Sailor Ranko

A Ranma 1/2 / Sailor Moon Novel

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This story is set after Sailor Moon S, but prior to Sailor Moon Sailor Stars. Assume that some time has passed, and that the Senshi have aged to about sixteen (aside from the obvious exceptions of Hotaru / Saturn and Setsuna / Pluto. The Ranma characters are their normal age (sixteen). This happens prior to volume 33 of the Ranma Manga and before Ranma is revealed to Nodoka...

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Chapter 1, Life In Juuban

Ranma stared out the window of the train and stubbornly refused to acknowledge Akane's presence. Akane in turn refused to acknowledge Ranma's. Of all the bad ideas that their parents have had, this possibly had to be the worst. Sure, they could send Ranma off for a training trip, but why send Akane too? Ranma thought back on just how stupid his old man was. At least he hadn't engaged him to someone new this time.

"Boy, someday you will be the master of the Saotome School of Anything Goes Martial Arts. When that day comes you must be prepared to take over the dojo."

"Sure, Pops, no problem."

Genma hit his son over the ear. "Be quiet and listen to what I'm saying. Being able to fight is just the first step; a step that you're mastering well. But you must be capable of **teaching** what you know. And that requires brains. Brains, which you don't use."

Ranma glared at his father and prepared to hit him. From nowhere Soun appeared and joined in on the argument. "Take it like a man, Ranma. You can fight but you can't teach. Genma and I have made an arrangement with an old friend in Tokyo. You will stay at his dojo, and he will begin to teach you what we cannot about how to be a sensei."

Ranma bowed his head. He had to admit, they might be right for once. He knew there was a lot to know about teaching; he just assumed that he would pick it up as easily as anything else related to Martial Arts. Mind you, Cologne had taught him so many secret techniques, maybe their "old friend" could teach him the secret techniques of being a sensei. Besides, some time away from high school and that uncute macho tomboy can't hurt. "OK, Pops, Mr. Tendo, I'll do it. Hah! I'll be back here in no time!"

Genma bellowed as if he really knew what he was talking about. "Not so fast, boy. Didn't you realize that to be a fully recognized fitness instructor these days, you need qualifications? No? I didn't think so. This is why we've also found you a tutor at your new school. She's in your class, but everybody says that she's extremely smart, so she should have no problem teaching the likes of you."

Ranma jumped to his feet. *I still have to go to school?* "No way! I don't need no tutor!"

Grabbing Ranma's head, his father held Ranma's face into the report card that had come through recently, thanks to a home visit by Ranma's pint sized homeroom teacher, Miss Hinako. Each letter grade was covered in sad faces written in crayon. "Look at these grades. You passed, but only just. For shame, Boy, for shame!"

With a flip, the elder Saotome crossed the room and slammed into the wall upside down. "And whose fault is that? If I didn't have all these fiancées hanging off me, bugging me all the time, there'd be no problems. But, nooooo. **SOMEONE** had to get me engaged five times over. Didn't they, **POP!**"

Soun grabbed Ranma's shirt and began to sob. "Waahh, I know Ranma. But that's why we're sending you to another part of Tokyo. Get away from the fiancées; get away from the

distractions and fights. Sob, sob! Oh, Ranma. Say you'll go. Juuban High will be perfect for you."

Pulling away from the fountaining man before the water could trigger his curse, Ranma gave in. "All right, **OKAY** already! Just so I can get some peace and quiet."

Both fathers cheered up and smiled, patting him on the back. "Well done, Ranma! The next four months will pass so quickly; we'll hardly notice you're gone. We'll just tell everyone that you and Akane have gone to Hokkaido. Take care of my little girl."

With a burst of anger, Ranma grabbed his father. "**WHAT!** If you think I'm going anywhere for four months with that tomboy, you've got another thing coming."

"Boy, you agreed to this, have you no honor?" **SPLASH!** Mr. Panda looked up from the Koi pond snarling.

"Sorry, Pop. Were you going to say something?"

From behind Ranma, came an angry voice. "Tomboy? Ranma, you jerk!" **WHAM!**

Drifting back to the present, Ranma looked around as he noticed the train slowing. "Hey, Akane. It's our stop."

Without a word, Akane grabbed her things and left the carriage. Ranma simply looked around and threw up his hands "What did I do this time?"

Jadeite smiled and looked around. While everyone thought him dead, he had been too powerful for Queen Beryl to easily destroy. When her final attack had come, he had moved with the power of the magic. Instead of being forever destroyed, he had been banished to this small proto-universe. Rather than being the massive affair he was used to, with galaxies and overlapping dimensions, this universe had but a single dimension, and all that it contained was a single sun; a complete, stable universe. All the mass in existence was within easy reach.

In the years since his defeat he had spent his time and energy well. Since the universe was completely uninhabited by any others than himself, there were little of the life force energies needed for most magical spells. He did have completely uncontested sources of solar, geothermal, tidal and any other form of purely mundane power, however.

He had taken this power and his carefully husbanded supplies of life force to create vast machines to tap more energy. With this, he began to raise his new army. Over the course of two years, Jadeite developed a new level of youma. His new creations had more power, discipline and armor than ever before. He also made them in greater numbers than the short sighted Beryl would ever allow.

Jadeite had learned his lessons well. In the original invasion of the Moon Kingdom, the Dark Kingdom had commanded a huge army, an army that not even the combined might of the Sailor Senshi could fight at the peak of their powers. When Beryl had commanded their

forces to attack, they were under prepared, and the Senshi had destroyed them, forcing loss after loss despite the best of his plans.

Now Jadeite had an army, a secure base of operations and a place from which to launch his strike. His only problem was that the spell needed to bridge the gap from his universe to the one he wished to conquer required vast quantities of life force. For now, he would send through his scouts, and then he would gather the power from the people of Earth. Soon his army would crush all resistance before him.

Opening the portal, Jadeite sent through the first of his scouts. Scouts, which were the last of the youma he had brought with him when Beryl had tried to kill him.

Ami and Usagi walked down the street from school. They were both headed back to Ami's place for the night. Since the defeat of Queen Beryl, the Black Moon Clan and finally the Death Busters, attacks by demons had fallen to an almost non-existent level. So low in fact, that Usagi had enough time to study that she even managed to pass everything without too much difficulty. The only problem with few attacks was that Makoto was beginning to start fighting at school again. The Senshi managed to help this by letting Jupiter take the brunt of the occasional demon attack whenever they could.

"Hey, Ami! You wanna go out for ice-cream tomorrow morning?"

Ami looked a bit down at the suggestion, "Sorry, Usagi, I can't. I'm going to be tutoring a transfer student for the next few months, and since tomorrow is Sunday, he's coming over."

Usagi looked really sad for a moment, her lip trembling. She could fight youma in the name of the Moon for all eternity, but any rejection from her friends made her want to cry. Seeing the impending flood, Ami patted her on the back, "Come on, I'll race you home!"

Tears forgotten, the friends raced down the street, failing to see the light blue flash as a youma popped into existence behind them. The youma had bigger fish to fry than a pair of running schoolgirls. Searching for its partner, they decided it was time to check the state of the Sailors. One youma would hide, and then return to Jadeite after watching the battle. The other would openly attack some people for their energy. When the Sailor Senshi arrived - as they surely would - the scout would be killed. But to kill it, the Senshi would need to attack, and when they did that, the youma could see what powers they had gained in the last two years.

Akane and Ranma were almost at the dojo where they would be staying when Akane broke the silence. "Ranma, I'm sorry about being so cross with you all day. It's just, well, I hate it when our fathers force this sort of thing on us."

Shocked by her almost-apology, Ranma hesitated. When he caught her watching him, he realized that perhaps he should respond. "Um, Yeah. Same here. Look, just cause we're gunna be together for the next four months, don't mean we gotta be... um... you know... I mean, we can say we're each other's, uh, fiancée and stuff, but, I mean, let's not go overboard."

Akane stiffened at that. Then she calmed. She knew she liked him, but she was never sure if he felt the same. At least he had offered to be acknowledged as her fiancée. She thought back to some of the times Mikado wanted to kiss her: *'Akane is MY fiancée. Lay one lip on her and I'll kill you.'* This was an improvement over that, sort of. Then, he had just been defending her and now he was willing to admit his relationship in public. "I know what you mean. Have you decided what you're going to tell people about your curse?"

Ranma shrugged and tried to look nonchalant. "Nothing. I was sorta hoping we could do the old Ranma and Ranko thing again. I just don't want to run into mom and have people call me by my name and, well, you know. It's only gonna be for four months... Would... would you mind helping?"

Akane smiled. She'd have to try the cold shoulder technique more often. They had actually spoken several whole sentences to each other without him saying something stupid. Incredible. "Sure. But how about Mr. Miyagi? If we're living with him, he'll find out eventually."

Ranma grinned down at her and with a flourish reached into his pack, pulled out a pair of small bottles. "Thermos flasks. I stick one in my room, and hide one outside the dojo. If I top them up every day, I can get to hot water without a problem."

Akane was stunned. Ranma had actually thought of something like that himself. She could hardly believe it. "Wow, that's really clever. Getting you away from all of Shampoo's and Kodachi's drugs seems to have sharpened your mind."

Ranma stuck his tongue out, and then ran down the street as she chased him, laughing.

Mr. Miyagi watched his two new pupils with great interest. Both were just seventeen and looked like the sort of impressionable kids he had been training back in America. This was really why he had returned to Japan. Americans had no respect. Americans had no talent. Americans had... He could go on forever. At least these two already knew something of the Art, and if the boy's father was to be believed, young Ranma was actually quite talented.

After showing them where they could sleep, he took them out to the dojo for a quick sparing session. If he could judge their fighting ability, then he could plan how to train them. The fight went like every other session that Akane and Ranma had. She kicked, punched, and struck at him as fast as she could. He just dodged.

When Akane started to get angry, Ranma simply leapt over her and touched her back. "Come on, Akane. Your getting even slower."

They continued in this vein for a while, until Miyagi called them to a halt. "Akane, you're very good. Rarely have I ever seen a girl who could fight as well as you. While Miyagi-do is a powerful Art, I can only teach you few things you do not already know. I am afraid that most of my students have been new to the Art, and needed to learn a great deal in a greater hurry."

Akane smiled and basked in his comment. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had actually said she was good at something. She began to drift off, reciting his words to herself again when she heard him continue talking to Ranma. "But you, Ranma. You show great talent in dodging, but you never attack. The best defense in the world will never win you a fight. Why do you not attack her?"

Ranma looked at the floor. "Well, Sensei, she's a girl. And she's my fiancée. I can't hurt Akane. I mean she might be a violent tomboy, and a macho uncute chick, but she's still a girl."

Akane snarled and pulled a mallet out of nowhere. While Miyagi watched, she yelled at Ranma, chasing him around the dojo, hitting him much more often than she did during training. Finally, she smashed his head into the wall of the dojo, shattering the wood with his face. "Humph."

Mr. Miyagi watched this match in much greater awe. He had seen some great fighters, but he had never seen anyone take so much damage in such a short space of time. If she kept this up, her fiancée would be lucky to survive a week. When Ranma groaned and pulled his head out of the wall, Mr. Miyagi almost fell over. *That was impossible. No one could receive those sorts of hits and not be hospitalized.* But there he was, standing up, just lightly bruised. He was even apologizing for the unsightly behavior of his fiancée.

Akane malleted him again, knocking him to the floor. *Perhaps there was hope for this pair...* "Akane. I need to speak to Ranma alone. Would you like to take a bath? We will be in shortly."

Akane bowed and left. When she was safely gone, Ranma stopped playing at unconsciousness and stood up, looking for the entire world like he had just walked in, rather than looking like an accident victim. "Ranma. This is training. I understand that you do not like to fight girls, especially your beloved fiancée, but this is only training. If you expect to run a dojo some day, you must be able to fight and train the girls that you teach. Remember this: the best way for them not to get hit in combat is for them to get hit in training. Akane's attack is very good, but her defense is not. "You will change this. Each day the two of you will practice in the morning before school. When you train, you will hit her. It does not need to be hard, but it must be serious. Some day she may need to fight for real - although I doubt it, few people ever really need to fight. And if you do not hurt her now, she will be hurt worse or possibly killed. Do you want that?"

For a moment, Ranma looked terrified. Then his gaze steadied, and his facial features firmed with resolve. "Yeah, Mr. Miyagi. I... I just don't like to hurt her... I'd do anything so she wouldn't get hurt."

"Good. It is like a doctor. Sometimes we must do things that hurt to make things better. Now, before I begin to teach you to be a proper Sensei, can you show me how to fix that hole you made in the wall?" His eyes moved toward the hole then back to his student, and he gave a look of displeasure at the mess that was made in his dojo.

Ranma grinned. "Sure. We do this sort of thing all the time at home, err, Mr. Tendo's dojo. I'll have it fixed in a jiffy."

Mr. Miyagi held up his hand. "No, show me. I need to know this so I can fix the dojo in the future. I am not much of a carpenter."

Ranma looked around then waved at the hole. "Well, just get a few bits of wood, then put them in the right place, it's easy."

Patting the taller boy on the shoulder, Mr. Miyagi led him into the house. "Think on it tonight. Tomorrow, you can show me."

Ranma asked. "I was wondering something. How do you know my pop and Mr. Tendo?"

Mr. Miyagi replied sheepishly. "I met their master many years ago. He taught me a technique called 'Paint Fence'. Sadly, it was used only to repay debts that he owed to a bra factory." He added smugly, thinking about a former pupil he once taught. "I was able to use that and other techniques like it to much better use."

Ranma raised an eyebrow and was about to ask more, but Mr. Migayi returned a look on his face that warned Ranma that he wouldn't speak of this again.

Rei had been feeling nervous for the last few days. Something bad was going to happen soon. She didn't know what it was, but it was bad. Calming her mind, she decided the best thing to do was try a fire reading. Minako was coming over shortly; perhaps Rei could discuss whatever she saw with her teammate.

Building up the fire, Rei found her focus then looked into the fire and saw... fire. Sighing, she tried again, but all she saw was fire. *Perhaps I'm losing the ability, or maybe I'm just too worried*. Meditating for a few minutes, Rei opened her eyes and looked into the fire yet again.

All she saw initially was the fire, but then something more. It wasn't the fire that she was seeing; it was the **image** of fire. That was what the reading was showing. Subtle hints showed other things. Taking hold of the image, she dredged for more information. Images moved through the flames, the first being a red haired girl. She looked like she was fighting something, but Rei couldn't see what. Trying to remember her face, Rei look onwards. *She must be important, but who is she?*

Next came the Senshi. All of them, fighting again, side by side, all surrounded by flames, and they looked like they were losing. The images stopped.

Breathing deeply, Rei checked the time and was startled to see Minako coming into the small courtyard to join her. Standing, Rei quenched the fire. "Sorry, Minako. The reading took longer than I expected."

Explaining what she saw, and her feelings of dread, Rei found that Artemis had spoken of some strange red haired girl also. She couldn't be a Sailor, since all of them were accounted for. Could she be the cause of the feelings of dread and fire?

After training with Akane in the morning, Ranma led Mr. Miyagi out to the dojo to teach him about fixing walls. Repairs were something he was almost as good at as fighting. And since he still couldn't really hit Akane, perhaps he was actually better at fixing than fighting.

Grabbing a couple of planks he had cut to length, he placed them in the hole that he had trimmed. Nailing them in place, he showed the old man how well they fitted. Sitting back on his heels, he surveyed his work. Lovely.

"Not so good." Miyagi kicked his foot through the wall, destroying the repairs. "How can I repair it myself if you plug good wood into a perfect hole? Show me again."

After a moderately successful tutoring session with Ranma, Ami heard Rei and Minako arrive. While she finished up the last problems with her student, they could be heard talking to another girl who had arrived at the same time.

Heading downstairs, Ami introduced Ranma to her friends, and Ranma introduced Akane to Ami. Akane was a bit mad about this. It's bad enough that he's got a girl for a tutor, but does she have to be so cute? Smiling nicely, she began to chat, and found that Ami was actually too nice a person to bear a grudge against.

After chatting for fifteen minutes, Usagi arrived, late as usual. "Sorry everybody. I tripped and hurt my knee. Are we still going for ice cream?"

Akane and Ranma perked up at this, then Ranma looked a bit sheepish. Guys don't eat ice cream. Seeing the look on the face of Ami's student's fiancée, Rei piped up: "Say, do you two want to come with us for some ice-cream?" Rei added silently to herself, *why were all the cute guys already taken?*

Akane clapped her hands and immediately nodded her head. Even Ranma wanted to nod, but instead, he got a strange grin on his face. "Listen, I can't come, but if you wait a few minutes, Akane's cousin will be coming here to meet us too. She must be running a bit late. I'll head off now, and if I run into her, I'll hurry her up."

When the girls nodded their assent, Ranma ran for the door. As soon as he was outside, he looked for a handy hose. Typically, there's never cold water when you need it. After a few minutes searching, a woman wringing her washing out the window drenched him. After growling at her to be careful, she sprinted back to Ami's.

Stepping into the room, Ranko looked around smiling. "Hi, I'm Ranko Tendo. Pleased to meet you!"

Rei simply fainted.

Ranko stood there, nonplussed. "What's her problem?" She silently thought to herself for a moment while the other girls woke up Rei; *Oh, please don't let her be someone Pops owes money to.*

At the ice cream parlor, everyone watched in awe as Ranko shoveled away two massive sundaes. Leaning over, Akane whispered in her ear. "You know, Ranma, it's bad enough that you had to change to do this. If your going to look like a girl, at least try and eat like one."

Ranma glared back at her, obviously wanting to say something in retaliation, but the presence of the other girls precluded that. Rei kept giving Ranko quiet glances, and whispering to the other Senshi. They weren't sure what it was, but this girl was more than she appeared, and there was something serious going on here.

Akane was almost finished her ice cream when she looked at her watch and screamed. "Oh, my god! Mr. Miyagi will kill me! I'm late. I'm late! Ranm-Ranko, can you pay for this? I've got to go!"

In a blur, Akane leapt over their table and raced out of the restaurant. Ranko merely grabbed her ice cream and made sure she got to eat it before the others. Noticing everyone's gaze on her, Ranko looked up. "Well, if I'm paying for it, I'm eating it!"

Ami just looked at her. *How on earth could she keep a figure like that when she ate some much?* "Where's your cousin off to?"

"Oh, she's got remedial lessons with our new sensei. Clumsy tomboy can't even fight."

Everyone just stopped and stared. Ranko was mocking Akane because she was taking advanced classes in Martial Arts? "Are you sure it's wise to pick on her if she's the one studying Martial Arts?"

Ranko leaned back and laughed so hard she almost fell off her chair. "Hah! Akane couldn't hit me on the best day of her life. That's why Mr. Miyagi is teaching her."

Minako nudged Usagi in the ribs. "Say, Ranko. Do you want to go for a walk for a bit and then have dinner at my place? If we drop over to Usagi's, we can get some stuff and then invite Akane and Ranma."

Ranko grinned. "Hmm, dinner. OK, but... um... I think Ranma's still going to be busy. So I'll eat his share, OK?"

Minako grinned. Perfect. First Usagi's house to get Luna, then when she and Artemis were together, they may be able to get some advice on Rei's fire reading. After paying for the ice cream, the friends set off to look around the city and show Ranko the sights. Apparently she was just visiting her cousin for a while.

They were all walking down a wide street, looking at some clothes (much to Ranma's disgust, but hey, this was a free meal we're talking about). A terrible scream rent the air, and a wave of foul odor washed over them. Near the end of the street, some sort of hideous monster had leapt out of the alley, and was starting to hit people and destroy cars.

Ranko immediately pushed the girls behind her. "And I wanted to get away from this sort of thing. Go get help for these people. **I'll** deal with that thing."

Bounding forward, Ranko started yelling at the youma, trying to draw its attention, and lure it to a nearby mall. The Senshi were stunned for a moment. This crazy girl was going to get herself killed! This thing looked like one of the youma Jadeite used to send at them during Queen Beryl's attempt at world conquest. It would be a challenge for any one of them as a Senshi, and this girl had just run to attack it! Usagi took charge for a change, grabbing her transformation brooch and running to an alley. "We can't let it kill Ranko! Let's transform!"

None of the running people noted the flashing lights, which emanated from the alley as the four girls called for the greater powers. Magically their clothes changed, and the four sailor suited warriors for peace burst onto the scene.

Ranko had successfully lured the youma to more open ground: a plaza in the middle of the street. While the youma's four tentacles kept striking at Ranko, she dodged and flipped under them, occasionally moving in for a few lightning quick punches which sent the monster reeling, but accomplished little else, and taking a few blows in the process.

When Sailor Moon arrived, she struck a pose, and the monster briefly halted. As much as it liked fighting the human girl, it wanted to kill the Senshi. "Stores are there for all people to enjoy. To destroy them and hurt people is a thing of evil. Now the beautiful sailor suited warriors: Sailor Moon."

"Sailor Mars."

"Sailor Mercury."

"Sailor Venus."

"Shall punish you in the name of the Moon!"

Ranko took a moment to catch her breath as the stupid monster watched the Sailor Senshi. This monster was tougher than she thought. She had seen the Senshi on the news before, and always thought they were wimps, but if they fought this kind of thing as often as they did, she was willing to cut them some slack for their silly clothes and speeches. Sailor Moon seemed like she must have the same scriptwriter as Kuno.

When Moon was coming to the end of her speech, Ranko watched the monster turn to face them, and ignore her completely. *Fine, then. If that's the way you like it. I'll teach you to ignore me for some silly looking* ***girls***.

"MOKO TAKABISHA!"

Sailor Mercury was just preparing to launch a Shabon Spray Freezing when a blue bolt slammed into the side of the youma, blasting off a tentacle, and knocking the beast to the ground. All of the Senshi hesitated for a moment as Ranko prepared to unleash another attack.

Mars yelled as she advanced to cast her spell: "Sailor Mercury! Find out what that was! **BURNING MANDALA!"**

Even as Mars was speaking, Mercury was dropping her hands from casting her own spell and got out her computer. Venus immediately moved forward to guard her, and Moon joined Ranko and Mars, then launched her own attack.

Ranko's second attack was nowhere near as effective as her first, since the youma was now prepared for it. By the time her third ki attack struck, the Senshi were finishing the job. Their powers had improved since they last faced a demon of this quality. Three to one - and with Ranko's help - they quickly defeated it.

When the youma dissolved into a messy puddle on the street, the four Senshi converged on Ranko, who began to look at them nervously. "Err, did I do something wrong? Or, uh, did you want me to clean that up?" She hoped the last part wasn't the case, since that stuff smelled really bad.

Sailor Moon looked at the girl, who seemed a bit worried at being the focus of some of Tokyo's most potent defenders. "Miss, we need to talk to you about what just happened. Can you spare a moment?"

Ranko thought for a second. She had the worst feeling that she knew these people, and she wanted to find out more about that monster. "OK, but you'll have to tell my friends where I am, they should be hiding in the mall, or maybe they went to call for help."

Venus smiled. "They ran into us. I'll go off and tell them you're OK... they must be worried. Back soon."

When Venus left, Moon jumped to a rooftop, and motioned for Mars and Mercury to hold Ranko and follow her. Much to their surprise, before they could even touch her, she leapt up and stood beside Sailor Moon. "Lead the way."

Although they had to keep their speed down slightly, the Senshi were amazed at the speed which Ranko could maintain as they bounced across the rooftops. Moon led the way, with Mercury behind Ranko. The other two Senshi had headed off already and were gathering Luna, Artemis and their teammates.

They were headed to a small park not far from Usagi's home, and all the way Sailor Mercury kept looking at her computer, marveling at the readings she getting. The Senshi were magically enhanced so that they were stronger and faster than ordinary humans, so they simply took long, fast steps. This enabled them to sprint across the roofs of buildings, with the occasional jump over streets and alleys.

Ranko on the other hand showed only the slightest of magical aura, but there was assuredly some burst of energy every time the girl launched herself off the roof of a building. Instead of running like they did, Ranko simply **bounced**. Her feet hardly touched the roof before the computer registered a brief flash of energy in her, and she leapt to the next roof. All in all, it was a remarkable performance.

When they arrived in the park, Ranko looked around nervously. She had been running at her best speed - using her ki to boost her jumps - and apparently the Senshi had been fast enough to outrun her and bring in reinforcements. *Well, eight to one was a little bit of a worry*. Best to keep her avenues of retreat open until she found out what was going on. All that Ranko knew about the Senshi was what appeared in the news, and that wasn't much. She knew they enjoyed killing demons, and apparently they had been involved in some sort of inter-dimensional war. Ranko was a Martial Artist, and while she was happy to beat up monsters, she still didn't like to kill them. As a matter of fact, she felt concerned that the monster they fought today was the first creature that she had ever helped kill. As far as she was concerned, there was a fine line between killing monsters and creatures from another dimension, and killing seventeen year olds like her.

Ranko wasn't particularly keen on the Sailor Senshi.

Landing near the group of girls, Ranko looked them over, and they looked her over. It was Moon who finally spoke. "I am Sailor Moon, and these are the Sailor Senshi: the beautiful sailor suited soldiers for love and justice. We are extremely grateful for what you did. We just have a few questions which may help us in the future."

Studying Moon's face intensely, she didn't look at the others directly. There was something wrong here. She was not sure what it was, but something was appealing to her instincts. '*Run*' it was saying quietly. Not knowing what she should be afraid of, Ranko stayed, but she stayed tense and ready to fight or run. Spreading her palms, Ranko blinked and acted innocent. "Ask whatever you like."

Immediately Sailor Mercury stepped forward and held up her computer. Its screen showed an image of Ranko blasting the youma with a Moko Takabisha. "As you realize, the Sailors are magically endowed with our powers. My computer can detect any form of magic, but I still don't know what it was that you did to the youma. Would you care to explain it?"

Ranko laughed nervously. As the Senshi gathered around to hear her answer, she felt more and more nervous. Ranko tried backing up a step or two. "It was nothing, just a ki manipulation technique. Anything else?"

Everyone noticed Ranko's nervousness. She would charge a youma - a killing machine from another dimension - but she was afraid of the good guys? Moon was about to ask for a clarification when she felt something touch her leg. Looking down, she saw Luna look at her. "Meow?"

Luna was so smart. Every girl liked cats. If she showed Luna to Ranko, the girl might relax a bit. She was just bending down when Ranko moved. Back-pedaling furiously, her eyes grew to the size of saucers and she pointed with a shaking hand. "C - C - C- Caaaaaaats! Caaaats!"

After another moment's hesitation, Ranko turned and ran, sprinting across the park. Immediately the Senshi took after her, trying to find out what the problem was, but they could hardly keep up. She made it all the way across the park before a building stopped her. It wasn't the concrete wall that stopped her, she just ran straight through it. It was the steel pole behind the wall. Ranko blacked out.

Everyone gathered around and looked at the girl. Sailor Uranus touched the Ranko shaped hole in the wall in shock. "She just ran straight through it! I don't believe it! I mean, we could, because we're Sailors, but she... she just ran through it!"

Moon and Venus patted their cats while Sailor Saturn examined the girl. "She's just unconscious. How about we go back to your place, Sailor Moon? Isn't it close to here?"

Moon nodded in agreement. "Yeah, my dad is still at work and mom and my dumb brother are in Yokohama at some video game convention he likes. We can have some privacy tonight."

Hefting the unconscious Ranko, they ran. On the way, Luna made a wise decision. "Sailor Moon, I fear that your friend is frightened of us. I don't know why, but if you wish to talk to her in your room, then we will wait outside. Perhaps you'll be able to get more information that way."

With Ranko lying on Usagi's bed, Sailor Saturn placed a hand on Ranko's forehead. In moments Ranko regained consciousness and looked around. Her fear was gone, and Ranko felt relieved. It must have been the cats. Even if she could not see them, Ranko could sense the presence of a cat in the same room as her. Cats invariably could sense her too, because they would seek her out.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Ranko looked up at the Senshi, who had spread themselves around the room and were relaxing on various pieces of furniture as though they owned the place. Then she realized: they may be fighters for justice and garbage like that, but they were still young girls. Which meant she had been lying on some strange girl's bed! Akane would kill her! Ranko gulped. Better not tell her about this. She didn't like Ranma having a girl like Ami as a tutor, how would she feel knowing Ranma had woken up in a bedroom filled with scantily clad, good-looking girls? After all, they weren't called 'Pretty Soldiers' for nothing.

Seeing their guest getting nervous again, Moon pre-empted her question. "We've put the cats outside for the moment Ranko. Don't worry, they won't come in."

Ranko visibly sagged with relief. Then she realized: with the cats past the door, she was trapped here! Mercury tried again. "You were saying something about ki manipulations?"

Ranko perked up at the mention of her favorite topic, fighting: "Yeah, it's pretty simple. You just have to be able to focus your ki, and then you can project it out. Of course, the better you get, the more power you can deliver."

Sailor Jupiter leaned forward. "I've heard of people being able to manifest their ki, but I thought it was supposed to be almost impossible to use it as a weapon."

"Bah, you just need to be good. Here:" Ranko summoned a small sphere of ki. It was similar to what she had fired at the youma, only smaller and she held it on the flat of her palm. All the Senshi came in close, going 'Ohhh' and 'Ahhhh'. Mercury held her computer up close and admired the results.

"Amazing! This is just the sort of energy that Beryl was trying to harvest, but she's got so much! We'd better hope that they never return and capture you, they could leave most of Tokyo alone and siphon you like a tap."

Ranko gulped again, it was not a pretty image. Dissipating the sphere, she sat back and answered the rest of their questions. After almost an hour of talking, the Senshi decided there was not much more that they could learn, so Mars and Mercury offered to take Ranko home, to make sure she would not get lost in the unfamiliar city.

As they ran along the rooftops, Mercury bridged the question they all wanted to know, but none had been willing to ask. "Ranko, why are you afraid of cats?"

Stumbling, she looked around. "Cats? Where? Where?"

"No! There're no cats. I was just wondering what made you so frightened of cats. If you don't want to tell me, it's OK."

Ranko sighed and slowed to a walk. "It's OK, I suppose people would find this out quick enough any way. Ever since I was really little, Pops trained me in the school of Anything Goes Martial Arts. Any technique, he would teach me. Anything that was needed, he would do. Well, one day he was reading a training manual, and he found out about the Neko-ken. Basically it's a secret technique, which uses the unstoppable ferocity of the cat to make you unbeatable. Unfortunately, he didn't read the next page in the manual, which told him you'd have to be an idiot to teach this technique... Mind you, I suppose that means he would be able to teach it."

Mercury nodded. "Ah, so. When you realized just how ferocious cats are, you became afraid of them."

"Nope. From what he told me, I agreed and wanted to learn it. Then he wrapped me in fish sausage and threw me into a pit full of starving cats."

The two Senshi stopped dead in their tracks. "That's awful! No wonder..."

"Nah, that didn't do it. You see, I didn't learn the Neko-ken, immediately. So the next day, he did it again, and again, and again... I don't know how many times it took; I was only five or six at the time, so I couldn't really count much then. Anyway, it ended up sort of working."

They resumed walking in silence. The Senshi were shocked. The youma and Queen Beryl seemed like true demons, but compared to this girl's father, they were normal. "Ranko, this looks like where you said you were staying. If you see any more youma, just leave them to us. We don't want you getting hurt."

As they turned to leave, Mars offered a consolation to Ranko. "I'm sorry about your fear of cats, Ranko. But at least you learnt the technique, right?"

Ranko huffed. "Sure I learnt it, but considering it drives me completely insane every time I use it, it's not very good. Is it?"

There was nothing they could say to that, so they left.

When Ranma told Akane where he had been all evening, he glossed over most of it. He just said there had been a bit of a fight, and he had been able to watch the Senshi in action. When he admitted to being impressed by their powers, she poked him. "Ha, Ha! There's one thing you can never do, Mr. I-Can-Do-Anything! All the Senshi are girls! And you're a guy! Guys can't be Senshi!"

Ranma thought of how callously they had killed the youma. "Trust me, I wouldn't want to be a Senshi for nothing."

Jadeite read his report with only the slightest worry. The Senshi had become better, but he was better still. Not only that, he was not plagued by some of the strange ideas that Beryl held. To get energy, you don't harvest it all on the spot, you get enough for a stable gate, and then you bring the cattle - err, people - to you. Selecting a school on the map, Jadeite prepared one of his new youma. A small gate initially, then it could harvest the energy from the healthy, lively, young bodies, and afterwards the invasion could begin in force.

Realizing that sacrifice was a necessary part of war, Jadeite expected the Senshi to come in time to kill the youma. That was another problem of Beryl, he thought: every mission must be an unqualified success. Any losses meant a failure, and punishment.

