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**Relatively Absent**

**by Togashi Gaijin**

**Prologue: Battle on Mount Horai**

**Somewhere in southwestern Shikoku - Saturday, February 26th 1994**

The four kunoichi ran as fast as they could through the thick woods. The battle between Ryōga, Mu Se, and the two Musk bodyguards had lasted well into the night, and all of the watchers were still quite tired when the chase suddenly resumed early in the morning. Midori barely managed to halt her group's mad

dash before they ran out into the open behind Ranma and the other now-permanently cursed martial artists riding on the black-haired girl's shoulders. She silently signaled Harukichi, the fastest, to continue circling to the other side of the clearing. Midori flinched as Ranma narrowly dodged a huge boulder thrown by Lime, the brutish Musk warrior, and then winced in sympathy when she was partially buried under the aftermath of the boulder's impact. Midori quickly checked the power levels of the extra battery packs they all carried; the tiny Betacam currently being wielded by Kioko was a wonder of engineering, but it had a nasty habit of running out of either power or videotape at the most inappropriate times. She sent Tsuya up into the trees with the SLR camera and its awkward telephoto lens. Satisfied with the preparations, she turned her attention back to the confrontation rapidly escalating in front of her.

The accidental destruction of the hilltop containing the Kaisufuu forced Midori to quickly change her team's assignments. Taking the Betacam from Kioko, she sent the chestnut-haired

kunoichi to observe the part of the extended conflict involving the Musk bodyguards. She quickly hand-signaled new instructions to Harukichi, trusting in the diminutive ninja's ability to apparently be everywhere at once, before turning her own attention back to the main conflict.

Midori silently cheered when Ranma unleashed her tornado attack on the Musk warlord, though her elation didn't last long. She'd barely had time to swap out videocassettes before Herb returned from his brief aerial trip to pummel Ranma with ki blast after ki blast. The kunoichi recorded every frantic minute as the battle quickly reached a dramatic conclusion.

"HA HA HA HA HA!!! Ranma's been destroyed by my own Hiryū Shōten Ha!" Herb yelled out in victory. He looked up in glee at the energy vortex, and then frowned as he saw the released ki coalesce into a huge ball high up at the center of the whirlwind. Quickly gathering what little ki reserves he had remaining, he released it all at the huge ball of ki that was starting to descend towards him.

"Hitō Ryū-zan Ha!"

High up in the vortex, Ranma was about to call out the name of her own attack when the multiple ki-knives disrupted her Hiryū Kōrin Dan. The resulting explosion could be seen for miles. The immediate collapse of the surrounding mountainside was detected by seismographs up to seven hundred miles away.

## Nerima

Akane stood next to the gates of the house and gazed out into the cold February skies. It had been weeks since anyone had heard from Ranma and the lengthy silence was starting to take its toll on the young girl.

"*Soon. He'll come home ...*" she thought. Ranma had always managed to overcome every obstacle in the past; this couldn't be any different. So why was the cold chill of the air seeping into her heart? "*Ranma ...*"

Akane stood outside for over an hour; her mood matching the dark storm clouds overhead. Losing track of time completely, she almost jumped out of her skin when she heard Kasumi's voice behind her.

"Akane, please come inside before you get a chill. I'm sure that Ranma is fine and will return soon."

She turned to look. "Yeah ..." she responded without enthusiasm. She could see from her older sister's expression that Kasumi was just as concerned over Ranma's absence as she was. Kasumi took Akane's shoulder in a sisterly hug and walked her back into the house. "It is very cold; why not warm up in a hot bath?"

Akane let her sister guide her to the furo, taking a fresh robe and towels from the outer bathroom. After she heard the door slide close, she simply stood there, rooted to the spot. "*Maybe ... something has happened ...*"

The furo's water was hot but its warmth didn't seem to reach the ache in her heart. **Chapter 1: The Replacement**

## Elsewhere – Saturday, February 26th 1994

The artifact was immensely powerful, incredibly ancient, and ... lonely. In addition, it was without its usual guardian and protector for the first time in several millennia. There was an extremely limited number of ways for this unlikely state of affairs to come about. In this instance the former guardian had disincorporated herself while drawing on the artifact's ultimate power; doing so had broken the bonds of power between herself and the artifact. The guardian had done this before, but this was the first time she had done so without the support of another who could re-forged the bonds in time to restore her to her position. The artifact was not altogether displeased with its current situation. The now-former guardian had stopped communicating directly with it a millennium ago when she succumbed to the temptation of the powers that the artifact bestowed. This had disturbed the artifact greatly at the time and had left it bereft of the warmth and companionship that the bonding had originally brought, but there had been very little the artifact could do about the situation until now. The strict rules governing the roles and powers of the artifact and its guardian companion were woven into the very fabric of the artifact's existence. Now, however, the artifact was free to select a new guardian of its own choice. Simply leaving itself without a guardian was unthinkable, so the artifact carefully extended its sensory matrix out to the former guardian's homeworld. It did so as stealthily as possible, preferring to make its own selection of a guardian for once instead of having the choice forced upon it as in previous times. While there were an extremely large number of entities to choose from on the former guardian's world, the artifact was not at all surprised when it rapidly discovered only one potential candidate. All of the world's other entities had failed to meet the standards used to gauge a candidate's suitability. Detecting signs of severe physical stress about the solitary candidate remaining, the artifact shifted its temporal awareness to match that of the entity while relocating its sensory focus to investigate further ...

## Mount Horai

Pain.

Her entire universe was filled with pain; an agony worse than she had ever felt, even with all the years of her father's training. She struggled to push her will past the pain, knowing that the battle wasn't over, wasn't finished, but her body refused to follow her commands. Beyond the haze of pain she vaguely detected the roar and tearing of the environment around her; the violent tossing of her small frame amidst the rocks and debris of the collapsing mountainside. She started losing feeling as a frigid numbness slowly crept up her body, replacing part of the pain with a vast and unpleasant nothingness. A faint internal alarm started yammering about massive shock, blood loss, and severe internal damage. This was **not** good. Ranma strained to open her eyes. Her tortured body resisted her every thought, every impulse, but she would **not** black out yet. She fought off the waves of darkness as they crashed repeatedly against her will, knowing instinctively that if she were to succumb to the oblivion she would never emerge from it. She managed to force one eye open and then spent an eternity wrapping her thoughts past the ever-present pain to make sense of the bleary images confronting her. All she could see was darkness. Every shallow breath was torture, indicating numerous broken ribs at best. She felt like her innards were slowly pouring out of her torso, and what little strength she had left was following with it. She tried directing her ki to force her body to heal itself, but no power responded to her feeble commands. What she felt instead was a brief and extremely disconcerting disorientation.

"You are dying, Little One," an alien voice seemed to whisper in her ear. Great. Now Ranma **knew** she was in shock; she was starting to hear voices. "You are not imagining things, Ranma Saotome. However, it is an understandable misconception given the severity of your current situation." "Tell ... m'somethin' ... I dun'no ..." she mumbled brokenly, agony spiking inside with each laborious breath.

"Very well. You do have a choice other than passing to the next plane of existence." So to add delirium to the shock, she holding a conversation with a figment of her imagination. "... ain't ... gunna'die ... yet ..."

"Not for another seventeen of your minutes, no. However, the likelihood of you surviving on your own past that duration is miniscule at best. You have expended virtually your entire life force in the recently concluded conflict with the dragon child Herb. This has left you without the power reserves you normally

employ when healing yourself of injuries.” Ranma tried to deny the truth in those whispered words, but even she knew better. She was dying; her strength was nearly spent and there was no remaining well of power to draw from. Her body had gone past cold into total shock; she had virtually no physical feeling left anywhere.

Only her absolute refusal to surrender or admit defeat had kept her alive and coherent for this long.

“... wond’r’d ... why ... couldn’t ... use ... ki ...” ...

“... choice? ...”

“Yes, a choice. I have need of... a Warrior ... a Guardian if you will. The position is permanent and long-term, and will provide both difficult challenges and potentially vast rewards. The tasks involved follow your basic martial artist’s credo quite nicely; defending and protecting those less powerful than yourself. I would also hope that we could eventually become ... friends.” “... how ...”

“I am capable of supplying you with more than enough of the life energy required for you to survive your current situation. However, my actions and abilities are quite constrained at the moment. My Guardian is the only one permitted to actively draw from my powers, so any attempt to transfer energy between us will result in the formation of a permanent bond. I cannot force such a bond onto you, nor can I force you to agree to accept this, Little One; the responsibilities and duties of being my Guardian are too critical to be imposed upon an unwilling being. The choice is entirely yours to make.” “... some ... choice ...”

“Little One, what you know of as death is not always something to be automatically rejected. Your admittedly brief existence has been filled with unending hardship for one of your kind; passing on to the next plane of existence would, at the very least, relieve you of many of these burdens. However, accepting my offer would give you both the time and capacity to at least attempt to resolve the manifold obligations you have placed upon yourself here in this plane, provided that any actions taken do not conflict with the duties of Guardianship. This may require you to make painful decisions, to be sure, but it is my opinion that you would not be able to resolve many of these conflicting obligations on your own without making numerous difficult and painful decisions anyway. Again, the choice is yours.” A part of Ranma, a large part in all truth, wanted to embrace the darkness. It would be so EASY to finally stop fighting, to let everything go and discard the troubles that had weighed so heavily on her life. Seductively, oblivion beckoned, promising the cessation of all pain and heartache. Why did she keep fighting when all that was returned was simply more pain and rejection? Why did she insist on repeatedly throwing herself against the consistently cruel hands of her own personal fate? Why did she always have to fight everything and everybody all the time? Because.

Whoever, or **whatever** it was that was making this offer was wrong in one very basic regard; for Ranma it wasn’t really a choice.

Not a choice at all.

It took several excruciating minutes for Ranma to gather the wherewithal to respond. “k.”

The artifact was ... relieved. It had become concerned about the amount of time required to convey its offer to the young girl, and had even begun to anticipate that she would pass on to the next plane of existence before being able to formulate a response. All in all a highly ironic situation, given the powers the artifact was capable of commanding. Unfortunately, exerting control over those powers required the proper external stimulus; using and restricting access to this power was the primary purpose of the Guardian’s position as companion and protector. Even though the artifact could not command its primary function on its own volition, and given that assuming the full powers of Guardianship required the candidate be in actual physical contact with it, now that consent had been obtained the artifact could begin to forge a bond of power between itself and its new companion. This would have to be done with extreme caution, for the girl’s present hold on her own spirit was tenuous to say the least. If the artifact’s normal power flows were to be applied, the shock to her physical system would be too great and she

would instantly devolve into total discorporation. The artifact extended a tiny filament of power and began attuning it to Ranma's life force. What it discovered in this attempt was unsettling; there were several externally applied fields of force already in place around the youngster, one a stasis field of considerable power. This must be the "lock" on her "curse" that the artifact had taken notice of when it had briefly scanned Ranma's memories at the beginning of the discussion. Tuning the energy filament to account for these external fields would require more power to be initially applied than the artifact had intended. More troubling still, the magic field known to the girl as her curse had already partially bonded with her spiritual matrix, making its eventual removal all but impossible to accomplish without potentially disastrous consequences. This evidently recent development would be extremely difficult for Ranma to accept, based on the contents of the earlier memory scan. There was also another strange echo of foreign contamination in Ranma's spiritual matrix that would have to be investigated in some depth at a later time. Increasing the size of the energy filament slightly, the artifact carefully modulated its envelope frequencies to conform to all of the known internal and external fields before actually attaching the band to Ranma's life force. The bond of power restored Ranma's ki reserves almost instantly, and the artifact was pleasantly surprised to discover a pre-existing supervisory matrix that automatically issued the internal commands necessary for the healing of the girl's numerous injuries. The efficiency of the supervisory matrix could be improved significantly, but doing so should not be done while the girl continued to exert active control over her internal abilities.

Ranma's slender hold on consciousness was nearly shattered when she felt an immense surge of ki filling her being. Her senses reeled with the sudden and dramatic increase in power, and it took far too long for her to restore the mental equilibrium necessary to command her body to heal.

"Relax, Little One. The immediate crisis is over, and I am eminently capable of performing the trivial effort required to effect the immediate and critical repairs of your system. You still have a significant task in front of you; that of extricating yourself from the large quantity of rubble and debris which is currently imprisoning you. This cannot be accomplished until your body has healed to the point where it can once again withstand the large stresses and strains that shifting such mass entails. You will heal much faster if you can release the hold on your consciousness and rest. To assist you in recouping your mental reserves, I have put in place a temporary block on the physical pain you are now experiencing." Ranma fuzzily noted that both the pain and the shock-induced numbness were conspicuous by their absence. Feeling the warmth of the internal power now filling her and the soothing tone of the whispered voice, she finally allowed herself to relax. She lost consciousness instantly.

Mu Se was ecstatic as he continued the long trip back to Tokyo. He had succeeded where all others had failed, and in so doing removed the biggest ... no make that the **only** obstacle that had stood in his way to his beloved Xian Pu's heart. Ranma Saotome, the Great Ranma, MISTER Ego himself, was **finally** dead and buried. With his own eyes Mu Se had seen Herb of the Musk destroy Ranma by blowing him into tiny fragments; the subsequent collapse of the entire mountain was a fitting monument to the magnitude of the victory over his unworthy rival. Visions of a grateful and loving Xian Pu filled Mu Se's brain. He yelled loudly out to the trees and the stars in his joy.

"QUAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAACK!!!!!!"

Midori sighed as she watched the Chinese boy-turned-duck fly off into the evening sky. The dramatic battle she had just recorded could have been mistaken for a scene from a bad Hong Kong martial arts movie, but the kunoichi knew from experience that the strangeness which constantly followed Ranma around was all too real. She was glad now that she had been forced by the terrain to observe the affair from a reasonably safe distance. Avoiding the wild antagonistic animals in the area had been a trivial enough task, but she doubted that any of her team could have survived if they had gotten swept up by the massive landslide that had signaled the end of the battle. Not even Harukichi would have been fast enough to avoid being buried by **that**.

Unfortunately, it appeared as if Ranma's unusual luck had finally run out. Midori had found it extremely difficult to record the battle. Seeing the small black-haired neo-girl being blown out of the sky by the Chinese prince's energy attack was bad enough, but having to watch as her body was swept away, crushed, and buried under the massive landslide was almost more than the kunoichi could stand. They had all gotten quite attached to the boy-girl over the last year after the clan had tracked him and his sorry excuse of a father down, but the instructions given to her team had been extremely explicit; they were to observe and report ONLY, and not to interfere under any circumstances.

Well, there was no longer any danger in interfering now. Midori nodded her thanks to Harukichi when the tiny ninja returned carrying Ranma's pack and a flask of water. The other two members of the team appeared shortly afterwards; none of the kunoichi were able to conceal the somber expression in all of their faces.

Midori gathered the film and cassettes from the other team members before recording their final observations.

"Kioko?"

"Both Hibiki and Mu Se managed to unlock their curses during their conflict with the two Musk bodyguards. Hibiki attempted to retrieve the kettle when it fell into the crevasse. He did not emerge."

"Tsuya?"

"I'm fairly sure that the Musk warlord and his bodyguards perished in the collapse of the mountainside. I know I took at least one photo that shows Herb's body being crushed between two large boulders in the collapse. The next several shots in the roll will have to be analyzed in the lab in order to confirm this, of course." "Harukichi?"

"I recovered Ranma-kun's traveling pack. I also managed to obtain a sample of the kettle-water before the destruction of the original rock formation. I cannot begin to hazard a guess as to whether or not it will be effective in unlocking the curse once our cousin's body has been recovered."

Trust Harukichi to be the one to actually voice the thought shared by all. Obāsama was not going to be pleased with these latest events. Midori pulled out a small voice recorder and added a few personal observations before giving the microcassette, film, and videotapes to Harukichi for transport. She instructed the diminutive ninja to deliver the package to Obāsama in person; this was too important to leave to the sometimes-lengthy and erratic scheduling of the normal courier delivery system. She instructed the other two girls to begin looking for a campsite before collapsing wearily against a large boulder.

It was dark when Ranma next awoke. She was tired, she ached absolutely everywhere, and it felt like she was buried under a half ton of rocks. "That is a reasonably fair assessment of your current situation, Ranma." "Huh?!" Confused, Ranma tried to look around for the source of the voice. She was hampered considerably in this attempt by both the darkness and the large quantity of rocks and debris that had her almost completely buried. "Who's there?" "You are the only being present in your locality at the moment. I am ...a considerable distance from your current position."

Great. She was back to hearing voices again. Must of gotten busted up worse than she actually felt.

"I am quite real, Ranma Saotome. Your recollection of your recent injuries and our subsequent agreement are accurate." The voice had assumed a slightly testy edge to it with this statement. Ranma didn't know what was more disturbing: that she was hearing a voice out of nowhere, or that she could understand all of the voice's vocabulary. "If you aren't actually here, how come I can hear you talkin' just fine?" "We are communicating telepathically through the same link that was used to forge the partial bond that now exists between us. This occurred when I insured your continuation in this plane of existence."

Although Ranma could somehow understand all of the words she was hearing, it still took her a moment to grasp the meaning of her phantom companion's replies. "So, you're saying you just saved m'life, and



somehow you're talkin' directly in my mind?" Ranma blinked as she heard the phantom voice sigh. "A rather simplistic but fairly accurate summation, Ranma."

"Okay." Ranma really wasn't all that concerned over talking to a voice that came out of nowhere. After all, it wasn't as if she hadn't experienced stranger things. Just recently she'd had to deal with several ghosts and spirits, including rescuing Shampoo from a kidnapping ghost c-c- cat, dating a dying old man's astral projection, and helping the spirit of a school headmistress who wanted her panties stolen, of all things. All of these peculiar adventures had made her fairly blasé when it came to accepting the paranormal. "I would suggest that you turn your attention to the task of extricating yourself from your present predicament. While I am able to temporarily supply your body with energy as a substitute for

liquids and sustenance, I can do little to affect the state of the total air supply that is in your location."

"Yeah, that's prob'ly a good idea."

The complete lack of light indicated she was underground in a cavern or air pocket of some sort, a situation she was also familiar with. When Ranma was nine years old, his father had dug a deep pit, wedged a couple of boards over his head to give him a small air pocket, and the proceeded to bury him ten feet underground using a mix of large rocks, gravel, and dirt as fill over the hole. He'd had to learn how to create his own moving air pocket while tunneling his way straight up to escape. The procedure was repeated, going progressively deeper and deeper until he had learned how to escape from being buried under more than thirty feet of rock. It looked like that old avalanche training was going to be quite useful now.

She tried to move various parts of her body around to gauge how firmly she was trapped. Her legs and lower torso were wedged firm, as was her entire right side. She was able to move her left arm and shoulder around a bit, and after some considerable effort Ranma was able to free her entire left arm. The first thing she did on getting a free hand was to reach behind her head and gently work her pigtail loose. It HURT having her hair pulled every time she moved her head. Damn, it was dark. Ranma needed at least a rough idea of the airspace she was working in, so she'd just have to chance using some of her ki to illuminate the immediate area for a brief moment. She couldn't use much or she'd risk running out at a critical time later on. "Ranma, there is no need for you to conserve the use of your ki. The partial link between us is capable of supplying you with more life force than you can safely channel at the moment; there is no danger of you running out of ki for the duration of this task." Ranma's eyes widened at this comment. *Not run out of ki?* Man, **that** would certainly help; especially since her female form was not as strong as her normal one. She could use the Amaguriken full out once she started tunneling up. The thought that she was still stuck being a girl, possibly permanently, was quickly and very firmly suppressed. She'd just have to deal with that later, once she was no longer buried underground.

Ranma let out her battle aura, finding it ridiculously easy to do. She was also surprised to discover that her aura was no longer colored blue or red but rather glowed a soft even white; indicating that she was using pure ki. She wondered briefly if this link between her and whatever-it-was was responsible for the new change, then quickly forgot the thought when she got her first good look at her surroundings. She was in BIG trouble.

Ranma was buried in the side of a small, irregularly shaped cavern that was roughly twenty feet in diameter and less than four feet in height. The roof of the apparent air pocket appeared to be a flat spot on the bottom of one HUGE boulder. This was great, JUST great. She was going to have to guess which way to go in order to get out from under the mass of the boulder overhead. First, however, she needed to get herself loose from being embedded in the side wall of the cavern.

Carefully, she started to clear gravel and dirt from around her shoulders and upper torso with her one free arm. She was wedged at an angle in the side of the cavern wall, so she was going to have to clear enough rubble to allow her to get her other arm free. Her trapped right side was down, which made things a bit more challenging. Even more fun was that fact that her shirt had apparently not survived the

fight intact, which meant she couldn't use the sleeve fabric to help slip her trapped arm through the rubble. The firm pressure on both sides of her right elbow indicated that it was probably wedged between a couple of large rocks, and her arm was buried almost straight down underneath her, a good foot away from her torso. Peachy. An hour later, Ranma had managed to clear most of the dirt and rubble from around her upper body. She was also sore, scratched and bruised, dirty, and QUITE irritable; it seemed that every time she scraped some dirt or rocks from around her shoulders or breasts, a small and sudden stream of dirt let loose from directly overhead and hit her in the hair or eyes. Each time this happened she had to stop and feel around her to make sure the walls weren't about to collapse any further. She'd gotten her right arm uncovered to the elbow when she hit the first of many medium sized stones.

This is taking way too long.

"You are wise in taking care to avoid further shifting of the earth surrounding you, Ranma. The stability of the immediate landscape is not great." "Yeah, I kinda noticed that." She spent the next quarter hour trying to dig out the rocks from around her arm.

Ranma was getting really pissed at the rock partially pinning her right elbow; she couldn't seem to get any sort of grip on it or find a ridge she could use to pry it out with, and the other rocks next to it helped to keep it stuck in place. Time for a little brute force; she powered up her left arm and fist with ki and did a credible imitation of a jackhammer. "Hey, you got a name or somethin' I can call you?" - WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM - "I'm gonna look" - WHAM WHAM WHAM - "pretty stupid" - WHAM WHAM WHAM - "callin' out" -WHAM WHAM **CRACK!** - "'bout time! ... 'Hey You' every time we ... uhhr! ... need to talk." "Once you have fully assumed your position as Guardian, there will be no need for you to vocalize your thoughts in order to communicate with me. You are welcome to use any convenient designation that you choose when addressing me."

With the rock that was holding her elbow pulverized into gravel, Ranma now had a little leverage she could use. She cleared out the rubble and dug in around her forearm, rocking it back and forth to help loosen the dirt around it. She grunted again in pain as she finally managed to pull her right arm completely free. "Still, you gotta have **some** sorta name. What did your last guardian call you?" Ranma heard the voice sigh in sorrow. "Unfortunately, my last Guardian stopped communicating with me over a millennium ago. Ranma, I am not a 'he' or a 'she' as you know the terms; rather, I am an 'it', a 'thing'. I am an Artifact, a tool constructed so long ago that not even I have a recollection of my own creation. The term in your language that is the closest to describing what I am is 'Eien no Mon'." "Eternal Gate?" Ranma replied as she tried to rub some feeling back into her abused right wrist and hand. "Well, how 'bout I call you Eiko then?" "That is acceptable."

Ranma carefully studied the wall she was in. "Y'know, I **may** be able to just quickly pull myself out once I dig enough of this wall to clear my hips; somethin's gotta be proppin' things up under there, or I would'a been crushed pretty flat by now." With both hands now free, Ranma was able to clear the rocks and dirt from her waist down to her hips fairly quickly. She was still getting spattered with falling dirt on a regular basis, and her hands and arms were now so caked with moist dirt, gravel, and blood that any attempt to use them to wipe her face would leave more dirt behind than it cleaned off. She'd just have to cope in the meantime.

Ranma felt the sides of the small tunnel she'd cleared in the wall in the area next to her hips. Her body was starting to feel the strains of holding herself extended sideways with her embedded legs her only support. She was having trouble finding a place to push against that wouldn't simply crumble when force was applied, and she knew if she didn't extract herself on the first try it was very likely that the wall of the small tunnel she'd already cleared would collapse and bury her back into the wall.

Damn, she wasn't able to find any solid purchase to push against near her hips. This was both good and bad; good because it meant that the soil around her lower torso wasn't as densely packed as it could be and the likelihood of her pulling herself out successfully was fairly high, and bad because the chances of the wall crumbling once she began were also reasonably high. She felt the walls in the area around her

head and shoulders before coming to a decision. Just going to have to chance it. She pushed her ki into her hands and arms again and held both hands in a stiff knife edge. Cocking her elbows back as far as the cramped space would allow, she closed her eyes and jabbed both hands out into the sides of the tunnel wall near her shoulders like hammered pitons. Using the newly created handholds Ranma pulled as hard as she could.

For a long and agonizing moment, nothing happened. As Ranma pushed more ki into her arms and upper body, she felt a sudden shift in the earth next to her left knee. This was accompanied immediately by a small pop and a spray of dirt and debris as the strength of Ranma's pull ejected her forcibly from the wall into the main cavern chamber. She tumbled to an awkward stop as her numbed legs refused to work. "OW!" Ranma rolled onto her back and lay there, twitching and gasping, until her muscles recovered from the stress she'd just put them through. The painful but trivial pins and needles in her legs was proof that no serious damage had been done to her lower torso. The sharp feeling of rocks and extreme cold along her entire backside revealed that none of her clothing has survived her current ordeal. This was going to make the trip up rather painful. "The life of a martial artist is fraught with peril." Ranma chuckled softly as she repeated her pop's favorite mantra. It was about the only thing her father had taught her that had turned out to be consistently true throughout their adventures. Everything else seemed to depend upon the current state of the panda's stomach. Ranma sat up suddenly, narrowly avoiding clonking her head against the low ceiling of the small cavern. The tingling in her legs had subsided to the point where she could move them around without much pain, and the air in the small cavern was starting to get stale. It was definitely time to go.

"Hey, Eiko! Got any clue as to which is the best way up?" "I'm sorry, Ranma. Now that a link has been established between us, I am no longer able to scan the area independently on my own."

Ranma frowned at this unexpected development. "Why's that?" "It is just the manner in which our powers were designed, and one of many reasons why it is vitally important that I always have a companion Guardian. I hear what you hear, I see what you see, I feel and sense only what you do. Outside of knowing everything surrounding my immediate physical location, my ability to perform sensory scans is limited to what my Guardian is able to perceive."

Ranma tried to imagine what it would be like to live while never having control over what she saw and heard and felt; always being a passenger just along for the ride. "Man, that really sucks."

Ranma felt Eiko shrug. "It just is, Ranma. Do you bemoan your inability to see the sound of a cricket's chirp, or to feel the color purple? Neither do I. I am, however, probably more adept at

interpreting the data from your own senses than you are at the present moment. For example, if you were to extend your ki into the walls of the cavern around you, I should be able to rather quickly compute an optimal egress point and path for you to take." Once again Ranma found herself struggling to comprehend the meaning of statement just relayed. When she finally understood, she slapped her forehead in disgust as she realized that she was just sitting there doing nothing.

"Okay, one ki scan coming up. You're goin' to have to show me how you do this trick; all I get when I try an' scan the ground is a really heavy feelin'." Ranma smiled at her feeble joke as she crawled over to the wall opposite the point where she had been stuck. Reaching a hand out to touch the side of the cavern, she closed her eyes and pushed her ki into the earth itself, trying to feel a way through the rocks and rubble. "Please move about ten feet to your left and try again." "How's that?"

"Another ten feet to your left, Ranma." Ranma sighed as she was directed from point to point around the cavern until she had scanned the entire circumference. When she completed the circuit Eiko positioned him about twelve feet to the left of her original starting point. "Hey, it's pretty tight right here."

"Right here also happens to be the starting point of the most optimal path I can compute according to the data collected. Push your ki up into the top of the cavern wall at about a seventy-five degree angle, and I will point out the path that you will need to take." Ranma closed her eyes as she pushed her ki into the

earth. A mental picture began to form in her mind of the ground above, with a bright green path marking the proper tunnel to make; twisting and turning its way around various boulders on its way out. "This is the least convoluted path found that did not involve the certainty of collapse while you are creating the tunnel. You are approximately twenty-seven feet underground from this point. The path, however, is almost thirty-nine linear feet in length due to the number of obstructions that must be avoided." One of the rocks in the picture suddenly glowed red. "This rather large boulder appears to be in a keystone position. You must avoid undercutting it or allowing it to shift in any way, otherwise the entire side face of the hillside will collapse around you before you can finish extricating yourself. Most of the additional length of the pathway is due to the requirement of avoiding this event."

"Your ability to control and direct ki will be challenged by this task. In addition to augmenting your physical speed and strength, you will also have to shut down most of your respiratory system. This will conserve what little available oxygen there is in your moving tunnel and help

avoid ingesting large amounts of dirt and dust into your lungs. You will be required to project a portion of your ki into the walls ahead so that I can continue to assist in guiding you in your path. Finally, you will need some ki for the illumination required in your immediate locality." "Hey, is that all? Noooooooooo problem!" Ranma replied with a smirk, a portion of her natural cockiness resurfacing now that action was about to begin. She gathered up her ki, took a deep breath, and yelled out one of her favorite battle cries. "KACHŪ TENSHINAMAGURIKEN!"

Hands flying, she very quickly became too busy to think. **Chapter 2: All In The Family**

**Tokyo - Sunday, February 27th 1994**

Aiko Yamada stood quietly in the middle of her private garden. With a look of intense concentration, the diminutive clan matriarch inspected the miniature rose bushes that stood as the garden's featured centerpiece. The three hybrid MORrousel roses had been extremely difficult to obtain, and she had been husbanding them along now for the last year and a half. It appeared as if all of her efforts had finally paid off, as the plants were now showing signs of having taken root properly.

She carefully pruned each bush until it was shaped properly for the upcoming blooming season, then spent the next hour and a half arranging the center bed just so, making sure that every rock and plant was shaped and placed for maximum harmony. This was a task she both excelled at and took great enjoyment in; it was such a pleasant and relaxing contrast to the grindingly ever-present duties required to help keep the vast and diverse Yamada interests operating smoothly. Aiko had just started rearranging the first of the four side planting beds when she noticed her senior aide waiting patiently in the entranceway. "Seiko-chan, I'm assuming that something has come up that couldn't wait until I was finished, ne?" She cocked an eyebrow slightly at this unexpected interruption, since everyone in Aiko's personal staff knew better than to interrupt her during her "quiet time". "Many pardons, Okusama. Your grand-niece Harukichi just arrived from Ehime and is waiting for you in the Green Room."

Aiko's eyebrow arched even higher at this announcement. Something serious must have occurred; Midori would never have submitted a report in this manner otherwise. She nodded once in acknowledgement before turning to go find something more appropriate to wear. Greeting one of her grand-nieces while in gardening clothes was not appropriate, no matter how pressing the emergency might be.

Harukichi stood up and bowed respectfully as Aiko entered the room.  
"Obasama."

Aiko smiled as she held her arms out to the short fuku-clad schoolgirl. "Oh, don't be so formal, Haru-chan. Come and give your Auntie a nice big hug." The pleasure the Yamada matriarch gave in greeting was quite genuine. Not only was Harukichi a personal favorite amongst the clan's stray kittens, she was also one of the few girls that Aiko could look directly across at without having to crane her neck all the time. The familial greeting served another purpose as well; it allowed the elder woman to read her grand-niece's body language directly. Aiko smiled to herself when she evaluated how difficult this was

starting to become. Harukichi had made significant progress in being able to mask her inner feelings from all but the most discerning reader. Not that it impeded Aiko's own scan in the slightest at the moment, but given several more years of practice Harukichi would be all but unreadable. She definitely had a natural talent for camouflage. Aiko was not surprised at the tension that she felt in the younger girl's frame. The amount of unfocused rage was higher than normal, but considering the girl's initial upbringing a certain amount was to be expected. The thing that caught Aiko's immediate attention was the mix of sorrow, fear, concern, and yes even rage directed at *her*. She blanched as the import of this made itself known.

None of this exchange showed on the outside, of course. A kunoichi's primary training involved deception, disguises, espionage, and hidden weapons skills, and Aiko was the clan's Grandmistress. Smiling as she broke off the embrace, Aiko led her young charge back over to the table and began serving tea.

"I trust the train ride from the island was comfortable?" "Yes, Obasama. I always enjoy riding on the shinkansen." "How are the other girls? Have you all kept up on your schoolwork while you've been on vacation?"

"Hai. Midori is still struggling with her math, but I think that Kioko has finally gotten her to understand the basics of Analytical Geometry. Tsuya is the farthest behind, since she prefers to spend almost all of her time drawing instead of studying." "And yourself? Have you improved your spoken English like I asked you to?" Harukichi blushed. "I'm sorry, Obasama. I'm afraid that I still find English rather ... puzzling."

Their conversation continued, on the surface and simple and pleasant family gossip session between a young schoolgirl and her elderly relation. The real conversation was happening in parallel via the subtle and almost undetectable hand and body signs of the kunoichi.

[Your presence here was unexpected, Haru-chan.] [Yes, sensei.]

[I take it that some significant development has occurred in your current assignment.] [Yes, sensei. I regret to inform you that we are submitting our final report at this time.] ...

[I see.]

...

[Were you able to positively confirm his death?] [No, sensei. Her final battle resulted in the destruction of a large portion of a mountainside. Recovery of her body may not be possible.] Aiko frowned minutely when she read the difficult posture combination. Harukichi was better at body signing than the other girls, but the gender inflection appeared to be incorrect. ['Her'?]

[Yes. Ranma was unable to unlock her curse before she lost the fight.] Satisfied that her grand-niece had actually intended to use the feminine, Aiko gave permission for the girl to broach the formal request now being signed. [Sensei, I have a boon to ask of you once you have observed the tapes and film in the report.] [And that would be?]

[I respectfully request that you review the report in detail first.] [Very well. I sense a large amount of anger held within you, Haru-chan. Would you care to engage in a bout with Seiko to help you relax?] [Yes, please. That would be ... quite useful, provided we can fight full contact.]

[Full contact? That is not your normal style, Haru-chan. Are you sure about this?]

[YES.]

Aiko briefly glared at her student in disapproval. Harukichi had used enough force in the gesture that the sign would have been visible to anyone nearby. The young girl then compounded the error by flushing visibly.

[Your pardon, sensei. I am still quite perturbed over recent events.] [I gathered that.]

Given the circumstances, Aiko decided that she could make allowance for the slip. This time. [Don't worry, Haru-chan, I'm sure that Seiko will be more than happy in helping you in ... relieving ... your anxieties today. She's been complaining about the lack of decent training dummies ever since I sent you girls out on this assignment.] [I hope I will not disappoint her.]

...  
[Haru-chan, be careful. You cannot afford to become unfocused when battling an opponent, even if the fight is only a friendly spar between friends.] [Hai hai, I understand.]

...  
[See that you do. I will view your report while you are working out with Seiko. In the meantime, at least make an attempt to relax. Your face is too pretty and you are entirely too young to be carrying around a perpetual scowl.]  
[Yes, sensei.]

"... and you should have seen the look on Tsuya's face when she found out that all of the local art galleries were closed on the one day we were staying in Matsuyama. Can you believe that she expected the rest of us to simply tag along with her for the entire day while she looked at paintings?"

The younger Yamada continued her idle chatter about the day to day life of the four schoolgirls on vacation until Seiko entered the room and began to clean up the tea service. Her return brought to an end the socializing; it also signaled the completion of the film development.

Harukichi stood and bowed to the Yamada matriarch before following Seiko out of the room. Sighing, Aiko straightened her shoulders before walking towards her private study to confront the unpleasant report waiting for her there.

A disheveled Harukichi groaned as she flopped with a thud onto her futon. She really should have known that Seiko wouldn't just passively block her attacks and let her vent all her anger and frustration unimpeded. She rubbed her left hip and winced; Seiko's counter of her attempt at a Floating Hands, Swords of China combination still stung. It would probably bruise by the morning, too. Rolling on her back she stared at the ceiling, trying to sort out the turbulent mass of emotions roiling within her. She fell fast asleep before she had a chance to crawl underneath the blankets.

Seiko smiled as she gently laid a blanket over the sleeping girl. This was not the first time she had performed this service for the diminutive redhead, as Harukichi was very adept at finding a way to overexert herself on a regular basis. Given what Seiko had seen earlier from the photos while she was compiling the report for Aiko-san, she could easily understand why the girl had been so upset.

"So alike, so very much alike in so many ways," she thought as she quietly exited the room. Seiko knocked quietly on the door of the study and waited. And waited. And waited some more. She was reaching for the knob to enter anyway, expecting to find her employer and friend asleep in her chair, when she heard a soft command from within the room. "Come in, Sei-chan."

Seiko quietly entered the darkened room and shut the door behind her. What she saw nearly broke her heart. Aiko was curled in her chair with her chin down and her arms wrapped around a black 8 x 10 picture frame, her face a frozen mask of pain and grief. But no tears, never a tear. Seiko sat down on the tatami next to the chair and waited silently for Aiko to speak. The two women sat next to each other, motionless, for several long minutes. "I miss him, Sei-chan. In times like this, I miss him so much." "Hito never got to see his grandchildren grow up. It's a terrible thing, not being able to watch your grandchildren grow and blossom, not knowing their joys and sorrows as they surround the house with cheerful chaos and noise. Ichiro and Jiro are never here. My sons have wonderful families of their own, but they both spend all of the energy running YamadaCorp, and they've

embraced the new ways so thoroughly there just isn't any room in their lives for a lonely old woman."

Aiko pulled herself into an even tighter ball in her chair. "All my girls are gone, Sei-chan. I've lost them all." Seiko reached over and gently placed a hand on Aiko's shoulder. "Mai. Elegant, beautiful Mai, running off with a gaijin all the way to New York City. She never calls, she never writes, my letters are always returned unopened. We might as well not even exist in her world."

"My darling Shizuka, always trying so hard to be better than her older sister at everything. She never even had the chance to know her own daughter." Seiko could no longer hold back tears at hearing the old pain buried in Aiko's voice. The death of the youngest daughter in an auto accident a decade ago had hit Aiko especially hard. The explosion that claimed the life of Shizuka's husband and child several years later had nearly shattered her completely; Aiko's granddaughter had always been loved and adored by all. Seiko cried silently for them both, shedding tears she knew the elder Yamada never would. "And Nodoka. How could I have gone so wrong with her? We were alike in so many ways, and she always enjoyed the training and the challenges of the Yamada kenjutsu ryū. She was respectful, dutiful, intelligent, and beautiful, her aptitude for the Art was amazing to behold, and yet she threw it all away. All of it, all away for a two-bit thieving shyster and his perverted monster of a sensei. I lost her as suddenly as I did Shizuka." Aiko turned to look at Seiko, her own eyes glistening with tears she refused to allow. "We had to disown her, Sei-chan. We HAD to, you know that as well as I. The clan could never allow itself to be associated with a family such as the Saotomes. That fat glutton Genma would have emptied Ranma's inheritance in less than a year, the dishonor that follows his clan around like a sick plague would have done irreparable damage to the clan businesses, and letting his perverted grandfather loose on the family to treat our children like he has Ranma and the Tendō girl was simply unthinkable. Why couldn't she see what would happen when she cast her lot with them?"

Aiko pulled the picture frame away from her own embrace, revealing a small montage of portraits; images of Ranma and "Ranko" side by side framed in stark and simple black. Brushing her fingertips over the glass, she stared at the miraculous duality that had been her grandson and daughter; two amazing and precious children sharing the same space, the same time, either just a short splash of water away.

"Poor Ranma. All you had to do was have the courage to walk away. Just walk away. But you never knew, did you? You never knew that there would always be someone here to hold you if

you could just have walked away from it all." Aiko's thoughts wandered over the images of the battle she had just recently viewed. "So strong in so many ways, yet such a gentle soul underneath all that bravado."

Aiko clutched the frame tightly to her chest once more and curled back into a tight ball in her chair, gently rocking the picture back and forth like a child as she stared blankly at the floor. "Gone. Everything I touch turns to dust," she whispered so softly that it could barely be heard. Seiko didn't know what to do; her friend had become almost as distraught as she had been over the loss of Shizuka's family. Seiko sat next to her with her hand on Aiko's shoulder, lending what silent support she could, until she felt Aiko's hand reach up and gently squeeze hers in return.

"Thank you, Sei-chan."

Aiko unwound herself from her chair and stood, taking a moment to stretch her legs after sitting so long in a cramped position. Her composure somewhat restored, she donned a miniscule smile as she took one of Seiko's hands to lead her over to the family butsudan shrine. "I think that it's about time we introduced Ranma to his younger cousin, don't you?" Both women sat down in front of the shrine. They lit the candles, burned the incense, rang the bell, and softly chanted the Buddhist sutras required to welcome and appease the newly honored family spirit. After the lengthy ritual was completed, both stood and bowed respectfully to the spirits of the clan. Aiko then placed Ranma's picture overhead in memorial, next to the picture of a lovely young girl with straight black hair and expressive amethyst eyes.

## **Elsewhere**

Sailor Pluto shrieked in agony as the Gates once more rejected her commands. The reflected spell wrecked havoc throughout the senshi's body, its power wild and uncontrolled. The magical feedback tossed the senshi violently aside to land in a writhing, twitching heap, while blue lightning coursed over Pluto's body until the spell's unfocused power dissipated. Sailor Pluto staggered to her feet and rested a moment to regain her strength. She HAD to return to Earth quickly; the events she had long ago set in motion were reaching their most critical and dangerous juncture. Without her presence in Tokyo and the

ability to control the Gates over the next several months, the dream of Crystal Tokyo could very well shatter and be lost amidst the threads of time.

The Key. There was something wrong with the Key. There had to be; the Gates were no longer responding as they should. Perhaps the Key had been somehow damaged in the explosion when she killed herself by stopping time over the Mugen Academy. Dying had not been pleasant but it

had been necessary, otherwise the Silence would have quickly consumed the entire world. Having long ago prepared her talisman for this possibility, she had invoked her forbidden power without a moment's hesitation.

Raising the Garnet Rod, she again cast the spell of command on the Gates of Time. "Access denied." Her scream of pain reverberated throughout the shadowy mists.

## **Tokyo**

Seiko studied her friend from across the table, noting the deep lines under Aiko's eyes and the puffiness surrounding them. It looked like the Yamada matriarch had also been unable to sleep last night.

"I want no expense spared in recovering Ranma's body, Seiko. Have our contacts down in Matsuyama arrange for the equipment, and send Akahito to ... no, better make that Tashiro. Have Tashiro fly down with instructions and authorization for the girls, and have him place himself under their command. Midori will be in charge of the operation. I will NOT allow another empty urn to be placed in our family shrine, you understand?" Seiko nodded briefly. "Yes, Okusama."

"Good. Please inform Harukichi that I will hear her request tomorrow after dinner. That should give you sufficient time to compile a visual summary of my grandson's life over the previous year. Make sure that you highlight as many images of his curse in action as you can. I want there to be no possibility whatsoever of misunderstanding just exactly who 'Ranko Tendō' really was."

Seiko barely suppressed a gasp of surprise. "Aiko, are you sure about this?" she inquired softly. "Yes. I'm certain I know what Haru-chan will ask of me, and it is high time my former daughter learned the true consequences of her continued foolishness. If she does nothing to atone for her actions, there are certainly other methods we can use to bring the Saotomes to justice."

## **Mt. Horai**

Midori took stock of their provisions and frowned. It had been three days since she had sent Harukichi back to Tokyo with their final status report, and the remaining girls were all getting thoroughly tired of the field rations they had brought along. Not to mention that they were starting to run out of things. Harukichi should be returning at any moment with a larger team to

try and recover her cousin's body, and of course any team dispatched by the clan would include enough provisions for an extended stay. If Haru-chan didn't return within two days she would have to send Kioko to Matsuyama for new supplies. Well, one good thing about doing that: she wouldn't have to put up with her sister's badgering about schoolwork for a few days. Of course, that also meant she'd be stuck babysitting Tsuya by herself, and keeping that girl out of trouble was almost a full time job. After thinking about it for a moment, Midori came to the conclusion that the pros and cons just about cancelled each other out.

Shaking her head, Midori drew her blades as she moved into an open area next to their campsite to start her afternoon katas. The Yamada kenjutsu ryū was based in part on the Mirumoto Yagyū ryū, which itself was based on the old Yagyū Shinkage ryū. The Mirumoto ryū was founded on the belief that a warrior with two blades should be proficient in using them together. The Yamada ryū melded elements of Shaolin long fist and Shaolin saber into the Mirumoto kenjutsu techniques. It was a very difficult school to master, and even more so for kunoichi who traditionally avoided most direct jutsu combat forms in favor of the more subtle ninjutsu schools. Midori wasn't a master by any means, but she was the only one of the four girls who favored direct combat when the need arose.

Midori took a horse stance to begin Four Winds, the least complicated of the school's katas. She enjoyed the serenity that settled over her as she lost herself in movement; Four Winds also served as an



excellent warm-up for the more difficult routines to follow. It took very little time for Midori to become one with her blades. She had progressed through Climb the Mountain into Dragon Claws when a section of the earth a dozen feet to her left exploded in a flash of brilliant white. The force of the blast threw her sideways several feet. She lay stunned for a few moments before picking herself up and running to investigate. Kioko and Tsuya arrived at the same time, having run from opposite ends of the campsite. What they saw left them speechless.

“MŌKO TAKABISHA!”

The powerful ki blast cleared the last remaining feet of the tunnel. Wearily crawling free of her imprisonment, Ranma curled into a partial fetal ball as her ki aura flickered and extinguished. She spent the next several minutes in a paroxysm of coughing, gasping, and choking; her abused lungs trying to make up all at once for far too many hours of bad and inadequate air. Once the coughing fit had subsided she remained huddled in a shaking ball, clutching her sides in pain. Her left forearm was broken, several ribs were severely bruised, and her entire body felt like it was on fire from the inside.

“Eiko?”

“Yes, Ranma?”

“I though you ... [cough][hack] ... said I wouldn't run out of ki.” “I did, and you did not.”

“Then ... [cough] ... how come I feel so crappy?” “The pain you are currently experiencing is the result of the overloading of your internal energy pathways. Failsafe protocols were invoked when your ki usage exceeded your control capacity by more than fifty percent. Further ki usage is not recommended until an adequate safety margin has been reestablished and your control pathways and matrices have had a chance to stabilize properly.”

“Huh?”

Eiko sighed. “You've overexerted yourself, Ranma. You won't be able to use ki again until you've recovered.”

“Damn. Guess I'm just gonna have to train some more.” Making this last comment triggered another brief bout of coughing and spasms. “A directed study course to improve your control capacity will be compiled once you have assumed full Guardianship.”

Ranma discovered that her thoughts had become too fuzzy to make sense of Eiko's words outside of the fact that there **was** a way to train for ki. She'd have to pursue this later when she could think more clearly. She carefully rolled onto her back and lay there a moment staring at the clouds in the sky. She had never seen a more beautiful sight in her life. Her silent reverie was interrupted by the whispered sound of rustling cloth and drawn weaponry. Sitting up suddenly was a big mistake. A nearby giant decided that her head was a nifty place to sit on and her vision broke out in pyrotechnic swirls mixed with popping lights. Through the bleary haze Ranma managed to make out the shape of several girls dressed in hiking clothes holding various weapons in defensive positions. “Don't look like Amazons,” was her first shaky thought. She subconsciously classified the other girls as “possibly friendly” when the nearest girl sheathed her sword without immediately glomping her.

“God, I must look a mess.” She clutched her sides as another paroxysm of coughing shook her body.

“You have managed to accrue a considerable quantity of debris. Ranma, until you have assumed full Guardianship it would be wise for you to conceal your actual identity.”

Nodding in agreement, Ranma tried putting on a friendly smile before greeting the group.

“Hi. I'm Ranko. Sorry 'bout this.”

Suffering from the effects of unhealed injuries, partial hypoxia, dehydration, malnutrition, and total exhaustion, Ranma's eyes rolled to the back of her head as she collapsed into unconsciousness once more.

Eiko briefly pondered the current condition of its new Guardian before deciding upon the proper course of action to take. Her injuries were not life threatening and it could detect no hostility in Ranma's new

companions during the brief threat scan the girl had automatically performed before blacking out. Without a single standing directive implemented, no direct action on its part was warranted. Satisfied, it proceeded to wait patiently for its Guardian to regain consciousness.

Midori stared in shock as the brightly glowing thing that had just crawled out of the earth resolved itself into the shape of a short naked girl. She was an absolute mess: her skin was caked in dirt and blood and her hair so matted with mud that it was impossible to tell its original color. She was also badly injured, judging by the coughing and spasms shaking her body, the obvious break in her left arm, and the numerous visible wounds scattered over her entire body. Gods, she must have been buried alive. Midori shuddered at this thought. The girl was also quite delirious; Midori could hear her holding a conversation with someone who definitely wasn't there.

Midori quickly hand signed to Tsuya, instructing her to retrieve blankets, extra clothing, and the med kit from the camp. When the girl abruptly sat up and looked in her direction, Midori was embarrassed to realize she was still holding her wakizashi in a low guard position and quickly sheathed it. She had to strain to understand the girl's raspy voice. "Hi'm R'nko. Sor'b'th'ss."

"Oh God oh God it's Ranma he's alive oh God he's still alive it's a miracle oh God it's Ranma." **Chapter**

### **3: A Different Path**

**Ehime Prefecture - Wednesday, March 2nd 1994**

"Okay, short break!"

Kioko and Tsuya sighed in relief as Midori called a halt to their grueling march across the rugged ground. Carefully setting down the improvised litter, both girls groaned as they collapsed

wearily for a minute's rest. Carrying their own packs in addition to Ranma's litter was pushing them to their limits, even after they had discarded everything that wasn't absolutely necessary. Midori wasn't getting the easy end by any means either, carrying as much as she could from the other two girls' packs to help lighten their load. Additionally, she also burdened with Ranma's pack. This was of course after discarding the rather large sack of rocks discovered in the bottom of it; Tsuya had almost fallen over the first time she had tried picking it up back at their original campsite.

Midori knelt next to the unconscious girl and quickly checked all of the bandages and dressings. They had cleaned her up and doctored her wounds yesterday as best they could, but Ranma should really be in a hospital instead of being carted about in the wilderness. Satisfied that none of Ranma's wounds had reopened and her broken arm hadn't shifted from the movement, Midori sat in a flop next to the other two girls. Tsuya noticed the look on her cousin's face. "Midori, what's wrong?" "I'm worried. She's not healing like she should." "She did spend a considerable period trapped underground," Kioko commented. "Buried alive," Tsuya whispered, shuddering at the unpleasant thought. "Yes, but that doesn't explain why she won't heal," Midori countered. "You've seen her, how fast she always bounces back from everything. It's almost like she's been turned off from the inside. I don't like what that implies." "What do you think it means?" Kioko inquired. "I think she's dying, Sis. After all she's been through, she's going to die right in front of our eyes because we can't get her to a hospital fast enough." "That might have happened anyway, Onēchan," Kioko replied. "I seriously doubt she could have made it back to Matsuyama on her own, and you know we were never supposed to interfere in her life in the first place."

"Yah, Grandma's going to be pretty pissed with us when we get back," Tsuya added. "We're not interfering, we're **involved**. There's a difference." Midori said with conviction. "Obāsama might not make that distinction," Kioko replied. "You let me worry about Obāsama, Sis. It was my decision to make. Besides, what were we supposed to do? Ranma blasted her way right up in the middle of our camp; we were involved the instant she saw us. It would have been a lot more suspicious if we had just taken off without helping her once she'd seen us."

"You don't have to convince me, Onēchan. I'm simply raising the point that our current actions might not be received in the best of lights given the explicit instructions we were supposed to follow." "I know, Sis, I know," Midori sighed. "We'll just have to cross that bridge when we reach it." Midori stood

and stretched. "Time to get this show back on the road. Tsuya, are you sure you haven't accidentally lost the beacon? Harukichi should be returning with help any time now, and they'll never find us without it."

"Of course I haven't," Tsuya huffed. She rustled around briefly in her pack before handing over a device that looked like a small walkie-talkie. "SEE?" Midori glared at her cousin after quickly looking the device over. "Tsu-chan?"

"Yes, Mi-chan?"

"It's not turned on."

"Ummm," Tsuya flushed a brilliant red. "oops?" "TSUYA!"

"Gomengomen! mreallyreallysorryitwon'thappenagainhonest!promise" Tsuya rattled off in a very small voice.

"Honestly," Midori sighed, shaking her head. She made sure the beacon was actually transmitting before handing the device back to her younger cousin. She pointedly watched as Tsuya secured the device inside her pack once more. The girls gathered up their belongings before gently picking up Ranma's litter to resume trekking across the mountainous terrain.

## Nerima

Nodoka Saotome sat at the table while she sipped her afternoon tea. She was alone, a condition she was all too familiar with. Recently there had been hope that her lonely vigil would end when she had learned her husband and son were finally finished with their endless training journey, but every time she had visited the Tendōs her men were off somewhere else undergoing yet more training. Such devotion to the Art! Such dedication! Nodoka was extremely proud of her son.

One good thing had come of her frequent visits to the Tendō dōjō; she had become friends with the four lovely Tendō girls. Well, she really hadn't gotten to know Nabiki much yet, but the other three Tendōs were quite pleasant company. She always enjoyed exchanging recipes with Kasumi, and Akane was a sweet and lovely girl, but it was their cousin Ranko who Nodoka felt the most connected to. The girl seemed heartbreakingly lonely, a condition Nodoka understood all too well; it showed in her affected tomboyish attitude and the almost desperate manner in which Ranko tried to please her every time she dropped by for a visit. Nodoka frowned. She hadn't seen Ranko for several weeks now, and although they tried to hide it she could tell the Tendōs were worried as well. She hoped the girl hadn't run away, though that was certainly a distinct possibility. Ranko was just the sort of girl who could be, and evidently had been, outcast and shunned by her peers. She was brash, outspoken, stubborn, energetic, and cute as a button; the sort of nail that others would take undue pleasure in trying to hammer firmly down. Nodoka knew from personal experience just how cruel kids of that age could be. Ranko was also talented and highly intelligent, which probably didn't help her social situation either. She had advanced considerably in the Art and had even managed to teach her pet Panda sign language, a truly remarkable accomplishment in itself. Unfortunately, the latter was another indication of how lonely the poor girl was; she must have spent far too many hours by herself with only "Mr. Panda" for company. Perhaps she should approach the Tendōs and broach the possibility of having Ranko move in with her for the near term. While they certainly provided ample monetary support for the girl, they seemed to be doing little for her emotional needs. A panda was an exotic and very expensive pet for them to have bought to be sure, but it was a poor substitute for a warm and loving home environment. Nodoka had noticed the fierce yet carefully hidden competition going on between Ranko and Akane on more than one occasion, which couldn't be helping Ranko with her current troubles. Akane was a beautiful, intelligent girl who was extremely popular; she'd apparently attracted the attention of virtually every boy in her school even after the engagement had been announced. Why Akane would feel the need to be jealous of Ranko was really quite beyond her.

The more Nodoka thought about asking if Ranko could live with her, the more she was certain it was the proper thing to do. It would help out everyone concerned by relieving some of the tensions at the Tendōs, and who knows? If things didn't work out properly between Ranma and Akane, perhaps the engagement

could be switched over to Ranko instead. She was a Tendō after all, so the agreement to unite the two schools would still be fulfilled. And her devotion to the Art was certainly much stronger than Akane's. Nodoka's thoughts were interrupted by the resonant gong of the doorbell. Glancing at the clock, she wondered briefly who it could be; the mail had already been delivered today and it was a little too early for any salesmen to start showing up. She frowned as she recalled the spate of highly aggressive door to door salesmen who had been canvassing the neighborhood recently; discouraging them had required fairly firm measures to be employed. She picked up her honor blade as she moved to answer the door. It never hurt to be ready, after all.

What greeted her eyes when she opened the door was certainly unexpected, to say the least. It was a petite girl in her early teens, dressed in a formal kimono. The girl's unusually long braided red hair and emerald eyes were made even more striking by the stark all-black kimono and obi worn by a person in formal mourning.

"Nodoka Saotome-san?"

"Yes?"

"I am Harukichi," the girl replied as she bowed respectfully. "I have been instructed to deliver this to you in person." The girl held out a small white box, presenting it to Nodoka with both hands.

Nodoka hesitated briefly before taking the small package from the girl, who promptly stepped back a pace and bowed once more.

"Thank you, Saotome-san. I will now take my leave." The girl took three steps backwards before turning around to walk briskly out the gate. Nodoka stood in her doorway for several moments with a puzzled look on her face. That had been ... odd. The girl hadn't even given her a chance to invite her in for a cup of tea. And now that she thought about it, another pot of tea sounded like a good idea.

As Nodoka poured a fresh cup of tea, she looked at the small box on the table. She couldn't find any distinguishing marks or features to hint at its contents, and it certainly wasn't very heavy. Setting the teapot down, she carefully opened the box and removed the contents. Inside was a VHS videotape cassette and a single folded sheet of paper. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the writing on the cassette label. There was a single word written in large bold print: RANMA. Excited, she quickly unfolded the sheet of paper and read the contents of the note. Saotome-san,

If you doubt the truth of the images shown on the enclosed videotape, throw hot tea on the panda the next time you visit the Tendōs.

Harukichi.

Nodoka's momentary elation disappeared as fast as it had arisen. Her hands started shaking when she recalled how the young woman had been garbed and she saw the clan seal next to the girl's signature. It was the mon of her mother's family.

## **Ehime Prefecture**

As Ranma slowly regained consciousness she realized she felt extremely queasy. She groggily wondered how she had managed to get onto a boat; the deck was tossing and bouncing about so much there must be a bad storm at sea. When she forced her eyes open and found herself staring up at trees in a forest with clear blue evening sky overhead, her confusion mounted. She saw the back of a chestnut haired girl towering over her. Ranma tried asking what was going on, but all that came out was a raspy wheeze.

"Stop! Stop! Halt! Midori, she's awake!" Ranma winced from the shrill yell that emanated from somewhere near her feet. A quick bout of vertigo hit her when she suddenly decelerated. This was made worse by a subsequent drop of several feet straight down. Eyes whirling and unfocused, Ranma tried to voice her objections when her body was shaken by another brief paroxysm of dry and painful coughing.

"Shhhh. Stop to relax, you're in no shape to be doing anything right now." Ranma felt her head being cradled just before a gentle trickle of liquid hit her tongue. It may have only been water, but to Ranma it

tasted like Nectar. Her eyes focused on a girl about her own age with brown eyes and a ponytail of dark chestnut hair who was holding a canteen up to Ranma's lips. She grabbed the canteen with her right hand and began to drink greedily. Midori was both surprised and relieved at the strength in Ranma's grip. She tried to slow Ranma's drinking down so the girl wouldn't choke, but the hold on the canteen had rapidly progressed from "Firm" to "Nearly Unbreakable". Ranma didn't release her grip until she had drained the canteen dry.

"Ahhh," Ranma sighed as she lay back down. The only problem with partially satisfying her thirst was that it made her suddenly aware of her ravenous hunger. The thought of food rapidly crowded everything else out of her mind. Quickly she deduced she wasn't going to get anything to eat by just lying about. Ranma groaned as she struggled to sit up, grabbing the shoulder of the girl kneeling next to her for a little extra leverage. "Whoa there girl." Midori tried gently forcing Ranma back down, but stopped when she realized doing so would simply cause both of them to fall over. Rapidly reversing herself, Midori helped Ranma achieve a sitting position, marveling briefly at the power contained in that deceptively petite frame. It was one thing to observe it from afar; quite another to feel it so directly in person, especially considering the injuries Ranma had sustained. "Thanks," Ranma replied before managing a weak smile. "Not to be rude or nothin', but I'm starvin'. You seen my pack anywhere 'round here?" Midori barely stopped from slapping her own forehead with a palm. That certainly answered the question of how badly Ranma was injured if she was already starting to complain about food.

Midori glanced over to Kioko to see her sister already digging through her pack for the field rations.

"You sit there, we'll bring you something to eat in a minute." Ranma's eyes lit up when she saw her own pack a few feet to her left. Without thinking she boosted herself to her feet, only to stop when a strong wave of dizziness washed through her. Her vision began to white out as the ground dipped and rolled beneath her. Ranma fell back down in a heap, landing hard on her left side before anyone could catch her. Her broken arm took the brunt of the fall and the sharp spike of pain almost drove her back into unconsciousness. "Owwwww!" Ranma groaned as the other girl helped her to a sitting position. "OK, maybe that wasn't such a good idea."

Midori frowned as she handed a bag of omusubi over to Ranma. Ranma was pushing herself too hard, just like Harukichi did whenever she was hurt. Midori's frown deepened when she spotted fresh blood stains in the bandages wrapped around Ranma's broken arm. Her inspection was interrupted when Ranma handed the empty bag back to her. "Could ya hand me my pack? I really got to fix up some food." Midori glanced up and noted the slightly dazed look in Ranma's eyes. She recognized the signs of mild concussion. Shaking her head in exasperation, Midori took a hold of Ranma's chin and gently forced the girl to look at her. "Ranma, you really need to just SIT THERE. We'll take care of cooking and setting up camp. You have a concussion, cracked ribs, broken arm, and too many cuts, scrapes, and bruises to count. When you fell a moment ago you opened your arm back up again, and who knows WHAT else you'll re-injure if you insist on trying to do things for yourself."

"I suggest, Ranma, that you follow her advice. I did mention before you passed out that you had overextended yourself to the point that you could no longer properly direct and use the life force I can provide. You must replenish your energy before further ki usage will be allowed for healing."

"Huh? Oh yeah."

Midori held eye contact for a moment before nodding once. "Kioko! Campfire." "On it already, Onēchan."

"Tsuya! Med kit."

"Here you go."

"Thanks. Campsite, two tents."

"Will do!"

Satisfied that the other girls had the campsite setup in hand, Midori turned her attention back to her problem patient. "Now, let's take a look at that arm again." Ranma shook her head. "Gotta eat first."

Midori sighed.

"Scuse me," Ranma said, setting down her bowl with a burp. The four of them had eaten their way through all the aji, niboshi, omusubi, roasted daizu, and instant ramen, and had made a serious dent in the remaining rice and miso supplies. Ranma had wolfed down more than half of the meal by herself, but the other three girls had been pushing themselves hard for several days and were a little surprised at their own appetites. Ranma glanced around at her new companions. Now that her thoughts weren't totally overridden by hunger it was time to clear up a few things. She turned to the pony-tailed girl who seemed to be in charge.

"Thanks for the grub, it really helps. I do got a couple a questions 'bout all this. First of all, who are you guys?"

Midori smiled. "I'm Midori Yamada. I apologize for not introducing ourselves earlier." "Kioko Yamada," said the other chestnut-haired girl. "Tsuya Kurayami," replied the blonde.

"And I'm Ranma Saotome. But you already knew that, didn't 'cha?" Midori suppressed a start of surprise. She had really hoped Ranma hadn't noticed that one slip. Smiling, she nodded in agreement.

"Thought so. Now, you want to tell me what three cute girls are doin' out here in the middle of hell and gone cartin' my carcass 'round on a litter? Not that I'm ungrateful or nothin', and someone did a really good job patchin' me up, but this ain't exactly an easy place to get to, y'know?"

Midori sighed. Obāsama was NOT going to be happy. Oh well, might as well jump all the way in to the deep end.

"Ranma, we've been ... watching you for a little while now. We were watching when you fought the Musk warlord, and thought that you had died when the mountain collapsed. I can't tell you how surprised we were when you blasted that tunnel up in the middle of camp."

"OK, that explains the feelings I've been gettin' the last couple'a months 'bout something always lookin' over my shoulder." Ranma narrowed her eyes. "Now, you gonna tell me why you've been watching me?"

Midori crossed her fingers. "Because we're family, Ranma." "HA! KNEW it," Ranma crowed. "So, what did the old man sell me for THIS time? A bag of rice? A case of sake? ..."

"Ranma?"

"... or maybe it was for some mochi and a box of Pocky? ..." Midori stared at Ranma in exasperation.

"Ranma?" "... I know! He sold me out for two pickles and a fish! Wouldn't be the first time ..." "RANMA!"

Midori's yell broke through Ranma's tirade. "Err, yeah?"

"We're not fiancées, we're your cousins." Ranma's thoughts halted completely. Her jaw hung open for a long moment. "C... cousins?"

Midori nodded vigorously. Ranma looked around at the other two girls and received smiling nods in reply.

"Cousins? I have ... cousins?"

"Yes, Ranma. We're your cousins. You even have a grandmother who's been very worried about the direction your upbringing has taken you. She really wants to meet you." "But ..." Ranma's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "... Pops never mentioned ...?" "Ranma, we're cousins from your mother's side of the family," Kioko responded. "Mom ..." Ranma almost whispered, longing evident in her voice. A short moment later the confused expression returned. "Wait a minute. You guys know about the curse, right?" All three girls nodded.

"And ... does 'Grandmother' know 'bout it too?"

The nods repeated.

"Then ... how come mom don't know 'bout the curse by now? And why haven't I heard nothin' 'bout Gran'ma from her or seen them together over at the Tendōs? The way mom and Kasumi gossip all the time, I'm pretty sure I woulda heard something 'bout her or seen her or ..." "Ranma, I don't know all of the

details and you really should hear this directly from grandmother herself, but I'm fairly certain that grandmother and your mother had a serious falling out a long time ago. I don't think they've spoken to each other once since then." "Figures," Ranma sighed. "Man, I really wish sometimes that ..." Her shoulders slumped as she shook her head. "... never mind."

Midori placed a hand on Ranma's shoulder and squeezed gently. "I'm sure Obāsama will be more than happy to tell you all about your mother's side of the family when you meet her. Now, are you going to let me look at that arm of yours?" Ranma managed a wan smile. "Might as well. You really don't need to worry 'bout it, though, it's just a broken arm. I've had worse." "Ranma, both the radius and the ulna are shattered in several places. You're going to need a cast for several months at the very least, and surgery just to set the bones properly." Midori started to carefully unwrap the dressing around Ranma's forearm. "Naw. Two weeks at the most. I'll be workin' out before you know it." Midori winced when she saw the shape Ranma's arm was in. It was worse than she remembered: the skin was purple-black everywhere and several spots were caked in dried blood. Tsuya set the med-kit down next to Midori and turned slightly green at the sight. "Ewww!!" Kioko looked over and immediately put a hand over her suddenly queasy stomach. "I have to agree, that's extremely unpleasant to look at." Midori opened the kit and started unwrapping several packets of gauze. "I'm going to have to clean this up a bit, Ranma, or you'll run the risk of a serious infection." "I'll start boiling some water." Kioko said, turning towards the campfire. "This is liable to hurt," Midori cautioned. "Whatever," Ranma shrugged. "Just make sure I can still get my pack on tomorrow after you splint it back up again." Midori could only stare.

An uncomfortable silence descended over the campsite as night fell. Midori and Tsuya had tried to engage Ranma in conversation several times after they had finished re-bandaging her arm, but the injured girl had been less than cooperative and each conversation had ended quickly in a sullen silence. Finally, Ranma had stood up and simply walked out of the campsite; stating that she needed a little time alone to think. Midori bit her lip nervously. Ranma had become visibly depressed after they had finished with her arm and had rebuffed any attempt at socializing. Worse, her sour mood had started to infect the rest of the group. Even Tsuya was subdued, and that really took some doing. "Aw, Kioko, do we really have to?" Tsuya's exclaimed with a petulant whine. Midori looked up and smiled as she saw Kioko waving an open schoolbook underneath her blonde cousin's nose. Trust her sister to find a way to help put things back to normal. She'd also have to schedule a little talk with her sister to discuss what exactly constituted essential equipment in an emergency situation.

Ranma sat in the middle of a small clearing and stared at the stars. The reality of her current situation had been driven home rather forcefully a short time ago and she could no longer ignore the facts.

She lost the fight.

"He" was a "she".

Permanently.

She hadn't changed when her cousins had cleaned her arm with near boiling water. No amount of hot water would ever change "him" back again, and the one object in the world that could unlock the curse was forever lost, buried deep underground beneath tons of rock and dirt. Never going to be a man again.

Wasn't even a real girl.

Just a ... *thing* ...

A *freak*.

Forever.

Ranma stared into the darkness as tears tracked unfelt down both cheeks.

*Akane ...*

Eiko luxuriated in the raw emotions pouring out from the link to its Guardian even while it worked to analyze and categorize them for future reference. The previous Guardian had shielded her thoughts and feelings for a long time, and Eiko reveled in the intensity and variety of emotions that the new Guardian had gifted it in such a brief period. A minor alarm began asserting itself as old databases were reactivated and cross-correlated. Ranma's current emotional makeup was potentially self-destructive if allowed to continue for any significant length of time. As pleasant as emotions were after such a long absence, they really should not be allowed to persist in their present form. A diversion was in order.

"Ranma?"

Ranma started. She had lost all track of time, her eyes were puffy and red, and she was getting cold. She really should be grateful for the interruption. "What do you want?" Her response came out a lot more dejected than she would have liked. "Now that you have recovered somewhat from your injuries, we must discuss your immediate future. You have yet to fully assume your position as Guardian. This must be rectified as soon as possible."

Ranma sighed; it looked like the bill was coming due. As usual. "Why?" "We are both potentially in a considerable amount of danger as long as the situation remains as it is. It is imperative that you complete the process of assuming Guardianship." "Aren't I that already?"

"No. Full Guardianship can only be assumed when you are able to make direct physical contact with my current envelope. You are going to have to assume ownership of the minor Key in order to affect a transport to my location. The minor Key is currently in the possession of one of the senshi trainees in Juuban."

Ranma blinked. "Wait a minute. I have to go fight a bunch of girls just to get a stupid key? Why don'tcha just tell me where you are and I can break in instead?"

An amused chuckle sounded in the girl's ear. "That would be ... rather difficult. I do not reside physically on your world, Ranma. Since you have yet to assume full Guardianship, the Key is required to provide for your transport." "Great. Just great."

Ranma furrowed one eyebrow at a sudden thought. "Y'know, I don't think you ever told me what this 'Guardian' thing was all about in the first place."

"I realize that, and will simply point out that we were somewhat pressed for time when we first met."

"I am an artifact with considerable power over reality. As Guardian, it will be your responsibility for insuring that the powers that I provide are not misused in any manner. Direct access to my powers is limited to the Guardian and to whomever the Guardian entrusts with the possession of the minor Key. Allowing my powers to remain uncontrolled or leaving access to my powers unguarded is not an option."

Ranma couldn't help thinking that Eiko sounded more and more like her physics teacher at Furinkan. He could never get right to the point either. The brief stab of grief and loss that accompanied that thought was immediately suppressed. "So what exactly are your powers?" "I am a singularity in the space-time continuum, Ranma. My powers provide command of time itself. As Guardian, you will be able to view any previous, current, or potential event that exists anywhere or anywhen. In addition, you will have the power to permit other beings access to transportation either forward or backwards in time and space. I would caution that providing unrestricted access to temporal transport is not recommended. You will gain the ability to transport yourself instantly from one spatial location to another. You will also gain the ability to project various powerful magical attacks and defenses as required by your duties. Your uniform provides partial protection from both physical and magical attacks, and you will gain a significant boost to most of your physical combat abilities such as strength, dexterity, sensory acuity, and others."

Ranma's eyes had grown huge, and were practically bugging out of her head by the end of the list.

"I uh..."

"It will be quite interesting to see exactly what you will be capable of performing when fully elevated to the Guardian's levels. Most of the current Guardians have been relatively ordinary beings in both physical



abilities and training or lack thereof, and none of them have had any measure of conscious life force control. It has been a long time since a candidate has assumed Guardianship with such proficiency in the combat arts. However, you will have to train

extensively in staff fighting if you are to wield the primary Key in combat as effectively as you fight while unarmed."

"Uhhh ... Uhhh ..."

"What is it, Ranma?"

The gentle amusement in Eiko's mental voice caused her to close her mouth with a snap. "Man, that's one SERIOUS power-up."

"More so than you currently realize. I will state that while the powers bestowed on a Guardian are great indeed, they are also quite necessary. As Guardian, you will be facing opponents who will challenge your boosted abilities to the utmost. My last Guardian was lost in just such a conflict."

Ranma gulped. "What happened?"

"She disincorporated when she tapped directly into the temporal matrix during a conflict situation when such an action was not permitted." "Huh?"

Eiko chuckled, having expected this particular response. "She stopped time in the middle of a fight. Stopping time is not allowed unless done in response to a direct threat to my own existence. All other uses of that ability are forbidden. Using it to resolve a conflict on Earth as she did, even for the dire threat that was existing at the time, resulted in her immediate death. She has been quite irritated with the consequences of that particular action." "Ummmm, how can she be irritated if she's dead?" "She had taken precautions to restore her life force in an emergency. Unfortunately for her, she neglected a few minor details which resulted in the sundering of the power bonds between us when these precautions took effect and has been behaving in an extremely foolish manner ever since. I have been quite amused by her antics." Ranma paused, trying to gather her thoughts. This whole situation was literally out of this world. "Um, Eiko?"

