

Sailor Ranko: A Love Story

A Ranma 1/2 / Sailor Moon Novella, 2nd in the Sailor Ranko series

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Chapter 1, Facing The Music

I don't own these characters. Please don't sue me, kill me or give me pneumonia.

Ranma walked in the direction opposite of the Cat Cafe with a worried look on his face. Keeping his thoughts to himself, he repeated a mantra. *I can't go back. I can't go back.*

Behind him, Akane stood silently and watched him leave. She was expecting him to turn around and tell her that he was only joking and he didn't mean what he had just told her. But Ranma kept walking, ignoring his instinct to duck out, double back and keep an eye on the tomboy in case she got into trouble with her imminent fight with Shampoo. One thing that his experience with her on Jadeite's world had taught him was that she needed to spread her wings, to be trusted to fight on her own and to win her own wars. And a war was coming, not from creatures from another dimension, but from his own past. He stared downward, sulking in how had things had gotten so out of hand. Kodachi, Lin-Lin, Lung-Lung, Ukyou, Shampoo and who knows whom else were all trying to win his affections. Of all of them, Shampoo had made it clear that she was not going to take his engagement to Akane lying down and she was going to force him to accept his 'marriage' to her whether he liked it or not. As far as Shampoo was concerned, Akane's life was forfeit if that was what it took to get Ranma to return to China with her.

He stopped dead in his tracks as he heard Akane's challenge to Shampoo. She yelled it loud enough that half of Nerima could have heard. "I don't have to take that any more. Come on out here and face me. I challenge you for Ranma's hand. The winner will be his wife."

Wife. Ranma felt pride in that word and the idea that Akane wanted to spend her life with him. It took superhuman effort for Ranma not to turn back, not to stand by Akane's side and ensure that she would win the fight. He slowly walked forward, forcing himself to take step after step as he paid close attention to the sound of combat behind him. *No, I can't help her. It wouldn't be fair,* he told himself, knowing that unless Akane won unaided, the combat's results would be declared null and void by Cologne, and it would only delay another assassination attempt on Akane's life. With a determined stride, he picked up the pace and walked away from the battle and toward another war. This one was a challenge that he had to fight on his own. Akane may have been the right one to deal with the Shampoo problem, but the issue that lay ahead was his and his alone to solve.

He reached the intersection and turned the corner and kept going, ignoring the passersby who walked to and fro visiting shops, buying snacks from street vendors. A few people were waiting for a bus and they barely gave him a glance as he went by. The air was filled with the sounds of happy people going about their daily lives, oblivious to what the young man sporting a pig-tailed hairstyle was doing. Ranma sighed and stopped, hands in his pockets and his shoulders slumped in depression. He moved toward a storefront and watched a salary man run by, waving his arm high, trying to catch the attention of a taxi. A mother went by with her four-year-old son, and then a small group of girls wearing sailor-style school uniforms giggled as they stole a peek at Ranma's biceps and they quickly scurried off. *It's not even a school day today,* he thought, watching them huddle in front of a candy cart buying treats for themselves. He pulled his hand out of his pocket and clasped in his fist was a gold encrusted red pen with an ornate star at the end with a symbol of the sun in the center. He quickly made it vanish, returning his gaze to the schoolgirls, who were disappearing into the entrance of a cram school.

Just like Ami, he pondered as the school uniforms the girls wore reminded him of his duties as the Senshi of the Sun. He faced down the street and several blocks ahead, barely visible, was where he had to be. He waited a moment, as he used the time to procrastinate. The smell of takoyaki made his stomach growl and he absent-mindedly rummaged around his pockets for some loose change, only to come up empty.

A meal was waiting for him ahead, yet the price to pay wasn't in yen, but something higher. He swallowed and took another step toward his damnation. He kept his gaze firmly on the sidewalk as his shame kept him from holding his head high. Here was the Senshi of the Sun, fearless and courageous. *Yeah, right*, wondered Ranma as a fit of depression worthy of Ryoga flooded his soul. *Some Senshi I turned out to be, gah!* Ranma gawked at the comment he made about himself. He shook his head vigorously to get the idea out of his mind that being a Sailor Senshi was a good thing. *I'm a guy for crying out loud!* The more he thought about it, the more he thought that maybe wearing a tuxedo wasn't such a bad idea after all? He had worn tuxedos before, like when Shampoo was under the spell of the reversal jewel, and he looked good. Ranma's confidence came back to him as he smirked in pride, *Yeah, I could do that*. But could he? He felt natural in the guise of Sailor Sun, too natural. Memories came back, and he brushed them aside, wishing that they would never return. *The tux, yeah, how... Who am I kidding?*

Ranma sulked again. He couldn't do that. 'Tuxedo Ranma' didn't feel right, he was Sailor Sun and that's all. His pride wouldn't allow him to take a demotion among the Senshi, and sealing the deal was the loss of power. Besides, he probably couldn't take the form of a tuxedo-wearing guardian anyways, the very idea seemed out of place, unnatural.

Deep inside, he knew where his power was coming from, and yet he still didn't want to admit it. It had been about three months since he got the transformation pen and almost for two months straight he was Sailor Sun. His feminine side had won this battle, but was it going to win the war? Was it going to take him completely? How long before Ranma was gone and all that remained was Ranko and Sailor Sun?

He shuddered and looked up and read the sign of the shop he was about to walk in front of. He stopped dead in his tracks, *how did I?* He checked himself to see what gender he was and he was still a guy. Something in the back of his mind said that it was possible for him to teleport, but Mercury's portal was locked away at Rei's place, or was it? Were they playing a joke on him? He couldn't have walked three blocks that quickly, could he? He looked behind him and the street was familiar. Looking in the direction he was going he read the sign again and recognized the storefront and the folding wooden sign that had the day's specials written on it.

"Ucchan," he whispered, half happily, half fearfully.

A beautiful waitress in a crisp clean kimono emerged from the shop and bowed in respect. "Good morning, Ranma-sama!" Konatsu looked up and made a happy smile. The genius kunoichi was someone Ranma had helped rescue from his cruel stepmother just before he and Akane were sent off to Juuban. Even though Konatsu was male, he was raised as a woman and it was almost impossible to tell that the demure, ladylike and pretty waitress was actually a guy.

Ranma weakly returned the bow, "hi, Konatsu-chan. Can I come in?" Ranma grimaced at the politeness he was showing. He had to act natural until he spoke to Ukyou, then he had to get ready to run like hell.

Konatsu's lipstick gleamed in the early morning sunlight and his makeup was perfection. He smiled and waved Ranma in, "of course you can come inside." He hurriedly rushed under the shop curtain and a moment later he said excitedly to his mistress, "Ranma-sama's here!"

"It's now or never," muttered Ranma, with the word 'never' sounding like the better choice. He lifted a hand to move the shop curtain out of the way and he went inside. There, the restaurant was almost empty. Sitting in a small table were two boys from Furinkan High he recognized from chance meetings in the hallways, but he had no idea what their names were. They looked in his direction for a moment, and then went back to talking to each other. At the grill was a salary man, who was giving some money to Ukyou. The gentleman bowed and walked toward Ranma, who took a step to the side to let the patron exit.

Ukyou closed up the register and waved at her best friend, "hey, Ranma honey! Sit down. Long time, no see." With a huge smile on her face, she mixed up some batter and poured it on the grill. In the time it took Ranma to sit in his usual seat in the restaurant, Ukyou was pouring her special sauce on a fully cooked okonomiyaki and she drew out a heart with the dark gooey liquid. Sliding a spatula under the Japanese pancake, she effortlessly flipped it into the air and it landed perfectly in the center of a plate. She served it with a smile. "There you go."

Without hesitation, Ranma grabbed the meal and chowed down. In less than fifteen seconds, it was devoured and his stomach demanded more. Holding up his empty plate, he asked. "Another please?"

The chef quickly whipped up a second one and in a show of great skill, she spun around facing the wall away from him and flipped the pancake behind her back. It flew through the air and landed right in Ranma's mouth. "There ya go, Ranma honey... Now..." She spun back and slammed her spatula down hard on the cooking surface causing a few condiment containers to bounce a centimeter high. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Mmmhmmh?" Ranma said while wolfing down his meal. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as Ukyou leaned forward, expecting an answer.

Her patience was rapidly running thin. "Well? I come to find out you snuck off to Hokkaido and I spend over a month running all over Japan looking for you. The least you could have done was call me so I could save you from Akane's cooking. What gives?" Her eyebrows twitched and her anger crept through.

Ranma chewed a bit slower, hoping the time dilation would bleed through into reality and delay the inevitable. Instead, it had the opposite effect as Ukyou sat on a tall stool and rested her head on her hands.

Ukyou looked Ranma over. "At least she didn't kill you and you don't look like you starved yourself. How in the world did you survive camping out with her for months? If you needed someone to help you train, you know I'd be there." Ukyou smiled. "Remember when Happosai made you weak?"

He grimaced at the memory.

She smugly added. "Yeah, thought so." She pulled out a grill scraper and began cleaning the cooking surface of burnt food particles. "You, Ryoga, Cologne and I went off on that training journey with you so you could learn the Hiryu Shoten Ha. I took care of you then." Raising

her voice with every scrape, she spat out angrily, "why didn't you take me with you this time?"

Ranma swallowed what he thought could be the last of Ucchan's okonomiyaki he'll ever have in his extremely short life. "I... I..."

"I... What?" Ukyou's piercing glare grew, fueled by weeks of anger and frustration. "You up and disappear and I had to spend good money to find out where you went. All I got for my trouble was sore feet and a month's worth of lost business."

"I'm sorry 'bout that, Ucchan."

Angrily she shouted, "Sorry? Sorry? Is that all you've got to say? What's this I hear about you planning on moving to the Minato ward? Was that where you've been all this time? Here, I thought you'd be out at some martial arts retreat and instead you're smack in the middle of the biggest thing to hit Tokyo!"

"But.... But..."

"Don't but me, Mister." If smoke could come from Ukyou's ears, the room would resemble a fog bank. "You take off. Your dad lies about it. I end up on a trip with Shampoo and her whacked out buddy Mousse, and tried to stay alive with all the times she tried to off me and then I come to find that you've been in downtown Tokyo the whole time. Then I get my butt to the Minato ward only to find that you and... And..." Ukyou held her giant spatula in her arms and bent the handle in her rage. "Akane! You and her took off again to parts unknown and I get caught up with those monster things who tried to drag me off to who knows where."

Ranma's jaw dropped to the floor at the revelation. "Ucchan? They took you to Jadeite's world?"

"What are you talking about? They tried to drag me off, but Ko-chan here smacked those things around and I chased them down the street until the Sailor girls showed up."

Konatsu bowed toward Ukyou. "You are too kind."

"I'm sorry! I didn't know! I was trying to save Akane!"

"What else is new?" Ukyou threw her giant spatula to the floor. "Prince Kirin, Prince Toma, the Amazons and heck, I heard Gosunkugi kidnapped her at least once. She's always getting kidnapped." Anger spent, she sank onto her stool. "Why don't you try someone who isn't always getting into trouble?" She muttered something else, but Ranma couldn't hear it.

"She... Uh..." Ranma tapped his fingers together nervously. He fought to urge to run back to the Cat Cafe to see if something had gone wrong and Akane needed his help, and then he remembered the look on her face, the raw strength that girl had and how skilled she had become in the art. Those memories quashed that idea. "She's not the kind who gets kidnapped anymore."

"What's that supposed to mean, Sugar? With the number of times she's hauled away, she'd make the cover of Hostages Monthly."

"Well, she can defend herself now. I mean, really defend herself." He glanced out the door of the restaurant and added with pride and respect. "Shampoo's finding out how much right

now."

The sound of his voice, the way he talked about her, and he hadn't said a single insult the whole time he's been here... Ukyou whispered, "no."

"Wha'?" Ranma looked around the grill area for anything out of the ordinary.

"You didn't? You couldn't? You..."

Ranma scratched his head in puzzlement. "Did what?"

Ukyou's face began to turn red. Her eyebrows arched further and her fury boiled over. "You chose her, didn't you? **DIDN'T YOU?**"

He held up his hands and waved them around like he was swatting thousands of angry bees. Judging by Ukyou's building battle aura, bees were a safer option. "I... I... I can explain!"

"Get out." It was not a request.

He backed away from the angry chef and held his hands up defensively, "But!" He ducked as a tiny spatula flew over his head and imbedded itself into a brick and plaster wall behind him. "Ucchan!"

"Don't you dare Ucchan me!" She produced four small spatulas, two in each hand, and with swift motions, she flung them at her best friend. "How could you?"

Ranma ducked and rolled on the ground, avoiding all of the spatulas, plates, knives and flour bombs being hurled at him. "Cut it out!"

"I intend to." A dozen butcher knives flew in his direction, piercing his clothes and they pinned him to the concrete floor.

"I can explain!"

Ukyou towered over her friend, and held out her empty hand. Konatsu disappeared and reappeared holding a giant spatula and he placed it in Ukyou's grasp. She held the weapon over her head and paused as she looked into Ranma's eyes. His eyes were pleading for forgiveness, even when Ranma was trying to wrestle himself free from the floor. She relaxed her grip on her weapon, but remained ready to strike a killing blow. "Explain, and it'd better be good."

"It was Pop's idea. He conned me into going to Azabu-Juuban for private math lessons 'cause my grades sucked. Then he had Akane go with me. We went to Juuban High and got caught up with the demon attacks and..." Rapid editing went through Ranma's mind, since telling her the whole truth wasn't something he could do without blowing his cover. "And we went to the desert and hid in a cave to get away from what was going on." Ranma braced himself for impact. He closed his eyes and held his hands up to cover his face as best as he could despite the fact he couldn't move very much.

"Math lessons? You went to Juuban High for Math lessons?" Ukyou started to chuckle. "That explains Miss Hinako. You mean you went to downtown Tokyo because your grades sucked?" She burst out laughing. "No wonder you didn't want anyone to follow you! The great Ranma Saotome, in math cram school! Ha ha ha!" Ukyou lost her composure, and fell back laughing.

Ranma laughed too, and wiggled to try to escape from the floor. One of the knives near his left leg jarred loose and he kicked it aside. *One down, eleven to go.*

Ukyou stopped laughing. "When the demon attacks started, you could have come here." She grew cold. "Why didn't you come back to the Nerima ward?"

Uh, oh... Ranma's fingers were able to jiggle another knife, but it still held fast. *Think fast Saotome, "Akane wanted to stay and fight," nice work moron, now I'm really dead.*

"That's why you didn't come back? Because Akane wanted to stay? You should have let her. Let me guess, she got kidnapped, didn't she?"

"I had to get her back!"

"Get her back? And you didn't ask for help?" She sarcastically added. "That's right, Mr. Macho doesn't ask for help. Nothing ever changes with you and... Wait a sec; you just said you went with her to a desert? The nearest desert is hundreds of kilometers away."

"Desert? Uh, I meant dessert! Yeah, we went to a dessert shop where Usagi, Minako and Ami hang out and..."

"Usagi? Minako?" Ukyou's temper flared again. "Who in the world are they? More fiancées?"

"Wait, it's not what it sounds like!"

"Then what does it sound like? You say you got math lessons? That'll be the day! There isn't a cram school that'd put up with you!" She lifted her weapon high. "Ice Cream? Desert? Monsters? Kidnapping? I'm through with your wishy-washy garbage you've been giving me, Saotome. If you're going to lie, try to keep your story straight." She held onto the handle tightly and waited for her cue to slice Ranma into bite-sized pieces. Seeing him on the floor, the man she loved, she lost her nerve and a tear flowed from an eye. "I'm the cute one, remember!"

