

Tailkinker Presents

A Wasted Wish

15 June, 1995

"A wish?" Ranma scratched his head. "I think I've had a few of them before."

"But this wish is different." The girl - Skuld, she called herself - knelt before Ranma. "The other wishes you had weren't issued by Goddesses, were they?"

"Well, no."

The evening air was cool, a welcome break after the horrid summer day, and a refreshing breeze blew through the family room. The remains of Ranma's dinner was scattered on the table. With the Tendos out at some family function, and his father off with Happousai on some brain-damaged mission, Ranma had been enjoying an unusually peaceful evening off. That is, until he had poured his first cup of tea, and this little girl had jumped out of it.

Ranma was used to odd things happening around hot water. But this was a new one.

"The whole reason why Kami-sama sends Goddesses to deliver wishes to those that earned them is to avoid misinterpretations. With me handling the wish, there's no way it can go wrong!"

"I don't see how a little girl can--"

"Don't call me a little girl!"

"Sorry." He sighed. "Why you givin' me a wish anyway?"

"Because you've done so much good and suffered so much in return!" Skuld clasped her hands before her. "You've fought for the woman you love, and you try to treat everyone around you as best you can, even when they want to kill you! Oh, I know you've been a real jerk sometimes--"

"Hey!"

** Disclaimer **

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"--but overall, your heart is pure and good." She looked down at the floor. "I never expected to get such a hero for my first wish-granting."

"Whoa!" Ranma raised his hand. "First?"

"Well...yes. But my older sister is helping me with this one! Really, you don't have to worry about me making mistakes. Okay?"

Ranma considered this. "Do I get three wishes?"

"Nope. Just one."

"Just one? That's kinda cheap!"

Skuld frowned. "What do you mean, cheap?"

"Well, in every story I've ever heard, the people get three wishes. One to screw up, one to fix the screwup, and one to get what they really wanted."

"You've got me to make sure the wish goes properly, remember?" She jerked a thumb at her chest.

"Oh, that's reassuring."

"What stories were these about three wishes, anyway?"

He waved a hand dismissively. "Aah, just stories my mother used to tell me, when I was a kid. Fairy godmothers, talking fish, that sort of thing."

Skuld sniffed. "Well, I am not a fairy or a mother, nor am I a fish."

"I probably ain't remembering them right, anyway. After all, I heard 'em when I was just a little kid. Ten years ago, or more, I guess."

"And your mother told you these stories?" Skuld shook her head. "Pity she didn't know any better."

"Hey, it's not like that!" Ranma shook his head emphatically. "She was just passing on fairy tales, y'know?"

"Wherever would she have heard such tripe?"

"I dunno. She probably heard them from her mother. I never met my grandmother, so I wouldn't know."

"Never met her?"

"No, she died before I was born. I wish I'd met her; Mom has said some pretty nice things about her. I don't really know my mother that well, either." He snapped his fingers. "That's it! I wish that I could somehow get to know more about my mother and my grandmother!"

He had barely finished speaking when a beam of light from the heavens struck down to illuminate the girl before him. Skuld's eyes glowed, and the mark

on her forehead blazed like a beacon. He was dimly aware of objects around him being blown around the room, before he blacked out.

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"Your wish has been granted."

"Huh?"

He tried to turn his head, to look at the speaker, but it didn't help; there was still nothing but blackness around him. It felt like his head was full of cotton.

No, wait. Just his eyes.

He raised his hand to his face, and found a damp towel draped across his eyes.

"Ah, he's awake."

The voice was Tendo's, but there was something odd about it. He pulled the towel off of his face...and gaped.

It was indeed Soun Tendo, seated next to him, along with a girl that looked a lot like Kasumi. However, Soun's face was unlined, and had no mustache; he looked to be about Ranma's age, and rakishly handsome. Ranma sat upright, and stared at him in shock.

"Careful, there. You don't want to re-injure yourself."

"Mr. Tendo?" Ranma blurted it out before he could think.

Soun glanced over his shoulder, then back at Ranma. "You were looking for my father?"

"You're Soun Tendo, right?"

"Yes, I am." Soun grinned. "Were you looking for me, then?"

"I..." Ranma's voice trailed off.

The girl spoke up. "What happened? We came home to find you unconscious on our floor, with a nasty bruise on your forehead."

"I don't really know." He shook his head, then looked around the room.

He was sitting in the middle of the Tendo family room, but there were many differences. The table looked a lot newer, and didn't have the Ranma-shaped dent in the middle. Many of the pillows scattered around the room were different. There was no game table by the doors, and the pictures on the wall were all different. Oh, yeah, and no TV.

Then he remembered the wish.

"No way..." He jumped to his feet. "What's the date?"

The girl replied, "June fifteenth. Why?"

"What year?"

"Year?"

"Noriko, I think the poor boy's delirious."

"No, I'm not." He glanced around the room again, until he spotted a calendar. "Nineteen seventy three!"

"Yes." Soun's expression was one of amusement. "For at least five months now."

Ranma turned and bowed to the future Tendo patriarch. "I thank you for looking after me, but I am well now and must leave. In thanks, I can offer you a glimpse at the future. You and your girlfriend here will have three lovely daughters. Thanks again." He turned and ran out the family room door, and jumped over the boundary wall.

Nineteen seventy three! It had really happened! He jumped into the air, yelling from pure joy. He could go visit his mother, meet his grandmother, find out what they were like!

Then he stopped, and smacked his forehead.

"I coulda wished away the curse!"

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"Noriko, I cannot help but hope that that odd young man was very wrong about our future."

"So do I, little brother."

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Of course, not even Ranma was so dense as to believe he could simply drop in at his mother's place, asking to visit her, and announce that he was her future son. Plus, he realized as he came to another screeching halt, he had no idea where she lived.

"Aw, man. This is gonna end up bein' another wasted wish."

"No it isn't."

He turned, and found himself face-to-face with the young Goddess Skuld. For her part, she was looking quite smug and self-satisfied. Behind her was another woman, a Goddess as well, to judge by her clothing and the way she floated an inch or two above the ground.

"I told you, didn't I, that I could grant your wish."

"Skuld." The older Goddess' voice was low and musical.

"Sorry, sis." She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "This is my big sister Belldandy."

Ranma waved. "Hi."

Belldandy smiled, and bowed to him.

Skuld cleared her throat. "Okay, I gotta tell you the ground rules for this wish. First off, you've got three days, not counting today. On the morning of the nineteenth of June, you will return to your own time."

"Man! Only three days?" Ranma threw his hands into the air. "That ain't nearly enough time to find her!"

"Yes, it is." Skuld produced an envelope. "In this, you will find her home address, telephone number, the school she attends, and her homeroom number."

"Sweet!" He took the envelope.

