

Dark Kingdom:  
Shattered Moonlight  
AE McRoberts

Written © 2024 by AE McRoberts

All rights reserved.

This book is a work of fan fiction, crafted with endless love and far too many tears. The characters, concepts, and original story belong to the brilliant Naoko Takeuchi, whose creation has inspired fans around the world for generations.

I do not claim any ownership over Sailor Moon or its characters, settings, or storylines. This book is simply an homage, a love letter if you will, to the story that has captivated hearts (and crushed a few) across the galaxy.

In other words: don't sue me, Naoko Takeuchi-sensei. You're the real Moon Princess.

# *Contents*

Dedication	1
Lost	2
1. The Birth of Eternity	3
2. Shadows of the Past	13
3. Echoes of the Forgotten	22
4. Awakening of Mercury	32
Dreams	43
5. Whispers in Dreams	44
6. Veil of Shadows	53
7. 666	65
8. Visions in the Flames	76
9. Vanishing Roads	87
Fateful Encounter	97
10. Crossing Paths	98
11. Beyond the Threshold	109
12. Embers of Rebirth	119
13. Truth Unveiled	131
14. Moonlit Masquerade	143

Frozen Princess	152
15. Hearts in Freefall	153
16. The Storm Within	165
17. Beneath the Rain	175
18. Winning Streak	187
19. A Haunting Encounter	199
Crystal Dreams	209
20. Strike of Fate	210
21. Between Two Worlds	221
22. Light of the Heart	234
23. Tangled Fates	247
24. Lonely Love	258
The Queen	270
25. The Rise of Metalia	271
26. Serenity's Shadow	284
27. Guilt and Grace	298
28. Fallen for Love	309
29. Repeating Fate	320
Drowning	331
30. Bound by Shadow	332
31. Cracks in Fate	345
32. The Final Eclipse	358
33. Dark Prince	370
34. Darkness Unbound	385

Broken Crown	402
35. Tempest of Betrayal	403
36. Crescendo of Souls	418
37. Edge of Redemption	432
38. Renewed Bonds	447
39. Shattered Moonlight	461
Together	475
40. Eternal Echoes	476
About the author	491
Acknowledgements	492
Also by AE McRoberts	493

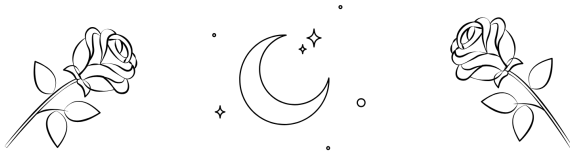


To all the dreamers who see magic in moonlight,  
and to every fan whose heart beats a little faster  
at the sound of a transformation sequence.

This story is as much yours as it is mine.  
Thank you for keeping the light of Sailor Moon shining bright.



# *Chapter One*



## *The Birth of Eternity*

**M**amoru felt lost in more ways than one. Unconvinced he was actually the boy called Mamoru Chiba. The once orderly world now felt jumbled and divided. He sat alone on the sterile hospital bed, in the barren room. His small hands clutched the thin sheets as if they were the only solid thing left in his shattered world. Tears streamed down his face. Each drop overwhelming. Each drop confusing.

Who was he really?

The doctors and nurses called him Mamoru, but the name felt hollow. A label attached to a stranger. Just a month ago, his entire world imploded, both literally and figuratively. As he stared at his reflection in the window, he saw only a lost child with haunted eyes. Searching desperately for a hint of recognition in his own face. Yet, there was nothing. No hint as to who he was. Who the before boy was.

They said it was a car accident. They said he was the only survivor. But how did the word “accident” explain the absolute loss?

It wasn’t an accident.

It was chaos. Wrapped in a cacophony of screeching metal and blinding light. It was ripping. It was the destruction of an entire world.

In those few minutes, everything changed. His family, his memories, his sense of self—all vanished in an instant. Now this austere hospital room had been his home, the nurses and doctors his parents. Soon he’d leave for an orphanage, to be raised by strangers. To be alone forever.

What would his life be like then? A routine of unknown and unsatisfying events. A collection of meaningless holidays and milestones, meant to be celebrated with family, but instead, observed alone. Significant moments, with no one but himself to appreciate them. How long would he be alone? Did orphans ever gain new families? Or was he destined to live and die alone?

A gentle breeze carrying flower petals drifted through the room, announcing his only friend’s arrival. Mamoru’s heart sank, knowing it might be the last time he’d experience this.

“I’m sorry, Mamoru,” Fiore said, laying a hand on his. “I wish I could stay.”

Fiore had to leave; the Earth’s air was making him sick. The only friend he’d made was leaving after just a few weeks together. Fresh tears spilled down Mamoru’s face, dotting his hospital gown with dark spots.

Fiore squeezed his hand. “We’ll always have our memories, even when I’m gone.”

“I know,” Mamoru hiccupped between sobs. “I’ll miss you lots.”

“We helped each other when we were lonely. That was special.”

Mamoru wiped his nose with his sleeve. “Where will you go? I know how lonely you were in space, searching for a new home. How can you do that again?”

Fiore shrugged. “I have no choice. Until I find a new home, I have to keep going.”

“Can’t I come?” But those words felt wrong somehow, like they were fighting destiny.

“No,” Fiore said with a sad smile. “You’re an Earth kid, Mamoru. Space is too dangerous for you.”

“Can’t you stay a little longer?”

“I wish I could. You’re my best friend. But I’ll get really sick if I stay.” Fiore looked up suddenly. “A nurse is coming. I’ll wait for you on the roof, okay?”

In a swirl of petals, Fiore vanished. The soft click of her shoes on the cold tile floor and the squeak of the metal cart were the only evidence of her arrival. He didn’t look up, didn’t want to be consoled again.

“Thinking about your parents?” she asked gently, sitting beside him. “It’s okay to be sad, Mamoru. It’s normal to cry when you lose someone you love.”

Mamoru rubbed his eyes. “But crying doesn’t fix anything!”

“That’s not true,” she said softly. “Tears are special. They’re how your heart talks when words aren’t enough. Crying helps let out the sad feelings, so you can start to feel better.”

Mamoru looked down at his tear-stained gown.

“Your parents would want you to be happy again someday,” she continued. “You’re living for them now, too. You’re a brave boy, and you’re getting stronger every day.”

“How do you know I’m brave?” Mamoru asked. “I don’t even know that about myself.”

“Being brave doesn’t mean you’re not scared,” she explained, giving him a hug. “Being brave means doing things even when you’re afraid.”

Mamoru looked up at her, his eyes wide.

“You’re brave because you keep trying. You’re brave because you let yourself cry. And you’ll keep being brave every day.”

She gave him one last squeeze before setting his lunch on the table. The soft click of her shoes on the cold tile floor and the squeak of the metal cart were the only evidence of her departure. Mamoru could feel Fiore’s energy on the roof, saying goodbye to Earth.

More tears fell. Mamoru didn’t want to go up there. Going would make it real.

He’d be alone again.

He’d be without a friend again.

He’d have to face everything by himself.

It was too much. Where there should be feelings, there was just a big, empty space. He couldn’t hear his mom’s kind voice or feel his dad’s strong hugs anymore. All the happy times from before were gone. Everything vanished like it never happened.

And now, even the fun times with Fiore would fade away. Mamoru was only six. How long until he forgot his best friend, too? Was he a bad friend for forgetting? A bad person?

He couldn’t remember his parents, and soon he might not remember Fiore either. The thought made his chest hurt even more.

His world shrunk to the confines of his grief, an endless void of loneliness and despair. Each breath felt like a struggle against the crushing weight of his losses. Then, without warning, a warmth blossomed in his chest, foreign yet achingly familiar. It spread through him like liquid sunshine, chasing away the shadows that had taken residence in his soul.

A small hand laid on top of his, a touch so gentle it almost wasn't there. The skin was cool and soothing, like soft silk. It anchored him, pulling him back from the brink of his sorrow. Mamoru blinked, his tears making the world a watery blur. As his vision cleared, he found himself staring into eyes as vast and blue as the summer sky.

A little girl, no more than three or four, gazed up at him with an expression of pure concern. She had her golden hair tied up in two buns, which gave her the appearance of a tiny rabbit. She leaned against his hand, her warmth seeping through the hollowness of his soul.

"Don't cry," she said, her voice as soft and sweet as a lullaby.

Those small fingers tightened around him, and Mamoru felt a jolt of... something. A connection, a resonance that echoed in the very core of his being. For a moment, the weight of his grief lifted. The ache in his chest eased, replaced by a feeling he couldn't quite name.

It was familiar, so familiar that it made his heart burn. But that wasn't possible. He'd never seen her before. Or had he? Were they lifelong playmates whose memory that horrible day had stolen? Were they best friends? Someone else yanked away from him?

Still, his entire soul yearned for this reprieve. It was comfort and hope and a promise of something he didn't understand. All he knew was that in this moment, with this strange little girl holding his hand, he didn't feel so terribly alone anymore.

"Please don't cry," she said. "I feel sad inside when you cry. Today is a happy day. My mommy just had a baby. I'm a big sister now."

"But my best friend is leaving today, and I'll be all alone. I'm all alone."

She squeezed his hand. "I'll be your friend, so you'll never be alone."

Somehow, her words were more comforting than anything the nurses or doctors had said. This girl, with buns in her hair and vibrant

blue eyes, felt more real and important to him than anyone else. Would he forget her, too? Would her memory vanish into the same black void that had swallowed everyone else he'd loved?

She straightened just as he was about to cry again. Plucking a rose from the bundle in her hand, she held it out to him. "Here! For you!"

"Thank you."

The instant his fingers closed around the stem, the world seemed to shift. There was a pulsing energy that resonated deep within him. Its vibrant red petals unfurled before his eyes, each one perfect and unblemished, as if it had just bloomed for him.

As he gazed at the rose, a strange sensation washed over him. Like he was seeing it for the first time, yet it felt intimately familiar, like a long-lost friend finally returned. The flower's fragrance enveloped him, sweet and pure, carrying with it whispers of memories he couldn't quite grasp—of moonlit nights, of battle fought, of a love that transcended time itself.

The rose seemed to glow softly in the sterile hospital room, its beauty a stark contrast to the cold, clinical surrounds. Mamoru felt a surge of something flow into his body, driving away the lingering shadows of his despair.

This was more than just a flower; it was a promise, a talisman against the darkness that had threatened to consume him. And he'd treasure it longer than time itself.

For a brief moment, he saw himself not as a lost, grieving boy, but as someone stronger, braver—a protector. Someone who fought for good and righteousness. Someone who defended the weak and made the world a better place. Someone who would transform the world into something of made of beautiful dreams and shimmering light.

The sensation was gone in a flash, leaving him confused but comforted. He looked from the rose to that little girl, her eyes twinkling with barely restrained light.

“It’s pretty.”

A man entered the room, and Mamoru tensed. Why he felt the need to protect this girl, he couldn’t say. But the girl only smiled up at the newcomer.

“There you are Moonshine, why did you wander off?” The man grinned and kneeled next to her.

She pointed to Mamoru. “I felt his sadness, and I wanted to make him happy! So I gave him a flower.”

“That was very nice of you.”

The girl nodded, her hair bouncing. “Mommy always smiles after you give her flowers, so I knew he’d smile too. And he did!”

“That was thoughtful of you.”

“Thank you,” Mamoru said. “It did help me smile.”

The girl beamed at him, her smile as radiant as the sunlight streaming through the window.

“Roses are magic,” she said.

Mamoru nodded, unable to explain the truth he felt in her words. This rose was magic. He held it closer.

“See, Moonshine, a little kindness can brighten the darkest days. If you’re ready, we can see mommy and Shingo now.”

“Because I’m his big sister! Bye-bye.”

The girl gave his hand one last squeeze, and the man gave a smile before they turned to leave.

She stopped before leaving and turned back. “Member, I’ll be your friend.”

New tears, not of sadness, but of found friendship, glistened in his eyes as he nodded. As they vanished around the corner, Mamoru

turned back to the flower, watching how the light seemed to spread across the petals before vanishing. Then somehow he knew what he needed to do. Who needed this happiness more than he did.

He practically ran through the hallways and up the stairs to the roof. By the time he shoved through the massive doors, his chest was heaving. But he was on time. Fiore stood on the roof. Instead of the human clothes, he wore the suit he'd arrived in.

Gold twinkled in the setting sun, with emerald green fabric shimmering in the fading light. Fiore's alien nature was undeniable now, his otherworldly beauty both mesmerizing and heartbreaking. Tears glistened on his cheeks, catching the last rays of sunlight like liquid diamonds.

"Fiore!" Mamoru called out, his voice cracking.

Fiore smiled. "You came." A sad smile played on his lips.

Mamoru rushed forward, his hands outstretched, offering the rose. "To help you smile."

Fiore's eyes widened, his gaze fixed on the vibrant red bloom. More tears spilled down both their cheeks as he gently took the flower, cradling it as if it were the most precious thing in the universe.

"Thank you, Mamoru," Fiore's voice trembled. "One day, I'll find you again and bring an entire planet of flowers, just for you."

The wind cooled the tears as they fell down his cheeks. "I just want you to be safe and not lonely."

Fiore met his eyes. "I won't be lonely anymore, because I'll have this rose to remind me of you."

A soft glow began to emanate from Fiore, growing brighter with each passing second. Mamoru's tears came faster, knowing what was coming.

"Please," Fiore said, his form starting to shimmer.

Flower petals and wind swirled around, catching Mamoru's clothes and brushing against his skin.

"Please, don't forget me."

"Never," Mamoru promised, his voice barely a whisper.

The glow intensified, enveloping Fiore in a cocoon of light. For a moment, Mamoru saw his friend's smile—full of love, gratitude, and hope—before Fiore vanished in a shower of sparkles that drifted away on the wind.

Mamoru stood alone on the roof, the setting sun painting the sky in hues of orange and purple. The warmth of the day faded, leaving him with a chill that went bone deep. Yet, as he watched the last of the sparkles disappear into the twilight, he felt a flicker of hope in his heart. Somehow, his eyes found the sliver of the pale moon hanging in the sky.

The sight stirred something within him—a mixture of sadness, heartbreak, and an inexplicable sense of destiny. As if the moon held secrets, he was meant to uncover. The little girl's words echoed in his mind, a promise of future connections.

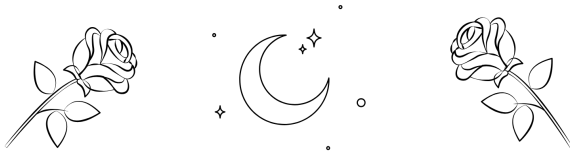
As darkness fell, Mamoru made his way back to his room. Exhaustion from the day's emotions washed over him, and he climbed into bed. His last thoughts before drifting off were of roses, sparkling lights, and a princess with hair like spun moonlight.

That night, for the first time, Mamoru dreamed of crystal spires and a kingdom bathed in silvery light. Of a hand in his, warm and familiar, as they ran through corridors that crumbled around them. Of a desperate need to protect someone precious.

As Mamoru slept, a beam of moonlight slipped through the curtains, illuminating his peaceful face. In that moment, he looked less like a lost orphan and more like a prince in waiting, poised on the threshold of an extraordinary destiny.

Though he wouldn't remember the details come morning, the dream would plant a seed—a quest for answers about his past, his future, and the mysterious connection he felt to the moon and its secrets.

## *Chapter Two*



# *Shadows of the Past*

**C**rystal spires pierced a star-strew sky, the moonlight caressing them like a favorite lover. He was running, a frantic race through endless pearlescent corridors, his heart pounding with a mixture of fear and determination. The walls shimmered and shifted around him, sometimes solid crystal, sometimes deadly stone. Shafts of light faded into oppressive darkness, only to burst into blinding, pure light.

The hand clasped tightly in his was achingly familiar, a golden connection to everything beautiful dreams were made of. He couldn't see her face, couldn't make out anything that would give him a clue as to her identity. But he knew with unshakable certainty that he had to protect her. That he was in love with her, mind, body, and soul.

Flashes of silver-white hair danced at the edges of his vision. Glimpses of pale moonlight glittering on gossamer fabric skittered

in and out of recollection. Sensation of soft and cool skin moved in memory. Yet, they remained always just out of reach.

“We have to hurry,” he heard himself say, his voice echoing strangely. The words felt right, yet foreign on his tongue.

Shadows pursued them, faceless and familiar and menacing. The very air seemed to crackle with malevolent energy. His chest tightened with an unexplainable grief, as if he knew the story’s tragic end before it unfolded. Still, he couldn’t look away. Couldn’t leave before witnessing the horrible resolution.

The hand in his vanished like mist, leaving him grasping at empty air.

“Princess!” he cried out, the word tearing from his throat before he could question its meaning. An overwhelming sense of loss crashed over him, drowning him in its depths.

As everything began to dissolve, he caught a fleeting glimpse of eyes as blue as Earth’s sky, filled with tears and a love so profound it defied the gods.

“Find the Legendary Silver Crystal!”

Mamoru jolted awake, his bedsheets tangled around him and his heart racing. Fragments of the dream clung to him like cobwebs, maddeningly vague yet impossibly significant. He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, trying to hold on to the fading images.

Those same questions that had bombarded him since the first dream years ago returned. Who was she? What was the Legendary Silver crystal? Why did his chest feel so hollow, as if he’d lost something irreplaceable? And why did it all feel more like a forgotten memory than a simple dream?

What was happening to him?

Mamoru knew it was pointless to sleep now. Automatically, like breathing, he grabbed the star-shaped locket from his nightstand. It

glimmered like moonlight, even in the dim morning sun. He brushed a finger over the crystal dome. The miniature moon set against the galaxy backdrop remained eerily dark.

Even when he clicked it open, nothing moved, nothing sounded. It was wrong and right all at once. It should move. It should sing. But it didn't matter how many of the world's best watchmakers, jewelers, and artisans he took it to, they couldn't fix it.

Mamoru sighed, still running his finger over the cool surface. That afternoon years ago, he'd been searching for more clues about the Silver Crystal, wandering the back alleys of Juban, when a small antique shop caught his attention.

Trinkets were on full display in dusty windows, faded paintings and fearsome carvings tucked into corners. The air was thick with the scent of aged wood and forgotten stories. Before he'd even been aware of his actions, he pushed inside the door. Weaving around the polished wood tables and glittering lamps, he stopped before a glass case.

There, on top, was the locket. It sang to him. Called out that he needed to take it home, to remember, to be whole. Its presence felt like a missing piece of his soul. Without hesitation, he purchased it. Now he carried it everywhere he went, becoming almost anxious whenever he was more than a few steps away.

Later, seeking answers, he'd returned to that lost alleyway only to discover the shop had closed, leaving no forwarding address. The mystery lingered. One more question on top of the thousand already plaguing him.

Knowing those answers wouldn't come, he tucked the locket safely into his pocket and began his day. During his morning run, a strange restlessness settled over him, an inexplicable anticipation thrumming beneath his skin. As he prepared for school, it was almost as if he stood

above a precipice. One step later, one second in the future, he'd tumble into that abyss, never to return.

"Something is wrong with me," he muttered to himself.

Throughout the day, the feeling only intensified. His attention drifted, his gaze repeatedly drawn to the window as if expecting to see something—or someone—appear. During quiet moments between lectures, he could have sworn he heard a faint, familiar voice calling out to him.

It was the princess from his dreams; he was certain, though the words always faded before he could make them out.

By lunchtime, the sensation had grown into an almost physical ache in his chest. Something was coming. The subtle vibrations of the earth testified to it. Would he finally discover the Legendary Silver Crystal?

Mamoru nearly collided with Motoki, who greeted him with a grin. "Whoa there, Mamoru! You feeling okay? I've never seen you get a problem wrong, and you missed two in English."

Mamoru rubbed his neck, knowing he couldn't actually tell his friend all the thoughts inside. "Yeah, I feel fine. Just a lot of things on my mind."

"I get that," Motoki nodded. "You should swing by the arcade. We got a new Sailor V game. It's a lot of fun."

"You know arcade games aren't my favorite."

Motoki grinned. "True, but this one is really great. You get to battle monsters."

Mamoru forced a grin. "Monsters? Sounds too intense for me."

"Perhaps, but a lot of cute girls hang out there. I'm sure you could find someone, take them out on a date."

Mamoru cringed. It wouldn't be fair to someone else to take them out when he was already in love. Too bad she wasn't real. "I'm not really interested in dating."

Motoki gripped his shoulder. “You can’t be alone forever, my friend. One day, you’ll have to open up and let someone in.”

“You make it sound like I’m some anti-social hermit. We hang out all the time. I go out with the soccer team.”

“That’s not close personal relationships, my friend.” Motoki’s grip on his shoulder was firm, comforting. “You haven’t ever dated or gotten close to someone else. One day, you’ll have to. I know what happened to your parents hurt. But you have to trust, eventually.”

“Thank you. I know. I’m just not ready yet.”

Motoki frowned. “Fair enough, but just remember what I said. But you should still come see that new game.”

“Yeah, thanks for thinking of me. I’ll consider it.”

Motoki gave his shoulder a last squeeze before continuing down the hallway. Mamoru watched him go, sad that he couldn’t tell his best friend everything. Then they would really put him in a mental hospital. Shaking his head, he turned, consumed by his thoughts once more.

As the final bell rang, Mamoru felt wound tight as a spring, desperate for some kind of release or resolution. He needed answers, needed to do something, anything, to shake the feeling of impending... what? Danger? Destiny?

Casting a quick glance up in the sky, his eyes found the third quarter moon. As always, the light felt almost discordant—sharp and tainted, as if something essential was missing.

“There’s Copernicus,” he murmured, noting the vast crater with its radiating streaks that seemed to whisper ancient stories. The moon held secrets he yearned to uncover, yet its light offered no answers.

Unnerved and seeking some aspect of control, Mamoru made his decision. As soon as he was clear of the school grounds, he ducked into a secluded alleyway, glancing around to make sure he was alone.

“You’re crazy, you know that,” he muttered to himself. “You should just go straight to the mental hospital.”

He sucked in a deep breath, grounding himself.

“Walk right in and say, ‘Hi, I can feel the earth breathe. I’m searching for a mystical crystal, and I’m in love with a princess from my dreams. Oh, and by the way, I can transform into a masked vigilante.’ Yeah, that about covers it.”

With another breath, he gathered more energy and prepared to become Tuxedo Mask. This wasn’t the first time, nor would it be the last. But the process still baffled him—this inexplicable ability to shift into someone else, someone with a purpose.

The first time it happened, it had been instinctual, a process he couldn’t ignore. A sense of urgency overwhelmed him, a call to act that rippled through his bones. When he’d first donned that mask and cloak, it felt as if he were stepping into the shoes of a forgotten hero.

Even now, he didn’t know how it was possible. But every time this form dominated, there was a familiarity to it, a whisper of power and ancient duty wrapped in mystery. Perhaps he wasn’t Mamoru Chiba after all; perhaps that was his real mask. Maybe he was Tuxedo Mask. Mamoru was his mask, his fake persona.

With practiced ease, he let the golden light surge through his body, emanating from somewhere deep in his core. It was a whisper of something powerful and distant, a promise wrapped in a veil of mystery.

The surrounding air thickened, shimmering with a soft glow. As the transformation began, a cascade of dreamlike images flooded his mind. Moonlit gardens. White roses, their petals gilded in ethereal light. Laughter. Golden columns and glittering tapestries. Crowns covered in blood. Betrayal.

Golden ribbons of light spiraled around him, caressing his skin and clothing. His school uniform dissolved, replaced by the sleek black of a tailored tuxedo. A crisp white shirt materialized, followed by a silken vest. The fabric flowed like water, conforming to him perfectly.

With a billowing snap, a cape unfurled from his shoulders, its lining a deep, rich red that caught the light like liquid rubies. It settled around him with a whisper, as if alive and sentient. A top hat snapped into being, gently lowering itself into place.

The golden light flowed up and around his body before concentrating around his eyes, coalescing into a white domino mask that adhered to his face like a second skin. As it settled, his vision sharpened, the world coming into crystal-clear focus.

A single red rose appeared in his hand, its stem thornless and strong. Its fragrance wafted around him, reminding him of his purpose.

“I will find the Legendary Silver Crystal. I’ll discover who I am and who the princess is.”

As the golden light faded, Tuxedo Mask stood in Mamoru’s place, the transformation complete. He felt whole and powerful, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead. For a moment, he remained still, marveling at the familiar and yet always exhilarating sensation of the change.

“Let’s try to be a little less conspicuous today.”

With a snap, the hat, cape, and mask vanished. Now, at least, he looked a little less deranged.

“Now, what do you have to show me?”

Those subtle vibrations along the earth guided him, the pull of the unknown urging him. He emerged onto the street, moving with the crowd. Blending in, yet completely separate. So he followed that expectant hum, hoping that answers awaited him on the other side.

Finally, he'd discover who he really was. Where the Legendary Silver Crystal was. Who the princess was. Then he'd be at peace.

With each step he took on the crowded sidewalk, the hum grew stronger, an almost tangible vibration that set his teeth on edge. As he approached a large jewelry store, he glanced upwards.

"This one looks big enough. Perhaps it's here."

The sensation intensified to an almost painful degree. He was close—so close to something important. Everything was screaming to him the importance of it all.

As he gazed up at the shop, imagining what it would feel like to be whole again, a crumpled paper smacked him in the face. Just ahead, a girl with buns in her hair and a school uniform was grumbling.

"Hey, that wasn't very nice," he said. "What are you trying to do? Put bumps on my head too?"

She whipped about. "These aren't bumps! They're buns! Learn the difference."

Curious, he looked at the paper. "30 percent? You've got to study harder."

"Hey!" she screeched. "Mind your own business!"

"You're the one who invited me to read it."

Then their eyes locket. He found himself staring into a pair of startlingly blue eyes. The world tilted on its axis. Those eyes...they stirred something deep within him, a flicker of recognition that vanished as quickly as it appeared.

Her eyes widened.

His eyes narrowed.

But then she was gone, turning away with a muttered word that sounded suspiciously like "Jerk." As she stomped off, he felt a strange reluctance to let her go, almost as if something important was slipping through his fingers.

No. He shook his head, forcing his attention back to the jewelry store. “They might have it, the Legendary Silver Crystal.”

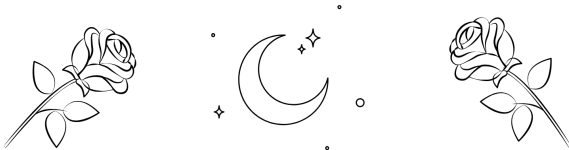
Yet, even as he turned towards the store’s entrance, he couldn’t help casting one last glance in the direction the girl had vanished. Something about her...

It was only then that he noticed the warmth against his chest. The star locket, usually cool to the touch, now pulsed with a gentle heat. He frowned, his hand instinctively moving to cover it.

“This has to mean I’ve found it. The Legendary Silver Crystal has to be here.”

Yes, he’d wait until dark. Explore every nook and cranny. Tear the place apart if he had to. This was the closest he’d ever gotten to recovering his lost memories, to finding out who he was, and who the princess was.