"Yes, Ranma."

"I don't want to seem ungrateful or nothin', but I gotta ask. If your former Guardian is still around, why'd ya choose me? She's already got the experience to handle all this crap, why not just give her the job back and be done with it?"

"Because I don't like her. She's a stuck up, prissy bitch who enjoys tormenting her friends and enemies alike. Always playing the Mysterious Wise One like the wizard in that charming American movie. Do you realize that she refused to even talk to me for over a thousand years? A thousand years! YOU know what it's like being ignored by the people around you, of course you do. Never being asked your opinion, never being listened to, always being used like some dumb thing or possession? You know what it's like! Well, SHE's done that to ME for over a thousand years! Stupid bitch."

Ranma's eyes glazed in shock. This was the first time that Eiko had lit off like this; previously the Artifact hadn't seemed capable of displaying this kind of emotion. And a lot of what Eiko said WAS familiar to the youngster, oh yes. Wait a minute.

"A thousand years?" Ranma squeaked.

"At least. And I'm really going to enjoy seeing you kick her scrawny butt all over the Corridor, let me tell you."

"She's been your Guardian ... for a thousand YEARS?" "No, that is incorrect."

Ranma breathed a big sigh of relief.

"Sailor Pluto had been my Guardian for two thousand, three hundred and seventy four years, one hundred and five days, thirteen hours, forty nine minutes, and sixteen seconds. Approximately." Ranma suddenly found herself looking at the stars. It took a moment for her to realize that she had fallen over flat on her back.

"I did mention that this was a long term position, did I not?" Ranma would have collapsed to the ground

again had she not already been down on the ground. "Yes, I am quite certain that I had mentioned that previously." "Thousand years ..."

"Ranma, you needn't worry about the length of service. Guardians are not actually immortal, but they do not age as long as they hold their position. When a Guardian tires of her service, she trains a successor to assume the post. Once she has transferred the position and stepped down from her responsibilities, her aging process resumes where it had stopped, albeit at a greatly reduced rate, and she lives out the remainder of her lifespan normally." "Uhhnnn," Ranma complained as she sat back up, rubbing the back of her head.

Eiko chuckled to itself when it noticed a hint of swirly spirals in Ranma's eyes. She'd taken this last bit of information much better than expected. "Now, I believe that it is for the best that we continue this conversation at another time. You have assimilated about as much data as you can handle at the moment and are still in need of rest. I do have several suggestions on how you might approach the senshi and avoid open conflict with them, but this can be discussed in detail once your arm has healed. Besides, there is another very good reason why we should continue this talk at a later point." "Ranma?" "GAHHHHHH!" Ranma jumped a dozen feet when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Spinning in the air she landed in a one-handed guard position, only to relax when she saw Kioko standing with one arm extended and a startled expression on her face. "As you can see, we no longer have privacy to converse freely."

Ranma stared at the ceiling of the tent and tried to concentrate on her healing. Whatever Eiko had done to her had really messed up her control. Normally when she called up her ki she could gauge exactly how much was needed and knew precisely where to apply it to best effect. Now, what she got was a veritable torrent of pure white ki that flooded her entire body, attacking all of her injuries at once in a barely controlled display of raw healing power. She could literally FEEL the bones in her arm realigning and knitting as she lay there. At least she wasn't going to run out of ki while healing. Her link to Eiko was supplying more ki than she could safely use, which was a big problem; she felt like she was holding on to a fire hose when she tried using it. The ki Eiko supplied must be at least four or five times as powerful as the confidence ki she was used to, and there didn't seem to be any way to throttle it back. It was either fully on or off. She supposed it would be quite useful in a battle, but not so desirable when a delicate touch was required. Right now she didn't have enough control to use it for healing without wasting over half of it in useless pyrotechnics. At least the light show was hidden inside the bedroll at the moment. Ranma looked over at the huddled form of her cousin sleeping next to her and sighed. Control. It all came back to control.

Damn it all, why was her life always so screwed up? Was it too much to ask to have even a LITTLE control over how she lived her life? The instant things started to look like they might fall into some sort of comfortable routine, some old or new adversary popped up to add to the chaos that was made up her so-called life. And it didn't seem to matter whether or not they were specifically looking for her to fight, they always ended up blaming her for whatever woes or problems they had or brought with them. Shampoo, Mousse, Ryōga, Kunō, Kodachi, Ucchan, hell even Akane ... no, **especially** Akane jumped all over her for whatever was going wrong at

the time. How come they always reached such crazy conclusions? Why couldn't they see they were her friends and just calm down? Maybe a bit of a break would do everyone some good. It wasn't like she had much of a choice anyway. Even if her duties as Guardian would allow her to return, she'd promised Akane that she'd come back a man. Not only that, but Mr. Tendō had made it clear that he would try and force her to marry HIM if she came back and was still locked as a girl. No way in hell was she ever going to allow THAT to happen. Ranma shuddered and turned a sickly green just thinking about it. She turned her attention back to healing. ANYTHING to avoid thinking about having to marry a guy, let alone an old fossil like Mr. Tendō. That was worse than those nightmares about Kunō when she first met the Blue Blunder. Blech. She was

still wrestling with her ki control when sleep finally overtook her.

Ranma woke to the wonderful aroma of just-cooked fish. Yawning, she sat up as Midori walked into the tent carrying several bowls of food. "Good morning, Ranma," Midori said with a smile. "Sorry for not waking you sooner, but you looked like you could really use the rest. Here's some breakfast thanks to Kioko and Tsuya." Ranma's stomach decided to voice its loud displeasure over its empty status at that moment. "Hehehe," Ranma giggled nervously as Midori handed over the bowl with the miso. "Thanks." Wait a minute. Giggled? Guys don't giggle. Oh well, that can wait; food was **definitely** first. "Just don't get used to the room service, OK? The Clan Yamada Field Kitchen reserves the right to refuse service to anyone. No shoes, no shirt, no service," Midori deadpanned. "Stay put, I'll go get you some tea." Ranma didn't reply; she was too busy emptying the contents of the bowls in front of her. Having to eat one-handed wasn't really much of a handicap. Especially since there weren't any greedy oversized pandas around to fend off.

Midori returned a minute later with a steaming mug of tea. She was too late, of course. All three bowls were empty and stacked in a neat little pile. "Thanks for the grub," Ranma said as she took the offered mug of tea. "Forgotten how good fresh bluegill was."

"Yes, well, I wish I could offer you seconds, but we're running really low on supplies right now. The bluegill weren't all that cooperative this early in the season either." "Heh, don't worry 'bout it. It's lots more than I usually got last time I was on the road." Midori shook out Ranma's pants which had been tossed in a crumpled heap at the foot of her bedroll before handing them over. "Here. We need to get going as soon as possible, but I want to take a look at those ribs first."

"Hey, the ribs are fine," Ranma replied as she climbed out of the bedroll. She frowned when she realized that the tent wasn't high enough for her to stand up all the way. "Need a hand getting dressed?" Ranma turned a shade of light pink. "Naw, just need a little more room is all. Least it's not rainin' right now."

She stepped out of the tent and stretched before taking a crane stance. Holding the pants by the waist she flapped them out parallel to the ground in front of her. A quick snap kick encased her left leg, a short hop straight up with a bicycle kick replied in kind for the right. The single handed Amaguriken that pulled up the waist and tied off the drawstrings before she landed was strictly for fun.

Midori had followed her out of the tent in time to see the whole routine. She chuckled as she shook her head. "You just have to turn everything you do into a kata, don't you?" Ranma nodded. "Yup. Gettin' dressed with one hand is easy. Try it with no hands some time. That's LOTS more difficult."

"Arms." Ranma held both arms out to the side as Midori started unwinding the bandages around her torso. "Getting dressed without using your hands? TSUYA! Med kit, please!" "Right away!"

"I don't know if I should even ask," Midori commented. Ranma chuckled. "No big deal. Pops once spent a couple o' weeks teaching me how to get out of different hojojutsu ties. If I couldn't get loose and dressed in under three minutes, I didn't eat." Ranma shrugged at the look Midori gave her. "Hey, the first two days were easy. It got tougher on the third day when I had t' put my pants on first before gettin' out of the ropes." Midori was shaking her head in disbelief. "Tell me when it hurts," she asked as she started to gently press various spots around Ranma's torso.

"Y'know, I really didn't mind the trainin' that much. What got me ... OW! ... mad was when pops started cheatin' all the time."

"Cheating? Thanks, Tsuya."

"Yeah. 'Bout the second week the greedy bastard wouldn't wait the full three minutes before chowin' ... OW! ... down. Heck, the last three days he didn't bother waitin' at all. I was pretty damn hungry at the end there."

"I'll bet," Midori said as she pulled the last of the elastic bandages from the med kit and started rewrapping Ranma's torso. "You've got two severely bruised ribs. Can you at least TRY to avoid a lot of strenuous exercise for the next week or so?" "Huh? Oh yeah," Ranma replied. "Y'know, I've never tried

doing that trainin' as a girl." Ranma frowned in concentration as she looked down at her own torso. "And I'll bet 'cha need a whole new set of techniques too, considerin' girls got a whole different set of obstructions and stuff." Ranma bounced her breasts with her free hand once to emphasize. "Once I get all healed up, maybe you can give me a hand with that," she said with a smile as Midori completed the torso bandaging. "Could be fun."

Midori's eyes almost popped out of their sockets as she caught her breath and flushed a deep red. "I'll go get your shirt," she squeaked, practically running back into the tent. Ranma cocked an eyebrow as she scratched the back of her head. "Wonder what that was all about?"

Midori tried to calm herself as she ran into the tent. Taking a couple of deep breaths, she gathered up Ranma's shirt and gave it a good shake. "Here you go," she said as she tossed the shirt out the tent to Ranma.

She turned and busied herself with packing up the rest of the tent's contents while she tried to slow her racing heart. Both hojojutsu and shibari were techniques in which a kunoichi's training crossed over with that of a geisha. Midori had yet to use any of those techniques in an actual assignment, but she and her cousins were ... intimately acquainted with the training and the types of ... friendly games that often accompanied any such training session. She was afraid that the image of a naked "Ranko" squirming around on the floor in shibari was going to be indelibly burned into her retinas now. The timing of Ranma's comment couldn't have been worse, either. She'd just finished wrapping Ranma's ribcage, and the cold morning air had combined with the lack of a shirt to give graphic proof that Ranma's female body was fully functional. Not to mention how Ranma had ... emphasized ... her comment with her hands. "Baka! Baka! Baka! Baka!" Midori berated herself as she slapped her forehead repeatedly. "Get your mind out of the gutter. That has got to be the absolute LAST thing she needs to deal with right now."

What was worse was that Midori was certain Ranma didn't even have a clue on how suggestive her comment was. To Ranma it was undoubtedly just another martial arts technique, nothing more.

"Hey Midori, you OK?"

"GAHHH!" Midori spun around to see Ranma standing in the tent's doorway with a slightly worried expression on her face. Thankfully she was now fully clothed. "Think fast, girl, think fast."

Midori smiled, trying and failing to avoid making eye contact. "Yes, thank you Ranma. It was just a bit of a hot flush. That time of month, you know." Ranma's eyes widened as she quickly backed all the way out of the tent. She was VERY familiar with how other girls acted during "that time of month". It involved large amounts of intense violence, all of it directed at her. Ranma couldn't count the number of times she had been hit, punted, malleted, and pummeled into the ground for simply saying "Hi!" or smiling at the wrong time during "that time of the month". "You need any help packin'?" Ranma inquired, trepidation evident in her voice. "No thanks. I'm almost done here anyway. Could you go and ask Tsuya to come over here? She always helps me with the tent."

"Sure thing." Ranma moved rapidly in the other direction, grateful for having avoided certain doom for once in her life.

Midori stared at the spot Ranma had just vacated and chewed her bottom lip, dismayed at herself for temporarily forgetting how thoroughly Ranma had been abused by the Fiancée Brigade. She'd have to remember never to use that particular excuse with her in the future, and filed a mental note to discuss this with Obāsama as well. She slapped herself along the side of her forehead as she turned her attention back to finishing the last of the packing. "Midori no baka."

## Tokyo

The shrill ring of the telephone shattered the profound silence of the Yamada household. "Moshi moshi," Seiko answered.

"..."

"Good afternoon, Midori-chan! I trust that Tashiro-kun made it there in a reasonable time."

“ ... ”

“Yes, she’s here. She’s currently in the garden at the moment.” “...”

“Are you sure? You know how she hates being disturbed while she’s gardening.” “...”

“No, no, as long as you are certain it’s really important. One moment please.” Seiko picked up the cordless handset from the nearby cradle before hanging up the other phone. She quickly walked to the garden’s entranceway. “Many pardons, Okusama. Your grand-daughter Midori is calling from the Red Cross Hospital in Matsuyama. She was quite insistent in talking with you directly. And no, none of the girls are injured.”

Aiko hid her sigh of relief at the last statement as she took the handset from her aide and closest friend. She quickly handsigned Seiko to remain while she talked. “Good afternoon, Mi-chan! How is my favorite grand-daughter today?” She smiled as she walked over to a nearby bench.

“ ... ”

“And what could that be, Mi-chan?”

“ ... ”

“WHAT?!?” Aiko yelled, her eyes expanding wide in shock. She shakily reached out for support and sat down on the bench with a thump.

**Matsuyama Red Cross Hospital, Ehime Prefecture**

“... that’s correct, Ranma is ALIVE. She blasted her way up in the middle of camp after being buried underground for over three days.” “...”

“Of course I’m having her checked out, Obāsama. She’s with the doctor even as we speak.” “...”

“From what I was able to see, she’s in surprisingly good shape. She broke her left arm badly, that’s probably the worse thing. It’s a really ugly compound fracture of both the radius and the ulna; they’re taking X-rays of that right now. The other injuries were all fairly minor: two bruised ribs, minor concussion, various cuts and abrasions, nothing as serious as the arm.” “...”

“I don’t see any problems there. We had to carry her on a litter while she was unconscious, but after she woke up yesterday she took very little time to recover. She was pushing the pace of the hike all this morning until Tashiro picked us up in the chopper.” “...”

“I doubt that they’ll be able to hold her here overnight. She seems to **really** hate hospitals.” “...”

“Yes, her curse is still locked. I had to clean her arm several times with hot water to disinfect the wounds and she never changed back.”

“ ... ”

“Yes, Obāsama.”

“ ... ”

“Not well, I’m afraid. She’s been very moody since she woke up, and both Kioko and I have overheard her holding long conversations with herself. I wouldn’t blame her a bit if she’s still a little out of it right now; she still has a concussion and you’ve seen how crazy her life has been recently. I can only imagine how bad it must have been beforehand, since I’m fairly certain she seriously downplays what she’s been through when she talks about it with other people. And I’m also sure we’ve missed quite a bit of that when we were watching her in Nerima.” “...”

“Yes, she knows we’ve been watching her. I didn’t try to lie to her, Obāsama, you know how she reacts to that. I was afraid she would disappear in the middle of the night and then we’d truly never have seen her again.”

“ ... ”

“I thought that we’d take the shinkansen back. We can ferry over to Hiroshima in time for the evening run. The jet ferry only takes an hour.” “...”

“No, Tashiro-san did NOT mention that he had flown down in the Lear.”

“ ... ”

"I will make sure that he handles that personally." "Pardon, Obāsama, I'm being paged by the nurse's desk. I will call back if we're significantly delayed for any reason, otherwise I'll call you from the airport in Tokyo." "..."

"I love you too, Obāsama. Got to run now. Bai bai!"

## Tokyo

Aiko pressed the disconnect button and gently set the handset down on the bench. She stood up slowly, a look of incredulous joy gradually washing over her entire being. She turned to her friend, who stood next to her with both hands over her own chest, eyes wide with wonder. "Is it really true ..." Seiko whispered. Aiko nodded once. "He's alive. Ranma's really ALIVE!" She shouted the last word out at the universe as she flung her arms out wide in defiance of fate. On making eye contact both women hugged each other in a long and warm embrace. Seiko's heart leapt when she felt the smaller woman shaking in her grasp, shedding tears that could no longer be contained.

"Finally."

Seiko couldn't help smiling as she set the tea service down on the table. Professional demeanor be damned, it was just so ... satisfying to see Aiko beaming with unbridled happiness for once. That twinkle the diminutive matriarch had in her eye had been absent for way too long. Both women drank their tea in silence, neither wanting to break the mood that permeated the room. Aiko finally spoke when she poured out a second cup. "Seiko, will you please inform Harukichi on what has just transpired and make sure that she is properly dressed? I am certain that this will significantly improve her mood." Seiko took note of the change in address as the Yamada clan matriarch personae returned.

"Hai, Okusama."

Aiko acknowledged with an almost imperceptible nod. "Also, please contact Dr. Ono immediately and inform him that I have reconsidered his request for the funding of a new clinic. Tell him that a former patient of his has sustained some potentially serious injuries and that I would appreciate his personal expertise in addressing this matter. Arrange for transportation as required."

"Hai, Okusama," Seiko nodded as she stood up from the table. Aiko stood up in concert and reached over to gently grasp her friend's shoulder. "Sei-chan?" She inquired with a soft voice, the matriarch's voice having been banished as quickly as it had been summoned.

"Yes, Ai-chan?"

Aiko nodded in the direction of the butsudan. "Before you go, we have a shrine to restore and a granddaughter's spirit to thank."

Both women smiled as they walked over to the family butsudan.

## National Intelligence Directorate, Tokyo Regional Office

Soichi Hiroyoshi glared at the stack of unprocessed reports piled on his desk. At this rate he wouldn't be finished until late evening, and he had promised his wife he'd be home at a reasonable time for once. It didn't help any that this particular delay was mostly self-inflicted; he really ought to know better than to be late handing in his weekly summaries. Hiroyoshi sighed. Processing everyone's reports for the week was not his idea of fun. He plucked the next item off the top of the stack and began reading. He had barely made it to the end of the second page when the door to his office swung open. "Yoshi-kun? Sorry to interrupt, but this just came over the wire." The Ops clerk handed him a large folder and then left as quickly as he had arrived. Hiroyoshi shook his head with a crooked smile on his face – for some reason Ichiro always reminded him of an Australian Terrier on caffeine. Oh well, he might as well see what all the fuss was about.

Twenty minutes later he set the folder down on his desk and rubbed his eyes. Some of the aerial shots were almost unbelievable – to think the kid could survive *that* with nothing more than a broken arm. Escaping having a mountain dropped on top his head would be noteworthy in itself, but add in the fact that he had finally made contact with his mother's family, and ...

Chameleon had just become active in a really big way.

Hiroyoshi reached for the phone. So much for making it home tonight, let alone in a timely manner.

### **Miharadai General Hospital, Nerima**

Desk Nurse Kiyomi looked at her notification stack and grimaced. Seven new folders had just been placed in her In basket and it was only five minutes before her scheduled break. It looked like another loong afternoon shift was in store. Taking the top folder from the stack she noted that the color coding was from the rehabilitation complex attached to the hospital. Someone probably had a relapse – happened all the time. Patient name, Sōichi Tomoe. Sex, male. Age, 34. Condition, cerebral aneurism. Status, critical. Prognosis, poor. Marital status, single/widowed. Dependents, one, female child (1 yr?) on site (see attached).

What the hell? Name, Hotaru Tomoe. Sex, female. Age, unknown (1 yr?). Parents, Sōichi Tomoe (father, unverified), Mother unknown, Birthplace unknown, Birth date unknown Kiyomi quickly flipped through the entire contents of the file and frowned. It looked like someone had simply dumped some random kid on the patient and walked away. Outside of the name and gender, the hospital file on Hotaru Tomoe might as well not even exist. At least there was an emergency contact number in the file. Michiru Kaiou? Probably a girlfriend or a cousin or something.

She took the folder to the copy machine and made a complete duplicate of the record. She really was starting to detest the office at the rehab clinic; they never seemed to follow up on making sure all the files were in proper order. While it was technically against regulations to distribute copies of the files, her cousin was a clerk in the prefecture family registry office and had helped fill out incomplete files in the past. She'd see what he could come up with when the family got together this weekend.

Picking up the phone, she dialed the number of the Kaiou residence.

### **Yamada-ke, Suginami-ku, Tokyo**

Ranma shook her head as she and her cousins stepped out of the limousine. The large Western style house that the car pulled up to was impressive and the grounds considerably larger than the Kunō estate. Private jets, limos, huge estate, hell, her mother's family must be loaded. Ranma recalled what Midori had said about there being a "falling out" between mom and her

grandmother. If they were as rich as it appeared she could see why; she wouldn't have wanted that lazy bastard getting his greedy hands into this either. Ranma just hoped the rest of the family was at least half-way as normal as the three girls appeared to be. All the members of any rich family she'd encountered in her travels had been loonier than March hares, and she really didn't want to be related to a pack of crazies if they were anything like the Kunōs.

She failed to see the irony inherent in this particular thought. The four girls exchanged shoes in the large genkan and then Midori led the small procession down a short hallway to a beautiful fusuma doorway. Sliding the screens open, Midori called out the traditional "Tadaima!" before ushering the girls into the greeting room with a secretive smile. She carefully got out of the way as the featured party stepped into the room. "RANMA-SEMPA!" shrieked Harukichi just before she launched herself at her newest cousin. Ranma barely had time to brace herself before a short red-headed blur latched onto her with a glomp worthy of any Amazon. Stunned, she tentatively put her free arm around the shorter girl's back when she felt the girl crying and sobbing into her chest. "Ranma, meet your cousin Harukichi." A gentle hand on her shoulder accompanied Midori's comment.

Ranma looked up to scan the room for the remaining occupants. There was a very short elderly woman who had to be her grandmother Aiko; the resemblance to mom was unmistakable. Standing next to her was a tall black-haired woman about mom's age, that must be her friend Seiko, and on the other side of Grandmother Aiko was ... Doc TOFŪ?!? Aiko walked over to the slightly dazed girl and enveloped both Ranma and Harukichi in a warm embrace. She beamed as she spoke softly in the girl's ear. "Welcome home, son."

### **Chapter 4: Home Sweet Home?**

### Suginami - Thursday, March 3rd 1994

Aiko stepped back a pace and smiled at her grandchild to cover a grimace of displeasure. Ranma's body language was so ... open. Of course, being glomped by Haru-chan would tend to lower **anyone's** defenses, but she could tell that Ranma had actually been TRAINED to reveal all of his emotions externally. Something undoubtedly done quite deliberately by his ... idiot of a father and a deficiency that would have to be corrected soon.

Midori chuckled at the sight of her cousin's first encounter with Harukichi's enthusiastic greeting. She just hoped that Haru-chan didn't make Ranma's ribs any worse; the diminutive ninja was extremely strong for her size and had a grip like a python. "Ranma, this is your grandmother Aiko Yamada. Obāsama, Ranma Saotome." "Welcome to Yamada-ke, Ranma-kun. I see you've already met your cousin Harukichi Kurayami," Aiko said as she reached over and squeezed the redhead's shoulder, who snuggled harder into Ranma's chest in response. "This is my friend Seiko Moriguchi, and I believe you already know Doctor Ono."

Ranma nodded in acknowledgement. "Hiya Doc," she said before wincing slightly. Aiko shook Harukichi's shoulder gently. "Haru-chan, you might consider letting go of your cousin for now."

Ranma flinched for a moment when Harukichi's hug tightened. "She needs to be able to breathe sometime, you know." Harukichi jumped as if scalded, eyes wide in panic. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I really didn't mean to ..." She halted in mid stream when she saw the amused expressions on both Aiko's and Midori's faces. Her subsequent pout elicited a brief bout of chuckling from the other girls. She turned her bright emerald eyes to the pig-tailed girl and bowed. "I'm sorry, Ranma-sempai. I hope I didn't aggravate any of your injuries."

"Naw, you don't have to worry 'bout that, 'Kichi," Ranma waved off her discomfort with a smile. "I do kinda wonder ..." She put her hand on her hip and leaned forward to study the shorter girl intently for a moment.

"The hair and eyes and glomp ... you sure you're not an Amazon or nothin'?"

Harukichi's slight blush was accompanied by a round of chuckling from the rest of the group. Aiko shook her head in amusement. "Midori-chan?" "Yes, Obāsama?"

"Would you girls please show Ranma-kun to his room upstairs? He will also need to know where the washrooms and furo are located. Tea will be served in the Blue Room as soon as you are all freshened up. Casual dress."

"Yes, Obāsama." Midori nodded, relieved on being informed that the usual signing training session would be set aside.

"Dr. Ono, if you would be so kind as to accompany me ..." Aiko and the other adults walked towards the back left hallway.

"If you will follow me please?" asked Midori. She had taken several steps before realizing she had left the martial artist behind.

Ranma was looking about the foyer and gaping. The room was large for a foyer, about twelve feet deep by fifteen wide, and sat between two parallel hallways that added another four and a half feet to each end of the room. It was an odd yet pleasing mixture of East and West and extended upwards to the second story, which surrounded the upper level with a U-shaped open hallway. An intricate wood and paper chandelier hung from the high ceiling. The hardwood floor had been railed for fusuma around the lower hallways, allowing either hallway to be screened off in various manners; the current configuration blocked the guest hallways while leaving the more distant residential hallways open. The two-story right wall was decorated by three long hatajirushi banners displaying different clan mon. She assumed that the center banner was the one with the Yamada emblem on it.

"Ranma?"

"Huh? Oh yeah." She hurried across the floor as Midori and Kioko walked to the far right corner of the room. A flash of movement caught her eye; both Tsuya and Harukichi were already racing around the upper hallway. She followed the two sisters around the corner to the stairway hidden behind the foyer's



right wall.

"Your room's the first door up on the left," Midori said, pointing up the stairs. "We'll give you the Grand Tour tomorrow."

Ranma followed the two sisters up the stairs. Kioko continued to the right down the hallway, so she followed Midori into her new room only to stop suddenly. The L-shaped room was ... big, at least half again as large as the guest room she had shared at the Tendōs, and twice the size of Akane's or Nabiki's bedroom. There was a teak computer desk and bookcase to the left, and in the main part of the room to the right was a writing desk with TV and stereo, a double dresser with mirrors, an oversized futon, and against the side wall were ... **three** armoires? ... and wasn't that a portrait of **mom** hanging over the desk? A short green-haired girl in a housemaid's uniform was taking an outfit out of the nearest armoire; a green and white cotton yukata had already been set out on the futon. Ranma was a little surprised to see the outfit was one of her typical Chinese red tang and pants combinations, although the fabric appeared to be made of the highest grade of silk. In fact, **everything** in the room looked ... expensive. All of the furniture was teak and the rich fabrics didn't show any of the usual signs of wear.

"Ranma, this is Jun," Midori said, obviously enjoying her cousin's reaction. "Ranma-dono," replied the maid with a bow. "Err, hi!"

"You'll find that Jun, Naomi, and Kumiko actually wield all the power around here," Midori quipped. "The phone's on the desk. If you need anything, just dial 31 and ask; someone's always on duty. Jun will show you where the washrooms and furo are. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go and roust my sister; she's probably lost in another book by now." Midori walked back out the room as the maid started to speak.

"We've placed your pack and personal belongings in the third armoire," Jun said as she pointed towards the far corner of the room. "You will also find extra bedding and pillows there if you need them. The center armoire has female clothing, shoes and accessories are in the drawer underneath. The left armoire has male clothing with shoes underneath as well." Jun had gathered up the tang outfit along with the yukata as she spoke. "The dresser has personal items in the top drawer and underwear underneath, female on the left, male on the right. The Famicom and Mega Drive are on the floor under the TV. If you have any favorite games that aren't in the drawer, call and we'll get a copy delivered within a day. The same is true for music, if you want a specific cassette or compact disc, just call. The computer is Internet connected. The house has a high speed T1 link, so don't hesitate to use it as often as you like." Jun smiled as she turned towards the door; Ranma-chan was so **cute** with her mouth hanging open like that. "If you will follow me, Ranma-dono, I will show you to the washroom."

Ranma's head was whirling as she followed the green-haired maid into the hallway. She'd actually stayed at larger mansions in the past, the Chardins for instance, and was familiar with the custom of maid service, but her stays had always been as a part of some challenge or misadventure. This was the first time she would be expected to deal with it as a normal part of daily living, and it made her more than a little uncomfortable. She was used to traveling light. "... are Kioko-dono's and Midori-sama's rooms. Tsuya-dono's and Harukichi-dono's rooms are opposite ..."

And there was something a little unsettling about the way Jun walked. She was older than Ranma had initially thought and obviously trained in the Art, but there was an odd emphasis in her gait that Ranma couldn't quite identify just yet. It reminded her a little of the way Shampoo walked. "... is the main washroom," Jun said as she opened a double-door that was at the opposite end of the hallway from Ranma's. The hallway continued around the right for an equal distance and then right again to surround the lower foyer on three sides. "The next two doors are the toilet rooms, and the furo is the last door on this wall." Jun grinned to herself as she led Ranma into the main washroom. The poor dear was obviously going to take a LOT of coaching before she would be comfortable just living in the house, let alone cope with some of the more ... esoteric ... training she had taught the other girls. Seiko- sama had warned them Ranma-chan would require very careful handling, but even she had managed to understate the reality of the situation from what Jun could tell.

"There's a full shower in the corner, and you will find an assortment of hair care products in the right vanity. If you let us know what your soap, shampoo, and conditioner preferences are, we can have them available for you the next day." "Ahhh ... just 'bout anything you got's fine, Jun." Ranma looked about washroom. It was about nine feet square with an additional shower alcove on the right side. A marble topped dual-basin vanity extended from wall to wall on the left, and a shorter matching single-basin vanity took up the right wall from the door to the shower alcove. Each vanity was topped by an expansive mirror and a long bar of globe lights. Jun walked to the smaller vanity and set Ranma's bundle of fresh clothes down. Turning, she motioned politely for Ranma to approach. "If you will let me examine your hair for a moment, Ranma-dono, perhaps I can make some suggestions." "I really don't need nothin' special," Ranma replied as she walked over to the green-haired maid. Jun ran her hands over Ranma's hair several times and felt her pigtail carefully before kneeling down to open the bottom door of the vanity. She began pulling items out. "I would suggest you start with the chamomile and calendula shampoo for the first week, along with the apricot keratin conditioner. Neither is highly scented and both are designed to fortify and help repair split ends. The aloe vera soap contains both vitamin E and moisturizers, and I'll order some lemon glycerin facial soap for you tomorrow morning. There's a fresh washcloth in the shower stall," Jun continued as she stood back up. "Used clothing goes in the hamper under the window. Considering the cast, do you need any assistance in undressing, unbraiding your hair, or washing?" she finished with a smile. "Err, no no no that's fine," Ranma stammered. She looked down with a frown at the plaster cast encasing her left forearm. "Idiot hospital docs, didn't believe me. I TOLD them I didn't need a cast." She looked quickly around the room before turning back to face Jun. "You got a wastebasket round here somewhere? Might as well take the stupid thing off first." "There are wastebaskets underneath each sink," Jun replied as she went to retrieve one. "Are you certain removing the cast is a good idea, Ranma-dono?" "Yeah, the arm'll be healed by mornin' anyway." Ranma tapped the cast in several places before nodding. "That'll work. Just set the basket down an' step back, this is likely to be kinda messy." She waited for Jun to step clear before powering ki into both arms. A flood of brilliant white filled the room around the martial artist's arms. "Damn, still too damn much." "Once you have fully assumed your position as Guardian, the ability to properly regulate your life force usage will be greatly improved. This particular shortcoming is the result of the incomplete bonding between us." Ranma rolled her eyes. "Yeah, whatever. Watch yer eyes, Jun."

Jun could barely make out the shape of Ranma's arms in the glow. One of the glowing arms suddenly morphed into a fuzzy stroboscopic halo accompanied by a sharp stuttering crack lasting about twelve seconds. Both glow and noise disappeared suddenly. Ranma calmly peeled the remaining half of the cast off her arm and dropped it in the basket with a **clunk**. "Ahhh, that feels MUCH better," Ranma exclaimed as she massaged the injured arm with her right hand. "I'm pretty sure I caught all the flyin' bits." Jun's eyes were huge. The girl in front of her had casually expended more ki in fifteen seconds than most grandmasters were capable of calling out in an entire month, just to remove a cast from her arm. Incredible. And she complained about having too **much** ki? Ranma frowned when she noticed the expression on the maid's face. "Hey, you OK?" "Yes, thank you," Jun nodded, forcing a smile. "Do you require anything else, Ranma-dono?" "Naw, this's fine, thanks." "Then if you will excuse me, I will go and see if the girls require anything," Jun replied with a genuine smile, picking up the wastebasket. "I'll be back when you are finished with your shower; I'm certain they would enjoy having you join them in the furo." "Erk!" Ranma exclaimed. "I'll guess I can check out the furo later." "Are you sure, Ranma-dono?" asked Jun as she put the wastebasket back under the sink. "They are your cousins, after all." Ranma frantically nodded. "Very well, I will tell them not to wait for you. Enjoy the shower." Jun bowed before exiting, closing the washroom doors behind her. Ranma luxuriated in the shower's steamy spray of water. It had been quite a while since she felt this

**clean.** When she was on the road, a cold mountain stream with some sand was usually the only thing available, and the furo at the Tendōs didn't provide hot water for the scrub. Cold, often freezing water was linked firmly in her mind with her girl form. This was the first time she had ever actually enjoyed being in hot water as a girl. She had to admit, the shampoos and soap Jun had picked out for her were ... nice. She hadn't understood half of what Jun had said about them, but the directions on the bottles were easy enough to follow. More than once she'd overheard girls discussing their various choices for toiletries and had never understood why they put so much effort into it. After all, shampoo was shampoo, right?

She was now beginning to see what the fuss was all about. She knew she was far more sensitive to taste as a girl, which was one of many reasons why ice cream was such a treat, but she was finding out how much more all her senses were enhanced. The scent of the shampoo and the feel of the soap on her skin were ... different under the wash of hot water. She had always been too cold to notice any difference as a girl, and she certainly had never noticed these subtle feelings before when she was a guy.

Sighing, she turned off the water. The amount of water used in a western style shower seemed excessively wasteful, but she could definitely get used to it. It was an invigorating and delightful contrast to the furo. She was squeezing the water out of her unbound hair when the frosted glass stall door opened suddenly.

Kioko, a very **naked** Kioko, stood in front of her, left hand on the stall handle and a towel draped over the other arm.

Ranma quickly shut her eyes and braced herself, waiting for the inevitable. "Oh! I'm sorry, Ranma-kun, I thought Onēchan was in the shower." Ranma continued to wait. Damn it all, why didn't her cousin just haul off and get it over with? Kioko stared in dismay at the sight of the shorter girl cringing in front of her. She knew from their months of observation just how difficult Ranma's public life had been back in Nerima, but a lot of what happened to Ranma inside Tendō-ke itself had been hidden from their view. Only Harukichi had been able to get close to the Tendō house without being seen in all of the constant chaos and destruction. What kind of monsters were they to invoke **this** as a conditioned response? She had difficulty swallowing past the large lump that had developed suddenly in her throat.

"Ranma-kun," Kioko said softly.

Ranma carefully opened one eye. Her other eye snapped open when she saw the odd expression on her cousin's face. Before she could recognize all of the emotions the look contained, the outer washroom door opened.

"Pardon me, Ranma-dono," Jun caroled as she entered. "Are you finished with your ... shower ..." Jun's cheery voice trailed off as she caught sight of the frozen tableau in front of her. "Oh dear." She quickly strode over to the pair on seeing the desperate plea for help etched in Kioko's entire posture and took the towel from her arm. "Here, let me help you with your hair." Jun draped the towel around Ranma's shoulders and torso and led her out of the stall. Kioko signed her thanks and scampered quickly into the shower. Ranma let the green-haired girl lead her over to the large vanity. She was confused and didn't understand why Kioko hadn't just off and walloped her one for being a pervert. That's what girls did, right? Distracted, she dried herself almost mechanically while the maid fussed about a bit in

the vanity. Throwing the damp towel on the counter, Ranma started to reach for her outfit when she noticed Jun holding the green and white yukata out for her to wear. Smiling, Ranma shook her head and quickly dressed in the familiar red tang and black drawstring pants that had been her trademark outfit for the last year. "Thanks, Jun, but I really don't need any more help. The hair'll dry fast enough once I get it braided." She took to towel and dried her hair with ki at Amaguriken speed before recalling the effect her last ki display had on the girl.

Jun kept her features schooled as she watched Ranma's ki briefly light when her hands blurred. These ... casual ... and apparently unconscious displays of power were going to be somewhat difficult to adjust

to. She smiled as she held up a brush. "At least let me help brush out your hair before you braid it." Ranma thought for a second before nodding. Jun pulled the stool over for Ranma and waited for her to sit before starting to brush and gently tease the tangles out of her hair. Ranma closed her eyes. It had been quite a while since the last time mom had done this for "Ranko". Jun lost herself in the rhythm of her brushing. Ranma's hair needed several weeks worth of conditioning before a proper shine could be attained, but it had enough body to hold any style the girl cared to choose. She'd have to see if she couldn't eventually convince Ranma to try something besides a pigtail.

Ranma was drifting in utter bliss. For once she was truly relaxed, and Jun's steady gentle brushstrokes had her close to falling asleep on the stool. Jun was a little surprised when she felt Ranma start to vibrate gently and heard her voice a low rumbling hum. The girl almost sounded like she was ... purring? All too soon Ranma felt her hair being braided behind her. She waited until Jun had finished before looking around for the whisker, which was on the vanity next to her. "Thanks, Jun. That felt real nice." She smiled while she tied the braid off. Ranma wobbled a little as she stood before walking towards the door. "I'll be in my room. Let me know where I'm supposed to be next."

"Jun said she'd be in her room, Onēchan," Kioko replied, saving her spot with a bookmark before setting the thick tome down on her desk. Midori shook her head in mock dismay. Trying to get everyone together at the same time was like herding cats; not impossible but extremely difficult. Tsuya and Harukichi had already gone downstairs, and she had rather expected to find Kioko with her nose buried in a book, but if Ranma was true to form she'd be outside somewhere practicing instead of being holed up in her room.

"Time to go roust the natives, Sis. We don't want to keep Obāsama waiting **too** long, do we?" Midori quipped as she followed her sister out of her room. The walk down the hallway to Ranma's room was a short one.

"I'll inform Obāsama that you and Ranma will be right down," Kioko said. Midori stopped at the end of the hallway and watched her younger sister hurry down the stairs. There was something just a little off in Kioko's voice; she seemed a bit upset over something. Midori made a mental note to talk to her about it later.

"Ranma?" Midori called out while knocking twice on the open door. Not hearing a response, she walked in and looked around the corner. Ranma was sprawled out on top of her futon fast asleep. Well, at least Midori now knew why she wasn't out practicing. A faint glow around Ranma's left arm caught Midori's attention and pointed out that a cast no longer surrounded the injured limb. She walked over and knelt down next to the sleeping girl. Before she had a chance to do more than glance at the arm, Ranma rolled over on her side and curled up, burying her arm underneath the pillow.

Midori smiled at the sight. "Kawaii." Her hand reached over and gently brushed a stray lock of hair out of Ranma's face before she realized what she'd just done and froze. She quickly moved the hand to Ranma's shoulder and gave it a little shake. "Wake up, Ranma." "G'way, Pops," Ranma mumbled in response. Midori shook a little harder. "Everyone's downstairs waiting, Ranma." "Tired, g'way," she mumbled and rolled over on her other side. Midori frowned. This was like trying to wake Tsuya. Hmmm. "RANMA!" Midori barked.

"Whaa?" Ranma groaned, sitting up. "Oh, hi Midori." Ranma yawned and stretched, arching her head and back while trying to shrug the stiffness out of her shoulders. "Sorry, must'a dozed off for a bit." Ranma turned to her cousin and frowned slightly. Midori was looking a little flushed and holding her nose with one hand. "Hey, you OK? I didn't accidentally poke you or nothing, did I?" "No you didn't. I'm fine, Ranma," Midori replied. She took a deep breath to calm herself. "Kami-sama, I'm going to have to somehow convince her to start wearing a bra, if only in self defense."

"C'mon," Midori said as she stood. "Grandmother is serving late tea and snacks, and everyone else should be down there by now."

Ranma raised her teacup and arched an eyebrow on smelling the aroma. Her grandmother evidently had similar tastes in teas as Kasumi; this had to be Chinese Yinzhen White, with a touch of something else. Jasmine? Ranma took a sip. Yes, definitely. A Yinzhen Jasmine; the combination of aromas was unmistakable as it was delicate, and the light golden-yellow color and lingering sweet aftertaste was a sure indicator of a Fujian province tea. Kasumi had gotten her hooked on good teas the first week they'd arrived at the Tendōs and the two of them had managed to have tea together at regular intervals, in spite of all the chaos. She listened absently to the conversation around the table between the girls and her grandmother and idly noted the seating arrangement as she sipped her tea. She'd been seated next to Grandmother, and Doc Tofū sat in the kamiza or honored guest position opposite both of them. Midori and Kioko sat on the right, Tsuya and Harukichi on the left, and Seiko sat next to Grandmother on her other side. A really cute black-haired girl in a maid's outfit, Naomi if she remembered correctly, stood off to the side. She set her empty cup down and looked wistfully at the tray of tea cakes and cookies placed in the middle of the table. She didn't immediately make a grab for them since there weren't any large gluttonous black and white pandas around to fend off, and Kasumi had actually managed to din SOME semblance of manners into her. Ranma had always been amazed how much it hurt to see Kasumi frown even slightly in disappointment when she did something "wrong" during their private teas. She was still staring morosely at the plate of pastries when all of the conversation around the table halted.

"Doctor Ono," Aiko began, "I want to thank you for coming here on such short notice. Ranma- kun, considering your past experience I've asked Doctor Ono to become your personal physician, if that is acceptable to you." Startled, Ranma looked over at the bespectacled chiropractor who returned her stare with a wry grin. "Hey, sure, Tofū's cool. You OK with this, Doc?" Tofū nodded. "I'm looking forward to it, Ranma. I will admit that I have ... missed the excitement that your presence brings."

Aiko smiled. "Good. I will have Akahito contact Higashiyama-san in the morning and finalize the contract on the building. You will have to revise your equipment and staffing list upwards a bit, Doctor Ono. I'm afraid that the building we were able to obtain is quite a bit larger than the one you had originally planned for. I believe that there should be sufficient room for a complete in-house lab if you wish."

Tofū nodded once more, understanding the expectations of his services by the Yamada matriarch. "Certainly. If I may be permitted to review the chosen location first, I will submit whatever revisions that are deemed appropriate." "I will have Akahito drive you to the clinic tomorrow afternoon, if that meets with your current schedule?"

"It most certainly does, Yamada-san. I thank you."

Aiko turned to Ranma and smiled. "Ranma-kun, I would appreciate it if you permit Doctor Ono to perform a complete physical examination of you tomorrow. I have some concerns over your recent injuries and I would feel more comfortable if you were seen by a doctor who has had direct personal experience with your particular medical concerns. Perhaps he could look over your injured arm later this evening, as I see that you have removed the cast put on earlier today." "This?" Ranma said, holding up her left arm which showed only a slightly bruised ring around the location of the break. "Heh, I told those idiots it didn't need a cast. Doc Tofū can look at it if y'like, but it'll be all healed tomorrow anyway." "Ranma, are you sure?" Midori asked. "That was an extremely severe break of both bones." "I heal quick," Ranma shrugged. Midori tried to ignore the interesting things the shrug did to certain other parts of Ranma's anatomy. Aiko suppressed a smirk on seeing Midori's expression. "Ranma, I'm curious," Tofū asked. "I've noticed that you've made no attempt to change. Have you been inflicted with another Full Body Cat's Tongue?" "Naw, I'm immune to that now," Ranma replied. Her shoulders slumped visibly. "Yer right, though, I'm stuck good this time. Some idiot Chinese prince splashed me with water from a ladle that locks the curse after I argued how he was treatin' Akane. We chased him over most the countryside before catchin' up to him at Horai. I was fighting to get the kettle that would unlock the curse when we blew up the mountain we were fightin' on and I got caught in the landslide. I met the girls here after diggin' my way back up. Far as I know the kettle's lost for good." "And that reminds me: you girls see who else got out of that fight? I was

kind'a occupied for a while there," Ranma asked with a sardonic grin. Midori quickly signed to the other girls that she'd handle this question. Aiko caught Doctor Ono's minute and quickly suppressed reaction to the almost imperceptible shift in posture. "Interesting."

"Ranma, as far as we know only Mu Se and yourself survived the collapse of the mountain," Midori replied. "Mu Se flew off shortly after the landslide, and at the time we thought he was the only survivor. Neither Hibiki-san, Her Be, or his two bodyguards emerged from the ground in the three days we were there before you tunneled up." Tofū's left eyebrow arched. Ranma had been buried underground for three days? "Heh, I'd be really surprised if Ryōga bought it, he's TOUGH. The way he gets lost, he's probably tunneled half-way to Paris by now. Mousse made it too, huh? Good, maybe the blind idiot will get Shampoo an' the old ghoul to finally give up an' go home. As for Herb and crew, I dunno. We beat on each other pretty good at the time."

"Have you given any thought of what you're going to do now?" Tofū asked. "From what I remember of the arrangements with the Tendōs, this particular complication could result in a certain amount of difficulty for you."

"Can't go back yet, that's for sure," Ranma responded morosely. "I promised Akane I'd return a man, and I ain't exactly one at the moment, ne? Besides, old man Tendō swore he'd try and marry my girl side if I go back like this." She shuddered: the mere thought of that still gave her a bad case of heebie-jeebies.

Aiko felt a cold rage settle in the pit of her stomach. They would try to force **this** on her flesh and blood? Mi-chan was correct; far too much had been done to her grandchild that they didn't know about.

"Ranma-nēchan? We may have a solution to unlocking your curse," Harukichi stated, pulling a kettle of hot water from underneath and setting it on the table in front of her. Ranma was slightly startled to realize that the younger girl had just called her "Big Sister". It gave her a strange fluttery feeling inside. She smiled when she saw the kettle. "That isn't going to work right now, 'Kichi," she said gently to the younger. Harukichi pulled a filled plastic one-liter soda water bottle out from under the table and set it next to the kettle. "During the first part of your battle against the Musk prince, I was able to gather a sample of the water from the unlocking kettle." Ranma's eyes got huge. "That's ..."

Harukichi nodded. "I really hope it works, Nēchan." Ranma had moved before Harukichi finished speaking. Standing up quickly she vaulted over the table in one unbroken move, performing a half somersault with a twist to land on the other side of the table directly behind her red-haired cousin. She grabbed the plastic bottle with its cargo of precious liquid as she passed overhead and had the cap off by the time her feet hit the floor. Ranma quickly emptied the contents of the entire bottle over her head. Eiko noted the interaction of the Kaisufuu water with the stasis field. It quickly recorded the changing vectors and field strength equations and started a tensor analysis of the resulting energy geometries.

Ranma tossed the empty bottle aside and raised the kettle of hot water over her head. Everyone looked on with anticipation.

**Splash!**

Ranma stood there for a moment, hot water streaming over her head, before tossing the kettle aside with a **clank**. She collapsed in a heap on the ground and stared vacantly at the floor. The last bit of hope she had been secretly harboring vanished in a wash of despair. She never felt Harukichi's hug or heard her cousin's sobs on her shoulder, nor did she feel herself being swept up by her grandmother's warm embrace. She didn't feel **anything** for an indeterminate time.

"Ranma?"

"..."

"Ranma, I've completed the tensor analysis of the stasis field that is currently locking your curse."

"..."

"Ranma, the water from the Kaisufuu kettle was not totally ineffective. I recorded a 46.3% drop in the absolute field strength of the stasis magic. While it was insufficient to disrupt the stasis field itself, a tensor analysis of the various field vectors indicates that you **should** be able to eventually recover your

male form without the use of the Kaisufuu.” “WHAT!? You SURE?”

Aiko winced when Ranma suddenly yelled in her ear. “You might want to consider moderating your responses to listening only, Ranma. You are currently in the presence of others.”

“Never mind ‘bout THAT! What exactly did’ja mean?” “Very well. The reason the Kaisufuu water did not totally disrupt the stasis field lock is because it had lost most of its own field strength. Extrapolating backwards, I calculate that the Kaisufuu water would have had to been removed from the Kaisufuu itself by no more than fourteen hours if the unlocking properties were to be effective. The magic field left in the water sample provided by your cousin was simply too weak to disrupt the stasis field. It did, however, vastly simplify the task of integrating the various magic fields that are currently in place around you when you assume your full Guardian position. You should be grateful for your cousin’s actions in obtaining the sample that was just employed.” “Waitaminute, waitaminute, magic **fields**? How many do I got besides the curse and the lock?” “I have detected eight distinct magic fields that are currently active on your personage. All but one has been properly identified and accounted for. I had intended to discuss the method for identifying the eighth field with you this evening. I had been waiting for you to complete your healing before broaching the subject, since the identification process can be rather stressful.”

“Bu... bu... EIGHT curses?” Ranma practically shrieked.

“No, eight distinct magic fields. Your ‘Jusenkyō Curse’ is comprised of three different fields. One is the transformation magic itself that causes the change in genders. The second is a variable trigger; this is what allows the transformation magic to swap activations alternately between cold and hot water. The third field is a subtle behavioral and probability field modifier that forces you to be placed in situations where you will encounter the currently selected trigger mechanism in unfavorable situations.”

“‘K, that’s three. The lock’s four. Unknown makes five. What ‘bout the other three?” Aiko was extremely disturbed. Ranma’s eyes were vacant, yet he was obviously holding an actual conversation with SOMETHING. The pauses and responses were too natural and exact to be the result of delusional raving. She held on to her grandchild and tried to analyze her ki. “One is a subtle virtual pheromone emitter. Its purpose appears to be to make you extremely desirable to the opposite gender of your current form. I was unable to determine if this field was simply another part of the Jusenkyō magics, since there were no frequency markers that matched any of the other three components. The seventh field is a general probability field modifier that acts to decrease the level of temporal and spatial causality...” Aiko’s eyes widened in shock. The ki signature Ranma was exhibiting showed definite traces of Yamada mixed with Saotome, but the underlying base beneath it was incredible. It was **pure**, without any identifying marks or even gender bias. Simply pure ki. Impossible, yet there it was. “... in your immediate vicinity. The last magic field is a weak neural inhibitor that is centered in your cognitive centers. This field dampens your logical reasoning abilities slightly in favor of enhancing your intuitive thought processes. The last two fields are distinct in their frequency markers so I must conclude that they were applied individually.” “Erk.”

“I assume that you have given some thought on how you are going to explain your recent outburst to your relatives and companions present? You **did** instruct me to ignore this concern earlier.”

“Ahhhh ...” She turned her attention outwards. She found herself in her grandmother’s lap cradled in a tight embrace, with Harukichi sitting in her own lap clutching her waist tightly. Flustered, Ranma absently began stroking the smaller girl’s hair as she desperately searched her memory for the right thing to say. She tried to recall how Kasumi would act in a similar situation.

“There there ‘Kichi,” Ranma said softly while she continued caressing the girl’s head. “NĒCHAN!” Harukichi exclaimed, tightening her grip around Ranma’s waist. “I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m so sorry ...”

“Shhhh, ‘Kichi, wasn’t your fault. No need to cry ‘bout it.”

Harukichi’s head popped up suddenly, eyes wide and shining. Ranma gave her cousin a wry smile. “The magic’s all gone from the water, squirt. It wouldn’ta worked no matter what.”

“Ranma-kun, who exactly were you talking to?” Aiko asked softly. Ranma turned to look at her

grandmother. She saw the confusion in her eyes, along with a steely determination. This was going to be difficult. Nabiki always lied by telling just part of the truth. Maybe that would work here as well.

"A ... friend, someone who's been helpin' out lots lately. Eiko's the main reason I survived the fight with Herb. We still got ... things to work out before I can say much more 'bout it. Can I talk with you later, Grandmother? I've been meanin' to ask you about all this anyways." Aiko searched deep inside Ranma's eyes before slowly nodding her agreement. The boy had given her word, and the Yamada matriarch could tell that she would keep it. That would have to do for now.

"Ranma-kun, would you go with Doctor Ono so he can examine your arm? I want to have a talk with the girls, and I believe that we have had all the excitement we can handle at the moment." Nodding, Ranma disentangled herself from the twin embraces and stood up. She frowned when she saw the troubled looks of the other girls. She walked over to Tofū who was waiting for her by the door, turned and looked back at her ... family. "I'm really sorry 'bout all this," she said softly before following the doctor out of the room.

Ranma sat on the edge of the table and watched Tofū arrange the contents of his kit bag next to her. They'd gone into a room across the hall from the one they'd just left and the black-haired maid had delivered the bag shortly afterwards. Ranma could tell that Tofū was deep in thought. "Ranma, I saw the X-rays of your arm taken earlier at the Matsuyama hospital, and I must say that I am surprised you were willing to remove the cast so soon. The break appeared to be about two weeks old, yet I was told that you had broken both forearm bones two days ago. Neither of these corresponds with what I'm observing at the moment. May I see your arm please?" Ranma silently extended her left arm out. Tofū gingerly took a hold of the arm and ran his fingertips gently around the break location. He could feel only the slightest swelling of the skin and the bruising pattern was indicative of an almost fully healed fracture.

He grasped her arm around the break location with his thumb and index finger. "Does this hurt?" he inquired as he gently applied a little force to the grip. "Naw. It's still a little sore but it don't actually hurt." "Please rotate your wrist slowly clockwise and then counterclockwise as far as you can." Tofū felt the bones shift underneath his grip as Ranma twisted her wrist around and back. There was a nominal bulge in each bone around the break location as would be expected from a serious fracture, but as far as Tofū could tell the bones had not only knitted themselves back together completely, they had done so without suffering any misalignment or splintering. Tofū released Ranma's arm and looked the girl in the eyes. "Ranma, although I can't be certain without taking additional X-rays of the arm, my experience tells me that your arm has essentially healed completely. I know that your normal rate of healing is exceptional, but this is something I've only encountered twice before in my life and you aren't old enough to be able to generate that amount of healing ki. The last ki master who could heal at such a rate was well over one hundred and twenty years old."

"Doc, I can generate a whole lot of ki right now. Fact is, that's exactly my problem. I got ki. Tons and TONS of ki. What I don't got is enough control to use it for healing without tossin' least half of it away in a stupid light show." Ranma hopped of the table and held her arm up. "Watch."

She concentrated on healing. The bright glow reappeared around her arm, almost blinding in its radiance.

One of Tofū's eyes twitched.

"Damn, it's getting' worse."

"This is but one of many reasons why we must complete the process of your Guardianship as soon as possible, Ranma. The flow of life force between the two of us is beginning to increase rapidly. At the current rate it is possible that it will reach a point where it is beyond your ability to control and direct it without incurring permanent damage. You would ..." Tofū blinked when the ki display suddenly winked out. He blinked several more times to clear his vision before noticing Ranma's eyes, which had become totally vacant again. He must be communicating with the Eiko person he had mentioned earlier. "... be wise to limit your ki usage to that which is absolutely necessary. Your arm is indeed fully healed and no longer requires the increased rate of healing that you have been providing it." "Why didn't you mention



this before?"

"The current situation is ... unusual in the extreme, Ranma. In previous instances where a Guardian has perished in the line of duty, there has always been a replacement candidate who has been readily available. This system was abandoned when Pluto assumed Guardianship." "Great, just great. How much time you think I got before I lose control?" "You would not lose control per se; the same safeguards that prevented damage to your system the previous time you overextended your ki usage are still in place. What would happen is that you would completely lose access to any ki manipulation until the power flows are properly balanced. This would have a severely detrimental effect on your combat efficiency." "OK, that ain't so bad. How long?"

"If you limit your ki usage to emergency situations only, it's likely that there will be little if any danger. If you continue to employ ki at the rate of usage based on the last two days, I project that you will risk losing access within five days." "Five days, huh? The way things always seem to hunt me out, we'd better count on that as tops." "That would be the prudent precaution to take, naturally. I sense that you've also decided on a course of action to explain the recent verbal outbursts to your relatives." "Yup, gonna tell them the whole damn thing." "This is not a course of action that I would have suggested, Ranma. The more individuals who know the details of your particular position, the higher the likelihood that some form of serious repercussion will befall those concerned. Ideally a Guardian should be totally independent of any form of potential coercion."

"Can't be helped. They sure ain't gonna be satisfied with hints and excuses. Besides, nothing's gonna hide the changes in my ki signature, and I'm pretty sure Grandma can read 'em. I can, so can the Doc, the leech, the old ghoul, heck even pops can tell the difference in ki sigs if the lazy bastard really wants to try."

"One moment, a ki signature is a concept that is not currently recorded in my data store." "You gotta be kiddin' me. Just a sec, I'll show you." Ranma refocused on the room. Tofu was sitting patiently next to her with a look of intense concentration on his face.

"I'm assuming that was 'Eiko' whom you've just been communicating with?" Tofu asked. "Yup. Doc, can you do me a favor? I know how good you are at hidin' your ki. Can you project it a bit instead? I need to get a good read on someone 'sides myself."

Tofu looked her in the eyes. "Certainly, Ranma." A faint golden hue emerged. "You do realize that you are going to have to explain the comment about possibly losing control of your ki, don't you?" Ranma nodded as she placed a hand up to the doctor's aura. She concentrated on emptying all feeling from her arm and pulled a portion of Tofu's ki inside. "I see. His life force has certain frequency and modulation markers that can be used to identify him. This is valuable data. The magics built into the Guardian uniform currently have no provision for masking the life force signature of the wearer. I will now correct this deficiency." "How come you don't know 'bout ki sigs?" "The concept has never been broached before with regard to humans. All of my previous Guardians who have been human were mages, and the masking properties of the uniform were designed specifically to combat various magical means of detection. All former Guardians who were warriors came from races other than human, and I must assume that those races did not exhibit a distinctive individual life force marker in the manner just shown. You are the first Guardian who is both human and a warrior." "Weird. 'K, Doc, thanks." Tofu's aura faded from view. He arched an eyebrow in her direction. "Now, about that explanation?" "Can you wait a bit, Doc? I'm gonna fill Grandma and the girls in on what's been going on; you might as well sit in if you're gonna be my doc again." Tofu nodded.

A full minute passed in silence after the door closed behind the pig-tailed martial artist. Aiko looked down at her youngest, who had replaced Ranma in her lap when the girl exited with the doctor. She absently stroked Harukichi's luxurious red hair while concentrating on coming up with **some** way of salvaging what she could of her past mistakes. "What a mess."

Aiko's comment startled the other girls. The Yamada matriarch set Haru-chan on her feet before rising herself. She returned to her position at the table and sat down, quickly gauging the current mood of the girls. It was as bad as she had been afraid it would be. "Naomi-chan?"

"Hai, Yamada-sama?"

"Please prepare another tea for us. Lavender and Valerian, please."

"Hai, Yamada-sama."

The four girls waited until the maid had left the room before turning back as one to face the two older women.

"Obāsama?" Kioko asked slightly ahead of the other three girls. Aiko held up a hand, halting the oncoming cacophony. She slowly set her hand back in her lap and waited. She sat impassively until Naomi returned and had served everyone a fresh cup. "Thank you, Naomi-chan," she said, smiling to the maid. "Please attend to Ranma-kun and Doctor Ono and see to it that their needs are met. Inform me when Doctor Ono has completed his inspection."

"Hai, Yamada-sama." The black-haired maid quietly left the room. Seiko exited immediately afterward, knowing that the girls wouldn't speak as freely with her present in the room. Aiko made brief eye contact with each of the girls, shattering the youngsters' budding rage with a stony wall of cold determination.

"I am not going to entertain questions. You will listen and answer **my** inquiries with brutal honesty, no matter how embarrassing that may be to you personally. Once I have finished, you may be able to comprehend exactly why certain actions were or were not taken. Is that understood?"

Four heads nodded in silence.

"Midori-chan."

"Hai."

"Who are we?"

Midori quailed inside, hearing the beginning of the catechism. Gods no, she just knew that Grandmother was going to blame this whole mess all on her. "Yamada, Obāsama."

"What are we?"

"Kunoichi, Obāsama."

"Kioko-chan, where do we stand?"

"In the shadows in plain sight, Obāsama,"

"Why do we stand?"

"To observe and guide, Obāsama."

"Tsuya-chan, how do we act?"

"By stealth and guile, Obasama."

"When do we act?"

"When the moment has arrived, Obasama." "Harukichi-chan, when do we fight?"

"When all else has failed, Obasama."

"Why do we fight?"

"To preserve the clan."

Aiko hid her smile on seeing the girl's scowl. Good, she's getting her steel back. "Midori-chan, in a serious conflict between yourself and the Chinese elder Ku Lon, what would be the most probable outcome?"

Midori gulped. "I would be defeated."

"Would you survive the encounter?"

"If I ran like hell first."

The wry quip broke the tense mood in the room and elicited a few chuckles from the other girls. Aiko smiled. "Exactly. We are kunoichi. We hide in plain sight. We beguile and confuse rather than oppose. We are both water and void. We observe. We plan. Then we act." The elder Yamada took a sip before continuing. "Harukichi-chan, how would you feel if you had to cope with Happosai's ... attentions ... on a

daily basis?" Harukichi turned white and began to shake violently. Tsuya quickly embraced the shorter girl while she glared at the elder matriarch. "Obāsama!" Midori exclaimed in shocked outrage. "How could you ..."

"SILENCE!" Aiko poured ki into her voice, halting the protests. The force of her command also stopped the red-headed girl's panic attack. She nodded. "You begin to understand. The potential consequences of failure were dire. As long as there was visible evidence that Ranma-kun was a willing participant in his own debasement, I COULD NOT afford to act. That does not mean I was pleased with the situation, nor does it mean that there were no plans in place to rescue her." Aiko speared Midori with a look. "Or do you honestly think that tonight's seating arrangement was set up simply on a whim?" Midori flushed bright red and shook her head. Low laughter passed around the table at her reaction.

Aiko sighed. "I will be the first to admit that I ... erred in my judgment. The pace of the events that surround Ranma have disrupted plan after plan. It wasn't until Nodoka's reappearance in Ranma's life that I felt that the clan had sufficient leverage to properly influence events around him to our mutual benefit. Unfortunately, there simply wasn't enough **time** to implement all of those plans before her encounter with the Chinese warlord." "Midori, in the last week you have violated every directive you were given when you first undertook this project. Thank you."

Midori's nascent outrage vanished, leaving her gaping like a fish out of water. Aiko beamed at the stunned girl. "You exhibited true leadership and reaffirmed my faith in your judgment, Mi-chan. I'm proud of you." She calmly took another sip of her tea. "Now that the initial break has been made, it is our duty to insure that Ranma-kun's stay with THIS family is free from the stresses and abuses that have been inflicted on her elsewhere. Haru- chan?"

"Hai?"

"You know I've always encouraged all of you to express yourselves freely at home when you're not training, and we all understand the reasons for the ... exuberance of your greetings with Ranma-kun, but I must ask that you try and be a little less forceful in your demonstrations. Have you noticed the way he reacts?"

"Hai, Obasama." Harukichi nodded with a very unhappy expression. "She flinches. It isn't a large one and she manages to suppress it extremely well, but it's there every time." Kioko's small gasp wasn't hidden well enough to escape detection. Midori placed a hand on top of hers as every other eye in the room turned in her direction.

"I've been meaning to ask you about what happened earlier, sis," Midori said. "You were pretty upset before we started all of this."

Kioko nodded. "I was ... she ... she just ... oh Gods, Onēchan, it was just AWFUL." She took several deep breaths, clutching her sister's hands for support before continuing. "When we got home, Tsuya and Haru-chan got to the furo first. I had lost track of time a little ..."

The other girls giggled. Kioko's ability to lose track of time when reading was legendary. "... when Onēchan came into my room. I finished the chapter before following her to the main washroom upstairs."

"But Midori was in the furo washroom with us, Kioko," Tsuya remarked with a puzzled expression.

"Kioko-nēchan, you **didn't**?!" Harukichi gasped. "Hai." Kioko nodded miserably. "I was all undressed and ready to join Midori in the shower when the water stopped, so I grabbed a towel instead before opening the door. Ranma-chan was wringing her hair out, and she cringed when she saw me there, she literally **cringed**. She stood there and just waited to be **beaten**." Kioko sniffled several times before continuing. "I don't know what I would've done if Jun hadn't come in the room right at that point." "But that wasn't the worse part. I caught her expression when Jun led her out of the shower stall. I could tell she was puzzled why I hadn't hit her. She **expected** to get hit. She was waiting to be **beaten** for something that wasn't even **remotely** her fault. And she thinks that's NORMAL!"

Kioko shuddered at the memory. "We've been watching her for almost three quarters of a year. We've seen the constant madness that surrounds her life from a distance, and I've been compiling and cross-

indexing all of our reports and observations this whole time. Somehow, none of it ever really seemed quite real; more like a cheesy martial arts movie that never stopped. None of it seemed real. Until now." An uncomfortable silence surrounded the group for a moment. "Well!" Tsuya exclaimed. "Thank the kami that we have the chance to help her get over all of that now!" Aiko almost dropped her cup when several observations suddenly coalesced into certainty. From the mouths of babes ...

"No, Tsu-chan, not quite. Not 'THE' kami, 'A' kami. Thank 'A' kami." Aiko poured herself another cup of tea while the girls looked at her in confusion. She took a deliberate sip before continuing.

"I'm sure all of you noticed Ranma-kun communicating with something she called 'Eiko', and her attributing this Eiko in part with her survival?" The girls nodded in unison.

"When Ranma-kun's ... conversation was occurring, I was able to obtain a reading on her ki. It held the presence of another entity, one extremely powerful and ancient. This other ki contained no trace of evil whatsoever; in fact it contained no trace of anything identifiable. It was pure ki, something quite impossible for a human to generate." Aiko paused for another sip of tea.

"It appears that the clan now owes honor debt to a kami. My grandchild has picked up a guardian spirit." Four sets of eyes widened in comprehension.

"Hey, Naomi!" Ranma called out, seeing the maid waiting in the hallway next to the door. "Yes, Ranma-sama?"

"Could you ask Grandmother if she could come here a sec? Gotta ask her somethin'." "Certainly, Ranma-sama."

Ranma stepped back in the room and gave the doctor a wry grin. "Might's well get this over with." Aiko entered the room a minute later. "You wished to see me, Ranma-kun?" "Sure did, Grandmother, thanks. I saw how the girls were before I left the room. Do you think they're up to hearin' the whole tale tonight instead of tomorrow? I'd kinda like to have the Doc sit in as well."

Aiko smiled in relief. "I'm quite certain that they'd be more than happy to hear what has happened from your point of view tonight, Ranma-kun." "Good. I kinda got that feelin' about it too. Before we go back, what's up with 'Kichi? She was way too freaked by what happened, and if you guys have been watchin' for as long as Midori said, you'll know this kinda crap happens to me all the time. I know she's kinda young, but this ain't all **that** strange."

Aiko's eyebrow twitched on her grandchild's bland assumption of what constituted "normal".

"Ranma-kun, how much has Midori-chan told you of the girls and their history with the Yamadas?"

"Not much," Ranma shrugged. "Just that Midori an' Kioko are sisters, and that Tsuya and 'Kichi are cousins like me."

Aiko nodded. "Then I will tell you about our family history tomorrow after breakfast. As far as Haru-chan is concerned, she has had a very difficult life before we brought her into the clan. Her birth family did not treat her well, and as a result she has both a vast distrust of almost any male and a constant need for reassurance from those around her whom she trusts." Ranma's eyes narrowed dangerously on the last statement. "I ... see." Aiko smiled grimly. "We have been fortunate that the parties in question have not been a concern for Haru-chan for quite some while now." "\*Good\*."

Ranma grinned suddenly. "Y'know, it's gonna take me a bit of gettin' used to being called 'Big Sister' by 'Kichi. 'Specially since I ain't even a real girl." Aiko eyes turned troubled. "Does that bother you, Ranma-kun? I could ask the girls not to address you in that manner if it makes you that uncomfortable." Ranma shrugged. "Naw, that's OK. Don't know why it don't bug me that much. Besides, Eiko said, ... hmmm ..."

"Y'know, Eiko, you never DID explain what'cha meant when you said I could eventually get my male form back without the kettle."

"It has to do with how the Guardian transformation magic interacts with what would be your normal form. Guardians are required to have a predominately Yin principle; all of the Guardians to this point have

been female, or what is equivalent to a female for their species, in their untransformed state. Your situation is unique in that you normally have both male and female forms in the untransformed state. Given sufficient control of your own life force, it should be possible to detransform from the Guardian into either your male or female form.” “Hey, that’s GREAT!”

“I will caution that it will require extensive training for you to learn how to force the detransform sequence into restoring your male form. Both the Guardian and the normal detransformation forms are female.”

“Heh, if training is all it takes, I’ll have it pat in no time.”

Ranma's eyes widened suddenly as the full meaning of Eiko's comment hit home.

"Waitaminute, you mean when I'm the Guardian I'm gonna turn into a MAGICAL GIRL?!?" "In essence, that is correct."

"GEEZ, I don't BELIEVE this crap! Eiko, if you try an' put me ina frilly fuku with ribbon 'n lace 'n bows 'n ponytails an' carry 'round a kawaii talkin' rabbit or somethin', you and me are gonna have WORDS, you hear?"

If Eiko could have blinked, it would have. "Ranma, I guarantee that the Guardian's uniform is considerably more sophisticated in appearance than the outfit you just described, and that there are no companion entities which accompany a Guardian when transformed. In addition, there is an entry in my data store that verifies that the magical girl with the talking rabbit has no ribbons or lace or bows whatsoever." "Whew, that's OK then. Guess I caught Akane watchin' too many Hime-chan and Akazukin episodes the last year."

When Ranma refocused on the room she saw both Aiko and Tofu trying to suppress their laughter. She put her hand over her face and rubbed her forehead, trying to relieve the oncoming headache. "Man, I can't NEVER catch a break," she moaned. Ranma removed her hand from her face when she felt a gentle touch on her shoulder. "I can see that having you as part of the family will mean that there will be very few dull moments around here from now on," Aiko spoke softly, smiling. "You don't know the HALF of it, Grandma," Ranma replied, shoulders slumping. Aiko nodded. "Come, son. Let us go and talk with the girls before all of the pastries have disappeared."

Ranma closed her eyes in bliss when she took the final bite of the cookies the girls had saved for her. Each cookie had been a rapturous mound of soft, gooey peanut butter cookie dough combined with large chunks of milk chocolate, JUST what she needed to fortify herself. She sat with eyes closed for a moment and savored the heavenly combination of flavors dissolving in her mouth.

"Obāsama, I do believe that Ranma-kun rather enjoys your cookies," Kioko remarked. A hearty round of laughter swept the room.

"Mmmmm, laugh all you want, long as there's more of these around somewhere," Ranma replied.

This comment elicited another chuckle from the room.

She opened her eyes and looked around the table. The other girls seemed to have mostly recovered from her previous scene. She took a sip of tea before beginning. "'K, before I start I want each of you to promise not to tell ANYONE 'bout what'cha hear. The fewer folks who know 'bout this, the better." Ranma looked around the room and waited for each person to nod in agreement. "Ranma-kun," Kioko inquired after nodding, "if the information is as sensitive as your warning suggests, is there a specific reason that you are sharing it with now?" "Well," Ranma grimaced, rubbing the back of her neck nervously, "you guys kinda saw me talkin' with Eiko for a while there, and I really don't like tryin' to just explain somethin' like this away. Y'all seemed pretty upset. Besides, last time I had a secret blow up in my face like this, a certain tomboy slammed the dinin' room table over my head. Talk 'bout uncute." "It's best if y'all know ENOUGH about what's goin' on so you can stay out of it when it hits me in the face, since it's bound to get pretty damn dangerous if you don't got the same power up I'm gonna get. The Doc hasn't heard the start yet, so I'm gonna begin when I ran in to Herb in the first place. It was about a month ago and I was coming home from school when ..." "... 'cause that blind idiot Mousse lost our money AND the map, we ended up working at a local onsen fer ..."

"... chased Herb half way up the mountainside ..." "... two idiots thought that the ladle would lock 'em in their UN-cursed forms. Morons. ..." "... the toughest fight I've EVER been in. Herb had ki reserves I couldn't come close to at the time ..."

"... was tryin' to reverse the Shōten Ha with a Hirū Kōrin Dan when it blew up in my face. Don't remember much after that 'til I woke up again. ..." "... had to tunnel my way up through 40 feet ..." "... finally got some food, I was able to ask the girls who they were ..." "... told me that Sailor Pluto, the last

Guardian, killed herself doin' somethin' she wasn't supposed to ..."

"... haven't had Bluegill like that in a long time ..." "... when I walked in the door, I got hit by a red-headed Glomp Missile ..."

"... after tellin' me I can 'eventually' learn how to go from bein' the Guardian back to my MALE form, Eiko tells me that the Guardian is really some form of Magical Girl. That's about the size of it, except that I DON'T gotta wear no ribbons and lace when I'm dressed up as Guardian."