Jadeite was more than happy to swap a single youma for the energy he would be able to harvest in the short time. A couple of days worth of preparation, and all would be ready. Ready for the end of the beginning, and the beginning of the end.

"All right, Mr. Miyagi. First you cut the wood, and you clean out the hole, right? All right, now if I place a piece of wood here, I can nail it in place. Repeat it a couple of times, and you'll be done."

Mr. Miyagi nodded. Then kicked a hole in the wall. "Better, but how do I cut the wood?"

Ryoga looked around and grabbed the man in the tartan skirt that was walking by. The man seemed to be torturing a cat in a bag under his arm... maybe this guy had once tried to learn the Neko-ken and was getting his revenge. "How do I get to the Tanaka Dojo in Hokkaido?"

The man only opened his eyes wide in non-comprehension at Ryoga's Japanese and continued on his way with the dozens of other bagpipe players marching in the parade.

Ryoga growled, scaring a small child who was watching the parade and the little boy clutched his mother in fear. "Ranma, you can't hide from me! Now, where did I put my map?"

"Are you thick? What do you mean you don't know how to use a saw?"

Mr. Miyagi shook his head. "Ranma, there is no need for anger. Stay calm, and tell me about using a saw. I came from a fishing village where I either fished or learned Martial Arts. I didn't do carpentry. Focus. Find your inner peace... Good. Now tell me of the saw."

"All right. When cutting wood, you use a saw. These sharp bits are called the teeth, and they are what do the cutting..."

Ranma and Akane walked to school, admiring what a beautiful day it was. With this much sun, it mean he wouldn't have to spend as much time hopping around hiding from girls who though he was Ranko, or guys trying to find out who the hot looking pig-tailed girl was.

Poor, Akane... it hurt her something awful the way that most of the girls in the school seemed to fall all over him. But one thing had come of being with Mr. Miyagi. He may not have taught Ranma about being a Sensei yet - he was too keen on his carpentry - but he had taught Ranma that even girls could cope with a little pain. Ranma couldn't remember seeing Akane so happy as when he had thrown her across Mr. Miyagi's yard and into his small pond. When she got out of the water, she didn't attack him with her mallet as he expected, she thanked him for finally treating her like a real Martial Artist. He just couldn't understand the uncute macho tomboy.

He could understand something though. That was the way that Akane hurt when the girls launched themselves all over him. Normally he wasn't very perceptive, but he had taken to watching her face more often. Must be because he was looking for her to attack, he thought, *or maybe it's 'cause she wasn't cute unless she smiles. Hey, that's it! Without Shampoo and Ukyou all over him, she didn't have to scowl so much, and she didn't hit him!*

They entered the school gates and he saw the smile slip from her face. *Oh, I want that back; just smile once more!* When the first girl ran up and latched onto him, he decided it was time for desperate measures. Prizing her off, he dropped her on the ground and grabbed hold of Akane. "Hey! Back off. I'm not interested. Just leave me alone!"

Ranma almost went after the poor girl. The way she looked, so hurt and sad at his rejection. But Akane looked at him, and he realized she hadn't pushed him away yet. Quickly he let her go, maintaining a bit of a distance. "I... um... it's just that... um... Hey, there's Ami and Makoto!"

Akane almost smiled at his back. Sure he had been pretty harsh on that poor girl, but it was the first time she could recall him ever doing something like that. *I almost think he does like me...* She thought.

Joining Ranma and the two girls, they went in to class.

At the end of the day, Akane went back to Mr. Miyagi's dojo, while Ranma waited for Ami to finish her gym class and get cleaned up. *Bah! Tutoring again.* At least she seemed pretty smart, and she was a good tutor.

He was wandering around aimlessly when he heard sounds of fighting. Not just fighting, but fighting Senshi style! Sprinting around the schoolyard to where the sounds came from, he saw most of the Senshi ganging up against a youma, which had appeared on the school grounds. It looked like it had been attacking a group of students that had been doing some sort of literature study in the yard. Ranma agreed with its tastes. He hated literature too.

Looking for a better place to watch, he saw a guy in a formal suit balancing in a tree. Curiosity got the better of him and he silently jumped up beside the stranger, and listened to him mumble. "Sailor Moon... you fight for love and justice... um... these are the source of your powers... err... Now, kick its butt... no, Now use your staff and destroy this evil..."

Ranma looked at the guy as he took a quick drink of water from a plastic cup, and then grabbed a rose from inside his coat. A rose?!? "Kuno, is that you under that mask?"

Whoever it was, he made a startled motion when he saw Sailor Moon barely dodge a blow. Apparently he had been concentrating on the fight below or his horrible speech because he hadn't noticed Ranma. Ranma - being the water magnet that he was - immediately ended up with a face full of the cold water the man had been drinking. When the man finally calmed enough and had grabbed the tree for support, it was a dripping wet Ranko he saw.

"I'm not sure who 'Kuno' is, fair lady, but I am Tuxedo Kamen. I am here to aid the valiant Sailor Moon in her quest for peace and justice."

Hmm, right script, right roses, wrong voice. "Sorry, I mistook you for another idio... person. And if you're here to help Moon, you better get a move on!"

As they had been talking, the youma had successfully struck the defender of love and justice and knocked her flying. While Moon struggled to be able to rise, the thick, slimy arms of the creature had grabbed Mercury. Sailor Jupiter looked on with fear. Her attack was too powerful and widespread to use now that Mercury was in close. Hoisting her fists she charged in yelling, and began to beat upon the monster. Gouts of slime flew everywhere, but she wasn't sure if any real damage was being done. Meanwhile, poor Mercury was having the life crushed out of her!

In a flash Tuxedo Kamen was beside Sailor Moon, helping her gently to her feet, and giving her words of encouragement. Seeing Moon safe, Ranko charged the monster. Ranko remember what happened the last time that she mixed it up with one of these things, and wished she could heed the warning to let the Senshi deal with the problem. But even if they were magically powered, Ranko couldn't let a bunch of girls get beaten up. If it were a choice between a monster dying and a Senshi dying, she'd let the monster die.

Since the monster held Mercury high in the air, Ranko zipped right up to its smelly armpit, which dripped some sort of equally smelly goo. "**KACHUU TENSHIN AMAGURIKEN!**" Launching a couple of hundred blows with her attack she realized that perhaps she should not laugh at the Senshi for their silly poses and speeches. After all, anyone who liked screaming about chestnuts couldn't really complain.

Beaten back by the damage, the youma dropped Mercury, and Ranko grabbed her, moving over to the side of the yard. As she placed Mercury on the ground, Ranko looked in her eyes and checked if she was OK. Mercury merely stared. *No wonder they were concerned about Ranko! Her forehead was glowing with a symbol similar to her own. But that was impossible! All of the Senshi were accounted for! Even Luna said that there were never any other Senshi in the Silver Millennium. All of the planets bar Earth had one, and the Moon did. There was no Sailor Terra, so who could this be?*

Ranko didn't wait long. With Mercury out of the way, recovering from cracked ribs, and Moon still concussed, it was up to her and Jupiter! Jupiter had backed off a bit, and was hopping about trying to get space to do an attack. "Jupiter! When I go in, you hit it from the front! I'm gunna jump when you attack. GO!!"

With a dive roll over a massive arm, Ranko came in close to the creature. Launching another Tenshin Amaguriken, she mercilessly pounded the youma, buying Sailor Jupiter the time needed to prepare her attack. "SPARKLING WIDE..."

Ranko leapt vertically, evading the arms that were about to slam into her.

"PRESSURE!"

"MOKO TAKABISHA!"

As Sailor Jupiter's heavy blast hit it from the front, Ranko's ki blast took it from above. Their efforts took the beast down, but not out. Smoking from its wounds, it continued to fight, and they only managed to hold it at bay. Minutes passed, and the two fighters began to weary. As their strength seemed to be almost gone, more Senshi arrived. Under the combined assault the demon died. With the death of the demon, Ranko's symbol also faded, leaving her facing a crowd of very inquisitive Senshi.

"Oh, no. I'm not staying this time! If my fiancée finds out I've been fighting I'll be in big trouble."

Before they could stop her, Ranko sprinted off into the school.

"Did you see it?"

"Her head!"

"The mark!"

"Don't lose her!"

Following her into the building, they lost her briefly, and then forever. The only person they could see in the corridor was a slightly steaming damp Ranma coming out of the men's toilets. "No, no. I haven't seen any red-haired girls around here, nope, none at all. Not a single one."

Leaving the slightly panicky Ranma behind, not panicked from the Senshi, but from an unexpected dousing of cold water properly timed for maximum embarrassment, the Senshi continued their search. Unfortunately, they were destined to fail, leaving them all filled with

the question of just who she was. Fortunately Ranma was so preoccupied at his tutoring that night that he didn't notice how pre-occupied the tutor was.

Usagi looked sternly at Luna. All the other Senshi other than Ami / Sailor Mercury and the mysterious Setsuna / Sailor Pluto were present. Ami had a tutoring position with the fiancée of Ranko's cousin, of all people! "Spill the beans, Luna. We need to know who she is. All of us saw the mark on her head, and we know she's a Senshi. Who is she?"

Luna shook her head sadly. "I don't know! There are no more Senshi! And there are never more than one Senshi per planet."

"Could she be Sailor Earth?"

"No, from what you've described, the symbol is wrong. Besides, Earth already has a guardian, it's Tuxedo Kamen."

All was quite for a moment, and then Artemis spoke quietly. "I could be wrong, but I think I know who she is." He made a nervous glance at Minako and continued. "Back during the Silver Millennium, only children of royal birth could become members of the Sailor Senshi, and so all of the positions were filled as time went by. But there was one young girl of common birth, and all she wanted was to be a Sailor Senshi."

"Every day she trained. She learned and she focused. Whenever she could she observed the powers of the Senshi, and tried to imitate their every action and deed. This girl was very determined and very resourceful. Legend has it that she lived in a small orbital station close to the sun, and spent her life trying to draw the focus of the sun for her strength, the same way you draw on the power of the planets."

"When the Dark Kingdom launched their attack against the Moon Kingdom, I was once told that there was a tenth girl fighting with the Senshi. It was this girl, who called herself Sailor Sun, which managed to defeat and destroy much of the space fleet that the Dark Kingdom sent. She wasn't a full Senshi, so she wasn't aided by the magic bestowed by Queen Serenity, but she had managed to tap the powers of the sun. Her power was devastating, even then. Short of Sailor Saturn's ability to destroy the world, she was more powerful than any individual. It was her final self-sacrificing attack that blasted much of the Dark Kingdom's fleet, and bought the Sailor Senshi time to recover and regroup. After Queen Serenity heard of this, she apparently decided she would posthumously make her a Sailor in honor of her deeds."

Artemis paused for a moment, remembering the terrible days at the end of the Moon Kingdom. "The only problem with this is that the Dark Kingdom's main attack came too soon. She never had time to make her a Senshi. Queen Serenity sacrificed herself in the same manner and bought the human race the time it needed to prepare against their return."

Everyone sat in silence. It was eventually Luna that broke the stillness. "Why didn't we know this before?"

Artemis merely shrugged. "It wasn't important then. She wasn't really a Senshi, and because she was already dead, she couldn't be reincarnated. The girl was only a minor character in a major production."

Putting her arm around Michiru, Haruka caught the eye of the other moon cat. "But what if Queen Serenity **did** make her a Sailor. Wouldn't Luna be able to produce a transformation wand for her?"

Luna thought about it for a bit. "I suppose. This doesn't explain how she is here now... but that's not as important as gaining a new ally."

With that, Luna thought for a moment, and then executed a complex back flip. At the pinnacle of the arc, a small, bright pen came out. Rei picked it up off the ground. "Well, what do you know? Now, Ranko is Akane's cousin. And Akane has to train with her Sensei after school. What say we get Akane to invite Ranko for ice cream? She liked that before, and after all, the poor girl must be lonely in a strange city..."

Usagi bounced happily, blond hair flying everywhere. "Oh, boy! **ICE CREAM!**"

"All right, after you measure the wood, you place the saw on the waste side, and gently begin to cut. In no time, we stick it in the hole, bang in a couple of nails. Hey, Presto."

"Very good, Ranma. But I can't remember what you told me about how to hammer it in."

"ARRRG!" Ranma punched a hole in the dojo wall in frustration. Teaching Ryoga which way was North was easier than this.

Ami approached Akane at school that day and asked her about getting her and Ranko out for ice cream again. Akane shook her head and admitted to other commitments, but she suspected that Ranko would be delighted. Timing was arranged, and Akane promised to let Ranko know.

When Ranma's tutorial was drawing to a close, both he and Ami were getting a bit restless. More restless than Ranma normally was when he's trying to learn something, that is. Given both their inattention, Ami finally let Ranma off early, much to his delight. As he streaked away to change into Ranko, it dawned on him that there actually was an upside to this stupid curse. Every grey cloud had a silver lining. His just happened to have a really small lining: an ice cream sized lining.

Ami was just as expectant, but not for the same reasons. Sure, she loved ice cream, but the prospect of inviting a new Senshi into their midst was even more exciting. When they decided about this, she just knew they would become best friends. All the Senshi were good friends, even if they got on each other's nerves a bit; but Ami somehow felt she would be closer to Ranko. *And they could visit her place, and meet her friends, and her parents, and see her school, and...*

Ami slowed down her train of thought. Better not badger the poor girl too much; it's liable to be a bit of a shock for her. Ami realized what a surprise it was for her, but somehow she thought it was what she was destined for.

Leaving in plenty of time, Ami met Rei and they made their way to the ice cream parlor. The Senshi had discussed this amongst themselves and had come up with a good plan. Rather

than frighten Ranko with a whole crowd of girls powering up into their Sailor clothes, just Ami and Rei would be there initially. When they had told her the facts of life, then the rest of the Sailors could join them. Poor Luna and Artemis would just have to hear the details second hand.

After doing justice to another massive quantity of ice cream, Ranko let herself be led to the Shrine where Rei lived with her grandfather. "Grandfather is out for a while tonight. I asked if he would mind if I had some friends over, and he said that the sounds of girls giggling would keep him up. So he's off to visit some of his friends from the war."

War? Just how old is her grandpa anyways? Thought Ranko. She looked around and admired the peace and tranquility of the shrine. It was a lovely place. Ranko thought it would be a nice place for some Martial Arts training. *Hey, perhaps they would like to do some training before dinner?* "Hey, you two! Ever considered doing Martial Arts? This place looks like it would be great for training..."

Ranko took one look at the expressions on their faces and immediately realized her mistake. "Oh, damn, I'm sorry, Rei. I just realized. If you live here, you must be a Shinto priestess or something. You wouldn't be able to fight even if a great slimy monster attacked you."

Ranko watched as their expressions went from surprised to completely stunned; *could she know already, and was just toying with us?* Ranko reached the conclusion that she was digging herself in deeper, and tried to cover up. "Whoops! Just forget I ever mentioned a slimy monster. Or tentacles, or demons and Sailors and... Ah... Um... It's a lovely night isn't it?"

Rei and Ami exchanged glances. *Did Ranko have a guide like Luna? But that was silly; Ranko hated cats.* Rei spoke up. "Ranko, do you know why we're here?"

"Yep, it's your home."

"No, I mean **why** are we here?"

"Err, you wanted to pick up something."

The girls looked relieved. Ranko did not know. "Ranko, we have some wonderful news for you, and we need to show you something."

Ranko watched carefully as Rei and Ami both took out small pen shaped objects. Holding hers aloft, Rei called out. "Mars Star Power, Make Up!"

Immediately shining lights surrounded her. Despite the fact that she was covered in an impenetrable glow, Ranko averted her eyes as Rei's clothes vanished. When she did a pirouette, new clothes appeared. And after a few seconds, Sailor Mars stood where Rei had been and before the shock could settle in, Ami also transformed into Sailor Mercury.

Ranko began to back up. *Oh, no! They've seen me change sex! Why does this always happen to me? They must think I'm one of those demons!* "No, No! It's just a curse! I'm not a demon! Honestly! Ami! I'm your friend! Don't do this to me!"

As the clearly terrified girl backed up, the Sailors advanced and tried to calm her. "Ranko, Ranko! It's OK. Don't be frightened. We're still your friends. We just need to talk."

Making placating gestures with their hands, the girls waited until Ranko calmed down. "You... you don't want to kill me?" Thoughts of an upcoming wedding taunted her mind. She quickly dismissed that idea since these girls didn't know she was a guy, or did they?

Sailor Mercury looked taken aback. "No! Why on earth would we want to kill you?"

Ranko looked sheepish. "Um... No reason. No reason at all. Ha, ha! Err... so why have you just shown me who you are? I mean, isn't that a closely guarded secret or something?"

Mars smiled and held out the new transformation stick. "It is. As a general rule, the only people who know our identities are the other Sailor Senshi. Take this."

Feeling bemused for a moment, Ranko took the pen, then the word sunk in. *They want to make me a Senshi!* Demon hunting, she could handle, but demon killing was something she'd rather not make her full time occupation. Ranko started to hand the pen back. "Sorry. I realize that it's supposed to be an honor and all that, but I'm not interested."

Not interested in being a Senshi! A sailor suited defender of love and justice! This was every girl's dream! But, Ranko wanted to refuse. Placing a hand on Ranko's shoulder, Mercury offered her support. "No, Ranko. It's not just that we want you to become a Sailor Senshi. The fact is, you already are. Sailors aren't chosen; they're born that way. Sometimes it just takes a while for them to awaken."

Ranko looked around and noticed that while they had been talking the rest of the Senshi had arrived. The courtyard of the shrine was filled with girls in those tight bodysuits and teeny-tiny skirts. Sailor Moon walked over and smiled at Ranko, trying to offer her the support of the entire team. "Ranko, you're one of us. Just take the transformation pen, raise it up, and say the first thing that comes into your head."

Ranko looked at the innocent looking stick. All she could think of was the words Akane had spoken the other day: 'All the Senshi are girls! And you're a guy! Guys can't be Senshi!' Looking around at all the girls, she could see them looking at her expectantly. Sighing, she raised the transformation stick and spoke loudly. "Those dresses look really silly! I'm not gunna be a Senshi!"

The girls were stunned. That wasn't the response that should be on the top of her mind! "Ranko. I understand, you might be a bit afraid, but it's OK. We're a team. You don't have to face these things alone. Join us. We need you."

Ranko spied Tuxedo Kamen standing behind Sailor Moon. She asked inquisitively wondering if Akane may be wrong. "I thought only girls could be Senshi. Are you saying that guys can be Senshi too?"

Mars looked puzzled. "No, only girls can be Senshi. Why do you ask that?"

Ranko was about to retort, "But I'm a g... never mind..." She quickly went quiet with resignation. Her life never went the way she wanted it to.

Something still didn't make sense and she pointed at Tuxedo Kamen. "What about him? Don't tell me he's a girl too."

Sailor Moon giggled in a childish way and grabbed Tuxedo Kamen's arm in a loving embrace. "He's not a Senshi, he's my guardian. He's the only one and he's mine." Ranko could almost

see little hearts floating from Sailor Moon as she hugged that uh... Guardian? Some guardian. Ranko remembered the fight at school and all he did was give Kuno-speak and stood around doing nothing. She wondered if that guy actually fought any of the monsters. So, he's either Sailor Moon's husband or fiancé. *Oh, no, not that fiancé stuff again.*

Ashen at the idea of what it meant to be a male member of this group, Ranko gently shook her head. *It figures, if I got a tux, I'm marrying one of these girls. No way! Besides, he's the only one and he can have Moon for all I cared.* Ranko looked at the pen in her hand thinking about the mini-skirt alternative and found it not any better. Images of a ritual suicide made up her mind as to what she had to do. She offered the pen back to Rei. "I'm sorry, Rei. I can't. It's different for me. I'm... I'm a... Look, what if Akane found out! What would she say? What would my mom say? She'd kill me for sure."

Sailor Mars did not take the transformation stick, but she did back off slightly. "Girls, I think I need to have a little talk with Ranko for a while. Why don't you go home? I'll call you later. Don't worry, it will be OK."

The other Sailors headed for the exit, changing back into their normal selves when out of Ranko's sight. If Ranko did not want to join them, perhaps it was best that only Rei and Ami had been exposed. Rei also transformed back and looked at the forlorn Ranko. She was standing there in the middle of the garden, head bowed. Rei walked over, and was shocked to see the girl crying. Placing her arm around Ranko's shoulder, Rei led her to a bench and sat down next to her.

"I'm sor... sorry, Rei. It's bad for me. I just... I just can't take this much more. I hate this stupid curse. It's like every day; another little piece of me is slipping away. Akane warned me about this sort of thing, but I thought it was just a joke. But it's true."

Grabbing hold of the black haired girl, Ranko put her head on her shoulder, and really cried in earnest. Rei held her tight and rocked her back and forwards. She wasn't sure what was wrong with Ranko, or what frightened her so much about being a Senshi or what she meant by hating a curse. Rei wondered what her cousin could possibly have said which would make her frightened. Why Ranko's mother would want to kill her was another mystery. Rei always thought that being one of the chosen defenders of the earth was a great honor.

But what Rei thought, and what Rei wondered wasn't the issue. Obviously Ranko had some serious fears, and Rei needed to help her get past them. "Ranko. Ranko, I know you're scared. But you don't need to be. We all want to be your friends, and we all want to help. If you really feel that you don't want to be a Sailor Senshi, then you don't have to be."

Ranko stifled her sobs and looked up. When Rei started speaking, she was sure Rei was going to badger her into joining, but then again maybe not. She started to give back the stick again, but Rei didn't take it. "As I said, Ranko, you don't have to be a Sailor, but we would really like you on the team. Can you tell me what's wrong? Maybe I can help."

Ranko sighed and sat back. She wiped her face with her sleeve, and then looked up at Rei. "Well, what if Akane finds out. She'd kill me. Well, maybe not kill me, but I don't think she'd ever speak to me again. I just couldn't cope with that."

Rei smiled. "Everyone keeps secrets. Even us. I realize that she's your cousin, but you don't need to tell her everything. Remember, you only transform when you want to. No one can force you, and the disguise field prevents anyone from ever seeing who you really are."

Ranko thought about that. She had seen Sailor Mercury several times and she never put together that Ami and her were the same person, despite all those tutoring sessions and seeing her almost every day. Now, after seeing them transform in front of her, it was obvious who Mars and Mercury were. *I wonder if I can use that technique in other ways? No, I'm not going to be a Senshi! I'm not a* ***girl****!*

Rei asked gently. "And what about your mom? She wouldn't really kill you, would she?"

Ranko merely nodded her head. "Yes. That one I'm sure of. I... I can't really explain it now; it's too complex. But trust me: if I became a Sailor Senshi and mom ever found out, she would hunt me to the ends of the earth and force me to commit seppuku. It's because of a promise I made many years ago."

That revelation shocked Rei to the core, Ranko was so sure, so certain, she had trouble doubting her. But what was so bad that could force a mother to kill her daughter? She remembered she heard Ranko asking something about 'guys being Senshi', but that didn't make any sense.

Rei listened to Ranko's objections one after another. Each time she countered with logic, support and friendship. When Ranko's excuses began to get thin, Rei changed to the offensive. "Ranko, everybody has fears. There's danger in everything we do. But facing those fears is what courage is all about. I saw you charge in and attack that youma with only your bare hands a few days ago. And why? To protect a few people you hardly knew? I was with you. Back then you didn't know Ami and I were Sailor Senshi, and you put your life in danger to save us. Why did you do that?"

The girl just looked baffled. Batting her big puppy dog eyes, she looked the other girl in the eye. "But it's the duty of every Martial Artist to protect those who are weak. That monster could have killed everyone there if it wasn't stopped. And I was the only one who could stop it. Well, I **thought** I was. Even that jerk Ryoga wouldn't pick on someone weak. Ha, he's always trying to kill me, and when I was finally weak once, he couldn't. Ryoga cried because his worst enemy had been struck down before he could do it."

She wasn't sure who Ryoga was, but this was definite progress. "What we face out there is more powerful than any Martial Artist. What we face is nothing less than a complete demonic invasion from another dimension. Once the Moon Kingdom ruled the entire solar system. In the first invasion, they were defeated, but at the cost of all civilization as it stood. Queen Serenity sacrificed her life to provide the time that was needed for us to regroup. The second time they invaded, we again defeated them, but only just. It was the combined efforts of all of the Sailor Senshi that managed to halt the advance of a foolish and ill-prepared enemy."

Looking into the distance, Rei remembered all the details that her friends had been discussing in the last week. "In the last week we have destroyed more youma than we did in the entire previous three months. Ami thinks there's a pattern. Sailor Moon is worried that this is just the start of something bigger. I think that this must be another invasion. The rulers of the Dark Kingdom are just as bad as the youma they control. If we don't destroy them, they'll just keep coming back again and again. I have an ability to see images in fire. It's a limited form of precognition. When I did a reading on the weekend, I saw you, fighting some great evil. There were flames everywhere and great suffering."

Rei was standing now, gesturing, imploring Ranko to understand. "Ranko, whether you like it or not, most of the people out there are weak. They can't defend themselves against the

powers of the Dark Kingdom and its armies. We don't fight because we enjoy it. If I could give up being a Sailor Senshi, and know that it would stop the demons attacking: I would. But it can't, so I won't. To keep people safe, we need defenders. People willing to risk their lives so that the people they love can continue their lives in peace. Ranko, don't do it because you can, or what you can get from it. Do it because if you don't, the consequences will be terrible. I know you care for your cousin, but the demons are getting stronger, and we're staying the same. If this keeps up, one day we will lose. We need you Ranko."

Ranko simply sat there. Rei's impassioned speech had touched her. Sure, Ranma would suffer from this. He seemed to suffer from all of the calamities that followed him. But as Rei said: if not her, then who? If not now, then when?

Standing again she looked down at Rei. "I still don't want to wear that silly skirt and, err... leotard, but I'll do it. If you show me what to do, I'll change, and I'll be a Sailor Senshi. But I can't stay long now. Akane will be getting worried about me, so she's probably gunna call before I get home. Just tell her... tell her I came asking advice. Tell her... tell her that I like her. A lot."

Nonplussed that Ranko could care that much about the opinion of a cousin she seemed to see only occasionally, Rei nodded. "Just raise your hand in the air, and say what comes naturally."

Ranko lifted the transformation stick and hesitated. She knew the words. They seemed natural and flowed from deep within her soul. It felt both right and wrong to her. Holding it high, she gulped knowing this was a point of no return. She closed her eyes and called out: "Sun Star Power, Make Up!"

A blinding light shone around her, and she felt herself float free of the ground. While she rotated in the air, she felt her clothes change, and the power filled her body. Even at his strongest, Ranma had never felt such power flowing through him. But now, as a girl, he knew he had powers he only dreamed of.

Sailor Sun stood there, looking glorious in her new Sailor suit. Her costume was similar to that of Mars, since bright red was her primary color. Along with the white gloves and body suit, she had a short red skirt, and knee length red boots. Her bright red hair flowed loosely down her back, and was held in place by a simple headband of red metal. In the center of the band was a clear jewel, which seemed to contain a continual flame, burning deep inside. Rei clapped her hands and looked on with pride.

Sailor Sun felt a draft. "Is there any way I can get a uniform that has pants?"

Rei and Ami looked at each other in disbelief. Rei stuttered, "P-Pants? Why? You look beautiful in that."

Sun groaned at the remark and thought of one more piece of information she had to know right this instant. "Another thing, Rei. How do I change back?"

Chapter 2, Life As A Teacher

Ryoga swatted flies from his face and looked at the guy on the dusty farm. It was a good thing that his travels had left him good at languages because wherever he was; someone there spoke English. "Can you tell me how to get to the Tanaka Dojo in Hokkaido?"

The man facing him looked blank for a moment. Looking at the sheep that surrounded him, he scratched his head. "Well, Jim lives about 300 kays north of here. But I don't know anyone called Tanaka there. You got the address?"

Ryoga brought out a piece of paper that was covered with soy sauce stains and drawings that looked like a toddler drew them with a piece of charcoal and read the address to him. The flies here really were terrible and Ryoga swatted one with his map, adding to it another little dot to go with all the other dots. "Well, mate. I'd say you're only a few thousand kays off. Try heading northwest for about eight or ten thousand kays, should be about right."

The farmer watched the black haired Japanese boy headed east. *Good idea, really. He could go to town and catch a plane or something.*

Two days later Ranma looked at Akane as they began their morning spar and shook his head. Mr. Miyagi had been trying to get him to train with Akane properly for almost a week now, and Ranma still had not landed one blow. As to be expected, Akane was getting madder and madder every day. Yesterday morning, Mr. Miyagi had said that they needed to work out their problems, and he would return when they needed his teaching; then he went back to bed.

Each morning they would spend two hours working out. To be more precise, Akane would spend two hours punching and kicking at Ranma - but never hitting - and Ranma would spend two hours dodging. It was shaping up to be another morning like the others when, fifteen minutes into the session, Ranma held up a hand for a break. Akane was a bit surprised. She knew that Ranma had been out last night, probably fighting judging by the way he was favoring his left side this morning. "Are you all right, Ranma? You look a bit stiff."

Ranma brushed aside the comment and looked at her sternly. "Akane, you know why I don't hit you whenever we train, don't you?"

She scowled fiercely at him. "Yeah, I know. You don't like to hit girls. But, Ranma! I'm not some piece of china. I'm a Martial Artist too. I managed to protect myself just fine before you turned up. I think I can handle a couple of hits in training."

"Akane... Akane... I don't know how to say this, but... But I don't want you to get hurt…

"I'm not a baby, Ranma! I can take care of myself, you jerk!"

"That's not what I meant, you uncute tomboy! Hey! Wait! Put that hammer down! OW! STOP!"

When Ranma pulled himself out of the ground he looked up at the angry Akane and tried again. "Please don't hit me this time, I just need to... to talk for a bit. Akane, I ... I... I really don't want to see you getting hurt. It's a rough world out there. You and I both know that I'm a better fighter that you. Put down that mallet! I'm not trying to insult you; it's just the truth. But Akane, when I was out last night, I got into a bit of a fight, and well, take a look."

Ranma pulled up his shirt and turned so that she could get a good look at his left side. From just above the hip to almost his armpit there was one big bruise. Ranma was glad that Akane had not received his crash course in youma. If she had, she may have realized just what sort of fight he must have been in to receive the injury. What was more incredible to Ranma was just how little injury there was. When the beast had hit him (her), he had been pounded straight into the ground. He knew that at least two of his ribs had been broken. It was only his own incredible healing combined with the magic of the Sailor Senshi powers that had allowed him to get off so lightly.

When Akane had finished going 'Ohhh' and trying to mother him, he pulled his shirt down. "It's just a bruise. It's not that bad, I've had worse before. But when this happened to me, I swore that nothing like this would ever happen to you if I could help it."

Akane growled "I just told you, Ranma: you can't protect me all the time. I can fight too, you know!"

He nodded and dropped his head. "You're right. I... I also realized that I couldn’t be there for you all the time. I also know that there's only one way that I can stop you from having this happen to you. I don't like it, and I... I need you to tell me it's OK. Akane, I care, I really do. That's why I need to hurt you. It's the only way I can feel safe about you."

Akane looked at him in shock. She always thought he was a bit of a pervert, but now the truth was out. He really was worse than Happosai. Well, if Ranma thought he could get to play his sick little games of torture with her just because he said he cared, he had another thing coming! "You're sick, Ranma. Really sick! If you want to play you're little S&M games, go see Shampoo, she's probably right into it. Anything for her husband! But if you every try and lay one perverted finger on me, I WILL KILL YOU!"

Ranma stood back stunned. After a moment he started to race after her into the house. "No! Wait! It's not like that! It's what Mr. Miyagi said. The only way I can stop you from getting hurt badly is to hurt you now. Akane... Akane, I really care. I mean I lo... Oh, I mean I need to train with you. If I don't, then what happened to me might happen to you, and I don't think I could really cope with that. Please."

Akane had stopped part way through his tirade. When he was finished she turned around and looked into his eyes. Placing one hand gently on his cheek, she looked up into his big blue eyes. Those blue eyes looked back at her with concern, fear, and perhaps, perhaps even something else. "Oh, Ranma. Do you mean it? You really want to train with me? Properly? So I'll actually learn something?"

Ranma nodded his head. "But, Akane, I have to warn you. Your defense sucks. Honestly. And there's only one way to improve it. Look at me. My defense is great. Ryoga can almost never hit me. Do you know why? Because when he does, it really hurts. It's the only way to learn. We could stand outside and do Kata all day, all year, and your defense will hardly improve. But... but if I hit you, and it hurts, then in a week's time, I have you defending twice as well as you do now. Akane, I would do anything to prevent this. I never want to hurt you, ever! But I can't be with you all the time. And I can't protect you like I want to. I know you don't

want to be protected, but at the moment, you need to be. Please, Akane, say it's OK. Say you won't mind, because I can't live in fear for you."