## *Chapter Three*



# *Echoes of the Forgotten*

The night air hung heavy with anticipation, an electric charge that set Mamoru's teeth on edge. He paced the shadowy streets, unable to shake the feeling that something monumental was about to unfold. Even as Tuxedo Mask, he felt vulnerable, exposed. An unfamiliar energy hummed through the air, vibrated the buildings. It whispered songs of change and destiny and forbidden love.

Needing some sort of comfort, he glanced upward. The waxing gibbous moon hung low in the dark sky, its light abrasive and distant. Tendrils of moonlight bathed the city in an otherworldly glow, its silvery beams trying, but failing, to tell him something.

"You've got to get a grip on yourself."

He squeezed his eyes shut. The princess in his dreams, her face forever shrouded in mystery, floated at the edges of his consciousness. But tonight, even her ethereal presence couldn't quell the restlessness that clawed at him.

Somehow, he found himself drawn to the sprawling Osa-P jewelry store. Even in the dark, the windows sparkled like a thousand captured stars. As he approached, the whispers of the earth grew more insistent, an urgent plea he couldn't ignore. Something was wrong here, and yet...

“This store has to have it. It's the largest one I've seen. It has to have traces of the Legendary Silver Crystal.”

He tucked a hand inside his cape, fingering the red rose nestled there. The smooth velvet petals tried to comfort him, but failed. The cool night breeze caressed his face, carrying with it the faintest hint of roses—a scent that tugged at the locked doors of his memory.

Just when he was about to enter the store, something made him stop.

The world around him seemed to hold its breath. At once, every natural phenomenon exploded and stilled. The moonlight intensified, bathing everything in an almost blinding radiance. And for once, it wasn't harsh or cloying. Instead, it was soft and silky. Just like it had been...

A jolt of energy surged through him, bringing him to his knees, gasping for breath. He clutched at his chest, pawing and digging at the spot behind his left ribs. It burned. It stung. As if every cell in his body had come alive at once, singing with a power both foreign and comforting.

“What's going on?”

In that moment, he knew with bone-deep certainty that everything had changed. Somewhere, a star burst into existence. True power had been awakened.

The force of it resonated through him, setting his soul ablaze with recognition. This wasn't just power; it was a call, a beacon, a piece of himself that he hadn't known was missing until this very second.

Automatically, his thoughts went to the princess. Perhaps she was real, after all. Maybe, just maybe, he wasn't crazy after all.

With a snap that left him wheezing, the sensation faded, leaving him trembling and weak. His heart pounded a frantic rhythm against his ribs. That spot still simmered, feeling scorched and raw. The world settled back to its familiar patterns, as if nothing had changed.

"Something just woke. But is it friend or foe?"

Still shaking, he stumbled to his feet, leaning heavily against the building. Whatever had just happened, whatever force had just awakened, Mamoru knew it was important. Knew that it would alter the nature of his world forever. Casting another glance at the moon, he narrowed his eyes. Now the moonbeams felt dissonant once again.

With a deep breath, he steeled himself and strode towards the jewelry store entrance. Destiny, it seemed, was calling.

He slipped into the store, his cape flowing silently behind him. The streetlights outside cast a muted, eerie glow on the interior, long shadows spilled across the polished floor. Bare and empty display cases sat in rows, mourning the loss of their glittering treasures.

"Where is that strange aura coming from?"

Keeping to the shadows, he eased down the stairs to the basement. His breath caught as he spotted a figure. A woman, bound and gagged, her eyes wide with terror. She struggled against her bonds, muffled whimpers escaping through the gag.

Now even more alert, fear pulsed behind his eyes. Now the shadows seemed more menacing and the silence more dark. He could release her, but with the unknown dangers lurking, she could get hurt. After a moment's agonizing hesitation, he decided.

"I'm sorry, but you're probably safer here."

With a silent promise to return, he melted into the shadows and made his way back upstairs. Rough brick scraped against his gloves as

he scaled an exterior wall, each movement precise and controlled. He reached a window on the upper floor and slid it open. Slipping inside, he crouched, waiting for something to happen.

It didn't take long.

Tuxedo Mask's breath caught in his throat as he peered through the window. A monstrous figure loomed in the moonlit room, its body a grotesque patchwork of glittering jewels and twisted flesh. Its elongated fingers, tipped with razor-sharp claws, were wrapped around a terrified girl's throat. The air crackled with malevolent energy, making Mamoru's skin prickle beneath his mask.

He coiled, ready to spring into action, when a voice rang out, clear and defiant. "Get away from Naru-chan! You have no right to touch her, you wrinkly beast!"

The monster's head snapped towards the newcomer, its jewel-encrusted face contorting with rage. "And who do you think you are? You're interrupting here."

"Oh, um," the girl faltered, her bravado wavering.

Mamoru watched, fascinated, as uncertainty flashed across her face. Then, as if responding to an unheard voice, she straightened, her posture transforming from a nervous teenager to something... more.

"I'm the pretty guardian in a sailor suit! A guardian of love and justice."

As she spoke, the moonlight seemed to pour through the windows, enveloping her in an ethereal glow. It caressed her skin, making her hair shimmer like spun silver. She seemed to pulse with the same energy as the moonbeams, as if they shared the same celestial essence. Her presence sent a jolt of recognition through Mamoru, leaving him gasping and confused. He'd never seen her before, and yet...

His hand flew to the star locket in his pocket. It hummed against his fingertips, vibrating with an energy that seemed to resonate with

the girl. Impossible. It was just reacting to another masked guardian, like himself. It had to be.

“I’m Sailor Moon!”

Mamoru watched, transfixed, as the moonlight gathered around her like a protective embrace. He felt an inexplicable pull towards her, a desperate desire to know her, to be close, to share the burdens that weighed so heavily on his soul. The intensity of the feeling was almost frightening—he’d never opened his heart to anyone, and didn’t want to start now. His heart belonged to the mystery woman from his dreams. He wouldn’t betray her.

The monster’s gravelly voice cut through his thoughts. “Sailor Moon? I haven’t heard of you. Are you new in town?”

“Who? Me?” Sailor Moon’s voice wavered. “Uh, I was born here.”

“Well, you’ll die here!” the monster snarled. “Awaken! I’ll send our great ruler energy! Go, my slaves!”

A dozen figures lurched from the shadows, their actions jerky and unnatural. Their eyes glowed with an eerie light as they advanced on Sailor Moon. Mamoru’s muscles tensed, every instinct screaming at him to intervene. But something held him back, a voice in his mind insisting that this was her fight.

Sailor Moon’s attacks were a strange mix of determination and fear. She dodged a swipe from one of the possessed civilians, her movements more luck than skill. A terrified yelp came from her as she barely dodged a swipe from a minion. Somehow, she ducked fast enough when a wild swing came for her.

Mamoru would have smiled if there wasn’t so much danger. She flailed her arms, swinging wildly as she attempted to fend off her attackers. Her strikes were awkward, as if she really didn’t want to hurt them. Several pairs of hands darted for her at once. She stumbled,

losing her footing on the polished floor. With a yelp of pain, she clutched her bleeding knee.

“What? Does this mean it’s... it’s... real?” she wailed. “I thought it was a dream!”

The minions closed in, their hands outstretched like claws. Sailor Moon’s eyes widened in panic. Something held him back from coming to her rescue. A realization struck with startling clarity.

He needed to see what she was capable of. If she was truly a guardian, she needed to discover her own strength. Interfering now might rob her of the chance to awaken to the potential he sensed within her.

Still, the decision to remain hidden gnawed at him. It was a gamble, a test of her abilities and his trust in her, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that she needed this moment. She needed to prove to herself that she could stand her ground.

“It hurts and I’m bleeding! This is my precious life blood! I’ll bleed to death! I’m too young to bleed to death!”

Mamoru’s heart raced. Every fiber of his being screamed to help her, to sweep in and protect this strange, captivating girl. His hand reached for a rose, ready to throw it at the nearest attacker. Yet practical concerns anchored him in place. If he revealed himself now, it could put her in greater danger.

The element of surprise was his greatest asset, and he couldn’t risk exposing his identity or intentions prematurely. Even so, he prepared himself, ready to ask if the situation became truly dire. His gaze remained fixed on her, silently urging her to find the strength he knew she possessed.

“Why do I have to suffer like this?” she cried, tears streaming down her face.

The monster loomed over her, its jeweled claws glinting menacingly in the moonlight. With his body coiled like a spring, Mamoru was ready to leap into action.

Then Sailor Moon burst into tears, her wails echoing through the room. "I can't take this. I'm going home! I'm gonna hide under my blanket and never ever ever ever ever ever come out again! You can't make me! Waaaaaaaaaa!"

To Mamoru's astonishment, the monster and its minions recoiled, clutching their heads in pain. The air vibrated with the force of Sailor Moon's cries, sending visible waves of energy rippling through the room.

"I'm so numb," the monster groaned. "Are these high frequency waves? It hurts! Make it stop."

Sailor Moon continued to cry, oblivious to the effect she was having. Mamoru knew this was his moment to act, not with physical intervention, but with encouragement.

"Don't cry, Sailor Moon," he called out, his voice steady and reassuring. "Now is the time to act."

She looked up at him, her tear-streaked face illuminated by the moonlight. Their eyes met, and for a moment, something ignited between them. Guilt flashed across his chest, almost like he was abandoning the girl from his dreams. Still, he gave her a single, confident nod.

Something in Sailor Moon's demeanor changed. With renewed determination, she reached for the tiara on her forehead. As she removed it, it began to glow with an intense golden light.

"Moon Tiara Boomerang!" she shouted, her voice ringing with newfound power.

The tiara spun through the air, a blazing disc of golden energy. It sliced through the darkness, leaving trails of light in its wake. The

monster barely had time to scream before the tiara struck, its body dissolving into a shower of golden sparks and dark shadows.

As the light faded, Sailor Moon stood in the center of the room, her eyes wide with disbelief. “No way,” she breathed. “It actually worked? You’ve got to be kidding me. Does this mean I have super powers?”

Mamoru found himself captivated, unable to look away from this enigma who had burst into his world and turned everything upside down. His mind raced, trying to process everything he’d witnessed.

“Well, I didn’t find the Legendary Silver Crystal,” he murmured to himself, “but I did find something interesting.”

He stepped onto the windowsill, his cape billowing behind him in the night breeze. He could feel Sailor Moon’s eyes on him, filled with curiosity and wonder.

“My name is Tuxedo Mask,” he said, looking down at her one last time. Their eyes met, and he felt that inexplicable connection once more. “Sailor Moon, I’ll remember you.”

With that, he leaped into the night, his heart pounding with the weight of new mysteries and unexpected emotions. The cool night air whipped around him as he bounded across rooftops, the city a blur of lights and shadows beneath him. But Mamoru barely noticed his surroundings, his mind a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts and feelings.

The image of Sailor moon, bathed in moonlight and raw power, refused to leave him. Her determined blue eyes, golden hair streaming in the moonbeams, the way she transformed into a crying girl to a powerful warrior in mere moments—it all haunted him.

He felt drawn to her in a way he couldn’t explain, a pull so strong it terrified him.

Yet, as he touched the hidden locket, guilt washed over him. The faceless princess of his dreams, the one he’d sworn to find and protect,

seemed to fade in comparison to the very real, very present Sailor Moon. Was he betraying his princess by feeling this connection to another?

He skidded to a stop on a rooftop, his cape billowing around him as he gazed up at the moon. Its soft light mocked him now, condemning him for these feelings. Just moments before, it had transformed into something soft and comforting as it caressed Sailor Moon's form. Why was it hard now?

"Who are you?" he whispered to the light, unsure if he was addressing Sailor Moon, the dream princess, or himself.

The locket hummed against his chest, a constant reminder of the unknown. But now, that mission was more complicated than ever. Was Sailor Moon connected to the Legendary Silver Crystal? Could she be the key to unlocking his past?

But then there was the other girl—the clumsy one who literally crashed into his life. Why did she keep appearing in his thoughts alongside Sailor Moon and the princess?

Mamoru ran a hand through his hair, frustration and confusion warring within him. For so long, his path was clear—find the Legendary Silver Crystal, uncover his past, find the princess. Now, everything was muddled, his heart and mind pulling him in different directions.

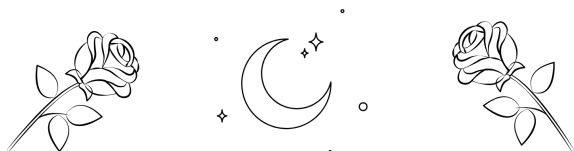
Almost reluctantly, he resumed his journey home, yet he couldn't shake the feeling that his life had just undergone an irrevocable change. Whatever destiny had in store for him, it was intricately tied to Sailor Moon.

The thought was both thrilling and terrifying.

"I'll remember you, Sailor Moon," he muttered into the night, his words carried away by the wind. "But will remembering you help me find my memories, or lead me astray?"

When no answer came, Mamoru melted into the shadows of the city, his heart heavy with unanswered questions and his soul alight with the first flickering flames of an attraction he didn't yet understand or want.

## *Chapter Four*



# *Awakening of Mercury*

**D**arkness swirled and pulsed, caressing the surface of the cavernous throne room. The very shadows harnessed and molded the only light that dared encroach on its territory. The darkness fed off the malevolent energy that permeated this place. Growing and strengthening. Expanding and conquering.

Evil flame silhouetted against shadow, one and the same. Brothers. Lovers. At the heart of its umbral domain sat Queen Beryl, her form nearly as tainted as it was. Almost. Her crimson hair danced with a life of its own, its swaying power a rippling praise to the power around her. Darkness clung to her like a second skin, enhancing her cruel beauty and the waves of dark energy that radiated from her very being.

But she was only a servant, a minion of the darkness.

Before Queen Beryl floated a crystal ball, images moving on its surface, flickering too fast for mortal eyes to comprehend. Long fingers caressed the surface, gliding across like the whisper of shad-

ows, its touch both delicate and entrancing. But the darkness saw all—glimpses of vast powers, ancient secrets, and the tantalizing promise of the Legendary Silver Crystal.

No movement stirred, not even a hint of wind brushed the air. Everything but darkness and evil had abandoned this place. A new presence disturbed the equilibrium. Another servant of the darkness, but this one tainted instead of converted.

Jadeite materialized from the deep shadows, dropping to a knee before the throne. The darkness could taste the trace of reluctance in his soul, a subtle glimmer of something not entirely lost. He'd remain a puppet, his strings pulled by forces he could never defeat. Yet, despite being bound, a flickering remnant of light existed—not wholly extinguished. The darkness would use him all the same, savoring the challenge of bending that light to its will.

“My Queen.” The darkness drank in those almost invisible threads of apprehension, savoring it.

Queen Beryl glowered down. “You’re a failure. You haven’t found the Legendary Silver Crystal.”

“I offer only the most humble apologies.”

“You and your brothers are proving to be a disappointment. If only you’d secured Prince Endymion, then I wouldn’t be faced with your disgrace time and time again.”

Jadeite bowed lower. “Yes, my Queen.”

The darkness coiled tighter around him, feeding off his rising panic and desperate energy.

“My Queen, I’ve made progress, but—“

“But you’ve failed!” Beryl’s words cut through the air like a blade.

The shudder that ran through him was imperceptible, but the dark felt it. Rejoiced in it.

“Your Great Ruler demands power!” She slammed her fist down on the stone throne.

The sound exploded outward, shaking the rock. Shards of stone rained down, tinkling down in a demented storm. Jadeite flinched, but recovered quickly.

“We must gather more energy, and above all, we must find the Legendary Silver Crystal!”

“I understand.”

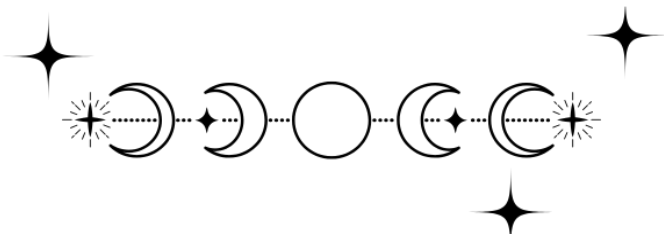
Queen Beryl leaned forward, her eyes narrowing. The darkness sizzled, anticipating her wrath. “I hope so, Jadeite. My patience wears thin. Do not disappoint me again.”

Jadeite bowed lower. The darkness settled on his back and shoulders, shoving him down further until his forehead almost brushed the icy stone.

“I the Dark Kingdom’s Far-East commander, Jadeite, will take that responsibility. I will find the Legendary Silver Crystal and obtain glorious energy for our Great Ruler.”

“Let us hope so, Jadeite. For I am not as merciful as Endymion once was. I will see you punished for your failure.”

Now the darkness surged, swirling about the cavern. The light flickered, growing bright in response to its master’s call. Queen Beryl laughed, a menacing sound that only complemented the sinister shadows that danced with glee.



The quiet murmur of voices filled the classroom, a familiar backdrop to Ami's solitary world. She sat rigidly at her desk, surrounded by an invisible barrier that seemed to repel her classmates. The empty chairs around her stood as stark reminders of her isolation, their vacancy speaking volumes in the crowded room. Her classmates seemed to orbit around her, lone asteroids never connecting.

"Mizuno is studying by herself again, as usual."

Ami's fingers tightened around her pencil as she hunched over her textbook, using it as a shield.

"She's such a snob because she gets good grades."

The words on the page blurred as she fought against the familiar ache of loneliness that threatened to overwhelm her.

"Teachers pet."

"Did you see her score on the last test?" A voice whispered nearby, poorly concealed disdain dripping from every word.

"Yeah, what a freak. No wonder she doesn't have any friends. Loser."

Ami's shoulders tensed, and she glanced over, only to force her eyes back to the page once again. She'd learned long ago that reacting only made things worse. Instead, she retreated further into her academic fortress, desperately clinging to the one thing that gave her life structure and purpose. The neat rows of text providing a comforting order amidst the chaos of her emotions.

A wave of fatigue washed over her, and she rubbed her eyes, trying to dispel the fog that seemed to cloud her mind lately. The lack of sleep was taking its toll, and when she did sleep vivid, confusing dreams consumed her mind.

Even now, the images were almost there, hovering on the edges of her consciousness. She wandered through an unfamiliar building, its

halls vast and ethereal. The architecture was nothing like the grand palaces of Versailles, the Forbidden City, or Buckingham.

How was it possible? She'd spent hours researching, poring over architectural books and historical texts, searching for it. Yet, she couldn't place the strange structure. It was as if it existed only in her mind, a phantom building that haunted her nights.

But it wasn't just the building. There was a man in her dreams, his long, wavy hair catching the light as he turned to her with a knowing smile. His face was always just out of focus, yet she found herself drawn to the graceful movements of his hands, each gesture filled with an elegance that felt familiar. But sadness polluted each appearance.

"Did you see her score on the last test?" a voice whispered nearby, poorly concealed disdain dripping from every word.

"Yeah, what a freak. She's probably not even human."

Once, walking home from cram school, Ami swore she saw him on the street. Her heart leaped, a jolt of recognition coursing through her. But when she blinked, he was gone, leaving her to wonder if her lonely mind was simply conjuring companions from thin air.

Ami blinked, banishing such thoughts. Such flights of imagination were illogical, a waste of mental energy better spent on her studies. Yet, as she forced her attention back to the book before her, she couldn't shake the lingering feeling that something was missing. That somewhere, somehow, there was more to life than this isolated existence.

The teacher's arrival silenced the class, sending students scrambling to their desks. Ami straightened, pushing her loneliness and confusion deep down inside. She was Ami Mizuno. Top student, and that was all she needed to be. It had to be enough.

Lunch was no different.

Ami sat alone, the blue sky and pale moon hovering above her. At least they had each other, unlike her. A bustle of activity and laughing caught her attention, and trying to be subtle, she looked up.

Ami recognized the girl. A popular and effervescent girl. Usagi. Friends always surrounded her. She never walked home alone, or ate by herself. Now the food tasted stale. Their laughter rising and falling like a melody that Ami could never be a part of.

A pang of envy struck her chest as she watched Usagi interact with such ease, as if friendship came as natural as breathing. It wasn't just the number of people that surrounded Usagi; it was the way she made each person feel seen and valued, creating a connection that felt as tangible as the summer breeze.

If only. If only she could experience that companionship. If only she could weave herself into the fabric of those around her without hesitation or fear. But the very thought of approaching someone like Usagi filled her with such terror.

What would she say? How could she possibly fit into such a vibrant world?

Ami shuddered, opening her book quickly to seek the solace in its pages. At least here she could momentarily forget the loneliness that lingered at the edges of her mind. But even as she read, the sound of Usagi's laughter continued to echo in her ears, a reminder of the friendship she yearned for yet felt powerless to attain.

The afternoon sun cast long shadows as Ami made her way home, her footsteps echoing softly on the pavement. Her mind wandered, still caught in the web of isolation that had ensnared her thoughts throughout the school day.

Suddenly, a sound pierced through her melancholy—a girl's laughter, clear and bright as moonlight on crystal. It danced on the air

around her, familiar yet elusive, resonating with something deep inside her.

She froze, her heart racing. The laughter faded as quickly as it had come, but its familiarity lingered, stirring something deep within her. Ami glanced around, searching for the source, but the street was empty. A chill crept down her spine as she considered the implications. Auditory hallucinations weren't a good sign—sleep deprivation, stress, schizophrenia, brain tumors, cancer.

The possibilities spun through her mind like a dark carousel, each one more frightening than the last. But the laughter seemed so familiar.

Lost in thought, Ami barely registered the pressure on her shoulder. She looked up, startled to find herself face-to-face with a black cat perched on her shoulder. Its eyes seemed to peer into her soul, knowing and wise beyond measure.

Reaching up, she scratched the cat's fur. "You're so soft!"

"Sorry!" a voice called out. "Did she hurt you?"

Ami turned to see Usagi approaching with a smile as bright as the full moon.

"No, I thought she was an angel."

Heat burst through her face, and she shoved her palms to her cheeks. What a stupid thing to say!

"You're Ami Mizuno, class five, right? I'm Usagi! From class one." Usagi's eyes twinkled in the sunlight. "And this one is Luna!"

Ami gave a small bow. "Nice to meet you, Usagi."

Usagi perked up. "Say, have you ever been to the arcade? It's really close, and so much fun."

"I... uh..."

"Come on!"

Usagi pulled her down the sidewalk. Ami's first instinct was to decline, but this was the first time that someone had wanted to do something with her. Usagi spoke rapidly as they walked, Ami followed behind, suddenly more contented than she'd been in a while.

"I think we're in luck," Usagi said. "Motoki is working today. He's soooooo cute! The way his hair falls over his eyebrows. Swoon. Not to mention his laugh, so adorable. He's so handsome, he could be a superstar."

Usagi paused and looked over at her. "But I hear he's into smart girls. I'll gracefully bow aside if he's into you, but expect a fight! I won't go easily. No way."

Ami chuckled at the thought. Who would want to pursue a loner book nerd?

"But she'd be lucky," Usagi continued. "Dating a boy who works at the arcade! Date nights, free prizes! What a life!"

As the automatic doors whooshed open, Ami looked around with barely concealed awe. Bright flashing lights blinked in steady rhythms. Cheerful music echoed off the polished floors. Ami grinned, she'd never seen a place like this!

"This way! The new Sailor V game is so much fun." Usagi frowned. "But so hard! Those monsters kill me all the time. Come on!"

Usagi slid into a seat and started tapping away at the buttons. "You smash this one. And hit this one. And kick this one."

Ami studied the movements and nodded. Seemed rather straightforward. It was all about timing, anticipating and memorization.

"Aww! What a waste of a 100 yen. That was my last one too! Waaaa!" Usagi stood and pushed Ami down into the seat. "Oh, well. You try."

With her trademark laser focus, Ami honed in on the game. Her fingers flew over the buttons. With careful thought, she analyzed the

attack patterns, calculating the timing, and memorized the sequence. It was like a complex math problem, each move a variable in an equation.

In the back of her mind, there was almost a practiced feel to it. Like she'd been training this way for years. Then, before she'd know it, "New High Score" flashed across the screen.

"Wow!" Usagi screeched. "Mizuno-san, you're so amazing!"

Just before she went to stand, a pen tumbled out of the dispenser. As she reached for it, her fingers brushed the cool surface, and a surge of energy shot up her arm. An image crashed through her mind. Crystal spires and white flowers.

"NO FAIR!" Usagi jumped forward and shoved the machine, kicking it and screeching. "I want one! I want one!"

With a shudder, another pen dropped out, and Usagi jumped for joy.

Ami laughed. "You're funny, Tuskino-san."

Usagi winked. "Call me, Usagi! Can I call you Ami-chan, please, pretty please!"

"Sure," Ami said with a smile.

She couldn't remember a time when someone had been so friendly. It felt right, like coming home. Like they could be good friends. Perhaps this meant that she wouldn't be alone anymore. Now she had a friend.

Something caught her attention, and she glanced at the clock on the wall. "Oh, is that the time? I have night school starting soon."

"Aweeewwwww!" Usagi cried. "Do you have to go? Is it close at least? Don't you go to Crystal Seminar?"

Ami blushed and looked away. "I go every day."

"Why would you do such a thing?"

“It’s the only thing I’m good at. I want to become a doctor, like my mom.”

Usagi’s eyes went wide. “Sounds hard, and boring, but cool! You’ll fix my bones, okay?” Usagi snickered.

Ami beamed. “Deal.”

She practically bounced, leaving the arcade. Her heart felt lighter than it had been in years. It would be nice to finally have a friend to experience true friendship. Thoughts of a more pleasant future filled her mind, but her steps faltered.

Across the street stood the man from her dreams. His long, wavy hair caught the afternoon light. Then his eyes found hers. The sheer intensity made her breath catch.

A thousand questions flashed through her mind. Who was he? Why did she feel such a strong connection to him? The logical part of her mind wrestled with the emotions surging through her, unable to reconcile the impossibility of the situation with the undeniable familiarity she felt.

Everything stood still, time froze. But before she could make a move for him, the crowd swallowed him.

Part of her longed to follow, to unravel the mystery he presented. But the responsible part of her mind reasserted itself, reminding her of her commitments.

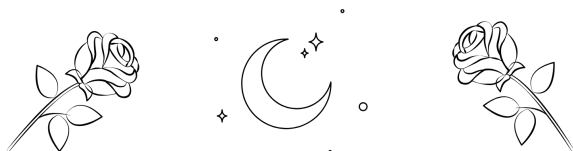
With a last, longing look in the direction he’d disappeared, Ami hurried towards cram school. As she walked, her mind buzzed with questions about the mysterious man and the new friendship she might have found with Usagi.

For the first time in a long while, Ami felt a spark of hope for the future, a sense that perhaps her lonely days were numbered. She had glimpsed a world beyond her solitary existence—one filled with friendship, mystery, and maybe even love. The thought both thrilled

and terrified her, but for once, Ami was eager to see what tomorrow might bring.