"It's almost nine o'clock at night now, and you must be getting tired. I know you can reach Juuban in about fifteen minutes, even without roof-hopping, but I imagine your mother's already in bed. In this time, she is, after all, a teenager." Belldandy smiled at him. "There's a hostel near the main park, and I've taken the liberty of arranging a room for you until the morning of the nineteenth. Plus the morning of the nineteenth in 1995, for when you return."

"Thanks, Bell."

"Okay, next," said Skuld. "I will be available to help you out. Once per day, at dawn, you may ask a question, and I will do my best to answer it." She beamed. "And since I am, among other things, the Goddess of the Future, my best is pretty darned good."

"Skuld?" Belldandy leaned forward. "Judging from the usual time Ranma gets up, perhaps you should make it sundown."

"But I'm always so tired by then!"

Ranma smirked at the idea of a whining Goddess.

"Skuld..."

"Okay, fine." She turned back to Ranma. "Sundown it is. And wipe that smirk off of your face."

"Sorry."

"Finally: You cannot change the past. Anything you do that might change the past will result in your wish being taken back. You've got a certain amount of leeway here - events tend towards a certain path - but if you start really mucking

with things, I'll rip the whole Tapestry up, and start over."

Belldandy spoke up. "This one is very important, Ranma. I've seen her do it before; it's not a pretty sight. And when my sister and I have rewoven the Tapestry, your wish would be gone." She wrung her hands. "In particular, you must ensure that your mother never sees your cursed form. Too many of her threads are tied up in that form; she would never forget it."

Skuld blinked. "Cursed form?"

"Didn't you read his file?"

"But it was so long!"

"Skuld." Belldandy sighed. "Ranma suffers from a shape-changing curse, triggered by water. Cold water changes him into a girl. Hot water reverses the curse, but only until the next time he's hit with cold water."

"Got it." Skuld nodded, then turned back to Ranma. "If your mother has too many threads woven into the curse, then Bell's right. If she sees that form, I'll have no choice but to tear up the Tapestry."

"You really do not want to get my sister angry." Bell smiled. "Trust me, Ranma; Akane has nothing on her."

"Aside from a really big mallet," muttered Ranma.

Skuld pulled Mjolner II off of her back. "You were saying?"

He raised his hands. "I'll behave!"

"Good." She re-sheathed the mallet. "I hope this works out the way you want, Ranma. You gave me a tough one for my first wish, but I'm up to the challenge!"

And they were gone, with a suddenness that left Ranma feeling somewhat foolish for being about to thank empty air.

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16 June, 1973

"How the heck am I gonna do this?"

Ranma stared at the small suburban house. It was perhaps half the size of her mother's house in 1994, and back to back with two others on the corner, but nonetheless looked like a comfortable place to call home.

But now he was stymied. He'd tried asking Skuld for help on this one, last night at sundown, but had received no answer. Probably, the envelope full of information was all the help he'd get for today. The school had turned out to be Azabu High, a local public high school, the telephone number was probably

correct but rather useless at this point.

But at the moment, he was seated on a bench, staring over at the house.

"Excuse me."

He jumped almost straight up.

The giggle from behind him did much to settle his suddenly shattered nerves. He turned, and gaped.

The girl was a few inches shorter than him, though she was obviously not yet finished growing. Her hair was a deep auburn, with red highlights showing in the sunlight, and was pulled back into a pigtail. In fact, save for the hair colour and the slim, coltish figure, she was a dead ringer for Ranma's girl form.

"I was just wondering why you were staring at my house."

"Sorry. I was thinking that it was a nice house. Nicer than where I grew up, anyway." He bowed.

"Oh, don't do that! It's terribly old fashioned!"

He straightened, and blinked.

She offered a hand. "I'm Nodoka. And you are?"

"Sa--Sato Ranma." He hesitantly took her hand.

She shook it energetically. "Pleased to meet you. Now. What was so terrible about where you grew up?"

"Well, I grew up on the road. Wandering from town to town."

"Really? Sounds exciting. And what's so cool about my house?"

Before he could answer her, there was a shout from the house behind her. "Nodoka!"

"Oh, shit."

Ranma blinked. Surely she had not said...

Nodoka was looking over his shoulder; she glanced back at him. "I gotta go. My mom is gonna give me hell for this..." She turned and ran towards the house.

Ranma watched her run, feeling even less sure of himself. This girl was obviously Nodoka Saotome, but...she seemed like a very different person.

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Neither puzzle was any clearer an hour later.

He felt certain that to continue to hang around the house as he had been doing was a bad idea. So, he'd wandered through the neighbourhood, wasting

time.

It was time well wasted, as Juuban was a pleasant district. There were several small parks, looking green and inviting in the morning dew. There were also street vendors and yatai about, rather more than he was used to seeing, some selling familiar wares and some selling things he'd never seen before.

He stopped now in front of a ramen yatai, on strict orders from his stomach. The proprietor, an old woman with a wide grin, greeted him loudly.

"Two bowls, please."

"Not a problem. Five hundred."

Ranma was surprised. "So little?"

"Little!" The old woman shook his head. "I wish. What with all the food shortages going on, it's hard to just get a bowl of rice for a reasonable price!"

Ranma scratched his head. "I have to admit, I'm from out of town--"

"Can't be too far out of town." She poked a finger at Ranma. "By your accent, I'd say you were born here in Tokyo, though I detect a hint of Kansai."

"...Well, I've wandered a fair bit."

"Indeed?" The old woman nodded. "That would explain a lot." She set the two bowls of ramen on the tray. "There you are."

"Thanks." Ranma dropped a five-hundred bill on the tray.

The old woman frowned at it. "What's this?"

"Hm?" Ranma looked at the bill. "It's a five. Why?"

"What are you trying to pull on me?"

"Nothing!"

The old woman dug into his pocket, and produced a bill. "This is a five-hundred yen bill. That's real fancy, and it does look like money, but it ain't no five."

"Hell." Ranma grabbed the bill off the tray and checked the date. Sure enough, it was a 1992 bill.

"Well, sonny. You got a problem, eh?" The old woman cackled. "Tell ya what. I can use a good strong back to help me out. I ain't so young as I used to be."

"Sure, what do you need? Dragon slain? Ancient magical artifact recovered? Daughter rescued? As long as I don't have to marry her, I mean."

"Nope." The old woman bent down, picked up a hatchet, and tossed it to

Ranma. "Wood split."

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"Hi there!"

Ranma glanced up from the woodpile. "Hello, Nodoka."

"You've done enough woodchopping for the day, boy." The old woman clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Drop by tomorrow for some more ramen."

"Thanks, Granny." He turned to Nodoka. "Sorry about earlier today."

"Aw." She waved it off. "Don't be. My mom was born before the war. She's a real stickler for proper behaviour and all that."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. She's always telling me to behave properly, like a proper young lady." She made a face. "Like I'm gonna listen to her. If she's an example of a proper young lady, I'd rather remain improper. She's miserable all the time."