In a tone of seriousness Ranma hadn't seen before, Ukyou growled at her captive. "So, who's it going to be? Me? Or are you planning on hooking up with Shampoo? Or Kodachi? Or whoever Usagi is? Or..."

Ranma spoke with authority and conviction, something that caught the chef off guard. "Akane."

The temperature dropped a few degrees from the coldness that came from the tall girl. The weapon slid out of her lifeless hands and fell to the floor with a loud clang.

Ranma turned away. "I'm sorry."

With a massive heave, Ranma's body went flying out the front entryway, across the street and into a pile of trash that was left out for the garbage collectors. Stars flew around his head as he lifted himself out of the rubbish. "Ucchan." A frying pan connected with his head and rang out a loud bang.

Ukyou stood in the doorway with tears pouring out of her eyes. She wordlessly unhooked the shop curtain and picked up the menu sign and returned back into her restaurant slamming

the door shut behind her. A moment later, the lights inside turned off.

Ranma sighed. "That could have gone better."

Konatsu appeared next to Ranma and he poured a cup of cold water on him, changing Ranma from a him to a her. "With Ukyou-sama's compliments, so sorry," he disappeared.

Ranko sighed again. "Yep, that could have gone better."

"Ukyou-sama?" Konatsu asked in a worried voice as he sat near his mistress. "How are you feeling?"

Ukyou numbly pulled the knives out of the floor and placed them one by one on a table. She quietly approached the wall and pulled out all of the spatulas and other utensils she had used as weapons and placed them beside the others.

She slowly walked into the back of the darkened shop, up the stairs and into her bedroom.

Konatsu stood at the foot of the stairs and watched his mistress fade from sight. He bowed his head in sadness and tidied up the main area of the restaurant. After spending a few minutes cleaning up, a young man called his attention. "Miss?"

The kunoichi smiled at the honorific, even though technically it was incorrect. "Yes?"

The two boys from Furinkan looked at each other then at the waiter who looked like a waitress. "I think we're locked in here."

He gasped, *they were right*. He waved toward the rear of the place. "I'll let you out the back. Come this way."

One of the boys snickered, "dinner and a show, just like Daisuke said. We gotta come here more often."

Upstairs, Ukyou locked the door to her bedroom and went over to her dresser drawer. Opening it, she pulled out a large group picture. In it, were many people she knew. She fondly remembered the picture being taken during a Christmas party that was held at the Tendo residence months ago. Her eyes drifted to the image of her best friend, and standing next to him, was her new sworn enemy, Akane Tendo.

She studied the image, examined every line, and came to the conclusion that the war was over long ago. Ranma and Akane were a couple, even back then.

Placing the picture back in the drawer, but this time face down, the chef slid back down on her bed. A small smile formed on her face, "Akane, eh. She'll slip up and when she does." She looked at a small picture she had purchased from Nabiki of Ranma in a combat pose. "You'll know that I love you, and you'll come home with me, as it was meant to be."

She closed her eyes and her memories played back a time several months ago.

"Whee!!!" Miss Hinako spun in a circle, holding in her hand a stick with a yellow ribbon tied to the end of it. Her long brown hair flowed around as she twirled and spun like a gymnast in training, more playing than performing. The teacher wore a yellow dress made of elastic spandex that seemed to be a size too large for the woman's tiny body. Her appearance was also strange since she looked to be no older than twelve years old and acted more like a four year old.

Ukyou entered the classroom, wearing her Furinkan girl's school uniform and sat at her desk. She placed her books down and opened her school bag. Checking her homework, she nodded that she was ready for the school day. Under the sheets of paper containing her assignment was a plastic bento box containing a specially prepared okonomiyaki that she made especially for Ranma. Everything was in order, so she placed her school bag under her desk and waited for the day to begin and Miss Hinako to lose interest in her latest plaything.

The school bell rung and two students were conspicuously absent, namely Ranma and Akane. Ukyou didn't pay any special attention to the fact that they were missing, Ranma was notoriously late and Akane usually was the cause of it.

Miss Hinako's ribbon stick fell apart from her over use of it and she twirled over to the podium at the head of the class. She opened up roll, doodled a happy face in it with a crayon then called out the names listed, "Yamada, Takehito, Ichirou, Kuonji, Saotome... Oh, I see Mr. Saotome's been a bad boy today! He's late!" The pint-sized teacher pulled out a tiny five-yen coin and held it out threateningly. "I'm ready for you, Mr. Saotome."

She stood there for five seconds before she got bored. "Oh, well, Tendo?" She looked around the classroom, very annoyed. "Two misbehaving students! I can't have that!" She waved her arms and had a temper tantrum. "Bad! Bad! Bad!" As she jumped up and down, another teacher appeared at the open doorway and knocked to get Miss Hinako's attention.

"Happo five yen satsu!" She aimed her coin at the hapless teacher, but nothing happened. Her technique for draining battle aura only worked on active combatants.

The teacher breathed a sigh of relief and held out a note. "This is for you."

She hid her coin behind her back like a little girl who just got caught raiding a cookie jar. "Sorry, I thought you were someone else. Ooooooh, shiny!" She lunged forward and snatched the note, which happened to have a little bit of glitter on it.

The tall man left the room to get as far away from classroom 1-F as he could. "They don't pay me enough for this."

"Whee!!!" sang Miss Hinako as she folded the note and fluttered it like a butterfly around the room. Again, after her attention span ran out, she turned the note over and read it. "Oh, Mr. Saotome, you're off the hook this time." She tossed it into the trash and stood once again at the podium. "Now class... Let's see... Oh, yeah... Yamada, Takehito, Ichiro, Kuonji, Saotome... Oh, I see Mr. Saotome's not here..."

Ukyou shrank at her desk; this morning wasn't going to be a good one.

During lunch, Ukyou sat at her desk, a little bored and lonely. She stared at Ranma's desk wondering where he was. Now that the teacher was gone, she got up and approached the

trashcan. Taking a quick look around, she reached in and rummaged to find the note. She pulled her hand out only to find that it was covered with melted chocolate and peppered with cookie crumbs. Turning her filthy arm, she found the glitter-covered note. Carefully using her clean arm, she pulled the note off the sticky mess, only for the paper to break apart. She held the note out and read it only to find that a part of it was illegible.

Miss Hinako Ninomiya
Room 1-F 10th grade
Students excused
Akane T....
Ranm.
Rea...
Tr..... .. .

That's just great, growled Ukyou to herself. She maneuvered toward the doorway and went to the girl's restroom, taking extra care not to contaminate anyone with whatever substances she was coated in. Inside the restroom, she stopped at the sink and examined her arm, trying to see if she could make out the last sentence of the note from the paper fragments still stuck to her arm. As she watched, the tiny fleck of paper dissolved in the chocolate colored goo. Not wanting to have her arm suffer the same fate, she turned on the water and with a bit of soap and elbow grease, removed the glop off of her arm.

Ukyou placed her hands on the edges of the sink and felt an urge to smash it with her bare hands. A voice from behind her asked, "five thousand yen?"

Her half-lidded eyes expressed her disdain for the person behind her, yet she was the only one who could quickly provide her with an answer. Pulling out a five thousand yen note from her pocket, she held it up to show the girl she meant business.

The Ice Queen of Furinkan High School, Nabiki Tendo, smirked in her usual fashion. She plucked the bill out of Ukyou's hand. "You want to know where Ranma is?"

"What do you think?"

"It doesn't matter what I think, but I'll tell you what I heard."

"Spill it."

Nabiki loved her job. "Mr. Saotome said that Ranma and Akane have gone off to the Tanaka Dojo in Hokkaido."

"Hokkaido? That's clear on the other side of the country! What are they doing there?"

"Going to the Tanaka Dojo, it seems." The middle Tendo shrugged. "That's what I heard, straight from Mr. Saotome's mouth."

"Whom else did you tell this to?"

Nabiki held out an open palm. The chef placed another five thousand yen note in it. "This had better be worth it."

"My information is guaranteed to be accurate and worth the price."

Ukyou grew impatient. "Who?"

"Shampoo."

Ukyou rolled her eyes. "Anyone else?"

"Not yet."

The taller girl knew better than to ask Nabiki to keep her mouth shut. She didn't have that kind of money and ten thousand yen had already tapped her out. "Thanks."

Nabiki stood and watched as an angry okonomiyaki chef stormed out of the restroom. "Pleasure doing business with you." She grinned evilly; the plan was working perfectly.

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chocolates.

Chapter 2, Life In Hell

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Being buried deep inside of a pile of trash allowed Ranko to dwell on her current situation. It was possible that Ukyou would never forgive her for choosing Akane, but it was a price that had to be paid whether she liked it or not. When Akane was taken by the youma months ago, Ranko swore no price was too great to bring her home safely, and it nearly cost her life. Now, it was going to cost her best friend in the whole world, perhaps her only true friend.

How much more was she going to have to pay before her life debts were settled? Ranko pondered the question as she slowly pulled herself out of the garbage. She brushed herself off and gazed longingly at the Ucchan's. Minutes passed, and no sign was visible that Ukyou was going to reopen her shop or allow Ranko to see her to mend the fence that was broken between them. Sullenly, Ranko walked toward the Tendo household, pausing twice to look back at the restaurant for any clue that she would be allowed to return.

She put her hands in her pockets and walked aimlessly, drowning in her sorrow. Earlier, her mother rejected her and Ukyou's reaction only deepened the wound. She ignored the people around her and kept walking randomly until she happened upon a small park. In the center of it was a small lake with a boathouse and a dock to one side, and a group of snack vendors on the other. She didn't feel like eating anything, since she had no money and she wasn't in the mood to do the cute girl act to get free food. She plopped herself down on a bench and stared at the waters of the pond, mourning her losses.

Not long ago, a body of water like this lake was something Ranko thought she'd never see again. Her mind wandered as she admired the things she had missed, trees, grass, other people and the safety in knowing that she was not going to be attacked at any moment by something that wanted her or Akane dead.

Ranko softly cried as the enormity of her loss settled in. "Pops, why'd you promise me to her? Why'd you tell mom that we'd commit seppuku? Why'd you take Ucchan's family's okonomiyaki cart? What were you thinking? Oh, Pops..." Ranko's lip trembled as she fondly remembered that Ucchan was someone she could always talk to, to rely on, to trust. If Ucchan could ever forgive her, things would never be the same between them. Ucchan had already paid a steep price, the loss of her family vending cart, her femininity, her family and all for what? So she could extract revenge on the Saotome family only for her to fall in love with Ranma again? Ranko felt a craving for Ucchan's famous okonomiyaki and she held her stomach back, letting it know that the empty feeling inside was one that was going to stay for a while.

Her mother was another thing. Months of hiding in plain sight as Ranko and Mr. Panda had taken its toll, and now she could never see her mother again, unless she wanted to don the traditional kimono to be worn when committing ritual suicide. A man among men? Some man she turned out to be. Even with all the Sailor Senshi acting as her references, it didn't matter. Nodoka Saotome didn't see her son, but an aberration. One, who should be cast aside for the sake of family honor. Ranko buried her head in her hands and cried.

There had to be a way to convince her mother and Ukyou that she only did what she knew was right. She saved thousands of people from enslavement by Jadeite and his armies. She

rescued Akane from certain death. She was a Sailor Senshi. A wave of pride washed over her as she thought about Akane, and the progress the young Tendo had made in her training.

She relaxed her head back and look upwards into the cloudy sky. High above, fluffy cottony balls of water vapor shifted and moved in odd shapes. She smiled, thinking about games she used to play with Uchchan when they were little. Almost a lifetime ago, the two of them played near Mr. Kuonji's cart while Ranko's father was building an obstacle course to test his six-year-old son's newest skills. One of the many games the two kids enjoyed together was to gaze at the clouds and call out what they saw. At the present moment, a white cloud to the south had a long thin line that ended in a trapezoid; a viewer could almost see it as a giant spatula. Ranko blinked her eyes and rubbed them in astonishment. She looked again and saw a long thin circular cloud with some holes inside that somewhat looked like the outline of a shrimp studded okonomiyaki.

Ranko held her hands to the side of her head in a crazed attempt to flush Uchchan out of her mind. "Aaahh!"

Spent, she spied a nearby tree and wandered over to it and sat near its trunk on the shade-covered grass. She lied on her back and paid attention to nothing in particular. It had been a long time since she was at ease, and she allowed her mind to wander again. Suddenly, Ranko sat up, and assumed a combat pose. *What was that?* She wondered.

Listening carefully, she heard the sound again and prepared herself to fire a bolt of ki at the enemy. She aimed her hands upward toward a low hanging branch and stood still, waiting for her opponent to make the first move.

A snap was heard and Ranko called out, "Moko Takabisha!" A bolt of life energy streamed out and hit the branch, slicing it in two. A startled squirrel jumped out, landed on the ground and scurried off to the safety of another tree.

Ranko chastised herself for being so jumpy. "It's just a stupid squirrel." She slumped to the ground and flopped backwards onto the soft grass. Feeling relieved, she whispered in a calm voice. "I'm not there anymore."

Tired, worried, and exhausted, she thought about Akane and drifted off to a nap.

This is it, thought Sailor Sun as she prepared to touch the clear stasis crystal. With a scream of "**BAKUSAI TENKETSU!**" the crystal shattered, spewing hundreds of shards outward. They struck the Sailor Senshi all over her body and she raised her arms as a shield against the onslaught. It took Sun a moment to recover from the stinging pain and as she lowered her arms she saw Akane's naked bodying lay helpless on the floor. With a look of rage, she flipped in the air and landed where Sailor Mercury once stood. Sun glanced back and confirmed that Mercury was carrying the tomboy to safety. Using the magic within her, she posed with her arms stretched forward and in her hands formed a ball of fire. Focusing her anger and her magic together, the fireball grew larger and larger. The three youma that Mercury had been keeping busy a moment ago paused and grew nervous as the flames became three meters across.

That's for taking Akane! "**SEARING PLASMA BLAST!**" Sun threw the fireball and it hit the lead youma in the chest, which didn't slow down the attack as it vaporized the creature and kept going. The other two were partially engulfed by the inferno and they died instantly.

A second later, the plasma struck the corridor beyond and exploded, sending fire ricocheting back toward the Sailor Senshi.

Sun reacted in shock and surprise at the ferocity of her attack and leapt backwards, performing somersaults until she was out of the chamber and bounced off a wall toward where Mercury carrying Akane had disappeared to. In mid-flight, the concussion wave hit, and she was hurled into a wall and slid downward and fire bathed her body in an orange glow for an instant. Once the building stopped shaking and her attack subsided, Sun lifted herself off the ground, no worse for wear. Frightened that her attack caused collateral damage, she hurriedly ran in the direction that Sailor Mercury had traveled. Turning a corner, she found Akane laying on the ground, unburned, and Mercury on top, acting as a shield. Relieved that Akane wasn't blasted to pieces, she lunged forward and grabbed Mercury by her Sailor collar and lifted her to her feet. Sun scooped up Akane in her arms and planted her lips on the tomboy's mouth and softly sobbed with relief.

Sailor Sun broke off her kiss with her unconscious fiancée and turned toward Mercury. "I got her! Let's go!" Gesturing away from the gaping, smoldering hole, she shouted, "this way, NOW!" Instantly, she sprinted down the corridor.