# *Chapter Five*



## *Whispers in Dreams*

**M**amoru stood motionless outside of the Crystal Seminar cram school, clad in his Tuxedo Mask persona. His feet remained rooted in the sidewalk as if the earth itself held him in place. Something was terribly wrong. The building seemed ordinary enough, yet an inexplicable sense of foreboding lingered in the air.

A chill ran down his spine, distinctly at odds with the warm afternoon air. Ignoring the crowd, he closed his eyes, focusing on the sensations rippling through him. He couldn't remember when he became aware of the way the earth seemed to speak to him. It was never frightening. On the contrary, he'd always found a strange sort of comfort.

It was just more proof that he was crazy.

"Tell me," he whispered.

The concrete beneath his feet seemed to vibrate with an unnatural frequency, a discordant hum that set his teeth on edge. As if the very

ground was trying to warn him, to push him away from the innocuous-looking building before him.

The faint breeze carried a scent of decay, barely perceptible but unmistakable to his heightened senses. Under it all, there was a sense of danger, peril, of disaster waiting. Casting a quick glance around, the plants lining the sidewalk, usually vibrant and full of life, seemed to wilt ever so slightly as he watched.

“What’s going on here?”

Dark tendrils of... something... oozed from the building’s foundation, invisible to the naked eye but painfully apparent to him in the light.

“What am I doing here?” he muttered.

He should be searching for the Legendary Silver Crystal, not loitering outside some random cram school. Unconsciously, his hand moved to his chest, where the locket lay hidden. The weight of it was a constant reminder of his missing memories, of the past that remained hidden behind a veil of shadow and fog.

And yet... he couldn’t shake the feeling that this place was important. That something was about to happen here, and he’d be needed. Mamoru gritted his teeth, torn between his duty to find the crystal and the undeniable pull of this strange aura.

“Just a few more minutes,” he promised himself, even as the nagging voice in the back of his mind whispered hew as wasting precious time.

The mystery princess, the silver crystal, his entire past—all of it hung in the balance. And here he was, standing outside a cram school like a lost schoolboy.

Mamoru’s concentration shattered as something smacked against his forehead. The sudden intrusion jolted him from his trance-like state, pulling him back to the busy street.

His irritation faltered as he recognized the girl standing before him—the same clumsy blond from the other day. Her long hair swayed in the slight breeze and something stirred in his chest, a warmth he couldn't quite place.

“Hey,” he snapped, squeezing the offending sheet in his hand. “Bun-head, this is the second time you’ve treated me like a trash can. Didn’t your parents ever teach you not to litter?”

She froze and whipped around. Those blue eyes widened and then narrowed.

“What! You’re the guy from before? Are you stalking me?”

Mamoru leaned forward, eyeing the cat in her arms. Something prickled at the edge of his awareness. “Did that cat just talk?”

The girl flinched, her eyes expanded, and he almost clucked as the cat’s eyes mirrored hers. For a few brief seconds, they wore the same startled and guilty expression.

“No waaaaay,” she chuckled nervously. “You must be crazy. Not only are you wearing a tuxedo during the day, but you think cats talk. So no, definitely no. Absolutely not.”

As she babbled, Mamoru found himself oddly captivated. The sun caught her golden hair, creating a halo effect that was almost ethereal. He blinked, trying to shake off the sudden and unwelcome attraction. This was ridiculous. She was just a girl—a clumsy, loud, probably too young for him, girl. Nothing like the mature, elegant, and refined princess.

“I’m, um, bye.” Casting one last glance at him, she darted off. Her hair streaming behind her.

He watched her go, almost tripping on the sidewalk, a bemused smile tugging at his lips. Quickly, he schooled his features, shaking his head at his own foolishness.

“Get it together, Chiba,” he muttered to himself. “You’ve got more important things to think about than some girl.”

But as he turned back to the cram school building, he couldn’t shake the lingering warmth in his chest, or the nagging feeling that there was more to her—and her strange cat—than met the eye.

Focusing again, he slipped into the alley beside the building. The strange wrong aura was stronger here. It almost burned his skin and brought tears to his eyes. He walked the perimeter, each step heightening his unease. An unnatural rhythm wove through the area, sending bolts of unease shooting through his body.

Casting a glance back at the street, he hoped the girl had left this place. Because if she stayed, she could be in danger. Panic gripped his chest at the thought, and he struggled to dismiss it. He was being ridiculous; she was nothing to him. If anything, he should be more concerned about himself. It’s not like he had any power to defeat evil.

Pausing at the corner of the building, he pressed his palm against the cool brick. A shiver ran through him as he felt the wrongness more acutely—like a sickness infecting the structure from within. Now the smell of decay became stronger, unmistakable even in the damp alleyway.

“What are you hiding?” he muttered, his eyes canning the seemingly innocuous window above.

As if to answer him, a gust of wind carried a whisper. Mamoru froze, straining to hear. There it was again—a voice, faint but clear, drifting from an open window on the second floor.

“We are the minions of the great ruler, and we must collect any information about the Legendary Silver Crystal.”

Mamoru almost didn’t believe it at first. This was the first time he’d heard those words outside of his dream. Then an icy wave of panic washed over him. The Legendary Silver Crystal, the very object of his

obsessive searches, the key to his past and haunted dreams. How could it be connected to such a place? To such a dark aura?

Instinctively, his hand went to his chest, where the locket lay hidden beneath his shirt. Its weight seemed to increase, as if responding to the crystal's name. The world around him blurred, the sounds of the busy street fading away, the implications of what he'd heard crashed over him.

Now he knew this was no ordinary cram school. Whatever evil lurked within these walls, it was searching for the same thing he was—and for all he knew, they might be closer to finding. An acute agony spread across his chest at the thought. He didn't know much, but he knew they couldn't find it first.

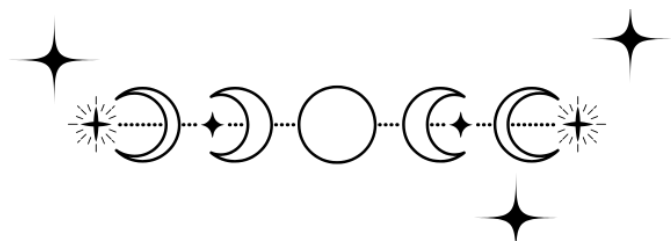
His jaw clenched. He wouldn't allow whoever—or whatever—was inside to get their hands on the Silver Crystal. Not when it held the key to his past, to his identity of the princess who called to him in his dreams. Not when this aura was so evil and the crystal was so pure.

Making sure he wasn't being observed, he ducked further into the shadows. In a flash of light and flurry of rose petals, he completed his Tuxedo Mask transformation, his cape billowing as he emerged from the darkness.

"Time to find out what's really going on in there," he murmured, his eyes fixed on the building that now loomed ominously before him.

Because if she was in danger... Somehow he knew that if evil was involved, Sailor Moon would eventually arrive. He fought to keep thoughts of her from his mind. Because he was already being unfaithful to his princess by thinking about the girl, if he added another to the mix...

Shaking his head, he slipped into the building and blended with the shadows.



Darkness engulfed Ami, thick and oppressive, pressing against her from all sides. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't move. It was worse than any nightmare she'd ever had, as if she were suspended in an endless pool of pure darkness—a void that stretched on forever. She was weightless yet impossibly heavy, numb yet excruciatingly aware, frozen yet burning, silent yet screaming.

Inky blackness swirled around her, tendrils of shadow wrapping around her limbs, her torso, her neck, pulling her deeper into the unknown abyss. The moment she opened her mouth to scream, the darkness rushed inside her, filling her lungs, choking her. It tasted of despair and decay, bitter and acrid on her tongue.

A faint voice echoed in the distance, familiar yet distorted, as if heard through water. "Blue, wake up! Blue! You have to fight it!"

But how could she fight when she couldn't even move?

The darkness pulsed, alive and terrifying. It whispered to her, promises of power and knowledge seeping into her thoughts like poison. Ami knew, with a certainty that chilled her to her core, that something was terribly, irrevocably wrong.

"If you don't fight," the voice said, "you'll be lost, and I'll never find you again."

This wasn't a nightmare; it was real, and it was consuming her.

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, a frantic rhythm that seemed to be declining with each passing second. The cold embrace of

the darkness numbed her limbs, creeping towards her center. Each thought became fragmented, memories slipping away like sand through her fingers.

Who was she? Why was she fighting? No one liked her. No one wanted to be her friend. All she was good at was studying. All she'd ever be was a loner bookworm.

It would be so easy to give up. To surrender to the soothing nothingness.

But something within her refused to give up. A tiny spark of defiance flickered in the depths of her fading consciousness. A crystal building surrounded by stars and brilliant moonlight. Laughter among delicate white flowers. Purpose. Dedication. Friendship.

She had to fight. She had to endure.

As Ami hovered on the brink of oblivion, caught between resistance and surrender, a new sensation cut through the darkness. A warmth, faint but growing stronger, like the first rays of moonrise.

A new sensation jolted through Ami's body, sharp and sudden. The crushing pressure around her neck snapped her back to reality, yanking her from the endless void of nothingness. Her lungs burned, desperate for air.

"You little slacker," the darkness hissed, its voice like sandpaper against her ears. "Why haven't you succumbed? You've skipped lessons, haven't you?"

Indignation flared within Ami. How dare they accuse her of slacking! She, skip lessons? The very thought was preposterous.

"I didn't skip anything!" she choked out, her voice hoarse and strained against the monster's grip. "Studying diligently is an accomplishment in itself!"

The creature's eyes narrowed, its grip tightening. "Then why are you still conscious? Why are you still alive?"

Just as Ami thought she might lose consciousness again, a streak of golden light cut through the darkness.

“Hey, you big bully! Let her go!”

Ami’s eyes widened as she saw a familiar figure silhouetted in the doorway. It was that girl—Usagi—dressed in an outlandish sailor uniform, her long hair whipping around her as she struck a dramatic pose. Despite the gravity of the situation, Ami couldn’t help but feel a mix of relief and bewilderment.

Usagi’s bravado faltered as the monster turned its attention to her. “Um, I mean... please?” she added, her voice quavering.

The monster snarled, its grip on Ami loosening just enough for her to gasp in a precious breath of air. It raised its free hand, dark energy crackling between its fingers.

“Ami-chan!” The black cat, Luna, appeared from nowhere, leaping into the fray. “The pen! Throw the pen into the sky.”

Despite her limbs feeling like lead, Ami managed to fumble the pen from her pocket. With the last of her strength, she tossed it upward. The pen twirled end over end, catching the light. As the brilliant blue gem atop it glimmered in a stray beam of moonlight, something within Ami resonated.

A searing heat bloomed on her forehead, and suddenly, blinding fog erupted from her body. The monster recoiled, its grip finally releasing as it staggered backward.

“What is happening?” it shrieked, its voice distorted by pain. “My body is freezing!”

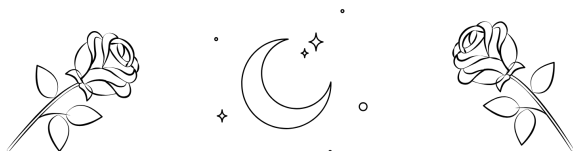
Ami collapsed to the ground, gasping for air. The moisture in the air clung to her skin, cool and comforting. It didn’t harm her; instead, it felt like a protective embrace. Through the dense fog, she could make out shadowy figures moving.

“Fog? Luna! Where are you?” Usagi’s voice cut through the mist, high-pitched with panic. “Ami-chan? Okay, I’m sorta, kinda, freaking out here!”

Ami wanted to call out, to reassure Usagi that everything was okay, but her voice refused to cooperate. Instead, she pushed herself to her knees, the fog swirling around her like a living thing. She felt different—stronger, more aware. As if she were waking up from a long dream.

Through the mist, she saw the monster regrouping, its eyes now fixed on the flailing Usagi. As the fog began to clear, Ami felt a new sense of purpose settling over her. Whatever was happening, whatever this new power was, she knew one thing for certain: she had to protect Usagi. And somehow, she knew exactly how to do it.

# *Chapter Six*



## *Veil of Shadows*

A jolt of primal fear clawed at Mamoru's chest, an icy bolt of unadulterated dread weaving through his body. At once, his heart pounded as if trying to escape his chest. The sensation of impending danger crashed through him like a tidal wave, leaving him gasping for air.

The feeling was intense, visceral, as if someone had reached into his very soul and twisted it, leaving him breathless and desperate. He staggered, clutching at the nearby wall for support as a wave of nausea threatened to overwhelm him.

Something was terribly wrong.

His mind raced, grasping for an explanation. An image flashed through his thoughts—the mysterious princess from his dreams, her face etched in fear. But as quickly as it appeared, the vision faded, leaving him questioning his own mind. The princess might not even be real, a mere figment of his imagination, a coping mechanism to combat his loneliness.

Still, every fiber of his being screamed that someone—someone important—was in peril.

His hands trembled as he reached for the familiar weight of the star locket hidden beneath his shirt. Its presence was a small comfort, a mythical connection that he still didn't understand.

"Get it together," Mamoru muttered, caressing a rose petal.

The familiar weight of Tuxedo Mask's cape pressing on his shoulders, the slight feel of the mask against his face, and the glide of fabric across his chest were the only things keeping him sane. His feet were moving before his mind could catch up, guided by an inexplicable force, by a faint vibration beneath the natural pulse of the earth.

As he raced through the building, confusion warred with determination. Why did this unseen threat feel so personal? And why did his heart whisper that Sailor Moon might be at its center?

As he rounded a corner, an ominous fog began oozing through the hallway. It glided and snaked across the floor like a demented snake, yet he felt no malice in it. Those alarm bells continued sounding as he bounded forward. While there were numerous doors on this floor, somehow he knew which to take. Without hesitating, he smashed through a door.

"I don't even like horror movies!" A voice yelled from the fog.

"Sailor Moon!"

The dense fog engulfed him, but even in the murky haze, he could sense her. As if an invisible thread pulled him towards her, a connection he couldn't explain and couldn't deny. His heart rate spiked as he caught sight of her.

A monster with an unsettling, humanoid appearance loomed dangerously close. Sickly green skin, stretched tight over a skeletal frame, half-obscured by fog and darkness honed in on her.

"I'm going to turn you into hash," the monster spat.

Glowing red eyes cut through the mist, the sight sending chills through his body. Without thinking, considering nothing, he darted

forward. Her presence settled him somewhat, calming the storm inside.

“Sailor Moon,” he spoke just loud enough for her to hear him.

Thankfully, she didn’t dart away from him. Taking her arms, he held on tightly. “Now! Kick her!”

She didn’t hesitate or question, only followed his instructions. “Sailor Moon Kick!”

Smashing into the monster before her, the beast fell away with a cry. Pulling her backward into the mist, they vanished from sight.

“That monster was right in front of you. You have to be more careful!” The panic in his chest was nearly overwhelming at how close she’d come to harm. If that monster had sunk its claws in her... Just the thought was enough to make him tremble.

The intensity of his reaction startled him—why did her safety matter so much?”

The look of shock on her face was almost amusing, as if she never expected to see him again. Their eyes met, and for a moment, they were the only two beings in the world. A warmth spread through his chest that both thrilled and terrified him.

How could he feel this way about Sailor Moon when his heart belonged to the princess in his dreams? And what about the clumsy girl? Why were they all battling for his thoughts?

“Tuxedo Mask! You’re here, I don’t believe it.”

“Go save your friend.” His voice was gruffer than he intended, but the storm of emotions swirling inside was too much to handle.

She straightened, squared her shoulders, and peeked back at him. That look in her eye—determined, yet vulnerable—moved him. It ignited something deep inside, as if he recognized it, a familiar spark of resilience and grace. It reminded him of someone important, someone just out of reach.

Then she was gone, vanished into the fog. He knew he couldn't leave, not when danger still lurked close. Instead, he retreated into the shadows, watching over her.

"Hey! That was a low blow," the monster shouted, rubbing her forehead. "You shouldn't be kicking people like that."

"Oh, please!" Sailor Moon huffed. "You're a monster. If you don't wanna get kicked, don't hurt people."

"Don't lecture me. It's in my nature, you don't chastise a snake for eating a mouse."

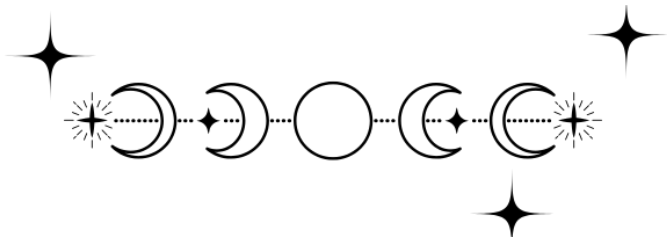
"If you weren't hurting my friend, I wouldn't kick you! I'd kick a snake if it were going for Ami-chan. If you don't deserve a lecture, I don't know who does!"

He watched over Sailor Moon as she sprinted into action. A mixture of fear and pride coursed through him. She was brave, perhaps recklessly so, and the overwhelming need to protect her was almost overpowering. Yet he also knew that she was capable, a hero.

Unconsciously, his hand went to where the locket lay protected. As he watched Sailor Moon battle the monster, he couldn't shake the feeling that his destiny might be more complicated than he thought.

"Moon Tiara Boomerang!" A blinding white light split the mist in two and smashed into the monster.

With a flash of darkness and light, the beast split before vanishing in a flurry of dispersing shadow. As the fog thinned, he slipped from the room.



The glowing tiara sliced through the air, its light momentarily blinding Ami. As it struck the monster, a brilliant flash exploded, forcing her to shield her eyes. When her eyes adjusted, the creature was gone, leaving behind only wisps of dissipating dark energy.

It sizzled and crackled along her skin, along with a new energy. She looked down at herself, unbelieving what she saw. Gone was her school uniform, gone was her old self. In their place was an outfit that mirrored Sailor Moon's, but in shades of blue and familiar.

"Ami-chan!" Sailor Moon shouted.

Ami picked at the skirt, somehow completely at ease with the sudden transformation. Almost as if Ami was her mask, and this was her real identity.

"Just like I thought." Luna's voice cut through her confusion.

"What's happened?" Ami asked.

"You are Sailor Mercury, guardian of wisdom and water."

The words resonated within her, striking a deep chord in her soul. It felt like a veil had been lifted, reminding her of a truth she had always known but somehow forgotten. She closed her eyes, almost rejoicing in the uncovered sensations.

Like a morning mist, a gentle haze settled over her mind, obscuring the details but unable to erase the scene. A faint scent of flowers hung in the air, their fragrance delicate and pure. A hand, elegant and graceful, placed a crystal piece on a smooth board.

“Your turn, Blue.”

Frantic, she clutched at the vision, desperate to learn the truth behind it. But the more she struggled, the faster the images vanished.

“Fun,” Sailor Moon said, bounding up next to her. “Sailor Mercury, we’ll be besties!”

“I... I’m Sailor Mercury?” her voice trembled with a mix of awe and uncertainty.

Luna nodded. “You are, and you’re an important part of the team.”

Her mind raced, processing this new development. Part of her wanted to deny it, to retreat into the comfort of her books and studies. But a stronger part—a part that felt ancient and powerful—embraced this new identity.

She looked at her hands, marveling at the gentle blue glow that seemed to emanate from her skin. It felt right, as if she’d finally found a missing piece of herself, a missing piece of herself she hadn’t even known was lost.

Once the initial shock faded, a nagging doubt crept in. What did this mean for her future? For her dreams?

“Luna,” Sailor Mercury began, “will I... will I still be able to become a doctor?”

“You’ll be just like Black Jack!” Usagi clapped.

Luna huffed and swished her tail. “Ami, being Sailor Mercury, doesn’t replace your dreams. It enhances them. You’re intelligent and compassionate, which means you’ll be a great doctor and guardian.”

Relief washed over her, followed by extreme satisfaction. She wasn’t just Ami Mizuno anymore; she was Sailor Mercury. And somehow, somehow, she would be both the guardian the world needed and the doctor she aspired to be.

The wail of approaching sirens pierced the night, snapping Ami out of her reverie. She glanced over at Sailor Moon, who rolled her eyes and huffed.

“Oh please, the police?” Sailor Moon sighed. “Why do they have to show up?”

“Sailor Moon,” Luna said, her tail twitching with annoyance. “You know you need to deal with local law enforcement. It’s part of your responsibility as a guardian.”

She stuck her lip out. “Do I have to? I’m so tired from fighting and I think I pulled a muscle and cops are so bland. They never get my jokes.”

Luna fixed her with a stern glare. “This is not negotiable. Your duty extends beyond just fighting monsters.”

Sailor Moon threw up her arms in defeat. “Fine. You take a breather, Sailor Mercury. I’ll show you how the pros handle the pros.”

Ami nodded gratefully, her legs still a bit shaky from the transformation. She made her way to a nearby window, needing a moment to process everything that had just happened. As she gazed out at the Tokyo skyline, the glass reflected a stranger back at her. The blue-haired girl in the sailor uniform seemed both foreign and familiar. Both a stranger and friend.

She raised a hand to her tiara, marveling at how natural it felt against her skin. Like she’d been wearing it for a century. Even how the skirt fell across her legs and how the bow moved hinted at a past that spanned more than moments.

It started to rain, and she watched the drops race down the flat surface. In the reflection, she saw herself sitting across from the man in her dreams, engaged in an intense game of Go. A radiant, glowing garden surrounded them, white flowers in full bloom and crystal vines

climbing up ornate columns. The air was thick with the scent of something otherworldly.

“Your strategy has improved, Blue,” he said, a playful smile dancing on his lips. His eyes sparkled with affection as he placed another stone on the board.

Ami’s heart swelled with a warmth she couldn’t explain. She reached out to place her own stone, but as her fingers touched the smooth surface, darkness swallowed her. Reality warped and twisted into a polluted nightmare.

The pristine white flowers wilted and blackened. The crystal vines slowly turned to stone, raining sharp fragments around them. Then, with a snap, the peaceful garden transformed into a hellish landscape of jagged rocks and barren earth. The air turned acrid, the wind icy, and all love vanished.

“Where are you?” Mercury called out, her voice trembling.

He was no longer smiling. Now agony contorted his features, and his eyes clouded over with darkness.

“Run, Blue!” he screamed, his voice raw with pain and desperation.

She tried to move, but her body felt leaden. She could only watch in horror as tendrils of dark energy snaked around him, wrapping him in a cocoon of darkness that she couldn’t fight. His cries of pain echoed in her mind, each one a physical blow.

“No!” she screamed, finally able to lung forward.

But her hands passed through him as if he were made of smoke.

Faster, the shadows swirled, and his form changed. His once warm eyes turned cold and cruel, filled with a hatred that chilled her to the core. The bond between them, once a source of comfort and strength, now burned with an icy blast that threatened to tear her apart.

“Please,” she begged, tears streaming down her face. “Come back to me. I’ll always love you.”

But her pleas fell on deaf ears. The man she loved was gone, replaced by a sinister stranger who looked at her with nothing but contempt.

“Long live the Dark Kingdom,” he said.

Something inside of her shattered. A tidal wave of hopelessness crashed over her, drowning her in the absolute finality of their destiny. Inside, she could feel their bond twisting, corrupting, becoming a conduit for darkness and loneliness.

As the vision faded, she found herself gripping the windowsill, an overwhelming sense of loss and terror gripping her chest. Reflected in the window before her was his face, twisted into a malicious grin.

With a gasp, she snapped back to reality, her heart pounding and body trembling. The rain continued to fall outside, but now each drop felt like a tear shed for a love lost to darkness and memory. Thankfully, like a lifeline in a storm, Sailor Moon’s voice cut through the sorrow.

Desperate for relief, Ami turned her attention to the conversation.

“Yes, Mr. Officer, I have the situation totally under control now,” Sailor Moon declared. “There was a bad monster.”

“A monster?” a deep voice asked. “You expect us to believe that?”

“Yeah, because it’s the truth. See, there was terrible evil here, and a brainwashing disk.”

“A brain washing disk? And you’re sure there’s no more danger to the public?”

“Absolutely!” Sailor Moon’s voice rose an octave. “Sailor Moon is on the job!” There was a pause, and Sailor Moon struck a pose. “I mean, yes, it’s safe now,” she added, clearly trying to sound more professional.

“What did they want?”

Sailor Moon shuffled around. “Uh, the bad guys are terribly determined to... uh... do whatever they’re trying to do.”

“And what is that?”

“I have no idea! We haven’t gotten to speak to a main bad guy yet, only monsters. They never know anything, ya know, low on the totem pole. But I’ll totally ask when a main bad guy appears.”

“Who’s going to pay for all this damage?”

“Uh, insurance! Isn’t that why there’s insurance?” Sailor Moon’s voice wavered as if she was unsure.

“Do policies include monster attacks?”

Sailor Moon scoffed. “Do I look like an insurance agent?”

Another officer chimed in, “Are you going to pay for all of this?”

“Oh, um...” Sailor Moon faltered. “Well, you see, when you’re fighting evil...”

Ami had to smile at her new friend’s predicament. There was something endearingly comforting about Sailor Moon. It was a reminder that they were still just girls navigating an extraordinary situation.

“You don’t have to be so mean, Anzi,” someone said. “Just submit a claim to the Office of Vigilante Affairs. They deal with Sailor V property damage.”

“Sailor V!” Sailor Moon squeaked. “I love Sailor V. She’s so cool, and so awesome. And I admire her so much more now that I have to deal with this stuff.”

As she listened, Ami’s mind raced. Perhaps she could come up with a way to work with the authorities to make this less stressful for both parties. Maybe a database or something to update them on current operations. That way, they’d know what was happening, and what to expect.

Finally, the police dispersed, their voices fading as they moved away.

Sailor Moon huffed and slid into the chair next to Ami. Leaning back, she rubbed her back and stretched. “I’m so tired. Dealing with skeptical adults is always tiring.”

“What about dealing with monsters?” Luna asked, jumping onto the windowsill.

Sailor Moon closed her eyes. “Don’t talk to me about monsters right now.”

Luna turned to Ami, her eyes serious. “Sailor Mercury, how are you feeling about all of this? I know it’s a lot to take in at once.”

Ami considered the question carefully. A new sense of purpose filled her, mixed with excitement and a touch of apprehension. She may not have all the answers yet, but she was part of something bigger now. A team. A family.

“I’m... overwhelmed,” Ami admitted. “But in a good way. There’s so much to learn, so much to understand. When is our first meeting? I’d like to catch up on all the information I’ve missed.”

Sailor Moon poked an eye open. “Meeting? Why would we have a meeting? Sounds boring.”

Ami shook her head, a small smile playing on her lips. “Meetings can be really fun and very informative. I just joined the group. I need to catch up on all the missing information.”

“If only you were so proactive, Sailor Moon.” Luna let out a breath, but there was fondness in her exasperation.

“Hey! I’m pro a lot of things. Pro-women’s rights, pro-manga, pro-early snack time!”

Luna sighed. “I’m increasingly glad for you, Sailor Mercury. Your dedication will be a valuable asset to the team.”