"I'm sorry to hear that." And he was; he'd come to meet her, and learn about her, and he wished...well, he wasn't really sure.

"Well, when you consider that..." She bit her lip. "Nope, can't go into that. Sorry."

"Not a problem."

She tilted her head. "You know, you're a nice guy, Ranma."

He bowed. "Thanks."

"Even if you are old-fashioned." She smiled at him. "Do you like ice cream?"

"Ice cream? Yeah. Uhh...why?"

"You really are a dope!" But her eyes were laughing. "Let's go get some! My treat!"

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Ranma raised a hand to his face and covertly glanced around the parlor as the two ice-cream dishes arrived. Well, it was about as covert as naval bombardment.

Nodoka looked at him oddly. "What the heck's your problem?"

"I don't normally eat this stuff."

"Why not?"

"Well, it's not really manly. And my parents always carped on me to be a

man among men." He sighed, and picked up the spoon. "But I do like ice cream."

"That's stupid."

"Hm?" He looked up again.

"To deny yourself ice cream for any reason is dumb. But that's the lamest thing I've ever heard." She shook her head. "Ice cream not manly? If it bugs you that much, just eat plain vanilla. Or don't eat any. I'll take yours."

"No!" He pulled it away from her, and she giggled.

"That's what I thought." She dug into her banana split.

"Hey, I never said that it wasn't dumb. But I keep thinkin' about it. It's kinda beaten into me."

"And then when you do order ice cream, you go with something like that."

He looked down at the dish in front of him. "What's wrong with it?"

"Three flavours of ice cream, all in one dish. Plus chocolate sauce. Plus sprinkles. Plus nuts, and both strawberries and cherries. Ice cream doesn't get any less manly than that."

He shrugged. "Hey, if you're gonna cheat, go all out, right?" He picked up a spoonful. "Never figured you liked ice cream, though."

She glanced up, surprised. "Why do you say that?"

He blinked, and realized he'd made a mistake. Luckily, dealing with Nabiki day in and day out had sharpened his wits somewhat. "Well, you seem kinda tomboyish - not in a bad way, mind you." Dealing with Akane had sharpened his reflexes as well. "Just not the cute flowers-and-bunnies sorta girl that eats banana splits."

"Well, I suppose I can take that the right way." She pointed at him with her spoon. "But trust me, there's a hell of a lot about me you don't know."

"You got that right." He looked out the window. "But I wouldn't mind learning."

She blinked. "Really?"

He glanced back, and grinned. "Sure. I mean, you seem nice enough."

She stared at him, wide-eyed, then tore into her banana split at a rate that would have impressed a school of piranha.

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"My dad works for Sony. He's the manager for a small radio factory." She shrugged. "It's boring work, I imagine, but he makes a fair amount of change."

She glanced over at him. "What about your family?"

"Ummm..." How to answer that loaded question? "Well, I can't really talk about them. Except that they expect an awful lot from me, and don't really ask my opinion."

She glanced down at her feet. "I know what you mean."

"Hm?"

She glanced up. "Well, you know that my mother is even worse than you for being old-fashioned." She smiled sadly. "She wants me to find a husband, and get married right away. Says I don't need any more school." She looked back down at the road. "Three times she's tried to marry me off to someone. Each time, I've made myself so intolerable to them that they couldn't deal with me at all. I don't like doing that."

Ranma nodded. "I understand. My father has gotten me engaged to three different girls, and two others are chasing me just because."

"You're engaged?"

"Not my choice."

She glanced up at him. "You in love with any of them?"

"No!"

"So, you see? My problem, too." She looked away again. "Oh, I might get married someday, but it'll be to some brave, handsome, wandering martial artist. I told Mom this once, and she tried to hook me up with this guy from the other side of town. But he was way too settled for me." She grinned impishly. "I grabbed my Mom's katana off the wall and threatened to cut his balls off. He's been scared of me ever since."

"A wandering martial artist, eh?" He grinned. "I have a good feeling you'll meet just such a person in the not so distant future."

"Really?" She glanced over at him. "You got a name for him?"

"The name Saotome comes to mind."

"Saotome...but that's my name!"

He kicked himself mentally. *Idiot! Genma's last name was Ikari, before he got married!*

She snapped her fingers. "I know what you mean! He'll take my last name!" She frowned at him. "You're calling me a tomboy again, aren't you?"

He took a step back from her and raised his hands. "Hey, if you're the sort that wants a wandering martial artist--"

She kicked him in the shin. Hard. "Beast." She then stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek.

"Huh?"

"Sorry for kicking you. But you needed it." She took a step back. "Meet me after school tomorrow. We'll talk some more." She turned and ran down the street.

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"Three times you goofed up, Saotome."

"Three?"

Skuld nodded. "Yep. But you managed to patch all three."

"I know I shoulda never mentioned the name of Saotome. But it was her that covered that one up."

Skuld nodded. "But it mighta bugged her more if you'd not said something really boneheaded immediately after."

"And the bit about the ice cream. Managed to pull that one along, too. The other?"

"The old woman. Trying to pay her with money from the future."

"It's all I had! You want I should starve?"

Skuld considered. "Well, it worked out all right in the end. But I'll make you a deal. Gimme as much future money as you can, and I'll replace it with current money."

"Good enough." He tossed her his wallet. "Now, about my question."

"Shoot."

"What the heck is wrong with my mom?"

Skuld chuckled. "You know, I bet I can answer this one all by myself, without help from Belldandy. Tell me, what do you remember about yourself from one year ago?"

Ranma thought back. A year ago today? He shook his head. "I wasn't even born yet!"

Skuld smacked him. "A year ago from 1995, you twit!"

"I can't remember what happened last year at this time." He shook his head. "Was it the Yoiko disguise?"

"I was referring more to the sort of person you were one year ago." Her face held an expression of long suffering. "You were, to put it simply, extremely

arrogant and sexist."

"Well...yeah." He hung his head.

"But in the last year, you've been forced to defend your loved ones from death, or worse. You've been forced to admit your love for Tendo Akane, and worse, you've had to admit it to yourself. And you've had to kill to save her."

His head snapped up. "That ain't something I'm real proud of, Skuld."

"Nonetheless. You've changed, Ranma. You've grown up. And you will continue to mature, until probably you reach about twenty-five. Nodoka's only fifteen. How do you think she's gonna change in the next ten years?"

Ranma nodded. "And if her mother is as old fashioned as Nodoka thinks..." He shook his head.

"Exactly. It's something all mortals have to go through, and even us Goddesses." She smiled. "Remind me, Ranma, when this is all over, to introduce you to my sister's husband. Meeting him forced me to grow up in a hurry."