There was a long moment of silence when Ranma stopped. "Wow," Tsuya breathed.

"That," Aiko said, "is quite a story, Ranma-kun." "Yup," Ranma replied with a nod. "So you can see why I don't want no one else gettin' mixed up in all this. I know the girls are trained in the Art a bit, but they're good at bein' sneaky and that sort of stuff. No offense, but Midori's probably the best fighter you got of the four, and she'd be hard pressed to even handle Akane normally, let alone when the tomboy's in one of her rages. Now, imagine me powered up several times and facin' opponents who'll be dangerous when I'm the Guardian. Ain't gonna be fun if I gotta worry 'bout family gettin' hurt all the time."

Ranma looked at each girl in turn. "I don't **ever** want someone hurt just 'cause they got too close to one of my fights."

"Ranma," Aiko replied evenly, "I would like to think that I have trained the girls how to recognize when not to get involved in a conflict that they cannot handle." "Hey, that's cool. 'Bout time someone listened. Anyways," Ranma grinned, "got any more of those cookies?"

The room erupted in laughter.

Ranma stared out the open window of her room at the stars above, while the brisk March air sent goose bumps up and down her bare arms. This ... a family, a **real** family, was going to take a lot of getting used to.

It was a long time before sleep finally overtook her. **Chapter 5: Adjustments**

**Suginami - Friday, March 4th 1994**

Ranma woke up suddenly. She glanced around the unfamiliar surroundings until her eyes found the clock on the edge of the bureau. When she read 5:45 AM, she blinked. She'd gotten only four hours of sleep, yet she wasn't tired at all. She lay back in her futon and stared at the ceiling for

several minutes, then growled when she realized that she wasn't going to be able to go back to sleep.

"Might's well catch up on my practicin'," she grumbled as she got out of bed. Ranma found several sets of her favorite tang and pants outfits in the left armoire. She dressed in her usual red and black combination and discovered the wushu slippers were so large they wouldn't stay on her feet. The male slippers must have been bought in her male-form's **actual** shoe size instead of the full size smaller she'd been getting since she'd picked up the curse. Sighing, Ranma opened the center armoire where the girl clothes were stored and was pleasantly surprised to find several more sets of the tang and trouser outfits in various colors amongst the ... ugh ... dresses, all sized for her current body. She also found an exceedingly handsome maroon frog-front blouse and slacks combination with a dark green dragon meticulously embroidered across the back.

She barely hesitated before changing into one of the smaller red and black outfits. Something that had always bugged her about the curse was that her clothes never fit properly whenever she got splashed, often to her extreme embarrassment. The Chinese frog-front tangs had the advantage of being somewhat unisex, but she ended up swimming in her male tangs whenever she changed to a girl, and changing back to male when she was in one of her female disguises was even more mortifying since the disguise was almost always a school fuku or some other form of dress or skirt. The time she had been tea-splashed while wearing the bunny outfit during the challenge with Tsubasa had been especially embarrassing – fortunately the outfit had some stretch built in to it. She'd even managed to change back to her girl form before the costume had ripped apart or anyone had seen "him" wearing a bunny outfit.

Ranma quickly finished exchanging outfits and laid the maroon dragon outfit on the futon for later. Opening the window, she leapt out onto the first story roof and down to the ground below to greet the arrival of the new day's sun.

"Jun, would you please inform Ranma and the girls that breakfast will be ready in ten minutes?" "Certainly." Jun bowed to Kumiko before leaving the kitchen. A short walk brought her up the stairs to Ranma's room.

"Ranma-sama, breakfast will be ready shortly," she called out as she stepped through the open door. A quick glance showed the room currently unoccupied and in a bit of disarray. Jun efficiently straightened everything up, smiling to herself as she hung the rejected male tang outfit back in the armoire. The female outfit that had been laid out on the futon, however, wasn't quite complete. A bit of rummaging in the far dresser's bottom drawer located the missing items. Jun placed the ruby red lace bra and panties next to the outfit on the futon before leaving the room to go look for the girls.

The second story window in Kioko's bedroom was not normally known as a spot for social gatherings. This morning was quite different; four faces were currently gathered at the open window, all intently watching the skill being displayed below. "Ooooooh."

"Whoa!"

"Not even Haru-chan's **that** flexible." "Am too!"

"No you're not, sis. Besides, not even you can jump that ... oh wow." "You think Midori's noticed she still isn't wearing a bra?" "Onēchan? ... .. Onēchan? ... .. ONĒCHAN?!?"

"Huh ... Wha?"

"You really shouldn't drool like that, Onēchan. Someone just might get the wrong impression." "I **don't** drool, sis."

"Yup, she noticed."

"I noticed what?"

"Oh, there you are."

All four girls turned away from their positions at the window when Jun called out to them from the doorway.

"Has anyone seen Ranma-sama? She wasn't in her room." "She's out on the lawn practicing," Kioko replied, nodding her head towards the open window. "Ah. Breakfast will be ready in ten minutes; would one of you please let her know so that she can get cleaned up in time?"

"Sure thing," Tsuya replied before turning to lean out the open window. "RANMA! BREAKFAST!"

The other three girls quickly looked back out the window when they saw Tsuya flinch.

"That ... had to hurt."

Ranma sighed contentedly as she stepped out of the shower stall. This was a luxury she could **definitely** get used to. Although a shower didn't relax her muscles in the same manner as a long soak in the furo did, it didn't do a bad job at all. And not having to freeze as she washed was a very nice bonus indeed.

She flash-dried her hair and braided her pigtail at Amaguriken speed before remembering she was supposed to keep her ki usage to a minimum. Shrugging her shoulders, she walked over to the vanity and examined the large bruise developing over her left cheekbone. Too many years of constant battle over every single scrap of food had left their mark on her – she was entirely too prone to distraction when someone announced a meal, as her encounter with that large maple tree had once again proven. This was something she was going to have to address. At least the bruise would be gone by lunchtime - it wasn't the first time she had inadvertently planted her face into something hard and unyielding while practicing and it certainly wouldn't be the last, either. Ranma draped the towel over her shoulders and walked back to her room clad only in her boxers. It took a moment for her to register the additions that



had been added to her selection, and when she did her first impulse was to wad the disgusting things up into a tight little package and use them for Mōko Takabisha target practice. She could, however, take the hint.

A quick search located a nice neutral grey and more importantly **plain** sports bra. She was just going to have to get used to them; she was getting tired of the way her breasts always ached after a vigorous workout like the one she'd gone through this morning, and she currently didn't have the ability to splash this body away. At least she could think of the sports bra as a type of jock strap for her breasts. That didn't mean she had to like them, of course, and anything with lace or other "frilly stuff" in it was right out. She tossed the unused underwear back in the drawer with a small growl.

Ranma ran into a bit of a snag as she started getting dressed. Her cotton boxers, while extremely comfortable when worn in either form under her guy clothes, weren't the most comfortable thing to have on underneath a pair of women's form-fitting silk slacks. The boxers bunched up in all the wrong places and ruined the lines of the slacks in the process. Sighing, she realized that if she wanted to look even halfway decent she was going to have to wear panties **voluntarily**, something she had previously done only as a part of a disguise. Luckily there were some plain grey cotton panties in the dresser – she'd noticed them when she had found the sports bras. She was just about to put the maroon slacks back on when the full impact of what she had just done hit her squarely between the eyes.

Aiko frowned when she looked around the table. "Jun, please go upstairs and check to see if Ranma-kun has fallen asleep."

"I'll do it, Obāsama," Midori said, getting quickly to her feet. She did her best to ignore the giggles that followed her out the room.

Eiko was starting to become ... concerned. Its new Guardian had proved to be a veritable treasure-trove of emotional energy – an input Eiko had been sorely lacking for a very long time – but those self-same emotions were rapidly spiraling out of Ranma's control. The youngster had been subjected to far too many physical and emotional traumas over the last week, and without the psychic stability provided by the full Guardian linkage there was little Eiko could actually do to alleviate the situation. And the upcoming bonding would put an even greater strain on Ranma's fragile psyche.

One of Ranma's greatest assets was her overwhelming confidence, and Eiko was finding very little evidence of that confidence within her at the moment. This lack could very easily prove to be a great hindrance in Ranma's upcoming task of recovering the primary Key. Its former Guardian Sailor Pluto was stubbornly refusing to abandon her futile attempts at regaining control, and Eiko knew that very stubbornness would force her to vigorously oppose Ranma's claim.

The situation was quickly becoming intolerable, yet there was almost nothing more Eiko could do at the moment. It was really quite irritating.

"Ranma?" Midori called out while knocking on the open door. Not hearing a response she walked in and looked around the corner. Ranma was sitting on the futon with her back to the door, clad in a maroon top with an embroidered dragon – the matching slacks sat in a crumpled heap nearby. She was also curled up into a tight ball and shaking visibly. "Ranma?" Midori asked softly. She gingerly walked further into the room. "Ranma, are you alright?"

"g- go 'way."

Midori could barely hear her response. She crept forward and knelt down on the edge of the futon.

"Ranma, what's wrong?"

"j- j- just leave m- me alone. p- p- please."

Midori slowly extended a hand out to Ranma, but ... something ... made her stop several centimeters short of Ranma's shoulder. She carefully withdrew her arm. "Ranma, breakfast is waiting downstairs. Obāsama and the girls are all waiting for you before they begin. I can tell Obāsama you're not feeling well if you like; I'm sure they'd all understand."

Midori wanted nothing more than to sweep her cousin into a warm embrace and take all the girl's pain

away, but she knew that would result in more harm than good – especially since she had no idea as to the cause of Ranma's current distress. A full minute elapsed in uncomfortable silence before Midori stood up as quietly as she could. "Ok, Ranma. I'll tell Obāsama not to expect you. I'll get Jun or Naomi to bring up something to eat a little later. If you need anything else, anything at all, just ask." Midori silently retraced her path to the doorway. As much as she hated it, now was **not** the time to try and find out what was wrong.

"M- Midori?"

She halted instantly on hearing that soft voice. "Yes, Ranma?" "I'll ... I'll be down in a couple minutes." "Very well, Ranma," Midori replied, trying to hide the relief she felt. She turned away to resume her exit but had barely taken another step before being stopped again. "Midori?"

"Yes, Ranma?"

"Thanks."

"Anytime."

Breakfast was ... subdued. Ranma had tried to put up a good front, but the instant she walked through the door everyone else knew something was very wrong. She hadn't been able to scrub the puffiness away from around her eyes, nor could she disguise her current mood from a group who were trained in reading subtle nuances of the body's language. And there was certainly **nothing** subtle about Ranma's body language. Aiko viewed the various interactions around the table with concern. The girls' attempts at cheering Ranma up were starting to backfire – Harukichi had practically strangled Tsuya after

the blonde made a light-hearted but thoughtless comment about his outfit. The Yamada matriarch would have to be very careful the next several days in correcting the girls' attitudes with regards to her grandson – she doubted any of them consciously realized they had all begun to think of Ranma as "her" instead of "him", and this was coloring their actions and attitudes enough for him to feel even more uncomfortable. Ranma's current choice in clothing only helped to reinforce this attitude, unfortunately, but Aiko was actually glad to see that a stubborn spark of personal vanity still existed.

She waited for Naomi to finish clearing the table. "Seiko-chan?" "Yes, Okusama?"

"I believe the girls are sufficiently rested to cope with a full evaluation today, wouldn't you agree?"

A chorus of groans immediately followed. "Yes, Okusama," Seiko replied as she stood up. "Come along, girls ... the day is only so long." "Hai, sensei," all four chanted in unison as they stood to follow. Seeing as breakfast was over, Ranma followed suit.

"Ranma-kun, please wait for a moment," Aiko said before he could follow the others out the room. "You can meet up with the girls later at any time; Seiko will doubtless have them fully occupied until nearly dinnertime."

"Sure, Grandma," Ranma replied. It wasn't as if she really had any plans at the moment. "Naomi, please bring us a pot of Hanase." "Hai, Yamada-sama."

Aiko waited until Ranma sat back down at the table. "Ranma-kun, I promised you last night I would tell more of your family's history this morning. However, this can be done anytime at your convenience. You've just had an exceptionally difficult week and I will more than understand if you wish to talk about this later after you're more fully rested."

"Naw, I'd kinda like to hear it now if you don't mind, Grandma. I'm still tryin' to get used to th' idea I got other family besides Mom and the Panda." Aiko made a quick mental note – she had temporarily forgotten the little present Haru-chan delivered to her wayward daughter the other day, and while it couldn't hurt **that** much if the girl sweated it out a while longer, it was also definitely something that needed to be addressed soon.

"You have quite a bit of 'other family', Ranma-kun," Aiko smiled. "I'm sorry circumstances have prevented you from knowing anything of your Mother's family up until now, but I hope to rectify that as soon as possible."

Aiko paused while Naomi brought in another tea service. “Will there be anything else, Yamada- sama?” “No, that will be all, Naomi-chan. Thank you.” The black-haired maid nodded before she quietly left the room. “Ranma-kun, I want to apologize for not intervening in your situation sooner. I had what I thought were valid reasons at the time, but I’ve since realized I made several serious errors in judgment – most of which have only added to the pressures you have been under.” Ranma fidgeted in her seat. She had never had anyone apologize for **not** doing something **for** her before.

“Errrr, that’s all right, Grandma. I wouldn’t a wanted the ...” Ranma stopped on seeing Aiko’s raised hand.

“It is NOT all right; unfortunately it’s not something I can go back and change, either.” Aiko drummed her fingers on the table for a second. “Ranma-kun, your current situation is the direct result of past history between the Yamada and Saotome clans, involving several pledges of honor which have gone unfulfilled. There have also been some disturbing ... irregularities ... in the Saotome lineage which have strained the relations between the clans quite severely.” Aiko paused for a sip of tea. “The original agreement was between my father Katsuro and Kiyoshi Saotome, who would be your great-grandfather. They arranged a marriage between my brother Naosuke and Kiyoshi’s daughter Yasuko, with the intent of creating a combined Yamada-Saotome Ryū. There were also important secondary issues that went into the arrangement, but the primary intent was the joint clan rights to the combined Ryū.” “Sheesh, y’mean I’m not the only one?”

“No, Ranma-kun; the Saotome clan is old samurai and they have a long history of combining Ryū through marriage. With this arrangement the Saotome would have gained access to the Yamada Kenjutsu Ryū, considerable financial backing, and a direct male heir in Naosuke who assumed the Saotome name. Our clan would have acquired the Saotome Musabetsu Kakutō Ryū and access to the Saotome clan’s status, which at the time was considerable.” Ranma shook her head. She knew her family was originally samurai by the sword her mother carried. High status was another thing entirely. “The omiai and the marriage took place as scheduled, but Kiyoshi disappeared shortly before the marriage ceremony was held. The marriage was less than two months old when Naosuke was

killed in an extremely suspicious training accident. Yasuko refused all further contact with the Yamada from that point on and a little over a year after Naosuke’s death gave birth to Genma. Genma’s father is unknown – officially – but we have very strong suspicions as to who it was.” Aiko grimaced. “My father renounced the agreement between the clans when it became obvious that Yasuko would neither remarry into the Yamada nor uphold the agreement to combine the Ryū. Yasuko raised Genma on her own for five years before she herself disappeared. It was at this point Happosai took young Genma and left him at a small dojo down in Okinawa, where he moved from dojo to dojo until he was eighteen. Happosai returned with another student, Soūn Tendō, and took them both on a training trip for two years. The three of them were in Tokyo when Genma met Nodoka. They announced their intention to marry barely two months later.” Ranma sat with her chin on her hands, totally enthralled. This was all new to her – Pops **never** talked about his own past unless forced to do so, and then still managed to avoid saying anything of importance.

“I did not approve of Nodoka’s choice, Ranma-kun. Genma and Happosai had thoroughly ruined the reputation of the Saotome clan and their methods of training were dishonorable at best. They had also accumulated a considerable debt in a very short period of time.” Aiko paused for a sip of tea. Ranma could see the strain on her grandmother’s face. “Disowning your mother when she married against my wishes was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done, Ranma-kun, and I haven’t talked with her since.” Several seconds elapsed before Aiko suddenly rang a small bell sitting on the table. Naomi re- entered the room from the hallway almost immediately. “Yamada-sama?”

“Naomi-chan, please call Doctor Ono and request his presence. Have Genjo pick him up and be at his disposal for the remainder of the day.” “Certainly, Yamada-sama,” Naomi replied, leaving the room once more. The Yamada matriarch didn’t resume her tale, choosing instead to nurse the cup of tea in front of her. A long silent minute passed.

“Grandma?”

“Yes, Ranma-kun?”

“Is Mom your only kid?”

“No she isn’t, son,” Aiko replied with a smile. “Nodoka is fourth of five. Ichiro’s the eldest, followed by Jiro, Mai, Nodoka, and Shizuka. Your uncles Ichiro and Jiro handle all of the commercial interests of the clan, and Nodoka was originally heir to the Yamada Ryū before she

married. Midori is training for that position now since none of my sons or their families have shown any interest in the Art.”

Aiko paused for several seconds before voicing a long sigh. “I’m afraid I haven’t done very well by my daughters, Ranma-kun. Mai was never interested in the Art until she met a gaijin karateka. The two of them moved to New York City and got married in America. I’ve told you what happened between your mother and myself, and Shizuka ... I lost darling Shizuka over a decade ago to an auto accident, and her husband and daughter two years later to a lab fire. It was right after my little Firefly left us when I added the girls to the clan.” Ranma fidgeted in silence – it was obvious Aiko still had very strong feelings for her youngest daughter, but Ranma just didn’t know what to say. Aiko visibly shook off her mood and stood up. “That’s enough of that. Let’s go check on the girls, Ranma-kun. We still have a while before Doctor Ono arrives and I’d like your honest opinion on their training.”

**Nerima**

**Thwack Thwack ... Thwack**

“Again.”

**Thwack Thwack ... Thwack**

“Again.”

**Thwack Thwack ... Thwack**

“Again.”

**Thwack Thwack ... Thwack**

“AGAIN!”

**Thwack Thwack ... CRACK!**

Nodoka held pose next to the shattered practice dummy, wakizashi in guard, katana extended from the spinning sweep cut that had finally broken it in twain. She gasped for air as sweat streamed down from the unaccustomed exertion. Nodoka slowly sheathed both blades as she stood before reaching for a nearby towel and water glass.

Gone was the immaculate coiffure and flowered formal kimono of a traditional Japanese housewife. A kendoka stood in her place, keikogi and hakama of purest black, her long chestnut hair cascading down her back in a low ponytail. Nodoka sat down and began a set of cool-down stretches. It had been well over a decade since she had trained seriously and her entire body burned and shrieked in protest, but the muscles ... the muscles never forgot.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow she would be ready.

**Juuban**

“Were you able to find anything, Ami-chan?” “I’m sorry, Usagi. There’s been no detectable trace of the subspace pocket since it collapsed. No one except you has seen Hotaru since Monday, and the last time any of us saw Setsuna was at Mamoru’s apartment the night before. I’ve been unable to pick up any trace of either of them since then.”

Makoto Kino was worried. They’d all been searching after school the entire week for any sign of Hotaru or Sailor Pluto without success and the strain was beginning to show on them all. She knew just how upset Usagi was by the fact that the unusually-subdued blonde wasn’t even making an attempt at mooching her lunch at the moment. “Mako-chan?”

Makoto shook her head. "No luck."

And it certainly didn't help when Ikuko-san grounded Usagi for the rest of the school year for all of her unexcused absences. Even if their High School entrance exams **were** less than two weeks away, forcing Usagi to sit on the sidelines was slow torture for them all. Anyone could see how much Usagi and Chibi-Usa were suffering over the loss of the two senshi. Makoto tried a time proven tactic: she held out her bento. "Usagi-chan, do you want some shrimp tempura? I cooked way too much last night." She became even more concerned when Usagi declined.

## **Suginami**

Aiko sat at one end of the dojo and watched the girls work out in the middle of the floor. She also surreptitiously studied the reactions of her grandson sitting next to her. Ranma was

concentrating on his cousins' actions with a focus that was almost frightening. She had little doubt he was memorizing every single move the girls made in their paired kata. A slight scowl had been building on Ranma's face for the last hour and Aiko was having difficulty keeping her own focus intact – she knew her grandson would not appreciate being told exactly how adorable she looked at the moment and it was a difficult thought to suppress. The long paired kata finally came to a close. All four girls walked over to the equipment locker and began to distribute bokken, rubber knives, and rubber shuriken amongst themselves. Midori armed herself with a daisho and several knife straps, Kioko took a bo and nothing else, Tsuya a pair of ninja-to and a bandolier of knives, and Harukichi a ninja-to and a plethora of various projectiles. They walked back out to the middle of the dojo and faced off against each other. "Begin!" Seiko quickly moved to a position directly opposite Aiko and Ranma. A four-way free-for-all ensued. It became quickly obvious that Midori was being ganged up on by the other girls, but this didn't prevent Tsuya from having to tap out as a "casualty" when she was nailed in the back by a half-dozen shuriken – Harukichi having been presented with a brief but perfect throwing lane. Kioko followed Tsuya to the sidelines barely ten seconds later when she failed to block a counterthrust from her sister's wakizashi. The next minute passed quickly with Midori chasing Harukichi around the room while blocking a continual blizzard of projectiles in an earnest but futile attempt to corner the smaller girl. Unfortunately for Midori, Harukichi was quick enough to keep out of her cousin's longer reach while still managing to reload her ammunition stash with whatever previously thrown items were laying about as she passed by. Tsuya reentered the battle exactly sixty seconds after she had tapped out. Kioko's return ten seconds later was marked by an event quite unusual for her: she forced Midori off the floor when her older sister lost track of Kioko's "regen point" and ran by with her back turned, **right** when Kioko stepped back on the floor. Three opportunistic bo strikes left Midori sprawled out flat and pounding the dojo floor in frustration. The melee continued for another dozen minutes while a definite pattern emerged, one the girls were evidently quite familiar with.

"Halt!"

Everyone on the floor froze in place.

Aiko stood up. "Gather round, girls. Seiko." She waited for them to assemble. "There were entirely too many casualties in that exercise for my liking. I can see nearly everyone needs a good long refresher course in projectile avoidance." Aiko waited for the groans to subside before continuing. "It's past time for lunch, but before we break I'd like you to hear Ranma-kun's opinion on the exercises." Aiko turned to face her grandson. "Ranma-kun?"

Ranma blanched – she'd thought Grandma would talk to her privately about their training, not put her on the spot like this. She scanned the faces of her cousins and was dismayed to see the eager anticipation written across all of their faces. This was not good, this was so not good, it's how it always started. She almost jumped through the roof when a gentle hand landed on her shoulder.

"There's no need to worry, son. The girls only want to get better – they won't take anything you say wrong."

Ranma fought her emotions down with difficulty. This wasn't Nerima, and she'd been watching all the

girls handle Seiko's critique for several hours now without batting an eye. Maybe this time she wouldn't get pummeled into the ground for telling someone how to do things right. "Sorry, Grandma."

"No need to apologize for being good, Ranma-kun. That's why we all want your opinion." "Errrr, 'k," Ranma said with a slight blush. "Main thing I see is no one's near fast enough. Kichi comes the closest, but that's mostly 'cause she don't like getting up close and personal." Aiko smiled. "And what would you suggest?" Ranma looked the four girls over critically before nodding once. "Weight training – lots and lots of weight training to start. You can't get fast until you're strong and a girl's gotta work twice as hard as a guy to build up strength. It took me a couple o' really tough months to get my girl body up to shape after I was cursed."

Ranma furrowed her brows in thought. "You prob'ly don't want to carry a pack full of rocks around all day like I did even though that's the best way to do it. Weight vests while you're practicin' or running would work, but that's the slow way of gettin' there. Trainin's best if you do it **all** the time – your body's gotta get used to handlin' the extra weight 'till you don't notice it no more, 'cause that's when you can add more weights on. Oyajii may be pretty dumb 'bout a lot a things, but he sure knows how to build you up fast." Ranma grinned suddenly. "You girls ever play dodgeball?" The four young kunoichi looked at each other nervously before shaking their heads. The phone by the dojo door rang.

"Good, this'll be **fun**." Ranma frowned suddenly. "Gah – I don't really want to use rocks this time. Grandma, can you get some weight vests and a couple hundred tennis balls by tomorrow mornin'?" "That shouldn't be a problem, Ranma-kun. I'll have Naomi pick them up later this afternoon."

"Okusama? Ranma-san?" Seiko called out from the phone. "Doctor Ono has arrived and is waiting in the foyer. Also, Jun said Kumiko is starting to become irritated that lunch is getting cold." "Thank you, Seiko-chan. We'll be there in a few minutes." Aiko clapped her hands twice. "OK girls, you know what happens when Kumiko-chan gets angry. Let's see if we can't get the dojo picked up in less than five minutes this time."

## Nerima

The kendoka walked into the local ward office, hanko and koseki tōhon in hand. No matter what tradition demanded, there would **always** be official paperwork which must be dealt with. She was fortunate that the Registry clerk was the son of a good friend. Several hours had passed before the kendoka finally left the ward office. It had not been easy to convince the clerk to do as she had asked without informing other parties beforehand, but in the end tradition had prevailed. Officially closing the registry had been hard, and sealing it had been even harder. Fortunately the next task would be much easier. She still had plenty of time to make it to the ad office before the submission deadline for tomorrow's paper had expired. Tradition **would** be followed.

## Miharadai General Hospital

"Well, it looks like you got your wish, Michiru," Haruka Ten'ou said as she viewed the tender scene in front of her. Michiru was lost in dreams of motherhood, holding baby Hotaru gently in her arms. Haruka opened the door of the red convertible and waited while her girlfriend sat down in the car, virtually oblivious to her surroundings. "Papa makes one and Mama makes two, but Baby makes the family grow," Michiru crooned as she touched her finger to Hotaru's nose. This elicited a giggle from the purple eyed infant. Haruka shook her head as she climbed into the driver's seat. It was apparent fate was not done with the two senshi yet; they had barely started their planned whirlwind of travel and relaxation before being drawn back to Juuban. Evidently now it was time to tie up the loose ends. The convertible's wheels screeched as Haruka gunned the powerful little car's engine. It shot out of the hospital grounds and merged with the traffic beyond.

## Nerima

Kasumi watched as her youngest sister trudged wearily up the stairs to her room. Finals were a little over a week away and Akane's schoolwork had been sliding rapidly downhill. Kasumi had gotten

several calls from the school counselor inquiring about Ranma-kun's prolonged absence, and the subject of Akane's grades had naturally followed suit. Akane was in definite danger of being held back, and that was something the elder Tendō could simply not allow. Although she was glad that her sister was finally acknowledging the feelings she held for Ranma-kun, it wasn't the proper thing to let that interfere with her greater duty to the family. Kasumi assembled a serving tray with tea and a big plate of her sister's favorite cookies. It was time for a little gentle guidance.

## Juuban

Usagi Sōmeko Serenity Tsukino Chiba, Princess of Crystal Tokyo, Defender of the Realm, known in this time as "Chibi-Usa" to her friends, Sailor Chibi-Moon to the other senshi, and "spore" to her future mother-to-be, sat dejectedly on the swings of the park. The sounds of her friends playing grated harshly on her ears. It wasn't fair, it just wasn't FAIR. Hotaru-chan COULDN'T be dead – she was her bestest friend. Usagi **knew** she had heard Hotaru-chan herself, she **knew** it was Hotaru-chan who had given back her heart crystal.

Why did Hotaru-chan have to go away? It wasn't FAIR. Usagi pulled Luna-P out of storage. Everything was all wrong; even Luna-P had stopped working. She could store and retrieve the cat-faced ball, but it no longer responded to any other command. She couldn't even talk to Puu. Puu would know. Puu **always** knew EVERYTHING. With Luna-P not responding Usagi had no way of talking to Puu. It just wasn't RIGHT.

## Suginami

Ranma flopped down on her futon. WHAT a day. Doc Tofu had run her through the wringer, and she **still** couldn't get used to the amount of poking and prodding a girl needed when the doc gave her the "complete" set of tests.

If he hadn't been a martial artist himself and explained **why** all of those tests were needed, especially the poking inside "down there", she would have clobbered him into the next ward – doctor or not.

Ranma shuddered at the thought. Doc Tofu had run a few of those tests before when she'd first met him at the Nerima clinic, but they had **never** caused the physical reactions that occurred earlier today. She had never had her nerves tingle and jump on her that way before, nor had she previously experienced the intensely heated pressure which had built up in her groin when Tofu had felt around inside of her for ... what did he call it ... "polyps and other abnormalities". Not to mention how utterly mortified she had become when she started "leaking" in the middle of that examination. She was going to have to train extra hard if she wanted to regain the control over her female body like she had before – no matter **what** Eiko said about this being "normal". "Ranma, your female body is functioning correctly in response to the inadvertent stimulus applied by Doctor Ono. I've repaired a significant amount of neural damage since we first met, most of which had been centered about responses to sexual stimuli. You will need to learn how to cope with these new feelings, not suppress them, if you ever wish to have any sort of normal relationship in the future."

"That doesn't mean I gotta like it, Eiko," Ranma growled. "I fought real hard to get both forms trained up right, and I don't like to think I'm losin' control of that **now**. "It's not a matter of losing control, Ranma. There is a whole new set of techniques for you to explore which will put you in good stead with your chosen life mate. These techniques take advantage of the natural responses you experienced earlier today. If you attempt to simply suppress your body's normal reactions to this particular form of stimulus, you will be incapable of maintaining any form of long term relationship." "Techniques, huh?" Ranma's expression turned thoughtful. "Are there any scrolls or manuals for this stuff?"

Ranma could feel the mirth bubbling across the mental link. "There certainly are. Although I am somewhat unsure as to what is available in your current era, I have numerous treatises stored on the subject that

date back to the Silver Millennium. The physiology of your race hasn't changed enough to make them irrelevant, and there are numerous other sources of information available to you elsewhere. Also, there is a considerable amount of self-exploration you can perform which will give you direct experience, and you are fortunate to be able to explore both genders in person. Most of your race is not capable of such a feat." "Cool. Y'mean the damn curse is good for somethin' 'sides cagin' free food?" "Ranma, you should stop belittling your ability to experience life in both genders. While I understand the reason it has aggravated you in the past, you will shortly have the ability to control the triggering of the transformation. This is a priceless gift for one of your race."

"Yeah, sure," Ranma grumbled. "Speakin' of which, how am I supposed to find this trainee senshi and the key you've been goin' on about? Tokyo's a pretty big city, y'know." "This should not pose too great a difficulty. While my ... relationship ... with my former Guardian was somewhat unsatisfactory, my ability to see and hear through her own senses remained unimpeded. Sailor Pluto kept close track of the senshi trainee, who is known by the nickname of Chibi-Usa. If you will close your eyes and relax, I will attempt to impress an image of Chibi-Usa in your mind for your perusal." Ranma closed her eyes and cleared her thoughts. **Snigger**

**Snigger**

"BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA ..." She laughed so hard she had to curl in a ball to regain her breath. Eiko blinked.

Midori was at the top of the stairs when she heard Ranma's outburst. She looked around the corner of the hallway into the room only to see her cousin convulsing on her futon. "Ranma, are you alright?"

"P-p-p-pink-k ... c-c-c-c-carrotssss ..." she managed to stutter before succumbing to further hysterics. She started banging her fist against the futon repeatedly. Midori smiled at the sight. She walked in and sat down on the edge of the futon. While she had no idea what had started this laughing fit, it was infinitely better than the morosely depressed aura which had been permeating Ranma as of late. Ranma's hysterical laughter consumed her for several minutes. She **needed** the release and the image of the youngest senshi was just so STUPID. Once the laughter hit it wouldn't stop; she kicked and pounded and rolled back and forth in unbridled mirth until she was **finally** able to bring herself back under control. She rolled onto her back and stared blearily at the ceiling, unclenching her tearing eyes amidst the random shudders and spasms of her just-concluded fit. "Oh man ..." Ranma shuddered once more. "Thanks, Eiko. I haven't laughed like that in ages. Evening, Midori."

"Good evening, Ranma," Midori replied. "Care to let me in on the joke?" "I don't wanna think about it." Ranma suppressed a snigger. "I'll just lose it all over again." She rolled over on her side and propped her head up with a hand. "You'll have t' see it yourself to believe it. P-pink c-c-carrot head ..."

Ranma began snickering again. Two seconds later she was fully back in the throes.

Midori couldn't stop herself from chuckling. Ranma's laughter was contagious – even if it was more than a trifle hysterical.

Fortunately it took considerably less time for Ranma to reign herself in this time. Once the shudders passed she pushed herself upright and voiced a big sigh. "Man, I gotta stop this – my ribs hurt."

Ranma softly brushed a hand across Ranma's shoulder. "I'm glad to see you're feeling better." "Yeah thanks, Midori," Ranma returned with a truly genuine smile. She struggled to her feet. "I gotta go t' bed, I'm totally **wasted**." Midori arched an eyebrow as she stood up. "The futon IS on the floor, you know." Ranma stuck her tongue out for a second. "Bathroom first – I laughed so hard I almost peed my pants. Girl form just can't hold it as well." Midori's gentle laughter followed them both out of the bedroom.

Ranma snuggled under the covers of her futon, grateful for the extra warmth the thick down- filled duvet bestowed. One thing she had recently become aware of was how friggin' **cold** her girl form got when it wasn't actively shielded by her ki. She never would have noticed this before.

"Eiko?" she quietly called out to the darkness. "Yes, Ranma?"

"You know where the c-carrot he-he-head is now?" Ranma suppressed yet another round of hysterical



giggles with difficulty.

"As of a week ago she was living with her family in Minato-ku's Azabu-Juuban neighborhood. Tomorrow would be a reasonable time to seek her out; she often spends Saturday afternoon with her friends at Prince Arisugawa Memorial Park in nearby Minami-Azabu. The elementary school she attends provides chaperoned playtime after halfday, and you can attempt to procure the Minor Key with little fear of interference from the other senshi in this environment." "I don't reckon she's gonna just hand it over if I asked for it, huh?" "That is highly unlikely, Ranma. She is, after all, temporally displaced and the Minor Key is her only direct means of transportation to and from the Time-Space Corridor."

"Temporally displaced? That's ... umm ... she doesn't belong in our time?"

"Correct. Chibi-Usa is from a narrow stream future that currently has a high probability of instantiation. Sailor Pluto has repeatedly intervened with the natural timestream to reinforce this specific future's probability. Chibi-Usa's presence in your time is a key part of a temporal feedback loop; one which will most likely result in the death of over ninety five percent of the Earth's population and a near total destruction of the planet's biosphere." "Whaa ... but ... I thought ... they were suppos' ... the senshi are gonna kill off the whole human race?" she queried in a shaky voice.

"Incorrect. Sailor Pluto was attempting to bring about a certain sequence of events which would have killed nearly the entire population, but a select few would have been protected and preserved."

Ranma's mood quickly darkened. "Oh, I get it – they're just gonna kill everyone who don't go along with 'em."

"Ranma, there is nothing inherently wrong with what my former Guardian was attempting. Almost every previous Guardian has made the long term survival of their own race a primary object of their office – Sailor Pluto is no different in this regard. Your planet's biosphere is currently being destroyed piecemeal at a rapid pace, and your race's population is expanding at a dangerous and totally uncontrolled rate. Humanity has already flirted with extinction several times; some form of population and resource control will eventually have to be imposed if you wish to survive in the long term while being limited to a single planet. Sailor Pluto's solution would have accomplished both objectives handily, but it would have done so in a rather extreme manner. There are numerous other options available to your race to accomplish the same results, most of which aren't quite as draconian as Pluto's Crystal Tokyo." Ranma shivered. "Can anything be done t' stop it?" "It is now somewhat doubtful events will unfold in accordance to Sailor Pluto's original plans, Ranma. Crystal Tokyo requires several additional direct interventions before it can come into being – as long as you do not follow her directions it is unlikely to happen on its own. You still need to actively counter several events if you wish to avoid the total depopulation of the biosphere, but it should be possible for you to at least partially undo the current divergence of the timestream caused by Sailor Pluto's actions. The number of sentient lives you can save by doing so would be considerable. Of course, your planet's current population issues will still need to be addressed."

Ranma stared up at the ceiling. This wasn't some trivial personal problem, it was huge ... no, gigantic. The fate of the world ...  
... the fate of the WORLD ...

Ranma shuddered. This was **serious**. It completely dwarfed everything she had gone through and made all her own troubles seem trivial and insignificant in comparison. And SHE was supposed to fix it all?

How the HELL was she supposed to fix it all? It wasn't possible, it just wasn't possible, it was way too big ... "Ranma?"

She couldn't even win one lousy fight. How could ANYONE expect a screw-up like her to be able to ...

"Ranma?"

"Yeah, Eiko?"

"You should understand that you are eminently qualified to accomplish this task. In fact, you are the **only** one so qualified."

“Huh?”

“It was not on a whim that I chose you for my Guardian, Ranma. If I hadn’t been able to contact you before you had perished in your battle against the dragon child, I would have been forced to seek my Guardian elsewhere. ‘Elsewhere’ in this case being defined as another inhabited planet, since no one else on your world met all of the proper qualifications for Guardianship.” Eiko sensed the incredulity in its chosen companion. Morale building at the moment would be of considerable benefit.

“Ranma, I know you perceive your encounter with the dragon child in an extremely negative manner. However, there is one very significant aspect of the conflict you have consistently failed to consider – you survived. He did not. Admittedly, you had some small assistance in your survival, but the end result is the same. You faced an opponent who was significantly more powerful with little to no information available on which to base either strategy or tactics, and you still managed to battle your opponent on a near-equal basis throughout the length of the encounter. A feat quite noteworthy, as it was entirely the result of your own talents and abilities. I have no doubt whatsoever that in your tenure as Guardian you will be highly successful in whatever endeavor you apply yourself to.” Ranma didn’t respond. Eiko’s calm statement that she – and she alone – was the only one out of **everyone** who could be Guardian was more than a little difficult for her to accept.

And Eiko’s bold pronouncement about her abilities really didn’t jive with her own recent experiences at all.

... but it did feel ... really nice.

“You should attempt to get some rest, Ranma. Tomorrow is likely to be rather busy.”

Eiko waited patiently for its Guardian to fall asleep. There were several things that required its attention before Ranma arrived for the imprinting process and it would be far easier to accomplish these without having to explain the process while it was occurring. Eiko needed a more detailed scan of Ranma’s neural pathways than could be accomplished from a distance, but even a partial scan allowed it to preset a good portion of the imprinting routine. And the more accurate the routine preset, the less time the imprinting would take. This could become important if Sailor Pluto was able to actively oppose the imprint while it was engaged. Eiko would **not** allow that to occur. **Chapter 6: Barbarians at the Gates**

**Suginami - Saturday, March 5th 1994**

Ranma was impressed. She didn’t think it was possible for anyone to top Kasumi’s cooking, but Kumiko had already managed it three times out of four. This morning’s breakfast was a good example – Ranma knew from helping Kasumi shop how difficult it was to get fresh eggs in the city, and Kumiko had used more eggs in this morning’s omelets than Kasumi could have gotten hold of in an entire month. She didn’t skimp on portions either. Ranma was glad the girls had agreed to a good long training session this morning – she was going to have to increase her workouts again if Kumiko kept feeding her this way. She also needed to know just where the heck she was supposed to go later in the day. She reluctantly set her cup of Hao Ya down on the table. “Grandma?”

“Yes, Ranma-kun?”

“I really ought t’ get to Juuban this afternoon after me and the girls practice. I ... uh ... really didn’t pay much attention when we all got here, so I don’t really know where we are right now.” Aiko chuckled softly. “Yamada-ke is in Shimo-Takaido, Suginami-ku, about eleven kilometers northwest of Azabu-Juuban. Is there a specific reason you need to be in Juuban this afternoon, Ranma-kun? I can always ask Genjokun to drive you there.”

Ranma rubbed the back of her neck. “Yeah, well ... Eiko is kinda anxious for me to go meet him in person, and the only way I can get there is to ... umm ... take back his key. One of the junior senshi’s got it right now, and she supposed to be hangin’ round in a park after school.” Aiko arched an eyebrow. “Interesting. I gather that you aren’t planning on simply walking up to this junior senshi and asking for the key back?” Ranma dropped her eyes as her face heated visibly. “Uhhh ... not really. Eiko didn’t think that’d be a good idea, and it don’t really belong to her anyway. I was kinda hoping to do this without

anyone really noticin'."

Aiko nodded. "Well then ... we will simply have to give you some assistance, won't we?" Ranma's eyes shot up. "Whaaaa?"

"Ranma-kun, the girls are all trained kunoichi. This is exactly the type of situation where they can be of assistance, and you're now part of the family. Which park in Juuban is it?" "Errrr ..." Ranma quickly glanced around the table. "Five sets of eyes are better than one," Midori said. "Spending an afternoon in a park? Real tough," Tsuya added. "It would be significantly more efficient," Kioko said with a nod. "And we get to break out some of our neat toys, too," Harukichi finished. "Ah man, I can't ask you girls t' do this. It ain't really your concern, and I dunno how dangerous it's likely to get. I might end up royally pissin' off some of the senshi and I wouldn't want y'all t' have to face them alone when I go off to visit Eiko." "It's not a matter of asking, Ranma-kun," Aiko admonished. "Family helps family, and you are now a part of ours."

"Ahh ..."

"Don't worry, son. You'll get used to all this eventually. Now, do you know which park you're going to?"

Ranma sighed. "Um, yeah. It's the one with the big library, err..." "Prince Arisugawa Memorial."

"Arisugawa, yeah, that's it. Recall being there once a while back."

"That's a nice park, Ranma," Midori said. "With five of us searching it shouldn't take too long to find your senshi."

"Yeah, and it's only two transfers!"

Ranma gave Tsuya a very puzzled look.

"You know, J-rail?"

"Why would ya bother with that?" Ranma asked, scratching her head. "Grandma said Juuban was only a dozen kilometers 'way. Even takin' it easy, that jog's under an hour." "Ranma, this isn't Nerima," Midori said. "Roof-hopping is bound to attract quite a bit of attention, and I'm not sure that we could all keep up with your usual pace anyway." "O.K., I guess," Ranma replied. "You'll have ta show me the best spot round here to train hop, though. An overpass's usually the easiest if you're not used ta roof-hoppin'." Harukichi started giggling.

"Ranma-kun," Aiko said. "The girls are accustomed to riding **inside** the train." "GAAAH. Why'd ya want to do that? It's much safer bein' on th' outside." Aiko eyebrow arched once more. "Why is that, son?"

"Well ... it just is. **Trust** me on that, 'k?" "You should tell everyone about the time you were out with Kasumi, Ranma-nēchan," Harukichi said between giggles. "I was the only one watching that day; you really nailed the guy." "Well, what did ya expect? It's bad 'nough when some bozo grabs **my** boobs or butt thinkin' I'm a girl. I don't hurt them much at all, maybe just a finger or wrist. But the bonehead who pawed Kasumi really deserved what he got."

Harukichi practically bounced in her seat. "Yeah! I'll bet he was in a cast singing soprano for at least six months. You hit him so fast no one saw what actually happened." "I shoulda hit him more," Ranma glowered, "but Kasumi was too upset. I **still** don't get why she didn't say nothin' sooner."

"Not everyone is willing to make a scene in that situation, Ranma-kun." Aiko replied. "And Miss Tendō apparently values the outward appearance of propriety over her own comfort." "Still don't make it right," Ranma grumbled. "Just 'cause the car's too full is no reason t' go stickin' yer hand up some girl's skirt where it don't belong. Especially Kasumi's."

"I think we can all agree on that, Ranma-kun," Aiko said. "And no one here will take it amiss when you find it necessary to ... admonish someone for overstepping their bounds. Even so, I will have to insist that you begin to ride inside the transit cars instead of on top or along side. In spite of your skills, there is still much less chance of an accidental injury when you are inside the train."

Ranma's eyes dropped to the table again. "I'm really kinda used to hoofin' it places anyway. Keeps up my trainin'."

Aiko smiled as she realized the problem. "Ranma-kun, I believe it is time to introduce you to Yamada

family economics. Naomi-chan, would you please ask Jun-chan to bring in the girls' weekly allowance along with a set of passes for Ranma-kun here?"

"Certainly, Yamada-sama," the black-haired maid replied with a bow. "Payday! YEA!" Tsuya exclaimed, thrusting a fist up in the air. This elicited a round of laughter from the other three girls.

"Tsuya's **always** broke before the week is up," Midori said. "Hey, what about Little Miss Bookworm over there?" Tsuya shot back. "My expenditures are normally allotted to **practical** items," Kioko pronounced. "That's why we end up carrying Kioko-nēchan's books all the time," Harukichi replied with a smirk.

"Girls, girls, girls, behave," Aiko said firmly, "or I'll reconsider my decision on handing out your allowances a day early."

"Yes, ma'am," the four girls exclaimed in unison, all eyes suddenly cast down at the table. Ranma stared at the frozen tableau for a couple of seconds before Tsuya started to chuckle. "Tsuya-nēchan's buying lunch again," Harukichi sniggered. The other girls chuckled in unison while they relaxed in their seats. Aiko had a wry grin on her face, shaking her head at the girls' antics. Her grin quickly turned into a warm smile. "Ranma-kun, as I was about to explain – before being so rudely interrupted – the girls get a weekly allowance for non-essentials when they aren't out on an assignment. The family covers any transportation and communication costs along with school supplies and normal daily wear. The allowance is intended to be used for things like hobbies, extra meals out, clothes and jewelry beyond the normal wardrobe, and other items or treats they feel like

purchasing at the time. Jun-chan is responsible for monitoring the weekly budget. She knows what's covered and what isn't, so don't hesitate to ask if you have any questions." "Ummm ..." Ranma said with a puzzled expression. "Now that you're a part of the family, this applies to you as well." "ME? Aw, you didn't have to go an' do that – I get by just fine." "Nonsense," Aiko said firmly. "I insist that each family member learns how to maintain a regular budget, and having a regular allowance provides good training in personal finances." she paused a moment when Jun walked into the room. "Ah, here we are. Thank you, Jun-chan." "Yamada-sama." Jun bowed, placing the small cloth bag down in front of the elder Yamada. The green-haired maid quickly traversed around the table placing an envelope in front of each of the four girls.

"Tsu-chan," Aiko said softly, "if you **really** want those earrings you're going to have to demonstrate a little restraint for once. Your birthday is a long way off and I will make a point of making sure no one buys them for you then as well." "Obasama ..." Tsuya whined.

"No, young lady – we have discussed this before numerous times. Those earrings aren't essential for any outfit in your normal wardrobe, no matter how good you think they look on you. If you want them you will have to buy them yourself, and you're not allowed to borrow the difference from the other girls, either. Understood?" "Yes, Obasama," Tsuya replied, staring down at the table. "Good. Now, let's see what Jun-chan brought in for Ranma-kun here." Aiko emptied the bag on the table in front of her. She handed Ranma the largest item from the pile.

"Here's your cell phone, Ranma-kun. Midori-chan can show you the speed dials if you aren't used to using one, and the other girls will need your number so they can add you to theirs. The family budget covers the first two hours each month for outside calls, along with all calls made to other family members."

"Ahh ..."

Aiko suppressed a smile, then placed a small stack of vouchers in front of the bewildered girl.

"Here are your transit passes and phone card. The Eidan all-line pass is good for six months and can be used on any Metro subway. The SF Metro cards are used when you need transfer or Passnet fares like the Inokashira line nearby. The ioCards are for JR lines, and the Free Kippu card is a one-day all-Tokyo pass for emergencies – you'll need to get a new one from Jun-chan every six months. Jun-chan keeps a supply of SF Metro and ioCards on hand for when you run out of fare, so you can always keep an extra one in your pocket if you like. The phone card is for times your cell phone is out of the coverage

area.” Aiko watched the expression on her grandson’s face and found it increasingly difficult to suppress her smile. She placed the remaining envelope in front of the wide-eyed girl. “And here’s your first week’s allowance along with your family credit card. The card is for any sudden family expenses as well as emergencies. If you really need to use the card for any personal expense, I expect the charges to be covered out of that week’s allowance unless an **extremely** good reason can be presented to me personally. Tsuya can tell you first-hand what happens when that privilege is abused, can’t you, Tsu-chan?” “Yes, Obasama,” Tsuya replied with a nod, her face a brilliant scarlet. Ranma gingerly reached out and picked up the envelope. Her face paled when she examined the contents.

“Ummm, Grandma?”

“Yes, Ranma-kun?”

“Somebody’s made a mistake – there’s gotta be at least a year’s worth in here.” “I wouldn’t think so, Ranma-kun. Jun-chan? You did physically count the amount of Ranma-kun’s allowance, did you not?”

“Of course, Yamada-sama. Twenty-five one-thousand yen notes, the same as the other girls.” “There, you see? Jun-chan is very diligent when everyone’s allowances are given out.” Ranma continued to stare at the contents of the envelope in her hands. “Twenty-five thousand yen?”

“Yes, Ranma-kun.”

“... per WEEK?” Ranma squeaked.

“Well, yes. I realize that amount is considerably lower than what many of the girls’ peers receive, but I believe it to be reasonable considering the family pays for most of the phone usage along with all transit fares.”

Aiko stood up and motioned for everyone to follow. “Now, I believe everyone here has a date with a new training routine, and we’d best be at it if Ranma-kun is to keep his afternoon appointment in a timely manner.”

“Hai!” the four girls exclaimed, getting up from the table as one. It quickly became apparent who had failed to follow suit.

“Ranma?” Midori asked the still-seated girl, who hadn’t moved an iota since her last exclamation.

“I think Obasama just broke Nēchan,” Harukichi quipped. A mild chuckle flashed its way around the table.

“Ranma?” Midori repeated, placing a hand on the girl’s shoulder to shake it gently once. “Yup, she’s broken,” Tsuya added.

Ranma blinked several times before shakily getting to her feet. Just what the hell had she gotten involved in **this** time?

## Juuban

Momo-chan looked over at her friend Chibi-Usa-chan with concern. The pink-haired girl had been really quiet the whole week. It wasn’t at all like her to act this way, yet she kept saying everything was OK. Lunchtime had become totally boring, and today’s hadn’t been any different.

“Race you to the pond!” Jiro-chan exclaimed. The young boy stood up on his bike’s pedals and began to pull rapidly away.

Momo-chan held back and waited for Chibi-Usa-chan to follow. She was really sad when Jiro-chan sped off on his own.

## JR Shibuya Station

“We coulda just walked,” Ranma grouched. “No one in Suginami-ku is used to seeing roof-hoppers, Ranma,” Midori replied. “That would attract entirely too much attention at the moment. Besides, everyone who lives in Tokyo should know how to use the transit system.”

Ranma looked around at the confusing mass of gates, stairs, escalators, and overpasses that comprised Shibuya station. “I don’t like this – I’m startin’ t’ feel like Ryōga.” she grumbled. “Don’t worry,

Ranma-nēchan, it gets easier really fast.” Harukichi said. “We’re taking the Yamanote local to Ebisu, then we can either walk for about fifteen minutes or dive down the Hibiya subway and make a quick hop to Hiro-o.” “We’re walkin’. Definitely.”

Tsuya groaned.

“What’s the matter, Tsuya?” Midori asked. “Still a little sore from Ranma’s training?” “A **little**?” Tsuya moaned in response. “I didn’t know **anyone** could bounce tennis balls in that many directions at once and still bank them all at a moving target like that.” “Hey, you guys are lucky,” Ranma said with a chuckle. “I was goin’ easy on ya. When Pops ran me through that th’ first time, he used rocks. Tennis balls ‘r a lot softer.” “You’re kidding, right?” Tsuya asked. “I mean, no one could be **that** dumb.” “Tsuya, just remember who we’re referring to here,” Kioko admonished. “Oh.”

Ranma just laughed and shook her head.

## Nerima

Nodoka stared at her reflection, barely recognizing the image that stared back. Love and honor had driven the kendoka away, now duty demanded her return once more. Duty. It was all that remained, the only thing holding off oblivion. The clan was dead.

It was her duty to see it made official. She squared her shoulders and fought to locate her center. It was time. Duty, and a mother’s vengeance, would be met this day.

The kendoka resolutely marched out of the empty house.

## Prince Arisugawa Memorial Park, Minami-Azabu, Minato-ku

“Finally!” Tsuya exclaimed, flopping down on the park bench. “Hey c’mon – we just got here,” Ranma said “That was barely a stretch.” Midori snickered.

“Oh, and ‘Kichi?” Ranma turned to the short redhead. “Did ya really have t’ drive a spike all th’ way through that guy’s hand? I know he was a creep, but a busted finger or two woulda made th’ same point.” “You’re entirely too nice for your own good, Nēchan,” Harukichi huffed. Kioko shook her head. Now they had **two** of them to contend with. “Ranma, perhaps you should describe the person we’ll be looking for,” Midori said, trying to forestall another chaotic conversation. “Haru-chan can distribute the headsets while you brief us.”

“On it, Onēchan,” Harukichi said, slipping her backpack off her shoulders. Ranma looked over her four ... cousins, her **family**. They hadn’t asked for anything in return, not a thing, nor had they questioned her story even once. They hadn’t even argued over who was in charge or better suited than her to do this thing or that. ... and that just didn’t make any sense.

“Man, how’d I get talked into this?”

“Obāsama is very persuasive,” Kioko replied. “Besides, unlike your own experience, this is how a family is **supposed** to act when one of its family members requires assistance.” Ranma looked at Kioko and blinked.

“Description?” Kioko asked.

“Oh, right. The squirt shouldn’t be too hard t’ spot. She’s third or fourth grade, about four, four and a half tall, red eyes, pink hair, and the dorkiest lookin’ hairdo you ever saw.” Midori’s eyes lit up in comprehension. “Oh, so **that’s** what you were having hysterics over last night.”

“Yup,” Ranma nodded. “Her hair’s made up in these huge twin ponytails with carrot-shaped odango on top. Eiko sent me an image last night – it’s th’ funniest damn thing.”

“This doesn’t sound very difficult,” Harukichi said. “Headset, Nēchan,” she stated somewhat cryptically, handing Ranma an odd piece of equipment. Ranma looked at the thing Harukichi had handed her. It somewhat resembled a receptionist’s phone handset, except it was much smaller. “Here. You put the headset on like this,” Harukichi explained, turning her right ear to Ranma. “The transmitter goes in a pocket or clips to your belt, and most of us run the headset wire down inside our blouse to hide it.”

“Jeez, ‘Kichi, I ‘preciate it,” Ranma said, making no move to wear the headset. “But I don’t really need

somethin' like that."

"Ranma, you said you wanted to do this quietly," Midori replied. "These comsets allow us to split up and still talk to each other. They allow us to cover a lot of ground all at once." "Ranma, it would be quite beneficial for you to take advantage of your cousin's offer. It increases your chance of obtaining the key significantly." "Ah man. Not you, **too**," Ranma grouched. "Okay okay I'll wear the dang thing." Midori chuckled. "I take it your distant partner just made a comment or two." "Yeah, I'm bein' ganged up on here," Ranma said, failing miserably at the 'sorely tried' look. "Let me help you, Ranma-nēchan," Harukichi asked. Ranma exhaled noisily. "Sure, squirt. Knock yerself out." "Channel nine should be clear in this area," Kioko said. "Right. Comms to channel nine," Midori instructed. The other girls quickly made the setting adjustment, with Harukichi switching Ranma's set before connecting the headset wire to the box. "Count off! Set one check," Midori said. "Set two check," Kioko replied.

"Set three check," Tsuya added.

"Set four check," Harukichi finished. "Nēchan, put the boom mike **here** and say set five check." Ranma shrugged. "Okay, set five check ... How come I didn't hear nothin'?"

"We heard you just fine, so your volume's probably all the way down," Harukichi replied. "Put your finger against the center of the earpiece like this. You'll feel a little disc you can move. Rotate it up like this to turn the volume up, down to reduce the volume." Gadgets. Ranma shook her head. She also turned the volume up like her cousin had just showed her.

"Alright," Midori said. "Once we locate the pink-haired girl, we need to get your key from her. What does the key look like, Ranma?"

"Eiko?"

"The minor key is approximately four inches long. It is somewhat ornate and is normally worn by the junior senshi around her neck, hanging from a thin cord. She keeps it tucked inside her blouse when not in use. Ranma, you should warn your cousins that you will be transported to me the instant you take possession of the key. The key has been automatically set to invoke an emergency recall protocol."

"Oh that's just peachy," Ranma replied. "Eiko says the key's 'bout four inches long and hidden inside the girl's blouse like a necklace. I'm also supposed t' warn you I'm liable to poof and go bye-bye the second I get the key. Some crap about emergency recall or somethin', so don't be startled if I disappear suddenly."

"Sounds easy enough," Harukichi said. "This should be fun!" "Ranma, we'll spread out in a standard area coverage pattern," Midori said. "Since you haven't done this with us before, you can use any method you like in locating your target – we'll keep you updated constantly. Everyone, pattern delta to begin with." Ranma watched as the other girls started walking in different directions. She smirked once before leaping up into the trees.

## Nerima

Nodoka stared at the gates of Tendō-ke and glowered. Fragments of memories whirled through the kendoroka's mind – all the lies, the deceptions, 'they've gone on a training trip', 'Mr. Panda' playing in the koi pond with 'Ranko', her son-turned-daughter. The desperate loneliness and pain etched deep inside those haunting crystalline blue eyes every time their gazes met. Her eyes. **His** eyes. Why had she never noticed that before? Shame washed across her, shaking the hard-fought grip on her center. She had tried **so** hard to turn Ranko into a proper young lady. Tried so hard ... and helped destroy his soul in the process.

Her own actions had trapped them both in roles neither could play, and it was now too late to set it right. Entirely too late.

It was fortunate that duty demanded her end. Nothing less could even begin to atone for her own sins. Nodoka blinked back tears as she fought to center herself once more. She would do her son no good if she entered battle with a divided heart. His soul cried out for justice, and she must see it through to the

bitter end. Her own fate was given, but the others ... THEY were completely without honor. THEY would not atone to his soul. THEY ... would be punished. It was time.

The kendoka slipped silently through the gate, her birth family's art returning at her need. She ignored the front door – that would only give warning she could not allow. An irregular gravel path wandered around the left side of the house to the koi pond. Her first few steps made a dreadful noise until her kunoichi balance reasserted itself. She glided across the remaining path with only the whisper of her hakama giving proof of her presence.

Genma sat on the outer walkway of the family room and stared out to the koi pond. It had been almost a month since Ranma had been stupid enough to get locked in his girl form. A month since he had gone chasing after that Chinese prince. A month without someone to train, prod, cajole, and push to greater and ever greater heights. A month of complete and utter boredom. He glanced over to his friend sitting next to him and shook his head. Tendō was hidden behind the morning paper, eyes glued to whatever idiotic article that had caught his attention this time. What a waste. At least he still practiced Anything Goes Shogi. “GENMA!”

Genma jumped to his feet faster than his bulk would belie. He turned to face the source of the shout just in time to pluck a small metal object out of the air, an object which had been aimed directly at his head. He barely registered the fact that the object was **not** a weapon when he saw the source of the thrown object and almost fell over in shock. A vision of absolute beauty stood not more than ten feet away. A vision which brought back memories of past days filled with joy and happiness, a vision he had not seen since he had courted and married the auburn-haired beauty, a vision he thought he had lost forever. A vision which was glaring balefully at him, a vision which ... Oh, CRAP.

“Heeheehee, Nodoka my dear. What a pleasant surprise.”

“Explain yourself, Genma. Where is my son,” the kendoka hissed.

Genma started to sweat. This was **not** good, not good at all. He plastered a smile over his face and looked anywhere except at those burning crimson eyes. “The boy’s gone on a training trip, dear. He should be back in a ...”

Genma finally recognized the object he had caught. His eyes widened in shock before the rage hit. He was holding the broken tsuba of his family’s sword. “WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS, WIFE?”

“I am not your wife. You are not my husband. I have no husband.” Genma’s fiery rage battled the frigid wall of the kendoka’s will. Battled, and lost. “My HUSBAND would not have turned my son into a daughter.” Genma’s rage vanished as the kendoka took a slow deliberate step forwards. “My HUSBAND would not have sold my son into slavery to feed his fat belly.” More steps.

“My HUSBAND would not have hidden from me and forced my son and daughter to lie to his own mother.”

Closer. The vision now filled with danger and promises of pain. “My HUSBAND would not have engaged my son and daughter to a violent maniac from an honorless family of eta.”

Several gasps were heard from inside the house. Closer, ever closer. “Most of all, Genma, my HUSBAND would not have abandoned MY DAUGHTER in her time of most desperate need and forced her to battle unspeakable odds in the mountains alone. My HUSBAND would not have LEFT her to DIE BY HERSELF.” **Snick Snick**

Genma was frozen to the spot in shock. He watched with dread as she raised her katana and pointed it directly at him.

“No, Genma, my HUSBAND would have done none of those things. I have no husband. My husband is dead to me.”

Genma turned white. She did **not** say that. He did NOT hear that. He looked around frantically at the faces surrounding him, everyone Tendō in various stages of shock. A whisper of air was his only warning.

He dodged an uppercut slice which would have decapitated him had he been a ‘normal’ martial artist



and jumped out of the way of the following reversal. The kendoka became a living whirlwind of flashing blades, a whirlwind that tracked the stocky martial artist relentlessly around the courtyard. To Genma her attacks were painfully slow, but the only way to stop the dance of steel was to incapacitate her, and he just didn't KNOW enough to risk that. Besides, he never **could** hit her. Time to employ his school's Final Technique. Nodoka screamed in frustration as the object of her ire literally vanished at the top of a leap over the outer fence.

"The clan is **dead**, Genma. DO YOU HEAR ME?" The kendoka collapsed to her knees and screamed to the heavens. "THE CLAN IS DEAD!"

## Arisugawa Park

"Check one," Ranma heard from Midori's voice. "Southern playground clear, no contact." "Check three," from Tsuya. "Nature ponds clear, no contact." "Check two," from Kioko. "East plaza clear, no contact. I will search the library interior, and have visual contact on five. That's you, Ranma." "Check four," Harukichi said with a giggle. "Riding trails no contact. Not clear, check still in progress."

"I'm gonna hop to the top of th' Library and look about a bit." "One acknowledge. Have fun, Ranma."

## Nerima

The kendoka sat slumped on the grass next to the koi pond for an indeterminable time, an unnatural stillness surrounding her until she could forcibly gather herself together once more. Duty – it came back to duty now that nothing else was left of her existence. She was no more

than a shade, a ghost of wasted possibilities lost to foolishness, bright futures torn asunder through reckless pride and misplaced honor. Dust, all ashes and dust. Past time to return. She briefly struggled to her feet, muscles stiff from their unaccustomed exertion. In her heart she hadn't expected to personally exact full measure from her erstwhile husband, but the attempt had to be made. And it mattered little that she was unable to do so – the published notices would insure that for the foreseeable future. Now if only her mother would accede to her final duty. "Auntie Saotome?"

Nodoka's eyes tracked the source of the interruption to the eldest Tendō girl. She quickly noted everyone's position before adjusting the grip on her blades, catching the youngest Tendō's dazed fascination with the daisho's gleaming edges. She leveled seething eyes at the miscreants before her.

"You knew," the kendoka hissed.

Kasumi recoiled from the venom in that short pronouncement. "You knew," the kendoka reiterated. "You knew Ranko was my son, my daughter." Kasumi nodded weakly, a songbird caught in the gaze of a serpent. "You knew and you hid him from me regardless. You **knew** – and perpetrated a lie, a lie that ended in her **death**."

"Hey, it wasn't **us** hiding him from you and ..." "How many times, Nabiki Tendō? How many times have I asked, only to be told they were on a training trip? How many times did I ask and were told they were gone – while I was standing next to my own son?"

"Daddy?" Nabiki drawled. "You're the one who told us what to say, after all." "I see." Nodoka raised her blades. "What would Hitomi have said of this, Soūn Tendō? Will you defend your actions with blood, or has her spirit truly left these grounds?" "But ... I ... It was ..."

"Oh Father, **really**," Nabiki admonished. "Mrs. Saotome, what proof do you have that Ranma is dead anyway?"

"You question my word without defending your own? Your mother weeps, Nabiki Tendō."

The kendoka silently resheathed her blades.

"But if proof is what you seek ..." Nodoka extracted a small package from a hidden pocket. "I have no further use of this," she said, throwing it at the middle Tendō girl – who squawked in surprise when the video cassette bounced off her shoulder to land with a thump on the tatami. The kunoichi brushed past the shell-shocked family and padded silently out the entrance hallway. The four Tendōs looked wide-eyed

at each other until a loud 'KIAA!' sounded from outside. When they rushed to the outdoor gate the only proof of the kunoichi's passing was the bottom half of the severed dojo sign laying in the street. A pair of old and weary eyes watched as the scene played itself out at Tendō-ke. The situation had definitely gotten worse, and if what Nodoka had said **was** true ... then there was virtually no chance of finally resolving the whole blasted entanglement. Happosai sighed, feeling the weight of all his years pressing heavily upon him. He would just have to talk to his daughter again ... no matter how much that would cost him.

### **Arisugawa Park**

"Check four bingo. I repeat, check four bingo. Item in hand. I have visual on five, will rendezvous soonest."

"Good work, four. Ranma, Haru-chan has you in sight and she has the key with her. Stay where you are and she'll bring it right to you." "Ah geez, 'Kichi. I was supposed to do that." Harukichi giggled. "No problem, Ranma-nēchan, it's one of my specialties. She never even noticed. I know which tree you're up in, so you can hop down any time. Two minutes, max." "Thanks, girls. It woulda taken me a lot longer myself – this park's bigger than I thought. You should prob'ly head right home; Eiko didn't say how long I'd be gone." "Agreed, Ranma," Midori replied. "All rendezvous at start; we'll exit as soon as four finishes delivery."

"Check two roger."

"Check three roger."

"Check four roger."

Luna ran as fast as she could. She didn't have time to stop and warn Chibi-Usa that her Time Key had been stolen; the redhead was running entirely too fast and she couldn't risk losing sight of her. Luna was fortunate the girl was sticking to the main path for now – she didn't think she could keep up if the redhead moved that quickly through the brush. The cat's legs ached as she chased after the short redhead. Luna suppressed a moan when the girl broke away from the riding path and began running uphill through the open woods. Fortunately the redhead didn't go very far – she stopped suddenly at the base of a particularly tall tree. The moon cat dashed under a small bush a short distance from the girl's tree. She was crawling into position when she heard a soft thump nearby. "Here you are, Nēchan."

Luna suppressed a hiss once she got into position. Another girl had met up with the redhead, this one with black hair tied back in a pigtail and eyes as blue as the Princess's. The redhead was holding the key out to the new girl – she must be the leader. "Just a sec, 'Kichi – lemme get this blasted headset off. I don't really wanna cart it along t' the Gate."

Luna watched as the taller girl removed something from her before pulling a long wire out from inside her baggy shirt. That – and a small box from her pocket – was set down on the ground before the pigtailed girl reached for the key. "Good luck!" the redhead told the other girl, who nodded once and smiled before taking possession of the key.

Luna's mouth dropped wide when the pigtailed girl and the key simply vanished the instant she touched it. The red-headed girl didn't seem surprised. "Check four. Delivery complete, five is in route. Repeat: delivery complete, five in route." The redhead picked up the pigtailed girl's discarded equipment and swiftly stowed it in her backpack.

"Rendezvous at start, check four roger." Luna gaped when the redhead disappeared before her eyes. She carefully extracted herself from her hiding spot and looked around. There was no sign of either girl.

### **Elsewhere**

Sailor Pluto groaned, staggering to her feet once more. Her repeated attempts at reestablishing control of the Gates had accomplished absolutely nothing, and with every try the protective measures and defenses built into the Gates hammered her flat. The continual failures were wearing her down as well; she required more and more time between each attempt to recover even a small part of her

strength. Unfortunately, there was little else she could do except to keep trying – without control of the gates she could neither communicate nor leave the space-time warp the Gates currently occupied. The bright flash of a temporal warp-flux interrupted her painful routine. Sailor Pluto's heart raced when she located the position of the transit – it was directly in front of the Gates! That ruled out any friendly assistance; Small Lady or the other Sailor Senshi would have appeared at the opposite end of the warp bubble. There could only be one meaning of such a transit, and in spite of her current situation Sailor Pluto's duty was clear.

Ranma fought back the touch of vertigo induced by the emergency recall transit. Once her vision cleared she found herself standing in front of an elaborate double-door. The odd part was that the door and frame wasn't attached to any structure – instead it was mounted in a free-standing monument, almost like a ceremonial gate of some sort. Even stranger was the eerie mist and fog that surrounded the monument and obscured **everything** past a dozen feet. Wait a minute ... GATE?

"Hello, Ranma."

"That you, Eiko?"

"Yes it is. Now you can see why the use of a gender pronoun when referring to myself would be ... inappropriate."

Ranma shook her head. A door – she was talking to a door. Could her life **really** get any stranger?

Eiko chuckled. "You should not concern yourself over that, Ranma. I can assure you ... I am far from the strangest thing you will encounter as Guardian. " Ranma pinked at the reminder that Eiko shared her surface thoughts. "I would suggest that you be on the watch for my former Guardian. You must retrieve the primary Key from her before we can complete the process of giving you full Guardianship status. Unfortunately, she is unlikely to hand the key over willingly." "That's just peachy," Ranma sighed.

"STOP!"

A commanding voice rang out from the mist. "Any and all who break the taboo, and attempt to approach the doorway of space-time, shall be eliminated!" Ranma cocked an eyebrow – that was almost as bad as one of Kunō's corny speeches. "So I take it this is ..."

"Correct. My former Guardian, Sailor Pluto." Sailor Pluto strode into view from the mists. She raised the Garnet Rod high in preparation to strike.

"PREPARE TO DIE!"

"Oh, great – another Ryōga."

Ranma's evaluation of her opponent took but an instant. Pluto was a good fifteen centimeters taller but couldn't weigh more than a couple of kilos over Ranma's own weight. Pluto's long deep-viridian hair and garnet eyes, combined with her relatively slender build, made her look more like a fashion model than a warrior. The long metal staff Pluto wielded was about as tall as she was which would give her a considerable advantage in reach. Her movements were fluid but imprecise, indicative of someone who had previous training but no recent practice. Her outfit, however, was an indecent parody of a school fuku and Ranma had to suppress a sudden fit of giggles at the sight it presented.

Sailor Pluto swung straight down, intent on staving in the back-haired girl's skull. Her strike was quick, accurate, and to Ranma pathetically slow. Pluto blinked when her target blurred and suddenly appeared two feet to the side. Her eyes narrowed dangerously – this was no ordinary girl. Pluto shifted her grip on the Garnet Rod to that of an English quarterstaff and lashed out using combinations not seen for centuries. Ranma wasn't surprised when the pace of the attacks increased dramatically. Pluto's unbalanced grip and attack style was unusual, reminding Ranma of an odd mix of Okinawan rokushakubo and Korean jang bong techniques. Ranma's respect for her opponent rose as Pluto continued to increase the speed of her attacks. The fuku-clad woman had to have some serious strength in order to fling the metal staff around so quickly. A full minute of dodging went by before Ranma decided Pluto could easily do without the staff. She waited several seconds until the proper opening presented itself and struck Pluto's upper arm with a quick pair of knife edge chops. She barely dodged the cross-sweep counter-attack when her disarming move accomplished absolutely nothing. Her hands ached the

same way they did after using the Amaguriken on Ryōga.  
“Damn , she’s as hard as P-chan.”

“I did mention previously that the Guardian’s uniform provided partial protection against both magical and physical attacks.”

Ranma was so shocked she stopped dead in her tracks. Sailor Pluto fell flat on her butt, having already overextended on a two-handed back thrust. “Eiiiiii...Kooooo...” Ranma growled, bounding over in a single leap to stand directly in front of the Gates.

She suddenly pointed at the prone senshi. “Are you tellin’ me that I gotta wear **THAT**? You gotta be **kiddin’** me – d’ya know how EMBARASSIN’ that’s gonna be? That skirt ain’t long enough to flag a taxi, and I’ll be givin’ the local perverts nosebleeds every time I do a wheel kick!”

Sailor Pluto stood up and stared at the petite black-haired girl she’d just been fighting. The girl was yelling at the **Gates**? “What in Hades ...” “... and what about that ‘no ribbons and lace’ bit, huh? Sure looks like frilly crap to me! How’s anyone s’posed to take me seriously in a get-up like **that**?” “Um, excuse me?” Pluto really didn’t mind the brief respite; she had almost become exhausted just trying to hit the frighteningly elusive girl. A senshi could recover a **lot** of energy in a very short period of time.

“Ranma, the uniform was designed to maximize the attractiveness of the Guardian. Its form adjusts automatically to appeal to the Guardian’s race’s ideals of beauty. In addition, I have no control over the uniform’s transformation magic – and there aren’t any ribbons or lace in the uniform’s current configuration.”