Akane was touched. He had said everything for almost exactly the wrong reasons. She was a Martial Artist, and while she wasn't as good as Shampoo or Ukyo, she knew she was one of the best. As Ranma said, her defense could be much better, and he was right about how he could make her better. What it amounted to was that Ranma was offering her one of the few things he had always refused: respect for her abilities. He was willing to treat her as a Martial Artist, not his equal (Ranma never treated anyone that way), but as a proper training partner.

Despite what he had said, she knew he also did it for the best reason: he cared about her. He even said it. Finally she knew he had some feelings. Not love, probably never that, not when he had Ukyo and Shampoo to choose from. But now she knew she had his respect and friendship, and that was worth a lot to her. She finally looked back into his eyes. She saw the fear that he had overstepped the line. They might be engaged, but Akane could hardly remember the times when they had said something nice to each other. Well, actually, she could remember them perfectly, every single instance. But for him to say something unprompted, and meaningful, this was new.

"Oh, Ranma. Of course I want to do this. I've always wanted to do this. You just... never mind. Thank you."

Ranma took her out into the yard again and warned her that while he would be going easy, she was still going to get hit, and he didn't want her to go easy. If she did, then he would just hit her again until she took it seriously.

Akane nodded and the fight began. She had hardly taken a defensive stance when she was on the ground, her left shoulder hurting. "You're slow getting your guard up. Always pay attention to you opponent. Try again."

Ranma backed off to let her stand. When she was on her feet, she put her hands up. **SMACK!** Her eyeballs rattled from the blow to the side of the head. After a moment Ranma and the garden stopped spinning and she could hear him speaking. "Keep your arms up. If they're up, you can block a blow to the head, or drop them to block a blow to the body. Stay ready."

They only trained for an hour that morning. Akane didn't launch a single attack, and by the end, she was feeling like a punching bag. When Ranma signaled an early break, she slumped and agreed. "Oh, I hurt all over."

Ranma was immediately by her side and full of concern. She waved him away, insisting all she needed was a hot bath. When they were inside, Akane headed toward the bathroom with the furo, and Ranma walked to the kitchen to see about breakfast. Much to his surprise, Mr. Miyagi was already there, and had a full breakfast waiting.

"Hmm, You did well this morning. I think that we should skip your lessons on woodwork for today. I have an important technique from Miyagi-do to teach you."

Ranma's eyes immediately lit up. It hurt him terribly every time he hit Akane, but now Mr. Miyagi was apparently going to finally respect him enough to teach him to be a sensei! After breakfast, Mr. Miyagi led the two teenagers into the living room, and had Akane lie face

down on the floor. Kneeling beside her, Mr. Miyagi pointed out various vulnerable spots on her back and legs to Ranma. He already knew these, but repetition never hurt... much.

"Now, must know this. No student ever learn if too injured to practice. No fighter ever win if too injured to fight. You watch and learn: Special Miyagi-do Massage Technique!" Ranma was just stunned as Mr. Miyagi began to teach some of the techniques, which made Dr Tofu so renowned in Nerima.

Things rapidly went from bad to worse in the youma department. Attacks were occurring at least once a day, and generally at night. In many ways it was fortunate that they were happening at night. It was much easier to explain that you were tired at school than to say that you had to leave class because you were one of the Sailor Suited defenders of love and justice... especially when you were a guy.

What worried the Senshi even more than the number of youma attacks was their level of success. Rather than being able to win all of the fights, the Senshi were winning only one in three. Certainly, they would often be able to kill one of the demons, but these days, that was not assured. Often when the Senshi arrived, the youma would simply turn tail and run, eventually being sucked back through whatever dimensional gate they used. Other times, the youma would have come, attacked and left before the Senshi could wake up and get to the scene.

Given that most of the time it only took three or four Senshi to defeat a youma (without unnecessary risk) they tried to hold a staggered roster. Two days after they tried this, it all fell apart. Sailors Uranus, Neptune, Mars and Venus had headed out to battle one of the youma, which had attacked a movie theater. When they arrived, they found almost everyone in the cinema drained of their energy. The Senshi spotted the youma and gave chase.

Just when they had it cornered, they were ambushed. A full dozen youma burst from the surrounding buildings. The Senshi immediately called for reinforcements, and prepared for battle. The battle was long and hard, with the outnumbered Sailors taking the brunt of the punishment. By the time the remaining Senshi arrived, only Sailor Uranus was on her feet. The rescuer's combined assault managed to destroy one of the youma outright, and dispersed the remainder. Unfortunately their need to defend their fellows prevented the Senshi from pressing the attack. By the time they reached their wounded, the youma had vanished.

It was the first true defeat that the Senshi had faced in a long time. Three of their number were struck down and in need of serious rest for several days while everyone else was injured. The youma had also escaped with their haul of stolen energy completely intact, and all at the cost of only one of their number.

The days wore on, and somehow, the Sailor Senshi felt that this time they were losing the battle.

Ryoga wasn't sure where he was, but at least it was back in Japan. "**RANMA, THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!!!**"

If Ranma had not stolen Akane, then he wouldn't be wandering around looking for her. He would kill Ranma when he found him. Then he would give the presents he had collected in

his travels to Akane, even though most of the foodstuffs had passed their expiration dates. He looked around at the moderately deserted street. Eventually, he spotted a policeman and made his inquiry. "Do you know where the Tanaka Dojo in Hokkaido is?"

The policeman looked at him with sympathy. "It can be a bit hard to find can't it? Tucked away like that. Tsk, Tsk, Tsk. Just go up two streets, and then left one. You can't miss it."

Akane flipped up from her back, and launched forward. Her blow caught Ranma under his arm, and he paled when she struck. Backing up, she waited for his strike. But Ranma simply stood there, gasping. After a few moments, she called 'break', and came in to help him. He backed up, not wanting to admit pain, but when he tripped over the stairs to the house and landed heavily, he almost passed out.

Akane let out a short scream and then called for Mr. Miyagi. He might not be as good as Dr. Tofu, but in his own way he was superb at the healing arts. Akane laid Ranma on the porch and lifted his shirt. Gasping, she held her hands to her mouth. Ranma showed an assortment of bruises and injuries, minor cuts and grazes. "Oh, Ranma."

When Mr. Miyagi joined them, he took one look at Ranma and began to inspect his ribs. Even Ranma's control could not stop him from wincing when Mr. Miyagi prodded one of his ribs. "Hmm, Ranma, this rib is broken. You no fight. You no train. Ranma, you stay home and let this heal. I cannot let you go to school like this. Akane, go and get bandages."

Mr. Miyagi looked at Ranma with concern in his eyes. He had been training Akane, so he knew that her skills were improving. He also knew that Ranma was far better than her. All he needed to do was watch when they trained. Akane could leap and strike, and the only time she ever hit was when Ranma let her. Mr. Miyagi was surprised the first couple of times he saw Akane hit him. Then he watched more carefully. Each time Akane executed a good defense / attack combination, or if he wanted to make a point about her vulnerability if he sacrificed himself for a hit, Ranma would take a blow.

But it was not a blow that could ever hurt the boy, Mr. Miyagi was sure. Ranma always moved with the blow, cushioning the impact. Sometimes he would allow her a moderately solid strike, but it was always to a carefully prepared location, which Ranma had (almost) obviously provided as the target. Mr. Miyagi was honestly impressed with Ranma's abilities. What still impressed him was the damage Ranma could take when he invariably upset his fiancee. Day after day, Akane would thump him through a wall, or belt him with a mallet, which would hospitalize lesser men. All this did to Ranma was stun him briefly.

Mr. Miyagi was not sure he ever wanted meet the person or people that could cause injuries like these to Ranma.

Akane returned with the bandages, and Mr. Miyagi bound him up. With the support of the two of them Ranma was taken to his room. On the way, Mr. Miyagi tried a few gentle questions, trying to see who had hurt his student. Ranma was evasive, and said that it was just some fights he had been getting into with some friends from school. After admonishing Ranma for fighting, he ordered him to stay in bed, Mr. Miyagi departed, leaving him to Akane's ministrations.

"Ranma. How could you do this to yourself? Couldn't you at least tell me? We don't need to train if you're hurt."

"Oh, Akane, it ain't nothing. Don't worry, I'll be right as rain before you know it."

"Don't be an idiot, Ranma! You've broken one rib and fractured two others. It's going to take weeks to heal. Why, Ranma, why? Who have you been fighting that did this to you? Is it Ryoga? Who could hurt you like this?"

Ranma looked sheepish. "No, it's not Ryoga. I could clean the floor with him any day of the week. I just... got clumsy, OK? I really didn't think anyone would notice. Besides, there isn't anyone in Tokyo that could hurt me. You know that, Akane."

"Then who..." Akane paled. A dreadful suspicion formed in her mind.

"You haven't been fighting those youma, have you? I told you, that's a job for the Senshi. Oh, Ranma. It's awfully kind and noble of you to try. I know you feel Martial Artists are supposed to protect the weak, and I know you like to protect girls. It's one of your most endearing features. But this is work for the Senshi. They have the sort of magic to deal with these demons. If you keep going out there every night, then, then some night you might not come back. And I don't want that."

Ranma held Akane as she knelt by his bed and sobbed. He felt so bad doing this to her. But he could not tell her that he was one of the Senshi that was fighting the demons, and even with his skills and Sailor magic, they were fairly even. He could not lie to Akane, but he could hide the truth a little. "Akane, I'll tell you what. I won't go looking for them. If one of those things ever attacks you, or me I'll grind it into dust. Otherwise, only the Senshi will fight them, OK?"

Akane perked up. She was surprised that she would get such an offer out of him. "Oh, thank you, Ranma. I just worry about you sometimes. But don't worry about the Senshi. I know you like to watch them on the news, but they're strong. They can take care of themselves and Tokyo. Oh, Ranma can't you just imagine what it must be like to be one of those magical girls, able to defeat monsters for love and justice?"

Ranma blushed and looked nervous, really nervous. "Um... well... sort of..."

Akane had her turn at blushing. "Sorry, Ranma. Sometimes I forget that while you look like a girl sometimes, you're really a guy through and through. Of course you couldn't be a Sailor Senshi: only girls can be."

Ranma whispered so low that Akane couldn't hear his reply, "They made an exception."

Ranma went to his tutorial with Ami that night. He was not sure how she did it, but both he and Akane acknowledged that Ami managed to teach him more in two hours than the teachers could all day. Ranma was not only starting to catch up; he was even beginning to show real academic progress.

They were delving into modern history when they both felt slight tingles from their communicators. Ranma ignored his. While he knew who Ami was, she did not know Ranma's curse. The Senshi were still upset with their new teammate. Whenever trouble struck, she would be there. Any other time and she was impossible to find. None of the girls knew about her, no one knew where she lived. When Ami had tried to subtly pump Akane for information

on her cousin, she froze up. Even Ranma only mentioned that he and Ranko had similar training, but that was all. All that knew was that she must still live in the Tokyo area, since occasionally she would be spotted at school or walking around town.

Ranma was hardly surprised when part way through a question, Ami mentioned that she had to go to the bathroom. Excusing herself, Ami moved to the toilet and activated her communicator. As soon as she was out of sight, Ranma activated the communicator and signaled his presence - indicating that he (or as they thought, Ranko) was in a public place and could listen but not speak.

It was a youma alert, naturally, two youma at a train station. This was a job for the Sailor Senshi!

Ranma killed his communicator. There were advantages to knowing Ami was one of the Senshi, when she did not know he was. He knew in a moment that she would return and break off the tutoring early. All he had to do was wait. Lo, and behold: Ami returned from the bathroom feeling unwell. Could they make up the time some other night? Certainly.

Outside her house, and hidden down a street, Ranma pulled out the transformation stick and cried out: "Sun Star Power, Make Up!" He realized his mistake instantly. His face grimaced in anticipation at just how stupid he was going to look in a few seconds. The power of the Sailor magic surrounded him. As the transformation sequence begun, there was a short cloud of water, obscuring him, and changing him to her and then the blinding light, the spinning and the itty-bitty skirt. Sailor Sun looked down at herself with relief. A chill ran down her spine at the very idea of her being male in this outfit. *Now I know what happens when I'm too dumb and forget to have a cold shower first! Whew!*

Ranma still did not like the Sailor clothes. He felt like an idiot and a pervert wearing girl's clothes. But the Senshi had been right. The disguise field worked well. As Sailor Sun, she had bumped into several people from school, and none had shown the faintest recognition. As far as Ranko was concerned, the best thing about the Sailor suits was the incredible healing that they offered. Even as she ran to the battle, Ranko could feel her ribs healing.

Despite the healing, Ranko tried to stay to the back in this fight. Outnumbered nine to two, and apparently unable to reach their portal, the Senshi scored a stunning success. As usual, when the battle was done, Ranko disappeared as thoroughly and quickly as possible. The girls grumbled a bit. It was hard to trust someone who obviously did not trust you enough to describe themselves. For this reason, it was still only Rei and Ami that Ranko had been officially introduced to. The Senshi had offered. They had asked several times to meet at Ranko's place, and let everyone meet informally, but she always refused.

Ranko agreed to be a Senshi to fight the youma. That was all.

In the morning, Ranma dragged Akane out of bed, bright and early.

"Ranma, go back to bed! You can't train when you've got a broken rib."

Ranma rubbed his jaw indecisively then pulled her onto the floor. Holding up his shirt, he showed his undamaged chest. "You're right. But since it's not broken, get moving. I'm going to give you a lump for every minute you're late."

Akane stared at his firm muscled chest. Gone was the massive bruising. Gone was the slightly dented look that his ribs had shown. It was smooth and perfect, just the rippling muscles of a master Martial Artist in his prime. "What? But, how?"

Ranma nodded and touched his nose. "I'm just a quick healer... or would you believe a secret Sailor Senshi speed healing magic?"

Akane threw a pillow at him.

Ranma, Akane, Ami and a pair of her friends - Usagi and Makoto - were having lunch together. It was beautiful day, and everyone was enjoying their lunch. Ranma was particularly happy. He had managed to keep Akane training long enough this morning that she did not have time to prepare lunch. That meant cafeteria food: it was bad, but it was still better than Akane's cooking. Showing his newfound wisdom, Ranma carefully avoided mentioning this to Akane.

It was part way through lunch when the subject of why Akane and Ranma had transferred there for the semester raised itself. When Makoto found out that they were Martial Artists, she immediately wanted to have a little match. Naturally, Ranma balked. He hated fighting girls. Fighting Akane was bad enough each morning, and that was just training.

Akane on the other hand had no such compulsions. She immediately took up Makoto's challenge, while the rest of the girls needled Ranma for not being as good as his fiancée. Ranma fumed and protested and made a rude comment that earned him a blow to the head. Seeing how easily Akane was able to strike him, the girls were convinced that Akane was better.

When the fight started, everyone was impressed. Makoto was the best fighter that they knew, other than Ranko. Makoto was fast and strong, and she easily could beat up everyone at the school. Actually, she had beaten up most of the students at several previous schools, which was why she was now at Juuban High. Akane was a different matter.

Makoto started out with a high kick to the head. It was designed to be a simple win, or something easily dodged if the opponent had any skill. Unfortunately, Akane possessed lots of skill. She immediately moved under the leg. With one arm, she lifted the attacking leg, while turning and sweeping Makoto's supporting leg. In a flash, Makoto was on the ground, and Akane was backing up for the next exchange. Ranma yelled support. "Well done! Don't forget to keep your right arm up. Defense and attack are the same thing!"

Makoto regained her feet and circled her opponent with renewed caution. Obviously Akane had not been boasting when she said she was training hard these days. With a flurry of punches, both girls closed. Only a few got past either defense, but again it was Akane, which emerged triumphant. While Makoto concentrated on the upper torso, Akane snaked out one leg and neatly flipped her onto her back.

The third round went slightly slower. Makoto spent more effort on defense. As a result, she only hit Akane once. But Akane eventually moved in, locking the girl's left arm in a pain hold. When Makoto dropped to her knees and offered to yield, Akane released her. Immediately, Ranma was there, picking her up and spinning her around. "WOO HOO! Well done, Akane! That was beautiful! You've really learnt a lot in the last few weeks!"

It was in the excitement of the moment that he leaned in, and kissed her. It just seemed so natural, so normal that neither noticed in their excitement. It was not until Usagi coughed that they realized what they were doing, and with whom. Instantly they were two meters apart, looking completely innocent and on guard for the inevitable pummeling from one of their respective potential suitors. A moment of awkward silence went by and the expected pummeling didn't happen. With a great show of casualness, they returned to the lunch table and sat a few meters apart, where a surprised Makoto was waiting.

Usagi watched them and thought of her beautiful boyfriend. She sighed. It was so beautiful watching people in love. "Gee, you guys act as though you'd never kissed before."

Akane and Ranma immediately found something, anything interesting to look at. Usagi continued, genuinely intrigued at some juicy gossip. "Um, you guys have kissed before, haven't you? You've been engaged for a year now, haven't you?"

"I never wanted..."

"It was our parents..."

They both looked incredibly sheepish. So much so, that even Makoto decided to take pity on the girl that just beat her. "Akane, that was incredible. I don't think I've ever fought anyone that good. As a matter of fact, the only person I can think of who might give you a run for your money would be your cousin, Ranko."

"Blah!" Ranma was coughing and choking on his drink. After a few solid thumps on his back, he recovered. Akane decided to take pity on him; after all, he had said such nice things after she won.

"Err, that doesn't matter. I don't think you'll see her much. She's pretty shy. So you don't need to worry."

The Senshi eyed each other curiously. Usagi suddenly had an inspired idea. "Say, Akane. Where did you learn to fight? It would just be so nice to defend ourselves as well as you do!"

Once again Ranma nearly choked on his drink. While he coughed and spluttered off the end of the table, Akane gave them a new shock. "Well, Dad taught me initially, but now Ranma is studying to take over the dojo, so he's teaching me some of the things he knows."

"RANMA is teaching you?"

"Err, yes."

"Wow. So, is this just tutoring what you know or is he actually better than you?"

"Um, better. Lots better actually."

Ranma could barely believe his ears. Someone was actually accepting he was good without this absurd need to try and beat the life out of him or marry him. What a pleasant experience.

Makoto decided to follow up with Usagi's idea. "Well then, Ranma. Would you be interested in some students?"

"Well, I don't know. I'd have to ask Mr. Miyagi if I can use the dojo, but I don't think he'd mind. Would it be OK with you, Akane?"

When Akane agreed, Ranma promised to ask Mr. Miyagi, and try to start teaching as soon as possible. Ami offered to stop charging for the tutoring in exchange for the lessons. Ranma initially objected since he was not qualified, but soon relented. Maybe it was living with Nabiki, but Ranma was beginning to see the advantage of charging for some things. Even so, he would have taught for free if they wanted. Over the next few days, Ranma made arrangements. Soon his day was more packed than ever.

In the mornings, he would wake early and train with Akane. Then he would show Mr. Miyagi the finer points of Dojo repair. School, then tutoring with Ami. After that, the two would walk to Mr. Miyagi's dojo, where Ranma would train the three girls from Juuban High, Akane, and five of their friends. Ranma managed to hide his surprise at seeing Rei and Ami, since he knew they were both Sailors. However, Usagi introduced Rei as a friend of theirs from Junior High school. It was a rough world, and even being a Shinto priestess did not guarantee protection. After training and dinner, Ranma would turn in early. Most nights, he would awaken to his communicator, leave the house and fight demons for a few hours.

Kasumi smiled as a visitor entered though the door. He was covered in dirt and smelled like, well, a pig. "Hello, Ryoga-kun. Have you managed to find Ranma and Akane yet?"

Ryoga wanted to snarl, but couldn't in the presence of the eldest Tendo sister. "No, Kasumi. Not yet. I almost had them. I was this close, but they must have moved the dojo. Do you mind if I have a quick bath, then I have to head out again."

"Certainly, I shall prepare some tea while you have a bath. Just follow me, and I'll show you where you can put your bag. It's been so quiet without those two, I hardly know what to do with my time any more."

Kasumi smiled. It was nice to have a guest in the house again.

Two weeks passed quickly. Most of the Senshi picked up the techniques that Ranma taught with amazing speed. Most that was except for one. It soon became obvious that trying to teach Usagi to kick (or anything which required balance) would be an uphill task.

Akane continued to improve. The morning sparring sessions quickly became time where Ranma was able to expand his teaching skills. He would show Akane a technique, then watch her use it against him. She was good, no doubt about it. Next time Shampoo decided to challenge this girl, she would have a surprise.

Mr. Miyagi proved to be a very indifferent student of woodwork. No matter how basic a level Ranma went to, there was always something left unexplained. He soon found that anger or shouting had no effect on how fast Mr. Miyagi learned. But sometimes, he would see Mr. Miyagi finally mastered something, be it how to select wood, or how to hammer, and he felt a surge of hope. His hopes were always dashed. The next day, Mr. Miyagi would refuse to teach him the techniques of being a Sensei, saying he would when Ranma showed how to fix the dojo.

Ranma also learned more about the youma. He learned that they were smarter than the Senshi had described. They plotted. They planned. They also hurt when an attack got through. It was an unusual day when Ranma did not have some injury.

"Oh my, Ryoga-kun! I didn't realize you were still here." Kasumi said in surprise as Ryoga walked past the kitchen window. He was bathed, groomed and for some reason still had a faint smell of a pig.

He stopped and rubbed the back of his head with an embarrassed smile. "Sorry, Kasumi. I just can't seem to find the front gate. I need to find Akane before Ranma does anything. Um... I don't suppose you could show me the way to the gate?"

"I would be glad to."

When Ryoga reached the gate, he turned south and walked with a determined stride. "Hokkaido, here I come."

Sunday was a lazy day. No school, no training, and no tutoring. Akane sighed as she lay in a chair and read a newspaper in her bedroom. She had actually been hoping that Ranma and her might go for a walk today. Things had been going so well for them; they hardly even fought these days. No, going for a romantic walk was too much to expect of Ranma.

Just then a knock sounded on her door. When she responded Ranma came in and sat by her feet, holding a piece of paper. He looked sheepish again. As though he was going to say something significant. Akane felt her heart surge. Maybe he did want to go for a walk. She blinked her eyes and tried to look as cute as possible. Let's make things easy for him.

Ranma looked at her, and felt a pang of guilt over what he was going to do. He knew Akane's Martial skills as well as his own. There was one main technique she had not mastered. For that technique she just did not have the focus normally. He had pondered on it for several days, and figured out the only way he could do this.

"You know, Akane, you're doing really well these days. You fight better than Ukyo every day now."

Akane almost fell off of her chair. Ranma actually though she was better than one of his fiancées at something. She couldn't cook, she wasn't cute, but she could now fight better than Ukyo!

"But there's something really important for you to master. When Ryoga or I use a Shishi Hokodan or Moko Takabisha, or even the Breaking Point, it's a matter of ki manipulation. Now, I know you've got a good ki, God knows I've seen your battle aura often enough. Well, I was wondering if you're ready to learn a special technique."

Her eyes lit up. Few warriors could do ki attacks, and Ranma thought she was ready to learn. Even Shampoo could not regularly do ki attacks. "Oh, Ranma. Do you think I'm ready?"

"To be honest... I'm not sure. But I think so. I hope so. What I want to do is teach you to do a new attack. I designed it especially for you. It suits your strength, your personality. Do you want to learn it?"

Ranma looked at her with hope in his eyes. The youma attacks had been getting worse, not better. The Senshi had caused them casualties, but according to Sailor Mercury's best guess, the youma were stealing more energy than they were losing. He figured it was only time until one of them attacked Akane when she was alone. Maybe not now, maybe not for another month, but it would surely happen someday. If he did not do everything in his power to prepare her for that day, he would be as much to blame for her death as if he had stuck a knife in her.

He knew what he needed to do to teach her, and it hurt him just to think about it. But if he hurt her now, it might keep her alive later. Any sacrifice was worth that, even losing her.

"Oh, please, Ranma. Yes!"

"OK, but there are few things you need to agree to first:"

"One: I think I can teach it to you this morning. So remember, anything I say or do before midday is just part of the training."

"Two: No matter what I tell you to do, you do. It may seem strange, it may seem silly, but do it."

"Three: I'm going to leave this note in your room. Don't read it now, but read it after we finish training. Only afterwards, understand?"

"If you promise to do these three things, let's get changed and get started."

Akane promised, so he left the note while she changed. Akane wondered what was in the note that she could not read it until after training. No matter. Ranma trusted her, so she would fulfill that trust. They met outside and did some quick warm ups and a little light sparing.

After that, they sat down on some rocks and he explained about focus, and how to source the ki, which she would use. To Akane, it did not always make sense. But Ranma kept explaining patiently until she could almost envision the well of power within herself. After that he explained her attack.

As he had said, it was finely crafted to her. The Thunder Hammer Strike was something he had designed for her, and her alone. Ranma had studied her, she realized. He knew her better than she knew herself. What he described seemed so natural, so simple. She would stand upright, and gather the energy in her raised hands. Above her head, she would form her Thunder Hammer. When she felt it was ready, she would bring her hands in front, 'swinging' the Hammer, and 'releasing' the Hammer at its target.

As far as ki attacks went, it was quite simple. It was also fairly weak. But that was only compared to ki attacks. Compared to a punch or kick, it was much stronger; it also gave you the range advantage over almost every opponent.

Without summoning the energy, Ranma had her walk through the motions and thoughts needed for the Thunder Hammer Strike. It was half past eleven before he was satisfied with

her technique. Finally he decided it was time for her to put things into practice. Setting up a target at the side of the garden, he stood beside her and coached her to raise her aura, and strike.

Breathing deeply, Akane concentrated. Raising her hands above her head, she felt the power funneling into them. After minutes of this, she felt the strain and brought her arms down. Glaring at the target, she screamed and released. "**THUNDER HAMMER STRIKE!**"

A dim light flew from her palms and vaguely lit up the target.

"Oh, good try there, really Akane. But I honestly think it should have been more like this:" Ranma negligently gathered a ball of ki in his palm, then sent it flying into the target, burning a small hole in the center.

Akane turned at him and snapped. "Hey, back off! This is my first time, remember."

"Sure, sure. Try again."

Try she did, but with little more success. They kept trying for twenty minutes. Each time she failed, Akane became more frustrated. Each time she failed, he insulted her more. By the end of that time, he yelled at her for being a stupid girl, and stalked to the end of the firing range, where the almost undamaged target stood. "Well, I think I should be safe enough here, what do you think, Akane?"

"Shut up, Ranma. I'm trying the best that I can!"

"Oh, sure you're trying! You're really trying. I don't know why I bothered! You don't care. You can't even be bothered with the effort. This is why I have to run around looking after an uncute tomboy like you. You couldn't protect yourself from a mosquito!"

"Ranma, you jerk! I'm trying!"

"Tell it to someone who cares. God! Why did I waste my time trying to teach you? I knew we should have brought Shampoo along!"

Akane's battle aura went up, as did her blood pressure. "WHAT did you say?!?"

"I said we should have brought Shampoo! She can cook, she can fight, she's cute, and she could have mastered this in her sleep."

"**WELL FINE THEN! SEE IF I CARE!**"

"Hey, at least I have a fiancée I didn't need daddy to trap for me! Shampoo could have done this technique without even trying. You're an uncute violent macho tomboy!"

Akane's battle aura flared, and she screamed at the top of her lungs: "RANMA, YOU JERK! I HATE YOU! GO TO SHAMPOO FOR ALL I CARE! I NEVER WANT TO SEE YOU AGAIN! THUNDER HAMMER STRIKE!!"

Akane summoned a massive blue ball into her raised hands, and then flung it down range at him. Although he was expecting it, it still smashed him through the wall around the yard. Lying on the street amid the rubble he heard Akane yell. "And don't come back!"

When he heard her run off in tears, he crawled out of the rubble. Gods, that hurt more than he thought it could. And it wasn't the ki blast that hurt.

Back in the house, Akane threw herself onto her bed and cried. In the distance she heard the clock strike twelve. *Oh, Ranma. How could you? How could you?*

Akane's pillow was quickly soaked from her free flowing tears.

It was around four o'clock by the time Akane left her room. Her face was red and puffy, and her eyes hurt from crying. *I thought he cared. I really did. How could that idiot have fooled me? I'm such an idiot.* Heading to the bathroom, she washed her face, and tried to clean up a bit. She didn't want Mr. Miyagi to see her like this. Perhaps in a few days she could explain why Ranma was not around any more.

As she returned to her room she saw the note that he had left that morning. Grabbing it angrily, she was about to tear it up, unread. Hesitating just before she did she remembered, *I promised I would read it, Ranma, you jerk. I keep my promises. I care enough for that. I'll read it and get you out of my system forever.* Akane suddenly realized she would not need to explain to Mr. Miyagi why Ranma was not there: she would go back to Nerima tomorrow. At least her family cared.

Dear Akane,

I hope you are reading this today. If not, then things may be too late, but please try. Firstly, I want you to remember rule one from this morning. Do you? I wrote these down just a few minutes ago, so I do. Here's the rule I am about to tell you:

'Anything I say or do before midday is just part of the training.' Trust me, Akane. I timed it carefully. Everything should have happened before midday. Even if not, please allow me a few minutes grace.

Secondly, I need to say what I did. I know you well, Akane. You're really a nice person on the inside. I can see that these days. Even when I call you a macho uncute tomboy, you're still not really mad. But I know when you do get mad; your battle aura is huge. You glow like a street lamp, honestly.

All that power is what is needed for a ki attack. I know you can do a ki attack, but inside, fundamentally, you don't. You resist every effort I have made to introduce it subtly. There was only one option left. I teach you the technique, and turn you into a loaded gun. But you could never do it when you needed it if you did not believe you could. So I needed all the power of your anger.

I know what I said hurt you, it was meant to. It hurt me to say it, and I never meant a word. But the first is always the hardest. So I gave you the technique, then I gave you the power and motivation to use it. I expect that by the time you are reading this, you have blasted me through a wall and said you never want to see me again.

Here's why I did it. The world is a dangerous place, and it's getting worse. The demons the Senshi are fighting are getting bigger, nastier and more numerous. You couldn't hurt them with just Martial Arts. Even

I can't. The only hope you have if one those things attack would be to use ki against it. I realize I can't be there to protect you all the time. I want to be, but I can't. This is the only way I could think to allow you to protect yourself.

Keeping you safe means more to me than anything. If making you hate me for the rest of you life will keep you alive for a long time, then I'm willing to pay that price. I don't know whether this makes sense to you, but if you want to see me again, I am going to be at Ami's for a while.

I ~~like~~ ~~**honor**~~ ~~I respect~~ ~~I lo~~ ~~**lov..**~~ l

I love you.

Now and always,

Ranma Saotome.

By the time she finished the note, Akane was crying again. *He knew. All that time he knew what he said, what it meant, and what it would do. He knew I would blast him with everything I had, and he stood there and took it. Oh, Ranma, you sweet idiot!*

Chapter 3, Life As A Sailor Senshi

Ranma knocked on the door of Ami's condominium and stood there waiting until the door was opened. He had walked here in a complete daze. All he could think about was Akane yelling at him: 'I never want to see you again'. She looked so sad, so hurt, so betrayed. He always knew what he had done would hurt, it had to, and it was planned that way. He just never realized how much it would hurt him. Ranma had thought that any price was worth the chance that she would be able to protect herself. Now all that he could think was that it was not worth it. He should have settled for being condescending to her. He should have ensured that he was by her side every minute of every day. Anything but losing her forever.

Ranma wondered if she had read the note he left. He had to write it twelve times before he got it right. The last nine times had just been to get the last two sentences right. He still did not know what Akane felt about him, but if that was going to be the last chance that he would have to speak to her, Ranma eventually realized that he had to tell her how he felt.

Oh, why did he have to say those horrible things to her? Sure, it was the only way, but... Ranma's musings were interrupted when the door in front of him opened. "Oh, Ranko, what are you doing here?"

Ranko looked down at herself. She was dripping wet and quite obviously female. *I wonder when that happened? Oh, that's right, it was raining for a bit.* She was so depressed she didn't care. She looked up at Ami and saw concern in the girl's eyes. Ranko was about to reply when Ami continued. "Did I miss an alert or something? No, there's something else wrong, isn't there? Oh my! You're soaking wet! Get inside, we need to dry you off and get you some clean clothes."