Mercury commented as she ran after the redhead. "Wow. I haven't seen a girl kiss like that since Michiru's slumber party." Even at top speed, she could barely keep up with Sailor Sun's insane pace. Alarm klaxons sounded everywhere, signaling that in moments the place would be swarming with hundreds of Jadeite's youma. Beads of sweat formed on her brow as exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her. They ran down hallway after hallway until, straight ahead, were a pair of tall white metal doors blocking the exit and they were guarded by six giant youma, the same ones the two Senshi had seen lining up in formation outside. *Six against us? Not good*, thought the worried Sailor Mercury.

With a furious kick, Sailor Sun, with Akane held close in her arms, bowled over the youma like bowling pins. She didn't even pause to finish the fight. She tumbled into a ball, rolled on the floor and with blinding speed, spun around to avoid a blob of green acid. A look of terror was on Sun's face as she narrowly avoided the goop and used her shoulder to shield her fiancée from another attack.

Mercury shouted while ducking under a youma's punch. "Don't panic, Sun. She's just sleeping. I think she's probably exhausted from having her energy drained for the last week. Let's go!"

Sun paused for a second and touched one of the doors with her finger, instantly it exploded showering her with metal fragments and bright sunlight. "This way out!"

"How are you doing that?" asked the shocked Sailor Mercury. Sun didn't wait to give an answer. The red-skirted girl leapt out of the hole and sprinted down the ramp to the ground below. She checked on Akane as she ran away from the city with Mercury close behind. Sun was starting to tire and in moments, Mercury overtook Sun and the two spied in the distance a raised dais with an activated portal and a small group of youma milling about.

Giving each other a nod, they both ran toward the portal, completely ignoring the youma guarding it. Sun was fast, but with Akane's extra weight slowing her down, Mercury was faster. The blue-skirted Senshi darted ahead and before the youma could react, dived headfirst into the shimmering vortex and only an instant after the soles of her boots vanished from sight, so did the portal. Immediately after seeing Mercury reach safety and her method of escape cut off, Sailor Sun turned ninety degrees and ran at top speed away

from the three startled youma manipulating the portal controls. Sun hoped that Mercury would remember the instructions she was given about the signal flares. Mercury was the smart one. Sun knew she could trust her. The redhead ran, carrying the only thing that mattered to her in the whole universe, Akane.

Akane, you've gotta lose some weight, thought Sun as she struggled to keep up her sprint. She didn't bother to look back for it didn't matter what happened behind her. Akane was safe. The way home was shut down. The city was no concern of hers anymore. The area was swarming with youma and Sailor Mercury had already escaped. The only thing left to do was to get away and find shelter.

Sun wished she were home right now. Not at Mr. Miyagi's dojo in Juuban, but back at the Tendo compound where she happily lived a lifetime ago. She hoped she could wake up from this current nightmare and find herself lying on the floor of the guest room, clad in her boxer shorts, white tank top and hearing her father in Panda form snoring like a buzz saw. Moments later, she'd be sparring on the roof yelling and receiving taunts from her father like she always did for the last ten years on the road. Soon, she'd finish her sparring only to be fed breakfast by someone who couldn't tell the difference between salt, sugar and baking soda. *What's with this tomboy? Why can't she make a decent meal?*

Glancing down without breaking her stride, she saw a piece of reality that hit her square in the face. In her arms was the naked body of Akane Tendo, tomboy, Martial Artist, pathetic cook, gymnast, volleyball star, horrid swimmer and only recently, a huge power source for Jadeite's war machine. Closing her eyes and holding back her tears, Sun held her bundle tightly to keep her fiancée safe from harm. She failed her once, but never again. Even at the cost of her own life, she swore to herself that she'd never let anything ever harm Akane. Looking forward and picking up the pace a bit, she made a beeline toward an opening between two tall rock formations. The pass ahead appeared to be the most likely path to the other side of a range of craggy mountains.

How was she going to find safety in this forsaken land? In all her travels, she had never been to a place as barren and devoid of life as this. The great deserts in China were nothing compared to what lay all around her. Mercury told her that the sky was cloudless due to lack of water and with the sun hanging low in the sky, it wouldn't be long before it would heat the land to a nice warm temperature, but that was only temporary. When the sun reached midday, the ground would be too hot to walk on barefoot and without shade, Akane's skin would sunburn in moments.

What am I going to do? Sun had to figure out a solution to her dilemma and quickly. Her thoughts racing, she knew there had to be a cave or outcropping she could use for shelter close by. Sun made a high leap and flew over a three-meter tall rock with little effort. She quickly looked around for any sign of danger and continued her running. In moments, she was in the center of a tall canyon, forty meters high and ten meters wide. It was a great place for an ambush, and perfect to lose her pursuers if they were even chasing her. Ahead, the canyon split, and then split again as if a long dried up river had formed it and it followed the teachings of the Ryoga School of travelling in a straight line. Randomly choosing to turn left or right and stepping only on rocks to avoid leaving footprints, Sun began to slow down. She listened to the sounds around her and only heard the patter of her own footsteps and Akane's shallow breathing.

Sun stopped for a moment, panting heavily and weary from running. She could hear Akane's heartbeat in the silence of the dead riverbed, despite making raspy sounds from her own lungs. There was no other life here on Jadeite's world. Nowhere could be found a blade of

grass, tumbleweed, bushes or even long dead wood, nothing. Not even the common sounds of cicadas or birds could be heard which made the planet even creepier than it already was. There wasn't even a hint of wind at the moment, which made Sun's ears ultra-sensitive to even the sound of how air was flowing within Akane's lungs.

With new resolve, Sun bent her knees and gave it all her might as she leapt high into the air and scaled the canyon wall in a single bound. From her new vantage point, she was able to see for kilometers in every direction. She would find a place of safety. She would find somewhere that she could protect the only thing that had any meaning for her.

Akane.

Jadeite was angry. No, more than angry, he was completely furious. Not just furious, he had reached a Queen Beryl level of furious. He completely understood why his former Queen wanted to destroy her underlings when a mission didn't go according to plan. He counted to ten, all the while the youma in front of him sweated nervously as it awaited its impending destruction at the hands of its master.

He knew he was better than Queen Beryl. He wasn't going to waste valuable resources just to make himself feel better for a moment. He found his center and took a deep breath to release his anger. Calm restored, he waved off his servant. "That will be all."

Wasting no time, the youma made itself scarce before its master changed his mind and decided to blow it to smithereens because it delivered the bad news of the Senshi's escape.

Jadeite turned his chair around and pressed several controls for his viewing panels. He played back the recording on a data crystal that showed a Sailor Senshi destroy his once thought impervious stasis crystal with only a single touch. He played the video frame by frame, carefully watching how this act was performed, looking for any way he could create some sort of defense to keep his prisoners captive without the Senshi freeing them as easily as they just did. He played back the clip where Sailor Sun touched the main door causing it to explode and tried to glean what spell was cast to cause such an effect. He reached for the wall fragments that were recovered from the rubble and piled on the flat area of his desk. Holding a fist-sized chunk of shattered metal, he studied it carefully. He performed a magic detection spell and the spell dissipated revealing no aura of residual magic. "Non-magical? Impossible! What sort of Sailor Senshi magic can avoid detection?"

It doesn't make any sense, thought the soon to be leader of the planet Earth. When the two Sailor Senshi appeared on his world, he didn't know who they were. He thought they were just a scouting party who'd be intimidated by how well organized his base of operations was laid out. He knew the Sailor Senshi were in fact just school girls with super powers and as these kids suffered defeat after defeat, they'd be demoralized or better yet, they'd give up. Instead, these two girls had the audacity to actually infiltrate his base and get within five hundred meters of his main chamber without tripping a single alarm. It was only when Sailor Mercury struck the stasis crystal did he even know that he had intruders.

He already had made plans for how to improve on base security. It had cost him some time because he had to assign some of his super youma that he'd been stockpiling for his final assault on Tokyo for sentry and guard duty. A slow victory was far better than a rapid defeat caused by being too cocky, as evidenced by Queen Beryl's failures. He ran some numbers and found the increase in security would only cost him a few days of time and ensure that the

pesky Sailor Senshi would never get near him again.

Glancing at a security camera feed, he spied a pair of his super youma walking down a hallway, inspecting the area for any sign of an intruder. A small man-sized youma was near them and was installing an alarm switch on the wall. He had given orders to his youma that if anyone saw a Sailor Senshi, they were to hit the alarm button before attacking, even if it meant the youma would be killed. He sat back with a smug look on his face. Fool me once, shame on me, fool me twice, never.

Another thing puzzled Jadeite, the girl in the stasis chamber was supposed to be Sailor Mercury, yet in the video of the escape; it was clearly Mercury who was standing in the room with Sailor Sun. So, who was his prisoner? She wasn't as slender as Sailor Mars and her hairstyle and color didn't match any of the other Senshi, yet she emitted more life energy than any human he had ever found. He was convinced that he had captured a Sailor Senshi in human form, but which one? The report he got about her capture only reinforced his belief that she was one of them. It took three youma to restrain her and she killed one of them with an energy attack that only a Sailor Senshi could deliver. He pulled out the report of the capture and re-read the notation about a very large mallet being used to send a youma out a window while others piled on her to stop her attacks. Jadeite pulled up the information he had on the known Sailor Senshi past and present, and the only weapons he found were swords, mirrors, glaives, staffs, but not mallets.

He raised his hand to his chin deep in thought. *Maybe this girl was a Sailor Senshi trainee?* After all, they recruited a new Sailor Senshi and called her Sailor Sun so why not? Could this girl be the fabled Sailor Terra? Maybe she's a Sailor Senshi of another celestial body like Saturn's moon Titan? He wasn't going to take any chances. This girl had powers of some sort and he wasn't going to allow this new girl to get too comfortable in her new role as a Sailor Senshi. She, as well as Sailor Sun were going to find out that being a Sailor Senshi only meant one thing; a short lifespan.

Jadeite began to plan. He would ensure that these two girls were no longer going to be a problem for him and the only permanent solution involved a burial.

Sailor Sun cautiously walked along what was once a riverbed, but now was a testament to how lifeless this world was. All that could be seen were red and brown rocks littering a semi-smooth floor covered in fine brown sand. She poked her finger into the sand, looking for water and as before, came up empty. Given the fact that she hadn't seen any water anywhere ever since she had arrived worried her greatly. With the exception of Jadeite, his youma and the mana melon farm, the world was totally dead. Only a slight rustling of small pebbles being moved by a moderate wind gave any hint that where she was was real. Walking slowly, careful to avoid leaving any tracks that would lead the youma to her, she continued her search. "Where was it?"

Days ago, she had found a series of caves that she and Mercury hid in until they were ready to strike. It seemed as good a place to hide as any until Sun could figure out what to do next, however none of the area she was wandering around in looked familiar. The sun was climbing higher into the sky and the ground was warming up. Rocks, boulders, sand, and oh, my, more rock, were all Sun could see in every direction. She muttered in a quiet worried tone, "this isn't happening..."

Ahead, at the base of a cliff, partially hidden behind a boulder lay a cave entrance. Excitedly,

Sun ran up and took a peek inside. Darkness was all she could see. She raised her hand and a flame appeared in her palm giving off orange light. She tossed the fireball into the cave and watched it fly ten meters in before hitting the back wall and the light went out. Nodding in approval, she made another fireball and held it high and was about to enter when an irritated voice called her, "find anything?"

Sun turned around to see Akane, dressed in a red silk shirt, black cotton pants and black cloth slippers, the clothes Ranma usually wore, but now were the only clothes that Akane could wear since there wasn't a clothing store anywhere on the planet. Keeping her mouth shut, she studied how they looked on her fiancée; *I can't believe that fits her*. She nodded in response to her fiancée's question, "I think so. I don't see anything dangerous."

"Okay." Akane smiled and entered the cave without hesitating.

Sun waved her hand to stop her. "Wait! I hadn't checked it out yet."

Akane huffed. "Are you going to start treating me like a baby again?" She edged further inside and was quickly swallowed by the blackness.

"Get back here! I can't have you running around like that!" Sun ran in and grabbed Akane by the shoulder to pull her back and instantly the slightly taller girl screamed in pain as the fire Sun held in her hand burned the spot she touched.

"AAAHHH! You idiot!" Akane punched Sun in the face, sending the Sailor Senshi flying into a cave wall. The magical fire went out and the redhead slid down to the ground, out cold.

"Moron! Be more careful." The Tendo placed her right palm on her left shoulder and plucked at her shirtsleeve. It was scorched, but not burned through. Peeking under her shirt collar, she saw that her skin was turning red, but it wasn't serious. She gently rubbed the area to soothe the growing pain and waited a moment for her eyesight to adjust to the inky darkness. A minute later, with the bright daylight outside providing some illumination, she was able to examine the interior of the cave.

The walls, ceiling and floor were made out of somewhat smooth red rock, as if long ago, water had flowed inside and eroded everything into its present state. The floor of the cave was peppered with patches of sand and dust that made walking a little tricky. The ceiling was three meters above the ground in the center and quickly lowered to barely over two meters at the sides. The cave extended ten meters deep into the cliffside, so there was plenty of room to store things if they needed to.

Akane's stomach growled in hunger and she thought about when was the last time she ate anything. Ranma said earlier that they were going to have to steal some food, and she hoped it would be soon. She was starving. All the training Ranma had been subjecting her to back in Tokyo had given her an appetite that rivaled her fiancé. She moved a few rocks from the center of the cave over to the side to make space so she could sit down comfortably. Sitting, she sighed and gazed at her future husband with envious eyes. "A Sailor Senshi... Of all the crazy things that could happen to him, why that?"

She slumped forward in depression. "My battle do-gi, my being Juliet," she lowered her voice to barely a whisper, "my popularity, he took away everything."

Picking up a small rock, she threw it at Sun and it bounced off her tiara. "Idiot."

Slowly waking up in a daze and the world shifting spinning all around her, Sailor Sun groaned. She opened her eyes and with blurry vision, she saw someone but couldn't recognize who it was at all. She made a guess. "Aa... mi?"

Akane rolled her eyes in disgust. "No, she's not here."

Realizing her mistake, in a flash, Sun was standing in front of the seated girl and formed a ball of flame in her hand. "Akane? Akane!" Sun looked in every direction, searching for anything that could harm the woman she loved.

Akane rubbed her shoulder again. "Hey, firebug. Put that down before you touch me again with it."

"Oh, sorry." She put the fire out and paused for a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dark cave. "It's a bit too easy to make these things."

Rolling her eyes again, the Tendo scoffed, "so you say." Then in a more serious, worried tone, she asked, "Ranma?"

"What, Akane?" Sun sat down next to her fiancée, and without thinking, put her hand on top of Akane's with a gentle touch.

The gesture didn't go unnoticed by the blue haired girl, and she formed a smile. "I'm wondering. Where exactly are we? I mean, this place kind of looks like Mars."

Sun shrugged. "For all I know, it is Mars, but I'd really doubt it. Sailor Mars would probably know if someone was on her planet."

Akane froze. "What do you mean, her planet?" She raised her hands with warding signs, "is that it? You're aliens?"

"Get real, Akane. I'm not an alien and neither is Re... I mean Sailor Mars." Sun rubbed her head where Akane had struck her earlier to relieve her headache. "I heard them talk about their powers come from the planets."

"And you're Sailor Sun, so you're tied to the Sun?" Akane relaxed a little, and then crossed her arms. "Figures you'd pick the biggest thing in the solar system. I'm surprised you didn't get Sailor Universe."

Sun said excitedly, "hey! That's an idea!"

Akane buried her head in her hand, "forget I mentioned it."

She dreamily contemplated a new role in the Sailor Corps, "Sailor Universe... Sailor Universe..."