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17 June, 1973

Physically, Azabu High School bore a strong resemblance to Furinkan. Ranma was well aware of the fact that many schools in Tokyo were built along a common plan, but there were usually differences in placement of buildings and such. But Azabu's layout was mostly the same as Furinkan; only the trees, and the roof of the clock tower, were different.

Ranma was seated on the wall, looking out over the compound. According to the clock, he had five minutes before final classes let out, and he wanted to find Nodoka quickly. Most of today, he'd spent working for Kikuyo, the old woman with the ramen cart. Not that he needed to, since Skuld had given him some 1970's money, but it gave him something to do.

He glanced over to his left, and noticed a girl approaching him. He sighed; the more people he interacted with, the more likely he was to do something stupid and lose his wish. But if he left, he would miss Nodoka, and lose his wish. Once again, he berated himself for not simply curing his curse.

"Excuse me. Shouldn't you be in class?"

He grinned. "Shouldn't you?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Certainly the teachers insist that I should, but I think I can ignore them safely. You, on the other hand..."

"I'm waiting to meet someone."

"Really? Whom?"

"Saotome--"

"Nodoka?" The girl smirked. "You must be Ranma."

"If I must." He shrugged.

"She hasn't been able to talk about anything but you all day."

Ranma blinked. "What?"

"She's been prattling on all day about how nice a guy you are. Kind, friendly, clever, and so on. About how sometimes old-fashioned is nice. She also said you were a hunk." The girl smiled. "I see she was telling the truth."

"Well, thanks." He grinned. "And you are?"

"You say that as if I would give you my name," said the girl. "I've only just met you, and I am already certain that you are merely a peasant."

"Oh, boy." Ranma sighed. "Fine then. Don't even talk to me."

"I am of noble birth. If you are as old-fashioned as Nodoka-san claims, you will recognize my worth."

More and more this seemed like a battle, and in an arena that Ranma was simply not comfortable in. He considered a tactic, weighed the risks, and decided they were acceptable. He hopped off the fence, and bowed to the girl.

"Your excellency, I had no idea you attended such a common school." He straightened up. "Nor that you would grace one such as I with your words."

"Such as you?"

"Well, yes. My family has tried in the past to conceal our background, but there are too many private detectives, hired specifically to find us--"

The girl screamed, turned and ran. Ranma fell to the ground, laughing.

"What's so funny?"

He sat up, and glanced over at Nodoka, who'd just arrived. "Oh, I think I just gave that poor girl a heart attack."

"Poor girl?" She looked at the hole in the school boundary wall. "You mean Maki-sama?"

"Sama?"

"She's from some rich noble family, or some such. What did you tell her?"

"Well..." He snickered. "You see, my father is not precisely honourable, and has run out on several debts in the past. We've had private detectives showing up from time to time, to collect on these debts. I told her this."

"So?" Nodoka scratched her head.

"I think she assumed that I was burakumin."

Nodoka bit her lip. "Are you?"

"No."

"Shit. I was hoping you were."

Ranma frowned. "Why?"

She grinned. "Can you imagine my mother's face if I brought you to meet her?"

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"Nodoka, I've got a question."

They were back at the ice cream parlor - Ranma's treat, this time - and working on demolishing large confections. Ranma had ordered a massive parfait, custom made, with nuts, sprinkles, and many other sweet toppings. It would send a diabetic into shock just to look at it. Nodoka had again ordered a banana split. Well, more accurately, it had arrived in front of her without her saying a word.

"Don't be so formal, Ranma. Call me No-chan."

"I'm not sure if I should." Ranma absently toyed with his spoon. "I had a bit of a chat with Maki before you arrived."

"Why the hell would you want to talk to her?"

"I didn't want to, really. She just showed up and insisted on talking to me."

"And what did she have to say?"

"Well..." He sighed. "She was talking about you."

Nodoka blinked. "About me?"

"Yeah. She said all you could talk about was me."

Nodoka blushed, turning almost the same shade as her hair.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have said anything."

"No. It's okay, Ranma. But I do think I owe you an explanation." She sighed, and picked up her spoon. "First some frozen courage."

She must have needed a lot of courage; she finished off the banana split before beginning.

"My mom sorta made it known that she's tryin' to marry me off. She thinks I should be the proper Japanese housewife, and start pumpin' out children - male children - as fast as I can grow them." She snorted. "Not too bloody likely. If I

have any kids at all, I wanna have just two. A boy and a girl."

Ranma snickered.

"Oh, laugh it up, pal." She glared at him. "I know damn well I'm gonna be old, right? I gotta get all my fun in before I turn twenty, 'cause nobody over that age gets to have fun. But I'm not gonna walk blindly into the future. So I got it planned out, sorta. A husband I can tolerate. College. A good job, in journalism. One boy, and one girl. And they're gonna be raised a lot different than I was, I tell you!"

"No doubt." Ranma grinned. "What's wrong with the way you were raised?"

"Rules! Lots of 'em! And some of the dumbest ones you ever heard. A really early curfew, and I'm not supposed to be alone with any boys. You'd never know she's tryin' to marry me off. I'm not even allowed to date!" She sighed. "But back to my explanation.

"So Mom's tried to get me to marry these old geezers. The youngest must have been thirty. I mean, that's almost decrepit! And the boys at school hear about this, through that loudmouth Maki. So some of them figure I'm easy, and others figure I want to actually marry some of these creeps, and there was even one who told his buddies I was training to be a call girl!" She scowled. "I broke his nose for that one!"

Ranma nodded. "So you're tired of them chasing you?"

"Hell, no!" She shook her head. "I'm tired of them avoiding me!"

"...Come again?"

She dropped her chin into her hands. "You figure there's any guy who'd wanna go out with someone with my reputation? I mean, it'd be different if I'd actually done anything worth talking about, but it's all just a pack of lies. And now no guy will come within ten feet of me."

"You're kidding."

She lowered her eyes. "I told Maki, and a few others, that I was meeting you after school. They wanted to hear more about you, so I told them. I just..." She sighed. "Ranma, I'm tired of being ignored. I'm tired of being shunned. I just wanna find someone who'll take the time to get to know me, before judging me." She looked up at him. "You said you wanted to get to know me better, right? Was that a lie?"

"No."

"Good." She grinned.

"But..." He sighed. "Look, Nodoka, I don't want you getting the wrong idea about me, either. You called me old-fashioned, and maybe I am, a bit--"

"This is where you'll tell me you're not trying to get into my pants, right?"

Once again, he was taken back by her directness. "Well...I'm not."

"Why not?"

"Huh?"

She leaned back, placing her hands behind her head. "Maybe you think I'm too ugly?"

"No!"

"Or do you believe these rumours about me?"

"No, not that either!"

"So you're really just old-fashioned. Too bad." She sighed.

"You can't honestly expect me to believe that you'd want me to--"

"Why not?" She shrugged. "Shows me you appreciate me, right? Besides, it's not like you'd get anywhere."