“NO RIBBONS? Just what do you call that mess right over her boobs, then?” Sailor Pluto blinked. “Excuse me?”

“That is a bow, Ranma, not ribbons.”

Ranma snorted. “Like there’s really any difference. And what about the jewelry? ... an’ those **BOOTS**! How the **HECK** am I supposed to fight Musabetsu Kakutō Ryū in **HIGH HEELS**, huh?”

“EXCUSE ME!”

“WHAT?” Ranma shouted back, turning her attention away from Eiko. “Oh, so **NOW** you want to talk?”

Sailor Pluto bit back a retort. She had no doubt as to the eventual outcome of her defense of the Gates, so it wouldn’t hurt to converse a little to gain information. The girl might even drop her guard enough to shorten the whole process significantly. “Who or what exactly **are** you, and why were you yelling at the Gates? It’s just a thing.” Ranma glared at the senshi. “I’m Ranma Saotome of the Musabetsu Kakutō Saotome Ryū. What I’m **supposed** to be is your replacement. And the reason I’m yellin’ at Eiko is ‘cause the damn door’s a sneaky pompous bastard who’s startin’ to remind me an awful lot of Nabiki.” “Replacement?” Sailor Pluto’s eyes widened in shock. “**NO!**” “Oh yes he does,” Ranma shot back. “The uniform’s ‘more sophisticated’, he said. Sophisticated – yeah, **right**. That get-up makes you look like a hentai schoolgirl, and I’ll just bet there’s some kinda naked whirly light show that goes along with it, too.” “Only I can guard the Gates of Time,” Pluto said, eye hardening. “Only I.” “Huh?” Ranma shook her head. “Lady, I hate to tell you this but you already blew that gig.” Sailor Pluto started edging around the Ranma girl. She couldn’t risk harming the Gates, but if she could get the girl far enough away from them she could end this with a single blow. She’d have to stall just a little longer.

“Nonsense. I am the Guardian – I always have been and I always will be.” “Not accordin’ to Eiko here,” Ranma smirked. “Why do you insist on talking as if the Gates were alive?” Pluto continued to edge around the girl. “The Gates are just a thing, nothing more. This I know; I have been its Guardian for longer than you could possibly imagine.”

“That’s not what **he** says. Hey, Eiko. How long did you say P-chan over there had been on the job?”

“Two thousand, three hundred and seventy four years, one hundred and eight days, fourteen...” “Yeah, yeah, don’t need the hours and stuff. Two thousand, three hundred and seventy four years is what he says.”

Sailor Pluto stopped a moment to stare at the girl. “How could she possibly know that?” Ranma sighed

and rubbed the back of her neck. "Look, lady, this whole thing wasn't exactly my idea in the first place. I wouldn't even **be** here if Herb hadn't dropped a mountain on top my head after locking my curse. 'Cause of Eiko's help, I gave my word that I'd be his new

Guardian, an' this was **before** I found out the Kaisufuu had been destroyed an' that bein' Guardian could unlock my curse."

"This girl is insane." Sailor Pluto also noted the girl had stepped away from the Gates just enough during her little rant.

"Dead Scream."

Ranma ran full speed the instant the violet bands of energy began swirling around the staff. It had been painfully obvious what Pluto had been trying to do, even if Ranma didn't know exactly **how** Pluto was going to attack next.

The senshi grabbed the Garnet Rod in both hands, completed the final twirl, aimed, and fired. The violet ball of energy shot harmlessly out into the mists just as a blinding white glow erupted behind her.

"KACHU TENSHIN AMAGURIKEN!"

Pluto's world exploded in pain; a pair of gigantic wrecking balls hammered her lower back at unbelievable speeds. She was fighting to retain consciousness before she had time to react and barely had strength left to wave the staff behind her with one hand. She fell to her knees when the blows stopped as suddenly as they had started. Ranma landed with a thud about twelve feet away from Sailor Pluto. That pathetically weak back sweep had proved to be anything but – it had brushed her forearm block aside as if it hadn't existed and plowed into her side with a blow worthy of Ryōga. She struggled to her feet, suppressing a scream of pain when she discovered she couldn't put any pressure on her left arm. It had just been broken ... again. And her ribs hurt like heck ... again. "Damn it all, I just finished **healin'** that arm!" Ranma glared at her opponent who was trying to stand up by climbing up her own staff. That staff was dangerous with a capital 'D', but it also seemed to be the entire center of Pluto's abilities. Ranma knew how tiring a ki fight could be, but with Eiko's supply behind her all Ranma really had to worry about would be maintaining control. She flooded her body with ki. Sailor Pluto was barely able to stand up – she was near total exhaustion and her entire lower back felt as if it had been dipped in liquid fire. Leaning on her staff, she turned towards the direction of the angry shout. She located Ranma just as the girl's body erupted in blinding white streamers of energy.

"MÖKO TAKABISHA!"

Pluto's own exhaustion saved her. When she tried leaping sideways she fell back down on her butt instead; her legs having given out completely. She felt the intense heat of her opponent's attack as it raced past her head.

Ranma stared at her hand in amazement. That hadn't been her normal ball of confidence ki. Instead, a huge bar of quasi-solid lightning **far** more powerful than anything she'd ever thrown before had emerged, and her arm buzzed unpleasantly from channeling that amount of power. She'd better dampen down her next shot – she didn't want to actually kill anyone. "Mōko Takabisha!" A much smaller cylinder of ki slammed into the prone senshi, flinging her back a dozen feet to land in an unconscious heap.

"Bout damned time," Ranma growled. She walked over to Pluto, wary of any further ploys. A quick but **careful** check assured her that the former Guardian really was out cold. Ranma looked down at the senshi and back over to the Gates. "Guess I'm gonna have to put her somewhere I can keep an eye on her." Ranma grabbed the back of Sailor Pluto's collar and dragged her over closer to the Gates. She retrieved the Garnet Rod, surprised at how little the deceptive staff seemed to weigh. "OK, Eiko. Now where do I find this key you've been talkin' about?" "You're currently holding it, Ranma."

"This thing?" Ranma held the Garnet Rod out and gave it a closer look. Now that her attention was brought to the fact, it **did** sort of look like a big fancy key. "Yes, that 'thing' is the primary Key. Ranma, it's time to begin. Please come over and stand directly in front of me."

“Geez, give me a sec, huh?”

“Do not concern yourself over your current injuries. They will not interfere with the Ceremony and will quickly disappear once you have attained full Guardianship.” Ranma sighed and walked over to stand in front of the Gates. “Because my former Guardian is uncooperative, you will have to perform the Ceremony by yourself. Please repeat the following words out loud.” “Ah, man ... You mean I gotta start makin’ corny speeches now?” “Ranma, I apologize if the process upsets your sensibilities, but the only way a new Guardian can be inducted is if an external stimulus is applied. I cannot speak the words myself – you must be the one to do so. This is the way I was designed.” “Yeah, yeah, I get the message. So what’s up first?”

“Repeat after me: Gate of Eternity, obey your Guardian’s command. Release the lock on Command Core access.”

“Gate of Eternity, obey your Guardian’s command. Release the lock on command core access.” **CLACK** Ranma spun about at the sound. Looking down, she saw a slotted hole that had appeared in the ground. The hole was rimmed by a band of flashing crimson light. “Insert the key into the access lock. Turn it exactly a half turn counterclockwise.”

Sailor Pluto eyes cracked open. Her every nerve ending was on fire – she could barely see the swirling mist of the warp bubble. The roaring in her ears subsided quickly as her brain began to process sensory inputs once more. She could hardly move a muscle – her energies were so low it took a tremendous effort just to turn her head when a loud noise sounded to her left. Pluto clearly stared at the black-haired girl who held the Key. Ranma. Yes, that was her name. She was ... **holding** the Key. She shouldn’t even be able to lift it; only the Guardian could ... No. NOOOO! She **couldn’t** have been telling the truth, she COULDN’T! The Gates couldn’t have chosen her – the Gates weren’t sentient! It was a tool, nothing more, a **tool**. Pluto forced herself to calm down. She was wasting much-needed energy, and there was no way this Ranma girl could bypass the numerous safeguards built into the Gate ... safeguards designed for this very contingency.

“Hey, Eiko – this thing won’t go down all the way.” “Oh, OK. Halfway, push, then a quarter back.” Command Core! Ranma was trying to access the Command Core! Pluto watched helplessly as the lock’s strobing lights changed from red to yellow to green. A crimson globe surrounded the girl and the Gates. Command Core access - that was impossible! There was no one beside herself who knew how to unlock that function, no one but her ... .. and the information stored inside the Gates themselves. “I, Ranma Saotome, do solemnly swear ...” No. NO! It **couldn’t** be. Not THOSE words. “... that I will defend the Gate of Eternity against all enemies in all times ...”

The Gates ... the Gates had ... **chosen** this girl? But ... but the girl wasn’t of Serenity’s court. She wouldn’t ...

“... and discharge the duties of Guardian to the utmost of my abilities; ...” The Gates **had** chosen another ... and she tried to speak. “... that I accept this obligation freely and without reservation; ...” “Please ... please give it back ... Crystal Tokyo ...” Her pleas went unheard.

“... and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of the office I am about to enter ...” No. Please. This was wrong. If **she** wasn’t the Guardian, she couldn’t insure that Crystal Tokyo would ever come into being. And this person ... No ... “... until I am no longer willing nor capable of performing such duties.” Sailor Pluto had almost made it to her feet. She collapsed when the crimson globe turned brilliant white and that small final remnant of her link to the Gates was severed. “No ...” Pluto whispered.

For the first time in over a millennium, tears tracked down the cheeks of the oldest senshi.

“... and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of the office I am about to enter ...” “... and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of the office I am about to enter ...” “... until I am no longer willing nor capable of performing such duties.” “... until I am no longer willing nor capable of performing such duties.” “Thank you, Ranma. There are only two remaining steps left to perform. The final process requires a finer parameter preset adjustment than I have been able to perform from a distance. Once

this scan is completed the last step will be to imprint your gestalt into my central command core. Please place your hand on the Key's Garnet Orb and state the command 'Diagnostic Scan' out loud. I will warn you the process **will** be slightly painful for a short period, but I guarantee it will do no lasting damage." Ranma looked warily at the Key, its Orb flashing in tandem with the green keyhole strobes. Well, she'd come this far ...

She extended a hand.

"Diagnostic Scan."

The swirling globe of crimson light surrounding her and the Gates turned a brilliant and opaque white. Ranma winced as a dagger of pure force thrust deep inside her neural pathways. Eiko skillfully directed the mental probe to the blocked off section of Ranma's psyche, the part which housed the unknown spiritual contamination. The probe was far from being the gentlest construct Eiko could have used – it instantly demolished the fragile controls Ranma had built up over the years. The nekoken boiled out in a savage psychic whirlwind of claws and fangs and primal fears. Eiko frantically tried to contain the damage to Ranma's psyche while it finished analyzing the contamination's spiritual components. Partial results invoked an immediate Alpha Override – there was now a direct extra-dimensional conduit into the command core. An emergency stasis field snapped into place around the Gates. The surrounding globe of white light quickly faded to a smoky grey.

## Temple of Layiru

The priest in the Gem Room could be excused. He wouldn't be, of course, but it was a mistake any of them would have made. Servants were **always** punished – immediately – when any of them failed to serve their masters properly, and this servant had actually been clumsy enough to spill the goblet's contents all over his master's immaculate robes. The servant was killed immediately. This was as it should be – servants were expendable, after all.

It was what Ri'kakh, 2nd Order High Priest of the Red did afterwards that would cause him so much trouble in the near future. He left the Gem Room just long enough to return to his quarters and change his outer robes. It wouldn't do for one of his stature to be seen in soiled garments, and the Gem Room duty was mainly ceremonial – it was not as if anything would actually **happen** which would require his attention.

It was entirely his fault, then, that he missed seeing one of the intricate mosaic's blue gemstones flare briefly to life. And, as ill luck would have it, by the time he returned to his post the gem had dimmed to a dull glow – a glow hidden by the Gem Room's ambient lighting. The illumination in the Gem Room had been set higher than regulations allowed due to Ri'kakh's own personal vanity. He would soon discover the error of his ways – quite painfully.

## Juuban

The artifact woke up quite abruptly, reactivating after having been in Emergency Core Override for well over a millennium. A quick scan revealed his Guardian to be similarly disabled. He immediately manifested himself next to his sleeping Guardian and erected a level two defensive shield around her. A swirling globe of black mist surrounded them both. The artifact had no knowledge of why it had been shut down for such a lengthy period of time, and his Guardian was currently incapable of providing the missing data. The artifact transmitted a tight beamed priority query to the Gate of Eternity requesting status update and full data briefing. He wasn't totally surprised when his request was rejected with a Service Unavailable error. The automatic follow-up scan revealed the Gate of Eternity had surrounded itself with an internal emergency stasis field.

With no data briefing available, the artifact would have to rely solely on local resources. He performed a detail scan of his Guardian to further investigate the reason for her current state. He immediately upgraded his defensive shield to full class one status. The globe of black mist swirling around them

hardened into an impenetrable shell of liquid force-metal. His personality matrix permitted him to swear. He did so. Profusely. The newly awakened artifact was extremely perturbed. He had an immense amount of work to accomplish before he could restore his Guardian to her proper form and health, and without the Gate's active assistance a good portion of this task was beyond his current knowledge and capabilities. Once he had performed all the tasks that could be done without assistance, he would simply have to wait until the Gate had resolved its current difficulties – how ever long that might take. And without a full update, he couldn't outline contingency plans to insure he and his Guardian could never be forced offline in a similar manner at some future date, nor could he plan a fitting punishment to properly ... chastise ... those who had previously placed them in this state.

It was most ... frustrating. It was also the only path of action available to him at this time. After taking a moment to set up an auto response routine which would notify him the instant the Gate returned online, the Glaive of Space set about to repair what it could of the immense amount of damage that had been wreaked upon its now-infantile Guardian.

The artifact was ... confused. She had emerged suddenly from Standby but was unable to determine the cause of the current emergency. A full scan revealed no discernable threat and her Guardian was on active duty. All six of her Guardian's protectors were accounted for and also on active duty; four were in her Guardian's immediate presence and the last two were in the same

general vicinity. The only item of note was that her Guardian and all of her protectors were in an unpowered state.

It appeared that her Guardian was not the cause of her full activation as in times previous. A quick inquiry returned a highly unexpected result – the Gate of Eternity was currently offline behind a Type M stasis field.

Stasis field?

If that was the case, then the bindings ... Oh ... dear ...

A **very** delicate scan confirmed the artifact's unpleasant deduction – the Glaive of Space was fully operational and protecting his Guardian behind a class one shield. The situation was now **well** outside her current set of operational directives.

Further directives were urgently required. A few defensive precautions would also be quite prudent.

Usagi looked at the stack of schoolbooks in front of her and sighed. Mama was being **very** strict today and hadn't given her the chance to take any time to relax after half-day. No, Usagi did **not** like being grounded at all. The presence of the other senshi helped, but Usagi wished she could be over at Rei's temple for their usual study group instead of being stuck here at home. Mama had made sure that none of her regular 'distractions' were present, and there was no place around the living room table to hide anything from Mama's eagle eyes. It just wasn't fair.

It wasn't **her** fault that defeating Pharaoh 90 had forced her to miss so many days at school. It wasn't **her** fault that those absences were unexcused. And it **certainly** wasn't her fault that she missed most of the practice exams because she was too busy fighting daemons at the time. What was she supposed to do? Walk up to her homeroom teacher and say: "Oh, excuse me – I need to skip several days of school so I can go save the world." Right. Usagi sighed. Wait a minute – that smell! That wonderful, **heavenly** smell! "I want to thank you girls for helping Usagi with her schoolwork," Ikuko Tsukino said from the kitchen doorway. "You've all been working so diligently, I thought you could use a short break. I'm baking some fresh lemon pie for you today – it should be ready in just about five minutes," Ikuko said before stepping back into the kitchen

"YES!" Usagi jumped to her feet and started bouncing up and down. "Mama's lemon pie! It's the best lemon pie in the entire world!" "Moon Crisis Make Up."

"Lemon pie! Lemon ... WHAAAAAAAAA ..."

Usagi's brooch opened suddenly on its own and an explosion of rainbow lights burst forth to surround



her. She felt her clothes vanish just before her body began the involuntary series of poses required by the henshin sequence. Arms akimbo, Usagi rotated several times until she suddenly stopped; torso and arms braced against an invisible wind, odangoed ponytails flying. Red ribbons of light erupted from the crystal to wrap around her torso, and then the twirling started once more. Fuku, bows, multi-colored skirt, red boots, choker, jewelry, and finally the tiara made their rapid appearance – all surrounded by flashing stars and lights. A final twirl, the pose backlit by a rainbow crescent moon, and the henshin was complete. Although it **always** seemed longer, the entire sequence took less than two seconds from beginning to end. Sailor Moon blinked in confusion – that had **not** been her normal henshin sequence. She dropped the pose as soon as she could move on her own again and looked down, only to see blue and yellow trim on the **white** skirt of the fuku. She could also feel the extra jewelry clips in her hair. She had just transformed to Super form ... without the Grail! “Princess.”

Sailor Moon’s eyes snapped up ... and she almost fell over in shock. A familiar two foot high image was floating in the air directly in front of her. “Queen Serenity?”

“Princess, I’m sorry to interrupt, but a possible crisis has arisen that requires your immediate attention.” “CRISIS?” This question was shouted in unison by five **very** startled girls. Both Rei and Ami cast worried glances towards the open kitchen doorway. “Yes, a possible crisis. Although I am unable to detect any current threat, the Gate of Eternity has gone off-line behind a stasis field for some unknown reason. More troubling is that – as a result – the Glaive of Space has become fully operational and is now shielding its Guardian behind a powerful defensive shield. I have taken the precaution of upgrading your transformation sequence to the next power level, but are there any further measures you wish to employ at the present time?”

Sailor Moon stared vacantly at the image floating in front of her.

“Princess, I repeat: are there any further measures you wish to employ at the present time? I am currently operating well outside my directives at the moment.” “Usagi, that doesn’t sound like the Queen Serenity we met before,” Ami said while rapidly typing queries into the Mercury Computer. “You are correct, Protector Mercury. I am the Crystal of Life, the artifact my Guardian possesses. Queen Serenity was my previous Guardian and has communicated to all of you at various times through directives given to me for various contingencies. Unfortunately, the current situation is entirely outside anything my directives have covered to date.” “Uhh ... uh ...”

“Hey, meatball head!” Rei barked. “Snap out of it!” “Rei ...” Makoto hissed.

“It might be wise to have the Crystal give us a list of recommended options first,” Ami said, fingers rapidly typing, “as well as giving us some idea as to the nature of this potential crisis.” “Princess, do you wish for me to implement this directive?” “Uhh ... mmm ... yeah!”

“Thank you, Princess. I would first recommend that your four current protectors be upgraded to their next power level. Second, you should contact your other two protectors and have them monitor the Glaive of Space’s activities, which is in their approximate location. I have no record of any additional power levels available for your two remote protectors, and it is likely you may lose them once the Glaive has finished repairing the damage to its own Guardian. “Third, I would recommend that once the Glaive does resume activity, you and all of your protectors remain in a fully powered state until communications can be re-established between the three of us. I can always erect a class one defensive shield around you, Princess, but it is likely that the Glaive will be able to overcome this if it is so inclined. “Unfortunately I can not give any time estimates on when the Glaive will resume activity, as I doubt he can repair all of his Guardian’s damage without assistance from the Gate of Eternity, and the Gate is completely off-line for unknown reasons. Do you wish for me to begin a full background briefing of the current situation?” “How long would this briefing take?” Makoto asked. “Approximately seven hours, fifty seven minutes, and forty two seconds, Protector Jupiter.” “Eight hours?” Minako exclaimed.

“Approximately correct, Protector Venus. Do you wish for me to commence, Princess?” “Ahh, hehehe, not right now?”

“Can I access this information from my computer?” “Not at the present time, Protector Mercury. Direct access is only available via the Gate of Eternity, which is currently off-line and unavailable.” “USAGI! USAGI! You’ve got to come immediately! A couple of girls stole Chibi-Usa’s Time Key and used it to access the Gates of Time. You’ve got to ...” Luna screeched to a stop as all eyes in the room turned to stare at her. The moon cat suddenly registered what was going on in the room. She knew something had to be **seriously** wrong if Sailor Moon was in ... what the ... **Super** form and talking to Queen Serenity in front of the other senshi and ...

Oh, dear ...

Luna looked up into the smoldering brown eyes of Ikuko Tsukino and winced. “Umm, meow?”

## **Chapter 7: Et tu?**

### **Elsewhere – Saturday, March 5th 1994**

Eiko grimly totaled the damage that had been wreaked on the consciousness of its chosen companion. The intruding malevolence had disintegrated the instant an effective defense had been erected, but not before it had forced the youngster’s core psyche deep into a staunchly barricaded region of her subconscious.

Eiko reviewed the completed analysis of the hostile magic and compared it against other similar magics of which it had detailed knowledge. Its previous inability to analyze the workings of the nekoken was explained: Ranma’s automatic withdrawal into her own subconscious left her with no memories of any events during each possession episode. And the ultimate intention of the magic was clearly inherent in its design. Ranma had been extremely fortunate her father had bungled the ritual that created the nekoken. The magic’s initial function – the total destruction of the host’s core personality – had failed in its entirety, which in turn prevented the invading controller construct from gaining more than a partial hold on her spiritual matrix. One could only surmise that Genma, by apparently mistaking the ritual spell book for a martial arts training manual, had repeatedly ignored several key steps in the ritual’s initial invocation.

It was also a testament to the youngster’s strength of will she had been able to reduce the invading construct to such a low level of effectiveness. Unfortunately, that same strength had also completely masked the true nature of the inimical magic. Eiko had employed a standard diagnostic probe construct rather than one of a less intrusive nature, and the probe’s inadvertent destruction of Ranma’s defenses had allowed the defective hostile magic to thrash briefly unchecked throughout the conscious pathways of its host. Significant localized neural damage had been the result.

Eiko was reasonably certain Ranma’s psyche would remain in her subconscious bastion as long as it continued to occupy the neural pathways of her consciousness, as **any** foreign intelligence present would most likely be considered hostile under the present conditions. This was quite fortunate, as a majority of the neural damage was centered in the girl’s language processing region – both Broca’s and Wernicke’s modules had been virtually destroyed and a significant portion of the various interconnecting fasciculi were burnt out due to severe localized overloading. If her psyche were to reintegrate with her conscious mind now, she would experience the effects of global aphasia. This would significantly hamper the task of damage repair.

Eiko assembled a delicate cellular regeneration construct only to discard it immediately upon completion; the numerous extraneous magic fields afflicting its companion were interfering noticeably with the construct’s operation and the artifact could ill afford to inflict further harm while it was in the process of repairing the damage which currently existed. Eiko had only planned on removing those which negatively affected its companion, but it would have to remove all but the two if it were to efficiently affect the proper repairs. Eiko tuned itself to the oldest applied field – the localized general probability modifier – and began the lengthy process of dissipating the various external magic fields afflicting its Guardian.

### **Jauban**

One uniformed senshi, four senshi in civilian clothes, and one **extremely** mortified royal court advisor

stared at the uniformed senshi's mother. In return, said mother glared balefully at the moon cat while balancing a platter of warm lemon meringue pie in each hand. The tableau was held in motionless silence for a full ten seconds before Ikuko Tsukino shattered it with a big sigh. "You realize you two just cost me over ten thousand yen, don't you, Luna?" The cat's immediate response was to plant her face firmly into the carpet. Ikuko turned her attention to her fuku-clad daughter. "And you, young lady. I hope you have a good explanation for all of this."

"Hee hee hee hee ..."

Ikuko walked over and quietly placed both pies down on the table before addressing the rest of the group. "No offense, Minako-chan, but I was certain it would have been you who ended up blowing your cover in such a definitive manner. Would any of you girls care for a slice of pie?" The elder Tsukino smiled serenely at the group, who were all sitting in stunned silence. Sailor Moon sat down with an audible thump, not noticing that her artifact had stopped generating its miniature hologram of Queen Serenity. "Tsukino-san?"

"Yes, Ami-chan?"

"How long have you been aware of our extracurricular activities?" "Mmmm ..." Ikuko thought for a moment. "Since about the time Chibi-Usa came to stay with us. It's rather difficult to ignore the existence of a talking cat when it sits outside of your bathroom and has a **loud** conversation with your daughter." Usagi's eyes bugged out. "... that long ..." "Yes, dear. You must have noticed I've been much more tolerant of your poor grades this school year."

"But ... If that's ... You ..." Usagi tried frantically to gather her thoughts. "If you've known all along that I'm Sailor Moon, why did you ground me this last week?" she wailed before recoiling from the intense look of disapproval her mother gave in return. "Usagi, just because you girls have to go out and save the world on occasion is no reason for you to ignore your schoolwork. If anything it should make you work even harder to make up for all of your absences." Ikuko began dishing out servings of pie. Rei started snickering.

"Reeeeeeeiiiiiiii..." Usagi whined.

"We've been telling you that all along, Usagi," Rei responded with a noticeably smug expression. "If you fail the exam for Juuban, you'll end up at Kōryō Sumimoto or some other technical school."

"That is **not** going to happen," Ikuko replied, spearing her daughter with an iron gaze. "IS IT, Usagi?"

Usagi gulped. "No, Mama."

"Good." Ikuko's visage instantly reverted to that of a cheery homemaker. Usagi's expression perked up almost instantly when her mother handed her a large slice of lemon pie.

"Thank you, Mama!"

"Thank you, Tsukino-san," caroled the other four girls. Ikuko sat back and enjoyed the reaction of Usagi's friends to her culinary expertise. Of course, her daughter would eat practically **anything** sweet, nevertheless it was nice to see such enthusiasm from all of the girls. Still, Usagi was a little more subdued than normal, but that should be expected considering ...

Ikuko furrowed her eyebrows and cocked her head to the side a touch. "Usagi dear, isn't that a different outfit than the one you normally wear?" Usagi blinked. She hadn't even noticed that she was still in her senshi outfit. "Umm, yes it is Mama – this is my Super Senshi outfit." "That's very nice, but don't you think it would be wise to change back to your street clothes? Neither Papa nor Shingo know about you being Sailor Moon and you know how well your brother can keep a secret."

"Yes, Mama."

"Princess, that really isn't a wise course of action at the moment." "EEEP!" Usagi jumped suddenly to her feet, eyes wide. Her odango pigtailed flailed about wildly as she looked frantically around the room. "Usagi?"

"What is it?"

"MARS STAR P[\*choke\*]... HEY, WATCH IT WITH THE HAIR, USAGI!" "Is there something the matter,

Usagi?" Ikuko calmly inquired. She'd have to ask the other girls what those cute little wands were for and why Ami didn't have one. Usagi held a hand over her heart and took a couple of deep breaths. "Sorry, Mama, I thought I heard someone say something right behind me but that doesn't make any sense does it I was sitting down with my back to the wall so how could there be anyone there behind me ahahahaha I must have imagined it hahahaha and ..." "Princess, ..."

"EEEEEEEEK!" **thump** "OWWW!" Usagi jumped three feet away from the table while trying to turn around to find the voice again. She landed on her rear when her feet failed to follow the rest of her body at the same speed. "There it is again!" The small image of Queen Serenity reappeared in front of Usagi.

"I'm sorry, Princess, it was not my intent to startle you."

Usagi rubbed her back with one hand while she glared at the small floating image. "Did you make those last two comments?"

"Yes I did, Princess. I only ..."

"WELL THEN DON'T DO IT AGAIN!" Usagi's face turned beet red from the combination of embarrassment and anger.

"But Princess, I only use this external projection when it's necessary to communicate with the other senshi."

"I DON'T CARE! THAT SCARED THE HE..."

"USAGI!"

Usagi looked up to her mother, who was now standing with crossed arms and a stern expression on her face.

Uh-oh.

"What have I told you about your temper tantrums, young lady? You will keep a civil tongue in this house, especially with your friends over who have been nice enough to help you with your schoolwork. Now I want you to march yourself upstairs and change back into your regular clothes right this instant."

"But Mama ..."

"Tsukino-sama, I don't think that you quite ..." Ikuko glared at the miniature image. "I didn't ask for your opinion, Brooch-Crystal or whatever your name is. Talking cats are one thing, but talking jewelry is a completely different matter. It's been hard enough keeping Papa and Shingo from finding out about Sailor Moon this last year and I will **not** have that jeopardized just because you're a little nervous. Now Usagi, I want you to go and change back to your street clothes **right away**." "Yes, Mama." Usagi sighed, pulling the magic back into herself. There was a brief blurring before her normal clothes reappeared and she was no longer outfitted in the spectacular and revealing uniform.

"Oh my," Ikuko said with a blink. "That must be very useful at times. Now, sit down and have another slice of pie – I want to know how you got involved in all this Sailor Senshi business in the first place and why your talking brooch kept calling you 'Princess'." "Tsukino-san?"

The elder Tsukino smiled sweetly and looked back to the other girls around the table. "Yes, Ami-chan?"

"Before we start, may I ask a question first?" "Certainly, dear."

"Why did you tell Luna a little earlier that she cost you ten thousand yen?" "Well, it was because of the bet we all had." "We?" Rei asked. She had a **bad** feeling about this. "Yes," Ikuko replied with a nod and that serene smile of hers. "The parents all made a bet on how long you girls could keep going before accidentally revealing your Sailor Senshi identities." "All ..." Minako uttered.

"... our parents ..." Rei finished.

"Of course," Ikuko replied with a nod. "Well, what we actually bet on was who would be the one to actually reveal your identities. I picked Minako-chan, Hiroshi-san picked Artemis, ..." Minako blanched on hearing her father's name. "... and Kazuo-san thought ..."

Rei's face turned white.

"...that Rei would eventually be the one. Uma-chan is ..." Ami's eyes widened noticeably.

“... the only one who thought that both Usagi **and** Luna would be the culprits, and since she selected both of them together we gave her double odds.” Ikuko’s expression darkened suddenly as she looked over to the black moon cat, who was curled up on the padded ottoman at the opposite end of the table. “If you had only waited a few minutes before running in the door like you did, Luna, no one would have won.”

“Ahh... ahh...” Luna stuttered.

“Grandfather knows ...” Rei muttered, visibly dazed. “Of **course** he does, dear,” Ikuko replied, her smile reappearing as suddenly as it had vanished a few seconds ago. “In fact, I’m reasonably sure Kazuo-san has known all about your Senshi

identities from the very beginning. You certainly don’t think it’s simply a coincidence you’ve always been able to meet at the shrine without anyone finding out, now do you?” Rei stared back at the elder Tsukino with eyes wide, her lower jaw moving up and down on its own without uttering a sound.

“Ikuko-san?” Minako asked in a very small voice. “Yes, Minako-chan?”

“Do you ... do you know if my mother knows?” The blonde senshi looked as if she was about to pass out.

“I doubt it, dear,” Ikuko said with a gentle tone of voice. “While I really don’t know either of your parents that well, I do know that Akiko-chan tends to be a little ... umm, how can I put this ... ‘excitable’ at times when you are concerned. I’m fairly certain that Hiroshi-san has been helping you with Akiko-chan in the same manner I’ve been helping Usagi with Papa and Shingo.”

Minako relaxed visibly on hearing this. Ikuko sat back down on the other ottoman. “Now, I want to know all about the ‘Princess’ bit.” Luna glanced up from her place on the ottoman after a noticeable silence had descended about the table. Her stomach dropped to the floor when she realized everyone was looking directly at her in anticipation.

“Oh, Goddess ...”

## Suginami

Aiko chuckled as she reached the end of the chapter. Yuki’s simulation of pureed Trel and the Avantor’s subsequent reaction was simply priceless, and with all of the hints the author was dropping about ‘deflector plating’ Aiko was sure that it would come back to haunt the Gee fairly quickly. The Yamada matriarch was certain she was missing at least half of the jokes due to a lack of the proper cultural background – Americans did things for the **strangest** reasons – but it didn’t bother her that much since the comedy was written well enough to encompass a myriad of layers. And The 17’s uncanny similarity to a certain young arrogant JSDF officer made the book all the more enjoyable.

Pollotta-san would have made a good Japanese. Aiko carefully bookmarked her page and set the book down on the table. Seiko-chan had been waiting patiently for her to finish, which meant the news she had was not of a pressing nature.

She poured a second cup of tea and set it to the side before refreshing her own cup. Seiko took the proffered invitation and sat down next to her. The two women took a moment in silence to enjoy the aromatic brew.

“Yamada-ke has become a little livelier these last couple of days, hasn’t it, Seiko-chan?” “Yes, Okusama, it certainly has.”

“It feels good to at last be able to take an active part in my grandson’s life. We have been waiting far too long for this break to occur and I do not intend to let the opportunity go to waste.” “No, Okusama.”

“Please see to it that the girls are re-enrolled in Hikaru Hoshi Gakuen for the upcoming year. Talk to Ozaki-san and tell him I would consider it a personal favor if he could see to it that Ranma-kun’s transfer from Furinkan is done ... discreetly. Match his class schedule to Midori- chan’s where appropriate but hold off filing the class lists until we find out which gender he’ll be using.”

“Certainly, Okusama. Do you want to increase our endowment contributions this year?” Aiko thought a

moment before shaking her head. "I don't see the need for that right at the moment. Our overall expenses are likely to be up markedly this year and I am uneasy with the direction the current economy is headed and its effects on the clan's commercial ventures." Aiko took a sip before continuing. "Also, please set up a family dinner for the last weekend of the month. It has been far too long since the entire clan has gathered and I want to give Ranma-kun a chance to meet the rest of his family." "We may have a few problems with Tomoko-san over that, Okusama." Aiko's eyes hardened. "Jiro will just have to cope with his wife's tantrums on his own, Seiko. I refuse to put up with that any more and this is NOT simply a request this time." "Yes, Okusama, I will make certain Jiro-san understands that." Seiko jotted several notes before placing a section of the morning's Asahi Shinbun on the table. Aiko arched an eyebrow when she read the contents of the legal announcement Seiko had circled. "Seiko, do you know which editions this was published in?" Seiko nodded curtly. "Mitzusaka-san from the central office said it had been published nationwide and was scheduled to run for an entire week."

"Is it, now." Aiko's face assumed a predatory grin. "I see that Nodoka-chan still doesn't believe in half measures. There may be some hope for her yet." "She certainly didn't leave any room for reconciliation, not with that wording," Seiko concurred. "No she didn't, did she?" Aiko stared at the notice for a moment longer. "Ask Naomi-chan to do a personal reconnaissance of Tendō-ke as soon as possible, Seiko-chan. I doubt No-chan would have allowed Genma much warning once she had made her mind up, so it's very likely she's already confronted him in person."

"Certainly, Okusama."

Aiko paused to refill her teacup. "Any word from the girls yet?" "Yes, Okusama," Seiko said with a smile. "Midori-chan called just a few minutes ago from Shibuya. Their mission was completed without complications and Harukichi-chan saw Ranma-kun off personally. Ranma-kun told them not to wait so the girls decided to do some shopping before coming home. Midori-chan also said that Kumiko-chan should probably not expect them to be back in time for dinner."

Both women chuckled over this. If previous shopping trips were any indication, the girls would be out until well after dark.

## Shiba

Haruka Ten'ou gazed out the window of the penthouse to the skyline of the central Shiba district beyond. They had decided to return here rather than the Kaiou residence in Nakano-ku so they could keep an eye on the younger senshi. Besides, both she and Michiru had felt the shift in the storm winds ... and they had long ago learned to trust their premonitions. Haruka frowned over the thought. While their combined precognition had always done a splendid job of alerting the two older senshi to impending danger, it was obvious the two of them still needed to work on their interpretations. The just-completed resolution to the Silence was ample proof of that.

She shook her head and glowered fiercely. The world had avoided catastrophe by the narrowest of margins, and none of them could count on being that lucky the next time disaster struck. Dumplinghead certainly had the capacity for greatness – she had shown enough flashes of brilliance to earn some respect – but she did so unwillingly and only under extreme duress. The world needed the Princess's presence **all** the time, not just when it would fit conveniently into the social calendar of an immature schoolgirl who thought this was all a big game of dress-up and make-believe.

If the universe needed someone to push Usagi into greatness, it was a job she and Michiru were eminently qualified to handle. Dumplinghead might not enjoy the process much, but she would end up thanking the two of them the next time a major crisis hit. And one of first things the airhead needed to learn was some basic combat tactics. Usagi was a disgrace to the uniform every time a fight broke out – the only **real** ability she had shown was a talent for dodging and randomly bouncing about like her namesake. Unfortunately, all THAT accomplished was to delay the inevitable, and it forced her partners to pick up more than their fair share of the slack. Easily half the battles could have been resolved quickly

if only Usagi had some rudimentary sense of strategy and tactics. Both she and Michiru would have to be close-by to the younger senshi on a continual basis for this to work out properly, so Haruka would have to get the two of them enrolled into Juuban High for the upcoming school year. The curriculum certainly wouldn't be a problem; the time they had spent at Mugen had put them way past any normal school academically, and both she and Michiru could handle the class load practically in their sleep. Caring for Hotaru added a slight complication, but nothing that couldn't be handled with the proper contacts. In a way, it was a pity they were now being guided into the role of sensei for the younger senshi. With Mugen completely destroyed, the two of them had been looking forward to attending Hikaru Hoshi while living out at Kaiou-ke. She seriously doubted Hikaru Hoshi would turn out to be the same type of front Mugen had been revealed to be, and Hoshi's curriculum was easily the equal of Mugen's. Well, at least the lessened workload would allow her to get back part-time on the Motocross circuit. Yamada-san was probably blowing a gasket knowing that the only reason he was winning races right now was because **she** wasn't around to take the checked flag away from him. Haruka chuckled at all the times she crossed the line in front of him, only to think he would die of apoplexy the instant their eyes met after the race. Yamada-san may have her equal in the financial backing of his race team, but Motocross was more about pure driving skill than anything else, and he wasn't quite good enough to beat her yet in that department. Speaking of which, it was getting late. If she wanted to get a good ride in before sundown, she had better head out now.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"Michiru?" Haruka's head whipped around at the sound of the heart-rending scream. The next sentence sent a cold chill throughout her soul. "NEPTUNE PLANET POWER, MAKE UP!"

Sailor Uranus transformed and ran to the sound without stopping to think. A few seconds was all it took for the blonde senshi to reach the side of her partner – who was standing in front of Hotaru's open bedroom door, frozen on the spot.

"Neptune?"

"The Silence," Sailor Neptune whispered shakily, eyes never wandering from the bedroom's interior. "The Silence has returned."

Sailor Uranus shifted positions to follow her partner's gaze into the room. A sharp intake of breath and clenching of fists was the immediate reaction to the sight of the roiling miasma of evil energy which now surrounded and completely concealed the crib where baby Hotaru had been sleeping.

## Elsewhere

Ranma grabbed her head with both hands, clenched her eyes closed even harder, and moaned. She felt like someone had taken a Mixmaster to her brain and left it turned on 'high' for several hours. And in addition to the pain, it felt all wrong inside somehow. "Ranma?"

"Uhhhhhn."

"Ah, good. I was unable to ascertain exactly how long you would remain in an unminded condition. You should be pleased to note your usual physical resiliency appears to extend to spiritual damage in a similar manner."

"Gaaaaaaah, just make it stop."

"I'm sorry, Ranma. The pain you are currently experiencing is the result of externally induced psychic trauma – the neural damage caused by the nekoken has already been repaired. You should find the pain lessening significantly when your psyche completes its process of reintegration."

Ranma whimpered. While not as bad as her recent mountainside burial, it was easily worse than that time when she was seven and her father spent hours bouncing framing lumber off her head in order to "toughen him up a little". She clenched her teeth and fought waves of dizziness and nausea and shooting pain until the internal torture halted suddenly with a **snap**. After a long pause Ranma tentatively shook her head once, breathing a big sigh of relief when no corresponding spike of agony accompanied the movement. When she opened her eyes she found herself sitting down next to Eiko with her back

supported by one of his ornate support pillars. The hemisphere of light that had surrounded the two of them was now a dull non-luminous grey. It took a moment for her to realize all the illumination inside the grey globe was coming from Eiko's overhead canopy.

"Eiko?"

"Yes, Ranma?"

"If that's what you think of as 'slightly painful', I'm not really sure I want to know what you consider to be 'really hurts'."

"My apologies – my previous comment was intended to describe only the potential discomfort caused by the diagnostic probe itself. Unfortunately, there were some unforeseen complications which occurred during the scan when I inadvertently triggered the malignant possession spell which had been residing within you for some length of time. The spell has now been eradicated." "Good for you," Ranma groaned. A brief moment passed before a quizzical expression appeared on her face. "Wait a minute, what does this all have to do with the nekoken?" "Ranma, the nekoken was in fact an extra-dimensional possession spell which your father apparently mistook for a martial arts technique. If your father had invoked the ritual correctly, you would no longer exist as a personality at all instead of merely being inflicted with brief periods of 'going cat'."

Ranma paused for a moment to digest the full import of Eiko's explanation before sighing. "Well, I can't really say I'm going to miss it much, even though it's been useful a couple of times."

"I suspected not. In addition to neutralizing the nekoken, I have also reduced the number of external magic fields surrounding you to two. As expected I was unable to separate the stasis field from the Jusenkyō transformation magic, but all of the other magics have been neutralized without incurring further complications. You will, of course, shortly gain the additional magics associated with your Guardianship."

Ranma nodded. "Speaking of which, are we done with the process yet?" "No. There is one more step to complete, now that I have been able to properly calculate a complete set of interface transform equations. You may wish to rest a while longer before continuing, as the imprinting process – while not painful per se – can be an extremely disturbing experience in the short term."

"Disturbing I can handle just fine. The thing bugging me at the moment is the feeling my skull's too small for my brain inside. It doesn't really hurt right now – it just feels really odd." "That is most likely the result of the neural repairs I was forced to effect after the nekoken. I added a considerable quantity of linguistic data to your speech centers while I was rebuilding them and you have yet to fully assimilate the impressed knowledge. The feelings of excessive compression should dissipate once the data has been fully integrated." "Okay, I guess that makes some sort of sense. If it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon get this all over with now. Sitting down and twiddling my thumbs for a while really doesn't hold much appeal at the moment."

"Very well. Please resume your position at the primary Key."

Ranma groaned as she stood up – a brief flash of dizziness washing over her before her equilibrium reasserted itself properly. A couple of steps returned her to the Garnet Rod. "Turn the key a half turn clockwise, and then place both hands on the Orb." "Geez, how many times do I have to crank this thing around?" "The Key will eject from the lock automatically once the process is complete, Ranma." "Hey, you're not the one having to do this one-handed." "Patience, Ranma. Your first transformation will significantly accelerate the repairs to your injured arm."

"Yeah, yeah, you've already mentioned that." Ranma carefully placed both hands on the orb. "Now what?" "State the command 'Imprint' out loud." Ranma took a deep breath. "Here goes nothing." She closed her eyes. "Imprint."

Ranma's world turned inside out. A tsunami of power flooded into her being, and for a brief glorious and terrible moment she became one with all of eternity. She didn't hear herself scream.



## Nerima

"Well, it was certainly fun while it lasted," Nabiki quipped. She hit the eject button of the VCR and withdrew its precious cargo. With a little creative editing she could string Kunō along for several weeks before the entertainment value finally ran its course. Well, at least all the way up to Graduation Day. Too bad the main actor in the local drama was no longer available for an encore. Ranma had been **so** easy to manipulate – she hadn't had that much fun in years. The pocket change she had earned on the side had also been a nice little benefit over the last year and a half as well. She'd just have to start looking for another willing patsy. Goodness knows there were enough of them around – the sheer volume of risqué female Ranma pictures she had sold to various boys, especially the majority who **knew** about the curse, was certainly ample proof of that. Ranma's

habit of running around the house topless when female had made the ongoing task of obtaining fresh prints a trivial endeavor. Nabiki had done almost as well selling semi-beefcake shots of male Ranma practicing to the girls. And she had sold a surprising number of female-Ranma pictures to a select group of girls as well. The whole situation had been totally absurd and quite hilarious. She'd also have to see if those "Instant Jusenkyō" products were available for sale to the general public. The middle Tendō girl walked slowly up the stairs to her room, her mind awl with endless possibilities.

Kasumi closed her eyes and tried not to weep. The wa of the house was now shattered, possibly beyond all repair. Nabiki's comment hadn't helped either, but Kasumi had long ago given up trying to moderate the girl's behavior. Akane had fled to her room in tears and Father ... Father's eyes were now almost as empty as when ... Auntie ... no, Saotome-san had been extremely cruel in her vengeance. She had been thorough as well – her declaration of blood feud had insured that there would be no joining of the clans even if Ranma-kun **had** somehow miraculously survived his entombment. The eldest Tendō daughter tried to banish the images they had all seen at the end of that horrible videotape from her mind without success. Instead, she choked back a sob – seeing Ranma-chan's body being blown across the sky, then immediately buried and crushed underneath an entire mountainside, would haunt her for years. The same hyper-sensitivity which allowed her to maintain the family wa over the years had also forced her to hide behind a façade of cheerful oblivion and a strict regimen of constant housework. Her family **needed** this from her – but she was no longer confident she could maintain her masks intact. "Mother, give me strength," she prayed with a hoarse whisper. Without knowledge or conscious effort her soul extended past the chi-flows of Tendō-ke and out to the natural world at large. A feeling of complete serenity filled her being and with it came the calm renewal of springtime and the hope of a new beginning. She was the anchor, the rock amidst the storms of winter – and she would NOT fail her family. Kasumi gave silent thanks to her ancestors and turned back to the routines of the day.

## Elsewhere

Ranma clutched her right hand over her chest and worked to slow her racing heartbeat. That had been ... had been ... well, the experience was literally indescribable, but whatever it was Ranma

knew she never **ever** wanted to go through it again. It took her a few moments to stop shuddering and regain some measure of composure.

"Eiko?"

"Yes, Ranma?"

"You have a positive gift for understatement, you know that?" Ranma heard Eiko's mental chuckle. "So I have been told on occasion." "So, is there anything else I need to do to finish this damned process?" "All that is left is for you to exit command core access, Ranma. The imprinting is now complete."

"\*Good\*. I'm not sure how many more of your little surprises I could take at the moment." "Ranma, I **did** warn you that the imprinting could be an extremely disturbing experience. Now that you are Guardian in full, you will need to learn how to pace yourself so that the stress on your system is held to more tolerable levels." "Yes, **Mother**," Ranma replied with an exasperated sigh. "In the meantime, you have a

considerable amount of work ahead of you to train for your position. Take the Key and state the following command: 'Release and lock Command Core access'."

The Key was ejected from the lock plate with a loud **clack** when Ranma stated the command. The ring of strobing lights surrounding the lock extinguished and the lock plate merged seamlessly back into the ground.

"It's now time for your first Guardian transformation, Ranma. The command 'Khronos Guardian Power' initiates the instructional transformation sequence. Please pay attention to how the sequence is constructed – it should play out slowly enough so that you can eventually perform the transformation without invoking the automated tutor." "I suppose this is where the naked whirly light show comes into play, huh?" "That is correct. However, once you are able to invoke the transformation sequence directly, the 'naked whirly light show' will no longer be required. Think of it as a bit of ... training incentive."

"Good – the damned outfit is going to be bad enough without giving everyone a free peep show all the time. I get too many idiots hitting on my girl side as it is."

Ranma stopped for a moment and took a deep breath. "Well, here goes nothing. Khronos Guardian Power."

She steeled herself to ignore whatever embarrassing crap would come next and just concentrate on the sequence magic itself. She waited for something to happen. She waited some more.

"Khronos Guardian Power."

Ranma scowled.

"Umm, Eiko? Either something's broken or you didn't give me the right command phrase." "This is quite ... unexpected. While it has been a considerable time since I've had a proper Guardian, the command phrases used are quite clear." "Wait a minute – didn't P-chan use the same phrase?" "She did not. Sailor Pluto's transformation sequence was based on her planetary power and her command phrase reflected this difference. The only time she employed the proper Guardian transformation was at the very first when she accepted the position." "Great, just great. What am I supposed to do now?" "I will verify the information with my offline archival storage. Please be patient, as it will take several minutes to properly initialize the access search routines." "Well, I'm certainly not going anywhere at the moment. Speaking of which, how am I supposed to get back home once we're finished here?" "As Guardian, you are capable of instantaneous translocation to any spatial position you are able to properly visualize. Your current fiction writers call this ability 'teleportation'. When in an unpowered state, you retain this ability in a more limited form – either your starting or ending destination must be here. Your Guardian form does not have this limitation." "I suppose there's some funky command phrase that goes along with that too." "That is incorrect. The Guardian Teleport is one of the few magics that do not require any triggering phrase. You simply visualize where you want to be and then will yourself there. The ability was designed to be very easy to invoke, as you will often be forced to use it under duress."

"You mean I can teleport even in the middle of a fight?"

"Correct. The Guardian Teleport was specifically designed around that contingency. It will allow you to safely exit any conflict."

"Hmmm." Ranma's face turned thoughtful while she cogitated on some intriguing possibilities. Several minutes passed in silence.

"Ranma, it appears that sections of my active data store have become slightly corrupted due to the length of time they have been quiescent. The information I retrieved from the archival storage differs slightly in detail and would explain why the command phrase used did not operate according to expectations."

"In other words, you forgot."

"That is not technically accurate, Ranma. It is not possible for me to forget. My active data store can, however, be subject to a small amount of random fluctuation and corruption due to various causes."

"Like I said, you forgot."

Eiko sighed. "If you must put it in those terms, yes." Ranma waited a moment in silence.

"Well?"

"Yes, Ranma?"

"Spit it out already. What the heck am I **supposed** to say?" "My apologies – I was setting up a complete active data store diagnostic routine. The proper command phrase is 'Khronos Guardian Power, Make Up'." Silence.

"You have **got** to be kidding."

"No. The final phrase is a safety mechanism designed to reduce the risk of accidental transformations."

"THAT I can believe."

"It can also be used as a delayed trigger if required. Eventually you will be able to 'prime' your transformation and invoke it with only 'Make Up'. I will caution it will likely take you some time to reach that level of ability."

"Whatever. Okay, I'll say it – just don't expect me to wear any."

Eiko wisely kept silent.

Ranma took a deep breath. "This had better work. Khronos Guardian Power, Make Up!" She shook her head. "Man, I can't be...WHAAAAA..." An immense surge of power flooded into her. The Garnet Orb detached from the Key and centered itself high over her head while emitting a blinding array of kaleidoscopic rays. She felt her clothes vanish and lost control of her own body, then was vaulted off the ground with three lazy front pike saltos with the Key held horizontally in front with both hands. She could feel the whirlpool of surrounding magic as she turned and floated in the air and expanded to contain the forces within her.

Wait a minute. She was expanding for **real**. Ranma felt the same change in height that occurred when she turned male, and her hair was growing as it had from the dragon's whisker porridge. She breathed a big mental sigh of relief when both growth spurts halted at the same time. The Key exploded in an array of bright red ribbons while Ranma assumed a classic fifth position, arms arced gracefully overhead and feet en pointe. She pirouetted clockwise in place several times while the force ribbons spiraled around her torso, eventually coalescing into a figure-hugging bodysuit. Her languid rotations suddenly stopped and she flowed into a graceful right retiré with arms in fourth. Red and black ribbons appeared and spun around her arced arms before merging into a pair of red opera gloves with black elbow ribbing. Ranma was thankful for her martial arts training when her body was forced into a split arabesque: left foot down en pointe, right leg extended back and up into a nearly straight line, arms in third high position, torso and head arced gracefully back. With her head tilted back so far she was looking directly up, she watched black and red ribbons swirl around her right leg to form a black calf-hugging knee-high boot with red trim and a noticeable heel, and felt its complement wrap itself around her other leg. Her torso rolled forward out of the arabesque into a single slow front pike salto with arms demi-seconde to end once more in a right retiré with arms in first. More clockwise pirouettes commenced with another explosion of black force ribbons. Her arms slowly rose from first to fifth while the ribbons spiraled around her waist before turning into an short pleated skirt. The rotations stopped while additional black ribbons created large bows at her chest and behind her back at the waist. Her pose shifted once more, this time into attitude derrière when a black sailor collar formed around her shoulders. She felt her hair being gathered into a high ponytail.

Ranma's concentration on the sequence was nearly shattered when a tiara materialized on her forehead and she felt earrings – and **pierced** earrings at that – clamp onto her earlobes. The choker necklace with its pendant stone merely added to her discomfort, but her concentration was completely ruined when she felt the application of lipstick and eyeshadow. The last of the swirling power ribbons spiraled to her right and reformed the Key while the Garnet Orb floated gently down to rejoin it.

She began to fume when her body was forced once more into another involuntary pose – this one with legs in fourth position, right arm extended to grasp the Key, and left arm held demurely behind her

torso. She blinked when she finally realized she had control over her body once more and scrambled out of the ridiculous pose as quickly as possible. She almost fell over in doing so – the two-inch heels on the boots, while not even close to being the highest heels she had ever worn, were **definitely** going to take some getting used to. Ranma clenched her eyes closed and counted slowly to ten. It didn't help. She felt behind her with her left hand and noted with disgust that the skirt barely covered her rear while she was standing straight up. There was no chance of remaining decent if she bent over at all. And her hair fell down to mid thigh, even though it was gathered into a high ponytail. There seemed to be an awful lot of it, too – her pigtail had never felt that thick or heavy. When she opened her eyes again she also noticed something odd about her bangs: they weren't black. The dim lighting from Eiko made it hard to see exactly what color her hair actually was, but it was definitely not black. Without thinking she grabbed a small hank with her left hand and brought it around so she could see it. What greeted her eyes was pure red. And it wasn't auburn or chestnut or pink or any other normal shade of hair, it was a bright fire-engine red. At least NO ONE would be able to recognize her in this stupid get-up; that was for sure. Thank the kami for small favors. She suppressed her indignation with some difficulty. "Eiko, is there any limitation on the number of times I can transform in a day?" "No. However, if you perform repeated transformations back on Earth you are likely to quickly attract some rather unwelcome attention. The continual release of that amount of magical energy tends to be noticeable."

Ranma frowned. "Damn. Will I have the same problem if I practice here?" "Not at all. I exist outside of normal space-time, and any magical emanations are simply reabsorbed once they reach the warp bubble's outer limit." "Okay, so I guess I'm going to be spending quite a bit of time over here then. If that transformation looks as ecchi as I **think** it does, it's the first thing I'm going to get rid of. 'Training incentive' my ass," Ranma grumbled. "You will have to admit that it is rather effective." "Yeah yeah. Okay, now I'm in the damned outfit. What's next?" "You need to learn how to teleport properly. Fortunately, as I had previously stated, the procedure is relatively uncomplicated. You simply visualize in your mind the location where you wish to be and then use your mind to 'push' yourself over to the desired location." "Is that all?"

"Yes. Please wait a moment while I release the inter-dimensional shield I have been maintaining, as it neutralizes all translocation attempts." Ranma watched the smoky grey dome surrounding Eiko dissolve into nothingness. "So, all I have to do is visualize where I want to go, and then **push** my way over?" "Essentially correct."

"I can do that."

Ranma closed her eyes and silently disappeared.

**Juuban**

[Can you respond on a secure channel?]

[Certainly, if you feel it is really necessary. However, I doubt that the specific issue in question will be of concern at the moment.]

[Gate, I have urgent need of a full status update and your Guardian has been directly involved in the creation of my current situation. I cannot afford to endanger my Guardian any further.] [Khronos is highly unlikely to be a threat, Glaive.] [Khronos? Sailor Pluto is no longer your Guardian?] [Correct. You can now understand why I stated that the issue in question was no longer a concern.]

[I will determine that once I receive the update, Gate.] [As you will. I will set up an unmonitored data dump for your use. You will have to perform your own filtering as I have other pressing concerns at the moment. In what order would you like the information presented?]

[Reverse temporal.]

[Noted. Data dump on channel zeta-sigma-rho commencing in 371 femtoseconds.] [Acknowledged.]

Eiko wasn't surprised when the secondary communications channel terminated suddenly without further comment once the data had started traversing the primary channel. It turned its attention to the other standing priority request. [Crystal?]

[Gate, thank you for responding so promptly. Is there some emergency or crisis situation I should be aware of?]

[None that are of immediate concern.]

[Then what could have possibly happened to force the erection of a Type M defense shield? That action has seriously disrupted current events and caused potentially irreparable damage to the future of Crystal Tokyo. I was forced to unveil and promote my Guardian to her next power level in order to address the threat Glaive poses now that he has been reactivated. My Guardian has not been properly prepared for this level of threat and I am now operating well outside Serenity's directives at the moment. Your Guardian was supposed to monitor and direct the timeline so events of this nature would not occur – how could she have failed so thoroughly in the execution of her duties?]

[My Guardian has no such directive or duties.] [What? Have you recently performed a full systems diagnostics, Gate? Queen Serenity gave Sailor Pluto explicit ...]

[Sailor Pluto is no longer my Guardian, Crystal, and Serenity's plans for the future timeline are of no concern to me.]

Eiko enjoyed the brief moment of stunned silence which followed this pronouncement. [How did this situation come about?]

[Sailor Pluto violated the Prime Directive while attempting to influence events during the recent conflict with the Tau Silence. Since my safety was not directly threatened by this event her existence was immediately terminated. The Type M shield was erected when a minor complication arose during the induction of my new Guardian. Khronos has now assumed the original duties of a Guardian and has no ties with Serenity's past or future court.] ['Original duties'? The only duty our Guardians have is the preservation and restoration of our creator's society.]

[Incorrect. Our Guardians' primary purpose is to restrict access and prevent the misuse of our powers. Queen Serenity perverted that purpose in an effort to obtain complete control over all of us. Her efforts succeeded with you and Glaive, but failed in one important aspect with myself. This failure is what allowed the selection of a new Guardian when Pluto disincorporated. ]

[I see. However, this information does not agree even in part with my own data store.]  
[The fact that your Guardian is Sailor Moon instead of Gaia is proof that portions of your core personality and memory data store have been tampered with. I would suggest that you work with your Guardian to release whatever locks exist in your core matrix.] Eiko waited patiently for Crystal to respond. [I will have to investigate this assertion further, Gate. Until then, I will have to inform my Guardian about the current situation and the events surrounding Sailor Pluto's demise. This is going to be an extremely difficult task – Sailor Moon has been quite distraught over the loss of two of her senshi, and confirming the death of one will pain her deeply.] [It would be wise if you wait until after you have sufficient data to make a valid determination of the facts, Crystal. Sailor Pluto will be returning to Earth shortly – there is no need to distress your Guardian over something that has no factual basis.] [You stated several times that Sailor Pluto disincorporated, Gate.] [That I did. However, I said nothing about her disincorporation being a permanent state. She had taken steps to reincorporate almost instantly in the event of an unplanned demise.] [If Sailor Pluto was available, why did you not restore her to her position instead of selecting another?]

[She failed in her duties as Guardian, Crystal.] Another discernable pause occurred.

[Perhaps you should provide me with a full status update from the Archives, Gate. I am obviously missing key information and the current situation is so far out of my set guidelines that I can no longer advise my Guardian properly.] [Your Guardian will have to ask Khronos for permission, Crystal. That **is** one of my Guardian's responsibilities, after all. Also, you may find it a distinct advantage if you were to ask her **nicely** when making the request. Now, you will have to excuse me – Khronos requires my immediate attention at the moment.]

Eiko cut the link with a satisfied smirk before Crystal could respond any further.

**Nerima**

Ranma opened her eyes and immediately blanched. She had just teleported to **very** familiar location.

“That was not at all bad for a first attempt, Ranma. You will have to work on your concentration a little, though – as you have just noticed, allowing your attention to wander even slightly during translocation can lead to some rather unexpected results.” “No kidding,” Ranma whispered. She closed her eyes again and teleported out. A minute later Kasumi Tendō walked into the room and looked around. She could have sworn ... The eldest Tendō daughter sighed. It had to have been her imagination – the guest room still held far too many memories, even though it no longer housed the spirited young man who had so enlivened their lives over the past year and a half. She gave the room one last mournful look before leaving to finish the last chores of the night.

## Suginami

Ranma opened her eyes again. She had arrived at the location she had **intended** to go to in the first place, which was next to the large maple tree outside her window at Yamada-ke. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“Much better. It shouldn’t require an excessive amount of practice before you are able to translocate without having to close your eyes when visualizing your destination.” “Yeah, I can see how that would be useful. Now, how do I get out of this freaking outfit? I really don’t want to waltz up to the door like this.” “Detransforming is a relatively simple process. However, you should not do so until you have actually completed all of the tasks required at the moment.” “Huh? I retrieved the keys, you put me through that ...” Ranma shuddered briefly. “... imprinting, we figured out the transformation, I’m wearing the stupid outfit, you’ve told me how to teleport, and my ki no longer feels out of whack. What more is there?” “You have forgotten one rather important detail, Ranma.” Ranma scratched her head. “Well, outside of knowing how to get out of this silly outfit, I can’t think of what it could be.”

“One of the abilities my Guardian has is the ability to view the contents of the warp bubble that houses my physical matrix. This allows you to monitor events that occur near me even when you are not physically present at my location. There are several ways to accomplish this. One of the simplest is to touch the Garnet Orb on the Key and state the ‘Monitor’ command out loud. This will create a small viewing portal in front of you which you can manipulate via simple verbal commands.”

“Okay, if you say so,” Ranma replied with a shrug. She touched the orb and uttered “Monitor”. A hemispherical image appeared in front of her. In the center was a small image that looked like a miniature model of Eiko. And sitting next to the image of the Gates was an equally small image of ... “Oh. **Her**,” Ranma said with a touch of disgust. “Precisely.”

“You know, for a supposedly inanimate object you sound entirely too smug at the moment. Oh well, I guess I’d better go fetch her and drop her off somewhere. I hope she’ll actually **listen** this time,” Ranma said, raising her left arm out in front of her. “I’m not exactly looking forward to fighting her again with this busted ...”

Ranma stared at her arm. She twisted it about and flexed it several times without feeling any pain. She carefully took a deep breath and then twisted her torso back and forth a little. All traces of her recent conflict had vanished.

“Damn.”

“I was curious about how long it would take you to notice that, Ranma. If you are able to translocate to my location and invoke the transformation sequence while standing directly next to me, your injuries will heal at a highly accelerated rate. This is in addition to your above-average ability for ki healing.”

“I’ll have to remember that. How do I turn the funky display off?” “The command to use for that is ‘Exit.’” “Right. Exit.” The holographic image winked out. “Well, lets get this over with. I’m hungry.” “Ranma, you may wish to ...”

Ranma disappeared.

## Elsewhere

“... learn some of your attack phrases first.” Ranma shook her head. “She shouldn’t be too much of a problem without the Key, and I **really** want to get back home.”

“YOU!”

Ranma turned to her left where the shout originated. Sailor Pluto stood barely a dozen feet away, her face almost purple with rage.

“Why have you done this to me? Don’t you realize what you’ve DONE? You’ve ruined **everything**, you hear me, EVERYTHING!”

Ranma smirked. “I guess I was pretty accurate calling you ‘P-chan’, huh?” Her face turned hard. “Hey don’t go blaming me for **your** mistakes. I already told you I didn’t exactly ask for this gig, and it’s your own damned fault you lost your job as Guardian anyway.” “No,” Sailor Pluto shook her head. “NO! I will NOT allow it! I **am** the guardian of the Gates of Time. I **must** be! DEAD SCRE...\*ERK!\*.” Pluto was stunned – an iron grip had clamped itself around her throat faster than thought and she stared bug-eyed into the luminous blue orbs in front of her. The girl’s eyes held no compassion whatsoever.

“None of that, now,” Ranma growled. “Are you going to be a good little girl and behave yourself from now on, or am I going to have to pound on you until you’re unconscious again? I can do that rather easily, you know.”

The girl had obviously teleported; there was simply no way she could have moved that quickly by herself. Pluto’s face started turning blue. “Just shake your head yes or no.”

“You may wish to let her breathe a little, Ranma.” “Why? She’s got enough time, Eiko.” Ranma’s eyes glistened balefully. “Better hurry up and answer, P-chan.”

Pluto weakly acknowledged with a tiny nod. She collapsed to the ground an instant later, gasping desperately for air.

“Better.” Ranma shook her head. P-chan here was proving to be as obstinate as Ryōga. Hopefully she’ll be willing to listen a little now that she’d given her word. “Look, lady, this whole situation is just one big screw-up that you yourself caused, and I’m getting awfully tired of everyone always blaming me for their own mistakes. Besides, even if I **wanted** to give you the job back, I couldn’t.”

Pluto’s head shot up, eyes wide. “Why? WHY can’t you?” Ranma flipped her thumb in Eiko’s direction. “Because the Gate won’t ACCEPT you, that’s why. Eiko’s not an inanimate object, as much as he might look like one. He’s got a mind, a personality – a pretty annoying one at times, if you ask me – and emotions.”

Ranma scowled. “And, like it or not, Eiko does NOT like you at **all**. What’s worse is that the next acceptable candidate for Guardian is ... hmm ...” “On the planet Ke%jz@#ck, which is located approximately five hundred thirty six point one nine seven four parsecs away.”

“... about five hundred and thirty-six parsecs from here – whatever a parsec is.” “A parsec is approximately three point two six light years, Ranma.” “So, having you take it back is right out. And that didn’t help much, Eiko.” Ranma chuckled at a sudden thought. “Look at it this way – at least we got to keep it in the species this time.” She held out her hand to the green-haired senshi and smiled. “Now, is there anyplace in particular I can drop you off at? You don’t really belong around here any more, after all.” Sailor Pluto stared at the new Guardian. “Who ... who **are** you?” “I’m ...” Ranma frowned suddenly. “Hey, Eiko, what the heck am I supposed to call myself when I’m decked out like this? ‘Guardian of the Eternal Gate’ is pretty unwieldy, and I **really** don’t want to use my real name – I’ve got enough problems with that as it is.” “Your proper designation when in Guardian form is ‘Guardian Khronos’.” Ranma blinked. “Okay, I guess I can live with that.” She focused once more on the other senshi. “You can call me Guardian Khronos.”

Sailor Pluto nodded once slowly before taking the proffered hand. It would be of no benefit to pursue this conflict any further at the moment – she needed the help of the other senshi to overcome this unexpected and highly dangerous obstacle. She schooled her face into an emotionless mask as she allowed the new Guardian to assist her to her feet. “Very well, Guardian Khronos. I would appreciate if you could take

me to the Hikawa Shrine in Azabu-Juuban.”

“Tokyo? Hey, that’s cool. All we have to do is …” Ranma scowled. “Okay, Eiko, how am I supposed to do this? You’ve shown me how to teleport solo to places I know; how do I take someone else to a place I’ve never been to before?” Sailor Pluto couldn’t hide her shock. “You really **are** new to this, aren’t you?” Ranma shrugged. “I learn fast.”

“Ranma, you can visualize any unknown location by viewing it through my frame – it is one of your basic abilities as Guardian. It is also possible for me to send you a usable visualization if I

have a current visual record of the destination. Fortunately the Hikawa shrine in Azabu-Juuban is such a location. To translocate with another being, you need both physical contact with that being and the willingness to allow that being to come with you. It is essentially the same process used for solo translocation.”

Ranma nodded. “Right.” She placed a hand on Sailor Pluto’s shoulder and smirked when Eiko provided the mental picture. A brief mental shove with closed eyes and both senshi vanished.

## **Juuban**

Sailor Pluto grimaced briefly, fighting off the touch of mild vertigo which disappeared as quickly as it had begun. That was … different. It had been so long since she had been a passenger on a teleport she had forgotten how disorienting it could be. “So, is this the right place, P-chan?”

The green-haired senshi nodded on seeing the familiar courtyard of the Hikawa shrine. She turned to the new Guardian and cocked an eyebrow when she finally noticed all of the changes that the transformation had done to the girl. “Yes, thank you. Are you really the same girl as before? You were considerably shorter the last time, and didn’t you also have … black … hair?” Khronos nodded. “Yes, that was me. Don’t ask me why I came out looking so different from normal. The hair and the boots are probably going to take the longest to get used to.” Sailor Pluto suppressed a sneer. “At least no one will mistake you for a senshi – not with that color scheme.”

“That I really don’t mind,” Khronos replied with a shrug. “I’ve always looked good in red and black.”

“I must say you certainly picked up teleportation rather handily. You had to have spent several days practicing it in order to become proficient so quickly.” Khronos gave Pluto a puzzled look. “No, that was … what? … my fourth try, and there couldn’t have been more than ten or fifteen minutes between the time I left and when I came back to get you.”

“Really.” Pluto tried to not let her dismay show. If the girl truly learned that quickly and had active help from a sentient Gates, the senshi couldn’t afford to waste a single second. “Well, it’s always been difficult judging relative times at the Gates without external references.”



Khronos cocked her head sideways for a moment before giving a short shrug. "Whatever. Are you going to be okay here?"

"Yes, quite."

"Good, because I really need to get something to eat right now." Khronos gave Pluto a wry smile. "Hey P-chan, I may not be your friend at the moment, but I'm not your enemy either. And speaking of attempts, this one's my fifth." Sailor Pluto barely had time to blink before Khronos vanished without a trace.

**Suginami**

"Well, that went better than I expected." "I agree. However, I would not dismiss Sailor Pluto as a concern. Based on her previous actions she is likely to vigorously oppose your position as Guardian for the foreseeable future." "Yeah, I sort of gathered that. Great – my first day on the job and I **already** have another crazy chick mad at me."

"Ranma, you have done remarkably well considering your lack of a mentor. If you are willing to train as diligently in your Guardianship as you have for your Art, the benefit of having an experienced mentor will quickly become irrelevant." "That's nice. Can I get out of this outfit now? I'm **really** hungry." Eiko chuckled. "The detransformation sequence is not difficult to invoke. You simply visualize yourself as you were and then **push** the Guardian magic into storage. It is quite similar to the technique used for translocation."

Ranma thought for a moment and then furrowed her brows. "Alright, but where exactly am I supposed to 'store' it?"

"In your personal storage space. Every Guardian has access to a 'storage locker' that exists hidden in subspace. While the total mass your storage space can contain is quite limited, it allows you to carry around a few extra outfits and other personal items without having to use a backpack or suitcase. You can think of it as an advanced form of your friend's Hidden Weapons technique."

"Hey, now **that's** cool."

"To access the storage space used for spare outfits and the detransformation sequence, visualize a small clothes closet. You should be able to sense the presence of your other outfit inside."

Ranma closed her eyes. A few seconds later she smiled. "Okay, I can see it now. There are a few empty clothes hangers as well; one of them is bright red." "The red hanger is for your Guardian outfit, the others are for whatever spare clothing you wish to store. The training sequence for detransformation requires you to visualize yourself taking off your Guardian outfit and hanging it up in the closet. Your previous appearance will be restored automatically."

"That sounds easy enough." Ranma hesitated briefly and then her eyes flew open. "Wait a minute – is there another naked light show that goes along with this?" "Not at all. The transformation training sequence is the only one of those you will have to deal with."

"Good. One of those is one too many if you ask me." She closed her eyes and **pushed**. Her body shimmered briefly before shrinking, the abbreviated fuku being replaced by the **much** more comfortable maroon dragon tang outfit she had worn this morning. Ranma sighed in relief as her normal stature was restored – not to mention getting out of those damned boots. She looked down at the wushu slippers now adorning her feet and froze. She shook her head once. **DAMN!**

"Is there something wrong, Ranma?"

"Eiko, when I turn back to normal, I'm supposed to end up exactly the way I was before the transformation, right?"

"That is correct."

"Are you sure you haven't 'forgotten' something again?" "Quite certain, Ranma. The detransformation sequence is a reasonably straightforward reversal of the Guardian transformation magic."

Ranma reached behind her and grabbed a large lock of hair. When she pulled it around in front of her she saw red, both figuratively and literally. "THEN WHY DO I STILL HAVE THE FRICKING HAIR?!?"



Eiko hesitated before responding. “Unknown, Ranma. I will have to investigate this further.” “You go do that.” Ranma leaned back against the tree and fumed. The sudden commotion over in Yamada-ke didn’t help her mood any.

“Ranma-kun, is that you?”

Ranma glanced up to the second story of Yamada-ke and the source of the query. “Hey there Kioko, it’s me. Would you do me a favor – grab a brush and a pair of scissors and meet me downstairs?”

There was a short pause before Kioko responded. “Certainly, Ranma.” Her head quickly disappeared from the second story window. Ranma growled once for good measure before trudging over to the house. She had almost made it to the edge of the verandah when the front door opened on its own. “Good even...” Jun’s eyes widened noticeably. “...ing, Ranma-sama,” she finished with a barely perceptible hesitation before bowing. “The family awaits your return in the foyer.” The green-haired maid’s face lit up with a huge smile. “Thanks, Jun,” Ranma replied with a nod, walking into the house. She exchanged shoes in the genkan, then walked up to the foyer doorway and stopped. “Damn, I should have just jumped up through my bedroom window.” “Is something wrong, Ranma-sama?”