Ranko numbly followed the girl into the neat upscale condo. Ranko had been here once before, briefly when the Senshi had started to try and get her to open up to them. She would have to be careful that she didn't show too much knowledge of the place, after all, Ranma had been here almost every day for a month and a half, and he knew the place well. "Um, Ami, err, I saw Ranma on my way over here. He said he and Akane had just had a big fight and told me all about it. So, if Akane calls, just tell me, and I'll apolo... I'll go talk to her."

Ami's eyes narrowed. There was something a bit odd about this. She knew that Akane and Ranko were cousins, but from what Akane said, it seemed Ranko avoided her. But now, Ranko was having deep heart-to-heart talks with Ranma, and they appeared to affect her deeply. "You really care about Ranma, don't you Ranko."

Ranko looked very guilty and stared at her feet. "You could say that we're pretty close. Heh, heh. I suppose that's right, really. No matter what people have tried, they just can't separate Ranma and me. I know Akane and Pops have tried often enough."

Ami dropped the clothes she was getting and put her hands on her hips. "Ranko, that's terrible! Akane is your cousin! How can you possibly try and seduce her fiancée? That's a terrible thing to do!"

Ranko looked up in shock, and then began to laugh. "Is that what it looks like? I guess it does. I mean we dress the same, and we do the same sort of things. Heh, perhaps we could be a good match. But, Ami, believe me. There's nothing between the two of us. We're more like

brother and sister. If Ranma is cut, I bleed. If I hurt, he hurts. Trust me, Akane knows it, I know it, Ranma knows it. It's really impossible for anything to, you know, happen between Ranma and me. Impossible, between us, get it, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha!"

Ami watched as Ranko fell to floor laughing at some private joke. She didn't understand, but apparently Ranko thought that the very idea of her seducing Ranma was a stupid one. She might have thought some relationships were impossible too, but she had seen Makoto in action. Makoto proved almost anyone could fall for a nice smile and a pretty face, and Ranko had those. Eventually Ranko realized that she was the only one laughing, and calmed down. "Thanks, Ami. I think I needed a bit of a laugh just now. Um, someday I may explain it to you, but I'm afraid I can't just now."

Ami sighed. Well, so much for the hopes that Ranko had come over to finally want to be friends with some of the Senshi. Picking up the clothes she had dropped, she displayed them for Ranko. There was a pink tee shirt, some blue shorts, and some underwear. "We look about the same size, so you can borrow some of my stuff until yours dries. We don't want you catching a cold, do we?"

Ranko looked at the underwear in disgust. "I can't wear that! They're girl's clothes!"

"What's wrong with girl's clothes? You're a girl."

"I'm a g... Um, yeah, I look like a girl, but I always wear guy's clothes, they're much more comfortable, see."

Ami blushed as Ranko showed her that she was actually wearing boxer shorts. Perhaps this was what she meant about not being able to have a relationship with Ranma. "Err, Ranko, does that mean that you're, you know, um, that way?"

Ranko was perplexed. "What way?"

"You know... THAT way."

"Um." Ranko stood there confused. She managed to follow what Ami had been talking about until the conversation stopped being clear. Unfortunately after living on the road for so many years with only an obsessive father for company, Ranko missed out on some of the finer points of people's conversations. When people went 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink', all Ranko understood was a nudge and a wink. Innuendo was something that went right over her head.

"Well, I was just wondering if the reason you never wanted to go out with the Sailors is if because, well, you were a little bit of a cross dresser and worried about what we would say. But it's OK. I mean, not all of us are quite normal either."

Ranko went pale. "**I'M NOT A CROSS DRESSER!** It's just a curse, OK? But, err, yeah, that's why I never went places with the Senshi. I just... just didn't know how you would react. Wow. You must be really clever, Ami. When did you figure it out?" She scratched the back of her head in relief.

Ami beamed at the complement, so she realized that Ranko was a lesbian. It was no big secret, really. "Oh, just now. I sort of looked at the boxers, and thought of the confusion that Sailor Uranus sometimes gets, and well, it fell into place."

Ranko was seriously impressed. One look at her boxers, and Ami knows all about her curse. Ranko was just amazed that it took this long. But then, Ranko had been avoiding them whenever possible. When she saw Ranma, he really was a guy, so no clues there. Ranko was still impressed that she figured out about it so quickly. "Well, I still think you must have a pretty good brain to put it all together. I suppose there's not really much point in hiding it from you now, but don't go telling the others, OK? I really don't like people to know about my curse."

"Oh, Ranko. It's not a curse, really. You're just a bit different from others. No one would mind, honestly."

"Ami, it is a curse. When Pop and I were training in this place in China called Jusenkyo, I fell into the spring of drowned girl. And that made me into what you see today."

"Oh, Ranko, it really is OK." Ami patted her on the shoulder. "Besides, if you feel more comfortable not wearing girl's clothes, then I think I can find something more to your liking."

Ami rummaged through her drawers, and then found some more nondescript clothes. Ami was glad that she and Ranko had this little chat. If she could make her feel comfortable with herself, perhaps Ranko would really become part of the team, a real member, not just one that helped in the fights. When Ranko was dressed, they headed to the kitchen for some tea. Perhaps if she could steer the talk to more neutral topics, she continue to draw Ranko out of the shell she had built.

Ami came back from the kitchen, holding a tea set on a tray. She placed it down on the table and sat down. To break the ice, she thought it would be good to talk about one of Ranko's favorite subjects, namely fighting. "Ranko, what's that attack that you use when you fight the youma?"

"It's called the Moko Takabisha. It's a ki-based attack. Basically you summon up your internal energy and project it at the target. Why?"

"That's the same attack that you used when you fought the youma before you became a Sailor Senshi, isn't it?"

"True, but when I'm Sailor Sun, I can regain my ki much faster. Since I'm not in danger of seriously draining myself, I can use bigger and better blasts every time I let loose. You're right though, it's the same attack."

Ami smacked a fist into her palm. "I knew it! Rei did a fire reading before we first met you, and saw you surrounded by flames. Artemis also said that according to legend, Sailor Sun is supposed to have the most powerful attacks of any of the Senshi. Now I hate to say it; your ki attacks are OK, but not that great. Take my Shabon Spray Freezing: it can do about as much damage, but it does it to everything it touches, if I want it to. Your Moko Takabisha is good, but it still doesn't have the power you need.

"Next time we encounter a youma, I want you to concentrate. Feel the magic, feel the power flow through you. When you attack, don't force it, just use what comes naturally."

They continued to talk for a while, usually inconsequential things. Ami deliberately stayed away from personal information so that she did not scare away the slowly opening Ranko. Ranko was equally willing to stay on lighter topics. Thoughts of Akane kept breaking to the surface. All that she wanted to do was run back to Mr. Miyagi's and apologize, but she knew

it would be impossible. If Akane read the note, she would either forgive her or not. If she had not read the note, it would be months before Akane would let Ranma speak to her again, if ever.

They were on their third cup of tea when their communicators signaled. Trust the youma to ruin a perfectly good Sunday afternoon, moments later, a pair of Sailor Senshi leapt from roof to roof on the way to their rendezvous.

Jadeite looked into the screen that showed the battle about to take place. The last few weeks had been a greater success than even he had anticipated. While there had been losses, they were lower than expected. While the Senshi had a new one added to their number, the attacks which she possessed was not great enough to create a decisive advantage.

He puzzled over this new girl. He didn't recall a tenth Senshi during the Silver Millennium and this girl wasn't nearly as powerful as any of the others. She was skilled in hand-to-hand combat, but that was it. Her magical ability was mediocre at best.

"Sailor Sun, indeed." Chuckled Jadeite. It seemed that the Senshi were getting desperate and were trying to recruit new members into their midst. Without Queen Serenity's magic or experience, he believed they could never hope to be able to endow a new Senshi with powers sufficient to repel even a minor youma. This so called Senshi of the Sun never was able to kill a youma alone. She always had to have another Senshi deal the fatal blow.

He was worried at first when she appeared, thinking that this girl may have had powers worthy of her guardian star, but now all she was, was a stupid joke; a joke that Sailor Moon would live to regret.

Recently, he detected a burst of life energy in the area of Tokyo he knew the Senshi lived. He knew Usagi, Rei and Ami's identities but he didn't know where they lived. Now, he had a possible location for one of them. The idea of the kidnapping of a Senshi in human form was an idea he couldn't resist. The amount of energy he could drain from her opened up possibilities that he dared not dream of.

He had time to deal with this possibility soon enough. Right now, it was time to spring the next phase of the invasion.

A force of youma would be sent to earth. Not just one or two, but over thirty, thirty of the new generation of powerful youma. It was costly, but it would be worth it. Jadeite knew that the Senshi would stand a chance of winning against them. Not a big chance, but it was a chance. Unbelievably, the Senshi had managed to win from impossible positions so often; Jadeite was beginning to expect it. This time there would be no failure.

The youma would not fail because the Senshi had less brains than the youma did. You play with them a while, and they fall into a pattern. Then you trap them, so they see traps everywhere. It was a battle against superior forces, so sneakiness was needed. Over the time he had gathered the power for his army, Jadeite had let the Senshi become used to fighting one or two youma. He had also let them get used to the idea of being ambushed by a larger force.

When he launched a convincing attack against them that is all they would see. It would be more of the same, just on a bigger scale. They would never see the dimensional beacon. They

would never even look. From what he knew, thirty youma should be sufficient to destroy the Senshi. But Jadeite could not get his hopes up. Injure them, almost certainly, but kill; he felt he could not be so lucky. Something would save them, it always did.

The dimensional beacon was another matter. It would enable his forces to move back and forwards at a fraction of the current cost. Where sending thirty youma expended so much energy, he would send over a hundred at a much smaller cost.

The Senshi gathered and looked at the youma. Their detectors had registered the arrival of one or more in this area, and this was all they had been able to spot. Now it had drained the energy from over twenty people at an amusement arcade. They were ready to attack when Sailor Mercury spoke up. "I've been having a chat with Sailor Sun, and I think I have an idea on how we can release her full powers. Venus, if you can use your chain to hold the youma, we can give Sailor Sun the time she needs to realize her attack."

Sailor Moon nodded. "Great idea. See Sailor Sun, soon you'll really be one of us girls. Not only do we get these great costumes, you also get to have your own cool magic attack!"

As everyone leapt into position, Sailor Sun hesitated and in a small voice whispered. "But I don't want to be one of the girls."

"Amusement centers are a place for happiness and enjoyment of children and families. To pervert such a place and harm people is a thing of evil. For your actions, the beautiful sailor suited warrior for love and justice, Sailor Moon, shall defeat you."

Finishing her set of poses, Sailor Moon threw her tiara. "MOON TIARA ACTION!"

Weaving a beautiful stream of light, it flew at the youma, causing it to dive out of the arcade, and into the open. With elegant poise, Sailor moon reached up and collected her tiara as it flew back. While she replaced it on her head, blonde hair flying, the others went into action.

The twin calls of "SHABON SPRAY FREEZING!" and "BURNING MANDALA!" Sailors Mercury and Mars managed to confine the ugly beast, and obscure its vision. Neptune and Uranus leapt to either side of the monster outside of the burning ring, which surrounded it. There was no escape now. With all the others forming a defensive line in front of Sailor Sun, Sailor Venus moved up to attack.

Spinning slowly, she began to fire the chain of hearts from her hand. When she screamed "VENUS LOVE ME CHAIN!" they flew out. In no time, a chain of glowing orange hearts snaked out, bailing up the youma.

Sailor Moon looked on impressed. Their attack had worked perfectly, something to be remembered for the future. Behind her, Sailor Saturn placed a hand on Venus, and the two continued to feed power into the Love Me Chain. With this much effort, even a youma of this strength could not hope to escape.

Sailor Sun looked on, feeling impressed. She had been fighting with them regularly now, but this was one of their best-coordinated and executed attacks yet. It was amazing what these girls could do with little notice. They obviously worked together so much; they could almost read the thoughts of their compatriots. Clearing her mind of the ki attacks that she usually used, Sailor Sun meditated for a moment.

Somewhere deep within her, Sailor Sun could feel the magic responding to her request. Before, there had always been a sharp distinction, it was Ranko and Sailor Sun, and they were separate people. Once she had fought the idea of being Sailor Sun. She was a guy, she was a Martial Artist, and she didn't need the silly magical powers. As a consequence, all she received from being Sailor Sun was the minimal powers possible to be a Senshi. The true powers of attack, and the ability to withstand magical damage had been withheld. Now, deep inside her soul, Sailor Sun called for those powers.

But she did not call for them for herself. She called for them so that she could save Akane, and others like her throughout the world. Then the powers came. Suddenly Sailor Sun could see what she was missing out on. Within her soul, she could feel the very energy of the sun, the linking of her life force to the power that rules the solar system. Barely seconds had passed before Sailor Sun opened her eyes, but she felt like it was years, an entire lifetime.

Sailor Moon stared at their latest recruit. She had watched seven other Sailors come into their powers. She had been there when all of them had had their first boost in their powers, changing their battle cry from 'Planet Power, Make Up' to 'Star Power, Make Up'. Now she realized that she was seeing the true Sailor Sun for the first time. When the girl had closed her eyes there had been a pause, then a flare of flames. For several moments, Sailor Sun was bathed in the fire, which Rei had witnessed in her fire reading, all those weeks ago.

When Sailor Sun opened her eyes, the others fell back in surprise. Gone were the sparkling blue eyes that they were used to seeing. In their place were twin flames, burning in the darkness where her eyes should be. With a manic grin, Sailor Sun trotted to the front of their line. Passing her hands in front of herself, she began to gather small flames, then a glowing ball of red. Moving like she was pitching a baseball, Sailor Sun drew back the flaming, crackling sphere she was making. "SEARING PLASMA BLAST!" Like a whip, the arms shot forward and a flaming comet charged at the captive youma.

When the blast struck, the fireball exploded. A wave of heat came over them, and the two Senshi nearest cowered behind their arms, fending off the effects. The bitumen street where it had been targeted was cratered and melted, still bubbling and boiling in parts. Nearby shop signs had caught fire, and the force of the blast had smashed several windows. Of the youma, there was simply no sign.

The red head was overjoyed. "YEE-HAH! I did it! Whoo-hoo! Take that you evil demon, you! Go the Sailor Senshi!"

Sailor Sun danced around, her ecstasy obvious. While everyone else watched in awe of her demonstrated powers, she ran over to the hole in the street she had made. Sailor Moon was the first to recover. It's a good thing she's on our side. I wouldn't want to fight her! Shortly all the Senshi were running to her, cheering.

The crowd of super powered girls in short skirts had almost reached their friend when Sailor Mercury's computer beeped a warning. A youma was still nearby. It was only her excited dancing which caused the youma to miss Sailor Sun when it fired at her.

The youma was a new variant, something else they had never encountered. Rather than the heavy, bulky youma with devastating strength, this was a tall, skinny, hunchbacked creature, fairly human in shape, although almost twice as tall. This one also seemed to have some sort of long-range weapon.

Sailor Sun had missed being hit by the youma, but when the blob it fired landed, she was splashed. It must have been acid of some sort, because the much-abused street began to bubble and hiss. Sailor Sun also began to scream as drops of the fearsome gel clung to her in spots. As the pain began to register, she began swatting at the burning spots, smearing the acid with her gloved hands. The damage was only minor, even if painful. Sailor Neptune rushed up and summoned some cold water with which she washed off Sailor Sun. The acid gone, they could see several holes in her skirt and suit, and the glove on her right arm was almost destroyed.

Sun growled as she examined the damage to her bodysuit, "You ruined my uniform!" The pissed off Senshi charged the beast.

Moon looked around and spotted the fleeing youma. "Come on Sailor Senshi! We can't let it get away!"

Everyone yelled, and gave chase. The youma was fast, but they were faster, and slowly made up the distance. Now that they knew what to look for, the acid attacks that the youma possessed posed little problem. The Senshi were so fast on their feet that even minor splashes were uncommon.

They had chased the youma to an old area of the city, filled with abandoned warehouses when it stopped. It slowly turned and faced the formation of Senshi. Each of them stood ready. The chase and the minor burns most had received made them mad. Staring at the one youma, nine powerful Senshi readied an all out attack. Just as they prepared to deliver it, they were attacked.

Only the sixth sense for danger, which they possessed, had saved them. It had been finely honed from years of fighting, and even without thought, they abandoned their attacks, leaping to the air. Looking down, Sailor Saturn saw the boiling remains of where they had stood, covered with acid. Looking up, the small Sailor saw legions of youma gathered on the buildings. In their arms (or tentacles) they carried bloated looking sacs of a pale, sickly green fluid. Seeing their surprise had failed, the youma launched the acid bombs indiscriminately at the Senshi, blasting walls and road with assorted misses.

Sailor Saturn watched as her teammates nimbly dodged the bombs, and she joined their efforts. With so many incoming attacks, dodging was everything. After what seemed to be an eternity, the bombs stopped landing. Sailor Saturn brushed her short black hair from her eyes and looked around. Everyone was basically unhurt, but the street had become a minefield. One misstep would put you in the acid, and it would eat your foot off before you could stop it.

Then the little Sailor saw why the youma did not care. Dozens of the beasts were leaping off warehouse roofs, or through the walls. When they attacked, the demons did not care where they stood; they were equally happy on concrete or acid. It was just one more problem to contend with. When a demon stepped in the gel, it would splash, giving you something else to dodge. But the youma would have a foot (or hand, or whatever), which was now a fearsome weapon. A simple touch could cause debilitating pain.

A tall youma with a dozen long tentacles landed in front of Sailor Saturn. Bopping it on the head with her glaive, she retreated next to Sailor Uranus who was laying about with wild abandon. While battle cries and the occasional scream of pain filled the air, Sailor Uranus watched over her adopted daughter. When Saturn was sure the path was clear, she struck.

When she cried "SILENCE GLAIVE SURPRISE!" and lowered her weapon, everything in its path was shattered. In the distance a warehouse began to fall as its corner support was ripped away, while right in front of her a many tentacled beast split apart and began to dissolve.

The other Sailors were not doing as well. Like Sailor Saturn, they needed to be very careful with the attacks they launched, lest they hurt a friend. With so many youma to attack, hand-to-hand fighting was not working well. Outnumbered more than three to one, the youma could gang up and almost take turns fighting a target.

When one youma became hurt, it would withdraw slightly, its friends taking up the slack. When Sailor Jupiter attempted to chase one and press her advantage, she suffered a beating at the hands of a huge tiger striped youma with pile driver arms. By the time she recovered, her target was safely healing, and she was moving stiffly from the blows.

Sailor Neptune was the first to fall. Surrounded by six creatures, she had missed an attack from behind and was knocked stunned to the ground. Before the youma could press the advantage, an enraged Uranus had charged in, knocking monsters flying. Taking station over her fallen lover, Sailor Uranus fought with a berserker fury, driving back all who would attack.

The battle continued and began to drag into minutes, with both sides showing signs of wear. Sailor Saturn was the second to be knocked out. She did not have the strength for hand to hand against the youma, and her Silence Glaive Surprise was too dangerous for indiscriminate use. By the time she was down, she was the most successful, having claimed a total of four kills. All of the Senshi were injured, and quickly tiring. The youma were also faring badly. A quarter of their number were down, and many were injured. Unfortunately it looked like they were winning.

The Senshi were using their magic less and less as fatigue set in, and Sailor Sun had been beaten soundly. The youma had targeted her specifically with many of their fighters initially. It was known that she was the most powerful Senshi in hand to hand, and Jadeite had expected this to be a long-term battle right from the start. Jadeite had planned that the Senshi should not be able to group and focus their powers as they had so often in the past. Instead they had been forced to act as a group of individuals, dangerous individuals to be sure, but individuals. Fully expecting them to tire and lose the use of their powerful magic attacks, Jadeite had wanted the Senshi with the most long term power to be out of commission before it was a contest on equal grounds.

When the youma had realized that Sailor Sun also had one of the most dangerous magical attacks, the plan only made more sense. They had recently managed to break Sailor Sun's left arm, rendering her incapable of casting the powerful Plasma Blast that she had revealed. Now she was mainly on the defensive, holding her own, but unable to make headway against those arrayed against her. With Sailor Saturn down, Sailor Moon was the next target of priority. She was good, and wielded her staff to telling effect, but the battle was shifting against her.

With a scream and a leap Sailor Sun launched herself to where Uranus was guarding Saturn and Neptune. Sticking her arms in the air, she tried to ignore the way she could feel the bones grate in her left arm. "Sailors, join on me!"

Despite not knowing what she planned, all the Sailors moved. Teamwork was the key to their success. If Sailor Sun knew something they did not, they did not have time to question

her. Sun took one last look around her, making sure her friends were close enough. Closing her eyes, she called on the one other attack she knew she had. "SOLAR FLARE!"

A sudden concussion knocked most of the Senshi off their feet, and shook the youma, causing them to pause. Even though Moon fell straight onto Sailor Sun, the red haired girl did not move in the slightest. While she channeled massive quantities of power, the ground began to shake, and an ominous thunder rose from all around. The youma had just rejoined the attack when the full force appeared.

Centered on Sailor Sun was a small area of calm in which the Senshi and two youma hid, too stunned to speak or move while the force of nature raged beside them. A third youma almost joined them, but it had been caught on the invisible dividing line between safety and destruction. With half its body vaporized in a raging inferno, the youma fell to the ground and began to dissolve. All the Senshi could see was a dome of fire, covering them, surrounding them. A muted roar of flames could be heard, as though far away. Inside the dome, it was calm and cool. After seeing what had happened to the youma caught in the surrounding fires, none felt the desire to try putting a hand outside.

Outside it was another matter. For almost two hundred meters all around a blazing conflagration raged. Flames powered by the surface of the sun melted the ground, and reduced everything they touched to a seared plasma. A burning, inverted tornado of flame reached almost eight hundred meters into the air. While the top of the solar flare wavered and wobbled, the base stayed perfectly solid, an immovable circle of destruction.

Her spell lasted for only forty seconds, but to anyone watching it, it was an eternity. Past the circle of the outer radius, everything was unhurt, and the same was true for the small haven at the heart. But between...

Between the two regions the destruction was complete. Fire had sterilized both air and ground, melting through the street and rock underneath, leaving a bubbling seething mess of slowly cooling lava.

Sailor Sun collapsed unconscious; unable to help as the victorious Senshi dispatched the last of the youma.

Akane knocked on the door of Ami's condominium. No response. She tried again, and then was greeted by the face of an older woman. Bowing her head, Akane introduced herself. "Good evening, Mrs. Mizuno."

"Hello, Akane. I'm sorry, Ami's not here at the moment. She went out a while ago with a friend."

"Oh, sorry to disturb you Mrs. Mizuno. I don't suppose Ranma is here? He mentioned he was going to see Ami this afternoon."

Ami's mother looked confused for a moment, then explained. "No, Ranma hasn't come here. Ami's friend Ranko came over for a while, then they both went out. They should be back soon for dinner. Would you like to come in and wait? You can stay for dinner if you like... Ami may know where Ranma is."

Akane beamed. "Thank you Mrs. Mizuno! I'm sure Ranko will know where Ranma is."

The words had hardly left her lips when Mrs. Mizuno raised her hands to cover her mouth and she screamed. Turning around, Akane saw a horrid sight. A beaten and battered Ami was walking toward the door along with a semi-conscious Ranko draped over one shoulder. Both looked in terrible shape. They were smoke blackened, and coated in scratches and the odd gash of a more serious cut. Ranko looked like she had forced to go without food for a month, and then had been beaten with an iron bar, repeatedly. Her face was drawn and haggard. What was worse was the delicate and unnatural way that Ranko held her left arm.

Both women raced out to meet them. Ami smiled with relief when her mother reached her, and Akane lifted Ranko into her arms. She did not like to deceive people, but Ami thought it was best that Akane did not see her or Ranko in their Sailor suits. Let Ranko explain what had happened at another time.

Inside the condo, Ami's mother gathered her doctor's bag, while Ranko and Ami were placed on beds. Akane was getting ready to do some really serious crying - the sort that would really make her father proud - when a thought crossed her mind. Dashing out of the room, she grabbed Ami's mother while she was getting things. "Mrs. Mizuno! Ah, Ranko has a bit of a problem with hot water. It's something that happened when she was younger. When you wash her up, can you make sure the water is only slightly warm? It would really distress her if she felt hot water, and I'm not sure if she could take it at the moment."

Ami's mother looked at her for a second then nodded her head. Since Ranko was injured and dirty, the best thing would be to sponge bath her with hot water. However if something horrible had happened to her - say, having a kettle of boiling water poured on her when she was a baby - Ranko might have some sort of severe psychological reaction to hot water. Best to trust her cousin and not risk it.

While Akane cried over Ranko and apologized for all the things she ever said to Ranko, which hurt her, Ami was checked out, and then it was Ranko's turn. Aside from the broken arm, Ranko had a number of large cuts, dozens of small burns, and many, many bruises. Akane was shocked. She had known Ranma for almost a year now, and she had never seen him so badly beaten. When he had fought Ryoga, Kuno or any of the innumerable monsters or people, which tried to kill him, he had been knocked about or even cut a bit. Never like this. Whoever did this must be some sort of animal... or a demon.

Akane suddenly realized what must have happened. Ranko (why as a girl she did not know) and Ami must have gone out, and Ranko must have fought a youma. She knew Ranma would never risk endangering a friend - especially a girl - so the youma must have attacked them. *Oh, Ranma, you gallant fool. Please be all right.*

That night Ami's mother took Ranko and Akane back to Mr. Miyagi's place by taxi. Before taking the dazed Ranko in to the dojo, Akane hunted up the thermos of hot water that had been hidden out in the yard. A quick look and a quick check: no one around, and still hot. Hey presto, instant Ranma.

Late that night, while Ranma lay in bed, Akane sat by his side and watched over him. When he woke up, Akane was there, checking he was OK. But it was Akane he was worried about. Despite all that had happened to him that afternoon, it was still the events of the morning, which weighed heaviest upon him. When Akane told him that she had read his note, and of course she forgave him, he sighed, closed his eyes, and slept soundly.

Ranma woke up late the next day. Beside him was a note from Mr. Miyagi and some breakfast. Propping himself up with one arm, Ranma began to work his way through the food and read the letter. Apparently Mr. Miyagi had been suddenly called away by one of his past students. Daniel-san had managed to get himself involved in some Martial Arts contest over a girl and needed the wisdom of his old sensei. Mr. Miyagi expected to be home in a few weeks, and he hoped that Akane and Ranma would be all right, especially since Ranma was doing a good job of teaching Akane, and would be unable to study himself while his arm healed.

A second page of the note was from Akane. They had left him to sleep, and she wanted to ensure that he would stay in bed for the day. Since she knew about his pride, she was just going to tell their friends that he was sick. No point in her telling everyone that the strong Martial Artist had received the beating of his life. She would see him tonight after telling Ami to cancel his lessons.

There was also a request in there. Stop fighting the demons. It was short. It was simple. It was also impossible. Rei had been right all that time ago; if not him, then who? He needed to do this or Akane and people like her could never be safe. Ranma lay down and sighed. His arm and body was hurting again. He needed time to think, perhaps there was some way that he could tell her he was one of the Senshi, then she would understand.

Akane. He had finally said that he loved her. It was even written down. It was on the letter she had read, so he was sure she had read those words too. But she never said a word about it. Did she even care for him the way that he cared for her? Ranma seriously wondered that sometimes. She could be so nice one day, and then a minute later she would be trying to kill him. Ranma tried to think of the ways that he may have hurt her to make her so mad.

There was the time that Shampoo was looking for him, and when Akane stepped in, Shampoo gave her the kiss of death. And then Shampoo erased Ranma from her memories. Ranma sighed, how could he forget the fact that it was his and Ryoga's fault that she had short hair now, sure it suited her, but she was the casualty of their fight? It was also his fault that she lost any chance with Dr. Tofu. And Ukyo had taken a go or two at Akane. It was only that he had stepped in with another fight, which caused Kodachi to try and hurt Akane. There was also the time that...

Ranma sat bolt upright in bed. Not once had he ever done anything to Akane. But the number of times she had been hurt or endangered because of him was beyond counting. Ranma knew he was a trouble magnet; he even liked it that way, sort of. Trouble made life interesting, and the worst thing that could happen would be if things were quiet. He could deal with trouble... but Akane could not. She was good and getting better, there was no doubt, but Ranma also had no doubt about the outcome if she faced a youma.

Ranma did not think that black was his color, and the thought of attending Akane's funeral was too much. Somehow he needed to stop being the trouble magnet that he was. He pondered on that one for a while. That was one thing that being bed ridden was good for: plenty of time to think. It did not take him too long to figure out the common elements for most of the times Akane had been hurt.

What had he done recently? What was he doing that was kind or noble in some way? What was it that was dangerous? What was he doing that would help others, but take him away from protecting Akane? What made him a target for retribution? What could he give up without compromising his honor and life completely?

Sailor Sun.

That afternoon Ranma left a note for Akane should she return while he was out. It simply said that he was going for a walk because he could not stand being in bed all day. He would be back in time for dinner. As he left the house, he doused himself with water. Fortunately he had been able to arrange to get an adjustable splint for his arm (actually it was all that Mrs. Mizuno had available). While the transformation hurt for a few moments, there was no serious pain. Quickly she tightened the straps and moved into the distance.

She had considered calling Sailor Moon on her communicator, but Ranko did not feel like confronting all of the Senshi at one time. She felt bad enough giving up the mantle of being a Sailor, but it was a matter of priority. When she was Sailor Sun, she could not be Ranma, which meant she was not protecting Akane. Since Ranko knew she was the only person who was remotely capable of protecting that tomboy from the youma that meant that Sailor Sun had to go. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one? Not in this case, nothing outweighed the needs of Akane, not where Ranma was concerned.

If she could not call Sailor Moon and give her the transformation stick, which left only two options: Sailors Mars and Mercury, the only two she knew as people as well as Sailors. Of those two, Ami was out of the question since Akane was going to visit her this evening and that left Rei, which was quite acceptable. She was the person who initially convinced her to become a Sailor, and who seemed to be the nominal second in command. Perhaps even the person who really was in charge given the way that Moon acted most of the time.

Ranko arrived at the Shinto shrine where Rei lived and trained. Before entering, Ranko checked to make sure that no warm water had hit her, which she did not notice. The chances were slim, but Ranko could guarantee that the curse attracted water at the worst possible times. She was entering the grounds of the shrine when she saw a couple of brief flashes through some partially closed windows. *Oh, well, looks like Rei saw me coming, and she had some company.* Ranko was just about to knock on the door when it opened and Rei gestured her inside.

Haruka had been doing some push-ups in the garden of the shrine while Michiru and Rei talked. The three girls had come here after school to discuss the battle. Rei went to a different school then all of the other Sailors, so unless someone visited, she began to feel a bit left out. Knowing that they needed to discuss how to deal with a menace greater than any expected, the two upper class girls from Juuban High had dropped over. Part way through her exercise, Haruka had seen Ranko coming up the street. Since Sailor Moon's order for secrecy still covered Ranko, Haruka and Michiru transformed to ensure their identities remained hidden.

When Rei invited Ranko in and gave the injured girl a hug, Uranus thought of what she had heard from Ami that day. Apparently Ranko was inclined the same way as her and Neptune. Watching the cute little red head - looking so vulnerable with her arm in a sling - Uranus wanted to reach out and hold her. Casting a sidelong glance at Sailor Neptune, she wondered what her thoughts were.

Ranko looked around at the three girls. All were looking at her intently, and somehow she even thought that Uranus had the same sort of predatory look that so many boys had, but since they were both girls, that was obviously wrong. "I won't stay long, but I need to say

something. This isn't about the battle yesterday. I've seen worse than that, and fought monsters ten times the size. It's not even whether I **want** to be a Senshi. It's whether I **can**."

Ranko held out her transformation stick and communicator to Rei. "I'm sorry Rei. I can't do this anymore. Neptune, Uranus, I'm sorry, and please tell the rest. I can't be a Sailor. As a matter of fact, you'll probably never see me again. Sorry."

The two Sailors standing there were stunned beyond words. Hesitantly, Rei reached out. Before she took the items she looked Ranko in the eye. "Why?"

Ranko heaved a big sigh and looked Rei in the eye, holding her gaze.

"It's not the fight. I finally realized something today. It's not me that I'm worried about: it's my fiancée. Every time I get involved with something like this, the danger seems to follow me around. If those youma attack my fiancée, she might be hurt or even... even dead. I can't risk that. I think that I can protect us while we're together, but if I'm fighting demons elsewhere, who will protect her?"

Almost imperceptibly, Rei nodded her head. She did not like it, she did not agree, and she would not make that choice. She also thought Ranko was wrong, but you can't force someone to be a Senshi. A Senshi was something you must be committed to. It must be everything in your life. If Ranko could not do that, Rei could accept it, even if she wished it otherwise.