Ranma considered this, then turned back to his parfait. "I'm gonna give up tryin' to understand you. Is that okay?"

* * * * *

"Well, thanks for the ice cream, Ranma."

"No problem, No-chan."

She grinned up at him. "You don't need to try to unwind just for me, y'know?"

"I know." He shrugged. "But it'll make you feel better, right?"

"Mm-hmm." She paused. "Hey, you been in Juuban long?"

"Not really," he said. "I came into town only two days ago. Why?"

She pointed across the street. "The park over there has a really nice fountain. It was dedicated to some guy in the war who came from Juuban, and was a hero or something."

"They got a statue of him in there?"

"No. Just a nice fountain, with a plaque on it. C'mon!" She turned and ran across the road.

"Hey, wait!" Ranma raised a hand. "I don't really--"

"Come on! Don't be dull!"

Ranma's every nerve was screaming; he just *knew* that if he went into that

park, he'd end up getting splashed by the fountain, and then he'd lose his wish. Because Nodoka would definitely remember the curse, and the Ranko disguise he'd been forced to wear would fail. And that would change the past.

Plus, he *really* did not want to tick off Skuld.

He glanced both ways, hoping against hope that a runaway freight train would by some miracle come down this street, cutting him off...but there was not even motor traffic. He walked across, and Nodoka grabbed his arm.

"You're not afraid I'm gonna jump you in the park, are you?" She grinned up at him.

He smiled a bit. "Should I be?"

"Well, there's only one way to find out, isn't there?" She dragged him into the park.

She was right; the fountain was very nice. It was made of simple white stone and brass piping, but the arcs formed by the jetting water were complex and interesting, and the breeze carried just a small amount of spray, enough to cool them off in the summer heat. The spray also cast several rainbows in the summer sun; Ranma noticed that there were a few mirrors and prisms worked into the statuary, small enough to be unobtrusive but placed to enhance the effect. Best of all, Nodoka was content to stand at the outskirts of the small park, well away from all the cold water.

"See?" She grinned up at him. "Pretty, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"And you were scared of it!"

He bristled. "Was not!"

"Oh? Then why didn't you want to come in here?"

Someone bumped into them from behind.

"Watch out!"

Ranma and Nodoka whirled, in time to see three kids running towards them, apparently chasing the one that had hit them. One of the three chasers put his hand out and shoved Ranma backwards as he ran by.

It was a small amount of force...just enough to push him into the arc of the fountain. Instantly, he was a she.

"Umi-sen-ken fade!"

She invoked her father's art, vanishing from both eye and *ki* sense. Nodoka turned back, looked right at her...then turned again.

"Ranma? Where the heck are you?"

She slipped out of the park, then ran up to the ramen yatai.

"Hi! Can I get some hot water please?"

Kikuyo looked at her oddly. "Just water?"

"Please."

"Hot water, eh? You want tea?"

"No, thanks."

The old woman scratched her head. "I don't get it. Why just hot water?"

Ranma glanced over her shoulder, to see Nodoka emerging from the park. "Please, the water!"

"Not until you tell me what it's for."

Ranma threw up her hands. "Why do you want to know?!"

"I'm nosy."

"You sure are!"

Kikuyo crossed her arms. "You seriously need to learn some manners, girl."

She sighed. "I'm sorry. I just like hot water, okay?"

Kikuyo pulled out a paper cup and poured some water from the tea kettle into it. "Here."

Ranma looked at the cup.

"Take it, child. Before I ask some more nosy questions. Like why you're suddenly a girl, when you were a boy this morning." She grinned. "And I'll even distract your girlfriend there for you while you make an escape."

"Kikuyo...thanks."

"Any time, Ranma."

* * * * *

He met up with her a minute later, once again male. Thankfully, silk dried in the summer sun faster than any other material.

"Sorry about that."

"It's okay." She grinned. "But you can forget about telling me you're not really afraid of water."

"Well...it's not a manly thing, right?"

"Got it." She laughed. "What happened, did your father try to make you swim to China or something?"

"Yeah, he did, actually."

She stared at him. "No way."

"We made it, too."

"No way!"

"Yeah, we did." He chuckled.

"It doesn't really explain why you don't like water, though."

"Well, there is a reason, and I can't really go into it..."

"I've been hearing that a lot," grumbled Nodoka. "From both of us."

They reached the walkway that led up to her house, and he paused. "No-chan...I kinda understand some of what you're going through."

She shrugged. "Yeah, right."

"No, I'm serious! I've had a similar problem." He sighed. "Thanks to my curse, I've been treated much the same."

"Curse? You mean the water thing?"

"No, it's something else. A family problem. Something else I can't really go into. But anyway, because of my family problem, and a few other things, it seems that every guy that comes along wants to challenge me, and every girl that comes along wants to marry me."

Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, Ranma, I'm sorry."

"Eh?"

"When you heard about me talking about you? You must have thought I was doing the same thing."

"Well..." He sighed. "It did cross my mind. Sorry 'bout that."

"I'm real sorry, Ranma." She bowed to him, the first time he could remember her doing so. "I'll make it up to you." She straightened, and grinned. "Though, if I may say so, the idea did cross my mind."

"Wha--?"

"Well, you are one hell of a man, Ranma. Pity you're engaged." She tilted her head. "But then again, you did say you didn't love her...or was it them?"

"I..." He sighed. "I kinda do like one of them."

"What's her name?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

"And you probably can't tell me why, either, right?" She sighed. "You and your damn secrets."

"No-chan...I--"

She waved a hand. "Don't worry, Ranma. I'm awfully happy just to have a friend. Trust me." She glanced over at the house. "Oh, hell."

"What is it?" He started to turn.

"No! Don't move." She looked back at him. "My mom's watching from the window."

"She is?"

"Yeah." An impish look crossed her face. "So this engagement of yours...how much can you get away with?"

"Huh?"

"You say that way too much." She leaned forward, placing her hands on his shoulders, and stretched up towards him, her eyes closing.

"NODOKA!!"

Ranma had been about to yell the same thing, with about the same force. He turned in shock, to see a woman bearing down on him, waving a cane. Her hair was long and flowing, but quite white. She walked with a pronounced limp, and he noticed that she had some bad scar tissue on her face.

"You tramp! You get to your room right now!" She swung the cane, catching Nodoka across the seat of her skirt. The girl yelped, and made a beeline for the door.

The old woman whirled on Ranma. "You! Don't you dare move! I've got a bone to pick with you."

Ranma threw up his hands. "I ain't goin' nowhere, Granny!"

"Darn straight you're not!" She gasped in pain, and leaned on the cane. "First boy I've gotten to say within ten feet of my girl for more than five seconds."

"Excuse me?"

She leaned towards him. "What's your name, boy?"

"Sato Ranma."

"Hm. Good family. Unless you're one of those Okinawa Sato. A good-looking lad, too, and obviously healthy."