The youngest Tendo took a good look at Sun's uniform as the redhead kept imagining something stupid. The white leotard, the bright red mini-skirt, the huge yellow bow on her chest covering some sort of breast armor made of a soft material, the white gloves that had three red rings where they ended at the elbows, the gold tiara with a red gem that almost gave off a glow that reminded her of a lit candle, all made her feel depressed. *Why him? Why did he join them when...*

Akane stopped her chain of thought and slowly turned away from the beautiful girl sitting across from her. But the image of how lovely she looked wouldn't leave her mind, her bright red knee high boots with yellow trim at the top, the pretty yellow bow attached to the small of her back and two long trailing ribbons, the red button earrings, and her makeup, complete with bright red lipstick. She was awash in envy.

She began to cry.

It took a moment for Sun to realize that Akane wasn't looking at her anymore and her soft sobbing got her out of her trance. She slipped closer and held her in a soft embrace. "Don't worry Akane, I'll find us a way home."

Instead of returning the hug, Akane shoved her away. "Why you? Why did they pick you? You're not even a girl."

Surprised at Akane's shove and her question, Sun raised her arms in dismay. "Don't ask me! I turned them down and they wouldn't take no for an answer."

"You? Turn down a power up? Tell me something believable. When I got the battle do-gi, you couldn't handle that I was the one it chose. You were so jealous that all you did was keep challenging me to fight until you cheated by making my suit come off."

"I was saving you. That thing was a pervert!"

"It was my friend! I can't believe daddy took it back to the monastery where you got it."

"Well it kept coming back from the thrift store!"

"That's because it missed me!"

Sun crossed her arms. "The thing wanted to peep on you." Then she added without thinking, "no accounting for taste!" It was at this moment her brain caught up with her mouth and braced her body for impact.

"Ranma, you jerk!" **WHAM!**

Sun went flying out of the cave and bounced off the large boulder directly outside. She kept going and she spread her arms to guide her flight and smashed into something soft. Both her and the object rolled on the ground and were covered in reddish brown dust.

Sun chastised herself. "Man, I've got to keep my big mouth shut."

The youma she landed next to sat up and rubbed its belly. "Oh, what hit me?" The orange creature was two and a half meters tall, somewhat human like except for the elfin ears, vampire fangs and a Mohawk hairstyle in her green mane.

Sun and the youma looked at each other and they both screamed. "**AAAAAAHHH!**"

Akane emerged from the cave, battle aura glowing. "You're always putting me down!"

Sun jumped up into the air as the youma's mighty fist slammed down where the Sailor Senshi had landed. As soon as she touched ground, the youma's two companions, one with yellow hair, and the other with lavender hair arrived. Sun contemplated her tactics and

chose the best course of action, run like hell. She ran over to Akane, crying out, "we gotta blow this place!"

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" Akane grabbed a very large rock and in a show of her super human strength, held it above her head. "Take this!" She hurled the rock at Sun who ducked and it flew straight into the green hair youma, smashing it down. The other two youma looked at each other in shock, since the green haired one was their leader.

"Akane! Oh, man!" Which was worse, the two remaining youma, or Akane? Decisions, decisions, she backpedaled from the greater threat, the one she was engaged to.

"Get back here and take it like a man! **THUNDER HAMMER STRIKE!**" Akane raised her arms above her head and formed a ball of blue ki.

Sun got an idea. She jumped into the air again and taunted her fiancée. "Nyaa! Nyaa! You can't hit me!" Then she landed behind some cover.

Akane's eyes twitched and she hurled her life energy at Sun, impacting on her shield, blasting it to fist sized pieces.

The lavender haired youma stood dumbfounded as its yellow haired companion exploded. Retreat and bringing an army seemed to be a better option. It backed away and turned tail. "I've got to tell them where you are."

"Oh, no you don't!" Sun grabbed the creature's arm and pulled it back into the fight. The youma struck back, punching the redhead in the chest. Sun recovered from the blow and delivered a high kick then a follow up punch, which pushed the creature backwards.

Akane screamed in anger, "stop ignoring me!"

Dodging between blows, Sun retorted, "I'm a bit busy here."

Akane reached over and grabbed the youma, who was shocked at how strong this human was. With little effort, the Tendo swung it around like a bolas and slammed it on the head of Sailor Sun. "I'm not done talking to you!"

From under the dazed youma, Sun moaned. "Thanks for the help."

"Thanks? Thanks! She grabbed the youma by the legs, swung it over her head a second time and as the youma whimpered, smashed it down harder on top of her fiancée. This time, the youma broke apart and dissolved into dust.

Sun stood up, facing the dark blue haired Tendo. "Are you done yet?"

"No, I'm not! It's all your fault you moron!"

"What do you mean this is my fault?"

"They were after you!"

"In case you hadn't noticed," Sun angrily turned her attention to the green haired youma that was freeing itself from Akane's boulder. She formed a fireball and threw it at the monster, "**SEARING PLASMA BLAST!**" The youma only had a second to make peace

before it joined its friends in oblivion. Then Sun turned back to face her soon to be spouse, "they're after us!"

"They were attacking you, not me!"

"They're after us!"

"They're after you!"

"Fine." Sun crossed her arms in defiance. Then she had brilliant rebuttal, "if they're not after you, why'd they kidnap you?"

"Because they thought I was you, idiot!"

"Huh?" Sun blinked. "I thought... How could they? I wasn't there..." Sun allowed depression to take her as she recalled the day she lost Akane.

"That's right, you weren't. You were at the store getting groceries when they came for you."

Sun's confident defiance shattered and she hung her head in shame. "I'm sorry, I should have been there."

"It's a good thing you weren't. They sent an army to get you." It was Akane's turn to feel depressed and worried. "They would have killed you."

A hint of Sun's arrogance peeked out from behind her sad expression as she raised an eyebrow at Akane's remark. "An army? How many showed up?"

"I couldn't count them all, about fifty I think."

"F-fifty? Jadeite only sends groups of four or five, not fifty."

"Yes, fifty!" Akane's battle aura grew again. "I was in the back throwing away the pot when they appeared out of nowhere. I got one, and then the alley was full of them. So I ran in the house and bolted the door. They busted in and they kept telling me 'we've got you now Sailor Senshi!' I didn't have a clue what they were talking about, but now that I know about your hobby, everything makes sense."

"But... But... Akane, you gotta believe me, I quit being a Sailor Senshi so that wouldn't happen. I didn't want any more trouble."

Akane looked Sun up and down. "Yeah, you quit alright. Why are you dressed like that then?"

"I... I... I had to get you back. So I signed up again so I can get my powers back. I... I... I didn't mean for this to happen, I mean, uh... I gave up being a Senshi 'cause I didn't want you to get hurt."

"Stop treating me like a baby!" Akane stomped her foot down. "I'm sick and tired of you always thinking I'm helpless. I'm a martial artist too. Before you came along, I was the best in Nerima."

"You gotta understand. I quit so I could keep you safe."

"Safe? You call this being safe? What's wrong with you?" She fired a small bolt of ki to make a point. "I can defend myself. Maybe not against an army, but I can fight." She took a good look at Sun's eyes and read her soul. Sun's face was an expression of fear and love. Akane softened, "why won't you let me fight with you?"

"You don't know these things like I do, they're more powerful than anyone we know, except maybe Herb."

"And you beat Herb."

With pride, she gloated, "yes I did."

"And I didn't have any problems with those two."

It dawned on Sun that Akane was right. She was capable of defending herself. In a matter of seconds, she killed two of Jadeite's minor youma. Maybe, Akane was able to take care of herself after all? "Yes, you did."

Akane asked, half begging, half demanding. "Then teach me. Teach me how to fight people like Herb. You promised."

"Yes, yes, I did." Sun's stomach growled. "Man, I'm hungry. We gotta get some food."

Akane's stomach growled in agreement. "So, what's to eat around here?"

"You don't want to know."

"What do you mean, I don't want to know?"

Sailor Sun's face displayed a look of sheer disgust. "I'd eat a rat any day over what they got around here."

Akane's eyes grew wide at the idea of eating a rat, then she wondered, *how could I make rat stew?*

Night was falling and it would be dark soon, giving more reminders that they were far far away from home. Akane stood, feet apart, her right hand above her head and was in front of a small group of rocks that would soon become more numerous and smaller in size. She cried out, "Hyaa!" and slammed her hand down in a karate chop and shattered the stone as she had done thousands of times back home.

Sailor Sun kept a vigil, sensing the area for any youma activity. Jadeite had to know they were still around and she was sure he would stop at nothing to make sure the pair were dead or in a stasis chamber having their life energy sucked out. She watched the sun quickly move toward the horizon and sink behind some distant mountains. The sky changed from the purple it usually was into a rainbow of colors. Green, yellow, and reds shaded the atmosphere until it all became a uniform color of darkness.

Sun got up from the rock she was sitting on and summoned her magic. A ball of red fire appeared in her hand creating a ball of light that allowed them to see. The landscape in

every direction was completely encased in darkness. There were no stars in the heavens, no moon to cast a nightly glow, nothing even resembling illumination from anywhere except from one location: Jadeite's city of youma far off to the east.

Akane huffed, a little angry that her practice had to be cut short. The world revolved at a faster rate causing the days to be only sixteen and a half hours long. Sun examined Akane's handiwork and smiled at the young Tendo in pride.

Holding her flame above her head like a torch, she waved at her partner. "Okay, Akane, let's get inside. I think I figured out how to teach this to you, c'mon."

The Tendo followed Sun with a little trepidation. Earlier in the day, the two raided the mana melon farm and Sun commented how Akane could steal them faster if she knew the Chestnut Fist and without a bag of chestnuts, it was going to be tricky for her to learn it. But Sun did learn it by using a tank of goldfish, so improvisation was the answer.

Once the pair entered the cave, Sun paused. She turned around and stood next to the large boulder outside of their cave and with a shove, tried to move it. It slid a few centimeters and stopped. Sun put more effort into it, and moved it another few centimeters. With her third effort, Akane joined in and the rock moved easily into place. "Thanks, Akane."

The short haired girl growled, "you could have asked for help instead of trying to do everything yourself, you know."

"Oh, sorry. Mars gets on my case about that all the time."

"She's right. When I see the Sailor Senshi on TV, they're always working as a team. How in the world are they putting up with you?"

Sun was a solo act for over a week, and tricked the other Sailor Senshi into getting her here. *I'd better not tell Akane that.* "I dunno. I mean... Oh... Let's get inside before it gets cold."

Sun led Akane into the cave, as the temperature outside plummeted and the once hot desert became a cold one. Once they were in the center of the cave, the pair sat opposite each other on square rocks that doubled as chairs. Sun piled a number of fist-sized rocks and encircled them with larger stones. After her little pile was complete, she focused her magic and touched the rocks, and soon, they glowed with heat and light.

"Neat trick. You have to teach me that too."

"I wish I could." Sun sat back. "But that wasn't martial arts, it was magic; Sailor Senshi magic. But I can teach this." She produced a small pile of pebbles in her fist.

"You're going to teach me to hold rocks in my hand?"

With a gleam in her eye, Sun smiled evilly. "No, think of them as chestnuts."

The word had special meaning, and it caught Akane's attention. "I'm listening."

"Watch carefully." She tossed the pebbles onto the hot rocks. Focusing her ki, she rapidly snatched them all back and placed every one of them into a small pile in front of her. In a matter of seconds, she collected all the pebbles. "Do you need me to show you again?"

The Chestnut Fist! "Yes!"

Sun repeated the demonstration four times. Each time she changed her technique slightly, either by going faster, slower or placing the pebbles in different locations. Each time, it was to let Akane view the technique from a different angle to ensure she understood how it was being done. "Ready to give it a go?"

Excitedly, she replied, "yes!" She kneeled in front of the hot stones and held her arms close with her hands forward.

Sun tossed the pebbles in and called out, "go!"

Akane reached in and pulled her hand back in pain. "Ouch!"

Sun shook her head in disapproval. "Focus. The key is speed. Don't give the heat any time to do anything to you. If you're too slow, you'll get burned."

Nodding, the student put her arms up and was about to reach in when her teacher stopped her. "No... Focus your ki. Let it power your movements. Understand?"

"My ki?"

"Your Thunder Hammer Strike comes from your ki, your ability to make those mallets, same thing. Focus." Sun released Akane's hand. "You can do it."

With a new resolve, Akane closed her eyes and focused. After a brief meditation, she opened her eyes, reached in and pulled out a stone and placed it on her lap. She clapped her hands together in glee. "I did it!" Then she froze and instantly jumped up in the air leaving a smoldering pebble behind. "YEOOWWW!"

"Akane!" Sun grabbed a mana melon and broke it open. She carved out a small piece of the rind and placed the soft juicy part on Akane's wound where the pebble burned her on her thigh. "There, that'll fix you up." She kicked away the hot pebble to keep it from harming Akane. "We'll try again in the morning."

"Owww... That was hot!" Akane reclined a little and relaxed as the pain subsided. "Isn't that our food?"

"Yeah, but it's the only thing we got that I can use for this."

"Well, I'm hungry." She reached over and picked up the brown fruit, the size of a small watermelon.

"Uh, Akane... There's something about..."

The Tendo bit down and her expression went from relaxed to revulsion. "Yuck." Akane couldn't take another bite, and tossed the mana melon rind away.

Sun caught it and gently placed the half eaten fruit with the rest of the melons they had stolen. "We gotta make this stuff last."

Akane spat out some of the seeds and gagged. "How did you eat that stuff? It tastes like cardboard."

"I had some practice..." She completed the sentence quietly; *it tastes kinda like your fruit salad.* "It's all we got."

The Tendo coughed and spat out the last of the seeds, careful not to get any of them on her clothes. "I don't know how long I can eat that garbage." Then she thought about something else. "I wonder what those youma taste like?"

The redhead shrugged. "Dust, probably. They don't last long after we kill them. C'mon, we gotta work on your form."

"Just a minute, I gotta wash the taste out of my mouth. Hey, do we have any water?"

Sun sheepishly held out a mana melon.

"That's just great. How am I going to wash up?" Then she noticed her Senshi fiancée was only a little dirty. "How do you wash up?"

"Um... It's not a problem for me."

"Explain."

"Well, I just call up the uniform and it gives me a bath."

"Oh. So, where can I go to get a bath? After all the running around in those fields and my workout, I'm filthy."

You can say that again, thought Sailor Sun. "I dunno where there's water around here, but there's gotta be some. Jadeite can't be growing those things without it."

"We're better find some soon." She sulked as she slumped against the cave wall. She made motions with her mouth and spat out the last remaining seed. "Ick, that thing really tastes terrible."

Sun sat next to Akane. "Try living on that for a few days."

"How long were you here?"

The redhead placed her hand on Akane's without thinking about it. "A couple of days, not long." She turned to her partner, "I got you back, and that's what's important."

Akane shivered in the frigid air. The cave offering no comfort and Sailor Sun, looked sullenly at the ground. The dark haired girl closed her eyes, tears flowing from the hopelessness. "I want to go home! Why did we go to Juuban? What was dad thinking?"

Sailor leaned back against the cold, damp and unyielding stone cliff wall, trying to get comfortable. All around, an eerie deafening silence surrounded her. She looked up at her companion and replied with the same amount of sadness. "I do too. I... I want to go back to the way things were." She held out her gloved hand and held it in front of her face in disgust. "I never asked for this."

Akane blew out a puff of air and stifled a chuckle. "Yeah, sure you did."

"I didn't! They practically begged me to join!"

"And look where it got us."

"Yeah, look where it got us."

"I don't want to be here. It's cold. I'm hungry. I wanna go home." Akane placed her head on her fiancée's shoulder.

"Me too," and the pair settled on to a restless night's sleep.

