I think something's wrong."

Ranma looks incredulously at Kasumi, pondering her words. The shirt, now dry, is flapped a few more times to get rid of any straggling drops of water, then Ranma puts it on, waiting for her turn to bathe. After a while of thinking, and her observations of Akane recently, Ranma replies.

Ranma (C) : "You know, Kasumi, I think you're right. I never noticed it before, but Akane *has* been apologizing with less prompting needed, and I'm always seeing her going into her room, hardly at the Dojo. This is not her usual style...."

Kasumi : "Ranma, would you do me a favor? Would you keep an eye on Akane for me? I'm very worried."

Caught off guard by this request, Ranma only stammers, then nods. Kasumi smiles sweetly.

Kasumi : "Doomo Arigato, Ranma-chan!"

Meanwhile, in the bathroom, Akane is currently shampooing her hair. A million thoughts are going through her head, yet none of them remain long enough for her to ponder. She soaps herself, and as she does so, feels her arms and legs' a little softer than the usual, hard, muscle toned limbs she's used to feeling. She frets a little. Taking a bucket of water, she sloshes it onto her head, shivering at the frozen deluge that is cold water as it cascades down her body. Crossing her arms over her chest and shivering for a few seconds as the coldness works its way through her skin, Akane starts thinking in earnest.

Akane : (Thinking) "What is going on? Why have I been so distracted recently? I can't seem to find the concentration to practice my kicks, and I can't seem to really bring myself to hit Ranma, or call him names like I used to. I can't even concentrate in class.... why is this happening?"

While following this disturbing line of thought, Akane decides to end her bath by taking a nice soak in the hot tub. Putting one foot in, then the other, Akane shudders in pleasure at the pleasant feelings the warm water brings after a hard day at school and at home, as well as getting soaked in a cold rain. She closes her eyes, and thinks about the feelings she's been experiencing lately.

Akane : (Thinking) \*Sigh\*, "It can't be because I love Ranma that I'm acting this way... and it can't be anything in school. I'm not even upset at my own cooking (It's been improving), and it's certainly not Kuno! Then, what is it I'm feeling? Why can't it make itself known to me!?"

Finally, after a moderately long soak, Akane gets out of the tub. Grabbing her towel on the way out, she rubs her body dry, feeling the effects of a week or so of missed exercise catching up on her.

Akane : "Boy, I'm getting chubby! Better start shedding this excess baggage before I become *too* unsightly."

Yet, as she rubs her legs dry, she decides that her figure's not so bad, even after gaining a few pounds. Looking in the mirror of the changing room, she decides that she even likes her slightly fuller figure now, dropping the towel and looking at herself, naked, in the mirror. She smiles for a while.

"But, that's no excuse to miss exercise!" Akane sternly reminds herself.

Feeling much better now, and spirits lifted, Akane throws on her usual dress and walks out of the changing room. On the way out, she meets Ranma-Chan, who has just finished her talk with Kasumi. The two exchange brief looks, and Akane opens her mouth to speak.

Akane : "Oh, matte, Ranma!"

Ranma (C) : "Hm? Nani o desu ne, Akane-san?" (What is it?)

Akane : "Ranma, what did my sister say to you just now?"

Ranma appears to ponder this for a moment. But, following Kasumi's instructions to lie, she uses the sentence Kasumi gave her to explain to Akane.

Ranma (C) : "Oh, your sister just wanted to ask me to help her with some chores later. She'll be busy making some sort of special surprise for us, and asked me to go buy some ingredients."

Akane : "Oh, ok."

The two leave for their respective destinations, Akane going up to her room. Ranma to the bathroom. However, while in the changing room, stripping off her still wet pants and shorts, Ranma is strongly disturbed.

Ranma (C) : "Wow, Akane's really distracted! She didn't even question my reply one little bit! Something's going down, and I intend to find out what!"

With this, Ranma gets into the bath, to enjoy a good soak in some nice, HOT water.

Back in Akane's room, Akane is lying on her bed, hands behind her head, thinking, daydreaming. The curtains are drawn, and the room is cloaked in darkness. Staring at a shadowed ceiling, Akane is thinking hard.

Akane : "I've been troubled by this strange feeling for over a week now, and I still can't figure out why I'm acting like this. It's not like I'm possessed...."

Akane shudders at the memory of the time her body was possessed by the "Hate Revenge Doll".

Akane : "Nor is it because of Ranma or anyone else I know...."

Suddenly, at this thought, she closes her eyes and begins to think back to the people she DID know. A photo album of faces and names flash in her mind, people she once met but forgot a long time ago... then, one face, a blurred image, but a face nonetheless, surfaces and refuses to leave... she focuses on this face, the image slowly becoming clearer. The hair, the chin clear up first... then the nose, the ears, the mouth. Yet, the eyes remain strangely unresponsive to her mental reconstruction, and as she thinks about it, a name slowly begins to form at the back of her mind.

Akane : "N...no, L..... no, M.....yes...!"

Kasumi : "Akane! Are you awake!? I need you down here!"

Akane, interrupted by Kasumi's shouting, immediately loses the image of the strange person, and the name. Mumbling to herself and shaking her head, Akane decides that it is just an imaginary person.

Akane : "Ok, sis! I'm coming! Hang on!"

Getting off her bed, and running downstairs, Akane spots Ranma walking out the door with a small basket and a wallet full of cash, as she reaches the bottom. He spots her, smiles, waves, then leaves. Akane looks on at Ranma as he walks out, (whistling!) to do his errand. Then she feels a gentle hand on her shoulder. Turning around, Akane sees Kasumi smiling.

Kasumi : "So glad you came down, Akane. Come on, I've got something for you to do as well."

Kasumi points towards the kitchen, her hand still reassuringly holding Akane's shoulder. The two walk towards the kitchen, chatting a little, then disappear behind the curtains.

{The strange customer at Nekko Houten.}

In the bustling little shop known as the Cat Cafe, people are sitting down at tables eating, chatting, drinking, and generally doing the things you'd expect in a popular cafeteria with good food, service, and an even better looking waitress. However, for those who do end up staring, they learn not to the hard way, Shampoo style.

Currently, Shampoo is busy balancing a bowl of noodles on her head, a plate of fried rice on one arm, and a bowl of beef noodle soup on the other. She walks over to a table filled with some young students from Furinkan High who are relaxing after a day at the horrendous school with its mad principal and chi sucking teachers. Tossing the three orders into the air, she catches each one and places them onto the table without spilling a drop of soup or grain of rice, much to the delight of the customers. Clapping, they cheer her as she does a small curtsy for an adoring public.

Shampoo : "Thank you, thank you all! Wo ai ni!" (Wo = I, Ai = Love, Ni = You)

Suddenly, the doors slam open.

Everyone freezes, and looks.

An imposing shadow is casting its visage through the open doorway, a glint in its eyes.

A chill wind blows through the door and a leaf flies in.

"Will someone please shut the door? It's getting drafty in here!" complains Cologne.

"Oh, sorry, old lady." says a dashing young man in a pair of branded leather shoes, a business shirt with jacket and pants to match, deftly combed raven-black hair, and a pair of the most stunningly beautiful eyes anyone could ever set eyes on.

They are impossible black, and seem to stretch into his eyeballs forever. Even the smallest ray of light reflected on his eyes is increased a thousandfold, making his eyes glitter in an alluring, and mysterious way. They seem to take in everything going on around him, and anyone looking into them long enough feels drawn in, as if hooked onto looking into his eyes, those infinite vortexes.

The young man turns around, and shuts the door. Immediately, the place warms up again, and everyone stops shivering. Yet, everyone is still looking at the newcomer, who is calmly walking over to an empty table, causing all the girls he passes to swoon in incredible ecstasy. Ignoring all the stares he is receiving, he takes out a comb to comb his hair while he waits for someone to come take his order. Finally, after everyone gets over the initial shock, they go back to what they are doing, yet the topic of conversation is immediately changed to the newcomer.

Voice #1 : "Hey, who's that!? He's too good looking to be from around here!"

Voice #2 : "And he's definitely not Sanzenien Mikado! He's more handsome than Sanzenien!"

Voice #3 : "But, just who is he then? I don't have a clue!"

Voice #1 : "Beats me."

Ignoring all the chatter going on around him, the newcomer is still looking around, getting impatient by now.

Mysterious Man : "Hello? Can I get some service here?"

Shampoo comes over to him after serving some other customers first. She looks at him, at his enchanting eyes, which seem to burn into her very soul, ensnaring it. She looks at him a while longer, like as if infatuated with him, then snaps out of it, and gives him a menu to look at. The man looks at the menu for a while, hands it back to Shampoo, then smiles.

Mysterious Man : "I'll have the fried dumplings please, lightly fried."

Shampoo : "Ok, right away. Light fried dumplings coming up."

As Shampoo turns around and leaves to call for that order, Mousse comes out of the kitchen, wondering why it was so silent a moment ago. Putting his glasses on, he looks around. Suddenly, his hair stands on end and a cold chill goes down his spine as he realizes that something is very wrong here. Looking around more desperately now,

Mousse spots the thing which he has dreaded since he left his village. At this very sight, Mousse sweats, jumps a little, and nearly screams.

Mousse : "Eeks! It can't be! It isn't! It couldn't be!"

Cologne, noticing Mousse's reaction upon spotting the strange man, hops over to him and taps him on the shoulder. Mousse nearly jumps out of his skin as he turns around to face Cologne.

Mousse : "Ah! Oh, it's you, old prune!"

\*Bonk\*

Cologne : "Who's an old prune!? Anyway, Mousse! What's going on? Why are you acting so strangely, eh?"

Mousse breaks out into a cold sweat at this question. Stammering, muttering, stuttering, Mousse tries to find an answer to his question, when Shampoo saves him.

Shampoo : "Mousse! Where light fried dumplings!? Customer waiting!"

Mousse : "Oh! Coming right away!"

Mousse turns around and runs back into the kitchen enthusiastically, glad for this reprieve. Cologne looks on at Mousse, shakes her head and sighs.

Cologne : "If that young man has something he's hiding, it's bad. Very bad."

{A test of Akane's cooking! Something for her?}

Ranma : "Boy, sure is noisy here!"

Ranma is in the shopping district of Nerima, a huge crowd of shoppers all over the place, entering shops, window shopping, haggling with roadside merchants, and generally making the place a busy, bustling place. Ranma is on his way to the market just nearby, to buy some onions, and other groceries Kasumi asked him for. Swinging his bag lazily back and forth as he strolls towards the market, he turns his head to look at an interesting shop.

\*Bump\*

Ranma : "Oh! Sumimasen! Sorry!"

Mysterious Man : "Oh, no matter. Daijobo."

Ranma turns back to look at the man he just bumped into. It is the same person who was in the Cat Cafe just now, and having finished his meal, this man is also shopping. Ranma whistles in appreciation of the man's good taste in clothes. The man is examining Ranma up and down with those strange, large and glittering black eyes. Ranma feels very uncomfortable as he is being scrutinized, and as those eyes appear to weave magic over him. He loosens his collar, and sweats a little. Finally, the man stops examining Ranma, and Ranma feels an extreme sense of relief at being released from those eyes' grasp.

Mysterious Man : "Ranma Saotome, is it?"

Ranma gasps as he looks at the man. He realizes they have not met before, yet the man knows his name.

Ranma : "Yes, and you are...?"

Mysterious Man : "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Meseki Hokori, of Osaka. Sorry if I've caused you any trouble."

Ranma immediately feels compelled to apologize to Meseki instead.

Ranma : "No! No! No! It's my fault, I wasn't looking!"

Meseki looks and feels relieved at the fact that someone actually takes the blame for once. Either that, or his eyes have weaved their magic onto Ranma, at least temporarily. Either way, Meseki looks at this man his eyes have revealed to him as Ranma Saotome, fiancée of Akane Tendou.

Meseki : (Thinking) "Hmm... Ranma. What is it about you, that allows you to have such a good relationship with Akane? No matter. I will find out."

Ranma, in the meanwhile, is at a loss of what to do. Not knowing whether to take his leave or to wait for something to happen, Ranma opts for the latter, and looks around while waiting.

Meseki finally acts. He fishes in his pockets for something, then comes up with a small, velvet-covered box. Ranma looks at the box in wonder, and wondering what is inside.

Meseki : "Ranma, I know you are engaged to Akane Tendou, and I'd like you to give this to her as a gift, for congratulating her on her fine choice for a husband."

Meseki shoves the box into Ranma's open hands, although Ranma's face betrays his surprise and shock, at how such a complete stranger could know so much about him. He also blushes a little on the compliment on how Akane chose well on a fine choice for a husband. Namely, him.

Stammering now, trying to find the words to thank Meseki, Meseki just waves off any words of thanks. Ranma immediately falls silent.

Meseki : "No need for anything, just make sure you hand this to Akane, ok? You are a fine, handsome man in your own right. Now, I bid you farewell."

Meseki turns around and walks off, disappearing into the crowd, leaving a very bewildered and confused Ranma behind.

Ranma : (Thinking) "What just happened? Who was that man? And why a gift for Akane? What did he mean by handsome in my own right?"

Plagued by these questions, Ranma shakes his head, and with it the last vestiges of Meseki's magic. His mind clearing up, Ranma's brain begins to work normally again.

Ranma : (Thinking) "Hold on, let me recall what happened. I bump into man, he say sorry, I say sorry. He look at me, I feel funny. He say my name, give me gift to give Akane, congratulate her and me, then leave. He say his name Meseki Hokori, from Osaka. So, what I've got is a man who's named Meseki whom I've just bumped into, and apologised to, and then was congratulated on, and given a gift to be passed on to Akane for her fine choice of husband. Just how did he know so much about me and Akane anyway? Meseki, I'll find out soon enough, about, just you wait! In the meanwhile, I've got to get those things Kasumi sent me for!"

Shrugging, Ranma examines the velvet box given to him by Meseki, then stuffs it into his pocket, rushes off to buy the groceries he was originally sent for, while pondering the question of who it was he just met.

Back in the kitchen of the Tendou Dojo, Kasumi and Akane are in the kitchen, preparing a special dinner for that night. Kasumi looks at the clock on the wall as she prepares some vegetables, and begins to worry.

Kasumi : "I wonder where Ranma is? I sent him off two hours ago, and he hasn't returned yet. I hope he got what I asked for."

Ranma : "Kasumi! I'm back! I got your veggies!"

Ranma's voice booms out from the living room, nearly shocking Kasumi into cutting her own finger. She narrowly misses her finger by millimetres, and cuts the cutting board instead. Akane looks up from the oven as she watches over a slowly baking chicken, and turns around. Ranma bursts into the kitchen with a bag full of groceries.

Ranma : "Hey, Kasumi! I got your veggies here! Onions, garlic, carrots, etc...."

Kasumi, recovering from her initial shock, smiles as she takes the bag from Ranma.

Kasumi : "Thank you, Ranma! Now I can get on with my 'special' final dish!"

Ranma looks hopeful at the prospect of eating Kasumi's 'special' dish. He looks at Kasumi with puppy dog eyes, and asks hopefully.

Ranma : "Oh, wow! Can I taste it when you're done?"

Kasumi : "Now Ranma, you know you can't! Wait until dinner's ready, and eat it with the rest of the family!"

The puppy dog eyes fade from Ranma's face as Kasumi says this, but then is replaced by a cheerful appearance as Ranma turns around to leave.

Ranma : "Ok then! See ya!"

Ranma rushes out of the kitchen in a gust of wind. Kasumi and Akane share looks, wondering why Ranma's in such high spirits today.

Akane : "Don't ask me, sis! I'm in as much in the dark as you are!"

However, that masquerade of a cheerful Ranma becomes painfully obvious, as Ranma immediately puts on a scowl as soon as he leaves the kitchen. Rushing full speed towards the Dojo, Ranma sticks a straw dummy into the ground outside the Dojo hall and begins punching it.

Ranma : "Ha! Ha! Ha! Take that! Ha!"

Ranma is working off his confusion at his earlier meeting, and as he practices his basic moves, his mind works over the intricacies of his meeting, and using his workout as a calm base, Ranma slowly works out his meeting step by step.

Ranma : (Thinking) "Ok, time to think this over, clearly! First of all, I bump into Meseki Horoki. But, wait a minute... I remember looking into his eyes! Those eyes.... they did something! It must've been the thing that scrambled my mind into an omelette while Meseki was talking. No wonder I was so confused, and felt so strange! It was his eyes! But, what was it about them? Why did they make me so affected? How did they do it!?"

Ranma ponders this question as he works out for the rest of the afternoon. Thinking of all the strange things that have happened to him so far, Ranma treats this as just another strange event, albeit a little stranger than usual. Finally, as it approaches dinner time, Ranma decides to end his workout and rest. As he is walking towards the bathroom, he is unbuttoning his shirt. In the changing room, he takes off his sweaty, smelly shirt and tosses it into the clothes bin. He is about to do the same to his pants, when he feels a small bulge in his pant's pockets, and he immediately searches the pocket, finding the small "gift" Meseki wanted Ranma to pass to Akane. Slapping his head in irritation, Ranma examines the box.

Ranma : "Oh! I forgot about this! Oh, nevermind! I'll pass it to her during dinner!"

He takes the box with him into the bathroom, and sets it up on a high platform, where it won't get wet. Ranma then proceeds to take his bath, albeit at a leisurely pace, enjoying the feel of hot and cold water on his body as they help to sooth a day's worth of hard work.

Ranma finishes his bath just seconds before Kasumi calls out to everyone in the house to come for dinner. Drying off quickly, Ranma slips on a fresh pair of pants, and a sleeveless version of his shirt. Remembering to grab the box, Ranma rushes out of the bathroom and towards the living room, stuffing the box into his pants as he runs. By now, all the others have gathered in the living room, and are being seated. But around an empty table. Akane is there as well, having done her part in helping Kasumi and taking a much deserved break.

Ranma : "Eh? Where's dinner?"

Hearing his voice, Akane turns around to face Ranma, who is sitting down beside her.

Akane : "Hold on, Ranma! It's about to be served!"

Ranma then feels his pant pockets, and quickly remembers.

Ranma : "Oh, Matte\*! I've got something for you, Akane!" (\* Matte = Wait!)

Ranma sticks a hand into his pocket and fishes the small, velvet box out. He holds it out to Akane for her to see. Her eyes sparkle as she looks at the gift. The box has also captured the attention of the other members of the household present at the table.

Akane : "What's this, Ranma? A gift for me? From you?"

Soun : "Ranma! You got something for Akane!"

Nabiki : "And it looks expensive!"

Embarassed at this sudden attention, Ranma looks at the people who are staring at him, and stutters a while. Then, wiping his sweat away, Ranma regains his composure.

Ranma : "Er..... no... not really from me. I bumped into someone today, and strangely, even though we haven't met, he knew who I was and to whom I was betrothed to... he gave this to me and told me it was a gift for Akane."

Soun : "Huh? Someone you've never met, yet knew who you were?"

Ranma : "Uh huh. He had the strangest eyes I've ever seen too...."

Akane : "*Strange eyes?!!*"

Akane's sudden outburst shocks everyone into silence for a while, as they all look at her. Akane's face is twisted into a look crossed between sudden remembrance and pure shock, a kind of scared grimace. Everyone looks concerned at Akane.

Ranma : "Akane, you all right gal?"

Soun : "Akane-chan! What's wrong?"

Nabiki : "What's the matter, sis?"

Genma : "Is there something wrong?"

Akane is ignoring the stares she's receiving, as she thinks back to the face she nearly remembered that afternoon. Slowly, the face comes back, but with the eyes this time. Black, infinitely deep eyes that sparkle with the merest trace of light, and with the ability to make you lose yourself to him if you stare at them too long. She utters a name she long forgot.

Akane : "Me....se....ki!"

Ranma looks shocked at Akane's behaviour. Even more shocked at the mention of that strange man's name, even though he was sure he was the only one in the household who knew him. Akane looks like she's in some sort of trance. Regaining his composure, Ranma grabs Akane's shoulders and shakes her hard.

Ranma : "Akane! Akane! Snap out of it! Come on! What's up with this Meseki Horoki guy!?"

At the mention of his full name, Soun looks shocked, although Nabiki just looks confused. Soun starts to look scared and worried beyond belief, and is shaking visibly, in nervousness.

Nabiki : "Meseki Horoki?"

Soun : "No.... it can't be....! It can't be Meseki!"

Nabiki : "Father! What's wrong? Why're you acting so strangely? Didn't we meet Meseki during that funeral?"

Suddenly, Akane and Soun snap out of their shocked stupor. Soun looks *darkly* at Nabiki.

Soun : "Tendou Nabiki, don't you *EVER* mention that funeral again if you want to live here, *you got me!?*"

At the threatening sound of his voice, the normally impartial Nabiki starts shaking in fear.

Nabiki : "Y..y...yes daddy...."

Soun looks relieved again. Then Akane looks at Ranma. Soun still retains his look of nervousness, although it is much less pronounced now.

Akane : "Ranma.... you said Meseki sent me a gift?"

Ranma : "Yes."

Akane : "Give it to me."

Ranma : "Here."

Ranma hands over a box to Akane, with everyone looking intently at the box itself. Gingerly picking up the box, Akane holds it in her hands, examining it with curiosity, then hugging it with a strange tenderness. She begins to think to herself.

Akane : (Thinking) "So THAT'S why I felt so strange these past few days! Meseki's here, and he's nearby! No wonder!"

Looking at Akane with interest, Ranma is wondering just what it is with the box that Akane would hold so dear, especially since a total stranger gave it to him. He is also thinking about why Soun and Akane reacted so strangely towards the mention of the name "Meseki". Just then, Akane stops her musing, and looks up, to see Ranma staring rudely at her.

Akane : "What are you staring at?"

Ranma : "Erm... definitely not at you, that's for sure!"

\*Slap\*

Ranma : "What'd you do that for!?"

Akane : "I know what you're thinking! If you want to know about Meseki, ask my father!"

Ranma turns to look at Soun, who is sweating with intense fervor. Just then, he spots something and immediately points towards Kasumi, coming out of the kitchen with a large plate in hand.

Soun : "Look! Dinner's ready!"

All attention is immediately turned towards Kasumi, who is putting the plate down on the table, much to the delight of Soun, Genma and Ranma.

Kasumi : "Tonight, we'll have a little something special, just to celebrate Akane's culinary skill!"

Immediately, the three turn green at the words "Akane's Culinary Skill", which they interpret to be "Akane's Poisoned Food Kill". Looking at the plate of chopped vegetables, with slices of fish, Ranma points to it and looks at Kasumi, mouth opening but not knowing what to say. Kasumi immediately smiles.

Kasumi : "Oh, don't worry! I helped Akane with it, and I cooked most of it! Come on, it won't be that bad, or else I would've been in the hospital by now!"

Akane : "Yes, come on you all! Please try it! I spent such a long time cooking it!"

EVERYONE but Kasumi and Akane looks at the food, half cooked by Akane, half cooked by Kasumi. Although Akane's cooking generally looks and smells good, the taste and nutritional value leaves something to be desired. However, not wanting to stave themselves to death, Soun, Genma and Nabiki look at Ranma, who shrinks back from the withering glares he is receiving.

Ranma : "Er.... guys.... what is it?"

Ranma receives a fatherly slap on the back from Genma.

Genma : "Son, dear son, since half of this food was so painstakingly prepared by your future wife, I suggest you try it first. It is your responsibility to try your iinazuke's cooking first."

Soun : "Yes, Ranma! For my daughter's sake, do try it!"

Ranma : "And what if I say 'No'?"

Immediately, Soun transforms into the gigantic floating monster head of his.

Soun : "RANMA! YOU'D BETTER TRY MY DAUGHTER'S COOKING OR ELSE!!!!!! GAAAAAHHH!!!!!"

Scared more by Soun's visage than at the possible prospect of being poisoned to death by Akane's cooking, Ranma is quick to comply.

Ranma : "EEE! Ok! Ok! You got me! I'll try it!!!!"

With all due haste, Ranma grabs a pair of chopsticks off the table, and gingerly pokes at the steaming plate of veggies and fish. Finally, selecting the smallest piece of fish and vegetable, Ranma picks them up and slowly, but surely, brings them towards his mouth. As everyone, nervous and tense, looks at Ranma, sweat is pouring down off heads and down their necks. Akane especially, looks particularly hopeful.

Akane : (Thinking) "Please let my food be edible! Please let my food be edible! Please let my food be edible!"

The time of reckoning is at hand, or so they would say in movies. Now merely millimetres away from his mouth, Ranma looks fearful of the eventual outcome of eating Akane's cooking. Yet is forced to continue, for he has already condemned himself to try Akane/Kasumi's cooking by picking it up in the first place.

Ranma : (Thinking) "Here goes!"

T minus 3.....2.....1..... Houston, we have liftoff!

\*Chomp!\*

\*Munch\*\*munch\*\*munch\*\*munch\*

\*Gulp!\*

A look of absolute disbelief on his face, Ranma realises something that has not been since he tried Akane's cooking with the Water of Life.

Ranma : "Kono tabemono ga..... *Oishii!*" (This food is..... delicious!)

Fireworks skyrocket and explode, drums are heard in the background, confettii is tossed around, and a cheering populace is heard screaming in excitement as Ranma says this one word.

Everyone's eyes grow wide as they hear this exclamation. Akane's eyes water and tear in joy and happiness as she hears this one word she's been longing to hear since she started cooking, without help from any magical source. Everyone looks at everybody else, and arms wide, hug each other in celebration as this one word is uttered. Kasumi hugs Nabiki, Soun (crying) hugs Genma (crying).

Soun : "Genma-san! Finally! My daughter can cook!"

Genma : "Finally, my son likes your daughter's cooking!"

Soun & Genma : "We're so happy!"

Meanwhile, Akane is hugging Ranma, who is a little surprised.

Akane : "Oh, Ranma! I'm so happy! You really found my cooking delicious!?"

Ranma : "Not considering half of it was your sister's, I'm surprised it was even edible."

Akane : "What's that supposed to mean?"

Kasumi : "Come on you all, let's eat. There're about seven more dishes left to serve!"