"Is that legal?" Sailor Neptune blurted out, her eyes glimmering with hope.

Everyone looked at her, confusion evident. "I mean, is it legal for two girls to be married to each other? You just said your fiancée was a girl. I just wanted to know whether it was legal..."

Ranko blushed deeply. "I'm a g... It's a long story. Lets just say that that our parents arranged it before I was born, and well, one thing led to another. I love her and that's all that matters."

Ranko was amazed. She had just said it again. It just sprang out. Ranko realized that her mouth worked about twenty times faster than her brain. Did that mean what it seemed to mean? That Ranko really did love Akane? Ranko shivered at the thought, she thought she did, but, well....

Eventually Rei took the offered items. "What if we need to contact you?"

"Don't... All right. If it becomes that desperate... Speak to Ranma. He's almost a brother to me. You could even say he's my better half. Tell him anything and he'll get it to me in no time flat."

With that, the girl turned and left. Behind her, the Sailors looked on, feeling somehow that one of them had just died.

Jadeite smiled. He was feeling so good, he proceeded to smile wider, and then wider still. Shortly he was laughing, and screaming with glee. Sailor Sun was dead. Four days had passed since the battle. Four days in which his youma had returned from their energy raids. Four days of increased, constant pressure. Four days of no Sailor Sun.

All the other Senshi were there. Time and again they arrived to kill his servants. Time and again there was no Sailor Sun. After rattling his brains, he remembered his history. Sailor Sun was that Senshi wannabe who sacrificed herself in a devastating attack when the Moon Kingdom was first destroyed. Now she had done it again. She had saved the other Senshi back then and somehow she was reincarnated like the rest of them. But now she was dead, again. This was the first time in thousands of years that the Senshi had suffered a loss. He almost wished Beryl were still alive so that he could grind her face into the victory he had attained.

Four days of easy movement between the universes. Now he had energy stores to begin to really build his Empire. For an Empire needed energy. An Empire needed a constant supply of energy, for spells and new youma. One day he would rule the Earth, and all its power would be his. For now, however, the easiest way to ensure continuous energy was to get some 'volunteers' to supply it.

Jadeite was just setting up for another round of really good laughter (the best thing about being the only person in the universe was that you could be as loud as you liked and no-one complained) when he was interrupted. "Excuse me, can you tell me the way to the Tanaka Dojo in Hokkaido?"

Jadeite spun around and glared at the young man with the unruly black hair. He was dusty and dirty, and judging by the size of his backpack, he had been traveling for a while. None of that was a reason to interrupt the future ruler of the world! "Get out of here! Go, foolish mortal! How dare you interrupt the mighty Jadeite in his moment of triumphant introspection!"

Ryoga backed away from the raving nut case. If he did not know where it was, he could just say so. Moments later Ryoga was out the door and getting lost down the hall.

Jadeite turned back to his screens, then looked behind him again. *Wait a moment...* He was the only one with the dimensional travel necessary to get here... *Who was that man? How did he get here?* Jadeite ran from his control room and looked for the boy, but he was nowhere in sight. Re-entering the room, Jadeite checked his screens. He had not imagined it; the boy had been there. Following his progress with the cameras, he watched his guest travel through the maze of his base.

After a time the boy moved down a corridor where the cameras no longer could watch. Fifteen minutes of waiting had not caused the boy to reappear. When Jadeite sent a trio of youma down the corridor, they walked from one end to the other. There were no exits and no places to hide, but somehow the boy had vanished.

People can't just lose themselves like that... can they?

Sailor Moon looked at the slowly dissolving youma corpse and cried. "Why did she have to go? I'm sooooo tired! Wah!"

Sailor Mars gave her a poke. "Grow up, Moon. She felt she had commitments elsewhere. The Senshi are supposed to be fighting so that people can make their own choices. She made hers. We just have to deal with it."

Moon felt Tuxedo Kamen's strong arm around her shoulders. "She's right, Sailor Moon. We've coped before, and we'll cope in the future. I know you have the strength to carry on."

"But I'm so tired. We train in the evenings and then fight youma all night; I can hardly stay awake at school! I wanna rest!"

Out of sight of the public, the Senshi shed their sailor suits and became another group of teenagers. Minako eventually spoke up. "You know she's right. If we had Sailor Sun, we might be able to spit up into teams again. With two or three youma attacks each night, I don't know how long I can keep this up."

Rei smacked her fist into her palm. "We'll keep it up as long as we need to, or we'll die trying. And no, we won't call for Ranko. If she wanted to be out, she's out. We can't ask her just because we get a bit tired. We're supposed to be the ones who do the protecting. If that means that we need to work harder, then I say we do that. Besides, she's only one person, and there are nine of us. I say we're a team and we can defeat anything that they send against us!"

The rest of the girls looked at her with admiration, and just a little bit of chagrin. She knew how they felt. Every day Rei wanted to contact Ranma and have him beg Ranko to rejoin them. She was only with them a while, but now that she was gone, they felt her absence. Every day she resisted, only in a dire emergency. Only then.

Ranma and Akane were witnesses to the first series of abductions that occurred. They were walking through one of the shopping centers near the Miyagi dojo when a youma appeared out of nowhere. Ranma immediately leapt in front of Akane, but fortunately it was far enough away that they were not the creature's prime targets.

Ranma watched with a discerning eye, while Akane took up a battle stance beside him. The youma was definitely draining people, that were normal, but something was amiss. It only really dawned on him when a small - man sized - youma ran towards them. It almost looked human, aside from the fact that it was covered in a dirty brown sludge. When it reached them, it immediately tried to grab his arm.

Ranma ducked under the reach, and kicked it in the face. When it recoiled, Akane came in from the side and delivered a strong two-punch combination, which would have broken five bricks. The youma backed up, and then charged again. One more they hit it in combination, this time Akane first, and Ranma cleaning up. Almost instantly the youma stood up, none the worse for wear. Whatever the sludge was that it wore, it not only smelled bad, it was a good armor.

At his instance, Akane stood back and prepared her ki attack. Ranma kept the youma off of her with a series of repeated kicks. When he saw she was ready, he moved away, and Akane let fly. The blue bolt of her Thunder Hammer knocked it back, a small burn appeared through the sludge.

Shouting encouragement to her, Ranma unleashed his own - more powerful - attack against another of the small youma, which was attacking some kids in a shoe shop. So the uneven fight continued for several minutes. Akane received practice firing her ki, and Ranma tried to protect those he could. He knew he could have done better. He even realized that he could

have defeated the main youma if he was Sailor Sun. But if he did that, who would be there for Akane when she tired?

She did tire, and quickly too. Ki attacks were draining, and only superb, experienced Martial Artists like Cologne, Happosai, Ryoga or himself could keep them up for long. Ranma found he did not need to step in to defend her, much to his surprise. Akane was finally nearing exhaustion when all the youma retreated. The demons fell back to their master, and ran through a black portal. The last youma paused and studied the pair for a moment, especially Akane, before jumping into the energy field and vanished from sight.

It was Ranma's single-minded focus on Akane's well being which prevented him from noticing the most important part of the youma raid. There were now fewer people around than there had been, and not all of them had run away.

Ranma congratulated Akane on her prowess. Despite glowing with pleasure from his complements, she couldn't help but feel betrayed in some way. From the way he stood by her in the fight, he obviously thought she still could not protect herself. He should have been helping the others, not her; she was a Martial Artist too. Dwelling on this for a few moments, she ignored what he was saying and brought out her mallet.

"Ranma, you idiot! Why didn't you help those others? I can look after myself."

While he pulled himself out of the wall she had knocked him into, Ranma tried to plead that he only cared about her, not them. Akane was too far away to hear him, and in no mood to listen. Ranma groaned and rubbed his sore head. *I thought girls were supposed to like it when a guy stuck up for them. Doesn't she even appreciate it a little? What have I done this time?*

The Sailor Senshi arrived at the scene almost three minutes too late.

Ami sat in her darkened room and looked at the computer screen. The energy readings she had been getting recently made no sense, according to what she was seeing, the youma now transported into Tokyo with hardly any effort. It was so little effort; they even held the portal open for several minutes.

All of the Sailors agreed that the tactics had been different recently, but none had been able to pin down exactly what the difference was. The youma came in ones, twos or threes generally, so that was about the same, only a slight increase. Most of the time, the Senshi were able to kill the youma with difficulty but without great risk, so that was also the same. The number of attacks was up, that was certain, but if whoever was sending them had managed to reduce the cost, that also made sense.

The only thing that did not make sense was the smaller companion demons. The Senshi had largely been ignoring these since they had bigger fish to fry. The little demons were no real threat to the Senshi: several could attack at once and a single girl would defeat them all. Since a big demon draining energy was what they were there to stop, and the little ones avoided them whenever possible, the Senshi concentrated their efforts on the one target.

Something struck Ami as wrong. Summoning up a recording of the last battle she watched it again. That was it: the little fellows were not draining energy from anyone. That was also why the Senshi ignored them. If Ami's computer did not flag them as doing the normal sort

of demonic attack, and the Senshi went after the threatening target. *Why were the little ones there?*

She did not have to watch for long to find out. Using purely mundane means, the little demons would grab someone, and then throw them through the open portal. There it was, right under their noses the whole time, and they had been blind to it. The youma were not just draining people for their stored energy value. They had stepped up to kidnapping them for their energy production values.

She was about to call the Senshi and tell them when she heard a knock on the door. Damn, it was Ranma for his tutoring. She could tell them later.

Ranma looked around his temporary home and shuddered. It looked like a war zone. The only person which would have caused this much damage to Mr. Miyagi's house was Akane, and she had no cause to do it since he was out getting them food for the evening. After all, if he were not there to anger her and be beaten up, who else would suffer this much damage? Momentarily he thought of Kodachi, but there were no black rose petals anywhere to be found.

Ranma dropped the groceries on the floor and looked more closely at the damage. Not who, what. Yesterday he had seen Sailor Moon making a statement on the news. Youma attacks were on the increase, travel in groups, stay away from strange monsters or people, and report any kidnappings to the police. The Sailor Senshi had discovered that the youma were now kidnapping people and they were doing everything in their power to try and get those people back and protect everyone else. Ranma's heart filled with fear.

"AKANE!"

The scream echoed around the house, but there was no reply. He ran upstairs, he checked the kitchen, and he checked the dojo. No matter where he looked, she was not there. Ranma walked back to the main living area. Right there next to the TV: a small spot of sludge. A few burn marks on the wall, possibly from a ki blast, which only just hit. No Akane.

"AKANE!"

No blood. Some damage to the walls.

"AKANE!"

Another burn mark, possibly from the portal…

"AKANE!"

Ranma collapsed to the ground. Tears flowed down his face. A real man would not cry, but then a real man would have been able to protect her.

"AKANE!"

He would get her back, no matter what the cost.

Chapter 4, Life Without The Tomboy

Rei looked up at the sound of someone entering the shrine. All of the other Senshi, minus the four Inners from Juuban High, were there. The Juuban girls had all been kept back at school for falling asleep in class. Everyone looked around and saw Ranma push open the door to her house. Looking up from the desk where she was sitting she could see he was in terrible distress.

He looked at the girls gathered around Rei. "I don't know who they are, but I need to talk to you alone."

Rei set her face. He might be a good friend of Ranko's, but she would not tolerate anyone barging into her home and ordering her around. She could not even understand why he was here. He taught her Martial Arts, but that was all. He had never even visited her before. "My friends can hear anything you might have to say."

"Your call. I don't care who knows. I want the transformation stick."

Rei paled slightly. *How much had Ranko told him?* "I don't know what you're talking about."

Ranma snarled and advanced on her desk. He pointed to where it was sitting in her pen jar - so much for the purloined letter method of concealment. "Cut the garbage. I want it, I need it and I'm taking it."

Before he could reach for it, Rei grabbed it. Around her, the rest of the Sailors looked on with fear. There was no doubt that Ranma could wipe the floor with them unless they transformed, but if they did, he would know the Sailors' secret identities. "I don't know what you've been told, but you can't have this, Ranma. It belongs to one person, and that's not you."

Ranma reached out and grabbed the short end of the stick, which protruded from the bottom of Rei's clenched fist. "They've taken Akane. I will do anything to get her back, Rei. Anything. Even this. Now give me the transformation stick."

She tried to pull her hand away, but he was too strong. With the grip she had, she also knew there was no way he could take it from her. Since all the other Senshi in the room had their transformation pens out, she figured she was safe from any form of violence he might try. "I don't care who they have. You cannot have it. It's not mine to give, and it sure isn't a toy for some **boy** to play with."

Ranma's face hardened even further. "I didn't want to do this, but if that's the way it has to be, **okay**."

"**SUN STAR POWER, MAKE UP!**"

With an explosion of force, Rei was thrown back. All around, the Senshi covered their eyes as a bright light poured from Ranma. While he spun around in the air, Rei shook her hand, which felt like it had been sprained and burnt by the power unleashed by his cry.

Sailor Sun looked down at the fallen girl and then surveyed the others in the room. "Now you know. I'm going to get Akane. Don't try and stop me if you want to stay healthy."

With that, she ran from the room, trailing flames.

Hotaru looked about in concern. "Did I just see Ranma, a boy, transform into Sailor Sun?"

Sailor Sun stood on the parapet of an old church building and surveyed the city in the night. The wind blew and whipped her hair out behind her, occasionally causing her skirt to billow up. Covered in the depth of shadows, she was only visible as another shadow, silhouetted against the grey skyline of the city. Beneath her, the lights of traffic and the eerie glow of the neon signs broke the darkness of the city.

Hands on hips, Sailor Sun looked for the evil, which was entering her city. She had failed once. She had lost the one person that truly mattered. That would never happen again, and it would never happen to anyone else. Lifting her eyes to the overcast cloud, which covered the city, she saw a spotlight play in the darkness. She had the transformation stick, the power to transform into a Sailor Senshi, but she did not have the communicator. The only one way to find the evil was eternal vigilance. That was always the price of freedom.

A tear trickled down one cheek. Unnoticed by the girl, her emotions betrayed her. All around her, she spread her senses. As a Martial Artist she was sensitive to danger. As a Sailor Senshi she was sensitive to evil. They would come. She would find them. They would die.

Another tear flowed down her cheek, shining in the night. Then she felt it. A portal had opened and the demonic filth had come forth. Immediately bright flames sprang up all over her body, flaring in the darkness. The tears dried in the heat, and Sailor Sun leapt from her watching post.

Five stories she fell, a burning comet descending to earth. The shock of landing did not even slow her and she was sprinting past shocked pedestrians. There was not much time, there never was. It only took minutes for her to cross much of the inner city, and when she arrived she could see several of the minor demon servitors hauling people to the portal. With a scream of rage Sailor Sun raced through the assembly, knocking people flying. As soon as she arrived, the portal closed... too late again.

She would never cross that portal, she knew; but she would never stop trying.

Grabbing one of the minor demons by the throat, she held it off the ground and slowly squeezed until its head burst off. A second tried to hit her, but she simply placed a hand on its chest and engulfed it in flames. The screams of pain were music to her ears.

The youma were trying to scatter. They knew that such a small number had no hope of defeating her. They also knew that they would never return to their dimension unless they were far from the Senshi. So be it. Finishing her games with those nearby, Sailor Sun launched herself at a group of fleeing youma. With a series of magically powered kicks and punches she left a pile of smoking, burning and shattered corpses.

Reaching out with her senses again, she spotted the master of the raid, one of the full size, full strength youma. Sprinting ahead of it, she came to a skidding halt. When the youma

rounded the corner and saw her standing there in burning fury, it braked in panic. The hesitation was enough, and a fireball struck the monster in the chest. Bits of basted demon flesh and burning embers went everywhere.

Satisfied that she had halted another attack, Sailor Sun retreated into the darkness again. Her cloak of flames gone once the call to battle had left her system.

It had only been three days since Akane vanished. Three days or eternity, Sailor Sun was not sure. Looking down on the city once more, she wondered at the idea of eating something. Tomorrow. Tomorrow she would eat. Tonight she would continue her vigil.

Ryoga walked up to the red haired girl in the short skirt. "Excuse me Miss, can you tell me where the Tanaka Dojo in Hokkaido is?"

The girl continued to stand there, just staring down at the city. He tried again, but she did not even respond to his question. People in... Well, people where ever he was certainly were rude. Ryoga turned and walked off. At least he seemed to be somewhere that they spoke Japanese.

Ami closed her eyes and tried to sleep on the textbook open in front of her. Ranko was Sailor Sun again, at least in some form. Rei had told everyone about what happened, and Ami had been the only one able to clear up the confusion. Ranma was Ranko's idol. It was a simple enough step to see that Ranko wanted to be like Ranma, and had started to dye her hair the same. It only just dawned on her that Ranko always wore the same clothes that Ranma wore each and every day. It was just another step in pretending to be a boy, a boy she wanted to be, a boy like Ranma. Obviously the surprise of hearing Ranma and Akane had been abducted had shaken Ranko so badly, she reclaimed her transformation pen. Boys could not be Sailor Senshi, so it was just a case of mistaken identity.

When the Senshi had visited the Miyagi dojo they had seen further proof of Ranko's distress. The place had been wrecked. Akane, Ranma and Mr. Miyagi were nowhere to be seen. Neither of them had been seen at school, and no one had been available either for tutoring or Martial Arts lessons for a week. All the Senshi knew that people were being hurt, or kidnapped, in the war with the Dark Kingdom. It was just that it hurt worse when it was someone that you knew.

A short cry from her mother brought Ami back to full consciousness. *Something was wrong!* Getting up from her desk, Ami raced to the front door where the sound originated. When she arrived she almost cried. Standing in her doorway was the mighty Sailor Sun, but now she was not so mighty. Actually, she looked mighty awful.

"My god! Ranko! Get in here. What's happened! We've been so worried!"

The girl in the Sailor suit turned and stared at her. Her cheeks were sunken and her face was pale. All of her skin looked grey and sickly. The eyes which once burned so brightly, so full of life and happiness were dull, flat and empty. Her hair looked like a family of squirrels had taken residence and were evicted for gross violations of sanitation laws. She was dirty and smelled like a dead youma. Even her suit looked the worse for wear. It was torn, burnt

and damaged. Eyes that seemed devoid of life locked on Ami and stared at her. "I died when I lost Akane, there's only Sailor Sun now. She hasn't failed anyone yet. I need your help."

The Mizunos were shocked by her speech. The voice was as torn and lifeless as the rest of her. Ami knew that Ranko was shy; she knew that she deeply loved both Ranma and Akane, but to sacrifice everything like this was beyond human.

"Anything. Just come in her and let us help you. Please."

Sailor Sun stumbled through the doorway, and almost tripped until the other girl managed to catch her. Ami was shocked. Sun felt so light. With her arm around her waist, she could feel all her ribs. "Sit at the table. When was the last time you ate? You've almost faded to nothing."

"I ate on Thursday. I don't feel hungry anymore."

"Thursday! That was two days ago!"

"No... The previous one… I just... don't have time. I need to be out there. I can't let them take anyone else."

Ami watched as her friend dissolved into meaningless mumbling about tomboys, okonomiyaki, curses and how Chinese ducks might taste really good with soy sauce. Looking at her, it was easy to believe that she had been without food for a week. Not only that, she had been fighting off almost all of the youma incursions in the city alone. The Sailor Senshi had not been able to compete with her for speed. Or ferocity. Looking closely at the bags under her eyes, Ami began to realize how she could get to all of the night intercepts so quickly. It was probably days since she slept.

Sailor Sun jerked back upright. A brief spark flared in her eyes. "Need your help, Ami. You're the only one smart enough. You know I always respected you, don't you? No one else realized. Even Rei looked surprised, so I know I can trust you. Just gotta keep going a little longer, then we'll go get Akane. I can trust you, can't I, Ami? You'll help, you're my friend..."

Sailor Sun stopped her babbling for a few moments to accept a cup of hot cocoa from Ami's mother. The doctor thought that cocoa was just what she ordered for this patient. Not only did it have some calories - which the girl seemed to be sadly lacking at the moment - the strong flavor would also cover the minor sedative, which she had put in the glass. People were incredible machines, and she knew from her daughter that the Senshi's magic made them even greater; but people were not supposed to work themselves the way that this girl was. Whatever crisis could wait for a few hours until she was rested and fed. A bath would not hurt either.

Sailor Sun eagerly slurped the cocoa down. Fairly sure of what her mother would have done, Ami spoke quietly to her friend until her eyes began to close. A moment later, Sailor Sun was asleep at their dinner table, snoring quietly.

Ranko looked up at the ceiling. Slowly it dawned on her. She was in a bed, a proper bed, not just a futon on the floor. For that matter, she did not recognize that ceiling. Looking around her, she did not recognize the room either. She groaned. Real. It had all been real, the Sailor Senshi, the youma. Akane.

Akane.

Tears rolled silently down her cheeks and she tried to remember why she was here. Or where she was. She looked around. Not her room, someone else's. Time to get moving. Got to get up. Got to eat something. No telling how much time had been lost. Got to find that uncute tomboy.

With a great effort, Ranko hauled herself out of bed. She was so tired. She was so weak. What had happened to her? Standing up, she looked down and let out a small cry of 'eep!' She was wearing a nightie. Girl's clothes, Ranko was wearing a girl's nightdress. Quickly she took it off and threw it on the ground. She might be weak, she might have failed Akane, but she was still a guy, and there was no way she was going to wear girl's clothes.

Ami looked up when Ranko entered the room. She had a sheet wrapped around her - she really was a shy girl - but she was looking much better than yesterday. After they had left her fall asleep, Ami and her mother had given her a bath, then put her into Ami's bed for the night. They had remembered Akane's warning about Ranko's aversion to hot water, and gave her a fairly cool bath. Since then, Ranko had slept for almost eighteen hours.

"Hi, Ranko. Feeling better?"

"Yeah, much." Ranko was shocked at how her voice sounded. It was so dry and lifeless. She tried again. "Thanks for bringing me in, Ami. You're a real friend. I've had an idea, but I need your help. Do you think you could give me a hand?"

Ami smiled. It was the first time that Ranko had ever called any of the Senshi a friend. "Tell you what, Ranko. Join me for lunch and I'll do whatever I can, deal?"

"Deal."

While Ranko sat at the table, still only wearing the sheet, Ami started bringing out plates of food as she prepared them. True to her past form, Ranko had a massive appetite, made only greater by a week's denial. By the time Ami had brought out enough lunch for four people, Ranko was starting to slow down, actually chewing the food rather than inhaling it. Ami was about to sit down when Ranko asked for some hot water. Realizing that they did not have any tea yet, she brought out a tea set and a kettle of water.

While she served up her own plate, Ami watched as Ranko reached for the kettle. When she didn't pour the tea, but instead held it over her head, Ami's mouth opened. When she poured the water over her head and changed into Ranma, she fainted.

Ranma looked at Ami. It could be a bit of a surprise to see the first time, even if you were expecting it. Moving around the table, he propped her head up and patted her hand. Fluttering her eyes, Ami awoke and looked into Ranma's face. "Arg! It's a demon! What have you done to Ranko? Are you doing this just to taunt me! You won't win! The other Senshi are on their way over here!" She pulled out her communicator and pressed the all call button.

Ranma watched baffled as the terrified girl backed away. "What's the matter? You figured this out weeks ago. Besides, Rei must have told everyone what she saw. Why are you frightened?"

Ami calmed down. Maybe, somehow, it was Ranma, or Ranko, or whatever. "What do you mean figured it out? I thought you were a lesbian!"

"A what?"

"A lesbian."

"No, I'm a Saotome, you know that."

Ami relaxed at Ranma's attempt at a joke. At least she hoped it was a joke. "Silly, I mean that you like girls. Or that Ranko likes girls."

Ranma looked at her as though she had a few screws loose. "Of course I like girls. I'm a guy, can't you tell?"

"But, what about Ranko?"

"Hey, just cause I look like a girl sometimes, I'm still a guy. Of course I like girls. Why else would I like them if I wasn't a guy?"

"Um... Don't worry... So Rei was right. It was you that took the transformation stick. So who is Ranko?"

"I already explained this to you. When I was training with my father, he knocked me into the spring of drowned girl at Jusenkyo. Ever since then when I get hit by cold water, I turn into a girl. One hell of a curse, hey? I just use the name Ranko so I don't have to tell people about my curse. It's a pretty private sort of thing."

Looking down at his sheet, he asked sheepishly, "Could I have my clothes back?"

Ami blushed and pointed to a small laundry basket sitting on the floor behind him. Ranma took a moment to gather his things and change in the bathroom.

They kept the conversation pretty light for a while until the other Senshi arrived. When Ami explained about Ranma and Ranko, and told them she was now a fully committed member of the team, the disguises came down and full introductions were made except for the part when it was revealed that Usagi was Sailor Moon. It was Ranma's turn to faint. Finally, they all were seated and eating the remainder of the lunch.

When everyone had arrived and was ready, Ranma spoke. "I have a plan."

Shampoo and Ukyo were not happy girls, and since Shampoo was not happy, that meant that Mousse was not happy either. Oddly enough, the cause of their suffering was one that was highly familiar to them; it just came in a new variation. In many ways, it was fortunate that a Mr. Genma Saotome of the Saotome School of Anything Goes Martial Arts was off 'training' somewhere. There were at least three people who had a strong desire for a bit of Panda Stew.

Since Soun did not know the full details of Ranma and Akane's training, and Kasumi had not been told the exact details - she was considered too honest to know the truth - so Genma had confided in Nabiki. With the private agreement that fifty percent of the income generated would go to him, he had sat down with Nabiki and read his short prepared speech. While

Nabiki knew that his statements were lies, she was quite willing to sell such tidbits as: "Mr. Saotome said that Ranma and Akane have gone off to the Tanaka Dojo in Hokkaido."

Everyone knew (from personal experience) just how reliable Genma and Nabiki were. Nabiki was scrupulously honest, honest to the point that she would guarantee the information she gave was accurate when it was gathered. However, Genma's complete lack of honesty was also well known. If Genma had said that they were in Hokkaido, there were good odds that they were elsewhere.

Nabiki knew perfectly well where Akane actually was, she spoke to her on the phone several times a week. However, Nabiki loved her sister, and if she could reap a healthy - and easy - profit without hurting her: wonderful. A few carefully chosen words, and she brought in several thousand yen, and mislead the various people looking for the lovebirds.

Shampoo finally ground to a halt and rested on her bonbori.

"Shampoo think visiting twenty-eight dojo be waste of time. Husband no here."

Ukyo looked at her with distaste at the word 'Husband'. She was also beginning to suspect that they had been completely led astray. For the last two months they had searched high and low in Hokkaido. The large island had been searched quite thoroughly, since Tanaka was such a common name. "You're right Shampoo, but what else have we got to go on? If he's not here, he could be anywhere, anywhere in the world really. We just have to keep going."

Shampoo snorted in disgust. "Perhaps lost boy have better luck finding them. He look everywhere but where he want to."

The trio laughed and resumed the march. Tanaka dojo number twenty-nine was only thirty kilometers away.

Ryoga looked around. It was his worst nightmare (well, other than the one where Ranma marries Akane... or where Akane finds out he's P- Chan... or the one where he wakes up in town without any clothes... or the one where...). It was **one** of his nightmares. Everyone was dressed just like Principal Kuno. They even spoke the same!

Ryoga looked around some more. There was a sign for an interstate highway. Ryoga scratched his head. He had only been here for a few days, but he knew he was definitely on an island... how do you have interstate highways on an island?

He decided to follow the highway. Setting off, he envisaged the look of appreciation on Akane's face when he arrived: 'Thank you, Ryoga. I just couldn't stand another minute with, Ranma.' After a while Ryoga sighed and took stock of his surroundings again.

When had it started snowing in the tropics? Am I lost again? Before the cold snow could trigger his curse, he shouted to the heavens. "Ranma, this is all your fault!"

"That's the most absurd plan I have ever heard!"

"I haven't heard you offer anything better!"

Makoto glared at the boy. *A boy! How on earth had a boy become a Senshi? Was there no justice in the universe?* And he even looked a bit like her old boyfriend. *Oh, please don't let my old boyfriend turn out to be a Sailor Senshi too.* "Listen, we defeated Beryl before by staying here and defending. We can do it again!"

Ami coughed, "Remember D-Point?"

Makoto blinked. "Oh."

"Feh! You didn't defeat them! It's probably them right now. You can't win a fight by defending. We need information, and the only way to do it is to start to attack. I have to cross through that portal. When I'm on the other side, I'll finally be able to tell you who or what it is we're facing."

Rei joined in the argument. "I hate to admit it, Ranma, but she's right. It's also too dangerous. If what's beyond that portal is anything like D-Point, you'll never survive. We just got you back. We can't let you throw yourself away like this."

"OK, Rei, let me show you how important it is to be able to attack, and not just defend. See this line, that's your dimension. I can't cross it, and you stay on that side. I'll close my eyes. All you have to do is reach over and touch me. If you can touch me more often that I can grab your hand, you win."

Rei sighed and played his little game. It was obvious to Makoto that Ranma was holding back, she knew he could hear Rei's every move, but when she understood what he meant, she offered no criticism. Rei stood on her side and every now and again she would touch Ranma. If she was too slow, or touched the same spot several times, he would grab her hand. Otherwise, he ineffectively groped blindly. Eventually Rei really got into it, and started moving and poking him all over the body, arms, legs, chest, everywhere. Rei was starting to get excited at how easy it was to beat Ranma - her invincible Sensei - when the fact of the matter dawned on her.

As soon as she stopped, Ranma opened his eyes. "See what I mean? If we allow the Dark Kingdom to dictate the attacks, we can't win. Sooner or later, they will kill one of us. It may be tomorrow; it may be in a year. Then there's only going to be nine. Then eight. Then seven. After that, how long will we be able to hold them off? We only just won when they sent thirty. What happens if they send one hundred? Run away and let them have Tokyo, or curl up and die?"

Even Usagi snarled at this. "No way are they going to get Tokyo! I would die first!"

"You probably would. But what if we could hit them? What if every time they opened a portal, we went through and clobbered several of them. What if we went in rescued every person that they kidnapped. What if - in time - we could find and defeat their leader? What if we finally have a real opportunity to defeat these demons, once and for all?"

By now everyone was nodding their heads. Ami looked up from her computer and smiled. "OK, Ranma. I can force the portal to stay open, but only for a few minutes. You can make a quick trip in and out, look around and that's all. Next time we might be able to do better."

Ranma smiled and nodded. They were falling for it. "That's fine, in and out. No problem."

Haruka leaned on Ranma and wished he would change back to Ranko. Somehow he was so much nicer when he was a girl. There was also something quite disturbing about discussing the Senshi plans with a boy. Tuxedo Kamen did not really count, he was... different. "A bit of reconnaissance is fine, but you can bet that there is going to be a heap of youma on the other side of the portal. What makes you think that you can get back safely?"

Ranma smiled enigmatically. "Just bring Luna and Artemis. You'll see."

Mr. Miyagi watched as Daniel-san fought in the competition. Once he used to think that Daniel was quite a good student. Especially when he trained that other kid, and the American bimbo with no respect. Now he had seen Ranma fight, and honestly believed that Daniel would not last thirty seconds against Ranma, even if Ranma were holding back. As he expected, Daniel was whipped in the next round.

When Daniel came off the mat, Mr. Miyagi decided to try teaching him one of the special attacks, which Ranma had demonstrated, to him. He knew that he could not do the attack, but there was hope that Daniel-san was still young and strong enough to be able to focus his ki to be able to do the Kachuu Tenshin Amaguriken. The next bout that Daniel-san was scheduled to fight was not for another two days. Now if he could find a bag of Chestnuts, there would be no problem teaching him.

"Daniel-san. I have been studying with another Sensei in Japan recently. The young man is a true Martial Arts master and has demonstrated a technique that you would benefit from. I am not sure that you could master such a technique, but if you could: the fight would be yours."

Daniel smirked. "Give me a chance, Mr. Miyagi. I know I could master any technique you can teach me. Feh! When I'm finished here, I'll go back with you to Japan and show you what a real Martial Arts master is!"

Despite his decades of Martial Arts excellence, despite his years of inner calm and serenity, despite being a man who had found his center, and could maintain calm in any battle, Mr. Miyagi laughed so hard he fell over.

Sailor Sun stood with her back to the other Senshi and watched as three youma began a serious attack against a group of people indulging in a little late night shopping. Even when she could not see Luna or Artemis, just knowing that they were so close was sending a shiver up her spine. Forcing her voice to be steady, she gave them the final run down.