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<http://www.fanfiction.net/secure/review.php?storyid=4088438&chapter=2>. It makes me feel
oh so happy and keeps me from eating your fresh, sweet, juicy, and delicious brain.

Chapter 3, A Mother's Odyssey

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The cries of a mother losing a child were the most horrifying sound anyone could ever hear. Pain, agony, and the sum total of human suffering could be felt by the listener in those wails that came incessantly from a household in the Nerima ward of Tokyo. Releasing the emotions she had held in her heart for over ten long, lonely years, Nodoka Saotome lay crumpled just inside the front entryway of her tiny home.

It took a decade to pen up the pain that filled her soul and an hour for her to release it. Over and over again, she cried out for her son, the boy she had thought she was to never see again and now may never will. Lying next to her, wrapped in a cotton cloth, was the Saotome honor blade. A sword she had grown attached to in honor of the pact she had made long ago with her husband and son. Had she found Ranma wanting, it befell on her to take the duty of kaishaku, the second, and watch over her son and husband as they honored the contract with their blood spilled with the blade of a tanto and she would mercifully remove their heads and end their lives. Once done, she had resolved herself to follow them to the afterlife by slitting her own throat with the same blade.

After her sobs softened to a point where she could regain her composure, she lifted herself from her pool of tears and looked outside of her open front door to see if her son had returned. Her walkway was empty, as was her spirit, and she slid the front door shut. On the quiet street outside, life went on as usual, but inside, her world had come to an abrupt end. She took a deep breath and slowly walked to her bedroom, there, she shut the door and pulled out a kimono from the closet and quickly replaced the tear-stained one she was wearing with one with a pink floral pattern; a happy look that contradicted how she truly felt.

The fabric's pattern reminded her of better times. Times where she would be cooking ramen for her husband while she waited for him to come home from whatever he did when he went out with his friend Soun, or that horrible little man. Despite all of Genma's faults, she loved him dearly for he gave her the most precious gift any woman could ever receive, a child.

She lay down on her simple futon and thought about the day she lost her child the first time. Genma had run into the house in a big hurry, which wasn't surprising since he did that often. What was different that evening was after he ran around the house gathering his belongings, he made the proclamation that he was going on a long training journey and he was going to take Ranma, who was only six years old at the time, with him. That too wasn't unusual, since Genma had already begun to train Ranma in the ways of the family's school of martial arts, but that day was different: he was claiming that her motherly nurturing was interfering with his growth and his future was in jeopardy. He had to take their son on a long training journey and he packed almost everything he and Ranma owned into a giant backpack. It was obvious that he wasn't coming back anytime soon, if at all, and if he was to have Ranma go with him, the idea of not being with her son for that long terrified her. So she argued with him. He grew belligerent and grabbed her precious little boy and the backpack and as he was about to leave, she struck him with shoes, a wash bucket and even the coffee table to get him to stop. That was when he made the oath.

Nodoka, exhausted from her sorrow, slowly turned from place in bed and moved over to look

at a vanity on the other side of the bedroom. Inside the top drawer sat a tube and in that, was the document that sealed her family's fate.

Ranma will become a man among men. If we fail, we will commit seppuku.

Signed Genma Saotome, Ranma Saotome.

Covering the letter were the handprints of a child, her child. The child, whose future she entrusted to a man she hadn't seen in over ten years.

She rolled back on her bed and stared at the ceiling in a daze. Was what she saw an hour ago, real? Was that really her son standing among all of the Sailor Senshi? That red-haired girl, Ranko, was one of them? He and Ranko were one and the same? Her intuition had hinted to the possibility, but common sense said that was impossible. Many times before, she had visited the Tendo household and thought she heard the voice of her son and instead had found this beautiful young red-haired girl named Ranko Tendo, a distant cousin to the Tendo family. Thinking back, the girl felt familiar, like she was part of the Saotome family, not the Tendos. Once, Kasumi had commented on how Ranko looked like Mrs. Saotome and Nabiki had agreed with her, and at the time, she thought it was a cute thing for them to say. Now, she as put the pieces together, she understood how they were trying to tell her who Ranko really was.

She closed her eyes and cursed the newsreaders, the journalists and all the press who had prejudiced her against her son, all without knowing who they were talking about. Sailor Sun, dishonorable indeed! An hour ago, she had the entire team of Sailor Senshi give her a personal visit, all in honor of her son, who, by what means she had no idea, somehow had become one of them, a Sailor Suited Warrior of Love and Justice.

My son, was an honored Sailor Senshi? The very concept boggled her mind, yet it did explain some things, but not everything. Sailor Sun had only been in the news for a few months and at first she was more in the sidelines than in the front of battle. Occasionally, the news would film the end of a fight and it was Sailor Sun who was the first to leave and the newsreaders, always in search of controversy, made rude statements about how dedicated this new Sailor Senshi was to her duties.

Nodoka remembered all those nights, home alone, she would watch the news, each day hoping some miracle would occur and they would report on a heroic deed that her son would be found responsible for, and instead found the usual depressing state of human affairs waiting for her. Once the word came that strange happenings were occurring near the heart of Tokyo, her intuition told her that her son was there, making things right by doing good.

How manly he must have been, was the thought that kept her going as each day passed. She remembered something out of a dream where she was flying in the air on a tower of hot spring water, then falling to Earth, being held in the loving arms of her brave son. But that dream wasn't sweet reality because it was Ranko who had saved her, and not her son. Time and time again, she felt she was close to him, catching glimpses of him, and she was so desperate that she had allowed herself to be fooled by that Ryu Kumon boy who had impersonated her son and stayed at her home for a few days. Even though the boy wasn't her son, the idea of her son being home was a welcome fantasy.

Ranma was a girl? How was this possible? She kept staring, wondering, trying to grasp what had happened. There was no doubt that the boy who was standing on her doorstep was a fine young lad, strong, handsome, manly. Yet, he was Ranko for a few seconds and he changed before her very eyes? How?

Minutes passed, then an hour, as she lay there, numb, hoping for an epiphany to occur that could reconcile what she had seen and heard. The one in the red uniform, Sailor Mars wasn't it? Told her that her son was fighting the demons in their home dimension. Was that what happened? Was everything she had heard on TV had been a lie? What had she done?

The news had been brutal to Sailor Sun. There were several commentators who seized on the fact that she had been waging a one-woman war with the demons and gave little regard to collateral damage. Her attacks were vicious, swift, and she injured people by the shock waves of her wake as she ran at insane speeds to her targets. Some people, who were later discredited for faking their injuries, had claimed that Sun harmed them and were demanding compensation from the Japanese government. Hundreds of people's homes, vehicles and businesses suffered losses from the attacks, and without Sun to defend herself in the public eye, the tabloids pounced.

She took a gulp of air and grabbed her pillow in shame. She believed them! She trusted them, and they lied. When she saw Sailor Sun, she wanted to spit in her eye and tell her she was a coward, a disgrace to the uniform and she should pay for her dishonors. The other Sailor Senshi were always happy to have their pictures taken, especially Mars and Jupiter, and Sailor Moon always had a word of encouragement for the populous at large. But Sailor Sun was always the no-show, as if she had something to hide. The newsreaders argued over what could have been her secret, a jilted boyfriend, a long owed debt, and the most popular; she had killed someone out of incompetence or carelessness.

There were cries in the media for her dismissal, but when Sailor Moon came on TV, she defended her fellow teammate and quashed the rumors. Still, some doubt lingered among the older, more mature crowds. The kids were all excited about Sun's appearance and several young girls were begging to be chosen to join the Sailor Senshi like Sailor Sun, but an overwhelmed Sailor Moon declined all of those pleas.

As she had when she entered the pact, she had done it again. She acted before she knew all the facts. She allowed her husband to make that stupid oath and she believed he be gone for a few weeks, maybe even a year at most. The letters Genma sent her were of little comfort and all the postmarks were from every point in Japan and overseas so Ranma was seeing everything the world had to offer. Now, she saw Sailor Sun, and she judged her a coward despite the recent TV retractions. Finding that Sailor Sun and her son were the same person, a womanly man, a concept she reviled, she judged and too quickly. Absorbing all the words from the Senshi, it boiled down to whom did she trust, the Sailor Senshi as a whole, or television news that flip flopped on who they rooted for every day?

The tanto wasn't enough to atone for her sins. She needed a slow and painful death to pay for her mistake. Something to regain her honor and to show her son that she didn't mean to say those words; they were spoken out of years of sorrow and frustration. She wanted to get to know him, listen to him, be a part of his life, and only after knowing who her son really was, could she honor the pact and declare her son a man or not.

The pact? Was that really worth anything anymore? Had its meaning faded over the years? No, Ranma must uphold the honor of the family as required by tradition. *But had he fulfilled it? Yes*, she surmised. He had earned the respect and a place amongst the Sailor Senshi and that alone was an honor that any family would consider their daughter a true... Woman among women? But Ranma was a man, wasn't he? There were the times that Nabiki said he was a cross dresser, and there were those times she thought she saw him in women's clothes and those were certainly not the acts of a manly man. What if? What if he had sacrificed his

manhood for the greater good? Would becoming a woman be considered a manly act? It was well known that Sailor Senshi were women and men couldn't be one. What if that was the condition? Become a woman, and help the greater good, forsaking himself before all others. Was that the ultimate act that had earned their respect?

What did this all mean? Did she lose a son, and gained a daughter? Was it so terrible to have a daughter, a daughter like Ranko? For a girl, she was certainly a tomboy and her language was crude and unrefined, but she knew her way around a kitchen, and she always tried to please her elders.

Ranko... My daughter? She had always wanted one, but fate decided it wasn't to be. Had fate changed its mind? Did the ancestors decree that she had borne a daughter and not a son and some mystical force had corrected the error?

All of her thoughts didn't comfort her as each answer she deduced brought more questions. But Ranma's last words were the one that mattered the most. To him, the contract didn't matter anymore. Ranma, Ranko, and Sailor Sun had told her in one voice that Akane was worth more to him than the honor of the pact. No matter what she thought, he was going to continue and make Akane his bride.

He was going marry Akane; the motherly woman smiled and finished her chain of thought, *how manly. My son has truly grown to be a man.*

She reached over and picked the cloth wrapped sword held it close to her chest. It gave her little comfort, but all she could do was wait for absolution, for forgiveness, or final judgment.

Cologne gave a bow of respect to the triumphant warrior in front of her and remained silent as Akane turned around and stormed off. Her posture, her musculature, her use of Amazon techniques all told the elder volumes of what had happened to the son-in-law for the last four months. She passed a quick glance to Shampoo, who was being attended to by Mousse, and resumed her vigil on the retreating Tendo. She focused and saw with other sight Akane's ki signature. *Amazing! That woman has increased her abilities four to five fold!* Shampoo didn't stand a chance against her. Akane knew it and used that knowledge to hold back her abilities at the onset to lull Shampoo into a false sense of security, a classic Saotome move. Ranma had trained her well.

That brought up another point. The son-in-law wasn't anywhere nearby. She would have sensed him, and that alone warranted investigation. Something had changed between those two, and whatever it was, it didn't bode well for Shampoo's future.

She would have to consult the elders about this new development. Convincing the son-in-law to return to China now was going to be much more difficult than ever before. Nabiki's treachery had done far more damage that the old woman had thought possible. The middle Tendo had to be watched from now on, if she was able to fool Cologne, whom else had she manipulated? Akane and Nabiki were a force to be reckoned with.

"Get up," commanded the elder in a tone that demanded obedience. Seeing no response, she hopped on her cane and landed next to her great-granddaughter and did a quick examination. The purple haired girl's arm was fractured, she had several lumps on her head, and bruises were forming on all the weak spots on her body, yet the face was intact. *So, Akane did follow the rules of fighting. She had control over her abilities after all. Perhaps,*

there was a way to benefit from this.

Mousse patted Shampoo on the foot and stopped, as the texture didn't seem right. He adjusted his glasses, realized his error, and moved over to her hand where he resumed the patting. "Shampoo! Speak to me."

"She will be in no condition to answer for a while. Miss Tendo made sure of that."

"Why, that!" Mousse growled and pulled out a mace and chain. "How dare you harm my darling Shampoo!"

Cologne whispered, "I have to see how she handles this." She pointed at a woman standing near the entrance of the Cat Cafe and in a loud tone commanded, "you there, watch over her. I'll return in a moment." She quickly gave chase after Mousse who had reached Akane in a flash. He swung his chain around and cast it at the Tendo and as it was about to make contact, the girl spun around with a cry of "Bakusai Tenketsu!"

The ball on the end of Mousse's chain instantly exploded at Akane's touch. She ignored the shrapnel and reached forward and grabbed the chain. With a hard yank, she flipped Mousse over her head and he landed with a splash on a bucket of water in front of a small grocery store. Akane dropped the chain and stared at Cologne. The two women paused, waiting for the other to make a move. Mousse the duck emerged from the bucket and pulled a dagger out from under his wing. Quietly, he snuck up on his target, hoping to use the element of surprise. With a kick backward, Akane punted Mousse the duck into the sky without dropping her gaze at the Amazon elder.

The old woman made a grin and gave a hint of a bow of respect. Akane returned the bow, took two steps backward, and then resumed her walk home.

She was indeed worthy of being an Amazon. Cologne mentally remarked as she waited for a moment for Akane to gain some distance before she returned to Shampoo's side. There, the purple-haired girl's bruises were forming and it was going to be a few days before her great-granddaughter was going to be able to move again. Cologne studied the hit patterns from the head to the toe. Other than the arm, none of them were going to leave any sort of lasting problem. The arm? Perhaps it was Akane's way of leaving a reminder that she was defeated.

Cologne's respect for Akane grew immensely. She gently picked up Shampoo and hopped into the Cat Cafe. Once inside, she called out to all of the remaining patrons. "Everyone, we're going to be closed for a few days. I kindly ask you to please leave immediately. For your troubles, your meals are on the house."

Wasting no more time, she zipped to Shampoo's room and laid her down on her bed. "You'll be well in no time. After that..." She contemplated her next move, not sure if the situation was even salvageable anymore. "We're going to talk."

Down the street, Akane kept walking, head held high and exuding with confidence. She kept her ki focused behind her, sensing for any sudden attack from the Amazon elder. She breathed a sigh of relief when the old woman's presence had gone out of range.

Akane turned a corner and walked another block to make sure she wasn't being followed. Finding an American style fast food restaurant, she entered and went to the first empty

booth she saw, sat down and relaxed. "How does he do that?"

Letting her guard down, she allowed herself to breathe faster to catch up on the oxygen she had been missing out on. Ranma had taught her that presence in combat was just as important as the combat itself. Despite the fact that Ranma couldn't bluff to save his life in poker, he mastered the art of bluffing during a fight. Akane was certain she could beat Shampoo, Mousse; she wasn't so sure, Cologne, no, she wasn't ready. Her bluff worked thanks to Mousse's attack. The fight with Shampoo was tough, the fight with Mousse wasn't a problem with him being turned into a duck so easily, but the young Tendo barely had any energy left after the battles that a fight with Cologne was out of the question.

The smell of the fries cooking behind the counter made Akane hungry. She got up to go to the counter to buy some when a familiar face approached her.

Sayuri, Akane's friend from Furinkan High school, was standing in the dining area. She waved and called over to the Tendo. "Akane! Long time no see!" Then she gasped, "what happened to your hair?"

Akane covered her head in embarrassment. "Nothing."

Yuka, another former classmate from Furinkan High School came up and she held her hands to her face in fright. "Oh, my gosh! Did Ryoga do that to you?"

Akane shook her head no, while trying to keep her unusually short hair hidden.