"Well, I--"

"Shut up. I'm Saotome Akiko. You may call me Saotome-san. If you call me Granny again, I'll break your neck."

"I..." He hesitated.

"You may speak."

"Ummm...I wasn't tryin' to get fresh with Nodoka, Saotome-san."

"Good."

He scratched his head. "She said you were old-fashioned."

"Do you actually think before you speak? Or do you just open your mouth and let whatever words fall out?"

"A bit of both."

She snickered. "You've got spunk, kid."

"Thank you."

"I hate spunk." She turned and started hobbling back up the lane. "You may court my daughter, Sato-san." She whirled back towards him. "But step over the limit once, and you're toast. Got it?"

* * * * *

"Man, I am just too confused."

The vapour from his tea began to coalesce, and Skuld appeared. "About what?"

"I--wait, will this count as my question? 'Cause I got something more important to ask."

Skuld considered. "I think I can answer both questions. So what's the first one?"

"I thought you were the Goddess of the Future," said Ranma with a smirk. "Can't you see my question?"

"I see a mallet in your future, if you don't show me a little more respect."

"Sorry, Skuld-sama. My first question, O Exalted One, is this: Is my entire family doomed to have a screwed-up life?"

Skuld shook her head. "I'm afraid that's one I have to hedge around, Ranma. Let's just say that Saotome Akiko has had a really rough time, and she's trying to balance modern life against her traditional, pre-war upbringing. Your mother was born in 1956, well after World War II. But she lost two brothers to that war."

"They were soldiers?"

"No." Skuld shook her head. "They were children. Your grandfather was a soldier. But his wife and two sons were in Tokyo during the firebombing. Their house was hit and destroyed, the two boys killed, and Akiko badly injured.

"Nodoka is Akiko's last child. She's very protective of her daughter, but wants to see her line continued before she dies." Skuld sighed. "And she's not going to."

"I know."

"It's a pity, really. You should get to know her, Ranma, as she's really a worthy person. But she's angry at the world, and depressed, and just...not very happy." She bit her lip. "I hate depressing stories. What's your next question?"

"Well...Did No-chan tell the truth? About her problems?"

Skuld grinned. "You'd doubt the word of your own mother?"

"Yes."

"She is kinda dizzy these days, isn't she?" Skuld chuckled. "That girl, Maki Hitomi, is going out of her way to turn everyone against Nodoka. She pretends to be her friend, to try to get more ammunition. Nodoka sees through this, but still hangs around her."

Ranma shook his head. "Why?"

"Because she has no-one else, Ranma." She turned to go. "Why do you think she's so attached to you? Both now, and in 1995?"

* * * * *

18 June, 1973

Even in his own time, Sunday was a day off from school. For Ranma, it meant a whole day that he could spend with Nodoka, and possibly get to know Akiko as well.

As soon as he could figure out what to do next.

At the moment, he was seated on the bench across from her house, trying to think of some approach. Waltzing up and knocking on the front door was likely to cause Akiko to throw a fit, and the old girl didn't really seem that healthy to begin with. On the other hand, climbing up and knocking on Nodoka's window, even if he were certain he had the right one, would be likely to attract all the wrong sorts of attention.

"We keep meeting this way."

Or, he could wait for her to walk up behind him and scare the living crap out

of him. Again.

"How do you keep doing that?"

"I dunno." She shrugged. "Talent?"

Ranma waited for his pulse to return to normal, then said, "You got anything planned for today?"

"Not really. I was gonna hit the mall, provided Mom lets me out. If not..." She sighed. "Another boring day of re-reading all my books."

Ranma grinned. "Why tell her anything? We could go right now."

She shook her head. "Mom's waiting on these groceries. Wait here, and I'll be back soon. I hope."

She reappeared very quickly, and was grinning from ear to ear.

"Good news?" asked Ranma.

"Yes, indeed. Mom wasn't gonna let me out at all, because she saw you out here, but I convinced her otherwise."

"How'd you manage that?"

Nodoka chuckled. "I told her that if I didn't go with you to the mall, you'd likely disappear forever, and I'd end up an old maid." She waved a sheaf of yen. "She even gave me a whack of cash to play with."

* * * * *

They didn't quite make it to the mall. They had to stop at the ice cream parlor, of course.

"The look on her face was hilarious." Nodoka was waving her spoon in the air. "You'd think we'd handed her a live cobra. I don't even know where Reiko found such a thing." She tore back into her banana split.

Ranma chuckled. "I'd have paid to see that. Maki was extremely rude to me. I'd like to see her taken down a peg."

"Yeah." Nodoka's smile faded somewhat. "She doesn't really get along with anyone, as far as I know."

Ranma leaned forward. "Why do you put up with her? I mean, she isn't really nice to you."

Nodoka shrugged. "I don't have a lot of friends. It'd really hurt to lose even her."

"But she's the one spreading all these vicious rumours around, isn't she?"

"Yeah. I know."

Ranma considered. "Well, before I leave, I'll have to do something about her."

Nodoka's expression became worried. "Leave?"

"Yes, I have to leave tomorrow." He glanced up, to see the sadness on her face. "I'm sorry...it didn't occur to me to mention it earlier."

"It's okay." She sighed. "As usual, it's just too good to be true."

"I'm really sorry about this. If it's any consolation, I'm gonna miss you like crazy."

"Are you?" She smiled at him. "Where are you going?"

"Back home. Kansai." A white lie, but better than the truth.

"Are you ever gonna come back?"

"Oh, yes. I guarantee, you'll see me again."

"Good." She tilted her head. "We'll just have to make the best of today, then." She dropped her spoon back into the dish. "Done my banana split. Ready to hit the mall?"

* * * * *

The mall was a primitive example of the type, simply three city blocks walled off from traffic and set aside as a shopping district, but the day was warm, the sun was shining, and the company was excellent. Nodoka had insisted on entering every clothing store on the strip, and trying on several articles of clothing, and was now lugging along three bags containing her purchases. She had stubbornly refused to allow Ranma to carry any of them.

The photo booth was another thing they couldn't pass by. Nodoka insisted on getting their photo taken together, and Ranma couldn't really deny her. She fed the machine's coins, kicked it once - "You haveta with this one, trust me!" - and pushed Ranma inside. Once he was seated, she jumped onto his lap and threw her arms around him.

"No-chan! What--"

click

"--are you doin'?"

"Don't be so stodgy!" She kissed his cheek.

click

He grabbed her hand and tried to pull it away, inadvertently brushing her breast with the other hand. She laughed. "Finally getting fresh?"

click

He grinned, and slid his hand around her shoulders. The other hand he placed on her leg, and pulled her into a proper embrace.

click

"There!" He released her, and she hopped out, her face flaming. He stepped out of the booth, and grinned.

"What's the matter? Shoe not fit that foot?"

She kicked his shin.