All except Kasumi and Akane : "An 8 course dinner!?"

Akane & Kasumi : "Yup."

As everyone finishes off the first dish, Kasumi goes into the kitchen to get the next dish, and the dish after that. Lobster with shrimp in salad sauce is served, Roast Chicken stuffed with rice dumplings, and all the dishes worthy of praise by chefs worldwide you'd expect to find in a good restaurant are served right there in that little household known as the Tendou Dojo. As each dish is served, eyes sparkle at the marvellous display of good food, with the garnishing placed just right to make it look delicious and attractive. Each dish is quickly finished off, and quickly criticised. At the end of the dinner, everyone is contentedly patting a rather full stomach, and picking teeth with a toothpick, although generally only Ranma, Genma and Soun ate the most. Nabiki, Akane and Kasumi ate the amount they'd usually eat, although savoring the flavor a little more. Ranma thinking he finally knows what Kasumi's surprise is. Boy, was he wrong. At that moment, Nabiki, who was keeping tabs on Akane/Kasumi's cooking, claps her hands for attention.

Nabiki : "All right! Since this dinner's over, I've decided to bring out the results of tonight's Kasumi/Akane cooked dinner!"

Nabiki pulls out a clipboard containing a list of the 8 dishes on the menu for the night, and on each item, the word "edible" is written. Next to each one, there is either a "delicious", "above-average", and "average" written on it. 4/8 are delicious, 3/8 are above average, and 1/8 is average.

Nabiki : "4 delicious', 3 above averages, and 1 average all edible dishes have been served in tonight's menu, and the final verdict is....."

Drumroll. \*brrrrmmrrrrmmrrrrmmmm\*

Nabiki : "Akane's cooking is finally edible, although with help!"

\*clap\* \*clap\* \*clap\* \*cheer\* \*whoop!\*

Just then, Kasumi calls for everyone's attention.

Kasumi : "Excuse me, all of you. I'd just like to say that, although I said I helped Akane with most of the food tonight, I'd like to honestly say that I only helped Akane pick out the correct ingredients. She did everything else herself, from cooking time to seasoning and ingredients adding."

"Oooooohhhh...." comes the reply from all gathered. Ranma looks SHOCKED that Akane actually managed to cook proper food, with only minimal help. He realises this is Kasumi's surprise, and Kasumi smiles at Ranma as she reads Ranma's face, finally understanding what she means.

Nabiki immediately takes a pencil out and scratches the word "Kasumi" off the clipboard. Calling for everyone's attention again, she announces.

Nabiki : "Then, in that case, we have a different result. Akane's cooking is finally edible, period!"

Elsewhere in Nerima, and indeed all across Japan, fireworks can be seen shooting out of a certain Tendou Dojo, as people gather in the streets of Nerima gather to celebrate the most unexpected event in the universe.

{Pondering the Gift. Akane's link to Meseki.}

Later that night, after everyone has retired to their rooms, Akane is sitting at her table, lamp switched on, looking at the gift Ranma brought from Meseki. Feeling it gently, caressing it carefully, Akane looks at it from all angles with sleepy eyes.

Akane : "Well... looks like Meseki's come back for me..."

With memories flooding back into her head, Akane looks at the nondescript box, wondering if the thing that was inside still is inside. Carefully considering the question, she thinks about what she would do if she met Meseki again.

Akane : "Probably ask him, 'Why?!'."

Finally, giving in to the temptation of wanting to know what is inside the box, Akane decides that she'd better be fully awake to comprehend it. Grabbing a small basin of water from the darkness, Akane splashes her face, then dries it with a towel also grabbed out of the darkness. Tossing the two out the window, Akane, now fully awake, looks at the box. A slight noise can be heard outside, something like a person going 'OUCH!', but Akane pays it no mind.

Akane : "Here goes...."

\*creak\*

\*gasp\*

Akane : "It is still there! My gift to Meseki is still there!"

There, inside the box, lay something that can be considered the most important thing to a person in the world.

A lock of Akane's hair lay inside the box, carefully tied up with a longer strand of her hair.

Looking at this lock of hair, many memories, painful and sweet, well up inside her.  
Akane's eyes start to water at those memories.

Akane : "*Why, Meseki? WHY?*"

A memory flashback to the time when Akane first met Meseki.

*{Akane's 1st meeting with Meseki.}*

*A windy and cool Sunday afternoon. Akane is walking with her mother, a hat on her head, holding her mother's hand the way a child usually does, afraid that if she lets go, her mother would disappear.*

*Mom : "There now, Akane! Don't hold me so tight! You'll squeeze my hand off!" (Jokingly)*

*Akane looks scared at this prospect, and begins to cry. Her mother kneels down to stroke her daughter's head lovingly. She speaks to Akane in a reassuring tone.*

*Mom : "There, there, Akane-chan! I was just kidding. You won't squeeze my hand off! But, don't squeeze it so hard, ok? I won't disappear if you let go."*

*Immediately, Akane stops crying. Looking at her mother, she smile beautifully. Her mother wipes her tears off gently with her kimono's sleeve. Stroking her hair softly, Akane's mother smiles at her.*

*Mom : "There, isn't that better? Come on! We've still got to meet papa in the park!"*

*Young Akane : "Ok, mama!"*

*The two trot off happily through the park's entrance, mother and daughter hand in hand. Akane looks so happy, just being there with her mother. As the two walk to the park fountain, they see a young Soun Tendou with his two other daughters, Nabiki and Kasumi. The girls spot Akane and their mother, and start waving and shouting at the top of their lungs.*

*Young Kasumi : "Hey! Akane! Over here!"*

*Young Nabiki : "Hey! Sis! Over here!"*

*Akane sees her two sisters, and is eager to rush off towards them. She starts shouting back.*

*Young Akane : "Coming, sis! Hang on!"*

Turning to her mother, Akane tugs on her sleeve. She looks down at Akane.

Mom : "Yes, Akane-chan? What is it?"

Young Akane : "I wanna go there (pointing at her sisters) now!"

Mom : "Yes, Akane. Come on, I won't let you run off by yourself though!"

Young Soun : "Oi! Honey! Come on, don't keep our little jewels waiting!"

Mom : "Yes, Koi-bito!" (Sweetheart)

As Akane and her mother walk towards the fountain where the rest are waiting, a strong gust of wind suddenly blows. Akane's hat, which wasn't tied tightly, is blown off. Akane turns around quickly, watching as her hat flits off into the bushes.

Young Akane : "My hat!"

Mom : "Don't worry, honey. Go on then, go to your sisters. I'll get your hat."

Akane is still upset though, and begins to cry. Her mom starts coddling her.

Mom : "Now, now, sweetheart. Don't cry, I said I'd get your hat. Come on, go to your daddy first."

Mysterious Voice : "Excuse me! Is this your hat?"

A young boy's voice calls out from behind the bushes. Instead of waiting, young Soun Tendou has brought his two other daughters to rendezvous with his wife and Akane. The family turns towards the source of the voice.

A young boy, about the same age as Akane, steps out from behind the bushes, the hat floppily perched on his head. At this amusing sight, everyone begins to chuckle a little. The boy takes the hat off his head, and walks over to Akane, who is looking at him with interest. He tips the hat over to Akane, while making a perfect gentleman's bow.

Young Meseki : "I believe this is yours, miss."

With a little prompting from her parents, Akane reluctantly takes the hat from him. After taking the hat, Akane puts it on her head again, this time tying the pretty blue ribbon tightly under her chin. The boy, Meseki, looks up at Akane. His eyes, even then, were beautiful, pure ebony and liquid. Enchanted by the beautiful eyes set on an even more handsome face, little Akane stammered.

Young Akane : "A...ah... thank you..."

Young Meseki : "The pleasure is all mine, miss. I'm Meseki. Meseki Hokori."

Noticing his gentlemanly manners, Soun and his wife look at each other knowingly, nodding.

Young Soun : "Looks like my little daughter's falling in love already!"

Mom : "Yes, Akane-chan's a lucky girl, isn't she?"

Looking at her parents, little Akane blushes furiously.

Young Soun : "Come on you all, we're going to the fair now."

Young Kasumi : "Come on, sis! Let's go."

Akane, turning around to look at Meseki once more, notices that he has disappeared.

Young Akane : "Where did he go?"

{Years Later in Junior Grade School, Love comes? The Loss of a Mother.}

Years later, when little Akane has grown old enough to go to Junior grade school, she enters Furinkan's Junior Grade School. It is her first day at school, and parents are allowed to go with their children to provide moral support. Akane leaves with her mother to school, Soun having stayed in the Dojo to take care of certain things.

*Akane : "Mom, will school be fun?"*

*Mom : "Of course, Akane-chan. If you're well behaved, you'll make lots of friends there!"*

*Akane appears to seriously consider this as she and her mother walk towards the school. Looking at the great crowd of screaming, shouting, chattering, whispering and crying children, Akane notices she's the only one who's calm and happy.*

*Akane : "Mommy, why are all those children crying?"*

*Mom : "I don't know, maybe they're scared. That makes you special, little one. You're brave."*

*Akane beams at this praise, as her mother looks proudly at her. Then, gesturing to the gates, Akane's mother tells her.*

*Mom : "Akane-chan, go on. This is your first day! You don't want to be late, do you?"*

*Akane : "No, mommy! I'll be brave and show everyone!"*

*Mom : "That's my Akane! Lead on!"*

*Giving her daughter a reassuring smile, Akane's mother follows Akane into the school compound, where children and parents alike are milling around the courtyard, waiting for the principal. Finding a spot to sit down, Akane and her mother rest and relax, taking in their surroundings.*

*Mom : "You know, Akane-chan, I used to study here, although girls were hardly accepted at schools during those days. I was the top student in my class, until the civil war..."*

*Akane's mother winces at those many years of painful memories of watching soldiers die under her care as she worked as a nurse, and her joy at meeting Soun, a soldier who was badly injured enough at that time to remain out of action until the end of the war. Apparently, the two had a working relationship as the war wore on, and eventually, after the war ended and everyone got their lives back together again, the two married.*

*(Note, this civil war is PURELY fictional, and is nothing but a product of my imagination. Any semblance to it in real life Japan is PURELY coincidental.)*

*Just then, Akane looks straight ahead, and spots someone.... someone who is too familiar to be just another face. She pulls on her mother's sleeve.*

*Akane : "Mom! Isn't that... Meseki?"*

*Broken out of her musings, Akane's mother looks at the boy Akane is pointing to. Recognizing the face, she remembers him as well.*

*Mom : "Why, yes, I believe it IS him! Go on, call him!"*

*Akane blushes as she realizes what her mother wants her to do. She calls out in a tinny, embarrassed voice for Meseki, who of course doesn't hear her. Akane's mom is looking disappointedly at her daughter.*

*Mom : "Akane-chan! I thought you were brave! What happened to your bravery when it comes to boys?"*

*Akane looks shocked at this statement, then her shock dissolves into determined resolve. Gathering her courage, Akane calls out to Meseki.*

*Akane : "MESEKI HOKORI!!!"*

*Apparently taking notice, Meseki turns around and sees a beautiful, young Akane. Remembering her from so many years ago, Meseki walks over.*

*Meseki : "Hello, Miss. We meet again, don't we?"*

*Akane : "Erm.... yes...."*

*Akane's mom to the rescue.*

*Mom : "Meseki is it? Pleased to see such a splendid young boy here!"*

*Meseki : "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."*

*Mom : "My, and so polite too!"*

*Meseki blushes at this compliment.*

*Meseki : "By the way, Miss... I never did catch your name."*

*Akane : "Oh, ah, my name.... it's.....A...Akane Tendou...."*

*Akane turns a scarlet red while telling Meseki her name. (It's love, isn't it?)*

*Meseki : "Akane. What a lovely name. Little Scarlet, is it? It fits you."*

*Mom : "As does your name fits you, Jewel Eyes."*

*Akane remembers Meseki's beautiful eyes, and looks at him again, this time in the eye. True enough, his eyes are still just as black as before, but if anything was possible, more beautiful, more handsome. The two share a long, tense look while Akane's mother looks on. Just then, the principal steps out of his office, into the courtyard and begins to speak.*

*After the initial introductions and welcomes, the children are ushered into their individual classes. Parents are told to go home after the children are brought to class, to give them a sense of independence, and to return only at the end of school. As it turns out, Akane and Meseki land in the same class together. Akane's mother looks gratified at this arrangement, and she leaves the school happily.*

*In class, Akane and Meseki are seated beside each other, while the teacher introduces herself and asks the class to introduce themselves as well. An eventful day at school, with Akane and Meseki sharing secret glances at each other everytime there was a chance, one could almost feel the liking the two shared for each other. This was to be increased a few notches, when that unfortunate event happened.*

*\*Riiiiinnngggg\*, the bell goes, indicating the end of the day. Young children pile out of their classes, all assembling at the courtyard to wait for their parents to pick them up. Meseki leaves first, his father picking him up in a posh car, and the two "lovebirds" exchange farewells. However, long after everyone else has gone home, Akane is still waiting. Finally, after a few hours of waiting, Akane decides to go home on her own, having memorized the route home earlier on. But just as she gets up from her sitting position on the ground to leave, her teacher comes running up to her.*

*Teacher : "Akane-san! Don't leave yet! We just recieved a call from your father! He wants to speak to you!"*

*Akane turns around and looks confusedly at her teacher. Then she nods, and follows her teacher to the Principal's Office, where a solemn faced principal was sitting at his chair with a phone reciever on his desk.*

*Principal : "Akane-san, your father is waiting."*

*Akane gingerly picks up the reciever and holds it to her ear.*

*Akane : "Hello, daddy?"*

*\*chatter\* \*chatter\* \*chatter\* \*chatter\* \*sob\* \*sob\* \*sob\**

*Akane : "Ok daddy... I understand.... bye...."*

*And as Akane puts down the reciever, her face betrays nothing, simply assuming a neutral expression. Her teacher and principal look at each other worriedly, then the principal looks at Akane.*

*Principal : "Akane-san, I think I'd best send you home personally."*

*Akane : "Ok."*

*The principal escorts Akane out of the office to the parking lot, where his car is parked. Getting in the back*

seat, Akane sits sullenly while the principal starts the engine and drives off towards the Tendou Dojo. When they reach the Dojo, the Principal drops Akane off and drives back to his own home. Akane rushes through the gates, and sees her father and two sisters dressed in the traditional straw-made mourning clothes, little white cloth bandannas wrapped around their heads. (The chinese call these "ma yi" meaning Straw Clothes.) They are all crying, as Akane looks on at them. Walking up to her father, Akane asks him.

Akane : "Daddy, what's going on? What's wrong? What happened to mommy? Is she going to be alright?"

Soun : \*Sob\* "Akane-chan, you must be brave, alright?"

Akane : "Yes daddy."

Soun : "Your mommy.... she was hit by a speeding car on the way back from sending you to school. She died instantly."

Akane takes this news like a lightning bolt going through a person's body, she being old enough to understand the situation.

Akane : "Mommy's..... dead?"

Kasumi : "Yes...."

(Note : I write this part as purely speculative, maybe Rumiko Takahashi has something else planned, I don't know. But, as a note, Kasumi is barely old enough to take care of her family, and quits school soon after. More on it in the story.)

Akane takes the news badly, the worst since she was the closest to her mother. She begins sobbing almost immediately, tears streaming down her face as she wails out in absolute grief.

{The funeral. Helping Akane along.}

At the Tendou's funeral, everyone who knew any of the Tendous attend it to mourn the loss of a greatly loved motherly figure. The entire Tendou family is now wearing their mourning clothes, and while Soun shows the most control, his three daughters are off somewhere in a corner, crying softly, and have been doing so for the past day or so.

Mourner after mourner visit the coffin, pay their final respects to the woman whose face is frozen in a perpetual smile even in death, her final memory being that of Akane and Meseki together. Her death being swift and very painless, the driver of the speeding car has also come to pay his respects before allowing himself to be judged by the justice system of Japan.

One of the visitors is Meseki, and his entire family. Dressed in black, in respects to the dead, they pay their final respects as well, and then Meseki goes off in search of Akane Tendou, the girl he's grown attached to the last few days. He finds her outside the funeral tent, by the wall of the Dojo. She is sitting with her three sisters, leaning against each other for support, crying softly. Walking over respectfully, Meseki waits for a while to let the three girls let out some tears before Akane looks up and notices Meseki.

Akane : "Me..Meseki..?"

Meseki : "Hello, Akane-san. Are you alright?"

Akane : "Oh, Meseki! WAAAH!"

Running up to him and hugging him tight, Akane cries in his shoulder, and Meseki just stands there, looking compassionately at Akane, stroking her hair comfortingly as he whispers words of comfort into her ears.

Meseki : "There there, Akane-san... no need to be so upset.... your mother's just gone to a better place, that's all.... no need to cry.... there now."

Akane eventually stops crying, and looks up at the one boy she's grown to like fondly recently. Meseki seems so grown, so mature, and so understanding that Akane just rests her tear wet and reddened head on his shoulder and sniffs sadly. Akane's sisters have by now stood up and are going back to attend to their last duties before their mother's burial.

Meseki leads Akane off to a quiet corner of the garden, where the two sit down on a rock and rest, Meseki providing Akane with the comfort and support she needs. Eventually, Akane regains herself enough to return to the funeral service, now about to begin the final leg of its journey to the graveyard. But, Meseki's family isn't

going with them for the service, wanting to give the Tendous a measure of privacy. So before Akane leaves with her father to the burial, she does one last thing for Meseki, in return for his support for her in such trying times of grief.

Akane : "Meseki... I don't know how to thank you..."

Meseki : "No. It is I who has to thank you. I love you, Akane. I know I seem young, but I truly do love you.

Akane : "I love you too, Meseki."

Soun : "Akane-chan! Come on! We're leaving!"

Akane : "Coming, daddy!"

But before she turns around to leave, Akane tugs at a long strand of hair, pulling it out. She then takes a pair of scissors out of her skirt pocket and cuts off a small lock of hair where it won't be noticed. Tying the lock up, she gives it to Meseki.

Akane : "To remember you by."

Meseki : "To remember you by."

Akane's last memory of Meseki is him taking a small, velvet box out and keeping her lock of hair in it, and waving her goodbye. She later recieved a letter from him saying his family has moved to Osaka, and that they most likely wouldn't meet again, and that he was sorry he had to tell her this way.

Akane : "Why, Meseki? Why'd you leave so suddenly?"

{Akane meets Meseki, at last.}

It is morning, and birds sing their morning song. A gust of wind blows, and some curtains flutter in Akane's room. A ray of sunlight shines through the morning gloom, to settle directly on Akane's closed eyelids. Twitching a little, Akane's eyelids flutter, then open suddenly, as she sits up from her table, the lock of hair still tightly held in her hand.

Akane : (Thinking) "What? I fell asleep! But... those dreams.... they seemed so real! No, they WERE real! I just visualized them in my dreams! Then it IS true, I remember! Meseki!"

Akane gets up from her desk and rubs the last of the sleep from her eyes. Realizing that it's still early in the morning, and much earlier her normal waking period, Akane stands up and stretches, feeling bones pop from an entire night of sleeping in a sitting position, and the pain of sleeping in such an uncomfortable position.

Akane : "Ouch... that hurts. Next time I want to remember a lost lover, I'd better do it lying in bed... at least if I fall asleep, it won't hurt as much."

Mumbling a little, Akane puts the lock of hair back into the box, and then goes to the bathroom to wash off a night's weariness. She can just tell that it's going to take a long, hot bath to work out the kinks of a nights' worth of bad posture sleeping.

Slipping out of her nightgown, Akane looks at it for a while, realising that it's hardly been wrinkled, and smiling to herself.

Akane : "Must've been sleeping in one position too long. No wonder I hurt so much!" (Hint : Akane likes to move around alot on her bed when she's asleep. Read book 7.)

Shrugging off this thought, and wincing at the sharp pains the action brought her, she realises that she's very out of shape if a night's worth of sleeping sitting up can bring such pains so easily. Promising to make up for her lost exercise this morning before school, she walks into the bathroom, where Kasumi, knowing Akane well enough, has already boiled some water for her convenience.

Akane : "Good ole sis! Knows when I need a good bath!" (Ole here is simply a slang for Old)

Stepping into the hot tub, Akane gasps as the water immediately works it warm magic, loosening taut tendons and knotted muscles. Sighing in comfort, Akane slowly lowers herself into the water, while thinking about her

dream last night, scrubbing in the warm water.

Akane : "Well, I must really miss mom or Meseki to dream about them so vividly. But, if I miss Meseki, what about Ranma? Won't he get... jealous?"

Akane nearly laughs at this ridiculous thought, despite the fact that she does know Ranma has fought for her hand more than once before, when someone else wanted her as their own. She also hardly remembers Meseki anymore, although that is to change very soon.

Akane : "Ah well, I guess that if we're fated to meet, then we'll meet, hm? I just hope Ranma doesn't get all rash and try to fight for me again!"

While she finishes off her morning bath, Akane's mind goes back to more mundane things, like her cooking.

Akane : "Gee, I hope I can cook as well again as last time! Now I know why my cooking's been so bad! I can't tell one ingredient from another! Guess I'll have to try harder in the future!"

At least, that's ONE thing Akane's willing to admit in her cooking woes. After finishing her bath, Akane gets into her usual morning jog outfit consisting of a headband, shorts, and a singlet, but discovers that her bra is a little tighter than usual.

Akane : "Oh my. Is it me growing fat or am I already maturing?"

Giggling at the possibility of the latter, Akane opens the gates to the dojo and bids her siblings farewell as she goes for her morning jog. This time, Akane takes a longer jogging route, enjoying the feel of a cool morning breeze blowing in her face as well as the sheer enjoyment of jogging with complete enthusiasm once more. In an unusual display of cheerfulness, Akane even says "hi" to some of the most undesirable people in her life, like the Kunos, leaving behind her an entire trail of confused and bewildered people.

After returning from a nice, long, sweaty run, Akane goes directly to the Dojo hall and changes into her gi. While she practices her rusting skills, Kasumi looks on with Ranma beside her, peering around a corner.

Kasumi : "Well, it looks like that gift or else your compliment on her cooking did the trick, Ranma! Akane's back to her old self! Even better too, I might add. She's much more cheerful this morning!"

Ranma : "Well... I guess it's a little of both, Kasumi. I just hope she isn't as bad tempered as before! She's so uncute when she's angry!"

Kasumi and Ranma look at each other, sharing a stupid grin, then leave to attend to their own business. What Ranma didn't tell her was that HE was outside Akane's room the night before, eavsdropping on everything she said. (Remember who went 'OUCH!' that time? :-B)

As Ranma runs off to take his own morning bath, he mutters in a disturbed way.

Ranma : "Gee, Akane. I didn't know you could be so emotional.... do you really love him THAT much?"

At breakfast time, both Ranma and Akane have bathed (again?) and dressed for school. Eating their breakfast hastily, Ranma and Akane don't talk much to each other as they get their books and run off towards school. Soun watches the two teenagers leave for school, arms crossed, and begins to worry.

Soun : "Akane... be careful out there. If Meseki is out there, you'll want to be on your guard.... no telling what he might do."

Nabiki is about to leave for school as well, and catches a piece of what her father says. This sentence bothers her the most.

"Hey! Wait for me!" shouts Nabiki as Ranma and Akane rush off to school. Stopping just long enough for her sister to catch up, Akane walks with Nabiki, letting Ranma run off to school by himself on top of the chain link fence beside the canal.

Akane : "Hey, sis! What's up?"



After she's done screaming, the building shows visible damage along its entire structure, from the shattered windows to the cracked walls, the splintered tables and shattered statues. Having let out her unexplainable frustration, Akane quickly calms down. Quickly, A shaky voice comes over the PA system, now scratchy and full of static after Akane's scream.

Principal : "A...a...nd.....\*zzzzzz\*..... school will be closed for..... \*zzzzzz\* days..... please \*zzzzzz\*..... enjoy your holidays\*zzzzzz\*.... while I contact a \*zzzzzz\*..... repair company. Good Day!"

After hearing Akane scream, all the students can hardly hear the PA system, but understand it well enough that school will be closed for the duration of its premature annual repairing and renovation. Books are thrown into the air as students yell in joy, knowing the kind of damage Akane caused will take at least a MONTH to repair. All the students start piling into the corridors, grabbing their stuff from the lockers and running home yelling in joy at this sudden reprieve. The guys, at least are yelling. The girls are all walking in groups, gossiping about the things they want to do, about recent happenings, and discussing their "holiday" plans. Meanwhile, a wide berth is given to Akane, who is currently walking down the damaged hallways, a look of sadness on her face. A sadness that cannot be defined as just losing a mother and having a long lost boyfriend suddenly appear to your fiancée and telling him to deliver a present. Painful memories, returned once more to her mind, serve to create a chaotic swirl in her head that leaves her in a state only described by Depressive Sadness.

As Akane leaves the school compound, she is thinking about what has been happening to her recently, at what has been compelling her to let go of her stress at that moment, thinking about what it is that is causing her stress. Finally, unable to take this mental torment anymore, Akane just finds a wall to lean on, sits down and slumps dejectedly onto the sidewalk, sobbing uncontrollably.

Akane : "What... is going on? Why am I acting this way...? Why can't I get this out of my head!? WHY!?"

Akane is on the verge of screaming again, and she is opening her mouth to scream again, when suddenly, she feels a soft, yet firm grip on her shoulder. Stopping her scream, Akane expects to find Tofu or Kasumi the owner of the hand, yet instead she finds a young man, handsome to say the least, kneeling besides her, dressed in a long sleeved collared shirt, with matching pants and shoes. However, the most striking thing about him are his eyes, which are a liquid black, and seem to hold an infinite amount of wisdom and compassion in them. Akane seems to remember seeing those eyes, yet her mind is in too much turmoil to try matching his face to someone she once knew.

Man : "Excuse me, miss? I couldn't help but notice you crying here. I thought that maybe I could help you? Is something the problem here?"