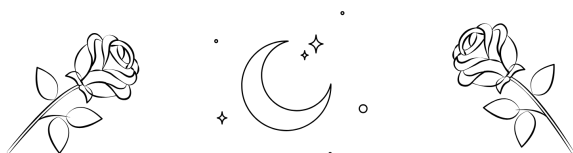
Ami chuckled, and soon Sailor Moon was laughing alongside her. In that moment, Ami knew that she’d never be alone again. She had a forever friend in Usagi, and something told her more friendships were on the horizon.

As their laughter subsided, Ami’s mind turned to the challenges ahead. There was so much to learn, so much to prepare for. But

looking at Sailor Moon's bright smile and feeling Luna's supportive presence, she knew they'd face it all together.

"So," Ami said, unable to keep the excitement at bay, "when do we start training?"

# Chapter Seven



666

**M**amoru stared at the rows of ancient texts and leather-bound volumes, feeling the knot tighten in his chest. His finger traced the spines of the tomes, willing them to yield their secrets. Grabbing one, he flipped through the pages, scanning for a word, a mention, anything. The words blurred together, meaningless.

This library was one he didn't frequent too often, but it contained impressive texts. The modern architecture boasted a modern glass facade that reflected the vibrant life outside. Soft glow of muted florescent lights illuminated the corners and made reading easy.

He'd been at this for hours, scouring texts, while the world outside continued to pass by. Large windows offered a view of the Juban Shopping District. Schoolgirls giggled as they window-shopped with shopkeepers keeping a wary eye on them.

No matter how hard he searched, how many books he searched, the answers he sought remained elusive. There was nothing about the Legendary Silvery Crystal that haunted his dreams, nothing that could ease the gnawing emptiness inside him.

Sliding the book back, he rubbed his temples, where a dull ache had taken root. The pain felt like a physical manifestation of the emotional turmoil churning inside him, as if the weight of his unresolved feelings was pressing down on his very skull.

Three faces swam in his mind's eye: the ethereal princess from his dreams, her silver hair cascading like moonlight; Sailor Moon, fierce and brave, her determination attracting him like a moth to flame; and the "odango-atama" girl that he kept running into, her infectious laughter and warm presence stirred emotions he refused to name.

The conflict tore at him, guilt digging at his insides. How could he feel such a strong pull towards three different women? The princess called to his soul, a beacon in the fog of his forgotten past. Sailor Moon awakened a passionate protectiveness, a desire to stand by her side against any threat. And the girl... her very presence soothed him in ways he couldn't explain, even as her clumsiness left him exasperated.

Mamoru's hand clenched around a book, his knuckles white with tension. He felt like a traitor. His heart split three ways. The worst part was, he had no claim on any of them, no right to feel this anguish of perceived infidelity.

"Hey! Mamoru." Motoki waved.

Quickly he slid the book back onto the shelf, unwilling to explain why he was scouring texts about crystals.

"Furu, how are you?"

"Ugh, don't ask. I have a double shift at the arcade and two papers due."

"I feel you. I still haven't finished my paper on the ethical implications of genetic engineering."

"Mr. Ohtori's class is brutal. I had him last semester, knocked my rank from 3rd to 5th. My dad lectured me for a week."

"Benefits of not having parents," Mamoru said with a half-smile.

“Sometimes I do envy you, my friend.” Motoki gripped his shoulder. “What are you doing in this section?”

“Oh, I’m thinking of taking a geology class next semester. Just checking things out.”

“You and rocks?”

“Crystals.”

“Interesting.” Motoki glanced at the clock and startled. “Shit, I’m going to be late. Check you later. Let’s get drinks soon.”

“Sounds good.”

Motoki darted around the corner. With a frustrated growl, he yanked another book from the shelf, flipping through its pages with desperate intensity. Nothing. Not a single mention of the crystal consuming his thoughts. He slammed the book shut, ignoring the disapproving glare from a nearby librarian.

Instinctively, his hand went to his pocket, fingers curling around the cool metal of the star locket. As always, a wave of comfort washed over him at its touch, but it was quickly followed by a sharp pang of inexplicable heartbreak. These feelings had intensified over the last month, somehow morphing into something sinister.

The locket was a paradox, soothing and painful all at once, much like these new feelings that warred within him. Mamoru leaned his forehead against the cool metal of the bookshelf, closing his eyes as he tried to center himself. He was so tired of feeling lost, of grasping at fragments of dreams and half-remembered visions.

“Who am I?” he whispered to the silent books, his voice barely audible. “Who are they to me?”

No answers came, only the musty scent of old paper and the weight of countless unknown stories. He straightened, his jaw tightening. No matter the cost, he’d find the truth. The crystal, the princess, his connection to Sailor Moon and the girl—all of it.

He turned back to the shelves, ready to continue his search. The answers were out there somewhere, hidden in the pages of history or myth. And Mamoru Chiba was nothing if not persistent.

Battling hopelessness, he scanned the titles, finally landing on a thick volume bound in deep blue leather, embossed with silver symbols. The title *The Moon: Ancient Myths and Legends* gleamed faintly in the dim light. Intrigued, he pulled it from the shelf.

Carefully, he turned the yellowed pages, when his gaze fell on an illustration of a moon goddess, ethereal and serene, her figure surrounded by a soft, luminescent glow. Long shimmering pearlescent hair caught the light and glittered like moonbeams dancing across crystal. Trembling, he traced the edges of the image with a finger.

“Why are you familiar? The Goddess of the Silver Moon,” he read, his heart quickening.

The image struck something deep inside of him. While he was positive it wasn't the princess from his dreams, he still knew her. Trusted her. How was that possible? No, it was just more evidence that he was going crazy. That he's lost more than his memories in the car crash.

Still, he had to read more. Flipping the page, he started to read the half-faded text.

“The Goddess wielded a mystical object of immense power.”

Those words vibrated within him. They sang out to him, whispering memories of glistening pearlescent columns and brilliant glowing flowers.

“It granted extended lifespan to its chosen.”

Laughter rang out in his mind. Pure as the moonlight glistening on a serene lake.

“And commanded the very forces of nature.”

Hope surged within him. Could this be it? Excitement burst violently to life in his chest. Was this the connection he'd been search-

ing for? Clutching the book even tighter, he read faster. Yet, with each word devoured, that excitement ebbed. Frantic that he'd missed something, he read the passage over again.

“This mystical mirror had the ability to capture evil.”

With a heavy sigh, he closed the book, the sound echoing his disappointment. Still, after searching for years, he'd never encountered the feelings this myth had evoked. Sliding the book back, he rubbed his eyes and glanced at his watch.

Hours had passed, and he had nothing but what could easily be indigestion to show for it. The frustration that had been simmering all day threatened to boil over. He needed air, needed to move, to do something.

Returning to his table, he gathered his things to leave. A hushed conversation from a nearby table caught his attention. He slowed his packing, listening.

“Did you hear about the demon bus?” a young woman whispered.

“The one that passes Hikawa Shrine?” her companion replied. “I've heard children are missing! It's completely terrifying.”

“Even worse is the police have no leads or anything.”

Mamoru froze, his body tensing. A strange energy sprouted inside of him, almost electric in its intensity. It was the same feeling he got before transforming into Tuxedo Mask, the same call to action. If this was another appearance of those evil monsters, then Sailor Moon would be involved. His grip tightened on his book bag. She could be in danger.

The idea of going home to his empty apartment, his tumultuous thoughts haunting him, suddenly seemed unbearable. He didn't need to make a conscious decision, it was just fact. He was going to Hikawa Shrine.

The streets were more crowded, and he dodged groups of students as he hurried to leave. Eager students clutching book bags and stressed looking attendants bustled about, but he paid them little mind. As he stepped out into the late afternoon air, his mind raced.

“A demon bus? Abducted children? It sounds ridiculous.”

Yet, in a world where he transformed into a masked hero and a warrior in a sailor suit existed, was anything truly impossible?

A restless energy within him grew with each step, urging him faster. Whatever was happening with this demon bus, he was certain that darkness fueled it. And perhaps, just perhaps, it would bring him face to face with Sailor Moon once again.

As he hurried towards the shine, a mix of anticipation and guilt churned in his stomach. The thought of seeing Sailor Moon again both thrilled and troubled him. To see those blue eyes that sparkled and shone, even in the face of danger. All he wanted to do was stand by her, to feel the connection that seemed to buzz between them.

But with that longing came a wave of shame that threatened to drown him. How could he yearn to see Sailor Moon when the mysterious princess still held his heart? The princesses ethereal beauty and the profound sadness in her eyes tugged at his soul. He felt a duty, an unshakable obligation to find her, to remember whatever he'd forgotten.

Then there was the clumsy, cheerful girl who irritated and captivated him in equal measure. Her sunny smile and infectious laughter had begun to occupy his thoughts with alarming frequency. The way his heart skipped when he saw her odango hairstyle in a crowd both confused and excited him.

He clenched his fists, frustrated by the tumult of his emotions. He had no right to feel this way about any of them, let alone all three. This emotional infidelity weighed him down. He was betraying the

princess by hoping to see Sailor Moon. He was deceiving them both by thinking of the girl.

Distracted, he didn't see the figure before it was too late. Slamming into the man, Mamoru only barely managed to keep himself and the stranger from toppling over.

"I'm so sorry," he said, helping the man stand.

The man turned, and a wave of *déjà vu* washed over Mamoru, strong and disorienting. There was something hauntingly familiar about him, as though they shared a bond beyond casual acquaintance. The man's pale blond hair, cropped close, framed sharp, gray eyes that seemed to pierce right through him.

Those eyes held a depth that spoke of battles fought and loyalty tested, stirring a flicker of recognition deep within Mamoru's soul. It was as if he was looking at someone he should remember—someone who had once been important to him, though the memory was frustratingly out of reach.

"Do I know you?" Mamoru asked, narrowing his eyes as the unsettling familiarity gnawed at him.

The man's eyebrow quirked up, a faint smirk playing on his lips. "I really doubt that," he replied smoothly, his tone almost teasing.

Mamoru studied him, searching for a hint of recognition. "Are you sure? You seem very familiar. Like we've met before."

"Perhaps in another life," the man said with a chuckle, though there was an undercurrent of something darker in his voice. "Or maybe you're just mistaking me for someone else. Happens all the time. I've got one of those faces."

Mamoru's gaze sharpened. There was something off about this man, something that set his nerves on edge. "You didn't see anything unusual around here, did you? There are rumors about a demon bus."

The man shrugged, his expression neutral. “I’ve heard them. You know how people love to talk, especially about things they don’t understand. Superstitions, ghost stories—people see what they want to see.”

Mamoru frowned, not entirely convinced. “And what do you see?”

The man’s smile widened, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “I see a world full of mysteries waiting to be uncovered. But some things are better left alone, don’t you think?”

Mamoru felt a chill run down his spine. “You seem to talk a lot about mysteries.”

The man shrugged again, as if the conversation was of little importance. “I’ve been around. Seen a few things. But I’m just passing through.”

“Passing through?” Mamoru echoed, still probing for answers.

“Yes,” the man said, his tone suddenly more clipped. “I have my own... responsibilities to attend to. I’m sure you understand.”

Mamoru nodded slowly, though he was far from understanding. “Right... Well, if you do remember where we might’ve met, let me know.”

“Of course,” the man replied, his smile turning cold. “But don’t dwell too much on the past. It can be a dangerous place to linger. Anyway, I’ve got a bus to catch.”

With that, the man turned and walked away, leaving Mamoru standing there, a sense of unease settling in his gut. As he watched the stranger disappear into the crowd, he couldn’t shake the feeling that their paths would cross again—and that when they did, it wouldn’t be under friendly circumstances.

Glancing up, he found the moon. The waxing crescent hung in the dimming sky, a slice of pale light in the growing gray. Sucking a breath,

he cast a last glance to where the stranger vanished to, before turning for the shrine.

“Here we are.” As he approached Hikawa Shrine, the bustling sounds of the city faded away, replaced by an almost tangible serenity.

The almost restless energy that plagued him all day subsided. A soft scent of incense moved through the air, mingling with the earthy aroma of the surrounding trees. Despite the peaceful atmosphere, Mamoru couldn’t shake the feeling that something was... off.

An undercurrent of energy pulsed beneath the tranquil surface, recognizable yet impossible to place. It almost reminded him of the moments before he transformed, when the world seemed to hold its breath, teetering on the edge of something monumental.

He paused at the base of the stone steps leading up to the shrine, taking in the scene before him. A strange sense of anticipation swirled in his chest, almost like the first tendrils of a brush fire before it consumed the land. Ascending the steps, two crows soared overhead, their sharp cries cutting through the stillness. They circled gracefully before landing on the roof, their beady eyes watching him with unsettling intelligence.

The soft swishing sound of a broom caught his attention. A shrine maiden with long, raven-black hair was sweeping the courtyard, her movements graceful and purposeful. His eyes narrowed as he studied the girl. The earth was trying to tell him something.

There was something about her—an aura that flickered like fire around the edges. But beneath that warmth, he sensed a thread of darkness that made him uneasy. It felt as if she had a connection to it, like a strand of fate.

Mamoru needed to know if she was a danger or connected to this demon bus. “Excuse me,” he called out. “I’d like to buy a good luck charm, please.”

She looked up, her violet eyes meeting his. “Of course.” Her tone was polite, but not overly friendly. “Follow me.”

As she led him to the charm stand, he had to admit he appreciated her professional demeanor. It lacked the flirtatious undertones he’d had to face from other women. It was refreshing.

She pointed to the stand, which displayed love charms, protection charms, and good luck amulets, all well kept and bursting with energy.

“Here you are,” she said, holding out a charm.

As he reached for it, their fingers brushed briefly. In that instant, a vision flashed before his eyes—a magnificent crystal palace, its spires reaching towards the sky, shrouded in moonlight and power. The image was vivid, so real, that he gasped, stumbling back.

The shrine maiden jerked her hand away, her eyes wide with shock. For a moment, they stared at each other, a mixture of suspicion and recognition passing between them. The star locket became fractionally heavier, as if anchoring him to reality.

He didn’t know what happened, but he was certain that this girl was something more than she appeared to be. Friend or foe, he didn’t know. But he’d keep a close eye on her, and this place until he learned which.

“Thank you,” he managed to say, breaking the tense silence.

He paid for the charm and turned to leave, the image still hovering behind his eyes. Descending the stone steps, he noticed a bus pass. His blood ran cold when he saw the number: 666.

“No way.”

He turned away from the stop, deciding to walk instead. The streets grew darker, and his thoughts followed the descending night. The vision he’d had with the shrine maiden, the strange bus, the rumors of abductions, the familiar stranger—it all had to be connected somehow.

Somehow, he was on the brink of uncovering something monumental, something that might lead him to the answers he so desperately sought about his past, the Legendary Silver Crystal, and perhaps even the identity of the princess who haunted his dreams.

The locket grew heavier with each step, a tangible weight that never ceased. As the last rays of sunlight dipped below the horizon, long shadows obscured his path, almost like the darkness devouring the world. Needing to banish the depressing thoughts, he glanced upwards.

Now the moon shone even more brilliantly, its pale light missing that spark of wonder that it should have. Perhaps one day it would return to what it once was, what it should be. Whatever that was.

# *Chapter Eight*



## *Visions in the Flames*

**D**arkness coiled and writhed within the icy throne room of the Dark Kingdom, feeding on the despair and fear that permeated the very air. No light dared to encroach on this area. The breathing darkness hungered for more power, more devastating destruction. Always seeking to destroy. Even light had no power against it. There was only the artificial illumination of shadow that provided the scant tendrils of illumination that spread through the space.

Shadows danced along the stone walls, whispering secrets of descending chaos and ancient evils. At the heart of this umbral domain sat Queen Beryl, her form a conduit for the darkness. A willing slave. And for that loyalty, the darkness rewarded her with just a taste of the power it controlled.

Jadeite kneeled before her, his head bowed in submission. The darkness savored the acrid flavor of his failure, relished in the tangy saltiness of his defeat.

“Twice you have erred. Twice. How many more times will you fail me, Jadeite?” Beryl’s voice cut through the air like a poisoned blade. “Twice you have failed to gather energy for our great ruler. Are you prepared for the consequences?”

“I am,” Jadeite said.

The darkness knew the truth behind his words.

If darkness could laugh, it would. This puppet wasn’t prepared for the consequences. Couldn’t be. As a corrupted beacon of light, there was only so much it could endure before shattering into oblivion. This minion was only a disposable pawn. An expendable resource, one that would be discarded without thought when the time came.

A delicious wave of fear washed over Jadeite, and the darkness savored it, drinking in the tremors that ran through his body. It coiled around him, tightening its grip, revealing in his desperation.

“My Queen, I—” Jadeite began, but the dark swallowed his words.

From the shadows, another figure emerged, tall and imposing, but nothing like the supreme power of the darkness. Nephrite, his long hair cascading like a river of blood in the dim light. Yet another of the corrupted four.

While useful, they were almost a disgrace. Merely tainted ones.

“It’s expected,” Nephrite purred. “His minions are only clay dolls. Naturally, they’re insufficient and weak. Like their creator.”

Jadeite snarled, sending the darkness skittering towards the hatred oozing. Hostile rivalry was so delectable.

“Queen Beryl,” Nephrite continued, ignoring the scathing looks from his brother. “Please allow me, your North American Commander, Nephrite, to complete the task.”

Beryl laughed, a sinister sound that echoed through the ice and cut the wind. “I have little hope that you’ll succeed where your brother failed. Endymion trained you and yet you lack all of his qualities.”

“I swear,” Nephrite said. “I will efficiently gather plentiful energy to offer to our great ruler. Even more, I will offer you the Legendary Silver Crystal and bring you glory.”

The darkness rippled with anticipation, feeding off the heightened emotions from these two warriors. What a supreme pleasure it would be to see them tear each other apart, to bathe in the chaos of their conflict. And to think, millennia ago, they were close companions, striving for good and honor. Now look at them.

More figures stepped into the cavern. Zoisite and Kunzite. The four former Kings of Heaven only eyed each other with barely veiled hatred and distrust. How far they’d fallen.

Jadeite leaned against a stone pillar. “Could it be these Sailor Guardians are seeking the crystal as well?”

A brief murmur spread across the gathered minions. The darkness spread a little further, waiting for the answer. For even it had limits to its reach. The appearance of these Sailor Guardians had caught it off guard, and that in itself was disconcerting. But how they’d so easily brushed aside the darkness was even more alarming.

“Queen Beryl,” Zoisite asked. “If we may pose a question.”

“Continue.”

“What exactly is this Legendary Silver Crystal?” Kunzite asked.

The darkness trembled at the mention of the crystal, craving the immense power that the crystal contained. It hungered for it, yearned to corrupt and twist it to its will. Then, the darkness would reign supreme for now and all time.

Beryl’s eyes narrowed, her gaze hardening to match the unyielding stone that surrounded her. “The Legendary Silver Crystal is no mere gem. It is the source of all energy, the very essence of creation itself. Its power is beyond mortal comprehension—limitless, unstoppable.

Whoever wields it will command the forces of the universe, bending reality to their will.”

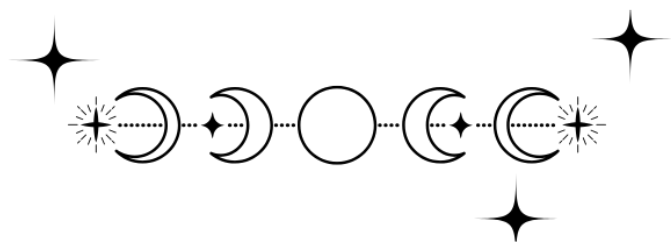
As the darkness fused with her, her red eyes glowed with a sinister brilliance. Eerie light spread through the cavern, tainting the already poisoned area. “No mercy will be shown to those who interfere with the ambitions of the Dark Kingdom. Far-East Commander, Jadeite, I give you permission to pause your search for the Legendary Silver Crystal. This is your final chance.”

The darkness surged at her words, its fibers reaching out, grasping at the promise of such a gift. It could taste victory on the horizon, the sweet nectar of a universe plunged into eternal night.

“I understand.” Jadeite bowed again. “I will eliminate those pesky Sailor Guardians with my own hand. I’ll vanquish them from the world.”

“You know what will happen if you fail,” Beryl said.

The darkness coiled tighter around Jadeite, savoring his terror. Anticipating the delicious agony of his punishment if he didn’t complete his task. It didn’t know which would be more pleasing, the Dark Kingdom’s victory over the guardians, or the pleasure of ripping this minion apart.



The sacred fire danced before Rei Hino, the flames a living, breathing entity. The flames danced, flickering shadows against the wooden

walls, their rhythm steady as her breath. More shadows moved across her face, casting the world in shades of past and present. Her raven hair cascaded down her back, a waterfall of midnight against the crisp white of her Miko robes. Around her the scent of sandalwood and incense hung heavy in the air, a fragrant offering to the kami.

Her eyes were distant, lost in the depths of the fire. To her, fire was more than mere flame. It was a bridge between worlds, times, a conduit through which the gods spoke. She'd always been able to hear their voice through it, listen to the soft murmurs that it spoke, and in turn interpret the visions that moved in its depths.

But today, the fire was restless, its energy swirling with a tension she couldn't ignore.

Her breath came slow and steady, each inhale drawing in the flame's essence, each exhale releasing her attachments to the material world. In this moment, she existed between realms, a bridge between the physical and spiritual.

A sense of foreboding filled the air, heavy and undeniable. Still, the orange and red rippled, yellow surged, blue relented. Then, in its depths, a face emerged—a man. Handsome and familiar, with short blond hair and eyes that seemed to peer into her soul.

Her heart leaped. A jolt of recognition coursing through her body. She knew him, somehow, somewhere beyond the veil of consciousness.

Who are you?

Why do you haunt me?

What were we to each other?

“Calm your thoughts, Princess.”

Something hot flashed across her chest. Those words stirred a deep, haunting recognition, sharp and poignant. They were visceral and real.

But the vision began to fade.

No!

She grabbed at it, but it was impossible, like trying to grasp smoke with bare hands. The more she reached for it, the quicker it dissipated. Frustration and something that felt too much like loneliness bubbled up within her.

Rei forced herself to breathe, to let go of her desire to understand. The kami taught that harmony within oneself comes from letting go of desires that cloud the spirit. Still, she struggled until the vision faded completely.

Rei opened her eyes, her heart heavy with unnameable loss. The echo of the man's face lingering in her mind like the afterimage of a bright light. She bowed deeply to the sacred fire, offering gratitude for its wisdom, even if she couldn't fully comprehend it.

"Who are you?" she asked the silence. "Why do I feel like everything is going to change?"

The cool morning air greeted her as she stepped out into the shrine courtyard. The sun was just peeking over the horizon, painting the sky in hues of pink and gold. Phobos and Deimos cawed a greeting from their perch on the torill gate. She acknowledged them with a bow of her head. Their presence was a comfort, a reminder of the constancy of nature amidst the chaos of human existence.

"Ready for breakfast?"

Rei threw a handful of seeds for them, and they swooped down, their feathers gleaming in the early morning light. Lost in their simple joy, she found peace in their uncomplicated existence. Crouching down, she spread more seeds, the soft sound of life pattering against the stone.

“I have a special treat for you today, some cheese.” She held out a small piece, watching as they eagerly pecked at it, their caws of approval bringing a faint smile to her lips.

Approaching voices broke the spell. A group of schoolgirls were making their way up the shrine steps, their uniforms marking them as students from the local high school. Rei tensed, recognizing some from previous visits. Phobos landed on her shoulder, his weight the only comfort she’d find.

“There, that’s her.”

“The one who’s the weird psychic?”

“Yeah! Lost rings, wallets, whatever! She just guesses where they are and she’s always right.”

Rei didn’t want to listen, didn’t want to hear it.

“Wow... that’s kinda creepy.”

The words cut through her like a blade, reopening old wounds that would never heal. She hadn’t asked for these powers, hadn’t wanted to bear this burden. But no one understood that. They only saw her as something other, something to be feared and avoided, until they wanted to use her.

As if to prove her point, another group of girls passed, only to veer sharply away when they spotted her. Their whispers carried on the morning breeze.

“Creepy.”

“Witch.”

“Freak.”

Each stung like a physical blow.

Loneliness settled over her like a heavy cloak, its weight almost unbearable. At that moment, she knew the truth: life is suffering. The ache in her heart was a testament to the pain of existence, the struggle of being different in a world that valued conformity.

Rei watched the girls laugh and chatter amongst themselves, and she couldn't help but feel the vast chasm that separated her from her peers.

Unwilling to inflict more pain upon herself, she turned away, busying herself with shrine duties, trying to lose herself in the rituals and routines that had been her solace for so long. That would forever be her solace. But under it all, loneliness persisted, a constant companion in a world that seemed determined to misunderstand her.

As she swept the courtyard, her thoughts drifted back to the man in her vision.

“Why do I keep seeing you?”

“What is it trying to say?”

Those questions echoed in her mind, unanswered and unanswerable. Like the flickering flame, she was searching for enlightenment, for understanding. But unlike the flame, her path remained shrouded in mystery, each step forward only revealing more questions.

Casting a quick glance at the sun, she'd need to leave for school soon. To face another day of sidelong glances and whispered comments. But for now, in the quiet of the shrine, she allowed herself to simply be—a girl with an extraordinary gift, seeking her place in a world that she didn't fit in.

“You can do it.”

As expected, the day passed in a blur of whispers and sidelong glances, each moment another brick in the wall separating her and the others. As the afternoon sun bathed the shrine in golden light, Rei found herself once again in the familiar embrace of her home. The sacred flame, ever present, welcomed her return, its warmth a balm to her weary soul.

Those golden rays danced across the stone path, reminding the world that everything dies only to be reborn again. A chorus of young

voices broke through the silence. A group of elementary school girls had gathered in the courtyard, their laughter contrasting to the solemnity of the shrine.

For now, they remained untainted by the prejudices of the world, but soon they'd join the others in their blind misunderstanding.

"Rei-san! Rei-san!" A small voice called out, full of enthusiasm. A vibrant young girl with glossy hair bounced up, her eyes shining with youth. "Can I say hi to your ravens? Please?"

At least in this moment, she was free from the weight of her isolation. "Of course, Mii-chan. Would you like to feed them dinner?"

Mii clapped. "Yes, please! Are they going to have curry rice or miso soup?"

Rei laughed. "Ravens wouldn't like soup, though they might like curry rice. But it's not good for them."

"What do they have?"

Together they walked towards the gate where Phobos and Deimos perched.

"Fruits, like grapes, cherries, apples. Seeds, and even meat."

"Ravens eat meat?"

"They do. Just like us, they need the nutrients found in meat."

"I understand," Mii nodded. "I love chicken!"

"Look," Rei said, gesturing to the ravens. "They're messengers of the kami, guardians of this sacred place."

Phobos swooped down, landing gracefully on Rei's outstretched arm. Mii gasped in delight, her eyes wide with wonder.

"Can I touch him?" she asked, her eyes wide with wonder.