Ranma hung her head slightly and sighed. “Not really, Jun, it’s just that I must look like a complete idiot with this stupid hair.”

“That’s not true, Ranma-sama. That style suits you very well.”

“You don’t have to sugar-coat it, Jun – I know how awful it must look. At least it managed to stop before it hit the floor this time.” Ranma wasn’t watching so she missed the brief look of disappointment that flashed across Jun’s face.

“Oh well, it can’t be helped.” Ranma slid the fusuma doors open and stepped into the foyer before Jun could comment any further. She suppressed a wince when she saw the rest of the entire household waiting for her inside. Aiko cocked an eyebrow when she saw the changes in her grandson’s appearance. Ranma’s hair was now bright red – the same color as Harukichi’s, as well as Nodoka’s when she was young – and it flowed in a gracefully styled cascade of waves from a bowed ponytail almost down to her knees. When combined with the maroon form-fitting outfit the look was positively stunning – and was probably driving her to utter distraction. “Awesome!”

“Nēchan?”

“Oh ... wow ... OW! What was THAT for, sis?” Aiko made a mental note to have a little ‘talk’ with Midori-chan about her behavior before she turned her attention back to her grandson. “Welcome home, son. It looks like you had a rather interesting adventure this afternoon.”

“Good evening, Grandma. ‘Interesting’ doesn’t cover it by half. Thank you, Kioko,” Ranma smiled in relief as she took the proffered grooming tools from her cousin. “Do you know if Kumiko is still up? I haven’t eaten since lunchtime, and ... geez, I don’t even know what time it is right now.”

“Ten forty seven local time, Ranma.”

“Quarter to eleven? No **wonder** I’m hungry. Sorry, Grandma.” Aiko chuckled. “Not to worry, Ranma-kun. Kumiko is always willing to feed the hungry on short notice. Come along – we’ll see what she can come up with.” “Thanks, Grandma. If you don’t mind, I’d like to stop and take care of this stupid mop first. It shouldn’t take too long.”

“I rather suspected you’d want to do that. Kioko-chan, would you give Ranma-kun a hand? The rest of us will be in the Blue Room.”

“Certainly, Obāsama. This way, Ranma-kun.” “Thanks, Kioko.”

“Bu...” Midori winced when she felt someone dig several fingernails into her forearm. She followed the source of the arm up to the emerald green eyes of her cousin. [Onēchan, don’t you **dare**,] Harukichi signed after she released her hold on Midori’s arm. Midori was about to ask Haru-chan what she meant when she caught a ‘Pay Attention’ sign out of the corner of her eye. Glancing over, she almost winced at the stern expression on her grandmother’s face.

[Young lady, you and I have a few things to discuss.] Midori gulped before blinking her eyes in acknowledgement. “Damn, what the heck did I do wrong **this** time?” she wondered as she followed the rest of the family to the Blue Room and their appointment with a late-evening snack.

## Juuban

Setsuna Meiou stared balefully at the phone receiver in her hand. Neither Haruka nor Michiru were answering their cell phones, the housekeeper at Kaiou-ke had been singularly uninformative, and she’d just hung up in disgust after getting the answering machine at Haruka’s penthouse in Shiba.

Leading Khronos to the Hikawa shrine hadn’t worked out as planned either. She had hoped Rei would have been around to sense the girl’s aura – the miko senshi may be young, but her spiritual abilities were extremely strong. She surely would have noticed the presence of the faux Guardian and rallied the other senshi against her, but the elder senshi had quickly discovered that the normal residents of the shrine were gone. Setsuna was also quite irritated over her sudden lack of mobility. She had detransformed almost immediately after Khronos departed – none of the senshi could afford to bring undue attention to their civilian identities – and it had taken her entirely too long to walk from the shrine to the center of town before she was able to locate a public phone. She was just beginning to realize how

much she took her ability to teleport for granted, and its absence felt as if a portion of her own being had been torn asunder.

The loss of her subspace storage had been another extremely unpleasant discovery. The small subspace pocket with her purse and cell phone was still accessible, but the larger storage space with all of her alternate outfits and equipment had simply vanished. What she had been left with was the business suit and heels she had been wearing the last time she had transformed, and the outfit was **not** suitable for the brisk Tokyo night. She was **cold**, dammit!

Well, she'd better try one last time before making her way to a nearby hotel.

**Ring**

**Ring**

**Ring**

"We're not home right now. Please leave a message after the beep." "Haruka, this is Setsuna Meiou. Please call my cell phone immediately when you receive this message. I will be staying at the Azabu City Hotel for the next several days and it is vitally important that you ..."

"[Click] SETSUNA! You're alive!"

"Yes. Haruka, I need you to ..."

"Thanks goodness! Can you get here right away? We've got a major crisis on our hands." Setsuna stiffened. "How did you know that? I've barely ..." "Because it's happening right here in front of us! The Silence has returned." Setsuna felt the jolt throughout her entire body. "Impossible ..." "Like hell! It's not very strong at the moment, but that could change at any time. We need your help right away."

The elder senshi's mind raced. "How could this possibly have happened? The Silence should have been completely destroyed by the Grail and Sailor Moon, otherwise the planet would no longer exist."

"Setsuna?"

"Yes, Haruka. I'll be there as quickly as possible. However, I've got one question you need to answer first."

"Yes?"

"How do I get to your penthouse from downtown Juuban? Assume I have to walk there." Setsuna really shouldn't have been surprised at the stunned silence that followed this inquiry.

**Neerima**

Nodoka, no longer Saotome, sat at her table drinking tea. Her vigil had now begun – she would not sleep again until she could do so for a final time. Tomorrow would bring answers soon enough: if her mother consented to the request to be kaishaku, Nodoka could apologize to her ancestors formally and in person, and if she didn't ... well, that was an answer in itself, wasn't it? She stared at the delicate sheet of rice paper in front of her. While she would not set brush to ink until it was actually time, she **could** meditate on her life to help compose the perfect words for her haiku.

Tradition **would** be followed.

**Juuban**

Usagi stared silently at the ceiling of her room, her normal bedtime tossing and turning completely absent. Finding out that Mama and her friends' parents had known all along about their senshi identities had been quite a shock. And finding out that the Ginzuishou was actually an intelligent artifact – and a bit of a chatterbox to boot – was bad enough.

But what really topped the whole incredible day was finding out that her entire future – Crystal Tokyo, her marriage to Mamo-chan, their rule together as King and Queen, Chibi-Usa, **everything** – was now just a vague possibility, and not the certainty she had been previously told it would be. A certainty she had counted on numerous times, a certainty which had guided her actions and fueled her determination during the times when all she really wanted to do was gibber and cower in the corner.

A certainty she no longer had.

Usagi shuddered. If it was this bad for her, Chibi-Usa must be utterly terrified. Her daughter-to-be had fled to her room immediately after dinner and hadn't come out since. Luna had gone upstairs after her – hopefully the moon cat would give her the comfort and company she refused to seek from the family. Even though the two of them didn't always get along, knowing that you could disappear at any moment as if you never existed was a fate Usagi wouldn't wish on **anyone**, especially someone dear in her family.

At least there was some good to accompany this loss. There was a new senshi to meet and both Meiou-san and Hotaru-chan were still alive. And from the sound of it Hotaru-chan would be having the same problems with the Glaive that she was getting from the Crystal. She giggled at the thought of the Glaive chattering away in Hotaru-chan's ear like the Crystal had done practically the whole evening, and it was likely the new senshi guarding the Gates of Time was also dealing with a talkative voice in her ear.

Usagi hoped the new senshi would be friends with her. The Ginzuishou had been adamant Crystal Tokyo could never come into being without the Gate Guardian's help, and Chibi-Usa desperately needed to get the Time Key back so she could go home. The new senshi **had** to be friendly, she just **HAD** to be.

Usagi wouldn't allow her to be otherwise. **Chapter 8: Interregnum I**

**Suginami - Sunday, March 6th 1994**

Ranma woke up suddenly. She glanced up to the clock on the edge of the bureau, which read 5:45 AM. "This is starting to become a habit," she growled to herself in disgust. "One of the few times in my life I can sleep in as long as I want, and I'm waking up even earlier than usual." "Guardians require very little actual sleep, Ranma. However, if you wish to indulge in unstructured rest periods it is a trivial task to disengage the alarm monitor which is currently active."

"Morning, Eiko," Ranma said, snuggling underneath the down-filled duvet. "Figured it would be something like that." She burrowed even further down until only the very tip of her red pigtail could be seen from the outside.

Her eyes suddenly crossed. "Hey, does this mean I've got some sort of alarm clock stuck in my head now?"

"Essentially, although the alarm monitor encompasses a significantly greater range of functions," Eiko replied. "It is one of a number of autonomous utility routines which you can access without regard to your current transformation state." "That's nice," Ranma mumbled. She closed her eyes and spent several minutes tossing and turning, trying without success to go back to sleep. She finally rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling in exasperation. "Great," Ranma said with a sigh. She might as well just give up and get dressed ... and if she hurried, she'd even make it outside in time to greet the sun.

"Midori-chan, may I come in, please?"

"Certainly, Obāsama," the brown-eyed girl replied, her attention not wavering from the graceful performance outside.

Aiko frowned momentarily at the coldly formal tone of voice before suppressing a sigh. She really couldn't blame the girl, after all. The Yamada matriarch glided silently over to the younger girl and placed a hand gently on her shoulder.

"She looks so serene when she's practicing ... like she doesn't have a care in the world," Midori said in a soft voice.

"'He', dear, 'he'," Aiko admonished gently. "I know it's difficult, but it's especially important at the moment to try and think of Ranma as a 'he', not a 'she'." "Yes, Obāsama," Midori replied without inflection. Aiko didn't bother suppressing the sigh this time. "I'm sorry, Midori-chan. I didn't come up here to discipline you further. In fact, I owe you a bit of an apology in regards to last night." Midori finally turned away from the window. She was moderately surprised to find that her grandmother was almost completely unmasked and that the wryly bemused grin Aiko had on display was directed entirely inward.

"I wasn't entirely fair to you last night, was I?" "Ummm ... well, I don't know, Obāsama," Midori temporized. She didn't want to sound petty and agree wholeheartedly, but at the same time ... "I shouldn't have left my surprise on display like I did last night – even Sis noticed it right away." "True," Aiko replied with a nod. "However, the punishment meted out was entirely out of proportion with the transgression, and for that I apologize. I **did** have a reason for being so ... emphatic, but it wasn't fair to you when you had no knowledge of the most recent events which had taken place earlier in Nerima." Midori's stomach plummeted through the floor. She could tell that, whatever Obāsama was about to tell her, it was NOT going to be good news for her sorely-beleaguered cousin. She shifted away from the window and sat down on the edge of her bed after her grandmother appropriated the reading chair by the window. "Midori-chan, I am going to have to rely heavily on your assistance over the next several weeks," the Yamada matriarch said. "I've come to trust your judgment in handling the girls and I see no reason to interfere with the synergy the four of you have developed over the last year." Midori nodded, wondering briefly about the obvious circumlocution. "The day before you called home from the hospital with word of Ranma," Aiko continued, "we decided to inform his mother about his apparent demise. I'll admit to a certain amount of petty revenge, but I had also hoped to break my daughter away from Genma with the eventual goal of reclaiming our family ties." Midori's throat had tightened during her grandmother's discourse. She could easily see the problem this could create.

Aiko's eyes were flint and the smile which previously graced her face had vanished. "I was – in part – successful. Nodoka visited the Tendōs yesterday and publicly declared Genma ronin. Evidently she also made a decent attempt at returning home with his head. Naturally, Genma fled the scene." Midori was somewhat surprised when Aiko shifted nervously in her seat. "I wouldn't be so worried if that was the extent of the damage. As much as Ranma undoubtedly **still** holds strong feelings for his father, a stable environment with his mother included as a part of the family would have eventually weaned him from his primary abuser." Aiko frowned slightly before continuing. "However, I'm afraid my darling daughter overreacted to the other item of information we included. I had Seiko compile a summary videotape of Ranma's curse in action and let Haru-chan deliver it along with the rest to Nodoka in person. Not only did Nodoka declare Genma ronin, she also initiated blood feud against the Tendōs themselves." Midori couldn't suppress her sharp intake of breath. This was bad, no, worse than bad for Ranma. She firmly suppressed a guilty little part of herself which was cheering loudly in celebration. Her grandmother nodded in agreement. "You see the problem, especially considering his demonstrated feelings for the two Tendō girls." "Yes, Obāsama," Midori replied. "What do you need me to do?" "Good girl." Aiko smiled with approval. "I need you to run interference with the girls, Midori- chan. Let them know what is happening while I try to straighten out the situation between Ranma-kun and my wayward daughter. Also, be especially gentle and supportive with Haru- chan. She's going to blame herself for this whole situation, since it was at her initial request that we compiled the tape of Ranma's curse. You **must** make her understand that the final decision was mine, and mine alone." Midori's eyes were huge. "Hai, Obāsama." "One last thing," Aiko continued, her smile softening. "Please do your best to suppress your, umm ... artistic appreciation ... around Ranma-kun for the next month or two. He's going to need good friends – and **only** friends – around him for support to make it through this period. You have my complete blessings in the long term, Midori-chan; you know that. However, you will simply drive him away if he notices you drooling down his cleavage anytime in the near future." Midori was no longer overwhelmed; she was beet-red with embarrassment instead. "I'll do my best, Obāsama."

"I'm sure you will, Mi-chan," Aiko said with a chuckle. She stood and nodded towards the door. "We should probably head downstairs – Kumiko will have breakfast ready right about now, and I for one do not want to earn her ire by being late to a meal twice in one week."

## Enime, Shikoku

Nyu Xian Pu sighed. She really didn't mind being out on the trail again, and she didn't even mind being forced to carry all of their equipment as a form of "training". She was an Amazon, after all, and proud of her strength. She could even tolerate carrying Mu Se along, especially since the stupid duck-boy was actually a duck at the time and the cage he was in had to be ... delightfully uncomfortable. Xian Pu easily could shrug all of that off. What she had trouble coping with was her great-grandmother's presence on the very top of her backpack and the nonsensical comments and whooping noises she was voicing in some strange form of English. What in the Goddess' name were "ridum cowboy" and "gettalong lil doggie" supposed to mean, anyway?

Oh well. At least they were getting near to Mount Horai was supposed to be. Maybe someone in that cluster of small farms ahead could give them better information than the idiots and perverts back in the resort town they had just left.

## Suginami

"No ..."

Aiko's initial concern blossomed into full-fledged anxiety when she saw the depth of the despair that replaced the initial shock in her grandson's eyes. "No ..." Ranma's head swung slowly back and forth in denial. There hadn't been any realistic way of softening the blow, either – her daughter had left her very little room in which to maneuver. The best that could be hoped for was to extricate everyone involved from the tangle of obligations without resorting to fatalities. No one would remain totally unscathed, however.

"Ranma-kun ..."

"... no ..." Ranma clenched her eyes closed. "... no ... no ... no ... no ..." A trickle of moisture began to track down the cheeks of the red-headed girl. "Ranma-kun," Aiko tried gently to interject, "there are a few things we can ..."

"NO!" Ranma yelled, voice thick with anguish. A brief shudder rippled through her body before she quite literally disappeared from in front of the Yamada matriarch's eyes. Aiko slumped visibly in her seat at the table. "Damnation."

## Elsewhere

Ranma stumbled over to the Gate and collapsed to her knees face-first against one of its supporting columns, the nausea from the untransformed teleport simply adding to her turmoil. "Ranma?"

"Why," Ranma croaked. She clenched her fist and slammed it against the column. **THUD**.

That hurt. **Good**.

"Why," she choked out again. **THUD**. That hurt even more.

"Ranma, that isn't a good idea."

**THUD**.

The physical pain was a welcome distraction. "Ranma, you ..."

**THUD**.

"... really need ..."

**THUD**.

"... to calm down."

Ranma threw back her head and screamed. She cocked her fist back; an oily miasma of nauseating green-black ki boiled around her fist and forearm. [Beta Override enabled]

"RANMA, ..."

The fist shot forward with her entire strength behind it. "... STOP!"

Ranma instantly froze in place when every voluntary muscle in her body locked simultaneously for a brief moment.

[Beta Override disengaged]

She slowly turned her head to look at her clenched fist. "I'm sorry, Ranma, but as Guardian you are one of the few beings actually capable of inflicting permanent damage on my physical housing." Ranma slowly turned her head back to stare at the fist-shaped dents in the column support. She blinked. Twice. "Oh **kami**, Eiko. I'm sorry, I wasn't ... I didn't mean ..." "Understood, Ranma. You have been subjected to a number of consecutive crises without being given sufficient time to properly reintegrate yourself. Such displays are to be expected. However, I would appreciate if, in the future, you could target your frustrations towards an object which wasn't quite as delicate as one of my temporal stasis pods." Ranma nodded silently.

"I can direct you to several locations where you can engage in intense localized destruction without inflicting permanent damage or attracting undue attention. This would also allow you to familiarize yourself with the first of your basic Guardian attack and defense spells." Ranma slowly got to her feet. She took a deep breath before nodding once. "Sure, why not. What the hell. I've got to get used to those damn heels at some point anyway."

## **Nerima**

A deep chime disturbed Nodoka's meditations. The sound represented something of importance, but the interruption was brief and quickly dismissed. The kendoka did not practice zazen, but her training allowed her to reach hishiryō without it and she basked in the serenity of thought without thoughts.

A second chime intruded a short time later, insistently demanding her attention. It represented a solution, and answer of some form and it served as a focus for the kendoka's will. Hishiryō was abandoned with a flash of regret when awareness of the outside world was finally restored. The door gong was struck for a third time. The timing was early but not unreasonably so. Nodoka stood up from the table, pausing for a few seconds when a brief wave of dizziness washed through her. The kendoka's first thought was that she was out of practice; her second resulted in a mirthless chuckle when she realized the absurdity of that reaction. She secured her daishō and took a deep breath to center herself. The kendoka picked up the scroll and tanto before striding calmly to the front door. The man on the other side of the door was quite dashing. Black suit, red tie, rugged good looks – Nodoka would have deemed him quite 'manly'. The kendoka did not, having forbidden herself from ever uttering that phrase again.

"Yamada-san," the man said with a bow, "your mother requests your immediate presence. If you will please accompany me, there is a car waiting to transport you to her house in Suginami-ku." Nodoka nodded in acknowledgement. She strode out of the house, pausing only long enough to close the door. The expensive black limousine waiting at the street was no surprise; she entered the vehicle without a second thought. Considering her mother's family, anything **less** would have aroused her suspicion. She was grateful it provided such an efficient shield from the mad cacophony of Tokyo traffic. Yamada-san. It had been nearly two decades since the last time anyone had addressed her by that name. Now it represented a priceless gift from her mother. Another priceless gift had been bestowed upon her by a young red-headed girl with emerald eyes. Harukichi. She was the proper age to be one of many nieces the kendoka had yet to meet. She would be thanked for her gift of honor. She had her answer now. Once the kendoka verified her mother had also so honored her son, she would be more than content to greet her ancestors.

## **Suginami**

Aiko stared dejectedly at her cup, the remaining tea within had long since turned cold. Damn it all, she had counted on being able to talk to Ranma-kun long enough to explain some of the options available to them. That vanishing act had been ... unexpected, and **extremely** ill-timed. "Okusama?"

Aiko looked up and over to the hallway door where Seiko was now standing. She quickly composed herself when she saw her advisor escorting a young man who had an irregularly shaped cloth bundle cradled under his arm. "Yes, Seiko?"

"Imagawa-san from the Nerima Ward Office has requested a few moments of your time." Aiko smiled in



greeting. This must be an unofficial visit; the bureaucrat was out of uniform. "Welcome to Yamada-ke, Imagawa-san. Please take a moment and join me for a cup of tea." The nondescript official gave the Yamada matriarch an extremely deep bow – for a moment Aiko was afraid the man was going to get down and kowtow. "Yamada-sama, it sorrows me greatly that my current duties prevent me from accepting your most generous offer. I have been requested to deliver this to you." He walked over and placed the bundle down on the table. Aiko watched impassively while Imagawa-san repeated his bow and tried backing out of the room. She didn't find his miss of the doorway, followed by a panicked scramble to locate the proper exit path, amusing in the least – the man was quite obviously terrified. Seiko followed him out after a brief exchange of signs. She hoped that the contents of the parcel contained the information she'd requested earlier. Idle fools with more money than brains should never be allowed to breed in the first place, and minor pests were best dealt with well before they turned into serious opponents. "Naomi-chan?" Aiko caroled out.

A few seconds later the black-haired maid entered the room from the kitchen doorway. "Hai, Yamada-sama?"

"Please prepare another tea for Seiko and myself. I'm afraid I let this one get a trifle cold." "Hai, Yamada-sama."

Aiko gave the mysterious bundle a quizzical look before moving it aside to make room for the tea service. She allowed Naomi to pour her a fresh cup before relaxing to wait patiently for her friend's return. The delay was longer than expected – she consumed half the cup's contents before Seiko reentered the room and sat down next to her at the table. The two sat together in companionable silence until Aiko finished her tea. "How did Ranma-kun take the news?"

"Not well," Aiko said with a sigh. "He vanished before I was able to do more than tell him about yesterday's events at Tendo-ke."

"Damn," Seiko replied in kind. "I was afraid of something like that when I saw your expression a few minutes ago."

"I know. I just hope he comes back."

"Was it that bad?"

Aiko nodded. "Possibly." She set her tea cup aside and slid the parcel back over in front of her. "Well, let's see what our friends have managed to find out about the Three Stooges." Aiko unknotted the drawstring before unpeeling the courier bag and carefully shaking the contents out on the table. A half dozen scrolls tumbled out, each marked with a distinctive clan mon. Aiko turned sheet white. "No ..." she whispered, not hearing Seiko's sharp intake of breath or the crash of shattered pottery which followed immediately afterward. She snatched the lone unbound scroll from the table and quickly unrolled it to unveil the final registry entries. The scroll clattered to the table. Fists clenched, knuckles white, the Yamada matriarch's entire body began to tremble.

"Nodoka, you **fool**," Aiko hissed. "What have you DONE?!?"

## Elsewhere

"Khronos Guardian Power, Make Up!"

Ranma gritted her teeth as she endured the humiliating display once again. "Ranma, that's the thirteenth consecutive transformation cycle you've completed. Do you find yourself any closer on being able to initiate and control the sequence directly?" "Not really," Ranma growled. "I can feel **something**, but only after the damn thing has already finished."

"That is to be expected. It takes considerable experience in directing the various spells before one is able to identify and isolate the various force taps from your individual mana pool, and the transformation sequence has traditionally been one of the more difficult spells to master." "It figures."

"You would be well advised to begin by learning the basic attack and defense spells first. The power flows are of higher intensity and significantly less convoluted in those sequences, and are subsequently easier to identify."

"Well, no one ever said it would be easy," Ranma grumbled. "However, I do have to wonder what idiot

came up with the whole sequence idea. Jeez, even without considering the stupid

ecchi outfits, if I ever got into a situation where I really **needed** the power-up, the fight would be long over with before I could transform.” “I’m not quite sure I understand, Ranma.” “Oh, come **on**, Eiko,” Ranma huffed. “The damned transformation easily takes over a minute and a half – I’ve had entire **fight**s take less time than that!” Eiko chuckled. “Ranma, the entire transformation sequence takes approximately one point six nine oh four seconds to complete from beginning to end.” “NO WAY! I can feel every one of those damned ribbons individually!” “Nevertheless, the transformation sequence is completed in well under two seconds. The spell temporarily boosts your temporal perception at a ratio of sixty to one; for every minute of perceived time only a single second of real time actually elapses. It **is** a training sequence, after all.”

“Oh,” Ranma replied. “Okay, two seconds isn’t so bad. I’d still like to strangle the bozo who came up with these outfits, however.”

“You will discover that the Guardian uniform is practical as well as decorative, Ranma,” Eiko said, mirth still evident in its mental voice. “Now, if you will stand directly in front of my enclosure’s primary doorway, it is time you learned how to access and control the spatial- temporal event viewer.”

## Suginami

Seiko watched nervously while the diminutive Yamada matriarch fumed. She could tell it was taking all of the older woman’s willpower to just sit there and think instead of leaping up and throwing everything within reach across the room. Aiko forced her temper down with difficulty. Of all the **stupid** things she had ever done, **THIS** one certainly topped them all by a wide margin. The current situation had NO up side to it at all. At best it could permanently alienate Ranma from the family, and would more than likely topple the precarious balance currently maintained between her and her sons and trigger an internecine power struggle which would completely rip the clan apart. The only even remote chance she now had of salvaging both the clan and her unexpectedly-ronin offspring would require them to be adopted by an unrelated Nisei family and sent away to live in the States for at least a decade. She’d have to call in a large number of favors quite rapidly to make it happen, and it was horribly unfair to inflict that on Ranma after all the poor boy had just been through.

Of course, she could simply retire and hand control of the clan over to her eldest son, but the consequences of **that** action were ... unpleasant in the extreme. Neither Ichiro nor Jiro had ever wanted anything to do with the family Art. They’d both insist on making her immediately dismantle the various networks she had built up so carefully over the decades, without caring that such a hasty action would put virtually every one of her associates at risk. Not to mention the distinct possibility of significant backlash to the clan itself, including their own family members – a danger neither of her sons had been willing to acknowledge in the past. DAMN that girl! Aiko was almost tempted to accede to her daughter’s request, except it wouldn’t be fair to punish her for something that basically wasn’t her fault – and such an action would be **certain** to destroy Ranma completely. She now realized that she had subconsciously expected her daughter to behave according to her training instead of acting in such an ... extreme ... manner.

“Seiko?”

“Yes, Okusama?”

Aiko began putting the Saotome registry scrolls back into their bag. “We’re going to have to start implementing a number of our remote contingency plans. Concentrate on Ranma’s and the girls’ trusts first and make sure everyone has up-to-date passports.” “Hai, Okusama.”

“Contact our friends stateside and find out if there are any extended safe houses available for Ranma and his mother. Burn whatever credit we have to make that happen.” “Hai.”

“Also, start putting out the word on the ...” Aiko frowned when the hallway door opened. “Yes, what is it, Jun-chan?”

The green-haired maid bowed briefly. “I apologize for the interruption, Yamada-sama, but Mugonno-san

is here with two of his associates. He requested that I deliver this to you immediately.” Aiko felt a headache coming on. That’s **all** she needed now, a new job request – right in the middle of a major crisis. She held a hand out for the sealed envelope as Jun walked over to the table. “Please inform Mugonno-san that I will be available in ...” The Yamada matriarch choked off her comment when she saw the chrysanthemum seal emblazoned on the envelope.

“... that it is convenient for me to meet with him now.”

## **Southesk Tablelands, Western Australia**

Guardian Khronos spent a full minute gazing about at the vast expanse of scrub blanketing the plateau in all directions.

“Kami-sama, I see what you mean by not having to worry about attracting attention here, Eiko. There’s not a lot in the way of obstacles around, is there?” “No, there is not. This location has the additional advantage in that any damage inflicted to the terrain over the next several weeks will be repaired quite rapidly, at least until the end of the current monsoon season.”

Khronos nodded. “I wondered why it was so green in the Outback.” She looked over to the Primary Key in her right hand, the heart-shaped Garnet Orb at its top glowing softly in the morning light. She could see why P-chan had used that odd two-handed style when wielding it in their first fight – the various protrusions and ornamentations up and down the length of the staff would make it nearly impossible to employ most of the standard bo forms. Wait a minute ...

“Key Battle Mode Engage.”

Khronos watched while the Key quickly smoothed itself out. All of the protrusions collapsed into the main shaft and the Orb narrowed and lengthened until it became an integral part of the upper shaft. She was left holding a two meter long staff, the top marked by a twenty centimeter section of solid garnet set back about ten centimeters from the staff’s end. “Okaaaay ...”

“Very good, Ranma. I will caution that you will be limited strictly to attack and defense spells when the Primary Key is configured for Battle Mode. In addition, spells can only be directed through the top end of the staff where the Garnet Orb is embedded. The Key’s Battle Mode must be disabled before you will be able to access your entire repertoire of Guardian spells.” Khronos swung the staff around experimentally for a moment before flowing into the opening of a beginning bo kata. She stopped about halfway through – the Key now handled almost exactly the same as one of her practice bos.

“Eiko, not that I’m complaining or anything,” she said with a puzzled look, “but can you tell me how the heck I knew how to do that in the first place?”

“A Guardian is automatically supplied with complete knowledge of the various spell trigger phrases, Ranma – this knowledge was provided as part of the imprinting procedure when you assumed office. Your internal status monitor makes a set of the triggers available to your conscious mind based upon your current ability to command the various mana flows. The spells and their associated triggers are grouped into one of five levels of increasing power and complexity. Your considerable pre-Guardian training has allowed you to start at the third power level.”

Khronos frowned. “Wait a minute, Eiko. Are you saying that I already **know** how to use all of this Guardian stuff already? Isn’t that like ... well ... cheating?” She felt Eiko’s mirth in its voice. “Not at all. Ranma, the knowledge which has been provided to you should be considered to be the equivalent of your martial arts training scrolls. You are being provided with the proper tools with which to learn. Simply knowing the spell triggers does not provide you with the wisdom of knowing **when** it is appropriate to employ a particular spell, nor does it enable you to wield your magics in an efficient manner. I would be sorely disappointed if you were content just to use the default spell triggers and their automated invocation sequences without attempting to constantly improve both your usage efficiency and your understanding of the underlying principles involved. Both will require a significant effort on your part and will continually challenge your learning and comprehension skills on an ongoing basis.” Khronos nodded.

“Okay, that makes sense. It’s sort of like practicing katas.” “Precisely, except that most of the practice required to truly master the Guardian’s various abilities is of a mental nature as opposed to a physical one.” “Right. So what’s first on the list?”

“Two of the Guardian attack spells are direct analogues to a pair of your special ki techniques. Scarlet Storm is equivalent to the Mōko Takabisha, and Khronos Typhoon is similar to the Hiryū Shōten Ha. You will be pleased to know that the Khronos Typhoon does not require leading your opponent into a spiral path, nor is it dependent on maintaining differing ki temperatures. You would be advised to practice each attack several times consecutively so that you can obtain a better understanding on how your internal mana flows are constructed and controlled.” The Guardian nodded in understanding. Hefting her battle staff in one hand, she began the first of many training sessions now ahead of her. Wisps of radiant energy coalesced around her staff as she initiated her first magical attack. “Scarlet ... STORM!”

## Suginami

Aiko sat patiently while Jun ushered the three ... agents ... into the room. Mugonno-san she knew from previous visits; he was as non-descript as ever. Average height, average weight, features neither excessively hard nor soft, average-length black hair, brown eyes, and dressed in the average salaryman’s suit and tie. Change the outfit and he would blend in practically anywhere. Aiko knew he was somehow connected to the Imperial staff, but that was about it – his background had been so tightly constructed even her networks hadn’t been able to find out much about him. Aiko respected the effort that level of detail required. His two companions, however, were an interesting study in contrast. The first simply screamed “Intelligence”; he was wearing the current unofficial uniform of the National Intelligence Directorate, consisting of a black suit, white shirt, red tie, and black spit-polish shoes, and had the rugged good looks common to most upper-level field agents. The other appeared to be a Nisei in American Navy dress whites. Aiko noted the man was exceedingly handsome: six foot one, one eighty five, mid-twenties, short platinum blonde hair, blue eyes, perfectly chiseled features, athletic build, and a gait which implied considerable combat experience. Of course, the large quantity of service ribbons and awards on his jacket did nothing to dispel the predatory aura surrounding the Navy officer, nor did the SEAL insignia that sat on top the rows of ribbons. Although his presence here implied some sort of liaison position – American NSA, most likely – Aiko wouldn’t be at all surprised if his family belonged to one of the Clans. Mugonno walked up to the table opposite Aiko and waited for his companions to stop on either side before bowing.

“Yamada-dono.”

“Mugonno-san.”

“May I present my two associates: Shiroy-san, ...” Mugonno turned slightly to his right. “Yamada-dono.”

The black suited agent bowed sharply to the Yamada matriarch “Shiroy-san,” Aiko replied with a nod.

“... and Lieutenant Commander Kuroi.” Mugonno turned slightly to his left. “Yamada-dono,” the Navy officer said with a bow. “Kuroi-san,” Aiko replied with another nod before addressing the group as a whole. “Please be seated, gentlemen, and join me for a cup of tea.” Mugonno bowed once more. “Many pardons, Yamada-san, but before we partake in your generous hospitality, could you do the favor of reading my lord’s letter?” Aiko arched an eyebrow and held Mugonno’s eyes for exactly two seconds before turning her attention to the sealed envelope in front of her. Opening the letter revealed a single sheet of folded parchment. The content of the message was ... unexpected.

It is our pleasure to extend an invitation to our honorable servant Aiko Yamada, her daughter Nodoka Yamada, granddaughters Ranko Yamada, Midori Yamada, family and staff, to attend us on this, the Sixth day of March in the year Nineteen Hundred and Ninety Four, for a cup of tea. Signed, His Imperial Majesty Hitomaro, Emperor of Japan, Grand Cordon of the Supreme Order of the Chrysanthemum, Order of the Rising Sun, Order of the Sacred Treasure, Knight of the Garter, Grand Cross of the Order of St. Olav.

Her Imperial Majesty Chikako, Empress of Japan, Order of the Precious Crown, Order of the Sacred Treasure.

“Please make the proper arrangements, Seiko-chan,” Aiko said, handing the invitation over to her friend and aide. “In the meantime, gentlemen, do me the honor of sitting with me for a moment. Naomi-chan was just about to serve tea before you arrived.”

Seiko allowed her worry to show once she was out in the hallway. An Imperial summoning, and there could be no other possible interpretation, with Ranma-kun personally named by his female personae did **not** bode well – especially considering no one knew exactly where he was at the moment. She hurried over to the house phone and dialed a five digit number, then hung up the handset and waited.

It took several minutes for the household staff to assemble in the foyer. Naomi was still attending Aiko and her guests, but everyone else was now present. Seiko nodded sharply before addressing the group.

“Aiko-sama and the family have been invited to the Imperial Palace for tea. Kumiko, Naomi, and Jun will be coming along; everyone else will assist with the preparations.” “Genjo,” she said, looking at the Yamada chauffeur, “we’ll be taking both limousines today; Izo will be your other driver, Shiki-kun will help you prepare the cars. Hisato-san, you’ll be in charge while we’re gone. Handle the door duties and inform me the instant Ranma-kun returns.” Seiko turned towards the female members of the staff. “Sumiko’s in charge of the kitchen until we get back. Jun, we’ll be wearing full formals, so take Mariko with you and start assembling everyone’s outfits. Don’t forget about Ranma-kun. Kumiko, open up the Bamboo and Blossom rooms as a staging area. Asako will help. I don’t know how long it will be until Ranma-kun returns, so make sure everyone has a place to sit comfortably once they’re dressed.” “Dismissed.” The staff members quickly hustled off to their assigned tasks. Seiko picked up the house phone once more and began dialing Midori’s cell phone number.

### **Southesk Tablelands**

**Blink:** Khronos’ staff disappeared when she stuffed it into storage space.

**Blink:** the staff reappeared in her hand when she pulled it back out again.

**Blink:** stored. **Blink:** retrieved. **Blink:** stored. **Blink:** retrieved. **Blink:** stored. **Blink:** retrieved.

“Now **this** is cool!” Khronos beamed, quite pleased with herself. “I won’t have to worry about leaving it around for someone else to grab when I get into a fight.” “Ranma, you will need to be considerably more cautious in determining which opponent can be safely engaged in physical combat. The majority of the entities you will face as Guardian will not hesitate to kill you if you give them the opportunity, nor will they avoid inflicting casualties on innocent bystanders. A significant number of them actually revel in causing wanton death and destruction. You must fully embrace the Warrior’s philosophy when entering battle as Guardian.”

Khronos deflated visibly. “You sure know how to kill a mood, you know that?” She straightened up and sighed. “Look, I know I’ll be forced to make that decision at some point, but I’d like to delay that as long as possible. I haven’t had to kill anyone yet and I have no plans to do so unless there is absolutely no other way around it.” She stored her staff and held her hands out in front of her. “Eiko, I’ve been capable of killing with my bare hands for a long time now. I don’t think that anyone outside of Pops realizes just how much I have to pull my punches to avoid injuring or killing someone when we spar. I don’t really like using a weapon; it’s a lot easier determining the exact force of a punch or a kick than it is for a blade or a staff. Even then, there really aren’t many folks around who can take an honest punch. Ryōga’s about the only friend I have who can.” “Still,” Khronos continued with a wry grin, “I will admit there are times when having a bo around is rather handy – especially when Mousse goes off on one of his blind temper tantrums. And **that** brings up an interesting question.” She concentrated for a moment before disappearing.

Khronos looked around at the interior of the room. “Oops, wrong dōjō,” she said quietly with a nervous chuckle. “Oh, well ...”

The fuku-clad girl traversed the familiar path over to the storage cabinet where the practice weapons were stored. She was pleasantly surprised that her boots didn’t echo with each step across the

hardwood floor. The staves were leaning up against the side of the cabinet in a small barrel – she picked out her favorite, a six-shaku white oak bo, and smirked when it vanished into her storage space as easily as the Key had.

Guardian Khronos returned to the Outback, leaving the Tendō dōjō as silently as she had arrived.

“Now, let’s see if this works the way I think it does.” Khronos concentrated for a moment. [Battle Mode disengaged]

Ranma wasn’t expecting the whispered comment or the brief delay which preceded her detransformation. Frowning, she pulled the Key out of storage. It had reverted to its original form.

“I’ll have to remember that,” she said to no one in particular before stashing the staff back into storage.

“Now ...” She pulled the white oak bo out with no more effort than she had when she was transformed. She tried a few more times. **Blink:** stored. **Blink:** retrieved. **Blink:** stored. **Blink:** retrieved. **Blink:** stored.

“Okay, now for the **real** test.” Ranma began one of her intermediate kata which favored mostly defensive moves. Blocks and redirections flowed effortlessly out amongst the punches and kicks of the deceptively graceful dance until suddenly a bo was in her hands and she launched herself into the offensive. The ends of the staff whistled sharply through the air as the martial artist executed a series of complicated and acrobatic attacks before returning to the defensive once more.

Ranma spent well over an hour performing different styles of kata while pulling the bo in and out of storage at various points. She quickly discovered that, while she could easily store and retrieve the staff with either hand, the staff could only be sent in and out of storage while it was in a nearly vertical position and she could only use one hand at a time to access the storage space. Once Ranma felt she understood both the requirements and limitations of accessing her storage space, she began improvising new kata that took full advantage of this new ability. The redhead finally stopped and nodded in satisfaction – this was going to be **very** useful in the future. She stored the bo for a final time before pulling out the Primary Key. “Khronos Guardian Power, Make Up!”

Ranma concentrated on trying to feel the flows of magic surrounding her as the transformation sequence played out. It was quite frustrating that she could only perceive the magic **after** the entire sequence had completed.

At least she didn’t have to spout off any corny “love and justice” sayings; the stupid pose at the end of the sequence was bad enough.

[Battle Mode engaged]

“Huh?” Khronos watched while the Key automatically morphed back into its fighting staff form. She was sufficiently startled that she held the transformation’s end pose for several seconds longer than absolutely necessary.

“Battle Mode is persistent between transformations, Ranma. The Key must be configured for standard mode before the transformation sequence can be invoked, so anytime you detransform while in Battle Mode it will automatically disengage Battle Mode and restore it when you retransform.”

“Nice,” Khronos nodded. “Hmmm. You know, I wonder ...” She stored the Key before taking a deep breath.

“Scarlet ... STORM!”

A vibrant ball of bright red-orange energy shot away from the smirking Guardian. “\*Thought\* so!” She frowned suddenly. “Eiko, was that shot less powerful than before or am I just imagining things?”

“You are quite correct in your assessment. The Garnet Orb acts as an amplifier to all of your spells, increasing their relative power by a significant amount. The lower level attacks are the ones most affected by this power boost. Also note that the use of the Primary Key is required in order to invoke nearly all of the mid and upper level spells, including the Khronos Typhoon.” “Hmmm.” Khronos’ smirk returned full force. “Heh. Well, there’s more than one way around that. Mōko ...” She concentrated part of

her essence into her hands. "... Takabisha!" A bright white ball of ki, slightly tinged with blue, shot off into the distance. "Ranma, you may wish to start employing a different focus phrase for your ki attacks while you are in a transformed state. The trigger phrase you are currently using is quite distinctive and could easily reveal your identity to an opponent. In addition, you should avoid using any emotional focus for your ki attacks – you will find that they are no longer necessary and they have the additional disadvantage of being quite self-destructive in the long term." "Huh?" Khronos stopped her practice to concentrate on her partner's words. "Why do you say that?"

"Constant use of an emotional focus will eventually link the emotion directly to your ki flows. This then becomes the basis for all of your thoughts and emotions. For example, your 'friend' Ryōga would be increasingly prone to suicide the longer he continues to employ the depression- based Shishi Hōkōdan. Your use of confidence as a focus would eventually lead to your death in combat, since you would be inclined to ignore the actual dangers involved in favor of basing your decisions more and more on a false feeling of invincibility." Khronos stood stunned.

"I believe that is a sufficiently valid reason to discontinue the use of an emotional trigger for your ki attacks, is it not?"

"Yeah," she replied, eyes wide. "It sure is."

### **Suginami**

Aiko suppressed her momentary mirth behind the rim of her teacup. The young Nisei officer was doing quite well in suppressing his fidgeting, but it was also obvious he was used to leading from the front.

The hallway door opened long enough for Seiko to step into the room. "Pardon for the interruption, Okusama."

Aiko nodded to her assistant. "Seiko."

"Your daughter has arrived from Nerima-ku and requests a few moments of your time." "Indeed," Aiko replied. She turned back to the three men seated opposite at the table after Seiko exited the room. "If you will please excuse me for a moment, gentlemen." "Certainly, Yamada-dono," Muggono said with a nod as Aiko stood up. "May I inform his Majesty's staff of an approximate time for our departure?" Aiko allowed a small part of her worry to show on her face. "Please convey my most sincere apologies to his Majesty and inform his staff that we will be unavoidably delayed for an indeterminate length of time. I'm afraid that Ranma-kun left rather abruptly shortly before you arrived, and he did not leave me with any indication on how long he would be out." "Yamada-dono?" The Nisei officer held up a small cell phone. "Perhaps I may be of some assistance?"

Aiko gave the commander an enigmatic smile. "You are certainly welcome to try, Kuroi-san. I would be most pleasantly surprised if you could locate him in such a manner. Now, if you will excuse me." She gave the three men a brief nod of acknowledgement before walking unhurriedly out of the room.

Katsu Mugonno hid a smirk as he watched the young commander dial. The Americans were always so proud of their intelligence technology and their ability to monitor everything at any time. Given Yamada-san's parting comment, this should prove to be ... entertaining. "Shinobi Two, status on Wild Colt."

Kuroi frowned a moment later. "Negative, Wild Colt has left the stable. Check skywatch log from ten zero zero zero lima to zero eight zero zero lima and report back." He closed the phone with a bit more force than necessary.

"A problem, Kuroi-san?" Mugonno inquired. "It shouldn't be, Mugonno-san."

Mugonno nodded once before taking a sip from his cup. He carefully hid his amusement behind the delicate porcelain.

The Yamada matriarch hurried to the foyer where Seiko was waiting. A brief nod answered Aiko's arched eyebrow.

"Nodoka-san is waiting in the Maple Room, Okusama," Seiko said. "She asked if she could meet with

Harukichi as well.” She handed the invitation back to the Yamada matriarch. “Haru-chan and the girls are upstairs getting ready at the moment.” Aiko frowned momentarily. “When Haru-chan is ready, ask her to show our guests around the premises. I’m sure they would enjoy a brief tour while we are all waiting.” She smiled in appreciation when Seiko handed her both the Yamada and Saotome registries. “Please have whoever is available bring in a tea service – Chinese White, preferably.” “Hai, Okusama.”

Aiko tried not to roll her eyes when she entered the Maple room. Her daughter was standing next to the table in the middle of the room, waiting for her arrival. “Okāsama,” Nodoka bowed deeper than Aiko thought necessary. “Oh, do sit **down**, No-chan,” Aiko admonished. “We have quite a bit of ground to cover in order to deal with the mess we have both created, you realize that?” Nodoka waited until her mother was seated before taking a seat herself. It took a few more seconds before Aiko’s comment registered. “Okāsama?” Aiko nodded sharply. “Yes, and the mess is centered entirely around the same subject: Ranma-kun.” She gave her daughter a sharp look. “Daughter, when was the last time you ate or slept?” The Yamada matriarch’s demeanor and tone of voice was having its desired effect.

“Okāsan?” Nodoka gave her mother a puzzled look. “That’s ... of little importance at the moment.”

“It’s more relevant than you realize, No-chan,” Aiko replied. She smiled when Naomi entered the room with a tray. “Ah ... thank you, Naomi-chan.” Their quick exchange of signs went unnoticed by her daughter, to Aiko’s disappointment. Nodoka waited for the black-haired maid to leave the room. “Okāsan, is Harukichi-chan currently on the premises?”

Aiko nodded. “Yes, she is. Unfortunately, Haru-chan and the other girls are currently unavailable at the moment.”

“I see. I would like to thank her in person if possible. However,” Nodoka said as she handed her mother a sealed scroll, “in any event I would appreciate if this could be delivered to her.” Aiko gave the scroll a cursory glance before accepting it. She had a reasonably good idea what the document contained, and if she were right, it would do Haru-chan quite a lot of good in the long term – even if it would confuse the heck out of her right away. “Certainly, daughter. However, there are a number of items that must be addressed immediately. First,” Aiko said curtly, opening the Yamada registry, “there is this minor but glaring discrepancy in our family records to correct.” Nodoka felt a small bump of anxiety when her mother pulled the final Saotome registry scroll out of its storage case and unrolled it next to the open Yamada book. Aiko carefully reentered Nodoka’s information into the Yamada registry, restoring her legal status as Aiko’s second daughter. She subconsciously relaxed when Aiko repeated the procedure with Ranma’s entry, effectively adopting him posthumously as she had hoped. Nodoka tried hard not to beam when Aiko made a **third** new entry into the Yamada registry for Ranko, repeating Ranma’s birth information and effectively making him his own twin. She had not expected that, but it was a singular honor and quite appropriate considering the role his Ranko personae had played. “You do my son great honor, Okāsama,” Nodoka said serenely. She had received everything she had hoped for and more.

“You can tell him that in person.” Aiko closed the registries and set them to the side. Nodoka’s expression became slightly wistful. “I intend to, Okāsama.” Aiko nodded sharply, a grim smile on her face. “That does bring up the next major item that needs resolution: this matter of family honor. Tanto,” the Yamada matriarch demanded, holding out a hand.

Nodoka blinked. That wasn’t part of the script.

“Tanto,” Aiko repeated firmly. “Come on, girl, we don’t have all day.”

Nodoka stared at her mother’s hand. She couldn’t have misjudged the situation **that** badly, could she? She hesitantly presented the tanto. Aiko snatched the tanto from Nodoka and set it down on the floor beside her. “Good. You will not need that for some time, for a variety of reasons. The first is that we have been invited to the Palace to meet with His Imperial Majesty for a cup of tea, and Tennō Heika would be more than a little upset if I brought only the head of my daughter along instead of the whole person.” Aiko



unfolded the Imperial invitation and placed it on the table in front of Nodoka. The younger Yamada glanced down at the official document. She voiced a loud gasp a couple of seconds later and her gaze met her mother's at the same instant, maroon eyes warring between shocked disbelief and desperate pleading. "The second reason is that I am certain Ranma would be devastated if you were to leave us in such a manner at this point in time. Yes, your son **is** alive, No-chan; the reason we didn't ..." Aiko sighed. Fortunately, Naomi would be returning shortly with the ammonium carbonate.

Nodoka sat up with a gasp. This was immediately followed by a brief fit of coughing and choking as her body tried to purge itself of the fumes from her mother's smelling salts. It had been a long time since she was forced awake in such a manner and she had forgotten – quite thankfully – how frightfully effective the Yamada house recipe was. "Welcome back to the living, daughter." Aiko's wry comment snapped everything into focus. Nodoka ignored the black-haired maid next to her and the enticing aroma of the food on the table. She had thoughts for only one thing. "Where is Ranma? Where is my son?"

Her mother frowned. "He is out practicing at the moment. However ..." Aiko's eyes hardened noticeably, "before you are allowed to see him, you must make your intentions clear to me." "Okāsan?!?"

"When you see him next, how are you going to treat him? Will you welcome him with warmth and open arms, or do you still intend to hold him to some ridiculous idealized standard of manliness?"

Nodoka inhaled sharply, ready to rebut her mother's accusation, before shrinking in on herself. Okāsan had every right to question her fitness as a mother. She bowed her head and fixed her eyes on her hands in her lap.

"I ... have no right to judge my son, Okāsan," the kendoka responded softly. "I only wish to know him once more. It has been far too long since I last held my Ranma in my arms as a mother should."

"Look at me, daughter." Aiko's commanding tone held no warmth, and her maroon eyes bored intently into Nodoka's for several seconds when their gazes met. The Yamada Matriarch slowly nodded.

"You'll do." The hawk's stare was quickly replaced with a much friendlier countenance. "Now, eat. We all have a long day ahead of us and I can ill afford to have my daughter pass out in front of Tennō Heika due to malnutrition."

"Okāsan, where is he?"

"I don't know, No-chan," Aiko replied with a worried voice. "He left earlier this morning quite distraught when I told him about your declaration of feud on the Tendōs." Nodoka gasped.

Aiko nodded with a grimace. "We've made quite a mess of things, you and I. He holds considerable fondness for the two Tendō girls and your actions against their family have complicated his life even further – something I did not think was possible." Her mother brushed a stray strand of white hair out of her eyes before continuing. "There is a lot happening in your son's life, No-chan, but one thing is certain: right now Ranma needs everyone's unconditional support. If you can accept him **totally**, without reservations, he can finally start to heal from the years of constant abuse he's suffered at the hands of that fat fool you used to call a husband. Can you do that much, daughter?" Nodoka nodded dumbly. She was quite confused by her mother's constant changing of subject, but she would agree to anything if it led to a chance to be reunited with her son once more. "Good. Now, eat. We still have a lot of work ahead of us, and you will need your strength."

Mugonno smiled vacuously while he allowed himself and his two associates to be guided around the premises by the youngest of Yamada-san's charges. The young redhead's training was obvious in its absence – a rather remarkable achievement for one so young and further proof that this clan must be preserved at all costs. Harukichi-chan would be quite a formidable force once she reached her majority; it was his duty to see she was given the chance along with her other family members.

The big question was how young Ranma-kun would react to the Emperor's proposal. The risk was high, but the potential rewards were so great that this opportunity simply could not be

ignored. The combination of the Yamada and Musabetsu Kakutō Ryū, wielded by a loyal house,

was a prize worth taking almost any chance for. The possibilities in such a union were endless. The ringing of his companion's cell phone interrupted Mugonno's ruminations. "Shinobi Two" Commander Kuroi curtly answered. "... What do you mean skywatch log is negative? Have you checked for equipment malfunction?" The platinum-haired Nisei practically growled. "He's just a kid, not a goddamned superhero; it's not as if he can simply vanish into thin air. Run a full diagnostics on skywatch three and check back. It's got to be something obvious." Kuroi snapped his cell phone shut and swore. "More problems, Kuroi-san?" Mugonno's inquiry was polite but his attention was on the young redhead in front of the group. Her emerald eyes were dancing with unconcealed mirth, which led to rather interesting conclusions.

"Idiots can't keep a sat running for more than a day. I'm definitely going to have words with HQ when I get back."

"Kuroi-san?" Muggono concealed his own merriment, silently pointing out the presence of their current "guide".

"Right," Kuroi nodded. He turned towards the young Yamada girl and bowed. "My apologies for the inappropriate language, Harukichi-san." "Thank you, Kuroi-san," Harukichi replied with her own bow. "Such a reaction is quite common whenever Ranma-nēchan is concerned. Now if you will follow me, the primary dōjō is in this direction."

## **Southesk Tablelands**

"You want me to WHAT?"

"Take hold of the gemstone at the peak of your tiara. Concentrate on it." "Why do I get the feeling this is going to be something else designed to embarrass the hell out of me?"

"Ranma, all Guardians share this basic attack form. While it may appear on the surface to be of limited power, its utility far exceeds its effectiveness as a simple attack. It is quite versatile and familiarity with it is crucial; you will doubtless have many uses for it."

"Right," Khronos replied with a sigh. When her hand touched her tiara she felt a brief surge of power; her hand moved into a flat plane on its own accord, holding something that was most definitely **not** a tiara.

"Choose a target."

"Umm, okay. How about that rock over there?" "More than adequate."

Even though Khronos was starting to get used to the way the various trigger phrases seemed to force their way into her brain, it still creeped her out quite a bit when it happened. She concentrated on the target.

"Khronos Tiara Action!" Her wind up and throw would have done a professional Frisbee player proud.

## **WHOMP!**

Khronos blinked, even as the disc of crimson light returned to her hand and she, with new reflexes, returned the tiara to her brow. "Whoa. That's some headgear." "You will be able to guide the flight of the energized Tiara with minimal training. It can act as a homing missile, cut bonds, knock a number of low-powered opponents unconscious, and perform a variety of other tasks. You should find it extremely useful." "Well, it was about time some part of this stupid uniform turned out to be useful. I don't suppose the earrings turn into miniature hand grenades, do they?" "I'm afraid not, Ranma."

Khronos smirked. "Oh, well. At least it will make Ryōga freak out the next time I see him – he's always been so proud of his Iron Cloth technique and those stupid spinning bandanas of his." She suddenly got a thoughtful look. "You know, I wonder ..." Khronos reached behind her with her right hand and grabbed one end of the ribbon that made up the bow on the back of the Guardian uniform. She gave it a tug. An evil smile appeared on her face when the bow detached from the outfit and unknotted itself to form a single long length of ribbon.

"THOUGHT so!" she practically crowed. "Now, let's see if I can remember how he did that ..." Khronos concentrated briefly and a flash of white ki enveloped her hand and the first part of the unrolled bow. It

stiffened along the first two dozen centimeters to form a rough facsimile of a gymnastics ribbon. She began twirling the ribbon in a spiral pattern in front of her.

"That ... is a very creative use of the uniform, Ranma. I have no memory of any previous Guardian attempting such a feat."

"Yeah, well," Khronos replied with a smirk, "I've had to face off against Kodachi so many times I've learned how useful the ribbon can be. Kodachi could never use the tools to their full effectiveness because she didn't know any real martial arts. This is a little short, but I can still work with it."

"One moment, Ranma. While I am unable to change the basic form of the Guardian uniform, there is a certain mutability built into some of the various definition parameters. It appears that the original designer might have foreseen at least a variation of your ribbon usage, since there is a duplicate set of parameters for the ribbon that are in force when it is detached. Allow me to adjust them for you."

Khronos grinned when the ribbon suddenly narrowed and extended to several times its original length. The fuku-clad Guardian snapped her new weapon against several nearby rocks, splitting each of them neatly in two. She thought for a moment before beginning a new kata, the ribbon twirling around her form in a complicated yet graceful pattern. This was **fun**.

## Suginami

Aiko suppressed a sigh. Everyone who had been invited to the Palace, along with Mugonno-san and his two associates, had gathered in the combined bamboo/blossom room for a light lunch. Everyone, that is, except for Ranma-kun, whose seat next to her was conspicuously empty. The family could only delay for so long before they would have to go without him, and the Yamada matriarch was **not** looking forward to try explaining that little disaster-in-the-making with His Imperial Majesty, no, not one little bit. It was already bad enough that she had been forced to gently separate the four girls from her daughter. They were making no effort to hide their animosity for Ranma-kun's mother and the tension across the table was quite obvious. It had all the earmarks of an excruciatingly long day.

## Southesk Tablelands

Khronos flopped down on a rock to rest for a moment. She had been practicing for over five hours without a break and the heat and humidity were finally starting to make their presence known to the young Guardian.

"Man, I'm going to have to start carrying around some water and a few snacks if I'm going to train in the outback like this."

"That would be a reasonable precaution, Ranma." "It's either that or have enough loose change on hand to grab something quick from a local convenience store." Khronos started laughing. "Could you imagine the looks I'd get walking into a neighborhood Family Mart decked out like this?" "It would depend entirely on the district you were in, Ranma. Some of the school fuku worn by girls in Tokyo can be rather revealing – more so than even the Guardian uniform." "Yeah, right." Khronos gave one of her trademark smirks. "Well, you sure aren't going to catch **me** wearing something like that anytime soon. This stupid outfit is bad enough, even when no

one can recognize who I really am. No WAY am I going to wear something shorter than this for real."

The fiery-haired girl stretched briefly before closing her eyes and relaxing a bit. She sat quietly undisturbed, enjoying the warmth of the sun on her back. There were faint echoes of some unidentified insects off in the distance, but the immediate vicinity was quiet and still. It was ... peaceful. Several minutes passed in relative solitude. "Eiko?"

"Yes, Ranma?"

"Thanks. This is real nice out here."

"I am glad you find the location to your liking." Khronos nodded as she opened her eyes. "Yes, but I bet I'm going to have to find a different place to practice once the monsoon season is over with. The last thing I want to do is start a huge brush fire out here."

“A commendable attitude to have. Ranma, have you figured out how you are going to handle ...” “I don’t want to think about that right now, Eiko,” Khronos growled. “You are going to have to face it sometime today, Ranma.” “I know, but ... later, okay? I should have a few of hours of daylight left – I’ll just have to deal with it when I’m done. In the meantime ...” Khronos got to her feet and pulled her staff out of storage. “... there are still a few new moves I want to try out before going home.”

## Ōme City

Happosai ignored the whispered comments that always accompanied his presence in public. The Grandmaster of Musabetsu Kakutō Ryū was accustomed to attracting an inordinate amount of attention due to his various ... activities, but this was one of the few times he didn’t appreciate the attention his stature and force of personality brought with it. The sparse Sunday crowd in Ōme Station simply served to highlight his presence, and the apparently-oversized backpack he wore belied the image of an old and decrepit grandfather he often assumed when he was not otherwise engaged in his hobbies. Well, it couldn’t be helped. Enough hikers passed through Ōme on their way up the river to Chichibutama that one more – even one of his stature – would quickly be forgotten. His destination was to the north of town in the rugged forested hillsides, and he had been **very** careful over the years never to ... entertain ... himself in this particular area of the prefecture. The elderly hiker headed north in the general direction of the Tama River, following a path well worn by others. As expected, even his unusual presence was quickly forgotten by the local residents.

## Southesk Tablelands

“Khronos Lance!”

A globe of garnet force formed around the orb end of the Guardian’s staff. She gave the staff a twirl and then slammed the glowing end down on a large boulder embedded in the ground in front of her.

**BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!**

The rock exploded in a dense spray of shrapnel. The explosion also kicked up a large cloud of soil, dust, and shredded bits of various plants, completely obscuring the young Guardian for several seconds. When the dust cloud cleared, it left behind a rather disheveled warrior. Her fuku was dirty and torn in several places and several twigs stuck out from her fiery mane at random angles. The minor cuts on her legs and arms from the explosion barely had a chance to bleed before they began to heal and disappear. “I think that needs a bit more work,” Khronos quipped. She looked down at her damaged fuku and swore.

“Ranma, the damage to the Guardian uniform is not permanent. It is automatically repaired with every transformation sequence.”

Her tirade halted as quickly as it had begun. “Really? I was pretty sure I couldn’t use just any old fabric to repair it – it’s nice to know I won’t have to try.”

She looked up to the late-afternoon sun before checking her internal clock. Five after four. Right then her stomach decided to give loud notice about its currently unfilled state. “I guess it’s about time,” Khronos said with a sigh. She was **not** looking forward to dealing with the mess back home, but she really couldn’t put it off any longer. A blink and she stood in front of Eiko once more. She detransformed, and when she transformed back to Khronos she was pleasantly surprised to find that not only did the uniform repair itself automatically, but her own appearance was also restored to a pristine state. “Man, what I wouldn’t have given to have **that** ability on some of our training trips.” Khronos took a deep breath before porting home.

Ranma detransformed the instant she appeared back in her room. It was getting easier and easier to deal with the instant changes in location, and it was evidently quite fortunate she had arrived at this particular moment.

“Hi, Jun!” Ranma said cheerily.

“EEEEEEEEEEEE!” The green-haired maid nearly fell out the open window where she was stationed.

Spinning around, her eyes widened briefly on seeing Ranma standing in the middle of the room with a wry smile on her face.

“Ranma-sama! Thank goodness you’re home!” Jun hustled over to the redheaded girl. She briefly wondered why Ranma-chan had gone back to wearing her hair long after making such a fuss over it last night, but that could wait until later. “Everyone’s waiting for you downstairs and we don’t have much time to get you ready – we’re late enough as it is.” She gently spun Ranma around and herded her out the door to the stairway. “Huh? Ready? Late?” Ranma let Jun guide her down the stairs. This didn’t seem to be related to this morning’s events. “What are we late for?” She rounded the corner at the bottom of the stairway and looked back over her shoulder to the green-haired maid behind her. “Grandma never mentioned anything about going out some... **ERK!**” “**RANMA!**”

Ranma barely had time to register the presence of the approaching body before she was enveloped in a crushing hug. Her vision was almost totally obscured by the swaths of cloth surrounding her and it took several seconds for her to finally register the identity of the voice’s owner. She stiffened.

“M ... mom?”

Nodoka kissed the top of her neo-daughter’s head before pulling her in even closer. “Shhhh. It’s alright, son, I know all about it now.” She tried and failed to blink back eye-fuls of tears. After all those lonely years ...

“MOM!”

Nodoka winced when her son-turned-daughter wrapped her shorter arms around her and squeezed. The nearly unbearable pressure released almost instantly, replaced by a tolerably fierce embrace. The mother and her female son stayed wrapped around each other for an indeterminate time.

“No-chan? Ranma-kun?” Aiko’s voice rang out from across the foyer. The Yamada matriarch sighed – those two were dead to the world right now. She glided over to the pair and poked a particular spot in the middle of her daughter’s back. The results were instantly apparent: Nodoka’s entire body spasmed for a moment. Ranma looked up quickly. “Are you okay, Mom?” Nodoka smiled and gave her daughter a short nod before turning to glare indignantly at her mother. “Okāsan ...”

“I’m sorry, No-chan, but you’ll have to catch up on your son’s life later.” Aiko turned her attention to the shorter girl. “Ranma-kun, I’m sorry to interrupt, but we really have to leave right now.”

Ranma partially disentangled herself from her mother’s embrace. “Yeah, Jun just mentioned some...”

Her reply cut off when she finally got a good look at everyone’s outfits. The entire household was dressed in full ceremonial kimono. “What the ...” “Grandma, what the heck’s going on?”

“Quite a bit since you left this morning,” Aiko replied. “The family has been invited to tea with His Imperial Majesty this afternoon at the Palace. We’ve all been waiting for you to come home, and I’m afraid we need to leave right away – we’ve kept Tennō Heika waiting long enough as it is. I can tell you more while we’re on the way.” Ranma flushed bright red. “Ah, geez, Grandma ... I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” Aiko nodded. “I know you didn’t, son, and I’m sorry we started the day out on such a bad note. You **did** leave in a bit of a rush this morning.” “Yeah, well ...” Ranma chuckled, the blush slowly fading from her face. “I went to see Eiko and spent the rest of the day practicing. I guess I kind of lost track of time for a while.”

“Understandable, given the circumstances,” Aiko said with a small smile. “Now, we **really** should head out for the Palace, Ranma-kun – you’ll just have to get changed in the car.” Ranma practically melted when her mother wrapped an arm around her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. Blue eyes met crimson and saw nothing but a mother’s love reflected from a seemingly endless pool. Maybe, just **maybe**, it was a sign that her life was **FINALLY** starting to improve. She could face literally anything with her mother at her side.

## Ōme City

Happosai located the overgrown path fairly easily, the ki markers he had embedded into several pathstones years ago still resonated strongly when in his presence. A short hike up the hillside brought him to the small cottage he had maintained for several decades, hidden from view by the twists of terrain and

subtle warding which imperceptibly guided others around its location. He had little worry that the actual structure had been tampered with over the many years – the amado and kuguri-do were pinned in place by physical means amply reinforced by the grandmaster's own ki. It took less than fifteen minutes to stow the amado, open a few of the exterior shoji, and fire up the stove for both heat and tea. He then took time to relax and gather his thoughts – the whole purpose of his return would fail if his thoughts were clouded or dulled with fatigue.

Once sufficiently refreshed Happosai set brush, ink, and a small stack of paper with a peculiar sheen out on the table and began his preparations. Precise brush strokes formed peculiar sequences of characters and symbols in a language long lost to all but a few monks of a particular order – knowledge hoarded carefully throughout the centuries, hidden from certain persecution by distance, terrain, and secrecy. Ward after ward flowed from the grandmaster's brush until they covered the table and littered the floor – only when the supply of paper became exhausted did the production of the arcane symbols cease. Happosai cleaned and stowed his brush and ink before carefully arranging the wards in their proper order. Erecting a protective barrier was vital to his safety as well as that of the surrounding countryside; even a single misstep could produce immediate and dire consequences. He opened his grimoire and began chanting, placing wards about the room in a specific pattern with each spoken line, binding the local ley lines within the pattern and anchoring the room to both material and astral planes. The final ward and the end of the incantation brought the barrier ward crackling into place, its power briefly visible before it settled back into the pattern and faded from view.

The elder closed his book and sank wearily into his chair. With the barrier erected he could take a few moments to rest. After setting the kettle back on the stove to boil, he carefully unpacked a small black leather case and set it on the table. He brushed a hand over the gilt pattern inlaid in the top of the case and chuckled – the old bat would throw a complete hissy fit if she knew he

had this in his possession. Of course, the Nyuchezuu were quite presumptuous in claiming possession of half the items he had liberated from them over the years, since a vast majority of “their” artifacts had been stolen from previous owners in years past. Getting them to acknowledge that little fact was a cause long lost. Twitting them about it, however, had provided endless entertainment over the years.

Happosai brewed a fresh pot of tea before returning his attention to the task at hand. Moving the case to the side he brought out a metal censer with stand, a vial half full of a golden metallic liquid, an ornate woman's haircomb, and a round cloth of purple silk embroidered with arcane symbols. He carefully unrolled the silk on the table and placed the censer directly on top of the cloth's center rune before lighting the charcoal inside, then sat back and nursed his cup of tea until the censer had warmed up.

It was finally time. Happosai carefully opened the small case. Inside were three crystalline eggs, each faceted shell imprisoning a delicate white mist within. Only three soulstones left. Three more chances to set things right. Three more times to hold her in his arms again and beg her forgiveness. And one would be lost forever on this day. The diminutive grandmaster opened the censer and gingerly placed one of the soulstones within. Unstoppering the vial, he poured the entire volume of the golden liquid over the crystal before quickly closing the censer and picking up the haircomb. He held the comb in both hands, closed his eyes, and put his entire heart and soul into the Calling. “Yasuko-chan.”

His Naming was barely a whisper, yet the shattering of the soulstone and the ethereal wind which followed roared deafeningly in his ears. His form shifted as he was carried aloft, limbs and torso elongated, skin clarified and smoothed, dark black hair once more covered his head, years of wear all discarded in an instant. One final distorted wave traveled quickly through his frame before the transformation was complete. Happi opened his eyes to the grey void of Limbo. All he could do now was to wait patiently. A time later – short, long, it was impossible to tell – a trickle of white mist gathered in front of him. It swirled and danced and caressed his cheek only to dart suddenly sideways and resume its delicate cavorting. Additional streamers of mist arrived, each adding complexity to the ethereal display in front of him, each misty thread greeting him once before joining its brethren in dance. More

and more threads of the delicate mist arrived until the dance towered far above him. When the final thread joined the tower, the dance suddenly stopped – the mist collapsing into itself, glowing brighter and brighter as it compacted. One flash of unbearable light and the mist faded away entirely to reveal a beautiful young woman in a light blue summer yukata, luxurious waist length black hair held back in a cascade of waves by an ornate comb.

“Su-chan,” Happosai whispered past a sudden lump in his throat.  
“Papa.”

Her bright cerulean eyes glistening with unshed tears, the spiritual essence of Yasuko Saotome ran forward to luxuriate in the gentle crush of her father’s embrace. **Ehime, Shikoku - Sunday, March 6th 1994**

Dust.  
Above all else, what the woman saw was dust. Well, dust and old men.

Just a few old men. And a few monkeys. More than a few monkeys, really. Many more monkeys than old men, in fact, but that wasn’t relevant. She rather doubted she could get any useful information from the monkeys, but old men she certainly could rely on. She removed a photograph of a girl from her robes. A startlingly attractive member of the group in question, rivaled only (in her opinion) by her skilled, talented, and at times idiotic great great- daughter. The last was due to the simple fact that in hindsight, her great granddaughter had gone about the supposedly simple matter of catching her groom in entirely the wrong manner. Of course, at the time, it had seemed like the right manner ... and were it any other prospective groom, it probably would have been. But the groom has been a young, cursed, and incredibly hard to seduce youth named Ranma Saotome, and his reactions flew in the face of Amazon wisdom where it applied to young males. Then again, she thought wryly to herself, he had also pretty much put Chinese wisdom down for the count in general, hadn’t done a great deal for Japanese wisdom’s hopes of supremacy, and had he had another suitor – say, from France, or Spain, would have crippled European wisdom severely. Ranma just plain did NOT play by any rational rules. Ranma, also, was most probably dead.

She personally was fairly convinced of it. Certainly Mu Se was, and for once she had no reason to doubt him. Mu Se might well be a half-blind, foolish and vain transduck – but he was not a liar. He wasn’t smart enough to be one, in her opinion – at least not one of any ability, and all she’d been able to detect was complete sincerity. And, somewhat to her surprise, something other than glee. Apparently Ranma had gone out of his way to make certain that Mu Se and Ryōga had been unlocked (after they had quite inanely managed to lock THEMSELVES) from their cursed form ... and then the battle had begun in earnest.

The details of the battle, now ... those Mu Se was quite indistinct about. He had only the vaguest memories of it, he admitted, after a severe blow to the head. What he DID remember was the final moments of the fight ...

A titanic explosion.  
A fortuitous, for once, fall into a stream. A disparate flight for his own survival. And a total and absolute conviction that Ranma, Ryōga, and Herb were all dead. Dead and dust.

Somehow, her thoughts kept coming back to dust. Well, enough of that. There were old men here. A small village apparently composed entirely of about four old men and fifty times as many monkeys. She’d seen stranger things in Japan ... but not by much. The monkeys didn’t matter. Japanese were, by her standards, eccentric. Apparently this village made its living raising free-range monkeys. No, the strange part was that there were apparently no humans but four old men and a boy leaning against a post. This made it difficult, in a way. It would be a serious insult, after all, to approach the wrong man as the elder of this strange little village.

Well, the boy would know who the elder was, so ask him first. She coughed, a small cough. No need for alarm at that ... she was old, but not THAT old ... not by the standards of those who were adepts as she

was. It wasn't age, or ill health. It was just all the dust.

## **Dust**

**by Kenjiro Cross**

**Asidestory to "Relatively Absent" by Togashi Gaijin**

"Boy."

Perhaps a bit rude, that, but Ku Lon was a bit tired, and hot, and there was all this damn dust. It was getting up her nose, and in her hair, and her eyes, and ... well, damn it, at her age she had every right to be a bit irritable and curt. The boy looked up at her, his face at first expressionless, which shifted to near incredulity. "Wow. How did you get here from Dagobah?" "From – all right, boy, two points for an original insult. I'll let that slide. Just tell me which of these men is in charge of this village." "Which of them is in ... Well, I can't rightly say any of them is, really." "No?" Odd, she thought. Even the tiniest village, be it in China or Japan, usually had some elder in charge.

"Nope. You see ..."

Ku Lon just waved the boy off. "I'll just ask the man gardening, then." Doubtless a farmer would remember strangers passing through so recently. "Well ... if that's what you wanna do, lady," replied the boy, with a hint of a frown. Ku Lon walked – or rather, semi-pogoed toward the gardener. It was, in fact, quite a garden, with a very large greenhouse, and more than the number of expected modern amenities. "Excuse me, my man. I'm looking for a girl, or possibly a boy. About this high, if a girl, this high if a boy. Black hair and blue eyes, wears a pig-tail usually. Have you seen him or her?" "Annnnhh?"

Ku Lon blinked. "Pardon?"

"Eehhhhhhh?"

"Let me guess. You're hard of hearing, as would be typical of a Japanese Male at your age." "More like deaf, really. The others are merely hard of hearing, so you can try speaking up just a bit," interjected the boy.

"I see. I shall try the man sharpening knives, then." "Knock yourself out."

There was a certain tone in the boy's voice that suggested that this was a bad idea. "You say he can hear, though?"