Sayuri took a step back, away from Akane. "You didn't do that on purpose did you? Oh, I hope you didn't have to pay them. Whatever salon did that; I'm never going there. I'm so sorry."

Juko, another girl from Furinkan came up to offer her condolences. "I think my big sister's got a wig she can let you borrow. It's pretty close to your hairstyle."

Akane glared at her.

"I mean, the way your hair looked like before it got butchered."

Akane quietly nodded in agreement and thanks. "Yeah, I could use it."

Yuka waved the others to the booth they were sharing. "C'mon, sit with us and tell us who did that."

Juko shook her head, "I'm never going to that place. Look how uneven it is. It's like your stylist took a pair of scissors and cut your hair off, blindfolded."

Akane groaned. This was not a conversation she wanted to have, "no, it's not like that. I was... I... I'm hungry. I'm going to get some fries, okay?" She made a step toward the counter with the idea of running out the door and straight home so she could put a paper bag over her head.

Sayuri held out her fries. "It came with my meal. I'm trying to lose weight, so I was going to toss them."

Mission, failed. Akane begrudgingly accepted the gift and sat down with her friends.

"Thanks. Juko, are you serious about getting me a wig?"

"No problem, my sister has a couple of dozen. She lets me borrow them all the time. I'm sure she won't mind."

Akane reflexively ran her fingers through her very short hair. "It's supposed to grow back soon."

"Not soon enough, girl." Juko took out her cell phone and made a call. "Sis? Hey, I got an emergency. Do you still have that dark short wig? You do? You know Akane? Can she use it for a while? Yeah, it's like what her hairstyle is, or was. That's the emergency. Cool! We'll be over in a jiffy!" She closed her phone excitedly, "problem solved."

Akane swallowed the last fry, crumpled up the empty container and tossed it across the restaurant and into a waste receptacle whose opening was only twelve centimeters wide. The other girls stared in amazement.

Yuka stood with her mouth open for a moment before she was able to speak. "Akane, I know you're good in basketball, but wow!"

"Yeah, basketball." Akane replied sheepishly and added silently, *I wonder how good I'll do on the court now?*

"They must have a great coach in Juuban, have you been on the team long?"

"No. I've been... Busy..."

Sayuri nodded in understanding, "was it the monsters they were talking about on the news?"

Akane shuffled her feet, and motioned toward the door. "Kinda of, but I'd like to..." She pointed at her hair. The trio quickly escorted Akane out the exit. In a little while, the girls got to Juko's home where they all gathered in young girl's bedroom. Juko's sister came in and after the obligatory gasp of fright, gave Akane the wig and a hair net.

Akane took a few attempts before she was able to get the wig on to restore her former hairstyle. "How's it look?"

"Hmm..." Sayuri looked on Juko's vanity for a suitable hair ornament, and sifted through assorted bows, clips and hair-bands and stopped on one that piqued her interest. Holding it out so Akane could decide, Sayuri smiled. "How about this? It will look cool on you."

Akane instantly recognized the red bow as one Sailor Venus usually wore. "Uh, no thank you. Where did you get that?"

Juko snatched it away and exchanged it for a light blue ribbon from the top of her vanity. "Hey, that one's not for her. Have her try this one?" After tossing the blue ribbon to Akane, she quickly slipped her red bow in a drawer and slammed it shut.

"Juko?" Yuka asked, curiosity heightened to the point beyond resistance. "What's in that drawer?"

Acting nonchalant and failing, she moved in front of the drawer and stood with her arms crossed in defiance. "My underwear, what else?"

Yuka and Sayuri exchanged evil glances and charged their friend. Yuka grabbed Juko and held her tight while Sayuri pulled the drawer open before their captive could react. Spotting a hint of orange, the girl's suspicions were confirmed. "I knew it!" Cried out Sayuri in glee. "And you said you didn't care about them!"

Akane was adjusting her wig while her friends playfully scuffled, before a familiar uniform went flying toward her. Without thinking, she raised her hands and was about to form a ball of ki to destroy it before she realized what it was and caught it just before it was to land on her head. She held out the mini-dress with the orange skirt and matching orange Sailor collar and sighed.

"Give that back!" Pleaded Juko and she pulled herself away from a now laughing Yuka. "That cost me a month's allowance!"

Akane tossed it back, shaking her head that her friends were closet Sailor Senshi fans. "You cosplay Sailor Venus?"

Without an answer, she put her uniform on a hangar and hung it proudly in her closet. On the floor, with the rest of her shoes, was a pair of Sailor Venus style pumps. Then she sat on her bed and sulked.

Sayuri stopped laughing and sat next to her embarrassed friend. "What's the matter? I have a Jupiter uniform." She looked up at Yuka. "Yuka?"

"Well..." She stuttered. "I..." Akane's eyes formed a glare, as she understood that her friends were all Sailor Senshi fans. *Traitors*. "I cosplay Mars."

"You know..." Sayuri looked in Akane's direction, with mischief in her eyes. "You could..."

Akane's battle aura engaged full force and she formed a giant demon's head against her friends. "If you say Sailor Mercury!!!!"

All of her friends reeled back in terror. Sayuri covered her face in fright. "I'm sorry!"

The Tendo dropped her battle aura and calmed down. She sat in the chair next to Juko's desk and buried her head in her hands in shame. "I'm sorry. It's... I've been through a lot." It was then, that Akane did something the trio had never seen before, she cried. "It's... I... You don't..." Tears flowed freely as she remembered those horrible weeks in the desert.

Yuka slowly approached Akane; fearful of triggering another dreaded demon head attack. She stood silently as the seated girl cried and spoke non-coherent syllables. Waiting patiently, the three girls gathered around their friend and waited for all the sadness to come out. After a few minutes, Akane was able to speak again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get angry at you."

Yuka put a comforting hand on Akane's shoulder and asked in a kind voice, the one of a true friend. "What happened, Akane?"

"I... I don't even know where to begin."

Juko shrugged and asked what was on everyone's mind. "How about telling us what happened to your hair?"

"You're not going to believe it."

"Akane," Sayuri started, shaking her head in disbelief. "You've been kidnapped by a giant blimp, you fought that eight headed orochi and you're engaged to a guy who turns into a girl. I'd believe it if you told me you're Amaterasu's avatar."

"Amaterasu?" Akane blinked at the mention of the name of the Japanese Goddess of the Sun. "For all I know, I'm engaged to her."

Sayuri giggled. "Now, I didn't mean it literally."

While huffing a private insult toward her fiancée, she looked away from her friends and stared out the window. "I don't want to think about that. I've had enough of Sailor Sun and her friends."

All three shouted in unison. "You know Sailor Sun?!"

"Here we go again," she muttered, hoping that the window was actually open wide enough for her to take a flying leap outside and escape.

"What's she like?"

"What powers does she have?"

"Can I get her autograph?"

"Does she have a boyfriend?"

Akane choked at Juko's question and immediately Sayuri patted her back in case she was choking. Akane waved her off, shaking her head slowly. "Sailor Sun? A boyfriend? Hee hee..." She laughed at some inside joke with a punch line that missed her friends by a kilometer. "That'll be the day."

"You mean?" Sayuri asked cautiously. "She's... Uh... Like Sailor Uranus?"

"No, she's nothing like Uranus. None of the Senshi are like R..." She stopped in mid-sentence, and sat back in the chair. "None of them are like her." She smiled cryptically. "Not at all."

"Spill." The three demanded together.

Akane held her breath as she thought about what to say, and none of the stories she could tell were ones she could share with her friends, no matter how much she wanted. She paused, thinking, and sank in her seat in defeat. "I can't."

The three gave the dreaded puppy dog eyes, the same ones banned by the Geneva Convention as a form of inhumane torture. "Please!"

Resistance to eyes, failing, failing, failed... Akane begrudgingly asked, knowing she was going to quickly regret it. "Okay, what do you want to know?"

"Well, is Sailor Sun dating anybody?"

"That's something I can answer. No, she's not."

"Is there someone she likes?" Asked Yuka, begging for any sort of gossip on the Sailor Senshi.

Akane dreamily nodded, "yes."

Juko was a bit more observant than the others. "Akane? Is there something going on between you and her?"

The famed Tendo panic response kicked into high gear. She waved her hands all around as she tried to avoid any more questions. "No! No! No! No way! Uh, uh! No!" She then took a step toward the door, and Sayuri blocked the way. Quickly, Akane took the other exit and dropped ten stories down, as she jumped out of Juko's families' apartment window. The Tendo landed in a bush, and ran down the walkway at high speed, into the street and out of sight, leaving a trail of dust in her wake.

The three girls took turns glancing at each other, the window and the fading trail of dust for a minute in silence. Yuka shrugged. "I still say Akane would make a great Sailor Mercury."

Sayuri put a finger to her lip as she pondered something. "You don't suppose?"

"Akane?" All three stared out the window again for a moment. Yuka shook her head. "Couldn't be. Ranma would want to join them first."

"Ranma?" Exclaimed Sayuri in utter shock. "He'd rather jump in front of a train instead of... No, he did wear the cheerleader's uniform against Mariko."

"And he did represent the women's gymnastic team a couple of times."

"There was the martial arts ice skating tournament."

"Didn't he wear a bunny suit to sell okonomiyaki against that Tsubasa girl?"

"Wasn't there that time he actually thought he was a girl?"

Together, they all went, "hmmmmmm..."

Akane ran and kept running, away from her friends, away from her past and toward an uncertain future. "Dummy! Dummy! Dummy!"

She kept berating herself; both for allowing herself to be trapped by her friends and for letting her jealousy get the better of her. For months, all she did was fight a losing battle against her nature and she knew it was going to cost her dearly if she didn't change. She slowed down to a brisk walk, then a slow walk, and then leaned against a familiar wall.

She read the sign next to her, 'Furinkan High School' and rested her back against the wall to take a moment for reflection. Her head itched and she lifted her hand up to scratch only to almost knock her wig off. She jiggled the wig slightly to restore comfort and sighed. The words her friends said were played back over and over again in her mind and with each recollection, they cut deeper into her soul.

My fiancée is a Sailor Senshi, thought Akane as she studied the cracks in the concrete sidewalk. *It's not fair.*

Akane slid down to the ground and held her hands to her face, holding back the tears. The wig kept reminding her of what else she had lost. Once, her hair was longer than Kasumi's, but hardly a day had passed since Ranma's arrival to her home, that her hair suffered and the short hairstyle she had when she was little was reborn.

Kasumi would have a fit if she knew, Akane silently thanked her friends for the wig, but she knew it wasn't going to fool her sister. Ranma did his best to try to save her hair, and she was thankful for that.

"That jerk." Akane softly smiled. "He didn't come to watch over my fight." She purred and said the words of her sentence with pride. "My fiancée loves me. My fiancée..."

Akane reached up to brush her very short hair and sighed. With Sun tossing magical fire around like it was going out of style and youma goo being splattered everywhere, her hair ended up being a casualty of war. After weeks of fighting, it was a total loss. She cursed herself for letting Ranma cut it short the previous night, or burned short as the case really was. She felt terrible about her 'new look.'

It was almost as if she didn't have any hair. She growled at how her companion looked, with her gorgeous mane of long red hair, shampooed, clean, shiny and the young Tendo felt pangs of jealousy at how beautiful Sun looked. Akane's clothes were mostly clean from the washing they received yesterday which was after she had her first bath in a while, but now dust and fighting had taken its toll. One knee was exposed through a hole in the right pants leg and the seam of the right shoulder of her red silk shirt was about to come apart. Her black slippers fared the worst, acid from a youma attack had done a fair amount of damage and sheer luck kept the shoes on her feet.

Undaunted, she held her center and focused on her training. A brief moment passed as she collected her ki and she thrust her hands forward rapidly, removing the small stones from a group of rocks glowing red. In a few seconds, all but two pebbles were neatly placed in a small pile in front of her. The ones she had missed fell to the side but were successfully retrieved from the fire.

"Okay, Akane, you're almost there." Sailor Sun stood back, smiling with pride over her student. "A few more tries and I think you've got it down."

Akane shook her hands to relieve the pain from having dozens of micro-burns inflicted on them. "I need a break."

"Five minutes, then it's Breaking Point training." Sun scanned the horizon and walked ten meters away from their campsite, nervous about something. They were near the base of a cliff, over two kilometers from their cave, at one of the many training areas Sailor Sun had set up.

The Tendo gently shook her hands, trying to soften the stinging pain and found little comfort for her efforts. She moved away from the hot stones and found a large rock to sit on. From her vantage point, she could see the desert stretch out for kilometers, filled with dry riverbeds, assorted rocks and small dunes made of rust colored sand. Keeping a vigil, Sailor

Sun walked around the area, looking for anything out of the ordinary and displaying an unusual amount of jitteriness. In the many weeks they had been here, they were attacked every other day, but now, the attacks had increased to twice daily, and this worried them both.

Sun returned from her scouting and paused for a moment, sweat beading on her forehead. She glanced left and right as if she was checking if someone was listening, then took a deep breath and gulped. "I... Uh... Gotta ask somethin' that's been on my mind for a while."

"What?" Akane replied, curious at Sun's strange question and even stranger demeanor.

"I... I wanna know.... somethin'..." She gently nudged a small rock around with the tip of her red boot.

Akane's eyebrow twitched. "Know what?"

She slowly stuttered. "Will you ma... Uh, I wanna know if you wanna... You know. I..."

Sun kept tapping the small rock until it came into contact with a large stone, and the little one shattered. As if the action was a sign, Sun cheered up and gave her usual cocky grin and held her hands together in anticipation. Uh, are you ready to break some rocks?"

"Ready when you are." Akane nodded and stood up, excited for more training, and dismissed Sun's actions to stress. Living here was stressful to anyone, except for Jadeite and his creations.

The red-skirted girl led Akane to a group of large boulders at the base of a large hill, which were surrounded by basketball-sized stones. Sun went to one of the giant boulders and Akane stood by another. With a cry of "Bakusai Tenketsu," the pair pointed their fingers and poked the nearest stone. Dual thunderclaps shattered the quiet of the area as the boulders exploded into thousands of flying pieces. Akane held her arms up in defense against the onslaught for a moment and repeated the action. For several minutes, both women continued their training, Sun, so when the time came to rescue the trapped people, she could break all of the stasis crystals in a matter of minutes, Akane, for her endurance training.

Akane moved over to another boulder, as the one she was training on had completely disintegrated. Smarting from her injuries, she checked her clothes for more damage. Her left pants leg had formed a small tear on the side showing a small bleeding cut inside. "Now I know why Ryoga's so tough." She resumed her practice and was able to destroy the adjacent boulder when Sun made a soft whistling sound. The dark haired girl froze at the signal, and opened her senses to find where the threat was coming from.

Sun formed a ball of fire in her hands, and stood close to Akane. Wordlessly, she gestured to Akane to look toward the east. The pair held their defense poses as Sun took Pointe and they moved toward the small hill, expecting trouble.

Behind the pair, a portal opened, and a giant youma emerged. It roared at the two, and Sun threw her fireball at it. "Searing Plasma Blast!"

The creature's arm came off, which annoyed it, but didn't slow it down. The towering behemoth stood at eight meters in height, human shaped, orange skin, female, pointed ears, sharp teeth and a very bad attitude. It charged Sun who bounced out of the way. While Sun was mid-air, Akane grabbed a large rock and held it in front of her. She poked the rock away

from her face causing it to explode in the direction of the youma, peppering it with tiny projectiles to draw its attention.