Akane shudders uncontrollably for a while, then controls her tears and stops crying. She continues looking into those eyes, wondering just what it is about them that she finds so familiar. Then something clicks. Pointing at him, an unsteady finger at best, Akane begins, with the man looking on curiously.

Man : "Yes, miss? You want to say something?"

Akane : "Are you..... Meseki!?"

The man suddenly jerks backwards as if he was hit by a dagger in the back, at the mention of his name. Not wanting to use his "special ability" to probe into this poor girl's identity, he thought he was helping a total stranger, but the mention of his name makes him think otherwise. He is absolutely caught off guard.

Meseki : (Thinking) "I.... don't believe this! How.... no. Wait! It can't be, or can it?"

Looking at the girl again, at this beautiful but distressed maiden, Meseki looks at her and bores deep with his probing glance, but only long enough to discover her name, not wanting to put her through the disorientation extended probing with others would do. He discovers what he needs to know. Now looking at her with disbelief clear as day on his face, Meseki stutters a little.

Meseki : "A....Akane-san.... is that you!?"

At the recognition of her name, Akane looks at the man whom she is now sure of to be Mesek Hokori, her first

time love. The joyfulness and happiness replacing the grieving and anguished face on Akane betrays all that Meseki needs to know. That this girl was who he had come looking for, after so many years apart. Akane now hugs Meseki with all her might, crying in happiness at having found someone she can really share her feelings with, and both of them know it. Not even after so many years have they forgotten each other's feelings for each other.

Akane : "Meseki! It IS you!"

Meseki slowly strokes Akane's hair, a little confused as to this sudden turn of events, that he would so coincidentally find his lost love at this time in this condition. But, banishing all confusion, he knows only that he has found her and his happiness.

Meseki : "Yes, Akane. It's me. I've been thinking about you since I left.... I couldn't stand it any longer, and had to come back just to look for you."

Akane says nothing, just burying her head in his chest and sobbing a little at this comforting and reassuring presence, that, as she realizes, has been the source of her distraction for the past week or so. If you'll remember one book in the comic series, a man once said that two lovers are bound by a red string. It seems Akane's and Meseki's red string has never really been untied. In fact, the very proximity of Akane and Meseki was the reason why the two have been so distracted lately. Their red string extends even THAT far. So, the two lovers, re-united, share a moment together, working out the problems that have been plaguing them for over a week.

Akane : "So, Meseki, you've been feeling distracted as well?"

Meseki : "Oh, yes! I even bumped into your fiancee recently. And I normally never bump into anyone."

Akane : "Oh, that nosy jerk? He's always getting into trouble."

Meseki : "One more thing, Akane. I didn't know you'd grown to be so strong and beautiful!"

Akane blushes at the compliment.

Akane : "T...Thank you, Meseki.... but, I'd also like to thank you for that 'gift'."

Meseki : "Oh... I've been keeping that lock since we parted..."

Akane suddenly remembers the question she wanted to ask him.

Akane : "Meseki? Can I ask you something?"

Meseki : "Ask away."

Akane : "Meseki, why did you leave so suddenly?"

Meseki is caught off guard for THAT question. Sweating just a little, Meseki clears his throat as he prepares his answer.

Meseki : "Oh... that... erm, well, it may sound stereotypical, but, my family left because my father found a better job in Osaka.... I'm sorry I couldn't say a final farewell."

Dismissing the explanation, Akane just asked Meseki the question to get it out of her system. Looking at him with tearful eyes, Akane grins.

Akane : "Who needs that? We're together again, aren't we?"

Meseki : "Yes."

The two smile, and even though Akane does love Ranma, she loves Meseki more. The one person who seems to understand her, and provides comfort whenever needed. (I know it sounds like other love stories. Put up with me for a while. Please, humour me.)

Suddenly, Meseki feels something while the two are sharing a look. He turns around.

\*Gasp!\*

"Killer chi!"

Something glints in the sunlight.

Meseki : "DANGER, AKANE! GET DOWN!"

And just in time too. As Meseki grabs Akane and the two roll out of danger, several sharp daggers slam into the floor where they were seconds ago.

\*Ting\* \*Ting\* \*Tang\* \*Ting\*  
\*Flop\*

Mousse : "Well, well, well... if it isn't Meseki Hokori, old *buddy!*"

Mousse drops out of the sky, and lands in front of Meseki and Akane, as they are disentangling themselves from each other and standing up. He puts on his glasses to make sure he's gotten the right people.

Meseki looks at Mousse, trying to remember where he saw this strange, bespectacled being. Mousse's glasses reflect off sunlight, creating a glint. Meseki then remembers something. Ushering Akane behind him, Meseki speaks.

Meseki : "Whoever you are, take off your glasses for a while!"

Mousse : "Gladly."

Mousse takes off his glasses and looks at the two people, now no more than hazy blurs. Meseki glares at Mousse's eyes, almost as beautiful as his own. Then something clicks in his head. Telling Akane to stay to one side while he deals with Mousse, Meseki walks up to Mousse.

Meseki : "Hold on, you're Mousse, aren't you?"

Putting on his glasses, Mousse nods.

Mousse : "About time."

Meseki : "Well then, Mousse, looks like your attempts to use your skills have failed?"

Mousse : "Unfortunately so."

Meseki : "And, what of the side effects?"

Mousse : "Why do you think I'm wearing glasses three hundred degrees higher than the last time we met?"

Meseki : "My sympathies then."

Mousse : "What about you? I thought the skill would affect you too?"

Meseki : "I have contacts."

Mousse looks a little lost at this, he himself unable to find words to say now. Akane then decides to come in to intervene. Looking at the two people, Akane looks confused, having overheard their conversation.

Akane : "Meseki, Mousse, you two people know each other?"

Mousse & Meseki : "More than that, Akane."

Akane : "What is it then?"

Mousse : "Meseki is my half brother."

Ranma & Akane : "**NANI O!?**"

Mousse is flattened by Ranma as he comes flying out of the sky and lands neatly on his head, Ranma having finally recovered from Akane's punch. Hopping off Mousse's head, Ranma looks at the two still standing figures jealously. Akane looks at Ranma in disgust at this intrusion. Ranma just looks at Akane in confusion.

Ranma : "What's this about Mousse and Meseki being... half brothers!?"

Akane : "Don't ask me! I'm in as much in the dark as you are!"

Just then, Mousse gets up, having straightened out his robes and adjusted his spectacles.

Mousse : "Allow me to explain, Ranma. But don't hit me again, got it!?"

Ranma : "*Sure, sure... whatever you say.*"

Mousse turns red at Ranma's arrogant tone, but calms down soon enough. Turning around, Mousse gestures at the three.

Mousse : "Come on, Meseki and I can explain this at the Cat Cafe."

Ranma and Akane look at Meseki, who shrugs nonchalantly.

Meseki : "Come on, Akane-san. Let's go."

Akane : "Ok."

Akane, her face a little red, holds out her arm in a very ladylike manner. Meseki gently kisses her hand, and then tenderly locks her arm in his. The two share a beautiful smile. Together, the two follow Mousse, with Ranma trailing behind, bristling green with jealousy. His mind almost screaming as he thinks, Ranma is deeply troubled.

Ranma : (Thinking) "*Akane!? Acting cute!? And actually.... WANTING to go with him? It's almost like.... she likes him, if not love him! No! I don't want to believe it! But it's best if I play along first. No telling what might happen!*"

{An explanation in order. A challenge!}

"So, you wanted to explain something to us, Mousse?" cackles Cologne as she brings out some food to entertain her guests.

Mousse : "Yes, old hag."

\*BONK\*

Cologne : "Who's an old hag!?!?"

Mousse : "Sorry!"

Cologne : "Much better! Now, you were saying?"

We see our group of heroes assembled around a large table partitioned off by some authentic chinese painted partitions. Ranma is sitting besides Akane, who is sitting besides Meseki. Mousse is sitting opposite the two, with Cologne off to one side. Shampoo is outside busy serving customers, and can't come to the discussion. (Not that she wants to, anyway.) Ranma seems to have put off his jealousy for a while.

Mousse : "Yes, as I mentioned earlier, Meseki is my half brother."

Ranma & Akane : "Just what do you mean by half brother?"

Meseki : "Allow me to explain. While we were born of different mothers, we shared the same father, much as I digress this." (If I'm correct, Digress means find repulsive, hating it.)

Akane : "And why would you digress this?"

Meseki : "Because I come from a high class family, and my father was taken in from Joketsuzoku. Mousse is... low class."

Mousse looks angry at the insult.

Akane : "Go on, what happened?"

Mousse : "He got lost one day, because he couldn't find his way home without glasses. As far as I could tell, he was found by Meseki's mother, the two fell in love, and they married, leaving me alone, with my mother."

Meseki : "And father sent postcards and photos of me, his baby half brother, to him to make sure he was updated on current events when he was living with us."

Mousse : "But I never expected Meseki to actually come here. I feel so cheated, having my own father stolen...."

Meseki : "Because our father once practiced a skill, something that only people on his side of the family could do...."

Akane looks surprised that this has never been revealed before.

Akane : "You... people have some skill?"

Meseki : "Yes. It seems that one of my father's ancestors was some deity, who married a mortal...."

Mousse : "Yeah, blood's been diluted enough though."

Ranma : "Strange."

Cologne : "Never mind that, you two! What is it that you two claim to be able to use?"

Mousse : "'Me Sen Benri Tsukau'. 'Eyes of a thousand convenient uses'."

Meseki : "Somehow, people on our father's side of the family are born with the strange, beautiful eyes you see on us, although in exchange for our eye's appearance and magical abilities, we all have VERY bad vision."

Mousse : "And... *SOME* of us are less fortunate than the others, because we have to receive proper training in order to master our inherent abilities, or else any attempts to use our abilities would result in worsening vision."

Mousse gives Meseki a poisonous glare with this sentence. Ranma claps his hands once in surprised amusement, and points at Mousse.

Ranma : "Which is why you have such bad vision, Mousse! No wonder you have to wear such thick spectacles!"

Akane : "But, if Meseki's from his father's side of the family, doesn't he need spectacles too?"

Meseki : "Who needs those crude, old fashioned things when you can have contacts?"

Ranma, Akane & Cologne : "True."

Then Ranma snaps his fingers, remembering a question he's been meaning to ask for a long time.

Ranma : "Meseki, that time I bumped into you...."

Meseki : "Sorry if I caused you any inconvenience, Ranma Saotome. I was just intruiged by you, so I just had to probe you."

Akane : "Meseki, that was rude of you!"

Meseki : "I know, Akane-san. I'm sorry, I won't do this to your fiancee again without your permission, ok?"

Akane blushes a little at this question, clearly showing that Meseki still likes Akane and respects her. Ranma's hair stands on end and his face starts to take on an unhealthy colour. He curls his hands up into fists, ready to smash the table into little splinters.

Ranma : "NNngggghhh.....!!!!!"

Cologne : "Ranma! Calm down, young one! You won't do any good destroying my cafe!"

Ranma apparantly hears Cologne, for he immediately calms down and his face resumes a normal colour. Everyone lets go of the breath they didn't know they were holding. Akane looks worriedly at Meseki and Ranma, two people whom she loves, each one for a different reason, and under different circumstances.

All attention goes back to Meseki and Mousse, who are now looking at each other, wondering what the other is thinking. The two break out into a little conversation.

Meseki : "Well, big half brother. How's life been treating you these past few years, hm?"

Mousse : "Hopefully better than yours."

Meseki : "I don't think so."

Mousse : "Yeah, at least I've got a girl I love close to home."

Meseki : "That Shampoo gal? Oh, I don't know. I probed her once... she doesn't much care for you, does she?"

Mousse : "You *WHAT!*?"

Mousse gets up immediately, and grabs Meseki by the collar, shaking him back and forth.

Mousse : "YOU PROBED HER!? YOU GOOD FOR NOTHING JERK! YOU PROBED *MY* SHAMPOO!? I'M GONNA KILL YOU!"

Still shaking Meseki back and forth, Mousse goes on to shout a few obscenities that causes the cafe's entire customer population to vacate the area rather hastily. Cologne is shaking her head in disappointment, as she starts

thinking about how business is going to suffer from now on. Everyone else is covering their ears to block out the obscenities spewing forth from Mousse's mouth. Shampoo comes to join them after seeing the last customer leave hurriedly, tossing a few yen bills her way. Looking at Mousse rocking Meseki back and forth, Shampoo also can't stand any more from Mousse.

Shampoo : "Mousse! Stop that! Shampoo no like it!"

Immediately after hearing that, Mousse stops shaking Meseki and screaming, instead, the two people turn to look at Shampoo, who is just standing there looking angry.

Mousse : "S...Sh...Shampoo?"

Shampoo : "What Mousse shouting about? What this 'probing' thing about? Shampoo want to know!"

Hurridly, Mousse drops Meseki and goes over to explain rather quickly to Shampoo what they were discussing about recently. After he's done, Shampoo looks disbelievingly at Mousse, then at her great-grandmother, who is nodding solemnly.

Cologne : "Shampoo, I think you'd better believe them. At least, Ranma and Akane act like they do."

Ranma : "More than you'd like to know."

Shampoo just looks confused at this, not wanting to believe that Mousse could be of such impressive origins. (Of course, I did mention that the blood has been diluted enough....)

Shampoo : "Shampoo no care about this. Shampoo only like Ranma. Period."

Turning around, Shampoo goes back to clear up the tables and wash the dishes. Mousse looks at a departing Shampoo, rather heartbrokenly. Turning around, Mousse stares daggers at Meseki, who has by now gotten up and is busy dusting himself and straightening his clothes.

Mousse : "Meseki..... even if Shampoo doesn't like me..... I STILL CAN'T LET YOU INTRUDE ON HER PRIVACY!  
I challenge you to a duel! If I win, you'll never set foot in Nerima again!"

Meseki looks unconcerned at this development.

Meseki : "And if I win?"

Mousse : "Then you do what you wish with me."

Meseki : "No, not with you. I wish to try for the fair Akane's hand in marriage then. Agreed?"

Mousse : "Agreed!"

Ranma looks shocked, and Cologne just looks happy.

Ranma : "Chotto! Chotto matte! Hey! Since when did I agree to let this attempt for Akane happen!?"

Cologne, Mousse and Meseki give Ranma a withering glare.

Cologne : "I don't mind! If Meseki defeats both Mousse AND you, I can have you marry Shampoo!"

Ranma : "And what of Mousse and Shampoo?"

Mousse : "If I have to lose fair and square, so be it."

Akane looks at the group of people, now challenging one another to duels. She looks concerned, but torn between intervening to stand up for her rights, or whether simply to agree to be one of the two boys' fiancee. Finally, she opts for the former. She stands up, and slams her hand onto the table, getting everyone's attention immediately.

Akane : "Hey! Since when did I agree to be taken as a prize, available to the winner!?"

Everyone looks at Akane, disbelievingly. Not caring one whit, Akane continues.

Akane : "I don't care about Mousse and Meseki's duel, but I refuse to be taken as a prize fiancee! I choose who I

want to marry here!"

Meseki and Ranma look at her, ashamed of themselves. Akane notes their shame, and her serious demeanor changes into a more pleasant smile as she lets up a little.

Akane : "Oh, all right. I like the two of you, for different reasons, but I can't decide. You two fight it out for me then. I don't mind... but I get a final say either way, all right!?"

Ranma and Meseki look at each other, totally ignoring everyone else. They turn back to Akane.

Meseki and Ranma : "Agreed."

As soon as this is said though, the place suddenly turns a few degrees colder as Ranma and Meseki look at each other coldly. Mousse appears to have been left out of the picture, as if he lost the match before it even starts.

Meseki : "Akane shall be mine."

Ranma : "In your dreams she will."

Akane starts to wonder if she's done the right thing.  
Cologne steps in.

Cologne : "All right then! I'll be the fight's organizer! Hosted by the Cat Cafe, the battle for Akane's hand, and a chance for Mousse to avenge Shampoo!"

Mousse : "Good."

Ranma : "Sounds good to me...."

Cologne : "I'll get the preparations right away. I'll inform you when the fight'll be ready, all right?"

Meseki : "If you wish....."

While Ranma and Meseki speak, their gazes never separate from each other. Mousse simply smirks, knowing that even if Meseki defeats him, he'll be too weak to defeat Ranma and even if Ranma loses, Ranma wouldn't want to marry Shampoo and Shampoo will "still" be "his". Cologne is thinking that Ranma will never lose, and if he does, Shampoo will marry him, and both ways, business will boom. Either way, SHE can't lose either.

Cologne & Mousse : (Thinking) "I can't lose either way!"

{Soun's explanation, a father's woes.}

Akane and Meseki leave the Cat Cafe holding hands, with a very angry and jealous Ranma trailing behind them. Caught up in his own world of thoughts, Ranma sullenly and sulkily trails behind Akane and Meseki, not caring where they go. Looking at the scenery once in a while, Ranma simply snorts and looks back to the ground, his mind hard at work. But then, after deciding that losing Akane would be a moot point since he is sure that he will win the challenge, Ranma begins to cheer up a little and walk with his head up, paying more attention to his surroundings. He wished he didn't. He realizes the path Akane and Meseki are taking leads back to the Tendou Dojo, and walks faster so he can listen to what Akane and Meseki are saying. However, hearing what they ARE saying, he nearly faints.

Akane : "...why not come to my house and meet my father? He'll be ecstatic to see you've returned!"

Meseki : "Why not? I've not met your family in a long time."

Akane : "Let's go!"

Ranma just stands there, mouth hanging open as he hears what Akane and Meseki just said. Then, not wanting to be left behind, Ranma scrambles off after them.

In the Tendou Dojo, Soun is playing another game of Go with Genma, when Akane returns home with her first-love. The gates creak open. Two shadows appear in the doorway.

Akane : "Daddy! I'm home!"

Soun, smiling, turns his head at the sound of such a cheery Akane. Then, he spots Meseki. His smile melts away.

\*Clang\*

Soun's jaw drops, and hits the ground. Clamping his jaw shut again, Soun starts to point at Meseki, who is being led by Akane towards Soun.

Soun : "A...A....Akane-chan!? Is that... who I think it is!?"

Akane : "Yep! It's Meseki! Long lost boyfriend!"

Soun turns pale at the mention of the name. Sweat runs down his neck in a constant stream.

Soun : "But...but you two only knew each other for... so long!" (Putting his fingers in the measurement sign, and making the space VERY small.)

Akane : "Oh, who cares! The thing is, we're back! Come on, Meseki! Let's go meet the rest of the family!"

Meseki : "All right, Akane-chan."

Akane and Meseki trot off into the house, where Akane is anxious to show off the rest of her family. As soon as she leaves, Soun starts crying. Ranma stumbles into the compound just after Akane leaves sight, and spots Soun crying, muttering something about "It's not good! It's not good!" and Genma trying to comfort him. Spotting Soun, Ranma disappears from the gates in a rush of wind and shoves Genma out of the way, reappearing in Soun's face, grabbing his Gi with both hands and screaming in his face.

Ranma : "SOUN BAKA! YOU KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT THIS MESEKI, DON'T YOU!? DON'T AVOID MY QUESTION THIS TIME, SOUN! WHO IS HE? WHY DOES AKANE LOVE HIM SO MUCH!? ANSWER ME!!!!"

Soun is absolutely terrified at Ranma's intense ferocity in asking this question. Overwhelmed by fear, he is unable to speak, and does the only thing he knows he can do. He faints.

He wakes up in his room, on a futon, covered in a blanket with a concerned Kasumi looking on at him, wiping his brow with a cold towel. Ranma and Genma are sitting off to one side, with Ranma much calmer than he was a few hours ago in which Soun was out for, looking at the floor in boredom. Immediately, Soun grabs the towel off his head and sits up.

Soun : "Ranma! Come here! I have something I need to tell you!"

Ranma looks up at Soun, knowing he's finally going to get the answers he needs. He leaps over to Soun's side, still in his cross-legged sitting position. Soun looks sad at what he is about to tell Ranma, but braces himself as he prepares to regale Ranma with the entire family history.

But FIRST...!

Soun : "Ranma, what I am about to tell you may shock you, are you ready? Ready to accept anything?"

Ranma nods solemnly as he hears Soun's question. Just to test Ranma's answer, Genma walks up to him and screams in his hear with a megaphone. For his effort, Genma is smashed on the head by two fists, one belonging to a shocked Soun, and one belonging to a calm Ranma.

Soun : "Yes, Ranma. I see you are ready. Here goes...."

Ranma : "Spare me the family history, Soun. Just tell me what is going on between Akane and Meseki."

Soun's hair flies up as he is shocked by Ranma's mind reading skills. So, cutting to the chase, Soun begins.

Soun : "Ranma, this is what happened."

"A long time ago, when Akane was still a small child of 4, she first met Meseki. We knew at that time that the two would be a perfect couple, and it showed on Akane's face. She lost her hat then, and Meseki recovered it from her. She looked so lost with Meseki, my wife and I shared a private joke that the two would eventually be married, even

though I already made a deal with your father. I was thinking at that time that you would marry Kasumi or Nabiki, not Akane, so I met up with his father later. I offered him a deal, saying that if my daughter really loved his son, I wouldn't mind letting them get married, in return for letting him become heir to my Dojo."

\*Bonk\* \*Bonk\*

Genma : "Soun Tendou, you....!"

Soun :

"Hear me out! I didn't think that childhood love would last forever, like some 'puppy loves' do. However, the event that kind of sealed their love was.... my wife's..... funeral.... \*sniff\*. I didn't know it then, but when I couldn't find Akane when the procession was about to begin, Kasumi came up to me and told me that Akane and Meseki went off to find a quiet spot together. I don't know what happened between the two, but I DO know that soon after that funeral, Akane recieved a letter from Meseki's family. After that, Akane never really did let go of Meseki's memory. I noticed she'd cut a little of her hair, and that was my first suspicion. The next few were a little more conspicuous."

Ranma : "Like?"

Soun :

"Oh, Akane would do nothing but talk about Meseki the whole time, tittering about just how wonderful he was at the funeral, how she missed him, how she kept asking me to bring her to Osaka to visit him, and do nothing but sketch pictures of him during her spare time. I became so worried that Akane would eventually become obsessed with him, I consulted a hypnotist. He suggested using a tape which he sold to me for ¥1000. I used it when Akane went to bed one night. She stopped remembering him after that. I was so relieved. But the tape had that unexpected side effect.... the one you see now."

Ranma : "Tomboyishness and uncuteness?"

Soun :

"Yes. Exactly. She began hating boys in general, although the tape was supposed to let her only FORGET her current love. The hypnotist warned me that the tape might have several side effects, but I paid him no heed. Well, at least Akane forgot about him after that, but she started getting into fights, and became the Akane you know today."

Ranma looks much clearer on this issue after Soun's explanation.

Ranma : "So, Akane still loves Meseki, even after this... 'conditioning'?"

Soun : "Only if she recieves a reminder, yes. In which that case I was to use the tape again."

Ranma : "So, unfortunately now, even if you wanted to, the tape would be rendered useless because Meseki is here, in person."

Soun : "Yes. And worse still, I lost the tape."

\*Blam!\* Ranma and Genma fall to the floor, jerking spasmodically for a while, then getting up. Kasumi looks worried after hearing Soun's story.

Kasumi : "Father, then does this mean Ranma's marriage plans to Akane...."

Soun : "Well, if Meseki wants to marry Akane, there's nothing I can do about it! I did promise his father after all..."

Ranma : "No, wait! There is still a chance! He challenged me to a fight for Akane's hand, and I'll wager that includes marriage!"

Kasumi : "Ranma! Does that mean you LIKE Akane?"

Ranma is caught off guard by this question. But, while he does like Akane, he falls back on his second reputation. Never turn down a challenge, and never lose one.

Ranma : "No! I don't mean that, but what I DO mean is that I will NEVER turn down a challenge, and I don't intend to lose this one! If Meseki loses, Akane will have to forget him, at least about having him to marry!"

Then Ranma remembers something Akane said during the meeting in the cafe.

Ranma : "Oh no.... unless...."

Soun, Kasumi and Genma look at Ranma expectantly.

Soun : "Unless what, Ranma?"

Ranma : "Akane said that she would have a final say in this matter....."

Soun : "*WHAT!?*"

Upon hearing this, Soun faints once more. Kasumi sighs at her over-emotional father, and goes back to the job of tending to her unconscious father.

Kasumi : "Now I know why Akane was so disturbed recently. Either her hypnotic suggestions were wearing off, or Meseki's presence close to her was disturbing her."

Ranma sighs, as he realizes the truth of it.

Ranma : "Either that, or both."

Then turning to Genma, Ranma glares at him darkly.

Ranma : "Come on, pops. Let's start training. I don't like Meseki any more than you relish the idea of losing the one chance of me inheriting this Dojo."

Genma : "Ok son. You got me. Let's go."

The two leave in solemn seriousness. Kasumi looks on after them, concerned.

Kasumi : "Good luck, Ranma."

{The day of competition. What Akane loves Meseki for.}

A day after the agreement to let Cologne host the fight for Akane's hand and Mousse's revenge, all the challengers receive word from Cologne that the competition is to be held on Sunday, which at that time, is only a week away. Furiously, Ranma trains non-stop in the Dojo, spending all spare time doing nothing but train with his father, and when his father grows too tired to go on, by himself. Day and night, the entire Tendou household hears nothing but the sounds of Ranma hard at work, perfecting his skills. Mousse, too, is practicing his weapon skills, practicing how to use his tools to maximum advantage, and finding less bulky, but deadlier items to stuff into his robes. Meseki on the other hand, staying in a hotel not far from the Dojo, stays calm and cool as ice, not caring one whit about his own "skills". Not that he needs to. And just a day after Meseki visits Akane's home, he begins to pick her up at the Dojo to escort her to school, and back home after school, the Principal having done a marvellous job of finding an incredibly fast school repairs service, much to the students' dismay.