"It's pretty simple. When I get scared enough, my mind just snaps, and I access the Neko-ken. Basically, if Luna and Artemis cling to me for a little while, I'll start yowling, and screaming like a cat. When that happens, stand back, because I tend to be a bit unpredictable. I won't have much control over what I'm doing, so point me at the portal, and set me loose. Got it?"

Mars smacked her forehead. "That's the stupidest thing I have ever heard. Even meatball head could come up with something better!"

Sailor Moon began to sniffle. "Hey! My ideas are better than that... aren't they?"

Sailor Sun shook her head. "No, you don't understand. When I'm using the Neko-ken I'm much more powerful than normal. Even as Ranma I could probably defeat one of the Senshi if I'm using it. When I'm Sailor Sun... Now toss those cats on me, people are getting hurt."

The cats were about to launch themselves at the girl when Mercury spoke up. "Wait! Sure you'll be safe, but how do we cure you afterwards?"

"Akane's the only one who can calm me down enough when I've gone cat... so you'll just have to change me back to being a guy. Just toss hot water. Luna! Artemis! Quickly! Now!"

When the Senshi nodded, they leapt. Artemis secured a position on Sailor Sun's head, while Luna landed on her shoulder. Together they screeched and held on for dear life. In a shocking display of speed, Sailor Sun began charging back and forth in front of the Senshi screaming in primal fear, waving her arms around like she was swatting thousands of flies. She had just bowled over one of the youma that had started to come too close when she seemed to trip over and calm down.

The Senshi's shoulder slumped. So much for that idea: she must have worn herself out. Then Neko-Sun spoke. "Yeeeoowwww."

No human throat should have made a sound like that. When Sailor Sun turned around, still on all fours, her eyes were empty. Any semblance of the girl they knew was wiped away. She had just started to clean her hands... paws... when the youma reclaimed its feet and marched over to her. Neko-Sun ignored it, her back turned as it approached. The Senshi were getting ready to intervene when the youma sent a sticky tentacle at her.

Neko-Sun hardly seemed to move, but then she was a meter away and looked really pissed. With a casual swat of her hand, the youma flew across the street, black blood pouring from four long gashes on it's flank. Neko-Sun looked at the Senshi curiously then ran at the other youma and the portal. As she ran, a corona of flame rose around her, and the form of a giant cat could be seen, composed purely of flame. The giant cat mimicked her every move, and as she struck at a youma, so did the cat image, shredding and burning the victim.

Neko-Sun was just entering the portal when Sailor Mercury started to sprint towards her. As she ran she emptied her bag and shouted to the other Senshi who were trying to keep up. "She's gone to rescue Akane! When she's a cat she won't know to come back through the portal! She wants to throw her life away! Neptune, fill this with hot water! I've got to get her back!"

Sailor Mercury continued to sprint for the portal. Normally it would have closed by now, but she suspected that the sudden appearance of a Sailor Senshi using the power of the Neko-ken had caught the Dark Kingdom's demons by surprise. As she ran, Mercury could feel the stream of water that Neptune directed into her bag. She kept her computer in one hand, but all the other little things she usually kept were gone, tossed on the road to make space. *I hope this will be enough water Ranko, or Ranma, or whoever you are. You never told us how much you need, or how hot. I just hope this will be good enough.*

The portal was shutting down even as she threw herself into it. *This could be bad,* she thought. Then everything went white. Not the blackness of space, not the grey fog of unconsciousness, but white. Everything, everywhere was white, all she could hear was someone screaming, high pitched in agony. It was not until she gasped for breath that she realized it was herself that was doing the screaming. As the whiteness continued to pour

through her, she felt screaming was her best option. *If I entered this gate too late, will I be here forever?*

Her question was answered when she fell to her knees. Gravity, touch, sound, and sight: things so taken for granted that you never notice until they are gone. Standing, she looked around, trying to take stock of the situation. She was on some sort of a raised dais on the middle of a plain. The dais, the road leading from it, and the city at the end of the road were all some form of white metal. Not silver or steel in color, they were similar but with their shine paled somewhat in whatever alloy this was made of. Sailor Mercury stood on her toes and looked for her friend. Around her there must have been more than a dozen youma in various stages of dismemberment and dissolving. A shattered cage, testament to the harvest of people, was also visible.

Looking around she finally spotted a small cloud as Neko-Sun ran across the plain, heading for some large rocks. Even at this distance, she could see the glow of her cat image. Mercury leapt off the dais and almost twisted her ankle. *I've got no power! Nothing.* She was still in her Sailor Suit, but her powers were gone. As she ran - puffing like a steam train - she thought on the problem. Eventually it dawned on her. When she went through the portal, she had separated herself from the life forces of the planet that she gained her power from. Which also explained why Sailor Sun was still fully charged. The sun was vastly larger that any of the planets in the solar system, but Sailor Sun was only marginally more powerful than any other Senshi. Sailor Sun did not use the life forces in her focus in the same way they did, she must be tapping other forms of magic energy, weak by comparison, but in such massive quantities...

Sailor Sun was going to be the only one capable of fighting the youma in this dimension, and she seemed to be sitting happily licking her wounds.

While being watched intently, Sailor Mercury advanced on her friend. The deadly, burning battle aura had faded away, and the all purpose cultural cat girl seemed calm enough. Whispering quietly, Sailor Mercury sat on the ground nearby and invited the cat over. Timidly, as though afraid of her every move, the cat girl advanced closer until she sat down next to her. When Sailor Mercury began scratching her shoulders under the long red hair, Neko-Sun jumped onto her legs.

Continuing the patting, Sailor Mercury pressed the jewel in Sun's bow in the proper way, which would allow Sailor Sun to change back to Ranko. She wasn't sure which was stronger: the Jusenkyo curse or the Sailor magic. Sailors must be girls, and hot water should make her a him. Best not to risk it. Ranko mewled plaintively when she felt her power vanish, weakening down to a mere mortal level. Looking around wide eyed, she failed to see Mercury hoist her bag full of water. *Better hope this is hot enough, because there's no way I can heat it.*

Ranma woke up and looked at Mercury. She held him and was quietly stroking his head. Panic filled him. *If Akane saw this, she would hit the roof.* Leaping off her, he immediately began to apologize. "It's not what it looks like! I didn't mean to Ami! Sorry! Sorry! Don't tell anyone! It's not my fault!"

Mercury smiled at his confusion. When he stopped apologizing for a moment, she let her smile slip into a frown. "You weren't planning on coming back, were you? You were just going come here and try and commit suicide. We're a team Ranko. We're here to help you."

Ranma looked sheepish for a while. "Sorry, Ami. It's just; I'd do anything for Akane. The only way I could think of to save her was the Neko-ken. People tell me that when I go cat, I tend

to look for her. I figured the best chance I would have to find her and survive is to use the Neko-ken."

"You really love her, don't you?"

"What? That tomboy?!? Are you kidding me? I... I... Yes... Yes I do... I do love her and I never got a chance to tell her. Now she's gone."

Tears began to form in Ranma's eyes. "Ranko, we can find her, and we can get her out. Strength is one thing, brains is another. There's a reason that mankind is the ruler of our planet and not the saber-tooth tiger. Brains, Ranko, brains. With our brains, we'll find a way in, and we'll get them all out, not just Akane."

"It's Ranma, not Ranko, Ami, please. You could be right. A pair of Sailors, with your brains and my brawn, we can accomplish anything."

"Actually, Ranma, I can't access my Mercury power here. We're down to one Senshi at the moment, but I've had some ideas on that..."

Ranma raised his eyebrows in trepidation. He hoped this didn't involve him marrying someone.

Almost two days had passed since Ranma's disastrously stupid plan. Rei looked around at the aftermath of another battle and sighed. In the past people had been hurt or they had seen each other captured or hurt, but now two of their number had been killed. Everyone was sure they were dead; transported into a dimension of demons, how could they survive? When they ventured to D-Point, they had died. If it weren't for Sailor Moon's dying wish, they wouldn't be alive today.

They could almost understand why Ranma would do it. Almost. If it was just himself, which he had sacrificed, Tuxedo Kamen said he would be able to understand. It was when he involved Sailor Mercury and caused her to join him in death: that was the unforgivable part.

After Sailor Mercury threw herself into the closing portal, the other Senshi had come in and cleaned up the youma. When they thought about it, they had realized that Mercury had been right: Sailor Sun gone cat would never have known to return through the portal. Only Mercury had been quick enough to understand, and she had been too late to save either of them.

Down to eight, the Senshi fought the youma with all their ability, but with a growing feeling of dread. What Ranma had said about attack and defense still held true: if they did not attack, they would lose. When Sun and Mercury crossed over, the attack that they expected around midnight did not occur. The usual attack at two in the morning did. All that their sacrifice had bought was a reprieve of a few hours.

Rei looked around and saw Usagi sitting on the pavement. Dropping her disguise, Rei walked over and put her arm around her small friend. Normally she took great pleasure in teasing the dizzy blonde, but somehow she could not bring herself to do that now.

"I know why he did it, Rei. If Mamoru was taken from me, I don't know what I'd do. I hate him for going, and I hate him for taking Ami. But I understand."

"I know, Usagi, I know. Now we just have to try and stop the invasion as best we can. The bastards may have killed two of us, but we'll never give in."

"NO! They're not dead, Rei! I know it! They're not dead. We're going to be here for them. Every time a portal opens, we'll be here, and when they come through, we'll rescue them."

The blonde girl shook her head, tears flying from her eyes as she spoke. Rei could understand her pain. No matter what else, it was better that Usagi was ready to stand up and fight, rather than lay down and cry. Rei sincerely believed that their friends were dead, but if Usagi wanted to cling to the false hope of their survival, so be it. False hope was better than no hope.

"We'll be here, Ami."

Sailors Sun and Mercury looked over the edge of the low cliff and watched the demon city. For all the darkness and evil it embodied, it was surprisingly beautiful. Other smaller buildings surrounded the large, white, central tower. Each of the buildings was smooth and elegant, with gently sloping ramps connecting the various parts of the settlement. All around, they could see numerous youma moving to and fro, doing whatever it is that they do when they are not killing people and invading other dimensions.

Beneath the cliff was the one piece of green that could be seen as far as the eye could see. In the middle of the plain of brown and red rock was a small garden. The pair had sneaked in there last night, and had been amazed to find some form of fruit growing. Ami's computer had shown that it was not only non-poisonous; it was also an ideal form of food. It was rich in calories, had all the essential minerals and proteins, and would be capable of sustaining life indefinitely. It also tasted like something Akane would cook, namely cardboard.

Two events that day made the acres of mana melons' use obvious. The youma were busily harvesting and scraping out the food inside, putting it into large buckets, which they carried away. They also saw twenty people arriving down one of the roads leading to one of three portal daises. If Jadeite was using these people for life energy, he needed to keep them fed. If the youma could harvest food it was just part of the process of converting solar energy - which grew the plants - in to the life force which was harvested from the people who ate the plants.

Mercury's attempts to find Akane had provided them with more information. Working on the assumption that anyone as powerful as Akane would stand out, she used her computer to scan for strong sources of life energy. Two showed up, and when one was confirmed as the Senshi's old enemy Jadeite, they assumed the other was Akane.

Mercury sighed at the view. "This is nothing like D-Point."

"What in the world is D-Point?" Sun asked, perplexed.

The blue haired Senshi sagged her shoulders. "It's where the Dark Kingdom had their base before. We went there to defeat Queen Beryl and... We died."

Sun got worried. "Died?"

"Yes, Minako, Rei, Makoto and I were killed helping Sailor Moon reach Beryl's base. After Sailor Moon defeated Beryl, we came back to life. Had she lost..." Mercury's voice trailed off in hopelessness.

"Well, that ain't going to happen. I'm going to get Akane and kick, uh, what's his name's butt."

"Jadeite." She reminded her. She scanned an area below their vantage point again and frowned at the results.

They had been hoping to spend some more time observing before rescuing Akane and anyone else they could, but they saw something that changed their minds. The land outside the city was divided into thirds by the roads that lead to the portals. In one third were the mana melon gardens. In the second was some sort of factory, and in the third an army was forming. An army of youma, not the ones and twos they normally fought. Not the thirty, which had attacked and almost defeated the Senshi. This was hundreds of the monsters. They stood there formed up in ranks, forming a large square, twenty to a side.

It should be said that they almost formed a square. The last column needed another eight to complete it. That number dropped to seven as they watched another youma come out.

"Are you thinking what I am, Ami?"

"Probably."

"We have to warn the other Senshi about that army. If they all transport to Tokyo now, there would be no way to stop them. You have to get back to Sailor Moon. Tell her that we need to evacuate part of the city. The army needs to be informed. They might not be as much use as the Senshi, but in an open battle, they're better than nothing. Head to one of the daises, when it's due to open, I'll go get Akane. You go through and warn the others. I'll meet you back on Earth as soon as I can."

Sailor Mercury glared at her. "Sailor Sun, if you think I'm going to abandon you or Akane, you have another thing coming. I say we go ahead with our original plan. We go in, we rescue everyone, and we get out. If we take enough people, we can put an end to his army building days."

Sailor Sun considered it for a moment then nodded. They waited for a few more minutes until their path of descent was clear, then leapt down the cliff. Using the garden as cover, they ran to the city, using Sailor Mercury's computer as a map to Akane. The other captives should be nearby.

Entering the city was quite easy. There were no guards, just the occasional youma going about its business. Jadeite was still suffering from overconfidence: he must still be expecting that whoever had come through the portal had gone to ground. An army of four hundred would make the battle suicidal for anyone who attacked. Running through the maze of white corridors, they burst into a large room, only thirty meters from Akane's location.

The room was large, possibly even big enough to qualify as huge (which is larger than large, but smaller than massive). All down the length of the room, and stacked three times vertically were clear glass cylinders. In each of the cylinders was a naked body. Machinery fitted to the tops of the cylinders pulsed and glowed with energy as it was sucked from the bodies inside. They had found one of the harvesters.

Mercury stopped stunned. They knew that people had been being kidnapped for a while, but this was ridiculous. This room alone must have held over two hundred people. There was no way that they could rescue this many people without having to fight off an army of demons. Protecting that many weak, innocent people would be no easy task. That was assuming that the portal would oblige them by staying open long enough for two hundred weary travelers to pass through it.

Two hundred? Mercury smacked herself in the head. If raids had been as successful as they seemed recently, there were probably five hundred or a thousand people to rescue. She turned to Sailor Sun. "Forget them. We can't rescue everyone today. Let's get Akane, and remember not to use your magic. If you do, I'm down to looking pretty."

Sailor Mercury had designed a way that Sailor Sun could provide the power that she, or even several Senshi would need to be able to fight. By using the power of Sailor Sun's massive reserves of magical energy, Sailor Mercury would be able to fight at full strength. However, if Sailor Sun started using her magic attacks the drain would be too great, and Sailor Mercury would be reduced to mortal levels. This gave them a full strength Sailor Mercury, and Sailor Sun's deadly ki attacks. Recharged with her innate Senshi healing, Sailor Sun should be able to keep up the ki attacks for quite a while.

Sun grew impatient knowing that her fiancée was now within reach. She ran from cylinder to cylinder, and took an embarrassed peek at the nude contents within. "No, no, nope, no, nope..." Each and every cell had someone, but it wasn't Akane.

Mercury opened her computer and scanned the room. "She's in the next room, that way." She pointed to a large door.

The pair stopped at the door and Mercury gawked in amazement at the symbol on it. It was her symbol, the one of the planet Mercury. Below, there was a name written, Ami Mizuno. "That's my name. What's going on here?"

"This." Sailor Sun gave the door a good kick and stubbed her toe. "Ouch!"

Mercury rolled her eyes. She walked over to a small button in the wall next to the door and pressed the one marked 'Open'. The door quietly slid to the side. Silently, she ignored her friend who was still dancing on one boot and moaning in pain.

Inside the chamber, they found Akane sealed in a cylinder. She was all in a room of her own. Apparently, since she was so valuable - she generated more energy than an average family - she was powering something special. Sailor Sun hopped up to the cylinder then blushed and looked away. "Err... Sailor Mercury, swap places. I'll guard the corridor so you can get her out. She's... uh... completely naked."

Mercury sighed. Akane was Ranma's fiancée. If he couldn't see her naked, who could? Especially since he was saving her life. Walking up to the cylinder, she waved at Ranma, and then punched it hard with her fist. Rather than shattering, all that occurred was an alarm started to sound. With a frown, Mercury tried a kick. It should have been able to buckle a steel plate, but there was no effect.

Using her computer she scanned the clear cylinder. Stasis crystal. This stuff was almost unbreakable. The only the person who could open it safely was the person who cast the spell

to seal it. Sure, it was possible to break, a nuke or similar should do it. The only problem was that whatever could break it would kill the occupant.

Mercury walked up behind Sun and placed a hand on her shoulder. "It's a stasis crystal, Sailor Sun. There's no way we can break it. Come on, we have to leave. If we get back here with all of the Senshi we may be able to spend the time to undo the spell. We have to move."

The girls walked slowly down the corridor, delayed by Sailor Sun's potent grief. "It can't be unbreakable. I have to rescue her. Everything can be broken. Every crystal can be chipped or shattered. All you need is the find the right... Breaking Point!"

Spinning, she raced back into the room and looked the crystal up and down. "Mercury, buy me some time. This might take me a while."

Puzzled, Mercury turned back to the corridor in time to see the first youma arrive. **"SHABON SPRAY FREEZING!"**

With the youma blinded in the freezing, painful fog, she began to attack. She did not know what Sailor Sun had planned, but she would try and buy her a couple of minutes. Inside the small room Sailor Sun sat and began to meditate. She had seen Ryoga use it so many times before; she must be able to learn it.

In her mind, she played back every fight she had with Ryoga since the old ghoul taught him the Breaking Point. She saw her counters. She saw its limitations. Sweat began to pour down her brow. Must remember. Must learn. Can't leave Akane. Nearby the sound of battle became a distant noise, fading from thought as she concentrated.

Two minutes passed. Three. After four and a half minutes Sailor Sun stood, poked her finger at the wall and yelled: **"BAKUSAI TENKETSU!"**

Pulling her finger from the wall, she sat down. Outside, Sailor Mercury was beginning to be forced back. A third youma had arrived. She had killed one, but fighting one to two was not an easy way to win. Another three minutes passed. When she struck the floor this time she felt something different. Close. Not quite, but close. Before closing her eyes, Sailor Sun checked on the status of her protector.

With Mercury in such trouble, Sailor Sun entered the fray. Between blasts of ki she encouraged the other girl. "Only a couple more minutes." She threw a careful blast at an arm, which was above Sailor Mercury when the thoughts formalized. Leaving her again with two opponents, Sailor Sun ran into Akane's room again.

This time she chose the wall near the stasis crystal. If her guess was right, a direct line here would be the fastest way out. A scream of **'Bakusai Tenketsu'** and a firm touch later and there was a smoking hole in the metal wall. "Sailor Mercury! When I call 'now', grab Akane and take her out of the room. You won't have any magic since I'm going to Plasma Blast that corridor shut!"

Mercury risked a glance over her shoulder. Sure enough, there was a new hole in the wall. How Sailor Sun could do it without magic was a mystery. While she fended off the attack of a youma, she heard Sailor Sun scream again, then there was the sound of breaking glass. "Now!"

Without hesitation, Sailor Mercury leapt backwards. The youma had left itself open after its attack, but years of team fighting had taught her to trust her friends. Even if you did not know what they were doing, they could be counted on to do what they said. When she landed, she turned and saw an unconscious girl lying in a pile of crystal shards. Everything she knew screamed that this was impossible. Anything capable of breaking the stasis crystal should have leveled the whole building.

Ignoring the impossible, she grabbed the naked, sleeping girl and ran through the mysteriously created hole in the wall. As she ran she saw Sailor Sun preparing an oversized version of her normal attack. Throwing herself around the corner, she leaped onto Akane, shielding the girl with her body.

"SEARING PLASMA BLAST!"

Looking back she saw a jet of fire race from the hole into the room. As the concussion faded and the building stopped shaking, she felt a powerful hand hold her by the collar and lift her to her feet. Before she could steady herself, Sailor Sun was there, holding Akane in her arms, kissing her firmly and sobbing with relief.

"Wow. I haven't seen a girl kiss like that since Michiru's slumber party. 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's plan of going through a solid wall seemed to have worked. They had a head start on the demons, and were doing well. Sailor Sun carried Akane and managed to stay with Mercury as she mapped their way through the complex. Finally they burst outside and could make the sprint for the portal.

Both Senshi headed off at full speed, but it soon became apparent that while carrying the sleeping form of Akane, Sailor Sun was slower. Mercury started to slow, but when Sun urged her on, she again sprinted at her best speed. "Get moving. We have to get that information to the Senshi. I'm right behind you."

By the time they were three quarters of the way there, the distance between the two Senshi had opened considerably. Puffing heavily, Sailor Sun called into her communicator. "Don't think I'm giving up, I'd do anything to get Akane to safety, you know that. But if they close the portal after you enter, remember three things. One: there's an army coming to invade. Two: we won't be able to follow you anytime soon, the army of youma will see to that. Three: we're going to need our own portal to be able to rescue those people. You can't stop running because they may close it before you arrive, and I'm beginning to think they'll be able to close it before I can get there. Get Moon to prepare a counter strike. If you can make a portal, we can ignore Tokyo for a few days and come here to defeat Jadeite. He's the master, without him, the youma are nothing."

Ahead of her, she could see Mercury hitting the steps of the dais. Off to the side there was a youma screaming into a communicator. Giving it everything she had, she tried to reach the portal. She watched Mercury hesitate, and knew the portal was closing. "Get in there NOW! Send red flares through when you're ready. Give me two days to signal, when I do, home on me..."

Still fifty meters ahead of her, Mercury moved through the portal, just as it sealed shut. On the platform, three youma moved to attack her. She knew she could defeat three youma. It would hurt, no doubt, but she could do it. The only problem was Akane. She would die if she

carried her into battle. Glancing behind, Sailor Sun saw the youma running to catch her. Turing ninety degrees, Sun sprinted into the sunset, fleeing Jadeite's city of evil.

Once she reached the broken rocks and hills ahead, the youma would never find her. Sailor Sun looked down at the precious bundle cradled in her arms. They were just two people, alone on a hostile planet filled with demons. Opposing them was an army of demons protecting and using the only passages to their home world. Isolated from all their friends. No matter how bad the situation, Ranma knew that somehow she still held in her arms everything that mattered to her in the universe. Either universe.

Akane.

It was dark when Sailor Mercury exited the portal. Once again there had been the tearing pain and the intense whiteness. One moment she had been there absorbed in the agony, next she was running face first into the back of a youma. Her momentum was enough to knock them both over. In many ways it was fortunate, because moments later Sailor Moon's deadly blast cleaved the air where her head would have been.

As soon as she regained her feet, Mercury vaulted over the youma. Again luck was on her side, since a powerful bolt of Sailor Jupiter's Sparkling Wide Pressure hit the creature. Turning in the air she rotated and took in the battle lines: good guys there, bad guys here. Sailor Mercury landed at a run and immediately charged towards the startled forms of Sailors Moon and Jupiter.

Stepping forward, Sailor Moon let Jupiter grab the exhausted girl. Holding off the youma so Ranma could rescue Akane then sprinting several kilometers to the portal made her collapse as soon as she felt her friend’s arms around her. Raising her staff, Sailor Moon snarled then yelled at the youma. "You dare to hurt one of the beautiful sailor suited defenders of love and justice? In Sailor Mercury's name I going to pound you into pulp!"

With one blast, she took out a youma and knocked it to the ground with a smoking hole in its chest, she then closed in on the other two. Even Sailor Mars could only watch in awe as her angered friend showed why she was the feared Moon Princess. By herself, Moon beat a demon into the ground, smashing it again and again, yelling in fury the whole time. By the time she had vented her anger, the other Senshi had easily defeated the remaining demon.

Resting in Sailor Jupiter's arms, Mercury looked at her surprised friends. "Oh, boy. We’ve got a lot of work to do."

Hidden in the rough, hilly area, Sailor Sun placed her fiancée on the ground and looked at her face. She was still unconscious, but she seemed to be regaining color. She brushed the hair out of Akane's face and took a look to see if she was injured elsewhere. What she saw immediately made her blush. Akane was naked. Not only that, but she had been carrying the naked Akane for several kilometers, holding her very tightly.

This could prove to be a problem.

Sitting down to think, Sailor Sun deactivated her magic and tried to come up with a brilliant idea. She had no idea how long they would be there, but it was a fair bet that the Senshi

would not be able to rescue them too soon. That meant that Akane needed clothes, and as far as she knew, the only clothes on the planet were currently on her back.

That was it! Ranma immediately began to remove her clothes. When she only had her boxers on, she again summoned her Senshi powers. After a few seconds of transformation, she was again clothed in her short skirt and tight white top. Sailor Sun shuddered at the thought of needing to spend weeks dressed this way, but she could do it for Akane.

As quickly as possibly, she dressed Akane and checked her pulse again. She seemed to be sleeping. With her own back against a rock, Sailor Sun rested Akane's head on her legs, then held her hand. They stayed like that for several hours; the only movement was when Sun caressed Akane's face.

Akane woke with a start and looked around. Confusion was paramount. The last thing she could remember was fighting demons at Mr. Miyagi's place. She knew she had been hit, but then everything went black. Now she seemed to be in some sort of lifeless, rocky canyon. A voice penetrated her senses. Spinning around she saw a strange girl, a strange girl who seemed to have been holding her quite closely a few moments ago.

"Who are you? Where am I? What did you do to me? ACK! Why am I wearing Ranma's clothes?"

"Calm down, Akane. Calm down. It's okay, you're safe now." Said the strange red haired girl with eyes filled with worry and... love?

Jumping to her feet, she grabbed a mallet and glared at the girl. "I don't feel safe, so you've got thirty seconds to explain."

"It's me, Ranma! Don't you remember being captured by the youma? We rescued you."

"Bull! I know what Ranma looks like, and you're not him! Or her! Twenty."

The disguise field! "Damn! Sorry, forgot about that. I'm Sailor Sun. Sailor Mercury and I rescued you. The bad news is that you and I are still in the demon's dimension. Don't worry; we should be safe here for a while. When things calm down a bit in a while, we can try and steal some food."

Akane sighed and seemed to accept it. She recalled something about a Sailor Sun on the TV news. "Hmm, you do look like her, I guess. And you dress right. But where's Ranma, and you still haven't told me why am I wearing his clothes?"

Sailor Sun stood up and slowly moved behind a boulder. "Akane, you're just going to have to trust me for a moment, and believe me that none of this was my fault."

With that, she concentrated and dropped her Sailor powers. Akane stared as a mostly naked Ranko was revealed. Suddenly she was very glad that she had not followed the girl around the rock. That could have led to a very embarrassing situation. "Ra... Ranma. You... You became a Senshi? You... rescued me?"

Ranko blushed and waved a hand dismissively. "Well, they sort of conscripted me, something about destinies and birthrights and stuff. And well, you know me: demonic armies and dimensional barriers could never stop me from rescuing you."

Before she knew it, Akane was in her arms, head on her shoulder, tears wetting her shoulder as she sobbed. "Oh, Ranma. I was so worried about you. When they attacked, I just knew that you would try and save me. I didn't know what would have happened if they got you."

"Feh! I just would have put them in a world of hurt until I got you back."

After a while she calmed down and stepped back. "Ranma, there's just one thing. Why am I wearing your clothes? And uh... Why are you in your underwear?"

Ranko backed away, suddenly feeling a bit nervous. "Er, I figured, you know, since I could call up the little Sailor Suit, you needed 'em more than me. So.. yeah. Well, you're safe now. Heh, Heh"

Akane narrowed her eyes, a faint tick appearing under the left hand eye. Just then, she spied a city in the distance and she drew up a dangerous conclusion. "Are you trying to tell me that you carried me all this way, NAKED?!"

I'm in trouble now. "Umm."

In rage, she screamed and raised her mallet. "You pervert. I hope you like what you saw!"

While she wound up for a big swing, Ranko hung her head and mumbled something.

"WHAT did you say?"

Ranko replied in a very small voice. If there had been any noise other than the breeze in the canyon, it would not have carried to Akane's ears. "Yes."

The massive mallet fell from her lifeless fingers. "Yes? You... you said yes?"

Ranko somehow managed to hang her head even further. Turning away from Akane she began to walk away. Ranko knew what was coming now. She'd try and say something nice and Akane would knock her into the next week. Ranko was beginning to understand the pain of unreturned love that Ukyo must feel. "Yes... You're... You're very beautiful. Especially when you're asleep. You look so peaceful and happy."

Akane watched her fiancée move away from her. She could see it in her face and in the way she moved. It was fear, a fear of her reaction, and a fear of her rejection. Reaching out, she placed her fingers on the girl's arm. "Ranma. Thank you. It... It means a lot to me."

Ranko turned around, surprise written large all over her expressive face. "Do you really mean it?"

"Oh, yes, Ranma, I do. I mean it as much as what you said in the letter to me." She took Ranko in her arms, holding the smaller girl tightly.

"Thank you for coming and rescuing me. I... I really think I do love you too."

Ranko's heart surged. She did care. Maybe not the way he did. She still hit him all the time, and she still yelled at him, but she cared. And that was enough. Placing her head on Akane's shoulder, Ranko whispered to her. "Thank you, Akane. I love you. I always have. Ever since you first wanted to be friends when we first met, I've loved you. I... I just haven't been able to say it. You never know what you've got 'til you lose it."

She had been working on the dojo's accounts when the phone rang. The repair bills have dwindled to almost nothing since Ranma and Akane went to Juuban, which eased the burden on the finances considerably. The middle Tendo sister answered the phone hoping it was another city council wanting to hire her father or Mr. Saotome for demon removal services. It was their only real source of income. "Hello, this is Nabiki Tendo. Can I help you?"

"Good evening Tendo-san. This is Ami Mizuno, Ranma's tutor. I was wondering if I could speak to your or Ranma's father?"

Nabiki looked over at the two men playing shogi. *Nah, if something has happened to little sister, I want to be the first to know. Besides, if she wants more money for trying to tutor that idiot Ranma, I'm the one she has to deal with anyway*. "I'm sorry, Mizuno-san, they're both busy at the moment. Perhaps I can help you."

Ami pondered for a moment. It really would be best to tell the parents, but she supposed that the sister would relay any messages. "Please call me Ami. I'm a good friend of theirs. I should have called you a few days ago, but I was unavoidably detained. As you've probably heard, Tokyo has once again been attacked by demons. After Ranma got hurt fighting one of them, the two of them headed out of the city for a while. A sort of training trip really."

That was a surprise. Nabiki spoke with an air of disbelief. "Ranma actually took Akane somewhere? Voluntarily?"

"Why, yes. I mean, they're fiancées, so they do things together, don't they?"

Nabiki giggled; maybe those two would do something together under the influence of magic jewels, ancient curses or extortion. It really was good that she had answered the phone. If their parents had, the wedding would be waiting in the dojo as soon as Ranma and Akane returned. "I suppose so. Did they say where they were going?"

"Not exactly. I know that they're expecting to do a lot of fighting, but I'm not sure where they are, exactly... "

"How's my little sister, Ami? Is Ranma taking care of her?"

"Actually, you'd be surprised just how well he's taking care of her. Last I saw, she was sound asleep, and two were just about to set off for... well... other parts I suppose you could say."

They talked for several minutes more, until Nabiki had enough information. She knew that Ami was not telling her everything, but she could tell that the girl was not lying to her. If she was not lying, then Ranma and Akane must still be all right, and they were actually off together. Better make sure that she gave their parents the abbreviated version. It would not do if they thought Ranma and Akane were getting too close. It never lasted anyway.

Ami sighed when she hung up the phone. She was really glad she did not have to lie to the Tendo girl. It was bad enough that her friends were trapped on another world filled with demons. Knowing Sailor Sun was there to take care of her, Ami was quite sure that Akane would be safe enough for a short while, and that should be all the Senshi needed before they could rescue them. Ranma would surely die before he let harm come to Akane, and in that

case Akane would be sure to follow soon after. Ranma was proud, but Ami knew he would sacrifice his pride before he sacrificed himself or Akane.

Lifting her head from the public phone, she looked over at where the other Senshi were getting ready to eat dinner. After the battle, they had reverted to normal clothes, and then stopped at a cafe for dinner. Ami had much to tell them and a lot to discuss. Just after they had ordered, she realized she needed to contact her friends' family. Some reassurance should hold them until the couple was safe. When she turned to leave the phone booth, she felt a touch on her arm.