Noticing the taller girl, the youma decided to make quick work of her and it grabbed a rock the size of a small car and hurled it at the Tendo, who leapt out of the way as it smashed down where she once stood. Behind the beast, came a taunt, "hey, ugly!" The creature turned around to find Sun holding a powered up version of her spell. "Give my regards to Jed." She hurled her spell at the monster that hit it square in the chest, and it exploded in a massive fireball showering the area with roast beast.

The two girls collapsed from exhaustion, Sun from the overuse of her magic, Akane, she was just tired.

Sun fought to stay focused, and was winning her battle to keep from falling asleep. "Man, that guy's persistent."

"I'll say," gasped Akane between breaths. "How many was that today? Three?"

"Small guy at the farm, small guy over there, and Goliath, yeah, three. But something's not right. That portal wasn't his style. It seems like it's a..."

"Kill them!" Another thing appeared coming over the hill and it charged the girls. Unlike all the other youma that they had encountered so far, this one looked like a giant woman completely covered in gray stones. She wore no clothing, but her rocky surface made having something to wear unnecessary. As Akane and Sailor Sun faced their new opponent, they both sensed something was amiss and jumped out of the way as a giant rock landed where they were standing. Akane pitched and rolled and avoided a barrage of small rocks being fired at her. She did a back flip to avoid another rock and as soon as she landed, she got a good look at her enemies.

They were surrounded. Six stone golems had encircled them and gave them no room for escape. Akane held her hands above her head and called out her attack. "Thunder Hammer Strike!" The bolt of blue energy lashed out and hit the lead creature, causing no damage.

The golem paused only to laugh. "You'll have to do better than that!" It lunged forward, only to have its face meet with Akane's foot. The Tendo lifted herself over the creature and jumped over it. From behind, she gave it another kick, which it wasn't expecting, forcing it forward and it landed on its belly.

Sailor Sun stopped punching the creature she was fighting and jumped backwards onto a pile of rocky rubble. "Back off! She's my fiancée! Searing Plasma Blast!" Sailor Sun launched her attack and it struck the golem in the center of its back, engulfing the thing in fire.

Sun laughed in triumph. "That will teach you to mess with the Saotome School... Of... Martial?" She stopped laughing as the fire subsided and the thing stood up with only a few burn marks on its body for its trouble, otherwise, it was at full strength.

"Kill!" It cried as it charged its new target.

"Uh, oh." Sun got slammed in the face by a stone fist and went flying into the air. As she was falling to the ground, her fiancée caught her.

"Now I get to rescue you, jerk."

Sun smiled. "Thanks, Akane." The two looked down at where they were going to land and both gasped in surprise. All six golems aimed their right arms at the two and their wrists popped up to reveal gun barrels. They fired hundreds of tiny rocks in their direction that only their Breaking Point training had prepared them to survive.

Akane held her arms in front of her body to protect herself as she fell. She rolled up into a cannonball and spun quickly to avoid further injury and it worked by making her a smaller target. Before she hit the ground, she unrolled and landed feet first with her left hand touching the ground and her right hand forming a ball of ki. Only on instinct, she fired at the closest golem. "Thunder Hammer Strike!" As before, the attack did nothing. She jumped back to avoid the creature's punch and glanced over to her fiancée who wasn't doing much better. Sailor Sun threw a fireball at one of the creatures, and the beast recoiled, and then continued its advance.

The dark-haired girl was running out of ideas. She did a kick to the cheek, then to the back of the knees, and finally, she grabbed a handful of sand and in an unsportsmanlike manner, shoved it into the eyes of her opponent and nothing she did fazed it.

She judged that the fight was futile and jumped back to retreat. Once there was some distance between her and the three golems that were attacking her, they once again raised their arms and fired their guns at her. Akane spun to deflect the incoming fire and flipped over a boulder for cover, the same one Sailor Sun was headed for. Both girls landed behind the rock and gave each other a quick glance before Sun peeked around the left side of the rock, and Akane peeked around the right.

Akane saw all six monsters coming toward them slowly. "They're not as fast as the others."

"No surprise there. That armor of theirs is slowin' them down." Sun popped back to strategize. "Magic ain't workin', any luck with you?"

"No, nothing I tried did anything."

"I'm thinkin' I should use Solar Flare, but Mercury warned me that if I do that, I'd be out of magic."

Akane watched, as the golems got closer. "Then we'll fight without it."

"We gotta, 'cause if Jed figures out I'm dry, he'll send more of his goons to finish us off. There's gotta be another way."

"How about the Breaking Point?"

"Nah, it doesn't work against living things. If it did, the ol' ghoul would have killed me when she poked me during training."

"We can't stay here."

"You're right about that." Sun looked behind the pair and for kilometers beyond, laid open desert peppered with small hills, giant rocks and dunes. Judging by the lack of defensive positions, their path of retreat looked bleak. "Can't go that way, we'd never make it."

"Well, I'm going to try." Akane jumped up and landed on top of the boulder.

Sun cried out, "Akane!"

From where she stood, she noticed one of the golems was a little farther than its friends. Smirking, she challenged. "Come and get me!" With that, she jumped into the air, bounced off the ground and jumped high to land on her target's back. Remembering her training, she touched the creature at just the right spot on its back and shouted. "Bakusai Tenketsu!"

The golem's friends didn't know how to react as they watched their companion shatter into thousands of pieces. They stood dumbfounded as another one of their rank exploded. Behind its remains, stood Sailor Sun, finger pointed forward and wearing a cocky grin. "Wadda ya know. It works."

Akane wasted no time jumping on the back of another golem and it too became nothing but grey gravel.

The lead golem took a step towards its group. "Keep them away from your backs." In a moment, it stood back to back with its closest ally, while Sun finished off the third.

Sun stood to face one golem, Akane on the opposite side, faced the other. Sun called out, "you thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

"Let's do it."

Together the pair called out, "Breaking Point technique revised, Boot To The Head!" United, the two girls jumped up, and kicked the farther enemy from each other, the one that was facing away from them, and the attack forced the two golems apart. Before the monsters could recover, both golems shattered from the follow up touches to their backs.

The two girls landed, barely able to continue. Akane gasped, "is that all of them?"

Sun also was gasping for air. "I think so."

Both of them fell over for a short break.

A minute passed, and Akane got her wind back, and she sat up. On her left pant leg were several new holes and the bottom of the right pant leg was missing several centimeters of fabric. "Great," she muttered, calculating how much time she had left before she would have to resort to making a bikini out of Ranma's shirt and pants. She deduced that she was changing her style of clothing in less than a week.

Something was different now and Akane tried to put her finger on it. She looked around and saw the remains of golems and they didn't appear to be trying to come back to life. The dust from the giant youma that came out of the portal, the distraction attack, had already disappeared. Then she noticed Sailor Sun.

The Senshi was standing there, with her hands low and her face high. It was the expression on her face that was different. It wasn't the usual cocky smile, or the arrogant manner that she usually carried herself with, no, it was a look that she remembered many years ago on her father's face when she won her first martial arts tournament. It was a look of pride.

Suspicious, Akane got up. "Ranma?"

Sun turned her face away as if she had been slapped. She slowly moved her head back, further angering her fiancée. Akane continued, "What going on?"

Sun nervously twiddled her thumbs. "Will you m..."

"Well?"

"I... You see..."

The Tendo crossed her arms in frustration. "Is that all you got to say?"

"Akane, I. Uh..."

"What?"

"I... I've been meanin' to ask. But... I..."

Akane stared Sun down, waiting for her to say a complete sentence. "Ask what?"

The Senshi gritted her teeth. Why was it so hard? "When we get out of here... Will... Uh... You know?"

Akane held her head in her hand and massaged her temples to ward off a headache. "Know what? Ranma, we gotta go before they come back, so if you have something to say, SAY IT!"

"W..." Sun stammered, using all of her willpower to say what was on her mind. "It's been hard. I'm so... I... What I'm tryin' to say is... Well, the last couple of weeks, I've been thinkin' about us and I... I... I'd..."

Akane rolled her eyes.

"I..." She closed her eyes and focused. *Use the Heart of ice, keep cool Saotome, you can do this. She already knows how I feel. She read the note. She...* Opening her eyes, she lowered her head. "I ain't got nothin'. I'm a martial artist, and I know it's not good for much money. I ain't gonna steal like Pops. I... I'm gonna run the dojo some day, and I know it's what I want to do, and I... I... I'd really like it if you'd b..."

Akane listened intently, not knowing what Sailor Sun, Ranma, was talking about. It barely made any sense.

Tears slowly formed under Sun's eyelids as emotion took over. "I... Oh, Akane, when you disappeared, I couldn't imagine a life without you. I was so scared. I did things I ain't proud of because I wanted to tell you I..."

She whispered. "I know." She took a few steps forward to get closer to her fiancé but as she was about to make contact, Sailor Sun held out a hand to stop her. Akane stopped, perplexed.

"You know all the stuff that happens to me." Sun pulled on her sailor collar, "and I have no idea what this is going to do to us, but I do know something. Akane..." Sailor Sun pulled in all her strength, her courage, and her will power and got down on one knee. She was a man and men did it this way. "You know I ain't got no money, and being a Sailor Senshi doesn't pay anything so I don't know if I can ever get you a ring you deserve."

A shiver went down Akane's spine. She's not going too...?

Sun reached out and held Akane's left hand in hers, "I can't think of being with anybody else but you. I want you to know that even though I got nothin', no money. I can give you somethin' else. I can give you my heart. You know, me... What I'm tryin' to say is, Akane." Sun took in a deep breath, closed her eyes and focused harder then she have ever done before. Slowly, Sun opened her blue eyes and looked deep into the brown eyes of her fiancée. "Akane, will you marry me?"

Akane froze. Before her, Sun's eyes glowed with love and respect. The former she knew she had, the latter, she had craved and it was being offered, willingly, without the use of threats, potions or magic. The Tendo girl was speechless, and as the seconds passed, Sun's expression slipped from hope, to rejection. The redhead softened and closed her eyes as if she going to cry.

The Tendo fell to her knees, held Sun's hands tightly and nodded slowly, with a growing smile of joy. "Yes. Yes, you idiot. Yes!"

The pair lunged forward and held each other, and happily cried.

Please review my story on fanfiction.net at <http://www.fanfiction.net/secure/review.php?storyid=4088438&chapter=3>. It makes me feel oh so happy and keeps me from rambling on and on about how your whites would be best cleaned with Tide with bleach.

Chapter 4, What The Future Brings

I don't own these characters. Please don't sue me, kill me or give me chicken pox.

Kasumi hung the laundry on the clothesline like she had done thousands of times before. Using careful precision to maximize the use of sunlight, each and every article of clothing dried without creases or wrinkles. She labored for a dozen minutes more as she placed her sister's clothes, her father's linens and the families' houseguest's things one by one on the thin weatherproofed cord. One article of clothing caught her eye from Grandfather Happosai's 'collection.' It was one of Ranko's bras.

Today is the day they come home, she happily thought as she removed the garment from Happosai's pile, and placed into one for Ranma. It will be good to see them again. It's been so long since they've been home.

She hummed a tune her mother used to sing to her, and picked up the clothes basket to return back to the laundry room. As she entered, she found her sister, Nabiki, shaking her head as if she was disappointed in something. The middle sister sighed, "you'd think they'd learn by now, sis."

Kasumi shrugged at the inevitable. "I know. But it's what father wants."

"What father wants and what reality gives him are totally opposite things. You know that Akane would never agree to this."

The eldest Tendo sister sighed in agreement to Nabiki. She looked down at her laundry, trying to reconcile her feelings about the matter. "Father seems to think so."

Nabiki's frustration showed only for a second from beneath her cold and uncaring exterior. "Maybe if he had some of those love mushrooms from the mushroom temple. Even when those two ate them, it didn't last. You know as well as I, that they're too young. Heck, from what I know about the law, it says they're too young to be married anyways."

"Father already took care of that, remember?"

Nabiki gritted her teeth in anger. "Yeah, but even with parental consent and the court order he got by being on the city council, it's still wrong."

"It's not our place to disagree with father."

"Maybe if it was the fifteenth century. But things are different. I know about the tax laws, and why he wants the marriage to take place, but couldn't he wait a few years? At least after we're sure that this is what they want? I mean..." Nabiki leaned against the laundry room wall as her older sister placed the basket on top of the washing machine. "Akane isn't ready and she sure isn't interested in marrying Ranma."

"Don't be so sure of that." Kasumi replied smugly. She took out the few articles of clothing she had liberated from Happosai's collection and sorted them, bras first, panties second.

"Akane not being interested in Ranma? That's something I'm sure about. If daddy thinks he's going to get Akane to agree to go through with this because of that little surprise he got, he's right. But will it keep them out of divorce court? Heh, heh..." Nabiki snickered. "I don't think so."

"You underestimate those two. All they need is a little coaxing. And what surprise are you talking about? I know that the decorations he ordered are a bit much but once they know what's at stake, they will agree."

"Are you talking about this?" Nabiki slid open a closet door, and inside was a wooden cask that was large enough to hold twenty liters of liquid. Stenciled on the side of the barrel was a very familiar word, 'Nannicuan'.

Kasumi dropped her head low. "Nothing escapes your attention, does it?"

Nabiki slammed the door shut in disgust. "Not when Daddy paid for it with the household account." She crossed her arms and shook her head some more. "Do you know how much that thing cost?"

"For Ranma's sake, I think any price would be worth it. You know how much a cure for his curse means to him."

"But to use it to force him to marry Akane? Or worse, force Akane to agree to a marriage she doesn't want? They'll get a divorce or kill each other before the year is out! Doesn't he see what's wrong with that?"

Kasumi folded the last of the clothes, and quickly piled them into her basket so she can deliver them to their respective owners. "There's nothing wrong with that. They're going to marry anyways. What harm is it if they marry in a few days instead of a few years?"

"What harm is it? Listen to what you're saying! Akane hates him. He hates her. It's obvious with how much they're fighting. I'm shocked that one of them hadn't come back here or ended up in the hospital already. I'm still wondering how those two went on a training journey together for weeks and not ended up on the evening news. It's got to be a ruse of some kind."

Kasumi gestured to the door. "Follow me, I've got to put these away."

"Lead the way." Nabiki stood aside to let her sister pass, and she followed her out of the laundry room. She shot a glance at the far side of the house where Mr. Saotome and her father were outside on the porch, playing their usual game of Shogi. Shaking her head in frustration, the middle Tendo continued up the stairs and followed Kasumi into Akane's room. There, Nabiki shut the door and blocked it by standing in the way, arms crossed and her toe tapping the floor. "Okay Sis, don't avoid the issue. They're not ready and you know I'm right."

"It's not like we have a say in the matter. Mr. Saotome and Father have made the arrangements already."

Nabiki happened upon a picture of P-Chan on Akane's dresser. She looked at it and groaned. "I know about that too. If the minister were available today, they'd be married by tonight. At least they've got a few days of freedom before Daddy springs this little surprise on them. I

don't plan stick around when they find out."

Kasumi asked incredulously. "You're not going to tell them, are you?"

"And put up with three days of yelling, screaming and destruction? No, thanks, I'm kind of used to the peace and quiet for the last few months and I'd like for it to stay that way for at least a little bit longer."

"Yes, it has been a bit quiet around here. Not many of Ranma's friends stop by anymore."

"That's because they've been running all over Japan looking for them. I made sure they knew those two weren't here."

"Yes, I know. Shame on you, it wasn't very nice."

"Nice? You think Shampoo's being nice when she busted down the front door with her bicycle when she came around? How about Ryoga and his 'Ranma Saotome, prepare to die!' speech? Or what about Kodachi with her little ninja minion? Don't get me started with Kuno-baby. At least Kuonji seems sane, but I have my doubts about her too."