Ranma however, despite all his feelings, does a marvellous job of acting the impartial fiancée, not caring one bit about whether his fiancée is being stolen or not. And this reflects well on Akane, whom after so many years of pent up feelings, can finally release them, after finding her long lost lover once more. In fact, she's so happy and so stress free after that meeting on that day, that her teachers, friends and classmates notice that she isn't her usual hot-tempered, grumpy, boy-hating self anymore. Instead, she is a sweet, demure, and cute girl who has all the patience in the world, and even her cooking's gone from plain edible to become a culinary match of world class chefs. All that, and she still finds time to work out now, much more vigorously than before too. Truly, everyone agrees that this Akane would be better than the Akane who spends time with Ranma, and are hoping she stays this way the rest of her life. Even Kuno is moderately well-relieved by Akane, receiving only a nasty bruise to the face everytime he tries to get her to be his girlfriend, instead of being sent into orbit by her uppercut. This is reflecting well on her indeed. Too well.

Finally, the day of the challenge has arrived! The avenue is in a clearing not far from Nekko Houten, where many banners have been set up, announcing the impending fight that day, and the host being the Cat Cafe. Stores have been set up all around the area, but the biggest one is the Cat Cafe's portable noodle stand, with Shampoo doing

deliveries to the people within the crowd. People arrive in droves to watch the fight, which they all hope to be spectacular. Ukyo is also enjoying brisk business, as she has a store set up right next to the temporary arena. The fight is scheduled to commence at 3 in the afternoon, and by 2:30 PM, the place is packed with anxious spectators. People are heard gossiping about the latest events.

Voice #1 : "Hey, you heard? This fight's going to be a battle between fiancées again!"

Voice #2 : "Haven't we seen enough of these fights between Ranma and some other so-called fiancée?"

Voice #1 : "Maybe, but you never know! This fiancée seems perfect for Akane! Notice how she's been behaving recently? I heard it's all because of his appearance!"

Voice #3 : "Really? Wow! This fiancée must be better than Ranma!"

Voice #2 : "Definitely!"

\*DONG\*, \*DONG\*, \*DONG\*!!!

A clock tower's chime rings out from nowhere, capturing the attention of all gathered. They notice that the three competitors have already assembled to one empty corner of the clearing, with Ranma cracking his knuckles angrily, Mousse adjusting his spectacles confidently, and Meseki simply standing there, looking at Akane, who is amongst the crowd. Akane however, isn't looking at Meseki. She has a disturbed look, as she looks at the two loves in her life.

Akane : "Ranma.... Meseki..... one I love for his understanding, the other I love because he's the 'can't live with, can't live without' type. Yet, I feel the same for the two, but also differently. I can't decide.... I think this fight's a bad idea!"

But Akane can't stop the fight now, especially since it is already as good as underway. Cologne is now in the centre of the ring, with a microphone in hand.

Cologne : "\*Ahem\*" Attention please! Now, I know you're all here for the fight, between Mousse and Meseki, and between Meseki and Ranma if Mousse loses! So, without further ado, let's start the fight!"

And with that, Cologne hops out of the ring, as Mousse and Meseki enter it. The crowd is quiet now, as the two face off in the ring. Mousse is looking, smirking, at Meseki, who is returning the same look at Mousse. Meseki dressed in a rugged looking long sleeved shirt, with matching pants and shoes, cracks a few knuckles. Even in a fight, he knows how to dress, eh? Mousse on the other hand is wearing the same things he's been wearing the last few years. Long sleeved robes, long pants, and a pair of cloth shoes. The two look at each other intensely.

Mousse : "Meseki, for having your mother steal my father, I can forgive. For calling me names, I can forgive. But, for intruding on Shampoo's privacy of mind, I cannot forgive."

Meseki : "Mousse, I only read the parts of her mind concerning things everyone else should know, I never searched her mind completely."

Mousse : "Shut up, you! I don't care if you just looked into a small part of her mind, I can't forgive you for even looking into her mind in the first place! Die! HAAAAA!!!!!"

And with that, Mousse leaps towards Meseki, extending a dozen swords, poles, halberds and assorted weapons from each sleeve. Meseki looks at the oncoming Mousse, and blinks.

The world freezes. (Ok, it doesn't really freeze, but it seems that way in this kind of tense moment.)

Mousse gasps, and swings his weapons at Meseki.

He doesn't connect though, as his weapons flies *through* Meseki, or at least, his illusion.

However, what the audience sees is a different thing altogether. While Meseki did indeed blink, his eyes weaved a little magic. Mousse, in mid flight, changes directions and strikes thin air, although he seems to think he's struck Meseki's illusion. Looking around blindly, Mousse starts to shout. Ranma is observing this fight with intense interest.

Mousse : "Where are you, you wimp!?! Show yourself if you're man enough!"

Meseki : "*Don't worry, I'm here, Mousse.*"

Mousse jumps in shock at the ghostly, disembodied voice that he hears besides him. Swinging his weapons wildly at the empty air besides him, he strikes nothing.

Meseki : "*Haa haa haa haa! You think I'm just going to roll over and die? Think again!*"

Of course, Meseki is just standing there, in a corner of the ring, grinning like a fool, while he speaks. People are all laughing at Mousse, who looks at them, confused. Still looking around, Mousse is sweating in fear now.

Mousse : "Damn it, Meseki! This is one of your tricks, isn't it!? Well, I'll soon fix that!"

And then, his weapons disappear into his sleeves, to be replaced by a dozen shurikens instead. Immediately the crowd ducks and stays down, as Mousse smirks evilly and confidently, looking at nothing in particular.

Mousse : "If you won't show yourself, then I'll just keep trying!"

And with this, he lets loose a metal storm of flying shurikens. People start screaming, although more in the spirit of faking fear rather than experiencing real fear. Looking up from her ducking position, Akane sees Meseki having a hard time avoiding the shurikens.

Akane : "Meseki! Be careful!"

Meseki stops for a while to look at Akane, and at the sight of her concerned face, he winks. Immediately, the shurikens stop in mid-air, and everyone looks up, wondering why the whistling has stopped. They gasp in awe as they see the shurikens just... HOVERING in mid-air, held by Meseki's magic eyes. Through this exertion, Mousse can "see" Meseki again, and his jaw is dropped as he notices that through the power of his eyes alone, Meseki has stopped his barrage. Ranma notes that Meseki's eyes are glimmering now, as he uses this strange skill to actually FORCE the shurikens to crush themselves into little metal balls, and with a gasp of relief, drops them all to the floor with little \*clangs\* of ball bearings hitting a floor. The crowd "ooooohs" and "aaaaaahs" at this magnificent feat, while Mousse isn't deterred.

Mousse : "Interesting parlour magic, Meseki. Now, I shall use my full powers against you! Watch out!"

Mousse summons even MORE weapons from out of his robe's sleeves, and leaps forwards to attack. With an impressive array of weapons, Mousse slashes at Meseki, who is deftly leaping and rolling to avoid Mousse's attacks. The people are all cheering on Meseki now, as they watch the fight unravel. Dodging a sword thrust at his head from Mousse, Meseki looks up at his opponent, who is still trying to regain his balance from an over-enthusiastic sword thrust. He blinks again, and this time, Mousse is THROWN back into the ropes surrounding the ring. However, unscathed by this move, Mousse decides to take this hand to claw. Replacing his swords with metal claws with he fits onto his hands, Mousse takes it out with Meseki once more. This time, with an easier time attacking, Mousse is keeping Meseki on his toes. Ducking here, dodging there, Meseki is being kept busy enough such that he can't counter with anything at all. But then, Mousse makes a mistake, as he is led into a trap the quick thinking Meseki thought of while dodging. Meseki makes a show of slipping as he dodges a quick slash to his face, and Mousse takes advantage of this "blunder".

Mousse : "I've got you now, you creep!"

And Mousse moves in to take advantage of this. He immediately lunges at a Meseki who appears to be frantically trying to regain balance. However, Meseki immediately reacts. He simply falls down. Mousse blinks at this unexpected move, and then looks ahead.

Mousse : "Oh Sh.....!!!!!"

In front of him are the ropes surrounding the ring, and with his incredible forwards momentum carrying him through the move, Mousse's claws strike the ropes. They tangle with the ropes, made of chains covered in plastic to prevent unnecessary hurt, and are unable to come loose. While struggling, Mousse is cursing.

Mousse : "Damn damn damn!!! You tricked me, Meseki!"

Meseki by now has gotten up from the floor, and is looking at Mousse's back, as he attempts to break free from the tangled mess of chain and claw.

Meseki : "This will teach you to be more careful in the future, eh, Mousse?"

Mousse : "GRRRR!!!!"

And, finally growing bored of this game, Meseki holds a hand up, and slams it into Mousse's neck. Going blank eyed, Mousse hits the ground, unconscious, his arms still hanging up as they are still strapped to the claws trapped in the ropes. Shampoo looks at the fight as she delivers an order, and looks surprised. Everyone cheers and whoops at the victory of Meseki, as he takes a gentlemanly bow towards the crowd, especially in Akane's direction. She blushes slightly. Ranma starts bristling in absolute anger. He cracks more knuckles in anticipation of the upcoming fight. He's been watching in absolute attentiveness at Meseki's duel with Mousse, yet is unable to completely understand how Meseki uses his eyes to work their magic. Cologne hops up to the arena again. Using her staff, she slashes a few times at the claws Mousse is still wearing, and they split and come apart, freeing Mousse, who slumps to the floor, snoring.

Cologne : "Ok, then boys and girls! Since it seems that Mousse has lost.... we can go on to our next fight! Ranma and Meseki, fighting it out for the fair Akane's hand! Good luck, you two! Don't disappoint me!"

Of course, what Cologne means is that Ranma should lose so he has to marry Shampoo, but no one catches the meaning at that time. Meseki, resting now after an exerting fight with Mousse, is looking at Ranma with those gleaming black eyes, the blackness seemingly swirling in a whirlpool, as if something else were there inside those eyes instead of just a pupil and iris. Ranma leaps from his spot on the ground, and lands neatly in the middle of the arena. Looking at Meseki with murder in HIS eyes, Ranma speaks to him in a deadly tone.

Ranma : "Well then Meseki, time I show you what losing means!"

Meseki gets up from his spot on the arena and huffs a little. Smiling confidently at Ranma, he gives a little gentlemanly retort.

Meseki : "If you wish to show me what losing means, give me a dictionary and I'll look it up."

At this, Ranma's face turns red in anger. Listening to the rest of the crowd laughing, Ranma realises he's been made a fool of. He bares his teeth in anger, grinding them. The sound produced sounds like a millstone grinding more wheat than it can handle. Finally, Ranma loses his cool. He roars.

Ranma : "Meseki! I don't know WHO you REALLY are, but if you think you can just *pop* out of nowhere and *steal* my fiancée just like THAT.... (snapping his fingers), you've got something else coming! Akane's mine, and I'm going to prove that to everyone here today! Akane, did you hear that!?"

All eyes go to Akane, somewhere in the crowd. She is turning red with embarrassment, and is gritting her teeth.

Akane : (Thinking) "What does that idiot think he's doing!?! Simply exclaiming I'm for him only? I'm some sort of property to be fought over!?! \*Sigh\*.... I knew I shouldn't have read so many love stories. It's happening all over again, in real life!"

Ranma and Meseki are still waiting for a reply from her, and are growing impatient. Just then, somebody in the crowd shouts out.

Voice : "Hey! I think Akane heard you! She's turning red over here!"

\*BLAM!\*

Voice : "OUCH!"

The person is very silent, very quickly, a huge mallet sticking out of his head. Ranma and Meseki look at that person for a while, then at each other, and sparks fly between them. They exchange one last sentence before they fight.

Meseki : "Ranma, prepare yourself for a humiliating defeat."

Ranma : "That's what I wanted to say. Come on!"

The two combatants leap towards each other. Despite his outwards appearance, Meseki is much more skilled than what most people would expect him to be. Ranma strikes out with a lightning fast kick, which is quickly parried by Meseki, and then grabbed. In surprise, Ranma does nothing, while Meseki gives him an evil smile. Then he twists his body (in mid-air, mind!), and starts swinging Ranma.

Ranma : "Whoawhoawhoawhoawhoa!"

Meseki : "This is my 'Goodbye, and Farewell! toss' Enjoy!"

Meseki starts building up speed, and even landing on the ground, he is still spinning Ranma. While this may look like Mikado's Couple Breaker spin, Meseki has a few tricks up his sleeve. (No, not like Mousse does!) Finally, after building up enough speed, Meseki tosses Ranma. Straight up into the sky.

Meseki : "Goodbye....."

Then, with an incredible leap, Meseki jumps into the sky to match Ranma's height.

Meseki : "And farewell!"

He gives Ranma an incredible double fisted slam to the head, sending him hurtling into the arena. Normally, he would've punched the person into the distance, but he decides to make sure Ranma is there when Cologne announces his victory, winning the fight and Akane's hand.

Ranma flies down towards the arena, and slams full force into the floorboards, face first. Fortunately, the arena stays intact, and Ranma's face is just level with the arena. From behind the crowd, Akane shrieks a little. Meseki comes flying down after Ranma, landing besides his still form. He looks at Ranma contemptuously.

Meseki : "Well then, that's the end of him!"

Ranma : "N...n...Not so fast!"

Meseki jumps back in shock as Ranma pushes himself off the ground, his face peeling off the arena floor and returning to its normal shape with a \*pop\*. While red from that impact, Ranma's face shows no other form of injury whatsoever. He rubs his bruise, then turns to look at Meseki, now stuttering.

Meseki : "T...t...that...w.was...my.... m.m.mmost p.p.powerful.... s.s.slam!"

Ranma's turn to look at Meseki contemptuously.

Ranma : "Well then, Meseki, looks like I can take that beating, and still come back, eh?"

Meseki recovers from his shock and gives Ranma a glare with those black eyes, which unnerves Ranma.

Meseki : "Well then Ranma, I guess I'll have to use my 'special skills' against you now...."

Ranma realizes that even though the fight has only just started, Meseki hasn't used his eyes yet, unlike when he went up against Mousse.

Meseki : "If you're wondering why I used my skill against Mousse and not you, it's because he was using weapons, and I decided, 'Oh well, tit for tat!'. Against you, I decided hand to hand. But since you refuse to lose, I'll have to get rough."

Ranma : "Yeah, looks like your rough is my smooth, (Taking a deep breath)

Mr. High-Class-Afraid-to-get-your-shirt-wrinkled-and-stained!"

Meseki : "....."

Everyone's laughing at Ranma's remark, noticing that Meseki has indeed been keeping his shirt prim and proper, even in a fight. Akane too, is giggling a little, realizing this point. Meseki is turning red, but regains his calmness rather quickly.

Meseki : "Well then, Ranma, looks like I'll show you no mercy."

Ranma : "As I won't show you any."

This time, Meseki and Ranma circle each other, looking at each other, assessing their strengths and abilities. Then, boring of this, Ranma leaps forwards to attack. Meseki blinks, and Ranma suddenly sees HIM disappear, like the fight against Mousse. He lands on the ground, rubbing his eyes and looking around. He can't see Meseki anywhere. Then Meseki strikes. He kicks Ranma in the stomach, sending him bending over in pain, then chops his neck, sending him to the floor. Getting up again, Ranma looks around angrily.

Ranma : "So, you wanna play? I'll show you play! Moko...Takabisha spread!"

And Ranma starts blasting fireballs all over the place, trying to get Meseki. Meseki simply blinks once more, and while he sacrifices his "invisibility" to stop the fireballs, he destroys them all in a spectacular fireworks show. Ranma is breathing heavily now, from massive exertions on his body, as demanded from firing so many fireballs at once. Meseki doesn't even look winded.

Ranma : "Meseki.... I'll get you!"

Ranma leaps over to Meseki, fist extended. Meseki blinks, and Ranma realizes what's about to happen. He is sent flying backwards, into the ring. Getting up, Ranma mutters.

Ranma : "This is almost like Mousse vs. Meseki!"

So, he decides to try another tactic. Getting sick of having all his physical and chi attacks repelled, Ranma resorts to the last skills he knows.

Ranma : "Saotome school of underhanded tricks secret techniques! Roga Shuhai-tai!"

And Ranma leaps towards Meseki, who looks unnerved at the name of this "move". Ranma looks so fierce now, that Meseki is too afraid to do anything but shield himself and close his eyes. Everyone goes "oooooh" at Ranma's so-called move. But, Ranma, not even noticing this weakness of Meseki's, decides to finish the move. He lands right in front of Meseki, who is unshielding himself now and looking cautiously at Ranma. Ranma points behind him.

Ranma : "Look! What's that!?"

Meseki actually falls for it, turning around to look. But even halfway through his turn, Meseki realizes he's been tricked. He turns his head around, and sees Ranma flying towards him. He blinks.

Ranma : "Oh no! I've been discovered, again!"

\*Blam!\*

Ranma : "Aieeeeeee....."

Ranma is sent flying off into the horizon as Meseki decides to really end this once and for all, using his "Eyes of a thousand Boxers" to send Ranma reeling. Watching Ranma fly off into the distance, everyone looks back to Meseki after a while, and all of them start cheering and clapping and whooping, congratulating Meseki on his win. Meseki just straightens out his shirt again, combs his hair, and looks around, expectantly.

Akane, somewhere in the standing crowd, begins to walk off sadly, after watching this fight. She realises that the fight is just something which is more for the boys' egos than for her. She walks off sadly, nearly crying, as the power of this truth works its way into her head.

Akane : "Why did those two fight, was it truly for me? Do I really want to love the winner of this fight, and not the one I choose to love? I don't think those two would care even if I said I liked the other, they'd just fight it out again! Why was I so stupid!?"

She starts to cry, and begins to run home. But even before she's taken another step, she feels a hand on her

shoulder. She immediately knows who it is.

Akane : "Meseki!"

Turning around, she spots Meseki, true enough. He is looking at her with sad eyes, and Akane is almost lost, looking into them, trying to figure out what they are trying to tell her.

Meseki : "Akane, I know what you're thinking. We were fools, to fight for you. Am I right?"

Akane : "...yes... I mean no! You're not fools.... at least, not to fight..... oh, what am I saying!?"

Meseki : "No, Akane. You're right. It was rather foolish to fight for you, wasn't it?"

Akane looks at Meseki, seemingly full of understanding. Slumping her shoulders, she admits it.

Akane : "Yes, you're right. You two were stupid to fight it out over me. But, what am I to do? I like the two of you, and I can't bear to leave either one of you! I don't want my fiancee to the winner of this fight! I want my fiancee....."

Meseki : "To be the one you choose to love. Am I right, Akane?"

Akane, looking so distraught and distressed admitting her thoughts, suddenly looks shocked. She looks up at Meseki, who is smiling at her, and she returns the smile, wiping tears from her eyes.

Akane : "Yes, Meseki... to be the one I choose."

Meseki : "Now then, Akane-san..... I won't force you to be with me if you don't want to. Why not give this as much time to think this over as needed? I won't be going anywhere soon, and I don't want to have you love me simply because you were forced to... think it over, hm?"

Akane : "Yes.... I should think it over."

Meseki : "That's it! Come on, Akane. It's getting late, you'll want to be home soon."

Holding out his hand for her to hold, Meseki gives her a reassuring look, those eyes of his turning a beautiful indigo, and so serene, not unlike the time when he was fighting. Akane looks at this man she's grown to love because of his understanding, and takes the offered hand in her own. The two share a smile, a lover's smile, even though Akane is torn between her two loves.

Akane : "Yes... let's go home."

The two leave, walking into the sunset.

{Thinking things through, Akane's decision?}

"Well, at least I can think straight now." Akane thinks, as she reaches home. Parting ways with Meseki, she walks through the gates, sullenly, with a concerned family looking on. Nabiki is sitting at the table, reading a magazine, and looks up at Akane. Kasumi, who is sweeping the floor, stops long enough to look at her. Soun and Genma, playing a game of Go, also stop, looking at her. Soun begins to sweat at seeing his daughter look so sullen and dull.

Soun : "Hey, Akane-chan! What's wrong?"

Akane, seemingly not hearing her father walks up to him. Then she looks up, giving the entire family the most brilliant, cutest and beautiful smile anyone's ever seen. She giggles a little, and Soun is caught off balance at this unexpected change.

Akane : "Nothing, daddy! I'm feeling great today! In fact, everything's fine!"

Soun : "Are you sure, Akane? You don't normally smile like that, or speak like this...."

Akane : "Daddy! I already said everything's fine!"

Soun : "Okokokok.... I won't bother you! You are grown up enough anyway! But, you are my daughter, and of course a father's gotta be concerned for his daughters, isn't that right?"

He asks this question, looking at Kasumi and Nabiki, who are looking back at him.

Kasumi & Nabiki : "Yes, father. Of course."

Soun smiles at Akane, still standing there. Akane just flashes a smile at her father, and walks between him and Genma, more of a skip actually.

Akane : "Ok, daddy! I'm off to take my bath! And don't worry about me! I'm fine!"

Soun, taken off guard by her sudden cheerfulness, just sweats and nods.

Akane then walks off towards the bathroom, a small smile on her face, thinking about the day.

Akane : "Well, looks like I've time to decide who I do like more, don't I? I sure hope Ranma's ok.... I don't want to know where he flew off to.... guess I'll have time to think about this in the bath."

Akane makes a turn into the changing room of the bathroom, and closes the door behind her. Pulling off her sweater, Akane looks at her reflection in the mirror, and giggles, apparently liking what she sees.

Akane : "Looks like I really AM maturing, and not growing fat!"

True, Akane's figure is now more feminine, with less angular, and slightly larger curves. Even her increased exercise has done little to reduce the feminine figure Akane is admiring in the mirror now. Smiling as she admires herself from all sides, Akane takes off her skirt as well, and looks at her thighs, feeling them.

Akane : "Wow, I really am beginning to look more beautiful! This is great! I just hope somebody notices.... it'd be such a waste if I began to look more like a lady but nobody noticed...."

Hoping that two specific people in mind would notice her more feminine figure, Akane strips all the way and tosses her clothes and underwear into the clothes bin, grabbing a towel from the towel rack on the way into the bathroom.

Stepping into the bathroom, Akane notices with a little dismay that Kasumi hasn't found time from her chores to boil Akane some hot water, as the hot tub only contains lukewarm water. Shrugging, thinking that a soak in a cold bath isn't so bad, Akane sits down and begins to wash her hair, thinking.

Akane : "Well.... I've had an eventful day today..... a fight for my hand, then the choice to choose between two people whom I love, whom I love for different reasons."

Following this line of thought, as Akane shampoos her hair, she begins a detailed case study on the two people in her love life.

Akane : "Right... let's begin with Meseki."

"Just before I met him, and when Ranma met Meseki, I was feeling rather distracted, as if his mere closeness rekindled some sort of feelings in me. Is it love? Is it so strong? I know I love Meseki.... because he's so strong, mature, and understanding. He's somebody whom I can relate my problems to, somebody whom I can share my woes with, because I know he can understand how I feel. He's so sensitive, so caring..... yet there are some things I find about him that I don't like...."

Banishing those prospects away from her head, Akane goes on thinking.

Akane : "Now... on to Ranma."

"While Ranma's only been in my life for a few months, I feel strangely attracted to him.... even with his strange sex changing curse, and his funny friends, I kind of like him a lot! His personality's a little rough... which kind of appeals more to me, and he's a bit stubborn, but he seems to care a lot for me. I've not seen anyone turn as green as he does when their fiancée's been stolen! I know that just for me, he's gotten into a lot of fights with other people, and he's suffered a lot for me! He's even rescued me before.... something I can't say about Meseki...."

Akane weighs the pros and cons of the two loves in her life, but is unable to come up with the person she likes more than the other. While pondering just how she's going to determine which of the two she likes, she washes the shampoo out of her hair. Watching the bubbles form on the floor as the water washes out the suds in her hair, Akane thinks. Unable to come up with anything just yet, Akane goes on to take a bar of soap and soaping her body, while giving her body a good massage at the same time. She is paying more attention to her body now, and enjoying the prettier, more beautiful her, although she's only taken the time to notice that fact now, as she only concentrated on her more masculine side before.

Akane : "Sigh... I know I'm beginning to look better everyday, or at least that's what I think.... I just hope Meseki or Ranma notice!"

Akane ponders this as she scrubs herself hard, watching the dirt wash away. Then, she thinks of the perfect solution to her dilemma, a smile growing on her face.

Akane : "I got it! I'll hold my own 'competition'! A dating competition! I'll go on a date with Ranma and Meseki.... and then I can decide who I like more!"

She giggles at this arrangement, confident that even if it doesn't work out, she'll have some fun with her two 'possible' fiancées.

Akane : "It's decided then! I'll tell Ranma and Meseki about this tomorrow!"

With this, Akane decides to end her bath with a good soak in the tub. Stepping into the warm water, Akane just slinks into the water, and sighs as she enjoys a good soak and rest after a trying day. Closing her eyes, Akane begins to think about what she's going to do during those two dates, and slowly, she begins to fall further and further into dreamland.

\*Sshhriiiiiip\*

Akane wakes up with a start. Rubbing her eyes, Akane stands up from her tub and begins to turn around, fully expecting her sister.

Akane : "Huh!? Who's that? Kasumi? Is that you?"

However, rubbing the last traces of sleep from her eyes, Akane realizes the figure in the doorway is not her sister, Kasumi, but a very badly bruised and battered Ranma with a towel around his waist, mouth gaping as he realizes he's just intruded on Akane's bath. The two stare at each other for a while, Ranma's nose bleeding a little.

Ranma : "Ah...ah...Akane! Erm.... I... er..... didn't know you were in here....!"

Akane, shocked and startled, jumps a little, and her breasts bounce. Ranma's eyes grow wide. Then, grabbing a towel and covering herself, Akane does the only thing she can do now. Get angry.

Akane : "RANMA-BAKA! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE!? GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT!!!!!"

And to emphasize that point, Akane starts grabbing buckets off the floor and tossing them at Ranma, who is still wearing a shocked expression on his face, as well as busy dodging the buckets.

Ranma : "A...ah.... whoa! Whoa! Easy, Akane!"

Akane : "What are you still doing here!? I said get out!"