Rei nodded, guiding Mii's small hand to gently stroke the raven's glossy feathers. The other children inched closer, drawn by the magical moment unfolding before them. For a fleeting instant, Rei felt a connection to these young souls, a bridge across the chasm that so

often separated her from others. But as quickly as it came, the moment passed. The distant rumble of an approaching bus signaled the end of their visit.

“It’s almost time to catch your bus,” Rei said.

As they walked to the stop, Mii’s hand found its way into hers, a small gesture of trust that seemed so infrequent. The other girls followed, chattering like swallows. The bus rounded the corner, its headlights cutting through the gathering dusk. As it pulled to a stop, a sudden jolt flashed through her body. As if the sacred flame had burst from its confines to dance along her skin.

Automatically, her eyes found the driver, and the world seemed to tilt on its axis. He was handsome, unnervingly so, with short blond hair and eyes that peered into her very soul. She knew him. That was beyond question. And with a start, she realized it was him—the man from her vision, from her dreams.

“You.”

Their eyes met, and for a heartbeat, she was something else. Recognition flickered in his gaze before it vanished behind a cold stone exterior. Then the world continued on, oblivious to the implications.

Mii waved through the window. “Bye, Rei-san! See you tomorrow!”

Rei raised a hand in farewell, her mind still reeling from the encounter. As the bus pulled away, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something momentous had just occurred, something that would alter the course of her life.

The walk back to the shrine was short, yet it felt long. Frantic thoughts spilled across her mind. Racing faster than the flickering edges of the fire.

“Have you heard of the 666 demon bus?”

The words collided with her and brought her to a standstill.

“Yes! So scary.”

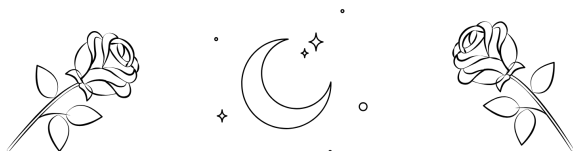
“Makes sense that it stops outside of the Hikawa Shrine.”

Those words turned to ice in her veins. Now the soft cast of the darkness felt wrong, tainted by an evil that would seek to overthrow the world. Shivering, she darted up the stairs and into her fire reading room. She closed her eyes, reaching out with her spiritual senses, seeking guidance from the kami. But the fire was silent. It showed her nothing.

No matter how long she sat before the flickering light, the gods were silent. The ominous feel continued to grow, something was terribly, terribly wrong. Still, the flames danced before her, offering no answers, only the promise of trials to come.

Without a doubt, she knew that the future would bring suffering and death.

# *Chapter Nine*



## *Vanishing Roads*

The bus lurched forward, its metal frame groaning as if in protest. Rei gripped the bar, her fingers curled tightly around the glittering silver bar. With every rumble, her school bag slapped against her hip. The air felt thick, charged with an energy she couldn't quiet name. Something was off—she could feel it in her bones, a strange sensation that started at the base of her spine and crept upwards, wrapping around her like a shroud.

It prickled along her skin, raising the fine hairs on her arms. It twisted around her soul and sang soft songs about forbidden bonds and creeping stone. A siren melody of defying gods and fate.

As the bus wound its way through the streets of Juban, the world outside seemed to blur and shift. Colors bled into one another until they were no longer recognizable. Rei blinked, trying to clear her vision, but the sensations persisted. In the smudged reflections of the window, she caught glimpses of impossible things.

Towering crystal columns rose majestically into starry skies, their faceted surfaces catching the light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

In a blink, they vanished, replaced by gardens of pristine white flowers, their petals glowing with a mystical luminescence. With a single breath, they, too, disappeared.

A scent of something delicate and familiar flowed freely, a fragrance so pure and sweet it made her heart ache with a longing she couldn't understand. Noise devoured it.

There, in the folds of color, a figure emerged. Unmistakably, a princess stood veiled in silvery mist. Though her features were indistinct, Rei felt a profound sense of recognition, as if she knew this ethereal being. The princess raised a hand, as if in greeting or warning, before fading away like the morning dew under the sun's first rays.

Between these images, in the shifting color, were fleeting images of the man from her dreams. His blond hair, the curve of his smile, and especially his piercing eyes. Those eyes haunted her, stalked her like a wolf in the night.

Each glimpse sent a jolt through her body, like a spark from the sacred fire leaping into her soul.

A sudden bump in the road snapped her back to the present. She blinked rapidly, her heart racing.

Why was this happening here?

She'd only ever had visions before the sacred fire. Did it have to do with the strange man yesterday? That vision she'd experienced when they touched... almost felt the same. Like they were woven from the same threads.

No. She shook her head.

Everything returned to its normal state, ordinary passengers going about their day, the same buildings moving past the windows. But the lingering energy of the visions hummed in the air around her.

With her stop approaching, she stepped to the door, praying her shaking legs would hold her. Every spiritual sense was on high alert,

scanning for any trace of the otherworldly phenomena she'd experienced. Moving towards the exit, her gaze fell on a girl with long blond hair tied in distinctive buns.

Something about her tickled at Rei's consciousness, but before she could examine the feeling further, the bus doors opened and she stepped out into the afternoon air. As soon as the suffocating closeness of the bus slipped behind her, she could take a breath. Now, everything would be fine.

"You're okay."

"Everything is fine."

The walk to the shrine usually calmed her, allowing her to shed the stress of the day and prepare for her duties and a Miko. Today, however, the path seemed fraught with unseen tensions.

The air was heavy, as if laden with unspoken secrets.

The rustle of leaves whispered thoughts of crystal towers.

The chirp of birds breathed the sound of power and gods.

"Something is following me."

A prickling sensation at the base of her neck told her the truth. Behind her, she heard the faint sound of a shoe on cement. There was something there, a presence too powerful to be mortal.

"You won't haunt this shrine."

As the torii gate of the Hikawa Shrine came into view, a wave of relief washed over her. Here, in the domain of the fire kami, she was on familiar ground. She was powerful. Taking the steps two at a time, her long hair streamed behind her like a banner of midnight.

Reaching the top of the stairs, she paused to catch her breath. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the shrine ground, painting everything in hues of gold and amber. For a moment, everything seemed normal, the strange events of the bus ride fading like a half-remembered dream.

Wanting to flee these strange sensations, she hurried to change into her miko attire. Bolts of anticipation returned in full force. That power that stalked her had come again. Something was coming. Something that would change everything.

The breeze carried the distant sounds of footsteps approaching. Rei steeled herself for whatever was about to unfold. At once, the sacred stillness of the shrine grounds shattered as a cacophony of caws and shrieks pierced the air.

Rei whirled about, her miko robes billowing like smoke in the wind. A powerful wave of an unknown aura smashed into her, almost bringing her to her knees. When her vision cleared, Phobos and Deimos, her loyal ravens and sacred messengers of the kami, were dive-bombing a girl with long blonde hair tied in distinctive buns.

Time slowed as her spiritual senses flared to life. Instinct took over, and her hands moved on their own accord, whipping a sacred ofuda from the folds of her robe. “Evil Spirit, be exorcised!”

It streaked through the air like a bolt of divine lightning, its power crackling with holy intent. But as the aura faded, Rei’s heart plummeted and embarrassment flared. The ofuda was plastered on a normal girl with high buns and long, flowing hair. The girl stumbled back, arms pinwheeling, before landing unceremoniously on the stone path. A black cat startled and yowled at the girl’s side.

“Huh? What? How? You’re just a girl?”

Horror washed over Rei like ice water. The oppressive aura she’d sensed vanished, leaving only an ordinary—if rather clumsy—girl sprawled before her. Mortification colored her cheeks as she rushed forward, her earlier suspicions replaced by genuine concern.

“I’m so sorry!”

The girl waved as she laid on the stone. “No problem. No problem. I get hit with paper all the time. Completely normal.”

Rei extended a hand to help the girl up, noticing for the first time the warmth that seemed to radiate from her.

“But that’s totally okay,” the girl chirped. “Because now I can introduce myself! I’m Usagi Tuskino. I guess I kinda deserved it for being a little stalkerish...” She lowered her voice. “I followed you from the bus.”

Usagi clutched her hands under her chin and eyes went wide. “You’re just soooo pretty. I had to.”

“I still apologize.” Rei bowed slightly. “I confess my error, but I swear there was a demonic aura. I couldn’t let this shrine be infected.”

“Please! It would really be terrible if anything infected this beautiful place. Better to be safe than sorry. Unless it’s peace... wait, can peace infect?” Usagi scratched her forehead before perking up. “Like in *Saint Seiya* when they’re fighting for peace, but everything gets all crazy!”

The black cat jumped into her arms, and Rei eyed it critically. There was more to this animal than a mere house cat. But when its secrets stayed hidden, she turned away.

“It’s strange. Phobos and Deimos hardly ever attach humans normally.” Rei turned to her birds and held out her hands. They swirled about cawing before flying away.

Eventually, they settled on the torii, their beady eyes fixed on the scene. Rei cast them a questioning glance, but they offered no explanation for their uncharacteristic behavior. Turning back to the girl, Rei found herself drawn to Usagi.

There was an undeniable warmth to Usagi, a sincerity that seemed to glow from within. Rei couldn’t shake the feeling that if the world could see the light in this girl’s heart, it would shine brilliantly. Shadows deepened as the sun herded in the death of another day.

“This place is so pretty! Like a dream,” Usagi said, her voice airy. “It even smells like the country! My papa takes me to the mountains all

the time, and this place smells like it! Is it the trees? No, it has to be the ground. Do you import dirt from the mountains?”

Rei scowled. “Are you really that dumb? Do you think we import soil from the mountains? Do you know how much that would cost?”

Usagi tapped her chin. “Fair point. Do you have a lot of “fresh mountain air” incense burning?”

Rei rolled her eyes, but before she could respond, a plaintive cry cut through the peace. Rei’s head snapped towards the sound, her spiritual senses on alert. Near the offering box, a woman kneeled, her forehead pressed against the worn wood as she fervently whispered prayers. With a jolt of recognition, she realized it was Mii’s mother.

“Please, great Kami, please guide my daughter back,” the woman’s voice crackled with desperation. “Bring my daughter back home to me.”

A leaden weight settled in Rei’s stomach. Mii, the bright-eyed girl who’d so eagerly fed the ravens just days ago, was missing. Even from here, Rei could feel the sacred flames flare in response to her distress, the heat prickling her skin.

“Excuse me,” Rei stepped forward. “What did you say happened to Mii?”

“It’s all over the news. Mii’s missing! Everyone is talking about the demon bus,” Mii’s mother spoke quickly. “My baby girl boarded that bus at 6 pm, right in front of the shrine!”

The woman started to cry. “My girl. I’m just so upset. But there have always been bad people living in this area. The police are saying it’s a kidnapping.”

Usagi stepped up next to her, frantically petting the cat. “A kidnapping?”

Before Rei could process anything, a group of women approached, their faces etched with a mixture of worry and barely concealed sus-

picion. The surrounding air crackled with tension, setting her nerves on fire.

“What’s with that miko?” A voice called out. “She didn’t react at all to the news.”

“That’s Rei-chan, Old Man Hino’s granddaughter. She’s already an odd one.”

“She performs weird exorcism rites.”

“She also keeps ravens as pets, and they say she senses the supernatural.”

Rei turned away and started to sweep the stones. The comforting rhythm and sound battled against the desperate energy inside of her chest.

Usagi approached, her warmth radiant like the moonbeams of a full moon. Rei tried to calm her racing heart, tried to ignore the stares and pressure of expectations weight upon her.

“Sendakizakaue is where five hills meet.” Rei didn’t know why she was telling Usagi this. “It’s a very unusual place.”

“Why?”

“There’s a legend, an urban myth of a rarely seen sixth slope.”

“Sixth?” Usagi gulped.

“The 6:00 pm Demon Bus is said to be sucked into that sixth slope and vanishes.”

“This doesn’t sound fun.”

“Do you know the name for such an occurrence?”

Usagi stayed silent.

Rei turned to look at her, black hair caught by the wind streamed out. “Being spirited away. That’s what they call it.”

“Well, don’t put me down for that. I want to die in my bed when I’m old. Preferably after a dessert buffet with lots of cake,” Usagi said.

The black cat yowled, and Usagi thumped it on the head. “Fine, Luna says it’s time to go! But I’ll be back. It’s way too nice here to never see this place again. Oh, do you think Ami would like it here?”

Rei offered a short wave, and Usagi grinned broadly at her before turning and skipping away. With chores taking up her afternoon, Rei could distract herself from the energies plaguing her. Then, finally, when the shrine grounds lay silent, bathed in the sun’s death. Her footsteps echoing were the only hollow sound as she made her way to the fire room.

The sacred space welcomed her, the familiar scent of sandalwood and ash enveloping her like an old friend’s embrace. Struggling to shake off the expectations of the day, she kneeled before the eternal flame.

With a last exhale, she closed her eyes and began to chant. The words, ancient and powerful, fell from her lips with practiced ease. Yet tonight, the atmosphere felt different—heavier. The air seemed to hum with an ominous energy, as if the shrine itself was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

The fire seemed distant, reluctant to yield its secrets. Frustration bubbled within her, mingling with desperation.

“Don’t break something, Princess.”

The voice came out of nowhere. A million indescribable emotions poured through her body. Before her, the flames flickered. Somehow, she managed to calm herself.

Sweat beaded on her brow as she pushed harder, channeling more spiritual energy into the flame. The fire roared, responding to her call.

“Please,” she whispered, her voice broke. “Great Kagu-tsuchi, kami of fire, I beseech you. Show me.”

Heat seared her skin. Prickling warmth rolling across her body like a lost lover after a long absence. The dancing flames flickered before an image started to form. When it solidified, she nearly lost it again.

There he was—the handsome man from her dreams. But this time, he sat beside her, helping her tend a sacred fire. They synchronized perfectly, creating a harmonious blend of spiritual energy. Between them, a vibrant red thread pulsed with a flickering light. Their souls connected in ways that she couldn't comprehend.

A mixture of exhilaration and fear burst into life within her.

What did this mean?

Who was he to her?

Before she could ponder further, darkness erupted from the flames. In seconds, it devoured the vision. Tendrils of shadows lashed out like hungry beasts.

The fire shot upward, nearly touching the ceiling. Rei fell back, lest she be consumed by flame and shadow.

In its wild dance, she caught one last glimpse—the man, his face set in grim determination, darkness behind his eyes.

The fire flared even more violently, and Rei jerked back with a cry of pain. Pain devoured the vision, leaving her gasping for breath on the floor. Trembling, she stared at her arms, the skin raw and blistering. An acrid smell of burned flesh mingled with the smoky air, a harsh reminder of the power she'd invoked.

Sleep eluded her that night.

Everything reminded her of the dream. Unable to find peace, she wandered beneath the ancient trees. While the cool night air soothed her burned skin, it didn't calm the tempest in her heart. She raised her eyes to the moon. Even its serene light couldn't conquer the turmoil within her.

“What does this all mean?” she asked the night.

The red thread, the handsome stranger, the darkness behind his eyes—it all seemed connected, but how?

Around her the leaves rustled, as if the very trees were whispering secrets she couldn't quite grasp. A shiver ran down her spine, not from the cold, but from the bone-deep certainty that gripped her.

Something was coming that would change everything.

Rei clenched her fists, ignoring the pain that flared. Fear and excitement warred within her. Each fought for dominance. But she was unable to determine which was more powerful. Power still thrummed through her veins, a reminder of the forces at play. The forces that she should be terrified of.

“I will not falter.”

As if in response, the breeze picked up, carrying with it the faint scent of fire and fate. Rei closed her eyes, letting the cool air caress her face. Whatever happened, whatever darkness threatened her, she would meet it head-on.



# *Chapter Ten*



## *Crossing Paths*

The late afternoon sun cast long, dappled shadows across Azabu-Juban Central Park, but Mamoru's gaze remained fixed on the sky above. Clutched in his hand was a book on crystals, forgotten. The waning crescent moon, just a faint sliver of white against the deep blue, tugged at his thoughts. There was something unsettling about the moonlight, a feeling like the tension before a storm. It carried an eerie weight, as if the light itself had been tarnished, more stone than crystal.

Bone weary, he leaned against the bench, letting his thoughts drift with the breeze that rustled the leaves overhead. His mind wandered, as it often did these days, to the princess in his dreams—her silvery hair, her haunting blue eyes, the way she called out to him across an endless void.

Her ethereal form, shrouded in a soft glow, was a constant in his restless nights. The desperation in her voice, the way her eyes seemed to hold the weight of an unnamed burden, haunted him.

He could never quite reach her, never quite save her, and the frustration gnawed at him.

But now another image kept intruding: a pair of bright blue eyes framed by long blonde hair tied up in distinctive buns. Mamoru shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts.

How could he be so captivated by someone whose name he didn't even know?

That wasn't even the biggest problem. Sailor Moon lurked there as well. Now guilt flooded his body. Not only was he betraying the princess once, but twice.

"The demon bus..." A nearby voice caught his attention.

Mamoru perked up, listening intently as two high school girls gossiped on a nearby bench.

"It's so freaky, I almost don't want to get on a bus anymore!"

"I know! There are even a ton of missing students."

"They're even elementary students missing."

"No! Those poor kids."

"They're going to need years and years of therapy."

Mamoru frowned, his chest tightening, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. The reports of missing students had been all over the news lately. If the authorities didn't solve it, then Sailor Moon would become involved.

And that terrified him.

The thought of her in danger made every muscle in his body tense. All he wanted to do was protect her, to keep her safe from whatever evil lurked in the shadows. Unconsciously, he squeezed the book until the spine cracked.

But that desire felt like a betrayal—to the princess in his dreams, to the mysterious girl who had captured his attention. With a start, Mamoru relaxed his grip on the book, sliding it into his bag. There was only one way to ease his troubled mind.

He'd spend the afternoon riding the so-called "demon bus," hoping to solve this mystery before Sailor Moon had to put herself in harm's way.

Mamoru stood at the stop, watching with a mixture of dread and anticipation as the 666 bus approached. It loomed over the street, casting shadows that seemed too dark across the sidewalk. The familiarity of the driver struck him again as he stepped onto the bus. But he hadn't been able to remember.

The sun dipped lower on the horizon, hues of orange and pink splashed over the sky, highlighting the clouds in a stunning display of color. He settled into a seat near the back, his eyes scanning each passenger, searching for anything out of the ordinary.

The bus jolted forward, its engine humming a low, monotonous tone.

Lost in thought, Mamoru almost missed the whirlwind of blonde hair and energy that plopped down in the seat next to him. His heart skipped a beat as he recognized the girl with the distinctive odango hairstyle. She let out a dramatic sigh, seemingly oblivious to his presence.

"If anything happens to us, it's totally your fault," the girl said. "You're the one who pressured me to get on this cursed bus, Luna. I'll be so mad if I miss dinner."

"It's all right," someone said.

He looked about, trying to determine where the other voice came from. With a start, his eyes settled on the black cat in her lap. Mamoru blinked in surprise. Was she talking to her cat?

"It's only 5:00 pm. We've got a full hour before the indicated time."

"Hrump. It's still scary!"

"And if something does happen, you have the communicator."

"Yeah, yeah, Ami will come. She always comes, right? Reassure me."

Now he believed. The cat was talking back.

Meow!! Meow!

“What is it, Luna? You’re being annoying, just talk already. You know I hate it when I have to translate cat. It hurts my brain.”

Mamoru couldn’t help but smile at her animated expressions and the carefree way she conversed with Luna. There was something refreshingly genuine about her, a stark contrast to his somewhat brooding thoughts. Almost like she was light to his dark... No, he couldn’t think that way.

“That’s right, Luna,” he said. “Go ahead and talk some more.”

Slowly, the girl turned to face him. And he almost burst out laughing. Her eyes were wide, mouth gaped open, red creeping up her cheeks. Mamoru found her flustered state oddly endearing. There was an innocence and purity to her reactions that he found captivating.

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!”

The sound smashed into him like a brick wall, and he took off his glasses to make sure the lenses weren’t cracked. “Well, bun-head, that’s a sound. But I don’t know why you have to shriek. We meet each other a lot.”

Her face shifted through several emotions, all clearly visible, before settling into an expression of shock.

“WHAT! Are you doing here?” she screeched.

“I’m taking the bus from school.”

“No way! I can’t believe you’re in middle school. Honestly, I would have pegged you a little older. Then again, you have the sophisticated bone structure going on.”

He puffed, a little proud she thought he looked so good. “Almost, I’m a high-school student.”

For some reason, he wasn’t exactly sure why. He pulled out his student ID and showed her.

“Mamoru Chiba.”

A surge of heat rushed through him as she spoke his name, the sound of it igniting something deep inside. He couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to hold her close, to feel her breath on his skin, to lose himself in the softness of her lips. But just as quickly, the thought filled him with guilt. There would be no giving in—not when his heart was still bound to the princess who haunted his dreams.

Her eyes lit up. “Mamoru Chiba? Great name, your name means protector of earth. That's so cool! You could be a dashing hero in a manga!”

Everything about her seemed to be made of sparkles and enthusiasm. What would it be like to be with her forever? Would everything remain bright and new? Was the princess in his dreams like her? There was no way to know. No way he'd ever know.

When he realized she was still looking at him, with those wide, perfect eyes, he cleared his throat. “It does. Though I'm not sure I live up to it.”

“Psh! I bet you do!” she exclaimed. “You've already protected earth twice.” She giggled. “Whenever I throw paper, you make me pick it up.”

Somehow, he was smiling more in these last few minutes than the entire previous year. “I guess you're right.”

A troubled expression clouded her face, and he desperately wanted to keep that burden from her. There was a courage in her, he realized, not the brash kind, but a gentle bravery that faced fear with hope. And he wanted to know her more.

“Do you know about the demon bus?”

He frowned and took off his glasses. “I've heard the rumors. It's this line, right?”

“Yes.”

“There have been a lot of strange instances lately.”

He glanced over at her, and she was staring at him. There was a strange introspective tightness around her eyes, like she was trying to decide something. Time passed as they stared into each other’s eyes. There was something... something about them.

They seemed to sparkle, an alluring blue, as vibrant as the summer sky. There was no fear, nothing but an electric spark of excitement.

As if realizing something, her cheeks burst into vibrant red before she turned away. The last rays of sunlight dipped lower, casting a radiant glow across her profile, and for a moment, she looked strikingly like Sailor Moon. The resemblance was uncanny.

“Guardian of justice,” he muttered under his breath, the words slipping out before he could stop them.

“Ehh?!”

Mamoru backpedaled quickly, realizing his mistake. “Nothing, nothing at all.”

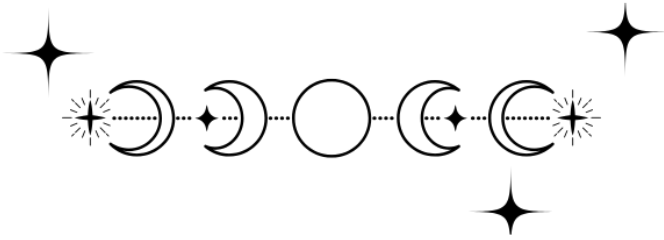
“Next, Sendaizakaue. Exit here for Hikawa Shrine,” the recorded voice announced.

Without waiting another instant, the girl leaped to her feet, clutching her cat. He held out his hands, unwilling to see her topple to the floor if the bus lurched unpredictably.

“Well, this is my stop! Gotta go!” her words came out in a rush, and she darted towards a door.

Mamoru stared after her, more intrigued than ever. As the bus pulled away, he watched her get further away. With each second that passed, the ache behind his left ribs pulsed just a little stronger, a little fiercer. The girl’s laughter, her boundless energy, the way she wore her heart on her sleeve—it all left him with a warmth he couldn’t quite explain.

With a start, he realized that he still didn't know her name. Yet somehow she continued to leave indelible marks on his heart.



The soft chime of the shrine bells did little to soothe Rei's troubled mind. The familiar scent of incense and aged wood that usually brought her comfort now felt cloying, almost suffocating. She stood at the top of the steps, her Miko robes billowing gently in the evening breeze, watching as the police officer approached.

"Good evening, Miss Hino."

"Officer," she bowed slightly.

"We'll be installing the surveillance cameras in two days. They'll go in around the perimeter, mostly facing the street and bus stop."

Rei's fists clenched at her sides, her nails digging into her palms. The idea of cold, unfeeling cameras invading this sacred space felt like a violation. But with the growing number of missing, she had no choice but to cooperate.

"Your grandfather has already given permission."

"You won't damage the trees, correct?" she asked.

"No, we have special straps that won't damage them."

"Thank you, officer."

He tipped his head and turned away. Rei stayed still, watching twilight deepen, watching the shadows crawl across the shrine grounds.

When had this happened? When had this sacred space been so tainted by the evil of the world?

Would it ever end? Would it ever end, or would stone slowly devour them until nothing remained?

A commotion snapped her out of her thoughts. A group of women approached with worry and barely concealed suspicion etched on their faces. Desperation lingered along the edges, and Rei wanted to erase it all. But that was beyond her.

Leading the pack, Rei recognized Mii's mother. "We're hoping that you can use your psychic powers."

"Divine, where our children have gone."

"My daughter's been missing for three days!"

"My poor little boy, he can't sleep without his stuffy. What's happened to him?"

"You have spiritual powers, Rei-san. Please!"

The weight of their expectations pressed down on her like a physical force. She wanted to help, desperately wanted to ease their pain, but the visions that had been plaguing her were fragmented, confusing. The more she tried to focus on them, to find the children, the more elusive they'd become.

Now the visions were always of the man, fleeting glimpses of the bus. Nothing more.

"I can't use my spiritual sense to pinpoint locations. It will be better to rely on the police."

"Isn't this what you're supposed to help with?" Mii's mother almost shouted. "You're supposed to be friendly and helpful. We are patrons of this shrine."

"I haven't seen your grandfather in ages!"

"And what about those exorcisms rites you practice?"

"Isn't it because of you that my daughter was spirited away?"

Rei flinched back as if struck. The accusation stung, not because it was true, but because she feared it might be. She regularly channeled powerful spiritual forces. Had she somehow offended the kami? Was this the result of impurity in her own heart?

Was all this her fault? No, it couldn't be. She'd always worked so hard to remain pure, to appease the gods while staying faithful. Were they punishing her for some transgression?

"P—please, just go home!"

As the confrontation escalated, Rei's grandfather appeared, his small frame radiating a calming presence. With great skill, he gently dispersed the group of mothers, and when they were gone, he turned to Rei. Concern creased his weathered face.

"Rei, are you alright?"

The simple question was enough to crack her carefully maintained composure. Tears welled up in her eyes as she shook her head. "Grandfather, I'm... I'm haunted. The visions, the dreams... they won't leave me alone. And now, with all these missing children... I'm helpless."

Her grandfather nodded, placing a comforting hand on her arm. "The kami speak to you for a reason, Rei. Go to the sacred fire. Let it guide you. Trust that connection, it's never lead you astray before."