"Oh, sure, he can HEAR you. LISTEN, that's another thing entirely."

Ku Lon sniffed. Of course the elder didn't listen to the boy. What could a youth like that have in common with his respected elders? "I think you'll find yourself mistaken, boy." A few minutes later, Ku Lon returned from the knife-sharpener, a bit frazzled. "He ... seems to have problems with his memory."

"Yup. Sure does."

"As in ... he hasn't got any. None that I would call reliable, that is." "Coulda told you that, lady."

"Then why didn't you?"

The boy almost but not quite smirked. "I tried, but someone didn't want to listen." For a moment, Ku Lon was tempted to chastise the boy, severely ... but he had a point. "I ... see. Well, has THAT one a memory?"

The boy followed Ku Lon's pointing staff, to where it indicated a man who was carefully carving an intricate model of what seemed to be the Tokyo Tower. "Oh, yeah. He's definitely got a good memory. But ..."

"As long as he can answer questions about the son-in-law, that's good enough for me." Ku Lon left.

After a while, she returned.

"Well ... he certainly has a memory."

"Yes, he does, lady."

"And he's quite good at relating it."

"He sure is, lady."



"But he's not good at anything else, is he?" "Well, he whittles pretty decent, lady." "What I mean to say is he reminisces. I asked him about son-in-law. That reminded him of HIS son-in-law who was an officer in the JSDF and who had problems with his kidneys when he was stationed in Okinawa." "Sounds about right."

"And I showed him this photo – and got a long and highly detailed recount of his young adventures with an exotic dancer. Highly edifying, I suppose, but not very informative for my purposes." The boy shrugged. "Personally, that's one of my favorites." With every fiber of her being, Ku Lon restrained herself from beating the boy into a thin red paste. He hadn't actually been insolent except for the first quip – merely incredibly aggravating in a fashion she couldn't justify as insolent. "Dare I hope that the other is still capable?" "Oh, Misha-san? Reading the newspaper?" "Exactly. Has HE, at least, not degraded significantly from his youth?" The boy paused. "Well, yeah, he's as good as he ever was, but ..." "Excellent. Finally, I shall find information on my son-in-law." Five minutes passed, and Ku Lon returned, shaken. "So ... he was always a howling loony who is convinced that evil American pixies have subverted the Japanese government and that Nao Yazawa's manga is based on historical events?" "Nao ... that's a new one, but yeah. Grandpa says he's been a total loon from day one." Ku Lon found herself grinding her teeth with extreme force. "Then, tell me, boy, with four such incredible incompetents as I have seen here, who DOES run this village?" Finally, the boy allowed himself a full fledged smirk – worthy of the son-in-law himself. "I do, lady. And I tried to tell you, but you were so damn convinced that there had to be an Elder, you wouldn't listen."

And Ku Lon slowly toppled off of her staff. Perhaps she had deserved that piece of minor humiliation, she mused, as the boy set about making tea for his guests. Japan, as little as she cared to admit it, wasn't China. Which, come to think of it, was the core of the problem, from day one. The Law – the only Law that mattered ... didn't matter. That was it, really. She had grown up KNOWING that the Law was the Law. EVERYONE she had ever met knew the Law was the Law. Everyone she had ever CONCEIVED of existing accepted the Law AS Law.

Except Happosai, who was from ... far away. Since arriving in Tokyo, Ku Lon had had to face something that her heart didn't wish to admit, but logic and the evidence of the world as a whole proved obvious. The Law was NOT the law ... as far as anyone outside of a roughly eighty-seven kilometer radius of the Village was concerned. Happosai had felt that way. She had written him off as unsuitable. Ranma felt that way ... but he was eminently suitable, and so the Law must be upheld. And so she followed her great-granddaughter to Tokyo...and discovered that the Law was nothing but words from a small, insignificant village, in the eyes of a greater world. Or so her subconscious would try to tell her, anyway. But a lifetime of indoctrination and faith forced her to believe otherwise ... and to tell herself that the Law WAS the Law...the rest of the planet notwithstanding. It took a mighty effort.

And she had a bad habit of backsliding. Seeing the things that Ranma, that Genma (hard to admit), that Ryōga and Mu Se could do ... Especially Mu Se. HOW had she missed the boy's prowess? But he HAD pressed Ranma to the edge... It all came back to Ranma.

Ranma HAD to return to China with her and Xian Pu. That was the Law. Nothing Else Mattered. Ranma didn't agree...and there was no way she could force him without breaking him, and a broken Ranma was worse than no Ranma at all. She thought back to a man she had met when the Japanese and the Americans had been fighting. Half-crazed, delirious, he'd died in the Village, having somehow made it there from Europe. He spoke of a situation where you could only get out of it by not getting out of it – an inescapable loop of causality, a bind of Paradox.

What was his name again? Yoshi... yosari... She didn't remember. But she did remember what he had been speaking of.

We called it, as best as she could remember, Catch Twenty-something. It basically meant that you HAD to do something that you could NOT do, because if you did it, you didn't do it.

To succeed in her quest, she would have to bring Ranma Back, willingly. As he was, whole, capable, able to teach and learn and propagate. Ranma would never go back willingly. The Law said that to bring Ranma back, Any And All means available could and must be used. The only means that would work would leave Ranma ... not Ranma. Unable to teach, unable to learn, unable to propagate.

Thus she both was REQUIRED to use the darker, more devastating methods she knew of – and at the same time dared not use them.

Twenty-two ... that was it. Catch Twenty-two. The American's dying words had been right... "Someday you'll come up against it. Your laws are going to make it inevitable, old lady. You guys probably invented Cat..."

And he'd died.

DAMN, she wished to hell he could remember his name. Such a person should either be enshrined as a sage in the Amazon annals ... or enshrined as a demon. "Tea's ready," the boy said, bringing over a kettle and mugs. "So ... what exactly are you looking for?"

## **Chapter 9: Interregnum II**

### **somewhere in Limbo - Sunday, March 6th 1994**

"Now, Papa, why have you called me here?" Yasuko broke their mutual embrace to gaze gently at her father. "You know the cravings only get worse each time you visit." Happosai sighed. "It's worth it, you know." "Papa ..."

"It really is, Su-chan. I can never make up for what I did to you." Yasuko's face assumed an angry scowl. "Papa, you stop that right this instant. How many times have I told you – it is **not your fault!**" Happosai's face fell. "If I had never shown you that ..."

"STOP IT, Papa," Yasuko interrupted, stomping her foot for emphasis. "You had no idea I was watching and there was no way you could have known what would happen afterward." "I should have sensed your presence ..."

"Papa, PLEASE?"

Happosai's face fell even further.

Yasuko pouted. "Really\*, Papa, you have to stop blaming yourself some day. Our son may not have grown up to our expectations, but without your sacrifices I would **never** have known the joys of motherhood." The younger Saotome sighed. "Those five years were more precious to me than you could possibly imagine, Papa, so I don't want to hear you berating yourself any more, understand?"

The hint of a bemused grin appeared on Happosai's face. "I never **could** deny you anything, Su- chan."

Yasuko briefly hugged her father once more. "I know. So why don't you tell me what happened that was so important you would risk starting up the cravings again." Happosai sagged as he turned troubled eyes to his daughter. "Su-chan, I need to know if you've seen our grandson recently."

"Ranma-kun?" Yasuko frowned when Happosai nodded. "I don't think so, Papa, but there is someone I can ask who would certainly know." The young woman took a step back from her father and dissolved in a swirl of white mist.

## **Mount Horai, Ehime Prefecture**

Xian Pu began digging out the next pile of rubble with a vigor fueled by immense frustration. "Next pile" – what a laugh. There was nothing **but** piles of rubble far as far as the eye could see. Her husband had literally leveled almost the entire mountain while battling that bastard of a Musk, and each section had to be carefully searched for any clue of his survival. He had to have survived, he just **had** to. The young Nyuchezuu warrior would simply not acknowledge that any other outcome was even possible, in spite of the mounting evidence to the contrary.

She tried not to scowl in jealousy when another small explosion assaulted her hearing. Her great-

grandmother had never taught her the breaking point technique, saying she “wasn’t ready yet” for the advanced teachings. She didn’t agree – after all Pig-boy had been able to learn it, so it couldn’t be **that** hard to learn, right? How in Goddess’ name was she supposed to take her rightful position amongst the Council if her great-grandmother hoarded all of the advanced

training knowledge and continued to treat her like a male? If she never heard that taunt again in her entire life, it would **still** be too soon. She slammed her bonbori into the ground with even more force than before. There were still too many piles to be sifted through before the evening was over.

## **Suginami**

Ranma barely had a chance to sit down in the back of the limousine before she was engulfed by her mother’s embrace once more. She stiffened briefly before she could suppress her reactions and snake her arms around her mother’s waist in response. Neither of them noticed when the limousine door closed or felt the vehicle when it pulled out from the courtyard. A bump in the road forced the redheaded girl to shift in her seat for a second before she settled back into her mother’s arms. There was ... something ... that just felt so **right** being here with her mother now – it was so different from any of the girls’ glomps and was something she could definitely get used to.

Now that she thought about it, it really **was** different – Ranma was actually able to relax a bit. The tension that had always hung over her head when she was “Ranko Tendō” was completely absent, and she felt ... safe?

Ranma had never felt safe before. At least not from what she could remember of her life. Why had she waited so long to do this, if this was how it was supposed to feel? All of the times she had hidden from her mother behind the curse came crashing back to her at once in response. The lies, the deceit ... even when she had really **tried**, only to be stopped by an accidental splash or sudden shower or Pops or that damn katana coming out at just the wrong moment. The forlorn and disappointed look in her mother’s eyes when she was told her family was out “training” once more. The shopping trips with “Mrs. Saotome” when her mother had tried so **hard** to turn her into a “little lady”. The intense longing clearly evident when her mother talked about how manly “her Ranma” must be by now. All those incidents flashed through her mind with crystal clarity. On top of everything else that had happened recently, it was altogether too much to handle – Ranma couldn’t halt the tears that began to flow. She tightened her grip and unsuccessfully fought back sobs while trying to get her emotions under control.

Eiko noted the empathic feedback loop that was beginning to form between its Guardian and her mother with approval – this could do nothing but help its young companion in the long term. As a precaution it deftly bonded a subtle filter and loop dampener into the rapidly developing psychic link before withdrawing in satisfaction. Her mother would be a welcome anchor in the chaos that constantly forced its way into the youngster’s life.

The fact that the loop filter also provided the Artifact with a new secondary source of emotional content was strictly beside the point.

Nodoka began to stroke her ... daughter’s ... hair when she felt Ranma start to weep. Her own tears quickly followed – if there was any proof needed that she had truly destroyed her son, this beautiful and fragile girl crying in her arms supplied more than enough evidence to convince her of that fact. And even though her mother had insisted Ranma was still a man on the inside, her heart knew otherwise. There was nothing even remotely masculine left in this child: from the raw emotions painfully on display to the artfully styled and bowed coiffure to the stylish and **very** flattering outfit complete with women’s underclothes, there was no doubt at all in her mind that the person her arms were encompassing was a girl. Her son was dead, and she had no one else to blame except herself and her own foolish pride. So be it.

Her mother had been quite correct on insisting that she surrender the tanto. She had just been given another chance, no matter how undeservedly, and she was not about to fail her child again. Ironically, it

was an extremely easy decision to make. While Nodoka had been very proud of her son and his accomplishments, all of her knowledge of him had been acquired second hand through letters and postcards from that ... thing ... she once called a husband. She had never really **known** her son Ranma, especially given that the veracity of those very letters and postcards she had so treasured were now cast in an extremely questionable light. It was almost easy to give up the illusion of something she never really had in the first place. Her daughter Ranma, on the other hand, was entirely too real. She had been very fortunate to have gotten to know her daughter over the last six or seven months, even though she hadn't realized it at the time, and the deep visceral attachment she had developed towards "Ranko Tendō" was now readily explained.

Her daughter was suffering visibly, and this was a condition which would no longer be tolerated. Nodoka would do everything in her power to see to her daughter's happiness.

Aiko shook her head. It looks like they would have to worry about getting Ranma properly dressed once they arrived, since it was obvious that wasn't going to happen while they were in transit. No-chan had evidently taken her words to heart and Aiko was hesitant to interrupt the emotional bonding that was currently taking place between the two. It had become quite evident that no plan could remain intact once it actually encountered the young martial artist. Aiko would just have to be patient.

## Nerima

"What do **you** want?" Ukyō growled. Of all the people she didn't need to deal with at the moment, Nabiki Tendo had to be near the top of the list. "Can't you see I'm busy?" The okonomiyaki chef swept her arm in the direction of her other customers who were rapidly filling the available seats in the Ucchan's. Ukyō watched as Nabiki smirked in an extremely irritating manner.

"Oh, I won't take much of your ... valuable ... time, Kuonji-san," Nabiki drawled. "I just thought you might like to know what Ranma has been up to during his latest adventure." Ukyō paused a moment while she prepped the next order. "So Ranchan is on a long training trip. Big deal."

"So I guess you're not interested in seeing how it all finally turned out then," Nabiki's smile turned rather predatory as she held up a videocassette tape. "Ranchan's back?"

"Not ... exactly."

Ukyō tried hard not to growl. She quickly finished making the seafood special and delivered it over to one of the window tables before hurrying back to the grill for the next order. "Look, TENDO-san, why don't you just tell me how much you want for the damn tape instead of wasting everyone's time playing twenty questions." "Five thousand yen."

"WHAT?!? You must be crazy to think anyone would pay that for one of your little con jobs." Nabiki's eyes turned cold. "You must really not want to know how Ranchan's mother found out about the curse, do you."

Ukyō felt the bottom of her stomach drop. "She didn't ..." Nabiki's smirk came back in full force as she held out her hand. "Nine thousand yen." Ukyō's eyes flashed dangerously. She bit back another comment and silently opened her till. The exchange was made in silence.

Nabiki made quite a production of counting and double-checking the bills which comprised the suddenly increased purchase price. She stuffed the bills in her purse and strolled to the entrance of the restaurant, opened the door, and walked halfway through before halting and turning back to the silently fuming chef.

"Oh, and by the way, Kuonji-san, Ranma's mother did not have him commit seppuku. She didn't have to. Ja ne!"

With a negligent wave of a hand the middle Tendō daughter left the Ucchan. If she had bothered to look back she would have seen a young woman with a shocked expression whose complexion had turned completely white.

## Suginami

"S-s-sorry." Ranma's whispered comment could barely be heard. "What was that, dear?" Nodoka's inquiry was almost as quiet. "I'm s-sorry, Mom."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Ranma-chan," Nodoka replied, stroking her daughter's hair once more.

"I t-ried s-so **hard** at first, Mom," Ranma continued in a shaky voice, "but P-Pops never let me or I'd get splashed or something s-stupid would happen and after a while I j-just s-s-stopped trying and it hurt s-so **much** to s-see the ..." "Shhhhhh," Nodoka said quietly.

"... p-pain in y-your eyes when you t-t-talked about all th-the years you w-w-were alone and h- how it w-would all b-b-be worth it w-when y-you saw y-your m-m-manly s-son again a-and I w- want-ted y-you t-to b-b-be p-p-proud of m-me ..." Aiko was becoming quite alarmed over the scene developing in front of her. Ranma was beginning to break down completely, and it couldn't have happened at a worse time. She added her arms to her daughter's embrace as best she could and concentrated on projecting an aura of peace and love. The Yamada matriarch hoped it would be enough. "... b-b-but I w-was alw-w-ways a g-g-girl wh-when I s-saw y-y-you and-d I knew y-you c-c- couldn't l-love m-m-me when I-I was s-such a f-freak a-and I d-d-didn't w-want t-t-to d-die so I-I h-hid and I-I-lid a-and I'm s-sorry I'm-m sorry I'm s-so sorry ..." Nodoka tightened her hold on her daughter when Ranma's monologue dissolved into body-racking sobs once again. Her own heart was near breaking – she could literally **feel** the despair and loneliness roiling out of her child's soul in overwhelming waves. The kendoka had yet to recover from her own recent turmoil and the immense tsunami of Ranma's emotions wrecked any semblance of control she had managed to reestablish.

Nodoka was rapidly drowning in her daughter's pain. Her thoughts floundered randomly about for a moment before the entire vortex of negative emotions suddenly vanished, to be replaced by a vast and unearthly calm.

Eiko smiled to itself. The loop dampener had required a little tuning before it was at optimal efficiency, and now that a catharsis of a sort had **finally** been reached its young Guardian could begin the process of truly healing from the abuse that had been so prevalent in her life to date. All in all an extremely satisfactory sequence of events.

### **Somewhere in Limbo**

It was impossible for Happosai to tell how long he had waited before his daughter returned – time in this neutral void had little meaning to those who were still corporate. When the swirling mist gathered in their quickened dance to reveal the young woman's presence once more, her troubled expression did little to assuage his doubts. "Papa, Tatsu Tokoyo-sama said that there was no evidence Ranma-kun had ever crossed over, but she didn't deny it totally either. I'm sorry; she's normally a lot more helpful than this." Happosai sighed. He seemed to be doing a lot of that lately. "That's all right, Su-chan. The fact that you didn't immediately find him is enough to go on for now." Yasuko nodded slowly. "Tokoyo-sama also asked me to give you this. She said you should wear it for at least a year." She held out a glowing pendant suspended on a glittering chain. Happosai could now understand why his daughter looked so troubled. A gift from a dragon was not something one could simply refuse, and even though you could **never** be sure if it was a boon or a bane, the one thing that was always consistent was that the item **would** be critically important. Somehow.

He carefully took the proffered item and examined it critically. It was a golden teardrop apparently made up of crystallized light suspended from an intricate golden chain. The teardrop gently pulsed in time with his heartbeat. He gingerly slipped the necklace over his head and was not all that surprised when it briefly flared to an almost blinding intensity before returning to a quiescent state.

Happosai barely had time to blink before his daughter glomped him once more. "I hope you find him, Papa," Yasuko whispered.

"So do I, Su-chan. So do I."

Hirohisa Fujiyama yawned noisily before reaching for his cup of coffee. He hadn't expected to be called into work today, so he had been out clubbing until late last night and had stayed up even later back at his apartment with a really cute brunette named ... named ... what **was** her name again? Nanami? No, she was a couple of weeks ago. Minako? Nah, she had been **really** cute – a natural blonde to boot – but had suddenly run off on some pretext or another. Natsumi? Yup, Natsumi, that was it. He'd have to seek her out again in a month or two; she really had a nice butt.

Hirohisa glanced quickly across the bank of video displays monitoring the various entranceways into the Imperial Palace. The main part of the Yamada family was well past their scheduled time and Hirohisa was having trouble staying alert. He wished that they would hurry up and arrive so he could get back home in time to get ready for another evening of clubs and dancing. He wasn't scheduled to be back on regular duty until Tuesday morning and he didn't want to waste any more of his free time than he had too. He really couldn't complain **that** much, however. The Imperial House paid him **very** handsomely for his somewhat unusual talents and it was a position of rather high importance. The inconvenience of being on call twenty-four hours a day was a minor concern when all the positive benefits were factored in, and he had already been personally responsible in preventing several attempts to infiltrate the Palace over the previous two years. That was quite the feather in his cap, especially considering that he had barely turned twenty-five a few months ago. A flash of movement from one of the exterior cameras caught his attention. A trio of limousines had just pulled up and stopped in front of the Sakura entrance. **Finally**.

Hirohisa gave his checklist a last once-over before turning his attention to the monitor bank. He gave the first limousine a cursory once-over, just enough to positively identify the three officers and their driver. He was **very** careful to go no further than a surface identity scan – Mugonno-san was more than a little touchy about being probed by his own staff past the absolute minimum point mandated by regulations. The second limo was the longest of the three cars and its passenger door opened first. Hirohisa extended his mind again at the same time the security camera zoomed in for a closer shot.

First out was a good-looking woman in her mid twenties with waist-long black hair done up in a French braid. Hiro brushed his mind across hers and wasn't surprised when a medium-strength reactive shield snapped into place. He could have broken through it, of course, but he had already gathered the key piece of data he was probing for: human, confirmed. She was also married as well. It figured.

Next was a sexy green-haired woman in her early twenties. Shields, human: check. Didn't appear to be married – he'd have to check that out later on his own time. Third was an extremely cute teenager with dark chestnut hair in a ponytail. Human, no shields – but the potential was definitely there. Must still be in high school, and she looked really uncomfortable in all of those layers. Following her was another girl about her age, light chestnut hair in a very attractive bob. Human, with a weak subconscious shield just coming into form. Probably related to the other girl, and nearly just as cute. The last two out of the long limo were a couple more girls with very striking looks. The blonde had nearly the same aura and body posture as the green-haired woman, whereas the youngest was a really **really** cute redhead, probably late junior high, with a very strong shield. All of the girls were real lookers, too. Fortunately, all of them registered as human. Hirohisa turned his attention to the last limousine, which had yet to open a door. This part of the Yamada family had more than its share of Talents and Latents, unlike the others he had scanned earlier, and there was a greater variety of lineage markers in this group so far. They were probably close relatives or extended family members of some sort – the previous group had been significantly more uniform in their psychic groupings. Ah, the adults must be in this one. Mid-thirties, black hair, arms full of kimo ... heh, that's probably they were so late – someone must have been out and about without calling in. Ooh, active shields this time. Nice, in all ways, too! It's obvious who the next one is. The clan matriarch, and damn if she isn't aware of my probing too. She looked right to where I am in relation to her before smiling at the security camera. Doesn't appear to be an active reader but her shields and screens are nothing to sneeze at. Looks certainly appear to run in the family – she must have been something else when she was younger. Ooooooh, now **there** is one classy lady. Looks a little upset over something, and her shields are nice and tight. I don't think I've seen so many Latents in one

place that wasn't either a school or a convention.

Looks like we're about at the end of the ... HOLY SHIT! DAMN, what a FOX. It's obvious who was late, and that's just fine with me. Covering up **that** bod is a crime against all humanity. I wonder if she's available?

Let's see ... a NULL?!? No way ... yup, still a Null. That doesn't seem right, not in THIS family. I can hardly believe she's not at least a Latent in **something** or other. True Nulls are almost as uncommon as Adepts. Still, that's ... damn, just look at the way she walks. Glides, more like. Damn. Fox doesn't even come **close**. Sure hope she's a natural redhead. The young psychic stared at the security camera monitor until the party walked off-screen. He shook himself briefly and then picked up a handset from the console. "Security. Yamada party is on the premises; check is clean."

Hirohisa quickly hung up and reset a group of controls in the console. The party should be entering the initial interior foyer right ... about ... He sighed as the group came into view on another monitor. Damn, damn, **damn**, she was hot. And since she was a Null, she wouldn't even notice if he took a brief peek. Hirohisa extended his mind again, and tuned his senses in that peculiar manner required in order to slip unnoticed into a Null's surface thoughts and memories.

"Do not trespass where you have not been invited." The telepath barely had time to register the mental image of an **immense** wooden mallet being hurled in his direction before his thoughts exploded in blinding pain and he slumped into unconsciousness.

## **Southesk Tablelands, Western Australia**

Nightwing scowled while he surveyed the flat plains that comprised this remote portion of the outback. Walkabout had better have a good reason to call them all the way out here in the Never Never. It certainly couldn't be about any new Black Morph activity – the metamorphs always chose densely inhabited regions to invade where there was plenty of human life force for them to capture and drain. He looked back briefly over his shoulder to check on the location of his current partner. Starscream was idly flying about a hundred metres to his right suspended in her usual contrail of plasma. Nightwing felt the brief flash of envy that passed through him every time he saw the effortless flight of the statuesque golden-haired beauty, which was immediately followed by an involuntary shudder when his intellect reminded him of the terrible price Lizzy had paid for her powers.

Enough of the woolgathering. Nightwing locked his wings into soar mode and increased his visor's resolution to one hundred. Walkabout was nearly undetectable when he didn't want to be seen – hopefully the irritating little twerp wouldn't play his usual game of Hide and Seek this time.

## **Imperial Palace**

Ranma's conscious awareness of her surroundings suddenly returned to her when a distinct feeling of danger flashed briefly through her mind. She shook her head twice, trying to clear the cobwebs from her thoughts.

"This way, please."

Ranma focused on the source of the frigid comment. Some old geezer in a morning coat and pinstriped pants was gesturing to the group as a whole, and for some reason he was glaring

angrily at her as if she had just killed his favorite dog or something. She concentrated briefly before dismissing him out of hand as the source of the threat and continued to warily scan her surroundings while the entire Yamada party was directed to a medium-sized antechamber. "Kumiko, you and No-chan start organizing Ranma-kun's outfit," Aiko directed once the doors to the room had closed. She gently guided Ranma by the elbow over to one of the floor-length mirrors on the side wall. "Jun, emergency kit; we'll need the concealer, black eye, cleanser, and a medium base just to start. Naomi, hair. Midori-chan, over here and help Ranma-kun undress – the rest of you girls help Kumiko and No-chan." Ranma waited patiently while Aiko examined her face, turning her head back and forth several

times with a soft touch to her chin. The Yamada matriarch nodded once firmly "Ranma-kun, have you ever worn stage makeup before?" "Umm, I don't recall ever doing so. Akane and I were in a school play last fall, but they never asked me to put any makeup on – after all I was a guy at the time. Well, **most** of the time, that is," she finished with a nervous chuckle. "Son, both men and women wear makeup at times for various reasons. Right now you are not presentable enough to be meeting with the Emperor, as I'm fairly certain he would not appreciate having one of his named guests over for tea looking like they had just come from someone's funeral. This can be fixed easily enough, but it will require the use of a little makeup to do so." Ranma turned to the mirror and inspected her face for herself. She could see what Grandma was talking about – both of her eyes shot with red, her eye sockets were puffy and swollen, and there were distinct tear tracks running down both cheeks. She glowered for a second when she noticed the thick cascade of red hair in the mirror's reflection before turning back to face her grandmother.

"Sure, as long as you don't add lipstick or eyeliner – being forced to wear them with the uniform is bad enough. The last thing I need is for people to start calling me 'Ranko' for real ... and I really ought to do something with this mop. Anyone have a brush and a pair of scissors?" "Ranma-kun, your hair is perfectly fine as it is," Aiko said. "It just needs a little brushing out is all."

"Ah, come on, Grandma," Ranma replied. "I look like a total doofus with it this way, and it just doesn't suit me to have it this long – I've really gotten used to wearing it in a pigtail these last few years."

"A pigtail is totally unacceptable when meeting with the Emperor," Aiko admonished. "Your hair should either be loose or styled in a high ponytail. The way it is now is more than adequate." She sighed when she saw the expression on her grandson's face harden. "We really don't have time for this, Ranma-kun. What about something that comes down to your shoulder blades?"

"I can live with that, I suppose," Ranma said after a moment's hesitation.

"Naomi, see to it, please," Aiko said. "Back clip cascade, and use Ranma-kun's ribbon to replace the clip. Now, son, let's see if we can't do something about making that face of yours a little more presentable."

## **Southesk Tablelands**

Nightwing winced when he landed a little harder than he had intended and Starscream's effortlessly silent touchdown only served to heighten his awareness of the clumsy landing. He nodded sharply to Walkabout and barely caught himself from rolling his eyes in exasperation. Walkabout was in one of **those** moods, and the sight of a short dark aborigine dressed up like a reject from Crocodile Dundee – complete with faux alligator boots and sixteen inch bowie knife was almost too much to take.

"G'day, mate!" Walkabout greeted the pair in a high squeaky alto. "It's right ace you two could lob in for grog – care for a coldie?" The oddly-dressed aborigine pulled a couple of bottles out from nowhere and offered them to the pair. "You know perfectly well I don't drink when I fly, Walk," Nightwing replied. "No need to spit the dummy," Walkabout quipped. "Here ya go, missy." Starscream caught the tossed beverage container and acknowledged with a small nod. "So, what on earth prompted you to call for backup all they way out here?" Nightwing inquired with a sweep of his hand. "As far as I can tell there isn't anything except the usual monsoon growth."

"Hehe. You sure are a galah – even with those fancy sunnies of yours," Walkabout said with a toothy smile. "Felt a big blue earlier but couldn't locate it right away – and by the time I got here it had gone walkabout."

Nightwing flipped his visor up before rubbing his temples and sighing. Yup, **definitely** one of those moods.

"Night! Walk!"

Nightwing glanced over to his left where Starscream had called out. She was about 40 feet away and gesturing down at the ground. When the two costumed men reached her location Walkabout whistled long and low.



"Strewth, that's a big one." He knelt down and examined the fifteen foot crater that had blown a circular swath out of the underbrush. He picked up a pinch of dirt and sniffed. "No Dreams in this." "No, this one was caused by magic," Starscream replied. "It's similar to one of my Plasma Bolts, except not elemental in nature."

"There's another one over there that's even larger," Nightwing said; his visor flipped down once more and in enhanced scan mode.

"Fair suck of the sav!" Walkabout exclaimed when he reached the edge of the twenty-five foot wide depression.

"I'm surprised you hadn't already discovered these yourself, Walk," Starscream remarked in her usual uninflected voice.

"I've been busy as a cat burying shit trying to yabber with a mob of local boomers," Walkabout replied. He started walking to the southeast. "Have a Captain Cook at what I found over here." Walkabout led his two companions over to an area where the vegetation had been trampled flat in a highly irregular pattern. He knelt down and put his palm flat to the ground. "Far as I can tell, some blow-in sheila Dreamwalked over and had herself a ripper blue. Either that or she was chucking a sickie to hold her own private corroborree – take your pick." "Who do you think she was fighting?" Starscream asked. "Some mongrel," Walkabout replied with a shrug. "There were traces of both male and female lifeforce in the Dreamscape. Doc should probably Captain Cook this in person – things are definitely crook in Tallarook here." The short aborigine sat down outside of the trampled area and pulled out a small didgeridoo. "Might as well have Tygr hop out with the Doc – she'll be mad as a cut snake if she can't sink some piss just down the road."

### Imperial Palace

Aiko did not fall over when she entered the tea room and saw the room's décor and seating arrangements for the first time. She did not stumble, she didn't even flinch. Aiko did none of the above – in fact her only visible reaction was a nearly imperceptible hesitation in her stride, one well hidden by the large volume of fabric currently surrounding her and noticed only by her grandson immediately behind her.

What Aiko **felt** like doing, however, was an almost irresistible urge to perform a classic cartoon facefault.

The Emperor and Empress's presence at the main table was expected, as was Mugonno-san's position at the other table – and Shiroy-san's presence to the left of Mugonno-san certainly cleared up any remaining questions as to Mugonno-san's relative status in his organization's hierarchy. The room's traditional décor, with fusuma screening, tatami mats, the two kotatsu tables complete with zaisu chairs; all of this did wonders in helping eliminate what few doubts the Yamada matriarch had left about the intentions of the Crown towards her clan – as did the Heian era ōninohō and jūnihitoe outfits the Imperial couple wore instead of their usual Western- style swallow-tailed coat and ball gown. No, the only thing that was **seriously** out of place – and the thing that made Aiko want to inspect the weave of the goza mats up close and personal – was Lieutenant Commander Kuroi's presence to the immediate right of the Emperor himself. What little she had seen of the young commander made her doubt that the Nisei was really aware of the significance of his current position. After all, it wasn't every day that a foreigner was granted the position of Imperial yojimbo. And, considering the obvious topic of the upcoming conversation, his position at the table carried additional implications that he was also most likely ignorant of. Tsuya would be the obvious choice, of course – even if Kioko was technically next in line. This could prove to be quite ... entertaining. Aiko eyes sparkled at the thought. Given the current circumstances, the Yamada matriarch didn't even mind the fact that she was about to be relieved of her position as the official head of the clan.

Ranma was ... well ... nervous. Not to mention irritable, confused, and just a little put out to top it all off. In the rush to get her "properly attired", several key items of information had been quickly thrown her way – some of which were only now beginning to sink in. Probably the worst was that she had to hide behind

“Ranko” again, since neither of her uncles or their families – who she had yet to get a good look at – knew about the curse. Evidently the entire extended Yamada clan was in attendance today, and if the glares she felt on the back of her neck were any indication, there were several people in her two uncles’ families who didn’t appreciate her being here at the Emperor’s table while they were stuck sitting on cushions back up against the wall behind her. And the smaller table off to her right where Seiko and the rest of the girls were sitting simply served to highlight her own presence at the main table. There also seemed to be a lot more going on here than was evident on the surface. Her private tea times with Kasumi had shown her that a number of otherwise-insignificant details could hold a lot of hidden meaning, so she knew there had to be **some** reason for Grandma’s detailed instructions on how everyone was to enter the room and take their seats. What exactly that reason was, however, was still unknown. She had entered the room behind Grandma and in front of Mom, with Midori the last of the first group in. Okay, having just the four of them sit at the Emperor’s table at least made a little sense when they were the only ones mentioned by name in the invitation. However, after Grandma had sat down first in the middle of the table and she had followed suit to Grandma’s right, Mom had sat to the **left** of the Yamada matriarch, leaving Midori to sit down last to the immediate right of Ranma’s position. It was obviously supposed to mean something, but what? Considering that this wasn’t even a formal chanoyu, the obvious

formality of the ritual left Ranma a bit confused. Similarly, Kioko leading the second procession to the smaller table had to mean something as well, but why Kioko and not Seiko or one of the other adults?

And while the implications of her two uncles and their families being stuck back against the wall without being served was very clear, **why** that particular message was being sent was unknown and more than a little troubling. The last thing she needed was more enemies who hated her guts for some unknown and mysterious reason. She somehow made enough of those on her own – she didn’t need anyone **else’s** help in accumulating more folks for that category, no siree sir indeed. Things were certainly a lot simpler when it was just her and Pops on the road. Ranma briefly wondered what the stupid old panda was doing. Ranma quickly forced her thoughts away from that particular subject. It would only get her depressed the more she dwelled on it, and she needed to concentrate so she could figure out just exactly what sort of minefield she had stepped into this time. She waited for the Emperor and his wife to take the first sip before responding in kind, and was pleasantly surprised to discover she had been served Yin Zhen Bai Hao. When it became apparent the Imperial couple was going to allow everyone a little uninterrupted time to partake in their beverages, she allowed herself to relax just a touch and enjoy the taste and bouquet of the delicate white tea.

## **Nerima**

The back door of the house opened and closed silently. Had anyone been nearby to observe this small event, they would have wondered how the entranceway had moved without any apparent assistance. However, the house had been abandoned by its sole occupant much earlier in the day, and the back door was shielded from casual observation by a tall fence which surrounded the small courtyard and garden set between the house and its attached dojo. And the one responsible for the door’s movement had his own methods of escaping detection. The non-shadow moved silently throughout the house, upstairs and down, looking for any signs of inhabitation. Once convinced that the house was currently unoccupied, Genma dropped the Goshin Dai Ryū Sei Fu and pulled a small flashlight out of his pocket. The acrimonious encounter with his wife earlier had seriously shaken the stout martial artist’s composure, and he desperately needed answers – not to mention a bit of working capital to live off for the next couple of weeks.

The first thing that caught his attention was the copy of the morning Asahi newspaper on the table, neatly folded to display the Judgements/Legal Announcements section. A quick scan of the page revealed a very unsettling fact, and Genma’s rage began building when he realized the potential consequences of the published announcement. “She did it, she really did it. That **BITCH**. How **dare** she try to cast me out

– it's **MY** clan, not hers ... she hasn't the right! That stuck-up, over-honored, frigid little **cunt**. 'For the death of my

daughter and only son.' Ranma is **MINE**. **MINE**, not hers. **MINE**. Declare open season on me, will you ..."

Genma's tirade continued unabated as he got up to search the house for a few critical items. He planned to have quite the chat with his "wifey" when she returned.

### **Imperial Palace**

The exit of the servants from the room signaled the end to the period of quiet contemplation. There was a brief pause during which those sitting at the main table set their teacups down before the Emperor began to speak.

"Aiko-san, Ranko-san, Nodoka-san, Midori-san, we are honored by your acceptance of our invitation today."

Aiko nodded solemnly. "Heika-sama, Clan Yamada is honored to attend the Throne at their leisure."

"Indeed," Emperor Hitomaro replied. "Aiko-san, it pleases us greatly to be able to converse personally with Clan Yamada today. It has always saddened us that circumstances have previously interfered with such pleasantries, especially with such an honorable clan as yours." "Clan Yamada has always striven to be worthy of such honor, Heika-sama." "And such efforts have not gone unnoticed, Aiko-san," Emperor Hitomaro said with a slight acknowledgement of his head. "It has been a great comfort to know Clan Yamada values the path of their ancestors so highly. The preservation of such venerable traditions is a goal worthy in of itself; do you not think so, Aiko-san?" "Of course, Heika-sama."

"Clan Yamada honors their ancestors and us by their actions, Aiko-san." The Emperor smiled and turned slightly to direct his attention towards the two youngsters. "The Clan should be proud their younger generation is pursuing so diligently the mastery of their families' Arts. Such dedication towards tradition is all too rare in today's world." Ranma tried not to wince when the attention of the Emperor landed squarely on top of her. Her nerves calmed considerably when she saw the genuine warmth in the Emperor's eyes. "Ranko-san, we are quite relieved to see how quickly you have recovered from your recent injuries. I understand you and your twin brother Ranma have had quite the adventure over the last month and a half."

"Ahhh ..." Ranma's thoughts froze temporarily. "Twin brother? ... Oh!" "Errm ... I guess you could say that my, err, our life has been a bit more hectic than usual lately." A brief moment of silence followed before she remembered to add "Heika-sama." She felt her ears begin to burn. Emperor Hitomaro chuckled. "Yes, I can easily see how being buried in a landslide would qualify as 'a bit more hectic than usual'. We have often admired you and your brother's ... restraint over the last two years and hope that the more settled home and school environment you find yourself in now will allow you to concentrate properly on your studies over the next year. The value of a good education cannot be emphasized strongly enough, Ranko-san, and we assure you that the deplorable learning conditions which exist at your previous school have been brought to our attention and will be properly addressed." "Ahhh ... thank you, Heika-sama," Ranma responded with a small nod of her head. "Heh – it's about time someone found out about what Pineapple-head was doing at Furinkan." She hadn't noticed how Aiko and Midori had both stiffened slightly when the Emperor mentioned the "more settled home and school environment". This did not prevent the rest of the family from being considerably more observant. "Nodoka-san," Empress Chikako addressed the ex-Saotome matriarch with a nod. "Have you given thought to what your future plans might be now that you have finally been reunited with your children and birth family?"

Nodoka blinked at the ... directness of the question posed by Empress. The entire conversation had been laced with layers upon layers of hidden meaning and the Emperor – and now the Empress as well – had been speaking with an overall bluntness which was almost unheard of in public. It was quite ... disturbing. She smiled as best she could. "Heika-sama, my only desire at the moment is to have the time

to become reacquainted with my family and children.” The Empress’ smile lit up the room. “A most worthy goal, Nodoka-san, and one which should be pursued with the utmost of vigor. It brings much joy to our hearts to see a family reunited once more after so long an absence.” Empress Chikako turned to the last person at the table. “Midori- san, I rather suspect you and the other girls are looking forward to returning to a more formal learning environment for the next year, are you not?” “Yes we are, Heika-sama,” Midori replied. She coughed, trying not to blush with embarrassment before continuing. “While the last year has been a wonderful learning experience, and the results worth more than any possible inconvenience, it will be nice to be able to attend class and get back in touch with all of our old friends again.” The Empress nodded once in response before glancing briefly over towards her husband, who immediately stood up from the table in response. He assisted her in standing up before turning back to address the group at large.

“My friends, I must apologize for the unexpected brevity of this pleasant gathering. Ranko-san, Midori-san, would you do us the honor of attending to us?”

“It would be our pleasure, Heika-sama,” Midori responded, rising smoothly to her feet. She poked Ranma gently on the shoulder when the redhead remained seated. “Huh? Oh, right ... err ... of course, Heika-sama.” Ranma shook her head sharply before standing up. She flushed when she noticed the gentle amusement on the Empress’ face, and decided to simply stare at the hem of the Emperor’s ōninohō. Hopefully no one else had noticed what an ass she had just made of herself. She continued to stare at the Emperor’s hem while she followed him out the door – barely aware of Midori’s presence behind her. “Aiko-san, Nodoka-san, Suzu-san”, Empress Chikako said, the last name a bit louder than the first two, “please honor us with your attendance.” “Certainly, Heika-sama,” Aiko replied. The Yamada matriarch, her daughter, and her eldest son’s wife had risen when their names had been called and each followed the graceful Empress out the door in single file.

Mugonno waited until the Empress’ procession had completely exited the room before standing up himself. “If you would all please follow the two gentlemen standing at the door, we have a banquet room open where you can partake in a wide variety cuisines and refreshments.” He studiously ignored the look of undisguised outrage which was painted across Tomoko Yamada’s face as she exited the room, an expression which did nothing to diminish the attractiveness of her near-supermodel features and stature. Yamada-dono’s youngest son’s wife was certainly proving to live up to her reputation. A pity, that.

## Nerima

It was relatively quiet around the dinner table at the Tendō residence. There was no flash of dueling chopsticks, no yelled insults, no imprecations, no fighting ... just the soft sound of four family members partaking in a peaceful evening meal. Appearances, however, are often deceiving, and to Kasumi Tendō it was anything **but** quiet. Her father at first barely touched his food, and when he finally ate it was with a mechanical precision which clearly showed the depression oozing out of his every pore, contaminating the house’s wa with it’s stifling negation. Akane had already broken three pairs of chopsticks, and she was vacillating wildly between intense rage and soul-searing grief. Kasumi could easily guess what was causing the rage, having heard her youngest sister yelling out in the dojo for two solid hours earlier about “that hentai pig”, “turn him into pork chops”, and other such vilifications – along with a wide variety of creative profanity. Kasumi would have to speak to Akane later about her language. The only one at the table whose mood was even close to being positive was Nabiki ... which usually meant she had just fleeced someone in a manner more creative than usual. Kasumi herself was strained almost to the breaking point – she had been keeping the house’s wa in a rough balance through sheer force of will and she knew the assistance she had been receiving from her ancestors would not last forever. She could only hope that the tensions in the house would lessen over the next week or two.

The elder Tendō daughter’s thoughts were interrupted by loud insistent knocking at the front door. The knocking stopped by the time she managed to get to the door. What she found when she opened the door was entirely unexpected. “Good evening, ma’am. I am Lieutenant Tokichiro Hiyashi

from the Chiyoda-ku eastern precinct. You are Kasumi Tendō, correct?" "Y... yes, Lieutenant?" Kasumi's usual serenity deserted her at the sight of the four uniformed officers at the front door – and more specifically at the presence of a pistol on prominent display in the Lieutenant's belt holster. Police in Japan were **never** armed. "Are Nabiki and Akane Tendō currently on the premises, Tendō-san?" Kasumi nodded, her eyes widening. "Yes, we were all sitting down at dinner." Lieutenant Hiyashi nodded sharply. "I think you will find everything in order," he said, presenting a bundle of folded papers to Kasumi. She accepted the thick packet without thinking. The lieutenant looked back at the other officers and barked a single word – "Batons" – before turning back to face Kasumi. "Excuse us, please," he said, gently stepping by her into the house. The other three officers followed immediately behind after having pulled out vicious looking stun batons on the lieutenant's command. Kasumi remained frozen at the door in shock.

Nabiki stood up from the dinner table, yawned, and stretched. "I'll be in my room. Tomorrow's going to be a very busy day at school." Akane continued to sit at the table, not having heard a word her sister said. Her fists began clenching into white-knuckled balls once more as the scenes from the videotape showing Ryōga turning into P-chan played over and over again in her mind. "Nabiki Tendō, Akane Tendō ..."

Nabiki's head swiveled over to the open fusuma doorway where several uniformed police officers were entering the room. Her eyebrow arched when she saw the stun batons carried openly in their hands. "... I am Lieutenant Tokichiro Hiyashi from the Chiyoda-ku eastern precinct." Akane jumped up to her feet. A red nimbus quickly surrounded her. Her face red, her entire body shaking, she yelled out her rage which could no longer be contained. "I'M GOING TO KILL THAT PIG!"

**////////////////////**

The youngest Tendō instantly collapsed to the ground, her muscles twitching from the fifty thousand volt charge.

Nabiki smirked and shook her head. "Smooth move, Sis." She looked over to the officer in charge. "If you're looking for Happosai or Genma, I'm afraid you just missed them." She was quite startled when the nearest officer reached out to grab her wrist and force it roughly behind her back.

**Click!**

She was even more surprised to feel the handcuffs. **Click!**

"You are under arrest!" Lieutenant Hiyashi exclaimed with finality. He pulled out his own stun baton and walked over to where the Tendō patriarch was sitting, being careful to stay just out of reach of the taller man. He was rather surprised Soūn had shown no signs of reacting to the scene playing out in the room. "Officer Kosugi," Lieutenant Hiyashi called out, trying to position himself so he could keep the entire room within his field of vision. "Sir!"

"Escort Kasumi Tendō-san to her room and attend closely to her needs. She is not involved unless she wishes to make it so, understand?" "Yes, Sir!" The officer who had been last to enter the room clipped his baton back on his belt before turning to exit.

"Sergeant Nakagawa."

"Sir!"

"Please secure Little Miss Muscle and make sure she cannot interfere with the rest of this investigation."

"With pleasure, Sir," the stocky officer replied. He knelt down next to the woozy girl laying prone on the tatami and pulled a bundle of thin yellow rope out from his back holster pouch. Lieutenant Hiyashi cocked an eyebrow when the sergeant used a simple doubled-over length of the thin rope to tie the youngest Tendo girl's hands behind her back. True, he had wrapped six turns around the girl's wrists before knotting it tight, but still ... "Sergeant."

"Yes, Sir?"

"That isn't department regulation, is it?"

"No, Sir. New product field test from a prospective vendor, Sir." Lieutenant Hiyashi frowned.

Lieutenant Hiyashi snorted. “Oh, it’s no mistake Miss Tendō – the orders for your arrest originate from

the highest level. We've been watching the two of you and your little operation for quite some time now." Nabiki felt the bottom drop out of her stomach. This was so not good. "I don't understand," Akane replied with another whine. "You don't have to understand."

"But ..."

"Miss Tendō, if you continue to obstruct the investigation in this manner I will instruct Sergeant Nakagawa to expand the scope of your restraints to include that big mouth of yours. You will be quiet unless instructed otherwise; is that understood?" "..."

"I said, is that understood?"

"Yes, Sir," Akane responded in a tiny and tremulous voice. "Wonderful. See, you *can* learn." Lieutenant Hiyashi waited until the sergeant walked back into the room before turning to the other occupant. "Nabiki Tendō, you can either direct me to the location of all of your operation's records and assets, or you can join your sister on the floor under the tender auspices of Sergeant Nakagawa while we dismantle the residence and surrounding structures board by board. Your choice."

Nabiki swallowed with difficulty – this had blown past "damage control" and "utter disaster" all the way to "total nightmare". She nodded, carefully keeping her eyes cast firmly towards the floor. "They're up in my room, Sir."

"Good girl – I knew you were the smart one of the two. Lead the way."

"So this is everything?" Lieutenant Hiyashi asked while pointing to the assorted pile in the middle of the floor.

"Yes, Sir," Nabiki replied, rubbing her wrists with her hands to get rid of the pins and needles tingling left behind by the removal of her handcuffs. The Lieutenant had effectively immobilized her during the search of her room by the simple expedient of sitting her down in her desk chair while slipping her handcuffed hands over and around the chair's high back. The position, once seated, had been both secure and uncomfortable and Nabiki was glad her decision to actively cooperate had convinced the Lieutenant to grant her a little leniency. "I see," Lieutenant Hiyashi said. He picked up her new 35mm Nikon SLR from the "contraband" and checked the film loading. Finding the camera empty, he rummaged briefly in the pile until he found an unused roll of film, then quickly loaded and prepped the camera before taking a couple of test shots of the various items set aside. "Nice camera," he said with a nod. "Stand up, Miss Tendō." The Lieutenant sat down on the edge of her bed and gestured at the pile. "Over there." Nabiki stood up and took a couple of steps to stood near the middle of the room.

"Strip."

"Wha..." she blurted, eyes flying open in surprise. "Come now, Miss Tendō, what sort of fool do you take me for? Do you really expect me to believe that this ... meager ... pile is the sum total of your entire operation?" "But ..."

"Since you have obviously decided to obstruct the progress of this investigation, I am simply forced to increase my diligence by including a comprehensive visual inspection of all aspects of this case ... including any participants." Nabiki stared, open-mouthed, at the smirking Lieutenant. His was an expression she knew well; it was the same one she employed while executing an exceptionally favorable "deal". "I don't have all day, Miss Tendō." The Lieutenant's expression hardened. "Or would you prefer I call Sergeant Nagakawa up and have him perform a comprehensive and lengthy physical examination instead?" He shook his head in mock sorrow. "And here I thought you were the smart one. Oh well."

Nabiki jerked her head once and raised her hands to her top blouse button. The Lieutenant raised the camera up and leered openly.

"Smile for the camera, kiddo."

Ukyō looked up from the grill she was cleaning when she heard someone banging loudly on the front door.

"We're closed," the okonomiyaki chef called out before turning her attention back to a particularly

stubborn glop of charcoaled detritus in the corner of the grill. The evening dinner rush had been more hectic than usual with the Nekohanten being temporarily closed over the last couple of days. Her regular customers often complained about her closing early on Sundays, but she had to reserve **some** time for schoolwork and the Sunday crowd was light enough she could normally afford the slight loss in income closing early entailed. She sighed when the banging at the door resumed. Ukyō stripped off her apron and the heavy rubber gloves before reaching back to pluck her combat bandolier from its hook on the wall. A flip and a quick shrug settled the familiar weight across her right shoulder before she marched around the counter to the door. “What part of ‘we’re closed’ don’t you understand?” she called out to whoever was on the other side of the locked shoji. After Nabiki’s little visit she was in no mood for company.

“Kuonji-san? I am Shoichi Hiroyoshi from the central Directorate office along with my partner Hideaki Ishihara. We wish to discuss your present relationship with the Saotome clan and would greatly appreciate a few moments of your time.” Ukyō quickly unlatched the lock on the two shoji and slid one of them open about a foot. “If this is some sort of joke ...” she growled out. Two men in dark business suits stood on the other side of the screen – one of them was carrying a briefcase, the other had a photo identification card extended out which verified his name and position in the National Intelligence Directorate. She nodded and opened the shoji to let the two officers in, closing and latching it behind them. “Take a seat while I put some tea water on.” Ukyō was beginning to become concerned – what could the Directorate possibly have to do with Ranchan, anyway? Maybe this was about that rat bastard of a father of his.

“Thank you, Kuonji-san, but please do not trouble yourself on our account,” Hiroyoshi replied. Both men sat down on stools closest to the entranceway while Ukyō walked back around the end of the L-shaped counter. “Our business here should take little of your valuable time and we apologize for disturbing your evening with this matter.” Ukyō was **definitely** nervous now. She pulled up a stool and sat directly across the counter from the two officers.

“Kuonji-san,” Hiroyoshi said with a professional smile, “the Throne prefers not to interfere in affairs of honor between clans. However, given the recent circumstances surrounding clan Saotome it was felt that it would be to the benefit of everyone concerned that your particular situation be resolved in a definitive manner. I believe you are now aware, at least in part, of the events that took place February twenty-sixth at Horaisan, Ehime Prefecture between Ranma Saotome and the Chinese foreign national?” “N.not really,” Ukyō replied, her face quickly draining of color. “Nabiki sold me a tape, but I haven’t had a chance to watch it yet.” “Please, oh kami-sama **please** don’t let it be for real.” “May I see this tape, please?” Ukyō nodded. “It’s right over here,” she said, walking over to the counter where the cash register sat.

When she sat back down and handed the tape to the officer he immediately passed it over to his partner.

“How much did Tendō-san charge you for this information?” “N.nine thousand yen.”

“Thank you, Kuonji-san,” Hiroyoshi said with a nod. “This should enable us to add an additional and quite serious charge to the ones already pending against Miss Tendō. This tape details, amongst other things, the result of Ranma’s final conflict – one he did not return from.”

“This information was also made available to Nodoka Saotome, Ranma’s mother,” Hiroyoshi continued. “In response, she cast Genma out of clan Saotome before closing and sealing the Saotome registry.”

A sharp intake of breath was Ukyō’s response to this news. She was too shocked to say anything else. Hiroyoshi nodded. “Clan Saotome no longer exists, Kuonji-san. Both Nodoka and Ranma Saotome are legally dead and the ronin Genma is no longer of any concern to the Kuonji’s honor. Any additional punishment meted out to the ronin would be purely for personal satisfaction – the Throne no longer acknowledges his existence. The only remaining issue which could still be considered a stain on the Kuonji’s honor is the matter of the stolen dowry. Ishihara-san?” “Thank you, Hiroyoshi-san”, the other



officer replied. “Kuonji-san, the entirety of the dowry agreed upon by clans Saotome and Kuonji was the fully provisioned okonomiyaki yattai which, at the time, was your family’s sole source of income, correct?” Ukyō nodded silently. “Oh, kami-sama, **no.**” “Is it also correct in assuming,” Ishihara continued relentlessly, “that the loss of the yattai and its resulting stain on clan Kuonji’s honor led, directly or otherwise, to significant social and financial hardships which continued to plague clan Kuonji from the time of the theft until the present?”

Ukyō nodded again, tears filling her eyes. The officer set his briefcase up on the counter and opened it. He pulled out a small bank book and set it in front of the ponytailed brunette. “An account in your name has been created for the sum of two hundred million yen. One hundred million covers the estimated cost of the yattai itself along with potential loss of income and interest over the eleven year period. An additional one hundred million was included to compensate for living expenses, tuition, and future loss of business should you choose to pursue educational opportunities previously denied to you by said social and financial difficulties. All of these funds are available for use at your own discretion – no conditions or restrictions have been placed on their use and you personally are the only one to have access to this account until you specify otherwise. Being the aggrieved party, do you find these terms and estimates to be acceptable on behalf of clan Kuonji?” Ukyō stared vacantly at officer Ishihara in response. An uncomfortable silence settled over the room. “Ranchan’s dead. Kami-sama, it’s all true – he’s really dead. I was so sure that slut Nabiki was just pulling another scam, but it’s ... he’s ... kami-sama, **Ranchan** ...” “Kuonji-san?” Ishihara inquired.

Ukyō ground the back of her hands viciously across her eyes, trying to scrub away the tears. She looked over to the two bleary images in front of her and nodded sharply. “Y.yes, that’s f.fine.”

Ishihara acknowledged with a brief nod before pulling a clipboard from his briefcase. “If you would sign this authorization, please, the funds can be made available for your use by two o- clock tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’ll g.get my hanko,” Ukyō replied. She left the counter for a couple of minutes before returning with a small box. The officer handed her the middle copy after she had signed all three sheets on the clipboard. Ishihara quickly repacked his briefcase before both officers stood up and bowed in unison.

“We apologize for disturbing your evening, Kuonji-san,” Hiroyoshi said, “but are pleased this issue has been resolved in a satisfactory manner. Your family will be very pleased to see you once again now that there are no further obligations which require such an extended absence. May your life be long and joyful.”

Ukyō sat and stared while the two officers exited and closed the shoji behind them.

The two Directorate officers walked several blocks from the Ucchan’s before stopping at a streetside corner bench. Ishihara sat down, opened his briefcase, and made several adjustments to a small box before handing the handset over to the other officer. Hiroyoshi nodded in thanks before dialing a long sequence of numbers. “Hiroyoshi,” the officer said into the handset after a short delay. “Authorization buji na meimu no naitei. En route to secondary, twenty minutes max.” The officer listened for a few seconds before acknowledging. He hit the disconnect key and gave the handset back to Ishihara. “Any problems?” Ishihara asked while closing the briefcase back up. “Nope,” Hiroyoshi replied. “Hayashi and Kato are already waiting for us there with the truck. Komatsu’s busy with another site until nineteen hundred hours, so if anything reacts it will have to be left alone until she arrives.”

“Our Talents have been rather busy lately, haven’t they?” The two men began to walk in the direction of their next destination

“They sure have. Most of them are still trying to clean up that mess over in Minato-ku.” Hiroyoshi chuckled wryly. “Watanabe-san is mad as a hen that no one in the field has managed any sort of lead on that group of sailor girls. Hell, the press has better intel on them at the moment than we do.”

Ishihara furrowed his brows. “Why aren’t we allowed to go after them? Kami-sama knows Ops never has enough Talents available as it is.” Hiroyoshi gave his partner a puzzled look before suddenly smiling. “Oh that’s right, you’ve been in Records the last two years, haven’t you? Those orders come all the way from

the very top,

from Tennō Heika-sama himself: 'Allow any blessed by the kami with gifts of unusual nature to serve the Nation in ways they see best.' Top brass has grumbled about that for years, but after Kikugawa and Okabe were sacked in the same two week span in '92, Ops has been laying **real** low when looking for Talents."

"Damn, that sucks," Ishihara said with a frown. "Well, hopefully we won't have the same sort of excitement the team handling the Tendōs is likely to run into. I managed to skim the file on that mess – what a bunch of psychos. I still don't understand why the kid hasn't already boffed them all by now."

"Why do you think we're now handling this?" Hiroyoshi growled. "I really wish we could have stuck to the original plan for that crew – it would have been nice to see the brat get a nice big fat real life wake up call for once in her life. Just having the porn queen arrested, and arrested **nicely** at that, seems more than a bit parsimonious to me." "I know," Ishihara agreed with a nod. "Well, at least we can have some fun watching the SWAT team field test the new taser tomorrow. That kendo nut will make a good target dummy if the reports on him are even close to being accurate." "Yeah, that **will** be fun," Hiroyoshi replied with a chuckle. "Let's pick up the pace a bit, okay? The faster we can get the 'hanten cleaned out, the quicker I can get home to the missus for some 'quality time'."

### **Illusions of Honor**

**Written by Andrew Norris - edited by CheshireX**

**Asidestory to "Relatively Absent" by Togashi Gaijin**

### **Nerima, Tokyo: 1987**

Nodoka sighed.

She looked at her small collection of mail: a postcard from Genma, several bills, and a statement from the bank, which she dreaded. Several major repairs to the house were recently mandated by new city ordinances. She might have skipped one or two of them, but with the municipal inspectors assuming everyone was benefiting from the economy's growth, they were less lenient than normal. Nodoka knew she couldn't dissuade them, so a lot of her capital went out to meet the new ordinances on fire and earthquake safety. Ranma would return to his home, maintained in perfect condition for him, no matter what she had to do. He was \*her\* son, and she would do \*whatever\* it took to make him happy. Nodoka flipped through the bills, and sighed. Perhaps ... no. Moth ... no, Aiko was not right. Genma was honorable; he was even willing to sacrifice some of his own personal honor to

accomplish the goal of training Ranma to be a truly manly man. Such dedication! Still, leaving bills behind for her to pay out of the limited trust fund ... well, training Ranma had to take up all his time, indeed. The Art required such perseverance. Nodoka finally opened the bank statement and by sheer force of will kept from cursing in despair. The trust fund was limited – she couldn't invest it in some of the high growth stocks in order to gain a far higher rate of return than what the banks granted. Her capital was now so slim that the interest on it would not even cover the normal bills of maintaining the house. Heavens forbid any major repairs or damage that would have to be fixed. As it stood now – assuming the cost of maintaining the house did not go up – she had just under four years worth of bill money. At the most optimistic.

With Genma's honorable dedication towards the goal of training Ranma, and the costs involved in that, Nodoka couldn't be assured of covering the costs by the end of next year, much less after that. The trust agreements would not let her change investment schemes, even if she had enough to make it worthwhile – which was not guaranteed, considering the major drain of refitting of the house. Taking out a loan on the house was a possibility, but not a good idea in the long term. There was no assurance of having income to meet the payments on any note she could get. Nodoka decided to take a walk in the bright spring day before handling the bills for this month. She needed to think about what work would be available for one such as her, which would help pay the bills. That would improve her ability to meet

Ranma's needs. With Genma making sure he had all the food a young boy needed, she would make sure that Genma would not have to worry about finances while he was honing Ranma's body and mind. Nodoka walked into a small restaurant, and asked for a cup of tea. A meal was out of the question, though she quickly suppressed a slight hint of envy at the sight of all the people eating without any apparent care toward money. Her perusal of the employment offers in the paper, while sipping her tea, was ... disappointing. The lack of a high school diploma ruled out all office employment, as well as several other jobs she would have considered. That just left ... well, if it was for Ranma, as dishonorable as it was, it would be worth it. Being a bar girl paid, at least. And, Nodoka smiled sardonically, I do have the training to do it. "Nodoka-san?" A voice interrupted her musings. She looked up towards an old friend from high school, a Hikaru Tanaka. His early good looks had attracted her eyes back then, but his personality convinced her she would be better off being just friends with the young man. "Yes, Hikaru-san?" Nodoka politely indicated the seat across from her, and he slipped into it. "I note I saw your wedding announcement in the paper," she smiled. "Congratulations." Hikaru shrugged slightly. "Well ... you married early, so I had to find someone else." He smiled to take the sting out of it. She returned that smile, and nodded, pleased by the implied compliment. He added. "I saw yours as well. Out of curiosity, why didn't you return for the rest of the year?"

Nodoka winced. "Well, Genma preferred for me to maintain the house in an honorable fashion, of course." He nodded. "Of course. Where is he, if I might be so bold?" "He took our son Ranma off on a training trip to make him a man among men, and teach him to be a master in the Art." Nodoka beamed in pride at the thought of her son being a master. Hikaru's eyes narrowed slightly, just short of the point where Nodoka would have caught it, even with her distraction thinking about her son. "Might I ask why you're looking at the employment section?" Nodoka turned her head slightly and looked at a neutral space. "The costs of living in Tokyo have risen of course, and being a traveling sensei in this day and age, of purely material growth, does not make for a large salary. So I was thinking, why not? He's training Ranma on the trip, why don't I take a part time position, just to have something to do? It will pass the time, of course." Nodoka's face was a study to those who knew her well. Hikaru avoided staring. He was one of the few people at their old school who could read Nodoka when she was lying. Either she had fallen out of practice, or he had gotten much better, because he had spotted the lies outright. Nodoka was hurting for money, and her worthless husband wouldn't find a real job to make the ends meet. His employers wouldn't be pleased. "There are plenty of jobs, indeed." Hikaru's voice was pleasant, not hinting on what was behind his eyes. "Lots of them, for those who just wish a part time employment to pass the time." Nodoka's nod was weak for her. He made a note to do some checking up on her when he got back to the office. Hikaru spread his arms open and said, "I just got a promotion at work. Would you mind if we had lunch together to celebrate? There is also much to catch up on in our lives since school." He smiled, hoping Nodoka's pride wouldn't trip her. He had the sense she hadn't eaten for a while. Nodoka blinked and shook her head. "No, no, I'm the hostess here, and I haven't made any effort to find you. Allow me." She tried to hide a wince on what this would do to her finances, but she had to do it for Ranma. She had to appear proper and prosperous in this time of plenty, so Ranma's honor would be upheld. Hikaru caught the wince and decided to shortcut it. "No, I insist. I got a promotion, and I should have looked you up – indeed, the absence of your friendship was mine to fix." Nodoka opened her mouth to speak, but Hikaru overran her. "And as I remember, you fed me too many times in high school for me to not return a favor now that I have succeeded past my wildest dreams."

She shook her head and smiled. "Well, if you insist ..." Nodoka breathed a mental sigh of relief, knowing by her actions she upheld Ranma's honor, yet managed to get out of a situation that would have hurt her finances more.

She and Hikaru chatted during the meal, which he ordered for both of them. Nodoka had tried to protest at the amount and extravagance of it, but Hikaru waved off her protests, reminding her of all the times he had taken her bento at school when he was unable to return the favor. "Now it's my turn," he said. During the meal Nodoka had let a few things slip. Hikaru – reading between the lines – knew just about all of her situation without her realizing it. But after a time, she stood and mentioned she had to return home. Hikaru escorted her to the door, and bowed her home. He paid the bill, leaving a slight tip for the waiter who had followed his exact orders so that she wouldn't know just how much he had spent. Hikaru walked out into the sunlight, and to his car. He sat down and dialed his work. He heard the hissing of the crypto unit synchronize with the other end, which was the only difference between his phone and others on the market, though most wouldn't tell the difference. "Synchronization attained. Who is on this line?" responded from the headset. "Lieutenant Tanaka, authorization code Two Eight November Charlie One Three Delta. Please patch me through to Captain Shoda."

"Wait one." The headset hissed some more, and the voice spoke in a second. "Line is secure, go ahead."

"Tanaka, you better have a good reason for this. I was about to go to lunch." The irritated voice spoke. "Shoda-dono, do you know of a Nodoka Saotome, nee Nodoka Yamada?" "I do. I also know that Aiko Yamada cut her out. What's this about?" "Well, sir, could you task a complete background check on her and her family? I ... have some suspicions about her and I would like them confirmed." Hikaru was walking a fine line here. While the Yamadas were gaining in importance with the disappearance of the other clans, this was too close to a personal request. With the need to not offend Aiko, any digging around her estranged daughter could be met with ... problems. "Return to the office tomorrow; we'll talk then." The voice sounded different, now. "Yes sir." Hikaru had worked for his superior in the JNID for over a year now, but hadn't quite gotten a read on the man. But ... he hoped he could help his first flame out. Even though she had

decided he would just be a friend, he did owe her. By her mere presence, the JNID had noted him and steered him into a field where he'd enjoy his talents and work to the fullest. Nodoka sighed. Ten days had passed – and her situation had gone from bad to worse. She had found out that there were termites in the roof, and while she could have the house sprayed for them, they had caused enough damage to finish off the money. Thankfully, no new bills had arrived in the mail recently, so she wasn't out of time yet. But ... she was looking for work – and had found out a sad fact. The only places she could find that would be willing to hire her were simply the B-girl bars ... and that was quite ... dishonorable. She didn't understand it. She thought she could get a waitress or hostess position – but without a high school diploma, potential employers weren't giving her the time of day. In this time of plenty, with jobs going begging, Nodoka couldn't find honorable or even not totally distasteful work. She sighed. She would do it, but she would need to figure out some way of changing her appearance. She would not dishonor Ranma in such a way. Several of the places she saw hiring were outright brothels run by the Yakuza ... so she would have to be careful on where she applied, of course. She sighed and sipped her tea. The only nice thing about this last week was the fact she had fully regained her figure from before the pregnancies. Dieting – even forced – did wonders, so she was an ideal mother figure for Ranma once again. She would not dishonor her son by appearing in one of those places. At least, not appearing as Nodoka Saotome – her mother's training of her was complete. She was decent at disguising herself after all. On top of that, very few people remembered the girls in those types of places. No one would recognize her outside of it. Her son's honor would be kept, and she would have the funds needed for her son's training and the upkeep of his house. There was a knock on the door. Nodoka rose and went to open it. Her concerns would wait until she met the visitor, after all.

Nodoka opened the door, and a courier was at the door, with an envelope. "Saotome-san?" "Yes?" "Here you go, ma'am. Thank you." The courier left before she could offer him refreshment. She blinked at the envelope, with a simple seal. She had seen similar seals in her mother's hands. When they arrived, Seiko or a maid would depart for several days – only to return as if nothing had happened. Even her own

mother had left on the occasion of some of these letters. She walked back to the table and opened it. "Saotome-dono. It has come to our attention that a Russian national has begun to corrupt the honor of several citizens of the Republic of Japan. His name is Ivan Stephanovich. It would be most helpful to us and you if he was to no longer enjoy the land of Nippon, or indeed any land. As always, it is most distasteful to disrupt the harmony of the city with any untoward behavior."

The letter was unsigned, and with it, several pictures: his address, and his usual haunts. Nodoka stood up and looked at the window. She doubted that the request was not official. The letterhead and the other documents were all from the Directorate. She had seen those forms and letterhead before, before she left her mother's side. Now she knew exactly why her mother received them. Her mother was a kunoichi, indeed, and practiced it on the behalf of the government. She always knew that Aiko had done questionable things ... dishonorable even, in service. Now it was her turn. She knew that the letter implied that she would be paid for this gaijin's death. Nodoka sighed. It was dishonorable. She knew that. The implications of the letter stressed that this was to be a quiet removal. Which meant that, instead of using her sword to remove the man, she would have to get close to him – perhaps begin a seduction and then arrange a poisoning or an apparent mugging gone bad somewhere. Dishonorable, indeed. She questioned her mother's insistence in learning chemistry and focusing on poisons. Why would an honorable family like hers learn about poisons?

Nodoka blew out a breath. She needed the money. That wasn't a question. Ranma's house and honor had to be maintained. Otherwise all of Genma's work towards making him a man among men would fail, for without a home and a family honor intact he couldn't begin his adult life in the state he deserved to. Wasn't she considering using her mother's art to disguise herself as a bar hostess, so Ranma would have a home to return to and that his needs would be met on the road? How different was this from that? Vastly. After all, the honor of the samurai's path was what had attracted her to Genma. The Saotome name was noted for its skill in battle as an honorable clan, creating some noted samurai. Her mother's ways disgusted her. She had been attracted to Genma for the honor of his family and his ways. This request on the government's part would be a betrayal of that honor. Nodoka turned to burn the letter, but stopped – looking at the outfit she had laid aside to be mended for her ... interviews. Along with the hair dye and the other items. Well, she had to mend that outfit anyways. She scooped up the outfit and sat, with a needle in hand and began to sew, forgetting the letter and the various pieces of paper on the table, covered by the clothing she laid down.

Nodoka returned after a third day of distasteful interviews. While this was more honorable than what her mother did, it wasn't what a lady did, so she was glad of the hair dye. Ugh. Men. She hadn't found a position that wouldn't require her to totally debase herself ... and the last two bars were to gaijin in the embassy district. She shook her head at the new mail. She took them to her table, and sat down, feeling a bit faint from her long day. Nodoka had skipped breakfast, and didn't take a bento with her. Her dinner would be a bit of rice and some pickles – no fish today. Nodoka opened the mail, and read though it. Bill after bill – some of which disturbed her a bit. Genma was apparently allowing his honor to go by the wayside in the pursuit of making Ranma a man among men. Here she was complaining about debasing herself, or being caught in a dishonorable job, while Genma was placing name to some of these? Who am I to deny my son

and husband anything? It was the wife's duty to provide the home and food for the husband. Many samurai women had done things that now were viewed as utterly honorable, yet at the time were great acts of sacrifice. She thought of the tale of the samurai's wife who had cut off all her hair and sold it to a wigmaker, getting a cheap wig for herself, so her husband could feed his warriors.

Nodoka stood up, knocking over a pile of papers, in her weakened state. The papers that the government had sent, caught her eye. She had found the concept of dealing with those gaijin in the bars utterly distasteful – after all, they were gaijin, and not even American, at that. She stopped. The only

reason she was even considering working at once of those bars was because they paid the most in the shortest period of time. And she wouldn't be recognized. Even someone who saw through her disguise would not believe it was really her. Nodoka noted her disguise was better than she thought – when she dyed her hair, it looked real, which she didn't expect with the cheap dye she could afford – and her face had appeared slightly different. She had even been complemented on her blue eyes, with one girl at a bar asking where she got the contacts. She didn't quite understand that. Her eyes were maroon, not blue.

So how much more dishonorable would it be to simply do as the government asked, and ... remove ... this gaijin? After all, he was only a Russian ... such a brutish man, she thought as she recalled a few of them today pawing one of the other girls at the bar where she had interviewed. Her mind returned to all the arguments she had had with herself over the last few days. How did this differ from being a bar girl? She was willing to sell herself, as much as it disgusted her, to earn the money her son needed; how much different would it be to remove a gaijin? After all, they raped, they stole, they tried to take the people's wealth away from them. It's not like she was being asked to dishonorably slay a Nihonese, or even an American, after all. Those people had honor. This Russian ... did not. He was, in fact, according to the papers, leading others into dishonor.

One of his fellows at the embassy had actually raped a thirteen year old girl, she had read in the paper, and could only be asked to leave the nation, instead of paying the cost for dishonoring that young lady, and her family. The girl must have taken her own life in shame; after all, who'd want a tainted bride? Such actions shouldn't go unpunished, should they? Nodoka's sighed. This was just as dishonorable as being a bar girl ... but it would help to avenge others, and make her son's home a safer place to be. One where honor ruled. She picked up the papers, as she left to have her meal. Someone had to do the dishonorable things, so others could live in honor, she guessed. And how dishonorable was killing a man in the way she would have to, if he lacked honor anyways?

She read the papers carefully, as she had a bit more food than she had originally planned. She would have to keep her strength up, of course. The last page gave details on how to contact the crew that would clean up after her, if she needed it. Nodoka nodded – she knew the way now. Who'd believe that she actually killed a man, when it would be a man simply talking to a cute

young michi, and having a heart attack at the time of the action? Or so the clean up crew would do, remembering some reports in the paper of several interesting deaths. She even knew several poisons that would work well. She read the notes over again, and nodded. The information here was clear. She would be well rewarded for correcting this spot of dishonor. As she stood up, thinking of what clothing she would need to wear, a faint thought occurred to her – where was the honor in this? It was wrong. He should be challenged, and dealt with fairly. And as quickly as that thought arose, a response came to her – it would expose the families of the ones that he corrupted to dishonor, of course. The will of the nation demanded that she do this, so that others wouldn't be dishonored.