And with that, Akane grabs a bucket filled with water, takes aim, and throws it. Ranma sees the bucket coming his way, turns around and runs. Grabbing the changing room door and sliding it open, Ranma stumbles out of the changing room, much to everyone's surprise, amidst a hailstorm of flying buckets. Turning around, Ranma is about to start a retort, when he sees the bucket of water still heading his way.

Ranma : "Oh, n....."

\*Bonk!\* \*Slosh\*

Ranma (C) : "AAHHH!!! COOOLLLLDDDD!!!!!"

The door to the changing room is slammed shut by a rather angry Akane, as Ranma-chan removes the bucket from her head. Looking rather indignantly at the closed door, Ranma begins spewing insults at Akane.

Ranma (C) : "Tomboy! Uncute! Stupid! Petty! Nggaaahhh!!!" (Sticking a tongue out.)

From behind the door, nothing is heard, save the splashing of water. Kasumi walks up to Ranma, towel in hand, and drapes it on her shoulders. Onna-Ranma turns around in surprise, then realises that she's changed. Remembering a shred of modesty, Ranma covers her breasts. Soun walks up to Ranma and places a hand on her shoulder. Ranma looks up at Soun.

Soun : "Ranma, I have something to ask you, since you'll be waiting for Akane to finish her bath."

Ranma (C) : "What's that?"

Soun : "Today... I heard from Akane that there was going to be a fight. Between you and Meseki for her. And from what I've heard, Ranma.... you lost. Is it true?"

Ranma gasps, shocked and aghast. She knows she's lost, but is extremely stubborn in admitting it. However, under the stern glare of Soun, Ranma has no choice but to admit it.

Ranma (C) : "Er... heh heh.... I... erm... did."

Soun : "RANMA! YOU MEAN TO TELL ME YOU LOST AKANE TO MESEKI!?!? GAAAAAAAHHHH!!!!!"

Soun transforms into his monstrous visage at the confirmation of Ranma's loss, and his chance of having his Dojo inherited by a real martial artist.

Ranma (C) : "Eeeee!! Don't get angry, old man! I don't like it either! But I'll challenge him again for Akane when I'm ready! Calm down!!!"

Soun : "YOU JUST LOST AKANE TO A MAGIC USING, NON-SKILLED FIGHTER WHO KNOWS ALMOST NOTHING ABOUT MARTIAL ARTS, WHO IS ABOUT TO MARRY AKANE, AND IS ABOUT TO INHERIT THE DOJO, AND YOU WANT ME TO CALM DOWN!?!?"

Akane : "Daddy! Calm down! Let me explain this, ok?!"

Soun immediately turns back into his normal self, much to the relief of Ranma-chan. Akane's just come out of the bath, dressed and rubbing her hair dry with a towel, and is looking calmly at the two. Looking at his daughter, crying, Soun hugs Akane, sobbing.

Soun : "Akane! Why did Ranma have to lose! Boo hoo hoo! Now my dojo's going to be inherited by somebody who doesn't practice our Tendou or the Saotome school of Anything Goes Martial arts! What am I going to do????? Waaaahhh!!!"

Akane : "Dad, I'll explain it later!! Don't worry, I won't be marrying Meseki yet! So cool it, ok?"

Soun stops crying and looks up at his daughter, hopeful.

Soun : "You mean it? You're not marrying Meseki?"

Akane : "Not yet, yes. Maybe though. I'll tell you during dinner."

But that is just enough for Soun. Crying in joy, Soun walks back towards the living room. Kasumi follows. Akane and Ranma share a look, then Akane smiles a little, and winks at Ranma.

Akane : "Ranma, I want to tell you something later during dinner. Don't be late."

Ranma (C) : "Don't worry! I'm never late for dinner!"

Akane : "Seeya!"

And with that, Akane trots off after her father into the living room. Ranma is shaking her head in wonderment and amazement.

Ranma (C) : "Boy, Akane's really cheery if she's forgiven me so quickly. Hmph. Must be Meseki, that jerk! I swear I'll defeat him yet! I won't admit defeat to him! Meseki, you'd better watch out!"

And as Ranma walks into the bathroom, a burning resolve in her heart, Meseki, in his hotel room, feels a sudden chill go through his head.

Meseki : "Oh oh.... someone's really angry at me, and I'll bet it's Ranma Saotome!"

Soon enough, at the Tendou household, Kasumi calls out to everyone to come for dinner. Arriving in gusts of wind, Genma and Ranma appear suddenly at the table, much like their usual style. Nabiki, Akane and Soun are slower to arrive, and they all sit down at the table as Kasumi brings out dinner for that night.

While stuffing themselves at the table, Ranma suddenly remembers something. He looks at Akane, who is secretly as she eats her rice, and she notices his questioning gaze. Then she remembers what she wanted to say to them earlier on.

Akane : "Oh, matte!"

Everyone stops eating, and looks up at Akane.

Soun : "Hm, what is it, Akane-chan?"

Akane : "I just remembered, I wanted to explain something to you all tonight!"

Soun : "Yes, that was true. Go on, Akane. What is it?"

Taking a deep breath and steadying herself, Akane asks.

Akane : "Ranma, Father, you two must promise me that no matter what I say next, you two must not, under ANY circumstance, try to stop me. Agreed?"

Ranma and Soun : "Ok."

Smiling at this promise, Akane begins.

Akane : "All right. Today, after Ranma was soundly beaten by Meseki...."

Ranma opens his mouth to begin something in his defense, but a look from Soun reminds him to keep his mouth shut.

Akane : "I almost thought I HAD to become Meseki's. But however, Meseki told me that even though he beat Ranma, he wouldn't FORCE me to become his girlfriend or fiancée. Much the opposite, he said that he would let me choose who I wanted to be with instead."

At this, Ranma and Soun share a very relieved look.

Akane : "However, I can't decide on who I like more. Ranma or Meseki?"

\*blam\* \*bonk\*. Ranma and Soun fall onto the floor.

Akane notices the shocked looks on their faces, and smiles, knowing that what she's going to tell them is going to blast them into orbit if her last sentence meant anything.

Akane : "So.... in order to decide who might be better for me, I've decided to hold.... a competition."

\*Boom!\* \*wheeeeeee.....\* Ranma does indeed go flying off into the sky, but comes back in a perfect three point landing, a feral gleam in his eyes as he relishes the idea of a possible rematch. However, what Akane's about to tell him is going to send him into the sky and into the pond. Soun just looks shocked.

Akane : "No, Ranma, this competition isn't a physical one. At least, not one that involves violence. This one.... this competition.... is going to be a 'Little Date Competition'. At the end of the two dates, the one I like better shall be the winner, all right?"

\*Boom!\* \*Wheee.....\* \*slosh\*. Ranma comes crawling out the pond as she comes back down from another takeoff. Walking back into the dojo, Onna-Ranma smiles evilly at Akane, who is a little unnerved.

Ranma (C) : "Don't worry, Akane! I'll make sure I win this one. When's the date?"

Akane : "Next week, Saturday. I'll take you out first, Ranma. Meseki'll be on Sunday. All right?"

Cracking her knuckles in anticipation of a rematch, Ranma nods and grins evilly.

Ranma (C) : "Whatever you say, Akane."

Akane smiles sweetly.

Akane : "Good! I'll tell Meseki tomorrow when he comes to pick me up!"

\*Whump!\* Ranma falls onto the floor, landing on her head. Akane finishes her rice, then gets up, yawns, and smiles sleepily.

Akane : "Well, it's getting late.... time to go to bed!"

Kasumi watches as Akane trudges off tiredly towards her bedroom. Looking up at the clock, she notices it's only 8:00 pm.

Kasumi : "Isn't it a little too early for her to go to bed?"

Nabiki : "Oh, let her be, sis. She's had enough to take as it is."

Kasumi : "I guess you're right, Nabiki-chan. Come on, eat up. I'll do the dishes."

{The first 'little date'. A test of Ranma's skill at dating!}

Time passes rather quickly for Ranma and Akane, and even before they know it, it's already Saturday. While Akane hasn't done anything to prepare herself for this event, save waiting for it and informing Meseki about it, Ranma has been hard at work, practicing lines to say to Akane, steeling himself to face her to say the lines, staking out places which they could visit, saving tons of pocket money to use on this date, and all the other little, petty things which most other boys going on a date would do.

It is Saturday morning, and the entire Dojo is still sleeping. But, as a snoring and drooling Genma wakes up a little prematurely, he looks to his side and discovers that his son, Ranma, is missing.

Genma (C) : "?????"

But Ranma isn't far. In fact, he's already at the sink in the bathroom, brushing his teeth, and already dressed in his Sunday Best, wearing a cap with that red star on it. He is thinking hard about the date today, about what he has to do to win Akane's heart, as well as win this competition at the same time. Talking to himself with a mouthful of toothpaste, Ranma reminds himself.

Ranma : "Mmmmmppph..... canghpp lesgh Meshekhi winsh..... Ish shtillsh lisksh Akanesh...."

With that, Ranma gargles and spits out the foamy water. Rinsing his mouth a few more times, Ranma goes over to a secluded corner of the bathroom, and from behind a bucket, pulls out a bouquet of fresh red roses which he hid the day before, to make sure nobody knew. Looking at the roses, Ranma smiles.

Ranma : "Well, time to play Romeo once more and capture the fair Juliet's heart!"

Making sure that nobody's outside in the hallways, Ranma sneaks out into the living room. Kasumi isn't even up yet, and Ranma, wanting to surprise Akane, decides to make her some breakfast. Walking into the kitchen, humming to himself, Ranma looks around, and finds an apron. Putting it on to prevent soiling his best clothes, Ranma hums to himself.

Ranma : "Instant Saotome school of dates rule no. 1 : If you live with your girlfriend, make breakfast for her."

And deciding to make her a delicious western breakfast, Ranma scavenges around the refrigerator to find what he needs, and smiles as he finds the ingredients he seeks. Carrying a packet of bacon, a couple of eggs, and some frozen vegetables in his arms, Ranma \*lightly\* kicks the fridge door close, and sets off to find a frying pan, some cooking oil, and some salt and pepper. Smiling at what he finds, he starts cooking Akane some breakfast. The smell of fried eggs and bacons reach throughout the household, and everyone slowly wakes up, albeit with rumbling tummies at the delicious smells wafting from the kitchen. Soun is the first to regain any semblance of conscious thought as he wakes up.

Soun : "Hmm? Hmmph. \*Sniff\* \*sniff\*... mmmm, what's that I smell? Eggs... bacons... delicious! Must be Kasumi's cooking."

However, he receives the shock of his life when he sees Kasumi, still dressed in her night gown, walking past his doorway, yawning. Scrambling off his bed, Soun changes quickly and runs out of his bedroom into the living room. There, the entire Saotome family sees that Ranma has not only prepared breakfast for Akane, but for them all too. Everyone, from Kasumi to Genma look approvingly at the delicious spread before them. Ranma is currently setting a common plate of toast and butter, humming to himself.

Ranma : "Instant Saotome school of dates rule no. 2 : Make breakfast for your date's family if they're staying in the same house too."

Akane is the last one to reach the table, but as she does, she spots the breakfast spread before her, at the table. Immediately, all sleepiness leaves her eyes, and the first words to leave her mouth that morning :

Akane : "Wow! Who cooked this!? Kasumi?"

However, in response to her question, Kasumi taps her lightly on the shoulder. She looks at her sister, shocked. Then she turns around and spots Ranma, all dressed for today's date, and humming to himself as he sets down the final plate, the one meant for Akane, down. He indicates that plate is Akane's, by putting a small card with the name "Akane" written on it down in front of it. He also indicates who's plate is whose by putting similar cards down in front of each plate.

Ranma : (in a slightly musical tone) "Breakfast's ready! Come and get it!"

But everyone's still standing there, assembled at the mouth of the hallway, staring disbelievingly at the spread before them, not wanting to believe Ranma cooked this. Akane walks up to the front of the gaping crowd, and pointing at the food, then at a smiling Ranma, she stammers.

Akane : "Y...y...you cooked this?"

Ranma : "Yep! For our 'little date' today! Now, come on! Don't look so shocked! Eat up, or else it's going to get cold!"

With a little more prompting, everyone starts moving and sitting down in their respective positions, and as Akane sits in front of her plate, she looks at the plate so lovingly set. She reads the words formed on the plate, exquisitely decorated with bacon strips, vegetables and eggs.

Akane : "A.....K.....A.....N.....E.....Akane! That's my name!"

The word "Akane" can be seen spelt out through an ingenious arrangement of vegetables, eggs, and bacon strips. Ranma looks at a surprised Akane, an ear-to-ear smile on his face.

Ranma : "Well? How do you like our date's first surprise this morning?"

Akane is still looking at the plate, then she looks at Ranma and grins.

Akane : "I'm already beginning to like today, if that's your first surprise."

Ranma : "Oh, don't worry! I've got plenty of surprises left! Just you wait!"

Akane is surprised that Ranma would go through so much trouble just for a date. Of course, she realises that Ranma also wants to win this competition badly, but she thinks twice.

Akane : (Thinking) "I think Ranma wants to do much more than just win this.... I think he really likes me!"

Blushing at this possibility, Akane proceeds to pick up a fork and knife set besides her plate, and begins to eat her morning breakfast, starting with the 'A' first. However, just as she's about to put the piece of bacon into her mouth, she looks up and realises no one else has taken a bite of their breakfast. Putting down the bacon, Akane looks at them.

Akane : "What are you all looking at?"

Soun and Genma exchange looks. Genma (panda) holds up a sign. Soun nods.

Soun : "Akane, since your date cooked breakfast this morning, we all feel that you should be the first to try his cooking!"

Akane blushes furiously at this comment. She looks down shyly, and begins to twiddle her fingers. Looking up again, everyone is looking innocently at the sky, whistling. Even Kasumi. Akane decides that she'd better eat first to get everybody eating or else she'd never feel comfortable. She picks up her fork. Everyone's eyes turn to her. Akane does her best to ignore it.

The fork begins to move towards her mouth, a piece of bacon on it.

Everybody is holding their breaths.

\*Chomp!\*

Everyone lets go of their breath. They all look at Akane expectantly, waiting for some comment. Akane looks at them and scowls a little. Finishing off her first piece of breakfast, she swallows, and looks at them.

Akane : "If you people want to find out how it tastes like, why don't you all just eat your own breakfast?"

Kasumi : "Because we want to find out what YOUR verdict is, Akane."

Akane : "Come on you all! That means, if I said Ranma's cooking was bad, you'd not touch it?"

Nabiki : "Yup!"

Akane : "Come on you all!"

She continues eating her breakfast, but even before she finishes her second piece of bacon, she notices everybody is still looking at her, even Ranma. Finally, giving in, she decides to give a verdict.

Akane : "Oh all right! If you want to know how Ranma's cooking is, it's all right, all right!? It's edible, that's all I'll say!"

Apparently satisfied at her response, everyone digs into their own breakfasts, painstakingly cooked by Ranma. As they eat, eyes grow wide as they realise Ranma's cooking isn't all bad either. Ranma seems to be thinking the same thing, as he scarfs down his own breakfast.

Ranma : "Say, my cooking isn't all bad!"

Akane : "Mine wasn't so bad, the last time I checked!"

Ranma : "Yeah, but you're a girl."

\*slosh\*

Akane : "Now you're one yourself!" (grins, and giggles.)

Ranma-chan, now dripping wet from that bucket of water doused onto her by Akane as a joke, puts on a rather serious face as she continues eating her breakfast. After everyone finishes eating, Ranma quickly collects the plates, and stacks them up, balancing them on her head.

Ranma (C) : "Hold on a moment, while I get the orange juice!"

Everyone looks at a departing onna-Ranma, and as soon as she leaves sight, all eyes turn to Akane. Soun speaks first.

Soun : "Well, Akane-san. Looks like your date's turning out quite well, even though it's only just started."

Kasumi : "Yes, Akane. Ranma's going through great pains to make your date perfect, isn't he?"

Nabiki : "Better make the best of it, sis! It's only for a day!"

Genma (C) : "Yes! My son's going through such lengths to make it a great day, don't let him down, Akane!"

Under the peer-pressure, Akane starts blushing all over again. Then, she starts to speak, but is saved by Ranma's appearance. Carrying a tray full of cups filled with an orange liquid in one hand, he is pouring hot water from a kettle on himself in the other hand.

Ranma : "Freshly squeezed orange juice, coming up!"

He glides over to Akane's side, serving her the biggest glass of orange juice. Then he serves the others around the table, and finally, he comes to his own seat, with the smallest glass in his hand. Everyone scrutinizes the cups, and deciding that it's impossible to foul up orange juice, they all start to sip at their drinks, savoring the early morning refreshment of a cup of freshly squeezed orange juice.

After breakfast, Akane goes to take her bath, and get changed. Ranma follows Kasumi into the kitchen to help clean up, and as the two wash dishes together, with Ranma folding his sleeves up, Kasumi asks Ranma something.

Kasumi : "Ranma, I know that while Akane said this was going to be a dating competition, are you doing all of this simply to win, or do you really like Akane?"

Ranma looks up from his plate, surprised at the question. Straightening his cap with his elbow, Ranma sees no real reason to lie. He looks at her casually, and gives a reply.

Ranma : "Well.... I really want to win this competition, if not for Akane, then for my own pride! But.... I do like Akane, even if only this *little* bit!" (Indicating a VERY small space in a sign of measurement.)

Kasumi smiles at Ranma's fairly frank response, and turns back to continue her washing. Of course, she knows Ranma cares more for Akane than he cares to admit, but decides not to pursue the matter. As they finish off the last dish and cup, Akane comes out of her bath, all fresh and dressed in her Sunday Best as well.

Akane : "Ranma-kun! Come on, we're going!"

Ranma : "Coming, Akane-chan!"

Hastily washing off the last of the suds from his hands with some warm water, Ranma folds his sleeves back down and trots off after Akane. Kasumi looks after the departing figures, a small smile on her face. As the two pass the rest of the family, they can't help but feel the glares of a several pairs of probing eyes boring into their backs. Ranma immediately takes Akane's arm and locks it around his, and then starts to walk out of the door with her.

Ranma : "Come on, Akane! Let's make the best of this date!"

Akane : "Slow down, Ranma!"

As the two leave the compound, Kasumi comes out of the kitchen, and everyone looks at everyone else, hoping for the best.

As the two daters walk out the gates, Akane tugs at Ranma's arm, and he turns to look at her. She releases her arm from their tender lock and holds his arm.

Akane : "Well then, Ranma, where are we going first?"

Ranma already has an entire timetable planned for the day, and various backup plans if the original doesn't go as planned. Confident that nothing can go wrong, Ranma looks at Akane. She waits expectantly.

Ranma : "Why not.... go to the park and walk for a while? It's still early, and we can enjoy some morning dew and atmosphere there."

Akane : "Ok, sounds great! Let's go!"

Glad that the date's starting off so well, Ranma is gratified. As the two walk, Ranma and Akane are thinking.

Ranma : (Thinking) "At this rate, nothing can go wrong! I can't lose to Meseiki!"

Akane : (Thinking) "Poor Ranma, trying so hard just to win this competition! I hope he also likes me... for his sake, I'll try to enjoy this date!"

Ranma/Akane : "Akane/Ranma...."

The two look at each other as they suddenly try to speak. Both blushing at the same time, Akane speaks first.

Akane : "Ranma? You wanted to say something?"

Ranma : "You first, Akane."

Akane : "Erm... ok.... I'll go first. Hm..... how do I put this...? Ranma, I was thinking. I know you're trying to win this competition to salvage lost pride at losing the last match.... but, tell me truthfully. Do you really like me?"

Akane looks at Ranma with glittering eyes, a face of perpetual hope. Ranma is caught off guard at this question, and at Akane's pleading and hopeful face. Searching for the right words to say, Ranma thinks hard.

Ranma : (Thinking) "She's.... so cute! How... can I answer her? I can't bring myself to say I like her, but I don't want her to think I'm doing this expressively just to win the match....."

Scratching his head while they are walk, thinking of an answer, Ranma suddenly remembers. He grabs the bouquet of roses he's been hiding somewhere in his shirt and hands them to Akane, who is taken by surprise at this sudden gesture. Ranma quickly thinks of a romantic sentence, that both expresses his true feelings (some at least) and an appropriate answer (a little white lie) to Akane.

Ranma : "Akane, accept these, please. If these roses show anything about my feelings to you, then you know what I think of this competition."

Akane accepts the flowers, slowly, but she accepts them. Her face registering flustered surprise and pleasure. Not wanting to pursue the matter any further, knowing Ranma, Akane just hugs the bouquet of dethorned roses, enjoying their fresh, sweet scent, while the two walk towards the park.

When they reach the park, Ranma takes Akane for a leisurely stroll through the park, as the two enjoy an entire morning of walking through the beautiful glades, enjoying the fountains' spouting displays, smelling the flowers, relaxing on the benches and feeding the ducks in the pond. (Although none of the ducks are wearing thick spectacles, much to everyone's relief.) By lunchtime, the two have enjoyed themselves immensely, having spent some quality time together, (and without a single quarrel too!) and getting to know each other better. Ranma and Akane start learning things about each other the other party never knew existed in each other until that day, and their feelings deepened so much more because of that. However, the grumbling of their tummies signified a more important need at that time.

Akane : "Well, Ranma-kun, what are we having for lunch this afternoon?"

Of course, Ranma having completed his timetable, calls up the name of the place Ranma has staked out for their lunch.

Ranma : "What would you say to.... dinner at the Promenade?"

At the mention of a place with such high class and high priced eating establishments, Akane gasps.

Akane : "Ranma, do you have enough money?"

Ranma : "Don't worry! I'll have enough!"

With this reassuring tone, Akane agrees, reluctantly. Ranma even goes to the extent of hiring a cab, and letting her in first, acting like a true gentleman. In the cab, Ranma is deep in his own thoughts.

Ranma : (Thinking) "Damn you Meseki! If you can be a gentleman, so can I! I'll be even more of a gentleman than you can ever be! I want to make sure Akane stays mine, because I'm not going to lose to you, big-eyes!"

Then, looking at Akane, who is looking rather happy and full of hope for the day ahead, Ranma starts thinking again.

Ranma : (Thinking) "\*Sigh\*, of course, Akane's so cute now, I just could like her! Ah well, I hope she appreciates my efforts to make sure she has a swell day! I'm going to be broke for a month after this meal!"

Then the two sit quietly together, in the back seat, sharing looks of affection. The cabby, looking in his rear view mirror once in a while, grins at the two "lovebirds".

Cabby : (Thinking) "Aahhckk... if only me and me wife were so lovin', I wouldn't be working this lousy job, eh?"

The cab pulls up at the Promenade, an expensive shopping complex located in the heart of Nerima (A note, I don't have any idea of what Nerima's district layout is, neither do I know what there is and what there isn't in it. I'm making this all up as I go along. Please forgive any mistakes made.) filled with high-class shops of all kinds, including Cafes. Ranma steps out of the cab first, then extending his hand in a gentlemanly way while bowing a little, he takes Akane's hand and helps her out of the cab. The cabby, seeing this, is grinning while shaking his head, and gives a snort of a laugh. When Ranma has slammed the doors shut and paid the cabby his fare, the cab drives off, leaving the two by themselves again. Looking at Ranma, Akane smiles.

Akane : "After you."

Ranma leads Akane to a small cafe in a corner. Small, but quaint and with a warm and homely feeling. Sitting at an outdoor table with an umbrella for shade outside the cafe, Ranma and Akane both order their meals. While waiting for their meals to arrive, Ranma and Akane simply exchange some idle chat, much like the way a "loving" couple would.

Unfortunately, the one thing that Ranma hadn't counted on was Meseki making an appearance at the Promenade. Meseki is at the Promenade, shopping for a gift that he can present to Akane on their date the next day. Dressed in a custom tailored shirt and vest, with matching pants and shoes, Meseki is walking in and out of various shops, jewellery and clothing stores alike, searching for the one thing that he can give Akane as a token of his appreciation for her. Not finding what he wants, and his stomach grumbling, Meseki walks out of the main entrance and heads towards a small, quaint cornerside cafe he always eats his lunch at. On his way there, Meseki spots Ranma from a distance, Akane's back facing him. Ranma apparently also spots Meseki, because even from this distance, Meseki can see the colour draining from Ranma's face.

Akane : "Ranma, what's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost!"

Turning white as a clean sheet, Ranma tries to regain his composure.

Ranma : "Er...erm.... it's nothing, Akane. Say, isn't it a little warm out here? Why not go into the cafe, where it's cooler, hmm?"

With that, Ranma starts to get up, but his plan to have Akane avoid Meseki is foiled as Meseki comes running up to greet Ranma and Akane.

Meseki : "Hello, Akane-san! What an unexpected surprise, seeing you here!"

Akane : "Meseki! My, what are you doing here?"

Meseki : "Shopping. What are you two doing here? I thought you'd be on a date?"

Ranma : "We are, Meseki. we're having lunch."

Meseki : "Here? I didn't think you'd have the cash, Ranma Saotome."

Ranma : "You wanna contest that, *Meseki*?"

Akane hears the poison dripping in Ranma's voice, and steps in to intervene.

Akane : "Ranma! Don't fight now, not with Meseki, not while I'm here! Please!"

Hearing Akane's request, the two immediately stop looking at each other so coldly. Ranma looks embarrassed.

Ranma : "Sorry, Akane. I don't know what came over me."

Meseki : "My apologies, Akane-san, for insulting your boyfriend."

Akane : "There, there... don't be SO apologetic, you two! Come on, sit down! Just because this is a date, doesn't mean we can't have a guest!"

Ranma looks like he's about protest Meseki's presence, but wanting to keep Akane happy, he simply grunts and sits down, quietly. Meseki bows deeply, then takes a seat besides Ranma and Akane. Meseki calls for a waiter, and places his order as well. While waiting, Akane starts to talk with Meseki, doing some idle chatter while waiting. Then Meseki, in a show of good sportsmanship, chats with Ranma, who is caught off guard at his pleasant demeanor and manners, chats uneasily with Meseki.

Meseki : "Say, Akane-san. I was thinking, about tomorrow's date..."