Looking up into the eyes of a large well-built boy, she smiled and said hello. Replying in kind, he flashed a magnificent pair of fangs - oh, dear, could he be a vampire? "Hello, I'm Ryoga Hibiki. I heard you mentioning Ranma and Akane. I'm a friend of Akane's, and I've been trying to find her for the last couple of months. Do you know where she is?"

"I'm sorry, Ryoga. They went off on a training trip a couple of days ago..."

She was going to say more, but Ryoga screamed in anger and punched his fist into the concrete wall of the building they were next to. To Ami's surprise, the concrete gave way quite easily to his fist in a pattern that matched how Sailor Sun smashed a wall. "Damn you, Ranma Saotome! You've made my life a living hell! **PREPARE TO DIE RANMA!"**

Before she could finish her conversation, or even try and redirect the boy, he charged off, waving his furled umbrella as he ran.

Ami stood there for a moment, blinking her eyes as she processed just what happened. She shrugged. "What strange friends they have."

It was a slight disruption to his plans, but certainly one, which would be easily enough coped with. Jadeite looked at his battle plans and tried to determine what effect Sailor Sun and that other Senshi could have from where they were. After several hours of planning and simulations, his eventual evaluation was that the pair posed little threat to the operation, providing he detailed some youma to the defense of his base.

He had never seriously expected the Senshi to ever travel to this dimension, and it seemed that he had underestimated their tenacity and stupidity. Now they were weakened and on the defensive, and if the Senshi here decided to attack, then they would surely die. While the two Senshi could cause enormous damage, there was no real risk of them surviving if they stayed around.

The only attack, which Sailor Sun had, that could come close to defeating his army of youma rendered her vulnerable afterwards. If she wanted to come here and cast it, she was welcome to try. Just in case, he ordered his youma to stand in wide, loose formations. Now that better defenses were in place, he would know when she arrived. Perhaps if he sent a few regular patrols out, it would keep her busy. Not enough for the losses to worry him, but if she felt she were contributing, she would spend less time planning how to be effective.

Jadeite checked the countdown. His main strike force would finish being assembled in one day. Another day for the units to be positioned at the portals, and then it would be time to strike. Soon he would have an unbeatable army in Tokyo. Not even the Sailor Senshi at their

full might, would be able to stop him. The only thing that could would be if the various governments decided to fire a nuclear weapon.

The magic required to withstand a nuclear strike was more than he had available. After he harvested a few thousand of the residents of Tokyo, and brought them here... that was another matter. When, and if the humans muster the resolve to vaporize Tokyo, it would be too late for them. After that... Well, Jadeite was perfectly happy with a slow victory. If each city he could save a few percent of the people before the humans vaporized everything, he would win eventually. Of course, there was nothing wrong with a devastating victory where the Sailor Senshi were crushed, and he was able to magically fortify the entire city before the civilians reacted.

The Senshi were arrayed in all their glory in the Governor's office. They had been up all night working on the information, which Sailor Mercury had risked her life to bring. Despite the fact that they were the city's most effective defenders, and although they had been the only thing which stood between this world and conquest by Queen Beryl, The Black Moon Clan and Pharaoh 90, most people still looked at them and saw young girls.

During the night, they had assembled a number of visual aids, something that they could use to convince the government to evacuate the city. Evacuation of a major city was an almost impossible task. The Senshi realized this, it was just that the alternative was too horrible to consider. If they could clear the civilians from the center of the city and put the army there, then it might be possible to halt the demonic advance.

Most of the pictures they were showing the Governor were from Ami's computer, but they had been blown up, and printed out. Gaining an audience with the Governor was easy; eight Senshi had walked up to his office and told his secretary that unless they were admitted and given several hours of time, the Governor would be responsible for the death of thousands of people. Now they were here, and Moon, Mercury and Mars were presenting information on the youma, which were attacking.

"In short, when doing a reconnaissance of the enemy base, we established that he had assembled an army in excess of four hundred of these youma. Given the known strength of the youma, we do not expect any non-military force to be able kill any of them. Also, it has been determined that their obvious objective is the capture and enslavement of as many people as possible to use them as a power source. Every person that Jadeite captures makes him harder to defeat.

"The Senshi will be doing everything that we can, but we're only human. Without assistance, we expect Tokyo to fall within two weeks of being attacked, if not sooner."

Everyone in the room looked at the last poster. On the left, a man-sized youma was pulling a struggling young woman into the portal. On the right, a massive multi-tentacled horror was preparing to throw a car. In the background, a sheet of flame covered the side of a building where a gas main had burst during the fight.

Silence reigned for several minutes. In one corner of the room, a clock ticked away the seconds.

After an eternity of waiting, the Governor looked at his aide and gave the smallest of nods. The aide immediately turned off the video camera that had been monitoring the meeting.

Taking the tape, he headed outside. "Thank you for what you have told us today. This information may well be able to save many lives. Unfortunately, I do not have the power to authorize the sort of action that you desire. My aide is making a copy of the tape even as we speak. As soon as he is done, I will present the information to the Diet. Only with their approval will we be able to get the military support that we need."

"Given your proven track record, I see no reason to expect that full cooperation will not be attained. However, it will take time. Unless there is some way I can contact you, I suggest that you contact my secretary. I will leave any messages with her, but I would not expect any sort of response until after four o'clock this afternoon."

"Finally, if you could try to be available to assist tonight, we will record a number of public announcements. I think your presence will help to calm and motivate people."

"All right, Akane, I think we have three priorities. First: we have to stay alive, nothing is as important as that."

Akane nodded her head. They were on top of the cliff Sailors Mercury and Sun had used initially. Looking at the patch of Mana Melons, her stomach rumbled, and she realized how hungry she was.

"Second: I need to keep training you, and third, we need to figure out how to help the Senshi when they return."

"Hang on, Ranma. Shouldn't those to be the other way around?"

Standing up, Sailor Sun led her fiancée away for the demonic base. "Not really, Akane. You see. There are lots of people trapped in there, just like you were. Sailor Mercury told me that the stuff you were trapped in is called a Stasis Crystal. She thought that it was almost unbreakable. Unless we had a week to try and break the spell, we would kill you getting you out."

Walking beside the red head, Akane cocked her head to one side. "So how did you get me out?"

Sailor Sun smiled a wicked grin. "I figured out the Breaking Point technique that Ryoga uses. You know, if Cologne didn't teach him, and if he didn't use it so often trying to kill me: you'd still be a prisoner. I bet Cologne will spit blood when we tell her that one. It would have been a fool proof plan to trap you, but she had already provided the key."

"So, does that mean you're going to teach me the Breaking Point?"

"You betcha! Not only that, but I'm going to teach you everything else I can. This place is dangerous. You thought holding a Christmas party in Nerima was dangerous? These things won't be hurt by normal attacks, and they **really** want to kill you."

Very soberly Akane nodded. Even just surviving here until they were rescued would be their own little slice of hell. She was not sure if Sun realized this yet, but when that army headed for Tokyo, the Senshi would not be able to do much to help them. Sun looked across and saw the concerned look on her fiancée's face.

Sailor Sun placed one hand around Akane's shoulders. "Don't worry too much, Akane. None of those demons are going to get through me. And that means we can train you until you're ready. When you're ready... Then... Then it's pay back time."

Akane smiled. Not her cute little smile. It was more an evil grin borrowed from Kodachi. "With interest, Ranma. With interest."

That night all of the Senshi other than Sailor Mercury headed for the film studios. The evacuation was being planned, and the army was being mobilized. The main desire was for it to be orderly. If people panicked, then they would get killed in the evacuation. So the Senshi were making commercials to convince people of the best ways to leave. Credibility was the name of the game, and it was something they possessed in spades.

Mercury was out for two reasons. Firstly she was a total wreck from her last few days of activity. Secondly, she was now formally excused from all of the Senshi duties unless there was emergency. One of their team was still pinned down by Jadeite, needing to be rescued and the enemy was sitting happily and safely out of reach. Both of those things spelt the need for their own portal. Mercury was the only person they knew who would be capable of making one.

In the morning, she would start work with the cats. Although they did not have Mercury's intelligence, both Luna and Artemis possessed great knowledge and experience. If the three of them could not match the science of Jadeite, they might as well give in now.

The Senshi had no intention of giving in.

Halfway through one of the commercials they were filming, the alarm went off. A youma was entering, and the Senshi left the studio in a flash. Film crew scrambled to follow them, but by the time they arrived, there was little left but smoking remains. Taking the opportunity, Sailor Moon made an impassioned speech. These were the scouts for a demonic invasion; if you wished to live, leave the city.

The first troops were beginning to arrive in the city proper when all hell broke loose.

Private Kanada Moriyama looked around the temporary barracks. It was once a school, but it had been commandeered for the duration of the emergency. A group of recent arrivals were packing away their equipment over on one side, and the remnants of his platoon were getting some well-earned rest. Propping himself on a chair in the middle of the room, Kanada looked over the arrivals.

"Corporal, I really wouldn't bother packing so much ammo for your M16."

The Corporal in question turned and looked at the private. He was just about to put the man back in his place when he noticed the number of other men, which had his unit insignia. Twelve. A platoon should have at least thirty. Considering the fact that all of them seemed exhausted, including one walking wounded, he guessed that they might have seen action already. "Care to elaborate on that, Private?"

"Since it will help keep you guys alive longer, it would be a pleasure. Gather 'round everybody."

When the movement stopped and he had a sufficient audience, Kanada lit a cigarette and waited for quiet. "I don't know what kind of briefing they're giving now, but I suspect that it's probably the same garbage they fed us. Whatever you do, don't believe it: it's almost completely wrong."

Grabbing an M16 from one of the soldiers, he waved it at them. "This thing is good for only one thing: shooting looters. You'll find a few of them, but you really should never need to take more than one magazine of ammo. If you try shooting this at a youma..."

Kanada shuddered and remembered what had happened to his platoon. "If you're lucky, it won't even notice. If you're unlucky, you'll be fighting one of the thin-skinned types, and you'll make it mad. Listen to this right now, there's no way you can kill one of them things with these guns. So don't even try. Now your M60 gunner, he's another matter. Any youma will notice what he's firing. Which means that you're M60 gunner is probably gunna be the first one to die. Gunner, you and your Gunner's Mate are best off being somewhere well back, and make sure you have an easy exit. You can always drop your gun and get a new one."

"Yeah, I know what you're thinking: he's just trying to put the fear into us. But I'm not, and it's the dying truth. See, we were there when they first started to appear. We were walking along, moving to one of the prepared positions, suddenly one of the civvies starts thrashing and falls over. Before we know what's happening, there's this great huge monster there, screaming and yelling and beating the daylights out of everyone around. We found out later that youma can infiltrate and possess humans. Given time, a person can be possessed and appear perfectly normal, until the youma takes control."

"Anyway, the civvies clear out of there right smart. So there's thirty-four of us, all banging away with our guns. The youma's just taking it all, doesn't even notice. Then the '60 kicks in, and it actually upsets the bastard. It was like a goddamn express train on legs. Faster than you could move, it was over and it ripped Hiyashi to shreds. There are bits of him everywhere. It took out the Lieutenant at the same time, too."

Waving his arms to illustrate, he showed how the three squads tried to break off. They found grenades would work. They would often knock it over for a moment, and occasionally, they would even hurt it. The main problem was hurting it quickly enough, and often enough.

"The big problem with these bastards is that they heal. They'll heal all right by themselves, but if they can get a hold of someone, they'll suck the life right out of them. Sergeant Otaga went that way. It just lifts him off the ground, then **slurp** you can just see him getting thinner and lighter. Suddenly, all it's wounds are healed, and the Sergeant is dead on the ground."

At that time, they got the idea of using their anti-tank rockets. Since there had been no expectation of encountering tanks, they only had three. Shooting a youma is a lot harder than shooting a tank. A youma is much smaller, and also a lot faster. It can dodge, and it would not sit still for a second. Two of the three missiles had struck. They managed to blow off one tentacle and put a big hole in its stomach, but they could not stop it.

"The damn thing is like fighting an ant. Unless you kill it, it won't lie down and die. It ripped into second squad that way too. After it drained two more men, the hole was all fixed, and it's tentacle was almost back. Half of us were getting ready to withdraw. By this time, most of us

had fired almost every round we carried, and none of them did any good. I don't think anyone had any grenades, and I know all the AT rockets were used up. We were goners."

Everyone was hanging on his words now. Even half his own platoon - what was left - was gathered around. They supplied hints and side comments. Most of them were even saying that things were worse than he described.

"I know we would have had it then, but one of them Sailor girls turns up. It was the cute little blonde one... yeah, Sailor Venus. It was the strangest sight you ever did see. Here was us, thirty big men, trying to kill this thing with everything we had, and it didn't care. But this girl jumps off a building and it just stops. So she says 'Soldiers are there for the protection of society. To attack them is evil, so in the name of the Moon, I shall punish you.' Sounds silly, I know, but I really don't mind anymore. They can say what they like."

After she challenged the youma, Venus had leapt into the air. Avoiding the flailing tentacles, she fired off her Venus Love-Me Chain. With most of its limbs locked up, the youma could not attack any of the soldiers. Still trying to strike out at her, Venus was kept on the run. Occasionally she was able to move in and punch the beast, knocking holes in its armor.

When the demon was almost free of her chain, she backed up and attacked again. **"CRESCENT BEAM SHOWER!"** Unleashing her magical strike, the youma was knocked back half a block, smoke rising from its torso. Even as it was standing, Sailor Venus charged in, blonde hair going everywhere. Keeping the fight up close and personal, she pummeled the weakened youma. All her damage did was keep it in a weakened condition. It was not until Sailor Uranus turned up that they were able to get the better of it.

"It was impressive to watch. Out of nowhere this second girl, this one in a short navy skirt, came charging up. Both of them run away from the beast at exactly the same time. It was almost like watching a ballet. With a bit of a distance between them, the girls start doing their little pirouette, and they sing out some words. Next thing you know, it's like the Emperor's birthday, fireworks everywhere. Both of their attacks hit perfectly, even though the monster was charging them.

"That knocked it down, but it took them another shot before they could kill it."

The Senshi had stayed around only long enough to confirm that it was dead. Then the pair had sprinted off to the next battle, leaving the soldiers to gather themselves.

"I checked up on it later with some of the other people stationed there. Sota from D Company said that basically the same thing happened to his people. Now his watch might have been a bit out, but he swears within a minute of leaving us, that pair of young girls had run a dozen city blocks and were saving his platoon."

Pressed for more information, Private Moriyama and his friends tried to give whatever details they could.

Chapter 5, Life Triumphant

After their latest raid on the mana melons, Sailor Sun carried a massive armload with her into the dry wastelands, which surrounded the city. When they reached their cave, she dumped the food. With what they had, they should be set for the next three weeks. *Thank you, Pops, for teaching me the Shop, Grab and Run technique.*

Ranko dropped the Sailor costume, and then raising her transformation stick in the air, she changed back into her Senshi uniform. The magic of the Sailor Senshi seemed to believe that all Sailors should be properly groomed and dressed for their battles against evil. Not only did it provide make up and jewelry, it also gave her a complete bath, cleaned and combed her hair, and fixed all the damage in her suit. Cleaned of all the demon blood, dirt and mess, Sailor Sun felt like a new woman.

When she wandered out of the cave and saw Akane, filthy from two weeks of action, she began to consider the options of getting a new woman. This one needed to be traded in.

Sitting down next to the dirty - and smelly - girl, Sailor Sun placed an arm around her shoulders. She had learned two days ago to try not to pat Akane's hair anymore. The hair was so matted with demon blood that even though it was short, it was tangled and clotted together.

Tears ran down Akane's cheek when she saw just how clean and beautiful her fiancé was. Silently Sun held Akane. There was nothing that could be said. They both knew that there was little they could do to escape, so until they were rescued, it was no baths, and living on highly nutritious cardboard. At least the mana melons had enough water content for them to survive. Akane had tried washing her hands once with the juice from the mana melons, but all that did was make them stickier.

Deep in the night, Sun woke up and looked at the ceiling. There was no movement. Even Akane was still for a change. Reaching out with her senses, she tried to find any youma: there were none. Lying back down, Sun tried to sleep, but when she was about to close her eyes, the idea that woke her resurfaced.

Slipping out of the cave, she grabbed an armful of the melons. A short distance away was another cave. It was smaller than theirs, and quite narrow. Placing the melons at the entrance, she walked several meters to the back. Yes, aside from some dirt, it was all rock. Blasting a hole in the ground, she collected the rocks and piled them near the entrance, blocking wind as much as possible.

Taking the first of the mana melons, she held it in her hands, and focused a small quantity of heat from the attack she usually used. Seconds later, the melon had split, and steam was rising off it. After ten seconds, it was a withered and dried husk. Tossing it away, she grabbed two more melons, one for each hand. Heating them again she continued the process.

By the time she had demolished the pile she brought, the cave was a sauna, and she could see drops forming on the stalactites. By the time she had gone through three quarters of their food supply, the floor had a sizable pool of water.

The next morning, Sun gave Akane her first bath for weeks, even if it was only lukewarm. Without soap, her hair was still a complete loss. Eventually - at her insistence - Sun gave her an even shorter hair cut. A haircut so short and spiky that even Principal Kuno would have approved.

They may have sacrificed their food, but they had reclaimed their pride.

Jadeite smiled.

His plan had worked perfectly. By smuggling almost eighty youma into the civilian population he had been able to draw the Sailor Senshi away from his main target. When Queen Beryl had attacked, she had insisted on using all forms of subtlety. Under her guidance, a youma would lay an elaborate and vulnerable network of energy absorption. This worked in theory, and gave yields almost as good as his humans in the harvesting crystals. The difference between theory and practice was that when the Senshi killed the youma, the energy was generally lost too.

So much effort, so little gain. His more direct approach had a better success rate since the energy was invariably saved, and the losses he suffered were expected and accounted for. Because he had not sent any youma in subversively, the stupid Senshi had conveniently forgotten he possessed the ability.

So even when they attempted to evacuate the city, all it did was add to the confusion. Three hours before his main army transited to Earth, his eighty hidden youma sprang forth. Struggling, the Senshi had managed to kill a number of these, but it kept them busy. By the time they could break off and respond, over one hundred youma were already through the beachhead. A rapidly expanding circle of demons kept all the civilians from escaping, and presented a unified front against the Senshi.

For the last week, his harvesters had been able to spare no energy for the creation of new youma. Not only was there a massive requirement for the portals, sending youma between the worlds; his main requirement was the casting of all of the Stasis Crystals. While his best-case plans had forecast almost this many captives, he had not expected that the best-case plans would come into effect. Now he already had thousands of the humans in his harvesters. With this much power, he could begin to create a second army, an army that would be able to take and hold Tokyo.

Yesterday Sailor Sun and Akane had killed off Jadeite's latest patrol that had come looking for them. Jadeite had tried a new plan, a design for even stronger youma. A youma which was supposed to be armored beyond anything, which a human could hope to damage and made specifically to deal with his little pest problem. A Senshi would have had a hard time defeating them and the six youma he had sent would have had an easy time defeating Sailor Sun.

Jadeite's plan had been a good one. He had created golems. A golem was a demon made entirely from rock. It was slower than a normal youma, but it had armor that was much stronger. Sailor Sun and Akane had found out just how much stronger when they charged in, kicking, punching and throwing ki attacks. All of these, the youma shrugged off. Sailor Sun had even been struck badly in the stomach while saving Akane.

The initial part of the battle had gone badly, and then the reason for the better armor had dawned on the pair. Composed completely of rock, the demons were susceptible to the Breaking Point technique. The training in the last month paid off instantly when, with six cries of **"BAKUSAI TENKETSU!"** the entire patrol was reduced to a pile of rubble.

Now they were relaxing after their meal, safely hidden in the hills. Part way through the conversation with Akane, Sailor Sun had dashed off behind some boulders. "Ranma? Ranma? Are you okay?"

A few minutes later, a rather pale Sailor Sun had returned. "Akane, I don't know how to say this, but I don't know if I'm going to be here much longer."

Akane gasped and the two of them fell to the ground in each other's arms. "What... What's the matter?"

"I'm not sure. This Sailor Suit protects me from most damage, and heals me really quick, but... but it doesn't seem to be working this time. After that attack yesterday... I seem to have some sort of internal damage. It started slowly, but I seem to be bleeding to death."

Akane stifled her cries and leaned on her fiancée. "I'll never be able to see what's wrong while you're wearing that. Can you change back to your normal body?"

"I can try, I'm just a bit worried that the Sailor Suit is all that's holding me together."

Concentrating hard, Sailor Sun dropped her costume. Fortunately, there was no change. She still felt the pain in her stomach; a certain sign of whatever wound it was that was killing her. Akane looked her over. She poked and prodded, and searched for bruises. Ranko was a little tender, but other than that, there was nothing wrong that she could find.

"Um... Ranma, how do you know you're bleeding?"

Ranko blushed and batted her big eyes. "It's err... kind of embarrassing. I seem to be bleeding from..."

Akane waited but Ranko did not continue. Usually Ranko had no feminine modesty. Perhaps being a girl for so long was having an effect on her morals. Then again, it had not affected her speech yet.

"Where? It's important. Have you got a wound I can't see?"

"Not exactly... It's... it's... it's somewhere personal."

"You don't mean..."

Her eyes darted downward. "Yes."

Akane sighed and leaned back. She has been a girl for almost a month. "I don't think there's anything I can do, Ranma. Let's say that you'll be better in a day or two. Let's just hope that we're gone from here before another month is up."

Ranko looked at his fiancée, fear in her eyes. "What's happening? What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing is actually **wrong** with you... I think that you really better spend some time talking to Dr. Tofu when we get back. This isn't the sort of thing I can explain to a boy."

Ryoga looked at the hitchhiker who was walking with him. He knew that he was in the wrong country, but hopefully Prefect-san would be able to help him find his way. They were currently stopped at a roadside diner on the middle of a long highway.

Ryoga was talking to some of the truck drivers, trying to get directions to the Tendo dojo. His directional sense was bad, but his sense of time was quite normal... unless he was traveling somewhere. Days just seemed to go missing. Since there was only a week and a half until Ranma and Akane were due back, Ryoga though he ought to try and be there to greet them.

Having received directions to a place called Texas - Ryoga was fairly sure it was one of the Wards around Tokyo - he waited. He was idly poking holes in the asphalt roadway spelling the word 'Akane' absentmindedly when Prefect-san came out of the diner. His friend handed him several packets of peanuts and some cans of beer. "Eat these. We're going for a little trip. I've managed to reach an old friend from Alpha Centauri, it'll give us a lift."

The hitchhiker looked around and poked the Japanese boy he was traveling with. "Ryoga, you do know where we are, don't you?"

"Sure, Prefect-san. Kansas."

He looked around at the way the hills grew to mountains in the east, and the way that the Pacific Ocean spread out like a blue tablecloth in the West. "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto."

Ryoga smashed his fist into the ground. "I knew I should have taken that left turn at Albuquerque. Damn you, Ranma!"

The Senshi gathered around Ami. Sailor Mercury was the only one that was dressed in her Sailor suit, and the reason was painfully obvious. While most of the Senshi had been fighting for around ten hours a day, or until they dropped, Sailor Mercury had been working on developing a portal in excess of twenty hours a day.

Sailor Mercury seemed to be living largely by the strength of the magic that healed the Senshi. She had been skipping meals, and missing out on sleep for almost two months, and it was not something the human body was meant to be able to do. Already a small girl, she had lost at least ten kilos, and was very thin now. While the other Sailors had been fighting to the point of exhaustion, Sailor Mercury had been working beyond that to develop some form of dimensional gate.

Every day she would awaken and begin her study or research, as the night would begin, she would sometimes break for lunch, and then it was back to the research. Most days when progress had been either particularly good, or particularly bad, she would still be working when her friends or assistants woke in the morning. Like most of the residents of the inner Tokyo area, her house had been evacuated. Now she worked in a private lab. The funding was brought in by the Senshi, either by their own money, bequeaths from thankful people

they rescued, or even some government funds which had been made available to the Senshi on a discretionary basis.

Now, after six weeks of inhuman effort, the brilliant girl had succeeded. In the middle of the room stood a hoop. It was precisely two meters in diameter, and looked like nothing more than some sort of cyborg donut. It was thick, silver and covered with piping. Naturally enough, there were also lots of bright flashing lights. The base of the donut was embedded in the raised floor, and ramps led up to each side. On each of the ramps there was a large red arrow, one pointing into the hoop, the other away from it.

Wearily, Sailor Mercury waved a hand at her invention. "Okay, this is it. I know that it's calibrated to the right universe, since I have sent through a couple of small cameras. We have a good image of Jadeite's base. Just before everyone got here, I also sent an energy scanner through: Sailor Sun is still alive."

There was some commotion at that. Surprise was certainly one of their main feelings. They knew Sun was good, but to be able to survive in Jadeite's realm must have taken amazing abilities. Usagi immediately jumped to her feet. "Then let's open the portal and bring back Sailor Sun and Akane. The sooner we have them back, the better."

Sailor Mercury shook her head sadly. "It's not that easy I'm afraid. One of the reasons I could find Jadeite's base so easily is I could track his portals. If I open a portal to send anything large through, he'll know exactly where we are. Not only that, but we lose any hope of surprise. Come on, Usagi, you know how he fights. If he could track us to this place, he would start sending demons through. As soon as he pinned us fighting them, he would open portals all around us and feed in his entire army. We're only going to have one shot at this."

The Senshi digested this and debated their tactics for a while. Eventually, Usagi made a pronouncement. "Ami, you're going to eat, then get to bed right now. Everyone else is the same. We can't mount a rescue or an attack while we're so tired. I want everyone to rest for the next two days. Then we'll signal Ranko. What was it she wanted, pink flares?"

Rei was not amused. "Red, Usagi, red."

"Tee Hee! Okay, red flares. Besides, we're going to have to make an exit for all the people that we rescue. If Jadeite has thousands of prisoners, they wouldn't be able to just walk out of the house, they need to be able to get clear as quick as possible."

The next problem they thought of was Sun's request to Mercury: 'I'll signal, then home on me'. Mercury said she could get the portal to open right next to Sailor Sun if she was still, the only problem was what her signal would be. There was nothing planned, and they had no way for Sailor Sun to communicate with them.

When asked about maintaining a constant watch over Sailor Sun, Mercury shook her head. "The power required for an open portal for that long would be too obvious. Ranko wanted two days. I say we get the army to watch all of Jadeite's portals. Maybe Ranko knows a way she could get a message to us."

Rei finished the meeting. "All right girls, we have a few things to do. Tomorrow, we open this wall, that's the easy part. Next, we have between two and four days to decide how to break thousands of stasis crystals, and kill Jadeite. After we send those flares, everyone has to be well rested and ready to go on a moment's notice. Sailor Sun might need us to bail her out pretty quick when she signals for us. For those who don't know, Luna and Artemis have

figured out that if we're prepared and rested, we can store enough magical energy to last for an hour. So when we get there, we have one hour to kill Jadeite. Finally, remember, when the portal opens and Jadeite knows we're in his domain, every youma here will go all out attacking. Without us to oppose them, they should be able to cream the regular forces. Just having us around means they need to use cautious tactics. Jadeite's probably not expecting an attack on his home turf for this very reason."

Rei paused with the weight of her words, unintentionally adding dramatic impact. "We either win this battle, or Tokyo belongs to Jadeite."

Mr. Miyagi was quite sad. While he had been contacted by one of Ranma's friends in Tokyo and knew that the kids were safe, he had not seen them in almost two months. True, they had left Tokyo before the invasion started, but that just meant that for the last two months the pair had been wandering around unsupervised. Mr. Miyagi had no doubt that they could handle any sort of violence that they were likely to encounter; it was more the moral problems.

Ranma and Akane were fiancées, and he knew what that was like. Especially when they were normal, active, hormone drenched sixteen year olds. He could only hope that Ranma was as honorable as he seemed to be. It would be a terrible thing if he had to tell his old friends Soun and Genma that their children had been living together for two months without a chaperone.

After Daniel-san had fought in his competition - without the Kachuu Tenshin Amaguriken, which he could not master - Mr. Miyagi had returned to Japan to try to find his charges. There was little success. All of the other students that Ranma and Akane had introduced him to had been disbursed due to the evacuation, and could not be found. While the school may have known their whereabouts, it had been leveled one day in a demon attack. For some reason that school had seen more than its fair share of demon attacks, and this one had just been too much to defend.

The school year was just ending, and the government had distributed pamphlets on what to do with your school children. Many of the records had been lost, and most schools - like Juuban - had not been able to conduct their end of year tests. All of the students at Juuban would need to take their exams at other schools, or do make-up exams later.

Mr. Miyagi felt sorry for the kids. They really were sincere about the Art, and quite talented. His technique of misdirection had caused Ranma to become a skilled sensei. If he could not find them within a week, he would contact the Tendo's and apologize for his failure to look after the children.

Sun and Akane looked down at the demon city. This in itself was nothing unusual. They tended to spend most of their time looking at the city, hoping for a sign from the Senshi. Even if they were not watching for a sign, it was still what they would have spent their time doing. There was always a slim chance that they would spot an open portal, which was lightly defended, and be able to escape, or they might be able to stage a quick food raid.

Sailor Sun lay on her back and idly played with Akane's hair. It was still cut short, short enough that even the blood and slime from their frequent fights with demons could be

washed out. Akane was on her stomach, looking down at the city through half closed eyes. Rolling over, Sailor Sun placed a kiss on the back of her neck, and then began to massage her shoulders.

"Oh, Ranma. That's so nice. You've really gotten good at that."

Sailor Sun giggled. "Well, considering the vast library that we have available, I need to spend my time doing something. Besides, we can only train for so many hours each day,"

Akane sighed even more deeply and closed her eyes. Sun had developed the amazing massage that Mr. Miyagi had taught her to astonishing new levels. She could feel Sun's light girl's body sitting on her lower back as she worked on Akane's shoulders. It really was nice.

Akane opened her eyes and smiled up at her fiancé. "Hmm, you know, when we get back, you could give up Martial Arts and become a professional Masseur. Hey, what's that? Is there something wrong at the portal?"

Sailor Sun immediately stopped her massage. If there was a fight at the portal, it might be the opening they needed to get back home. While Sun had no objections to fighting Jadeite, she wanted to be able to do it where and when they wanted. As far as she was concerned, it meant that they should be able to spend some time safe from youma patrols so she and her cute fiancée could get some time alone. Searching around she eventually saw what Akane had noticed: one of the portals was busily pouring red smoke all over the landscape.

Red Smoke?

A red flare???

Rescue!

Sun grabbed Akane and led her away from their viewing point. "Time for a rest, Akane. I could be wrong, but I think that's the signal that we've been waiting for. If it is, we have a day to rest and recuperate, then we're going in."

Akane smiled with grim anticipation. They had been working on this plan for the last two months, and they thought they had it down pat. If the Senshi had the ability to place a portal where they wanted, they should be able to join with the two of them, and then do some serious damage to Jadeite.

When they got back to their cave, they had a meal and sat down for a while. After eating, they talked of home, and then reviewed the plan. Both knew it back to front, but if they checked it again, the chance of anything going wrong was even less. That evening they slept deeply and comfortably held in each other's arms.

When the morning came, they rose and had a quick spar to loosen up their muscles. When they were finished, Sailor Sun heated most of their food and gave Akane a bath. If these were going to be their first guests in almost two months, then they ought to look their best.

They reached a spot almost a kilometer from one of the portals, and Sailor Sun looked at Akane. "Back in a moment."

Kissing the shorter girl, Akane waved her off and settled down to wait. They had no agreed upon way to signal the Senshi, and they had no way of knowing if their signal would be seen,

or even if the Senshi would be able to produce a portal to come and get them. However, Sun had faith in them, and that was enough for her. She had trusted her with her life so many times in the last couple of months that to not trust her had become a foreign idea.

Sailor Moon was dozing in the military command center when a awed looking young Private came over and bowed to her, stuttering her name.

"S-Sailor Moon, Ma'am. We ... we have a report coming in from one of the helicopter patrols."

Moon struggled awake and tried to remember where she was and why she was there. After seeing everyone in the military uniforms she felt like crying. She had been having a great dream about eating ice cream with her friends after a perfectly normal school day. Now she was brought back to reality in a very harsh manner.

Pulling herself together, she looked at the young man. He was cute, but not a shadow on her beautiful Tuxedo Kamen. "Thank you, Private Onotashi. Lead the way."

Pointing to TV screen, she could see a number of demons milling around a portal. After a minute, they calmed down and began to head off. "Here, Ma'am, we have the event on a recording."