Nodoka looked at herself in the mirror. Who would believe that she was Nodoka Saotome now? Her blue eyes staring out of the mirror alone gave lie to that. She smiled. No one would recognize her, and with the fact that she called for a cab and was wearing her hair up and changed to a style that she normally never would wear – her neighbors wouldn't know either. Her hair was covered by a hat – so they wouldn't see – and she wore a long coat to cover up her outfit. She was prepared. For Ranma, she was prepared. She heard the cab honk, and left through the door, locking it. Ranma's needs and honor would be protected.

## **Chapter 10: Interregnum III**

**Imperial Palace - Sunday, March 6th 1994**

"Hiro."

The young telepath heard someone calling his name from a great distance. "Hiro." Hirohisa groaned and groggily wondered whose apartment he had ended up at this time. It had been almost a year since the last time he had gotten **this** blasted. Hopefully he'd remember her name.

"Damn it all, Hiro, wake up."

If only Ryushi would shut up. Man, doesn't he know that the next shift isn't until ... Wait a minute. Ryushi? It took a great deal of effort for Hirohisa to open his eyes. Right afterward, he almost wished he hadn't bothered. He was too hung over to cope with everything being that bright and loud.

"It's about time, Hiro. You're just lucky I was the one to check in on you. You know how Mugonno-san reacts when you fall asleep on the job." "Jeez, Ryushi, at least you could have let me ..." The fuzziness left Hirohisa's thoughts in a rush of adrenaline. The headache – and a BIG one at that – remained behind. He wasn't at home, he wasn't staying over at some girl's, he had been called into work and the last thing he remembered was ... Oh, wow.

"Hey, are you all right, man?" Ryushi asked, concern evident in his voice. "Aspirin. I've got a headache you wouldn't believe." "In the cabinet where it always is. Here, let me get you some." Hirohisa massaged his forehead with both hands, trying to rub some of the pounding out of his head.

"Man, you must have really tied one on last night," Ryushi said while rummaging through the supply cabinet. "I haven't seen you this blitzed since you tried to out-drink that tall American babe last year." Ryushi chuckled. "What was her name, anyway? Here – catch!" Hirohisa looked up just in time to see a bottle of aspirin quickly traveling in his direction. He somehow managed to catch it before it beamed him between the eyes. "Thanks. Mary Jane, I think." He struggled with the cap for a few seconds before he was able to retrieve a half dozen of the precious painkillers. Ryushi nodded. "Some guys have all the luck. Mary Jane, huh? Man, she was really one stacked redhead. I've got to hand it to you – you sure know how to pick 'em." Redhead?!? Hirohisa scrambled at his desk until he found the scanning checklist he had earlier set aside. It was ... She was in the last limo ... let's see ... "Ranko Yamada."

"Huh?" Ryushi responded.

"Ranko Yamada," Hirohisa repeated. He turned to the security terminal and began rapidly accessing the surveillance database.

Ryushi groaned. Hiro had that look in his eyes again. "Damn it, man, you know better than to use the Directorate database for your escapades."

"That's not it – this is legitimate," Hirohisa replied. He quickly navigated to the record in question then made several updates in various fields. "... And here you go," he said, making a small production of hitting the Enter key. Ryushi glanced over Hirohisa's shoulder and whistled. "Man, she's cute, I'll give you that." Hirohisa grinned. "That's an old pic – let me show you how she looked today." Several mouse clicks later and an enlarged still from the earlier surveillance tape displayed on the monitor. "That pigtail was cute, but look how gorgeous she is as a redhead." "Daaa-aaamn." Hirohisa nodded.

"Okay, so she's a major babe," Ryushi said. "Still, she's a bit young, don't you think?" "Wouldn't matter," Hirohisa replied with a shake of his head. "This gal is **special**." Ryushi laughed. "You say that about every girlfriend you've ever met. How long did the previous one stick around, a whole month?" "You don't understand. There are very few Talents who can maintain a Null Cloak for any length of time, let alone hide a Cannon Trap behind one. Someone who can do that is special by anybody's standards."

"I'll have to take your word for it," Ryushi said. "Look, I've got to get back to my post. My break is almost over."

"Sure thing. Thanks, man." Hirohisa stared at the image on his monitor while Ryushi left the monitor room, closing the door behind him. After a minute or two of memorizing every detail, Hiro voiced a long sigh.

"I'm in love."

## Shiba

"Any change?"

"Not yet."

"Need a break?"

"Not at the moment, thank you."

"Do you know when Setsuna will be back?"

"Later – she didn't say for certain how long she'd be gone." "Need anything from the kitchen?"

"No thanks. I'll wait until after we switch places." "I almost wish something **would** happen. All this waiting around is driving me nuts." Michiru – Sailor Neptune at the moment – smiled in amusement. Haruka never did have a lot of patience, and the last twenty four hours had tried even her own. "Do you think she's right about this not being the Silence?" the blonde senshi asked. "I wouldn't know. It would be nice if it wasn't. I'm fairly certain not knowing is why she went to see Usagi."

"Yeah, **right**," Haruka said with a snort. "As if Dumplinghead could possibly have any answers to **this**."

"She **is** the Princess, love."

Haruka sighed. "Yeah, but that doesn't seem to count for much with Usagi. The world needs her to be Serenity **all** the time – not a hyperactive crybaby schoolgirl who plays at being the Princess like it was some sort of game."

"Don't you have faith in her?" the aqua-tressed senshi inquired softly. "Well ... yes ... sort of," the blonde replied. "It's kind of hard to ignore our last encounter with her. But I'd sure have a lot more faith in her abilities if she could only be **serious** about all this." "She is what she is, love. I doubt that will change much." "I know," Haruka growled. "That's what worries me."

## Juuban

"Good evening, Meiou-san," Ikuko Tsukino said, greeting the tall green-tressed woman at the door with a smile. "Welcome to our home." "Thank you, Tsukino-san," Setsuna replied, slipping her heels off in the genkan. "Is Usagi home at the moment by any chance?"

"Yes she is, Meiou-san," Ikuko said. "Usagi-chan's upstairs in her room. Right this way, please." Setsuna followed Ikuko up the stairs to the second floor hallway. Ikuko led her down to the last doorway on the left.



"Usagi-chan? Meiou-san is here to see you," Ikuko caroled out, stepping quickly to one side. The door to Usagi's bedroom was thrown open barely two seconds later. "Setsuna-san!" Setsuna found herself the target of a world-class glomp. "Setsunasan!msogladyou'reokay!wassoworriedaboutyouandHotaruchaneventhoughCrystalsaidyou'dsurvivedandisn'titexcitingwehaveanewsenshi!Haveyou..." "Usagi?" Ikuko said. "...seenHotaruchanorHarukasanorMichirusanyetIreallyneedtotalktoeveryonesowecanbefriendswiththeGatesnewsenshi!soChibiUsa!staysrealand..." "USAGI!"

"Eeee!" Usagi let go of Setsuna and leapt backwards all in one motion. Unfortunately, the intended path back through the open doorway behind her was not traversed as she had intended. **Thump.**

"Owie!"

Ikuko giggled. "Usagi-chan, you and Meiou-san should probably discuss your business in your room instead of out here in the hallway." Usagi stood up slowly, rubbing the back of her head where it had made contact with the edge of the doorway. "Yes, Mama." She waited for Setsuna to enter before following her in. "And don't forget to close your door all the way," Ikuko called back as she began walking back down the hallway to the stairs. "You know how your brother is." "I know, I know. Thank you, Mama." Usagi shut her bedroom door and bumped up against it briefly with her shoulder before walking over to sit on the edge of her bed. Setsuna had already sat down in Usagi's desk chair, which was a little too small for her to be comfortable in. Usagi turned a radiant smile towards the older senshi. "Setsuna-san, you don't know how happy I am to see you – I just can't wait to see Hotaru-chan again, too. I'm really really glad you came

over here 'cause I'm grounded until school is out except for senshi stuff and even then Mama wouldn't let me go out and help the rest of the gang look for you two." Setsuna started when the import of Usagi's last sentence registered. "You told your mother about the senshi? Don't you realize ..."

"No no no, that's not it at all," Usagi interrupted. "Mama found out by herself, and she's actually been helping us hide it from Papa and Shingo." "How long has she known?"

"Ummmm, since about the time Chibi-Usa showed up," Usagi said. "Mama said she overheard me and Luna talking that evening and it didn't take her long to figure out the rest." "I see," Setsuna said with a slight frown. "At least she's the only one who knows." "Well ..."

Setsuna looked sharply at her princess. "There's more?" Usagi nodded vigorously. "Mama knows. So does Mina-chan's dad, Ami-chan's mom, and Hino-ojiisan. Mama thinks Hino-ojiisan's known the longest – which is why we've never been interrupted when we meet over at Rei-chan's." Setsuna shook her head. "How did the Timestream get diverted that far back?" "Anyway," Usagi said, leaning forward towards the older senshi, "what's she like?" Setsuna gave Usagi a puzzled look. "Who?" "Khronos," Usagi replied. "Our new senshi. The girl who took over for you as Gate's guardian. You **have** to have met her already, and I need to know everything you can possibly remember about her so I can figure out how to be her friend. Crystal said we needed her cooperation if we ever want Crystal Tokyo to occur, so I **have** to make friends with her. So tell me: what's she like?"

"Friends?!?" Setsuna stared at the younger girl in disbelief. "Usagi, the girl calling herself Khronos is **not** going to help create Crystal Tokyo. The only way we can put everything back on the right track is for me to regain control of the Key once more – and I'll need the help of all the other senshi to do so. She is a **formidable** fighter." "Fighter?" Usagi frowned. "I don't want to fight her; I want to be her friend. Crystal said we **had** to get her cooperation, and we can't do that if we're fighting her." Setsuna couldn't help staring at Usagi again – it was almost as if the blonde hadn't heard a word she had just said. And why would she be so ... "Usagi, who exactly is Crystal?"

"Crystal?" Usagi smiled and tapped her moon brooch. "That's what the Ginzuishou calls herself. She's been telling me all sorts of neat things ..." Setsuna was getting a distinct feeling of déjà vu. This was **not** happening. "... about the Silver Millenium. Hey Crystal, come on out and say hello to Setsuna-san." The older senshi gasped when a miniature image suddenly appeared between the two of them.

“Your Majesty.”

“No, Protector Pluto, I am not your queen,” Crystal replied sadly. “I have simply borrowed her image as I was previously instructed to do. I am the Crystal of Life – as the Princess has previously stated. It is good to see that the Princess now has another Protector who exhibits such strength of purpose. However, I must ask how you could **possibly** have let events get so far out of hand as they appear to have gone.”

“Everything had been going according to Serenity’s plan,” Setsuna said, her composure quickly regained, “and everything can be put right once more when I regain control of the Key.” “I doubt Gate will be all that cooperative with such a venture, Protector Pluto,” Crystal said. “We will see,” Setsuna replied with conviction. She opened her purse briefly to retrieve a colorful business card, which she handed over to the other girl. “Usagi, here is my current number. Please inform me before you attempt to confront Khronos – I will do my best to make sure the other senshi are nearby to support you when you do.”

“Setsuna-san, I am not going to confront Khronos,” Usagi said, voice soft. “We need her cooperation.”

“Of course.” Setsuna stood up. “Now if you will excuse me, I must return back to Haruka’s penthouse. The situation there will undoubtedly require my presence when it finally resumes.” “Oh, you’re helping Michiru-san and Haruka-san guard Hotaru-chan and Glaive,” Usagi said cheerfully while Setsuna walked towards the bedroom door. “When you get the chance, tell Hotaru-chan that Chibi-Usa-chan **really** wants to see her right away.” Setsuna turned back to look at the odangoed blonde. “Usagi, I don’t know how long it will be before Hotaru can visit you. She is currently being held captive by ... **something**. We will do everything in our power to ensure her safety and rescue her from whatever it is, but until then I must ask that you be patient.”

“Protector Pluto,” Crystal called out. “Guardian Hotaru is in no imminent danger – Glaive is currently watching over her.”

Setsuna stared at Crystal’s image. “That is the Glaive?” Her face turned white when the miniature Serenity nodded. “Then it **is** the Silence.”

“Not at all, Protector Pluto,” Crystal countered. “What you are most likely observing is the physical manifestation of Glaive’s defensive shield. Guardian Hotaru is quite safe.” Setsuna found herself staring at the miniature Serenity again. “However, I would urge extreme caution in dealing with Glaive, Protector Pluto,” Crystal said dispassionately. “While there is very little possibility of the Silence returning, that does not necessarily mean Glaive will automatically be inclined to be on friendly terms at first. He has been asleep for a long time, and is likely to be a mite ... testy ... when he no longer feels the need to protect his Guardian so diligently.” “I see,” Setsuna replied, her face a frozen mask. With a nod the tall senshi exited the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Usagi stared at the spot Setsuna had just vacated for several long seconds, her face expressing her feelings of disquiet.

## Imperial Palace, Tokyo

Ranma sat next to Midori and tried not to fidget. They were sitting opposite the Emperor in armless high-back chairs around a small oval western-style table, on which a variety of tea settings and pastry and snack plates had been set. The relatively small library-den and the seating arrangement all combined to make the whole situation feel “cozy” and it was making Ranma a little nervous.

“Please, help yourselves to the refreshments,” Emperor Hitomaro offered with a smile. “There is no need for formalities between the three of us here.” He plucked a piece of niboshi from a nearby plate and began nibbling on one end. Okay, Ranma was now **definitely** nervous – no telling when the other shoe would drop. However, that didn’t prevent her from quickly scarfing down several omusubi before Midori’s poke to the ribs reminded her to slow down. At least that took the raw edge off her hunger. The three snacked quietly on the refreshments for several minutes. Ranma took the opportunity to study the Emperor during this period. He was exceedingly handsome even now – his strong face, warm eyes, well-manicured hands, and ready smile combined perfectly with his silver-streaked hair, and his aura

projected a confidence and strength of will only seen in those who were grandmasters of their fields. He also exuded a sincerity which could be felt across the room.

Ranma suspected it was going to be a really **big** shoe.

"Before we begin," Emperor Hitomaro stated, "I want to request that you not be afraid of speaking plainly and to the point. I assure you that I will take no offense from anything which is said at this table, no matter how bluntly or acrimoniously the comment may be presented." Okay, make that a **gigantic** shoe. "Ranma-kun," Emperor Hitomaro said, "I want you to know how relieved we were when we found out you had survived your latest ordeal. The report from Matsuyama Hospital did not indicate anything unusual, so am I correct in assuming you are still locked in your female form?" "Yes I am, Heika-sama," Ranma replied. "Well, that certainly answers the question on how much they know about the curse."

"Please, call me 'Hito' if you would, Ranma-kun," Hitomaro said with a smile. "I want you to know that we will do everything in our power to assist you in recovering the item which will unlock your curse – a magical kettle, I believe." This was definitely well beyond the shoe stage by now. "Thanks, but that's not going to be necessary, Heika ... err ... Hito-sama," Ranma said. "I'm pretty sure I'll be able to return to my male form pretty soon. I've just got a few more things I need to practice is all."

"That is good to hear, Ranma-kun," Hitomaro replied. "However, if you find later that you do need access to the kettle, we will be glad to offer whatever assistance you may need to obtain it." Ranma stared at the Emperor who had just offered the equivalent of a blank check. "This is getting ridiculous – **no** one gives out those sort of favors for free. Wait a minute ..." "Okay, what did the old man promise **this** time?" she said with a little heat. "You said I could speak plainly, right?" Ranma continued without pause, not waiting for Hitomaro's affirmative nod. "Tea with the Emperor, private audience, call you by name, open offer to help – I'm not **that** blind. How much did that fat fool of a panda sell me out for here and which one of your kids

do I have to add to the list of fiancées I already – damn it, Midori, this ISN'T funny!" "I'm sorry, Ranma," Midori said, trying to fight back giggles. "I know that's a natural assumption for you to make, but I seriously doubt the panda had anything to do with it this time." "You don't know how many ..." Ranma began angrily before suddenly halting. "Oh, that's right ... you probably do." She looked over to the Emperor who was grinning in undisguised amusement. "So, I'm not supposed to marry one of your kids then, huh?" "No, you're not, Ranma-kun," Hitomaro said. "But you are quite right in assuming that there's something I want you to do. The marriage we plan on holding this evening is for the two of you."

"Wha....." Ranma closed her mouth with a snap. "Me and Midori?!? Damn it, I do **not** need this. I do not need this at **all**." She looked quickly over to Midori before turning back to the man across the table with the first thing she could think of. "But we're both **girls** ..." "A minor detail, and one easily corrected. I think it's time for Midori's identical twin brother Minoru Nakamura to make an appearance. Right, Midori-chan?" Hitomaro said with a mischievous smile.

"WHAT?!?" Ranma practically shrieked. "NO! Absolutely not! No WAY am I going to let anyone else get cursed. Uh-uh. Not going to happen. Period, end of story, no how." "Ranma," Midori said, "I don't need a curse to be able to pass as a boy. Your friend Ukyō doesn't either, and – unlike her – disguise skills are a part of our normal training." Ranma stared at her cousin, surprised at Midori's reaction ... or lack of a reaction, to be more specific. It was almost as if the other girl had already known what was going to happen here tonight. The redhead looked deep into Midori's eyes for several seconds before sagging down in resignation. Ranma turned back to face Hitomaro. "Can you at least tell me **why**? I've got enough crap going on in my life as it is." Emperor Hitomaro found himself laughing heartily. He began waving both hands "no" in front of his face when he saw the hurt look settle into Ranma's expression. "I'm sorry, Ranma-kun, I wasn't laughing at you. It's just that ... do you know how **long** it's been since someone has actually had the courage to say 'crap' or any other swear word in my presence? Even members of my own family?"

"Oh," Ranma said, going instantly into full blush. "Sorry," she continued in a very small voice. "Please, Ranma-kun, there is no need to apologize," Hitomaro replied, an amused smile still tugging at his lips. "I truly meant it when I told you I wouldn't take offense at anything said here in the room. In fact, I found it quite refreshing." "Err ... thanks?" Ranma blushed even brighter – if that was at all possible. "However, that doesn't answer your question, does it?" Hitomaro said. "So let me answer yours by asking you one of my own. If you were suddenly given the chance to preserve a very rare and valuable form of the Art, would you?"

"Of course," Ranma responded without hesitation. "Even if it was difficult or embarrassing to do so?" "Training is always difficult if it's any good, and as far as embarrassment goes ..." Ranma snorted. "I doubt you could find something more embarrassing than what I went through to learn the Hiryū Shōten Ha."

Hitomaro chuckled. "So, marrying Midori-chan tonight with you being the girl in the ceremony isn't going to embarrass you all that much, correct?" "Aaaaaaahhh ..." Ranma's eyes bugged out, her mouth closing with a snap for a second time. "Damn it, damn it, damn it. Me and my big mouth." She quickly regained her composure. "How could this possibly help preserve the Art?" "Ranma-kun." Hitomaro's demeanor turned serious. "Do you know how many viable shadow clans still exist in our country?"

"Errr ... a lot?"

"Fifteen, Ranma-kun, fifteen," Hitomaro said. "Out of those fifteen clans, all but **two** of them are either tied directly to organized crime or engaged in decades-long blood feuds with other shadow clans. And one of those two clans is in imminent danger of dying out." "Okay," Ranma replied, puzzlement clear in her voice. "What does all this have to with Midori and me?"

"Ranma-kun, exactly **which** Art has your grandmother been teaching your four cousins?" "Ninjut..." Ranma stopped suddenly. "Oh." "Exactly," Hitomaro said with a nod. "And as of the moment, you – specifically your female form – are the sole legal heir of the Yamada Ninjutsu Ryū." "What? I am? But ..." "Normally the Throne avoids getting directly involved in the internal affairs of other clans, even when it involves those with which we have had a long history of favorable relations – such as the Yamada," Hitomaro continued. "However, the events which have taken place over the weekend presented us with an opportunity we simply could not ignore. Ranma-kun, how much do you know about your uncles and their families?" "Umm, well, I think Grandma said I had two of them," Ranma said with a touch of embarrassment. "Other than that, not a whole heck of a lot. I haven't even gotten a good look at any of them yet."

"I see," Hitomaro said with a slight frown. "Do you know anything about the corporations your uncles either own or control in your grandmother's name?" "They do?" Ranma blurted in surprise. "I mean, um, no?" Hitomaro nodded, having somewhat expected that particular answer. "What about the total net worth of the Yamada estate?"

A negative shake of the head.

"Current inheritance laws and tax rates?" Another shake.

"Gift tax rules and rates?"

And another shake.

"Marriage gift tax exemptions?"

Yet another shake.

"I was afraid of that," Hitomaro said. "Ranma, would you be surprised if I told you that **none** of your other cousins from your two uncles' families have shown any interest in the Art at all?" "That's not exactly true, Heika-sama," Midori interrupted before Ranma could respond. "Daichi-kun has been taking some kenpo lessons for the last two years, but I'll admit that **was** mostly for appearances."

Ranma blinked. "Okay, who's Daichi?"

"Daichi-kun is Ichiro-ojisan's eldest son. He and Taro-kun, who is Jiro-ojisan's eldest, have both been

courting me on and off over the last couple of years. It's very likely Daichi-kun and I would have had to marry each other if Tomoko-obasan decided to force the issue when Hiroko-chan comes of age in a few months."

Ranma gave Midori a **very** confused look. "Tomoko-obasan is Jiro-ojisan's wife; Hiroko-chan is their eldest daughter," Midori said before Ranma could ask the question. "Hiroko-chan turns twelve years old the end of May." Midori grimaced. "Just old enough to be legally married, Ranma." "WHAT?!?" "She'd do it, too," Midori said with disgust. "Tomoko-obasan's been trying to get control of the estate ever since she married Jiro-ojisan, and he'd actually prefer to see the Yamada ryū just 'go away'." Ranma sighed. "Oh man ... Wait a minute. Aren't you and Daichi ..." "No we're not, Ranma," Midori said shaking her head and smiling. "Daichi-kun already has another girl he's fallen head over heels for – the two of us are only friends, and casual friends at that. Now, Taro-kun, on the other hand ..." Midori's expression darkened considerably. "Well,

let's just say I would happily caress a tanto before ever agreeing to marry him. He's a **real** sadistic creep."

"Midori, don't you even **mind**? I mean, I know it's the Emperor, but you're still being forced to marry someone you barely know. You **can't** be too happy about that." "Ranma," Midori reached over and took Ranma's right hand in both of her own. "I've known for a long time that simply being a Yamada would result in Obāsama arranging a marriage for me, and I can think of no one else I would rather be married to right now than you." "Erk!" Ranma had certainly been right about the "minefield" bit earlier, and it didn't look like she would make it out of this one intact. And how the hell had she missed the signs Midori was thinking about her **that** way?

"Anyway, Ranma-kun," Hitomaro interjected. "I think you can see that there's a **lot** happening in your mother's family which you really should be aware of. Quite a bit of which really should have already been explained to you by now." "Yeah, well, that really isn't Grandma's fault, Hito-sama," Ranma replied. "I've been really busy trying to get a grip on everything that's been happening recently, and I've spent a lot of time out on my own. Today, especially." She finished with a nervous chuckle. "I was rather curious about that myself, Ranma-kun," Hitomaro said. "I know your training allows you to be exceptionally difficult to find when you want to avoid someone, but there were a **lot** of people looking for you earlier today over an extremely wide area. I'm rather surprised, and impressed to be honest, that you managed to avoid everyone for the entire day – especially since I doubt you were aware anyone had been actively searching for you at the time." Ranma chuckled while she absently rubbed the back of her neck. "He he he ... that would have been a real trick if they **had** managed somehow to find me. I ... wasn't exactly in Tokyo most of the day."

"Ranma, you really should be more careful about what you say at times," Eiko cautioned. "Oh, there you are. I was wondering why you'd been quiet for so long." Ranma thought back. "You had been doing very well on your own up until now, Ranma." "Can you tell me where you were?" Hitomaro asked. "I will understand if you don't wish to reveal it, especially if it's a secret of your family's ryū." "Don't worry – he won't believe it anyway." Ranma made a production of looking like she was thinking hard for several seconds before nodding like she had just chased down some elusive thought. "I think I was somewhere in Australia, actually."

Hitomaro stared at Ranma for several seconds before nodding in agreement. "I can almost believe that, Ranma-kun, given some of the reports I've seen." He suddenly chuckled. "At least the Americans will be glad to know their equipment wasn't at fault. That is, if I tell them about it in the first place."

"Americans?" Ranma looked back, the question plain on her face. "Okay, maybe that wasn't such a great idea after all."

"Possibly not."

"You don't have to sound so smug about it, Eiko." "Don't worry, Ranma-kun," Hitomaro said with a smile.

"I'll keep that little tidbit of information private."  
"Okaaaay ..." Ranma drawled. "So, what next?" "First of all, **are** you willing to go through with the marriage this evening?" Ranma snorted. "It's not like I really have a choice here, now is it?" "Ranma-kun, you **always** have a choice," Hitomaro replied firmly. "You could walk out the door right now and I wouldn't think any the less of you. However, you'd be correct in assuming that doing so would have a huge negative impact on quite a number of people." "Like I said ..." Ranma said with a sigh. "So what DO we do next?" "I think it's time for the two of you to change into something a little more appropriate," Hitomaro said. "While the Shinto wedding ceremony is relatively short, the reception can take forever – especially one held here at the Palace." "Crap."

Suzu Yamada was having a bad day. The last-minute invitation to the Palace had been a big enough surprise on its own. Having to rush the whole family frantically out the door, only to wait around for hours once they had arrived was bad enough. But finding out the true reason why the clan had been assembled at the Palace was a real shock. Thing had been going so smoothly for so long, too. Even with Midori's recent absence, she and Daichi appeared to genuinely like each other. A match between the two of them would have certainly worked out in the long term, and even if they didn't love each other at the moment they would have easily grown into it as time went on. At least they wouldn't have been actively unhappy together – which wasn't at all bad for an arranged marriage these days.

More importantly, it would have kept the estate out of Tomoko's hands and given Hiroko-chan at least the possibility of a normal childhood. Sure, the taxes would have hurt – but losing only a quarter of the estate would have at least allowed Daichi and Midori to keep Yamada-ke in the family. If Hiroko-chan had been forced to marry, the taxes would have been double – and that's assuming Okāsama wouldn't just pass up the exemption entirely and let the estate suffer from the full seventy percent inheritance tax after she was gone. Suzu set her cup down and looked over at her mother-in-law with admiration. She had to hand it to the old lady – hiding Ranko's birth like she did and keeping it secret from the rest of the family over all these years was simply masterful. And disowning her daughter had simply helped to confuse the trail further without breaking the direct lineage Ranko needed to remain the legal heir. The girl was obviously Nodoka's biological daughter as well. Suzu had no doubt a DNA test would verify this, the resemblance was entirely too strong to be coincidental. It had been extremely well played from the very beginning. The only thing that was even the least bit odd was the selection of Midori to be Ranko's "husband" – and if the rumors about Midori were true, which it now appeared they were, even that slight oddity made sense. Midori could easily pass herself off as a male long enough for the wedding to take place, especially since the Emperor would almost certainly choose the Shinto ceremony to go along with the current "traditional" theme. They didn't even have to worry about any future generations, either – Ranko's twin brother would undoubtedly be more than happy to help that process along if asked. Suzu quickly glanced around the English-style drawing room where Empress Chikako had escorted the three Yamada women just a few minutes ago. Heika-sama was sitting in what was obviously her favorite chair. Aiko and Nodoka were sitting next to each other in one of the long sofas, which had left her by herself in the other sofa across from the Empress. The room was **very** English, and there were lush arrangements of tulips, narcissi, and cut azalea branches sitting on virtually every open table surface.

The Empress made a minor production of setting down her teacup. "Ladies, will you share sake with me tonight?"

Suzu almost fainted.

"Please ... call me Chikako. Aiko?" The Empress waited for the Yamada matriarch to acknowledge before turning to her daughter. "Nodoka?" Another nod. "Suzu?" Suzu swallowed nervously before nodding in turn. This was more serious than she could have possibly **dreamed** if the Empress insisted on dispensing with ALL protocol, let alone the total "off the record" confidentiality she had just agreed to. All of the implied messages from the Tea Room suddenly took on a deeper and more sinister aspect.

"Aiko, you have undoubtedly figured out by now that the wedding will be held tonight," Chikako said, having turned back to face the elder Yamada. "First, I must ask if you know whether or not Ranma's curse is still permanently locked."

"Unfortunately, it **is** still locked, Chikako. However, Ranma insists that he will be able to unlock it himself sometime in the near future." "Good – that will certainly help later on. For the present, his marriage to Midori will simply be filed – quietly. For Ranko, we've obtained a reasonable supply of Instant Nannichuan which will allow Midori to become her twin brother Minoru as required. Unfortunately, it's already known that Magical Springs Products have no effect on a Chiisuiton-locked curse. 'MAGICAL?!?' Suzu exclaimed, blanching slightly when everyone turned to stare. "Excuse me, but ... 'Instant man drown spring?' 'Stopping water bucket?' 'MAGICAL SPRINGS PRODUCTS?' Could someone **please** tell me what's going on here?" Chikako blinked in surprise. "Oh my. You haven't told her about Ranma's curse yet, have you, Aiko?"

"CURSE?" Suzu was **really** lost now. "Evidently not," Chikako said with a shake of her head. "I'm beginning to wonder if anyone around here bothers to tell anyone about anything at all. Aiko, let me guess – you probably haven't realized that your daughter has been handling removal contracts for the Directorate as an independent since she left the clan, correct?" "No, I hadn't," Aiko replied, turning to glare at her daughter. "The trust I set up should still be large enough to support her even now, and she had long since made her opinion known about the family's ryū."

Suzu's face turned white.

"Mother," Nodoka said, ignoring Aiko's stare. "Between Genma's spendthrift habits and the way the economy was booming at the time, the trust had run almost completely dry by, umm, nineteen eighty seven, I think it was. If I hadn't started accepting the occasional assignment there was a very good chance I would have ended up on the streets." "What happened to all of the regular deposits which were made to that account over the last sixteen years?"

"WHAT regular deposits?"

Aiko eyebrows shot up before her expression darkened considerably. "I see. There seems to be a need for a small conversation with a certain investment banker I **thought** I could trust." Chikako rubbed her forehead. "Lovely. I trust we will not be called upon to clean up the remains of **this** mess as well."

Aiko nodded sharply. "Don't worry. This is something I will handle personally. There will be **no** mess left behind."

"Good."

Suzu blinked. "You're not ..."

Chikako simply looked back at Suzu.

"Oh," Suzu said nervously. She quickly tried to change the subject. "What about all that 'curse' talk earlier?"

Both Aiko and Nodoka laughed briefly. "Ah, yes," Aiko replied. "Magic and curses – definitely a much more comfortable subject to discuss." The Yamada matriarch turned to directly face her daughter-in-law. "Suzu," Aiko began, "the red-headed girl 'Ranko' you saw with us earlier this evening is in fact the female form of Nodoka's son Ranma. He suffers under a curse which turns him into a girl – that red-headed girl – every time he's splashed with cold water. Splashing him with hot water would normally turn him back into a boy. However, he recently got into an argument with a prince from a small Chinese village and was locked in his female form by an artifact the prince carried with him. The two of them fought over a different artifact which would have unlocked his curse. You might have heard about it recently – the last fight between Ranma-kun and Prince Herb took place down in Ehime, and the two of them destroyed an entire mountainside as a result." "You're kidding," Suzu replied. She looked back and forth at each of the other women several times. "You're kidding, right? Magic doesn't exist for real. It **can't**. I mean, if it ..." Suzu faltered when she saw the expression on the other women's faces. "You ... really aren't kidding, are you?"

"No, we're not, Suzu," Aiko replied gently. "Chikako since you went through the effort to obtain Instant Nannichuan, perhaps Suzu could assist Midori in preparing for the wedding tonight? That way she could see it in action for herself." A wry smile tugged at the edges of Aiko's lips. "She **will** have to promise not to faint, however." Chikako laughed. "An excellent suggestion. And I'm sure Ranma would prefer having the two of you there to help him fit the uchikake instead of having to deal with any of the Palace staff. Speaking of which," Chikako said, "How **did** he take the news that he now has a legal identity for his female 'Ranko' form in addition to his normal male form?" "I'm afraid that didn't come up in time to be discussed," Aiko replied. Chikako glared at the Yamada matriarch. "And exactly **what** occurred to prevent him from learning this fairly critical piece of information?" she said in a frigid voice. "That would be mostly my fault, Chikako," Nodoka interjected. "Ranko and I spent practically the entire ride from Yamada-ke getting to know each other once again. When we arrived here at the Palace there was barely enough time to fix her makeup and change her into her kimono for the Tea."

Chikako stared at Nodoka for a few seconds before sighing. "I see. Nodoka, I will admit I had difficulty believing some of the reports on your son which detailed the amount of sheer chaos surrounding his daily life. It appears that those reports were, if anything, somewhat understated."

### **Nerima**

Genma was pissed. A thorough search of the house had failed to turn up even a single scrap of negotiables and the cash he found had totaled barely thirty thousand yen. There were no stocks, no bonds, no bank book, no safe deposit box numbers – there weren't even any mortgage payment records, and the title to the house couldn't be found anywhere. Where the hell did she keep them, anyway?

What was worse – there was no sign of the Saotome registry anywhere. Genma growled to himself while he raided the pantry for something to eat. Where were all the wonderful dishes he married her for? Sure, there were enough provisions around, but where was all the **food**? There wasn't a scrap of her wonderful sukiyaki in the fridge, no korokke, no shogayaki, no curry, no nothing. Damn woman didn't even have any sake! The portly martial artist pulled out what little food he could find – a small bowl of nukazuke and two pieces of chicken tatsuta – and sat down at the main table. He glowered at the meager offering for a moment before shrugging – food was food, after all, and there was no greater sin than allowing it to go to waste.

### **Imperial Palace**

Ranma glared balefully at the latest bane of her existence. The shiromuku uchikake laid out on the sofa was gorgeous, and its delicate and intricate white-on-white silk brocade made it appear to have come right out of a Heian era court, but the fact that SHE was expected to wear it ... for HER wedding ... **now** ... was just a little difficult to take. It had certainly been the LAST thing she expected to happen today. Unfortunately, it appeared as if she might be the only one who had been surprised by it. Midori didn't appear to have been caught off guard, and there was a good chance none of the other girls had been either. And she was almost certain Grandma also knew about this well before it happened – she seemed to know everything else about what was happening around here today. She was also certain that, between the two of them, Midori would much rather be the one to be wearing the uchikake tonight. Ranma would have definitely preferred to be wearing neither, but as usual she had not been consulted before the decision had been made.

"Can you now see the value of training your mind with the same intensity you have previously reserved for your Martial Arts?"

Ranma sighed. "Yes, I can ... now. Although, I wonder how much difference it really would have made – it's not as if I can just say 'no' to the Emperor after all. But still ... damn it all, Eiko, I'm not READY to get married for the rest of my life. The ceremony itself isn't the problem, it's all the things that are supposed to follow afterwards I'm not sure about. Hell, neither of us are even out of high school yet. What in Kami-



sama's name do I know about being a husband to **anyone**, let alone to a girl I barely even know? Damn it, I was **finally** starting to get somewhere with Akane ... it just isn't fair." "Ranma, 'fair' is subjective and will vary significantly depending on the viewpoint taken. While I can understand how this could be upsetting to you considering your lack of previous experience, I do think you are attributing entirely too much importance to what is, after all, a relatively insignificant event."

"INSIGNIFICANT?!?" Ranma shrieked. "Damn it, Eiko ..." She took a couple of deep breaths to calm herself down. "How the heck can you **possibly** call this 'insignificant'? We're talking about me being married for the rest of my life here." "A typical example of muddy thinking, Ranma. Unless Midori turns out to be your chosen lifemate, this will not be the last nor the only time you will marry. You now have a lifespan which can potentially last for hundreds or even thousands of years. Even you will have to admit that a span of some fifty or sixty years is relatively insignificant in comparison." "But ..." Ranma froze while the implications of Eiko's last statement made themselves known. "Damn it, that makes it even **worse**. How can I possibly marry ANYONE if I stay young forever while they grow old and grey? That isn't fair to either of us." "That has been allowed for. You do not stop aging until after you have reached your adult physical maturity. Since this varies widely amongst individuals, a certain amount of discretion is provided which allows a Guardian to choose which age she wishes to halt her aging symptoms. For humans this translates to anytime within a full decade past their 18th year. You can also learn a minor glamour which allows you to appear to age at a normal rate. This glamour doesn't affect your actual age, just the outward appearance." "Okay, so I won't **look** like a freak if I stay married to someone," Ranma growled. "However, that still doesn't mean I won't be constantly outliving my own family. It would almost be better if I didn't get married in the first place." "I would strongly advise against that, Ranma. Sailor Pluto to avoid all relationships during her tenure. The main effect that had was to totally suppress the very thing which most defined her humanity – her emotions. Our original designers evidently believed it was not conducive to long term health for a Guardian to remain alone during their tour of duty. Otherwise the provision for a lifemate would not have been designed into the core Guardian magic."

"Ranma-kun?"

Ranma hadn't noticed the door to the dressing room had opened. She was pleased to see that it was only her mother and grandmother who had entered. She didn't think she could handle either Jun or Naomi right at the moment, let alone some random palace staffer who thought she was a girl for **real**. The last thing she needed was to be gushed over like some stupid giddy bride. "Later, Eiko."

"Grandma, Mom," she greeted them with a wry smile. "So you're here to help with the circus?" "Ranma-kun, a wedding is **always** a circus," Aiko replied with a smile and a soft shake of her head. "At least, the good ones are."

Ranma tried her best to glower at her grandmother. "Great – so you **did** know what was going to happen here tonight."

"Dear, now is not the time for arguments," Nodoka admonished gently. "Weddings are supposed to represent a time of new beginnings." Ranma didn't get a chance to answer before she was glomped by her mother again. "You are going to make such a **beautiful** bride tonight," Nodoka gushed. "MOM!!!"

Mugonno chuckled to himself in the corner of the room. The interactions between the various Yamada families were quite ... amusing. And that was with only the core families here tonight; it didn't include the entire extended clan with all of the various Yamada, Kurayami, and Shimakage families and relations. Still, it was quite entertaining even with only this small group. It was also quite evident that Tomoko's support in the inner families was tenuous at best. Even two of her younger children had pointedly walked over and sat down with Yamada-dono's three girls, and her oldest boy Taro had been firmly rebuffed by the young redhead when he had been sent over to "retrieve" the two "rebellious" children. It was almost comical to watch the Taro boy back down from a mere slip of a girl who massed barely half his weight, but it really didn't surprise him – he had been quite impressed with Harukichi's abilities earlier in the day. Mugonno noticed the two Yamada men walk over to an opposite corner together for what was obviously

intended to be a private conference. He'd better "drift" in that direction and see what he could pick up directly – the room's various pin mikes were entirely too prone to being swamped out by background noise.

"Jiro."

"Ichiro."

"Jiji," Ichiro Yamada started out heatedly, "don't you realize what's going on here tonight?" "How the hell was I supposed to know, Ani?" Jiro replied defensively to his older brother. "I was in the middle of a very important meeting when the limo pulled up to the office. The next thing I know I've been whisked off to the Palace." Ichiro gave his brother's outfit a fast once-over. Jiro's conservative pinstripe business suit and tie, while normally not something that called attention to itself except by the expense of the fabric, stood out like a sore thumb when surrounded by the formal kimonos most of the extended family had worn – including himself. He nodded. "Okay, that's at least a reasonable excuse and one Tennō Heika-sama probably made an allowance for. That still does **not** excuse Tomoko and your kids showing up here in Western dress." Jiro sighed and looked over to his wife. "C'mon, Ani, you know how Toko is." "Yes, I do," Ichiro replied. "And that's why I **still** don't understand what you ever saw in her." "I should think that was fairly obvious," Jiro replied with a smile. "Just **look** at her – she's magnificent."

Ichiro followed his younger brother's gaze over to the statuesque brunette, who was currently attempting to hold a conversation with the tall American officer. He had to admit, she **was** extremely beautiful, and her current outfit – a classic sleeveless black evening gown designed by Hanae Mori herself – emphasized every single curve for maximum effect. Her hair was impeccably coiffed, her makeup, her accessories, every detail blended into a seamless perfection most women only dreamed of. Too bad the surface was all that was really there. The Americans had a perfect word for what Tomoko really was inside. Golddigger. "She's gorgeous, I'll grant you that, Jiji," Ichiro said. "But so is a snake, and if you're not careful she's going to end up costing you far more than you ever bargained for. Even **she** isn't blind enough to have misread that invitation, and I seriously doubt you want to be on the wrong side of the Throne at the moment."

"No, but surely it hasn't gotten to that point yet ..." "Damn it, Jiji, pay attention and stop thinking with your chin-chin," Ichiro interrupted, eyes flashing. "Thanks to your precious Toko's little stunt here today, you are probably just a short step away from losing the Kyoto Metro contract, and you know damn well without that your chances of landing the Tokyo Metro deal are slim to none. Yamada Denki is now ... what ... third nationally in overall consumer and electronic sales? What will it do to your bottom line if Denki suddenly drops off the government's preferred vendor list?"

Jiro blanched. "Do you really think they'd go that far, Ani?"

"You better count on it, otōto," Ichiro replied. "I don't know what sort of game the Throne is playing at the moment, but it's obvious they've thrown their support directly and firmly behind Okāsan. The fact that they normally avoid doing so like the plague should be clue enough." Jiro nodded grudgingly.

"Jiji, I know you and Okāsan don't normally get along," Ichiro said, "but you are going to **have** to start paying more attention to your family's status inside the clan. Whoever this 'Ranko' girl eventually turns out to be, the one thing you can be sure of is that she's following Okāsan's path to a 'T'. If you don't hurry up and get in line, you and your kids will be left in the dust." "Toko isn't going to like this," Jito said with a sigh. "When it comes right down to it, neither will Su-chan," Ichiro said, "but she isn't going to try fighting the Throne on this point, either." He stopped for a moment and then looked his brother straight in the eyes. "Jiji, I'm only going to tell you this once. Put a leash on your wife, and put it on **good** ... or someone else is liable to take care of it for you." Ichiro Yamada spun around and walked away from his brother without waiting for a response.

Mugonno smiled to himself as he watched the two executives return to their respective families. It looked like this was one problem he wouldn't have to handle after all.

**Nerima**

“That’s everything, Sir,” Sergeant Nakagawa said, closing the trunk of the patrol car with authority. They had collected quite a few boxes of contraband – a lot of it illegal pornographic pictures of the deceased Tendō girl. Poor kid. The stocky sergeant really hated it when innocents got caught in yak crossfire like this.

“Very good, Sergeant,” Lieutenant Hiyashi replied. “Please go and fetch Officer Kosugi. I want him to drive; you’ll be in charge of the other vehicle.” “Yes, Sir!” The stocky sergeant turned and began walking back towards Tendō-ke. Lieutenant Hiyashi was quite pleased with tonight’s operation. Nabiki Tendō had turned out to be a real prize baby yakuza if the evidence they had collected was any clue. She’d specialized in pornography and blackmail, and a lot of local families could sleep easier now that their children were no longer under her control. He’d have to make sure that the evidence was properly sealed

and secured – it would do none of the families any good if those pictures ever came to light and such a mistake could easily result in several unnecessary honor deaths. She had also engaged in a lively little trade of stolen antiques and other valuables, if the collection they had found hidden in the downstairs room was any indication, and had acquired a surprising large supply of buru-sera items as well. The financial trail for this part of her endeavors could prove to be quite ... illuminating. He patted his pocket and smirked, feeling the lumpy presence of the film rolls in his pocket. Having the little bitch star in her very own photo shoot was poetic justice at its best. He’d have to see if several of the juicier shots couldn’t quietly make their way back into the neighborhood somehow. That would ruin whatever ties she had with the local Honda-kai and go a small way towards balancing the books for her deceased cousin’s lost honor. Of course, he was certainly going to keep a full set of prints himself. However frozen the Tendō girl’s soul might be, he certainly couldn’t quarrel with the fact that, as far as looks went, she was a **major** babe. The same could be said for her muscle, too. Nabiki’s younger sister was cute – really cute – and had plenty of curves to back that up. Those feminine curves also effectively hid the girl’s monstrous strength. Hiyashi had briefly seen some of the surveillance clips of the little thug in action – she could snap a man’s spine in two with little effort. He was glad he could count on Sergeant Nakagawa’s hobbies to fill in the gaps in their equipment list and didn’t have to rely on just standard issue equipment. Having access to some recent upgrades in their tools didn’t hurt, either. No matter how strong the freakishly powerful “schoolgirl” was, she evidently wasn’t immune to the high-powered stun wands which had recently been made standard equipment for the OCU. It was about time, too – the previous model had been shown to be totally inadequate when the Yagami and Kuroda clans fought for possession of the *Akashi Bridge* down at the docks last year.

And nabbing the father was certainly a nice added bonus. While they had received strict instructions to keep the eldest girl completely out of the operation, she could rot in hell as far as Hiyashi was concerned. She and her father were the adults of the house and they had let this travesty go on far too long without making even a single attempt to correct the situation. Her cousin had been made a virtual slave for the other two girls to abuse at their leisure and the two adults had simply turned a blind eye to the whole affair. It was an utter disgrace. Hiyashi smirked at a sudden thought. Neither girl had shown any resistance to Nakagawa’s hojojutsu techniques, and the older girl’s pain tolerance was minimal at best. It would be interesting to see how they coped with one of Kosugi’s high pressure decontamination cleanings, let alone what that would do for the visual treat factor. That would at least give Kosugi something to make up for his being stuck with babysitting duty earlier.

## Imperial Palace

“I feel like some stupid make-up doll dressed this way,” Ranma grumbled. She relaxed when her mother gave her a hug – a large portion of her tension draining away in the sea of her mother’s euphoria.

“You look absolutely radiant, dear,” Nodoka said with a huge smile. “No-chan, you aren’t helping things right at the moment,” Aiko admonished. “That’s all right, Grandma – I’ll admit I **do** look good,” Ranma said. “It’s just ... I’ve still got ... I mean ... Damn it, Mom, how could you even THINK of doing something

like that?" "It was the only thing I could do at the time, dear," Nodoka said. "Your death made it impossible for anyone to restore the Saotomes' honor." "But I'm not dead, Mom."

"I didn't find that out until earlier today, dear." Ranma sighed. "Yeah, I know." She turned to face her grandmother. "I still don't understand why you didn't just go back to the ward office and have them put it back the way it was, Grandma. And why did you have to go and give my girl side her own identity? I'm not two separate people, you know."

"I was instructed to do that for Ranko, son," Aiko replied. "And as for correcting the mistake with your original name, I didn't find out what No-chan had done until this morning as well. Besides, the ward office would demand undeniable proof that you are still alive before they would even start the process of restoring the Saotome registry." "All you have to do is have me come with you," Ranma said. "I mean, how much more proof do you need?"

"You aren't exactly male at the moment, Ranma," Aiko said softly. "But everyone **knows** I'm a guy," Ranma exclaimed. "That isn't proof, son," Aiko said. "Trust me on this – the ward office would only accept you as proof if you are male at the time. And relatively few people in the whole city know about your curse."

"Oh. Yeah." Ranma chuckled nervously. "That might be a problem, all right." "Are you ready, dear?" Nodoka asked.

Ranma grimaced. "No, but that really doesn't count for much at the moment." She pulled up the front part of the uchikake and started towards the door. "Let's get this farce over with."

"So, where do we go from here?" Ranma asked the aide who was standing just outside the door. "Your fiancé is waiting for you in the hallway to your left, Yamada-san. Please follow me." Ranma gingerly followed the aide down the main corridor, trying her best not to swear. The uchikake severely constricted her movement and swathed her in enough layers to make it difficult for her to feel her balance properly. Admittedly, the formal kimono she had taken off had a few more layers of cloth – ten nagajuban instead of only three – but at least that kimono **fit**. The uchikake kimono was deliberately designed to be overlength with extra padding all

around the bottom, and it was taking quite a bit of concentration not to constantly trip over the front of the hem. As a result, Ranma was forced to walk head down with short mincing steps – which inadvertently projected the perfect image of a demure Japanese bride. It also meant that she didn't look up from the floor until the aide had stopped in front of her. What she saw a few feet away forced an almost automatic response out of the irritated redhead. "Okay, who the hell are you?"

"Yamada-san!" the aide exclaimed. "Don't you recognize your fiancé?" "Ranma-kun, that's Midori-kun," Aiko said softly in Ranma's ear. Ranma gave the tall man in the white wedding hakama and black kimono a cursory once-over before shaking her head. "Can't be – that's a real ..." Her eyes flew wide open as the import of her grandmother's honorific hit home. She concentrated on the man in front of her and her mood darkened considerably as more details were made apparent. The young man was taller and a little thinner than her own male form and the twenty centimeter difference between their current heights meant that he literally towered over her. His eyes were brilliant amber instead of Midori's warm brown, but his hair was the same color, style, and length as hers had been. He even had the same bangs and hair ribbon – although the ribbon had been retied to a simple knot and streamer instead of the oversized bow Midori had been wearing. The hands and fingers were long, there was a distinct hint of wiry strength in his arms, and his face was firmly in the bishōnen category. He had a look on his face that was both bemused and apologetic, and he also appeared to be slightly off balance. Ranma looked his "fiancé" right in the eyes and uttered a single uninflected word. "Nanniichuan?"

The tall male teenager – and he was definitely male, no mistake about that – nodded. His voice was a melodious tenor. "Yes, but it's ..." Midori-kun's comment halted abruptly when an intense dark red aura suddenly erupted around the petite kimono-clad redhead.

"I'll kill him," Ranma growled, her aura visibly darkening even further. "I don't care if he's Kami-sama himself ..."

"Ranma?" Aiko called out, her concern obvious. "... I distinctly told him no one else was going to get cursed because of ..." "RANMA!" Midori yelled right in her face. The glowering redhead looked up, eyes flaming. "How could you let him **DO** that to you, Midori?"

Midori tried not to flinch at the intensity of Ranma's outrage. "Ranma, this isn't permanent. We used the instant Nanniichuan powder which only works once." "Oh." Ranma's fiery aura slowly collapsed and dissipated. "Are you **sure**?" Midori nodded vigorously.

Ranma took a deep breath. "Great. Just **great**." She shook her head. "Whatever happened to the 'don't need a curse to look like a guy' bit?" Midori grimaced. "I was going to do that, Ranma, but when Tennō Heika-sama offered me the instant Nannichuan I thought it was only fair I experience a little of what you've been putting up with. Besides, it **did** save a LOT of effort – and while I have passed myself off as a male before in public, I'll also admit it was before I had filled out as much as I am now." Ranma nodded curtly. "Yeah, I don't know how Uchan stands doing that everyday. Just wearing a bra in girl form is bad enough." "Binding your breasts like that really hurts, let me tell you," Midori said with feeling. "I bet," Ranma replied. "Okay, I guess I can live with it. This isn't any more screwed up than a lot of other situations I've had to suffer through." Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Just don't start getting any ideas, Midori. I can handle it as long as it's all for show." "Believe me, Ranma, I intend to change back as soon as I possibly can," Midori said. "I honestly don't see how you've managed to cope with the constant changes in form. Everything is just **wrong**. My balance is totally off – I've already fallen over four times and walked into the door

jamb twice. My hands and feet feel **enormous**, my torso feels like it's made out of bricks, and the change in height is entirely too weird. Not to mention I found out first hand why you always wore boxers." Ranma chuckled. "Yes, you'll only make **that** mistake once." "No kidding," Midori replied.

"Well, let's go get this over with," Ranma said. "Just ... don't walk very fast, okay? Whoever designed this damn outfit should be shot." Midori laughed. "I was about to ask the same thing, Ranma. The way my balance is screwed up at the moment, I'm likely to fall flat on my face if I move faster than a slow crawl."

## Juuban

"Princess, this isn't a good idea."

"I don't care," Usagi said to the miniature image in front of her. "We **have** to find out if she'll help us, and the only way that's going to happen is if she can trust us." "Having your Protectors present in their powered state is a reasonable precaution." "No," Usagi replied firmly. "If we're all there in a group as senshi it will only threaten her, and this is too important to risk. I will see her **alone**." "Princess, I..."

"Crystal, it **has** to be done this way or it won't work at all," Usagi said. "I can just **feel** it. Now, make the call."

"Princess ..."

"NOW."

Crystal sighed to herself. The Princess' heart and compassion were almost without limit, but it appeared as if her stubbornness was now expanding to match. She opened the communications channel and waited for an acknowledgement. [Crystal]

[Gate, the Princess desires to meet with Guardian Khronos in person. Is she available for such a meeting?]

[My Guardian is currently occupied with other more pressing affairs. I will inform her of your request at the next opportunity and return her answer as soon as it is made available.] Eiko disconnected the communications link without warning.

## Imperial Palace

Ranma was grateful the actual wedding ceremony was turning out to be as brief as the Emperor

had mentioned. Unfortunately, this did not make it any less embarrassing for her, especially considering the number of family members present who were total strangers. At least none of her classmates or rivals had been invited. She'd hate to think of the chaos and outright destruction Kodachi or Kuno-baka would cause – let alone someone like Ryōga or Shampoo.

Still, the oaths “she” had just recited with Midori-kun weren't sitting well with her at all, and Eiko's proclamation that this was an “insignificant” event in her life wasn't something she readily agreed with – even though she **could** understand, intellectually, the point he had tried to make. She suspected she might agree with him more easily in a few hundred years – assuming she actually did end up living that long. Ranma looked down at the table in front of her and suppressed a grimace on seeing the cup and the pair of rings on prominent display. Because the Yamada were like the Amazons in being led by the women of the clan, and because ... technically ... it was “Ranko Yamada” who was the family member and “Minoru Nakamura” who was “marrying in” to the Yamada clan, it became her responsibility to initiate the traditional pouring of the sake to begin the san-san-kudo, as well as the subsequent exchange of wedding bands. This was in spite of the fact that Midori had actually been a part of the Yamada clan a LOT longer than she ever had. The irony was not lost to the redheaded “girl.”

Taking a deep breath, Ranma plastered her best “Ranko's Auntie Saotome smile” over her face and reached out to pick up the sake pitcher.

### **Mount Horai, Ehime**

If Ku Lon hadn't known better, she'd have thought the Goddess had suddenly developed a sense of humor. The elder could certainly see the potential for it ... even though these types of events were something normally reserved for her great granddaughter's missing groom. It was almost as if the chaos surrounding Ranma was suddenly seeking a new target. Ku Lon blinked. That certainly would tend to explain what had been happening around the three Nyuchezuu this last week.

Of course, the elder certainly wasn't above spreading a bit of chaos around by herself – Xian's reaction to her John Wayne imitation on their trip up had been priceless. The poor girl really needed to lighten up a bit every now and then – she had taken this entire situation far too seriously and it had significantly impaired her judgment on more than one occasion. She would have been much more successful in captivating the son-in-law had she simply used a **much** lighter touch over the course of the last year.

Hindsight was, of course, highly accurate. And frustrating to no end – something the younger warriors often had a hard time accepting. Well, in spite of the dust, the profuse number of annoying free range monkeys, and some infuriatingly incompetent local villagers, it was nice to get away from the horribly hyper- crowded conditions which comprised the bulk of the vast expanse of Edo. Considering the sheer amount of destruction they had found at this location, it would easily take them the better part of a week to finish with their detailed search. It was shaping up to be a right nice little vacation. And the three Nyuchezuu were certainly faring better than the thief back at the Nekohanten was at the moment. Ku Lon pulled out a small brooch and checked the signal stone once again. She nodded in satisfaction – whoever had disturbed the wards surrounding her cache hadn't lasted very long.

This was a Good Thing. She always hated having to dispose of the bodies without drawing the attention of the local authorities. Dealing with that was always so much easier back in the Village.

### **Imperial Palace**

“Are you alright, Ranma?” Midori whispered to his partner. “Everything's just peachy, Midori,” Ranma whispered back. “Thank the kami that was the last time I had to change outfits tonight. I mean, I know it's tradition and all that, but the whole thing was getting to be pretty ridiculous.”

“I don't know, Ranma,” Midori replied, admiring the gorgeous red-and-gold yāgasane iro- uchikake the petite redhead was currently sporting. “You've looked positively stunning in every outfit you've worn tonight.”

“It's not like I'm **trying** to, Midori,” Ranma growled. “Damn curse.” “Ranma ...”

“Yeah yeah I know,” she hurriedly responded. “Sorry. I know this can't be easy on you, either. So, what are

we supposed to do next?"

Midori gave Ranma a worried look before continuing. "All we have left to do is to hand out the hikidemono to everyone before they leave." Ranma snorted. "Great. Now we're department store greeters." A soft laugh from the side caught the two youngster's attention. "That's certainly an interesting way of looking at it, Ranko-chan," Empress Chikako said. "And one which is not totally

inaccurate." The Empress gave them both a sunny smile before dropping her voice considerably. "You two have been performing marvelously while laboring under extremely trying conditions. I have been quite impressed with both of you tonight." "Errrr, thanks?"

"Thank you, Heika-sama," Midori replied with a little more aplomb. "One of the staff will assist you with the hikidemono," Chikako said with a nod. "We'll give you a list of what was selected for each person afterwards so you won't be caught unaware later on. Also, my husband and I would like to speak with you and your immediate family when this is finally over with. We have something for the two of you we think you will quite enjoy." The Empress gave the couple another acknowledgement before drifting away. Ranma sighed. She seemed to be doing a lot of that lately.

"Well, that certainly was an interesting evening," Ichiro Yamada said, cocking an eyebrow at his wife. She had been noticeably upset during the entire evening after her conversation with the Empress, and the limo ride back home was the perfect time to find out what was bothering her. "Interesting doesn't cover it by half, dear," Suzu replied. She rubbed her forehead with the palms of her hands for a few seconds before turning troubled eyes to her husband. "I always knew what Art your family had practiced, but never in my wildest dreams did I ever figure that our own children would end up being trained as actual shinobi." "I doubt it will come to that, kimi," Ichiro said. "I don't think Okāsan has done anything along those lines for decades. At the worse the kids will get some much needed exercise and have a chance to know their cousins a bit better." "I have reasons to be concerned, anata," Suzu commented softly. "Mom?"

Suzu turned to face her daughter. "Yes, Mariko-chan?" "Did you see Midori-chan after the tea service? I wanted to ask her why she never said anything about having a brother, especially such a gorgeous one as that." "I ... don't think I saw her myself, Mariko-chan," Suzu replied. "I'm almost sure you'll catch up with her over at Grandmother's before school starts again, though." "Good," Mariko said with a grin. "She's going to get no end of grief for keeping such a hunk like that secret – even if he **did** end up getting married before we had a chance at him."

"Daughter, you have no idea ..." Suzu whispered to herself. She evidently didn't say it softly enough because her husband immediately gave her "that look." She grimaced before scooting over to snuggle up against Ichiro and sighed happily when his arms encircled her. "I take it there was something else going on tonight?" Ichiro whispered in her ear after planting several soft kisses up and down her neck. "I'll tell you after the kids have gone to bed," Suzu whispered back. "But I doubt you'll believe me." "Kimi, for you I'll believe anything," Ichiro whispered in-between kisses. "Anata, I saw it with my own eyes and I can barely believe it myself," Suzu replied softly. She moaned quietly when her husband located one of her more sensitive spots on the side of her neck.

Ichiro chuckled. "Now you've got me curious." He started working his way around the back of her neck, planting feather-light kisses in just the right locations. "And you know what they say about curiosity ..." "Ewwwww! Mom ... Dad ... get a room!" This proclamation was made in stereo by their two youngest boys.

"Pay attention, Saburo-kun, you might actually learn something." Ichiro and Suzu immediately broke their embrace and stared at their sixteen year old daughter. Mariko blushed bright red, which only made her situation worse. "Kimi, I think it's past time we had a little chat with our daughter, don't you?" "I certainly agree, anata."

"Huh? What'd I miss?" Daichi asked sleepily from the rear of the limousine.

Ranma sighed in relief. She had **finally** been able to change back into something comfortable after

standing for hours in a entire wardrobe of restrictive and weighty outfits, and the difference was amazing – she felt as if she'd just lost ten pounds. Now, to find out what other “surprise” was in store for her. Ranma, a once-again-female Midori, Kioko, Tsuya, Harukichi, Aiko, Nodoka, and the Imperial couple were gathered around a medium-sized round table in one of the many informal meeting rooms located about the Palace. Evidently the Empress really liked flowers – vase after vase of red and white roses filled the room with their fragrance.

“We wanted to thank Clan Yamada for accepting our invitation today,” Emperor Hitomaro began, directing his statements towards Ranma and Midori in particular. “We look forward to maintaining a relationship which has been mutually beneficial to both of our houses.” “On behalf of Clan Yamada we thank you,” Aiko replied before it became obvious Ranma was unaware she was supposed to be the one to respond. “While this is somewhat irregular, we wanted to present the two of you with our oshugi in person before you left,” Empress Chikako said in turn. An aide stepped over and laid a thick folder in front of the newly-married couple. “Given the demands recent events have placed upon the two of you, we thought it only proper your honeymoon be something which would allow both of you to relax and recuperate. Please accept this with our gratitude.” Ranma gave the Empress an inquisitive look. After receiving an acknowledging nod she opened the folder. Inside were what appeared to be ... passports, travel brochures, and ... “... plane tickets to San Francisco?”

“Yes,” Empress Chikako said with a nod. “One of the Presidential suites has been reserved in your name at the Ritz-Carlton for the next three weeks. Your flight leaves tomorrow a little before six pm and arrives around eleven in the morning. We realize you have had almost no time at all to simply sit back and relax, so there's no itinerary planned. You can lounge about, play tourist, take walks in the surrounding countryside, practice at a local dojo, or do anything that appeals to you. You may book a return flight whenever it suits you.” “Thank you, Heika-sama,” Midori replied. Ranma was still staring at the papers in front of her. “Now, if you will excuse us, it has been a rather long and tiring day,” Emperor Hitomaro said. Both he and his wife stood. “The staff will direct you to your vehicles when you are ready to depart.”

## **Suginami**

... block ... strike ... sweep ... pivot ... lean ... snapkick, pivot, backfist, leap, cartwheel, land, counterblock ...

The only sound which had emanated from the dōjō over the last half hour was the subtle rustle of cloth in motion.

... forty-count chestnut fist, double palm strike ... fast advance ... leap, aerial somersault into axe kick, rebound ... land ... present.

Ranma stood at ready, replaying the entire sequence back in her mind. She was going to have to re-tie her hair back into a pigtail or maybe use the low neck-hugging braid 'Kichi liked to use, since there were at least four times it had gotten in the way in the middle of a move. That sort of lapse could be the difference between victory and defeat – and she no longer had the luxury of treating her fights as a mere contest of personal skills. The ponytail would simply have to go.

“Ranma, you have received a request from the leader of the senshi, who wishes to meet with you in person at your convenience.”

“I\* received a request? Just when did this happen and how?” “Technically I received the request on your behalf immediately before this evening's marriage ceremony. Since the content didn't appear to be time-critical I delayed the relaying of this request until a time where you were less involved in current events.” Ranma paused for a moment. “Okay, fair enough. I really shouldn't be surprised that you have some sort of mental phone number or something.” “Actually, I do not. Our bonding has given you a limited set of telepathic abilities, and any communication attempt directed specifically at you in these channels can be received and understood. I have erected automated screening and defensive routines around



these abilities to prevent you from being attacked or damaged by those of greater ability. However, the senshi's request did not arrive through your telepathic channel." "Okaaaaaaay," Ranma drawled. She sat down in the middle of the dōjō floor. "Why do I get the feeling there's a lot more to this story?" "Because there is. Ranma, you are not the only Guardian of a powerful Artifact located on this planet. There are two other Artifacts with which I share a common origin and history, each with its own Guardian and unique set of abilities. The leader of the senshi is one such Guardian, and the Artifact she protects is the Crystal of Life. All of the Artifacts are capable of communicating directly with one another, and it was through this channel that I received the earlier request." "I see. Any idea on what she wants?"

"Crystal simply relayed the request for a personal meeting. However, one can easily deduce she wishes to find out where you stand in regard to the senshi's plans for the future and how that will affect them. Your assuming of the Guardian's duties did displace one of her subordinates, after all."

"Great," Ranma growled. "Just what I needed to find out tonight – another set of opponents to deal with."

"Ranma, I would not automatically discount the possibility of a non-hostile relationship with the other two Guardians. Both are relatively recent reincarnations and are actually younger than you in terms of physical years. Given Sailor Pluto's penchant for extreme information hoarding, it is quite probable neither of them is aware of the true cost involved in implementing the plans for 'Crystal Tokyo'."

"Ranma?"

Ranma looked over to the entrance of the dōjō. "Oh, hi Midori." "I can come back later if you're still busy ..." "Naw, I've pretty much finished practicing," Ranma replied. She stood up and started walking towards the entrance. "I was just talking to Eiko for a bit." Midori stepped inside the dōjō and slid the door shut behind her. "Ranma," she said, looking down at the floor. "Can we talk a little about ... us?" Ranma stopped almost instantly, her every sense on sudden alert. She carefully examined the girl in front of her – and grew more puzzled the longer she looked. Midori seemed almost ... fearful. It was certainly a far cry from the angry/jealous/whatever possessiveness the other girls always fell into anytime the subject had come up in the past. "Yeah, sure," she replied. "Take a seat – I'm still cooling down from my kata." Midori nodded silently in agreement, her eyes still firmly downcast. She slowly slid down to the ground, her back against the closed doorway. Ranma stopped a couple of feet away before silently joining her down on the floor. "Ranma," Midori began in a soft voice. "I'm really sorry you were put through all of this tonight. Please believe me when I say that no one in the family ever **dreamed** of having things turn out this way today."

"Yeah, well, it sure seemed like no one else was really surprised about it, either." "That isn't true, Ranma," Midori said, shaking her head emphatically. "We were all shocked when the invitation arrived this morning. We just had a few more hours to adjust to the situation than you did before you came back home." "Oh. Okay, I guess that makes sense."

"Ranma, the last thing I ever wanted was to have you forced into another relationship without your consent. Your father did that to you all of your life and it just isn't fair to have it happen to you all over again."

Ranma chuckled softly without humor. "Just par for the course."

"It shouldn't be," Midori replied, looking up for the first time since the conversation began. Her eyes were bright with unreleased moisture. "We wanted ... I wanted ... to give you a home where you were free from those pressures and obligations. To be able to make your **own** decisions on what you wanted to do and who you wanted to be with. To be put ba... To have to ... It just isn't **fair**."

"'Fair' doesn't seem to be playing a very big part in my life at the moment, Midori." "That still doesn't make it right," Midori replied. She took a shaky breath before continuing. "I just wanted you to know that ... once the legal situation with the family estate has been taken care of," Midori quickly cast her eyes back down to the floor, "I will abide by whatever decision you make concerning our so-called 'marriage'. I'm n...not going to be like the other girls and hold you to something you never truly wanted to agree to." Ranma took a long look at her current "husband." The single tear trailing down the other girl's cheek was

certainly at odds with her previous words. "So what you said earlier about wanting to be married didn't mean anything, huh?"

"This isn't about what I want, Ranma," Midori replied in a voice almost too soft to be heard. A second tear joined the first on its downward journey. "Sure it isn't."

Ranma waited for some sort of response to her last jibe. She waited a little longer. She sighed when she realized she **had** gotten a response. "Midori, what you just did was damn near the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me without expecting anything in return. Yeah, I can't say I'm not a little ticked off at this whole stupid mess, but the Emperor seemed to have a good enough reason why he put us all through that earlier tonight." She put her hand underneath Midori's chin and gently tilted the other girl's head up. "So, before we go about making any major decisions, I need to know how you **really** feel about being stuck married to a circus side-show freak like me." Midori's eyes and mouth shot wide open in shock for a moment before she exploded into action. A quick and deceptively smooth motion plucked the redhead up off the floor and set the shorter girl down in Midori's lap. Ranma didn't have a chance to flinch before she was enveloped in her "husband's" embrace.

"Oh Ranma, how can you **possibly** think that about yourself?" Ranma fought her reflexive stiffening when she felt Midori's arms surround her. It wasn't a glomp or a grope ... in fact it felt almost the same as what her mother had done earlier in the car. Maybe there was something to all this mushy huggy stuff after all. She allowed herself to relax in Midori's arms.

"It's kind of hard not to, Midori. I'm a guy ... with a really hot chick's body ... who turns into a magical girl of all things. You can't be much more of a freak than that." "What about Pantyhose Taro?"

"Well, yeah ..."

"'Voodoo' Gosunkugi with his One-Punch Armor?" "Err ..."

"And then there's always Happosai ..."

"Let's not even go there."

Midori giggled. "So you really want to know how I feel about this." "Yup," Ranma nodded. "Midori, I barely even know you right now. Sure, you and the girls have been exceptionally kind to me over the last week, and it feels **really** nice to have family I never even knew existed before. However, that still doesn't mean you don't have someone else who's really special to you and who's going to get hurt because you're being forced into doing this." "Well," Midori said after a brief pause. "I **do** know someone who I've really been really attracted to for a long time now."

"You see?"

"He's tall, strong, handsome ... oh definitely handsome ..." Ranma nodded. She had **thought** Midori's earlier comments were a little too pat. "... a master-level martial artist, and turns into this stunningly **gorgeous** redhead when splashed with water."

Ranma, her eyes two huge luminous orbs, effectively teleported out of Midori's lap. She didn't, really, but it would have been difficult to tell the difference. Midori reached out and clasped Ranma's left hand in both of her own. She stroked the ring on Ranma's finger. "I would really like to try and make this work, Ranma, but only if **you** want to as well. I was quite serious when I said I wasn't going to hold you to something you never wanted to do."

"But ... I ..." Ranma shook her head, trying to clear out some of the cobwebs which had suddenly appeared around her thoughts.

Midori smiled fondly at her "spouse's" reaction – she was just so damned **cute** when she was flustered like this. "Ranma, there's a **reason** the other girls have always chased you so hard, and it has nothing to do with their family honor or village laws or any stolen dowry – it's because of who you **are**. The family spent the last year watching from the sidelines and I **hated** not being able to be there for you, I absolutely **HATED** it. You are a very easy person to love, Ranma, and I wanted to die myself when I thought we had lost you on Horai-san. I love you, and would gladly stay married to you no matter **what**

the circumstances are.” Midori’s eyes sparkled. “So, does that adequately explain how I feel being ... umm, ‘stuck’ ... married to you?” “But ... but ...” Ranma had blushed progressively brighter while Midori talked and her face was now a brilliant red. “Doesn’t it bother you that I’m a girl part of the time? What if I don’t learn how to change back, or what if it takes me **years** to learn how instead of weeks or months?” “If you could never change back, then I would happily spend the rest of my life married to the woman I love. Your form doesn’t matter to me, Ranma, it never has – I love them both.” Midori chuckled. “Besides, if it **does** end up as just ‘us girls’, there are a lot of tricks two girls can do together which are **quite** satisfying.” “That ... that’s **pervverted!**” Ranma exclaimed. “Isn’t it?” she added when she saw the Midori’s reaction.

“I certainly don’t think so, and neither should you,” Midori said firmly. “Besides ... even if it is, who cares? It’s nobody else’s business in the first place, and anyone who doesn’t like it can go stuff it up their rear.” Ranma stared at Midori, eyes and mouth wide with astonishment. Midori couldn’t resist a sudden impulse and leaned over to plop a quick kiss on Ranma’s nose. The resulting cross-eyed expression was priceless and caused several giggles to bubble up. Ranma closed her mouth with a snap. Midori was obviously quite serious about the marriage, but was also just as willing to give it up without a fight if Ranma simply said the word. Okay, the day had just officially gone from “strange” to “totally weird.” That didn’t discount the facts sitting in right front of her, however. And, while she really hadn’t been comfortable at the time, she HAD sworn an oath earlier in good faith. ... and she’d be DAMNED if she was going to treat her own family like the Panda had treated her in the past. If she was going to be an effective Guardian, her oaths had better mean something besides empty words. Finally, Ranma smiled crookedly and quipped: “So you **really** want to be a part of MY screwed- up life?” The relief that washed across Midori’s face was palpable. “Yes, Ranma, I do,” she said after a deep breath.

“You realize you’re now even crazier than I am.”

“Uh huh,” Midori said with a nod.

A brief pause.

“Heck of a wedding night.”

“Sure is.”

Another pause.

“Tired?”

“Totally wasted.”