Rei nodded, but found herself strangely reluctant. Since the fire burned her, she'd been almost afraid of it. But she knew that she'd need to face it sooner or later. Casting a quick glance up at the moon, she turned and made her way to the fire room.

The familiar space, with its ancient wood and the ever present scent of burned wood and smoke, usually brought her peace. But tonight, an undercurrent of foreboding tinged the air.

Kneeling before the sacred fire, she let its warmth embrace her. Rei took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She'd barely begun to focus

when the flames roared to life, higher and more intense than she'd ever seen before.

The world dissolved, replaced by a hellish landscape of darkness and stone. Through the shadow, Rei saw her. A girl with long blonde hair tied up in distinctive buns, dressed in a sailor uniform. Sailor Moon. But this wasn't the confident guardian Rei had seen before. This Sailor Moon was battered, her uniform torn and singed, blood etched across her face, fear pulling her features tight.

Opposing her stood a man Rei knew. The man from her dreams, his hair gleaming like polished gold in the firelight. His eyes were cold, devoid of mercy, reflecting the flames like pools of molten lava.

"You're here, Princess."

The air crackled with dark energy, making her skin crawl. The metallic taste of blood and fear coated her tongue, and the only sound was the labored breathing of Sailor Moon.

With inhuman speed, the man moved, his hands shooting out like viper strikes. Fingers closed around Sailor Moon's throat, and somehow, Rei felt the pressure around her own neck. Choking. Suffocating. Draining her life.

Sailor Moon's eyes widened, filled with a primal terror that shook Rei's core. Desperately, the gloved hands clawed at his grip, her legs kicking frantically. Each gasp of breath was a knife in Rei's heart.

His face twisted into a cruel smile, his grip tightening. Rei wanted to scream, to look away, but she couldn't. Instead, she remained frozen, forced to watch as the life drained from Sailor Moon's eyes.

With a sickening finality, Sailor Moon's body went limp. He released her, and she crumpled to the ground like a broken doll. Now, her once vibrant eyes were dull and lifeless.

The vision shattered like glass, leaving her gasping and trembling before the sacred fire. Her heart pounded so hard she thought it would

break bone. A cold sweat drenched her body, and she tasted bile in the back of her throat.

Unable to bear it any longer, she scrambled to her feet and fled. Running blindly, desperate to escape the horror. Bursting out of the doors, she didn't stop. Couldn't stop. Her ravens cawed, a frantic sound that only fueled her flight.

She had to prevent Sailor Moon's death, why she didn't know. All she knew was that she had to do everything in her power to see that Sailor Moon survived.

In the gathering darkness, the image of Sailor Moon's lifeless body haunted every shadow. The heat of the fire guided her down the stairs, around the corner, down the street. Somehow, she found herself at the bus stop, gulping in the air, her entire body shaking.

Shadow passed over her, and she looked up.

He sat behind the wheel. The man from her dreams was there.

"I wish you'd never come," he said.

But before she could react, a wave of dizziness washed over her. One step. The fire dimmed. Two steps. The flames extinguished.

"Now board my bus." The voice was distant.

"Board the 'Via Alternate Dimension' bus that will bring you to our castle." The voice was cold.

Behind her, the doors slid shut with a hiss of finality. The fog conquered her at last, leaving nothing but icy darkness.

# *Chapter Eleven*



## *Beyond the Threshold*

**T**he bustling early evening streets of Azabu-Juban hummed with the ordinary rhythm of life—shopkeepers calling out their wares, schoolgirls giggling over shared secrets, the distant chime of a temple bell. But for Mamoru, this normalcy felt like a thin veneer, barely concealing the turbulent undercurrents that threatened to pull him under.

Relentless phantom sensations clawed at his chest, an invisible vice gripping his heart with unyielding force. Each beat pulsed with an urgency he couldn't explain, couldn't shake off. The air around him seemed charged, thick with the weight of impending danger. Every nerve flickered like the streetlights beginning to flicker to life in the fading afternoon.

He rubbed his chest, trying to soothe the ache that beat deep within, a dull throb that echoed the confusion and fear swirling in his mind. The setting sun cast long shadows across the familiar storefronts

and apartment buildings, but the darkness within him grew with each passing second.

Somehow, his feet moved of their own accord, drawn by an inexorable force towards the street where the demon bus passed. His mind raced, a maelstrom of conflicting emotions threatening to tear him apart. The princess from his dreams, her silvery hair and pleading eyes, haunted his nights. Sailor Moon's determined gaze stalked his waking hours. And then there was the odango-haired girl...

A memory flashed unbidden—her warmth as she sat next to him on the bus, her lips curving around his name as she spoke it for the first time. Her enthusiasm had been infectious, her presence a balm to his troubled soul. For a moment, he'd forgotten his worries, lost in the sparkle of her eyes and the music of her laughter.

The recollection sent a fresh wave of guilt crashing over him. How could he feel such a powerful connection to three different women?

They haunted him.

They plagued him.

They tormented him.

He clenched his fists, nails digging into his palms, the pain a welcome distraction from the turmoil in his soul. Unable to bear it anymore, he knew Mamoru must give way to Tuxedo Mask. Quickly, he ducked into a secluded alleyway, the scent of rain-washed stone and distant flowers filling his senses.

A surge of electric golden energy crackled across his skin, dancing like lightning in a midnight storm. The world around him blurred, reality bending as if viewed through a prism of memory and destiny. The transformation took hold, a symphony of whispers filling his mind—echoes of a past life, fragments of a future yet to be written.

Silken threads of midnight and rose red wove themselves around him, a cocoon of shadow and struggle. The air shimmered with pos-

sibility, each breath drawing in power that felt both controlled and uncontrollable. A faint chiming, like crystal bells in a distant tower, rang in his ears.

Holding his breath, he waited, because she always appeared when he transformed. Besides his dreams, this was the only other place he could catch a glimpse of his ultimate love.

A faint profile emerged from the curtains of golden light. Glowing skin. Pearlescent cloth. Shimmering hair.

“I miss you,” he spoke, knowing that this vision could never hear.

“Find the Legendary Silver Crystal!”

The transformation crescendoed, a burst of golden substance engulfing him. As it receded, Tuxedo Mask emerged, the weight of his cape settling on his shoulders like the mantle of an unremembered duty. His mask, cool against his skin, sharpened his senses, attuning him to the very pulse of the world.

In that moment, suspended between who he might be and who he was meant to be, Mamoru felt the tug of fate. Though the path remained shrouded in mystery, an undeniable purpose burned within him, as constant and guiding as the moon. Yet, even as he embraced this purpose, a part of him ached. How could he focus on finding the Legendary Silver Crystal when Sailor Moon might be in danger?

Which took precedence? The desperate pleas of the unknown or the frantic calls of the present?

“We’re almost done setting up surveillance,” a nearby voice said.

Tuxedo Mask flattened himself against the building, letting the shadows devour him.

“The commander is really putting pressure on us to solve this.”

“Of course he is. Kids are missing.”

“It’s just so weird.”

“I’ll bet Sailor Moon solves it.”

“Oh yeah? Drinks are on you if she does.”

“Deal.”

The men moved off, and Tuxedo Mask emerged from the shadows, his heart heavy. He desperately hoped they were wrong, that Sailor Moon wouldn't become involved. The idea of her dealing with something so sinister made his chest tighten and tension grip his spine.

Quickly, he glanced up at the moon. “Third quarter, the phase of quiet transition. But from what, to what?”

As he approached the bus stop, the air seemed to thicken further, charged with an ominous energy that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. The last rays of sunlight painted the sky in hues of blood and fire, a fitting backdrop to the dread that coiled in his stomach.

Police cars dotted the periphery, their flashing lights spilling across the pavement like heralds of disaster. His heart thundered in his chest, each beat a war drum sounding the call of an impending battle. He knew, with a certainty that chilled him to the bone, that Sailor Moon would soon be involved in this danger.

That thought sent a jolt of panic through him so visceral it left him gasping. Perhaps that's why the unknown pressure in his chest called him here. To save her. Whatever darkness threatened to engulf this city, whatever danger awaited Sailor Moon, he would face it. Even if it meant betraying the princess who called to him in his dreams, even if it meant losing himself to this inexplicable pull.

For in this moment, as the last light of day gave way to the encroaching night, Tuxedo Mask knew one thing with absolute certainty: he would protect Sailor Moon, no matter the cost to his own heart or his mission to find the Legendary Silver Crystal.

A tainted taste of copper apprehension lingered on his tongue as he pressed himself against the cool brick of a building. A gloved hand

moved to his chest, fingers splaying over his heart as if to soothe the restless ache that pulsed beneath.

What was this sensation?

This pull that seemed to tug at his very soul.

A flash of golden hair caught his eye, and his breath hitched. There she was—the girl with the odango buns, her presence both a balm and a spark to his frayed nerves. What was she doing here!?

She moved with a curious mix of clumsiness and grace, her long pigtails swinging with each step. The fading sunlight caught her hair, creating a halo that made her seem almost godly.

What would he do if she became entrapped by the demon bus? What would he do if she was listed among the missing tomorrow?

Before he could leap from his hiding place and save her, she glanced around furtively, her bright blue eyes wide with a mixture of determination and fear. In her arms, she clutched a black cat—the same one he'd seen her with before.

Tuxedo Mask strained to hear, catching snippets of her words.

“Luna, are you sure about this? What if—what if I can't do it?”

“Remember, we can't allow the enemy to find it.”

She puffed out her lip, pouting. “I'd rather be sleeping, or eating. Mama made lemon pie.... That's my favorite.”

He found himself leaning forward, drawn by an invisible thread towards her. His fingers twitched, every instinct screaming to reach out, to protect her from whatever danger lurked down the road. But he held back, rooted by fear. What would he do if she was afraid of him?

A masked vigilante would frighten any girl.

The ache in his chest intensified, a clash of confusion, worry, and something deeper—something he dared not name—playing out in

every beat of his heart. Then everything seemed to explode and freeze at the same time.

The demon bus approached, rumbling down the street. Surprisingly, all the police seemed to miss it, oblivious to its presence. Still, it came closer, darkening the street with shadows and malevolence.

“You mean this is the “Demon 6:00 pm, bus”? No way?” She squared her shoulders. “Let’s do this, then I’ll go home and reward myself with dessert!”

No! She couldn’t be involved like this, couldn’t be in danger. But before he had a chance to even think, the girl was already moving.

“I have to rescue Rei-chan!”

The earth cried out in pain, and his knees buckled with the onslaught of sensations. The air thickened as the bus approached the wall. With an audible groan, the solid brick facade rippled and parted, as if suddenly transformed into liquid. The headlights stretched and distorted, their beams elongating impossibly as the vehicle sank into an impossible portal.

Metal screamed against stone as the bus’s frame compressed, twisting at an unnatural angle to conform to the shimmering gateway. Windows warped, reflecting fractured darkness outwards. The exterior took on an eerie, ethereal glow against the void-like darkness of the portal.

Gravity itself seemed to waver, the bus hovering for a heartbeat between worlds before being pulled into the yawning maw of unreality.

Still, the screaming vibrations of the earth held him. Desperate to escape, he tried to break free of the extreme suffering, but couldn’t.

“Moon Power! Change me into a stewardess!”

In a dazzling burst of light and color, the world around her exploded in a vibrant burst of moonlight and motion. Ribbons of light enveloped her form, swirling and dancing in a mesmerizing display.

Tuxedo Mask forgot the suffering of the earth. His eyes went wide as he witnessed the impossible unfold before him.

Ripples of power flowed outwards, sparkling across his skin. He could almost swear that it strengthened him. The light continued to intensify, forcing him to squint against its brilliance. When it faded, the clumsy girl was gone. In her place stood a figure both familiar and utterly new—a fight attendant, her uniform crisp and professional, yet power still clung to her.

“What in the world?”

Was this girl like him? His mind reeled, trying to process what he'd seen. The transformation, the pen, the cat that could speak—it all pointed to one inescapable conclusion. This clumsy, endearing, infuriating girl somehow had a connection to Sailor Moon. Perhaps she was even Sailor Moon herself.

Yet, if she was indeed connected to Sailor Moon... If she was planning to confront the demon bus alone...

Pure terror shot through his body, electrifying every nerve. Images of her broken body flashed before his eyes. His chest constricted, the ever-presence ache blossoming into a fierce fire.

He wouldn't allow it. Couldn't.

Somehow he shook off the frantic cries of the earth and burst into movement. Doubt crumbled away, replaced by an iron-clad resolve. The pull in his chest, the invisible thread that had been tugging at him all along, now felt like an unbreakable tether.

“I'll save you!”

He had to save her. Had to protect her. It wasn't a choice anymore; it was essential as breathing. Slipping from the shadows, he ran. Frantic urgency pushed him faster, his muscles straining with the sudden movement. His chest constricted, his breath coming in strained gasps.

The sharp staccato of her heels against pavement cut through the air like gunshots, each click a countdown to disaster. Tuxedo Mask's heart raced in time with her steps, a frantic rhythm that threatened to burst from his chest.

He pushed harder, muscles screaming, but the distance between them seemed to stretch impossibly.

"Stop!" The word tore from his throat, raw and desperate.

She either didn't hear or decided to ignore him, her uniform a blur of white and blue as she sprinted towards the back of the bus. Time slowed to a crawl. In horror, he watched as her fingers grasped the rear frame, her body clinging to the moving vehicle.

A yowl pierced the air. Without thinking, Tuxedo Mask lunged, catching Luna mid-fall. The cat's warm weight in his arms was nothing against the icy dread flooding his veins.

She reached back towards him, and he tried to move faster. But she slipped out of reach.

"No!" The cry ripped from him as the bus, with the girl clinging to the back, plunged into the shimmering portal in the wall.

For a heartbeat, he saw her face. Eyes wide with fear, with the realization of what she'd done. Then, in a final, sickening twist of reality, she vanished.

The wall solidified, leaving no trace of the devouring gateway. The sudden silence was deafening, broken only by his ragged breathing and the pounding of blood in his ears. Luna wriggled free and leaped from his arms, disappearing into the shadows without a backward glance.

An iron grip of panic seized him, clenching his throat and threatening to choke him. The chill of the night air bit at his skin, a harsh reminder of his failure. Even the light of the moon seemed to cry out in agony. He stood frozen, unable to process the magnitude of what had just happened.

“What do I do now?”

He paced the empty street, gloved hands raking through his hair, tugging at the strands as if the pain could wake him from this nightmare.

“What can I do now?”

Each step felt laden, weighted down by the crushing realization of his powerlessness. He, who had always swept in at the last moment to save the day, now stood useless before an enemy he couldn't even see.

“Bring her back!” he shouted at the impassive wall, his voice cracking.

He smashed a fist against the wall, the pain barely registering through his despair.

“Take me instead!”

But the bricks remained silent, unanswering. No amount of pleading or threats could undo what had been done.

The sensation of helplessness clawed at his insides, tearing at the very fabric of his soul. His knees buckled, and he sunk to the ground. The cold pavement jarred against the heat of his failure. He pressed a gloved hand to his chest, the relentless ache flaring into a fiery, unbearable pain. He'd failed her.

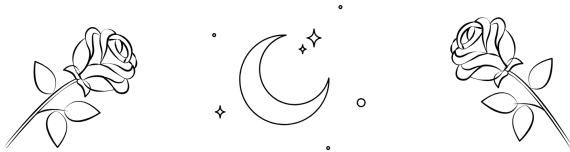
Sirens pierced the night, their wail a haunting echo of his own anguish. The lights bathed the area in flashes of blue and red. Somehow, he found the strength to stand. Somehow, he slipped into the shadows. But he couldn't bring himself to leave entirely.

As he watched the police swarm the area, a new resolve began to form within him. He might have failed tonight, but he would find a way to save her. No matter what it took, no matter how impossible it seemed, he would bring her back.

With one last look at the wall that had swallowed her, Tuxedo Mask melted deeper into the darkness. The night wasn't over yet, and

neither was his fight. He'd get her back. Find her, even if he had to battle all the monsters in the world and swim through the darkness.

# *Chapter Twelve*



## *Embers of Rebirth*

**D**arkness held Rei, a suffocating shadow that pressed against her skin like stone fingers. Everything was oppression and smoke, an endless void where the sacred light of fire couldn't reach. The cloying scent of ash and decay filled her lungs, discordant and disgusting. Her breath came in shallow gasps, struggling to latch on to anything real. She was a drift in the nothing, her senses dulled, her soul stifled.

Disoriented, she struggled to make sense of her surroundings, her mind reeling as reality seemed to warp and twist around her. How long would she wallow like this? How long had she been here?

Was this how she'd passed from this life? Was this the gateway before she entered her next life? A brief flash of a swirling mass of darkness and stars swirled before her mind.

Suddenly, a flicker of warmth brushed against her consciousness. It was familiar, a presence she'd felt before, in dreams and visions, in moments where the boundaries between past and present blurred.

The darkness gave way, giving way to wisps of silvery mist that danced and swirled like ethereal spirits. As if summoned by an unseen force, flames erupted from the ground, their heat a comforting caress

against her skin. The fire spoke to her in ancient whispers, echoing the voice of countless kami that guarded sacred land for millennia.

“What are you trying to tell me?”

Through the veil of flames and mist, a figure emerged out. Rei’s breath caught in her throat as recognition slammed into her. The man from her dreams. But now he had a name.

Jadeite.

He sat before a ceremonial fire, his golden hair gleaming in the firelight, his gray eyes reflecting the dancing flames with an intensity that made her heart skip.

He looked at her, a smile playing across his lips. “What are you waiting for, Princess?”

She huffed, crossing her arms. “Don’t call me Princess.”

“Then don’t make it so tempting,” he whispered. Then his eyes locked on hers. Fire rolled across his gaze, warming her, comforting her.

“I’d rather not be here all night.”

“Sorry, Princess, but I’d rather do a good job.”

Twin flames burst from both her hands. “Stop calling me that!”

“Why?” the smile deepened. “You’re a princess of Mars. ‘Princess’ is a perfectly good title.”

She resisted a moment longer before sitting next to him beside the roaring, sacred fire. This was so natural, so right. Almost like she belonged by his side. A burst of warmth shot through her every time their eyes found each other. Each time “Princess” slipped from his lips.

They’d shared a lifetime together. An unspoken bond that defied the gods.

Yet, this wasn’t reality. Rei knew that. The flames spoke the truth. The wind whispered it. Even the ground hinted that this was only a gift from the fire. A way for her to remember.

“Jadeite?” Rei’s voice was barely above a whisper, still clouded by hesitation.

Did she want this to end? Or did she want to stay with him forever?

He stilled and looked over at her, and in that moment, the world stilled. His eyes—those mesmerizing pools of stormy gray—held her captive. They were not just windows to his soul but the very essence of the fire that burned within him, a fire that matched her own.

The depths of his gaze were endless, swirling with a thousand shades of gray and blue, flecks dancing like stars in the twilight sky. There was an intensity evident, searing heat the spoke of passion, of power, and a bond that transcended time itself.

As if the gods had poured all the fire of the universe into his eyes, making them both a blessing and a curse, a beacon that drew her in even as it consumed her.

With each second that passed, she remembered just a little more. Their relationship went beyond friendship or romance. They were bonded. They were Fated Souls.

Now afraid, she broke the contact, but she couldn’t stay away for long. Soon, her gaze returned to his, only to find his eyes roaming across her face. Gone was the playful expression of youth and joy. Now his face was a mixture of longing and loneliness.

“I’ve missed you,” he said, his voice a low rumble that seemed to reverberate through her very soul. “God’s, I’ve missed you so much.”

Rei’s heart broke. Perhaps he’d been as lonely as she’d been. She reached out, desperate to touch him, to confirm he wasn’t just another fleeting dream. But as her fingers neared his face, something shifted.

A shadow fell across his eyes. Slowly, she watched them turn to stone.

An acrid taste filled her mouth—the unmistakable flavor of evil, of corruption so deep it threatened to swallow her whole. Her Jadeite was gone. Replaced by this impostor.

The world fractured, reality bleeding through the cracks of this supernatural dreamscape. Jadeite’s form began to waver, like a mirage in the desert heat.

With a sudden, violent motion, he lunged at her, his hand closing around her throat. Rei gasped, more shock than pain, as she stared into eyes that no longer held any trace of the man she once knew.

“So you’ve finally arrived, Sailor Moon.” It was Jadeite’s voice, but not.

“Let go of Rei-chan! I’ll never forgive you for imprisoning innocent children!”

Rei knew that voice. Knew the passion behind it.

“In the name of the Moon, I’ll punish you!”

Then a new voice joined. “Mercury Aqua Mist!”

Despite the suffocating pressure around her neck, despite the screaming of fear in her chest, everything felt so familiar. As if she should join these voices in their fight. To protect... who?

“Go save Rei-chan now Sailor Moon.”

Jadeite’s chest rumbled behind her, a twisted laugh that contained none of the joy it once did. “Don’t be stupid.”

A flash of power rolled across Rei’s skin.

“The fog is lifting!”

“Ouch! Now the fog is ice. I can’t do this. I can’t do this. Why do I have to fight more!!”

“Sailor Moon, you can’t cry! This is a fragile dimension. You’ll endanger everyone,” an unknown voice shouted.

Rei struggled against the force around her throat. She fought against the constraints. No matter what, she refused to go into the

next life without fighting for her life. For those she swore to protect. These were her sisters. Not of blood, but of... what!?

“Moon Tiara Boomerang!”

Without warning, light burst across the dark. It flooded Rei, brushing aside the tendrils of shadow that held her captive. It was more pure than the sun and even rivaled the sacred fire. This light, whatever it was, contained true power. Not taken by force, not used for evil. But a power that was freely granted by love, by hope, by everything that was good in the universe.

It moved with grace and gentleness that spoke of unity and purpose, untainted by the hunger for control that so often corrupted. This was a power that brought life, that restored, that carried with it the promise of protection and peace.

As it flowed through her, Rei felt not just freed, but whole—connected to a familiar strand of fate.

When the light faded, she found herself completely free from the darkness. Almost like waking from a nightmare, the darkness fell away.

The world around Rei was a barren wasteland, a vast, cavernous chamber. Walls of lifeless stone stretched upward, archways carved from the stone flowed across the walls. Shadows seemed to consume the stone. Only the barest trace of illumination fought against the darkness, struggling to hold it back.

The air hung heavy and still, carrying a bone-chilling cold that seeped through skin and muscle, threatening to freeze the very marrow within.

Rei gasped, seeing the frozen forms of children scattered across the cold floor. Without out a doubt, Rei would save them.

“Ha! That can’t hurt me!” Jadeite shouted, batting away the bright light.

Rei winced as the power flowed across her skin. Sailor Moon and Sailor Mercury fell backwards, smashing into the stone. Before she could latch onto the feelings swirling around her chest, a glittering gold and red pen flew towards her.

A surge of recognition flooded her. These were not just masked vigilantes, they were sisters, bound by a destiny that reached across time and fate. The realization hit her with the force of fire, igniting something deep within her soul.

Then, her fingers closed around the pen.

Flames burst across her chest, spreading outwards with an increasing intensity. Her forehead burned, as if the sacred fire she'd tended for so long had taken residence within her very being. The heat grew, not painful but purifying, burning away doubt and fear, leaving only purpose and resolve.

Phobos and Deimos appeared with a crack. Shattering everything with their call.

Flames erupted around her, a swirling vortex of crimson and gold. They danced across her skin, caressing rather than burning, weaving themselves into fabric and form. The fire of Mars, ancient and powerful, answered her call, infusing her with its strength and wisdom.

As the transformation took hold, Rei felt herself changing—not just physically, but spiritually. The flames reshaped her, molding her into a warrior of fire and passion. Her miko robes gave way to the familiar sailor fuku, red and violet, replacing the traditional red and white.

When the cold tiara materialized on her forehead, it reminded her of the responsibility she once carried and would carry again.

As the flames receded, Sailor Mars stood tall, a new determination blazing within. The chill of the Dark Kingdom's lair no longer touched her, warded off by the fire that now burned within.

Jadeite sneered. “It wouldn’t matter if there were a hundred of you. Because you’re in the Dark Kingdom, where darkness holds power.”

“Good always triumph over evil!” Sailor Moon yelled.

“Then end me if you can! That pathetic tiara already failed. The fog was nothing but a minor inconvenience. Is that the best you have?”

Sailor Mars stood frozen, her heart pounding against her ribs. The chamber seemed to close in around her, the oppressive darkness pressing against her newly awakened powers. Before her, Jadeite’s form flickered between the corrupted shell of evil and the fleeting glimpses of the man she once knew—the man she loved.

“Please don’t make me do this,” she begged.

Jadeite laughed. “As if you could. Fire is nothing compared to the darkness.”

Every fiber of her being screamed in protest. This couldn’t be happening. This couldn’t be real. But the heat of her powers surged through her veins, demanding action. She knew what had to be done.

“Phobos! Deimos!” she cried.

They responded.

“Evil Spirit...” The words caught in her throat, choking her. Tears stung her eyes, blurring her vision. “Be exorcised.”

Jadeite’s beautiful eyes met hers one last time. For a heartbeat, she saw something flicker—a flash of the bond they once shared. A bond they would share again.

The spell erupted from her, a conflagration of crimson and gold. Phobos and Deimos shot forward, adding their own power. It engulfed Jadeite, his scream of agony piercing her very core. She watched, horror and determination warring within her, as the flames consumed him.

His body crumbled, leaving only a ghostly white skeleton.

A sorrow she'd never felt before crashed over her, drowning her. She fell to her knees, a keening wail tearing from her throat. The weight of her actions pressed down on her, suffocating in its intensity.

She'd killed him. Her lover. Her Fated Soul.

Yet, even as the grief threatened to consume her, a small voice whispered in the depths of her mind that this was the only way. The only path to free him from the corruption that had taken root in his soul. Now, liberated from the Dark Kingdom's hold, his star seed could begin anew.

"Is... is he gone?" Sailor Moon asked.

"I think so," Sailor Mercury responded.

Sailor Mars pressed a hand to her chest, feeling the steady thrum of her heartbeat. Somewhere out there, Jadeite's soul still existed. One day, cleansed and reborn, he would find his way back to her.

Their bond, transcending death itself, would guide him home.

Trembling, she rose to her feet. Sailor Moon and Sailor Mercury flanked her, the comforting balm of sisterhood resonating through her chest. As naturally as breathing, they came together, their energies intertwining in a dazzling display of light and energy.

Mark took a shaky breath, her gaze lingering on him. "Goodbye, my love," she whispered. "Until we meet again."

"This is bad!" Sailor Mars didn't know where the voice came from, but she knew to trust it. "The fire is causing distortions! The dimension is going to collapse. Gather everyone together."

They worked swiftly to gather the children, making sure to leave no one behind. With a surge of prickling power, the evil aura faded. Replaced by an effervescent light that both cleansed and rejuvenated.

As the last wisps of dark energy dissipated, reality seemed to reassert itself. The cold, oppressive chamber of the Dark Kingdom gave way

to the familiar grounds of the Hikawa Shrine. Sailor Mars blinked, momentarily disoriented by the sudden shift.