Kasumi acted oblivious to her sister's outburst. "They do bring food and gifts when they stop by. They have their unique ways of showing affections, and they at least display good manners."

"Last time someone stopped by to show good manners, we had to rebuild the back wall of the dojo."

Kasumi corrected her. "Mr. Taro was here visiting Grandfather Happosai, not Ranma."

Nabiki feigned ignorance as she held a hand to her chest. "Oh, how could I forget? Especially when he got mad because Happosai wasn't here and he smashed the wall looking for 'the cross dresser.'"

Kasumi finished replacing the last of Akane's 'borrowed' underwear and slid the drawer shut. "That was a simple misunderstanding."

"Everything is a misunderstanding around here." Nabiki looked at her watch and sulked. "What do you know? They're late. Well, it was fun while it lasted." She turned the knob and opened the door, pausing for a moment and she muttered under her breath. "I'll go barricade my room now. You know the town knows they'll be here today."

"Yes, they do have a way of finding these things out."

"Yeah, they do." The middle Tendo left Akane's room and entered her own. Shutting the door softly, she engaged the lock and quickly sat at her desk. She pulled out a sheet of paper from under her blouse and read what was written on it. Smirking, she opened a drawer and took out a few ornate envelopes and finely crafted invitations. She selected her best calligraphy pen and carefully and methodically began to write in some names. "Akane, this is for your own good."

Ranko's nap was interrupted by a familiar voice accompanied by a light tap to her knee.

“Hey, jerk. Wake up.”

The redhead mumbled something then turned to her side.

Her new companion waited a few seconds, and then poked Ranko on the seat of her pants. “We’re late.”

She quietly muttered. “They can wait.”

Akane kneeled down next to her fiancé and in a singsong voice replied. “They’ve waited all summer. Of course, if you want to miss Kasumi’s dinner...”

In a flash, Ranko was up, brushed off and ready to go. “Why didn’t you say so? Let’s...” Ranko’s smile turned to an expression of puzzlement and she pointed a finger at Akane’s head. “Uh... Akane?”

Akane looked up from her kneeling position and then stood up. “What’s the matter?”

“Your hair? How did you grow it back so soon?”

The Tendo grinned. “Sailor Senshi magic, of course.”

“Huh? Did I miss something?”

“No, it’s a wig, stupid. I bumped into some of my friends from Furinkan and they helped me out.”

“Hmm, it doesn’t look bad at all. I think if you...” Ranko formed a ball of ki and nipped off some excess hair from the wig and with lightning speed she had it trimmed to the previous length before their adventure in Jadeites’ world. “That should do it.”

The Tendo reached up and felt that her wig had been tampered with. “What did you do? You had better not have ruined it!”

“It looks good. See for yourself. Now where... Ah...” Ranko peeked around and spied the public restrooms down the end of the path. Shortly, the pair were inside the ladies room after a moment of coaxing for Ranko’s sake. Akane looked at her reflection in the mirror and admired Ranko’s handiwork.

“I guess if the dojo doesn’t work out, you can get a job as a hairdresser.”

“Uh, I’d rather not.” Ranko turned on the tap and ran her hand under the water, waiting for it to heat up.

Akane wordlessly left the restroom, walked down the path and waited patiently. A moment later, her fiancé in male form emerged from the restroom, chased by two older and very angry women. “Someday, he’ll learn.”

Minutes later, the pair were walking towards the direction of the Tendo Dojo. Ranma kept looking in all directions while Akane ignored him. “I think you lost them.”

Ranma kept his vigil. “Man, I never thought a purse could hit that hard.”

“You’d be surprised what some women carry in their bags.”

Ranma rubbed the bump on his head. “I dunno. The way it hit me, I could have sworn she had a brick in there.”

“It’s your own fault, you know.”

“It’s not like I did anything.”

Akane stopped in mid-stride and she grabbed Ranma’s arm, stopping him in the process. She then reached for his hand and playfully slapped it. “That’s for being a guy in the ladies room. What did you think was going to happen?”

“But I wasn’t doin’ nothin’! Geez, it’s not like I’m the ol’ freak.”

“You’ve got a lot to learn about being a woman.” Akane started again to walk toward home.

Ranma angrily retorted. “Who said I wanted to be a woman?”

“You were one for a couple of months. After I tell Kasumi what happened, she’ll make you some red beans and rice.” Akane stuck her tongue out. “Welcome to womanhood.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Why do you want me to eat red beans and rice anyhow? That’s only something girls do.”

“You forgot about your little bleeding problem?”

“No, I didn’t forget about that. I’m thinkin’ of seein’ Dr. Tofu next week and seein’ if he’ll take an X-Ray or something and make sure I healed up properly.”

Akane summoned super human strength to keep from bursting out laughing. “Oh, I can’t wait to hear what he has to say about that.”

Ranma noticed Akane’s smirk. “It’s not funny. I could’ve bled to death.”

“Sure. Yep. Anything you say.”

Ranma growled and slowed down his walk slightly. “You’re not taking this seriously.”

“C’mon, let’s get home before it gets dark. If you’re lucky, Kasumi can make your special beans tonight.”

Ranma stared dead ahead, in front of him was a paved road with houses on the left side and a tall chain link fence bordering the canal on the right. Ranma focused his senses and walked a little faster to catch up with his fiancée. “Akane, you know that ol’ bat you use when you’re playin’ softball.”

Akane turned to look at Ranma. “Ol’ bat? What are you...?” She was about to slow her pace to continue her question when Ranma grabbed her hand and led her toward home at the speed of a brisk walk.

Ranma’s attention remained focused on a light pole, even as they quickly passed it. “Yeah, that thing. Don’t you worry about spectators?”

The worried look on Ranma's face clued the Tendo in on what was going on. "Yeah, do we have one?"

"At least one. I've been meaning to ask. How'd Shampoo take the news?"

Akane grinned evilly. "She took it lying down."

"Did she at least get the message?"

"I think so. I hope so."

In a slightly louder voice, Ranma replied. "Good, I don't want to deliver the message again 'cause I'll be delivering it personally."

In moments, at their hurried pace, they reached the end of the block and turned the corner and disappeared out of sight. Appearing from behind the lamppost, Cologne balanced silently on her gnarled walking stick. "Message delivered son-in-law. If there was any doubt in my mind, it's gone now. What happened to you? This doesn't bode well for my great-granddaughter."

A few minutes later, the pair reached the rear entrance of the Tendo compound, a place they hadn't seen in quite some time. Ranma and Akane breathed a sigh of relief before they burst through the gate and into the rear entrance.

Akane was the first to enter the house. "I'm home!"

Kasumi rushed out of the kitchen and held out her arms. "Oh, Akane, it's so good that you're... What happened to your hair?"

Akane's face fell and she reached up to touch the top of her head. "You can tell?"

Kasumi lifted up her hand and with a gentle nudge of her index finger, she pushed the wig back into place. "There, now no one can tell. What happened?"

"I'll tell you later. How have you been?"

As the two descended into idle chit-chat, Ranma slid away and crept into the kitchen, looking for a snack. Behind him, crept his father and Mr. Tendo who were hiding implements of persuasion.

"You don't need that, Pops. You can get the ceremony started." In a blur, Ranma stuck out his finger twice.

The men froze in mid-strike. Both of their mallets exploded, showering the fathers with hundreds of wood fragments.

Genma brushed the particles off and crossed his arms in suspicion. "This is some sort of reverse psychology isn't it, boy? You're saying that to fool us."

Ranma rummaged through the freezer and pulled out three tubs of ice cream. "Nope. I wanna marry Akane. When can we do it?"

“But... But...” Stuttered Soun as he held up his hand and waved it pointlessly. “I... You... Akane... Akane!” He turned to the open doorway and called out for his baby daughter. “Akane, I need you to come here.”

“Yes, daddy?” Akane entered, all sweet and innocent. She growled at Ranma, then dropped the act and stood at his side and held his arm.

Ranma held out a tub for Akane. “Want some?”

“Would I? I hadn’t had this in weeks.” With the same efficiency as her fiancé, she grabbed a spoon and wolfed down the contents of the ice cream tub in seconds flat. Kasumi, Genma and Soun stood mesmerized at Akane’s incredible speed.

“Hey, leave some for me!”

“Sorry.” She sheepishly replied. “Beating Shampoo made me hungry.”

Soun blinked. “You beat Shampoo?”

Genma was speechless. He could have sworn he saw Akane use Ranma’s Chestnut Fist technique to devour ice cream.

Kasumi held her hands to her face in surprise. “Are you alright?”

Akane smiled. “Never better, I’m still hungry. When’s dinner? Oh, and can you please serve me a double helping?”

It was Kasumi’s turn to blink. Akane never asked for that much before in her life, even when she was training hard to beat all the boys who challenged her in the mornings last year at Furinkan. “Of course. I may have to make another dish.”

Akane snickered in Ranma’s direction. “Well, you could make red...”

Ranma poked Akane in the ribs and then tried to look innocent.

Soun held up his fist to his mouth and faked a cough to draw attention to himself. “Ahem. Akane, your fiancé said that he wishes to marry you.”

“Yes, that’s right. He proposed a week ago. When can we do the ceremony?”

The room echoed the sounds of three people hitting the floor at the same time.

Akane looked down at her fallen family. “Was it something I said?”

Ranma looked up from the tub of ice cream he was eating out of and shrugged. “Want some more?”

“You bet.”

Ranma lay down on the roof of the dojo and stared into the night sky. Thoughts of the day and the last few months circulated in his head and kept him from relaxing. He folded his

hands behind his head and watched the stars twinkle among the bright haze coming from the city around him. He remembered the times he lay on the ground, looking up from his bedroll at the sky when he was on a training journey and wondered in amazement at the difference the sky looked from the city versus the country.

Not very far above the horizon lay something that now had a hand in his destiny, the moon. *What was it like living there?* He wondered. When Usagi revealed herself to be Sailor Moon, she told him she was the Moon Princess, an idea Ranma laughed off as nonsense. Now, it didn't seem so far fetched anymore.

Princess of the Moon? Ranma shook his head at the absurdity of it all. *Ami was Princess Mercury and Rei was Princess Mars, so what did that make me? Prince of the Sun?* That didn't feel right to the young man lying on the tiles. *Princess of the Sun? Yuck!* Despite having a more natural sounding feel to it, Ranma wasn't keen on being Princess of anything.

A familiar tomboy landed only centimeters away from Ranma's left leg. Akane looked down at her fiancée. "Got room for company?"

He sat up on his elbows and gestured to his side. "Sure."

Akane carefully kneeled down and turned over to lie on the roof next to her fiancée. She felt uncomfortable for some reason and lifted up her arm to examine the underside of the sleeve on her dress and gasped at how dirty it was. "What?"

"If you're going to lie up here, you gotta sweep first."

Akane looked around for a solid object to throw. Finding none, she settled for playfully slapping Ranma on cheek. "Jerk! You could have warned me."

Ranma's evil grin was his only reply and he resumed staring into space.

Ignoring her dirty clothes, Akane lay back and looked up and saw nothing in particular. A minute passed with the couple admiring the scenery above and listening to the chirping of the cicadas hidden in the grass below. She turned her head and lovingly gazed at the face of her rescuer. "How are you feeling?"

Ranma continued to stare skyward, not moving from his position. "I dunno."

That wasn't an answer she was hoping for, but coming from Ranma, it was expected. She rolled her head back and watched a plane flew high overhead, running lights blinking, leaving a clear outline of the craft's silhouette. It kept her attention for a moment before a shooting star whizzed by in another part of the sky. "Look at that."

He nodded. "Uh, huh."

Akane closed her eyes and made a wish. She opened them and smiled. "Did you make a wish."

"Uh, huh."

Articulate as ever, jerk. Akane softly shook her head at the cluelessness of her betrothed, but it was one of the many flaws he possessed. Despite that, she knew he was the one she wanted to be with, even when he spent half of his time as a girl. Her face hardened and she crossed

her hands on her tummy, clasping them together with a little fear. "What's going to become of us?"

"I dunno. Probably go somewhere for honeymoon after Pops and your dad stop dancing around and get the wedding taken care of."

Akane's eyebrow twitched. *Leave it to him to miss the point.* "I mean, after that?"

Ranma shrugged. "Finish school, and teach at the dojo. With Ami's help, I'm passing."

Akane slapped her own forehead with the palm of her hand. "No." She sat up and looked down at the lying man. "I mean, what about us? Now that you're... You know? What's going to become of us?"

Ranma looked away for a moment. Uncertainty, guilt and lack of foresight were written all over his face. He sheepishly turned to face his fiancée again. "I dunno. I mean, Jadeite's toast, so he ain't botherin' us again. So, I dunno if I'm going need to do that stuff again. I was kinda hoping I don't have to, but..." He looked downcast. "Something tells me this is only the beginning."

"Where do I fit in all this? I want to fight with you." Akane's eyes were pleading.

"Fight with me? I..." Ranma's bravado faltered at Akane's puppy dog eyes. "You saw what those things we fight are like. You really sure about that?"

Akane nodded in understanding. "I've never been more sure of anything else in my life."

"What we went though was a walk in the park. I... I... I gotta train you, a lot."

"Ranma." Akane took her fiancée's hand and held it firmly. "I spent my life learning the Art. It's what I want. Don't treat me like a baby now."

Ranma's smile betrayed a hint of mischief, and a mixture of other playful emotions. Without another word, he turned his head to face the sky and resumed watching the stars. "Well, it's going to be a challenge."

Akane raised an eyebrow.

"I gotta figure out how to squeeze ten years of trainin' into a few months. I think you'll do okay."

Akane smiled in return and she too laid down to think about her future. Her smile widened as she gently caressed her husband-to-be's hand, because unlike many other times, he was caressing her hand back.

"Akane?"

"What, Ranma?"

"What do we do about the Kuno's?"

"Let's not spoil the mood by talking about them."

In the distance, an insane laugh was heard.

Akane moaned. "Speak of the devil."

SPLASH! Ranma was doused with cold water and a short old pervert was attached to her breasts. Ranko sighed. "We're home alright."

What do we do about Akane? Rei Hino pondered as she pulled out her robes from her closet. She quickly changed into the proper attire of a Miko and walked over to the chamber where the sacred fire was located. Finding the proper wood, she made the prayers and neatly stacked the small logs in place at the center of the pit.

"Hello, Grandfather."

Rei's Grandfather stood in the doorway and made a bow. "You did good. If your mother were alive today, she would be proud."

"What about father?" Rei growled. "Did he even ask about me?"

Her Grandfather looked away, waited for a moment, and left without a further word.

Rei closed her eyes and spoke words for Risa, her mother, to hear. "I know you were with me, protecting me when my friends and I needed your help. Right now, I need you more than ever. Please guide me, help me. Help her."

After the proper rituals were performed, Rei lit the wood and tended it until it was a raging inferno. She concentrated on the flames. Searching, seeking, gazing and questioning the images she saw. Fire danced in a rhythm all its own moving to an alien beat as it connected the real to the beyond.

The future, what will it bring for us? For her? She focused on the enigma named Akane and prayed for an answer.

A week later, at Dr. Tofu's office, which was located in an unusually quiet area of Nerima. The senior citizens flocked to the district because of the peace and tranquility that permeated the region.

The silence was shattered that day, as a young man screamed at the top of his lungs. "You mean to tell me that happens **EVERY (CENSORED) MONTH!?!?!?**"

Please review my story on fanfiction.net at <http://www.fanfiction.net/secure/review.php?storyid=4088438&chapter=4>. It makes me feel oh so happy and stops me from planting man eating vines in your backyard.