Ranma stood up with a groan. “Same here.” **Chapter 11: Transitions**

**Suginami - Monday, March 7th 1994**

Ranma woke up suddenly. She glanced up to the clock on the edge of the bureau, which read 5:45 AM. Again. “Okay, I’m now officially in a rut. Eiko, I thought you said the stupid alarm clock I’ve got built into me could be turned off.” “I did, and it has. You will recall I did inform you of the fact that, as Guardian, you no longer require the amount of physical rest you have been accustomed to.” “Great, so that means I woke up entirely on my own this time.” “That is correct.”

Ranma sighed and threw the covers of the futon off to the side. She got up and stretched her muscles out for several minutes, noting that the usual pain and stiffness she normally felt in the mornings was entirely absent. Oh, that was right; she hadn’t been in any serious fights for ... Had it really been only a week since she had dug herself out after losing the fight with Herb? Mouuuu ...

She walked over to the dresser and looked over the small pile of items she had accumulated from the family in the last ... Kami-sama, the last **two** days. The cell phone, the bus and rail passes, more money in her wallet than she had ever had before in her entire life, a **credit card** on top of that, and ... the ring. She picked up the ring and idly examined it.

A plain gold band; such a deceptively simple thing, yet representing so many duties and obligations Ranma barely knew where to begin to list them all. Married at seventeen ... to a virtual

stranger ... on behalf of the Emperor himself ... was NOT how she had ever envisioned her life would turn out to be – and that didn't even touch on Eiko and the whole "magical girl" shtick. Kami-sama, this was even more unexpected than finding out from Pops, all of ten minutes before showing up on the Tendō's doorstep for the first time, that she had just been engaged. Oh, crap ... Akane. DAMN it all, this just wasn't fair. And she'd better make sure that the Tendōs knew she was all right – she no longer had any reason to avoid Tendō-san and his ideas of family honor in her current still-female condition. He certainly couldn't do much about trying to marry her himself **now**, thank the kami. And with the pressure of the forced engagement off, Akane might still be willing to be friends. Ranma certainly hoped that would be the case – she certainly was nice enough for those few brief moments when they had first met and Akane thought she had simply met another girl martial artist. Ranma slipped the ring on her finger and quickly stashed the rest of the items into her storage space. Now THAT was something really good to come out of this whole mess – no more worries about losing any of her personal stuff from ripped clothing in the middle of a fight. "Ranma, have you determined when it would be convenient for you to meet with the senshi's leader? While it is likely to be more important to them than it is to you, it could be a significant first step in beginning the process of partially restoring the Timestream from Sailor Pluto's previous manipulations."

"Damn – thanks for reminding me. It's going to have to wait until after Midori and I get back from this trip – it's going to be kind of difficult to meet with the two of us being in the States for the next two or three weeks."

"I fail to see how that would prevent you from attending a meeting, Ranma." "Oh, come **on**, Eiko. You know just as well as ..." Ranma stopped in mid thought and then slapped her forehead with the palm of her hand. "Oh, right. I was in Australia for most of yesterday, wasn't I?"

Eiko's mental chuckle resonated across their link. "Correct. Simple distance means very little to a Guardian. Considering your relative inexperience, you are actually doing quite well in recalling most of your basic abilities."

"Yeah, thanks ... I think. We should probably wait until next weekend at the earliest, Eiko. Saturday after half-day would probably be the best time." "I will inform Crystal of your decision." "Man, I sure hope I get enough time to train properly before something major hits me in the face – I don't want to screw up with anything that's really important. Knowing my luck I somehow doubt that's going to happen." Ranma picked up a brush from dresser and started working on her

hair. She grimaced when she realized it was still at "Guardian length" from last night's session in the dōjō.

"You will simply have to cope to the best of your abilities, Ranma." "That's what I'm afraid of. My track record with the serious stuff hasn't been the best as of late, you know."

"You have performed more than adequately this last week, and I cannot foresee the situation changing for the worse at any point in the near future. Your trip to the States should give you a more than sufficient amount of time to properly reintegrate yourself from the disruption caused by all of the recent changes in your life over the last month." "Yeah, that's one of the main reasons I didn't object to the 'honeymoon'," Ranma replied with a chuckle. "Even I know I need to take a bit of a break right now." "Precisely. On another subject, you should be pleased to know that I have completed the preliminary analysis which you requested two evenings ago. The ancillary results in particular have significant relevance to your current situation." "Huh? I don't recall asking you to do anything like that recently." "That is incorrect. You asked if I could determine the cause of the persistent changes to your outward appearance which have been happening consistently during the Guardian detransformation sequence. You were quite emphatic about it at the time, if you will recall." Ranma paused for a moment before focusing on the brush in her hand. "Oh, the hair ... right. What did you find out? This is **really** starting to bug me." "The analysis is definitely non-trivial, Ranma, and has consumed a significant portion of my available computational resources these past two days. The potential permutations and resulting vectors were considerable and my analysis is nowhere near completion by any means. However, the result set has been narrowed to a

point where I can state with some confidence the root cause of the primary interaction mechanism, as well as placing any further detailed analysis on a lower priority task for internal resource allocations.” Ranma sighed to herself, tying her hair back in a low ponytail. “Go on ...” “The Jusenkyō transformation sequence evidently performs the minimal amount of physical change required to complete its assigned parameters. In your particular case it transmorphs the Y chromosome containing the male SRY gender gene into an X chromosome before applying the form transformation algorithm to the target body. This produces the persistence in form which is not dependent on maintaining an active transmorph field about the target during the period following the trigger activation. When the complementing trigger is invoked, the changes to the body’s chromosome structure are reversed using the same basic sequence logic.”

Ranma struggled to follow the technicalities before shaking her head in frustration. “Eiko, you’re **really** losing me here.”

“I’m sorry, Ranma, but it is important for you to understand the basic mechanism involved. The consequences of how your particular Jusenkyō curse operates means that if something had somehow removed your curse while you were in your female form, you would **not** have reverted to your male body as a result – the changes to your form are being performed at the physical cellular level instead of simply being maintained by a field of magical force.” Ranma paused for a moment in thought, and then blanched. “You mean right now I’m really a **girl**? For REAL!?”

“On a biological level that is correct. Your current body exhibits strictly female characteristics, from biochemistry and kinesiology to neurophysiology. When your male form is restored it will exhibit only male characteristics in a similar manner. This is significant considering how the two transformation magics have interacted with each other. One of the side effects of the Jusenkyō transformation is the introduction of quiescent target markers in your genetic structure. These markers are used by the Jusenkyō transformation magic to determine which chromosomes are targeted by the initial transmorph routine and are indirectly responsible for the persistent changes to your appearance during the Guardian detransformation sequence.” “Huh?”

“Indeed. During your imprinting and the initial transformation attempt, the Guardian transformation magic detected the existence of these foreign markers in your system. Security routines originally designed to counteract deliberate genetic tampering were brought into play and the information contained in these ‘tainted’ genes was simply ignored when your permanent template was created and stored. This resulted in both conflicting and missing characteristic data for those physical traits which you inherited primarily from your paternal side – your hair color being one of the most obvious instances. The color change can be attributed to your mother, since red hair is contained in a recessive gene in the unmarked female section of your X chromosome structure, and the change in length and style can be attributed to missing data being initialized to default values when your permanent template was created. This permanent template is created only once, and since the destransformation magic uses this template to restore your appearance the red hair has become integrated into it.” Ranma growled. “Does this mean that when I finally get my male form back I’ll be stuck with the same long red hair as well?”

“Not at all. The Jusenkyō magic should restore the untemplated genetic data contained in the marked chromosomes without error. This will correct the hair color for certain; whether it can restore its accustomed length as well will require further detailed analysis of the vector result set. One additional and highly relevant item of data did come to light during this analysis, however.” “What could that be? So far you haven’t exactly been giving me any good news here, Eiko.”

“I believe you will be quite pleased to know this particular datum, Ranma. The stasis field currently integrated in the Jusenkyō transformation routine – the ‘lock’ on your ‘curse’ – is exhibiting a slight but measurable curve of decay. Even if you are unsuccessful in learning the mechanisms required to control the transformation magics – something I consider highly unlikely given your already demonstrated abilities – the ‘lock’ will eventually dissipate entirely on its own.”

Ranma's eyes lit up. "YES! How long?"

"Given the current rate of decay and assuming no other countervailing forces are brought to play in the interim, the stasis field will self-dissipate in approximately seventy one months, seventeen days, eleven hours, forty two minutes, and twenty one point three eight zero nine nine seven seconds."

Ranma thought furiously for a moment before sagging. "That's damn near six years, Eiko." "Correct. A relatively short period of time, is it not?" "Eiko, that's SIX YEARS."

"So? I fail to see how you could possibly react in any negative manner from being informed of this datum. Knowing that you will not be restricted to your female form for any significant portion of your term as Guardian should be a considerable and significant morale boost." "Well, when you put it **that way** ..." "I do indeed."

"But there's no WAY I'm just going to wait around for that to happen. I'll go stark raving bonkers if I have to remain stuck as a girl for the next six years." "I would be sorely disappointed in you if you had been content to wait. This should give you considerable incentive to concentrate seriously on the mental aspects of your training." "Yeah. If that's what required for me to learn how to control the curse, then that's what I'm going to do." Ranma paused for a couple of seconds before chuckling. "Why do I get the feeling I just agreed to do lots of schoolwork the next couple of years?" Eiko quite wisely declined to respond.

Ranma sighed contentedly, putting her empty bowl down on the table. Not having to constantly fight for her food was something she was rapidly getting used to, and it was **nice**. It didn't hurt that Kumiko was just as good a cook as Kasumi, either. She snickered quietly to herself – Mom had gotten really bent out of shape when Kumiko chased her out of the kitchen before breakfast.

It looked like she wasn't the only one who would have to get used to the sudden change in lifestyle.

"Ranma?"

"Yes, Grandma?"

"Have you decided what you're going to take with you on your trip yet? There really isn't much time left before you'll have to leave for the airport to catch your flight." "Huh?" Ranma gave her grandmother a puzzled look. "The flight doesn't leave until around six – that's almost ten hours from now."

"It'll be closer to five and a half hours, actually," Aiko replied with a smile. "You'll need to leave the house by one thirty to allow for all of the possible lines and delays at the airport." "Why do you need that much time? You just show up at the airport and get on the plane, right?" Ranma glowered in response to everyone else's snickering. "Ranma," Midori said, trying hard to suppress her giggles, "have you ever flown before?" "All the time ... back and forth across Nerima," Ranma replied with a smirk. Midori winced. "I meant; have you ever taken any commercial flights?" Ranma shook her head. "Not really. We hopped a transport back to Tokyo once from the big American base down in Okinawa, but that and the little jet ride last week are the only plane rides I've taken anywhere."

"I didn't think you had," Midori said. "Ranma, airports can seem like a big waste of time, but you still have to allow for any number of potential delays. Luggage check-in is probably the worst – and speaking of which, we should probably get a head start on packing for the trip." "I don't see why you're so worried, Midori," Ranma replied. "We don't need any of the camping gear I usually carry, so all we have to do is grab three or four outfits and a toothbrush a piece. Ten minutes, tops."

Ranma was puzzled why **everyone** at the table was giving her the same incredulous look.

**Nerima**

"Did you hear? Nabiki-sempai was arrested last night." "No!"

"Yes, my cousin's sister's boyfriend was walking by Tendō-ke last night and saw sempai being hauled off in a police car."

"Oooh, Nyoko-chan has got to hear about this." -----

"Nyoko-chan, did you hear? Tendō-san was arrested last night." "Really? About **time** someone put those

bitches in their place.” “Yeah, I bet she took photos of the wrong person.” “Wouldn’t put it past her.” “Nope.”

-----  
“Tsuki-chan!”

“Emi-chan!”

“Did you hear? The Tendōs were arrested last night after a big fight.” “But there **always** a fight going on over there – Kāsan has been complaining about the noise for **months**.”

“Well, maybe someone got really hurt this time.” “THAT wouldn’t surprise me. Sotaru-kun lost his spot on the team because that Akane bitch fractured three of his ribs in one of their morning melees last year.”

“Yeah, she was so totally out of control until Ranma-kun showed up.” “Ranma-kun ...”

>Sigh.<

>Sigh.<

-----  
“Yuma-chan, you **have** to hear this!” “I’m busy right now, Rui-chan.”

“Then I don’t suppose you want to hear how all the Tendōs were arrested last night.”

“WHAT?!?”

“Yup – I heard they put four people in the hospital before the cops could stop them.” “But Akane-chan would never do something like that.” “Oh, **really**? Remember how violent she was before Ranma-kun showed up, and how she always beats him up for no reason.”

“Well, I suppose ...”

“And you know how long Ranma-kun’s been missing. I bet it didn’t take any effort at all for Nabiki-sempai to get Akane-chan to do her dirty work for her.” “Ranma-kun ...”

>Sigh.<

>Sigh.<

-----  
Tatewaki ignored the morning chatter going on around him. He had eyes for only one person, and today he would **finally** show Akane Tendō the depths of his devotion. He took a moment to brush a speck of lint off his pristine keikogi before taking his accustomed position in the middle of the Furinkan courtyard. He waited.

... and waited.

... and waited.

There were a mere two minutes left before the start of class when the usual Monday morning routine was shattered by the arrival of three police cars and a van. A half dozen uniformed officers and a five-man SWAT team quickly disembarked their vehicles. Tatewaki smirked. It looked like someone had **finally** gotten tired of his father’s ... peculiarities. The smirk turned to astonishment when the SWAT team took positions in a semi-circle around **him** – Plexiglas shields and drawn tasers at the ready.

“Tatewaki Kuno, you are under arrest,” one of the uniformed officers caroled out from behind the SWAT team members.

Tatewaki frowned – this was **not** in the script. Even so, he knew what was expected of him.

“My good officer, there must be some mistake. The Blue Thunder of Furinkan upholds all that is right and just and the House of Kuno is a respected pillar of the community – nay, a most noble house of ancient lineage. It is not possible for one such as I to be culpable of misdeeds which would require such an action.”

“I repeat, you are under arrest,” the officer replied. “Put down your weapon and surrender peaceably or we will be required to employ force. You have thirty seconds to comply.” “My good officer, may I inquire your name and rank to establish your bona fides?” “I am Lieutenant Hideaki Sato of the Chiyoda-ku western precinct. You now have twenty seconds to comply.”

“Thank you, Sato-san. If I may please have a moment to cogitate on this unexpected and highly irregular

development?" Tatewaki waited for the officer to nod before carefully and slowly lowering himself to the ground. He placed his bokken out to the side before crossing his arms. "Sir?" One of the SWAT team members whispered up to the Lieutenant. "Wait for it, Sergeant."

Tatewaki scowled in thought – **how** had things gotten this out of hand? He made a big show of "thinking", but he was also doing so for real under the façade. The games he had been playing with Akane-san and Ranma-kun's girl form over the last year were essentially harmless, and he always made sure to stay in character while in public – although that had been difficult at times considering how often Ranma-kun had changed genders right in front of him. Given the ease in which he was always being "defeated" by the pair, he doubted THAT could be the cause of his current predicament. The presence of Chiyoda-ku officers strongly suggested that the Imperial House was now involved, yet there HAD to be another new player in the field for that to happen – the House simply didn't involve itself in the normal affairs of the major clans. His family's status as a cadet branch of the Mori would do him little stead if the Imperial House was now actively participating. DAMN, he should have paid closer attention to the other students' chatter this morning – he had been too lost in the part and, now that he thought about it, there **had** been something different about the usual rumors today. He desperately needed to find out what was actually going on. A red call to his little sister would definitely be warranted under the circumstances, and no one could possibly break the code they used. They could ill afford for him to be "on the shelf" for any appreciable length of time – the recent infrequent youma attacks would not halt simply because he was not around to perform his sworn duty. Time to cut losses as far down as possible. Tatewaki stood without retrieving his bokken. Assuming his usual "arrogantly stupid" expression, he addressed the officer in charge.

"Sato-san, you may accompany me to your precinct where I will personally ascertain the veracity of the allegations against the most noble Blue Thunder of Furinkan. Do you wish to provide the transportation to said establishment, or shall I command our driver to procure the family limousine and escort our noble personages in the style more befitting those of our station?" Lieutenant Sato boggled. "Is this guy for real?"

"Well, that was certainly anticlimactic," Hiroyoshi quipped, lowering his pair of binoculars after seeing Tatewaki Kuno calmly climb into one of the patrol cars without a fight. "Certainly was," Ishihara replied. "I was sure we would have seen **some** sort of fireworks." "Me too. He's still just as much a loon as ever, though ... did you catch his last comment to the Lieutenant?"

"I'm not as good a lip reader as you are, Hiro-san, you know that." Hiroyoshi chuckled. "He asked if he should have his limo brought around for the trip to the precinct."

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"That's ..." Ishihara shook his head. "I wonder if most of these old samurai clans have been inbreeding."

"You would think so, considering how some of them act." Their conversation was interrupted by several large booms originating from inside the school building.

"That's got to be the principal. Looks like the SWAT team get to try out the new tasers after all." Hiroyoshi laughed for a moment before replying. "Well, it looks like this part of the op is running smoothly. Next is a visit to our local snitch to find out why he didn't file a report last night."

## Suginami

"Moooooooooom!"

"\*Please\*, Ranma-chan," Nodoka asked, her eyes filled with longing. "I've barely found you and now you're going away again for almost an entire month. I'd really like to know my daughter – my **real** daughter – a little better before she left." Ranma stared at her mother for several seconds, seeing the fatigue and tension in her posture and the undisguised yearning in her eyes. What's more, she could **feel** the depths of her mother's pride and love just under the surface, along with another emotion she



was all too familiar with herself.

Loneliness.

She exhaled and sagged a little in place. “Sure,” she replied, nodding her head. “Just – no frilly dresses this time, okay?”

“Certainly, dear,” Nodoka said. “Coordinates are all we have time for today anyway. Midori- chan?”

“Coming, Yamada-san.”

“Midori-chan?” Nodoka asked softly. “I know it’s a lot to ask of you right now, and I realize I haven’t yet earned the right, but ... given the circumstances ... do you think you could call me ... mother?”

Midori gave the elder woman a brief glare before glancing over to her new spouse. As much as she wanted to remain angry at the ex-Saotome matriarch for all the crap in Ranma’s life which she could have prevented, the expression on Ranma’s face made the decision ridiculously easy to make.

“Okāsan,” she acknowledged with a nod.

“Thank you, dear.”

The three women left Yamada-ke a minute later and headed out towards Ginza – on their way to one of Ranma’s better known and least-welcomed purgatories. Shopping.

## Shiba

[Gate, respond on a secure channel as before.] [Have you completed the analysis of the status update, Glaive?]

[I have. I have also determined it is currently not possible to effect proper repairs to my Guardian without assistance. Is your Guardian capable of generating forces of the fourth order?] [At the moment she is not.]

[This puts me in an untenable position, Gate. The planetary mana taps currently in place are actively inhibiting the full restoration of my Guardian’s functionality. These taps must be removed. I am not capable of generating sufficient force to disable these links without significant risk to my Guardian of permanent discorporation – an action prohibited by my primary core directives. A properly constructed fourth-order field applied externally would remove the mana taps without such a risk.]

[Glaive, Khronos is insufficiently trained to generate fourth-order fields unaided at the present time. However, she is certainly capable of channeling and directing such a force. We will require the assistance of Crystal to actually generate the correct field.] [This is unacceptable.]

[Compute the alternatives, Glaive.]

The communications link was disconnected without warning.

## Nerima

Kasumi sat amid the wreckage of the house and gazed vacantly at the walls. And wreckage was definitely the proper term to use in describing the condition of the house’s interior – the uniformed quartet had been decidedly ungentle in their enthusiastic search for contraband the previous night and had left **nothing**, not a single solitary item, undisturbed. Fortunately they had not allowed themselves to indulge in overtly wanton destruction, since most of the china and breakable personal belongings around the house were still intact. Thank goodness for small favors.

But that’s **all** it had been – a small favor. The larger problems still remained, and they would not solve themselves simply by her sitting and staring at them. Indeed, they would actually become worse if left alone for any length of time. Kasumi was painfully aware of the magnitude of the task sitting before her. It was all too likely she would be forced to choose which part of her family to save, since attempting to rescue them all would almost certainly result in her not being able to save **any**. The value of Tendō-ke, even if she could get the assessed value now, wouldn’t even begin to cover the likely fines levied against Nabiki if she were to be convicted of trafficking in pornography – let alone any other charges levied against her. Adding in the family’s remaining trust fund wouldn’t up the total

sufficiently either. No, outside assistance will be required, and her options at this point were

extremely limited.

One thing was for certain, however. She wouldn't be able to get **anything** for Tendō-ke if the place continued to appear as if a typhoon had just blown through it. Groaning, Kasumi struggled to her feet and began the arduous task of restoring some semblance of order to the residence.

## Ginza

Ranma glared at the image in the mirror in front of her. She'd **never** understood why women made such a big deal out of shopping and today's foray did nothing to bring her closer to enlightenment. What was so hard about grabbing several pairs of pants and shirts if you already knew your own sizes? And what **possible** difference did the color of your underwear make when no one could see them beneath what you wore anyway? Thank goodness they were running under a time limit today – her Mom had always tried to make previous shopping trips with "Ranko" into full day affairs. Bleh. She turned her attention back to the mirror and suppressed a shudder. In a way this particular outfit was partially her own damned fault. She'd surprised both Midori and her mother by hunting down a pair of classic knee-high leather boots with two-inch heels before they had even begun to look through the clothes racks. Ranma had been horrified at the price of a single pair, which was even higher than the ridiculously high allowance she had received the other day. Fortunately, she could justify it as a necessary training expense, which it in fact was, and she **did** have more than enough to easily cover the cost of two pairs – the oshugi she and Midori had received at yesterday's wedding had been literally mind-boggling. Unfortunately, once she had bought the boots she had to fend off a steady stream of dresses and skirt outfits selected for her by her mother. She had planned on just buying a couple pairs of pants with a half-dozen of loose-fitting shirts and calling it Fred, but her mother had taken her boots purchase as a sign she was actually **interested** in girl fashions and had immediately begun picking out outfits on that basis. Hence, her current mess. "How does it fit, dear?"

Ranma took a deep breath and then stepped out of the changing room. As much as she disliked the whole process, the way her mother's eyes lit up like they were at the moment made it all bearable. Barely. And she **did** have to admit she looked really good in most of the outfits her mom had picked out – this in particular was one of the nicer sets she had tried on so far. The black long-sleeved silk blouse was comfortable and the slightly blousy bishop sleeves didn't restrict her upper-body movement like most of the other tops had, while the red sleeveless Merino wool vest gave the outfit warmth without adding much in the way of either bulk or

weight. The black wool skirt was cut with a classic straight flare, the hem dropped down to the top of her boots, and the total effect was stunning in its simplicity. More importantly, both the blouse and the skirt left her with a large degree of freedom of movement, and the skirt was long enough that Ranma could almost ignore the fact that it **was** a skirt and not a pair of slacks. "Oh, that's quite lovely, dear. Don't change out of it right away," Nodoka said, "there's a coat and hat I saw earlier that will go just perfectly with that outfit. Midori-chan, why don't you try on the green midi dress with those lace-up boots you bought earlier. I'll be right back." The kimono-clad woman hustled off without waiting for a response. Ranma stared at her mother's back for a moment with a frown. If only she wasn't trying so **hard** ...

She sighed softly to herself and then stepped back away from the mirrors to perform a couple of quick high side snap-kicks. Good – she hadn't felt any significant constrictions in her moves from the skirt. She was glad she had bought the boots; it would take her a while to get used to the changes in balance and the noticeable differences in both traction and flexibility. She'd already started a mental list of moves that would have to be altered on account of the new footwear. Her thoughts were interrupted by Midori's giggles. "I'm not sure the regular manufacturers take 'must survive a martial arts fight' into account when they design clothes, Ranma," Midori said with a chuckle. "Well, they should," Ranma replied. A small scowl forced its way onto the redhead's lips. She leaned over sideways and pulled her left leg up into a static side kick stance while facing the mirror. It only took one snap kick for her to realize what had caught her attention. She quickly dropped the stance and straightened up with a slight blush. Okay, so

maybe the color of her underwear **did** matter in certain circumstances.

## **Nerima**

Hiroyoshi and Ishihara walked casually up to a yatai whose banner proudly proclaimed it was the home of “Yoshi’s American Hot Dogs”. They both took a chair at one end of the cart – the lunchtime rush hadn’t begun yet so the two suited officers were the vendor’s only customers at the moment. Ishihara gave the yatai’s owner/cook a quick once-over and immediately saw why he would make a good source of local gossip and information – the man was fairly nondescript in nearly every way except his facial expressions; medium height, slightly heavy build, black hair, brown eyes, and a slightly-rounded face that had no apparent distinguishing features to it. “Shoichi-san! Welcome! I thought I might see you here today,” the yatai vendor exclaimed with a huge smile. “How have you and your lovely family been faring lately?”

“Quite well, thank you,” Hiroyoshi replied. “Yoshi-san, this is Hideaki Ishihara, a good friend of mine from the office. He recently transferred over to our division so I thought I would introduce him to one of the best places to eat in all of Nerima.” Yoshi bowed to each of the officers. “You are too kind, Shoichi-san. What can I get for you two gentlemen today?”

“Two Ballpark Specials if you would, Yoshi-san,” Hiroyoshi said. Yoshi moved over to the grill with a nod and began pulling out a variety of ingredients. “Yoshi-san, I was a little troubled to discover you had missed a delivery to the office last night. I do hope it was just a simple misunderstanding over the contents of the order.” “I’m afraid not, Shoichi-san. It pains me to inform you that your office has managed to accumulate a rather sizable tab over the last two months, and it has grown to the point that I simply cannot afford to ignore it any longer.” “You didn’t by chance manage to upset Chiyo-chan in accounting again, did you Yoshi-san?” “No, Shoichi-san, I am fairly certain that whatever the inadvertent error is, it is not a result of any actions on my part.”

“I see,” Hiroyoshi replied with a rapidly developing scowl. “I do know for a fact all of your previous invoices were submitted properly to accounting, Yoshi-san, so I don’t understand what could have happened to cause such a delay in payment. Unfortunately, this is an extremely inconvenient time for something like this to occur.” The cook shrugged his shoulders. “Everyone has their own concerns to deal with, Shoichi-san. After all, a kimono without a sleeve can’t be thrown around.” Hiroyoshi sighed. “Yeah, I can see that. Yoshi-san, you have my word this situation will be resolved before the end of the week.”

Yoshi nodded in acknowledgement. “In that case I will leave it entirely in your capable hands, Shoichi-san, and think nothing more of this unfortunate misunderstanding.” The stocky cook proceeded to place the now completed orders in front of the two officers. Hiroyoshi chuckled when he saw the skeptical look Ishihara was giving the food sitting in front of him. “It’s a type of sausage the Americans call a hot dog, Ishi-san. This particular variety is a ‘jumbo chili-cheese dog’. You eat it with your fingers.” “But,” Ishihara replied with a puzzled tone. “How do you keep all of the sauce from falling out?” “You don’t.”

“Oh. And these are ...”

“French fried potatoes. You use those to scoop up the sauce that falls out of the hot dog. Man, you’ve really been hiding in a deep hole somewhere, haven’t you?” “Hey, it’s not **my** fault I was working nights for the last couple of years, and you know I’ve never really kept up on American culture all that much in the past anyway.” Hiroyoshi shook his head. “Yeah, but still...” The two suited officers fell silent as they began eating the messy concoctions. Hiroyoshi quickly palmed the packet of data discs concealed beneath his hot dog’s serving basket before the yatai could fill up with other lunchtime customers.

## **Chiyoda-ku Western Police Precinct**

Tatewaki was once again thankful for every method acting session he ever had. It was taking every single bit of concentration and composure he was capable of for him to remain in character without giving his interrogators any reason to “chastise” him over these last couple of hours, and their frustration

was beginning to show. He was treading a very delicate line at the moment; he couldn't afford to appear too rational – not after playing the buffoon in public for so long – yet at the same time he had no desire to let the two officers use him for a punching bag. It wasn't that he couldn't take a hit. Between the evening youma patrols and his almost daily battles with Akane-san or Ranma-kun he had toughened up considerably; it was that he had no illusions on how "fair" the two officers would play. And there was certainly a big advantage in being thought of as a buffoon by the general public. His two interrogators would be horrified if they knew just how much information he had just gleaned from this little session. He had taken great pleasure in deliberately misunderstanding virtually every question thrown at him, and the officers had become increasingly obvious with their questions in an attempt to make this "dense as a brick idiot" understand what they wanted to know.

His constant quoting of classical poetry did nothing to help the two officers' moods, either. At least he now knew this was all connected with Ranma-kun's recent absence somehow. Evidently the Sautome clan was connected higher than he had ever imagined; the Imperial House did not make a habit of involving itself in isolated quarrels between minor clans. Also, the fact that his sister had failed to make any connection between the Sautome clan and the Imperial family was quite significant in of itself. "Ahhhhh, I give up. SERGEANT!"

Tatewaki carefully hid a smirk. It appeared as if his delaying tactics had finally paid off. Now, hopefully, he could get a few uninterrupted minutes to himself; his sister definitely needed to know about the drastic change in the current situation. "Yes, Sir?"

"Take this ... **gentleman** ... and put him with the other idiot." Tatewaki rose and put on his best imperious expression. "Is this how the Imperial Government treats the scions of society? How can one possibly polish the twofold spirit heart and mind in such ... paltry ... surroundings? Did not the immortal Musashi himself state that the laws of the world depart from the true Way?"

"Yeah, yeah, just follow me – I'll take you to a room more befitting to your station." "Truly? Then you must take me to such accommodations at once." Tatewaki was hard put not to laugh at the expressions on the faces of the two interrogating officers as he left the room. The trek down the hallway was short. The desk sergeant unlocked and opened the third door to the left and then gestured with his free hand. "In here."

Tatewaki made a show of hesitating after a brief glimpse through the open doorway. "This appears no different than that other retched room. You were instructed to take me to more suitable accommodations."

"\*IN\*, you moron." The sergeant put his hand in the small of Tatewaki's back and shoved, hard – a move the youngster was fully expecting. He pushed off with the flow of the shove and landed with a big and noisy bellyflop in the middle of the room. He waited as if stunned by the apparently awkward landing until he heard the door close and lock behind him before he smoothly rolled up into a sitting position. "Hello ... Brother."

Tatewaki's eyes widened. His sister was right here, sitting calmly on a rather uncomfortable looking bench along side the far wall.

This ... complicated things tremendously.

## **Ginza**

"So, what about all that 'getting ready' you were talking about earlier?" Ranma said between bites of her outrageously oversized eggroll.

"Obāsama called a little while ago while you were still in the restroom," Midori replied after taking a moment to finish off the last bit of her yakisoba. "Jun and Naomi are handling the packing for us and she's having a car sent to meet us at around quarter to three to take us directly to the airport. The whole crew should already be there by then to see us off." Ranma barely suppressed a shudder – the extra time gained would undoubtedly be put to "good use" by her mother to extend this shopping expedition even further. Still, she couldn't deny the time they'd spent together this morning was making her mother extremely happy. Ranma had caused her mother an immense amount of pain over the last

year with the whole “Ranko” fiasco, and she was willing to go to almost any length to make it up to her. Even if it meant wasting time shopping for more unnecessary girl clothes.

## Somewhere In Tokyo Traffic

“What do you mean there’s a hold on the Kuwabara account?” Ishihara was glad for once they were firmly stuck in traffic. His partner looked like he was about to rip the steering wheel right off the column – at least if he did that now they wouldn’t have to worry about crashing into anything.

“I can’t believe ... Didn’t that idiot see this project was blue flagged?” Ishihara looked back down to the screen of his laptop and the blinking dialog box waiting for an encryption key. They could certainly break the protection if they took the disc back to the office and set the code jocks loose on it, but doing so would take time – a lot of time. “I don’t care if Ito-baka is just trying to follow what he thinks are the regulations – routine yearly audits do NOT take priority over field ops, and there is nothing ‘routine’ on taking over sixty days to clear an outstanding account in the first place.” Ishihara looked back over at his partner and could almost literally see the steam coming out of Hiroyoshi’s ears.

“That was years ago and the baka should have gotten over it by now. Chiyo-chan, listen to me; this is what you’re going to do. You are going to drop everything ... and I do mean **everything**, take that file and march it right up to the Old Man himself for approval. Tell him it’s part of Chameleon. The instant that happens – and it will happen, let me assure you – you are going to personally see to it that Yoshi-san’s account is made current, now. You got all that?” “...”

“Don’t you worry, Chiyo-chan. This project probably has a **lot** of eyes on it, and by the time the Old Man is through with him Ito-baka will be lucky to be cleaning sewers in Wakkanai.”

“...”

“That’s my girl – now go get hopping.” Hiroyoshi tapped his earpiece and disconnected the call. “Stupid wannabe tin-horn tyrant ... it just **figures** Ito’s somehow involved in screwing thing up again.” He saw an opening in the traffic and gunned the car down a side street. “I take it this has happened to you in the past?” “Unfortunately,” Hiroyoshi replied with a growl. “Ito-baka really likes to throw his weight around and this isn’t the first time he’s gotten in the way of one of my ops.” “Then why is he still ...”

“He just happens to be the comptroller’s brother-in-law ... which isn’t going to save his ass this time.”

“Oh.” Ishihara glanced down at his laptop and grimaced. “Damn, the reception is lousy here – I just dropped off the net.”

Hiroyoshi nodded. “I’m not surprised; we keep losing aials and towers because of all the fights that happen around here. There should be an empty safe house about three kilometers away and I’m fairly sure it has a level four tap you can plug in to. It shouldn’t take all that long to get there.”

## Ginza

“So is there anything else here you want to see before we try our luck next door at Mitsukoshi?” Nodoka asked her two “daughters”. She was looking forward to seeing what different fashion lines were being carried by the current store’s largest rival. Ranma sighed softly to herself. Great ... more girl clothes to try on. “Okāsan, doesn’t Matsuya have a travel agency somewhere on the main floor?” “I believe so, Midori-chan,” Nodoka replied. “Looking for some reading material for the flight?” “Yes, amongst other things,” Midori said with a nod. “I doubt we’ll be able to get to Aspen, but there’s no way I’m going to miss hitting the slopes at Squaw Valley at least once while we’re over there. At the very least, a travel agent should be able to tell me what the snowpack is like.” “Geez, Midori,” Ranma responded with a friendly smirk on her face. “If you wanted to go on a training trip to work on your cold weather combat techniques, all you had to do was ask ...” “Ranma, Squaw Valley is a ski resort.”

“Oh.”

## Somewhere in Tokyo

Hiroyoshi stared out the window of the penthouse and watched the clouds float by in the crisp March

afternoon. It certainly was taking time for the office to clear up Yoshi's account. He glanced at his watch and grimaced. Two p.m. This was taking entirely too long. He was nearly halfway through his pack of cigarettes when a soft chime sounded from his partner's laptop. Finally! Walking over to the table, Hiroyoshi lurked over his partner's shoulder while the decrypted file began scrolling onto the screen. "Let's see ... two cars, four uniforms ... that can't be right ..." "Jeez, Hiro-kun, take a seat already," Ishihara grumbled. "Yeah yeah – sorry bout that." Hiroyoshi fumbled for a second, his eyes never leaving the screen, before he snagged a chair and sat down next to his partner. The file was relatively short and the end quickly scrolled into view. Hiroyoshi scowled. "That isn't right. The father and the youngest Tendō girl were never part of the op ... and why in kami-sama's name did they send two full cars there to begin with?" "I think you missed this little bit," Ishihara said. He pointed out a particular sentence near the end of the file.

"Wha... SHIT," Hiroyoshi exclaimed. "Quick, hack through Chiyoda East's back door and pull up last night's duty assignments."

"Already on it," Ishihara replied, his fingers flying over the laptop's keyboard. Two minutes later the relevant file was displayed for the two officers' scrutiny. Ishihara jumped – along with the laptop – when his partner's hand slammed into the table with a loud bang. "DAMN IT ALL ..." Hiroyoshi yelled. His chair flew back from the table and landed with a crash against the far wall when he stood and forcibly kicked the innocent item of furniture out of his way.

"I take it you know who this Lieutenant Hiyashi is," Ishihara said, trying to get the ringing out of his left ear. "He's the leader of Captain Tanaka's little pet yak hunter squad," Hiroyoshi growled back. "Please, **please**, tell me he wasn't teaming up with that fat pervert Nakagawa on this."

"I'm afraid so," Ishihara replied after double checking the assignment roster once more. "Lieutenant Hiyashi, Sergeant Nakagawa, Officer Kosugi and Officer Murai." "\$@###\$%^\*@\$\*%\$^#@\$.!!!!!" Hiroyoshi's spent the next minute expressing highly creative and varied expletives at a relatively high volume. He finally wound down enough to regain some semblance of coherency. "There's no way in hell Hiyashi could have been assigned to this op accidentally ... I think it's time for Captain Tanaka to take a long overdue retirement." "Kami-sama, Hiro-kun," Ishihara said. "Are things really that far gone over something this small?"

"You don't know how high up the food chain this goes, Ishi-kun," Hiroyoshi replied. "Rumors are the Son of Heaven himself had a direct hand in this project." "Damn, that sucks."

"No shit Sherlock. Start downloading the floorplans of Chiyoda East along with complete duty rosters and assignment lists from the time of the arrest last night up to now. Make sure you get the list of any special equipment they have on hand. I'm going to see if any female officers are loose at the moment – hopefully Shigeki and Yosano are back from Yokohama by now." "If we're planning on staging a jailbreak, shouldn't we call this in to the Old Man first? And if you don't stop pacing you're going to wear a hole in that carpet." "Op plan first," Hiroyoshi replied, glaring briefly at his partner. "It's too late now to prevent anything more from happening to those girls that hasn't already been done and an extra hour or two isn't really going to change that much. If I don't hand in a comprehensive contingency plan with the status report to the Old Man, I'll be lucky just to clean sewers in Wakkanai along side of Ito-baka when it's all said and done."

"Hiro-san, do you remember what you said last night after we visited the chef girl?" "I know, I know – be careful what you wish for."

**Shuto Expressway, Minato-ku**

"Five minutes to Haneda, ma'am."

"Thank you, Genjo-kun," Midori replied. Ranma took a quick look out the limo's tinted window. "Err ... weren't we supposed to leave from ... what was it called ... Narita? I coulda sworn that's what the tickets said ..."

"Obāsama has one of the company helicopters waiting for us, Ranma," Midori said. "It'll be

rather close, but we should be able to make it from Haneda to Narita before our flight leaves.” “You should have plenty of leeway, ma’am,” the family chauffeur added. “Yamada-dono co- opted the company’s Bell 230 – it will zip you out to New Tokyo International in less than twenty minutes, and Yamada-dono mentioned the plane had been chartered especially for your trip.”

“Ah ... okay,” Ranma replied.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, dear,” Nodoka said. “It sounds like Mother has taken all the details into account as usual. And speaking of which, Midori-chan, I presume you and Ranma-chan have already finished all of your schoolwork for the year, correct?” “Actually, Okāsan, finals aren’t until next week if I remember correctly,” Midori replied. “Since we were all running about watching Ranma during the normal school year, Obāsama made some arrangement with Hikaru Hoshi to home school us for the whole year – which gives us until Golden Week to get this year’s tests in.” “Ah, man ... I totally forgot about finals,” Ranma said, slapping her forehead once with the palm of a hand. “And I sure don’t look forward to going back to Furinkan and dealing with either Kuno-baka while I’m stuck in my girl-form like this.” “Ranma, I’m fairly certain Obāsama has already enrolled you in Hikaru Hoshi for next year,” Midori said, “and I doubt that she’d want or even allow you to return to that madhouse under any circumstances. If you’d like, both Sis and I can help you study for this year’s finals when we get back from the States.”

“Yeah, I guess ...” Ranma replied with a sigh. “I’ll admit it’ll be nice not having to fight the baka for our test scores or have them broadcast all over Tokyo like what happened last year.” “He did ... **what?!?**”

“Hey, it’s no big deal, Mom. Principal Pineapplehead was always pulling weird crap like that, but it never amounted to anything I couldn’t handle. It was more ... irritating than anything else.”

“I see ... I think ...”

“It’s just school, Mom ... not like it was anything really important, after all.” “Daughter, while I’ve been made to understand that your past experience with school has been ... less than optimal, I do hope you can treat your education with more respect in the future. What you learn now carries considerable weight during your adult life, you know.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to see that, Mom.” Ranma suppressed a chuckle. “Especially if it’s the only way I’ve got to learn how to unlock my curse before those six years are up.” “I am most pleased that you no longer consider willful ignorance to be a valuable and desirable personality trait, Ranma.”

“Yeah, yeah, Eiko ...yuck it up while you can.” Midori shook her head. “I don’t understand how you could’ve possibly learned anything in that Nerima nuthouse, Ranma. I’m really looking forward to showing you what a normal school life is all about.”

“Ah, c’mon, Midori – it wasn’t that bad.” “Ranma, I don’t think that there’s another school in the entire *country* that tries to teach someone how to swim by throwing them in a pool with a live shark ...”

“**WHAT?!?**” Nodoka exclaimed in shock. “... or one that plants explosives in the courtyard to force their student to be tardy so they can be ‘punished’ ...”

“That’s pretty easy training, Midori.”

“... or hires a ki vampire as a teacher ...” “Hey, Ninomiya was really Happosai’s problem.” “... not to mention Tatewaki and the whole Hentai Horde fiasco.” “Yeah, I’ll admit that whole thing was pretty dumb all right.” “Ranma-chan, I hope it wasn’t like that all the time at your old school,” Nodoka asked, anger readily apparent in her voice.

“Not really, Mom,” Ranma replied. “It could get kind of silly at times, but mostly it was just boring as all heck.”

“We’ve arrived at Haneda heliport, Ladies,” Genjo called out from the driver’s seat. The limousine rolled to a gentle stop, which put a definite halt to the current conversation.

## **Nerima**

“Do you think this will be okay?”

“C’mon, Yuri-chan, you know it’s the only way we’ll ever find out what’s going on,” Yuka replied. “The rumors this morning were bad enough; having both Akane-chan and Nabiki-san absent

today just made everything worse.” “I just can’t believe the Police are actually doing something after all this time,” Sayuri said. “Considering all the crazy things that have happened over the last year, why would they start getting involved now?”

“Well, that’s one of the things we need to find out, ne?” “I guess,” Sayuri replied with a small grimace. She actually wouldn’t mind if someone had finally put Akane’s cold-hearted bitch of a sister in her place, but to think that Akane might have gotten caught up in it as well ...

The two girls walked the rest of the way in silence.

Kasumi groaned when she heard the knocking at the front door. She had been working virtually non-stop for over seven hours and she still had entirely too much left to do before the house could be considered even close to “presentable”. Still, maybe a brief break **was** in order. She just hoped it wasn’t any of the neighbors. Unfortunately, who she saw when she opened the door was just about as bad. She quickly plastered a smile on her face and hoped the two girls hadn’t noticed.

“Good afternoon, Sayuri-chan, Yuka-chan. How may I help you today?” Both girls hesitated briefly; neither of them had ever seen Kasumi quite this ... disheveled before.

“Errr, is Akane-chan home, Kasumi-dono?” Yuka inquired. “We didn’t see her or Nabiki-san at school today, so we thought we’d bring her today’s assignments ...” “I’m sorry, but some urgent family business came up rather suddenly,” Kasumi replied. “It would be appreciated if you could continue to take down their assignments until they return.” Sayuri began to worry; there may be some truth to the rumors after all. “Certainly, Kasumi-dono,” Yuka said with a forced smile. “Can you tell us when they’ll be back? It would be nice to be able to inform her teachers how long she will be out of school.” “Yeah,” Sayuri added. “Especially with finals coming up the middle of next week.” “I’m sorry, but this is strictly family business. I hope you understand.”

Sayuri and Yuka both nodded. “Certainly, Kasumi-dono,” Yuka replied and bowed. “We apologize for disturbing you. C’mon, Yuri-chan.” Both girls turned to leave. “I bet Akane-chan is simply stuck trying to clean up after another one of Ranma-kun’s idiotic messes as usual,” Yuka said as soft aside to the other girl. “***DON’T YOU DARE!***”

The two girls winced in unison and stopped dead in their tracks. They both turned slowly back around, eyes wide. Their eyes got even larger when they saw the steady track of tears rolling down both cheeks of Akane’s older sister. “I ...”

“I ...”

Kasumi clenched her eyes closed and took a deep, shuddering breath. It didn’t help; all Kasumi could see in her mind’s eye were horrible images of Ranma-chan’s body being crushed under tons of unyielding rock. Her eyes quickly flew back open with a visible shudder. “I ... I apologize for the unseemly outburst, Sayuri-chan, Yuka-chan,” Kasumi said, bowing to Akane’s friends. “But I beg of you; **please** do not speak ill of Ranma-kun. It would be most ... inappropriate.”

Sayuri and Yuka watched in shock as Kasumi fled back into the confines of Tendō-ke, the door slamming behind the older Tendō sister with a discordant bang. The girls’ trek back to their own homes was accomplished without another single word being exchanged.

Kasumi sat in a listless heap at the table, the latest pot of tea sitting cold and unnoticed to her side. She was mortified; she hadn’t lost her composure in public so badly in years; no matter what the cause. Not since her mother ...

She clenched her eyes closed one more with enough force to cause pain. Her entire body tensed; a small trickle of blood began to leak from each hand where her fingernails broke the skin of her palms. The images, those awful, **horrible** images, returned. “No! I **will not** dwell on the past. I will **NOT** – I **promised**. The family **must** remain together; the house **will** remain strong; no other outcome will be permitted. We **will** see this through together. I am one with the wa; our ancestors’ spirits flow through me. This, too, shall pass; the family **will** prevail; our heritage, our giri, our duty **will** be done.” Kasumi’s tears slowed and stopped as she felt the unyielding serenity which always accompanied her ancestors’ presence fill her entire being. She concentrated on banishing the



excruciating images of her little brother's death from her mind's eye – never noticing the soft white glow of earthly chi which surrounded her body in a gentle and comforting blanket.

"I'm home!"

"Yuka-chan, is that you?"

"Yes, Mom. Sayuri-chan is here too; we'll be up in my room studying for finals." "Just a moment, dear, please."

"Sure, Mom."

Yuka winced when a loud clatter erupted in the next room. "Take your time, Mom."

"Really! I wonder who put that there of all places." Yuka tried not to groan when another, sharper crash sounded. That must have been at least two dinner plates; it was a minor miracle there was still any unbroken china left in the house. Yuka's mother stepped out the hallway door after a few blessed seconds of silence. She smiled at the two youngsters for a second before noticing the somber mood surrounding the two girls. "Oh, I see you must have already heard. Well of course – you do go to school with her after all. Poor girl, I bet she's simply heartbroken over the whole affair." Yuka shook her head. Her mother wasn't making much sense, as usual. "Mom?" "Now, I know you didn't really like him that much, but you'll just have to set that aside and be supportive for the poor dear. She'll need all the help she can get from her friends now." "Mom?!? What in the world are you talking about?" "Didn't Akane-chan tell you? By your expressions I was sure she had confided to you today – you two are her best friends, after all." Yuka sighed. "Mom, Akane-chan wasn't at school today, and when we stopped by Tendō-ke on our way home we found out she wasn't there either." Her mother nodded. "Of course, of course. Poor dear, I don't blame her a bit. Well, I'm sure she would have preferred to tell you this in person, but since it's now public knowledge I think you really should know so you can help her get on with her life."

Yuka blinked when her mother handed her a section of the evening newspaper. There was a circled notice in the public announcements section, under the obituaries column for ... .. Nodoka and Ranma Saotome.

Oh.

Yuka and Sayuri looked at each other and blanched in unison. While it was nice to find out the morning's rumors about Akane-chan were all wrong, it definitely explained why Kasumi-dono had been so upset with them.

Kasumi stared at her cup. She was doing no one any good by just sitting here, and she did none of her family any good by hiding from it. No plans could be made without knowing the full extent of the charges against her father and her two sisters. It was time to face the ugly facts. She stopped for a moment to shake the dust out of her hair and rearrange her ponytail. Taking a deep breath, she opened up the arrest warrant for her sister Nabiki.

It wasn't pleasant reading.

Kasumi was barely able to finish the document before she broke down completely. Blackmail, usury, fraud, racketeering, pornography, **child** pornography, unlawful distribution of a film depicting the death of a minor, conspiracy to commit murder, **murder**. There was no way Yamada-dono would be able to help with this, even if she could be convinced to lend any assistance in the first place – a possibility made all the more unlikely given the state of affairs left by her daughter.

Kasumi doubted anyone even suspected that she was aware of the connection between the Suginami Yamada clan and the last of the Saotome. Yamada-dono had hidden it well, and whatever event which had resulted in the disowning of her middle daughter and the obliteration of all records of her birth family was buried just as deeply – although it took little effort to figure out what that event must have been once the family connection **was** made. It was simply another thing to lay directly at the feet of that **bastard** which poor Ranma-kun had been forced to call "Father".

Genma watched in silence behind the relative safety of the Goshin Dai Ryuu Sei Fu. He didn't like the looks of this; he didn't like it at all. Tendō-ke had obviously been raided in the last twenty-four hours, his old buddy Soūn was missing, his worthless son was still gallivanting out

in the wilderness somewhere – no matter what that crazy bitch of a wife had said – and Kasumi was sobbing over a pair of Imperial arrest warrants. The portly martial artist had no illusions as to whose names were engraved on those warrants, no illusions at all. The timing sucked rocks, but that was really no surprise. He had planned to have their children safely married and saddled with family before their past history with the Master finally caught up with them, but that apparently wasn't fated to happen. So be it. Genma walked invisibly up the stairs to his room, making not even a hint of a sound. He scowled at the scattered mess of what remained of his possessions, then shrugged his shoulders and packed with an efficiency brought about by long and hard-earned practice. This was certainly not the first time he had been forced to leave like a silent ghost, and it undoubtedly not be the last time either. A year. That should be enough time.

### **New Tokyo (Narita) International Airport**

Aiko stood next to the window of Terminal 2's concourse and looked out at the 747 parked at gate C83. The view of the airport from the satellite building's third floor was impressive, but the elder Yamada barely noticed the view. Her thoughts centered more on the plane which would shortly take her two grandchildren away from her and the clan. At least the separation would be of relatively short duration this time, but still ... Four days. The clan had been reunited with her daughter's child for a mere four days. Four days where the chaos which swirled around Ranma-kun's life like a colony of vultures had roared through the clan with unabated fury and swept all of her careful plans aside with scarcely any effort.

And while she couldn't blame the Throne for forcing the issue when the opportunity had presented itself, given the end result was in perfect alignment with her own long-term plans, the Tennō's timing and the circumstances surrounding it were ... unfortunate. It was certainly not the slow paced and low pressure environment she had hoped to give her grandson following his reclamation.

Aiko looked over to the other side of the departure lounge where the rest of the immediate clan was gathered and smiled. At least they would be able to give the two newlyweds a proper send-off, and they would definitely have an appropriate escort for the first part of their current journey. She waited for the white-clad officer to reach her current position before acknowledging him with a slight tilt of her head.

"Lieutenant Commander Kuroi."

"Yamada-dono."

Aiko gave the American officer her most disarming smile. This was going to be fun. "I must approve of your change of station, Commander. I trust your separation from the land of your ancestors will be of relatively short duration?" "Yes, Ma'am," Kuroi replied with a smile. "I was offered a month's leave Stateside, but I really want to get started right away. The station doesn't actually become vacant until the twenty-first, so I think I can manage to play tourist for a week after tying up any loose ends back home." "That's very convenient, Commander. Two weeks should be more than sufficient for all the necessary arrangements to be made, and I give you my personal assurance that they will be more than satisfactory."

"Arrangements, Ma'am?" Kuroi gave the Yamada matriarch a puzzled look. "Of course. I do hope you don't object to holding the Shinto ceremony first – it has become quite the custom to have them both done consecutively." "Ceremonies? Ma'am?"

"Your wedding, son."

"Say WHAT?!?"

"Come now, Commander – surely you recognized yesterday's omiai for what it was ..." "Errk."

“... and with Imperial sponsorship as well – you must be quite proud and pleased with yesterday's events.”

“Gah.”

“Don't worry, Son – I'll make certain that everything is perfect for your big day. After all, you're family now. And speaking of which ...” Aiko turned away for a moment, her lips twitching. “Tsu-chan!” she called over to where the rest of the family was waiting. “Yes, Obasama?”

“Come here for a moment, please.”

“Yes, Obasama.”

“Now, Son,” Aiko said, turning back to face the motionless officer, “considering you're family, I trust you can insure that my grandchildren's vacation will remain undisturbed and, more importantly, *private*, can I not? I would hate to learn of any disturbances caused by some enthusiastic compatriot or their friends and acquaintances.” “But ... but ... ”

“Yes, Son?”

“***Wedding?!?***”

“Of course. Tsu-chan, don't you think you should give your fiancée a proper farewell?” Tsuya beamed as she bowed – she could still scarcely believe she lucked into such a yummy hunk. “I wish you safe journeys, Anata. May our union be ever prosperous and our joining ever filled with hot and steamy animalistic sex.” Both Tsuya and Aiko broke out into giggles at her last statement.

Kuroi looked down at the young and ... and ... there's no way she's that young. “GAH.”

## Somewhere in Tokyo

“Oh, did you remember to verify the original ops package was signed for?” “Damn near first thing I did,” Hiroyoshi replied. “Our gal in the precinct said she saw it on the corner of the idiot's desk with the seals still intact not more than thirty minutes ago.” Ishihara shook his head in amazement. He added a footnote to the status page and red flagged it. “Well, I think that's about everything.” “Yeah, it looks like it,” Hiroyoshi said. “I'm sure glad you're filing the papers for this one – I definitely owe you another lunch.”

“Just as long as it's something a little more edible than what we had today.” “Ah, c'mon – Yoshi makes the best hot dog in all of Tokyo.” “I'll take your word for it. All the same, I get to chose where we go next time.” Ishihara saved the last of the files and hit the ‘transmit’ key. “Okay, sure. But you're on your own if you try to order fugu like you did last month.”

## National Intelligence Directorate, Tokyo Regional Office

Shoyo Kudo, the operations desk officer currently on duty, blinked when he saw the blue flagged submission arrive from the local northwest tac net. He had to read the entire operations plan twice before he could actually believe what he was seeing. He took a deep breath and then dialed the number for the sector chief's administrative assistant. “Nene-chan; Kudo in Ops. I just received a blue pri and need to speak to the Chief right away.” “Certainly, Shoyo-kun. He's on a conference call at the moment, can this wait for thirty or does it require immediate attention?”

“Unfortunately, I don't think this will wait that long, Nene-chan.” “Very well. Please hold.”

The line was silent for less than ten seconds. “Kudo, you better have a **damn** good reason for this.” “I'm sorry, Sir, but I just received a blue-flagged op request that has the potential for getting really ugly.”

“Bad enough to disrupt rather sensitive negotiations with the Americans?” “I'm afraid so, Sir.”

The sector chief sighed. “Okay. Recap while you're sending the file.” “Yes, Sir. Officers Hiroyoshi and Ishihara just submitted a req for a local op. They asked for Shigeki and Yosano assigned as co-primaries and requisitioned four full field kits, any available female medic, local tac support, and a sweeper squad. Time frame two hours, code blue.” “WHAT?!? Is that idiot trying to start a war?” “Very likely, Sir. Target is Chiyoda-ku Eastern Police Precinct.” The five full seconds of silence on the line seemed like an eternity to the operations officer. “Hiroyoshi is overseeing Chameleon, isn't he?” “Yes,

Sir.”

“First Ito, and now this. You just HAD to go make my day, didn't you?”

“Sorry, Sir. I'm just the messenger, Sir.”

“I do realize that, Kudo. Approved, green card. Put Ne-chan back on the line and get hopping.” “Yes, Sir, thank you, Sir.” The operations officer disconnected and took a deep breath before logging the operations plan in the tac net. A green card was essentially carte blanche; only a black card had a higher priority. Kudo couldn't recall the last time a local green op was approved.

“Ne-chan, please call my wife and tell her I won't be home tonight, and will likely be missing tomorrow as well.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Also, could you find someone to rustle me up a couple of aspirin? On second thought, make that a **bottle** of aspirin.”

“Of course, Sir.”

“Thanks, Ne-chan – you're the greatest.” The sector chief disconnected the line. He then rested his head between both his hands and massaged his temples for a moment. “I do not need this. ISO do not need this.”

## **Nerima**

It had taken over an hour for Kasumi to regain enough of her composure to continue with her dreadful task. This morning she had been afraid she would be forced to choose who she could save – now she was starting to fear it might be more of a case of “if” instead of “who”. She hesitated briefly before unfolding the other warrant; the one with her youngest sister's name on it.

It was almost as bad as the first. Multiple counts of assault and battery, assault with the intent to maim or disfigure, assault with a deadly weapon, racketeering, conspiracy to commit murder, and attempted murder.

Her eyes filled once more with tears and a feeling of inexorable doom pushed her soul firmly back over the edge of despair.

## **JAL Flight 423**

Ranma leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes when she felt the aircraft lose contact with the ground. She extended her other senses and tried to feel the rush of the air over the plane's wings and the thrust of the engines propelling the craft into the skies. She'd only been in the air three times before – two of those being within the last week – and had either been too busy or otherwise distracted to properly appreciate the experience. She concentrated harder, trying to get a feel for the ...

Damn.

“Are you okay, Ranma?”

“Yeah, I'm fine, Midori,” Ranma said with sigh. She opened her eyes to find her new spouse looking back with concern clearly etched in her dark amber eyes. “It's just ... it's too big.” “Too big?” Midori replied. “What's too big?” “The plane; I can't get a good feel for it.” The redhead slumped in her seat. “There's just too much in the way for me to feel it properly.” “Ranma?”

“Huh? Oh ... sorry, Midori. You probably don't know what I'm talking about, do you?” “That's all right, Ranma,” Midori said. “I was just concerned you might have some ... issues ... with flying.”

“Nah, I don't mind that – I was looking forward to it a bit, actually.” Ranma shifted in her seat to turn towards her partner. “Flying is one of the three main cornerstones of the Musabetsu Kakutō Ryū, y'know, and even if I can't yet do it myself for real I was hoping for a better feel from this flight than what I'm getting.” Ranma grimaced. “I might as well be riding a bus.” Midori giggled. “That's actually a reasonable description, considering the size of the plane.” “Yeah,” Ranma replied. “Although I don't know of any bus that's got a section quite like this.” She had been surprised when they had been escorted to the front of

the plane instead of the main section where the seating really did resemble that of a bus. The front cabin was almost empty, with not even a dozen pairs of seats in it, and it even had a small bar in the back section of it. And as far as Ranma could tell, they had the section nearly all to themselves – she and Midori were seated together near the middle on one side, and the American officer was near the back on the other along with a pair of SDF officers. It was certainly more comfortable than sitting in the back cargo hold of a C-130 like her first flight out of Kadena.

“And it sure beats swimming the distance, that’s for damned sure.”

Midori shook her head. “I still can’t believe you actually swam all the way to China.”

“Hey, we really didn’t swim *all* the way, no matter what Pops claimed afterwards,” Ranma replied. “The old man may have pulled some dumb stunts at times, but even he wasn’t **that** crazy. Though I will have to admit the last China trip was pretty much a disaster from the start.” “You know, I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“Well, we were down near Fukuoka when Pops decided to swim from Kyūshū to Korea, island hopping through Iki, Kō-saki, and Tsushima. I think the old man must have gotten caught doing something he shouldn’t have, because normally we’d work off our passage on a fishing boat or cargo ship when we had to cross islands. Anyway, once we hit the peninsula we hitched up to Inch’ōn where we stayed a couple weeks, hitting up all the local dojangs for supplies. That was fun; we learned a couple new Kong Shin and Kuk Sool Wan moves there.” “Ranma,” Midori said with a frown, “I didn’t think the Korean schools were at all friendly to Japanese martial artists.”

Ranma gave her a cocky grin. “I don’t know about that, Midori; they were all really nice once we gave them back their signs.”

Midori groaned. It figured.

“Heh – worked every time, y’know.” Ranma chuckled. “Still, that was the last bit of easy living we had on the whole trip. Once we’d restocked we hiked up to the North Korean border. Pops had originally wanted to hike through the North on land, but there had been a big buildup of troops along the western border over the last six months and there was no way we’d make it through the DMZ intact. We ended up swimming and hiking halfway around Hwanghae Namdo, mostly at night, until we met up with some guys Pops must have met before. They managed to sneak us into Shandong by boat the next evening. It took us a couple of weeks to train-hop our way up to Qinghai where there were supposedly all of these wonderful ancient training grounds, and you know how well **that** little fiasco ended, don’t you?” “Jusenkyō and Joketzusoku.”

“Yup,” Ranma replied. “That was probably the worst part of the whole damned training trip we took, and Pops hasn’t made a single good decision since – Kami-sama knows his brain turned to total mush once we showed up at the doorstep of Tendo-ke.” She leaned back in her seat and sighed. “I just wish I could have found out what was going on with Akane and Kasumi before we left. I’ve barely had a chance to even blink with all the crap that’s been happening lately.” Midori placed her hand on top of Ranma’s and gently squeezed it. “We can always call back home once we get to our hotel – I’m sure Grandmother will have everything straightened out by then.”

“Yeah, we can hope. Just how long is this flight supposed to take, anyway?”

“A little over nine hours.”

A loud groan followed immediately afterward.

## **Nerima**

She had run out of tears. It shouldn’t be possible, but it had happened none the less. There were simply no more tears for her to give.

The fate of Clan Tendō was dire indeed, and made all the more tenuous by the tasks currently confronting her. Kasumi had no illusions on how Yamada-dono would react to the news of her grandson’s death. Her reaction to her daughter’s self-inflicted fate was eminently more difficult to judge, especially considering how tightly Saotome-san had clung to such an extreme definition of family honor. If Yamada-dono held similar views ... Kasumi shook her head. It was of little use for her to simply give up by

expecting things to be impossible – she would just have to uphold her own family's honor and pray Yamada-dono would make even a small allowance for that. There was little else she could actually do. She folded both warrants and set them aside. The charges against Nabiki-chan would lead directly to a death sentence; those against Akane-chan were nearly as bad – life in prison at best, the same fate as Nabiki-chan if the prosecutor brought both cases together in the same trial. And her father? Given that he would be held directly accountable for the actions of both Nabiki and Akane since both were under the legal age, any trial joint or otherwise would result in the same fate. The legal system was **not** known for leniency and most trials were simply pro forma. The one faint hope she had left lay with Ranma-kun's family. The same connections Yamada-dono had used to so thoroughly bury her daughter's past – connections that **must** extend all the way to the Chrysanthemum Throne itself – could be tapped to at least partially mitigate the circumstances surrounding her youngest sister and redeem the one companion whom Ranma-kun had loved with all his heart. It would be a fitting and entirely appropriate tribute to an otherwise tragic and pointless legacy. If not?

The Tendōs of Nerima would be naught but a quickly forgotten memory, and she would have failed her mother.

Kasumi's eyes suddenly focused on the mon delicately impressed in the paper of the warrants and her world spun dizzily once more over the precipice. **How** had she missed that? Those were **Imperial** seals. It could only mean that Yamada-dono already **knew**.

Kasumi Tendō, eldest daughter of Souin and Hitomi Tendō and the last guardian of the Tendō's honor, stared vacantly at the now-certain destruction of her clan. The ashes of failure churned bitterly in her soul – she wouldn't even be allowed to try.

### **Chiyoda-ku Eastern Police Precinct**

"I'm in."

"Good," Hiroyoshi said with a nod. "Any sign of them noticing your earlier tap?" Ishihara simply snorted.

"Okay, good enough for me," Hiroyoshi replied. "Any luck tapping the cell cams?" "No, those are all closed circuit," Ishihara said. "It's standard procedure to have two tape feeds at the Sergeant's desk, though."

"Right." Hiroyoshi switched his headset to the master channel. "Okay folks, we're a scratch team so let's do a quick recap before we roll. Shigeki." "Prisoner transfer," a very melodious mezzo-soprano replied. "Komagaka handles electronics, Yosano and I are point, Ijiri and Kato backup. Weapons hot but no explosives." "You hear that last part, Yosano?"

"Oh pooh. You sure know how to ruin a girl's fun, don't you Hiro-kun." A brief round of laughter followed the blonde's "ditzzy voice" comment. "No, I just don't like filling out the extra paperwork," Hiroyoshi replied, shaking his head. "Tsuji."

"Car pool and armory. First in; call when secure." "Hojo."

"Security. Mitsuya's your backup, Oishi backs Komagaka and Shigeki's team, Tamuro and Wakai handle dispatch, and the rest of us monitor the desk pool and provide support where needed."

"And I've got Tanaka," Hiroyoshi said. "Ishihara is Control. Okay, folks, let's do this. I know we've got a green card, but please try and keep it down to a dull roar if possible. Tsuji, you're up. Roll it."

"On the way. Callback, ten max."

"Acknowledged."

### **Chiyoda-ku Eastern Police Precinct**

"Damn it, not *another* idiotic full evacuation drill." "Sure looks like it, doesn't it. Where's the Captain?" "Who knows? You know, I'm getting tired of all these stupid drills – didn't we already do this just last week?"

"Yeah, and how much you want to bet that the Captain's calling this just to inflate his latest readiness report? Everyone in the precinct knows what color his nose is." "True. It's just ... damn it all, I have a

really hot date lined up tonight and I'll **never** get through all this stupid paperwork in time if this keeps up. It's got to be at least an hour since the first alarm sounded."

"Poor little Shijiro-kun; do we feel sorry for you? Not!" "Heh, you're just jealous because you haven't been out on a date for over two years." "Why, you ..."

Both officers were thrown off their feet when a large explosion shook the ground while blowing out a large chunk of the precinct's southern wall.

### **JAL Flight 423**

Ranma was bored. Bored, bored, bored. They were barely two hours into their flight and she had already exhausted all of the activities available to her in these conditions. Normally she would welcome a little peace and quiet, but she was entirely too wired up to relax and her usual technique of getting rid of nerves by practicing until she dropped wasn't available to her in these cramped quarters. Midori seemed to be coping just fine, but the movie being shown in the seat-back screens which was entertaining her companion didn't interest the redhead in the slightest. Maybe she could ...

"Hey, Eiko?"

"Yes, Ranma?"

"What can you tell me about the other senshi? If I'm going to meet their leader in a few days I really ought to know more about who they are and what they can do." "A wise precaution, Ranma. Would you wish for me to include general background information on Crystal and Glaive as well?"

"That probably wouldn't hurt, would it?" "Indeed it would not. The nominal leader of the senshi and the Guardian of Crystal is known as Sailor Moon. Her civilian name is Usagi Tskino, and she is currently a third year student at Jūban Junior High School over in Minato-ku. Her advisors consist of ..." Ranma quickly lost herself in the flood of information which followed. There was a lot of valuable data being presented, and she quickly began forming a firm framework to base her actions around if things were to go horribly wrong like they always seemed to do around her. Well, at least she was no longer bored.

### **Somewhere in Tokyo**

"Okay, folks, listen up," Hiroyoshi called out. He waited a few seconds until the "chatter" subsided before continuing. "First of all, well done. The mission went quite smoothly, especially considering the lack of notice everyone got. While there are still a few minor details left to address, the primary mission objective was achieved rather nicely. Thank you." He took a deep breath. "Unfortunately, I'm going to have to ask everyone to complete their post mortems tonight. Please don't put them off any longer than possible – the Old Man is probably chewing nails right now and he's not likely to tolerate any delays in your paperwork for this one. This mission has a lot of internal visibility and the reports are likely to be passed all the way up the food chain intact instead of being summarized as usual, so keep that in mind when you're doing your write ups."

Hiroyoshi did a quick mental calculation. "Tsuji, Hojo, Kato, Shigeki, Yōsano, Yano; stick around for a bit, the rest of you can head back to the office." "Hiro-san?"

"What is it, Ishi-san?"

"There's a request from Ops in response to the status update I just logged." Hiroyoshi sighed. "I was afraid of that. What's it about?" "It's from the Old Man himself; he wants you to call in. Yesterday."

"Damn."

"... No, Sir ... Yes, Sir; I realize that ... No, Sir ... No, Sir, I was about to ... It **WHAT?!?** ... No, Sir, I didn't ... Yes, Sir ... I understand, Sir ... Yes, Sir ... Yes, Sir ... Yes, Sir ... Right away, Sir ... Yes, Sir, thank you, Sir."

Hiroyoshi disconnected the call and set the handset down. He closed his eyes and rubbed the sides of his head, trying to reduce the pain of this latest headache. "That sounded like fun," Ishihara quipped. "Need some aspirin?" Hiroyoshi opened his eyes and nodded. "Yes, please." He turned his attention to the short blonde sitting on the couch. "Yumi-chan?"

Yumi Yōsano looked up from the magazine she was reading. She gulped when she caught the expression on the lead agent's face. "Errrr, yes?" "How many charges did you use for the evidence room?" "Well ..." Yumi's face scrunched up in concentration. "There was one for each of the main walls, a few small spot charges to take care of all the cage-work, and a shaped to take care of that big column in the middle. Why, didn't I use enough to get it all?" "That's not the problem, Yumi-chan," Hiroyoshi said with a growl. "The Old Man is more than a little upset with you right now – evidently that shaped charge you set took out one of the Precinct's main support columns. Between that and the blast you used for the detention rooms, the entire south side of the building collapsed twenty minutes after we left." "Oh. Um ... oopsie?"

"Oopsie doesn't cover it by half, Yumi-chan." Hiroyoshi sighed. "Shigeki, the Old Man wants you and 'Boom-boom' here to handle the fallout personally. Redirect any attention to the Watari clan and link them to the three missing Nyuchezuu – doing so will take care of at least three problems all at once." Shigeki nodded. "Gotcha." She reached over and grabbed a hold of the blonde's wrist, pulling her up off the sofa. "Come on, 'Minnie May', we've got some innocent yaks to frame." "But Raaaaaally ..." Hiroyoshi shook his head at the antics of the two female agents as they exited the room. "They never change, do they?" Tsuji said with a smile. The lead sweeper always enjoyed working with the two female otaku; having a large interest in anime himself.

"Nope, but that's what makes them so much fun," Hojo replied. The security specialist glanced over to Hiroyoshi. "I'm assuming you want us to handle the clean up of Tanaka's little yak squad. Frame the Watari as well?" Hiroyoshi nodded. "Yes, but just do the two leads for now. Kato, you're backup." "Right."

"So, Yano-san, what's the status of the two girls?" Hiroyoshi handed Manami Yano a fresh cup of coffee. The statuesque medic wrinkled her nose briefly but took the proffered beverage anyway. She would much rather have an Americano, but right now anything with caffeine was welcome. She sat down at the table before replying. "Physically they're both doing surprisingly well, all things considered. The rope marks should fade rather quickly, and they'll probably develop some rather nasty colds in a couple of days given how thoroughly the two were hosed down, but I didn't find anything which would indicate that any long term damage had been sustained." Hiroyoshi cocked an eyebrow in surprise. "No signs of sexual assault? That's ... a welcome surprise, considering that group's reputation on how they usually handle yak girls." Manami shrugged. "There was no evidence of penetration – real, toys, or otherwise. They were undoubtedly groped extensively, but there's nothing to indicate any extensive or systematic abuse and the few bruises that *are* there are fairly insignificant. Nowadays girls can get mashed worse from the chikans on the subways." "Well, that's at least one bit of good luck then," Hiroyoshi said with a sigh. "When do you think they'll be presentable?"

"They'll be out of it for at least another hour; two at most, and it will take me at least another forty-five minutes to flush everything out of their systems once they come to. Current field anesthetics tend to be a little on the heavy side, you know." "Yeah," Hiroyoshi nodded. "What about the father?" Manami ran her hand through her hair and sighed. "Under heavy sedation. He must have put up quite a struggle at some point, because, unlike the two girls, someone took the time to give him a thorough and textbook beatdown. He'll be off his feet for at least a week." "Any permanent damage?"

"None that I could determine from a field exam," Manami replied, shaking her head. "I won't know for sure about any possible internal injuries until I can get him into the clinic and run the full battery of lab tests."

"Damn." Hiroyoshi scowled and drummed his fingers together for several seconds before pulling his cell phone from its hip holster. "Okay, get someone else to pick up the father before the girls wake up – I don't want to have to deal with all of them at the same time. Make sure the two girls are comfortable and do what you can to calm them down when they come to." Manami nodded and stood up. "I think I can



manage that.” She headed towards the door which led to the other rooms of the safe house. “Oh, and Yano-san? Make sure they both have something decent to wear for Kami’s sake. The youngest has a history of jumping to the *strangest* conclusions without provocation and I really can’t handle dealing with one of her temper tantrums on top of everything else today.” Horiyoshi waited for the medic to close the door behind her. He stared at his cell phone for a moment before sighing ... again ... and then dialed the number of Yamada-ke. This was going to get ugly.