The night air was thick with the rich scent of soil and incense, a welcome contrast to the acrid smell of the battle that still clung to her. In the distance, sirens wailed, growing louder with each passing second. Sailor Mars's heart clenched with the weight of what she'd done—what she'd lost. Somehow, she knew it would remain etched on her soul for a while.

“Sailor Moon,” Mercury's voice cut through the haze of her thoughts. “The police are coming. You should—“

“Awweewwww!” Sailor Moon wailed. “Do I have to? Really? The police are so dry. And they always try to blame me.”

Sailor Mars smiled. “Perhaps you're the dry one.”

“Hey!” Sailor Moon pouted. “I'm a bubbly and energetic girl. There is no part of me that's dry! I use extra moisturizer to make sure that's true.”

“It's your responsibility as the leader,” Mercury said.

“When can I retire?” Sailor Moon sniffled before turning. With a last sniffle, she squared her shoulders and stomped off to meet the first of the police cars.

Mars watched as Sailor Moon stood tall. Somehow, she seemed even more brilliant in the moonlight. Each moonbeam almost worshiped her. There was something regal in her bearing, a hint of power that Sailor Mars didn't understand.

“Never fear!” Sailor Moon called out. “I is here! The situation is completely under control, thanks to your friendly neighborhood Guardians!”

“Not you again,” an officer moaned. “Weren't you behind the cram school debacle?”

Sailor Moon frowned. “I was the reason all those students didn’t get brainwashed and their energy sucked out, yes. But not like the bad reason behind it.”

Another officer approached. “My niece was there. I’m glad you saved her. But you are?”

Sailor Moon struck a pose, and for a moment, Mars could have sworn she saw a crescent moon gleaming on her forehead. “I am Sailor Moon, champion of love and justice!”

“Where did you find the children?” the officer motioned to the kids, just now waking.

“The Dark Kingdom! It was terrible, super cold and depressing. Personally, I never ever ever wanna go back. But we saved them!”

As Sailor Mars continued to speak with the police, a commotion drew her attention to the shrine steps. A small figure broke free from the group of rescued children, running towards a man and woman.

“Mii,” Mars whispered.

Mii flung herself into her mother’s arms, both of them sinking to the ground in a tight embrace. The man crouched beside them, holding both close. “Mama! Papa! What happened?”

“Oh, my darling,” Mii’s mother cried, pressing kisses to the top of her daughter’s head. “You’re safe now. You’re home.”

The scene blurred as tears filled Rei’s eyes. Joy for the reunited family warred with the ache of her own loss. Jadeite’s face flashed in her mind—not the corrupted version she destroyed, but the man she’d loved in another life. The man she hoped would find his way back to her someday.

“Don’t worry, officer,” Sailor Moon continued. “Everything is all good. I didn’t even ruin any buildings!”

A gentle touch on her arm startled her. Sailor Mars turned to find Sailor Mercury smiling softly at her, and just a moment later, Sailor Moon joined them.

“Police officers really need to get a sense of humor,” Sailor Moon sighed.

“You did well, Sailor Mars,” Mercury said, her blue eyes shimmering in the dim light.

Sailor Moon nodded, reaching out to grab Rei’s hand. “Welcome to the team, Sailor Mars! You’re so brave and pretty. You’ll be a completely excellent guardian.”

The genuine affection in their voices broke something inside of Rei. A sob escaped her as she allowed herself to be pulled into a group hug. The warmth of their embrace seemed to soothe the jagged edges of her grief, if only for a moment.”

“I—“ Sailor Mars began, her voice thick. “I don’t understand everything that’s happening, but I know this is where I’m meant to be. With you.”

Sailor Moon beamed, her smile as bright as the moon itself. “We’re more than just a team, Sailor Mars. We’re family now. And as your sister, I’ll always be here for you.”

“Me too!” Sailor Mercury smiled.

As they stood there, bathed in moonlight and the flashing lights of police cars, Rei felt a spark of hope ignite in her chest. From inside the shrine, she could feel the power of the sacred fire roll over her. The road ahead would be difficult, filled with battles both external and internal. But she wasn’t alone anymore.

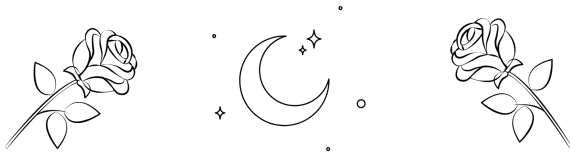
Yes, she’d lost a love, but she’d gained sisters. And together, they would face whatever challenges lay ahead.

“I am Sailor Mars,” she said. “The reason I’ve got power is because I’m a guardian.”

“Yes! And I’m so happy we found you!” Sailor Moon beamed.

And despite everything—the grief, the uncertainty, the looming threats—Rei found herself laughing. This was the beginning of their story, and deep in her soul, she knew it would be legendary.

# *Chapter Thirteen*



## *Truth Unveiled*

**A**s the early morning sun cast long shadows across the peaceful suburban streets, Mamoru's feet maintained a steady rhythm as they pounded the pavement. The air was crisp and fresh, carrying with it the scent of blooming flowers and the distant hum of a waking city. Each step was steady, measured, but his thoughts were anything but.

Last night, he'd dreamed of the princess again. Like every night. But everything was more crisp, more abrupt. Like she was drawing closer to him. Perhaps that meant they'd meet soon. But that brought new trouble to his chest. After their destined meeting, what would happen to Sailor Moon and the clumsy girl?

That wasn't the only thing troubling him.

He wasn't sure why, but there was something particular about this route, this peaceful street lined with little trees and neat houses, had drawn him in today. There was this inexplicable pull to this area.

Everywhere else felt wrong—oppressive and suffocating. But here, the air was lighter. The tension in his chest eased.

The feeling was almost magnetic, pulling him along without question. Maybe it was just his need to escape his restless thoughts—the princess, Sailor Moon, the girl, and his mission to find the Legendary Silver Crystal.

More and more, he couldn't escape the feeling his life had become a tangle of half-remembered dreams and fractured realities, and the need to untangle them gnawed at him constantly.

Lost in contemplation, Mamoru nearly collided with a blur of golden pigtails as he rounded a corner. His hand shot out instinctively, steadying the girl before him.

“Bunhead, it's you!”

“It's you!” Her eyes widened, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. “Mamoru Chiba! What are you doing here?”

Before he could respond, a voice called out from the house. “Usagi! Don't forget your lunch!”

A woman emerged with long wavy dark blue hair. She carried a wrapped box. With a quick glance at him, Usagi turned and scurried back to retrieve it, her movements a charming mix of embarrassment and clumsy. He tried to hide the smile pressing against his lips. She really was rather endearing.

Returning, she shuffled her feet. “Since you know where I live, are you going to follow me around more now?”

Mamoru laughed. “Sorry to break it to you, Bunhead, but I have much better things to do than follow you around.”

“Oh, really?” she puffed out her chest. “Like what?! I'm the most interesting person you could ever follow! I go to the cake shop, and the arcade, and the park. Oh! And the mall. The mall is really fun. Then there is the café and the ice cream shop. I can't forget the bookstore.

They have a great manga collection. See! You'll expand your horizons if you follow me."

"Now you're inviting me to follow you?" he smiled. "We're you just blaming me?"

She rubbed her neck. "Yes! No! Yes? No? Uh, undecided! Yeah, I'm undecided. Ask me later."

Mamoru laughed, enjoying her company more and more. What would it be like to... No, he was entirely devoted, body and soul, to the princess. A torrent of conflicted emotions pulled at his chest. He couldn't betray her. The princess or Usagi or Sailor Moon.

"We've known each other for a while now, and I'm finally learning your name."

"It just didn't come up before." She rubbed her shoe on the sidewalk. "Well, here we go. I'm Usagi Tsukino!"

"Rabbit of the Moon," he murmured, the words slipping from his lips before he could even think about them. Something deep within him stirred, a sensation that was both unsettling and oddly comforting. Almost like a half-forgotten memory brushing against the edges of his consciousness.

It was as if her name carried a hidden weight, a significance he couldn't quite grasp, but it resonated with him on a level he didn't understand.

Blinking, he tried to shake off the sudden, inexplicable feeling. "It suits you."

Usagi beamed up at him, and his heart seemed to skip a beat. She was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen. And with that, his chest constricted. Because he knew that if these encounters continued, he was risking his heart.

"Try to stay out of trouble today, Bunhead. And maybe pay attention to where you're going?"

She spluttered and puffed up. Like a baby bird trying to intimidate a predator. “Hey! You’re the one barreling down the sidewalk at the crack of dawn!”

As she took a step towards him, she entered a shaft of light. The morning rays caught her just so, illuminating her in a way that made his breath catch. In that moment, everything clicked into place. The familiar blue eyes, the golden hair, the unmistakable aura of warmth and light.

Sailor Moon. Usagi was Sailor Moon.

The realization hit him like a physical blow, leaving him stunned. He stammered out a hasty goodbye, his mind reeling as he forced himself away from the girl.

“Hey! Where are you going? You can’t leave me like that! RUDE!”

His heart thundered in his chest like a caged bird, desperate for freedom as he ran away. He barely registered the bustling streets or the people he passed. Everything blurred, colors melting into a dizzying kaleidoscope as he stumbled forward, barely aware of his surroundings. All he could do was focus on the revelation that had just shattered his carefully constructed reality.

Usagi was Sailor Moon.

He found himself in a nearby park, the morning dew still clinging to blades of grass that sparkled under the strengthening sunlight. Bubbling water sang from the fountain, water droplets reflecting rainbows in the sunlight. A massive clock loomed overhead, throwing a slicing shadow across the space. The sweet scent of new life and vibrant flowers filled the air, providing a tranquil backdrop to his turmoil.

His step faltered, and he collapsed onto a weathered wooden bench, its cool surface grounding him as he struggled to process the revelation. Thankfully, the park was empty, silent, save for the distant rustle of leaves and chirp of birds.

“Usagi is Sailor Moon.”

Mamoru buried his hands in his face, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he tried to make sense of it all.

“Sailor Moon is Usagi.”

The clumsy, bright-eyed girl who irritated and captivated him in equal measure was the same warrior who fought in the moonlight. Quickly, he glanced up, automatically finding the moon in the pale blue.

“Waxing crescent.”

Letting out a breath, he tried to ignore the slight tickle of discomfort that spread across his skin. The moonlight still felt discordant, harsh. Yet, he couldn't ignore the overwhelming sense of relief. The burden on his shoulders felt slightly lighter.

Now, instead of being drawn to three women, it was down to two. He snorted.

“Don't think this changes anything, Mamoru.”

The guilt still crushed him. The princess—her ethereal form and pleading eyes still haunted him. His heart was still being torn in two, still torn between the dream and reality.

Mamoru rubbed his face roughly, as if he could physically wipe away the confusion. The surrounding park seemed to mock his turmoil with its serenity—birds chirping merrily, leaves rustling gently, cars, people, all of it so oblivious.

He felt like a storm contained within a glass bottle, surrounded by calm but unable to escape his own chaos.

Each night, the princess came to him, with each new appearance more vivid, more urgent. He could almost feel the warmth of her touch, smell the delicate fragrance of her. But he was no closer to finding the Legendary Silver Crystal, no closer to unraveling the mystery of his past and his connection to her.

“What are you doing, Mamoru?”

Still shaken, he pushed himself up from the bench.

“Nothing. That’s the answer. You’re doing nothing.”

His legs were weak, barely able to support him as he stumbled from the park. The once soothing environment now felt oppressive, the trees looming over him like silent tormentors. The path before him was hazy, the weight of his thoughts making it difficult to focus on anything but the whirlwind of emotions tearing through him.

The city streets passed in a blur, faces of strangers merging into an indistinct mass as he focused solely on putting one foot in front of the other. Finally reaching his apartment, he practically fell inside, collapsing onto the cool leather of his couch. As his eyes fluttered close, exhaustion overtook him. Immediately, a brilliant vision pulled him under.

The princess stood before him, her ethereal form bathed in moonlight that seemed to spill from the heavens just to highlight her. The pale glow was almost blinding, wrapping her in a shimmering veil of brilliance, as if the very stars had descended to encase her in their light.

She was so close, close enough that he could see the gentle rise and fall of her chest, the delicate flutter of her lashes as she looked at him with eyes filled with infinite sorrow.

All that existed was her, standing there, waiting, as she had for an eternity.

His entire being wanted to hold her, to feel her warmth surge through him like a tidal wave. It had been too long. Ages. Millennia. Eons since he’d last felt the comforting embrace of her presence. Since he’d known the peace that only she could bring.

His hand trembled as he reached out, every fiber of his being straining towards her, desperate to bridge the chasm that had separated

them for so long. His fingers brushed through the mist, the air between them charged with an electric tension.

He could almost feel her, the ghost of her touch, the faint promise to chase away the cold that had settled in his soul. To make him whole.

But as he drew closer, she began to fade. The brilliant light that once encased her grew dimmer. The edges of her form blurred as if the mist itself was swallowing her.

Panic clawed at him, his breath catching as he strained further. Willing himself to move faster, pleading to close the distance, to grasp her hand before she vanished completely. Before the fog consumed her.

“Find the Legendary Silver Crystal!”

“No!” he screamed, the word a plea, a desperate cry. His voice cracked with the weight of his anguish, raw, unfiltered, as if his very soul was being torn from his body. “No, please, don’t go!”

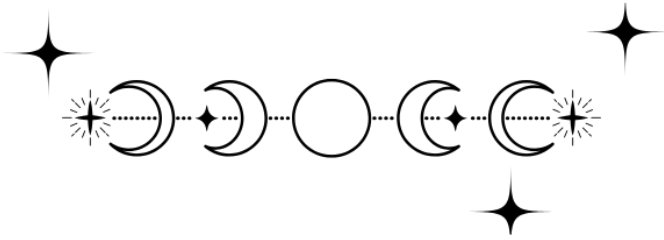
But she was already slipping away, her form dissolving into the light, her outstretched hand nothing more than a fleeting shadow. And then, just before his fingers brushed the ghostly remnants of her presence, she was gone.

A scream tore from him, a primal sound of loss and despair that echoed through the void, reverberating off the walls of his broken mind. He snatched at the mist where she’d been, as if he could somehow pull her back through sheer force of will.

But there was nothing left—no trace of her, no warmth, no light. Only the cold, unforgiving darkness remained.

Mamoru collapsed, his body trembling with the force of his sobs. The princess was gone, and with her, the last remnants of his hope. He’d failed her. Failed to protect her. Failed to keep her by his side. And now, all that remained was the crushing weight of his guilt and the unbearable ache of her absence.

He woke, wet tears still cascading down his cheeks. Failure still crushing him.



The oppressive darkness of the Dark Kingdom pressed in on Nephrite as he strode through its twisted corridors. The malevolent energy pulsed from the very walls, from the shadows that clung to every surface. Darkness twisted and writhed like a living entity, a constant reminder of the evil that ruled this forsaken place. Even the air was thick with a tainted miasma that clung to everything it touched.

As always, it left a discordant and uncomfortable feeling inside his chest. Almost like a burr, a discontented itch that dug at him.

Entering the throne room, he bowed deeply before Queen Beryl. An icy presence settled on his shoulders, pushing him deeper, further, until his forehead brushed the stone. Knowing that resistance was futile, he didn't defy.

"Rise."

The familiar sense of dread settled in his gut, a sensation he'd long grown accustomed to but could never quite shake.

"You've lost a brother," she said, her fingers swirling over the crystal orb.

"Yes," Nephrite said through gritted teeth. "Jadeite was a chosen one. One of the Four Kings of Heaven, to have eliminated him, must have taken a substantial amount of power."

“Or he was just weak.”

Revulsion spiked in his chest. Jadeite was not weak.

That same icy presence bit at him, forcing the discordant thoughts to flee, replacing them with darkness. Nephrite clenched his fists, nails dug into his palms. Somewhere inside his chest, a faint pulse of electricity seemed to ripple around and around.

“Perhaps you’ll be the one to find the Legendary Silver Crystal and eliminate the guardians.”

Nephrite bowed slightly, that presence ghosting across his skin. “I’ll achieve a great victory for the Dark Kingdom.”

Beryl snorted. “If only you’d secured Endymion, then we would have already secured a glorious victory.”

Nephrite stayed silent. Whoever this Endymion was needed to die. All the queen did was compare them to him.

“I’ve gathered some information from the humans,” Nephrite said. “Surprise me.”

“Soon, in Tokyo, the Kingdom of D will reveal their hidden treasure. It’s said to contain immense power, and I believe it may be the Legendary Silver Crystal, or at least be able to lead us to it.”

A cruel smile curved across her lips. “Excellent.” Her eyes narrowed, flashing in the darkness. “The power of the crystal can revive your fallen comrade.”

Jadeite. The name sent a jolt of something through his chest. A pang of something that felt disturbingly like guilt. The thought of him lying in the cold, dark crystal coffin bit at his conscience, something he thought long dead.

But before he could truly consider the emotion, ice spread across him. Anger. Jadeite had failed many times to bring victory to the Dark Kingdom. He deserved nothing but this fate.

Queen Beryl waved a dismissal, and he quickly turned and left the throne room. As he returned to his observatory, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was forgetting something important. Something that lurked just beyond the reach of his mind, calling to him from a past he could no longer recall.

The massive entry doors opened, revealing his haven. A circular room filled with ancient arcane instruments. Celestial maps and charts filled the walls, all focused on the ever-changing positions of the stars. In the center of the room loomed his towering telescope, its lens pointed towards a patch of sky that seemed forever shrouded in darkness.

"Why aren't you speaking to me?"

Here, at least, he felt a semblance of peace. Even if it was fleeting and artificial. He gazed upwards; the stars shifted and swirled, responding to his silent call. But lately, their messages had become muddles, contradictory. Where once they spoke with clarity, now they whispered in riddles.

A face formed in the celestial dance above him—a visage both strange and familiar. Soft brown hair that framed gentle eyes which seemed to look into his soul. His heart clenched with an emotion he had no name for, a longing for something forever out of reach.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

Nephrite rubbed his face roughly, trying to dispel the image. This development worried him. The stars had never led him astray before, but now... now he wasn't sure.

The door to his observatory opened with a soft hiss. His only remaining brothers, Zoisite and Kunzite, entered. Now they were the Three Kings of Heaven. Each wore equally grim faces, the weight of recent events resting in the set of their shoulders.

"Jadeite's loss is troubling," Kunzite stated.

Nephrite turned from them, glancing at the stars. "It should trouble us all. The Sailor Guardians are more powerful than we anticipated."

When silence descended over his brothers, he turned back to them. How could this have happened? What events led to the downfall of a brother? Why didn't the stars warn him?

Zoisite's eyes flashed with a dazzling display of anger. "How could those mere humans possess such great strength? To fell one of the Four Kings of Heaven..."

Nephrite didn't know, couldn't know. All he could sense was change. Something that would please fate and destiny. Something that he had no power to stop.

After a moment, Zoisite spoke again. "Does Sailor Mercury seem familiar to either of you?"

Nephrite and Kunzite exchanged glances.

"Familiar?" Kunzite asked.

"I can't explain it," Zoisite continued. "When I see her, it's like I'm forgetting something important. Almost like there is something I should know. Should do."

Nephrite thought of the face in the stars. That same sense of forgotten knowledge gnawed at him. "The stars have been unclear lately. I have no answers for you."

Kunzite shook his head. "We cannot afford uncertainty. Not now. Whatever these feelings are, Zoisite, push them aside. We have to accomplish our mission for the Dark Kingdom."

Yet, that felt strange to hear. As if it was wrong. But that couldn't be the case. The Dark Kingdom created and nurtured them. It had shared its glorious dark energy to strengthen and imbue them. All they were was because of the Dark Kingdom. All they'd ever be is because of the Dark Kingdom.

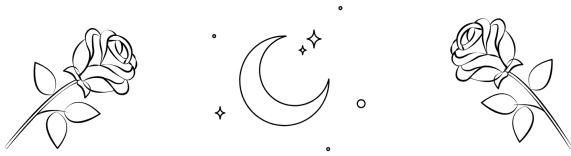
But, Nephrite couldn't shake the feeling that they were missing something crucial. The face in the stars, Zoisite's strange familiarity—it all pointed to a mystery that lay just beyond his understanding.

“We will serve the Dark Kingdom until we're transformed to dust, like our brother,” Kunzite said.

The three remaining kings nodded. After Zoisite and Kunzite left, Nephrite turned back to the stars, silently pleading for answers. But the lights remained stubbornly silent, leaving him alone with his troubled thoughts and the nagging sense that everything was about to change.

Nephrite clenched his fist. He'd get his revenge against the Sailor Guardians, and he knew the exact time and place. The Kingdom of D's masquerade party.

# *Chapter Fourteen*



## *Moonlit Masquerade*

**T**he opulent embassy of the Kingdom of D glittered like a jewel in the Tokyo night, its windows ablaze with light and laughter. Towering columns cast long shadows under the moonlight. Marble shone and sparkled as if created from shattered mirrors. Tuxedo Mask moved silently through the throngs of elegantly dressed guests, his black tuxedo and mask blending in perfectly with the revelers.

Yet his heart still thumped beneath his calm exterior. A desperate anticipation infused every step, every breath, every moment. He'd been awaiting this moment since he first learned the Kingdom of D was revealing its secret treasure. Tonight, he might finally grasp the key to unlocking his past—the Legendary Silver Crystal.

The secret treasure called to him like a siren's song, promising answers to the questions that plagued him for so long. He tried to

keep the dreams from his mind, the vivid glimpses, the soul-agonizing desperation. Even now, he could almost feel her presence, her soft voice echoing endlessly through his mind:

*“Find the Legendary Silver Crystal.”*

Frantically, he tried to banish the memory of her fading form, slipping away just beyond his reach. If he allowed himself to remember that anguish, he might not make it until tomorrow. He clenched his fist, the guilt and sorrow threatening to overwhelm him.

No, he couldn't, wouldn't, let her down again. The crystal had to be here.

Thankfully, the Kingdom of D had made it easy. They hosted a masquerade ball. A glamorous party behind masks. Tuxedo Mask scanned the room, his eyes sharp. The swirl of colorful gowns and glittering masks flowed like the ocean. Lights twinkled above, making jewels sparkle.

He moved from group to group, his ears straining to identify any whisper, any hint of his quarry. Then a flash of gold caught his eye.

He turned, and his breath caught in his throat. His pulse quickened, a warmth spreading through his chest. There, amidst the sea of revelers, stood Usagi. She was resplendent in a flowing pink gown, delicate white flowers accenting the color. Her golden hair cascaded down her back like a river of sunlight.

Everything froze.

The way the light caught her delicate features. The way her eyes sparkled with a mixture of curiosity and mischief. How her hair moved. How the crowd seemed to rotate around her.

For a heart-stopping moment, she was the princess from his dreams.

Time stopped as he gazed at her, his mind reeling. Could it be possible?

No. He dismissed the thought. It was impossible. He and the dream princess shared something deeper than just coincidental meetings and a fleeting attraction. Everything told him he shared a past with the princess, a connection that spanned lifetimes.

Usagi was just a girl. A clumsy, bright-eyed girl who had only recently tumbled into his life.

Yet, he couldn't tear his eyes away from her. He was supposed to be searching for the Silver Crystal, but all he could do was watch her. With each passing moment, his heart twisted into that now-familiar conflict. Loyalty to the dream princess warred with his growing feelings for Usagi—feelings that had only intensified since discovering she was Sailor Moon.

An overwhelming urge to protect her surged through him. In this crowded ballroom, filled with strangers and potential threats, he longed to shield her, to keep her safe. But he knew she was stronger than she appeared—she was Sailor Moon, after all.

“They’ll be unveiling the treasure soon.”

“I’ve heard the princess of D is interesting.”

“Doesn’t matter if she has warts and a leer. She’s the first princess of the Diamond Kingdom, the world’s largest producer of gemstones.”

He snapped to attention, chastising himself for becoming distracted. He couldn't afford to let this opportunity pass, not when he was so close to finding the crystal. But even as he turned away, Usagi's presence drew him back. Like a moth helplessly drawn to her brilliant flame.

He'd turn away only to find himself watching her again. Her presence was magnetic, drawing his attention no matter how hard he tried to resist. The task he'd set out to accomplish—the search for the Silver Crystal—faded into the background as if it were an afterthought, a mere shadow in the presence of her light.

Every time she moved, he orbited her.

Watching as she navigated the crowded ballroom, her pink gown swirling.

“She looks just like Usagi.” Her name made him freeze. He glanced at the man and could see the resemblance. “I wonder if my daughter will grow up to be as pretty as her.”

Tuxedo Mask memorized his face. As Usagi’s father, he’d protect him for her sake. Turning away, he focused on her again. She edged across the room, looking at everything but where she was going. A smile edged across his lips. Typical.

Then the inevitable. Usagi bumped into a lady with a champagne flute. The golden liquid sloshed over the rim, darkening the front of her dress.

“Excuse me, darling,” the woman said, barely giving Usagi a second glance before moving away.

Usagi frowned and examined her dress. “Awww, are you serious?”

Clumsy as always, yet charming.

“Handkerchief. Handkerchief. Handkerchief.”

She shuffled about and something white fluttered to the floor. Without thinking, Tuxedo Mask moved swiftly through the crowd, scooping it up before anyone could notice. A handkerchief. The sea of people faded as he examined it. He ran a gloved thumb across the delicate embroidery. A small rabbit face, stitched in soft pink and red thread, adorned one corner.

It was so perfectly... her.

Glancing up, she slowly faded into the throng, replaced by the anonymous and unimportant. Still, he held onto her handkerchief. Was it a gift from her mother? A pang of sadness washed over him. He no longer had anything from his parents. Nothing but a single

photograph remained of them. Not even their faces lingered in his mind.

He shook his head, trying to dispel the melancholy. Letting out a breath, he tried to focus on the true task of the evening.

“I’ve heard the princess is actually quite shy.”

“Really? Why was she chosen to present their national treasure?”

“Bad luck, I guess.”

While he perked up at the mention of the treasure, a strange sensation passed across his chest. Sadness. It was sharp and all-encompassing, pressing on the edges of his mind. He didn’t know why, but the handkerchief, the thought of her innocence, left him feeling anxious, unsettled.

He had to see her. See her smile.

Listening to the thrum of the vibrations. Following the pull of the tightness in his chest, he moved towards the balcony. Yet, he hesitated. What was he doing? He was supposed to be searching for the Legendary Silver Crystal, not chasing after a girl.

Even if she was Sailor Moon.

“What about the princess?”

Her pleading eyes were a reminder of his mission. But as he looked at Usagi, bathed in moonlight and looking achingly sad, he felt a pull stronger than any duty or promise. Still, he hesitated. Two paths tore at him. The path to his unknown past. The path towards her.

Stepping out into the cool night air, he glanced up at the moon. The first quarter moon shone in the blue-gray sky, glistening for all to admire.

The moonbeams slid across the marble balcony, begging him to follow. So he did.