Akane : "Yes, Meseki, what about it?"

Meseki : "I was thinking about maybe going to the beach..."

Akane : "The beach! Wow! I wouldn't mind going there tomorrow!"

Ranma immediately feels disappointed that he couldn't think of so simple a place to go for so important a date, and his disappointment and depression shows on his face. Akane catches it, and smiles sweetly, knowing what he is thinking immediately. She speaks to Ranma truthfully.

Akane : "Oh, come on Ranma! Just because you didn't bring me to the beach doesn't mean I don't like you, or that you've failed me in this date in any way! I'm having a *wonderful* time here!"

Meseki smiles at the fact that Akane's having such a wonderful time, simply pleased that she is, while Ranma's dejected face perks up at her comment, his face brightening up again once more. Blushing in embarrassment, Ranma only grins sheepishly and scratches his head, feeling much better now at Akane's comment. Then Meseki steps in.

Meseki : "Say, Ranma Saotome, since you've been so nice to let me sit here with you two, even on your date, why not I return the favor? Come with me and Akane to the beach tomorrow!"

Ranma looks shocked at Meseki, who he thinks is using this to his advantage, making Akane think more highly of him. But with an approving glance from Akane, Ranma has no choice.

Ranma : "Sure, why not? It'll be fun, I'm sure!"

Akane smiles happily, and claps her hand in joy.

Akane : "Well then, that's settled! We go to the beach tomorrow!"

Meseki : "I'll pick you all up at 12:00 noon, what say?"

Akane : "As you wish, Meseki."

Ranma : "Fine by me."

Meseki : "Good." :-)

Then, silently waiting for their orders, they sip at the coffee which has been served to them while they wait. When it comes, the three eat in silence, and afterwards, they wipe their mouths with their napkins. Meseki gets up to leave.

Meseki : "Well, I've intruded on this date long enough. I can't disturb you two for too long. Thank you, Akane, for letting me stay this time. I will not disappoint you tomorrow."

Akane : "Oh, no! You didn't intrude on this date! Your presence was welcome!"

Meseki : "Nonetheless, I shall not intrude further. See you two tomorrow then. Good day."

And with a gentleman's bow, Meseki walks off back into the Promenade, to continue his search for a suitable gift. As Akane watches him go, Ranma is feeling somewhat jealous at Akane's reaction to Meseki's appearance.

But, forcing down his jealousy quickly, Ranma recovers quickly. After paying the bill, the two are walking together on the Promenade's sidewalk, enjoying a stroll amongst the crowd.

Akane : "So, Ranma, where to now? You've still got until evening for this date. Don't tell me you want to spend the rest of the day walking?" \*giggle\*

Ranma : "No, of course not, Akane-chan!" (He realizes he's never called Akane that before. Akane realizes the same thing.) "Come on, you want to go to the movies?"

Akane : "What are we watching? *Nani o mimasu ka?*"

Ranma : "Whatever you want to watch, my treat."

Akane : "Ne, mina ikimasu!" (Let's go!)

And the two walk off towards the Promenade's movie theatres, Ranma shelling out the fees from what little reserves of cash he has left. It seems Akane's taste for movies extends past action packed, karate filled shows. Because she opts for a romance movie, which surprises Ranma a little. At any rate, the two still watch and enjoy the movie. In the darkness of the theatre, other couples are there, hugging each other and kissing, giggling and cuddling together. As Ranma and Akane notice more of what is going on around them, Ranma begins to feel a little uncomfortable. However, Akane draws a little inspiration from the crowds around here.

\*smack\*

Akane kisses Ranma on the cheek. A quick peck, but one nonetheless.

Ranma nearly jumps out of his seat in absolute surprise. He turns to look at Akane's shadowy form, and she appears to notice. She giggles a little.

Akane : "Sorry, Ranma, if I scared you. I just thought.... 'oh, maybe it would be romantic if we did what the others were doing!'"

Ranma looks long and hard at Akane, disbelief showing on his face even in the darkened room.

Ranma : (Thinking)"Wow, this is DEFINITELY not the Akane I know. She's.... so cute and ladylike! It's almost like a dream!"

Pinching himself and yelping a little, Ranma blinks, shakes his head, and is convinced that it isn't a dream.

Ranma : (Thinking) "Well, looks like Meseki's done a little good after all! He's released Akane's cute side!"

Then, taking the initiative, Akane decides that she wants to be like the other couples, so loving and intimate. She leans her head on Ranma's shoulder. Ranma looks at Akane, not really knowing what to do, until he starts studying the people around him. Here and there, girls with their shoulders on their boyfriends' shoulders are holding hands, whispering sweet nothings to each other, having their hair stroked, and many others. Ranma decides that he should do something, so he won't hurt Akane's feelings.

He holds Akane's hands in his, stroking it softly, marvelling at how soft and smooth her skin could be even though she fights like a mad dog.

Part of him was telling him, "This isn't what you're supposed to be doing, Ranma! She'll start screaming at you and calling you a pervert! That tomboy is trouble!", yet another part of him was telling him a little more loudly, "Take advantage of this, Ranma! You've got a perfect Akane here, don't lose the chance to return her affections.... you'll regret it if you do! Don't you see, she loves you! Don't lose her, don't let her down!". Then the other part speaks up. "What's there to let down, considering she's still a tomboy!"

"No, she isn't! If she's acting cute now, make use of this to return the feeling!"

"If she starts screaming at you all of a sudden? Then what? And how do you know she loves you!?"

"Just.... LOOK at her! You do know she's trying to enjoy this date as much as she can!"

"Well, what about later!?"

Ranma is getting bored of this argument in his head. Calling on a third party, his brain, he tells the two sides to get lost, and leave him be. He continues to hold Akane's hand, a little tightly, and then lightens the pressure. Akane apparently likes what Ranma is doing, because she starts stroking his hand as well, and then she looks up from her spot on his shoulder, their eyes meeting. The two smile, and can see each other doing so, even in the darkness of the theatre. Ranma feels his face flush red hot in the darkness, and not knowing what to do, he turns his attention back to the movie. Akane doesn't mind. Ranma sighs in contentment. Akane does the same.

After the movie, which lasted an incredible 3 and a 1/2 hours, ends in a tearful ending, although none of the people who went in to watch cared one little bit, since they are all couples, and went in simply to share some "private" time together, in the darkness. In fact, halfway through the movie, Ranma and Akane had also gotten into the spirit of things, and by the time the movie had ended, the two were every little bit as close as any of the other couples. Ranma is simply lost in a world of loving ecstasy, as is Akane. Looking a little like Ryoga lost in love with Akane, Ranma simply walks out of the theatre with Akane hanging onto his arm, lost. Soon, Ranma snaps out of his stupor, and looks at his watch. He realizes that it's really late, and that if he and Akane walked home, they would reach home just in time for dinner.

Ranma : "Come on, Akane. Our last activity for today's date, a walk home. Coming?"

Akane : "Lead on, Ranma-kun." (Oh, I forgot! Akane's never called Ranma Ranma-kun before either!)

So, loving hand in loving hand, Ranma and Akane walk home, slowly. Ranma is reflecting on this date so far, a smile brilliant as the sun reflected on his face.

Ranma : (Thinking) "Sigh.... I'm so lucky! Finally, Akane's acting cute, we've gone on a real date, and I feel completely happy for once! This is better than a dream! This is heaven!"

Then, catching himself, and thinking more seriously now, Ranma reflects.

Ranma : (Thinking) "Hm, but this is no time to give in to emotions so easily! I've still got that competition to win! I don't care what Meseke's done with Akane, I must win this competition!"

However for now, Ranma is content to walk with Akane, holding hands, back home towards the Tendou Dojo.

Back home.....

Soun Tendou and the rest of the family are waiting anxiously for Ranma and Akane to return home from their date, fully expecting Ranma to come back disheveled, face covered in reddening slap marks, as well as being covered in band aids, as well as bruises, even fearing a black eye. They also fear that Akane would return in her usual angry, sulking and dark-mood self, which tends to happen most of the time whenever Ranma's with her. However, the simple appearance of Meseke has served to make Akane more tender, more demure, and less boyish. And even though Akane might or might not have forgotten about her feelings for Meseke, his old magic hasn't lost its touch! So, when the gates to the Tendou Dojo's compound starts to creak as it is opened, the entire house literally *freezes* in its tracks, as everyone turns to look anxiously at the arrivals.

\*creeaaakk\*

Two shadows appear.

Soun gasps, as he realises the shadows are together.

Ranma and Akane walk in, holding hands, locked in a loving embrace.

Everyone lets go of a sigh of relief, at this most fortunate sight. Soun is practically crying in happiness as he sees the two teenagers together so happily. And everyone else is looking admiringly at the two of them, seemingly so close together. Ranma and Akane seem not to even notice the others, as they walk towards the living room. There, they stop. They let go of their hands, and look at each other, not knowing what to do. Then Akane speaks.

Akane : "Kasumi? Have you started cooking dinner tonight?"

Kasumi looks surprised, as she realises what Akane intends to do. Smiling, she shakes her head.

Kasumi : "Not yet, Akane. But, if you want to cook dinner tonight, I'll be glad to leave you to your own devices..."

Akane smiles at her understanding sister, who's so handily read her mind.

Akane : "That would be fine."

Then, turning to Ranma, Akane speaks.

Akane : "Ranma, I want to do something for you tonight... in return for this morning's breakfast. I want to cook you dinner tonight."

\*chirrrrp\* \*chirrrrp\*

All is silent, as the entire household looks at Akane solemnly. Ranma breaks the silence.

Ranma : "Erm.... ok, Akane, if you want to...."

Noticing the hesitation in Ranma's voice, Akane looks concernedly at him.

Akane : "Is something the matter, Ranma?"

Ranma : "No no no! Nothing's wrong! Nothing at all! Heh... heh..."

Ranma starts laughing fakely, as he tries to hide his nervousness.

Akane : "Oh, I know! You're afraid my cooking might become bad all of a sudden?"

Ranma is caught by Akane's question, as he realises that she has divined the reason for his hestiation.

Ranma : "Erm..... ok, Akane, you got me. Despite a great day today, and all that's happened, I still don't have THAT much faith in your cooking still."

Akane listens to Ranma's explanation, and the entire household goes deathly silent. Soun expects the worst, as does everyone else. Akane looks down for a while, her eyes covered in a shadow. Ranma begins to regret what he just said. Then Akane looks up again at Ranma, frowning. Ranma gulps.

Akane : "Ranma....."

Curling her hand into a fist, she draws it back. Ranma's worst fear has come true! Akane is now angry and that the day's effort for the date has gone to waste!

Akane : "RANMA-BAKA!!!"

She swings. Everyone almost screams. Ranma throws his hands up to block the incoming blow, but after a few seconds, he realises he's not been sent into orbit yet. Daring to open his eyes, and dropping his defense, he sees Akane bending over towards him, her hands behind her back, grinning like an idiot.

Akane : "haa haa! Ranma-baka! You were fooled! Serves you right! Ngaaah!" (sticks a tongue out.)

Ranma realises that Akane's been playing a trick on him. Looking rather upset, Ranma starts pouting. (Not REAL pouting, just the pretend kind you'd use!) Akane looks at him, and at his comically upset face, and giggles.

Akane : "Oh, all right, Ranma! Stop pouting! I know you still don't trust me cooking by myself, but I'll show you yet, just how good a cook I've become! Just wait!"

This is VERY much to the relief of the entire family, who thought an entire day of dating and effort would go to waste on Ranma's part. Ranma just looks relieved that the date hasn't ended in disaster, yet. Watching as Akane walks off towards the kitchen, with Kasumi following, Ranma heaves a sigh of relief.

Ranma : "So far, so good! She hasn't gotten angry yet!"

Genma : "And I'd like it to stay that way!"

\*bonk!\*

Ranma : "Pops! Don't sneak up on people like that! It can give people heart attacks!"

Genma : "Yeah, and it can give me migraines if you go on like that."

Ranma : "Grrr..... just what do you mean!?"

Genma : "Ya wanna piece of me, son? Do ya!?"

Ranma : "Gaaah!"

And then, Ranma and Genma get into a father-son squabble, all because of a simple shock. Rolling around in a dust cloud, Ranma and Genma are having it out with each other, and growling all the time. Nabiki turns her attention from the T.V towards the two, in bored indifference.

Nabiki : "A loving Ranma spending a whole day with a loving Akane on a loving date and coming back in a loving state, and he STILL hasn't changed his attitude towards his father. How typical."

\*slosh!\*

Hm... it seems the fight's gotten a little out of hand, and the two end up landing in the Tendou's pond. Dragging herself out of the pond, dripping wet, with tongue stuck out in disgust, onna-Ranma glares at her father, now a giant panda.

Ranma (C) : "Yucks! Pops! Look what you did! You ruined my shirt for our dinner date tonight! Now I'll have to change!"

Genma (C) : \*plorp!\* "Oh all right, sorry! Go get changed! Try something suitable for a nighttime date then!"

Ranma (C) : "Hmph. You're telling me!"

A few hours later, at around 7:00 PM in Nerima, Akane has finished cooking the last dish. Delicious smells waft out from the kitchen, much to everyone's delight. When Kasumi looks into the kitchen, Akane gives her a nod, grinning like a fool. Kasumi calls out to everyone for dinner, and in a gust of wind, Genma and Ranma arrive. Ranma has changed into some dryer clothes, a night-black chinese shirt with dark blue pants, something the entire family have not seen him wear before.

Kasumi : "Nice shirt, Ranma! Where'd you get it?"

Ranma : "erm... well, I've been saving this shirt for a long time! For special occasions!"

Soun : "Does that mean you really like Akane and want this date to be a success, Ranma!?"

Soun asks this question to Ranma, full of hope that Ranma finally loves Akane. Of course, Ranma, while having grown much closer to Akane, is not yet close enough to really say he loves her. And besides, he really wants to win this competition so badly, he's willing to do almost anything to do so. And in this case, as a double meaning to this event, Ranma's taken out his most expensive and valuable outfit for this event.

As described earlier, Ranma's most expensive and prized shirt is pitch black, with a white inside. The buttons are made of woven gold coloured cloth and real gold (which is why it's so expensive), and comes with a gold coloured belt, also of similar materials. His pants are made from fine silk, dyed blue, and reinforced with some special treatment. Nodoka gave this to Soun, asking him to pass it to Ranma when he arrived, and Soun did... after Nodoka left. Ranma is, in other words, wearing his mother's most expensive and valuable gift for a simple dinner tonight.

(In case you're wondering why he didn't wear this during the date, Ranma was afraid that if his mother was nearby and accidentally saw a boy wearing the one-of-a-kind black/gold chinese shirt, she'd think he was Ranma. And if it turned out to be so.... he'd be in trouble.)

"Hold on hold on hold on there! This is no simple dinner! My entire future depends on this! If Akane's cooking is like last time, my future will be rather short, 'cause I'll be dead! But, if it's good, and I live, she'll still have to choose who she likes better. Meseki or me! And you say this dinner is simple!?"

Ok, maybe it's not so simple, but it IS crucial, and Ranma decides to make sure that he gets the most out of it.

Dinner is served. Akane's cooking looks much better than the last time everyone saw it, and it appeals a lot more as well, everyone having tasted Akane's previous cookings. Akane comes out of the kitchen with her last dish, a bowl of steaming soup, places it on the table, and sits down besides Ranma. Ranma looks at the food with interest.

Ranma : "Ah well! Time to dig in! Come on!"

And as Ranma reaches over to grab something off the nearest convenient dish, he realizes no one else has moved. Looking around at the assembled family, Ranma begins to sweat.

Ranma : "Hey, what's everyone looking at me for?"

Soun & Genma : "Ranma, since it's your final activity in this date, and since Akane can still be considered your fiancée, we suggest that YOU (pointing at him) try her cooking first."

Ranma looks at the fingers pointed at him, and opens his mouth in shock. Just then, Akane holds Ranma's arm, and looks at him. Ranma notices this and looks at a pouting Akane, who just looks irresistible.

Akane : "Come on, Ranma.... just this once, for this date, please? We may be living in the same house, but I still want you to try my cooking...."

Even without needing this prompting, Ranma would've tasted Akane's cooking anyway, just to get on her good side. Finally, he speaks up.

Ranma : "Oh, all right! Just leave me be, and I'll taste her cooking, all right!?"

Everyone seems to agree, and immediately, the pointing fingers withdraw and Akane lets go. Ranma grabs the pair of chopsticks he dropped onto the table, and reaches over to grab a piece of Akane's "Akane only" cooking. Like the last time he tried her cooking, the atmosphere is tense as Ranma brings the food over to his mouth. He braces himself, and opens his mouth.

\*Chomp!\* \*Munch\* \*Munch\* \*Munch\*

\*Gulp!\*

Ranma's eyes open wide in shock as he tastes Akane's most recent cooking. Akane is looking at Ranma, thinking that perhaps her cooking has ended up with the wrong ingredients again.

Akane : "Ranma.... what's wrong?"

But he doesn't reply. Simply sitting there, eyes wide open, Ranma stares, blank eyed, in front of him. After a few unsuccessful attempts to get him to respond, Akane resorts to her oldest method of waking someone up.

\*Slapslapslapslapslap!\*

Akane : "RANMA! Wake UP!"

Akane stops slapping Ranma, and apparently brought out of his daze, Ranma looks at Akane, face red and puffy.

Ranma : "Ouch! Akane, I AM awake! I was just thinking, how your cooking could taste so normal!"

Akane : "W...what?"

Ranma : "You heard me! I said I was thinking how your cooking could taste so normal!"

Akane : "Ra...Ranma.... my cooking's.... normal!? Without help too!"

With this, Akane leaps into the sky, arms extended, going "Yipeee!!!", and nearly overturning the table while she's at it. Calming down, Akane grabs her own pair of chopsticks and starts to dig in enthusiastically. After a while of chewing on her food, Akane decides that her cooking isn't so bad after all, and she speaks between mouthfuls of food, too excited to swallow before speaking.

Akane : "mmph! Yeshmmph! Myph cookinmpgh ISPFH normaphsggh!" (Mmm! My cooking IS normal!)

And with this reassuring word, everyone shares one last, wary glance, then digs in. They are not disappointed.

Soun speaks first, crying in joy as he does so.

Soun : "A...Akane.... my daughter.... your cooking is finally normal!"

Kasumi : "Yes, Akane. Without my help too!"

Akane is beaming at these compliments, and is absolutely ecstatic at this. Turning to Ranma, Akane flashes him her most beautiful smile.

Akane : "Ranma, you have just made today the happiest day of my life!"

And then, she goes back to eating her dinner, still marvelling at how normal her cooking is. Ranma just turns red while eating, thinking.

Ranma : (Thinking) "Oh, wow! Akane just said I made her happy!? This is a good sign indeed! I think I could win this competition!"

Genma and Soun are thinking much the same thing too, as they eat Akane's cooking.

It is much later at night, when everyone's going to bed. Akane is in her room, after a refreshing bath and change of clothes, lying on her bed, hands behind her head, smiling at the ceiling.

Akane : "Oh.... I'm so happy today! I didn't know Ranma could be so loving! I don't care if he wants to win this competition, I think I like him more already! Even though he may be a jerk, a pervert, and more, I just KNOW I'm going to remember this day for the rest of my life! Ah well, tomorrow's Meseki's turn... better be in top form! I want to see what Meseki has in store for me!"

Meanwhile, in Ranma's room, Ranma is lying on his futon besides his snoring father.

Ranma : "Akane.... I didn't know you could really be so cute... especially towards me! Looks like Meseki really did some good, old fashioned emotional release in you! Ah well, I hope I win this competition. I'm afraid anymore of this and I might start loving Akane.... even though I think she's still the uncute tomboy I know..... I think."

And the two fall asleep, lost in thought.

{The Second date, Meseki style. Giving Ranma a little lady's respect.}

The next morning however, proves to be a little unfortunate, as Akane realizes scratching her head as she gets up. Hugging herself and shivering at a very chilly morning, Akane wonders why.

Akane : "It's so cold... brr...."

Walking over to the window, she looks out and realizes that the sky is dark and overcast. She looks off into the distance and notices she can't see too far off, indicating heavy rains off in the distance. She groans. To confirm her suspicion, she can hear thunder off in the distance.

Akane : "Oh darn! If it rains here, that means my beach visit with Meseki's gonna be ruined!"

She starts to mutter and curse at her bad luck. Walking out of her room, she meets her sisters in the hallway. Walking down towards the living room, the three start a conversation.

Kasumi : "Akane, isn't today supposed to be your date with Meseki?"

Akane : "Yeah... but look outside! It's going to rain! I can't go to the beach like this!"

Nabiki : "Wow, sis, you're going to the beach with him?"

Akane : "Yeah. He even invited Ranma."

Kasumi : "My, he's a good sport."

Akane : "Yeah. That's why I like him so much... he's so caring... so.... sensitive... so understanding....."

And as Akane starts saying this, she starts dreaming of him, her eyes glimmering, hands held together in a pose

resembling hope, and still walking at the same time. Apparently, she's not forgotten how much she likes Meseki too. Kasumi and Nabiki look at each other worriedly, afraid that she might forget her feelings for Ranma in a blink of an eye. Akane then snaps out of her wonderland stupor and looks at her sisters, who still have that worried face of theirs. She grins.

Akane : "Don't worry, you two! I won't let any past feelings for Meseki get in my way of judging the competition! besides, my feelings have changed quite a bit since that weirdo Ranma came into my life...."

She starts giggling at the many troubles Ranma's gotten into that have proved humorous because of his curse. From somewhere behind them, pattering of feet can be heard. Turning around, the three sisters spot Ranma appearing in a dustcloud behind them. He comes screeching towards them, slows down, then starts walking at the same pace as they are.

Akane : "Ranma! What's up?"

Ranma : "Looks like your date with Meseki isn't going as planned?"

Akane : "It's too early to tell.... maybe he'll have a backup plan."

Ranma : "Yeah. Tell me about it."

The four make their way down the stairs. A chill wind blows through the hall, a sign of coming rain. Akane looks worried at the prospect of losing a chance to go on a date at the beach. She sighs and slumps her shoulders in defeat at the absolute likelihood of missing the beach this once. Kasumi goes off to make breakfast, while Nabiki goes off to watch some morning-aired business and finance series. Akane just stands at the front porch and looks at the sky, silently cursing it for the rain it threatened to bring. Just then, the gates open.

Everyone present looks at the shadow at the entrance.

It appears to have a cloak flapping in the wind, and a small bundle under its arm.

Akane gasps.

The figure walks towards the Tendou Household, cloak still flapping in the wind. Then, as it gets closer towards them, a flash of light glints off him, lightning from a distance.

\*brrooom!\*

His eyes glint and glimmer at the sudden flash of light.

Ranma : "Oh, it's you, Meseki."

The shadowy cloaked figure walks into the light, where everyone can see him. Indeed, it is Meseki. The cloak is simply a long beach towel, the bundle under his arm a picnic basket and other beach accessories. Akane gasps in wonder at his insistence on wanting to come even in this weather. Meseki is even wearing a pair of bermudas and a tight singlet. Ranma shakes his head and chuckles a little at Meseki's stubbornness and stupidity. Akane just ogles at Meseki's trim and tone body, which isn't surprising, since he's better built than Ranma. Ranma decides to ignore this fact.

Akane : "Meseki! What are you doing here now?"

Meseki : "Sorry, Akane for coming so early. But I have a little something to do."

Akane : "Like what? Pray it's not going to rain!?"

Meseki : "Better."

With that, Meseki tosses his stuff at Ranma, who catches the blanket on his head and everything else on the blanket. Then he proceeds to look up at the sky. He frowns a little, in irritation more than in anything else.

Meseki : "Time to play weatherman."

Concentrating hard at the sky, Meseki stares. And stares. AND stares. By now, Ranma has gotten everything off

his head and is looking bewilderedly at Meseki, as is Akane and Nabiki. Soun comes down, groggy from a good night's sleep, and looks at this strange event.

Then, Meseki's eyes work their magic. Eyes glowing white, Meseki keeps staring at the sky. Beads of sweat form on his head, as he concentrates hard. Then the impossible happens. Slowly, the skies clear up. The clouds start to move away elsewhere, and the sun starts shining again. The whole of Nerima starts to notice this sudden change in weather as well, and as complaining couples and peeved parents look up at the sky, they realize that their plans for the day aren't ruined after all.

At the Cat Cafe, Mousse feels something strange, and walks out of the cafe, looking at the sky clearing up unexpectedly. Adjusting his spectacles, Mousse starts to mutter.

Mousse : "Hm.... Meseki's using Me Sen Benri Tsukau Kazu SanhyakuGo (Eyes of a thousand uses Use no. 305), 'Clear Eyes, Clear Skies'.... darn, why does HE have all the luck!?"

Seems Mousse's got all the uses memorized, eh? Anyway, back at the Dojo, the entire household looks at Meseki straining as he keeps staring at the sky, until, finally, the entire sky clears over and becomes a beautiful Sunday morning, with birds singing and a cool morning breeze blowing. Ranma, Akane and Soun are simply staring at Meseki, who is now covered in sweat, jaws limp.

Akane : "Meseki... I didn't know you could do that!"

Meseki : "Use no. 305 of my special skills.... 'Clear Eyes, clear skies'.... whew! That was tiring!"

Mentioning his skill's name, Ranma walks up to Meseki and stares at his eyes. Meseki looks confused. Then, after some scrutinizing, Ranma turns around and shakes his head.

Ranma : "Clear eyes? You seem to have them ALL the time, Meseki!"

Meseki : "True... but our ancestors thought that this name sounded nice because it rhymed."

\*whump!\*. Everybody falls over.

Slowly, one by one, they get up, and invite Meseki into their house, even Ranma, who wants to keep on Akane's good side, especially after all that trouble he went to yesterday. Akane yells into the kitchen, telling Kasumi to prepare a plate for one more person, and Kasumi shouts her own reply.