Pressing a button, the scene changed and she watched as the camera panned down to center on the portal. Except the portal was hard to see. Every couple of seconds, a billow of flame would jet out. She watched for a few moments and wished she could have been there in person. If she was, she could be sure. As it was.... there was a chance it was just some sort of malfunction from the portal. She didn't think so, but it was a chance.

But she was the beautiful soldier Sailor Moon, and that meant she was supposed to be the leader of the Sailor Senshi. Leaders make decisions.

Sailor Moon hated making decisions.

"Private, tell General Masaki that 'Revenge' is a go. Relay the same message to your CO, and await his orders."

Not even glancing to see if she was obeyed, Moon ran from the temporary command post and headed to where Sailor Mercury had created their portal. On the way there, she summoned all the other Senshi from where they were. No one was out fighting at present. They had been deliberately trying to avoid committing to any battles since they threw the flares through. Now they would find out if it paid off.

She was almost there when she dashed past the tall boy with the black hair, fangs and red umbrella. Normally she would try and give directions to someone who looked so lost, but this day was far from normal.

When she arrived she was surprised to see the portal was still closed. Sailor Mercury was sitting at the control panel, fiddling with all sorts of strange dials, and the other Senshi were queued up waiting to charge through. Sailor Neptune was going to lead their assault just in case they needed to force their way through some reluctant hosts. Mercury looked up at her friend and gave her a smile. "I hope it was the signal, because ever since your call, I've been trying to lock onto Sailor Sun. She just keeps moving."

Moon looked concerned. Even if it were not the signal, the Senshi would be going in now. They may not have given Sailor Sun the full two days she needed, but the plans she had set in motion with the military would be too hard to stop then restart later. Moon's lower lip was starting to tremble, as she feared that she had made a bad choice when Mercury screamed.

"She's stopped! Go, Neptune! Go!"

As soon as the black circle of the portal appeared, Sailor Neptune shot through. Instantly, the other Senshi began to run in after her. Moon and Mercury were the last two through, and then the portal shut itself down. Outside the room, soldiers and medical people began to form up. If things went well, lots of people should be pouring out of the portal any time now.

Sailor Sun stood in the melon field and smiled at Akane. "Now, we wait."

The words were hardly out of her mouth when Sailor Neptune ran out of thin air and straight into Sun's head, knocking the red head down. Neptune picked herself up and only just managed to avoid being jumped on by the next Senshi whose fall was softened by Sun's fallen body. In moments, all of the Senshi had crowded through, and were being helped to their feet by Akane. Sun got up in a daze. "Watch where you're stepping."

When everyone was gathered around, they took stock of each other. Generally most of them looked the same, but the girls from Juuban who knew Akane were stunned. Where Akane had been a fit girl with short hair, she looked almost feral. Her body was almost whipcord thin, except she still carried a lot of muscle. Looking at the girl, it would be hard to believe that she carried a gram of extra fat on her anywhere. It was an easy thing to judge too. Two months living rough and fighting regularly had not been kind to her clothes. The pants were little more than a shredded pair of shorts, and her shirt strained the bounds of decency... if you had very wide bounds of decency.

What probably gave some them the greatest shock was her face and hair. Gone was the baby fat, which had rounded out her face, and also gone was most of her hair. When everyone stared, Sailor Sun came up and put an arm around her. Running a hand through her short-cropped hair, Sailor Sun grinned. "Pretty cute, isn't it?"

Everyone nodded dumbly. Haruka had short hair, but even hers was twice that length. If she didn't have such a feminine face and musculature, Akane could easily pass as a boy.

"Enough with the reunion now. Mercury, how can we get the portal back?"

Sailor Mercury pulled herself back to earth. She was just so happy to see her friend still alive. "Portal... Right... Okay, I have a signal beacon. I can call the portal once to where I am. Then I need to go through and reset the mechanism."

Sun nodded. "Right. That means you're with Akane. Go with her now, she's in charge, do what she says, and everything should be okay. We'll see you back in the real world soon. As long as you can, try and use my magic, Mercury needed it before. Senshi, let's go!"

Before anyone had a chance to object, Sailor Sun and Akane headed in opposite directions. Looking to Moon and Mars for guidance, Mercury eventually headed after Akane when her leaders shrugged their shoulders. The Senshi had worked up their own battle plan, but if the

girl on the spot - someone who had been studying the place for two months - had a suggestion they thought it would be worth trying.

Mercury caught up with Akane quickly. She was quick, but there was no doubt that she was not a Senshi. For Akane, it must have been close to a sprint; for Mercury it was a jog in the park. "All right, Akane. Can you tell me what we're doing?"

Akane looked across at the girl and talked between breaths, huffing and puffing in her hurry. "We're the... diversion... and the... rescue... party. When we... get there... you're my... shield."

That didn't explain a great deal to Sailor Mercury, but considering how hard it was for Akane to talk while she ran, she could wait. Eventually they arrived somewhere, Mercury did not know where, but Akane seemed satisfied. It was just another section of plain wall, but Akane stopped and regained her breath before facing the Senshi.

"Do you remember how Ranma got me out of the Stasis Crystal?"

Mercury shook her head. "Sorry, I was busy holding off the youma."

"It's a Martial Arts technique called the Breaking Point. Great technique, it can make any sort of rock explode by hitting the weak point it has. Only problem is that it **is** an explosion: bits of rock go everywhere. Now I know that I can stand around most of the day doing the Breaking Point, but we have two problems: one, as soon as we start, the youma are going to attack us. Two, I can't get hit by exploding rocks all day without being cut to shreds eventually."

"So you need me to protect you?"

"You got it. Youma should not be a big problem. We figure most will head to Earth to take advantage of your absence, and the rest should be tied up with Ranma. When I start work, I need you to stand in front of me. Sorry, this is going to hurt like hell - Ranma and I practiced this - but your magical healing should keep you safe. Okay, it's time."

Grabbing Sailor Mercury in a rather friendly hug, Akane leaned past her and poked the wall. Sailor Mercury screamed as she felt small knives rip into her all up and down her back. Before the pain subsided, Akane was past her and pulling her inside.

They took a few moments to look around, and then they headed for a nearby room. Mercury recognized it as a twin of the one she and Sun had seen so long ago. "Head for the middle of the room and open the portal, then we'll get started." When the portal was open, Akane again grabbed Mercury and used her as human shield. Moving sideways down the crystal prisons, Akane freed twenty people in rapid succession. The whole while, Mercury screamed. By the time she passed fifteen, she could begin to feel blood trickling down her back.

After twenty were free, Akane indicated that they should toss the twenty through. While they were moving the unconscious people through the portal, Akane saw Mercury's back. "Oh, my god! I'm so sorry! It never did that to Ranma! Damn, this isn't going to work!"

Sailor Mercury's back was almost healed by then. They were only shallow wounds, but if they kept this up for thousands of people, she knew that she would fall soon. "Akane, will you be safe here for a couple of minutes? I might be able to do something about this."

When Akane nodded her assent, Mercury dashed into the portal carrying the last two freed people. All alone, Akane began to work on the next chambers to be freed. The crystal shards did hurt, more than just rock, but her martial arts training gave her a tougher skin than Mercury. She might not heal as fast, but she knew she could take light damage like this for a bit longer. After a minute she had a different idea and began to strike the crystals while on the run. It was hard to keep her balance while getting hit, but she suffered fewer hits this way, having moved past most of the crystal shards.

There were forty-eight people on the floor when Sailor Mercury returned with a pair of soldiers. When Mercury pointed, the soldiers immediately began grabbing people and dragging them to the portal. She was just about to give Akane a bulletproof vest and riot shield helmet when a youma interrupted. Stepping past the soldiers, Akane launched a ki bolt at the monster, and then boggled as Sailor Mercury launched into the fray.

She had seen the Sailor Senshi on the news, but one up close was something to behold. She moved so quickly, and with such grace that even a trained Martial Artist like Akane had a hard time following her movements. Sure, she has seen Sailor Sun in action, but Sailor Mercury fought in a way that looked more like a dance than a fight. Akane watched her for a minute then realized two things: first, the girl was a lousy fighter. She might have great magical powers, but her hand-to-hand combat left much to be desired. As soon as they got back to Nerima, and the invasion was taken care of, Akane thought that she and Ranma should do a little something to increase the Senshi's effectiveness. The second thing that she noticed was that she was standing there doing nothing. Ignoring the fight she returned to her real work. Donning the protective gear that Sailor Mercury had provided, Akane returned to the major job of smashing crystals.

Jadeite snarled in anger. He had never seriously expected the Senshi to launch an attack against him. They knew what would happen to Tokyo as well as he. Tokyo was now his by default.

As soon as the detectors had indicated that the Senshi had entered his universe, he had sent an all out attack order to his youma on Earth. Without the fear of the Senshi, the youma could cover enormous ground, spreading themselves thinly knowing they were safe. While the human armed forces were present, they did not present a real threat. Tanks and soldiers could not compare to the shear power of a youma. Even if the expanding ring of youma trapped thousands of soldiers, soon they would exhaust their ammunition, and the youma would still be there.

Tokyo belonged to Jadeite, and it was time to let everyone know. Jadeite's joy was so great that his laughter could almost be heard all the way to Earth.

Calling up his reserves, he sent them racing to the harvesting chambers. If the Senshi wanted to fight him on his home ground, he would show them a fight they would remember for the rest of their lives... or about two hours if his estimate was right.

Two months allowed you to find out a lot about a building. In two months they had managed to isolate the function of much of Jadeite's city, and they knew almost exactly where he would not be. Having ruled out most of the city, it left a small, well defended area which needed to be checked to find Jadeite, and that was what they were there for. While she lead

the way over the surface of the city, Sailor Sun filled the others in on her plan, and fitted in all of the updates and advice she could get from the Sailor Senshi.

It all boiled down to two things: magic was easy to detect, and by the time the magic resistant metal had been blasted through, a force of youma could easily arrive to defeat the Senshi. Given the expected situation with the Senshi, it made perfect sense. Unfortunately for Jadeite, he did not realize that one of the Senshi had trained in the secret techniques of the Chinese Amazons. Secret techniques such as the Breaking Point, which would be able to shatter the armored dome which protected Jadeite's control center without tripping any of the magic sensitive alarms.

While the Senshi dashed down the corridors, searching for their prey, Akane and Sailor Mercury had lured off most of the youma protecting the base. Akane and Ranma knew that there was no way that the two of them would be able to defeat the youma that would attack them. But if they could buy the main force of Senshi the time they needed to defeat Jadeite, there would be no need to face them en masse.

Sailor Sun had cautioned the girls to be quick and very careful while they searched for Jadeite. They would not have much time before the army of youma turned back to attack them, and the first time they used their magical attacks, the youma would come running. By the time they found the command center, the Senshi had destroyed five youma in viscous, messy and unpleasant hand-to-hand combat. When the team burst into the large amphitheater which Jadeite used to direct his invasion, Sailors Jupiter and Sun were covered in sticky body fluids, and Sailor Saturn's Silence Glaive was black for it's top third where she had pinned a beast until her friends could dispatch it.

The Senshi lined up and struck a pose. Across from them, Jadeite stopped calling his orders and looked at them with disdain. Shock evident on his face from their surprising arrival. "How in world did you get in my chamber?"

Sailor Moon stepped forward and leveled her Moon Scepter at him. "Jadeite, you send demons to Earth to enslave and kill people. You have no regard for human life. I name you an abomination and a thing of evil. In the name of the Moon, we, the beautiful Sailor Suited soldiers for love and justice, are here to destroy you."

With one voice, the Senshi called out a challenge and charged into battle. All around them, youma raced down the stairs of the amphitheater and the battle was joined.

Akane looked up from the destruction she was wrecking and saw six youma arrive in the door of the room. Sailor Mercury cast a Shine Aqua Illusion, but their attack could not be blunted for long. Passing the two soldiers who were carrying the people she rescued, Akane ordered them to run. "Get through the portal, we're leaving. Don't worry about these people. The youma want prisoners. They won't be hurt. If you're still here when we go through, you're staying. Move!"

Hearing that they would be abandoned, the soldiers took flight, carrying their burdens on their back as they ran through the portal. Akane ran up to where Sailor Mercury was fighting and joined the fray. One of the demons struck at her, so she leapt above it. Grabbing its head in mid air, she pivoted as she flew, doing a handstand. Contrary to the way Ranma would do while training, she kept a firm hold on the head as she moved. With a sickening

crunch, the neck of the youma broke, and it fell like a rag doll to the ground. Summoning a ki bolt to her right hand, she lashed out and caught the youma she landed near.

The youma stepped back, stunned, but it bought her the time she needed. "Mercury, time to go!"

Akane stepped back and waited for Mercury to follow, but she didn't. "Akane, we can't leave these people!"

While Sailor Mercury lashed out another dazzling attack, Akane looked at the fight. Mercury was outnumbered seven to one, and refusing to give ground. At this rate, she would be surrounded and defeated in moments. Mercury was already weakening, and the youma pressed her even harder. Gathering her strength, Akane charged at the girl. With only millimeters to spare, she skidded to a halt adjacent to her. Poking the floor, she watched it erupt and knocked the youma back a step. Akane was expecting the effect, and latched onto Sailor Mercury with her off hand. Both went flying, but Akane had used the blast to move them in the right direction.

"Move, damn it! We can't rescue them if we're dead!"

Sailor Mercury struggled to her feet, then the pair raced for the portal. As soon as they entered, Mercury shut it down. Back on Earth, Sailor Mercury looked around. Soldiers, medics and wounded were everywhere. Not too far away came the sounds of heavy fighting. Relieved of the danger of the Senshi, the youma were making much better time advancing than any of the Senshi would have credited them for. "Everybody! Start to evacuate this area. I need army personnel to guard the portal and everything around it. Watch your targets, but don't let any youma in the area. Everyone else, move out!"

Looking back at Akane, she wondered if she should have the girl evacuated from the area too. One look in her eyes was enough to convince Sailor Mercury that nothing short of physical violence would move her, and Sailor Mercury was not sure that there was anyone strong enough to be able to move her when she refused.

"Hurry up, Sailor Mercury! Get this portal open. We're going back and Ranma needs my help. If you think I'm going to leave that pervert in a world with eight pretty soldiers in short skirts for company, you have another thing coming."

The nine Senshi and one well dressed man charged into battle and struck a wall of youma. All baring Sailor Sun had been preparing for this battle for two months, and moved into a carefully prepared attack. Only one Senshi truly possessed the power and capability of destroying Jadeite, and that was Sailor Moon. She was the mighty Moon Princess, and she was the focus of all the other Senshi.

The Outer Senshi had formed a brute squad and were methodically ganging up against individual youma, seeking to thin the numbers that were attacking them. At the best speed possible, Sailor Moon was leading an assault straight through the enemy line. She was diving directly for Jadeite; all else was secondary to being able to stop him. Meanwhile, the Inner Senshi and Tuxedo Kamen were running interference for her. They kept attacking any of the youma, which moved to block her path. When it came time for her to challenge Jadeite, they would ensure that the two of them had some time alone, and they would be there to provide their energy to Sailor Moon if she faltered.

Sailor Sun had been left out from their planning, so she was leaping and blasting anything she could. Given the incredible power of her plasma blasts, Sailor Sun had taken to jumping to roof height and throwing a fireball into the rear ranks of the youma. Whenever she spotted one that was wounded and trying to recover, she sent it onwards to the next world with a fiery farewell.

On one side of the vast room, Sailor Saturn and Sailor Pluto had teamed up and were trying to ruin the day for some ugly beasts, which seemed to be taken from an entomologist's worst nightmare. The youma bugs they were fighting were insectile and almost ten feet tall. Sailor Pluto was working the front of the crowd, flowing between one demon and the next, her arms and legs striking everything in reach. Although the demons were taking their toll on her, she was keeping them away from Sailor Saturn.

Several times in the course of a few minutes Pluto would be fighting, dodging under a claw, or avoiding a set of mandibles and she would hear Sailor Saturn yell 'Clear!'. A few moments later, Sailor Saturn would charge her Silence Glaive and level it at a line of youma. In one crushing blow, a line of demons would explode into pieces, gore and mess raining down on their mates as they filled the temporary gap.

Beside them, Sailors Uranus and Neptune were double teaming individual youma. As one would run up to them, Sailor Neptune would cast her Deep Submerge, hitting them with the assistance of Uranus' Space Sword Blaster. While they recovered from the discharge of the magic, they would wade into the battle and attempt to kill the grievously injured youma with their fists. It was a dangerous and messy business. It did not take too long before both of the girls were sporting nasty injuries. Outnumbered as they were, both Sailors often took hits in their quest to get a clean kill. None of their injuries were life threatening yet, and they both believed that it was worth the sacrifice if they could destroy some of the youma that would surely be trying to kill their Princess.

Sailor Moon had knocked aside another furry beast and ran past it, getting closer to Jadeite, where he hovered at the rear, directing his forces and calling for reinforcements. Catching sight of him, Sailor Moon stopped to throw a brief bolt of magic at him, but one of the youma jumped in its path, sacrificing itself to save its master. While Sailor Moon ran on, Mars and Jupiter took the time out to burn and electrify the creature until it died.

Sailor Venus was keeping up with Moon, running faster when she could, but spending more time attacking. Just ahead of her she saw Sailor Moon break past the last of the youma and brace herself in combat against Jadeite. A large youma made of crystal was about to grab her from behind when Venus spotted it. **"VENUS LOVE ME CHAIN!"**

Binding the youma, she pointed it out to her friends and the three girls delivered a combined attack that reduced it to shards on the floor, which began to smoke and vanish. Before Sailor Venus could move, she was thrown to the ground by a huge burning explosion. Rolling onto her back, she sat up and glared at Sailor Sun. "Damn it, Sun! Watch where you're shooting that stuff!"

The words were barely out of her mouth when a medium rare blob of youma landed on her face, knocking her to the floor. Sitting up, she realized that there was a blasted corpse next to her. If that had been alive for another five seconds, it would have clawed her spine out while she was watching over Moon. This time she tried to thank Sun, but she had already moved on, hurrying to guard the diminutive Sailor Saturn now that Pluto had been temporarily brought low by the heavy combat.

Gathering her powers, Moon called forth her energy and hurled it at Jadeite, once a General of the forces of the Dark Kingdom; now a leader of the mightiest army of youma in thousands of years. While lights flashed around her, Sailor Moon cupped her hands and summoned the sacred Silver Crystal from within herself and called forth her attack. **"MOON PRINCESS HALATION!"**

The line of silver magic launched out and was struck by Jadeite's counter blast. Magic fought magic, and the room was bathed in intense flaring energy. As she threw more and more power into the attack, Moon could feel herself weakening. Back on Earth, she would have been able to sustain the power for much longer, able to call forth from the well of life energy, which existed there. Here, it was Jadeite, which held the cards the Senshi usually had. He was the one on his home turf. He was the one with the regenerating power supply, thanks to his largely intact harvesting operations. He was the one that could feel victory coming to him.

"Wah! Sailor Senshi, help me!" Suddenly Sailor Moon could feel Tuxedo Kamen's hand on her shoulder and he fed his power into her. Drinking it up like a refugee in a desert, Sailor Moon brought out what she could, and fed it into her attack. Moments after his efforts, she felt the streams of power as three girls near her called 'Venus Star Power!' 'Mars Star Power!' and 'Jupiter Star Power!'

Jadeite took a step backwards as the power intensified. His shield was holding, but his attack was making no progress against Moon. Around him, the backlash from the massive quantities of magic was destroying any youma that attempted to attack Sailor Moon. He had commanded the few remaining to attack the Outer Senshi and prevent them from joining, but Sailor Sun was doing all in her power to protect them. After twenty seconds of intense magic pounding, Jadeite had to drop his attack completely. The Outer Senshi had offered Moon their power, and she was using it too.

Keeping his magical protection this strong was requiring an almost ridiculous level of energy. Even as he was forced to retreat another step by the arrival of Sailor Mercury, he knew he had won. The Senshi would be almost exhausted. If he could resist for just another minute or two, victory would be his. Senshi without their magic would be so much food for his army, and his army was running to this room, even as they fought.

Sailor Sun looked at Akane as the two of them fought to keep the three remaining youma from attacking the vulnerable Senshi. The pair of them kicked and struck, blasting youma with their ki or magic, and tried to keep them at bay. Fearing the worst from the dazzling, stalemated battle, Sailor Sun jumped up and backwards. Trust was the key. "Akane, guard us! You can do it!"

Akane spared a glance as her fiancé joined the ring of human statues around Sailor Moon, offering her power to the battle. Not wasting any time on distractions, Akane returned to fighting. She was fast and strong, but it was nothing compared to the youma. She was tired and her ki attacks - the only thing really effective against the youma - reflected it. Jumping around the three injured youma, she kept them busy and off balance. Constantly attacking was the only way to distract them from her vulnerable friends, and that meant she needed to get within striking distance. Akane was soon black and blue all over, and close to collapse. Human-youma combat was never designed to be fair, even for the strongest of humans, and Akane was out numbered three to one. A prolonged fight could have only one outcome.

All the Senshi could feel it when Sailor Sun entered. It was a burst of life, a feeling of strength, of freshness. Everyone was tired, but for the last half-hour Sailor Sun had been the only one capable of recharging her powers. All of the Senshi had been throwing magic around at the youma, and now they had been draining themselves against Jadeite.

The magic of a Senshi is like the water in a bathtub: each time she launched an attack; it was like throwing a bucket of water at the target. Normally the bathtub would have been refilling all the time, but here in Jadeite's universe, the bathtub only emptied. Sailor Sun on the other hand reflected the magnitude of her power source, the sun: where the other Senshi had a bathtub of power, she had a swimming pool. Sailor Sun could normally only throw buckets of water like the other Senshi, but her Solar flare attack let her drain the pool in one big attack.

Joined into the network of Senshi under Sailor Moon, Sailor Sun did just that; she emptied everyone's reserves. In one massive hit, Sailor Sun released all of the power that each of the Senshi had left. Passing it all to Sailor Moon, she prayed that she would not kill the girl.

Moon felt a slight increase in power when Sun arrived and hoped it would be sufficient. Then a flood of energy almost knocked her off her feet. She had never felt so much power before, and she could feel it beginning to burn her up. Her hair crackled and stood on end as static electricity burst around her. Lifting off the ground, Moon began to glow with a blinding white light. All over, she could feel her body begin to heat; she was burning up, despite the amount of energy she was throwing out of her staff. Throwing her head back and screaming in agony, Moon gave herself to the pain. Even as she lost consciousness, she finally broke her inner barriers and unleashed the power flooding into her.

It took under a second from when Jadeite first saw Sailor Moon begin to glow and float to when she finally released the attack. When her final attack struck, Jadeite did not even have time to wince. Sailor Moon's pencil thin beam of magic flared for a second into a column over a foot thick. A second was all that was needed: With a blast like a bomb, Jadeite's shield was shattered, and he developed a foot wide hole in his torso. Having blasted through his belly, the beam also went through over two meters of the magic resistant metals that his city was built from. Jadeite only stood there, dreams shattered, and then he slid to the ground.

The Senshi hardly had time to gasp before they fell to their knees. Sailors Moon, Saturn, and Sun were unconscious, unable to take the stress of so much power. The others... the others were completely drained, denied all their Sailor powers from lack of magical power.

Sailor Mars was the first to recover. She saw Akane still battling three youma, and it looked like she was losing. Most of the Senshi were kneeling or lying on the ground like her. On one side of the room, she could see Mercury's portal, and directly ahead she could see a devastated and most definitely dead Jadeite, and a completely burnt, smoking Sailor Moon. "Noooo!"

Mars grabbed the smaller girl in her arms and held her gently. Moon was breathing, but it was weak and shallow. Her skin was covered in burns, and her Sailor Suit was almost completely destroyed. "Neptune! Uranus! Get those two! AKANE, WE ARE LEAVING!"

She barely heard Akane's response as she ran for the portal, her precious burden cradled in her arms. Sailor Mars could not count the number of times she had teased the leader of the Sailor Senshi. She regretted every one, because once again, Sailor Moon had shown that when she was really needed, she had the courage to do what no one else could do. She did not even notice as the distraught Tuxedo Kamen kept pace with her and panicked for his love.

When Akane had seen all of the Senshi other than Sailor Mercury go through the portal, she tried to follow. The youma she was fighting did not like that idea, and it took an inhuman effort to avoid them and get closer. As she dived through, she saw the beginning of the youma reinforcements arrive. Sailor Mercury was right on her heels, and as soon as she entered, the portal closed, sealing the link between the worlds.

Throughout Tokyo, the instant that they felt their lord and master die, most of the youma fled. Vanishing into drains, or slipping into other dimensions, over ninety percent of the youma disappeared. Around the city, soldiers began to push the invaders back.

Over the next three days, the Sailor Senshi cleaned up the last of the active youma. Then they returned to Jadeite's world.

This time, they rescued all of the captives.

Nodoka Saotome heard a knock on her door. As with every other time she heard a knock, she hoped after all this time, Genma and Ranma had returned. Trying not to get her hopes up, she opened the door and looked out in surprise. Lined up outside the house were ten young girls wearing very short skirts. Even though she was from Nerima, she recognized the Senshi, after their publicity for the last few months, who would not?

The girl in the center, with long blonde hair held up in two very long ponytails; stepped forward. Her tiny blue skirt fluttered in the light spring breeze, and her voice rang with authority. "Nodoka Saotome, I am the beautiful sailor suited soldier, Sailor Moon, and these are the Sailor Senshi. We are the defenders of love and justice, and we have come to you to repay a debt that we owe your son.

"Through various ways, we have come to know Ranma Saotome and know of his promise to you: that he will commit seppuku if he is not a man.

"I am Sailor Moon, and I say that there is no man that has done more to fight for love and justice than your son. I am proud to count him as my friend."

The girl in the pale blue skirt, with the big blue bow on her chest stepped up next to her leader. "I am Sailor Mercury. I have known Ranma, and I testify to his knowledge and wisdom. He has the wisdom of a man, and the humility to know when to ask for help and advice. I am proud to count him as my friend."

On Moon's other side, the girl in orange moved up. "I am Sailor Venus. While I have known your son, he has risked his life countless times to save the fiancée he loves. I am proud to count him as my friend."

"I am Sailor Mars. Ranma has shown himself to be a warrior beyond compare. Ranma is an ally of mine I would trust, and I would welcome in any battle. No finer man exists."

"I am Sailor Jupiter. For a long time, I was proud to call myself a Martial Artist of the highest caliber. Ranma Saotome has shown me what that really is, and I am honored to be able to call him my sensei, and a Master of the Art."

"I am Sailor Saturn. Not only can Ranma fight, he is also a man that can help and heal. While I have known him, he has helped, saved and rescued many people. I cannot count the people which own him their life, and I am counted within that number."

"I am Sailor Neptune. I am a skilled musician and teach others this art. Ranma has dedicated his life to an Art, and his devotion and skill are worthy of anyone's admiration. I am proud to count him as my friend."

"I am Sailor Uranus. Because of my lifestyle and appearance, I have sometimes been mistaken for a man. No matter what his appearance, Ranma Saotome is a man in all aspects, and comports himself as such. I am proud to count him as my friend."

"I am Sailor Pluto, the Guardian of Time. Without your son's help, Jadeite would have succeeded in his conquest of the Earth, and the time stream would have been irreparably damaged. We all owe him our thanks."

The girl at the end of the line stepped forward and walked up adjacent to, and just slightly in front of Sailor Moon. As she walked, She glowed brightly, eventually revealing a girl in Chinese clothing when her Sailor Suit vanished. "I am Sailor Sun..."

Nodoka gasped, “Ranko?”

Sailor Neptune provided a small quantity of hot water. "I am also your son."

For a long moment Nodoka just stood there in silence. "My son is a girl? You’ve been lying to me all this time? You are one of the Sailor Senshi? Not only that, but you are Sailor Sun? The Senshi that ran as soon as the war began, only to return when the Senshi were victorious without you! Coward!"

Nodoka spat at his feet. Ranma began to stumble out a reply. "No... No... It’s not like that..."

"Silence! You're a disgrace to your family and your name! For that alone you should be willing to die."

Ranma hung his head. Before he turned and walked off, he spoke his last words. "I have found something more important than honor: love. If I were to die, Akane would surely die too. My honor is worth more to me than life itself, but nothing is worth more than Akane. We will be married in one month. If you ever wish to see me again, you may attend. Don't ask me to choose between Akane and my honor. You won't like the answer."

With that, he was gone. Nodoka started after him, still fuming, only to be body checked by the smaller Sailor Mars. Sailor Mars looked like she was ready to do justice to the god, which her planet was named after. Mars was the god of war, and though she had spent the last two weeks fighting, she was ready for another one. "Mrs. Saotome, you insult your son, and you insult all the Sailor Senshi. You spoke in ignorance and your words would be enough for most people to call for a blood feud."

"Your son is honored to be a Senshi, and we a privileged to have him. While the Senshi fought in Tokyo, Ranma went to the demon's own dimension. There he battled their entire army to save his fiancée and the Earth. Every day he showed more courage, and honor than you will ever know!"

"You have insulted him, you have insulted me, and you have insulted us. Your behavior is an abomination, and a disgrace upon your family. Pray that our paths never cross again."

With that, Sailor Mars turned on her heel and strode off. In silence, Sailor Moon and the other Senshi turned and left her. Not one of them spared her a word or a second glance.

Nodoka fell to her knees and cried.

Akane met Ranma a few blocks from his mother's home. She could tell by his face that things had not gone well. They held each other for a few moments before he stepped back. "One last thing to do before we go home. I'm going to explain things to Ucchan. I figure it will take me a while to explain why I have to end my engagement to her. Do you want to go see Shampoo and, err... explain... things to her?"

Akane grinned. After Ranma's training, she was reasonably confident of being able to beat the Amazon. "Are you sure you don't want to come and watch over me? Shampoo's pretty good, you know."

Ranma laughed and headed off. "Feh! If she manages to hurt you seriously, I'm going back to Jadeite's dimension to look for the real Akane."

Puzzling on that, Akane walked to the Cat Cafe. Fighting the Amazon was something that really scared her. Akane actually wished that Ranma were there to back her up. Shampoo, Mousse and Cologne were all there serving customers when she walked in. When they saw her, Shampoo burst out laughing. "Ha Ha ha! Violent tomboy girl go all way! She cut off hair and become boy! Violent tomboy give up on Shampoo husband?"

Akane snarled. "I don't have to take that anymore. Come on out her and face me. I challenge you for Ranma's hand. The winner will be his wife."

Cologne raised an eyebrow in contemplation. Something had happened to the young Tendo and it didn't bode well. Akane would never have challenged Shampoo, ever. "Great-Granddaughter, do not underestimate her."

Shampoo just laughed and grabbed her bonbori. With Cologne and Mousse watching... not to mention all the customers, she would finally have the fight she wanted. With husband away, he would not be able to stop her from finally removing the obstacle to their marriage. Grinning she spun her bonbori, and then leapt into the attack expecting an easy win.

Akane watched as Shampoo thrust at her time and again with her balls on sticks. Hopping, she wondered why Shampoo was playing with her. "Come on, Shampoo! Fight seriously! Don't just play with me!"

Shampoo snarled. *Tomboy thought she was playing?* "Try this, great grandmother teach Shampoo. **KACHUU TENSHIN AMAGURIKEN**!"

In a blur, hundreds of strikes with her bonbori struck at Akane. Akane stood there and blocked them all, her own Chestnut Fist fast enough to stop each and every one them. By the time Shampoo stopped, Akane was actually starting to breath hard, with a slight sweat starting to rise. Watching the way that Shampoo's chest was heaving as she gulped in air,

Akane decided to end the fight quickly. Before Shampoo could move them, Akane struck out at the weapons. **"BAKUSAI TENKETSU!"**

In the blink of eye, Shampoo was holding two short pieces of wood. "Do you yield?"

"Shampoo never yield!" Throwing the garbage to the ground, Shampoo continued to attack. Dodging around her attacks, Akane finally threw her own punch. Immediately Shampoo was knocked clear across the street, moaning and holding her stomach. Akane watched as she slowly struggled to regain her feet. "Shampoo never let Akane have husband!"

Placing her hands together in front of her, Akane summoned a ball of blue ki. **"THUNDER HAMMER STRIKE!"**

A burnt and unconscious Shampoo slumped to the ground. Mousse immediately ran to her aid, and Cologne looked at Akane in amazement. Akane looked back with clear determination. "Shampoo lost the challenge, Cologne. Ranma is mine. You stay away from him!"

No one said anything as Akane walked off. Four months ago, Shampoo would have wiped the floor with her. Now she could not even land a blow. Akane had known for months that she had Ranma's love. Now she finally realized that by refusing to watch over her fight with Shampoo, she had the only thing he had ever really denied her.

Respect.

End of story