"Ow!"

"Fits just fine." She grabbed the photos, and tore them apart at the perforations. "Got a pen?"

He handed her one, and she scrawled their names and the date on the back of each photo. She paused, jotted two kanji on the back of the third one, the one with his hand on hers, and handed it to him. "This one's yours."

He glanced at the small, black-and-white snapshot. "Only one?"

"After the way you acted, you should be glad I'm giving you any!" But her eyes were laughing.

* * * * *

Ranma had spotted a manga store, and was sifting through stacks of manga. He held one up triumphantly. "Science Ninja Team Gatchaman, number one! I've been looking for this one for years!"

Nodoka was looking at him oddly. "Ranma...Gatchaman only came out last year."

"...Well, it seems like years. And I'm real glad I got it! Once I'm home, I'm really gonna have to scrounge to find more issues."

Nodoka grinned. "Okay, then. As long as you're pleased."

He handed her the manga. "I'm gonna check out the back rows. Hang onto this, please?"

She glanced down at the comic. "Ranma...Can we leave soon?"

He paused. "I'll just be a moment, okay?"

"It's--" She bit her lip, and glanced around. "I'm not real big on manga, is all."

He frowned slightly. "Did I complain when you insisted on stopping at every clothing shop between here and Nerima?"

"Well..."

"I'll be back in just a second, okay?" He tapped the comic book. "Guard this with your life." He turned and walked back to the rear of the shop.

"Nodoka-san."

She braced herself, and turned around.

"Why, hello, Maki! What brings you here?"

"You will refer to me as Sempai." The girl tossed her head with disdain. "As to what brings me here...well, let's just say I'm concerned for your well-being."

"That would be a first."

Ranma was digging through a crate of back issues, all very rare manga, when a hand fell on his shoulder. He straightened, and turned to see a boy, close to his own age.

"You're Ranma, right?"

"Yep." He sighed; loonies seemed to gravitate towards him.

"I take it you're new around here?"

"Yeah. So?"

"I'd advise you to avoid that girl, Nodoka." The boy smirked. "She's probably got every sort of social disease that exists."

Ranma stared at him, mouth hanging open, then grabbed the boy's shirt, pushing him up against the wall. "You better take that back!"

The boy's smirk widened. "What are you going to do? Beat me up, here in a public place?"

Ranma was sorely tempted; he would be gone tomorrow, regardless of what happened. But he knew that he wouldn't always be able to solve problems with his fists, and he didn't want to lose his wish because of some clod. He considered, then set the boy down.

"No, I'm not going to beat you up. What's your name?"

"Akira."

"Well, Akira, you and I are gonna have a chat with No-chan." He spun the boy around, and shoved him towards Nodoka.

* * * * *

"Do you need ice for that hand?"

Nodoka looked up at Ranma. "No, it's okay." She rubbed her hand. "I

shouldn't have hit him so hard, I guess."

They were near the school; he leaned up against the stone boundary wall. "Ya gotta make sure your hand is lined up right, and braced for the impact. I could show you--"

"Ranma."

He paused, and looked down at her. "Eh?"

"You didn't have to stand up for me." She smiled at him. "I'm rather used to it, after all."

"I did have to, No-chan. Anyone that insults you, insults me too. And it just ain't right, to be spreadin' those kinds of rumours about a girl." He looked back down the road. "Is that guy the reason you wanted to leave?"

"No...it was Maki." She sighed. "I saw her in the shop, just before you went to the back. All I wanted was to get away from her."

"You don't need to take her crap either, y'know?"

"I know. But..." She shrugged. "Like I said earlier."

"You know she's following us?"

"Huh?"

"No, don't look. She's pretty good at tailing people, but I'm used to that sort."

"That damn little..." Nodoka fumed. "I am really getting sick of her."

"Pity I can't talk to Nabiki...she'd have a few choice ideas for dealing with this chick."

It was then that he heard it: The voice, the one he'd dreaded more than any other.

"What a haul!"

"Oh, man..." He turned to Nodoka. "We've gotta get off the street. Now!"

"Wha--?"

The front of Nodoka's skirt flipped up. She squawked, and pushed it back down. Ranma spun into an axe kick, slamming his heel into the top of her assailant's head.

"You old leech! What the heck are you doin' here?"

Happousai peeled himself off the pavement. "Well, that was a remarkably good kick, youngster." His eyes narrowed. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were a student of Anything Goes."

"I am."

"That's impossible. I never taught you it." The old man pulled out his pipe. "Well, let's see how good you really are, eh?"

"I got a better idea." Ranma jerked a thumb towards a nearby bush. "There's a really pretty girl, wearing a really short skirt, hiding in that bush."

"Hotcha!" The pint-sized pervert turned and leaped into the bushes. There was a high-pitched shriek, and Maki took off at top speed. Ranma turned and picked up Nodoka. "Yama-sen-ken fade!" He leaped backwards, over the stone wall, and landed in the schoolyard.

Nodoka was suffering from one of her extremely intense blushes. "Ranma...could you please put me down?"

"Hm?" He suddenly realized that the hand he had supporting her was touching skin...and most definitely should not be. Even if it had accidentally gone under her skirt...

"SorrySorrySorry!" He dropped her and leaped backwards. Nodoka fell with an undignified bump, her legs in the air. Ranma whirled around, only to come face-to-face with the last two people in the world he wanted to see.

Tendo Soun and Ikari Genma.

He turned again, grabbing Nodoka - this time being more careful where he put his hands - and leaped back into the shadows. He invoked the Umi-sen-ken this time, quickly adjusting his ki to cloak both his and Nodoka's.

Tendo blinked. "I've seen that boy before, but I had no idea that he was a martial artist."

"Vanished into thin air." Genma nodded sagely. "A very powerful martial artist, indeed, if he can defeat the Master and then fade from view like that." He pulled a tissue from his pocket and held it to his nose. "And the girl was very lovely, too."

"Hm." Soun nodded. "Very."

* * * * *

She looked at him with an odd grin. "I'm not sure whether or not to believe you."

"I really didn't mean to--"

"Cop a feel? As if." She tilted her head. "Though you passed up a chance for a free show. Who the heck was that old freak, anyway?"

"A rather infamous martial arts master called Happousai." Ranma sighed. "He's the biggest pervert on the planet. He's devised a martial art completely

around stealing women's underwear."

"So I noticed. Or rather, didn't notice. I didn't even realize he'd stolen mine until you put your hand on my--"

"Never mind that!"

"So old fashioned." She frowned. "Didn't you say to him that you practise the same martial art as him?"

"Well...he trained my father. My father removed most of the really perverted stuff from the form, and trained me." He scratched the back of his head. "You wonder why I'm so 'old-fashioned', as you put it? I don't wanna end up like him."

"Aren't you taking it a little too far?" She looked up at him. "It's perfectly normal for you to have a healthy interest in a girl's body. Even if you are engaged. Even if it is mine."