Meseki then goes to pick up the beach equipment he tossed at Ranma, and arranges them neatly at the doorway. Coming back, he sits at the table besides Akane, sandwiching her between Ranma and himself. Ranma gives Meseki a dark glare, and Meseki, noticing, gives Ranma a darker glare. (Boy, what a way to start a morning date!) Akane then notices the two peoples' staring match, and puts a hand between the two, breaking the black line that is linking the two boys' eyes. She gives Ranma and Meseki a pouting, angry look.

Akane : "Ranma! Meseki! You two shouldn't fight! Especially today, since it's Meseki's turn to take me out!"

Meseki : "Yes, Akane-san. I did tell you yesterday we'd be going to the beach, and I did invite Ranma. But, I've been thinking, why not.... invite your whole family too?"

Ranma jerks at Meseki's comment, but cannot do anything about it. Looking on furiously at Meseki, Ranma can do nothing but stare. Akane, her sister Nabiki, and Soun, however, all look very pleasantly surprised at Meseki's sudden invitation. Then Akane snaps her fingers.

Akane : "Say, Meseki, why'd you come HERE so early? Just to show off your.... abilities?"

Meseki : "Oh, that.... erm...."

Ranma : "Admit it, Meseki. You just wanted to show off in front of Akane!"

Akane gives Ranma a jab in the ribs, and then looks at Meseki, who is coming up with an appropriate response. He does, soon enough.

Meseki : "Not exactly true, Ranma Saotome. Yes, I did come here to show Akane that I was the one who cleared up the weather, but I did come here to tell her about the family's invitation too. They do need time to get ready, you know."

Ranma : "Why not call us and tell us that you cleared the skies and that you'd be inviting us all?"

At this, Akane does start to ponder why Meseki didn't call instead.

Meseki : "Can't. My hotel's phone system is down. Try calling them if you don't believe me."

Ranma : "I think I will. What hotel, what number?"

Meseki goes on to tell Ranma a name and number to dial. Ranma jogs off to the nearest phone to start dialling. As he returns, Kasumi comes in from the kitchen with seven plates of this morning's breakfast, some fried rice. Tucking in, everyone starts to eat, while Meseki and Kasumi discuss the beach trip's plans.

Kasumi : "Meseki, have you prepared everything yet?"

Meseki : "Oh, I'm sorry. I've got ALMOST everything.... but I can't carry everything here.... I'm still missing some beach umbrellas, and a bigger picnic basket with more food. I've only got enough food and drinks with me for two...."

Catching this phrase's obvious meaning, Ranma growls between mouthfuls of rice and begins to glower at Meseki. Meseki ignores Ranma, and looks back at Kasumi.

Meseki : "Kasumi-san, would you mind getting the rest of the beach equipment we need...?"

Kasumi : "Of course. Come on, finish up first. Then we can start preparing."

And everybody starts eating in earnest, no one talking during the breakfast meal. At the end of the meal, Kasumi packs up, and asks Akane to come in with her to help with the dishes. Akane nods and follows. Inside the kitchen, Kasumi asks Akane a question while they wash the dishes.

Kasumi : "Akane, do you really think Meseki's a good choice, or Ranma?"

Akane : "I don't know, sis. So far, Ranma's been really nice... but I want to see what the Meseki of now has to offer outside of moral support."

Kasumi sighs in relief, knowing that although Akane's original reason for loving Meseki was his understanding, Akane is now beginning to think straight, especially after a sudden reunion and expending all her initial pent up love for Meseki, now wanting more than just a shoulder to lean on from Meseki. She wants to know what Meseki can provide her with \*if\* they married.

Kasumi : "Then, Akane, I'm sure whoever you choose will be the perfect choice."

Akane : "Thanks, sis."

The two sisters wash up the remaining dishes in silence. Finishing up the last dish, Akane washes her hands clean and walks out into the living room, where Meseki is waiting. Glancing at the clock, Akane realizes that it's already 11:00 AM. Meseki walks over to Akane.

Meseki : "Come on, Akane. Get changed. Your sister's helping me get your stuff ready."

Akane : "Nabiki? It can't be Kasumi, she's still busy."

Meseki : "Is Nabiki the short haired one?"

Akane : "Yes."

Meseki : "Yes, it's her. But forgive for saying so, but I think she's quite a ruthless mercenary."

Akane : "Yeah, 'bout time you noticed."

Meseki : "But nevermind, what she charged me is nothing compared to what I can pay. Anyway, go get changed now. We should be ready to leave soon."

Akane : "Ok."

With that, Meseki leaves to get the other preparations ready. Akane turns to leave for her room to change, but as she turns, she notices Ranma sitting alone at the porch, sulking. She walks up to him and taps his shoulder. He turns his head around to look at Akane, a frustrated visage.

Akane : "Come on, Ranma. What's the problem now?"

Ranma : "Akane, I can't show that.... I can't show Meseki I'm half-girl!"

Akane : "Is that what's troubling you, Ranma? Hmph. I expected you to be less petty than that!"

Ranma : "Who's petty!?"

Akane : "Calm down, Ranma! Alright, I've thought of something. Want to hear it?"

Ranma : "Go ahead."

Akane leans over and whispers into his ear. Ranma grins at the silliness, yet practicality of this plan. After Akane finishes, she leans back and the two nod.

Ranma : "Well, it's amusing, but it's practical! Alright, I'll be in my room. Tell me when ready."

Akane : "Right. Remember the codeword." (Winks at Ranma.)

Ranma : "I remember it."

Ranma runs up to his room, glad that he at least has a chance to keep his pride while showing Meseki his curse. Akane goes off to look for Meseki, to ask him something "special".

Ranma : (Thinking) "Least Akane's on my side here... and I won't embarrass myself in front of Meseki."

He runs up to his room, slams it open, runs in, and slams it close. Then, walking over to the most hated corner of the room, Ranma opens a portion of his cabinet labelled "Onna" and forces himself to look inside. Inside is a fairly large collection of clothes for those events in which he has to inevitably become a girl. Namely, times when he has to go swimming, because if he went as a guy and jumped into the water... well, you know.

Searching through his swimsuits corner, he pulls out his "favorite" swimsuit, a black and gold swimsuit with the word "boy" stenciled on the chest area, and a light dress to wear until they reach the beach. Nodding in satisfaction, he holds onto it and closes the cabinet, then goes off to find a bucket of cold water.

Meanwhile, Akane has found Meseki with Nabiki, packing some things into a corner where the rest of the stuff essential for going to the beach is being stashed. Walking up to Meseki, Akane clears her throat to get his attention. He finishes stuffing a deflated beach ball into a corner, then turns around to face Akane.

Meseki : "Akane-san, what is it?"

Akane : "Meseki... I wonder... you have such good fashion sense.... I don't know. I don't think Ranma's fashion sense is very good. Especially in beachwear. Could you help give him some pointers?"

Meseki looks incredulous at this request, his eyes glimmering in the late morning sun. His pupils dilating to block out excess sunlight, Meseki decides that anything Akane requests, he should try to fulfill. Of course, that excuse was the best Akane could come up with, but who cares?

Meseki : "Hm... all right, Akane. If you wish. Where's Ranma?"

Akane grins at Meseki's agreement to "help" Ranma. Grabbing his hand, Akane starts dragging him upstairs and towards Ranma's room. (She's reverting to her old behavior....)

Akane : "Over there....."

Akane then stops in front of a closed door, which leads into Ranma's room. Meseki waits patiently, while Akane knocks on the door.

Akane : (Reciting her memorized lines.) "Ranma! Are you done '*changing*' yet?"

Ranma, inside the room, has gotten the bucket of water ready, and is still holding the swimsuit, ashamed to wear it while still in male form. He calls out, and his voice is heard from inside the room as Akane waits patiently.

Ranma : (Reciting HIS memorized lines.) "Almost done! Hang on!"

The sound of water splashing can be heard, and inside the room, onna-Ranma is hastily stripping and putting on her body hugging swimsuit and loose light dress. She shouts again, and this time, when Meseki hears a woman's voice instead of a man's one, he begins to look confused.

Ranma (C) : "All right! I'm 'changed'!"

Akane : "Come out... Meseki said he'd help you appraise your dress code."

Ranma (C) : "Coming."

Meseki is thrown off balance at this sudden change. He practically hits the floor when Ranma-chan comes out of the room in a swimsuit and a light dress. Getting up, he loses all semblance of gentlemanly manners, pointing at Ranma rudely and stammering.

Meseki : "Er....ahh.....er.....oorrr.....Akane, who's that!? *Are wa dare mo desu ka!*?"

Ranma and Akane share a grin, as their plans works out as expected. Akane turns to face Meseki, now trying desperately to regain his composure.

Akane : "Oh, Meseki! Did I forget to tell you? Anyway... Ranma's got this curse, you see.... he changes into a girl everytime he has cold water poured onto him....."

Meseki's eyes flash as he remembers something as Akane tells him about a curse and cold water.

Meseki : "OH! I remember! Jusenkyo!"

Akane and Ranma look at him incredulously. Meseki looks thoughtful as he remembers some lore his father taught him about China.

Akane & Ranma (C) : "You've heard of it?"

Meseki : "Father used to tell me about his experiences in China, and Jusenkyo was one of them. I never expected to actually see one person who's been cursed by it!"

Ranma-chan looks at Meseki as he flashes a look up and down her body, admiring the work of Jusenkyo. Then Akane gives the two a smile and tells them :

Akane : "Ok, you two! I'm going to get changed now! You two go down and wait for me!"

Akane skips off towards her room, Meseki and Ranma-chan looking. Then, when she's gone from sight, Meseki and Ranma return their looks at each other. Extending a hand out to Ranma to hold, Meseki does a slight bow. Ranma is a little taken aback at this.

Ranma (C) : "Nan Dayo?" (What're you doing?)

Meseki : "A helping hand downstairs, *madamoselle?*"

Ranma (C) : "Hey, what do you take me for?"

Meseki looks up from his bow, apparently having his dignity hurt. He thinks a short while before coming up with the least offensive answer he can produce.

Meseki : "Well, as a gentleman, it's my duty to at least try to be courteous to any woman, whether she's ugly, or.... well, look at yourself."

As Ranma looks at herself, she ponders Meseki's words. True, she has to admit that she isn't a 100% girl, at heart at least. But by now she's so used to changing into a girl, she's beginning to think that any more of this and she might actually begin liking to be one. Goose pimples run up and down her body as she thinks of this horrifying thought, and she shudders a little. Meseki is still waiting, hand extended, in a bowing position, looking at her expectantly.

Meseki : "Well?"

Ranma appears to consider this, then shrugs nonchalantly.

Ranma (C) : "Ah well, just this once, to be nice to you."

Meseki : "This way, madam Ranma."

Taking her hand in his, Meseki leads onna-Ranma down the stairs. Everyone present in the living room waiting for Akane looks at the "couple" arriving from the top of the stairways, fully expecting it to be Meseki and Akane. They get a mega-shock when it turns out to be Meseki leading Ranma instead, and as soon as the two reach the

foot of the staircase, Soun comes running up to Ranma, crying.

Soun : "Ranma! What do you think you're doing!?"

Ranma (C) : "Relax, Soun! It isn't what you're thinking!"

Meseki : "Yes, Soun-san. I was simply acting the way I would to any other girl... except Akane."

Soun : "But Ranma's a *BOY!*"

Meseki : "For as long as Ranma stays this way, she's a girl as far as I'm concerned."

Ranma (C) : "Just don't get *TOO* carried away with this gentleman-to-a-girl thing ok? I'm still a boy at heart!"

Meseki : "If the *lady* Ranma wishes it."

He allows himself a malicious grin at this remark, watching Ranma grit her teeth in embarrassment and annoyance. Everyone else just laughs, even Soun, who sees the joke here. Just then, Akane comes down the staircase, she herself dressed in a swimsuit and a light dress. Everyone is still chuckling a little as she reaches the bottom. She looks confused.

Akane : "Eh? What's going on here?"

Soun, laughing a little harder than the rest with tears streaming out of his eyes, walks over to his daughter.

Soun : \*hee\* "N...nothing, Akane! Just a little something Meseki told us...!" \*haa\*

Akane looks at Meseki, who has put on a neutral expression at the commotion going on around him. She then looks at a red-faced onna-Ranma, who is scratching her head, wondering what to do. Finally, not standing it any more, she walks into the living room and raises her voice a little.

Akane : "Ok, come on you all! Time to leave! Let's pack and go!"

At the commanding tone of her voice, everyone stops giggling immediately, and gets up to start picking up the pieces of beach equipment stashed in a corner. Meseki goes over to open the door, the beach blanket draped over one shoulder, a basket in one hand, and a deflated beach ball or two under his arm.

Meseki : "This way, please."

A chattering group of Tendous walk out the door, followed by a Saotome panda and finally by Akane and Ranma. As the last two leave, Meseki closes the gates behind him, and lets Akane do the locking up. Then he follows behind the two girls as they walk towards the nearest bus stop to take the bus to the beach. The walk is uneventful, and the family just reaches the bus stop when a bus pulls up. Everyone piles on board, at Meseki's expense of course, and finds places to sit. Akane sits besides Meseki (It is THEIR date after all. The rest of the family's just along for the ride.) and Ranma besides her giant panda of a father. All the girls are drawing stares from the mostly single male population on the bus, as they settle down for the moderately long ride to the beach. Anyone who starts staring at Akane, however, receives a lesson from Meseki's eyes never to do so again. Staring each and every man who dares to stare at Akane, Meseki "protects" Akane from probing eyes. This goes on for the remainder of the journey, the only person to ever notice the stares is Nabiki, who is assessing each and every boy around her, her devious mind hard at work, thinking of ways to drain each and every one of them of their money.

Eventually, the bus arrives at the beach, and all the passengers going there pile off, including the Tendous, the Saotomes, and the lone Hokori. The bustling group walks off towards the beach, Ranma scouting ahead for a spot to set down on. Finding one, she starts leaping up and down and yelling to the group. They notice her, of course, and start off towards the designated spot. Meseki is drawing the most stares from the female population at the beach here, all of them pretty much adoring stares, although Meseki pretty much ignores them. Akane and Ranma on the other hand, are drawing the most stares from the male population, and they don't seem to care either. Meseki proceeds to lay down the blanket, and helps to unpack the goodies from the baskets. The family sits off to one side, knowing that they should leave Meseki and Akane alone on their date. Of course, Ranma, being the ever-jealous fiancée, decides to come snuggle in with them. She sits besides Akane, who seems to be a little disturbed at the intrusion.

Akane : "Ranma! Can't you see I'm still on a date with Meseki?"

Meseki : "No, Akane. Let the lady Ranma stay. A little repayment to the big favor yesterday...."

(Wow, Meseki really pays back little favors big time!)

Akane giggles at the name Meseki called Ranma. Then breaks out into full fledged laughter, while Ranma simply turns red.

Akane : \*hee hee\* "Meseki, that's the first time I've ever heard ANYBODY call Ranma a lady!"  
Ranma (C) : "Akane, no one's ever called you a lady either."

Akane stops laughing after hearing this, and begins to stare at Ranma, who is sweating.

Meseki : "Well, there's a first thing for everything, right? Would the Lady Akane like to go for a walk and an ice-cream? My treat. Come on, madamoselle Ranma, you can come too."

Meseki is purposely irking Ranma while getting on Akane's good side. Laughing so hard she can't stop, Akane gets up off the blanket, taking Meseki's hand in her own to help steady her. Ranma just turns a deeper hue of the already scarlet colouring on her face. Meseki holds out a hand for her as well, and she takes it, hesitantly, but not wanting to offend Meseki and Akane. *Especially* Akane.

Ranma (C) : (Thinking) "Remember, Ranma! You're doing this simply to win the competition and Akane's heart! You MUST put up with this, no matter what happens!"

After helping Ranma up, Meseki puts a hand on Akane's shoulder and the two start walking, Ranma trailing along behind. The entire family on the blanket watches the trio leave, and begin praying for the best. Apparently, Meseki has an entire host of ideas to charm Akane on the beach, and it begins with a simple icecream. Walking to the nearby ice cream store, Meseki invites both Ranma and Akane to pick out a cone of their choice. Ranma picks out chocolate. Akane, strawberry. Meseki buys a vanilla for himself. Paying the store tender, Meseki starts licking his ice cream, as does Akane. Ranma is taking little bites out of hers.

Meseki : "Come on, Akane. Let's go for a walk on the shore, over there, where there're less people. It's more romantic."

Akane : "Ok! Let's go! Come on, Ranma!"

Ranma reluctantly follows, and the three start walking off towards the less densely populated coast. Walking slowly, Akane and Meseki first walk on the dry sand, enjoying the feel of fine, soft sand under their feet. They even stop for a while, to simply wiggle their toes in the sand and enjoy the feel of it rubbing against their feet. They hold a mini-competition, wiggling toes and shuffling their feet to see who can make more interesting designs in the sand, although in the end, they both admit that the others' designs are equally interesting. They then continue on their walk, under the shades of the local trees growing nearby. Enjoying a cool walk under the shade of the trees, Meseki and Akane whisper sweet nothings at each other, enjoying the company the other provides, and having a marvellous time. Meseki leads Akane towards a large coconut tree, with some respectable shade, and the two sit under the tree, enjoying a rest under the tree. Ranma just shuffles up nearby and sits under another tree, only to shriek and jump up as she's attacked by the fire ants living by that particular tree's roots. Jumping up and down, patting her body to get rid of the ants clambering all over her and giving PAINFUL bites, Akane and Meseki look on amusedly as Ranma-chan leaps into the water and starts swimming laps to wash off the ants. Finally, she comes out of the water, although with painful red welts showing on several places all over her body. Akane and Meseki giggle. Tenderly touching her welts, Ranma looks indignantly at the chuckling couple, as Akane hugs Meseki for a while.

Ranma (C) : "Hey, being bitten by fire ants ain't painful, ya know!"

Akane : "Oh, Ranma! You don't have to stay in the shadows you know! Come on, join us!"

Meseki : "Yes, Ranma-san. You're still a boy at heart, aren't you? Be a little braver! Come on, sit down!"

Ranma begins to grow dark at Meseki's comment, although Akane doesn't seem to catch it. But she immediately calms herself down, telling herself that if she loses her cool, she's going to ruin ALL her chances of winning Akane's competition and heart. So, walking over to sit down besides Akane in the shade, Ranma just looks off into the distance, at the distant beach, where there are more people. Akane and Meseki just look off into the sea's horizon, enjoying a breeze, and the salty smell of the sea. After a long while of just sitting there, lying down and enjoying the beach, Meseki unexpectedly turns towards Akane and holds her hand in his. Akane looks at him

questioningly. Ranma just ignores them.

Meseki : "Akane-san... I just wanted to ask you. I've been thinking about this for a while now...."

Akane : "Yes, Meseki?"

Meseki : "Lady Akane, I want an honest answer from you. Please."

Akane : "Alright... but I don't know what to say if you don't ask...."

Meseki : "Akane-san. I want to ask you honestly. After all these years apart, have you ever thought of me?"

At this question, Ranma's body stiffens, as she remembers Soun's words :

*"I used it when Akane went to bed one night. She stopped remembering him after that."*

Ranma (C) : (Thinking) "Oh oh..... Akane's in trouble...."

Akane too, stiffens as she hears this question. She begins to sweat nervously, as she tries to gather the courage to tell him that she hasn't remembered him for some reason, even though her feelings for him are strong. She looks at Meseki, with a nervous grin, while Meseki patiently waits for Akane's reply.

Akane is about to begin her unfortunate reply, when Ranma tries to come to her rescue. Butting in on their conversation, Ranma sits between Akane and Meseki, smiling

Ranma (C) : "Say, Meseki... I'm thirsty.... ooh! Look at those coconuts up there! Why not you help me get one down, hm?"

Meseki appears to consider this, and Akane is quite pleased at Ranma's attempt to help. Looking up at the coconut tree, Meseki spots a big bunch of coconuts hanging up there. Looking at the three choiciest ones, he blinks. The three coconuts come flying down, at incredible speeds. Both Ranma and Akane scream a little and try to take cover by dodging. However, after a few seconds, the two realize that nothing's happened, and looking at Meseki, who is chuckling, they notice the three coconuts besides him, all with their tops opened. He holds one out to each girl, a coconut in each hand.

Meseki : "Good idea, Ranma-san! We can drink while we talk!"

Ranma hesitantly takes the coconut, plucks a straw out from the air, and starts sipping at her drink. Akane does the same thing, and slowly sipping her drink, Akane begins her explanation. Ranma quickly starts thinking about a way to stop Akane from explaining, and quickly decides on the truth.

Akane : "Actually, Meseki...."

Ranma (C) : "Hold on, Akane! Let me speak for you!"

Akane & Meseki : "Ranma....?"

Ranma quickly goes on to continue her story. Taking a deep breath, she lets it all go in one burst.

Ranma (C) : "The truth is, Akane, your father went to buy a hypnotic tape to make you forget Meseki a few years ago. He was afraid you'd miss Meseki so much you'd go *mad!*"

Letting go of her breath, Ranma finishes the last word in a huff. Meseki is looking at Ranma strangely, and Akane is just looking at Ranma angrily, thunderclouds forming above her head. Ranma realizes she's made a major mistake, and begins to sweat.

Ranma (C) : "Akane.... did I say something wrong?"

Akane : "Oh no! Your explanation was perfect. *JUST PERFECT.....!*"

Ranma (C) : \*gulp\* "Uh oh."

\*KAAAAA-BLAM!\*

Ranma (C) : "Aieeeeeee....."

In a single, swift move, Akane uppercuts Ranma straight into the sky, where Ranma lands, rather painfully, on top

of the tallest coconut tree on the beach, causing a deluge of ripe coconuts to come raining down on top of the unfortunates below.

Back where Akane and Meseki are, Akane is blushing bright red and breathing heavily. Being "embarrassed" by Ranma, she doesn't know what to say.

Akane : "Me...Meseki...I...."

Meseki : "There now.... don't worry, Akane. I know Ranma was lying.... I probed her....."

Of course Meseki is just telling a little white lie, but Akane looks at him as if he's just committed a crime.

Akane : "Meseki... didn't you say the last time you wouldn't probe my fiancees without my permission?"

Meseki realizes what he's just said is going to get him in trouble. Sweat starts pouring down his neck.

Meseki : "er... yes, Akane-san."

Akane : "And what did you say you did?"

Meseki : "I.... er.... probed Ranma?"

Akane : "So....?"

Meseki : "Sorry, Akane-san. My apologies."

Akane : "Forgiven, Meseki.... I don't know what Ranma wanted to do... but I'll tell you truthfully... about these past few years. About whether I've been thinking about you."

Meseki : "No need, Akane. I know that if you remembered me the first time we met that day, you must've not forgotten me at all."

Akane apparently sighs in relief at being spared the torture of telling Meseki that she actually forgot about him and his eyes until recently. Putting his arm around her shoulders, Meseki tosses his coconut into the sand, and Akane follows, making hers land directly on top of Meseki's. Meseki points to a small breakwater off in the near distance, which extends out into the open sea a short distance.

Meseki : "Come on, Akane. It's almost evening now. I know that place off in the distance has an excellent view of the sun setting. Come on, it'll be my final treat before the day's over."

Akane : "Ok!" (With a brilliant, beautiful smile.)

The two walk off towards the water break, holding hands. They walk slowly, feeling the water of the sea lap at their feet as they walk on the shore. Every once in a while, they get splashed by water from a particularly large wave, and enjoy the feeling for being a little wet. Eventually, they reach the breakwaters, and helping Akane up onto the raised platform, Meseki and Akane walk down the stretch of cemented stone to its end, arms wrapped around each other. They watch a beautiful, crimson-amber sunset slowly, slowly go down.

Meanwhile, Ranma's managed to extract herself from the tree, and is running towards the spot where Akane and Meseki were last, passing a blanketful of wondering Tendous and a Saotome, ignoring questions thrown at her, simply walking fast towards the spot, bristling.

Ranma (C) : "That Akane'll be the death of me! I try so hard to help, and that uncute ingrate gives me an uppercut into to sky! I'll show her!"

Back at the breakwaters, Meseki and Akane are now looking at each other, Meseki's eyes sparkling a beautiful golden hue.

Meseki : "It's a beautiful sunset, isn't it?"

Akane : "Yes, Meseki. It is."

Meseki : "Did you have a good day today?"

Akane : "Yes, Meseki, I did."

Meseki : "Would you like a kiss?"

Akane : "Where?"

Meseki : "Here."

Meseki turns Akane towards him, and tries to give her a kiss on her lips. However, she resists. She tries to push him back, and he slowly stops. He leans back a little, and looks at her, confused.

Meseki : "Akane.... didn't you want that kiss?"  
Akane : "No... I'm sorry. I can't. I.... don't think..... I can....."

Meseki looks hurt.

Meseki : "Akane.... no! Don't say it....!"  
Akane : "No. I think you know then?"  
Meseki : "You like that sex-changer?"  
Akane : "Ranma is NOT a sex changer!"  
Meseki : "Well, he certainly seems that way!"

Oh my, Meseki's beginning to lose his cool.

Akane : "No! He's quite pitiful actually! While he acts the way he acts, he's suffered a lot too!"  
Meseki : "Akane-san! Please, listen! I love you. I could never bear to leave you!"

With this, Meseki looks at Akane with tear filled eyes. Akane looks at them, and something in her head clicks. She starts thinking.

Akane : (Thinking) "Geez, he's really lost for me!?"

Just then, a huge waves comes. Unexpectedly, unnaturally, and unstoppable. Akane and Meseki hear a giant roar as the wave makes it way towards them. They turn, and gasp at the wave that threatens to consume them. Akane hangs on to Meseki, who, utterly awed at the sudden appearance of this wave, is unable to do anything at all, expect hold onto Akane and shield her with his own body.

\*SLOSH!\*

The wave slams into the two standing on the breakwater. A slight scream is heard, but quickly disappears. However, Ranma manages to hear the scream before it is drowned out by the wave.

Ranma (C) : "Akane!"