He waved a hand dismissively. "Aah, there's nothin' wrong with your body. Trust me, I've seen a lot of girls, and you're a lot cuter than most."

"Thanks." She blushed again.

"Y'see, it's not that I don't want to look at girls. But there's a fine line between admiring an' bein' a pervert. And I ain't always sure where that line is."

"Well, I would say that looking doesn't matter. If the girl is dumb enough to get caught with her pants down, she deserves to get gawked at."

"If all women believed that, I'd have taken a lot less lumps," grumbled Ranma.

She tilted her head. "So you've been caught peeping before, eh?"

He shook his head. "Not exactly. I've had girls try to climb in the bath with me, I've had them walk in on me - and then hit me and call me a pervert!"

She sighed. "I'm sorry, Ranma. I won't tease you any more."

"Eh?" He grinned. "And here I was just getting used to it."

She smiled sadly at him. "But it's not really fair to you. You're fighting to avoid being a pervert, and I'm not really helping, am I?"

* * * * *

"Well, overall, it's been fun, Ranma." She smiled at him. "I'm really gonna miss you."

"Me, too, No-chan," said Ranma.

"You promised me I'd see you again."

"I did, and you will. Don't worry about that."

She stepped forward, wrapping her arms around him, nearly crushing his ribs. She held him for long seconds, then stepped back.

"I hope you and your fiancée are happy together, Ranma" She sniffed. "And I hope I meet someone half as nice as you." She turned and ran into the house.

Ranma watched her go, then turned to start down the road.

"Hold on, Sato."

He stopped, and turned to face his grandmother. "Saotome-san." He bowed.

She returned the bow with a slight nod. "Did I hear my daughter say you have a fiancée?"

"Yes."

She stamped forward angrily. "Why did you not tell me this before?"

"You wouldn't let me."

"Ah. There is that." She sighed. "Pity I got my hopes up like that. Nodoka is quite thoroughly in love with you."

"I know," said Ranma. "And I love her, too. More than even she would guess." He looked away. "But there is no way I could marry her."

"Family honour comes before personal preference, eh?"

"Not just that."

"I see. You love your fiancée more." She nodded. "It's a pity it won't work. You're a good man, Sato-san." She stepped forward, and dropped a hand on his shoulder. "You will be welcome back here, Sato-san, when you return. Even if you bring your wife." She smiled. "Even if you did bring my daughter back with less clothing than she had on when she left."

Ranma raised his hands. "It's not my fault!"

* * * * *

From her bedroom window, Nodoka watched Ranma walk away from her house, and out of her life.

She knew, despite what he had said about seeing her again, that there was simply no way that they would ever be together. Besides his being engaged, and the age difference - and that would hardly matter a few years down the road - there was the simple fact that he was out of her league. Someone that nice, that handsome, and that well built, could have his choice of women. And he did, apparently. Why would he pick some nobody, some plain girl with red hair, no figure, and a trashy reputation?

"I wish I could have him..." She sniffed, and looked up into the heavens. "Even if it wasn't as my boyfriend. I wish he could be part of my life, in some way. Any way."

Another wasted wish, out of so many. She dropped her head into her hands, and wept.

Once he'd been gone a while, she was certain that he'd forget about her, and she'd never hear from him again. She was best off simply putting him out of mind, and getting on with her life.

But she knew that it would be nearly impossible for her to forget him.

* * * * *

June 19, 1995

Ranma sat up, stretched, and yawned. He glanced over at the window, to see the sun shining in at a steep angle.

"I musta overslept."

"That you did."

He jumped in shock, and turned to find Skuld sitting at the end of his bed.

"If you want, I can build you an alarm clock. I can guarantee you'll never sleep in again."

"No, that's all right." He stood up, realizing that he'd fallen asleep fully clothed. "Thank you, Skuld-sama, for granting my wish." He bowed deeply to her.

"You're welcome." She grinned. "It was a lot of fun. A real challenge."

"You only answered two questions."

Ranma turned, to see Belldandy stepping out of the mirror. "Hi, Bell!"

"Hello, Ranma. Did you enjoy your trip?"

"Yes, I did! But you were saying...?"

"Technically, Skuld owes you one answer. You fell asleep almost as soon as you came in last night."

"Oh." He turned to the smaller Goddess. "Okay, here's my last question. Did it all really happen? Or was it just a crazy dream?"

Skuld smiled. "It did really happen. And despite you rearranging the Tapestry in many unusual ways, you didn't actually change history. There were a couple of times that I was sure I'd have to rip it up...but in the end, all went well." She closed one eye and raised a finger. "Not bad for a first time out, eh?"

"Not bad at all." Ranma glanced around the room. "Hey...one more question. Where's my manga?"

Belldandy smiled. "Oh, I'm sorry, Ranma, but you can't bring things back from the past."

"Ack! I spent a lot of money on those!"

"Don't worry, Ranma! I had my sister Urd grab them and move them to our Temple." Skuld opened her backpack and pulled out a bundle. "They've been carefully stored all these years. You'll find them somewhat faded, but in good shape nonetheless."

Ranma grabbed the bundle, pulled out the Gatchaman magazine, and started leafing through it. "Good. It's still here!"

"Of course it is!" Skuld looked nettled. "My sister may be evil, but she's not incompetent."

"Not the manga!" From between the pages of the manga, Ranma pulled out a small, faded photograph. "This!"

* * * * *

20 June, 1995.

Ranma looked around the ice cream parlor. The store had obviously changed hands at least once since 1973; the decor was completely different, and the booths had been replaced. But they were in the same place. Ranma led the way to the one he'd shared with his mother three days ago, twenty-two years ago.

Nodoka looked around the store. "This place seems familiar somehow...I may have come here when I was growing up." She glanced over at her son. "Why are we here, Ranma? You were so secretive about it."

Ranma turned to the man at the counter. "One parfait, please. Lots of sauce, sprinkles and nuts."

Nodoka shook her head. "Not exactly a manly selection, my son."

"Hey, if you're gonna cheat, go all out, right?"

Her eyes widened. "What--"

"And a banana split, please."

Her knees buckled, and she sat down quickly. "No...It's not possible."

He sat down opposite her, and slid the photo across to her. She picked it up, her hand trembling.

The picture had been grainy to begin with, and it had faded over the years, but she could clearly see herself, at fifteen years old, sitting with her son, his

hand on hers. She flipped it over, and read the back.

"Ranma and Nodoka. June eighteenth, nineteen seventy three. Friends forever." She choked back a sob. "It was you...but..." She looked up at him.

"I told you you'd see me again, No-chan."

She kicked his shin, under the table.

"Ow!"

"Beast! That's twice you've run off and left me pining for you! And you lied to me about your name! Is that any way to treat your mother?"

But her eyes were laughing.

THE END