Turning towards the origin of the scream, Ranma speeds off in a sandstorm. Running towards the breakwater, Ranma notices a sign carelessly tossed into the bushes near the breakwater. She pauses long enough to read it. It says :

"WARNING :

Do NOT go onto the breakwater. Unnaturally large waves have been known to form there at odd times. People have lost their lives there before.

-Thank you, The Management."

And below the sign's message is a list of dates indicating when the waves have occurred.

Jan 1922, Jun1935, Dec 1936, Mar 1937, Apr 1967, Feb 1968, May 1987, August 1989, Sep 1990, Oct 1991. XXXX

Ranma looks at the dates, and keeps running. As she runs, her mind works hard, and suddenly, she realizes.

Ranma (C) : (Thinking) "The one month which hasn't been mentioned....! July! This IS July!"

By now, Ranma has reached the edge of the breakwaters, searching desperately for any sign of Akane and Meseki. Then, unable to find the two on the surface, Ranma takes a plunge.

Ranma (C) : "Hang on, Akane! I'm coming! You too, Meseki!"

She leaps, and dives into the water. Swimming in the water, Ranma realizes the undertow is incredible. While it's nothing SHE can't handle, Akane and Meseki would be struggling, and as Ranma realizes that, she notices two

shadowy figures in the distance. She starts swimming desperately in their direction. True, the two figures are those of Akane and Meseki. Both people have their eyes closed, and are gritting teeth, Meseki still holding onto Akane tightly. Realizing that they've been caught in the undertow, Ranma turns around, and gives the water behind her a little Moko Takabisha to help her catch up with the quickly receding figures.

\*Bloooooop!\*

Ranma is sent flying towards the two figures, and then applies her emergency water brakes just in time. She reaches out with both hands and grabs the two figures before they are dragged even further out to sea, and starts kicking desperately, trying to break free of the undertow as well as lug the two semi-conscious figures along with her. Realizing it'll take more than leg power alone, Ranma transfers Akane's limp form into the other hand, which is still holding onto Meseki's singlet. Concentrating on building up confidence of saving Akane, Ranma blasts the water behind her.

\*BLAAAAMMOOOOOPPP!!!\* (Sound strange?)

"Aiiieeee!!!!!!!!!!!"

Far off in the distance, Soun and his family are packing up, getting ready to leave the beach after a long and enjoyable day there. They see in the distance, a water spout as the Moko Takabisha does its magic and blasts Ranma clear into the sky, Akane and Meseki still in her hand.

Still in the sky, Ranma is screaming as she hurtles towards the same tree as before. However, her screaming wakes Meseki up, who coughs up some water, and then looks at the hand holding him.

Meseki : "Ranma! You...."

Ranma (C) : "What are you talking about now!? DO SOMETHING!"

Meseki : "Right."

Meseki blinks. Akane and Meseki disappear, while Ranma keeps flying.

Ranma (C) : "This is gonna hurt."

\*BLAM!\*

Meanwhile, Akane and Meseki have reappeared underneath the coconut tree Ranma just flew into. Fortunately, all the coconuts have already been knocked off, and only thing that comes down now is a dazed and battered Ranma-chan. Sliding off the trunk, Ranma sits up and looks around, dazedly. Then she spots Soun and the rest come running towards them, followed by Shampoo, Cologne and Mousse. (If you don't remember, the Cat Cafe does its business at the beach on Sundays.)

Soun : "Ranma! What's going on!?"

Shampoo : "Ranma ok?"

Mousse : "Where's Meseki?"

Meseki is still groaning and shaking his head, vomitting water, while Akane is out cold and lying on the sandy floor. Ranma crawls over to her, and puts a finger under her nose.

Nothing.

Ranma (C) : "NO!"

Desperately, Ranma takes a pulse.

VERY weak, and getting weaker.

{The fight to save Akane! Will Meseki or Ranma pay the price...?}

By now, the entire gang has arrived, and are all looking concernedly at Ranma and Akane.

Soun : "Ranma! Is Akane alright!?"

Kasumi : "Is she?"

Ignoring the maelstrom of questions around her, Ranma looks at Akane's bluish form. Refusing to let her die, Ranma begins her first life saving move.

Ranma (C) : "Ningen Pump!"

Pushing hard on her chest (!), onna-Ranma begins pumping water out of Akane's body. Squirt after squirt of sea water start to shoot out of her mouth, and after a few rapid pumps, Ranma has pumped out approximately a dozen pints of water. (That's a lot! I know, Akane has big lungs.) However, Akane has not begun to breathe yet, and Ranma looks around desperately. Cologne shakes her head.

Cologne : "Sorry, Ranma! I know no healing arts!"

Ranma starts to look forlornly at Akane, turning an unhealthy blue. Then, a thought comes to mind, something Dr. Tofu taught her once.

*"Remember your CPR training?"*

Ranma (C) : "I should! Time to try CPR!"

However, as Ranma pinches Akane's nose and bends over to blow into her mouth, everyone starts looking. Ranma pauses only long enough to scream at them.

Ranma (C) : *"HEY! AKANE'S LIFE IS AT RISK HERE! DON'T START PLAYING AROUND! GO GET HELP! GET AN AMBULANCE, DR. TOFU, ANYONE!"*

Everyone starts rushing off for a phone, even Shampoo. Then, bracing herself for the task ahead, Ranma begins basic CPR.

Ranma (C) : "Pinch nose, open mouth, breathe hard in, pump! Repeat..... once more....."

Repeating this action a few more times, Ranma looks at Akane. Tears start to form in her eyes.

Ranma (C) : "COME ON, AKANE! DON'T DO THIS TO ME! BREATHE!"

Ranma is about to begin CPR once more, but before she can start, she feels a cold hand on her shoulder. She turns to meet a shivering Meseki.

Meseki : "Ranma... let me help! I love Akane too!"

Ranma (C) : "Stop wasting your breath and help then!"

Meseki stands up and takes a deep breath. He starts staring at Akane with his eyes, concentrating. His eyes start to glow, but this time, an unnatural red. A small, red line forms between Akane's heart and Meseki's body. A 'flow' of the reddish substance can be seen from Meseki into Akane. Ranma looks on, awed. However, she does not attempt to try anything, afraid that she might ruin this procedure. Meseki is thinking otherwise. Ranma feels Meseki's eyes on her now, as he speaks in a echoing, hollow voice.

Meseki : "Ranma! I am now transferring my qi to her! Go now! Save her! Now is the time!"

Ranma (C) : "....."

Meseki : **"DO IT!"**

Without further hesitation, Ranma bends over Akane's mouth and restarts CPR. By now, a red glow has encompassed both Akane and Meseki. Sweat forming in massive beads on his head, Meseki strains harder to keep the flow of chi constant.

Meseki : "Hurry.... up.... Ranma! I... can't.... keep.... this... up.... much longer....!"

Ranma simply ignores Meseki, working her hardest. Soon, a group of figures are seen approaching the trio. In the lead is a running Dr. Tofu, who is moving at fastest possible speed. The rest of the group are trailing behind him, trying to keep pace. However, they are still far away.

Too far.

As Ranma and Meseki struggle to bring Akane back to life, hopes between the two are beginning to waver and wane. Finally, Meseki, unable to see Akane like this, decides to call upon his final, and most powerful Skill. With a serene look on his face, Meseki looks around, then at Ranma. He speaks in an icily calm voice.

Meseki : "Farewell, world. Farewell, Ranma. Me Sen Benri Tsukau Kazu Ichisen. (Eyes of a thousand uses, Use No. 1000) The final Farewell."

With this, Meseki blinks his eyes once more, and, slowly, a bright light starts to form from Meseki's heart. Ranma stops CPR, and looks up, forlornly, tears streaming freely as she loses hope. Then she sees Meseki's form glowing both red and silver/gold. By now, Dr. Tofu has managed to reach the three people. Or, at least, two people and one soon to be corpse. He looks at Meseki, awed. Mousse comes up next, and stares at Meseki, the silver/gold glow now concentrating around his heart.

Mousse : "No. It can't be. He's going to use the Me Sen Benri Tsukau Kazu Ichisen! He'll kill himself!"

Ranma and Tofu turn to look at Mousse, now sweating.

Ranma (C) : "Meseki's going to kill himself so Akane can live!?"

Mousse : "Afraid so."

Ranma (C) : "No! I can't let MESEKI die too!"

Tofu : "Ranma, if he doesn't die, who will?"

Ranma (C) : "ME!"

Without thinking, without even knowing what she's doing, Ranma runs over to Meseki, and pushes him away. The red cord, the aura, and the glow shimmer in the air for a moment, and then Ranma steps in to take Meseki's place. Mousse looks worriedly at Ranma. Meseki just looks shocked, the red glow fading from his eyes.

Mousse : "Ranma.... has just condemned himself to death."

Tofu : "....."

The rest of the group have reached the scene. They are all staring at the event going on, and are all gasping in awe. Shampoo grabs Mousse by the collar and starts shaking him.

Shampoo : "Mousse know what going on! Tell!"

Mousse : "I already said it. Ranma's condemned himself to death by pushing Meseki away and taking his place....!"

Hearing this, Shampoo suddenly drops Mousse. She looks at Ranma, the silverish glow now a small sphere, moving towards her heart. She screams. Then she leaps towards Ranma.

Shampoo : "No can let Ranma die!"

\*Shove\*

\*Ping.....!\* The sphere reaches a heart.... but it is Shampoo's.

The now purely silver globe travels along the red line, into Akane's still heart. There, it diffuses itself, and Akane's heart can be seen as a silver outline, beating strong and hard now. The red glow fades. Shampoo drops to the ground, lifeless. Ranma is just lying there, on the floor, gaping at the scene.

Silence.

Everyone looks down onto the ground, in solemn respect for Shampoo Joketsuzoku. The Late Shampoo Joketsuzoku.

Suddenly, Mousse cries, loud and long, a bawling. He runs over to Shampoo's body, and cradles it, crying.

Mousse : "Shampoo.....! No.....!"

Cologne is sniffing too, as she recites something.

Cologne : "Shampoo Joketsuzoku, of the Joketsuzoku tribe of China, has paid the ultimate price in return for saving two lives. That of her love, and that of Akane Tendou. We, the people of the Joketsuzoku tribe, pay homage to the person who truly deserves the name, Joketsuzoku, the hero of our tribe. Shampoo Joketsuzoku, we shall mourn your loss for years to come."

Ranma is looking at the scene, of Mousse crying, cradling Shampoo's quickly cooling body, of a unmoving Akane, and of a solemn group of mourners. Ranma feels tears welling up in her eyes too.

Ranma (C) : "No...."

Mousse is still cradling Shampoo, crying.

\*sniff\*... "Shampoo...."

\*drip\* \*drip\*.....

Mousse's tears, one by one, fall onto Shampoo's face, directly onto her closed eyelids.

They disappear, one by one as they touch them.

Meseki notices this.

The tears continue to drip, tears of true affection and sadness of the loss.

They continue to be absorbed, somehow, by Shampoo's dead skin.

Suddenly, Shampoo coughs.

Everyone looks up, at a person they thought dead. Meseki looks shocked.

Meseki : "Me Sen Benri Tsukau Kazu Ichi.... (Eyes of a thousand eyes Use No. 1)..... Tears of Love, Live a Love!"

Everyone starts looking at Meseki strangely. Then they look at Mousse, then at Shampoo, now coughing violently as she takes in breaths of life, or air again. Meseki looks admiringly at Mousse.

Meseki : "Mousse... you really are your ancestor's prodigy... no one in his family's been able to do that for centuries.... the Tears of Love, Live a Love.... incredible!"

Shampoo regains consciousness, and sees Mousse holding her, tears running down his cheeks, from those... beautiful eyes of his. She looks confused.

Shampoo : "Mousse save Shampoo?"

Cologne's mouth opens wide enough to touch the floor, and from her staff's added leverage too.

Cologne : "Shampoo.....! You're really alive!"

Shampoo repeats her question.

Shampoo : "Mousse save Shampoo?"

Cologne hopes over to Shampoo and Mousse. Shampoo looks at her grandmother.

Cologne : "Yes, granddaughter. Mousse did indeed save you."

She gives Mousse a kiss.

Shampoo : "Wo Ai Ni, Da Ying Xiong!" (Wo = I, Ai = Love, Ni = You, Da = Big, Ying Xiong = Hero!)

Mousse turns a pure red. Then.... Ranma looks at Akane, who hasn't breathed yet, despite the sacrifice.

Ranma (C) : "No... Akane's.... dead. She's not breathing."

Kasumi and Nabiki look *EXTREMELY* distraught at this, as does Soun.

Soun suddenly rushes up to his daughter's body side, hugging her, crying, screaming.

Soun : "NO! SHE CAN'T DIE! NOOOOOOOOOOoooo! AKANE!!!!!"

\*Cough!\* \*Cough!\*

Then, suddenly, in his arms, Akane coughs. Looking at his daughter, Soun stops crying. He shakes her a little. Akane's eyes open with a start, and she starts coughing, harder this time.

Soun : "A...A...Akane..... you're alive!"

Akane looks around, and tries to sit up, Soun letting go. She stands up, with Shampoo, and looks around. Groggily, she rubs her head.

Akane : "Ack.... what happened? I... felt like I was.... dead."

Soun : "Don't say that word, Akane! Please, don't!"

Akane is taken aback at this, as she suddenly realises that she WAS dead. At least, for a while. Miraculously, she hasn't suffered brain damage. (This shows how tough her brain is, even in the most trying of times!) While Tofu goes over to check Akane's vital signs, she looks around, confusedly.

Akane : "Then... who saved me?"

Ranma and Meseki step back, as does Mousse and everyone else but Shampoo. Akane looks disbelievingly at Shampoo. She returns the look.

Tofu steps back, and gives Soun a thumbs-up sign, smiling.

Akane : "You..... saved me?"

Shampoo : "Shampoo only want to save Ranma. But I also save you too."

Akane : "In that case... I owe you my thanks."

Shampoo : "Shampoo no want thanks. She save Ranma, that enough."

Mousse looks upset at Shampoo's statement. She turns around, and spots him, looking down, dejectedly. She smiles.

Shampoo : "Silly Mousse! Shampoo no hate you! Shampoo grateful you save me!"

Mousse looks up and begins to smile.

Mousse : "Does that mean....?"

Shampoo : "Not exactly. But now, Shampoo know Mousse REALLY love me. Maybe she go out with Mousse...."

NEXT time."

This is enough for Mousse, who leaps into the sky, yelling "Yippee!!!".

Standing up now amidst a VERY relieved crowd of Tendous and Saotomes, Akane feels her lips are rather dry. Akane tries to wet her parched lips, but feels something strange. As though she'd been kissed.

Akane : "Yech.... what's this feeling? I feel like I've been kissed!"

At this comment, all the Tendous smile, Soun is practically beaming.

Soun : "Akane..... you want to know who 'kissed' you?"

Ranma immediately puts on a flustered look.

Ranma (C) : "Hey hey hey! Don't look at me! I didn't kiss her! I was doing C..... oops."

She realises what she's just said. Akane looks at him, then at Meseke. Meseke shakes his head, sadly.

Meseke : "Yes... Ranma saved you. I didn't do a thing when that wave swept us down..... I didn't dare to expose my eyes to the salt water for fear of the pain..... what a fool I am!"

Ranma, in a rare show of compassion, pats his on the shoulder.

Ranma (C) : "Hey, come on! If you didn't start that aura, we couldn't have saved Akane!"

Meseke brightens up at this.

Meseke : "True...."

Akane decides to step in.

Akane : "Oi! You two! What are you talking about!? What's this about Ranma... Kissing me!?"

Soun steps in too.

Soun : "Come on, all of you. Let's go home first, then we'll explain."

Cologne steps in, crowding the place.

Cologne : "\*Ahem\*.... attention please! I'd like to hold a feast tonight, at the Nekko Hanten! Simply to celebrate Shampoo's brave sacrifice today! It'll be at 8:00 PM!"

Everybody cheers.

Cologne : "All are invited! But... do go home and wash off first, alright!?"

Shampoo, Cologne and Mousse walk off first, back towards their Sunday store to clear up and leave for the night's feast, in Shampoo's honor.

{Nearing the end.... Akane's verdict.}

As everyone watches the group go, Meseke looks very upset. Then, Tofu bids a slight farewell to Kasumi, to a coconut tree which he assumes to be Ranma, and a bush which he assumes to be Soun.

Tofu : "Farewell, Kasumi. Farewell, Ranma. See you later, Soun."

Everyone watches Tofu as he walks off into the distance, just snapping out of his love spell before walking into a

coconut tree. That leaves the Tendous, the Saotomes and Meseki all alone, again.  
Looking around, Soun speaks first.

Soun : "Come on, you all! It's been an eventful day. Let's go back. We can let Ranma and Meseki explain on the way back home, all right?"

Akane : "Er.... ok. I'm still a little fuzzy on what happened after that.... giant wave took us down."

Looking around her, she points towards the bus stop. Everyone nods, packs up their beach equipment, and then starts walking towards the bus stop. While walking, Akane starts demanding an explanation about what happened after the giant wave took her and Meseki down.

Akane : "Well, what happened? I do remember Meseki bravely shielding me with his body, but after that, I can't recall anything."

Ranma and Meseki look at each other, wondering who should start. Meseki nods.

Meseki : "Akane.... I failed you. I tried to protect you, but after that wave got us.... I couldn't do much."

Ranma takes over, and Akane notices that she has some rather painful looking welts on her body from all those coconuts trees.

Ranma (C) : "Then I can running along after you punched me into the sky, and heard your scream. I jumped in, and dragged you two out."

Meseki : "And after that.... we thought you were dead....."

Ranma (C) : "You were."

Suddenly, Soun turns around, hearing their conversation and wanting to take full advantage of this opportunity to tell Akane who "kissed" her.

Soun : "And, Akane, Ranma applied CPR to try saving you! It looked so.... romantic."

And he starts crying in happiness. Ranma gives him a poisonous glare, realizing what Soun is trying to indicate. Then she looks embarssaedly at Akane, who is giving her a strange look. She puts on a look of mock-disgust.

Akane : "You... did CPR? Yech, I never thought I'd be kissed by a half-boy!"

Ranma (C) : "Akane, watch it with that half-boy stuff."

The group has reached the bus stop, where a bus is still picking up other passengers. They quickly pile onto the bus, and take up their respective seats. Meseki is still too ashamed to sit with Akane, seeing that he failed her by not saving her. Soun is now explaining to Akane the aura Meseki used to try saving her. She looks at Ranma, sitting besides her, for confirmation, who nods. Then she turns to face Meseki, who is sitting behind her, head hanging down.

Akane : "Meseki...."

Meseki looks up.

Meseki : "Yes.... Akane-san?"

Akane : "Meseki.... is it true, you tried to sacrifice yourself?"

Meseki : "Yes.... but that was only because Ranma managed to save us in the first place. And it was Ranma who was willing to sacrifice herself. She is the one deserving of the credit."

Ranma looks incredulously at an incredibly humbled Meseki, who is still avoiding Akane's gaze. For once, she is at a loss for words.

Akane makes her announcement to the two.

Akane : "Well, you two..... I... think I've come to a conclusion now. The dating competition ends now."

Ranma and Meseki look up at Akane, hopefully. Akane smiles at the two of them, looking exotic in the reddish hue of the last vestiges of the setting sun.

Ranma (C) & Meseki : "Akane, you've decided?"  
Akane : "Mmm hmmm!"

Ranma looks at Meseki, who looks back at Ranma. Then they look back at Akane. Both, despite what happened today, hold out some hope. Akane looks at the two comically hopeful faces, and giggles. Kasumi, Nabiki and Soun all look at Akane, smiling as they see her so alive and well again after that near disaster.

Akane : "Yeah! You two wanna know who I like more now?"

Both nod. Akane looks like she's preparing herself. She smiles.

Akane : "Well, here it is.... my verdict is....."

\*brrrrmmmmmmrrrrmmmm\* Drumroll.... everyone in the bus looks around, trying to find the source of the invisible drumroll.

Akane : "I like you both as much!"

\*whump\*

Ranma and Meseki nearly fall off their seats, and narrowly avoid knocking their heads on the handle bars in front of them. Ranma looks up first.

Ranma (C) : "Akane! You can't like us both as much, there's got to be a winner!"  
Akane : "Well.... about this winner....."

She looks apologetically at Meseki, who knows what is to come.

Akane : "Sorry, Meseki. I know you love me.... but I don't feel the same about you anymore. Sorry."  
Meseki : "It's all right, Akane. We can still be good friends, right?"

Akane looks into Meseki's eyes, glimmering even in the faint light. The bus driver flicks on the bus' internal lights.

Akane : (Grinning) "Yeah, we can still be."

Ranma looks gratified at the two, then realizes something.

Ranma (C) : "Holdonholdonholdon, Akane! Does that mean....?"  
Akane : "Yep, Ranma! You won! I guess I like your rougher nature better!"

Soun and the rest share a beaming smile behind Akane's back.  
Ranma just grins at this, happy. In fact, she's even forgotten about the fight the last time. Meseki looks at Ranma. He grins.

Meseki : "Congratulations, Miss Ranma! You won Akane's heart."  
Ranma (C) : "When we get back, I'm going to change back. I can't stand being called 'Miss' again! Yech!"

Everyone grins and laughs after hearing this. Soon enough, the bus pulls up outside the Tendou's dojo, and everyone piles off. As Soun struggles with the lock, Akane has one last announcement.

Akane : "You know, Ranma, I think that kiss of yours was rather nice!"

\*Poof!\*

Akane : "Ranma? Ranma? You all right?"

{Meseki leaves.}

Soon after they reach home, the entire family bathes, and changes. Meseki returns to his hotel, to change. After everyone is dressed and ready, Akane in a nice looking pink dress with a ribbon, while Nabiki is wearing a bare-back, low cut dress with some jewellery. Kasumi simply dresses up in a conservative blouse and skirt. Soun and Genma are still wearing their Gis, while Ranma has changed into his black and gold outfit. Dressed and ready, they receive a call from Cologne telling them to come over immediately. They set out for the Cat Cafe.

They meet Meseki on the way, handsomely dressed in a formal tuxedo, the kind you'd wear to a dinner. In fact, he's so handsome tonight that the three girls nearly lose it, until Ranma decides to remind Akane something.

Ranma : \*Ahem\* "Akane, aren't you forgetting something?"

Akane : "Ranma! Can't I ogle at him?"

Ranma : "Er.... aren't I as good looking?"

Akane : "In your dreams!"

Ranma : "Doh."

They go on to dinner, celebrating Shampoo, and toasts are held. Ranma is back to his jealous ways, as Akane and Meseki share a friendly dinner that night. Generally, everyone has a good time, and Shampoo, as always, still tries to get Ranma to date her. Mousse just waits patiently, knowing sooner or later, he'll collect on that date Shampoo promised.

The next day.....

It is Monday, a school day. Meseki comes to pick up Akane as he has been doing the past few weeks. However, this time, he has some bad news for her, and he breaks it as he walks her to school, Ranma trailing.

Meseki : "Akane, I have something to tell you."

Akane : "Yes, Meseki?"

Meseki : "Sorry, Akane. But I must leave you again. I've overstayed my welcome, and my father wants me home anyway. He tells me that he's got a fiancee waiting for me."

Akane : "Oh."

Ranma just smiles happily at this piece of news.

Ranma : "Well then, Meseki. Looks like we'll be saying our farewells?"

Meseki : "Soon.... would the lady Akane mind seeing me off at the airport today after school?"

Akane : "Sure."

Meseki : "Would.... the *lady* Ranma mind seeing me off too?"

Ranma turns a pure red in anger, Meseki irking Ranma one last time. Akane laughs out loud, as does Meseki.

Ranma : "No, I'd rather see you off as a *MISTER*."

At the school gates, Meseki turns to Akane one last time.

Meseki : "See you after school, at the airport then, Akane?"

Akane : "See you later."

The two share a brief hug, and then Ranma and Akane enter the school compound. Meseki leaves to pack up. And also to call Akane's family as well.

At the airport, Meseki is dressed in the same thing he was wearing the first time he came to Nerima and entered the Cat Cafe. As Akane and Ranma reach the airport to see him off, Akane gets a surprise as she sees her family there as well. With only a few minutes left before the plane starts seating, Akane and Meseki share one last farewell, while the rest of the family stands off to one side watching.

Meseki : "Friends forever, then?"

Akane : "Friends forever, Meseki."

Then the airport's intercom sounds, indicating that Meseki's flight is now seating. He turns to leave, bidding all a final farewell. However, moments after he turns around to leave, he spins around once more to face Akane, who's still watching him.

\*smooch\*

Meseki gives Akane a kiss, a peck to the cheek. Drawing back, he smiles at a blushing Akane, then turns around to really leave.

Meseki : "Farewell, you all."

Akane : "Farewell.... Meseki."

Meseki leaves for his plane, his figure turning into a mere shadow as he walks into the brightly lighted boarding tunnel. Turning around, Akane wipes some emotional tears out of her eyes.

Akane : "Come on, let's go home."

{Epilogue.}

After Meseki leaves, life in the Tendou household slowly returns to normal, and Soun is relieved that he doesn't have to use the tape now to "cure" Akane. Unfortunately, after Meseki left, Akane's been slowly returning to her old ways. Even now, on their way to school one week after Meseki's departure, Ranma and Akane are caught up in another argument.

Ranma : "Akane! Don't make me try your cooking! It's been getting worse again! It almost tastes like last time!"

Akane : "Ranma! Just humour me, ok? I'm working on it! I'm sure I can get my cooking right again!"

Ranma : "That'll be the day Meseki comes back."

Akane : "Ranma! HAH!"

\*Bop!\* \*Slosh!\*

Ranma flies into the canal, and surfaces from the water, now changed. She looks up at Akane, and begins her usual insults.

Ranma (C) : "Ngaaahhh! Uncute fiancee! Tomboy fiancee! Swims like a hammer!" (Sticking a tongue out.)

\*Bonk!\* Ranma is smashed on the head with a mallet from Akane.

Ranma (C) : "Ouch."

**The End.**

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Thanks for reading this Fanfic! Hope you enjoyed it!

-The RanMaFan.