There she was, standing alone under the moonlight, her eyes closed, expression sad. A sight that felt so wrong, so out of place, it made his heart ache. She should never look sad, never feel anything but joy.

Before he realized what he was doing, he approached.

“My pretty princess.”

Her eyes shot open. The moonbeams found them instantly, making the blue sparkle so brilliantly it nearly blinded him.

“Would you honor me with a dance?”

“Tuxedo Mask!”

In that moment, nothing else mattered. Not the crystal, not his mission, not even the princess in his dreams. All he wanted was to see Usagi smile again.

“At this exact moment, I was hoping to meet you again.”

Then she looked up at him, and the world stilled, and the bustling commotion of the ballroom vanished. Somehow, her eyes glistened even more brilliantly. Her smile shone more radiant. The moonbeams glittered more resplendent.

“The same for me.”

As she placed her hand in his, a jolt of something primal passed between them. Tuxedo Mask led her back into the ballroom, the sea of guests parting before them as if by magic. The music flowed through the air like a dream.

With one hand on her waist and the other clasping hers, he began to lead. Usagi stumbled at first, her usual clumsiness making an appearance. But as they moved together, she found her rhythm. They fell in step with him as natural as breathing.

The world beyond the two of them ceased to exist. There was no crowd, no more crystals, or dreams. There were no more forgotten memories or hidden pasts. There was only Usagi and the way she felt in his arms.

They moved as one, seamlessly, as if they'd been dancing together for a lifetime.

"I didn't know you could dance," she murmured, looking up at him with wonder in her eyes.

He smiled, surprised at himself. "Neither did I."

He looked at her, mesmerized by the way her eyes sparkled. Her innocence, her warmth, her lighthearted nature—all the things that had drawn him to her from the beginning—shone during this moment. For the first time he could remember, everything felt right. As if every moment in his life had led him to this point, to this dance, to her.

This is where he belonged, with her in his arms.

The light seemed to worship her. Gliding across the smooth planes of her skin. Flowing across the edges of her shoulders. Rolling across the curve of her cheek. And it made him jealous. How lucky those bands of light were. They could touch her freely, dance across her without thought or punishment.

A time would come when his fingertips would know every inch of her.

"Usagi!"

The spell was broken.

Tuxedo Mask startled, ashamed and embarrassed by his thoughts and actions.

Unable to speak, he twisted away from her and vanished into the crowd. He fled, weaving through the innocent with a desperate urgency. He needed to get away, to clear his head, to forget how she felt. Finding a secluded corner, he leaned against a cool marble pillar, his breath coming in short gasps. Clutching his chest, he begged his heart to calm its frantic race. What happened? How had he lost control so completely?

He squeezed his eyes closed, trying to calm himself. But all he could see was Usagi's face, bathed in light. All he could feel was the supreme warmth that coated his soul. All he could imagine was a future with her.

"Pull yourself together." He clenched his fists.

Something had changed, irrevocably. And he wasn't sure he could ever go back.

Finally, he managed to get his breathing under control. The frantic beating of his heart began to slow. His thoughts slowly untangling themselves from the web of emotions that had ensnared him. Back in control of himself, he stood, straightening his jacket.

"No more distractions."

But before he took a step, a sinister chill ran down his spine. The earth's vibrations yelled out, screaming in terror and fear as a sudden, oppressive aura filled the air, sharp and dark, like the first crack of thunder before a deadly storm.

As if darkness itself had seeped into the atmosphere. Every sense screamed danger. But only one thought filled his mind.

"Usagi!"

Without hesitation, he sprinted around the edge of the building, only to skid to a stop. Something tickled his senses and peering inside a window, he saw what. The guests were all slumped on the floor, bodies piled where they'd fallen.

Was Usagi among them?

His eyes darted about, searching for a flash of pink, a glimpse of golden hair. As he circled the building, a bone-chilling laugh echoed through the night. At the far end, he saw her—the Princess of D. Except not. Something was terribly wrong. A dark, writhing shadow had enveloped her, twisting her features into a grotesque mask.

"Princess D!" He knew that voice. "Get a hold of yourself!

It was Usagi.

“The Legendary Silver Crystal will be mine!” the possessed princess shrieked, her voice distorted and inhuman.

Usagi darted forward, and his blood ran cold. There was no way that she could deal with this level of evil. Not as Usagi, maybe not even as Sailor Moon. But he was too far away, unable to help. Running faster than he thought possible, he closed the distance.

She moved closer, reaching for the princess.

“Let go of me!” the princess yelled.

It all happened so fast, yet every movement stretched into forever. With a twist, the possessed princess shrugged Usagi’s grip, sending her toppling over the edge of the balcony. Pink billowed around her like wings. Gold glimmered like sunlight. White flashed like death.

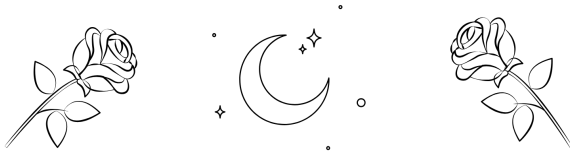
“NO!” Usagi yelled as she vanished over the edge.

Somehow, he made it. His fingers wrapped around her wrist, stopping her fall. The weight of her nearly pulled him forward, but he braced his legs against the balcony. He stretched further, muscles straining, the force almost dragging him over the edge with her. But he resisted. His teeth clenched as he fought to hold on, his grip on the cold stone railing the only thing keeping them both from plummeting.

They hung there, suspended in a horrifying limbo, her life literally in his hands. One slip and this life would end.



# *Chapter Fifteen*



## *Hearts in Freefall*

The world narrowed down to the single point of connection. Tuxedo Mask barely clung to Usagi's wrist as she dangled from the balcony. Wind tore at her dress, pulling her further away. Time stretched, each second an eternity. The weight of her was unbearable, but letting go wasn't an option.

His heart pounded against his ribs like a war drum, the beat too fast, too hard. The idea of seeing her broken body, shattered and lifeless beneath him, filled with a terror so profound it nearly swallowed him whole. His hands ached, muscles trembled under the strain, but he refused to relent.

The void below yawned wider, hungry for its prey.

Every muscle screamed as he stretched further than he thought possible. He could feel the strain in every fiber of his being, the burn of desperation in his lungs. The spot behind his left ribs exploded in panic, a frantic symphony of agony. Cold stone bit into his flesh as he dangled further over the edge.

"Look at her eyes!" someone shouted.

But he dared not look, not when saving her was the only thing that mattered.

“The eyes of the princess! She’s possessed! By an evil spirit!”

“Are you sure?”

“No! She’s possessed by the enemy!”

An cackling laugh rolled across the night. “Now you’ll be my slaves and open the pathway! Anyone who dares to defy me will become a living sacrifice for our great ruler!”

It was becoming harder to hold Usagi. But he couldn’t lose her. He’d already failed to save the princess. Failed to find her or the Legendary Silver Crystal. What would happen to him if he failed to save Usagi? He knew the answer to that question. He wouldn’t survive.

A wave of nausea shot through him, his vision blurring with unshed tears.

They hung there, suspended between life and death, his grip the only thing keeping her from plummeting to the ground. Her eyes found his, wide and brimming with fear, yet something deeper flickered in those brilliant blue depths—trust.

It was so pure, so unwavering, it made his heart seize. She *believed* in him, despite the trembling of his arms, despite the sweat beading on his brow. For her, there was no doubt that he’d save her.

The weight of that belief crushed him, a burden heavier than the physical strain pulling them both to destruction. His muscles screamed louder, but the look in her eyes held him steady, like an anchor to his fraying soul.

That trust felt like a lifeline, one he didn’t deserve but would die to protect.

“I’ve got you,” he managed to gasp out, though the words felt hollow in his throat. Because the truth was, he didn’t know if he could hold on.

His muscles trembled, sweat dampening his brow beneath the mask. The ground below seemed to stretch endlessly as his mind scrambled for a way to save her. But for all his desire to protect her, he was aching, terrifyingly human in this moment.

And he'd never felt more helpless.

She slipped again, her wrist sliding defiantly through his trembling grasp.

The world shattered.

Together, they tumbled into the dark void. He'd failed her. The wind rushed past as they plummeted, his cape billowing uselessly behind him. He reached for Usagi, his arms cradling her. If this was the end, he'd face it with her. Perhaps take some of the pain.

The ground raced towards them, a merciless executioner. True fear—fear for her—gripped him with a force that tore the breath from his lungs. The shame of his failure, of his weakness, consumed him. She had put her trust in the wrong person. He'd sworn to protect her, and now they were both failing to their doom.

Her warmth against him was both a comfort and a torment—a cruel reminder of what could have been. Her golden hair whipped around them, a halo in their descent. The scent of her—vanilla and strawberries—filled his senses. How could he have let this happen?

“Usagi!” Luna's voice cut through the roar of the wind. “The pen!”

Frantically, she grabbed at something, her movements jerky with panic. Then gold glimmered in the moonlight. A flash of light erupted between them, momentarily blinding him. Their descent slowed, and when his vision cleared, he discovered her clinging to the handle of an enormous pink umbrella. The frantic tumbling fall turned into a gentle float.

Relief flooded through him, so intense it left him dizzy. They were safe. Usagi had saved them both.

As they drifted towards the ground, Tuxedo Mask held her tighter, not knowing when he'd be this close again. Her back pressed securely against his chest, and though born of chaos, the moment felt... peaceful. She fit perfectly, as if the space between them had never existed. His breath hitched—whether from relief or the overwhelming closeness, he couldn't tell.

Every part of her was soft, warm, and real in his arms. Her heartbeat, quick and steady, pulsed through the delicate fabric of her dress, echoing his own. His hand, still trembling from both adrenaline and something deeper, held onto her.

She was everything he wanted to protect, to shield from the dangers that seemed to shadow her every move. He wanted to hold her like this forever, to savor the way her presence seemed to fill the hollow spaces inside of him.

Did this mean that he was falling in love with her?

Did this mean that, yet again, he was betraying his princess?

Their feet touched the earth. His legs nearly buckled beneath him, the adrenaline making him shake. But Usagi stood tall, her strength radiating like a beacon.

"Today," he whispered, "you rescued me."

He thought himself her protector, but tonight she'd been the hero. As he gazed at her, bathed in moonlight and flushed with victory, he felt something shift inside of him. That spot behind his left ribs blazed to life, and it frightened him.

"Tuxedo Mask!" She turned to face him, tears glistening in her eyes.

But before he responded, the evil aura above swelled. Tuxedo Mask glanced up and knew that she wouldn't transform with him lingering. Yet, he also knew that he couldn't go far. Without another word, he turned on his heels and ran into the dark.

He melted into the shadows, his heart still pounding. Light spilled across the embassy grass, and he startled. It felt strangely familiar, like how moonlight should feel. When it faded, Sailor Moon stood in her determined stance. The sight of her, bathed in moonlight and power, both awed and pained him.

Quickly, he glanced up at the moon, expecting to feel a change, but the light was still grating and harsh. Perhaps one day he'd experience the soft moon from before.

"I'll stay close."

Not that he could do much, but the idea of leaving her to face this darkness alone was even more terrifying than falling over the edge.

"Usagi! You're late," Sailor Mercury shouted.

A dark aura loomed above the Princess of D, morphing into a sinister face that hovered like a malevolent shadow. Everything inside him screamed to rush to Sailor Moon's defense, but he knew better. He'd be a hindrance, powerless to stop the magic swirling around them. His only option was to watch and pray that she would emerge unscathed.

The tension crackled in the air as Sailor Moon faced the looming darkness. Her light flickered, stronger than before, but each moment she stumbled, each flicker of doubt in her eyes, made his muscles coil with helpless frustration. His fists clenched, nails biting into his palms as he fought the urge to act.

He was powerless—a mere observer in a battle far beyond him. The bitter sting of inadequacy seared through him, the weight of his failure heavy on his chest. Was this what happened to the princess in his dreams? Had he stood by, unable to save her too?

The earth beneath him quivered with pain, and for a brief moment, he crouched, his hand pressed to the trembling ground. Whispering

quiet words, he hoped, even without power, he might bring a measure of peace to the world that suffered along with them.

“The darkness will devour everyone!” Sailor Mars shouted.

“Heh heh heh.”

Tuxedo Mask stilled and looked up. That voice...

“I, Nephrite, will claim this secret treasure and these people as sacrifices to our great ruler!”

A face became visible in the darkness, solidifying with each second that passed. The newcomer moved with a fluid grace, a cat-like prowl, something honed from decades of training. A shock of recognition jolted through Tuxedo Mask, like a half-remembered dream.

He knew this man. Somehow, somehow, he’d seen him before.

Tuxedo Mask clenched his jaw, his mind racing. Where had they met? The answer danced just out of reach, taunting him.

Sailor Mars launched a powerful attack. “Evil spirit, begone!”

It smashed into the darkness, but when the red sparks faded, nothing had changed.

“It didn’t work!” The three Sailor Guardians shouted in unison.

Moonlight tickled his face, and he glanced upward. From the balcony, he could almost feel Sailor Moon’s desperation.

“Sailor Moon!” his voice broke through the chaos. “Sometimes, the only way to banish the darkness is with an even greater light!”

She turned to face him, and the moonlight lit upon her features. With a nod, a soft smile spread across her lips before turning away.

“What a shameless villain to possess the body of a princess!” she shouted. “In the name of the Moon, I will punish you!”

A wash of power rippled through his body, surging like an electric current. It wasn’t just power for power’s sake—it was pure, radiant, true power. The kind that someone who fought for something greater

could only wield. For love. For justice. The energy danced along his skin, silencing the storm of emotions raging inside of him.

Sailor Moon stood tall, her form bathed in the shimmering light of the moon. Her hand lifted, graceful and commanding, as the moon's rays coalesced around her, wrapping her in a veil of celestial brilliance. Every movement was deliberate, filled with purpose, as if she were in perfect harmony with the universe itself. The air around her hummed with power, bending to her will as she called forth the magic deep within her.

The words tore from her lips like a battle cry, filled with righteous fury and unyielding conviction:

“Moon Twilight Flash!”

Light exploded from her, a blinding beam that cut through the darkness with the precision of a sword. The night parted for her, shadows recoiling from her strength. Silver beams arced in all directions, chasing away the last remnants of evil and casting the embassy grounds in a pure, untainted glow.

“Sailor Moon,” he whispered, breathless.

His heart swelled as he slipped further into the shadows, entranced by the force of her power. It was strong—righteous. She fought not for glory or vengeance, but for love and justice, to protect everyone—even him.

With a snap, the final vestiges of darkness evaporated, leaving behind a palpable sense of relief. Even the earth seemed to exhale. The battle was over, yet Tuxedo Mask remained in the shadows, watching her with quiet admiration.

The spell of sleep that had fallen over the crowd during the battle broke. Murmurs of confusion and excitement rippled through the guests as they slowly came to their senses, like waking from a shared dream. Tuxedo Mask tensed, ready for chaos, but to his surprise, the

partygoers seemed to shake off the events as if they were nothing more than a momentary interruption.

As the celebrating resumed, albeit with a nervous energy, Tuxedo Mask's attention snapped back to the reason he'd come here in the first place. The Legendary Silver Crystal. In the chaos of the battle, he'd almost forgotten about it. His pulse quickened as he realized the unveiling of the "secret treasure" hadn't happened yet.

A hush fell over the crowd as Princess D, looking slightly dazed, stepped onto the stage. Tuxedo Mask held his breath, every fiber of his being focused on the moment he'd been waiting for.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Princess D's voice rang out, slightly shaky but growing in confidence, "we apologize for the delay. It's now my honor to present the world's final secret treasure! The crown jewel of the royal family!"

As Princess D reached for the covered pedestal, Tuxedo Mask tensed. This was it. The moment that could change everything. He leaned forward, barely aware he was doing so, as the veil was lifted to reveal...

Princess D opened the box. Light refracted off the glittering statue. "It's a statue of the very first Princess of D, chiseled from a 2000 carat diamond!"

But as the light refracted off the glittering diamond, his hope shattered like glass. A wave of disappointment crashed over him, so intense it was almost physical. The Legendary Silver Crystal, his key to unlocking his past, recovering his memories, finding the princess—wasn't here.

He clenched his fists, frustration and despair warring within him. How many more dead ends would he face? How much longer would the princess have to wait? The weight of his failure pressed down on him, threatening to crush his resolve.

But as he watched the crowd fawn over the statue, he hardened his resolve. The Legendary Silver Crystal was out there somewhere, and he would find it—for the princess, for his past, and for himself. This setback wouldn't stop him. He'd search every corner of the earth if he had to. The Legendary Silver Crystal was out there somewhere, and he would find it.

Movement caught his eye, and he watched Sailor Moon drifted with the crowd, eyeing the dessert table. His lips pressed into a smile, watching her delicately pick a cake off the table only to devour it in three bites.

Taking a step over, she eyed the glasses filled with glittering liquid. "Don't do it," he said to himself. "Don't think about it."

But she was too far away to hear him. Taking a glass, she downed in, and he winced.

"Oh! You know, this tastes really great!" She drank another one.

There was no way that she'd be used to drinking alcohol, so he slipped from his hiding place and approached her. Her golden hair caught the light, a beacon that drew him no matter where she went. With another glass downed, Mamoru's unease grew. His fingers twitched, knowing the trouble she was flirting with.

With each stumble, every giggle that was a touch too loud, a jolt of concern spread through him. The instincts that yelled for him to protect her were already on high alert from the night's events. Now they sharpened to a razor's edge.

"Usagi," he whispered to himself, begging her to slow down, to be careful.

Then it happened. Usagi turned, her eyes glassy and unfocused, and stumbled. He stepped forward, arms outstretched.

"Thank god the cops didn't show up," she said, hiccuped, then snuggled against his chest.

The sudden contact sent a shock through him, every nerve igniting at once. Her weight in his arms felt unusually familiar, as if she belonged there. As if he'd held her a thousand times before. When he eased her closer to him, her skin, cool and soft, pressed against him. It was refreshing, rejuvenating. Like finding something he hadn't realized he'd been missing. Like coming home.

It all felt so right. So perfect. Every part of him wanted to pull her closer and never let go.

But then, like a bucket of ice water, guilt crashed over him. The princess from his dreams flashed in his mind. Her pleading eyes. Her desperate calls for help. He'd already failed her. Now he was failing and betraying her even more.

Two gravitation pulls tore at him. Usagi, real and tangible in his arms, represented a future he could see and touch. The princess, ethereal and distant, was a past he couldn't remember but couldn't ignore.

As Usagi stirred slightly in his arms, Mamoru felt the war inside him intensify. He knew he should step away, maintain the distance that had kept him safe for so long. But his body refused to obey, savoring every second of this stolen moment.

In that instant, he realized with startling clarity that his heart was no longer entirely his own. And that terrified him more than any monster or evil spirit ever could.

Stepping outside, he glanced about for a place for her to rest. Lingered in the doorway, he hesitated. Then, as if orchestrated by fate itself, a shaft of moonlight broke through the clouds, bathing Usagi in an ethereal glow.

The silver light danced across her features, transforming her into a vision that took his breath away. Time seemed to pause, the world holding its breath in this perfect, frozen moment. With the utmost

care, as if handling the most precious treasure in the universe, he gently laid her on a nearby bench.

His movements were slow, deliberate, each touch filled with a tenderness that surprised him. He fluffed the pillow beneath her head, his heart aching at how vulnerable and beautiful she looked.

His hand hovered over her face, trembling slightly before he allowed himself to brush a stray strand of hair from her cheek. Even through the gloves, the sensation sent a jolt through him, a mixture of longing and guilt that combined to overwhelm him.

Unable to resist her, or himself, he leaned closer, drawn by a force he couldn't—didn't want to—resist. Her peaceful expression, the soft rise and fall of her chest, the way the moonlight kissed her skin. It all called to him in a way he couldn't explain.

Before he could stop himself, he pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek, his lips barely grazing her skin.

The moment was electric, filled with emotions and possibilities he couldn't name. As he pulled back, his heart raced, a storm of conflicting feelings raging within him. Admiration, protectiveness, and something deeper, something he wasn't ready to name, all warred for dominance.

“Get away from Usagi-chan!” Luna shouted.

The sound shattered the stillness, jolting Mamoru back to reality. He straightened abruptly, stepping back as if struck. Luna's eyes narrowed with suspicion and bore into him.

“Just exactly who are you? Why do you keep appearing wherever we are?”

The accusation in her tone stung, but he couldn't deny the truth in her words. Taking a deep breath, he struggled to find the words. What was the truth? “Because I too am searching for the Legendary Silver Crystal.”

Luna's tail twitched, her posture tense. "And are you an enemy or ally?" The challenge in her question was clear, laced with an unspoken threat.

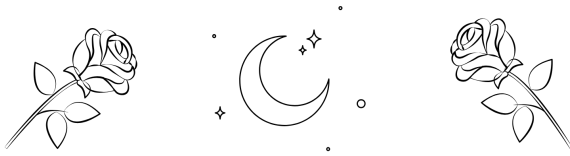
A heaviness descended into his heart. "Who can tell? Since we're both after the same thing, that may mean I'm an enemy." The words tasted bitter on his tongue, the possibility of being Usagi's adversary sending chills down his spine.

The thought of facing Sailor Moon—facing Usagi—in a direct confrontation for the crystal filled him with horror. It was a scenario he dreaded, one that tightened his chest with an aching sorrow. He couldn't bear the idea of those trust-filled eyes look at him with fear or betrayal.

With a last, lingering look at Usagi's peaceful face, memorizing every detail as if it might be the last time he saw her like this, Mamoru turned and fled into the night. The echo of Luna's suspicious gaze followed him, haunting him.

As the shadows devoured him, he felt more heavy. He was now a man torn between duty and desire, between a past he couldn't remember and a future he longed for but feared he could never have. The night enveloped him, offering no answers, only the promise of more questions and the bittersweet memory of a moonlight goddess.

# *Chapter Sixteen*



## *The Storm Within*

The rain fell in sheets, a relentless curtain that blurred the world into watercolor smudges. Makoto stood beneath the awning of her school, her heart pounding a frantic rhythm against her ribs. The chill was barely noticeable. Her sopping socks forgotten. The rivulets of water tracing icy fingers down her spine ignored.

No, the discomfort paled in comparison to the anticipation coursing through her veins.

Today was the day. The day when she'd confess her feelings to him.

In minutes, they'd finally be together.

In seconds, they'd kiss in the rain.

Her fingers twisted in the fabric of her skirt, wringing out droplets that fell unnoticed to the puddled ground. The scent of petrichor filled her lung with each deep breath she took to steady herself. The rain wasn't an inconvenience, because rain brought lightning, and lightning was life.

Besides, this was the perfect backdrop for the romantic scene she'd imagined a thousand times.

Butterflies danced in her stomach, their wings beating a staccato beat that matched the erratic patter of raindrops. Yet under the flutter of nerves, a tendril of dread coiled like a serpent, whispering doubts she fought to ignore.

With a strained creak, the school doors open, and her breath caught. There he was, his silhouette backlit by the florescent glow from inside. She'd know him anywhere, just by the curve of his forehead, the plain of his cheek. Her heart soared for a brief, beautiful moment—and then plummeted.

He wasn't alone.

A girl from their class walked beside him, her delicate hand tucked into the crook of his elbow. She was everything Makoto wasn't—petite, graceful, with a face that belonged on magazine covers. The kind of girl who didn't have to fight to be noticed. Nothing like her. His eyes, the ones Makoto dreamed of, were fixed solely on his companion.

No. There could be a thousand excuses. Perhaps she'd just slipped, and he was helping her. The boy she loved was nice like that.

"Hey!" Makoto launched into movement, nearly toppling on the slick stone. "I've been waiting for you!"

"Oh, hello." He cast a quick glance at the girl by his side.

Makoto ignored that look. "Let's walk home together. I have something important I want to tell you," she smiled at him, hoping the muted light made her skin shimmer.

"Oh," he stammered. "Sorry, I'm walking her home from now on. We're together now."

Her world tilted on its axis.

The rain, once romantic, now felt like needles against her skin. She stared blankly. "But..."

“See you later.” He offered a rather pathetic wave.

The words hung between them, as heavy and suffocating as the humidity. She remained rooted to the spot as they turned away. Their figures blurred, not just from the rain but from the tears she refused to let fall.

What went wrong? The question echoed in her mind, a broken record of confusion and pain. She’d been so sure, so certain, that this time would be different. Why did no one want to love her? Was she that unlovable? Was there no one out there for her?

She’d been so sure, so certain, that this time would be different—that she wouldn’t be left behind again. Furious, she smashed a fist against the wall. Stone cracked and debris sprinkled down. Typical. She shouldn’t have expected anything different. No one ever chose her. Fate wasn’t that kind. No, that unyielding force, refusing to release its grip on her.

“Damn.”

A gust of wind whipped around her, tugging at her clothes and hair. For a moment, it almost sounded like whispers, like fate itself was trying to tell her something. Then, as if on cue, a crack of thunder split the sky. The sound reverberated through her chest, shaking loose the pieced of her shattered heart.

The happy couple continued to walk away, tucked close to each other under the umbrella.

Taking a step forward, she emerged from under the awning and let the rain soak her more. Prickles of electricity tickled her skin. Cold water struck her fevered flesh, doing nothing but irritating her.

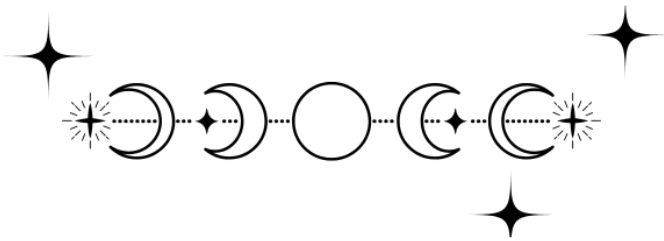
Lightning flashed, chasing away the darkness for a split second. Like it understood her rage.

Thunder split the sky, loud and angry. Like it was cursing fate, too.

In that moment, as sharp and bright as the storm that hovered above, Makoto knew: this place, this life, wasn't for her. Whatever destiny had in store, it wasn't here, surrounded by the ghosts of broken dreams and unfulfilled promises.

The rain continued to fall, but Makoto stood taller.

It was time for a change.



Cardboard boxes teetered precariously in Makoto's arms as she stood before her new apartment building. The scent of unfamiliar concrete and car exhaust assaulted her senses, a constant reminder of how far she'd run from the life she once knew. Each step felt like a battle against fate itself, the weight of her belongings nothing compared to the burden of her shattered heart.

The rain followed her, though now a soft mist that clung to her skin, dampening her clothes as she juggled the weight of her belongings.

"Don't worry, guys," she murmured to the potted plants nestled among her possessions. "Welcome to our new prison. Juban District, can you believe it? Miles away from... from him."

She swallowed hard, forcing down the lump of emotion threatening to show itself to the world. "We'll get you inside soon enough. I know. I know. Running away because I couldn't bear to see his face every day was pathetic."

The wind picked up, rustling leaves and sending a shiver down her spine. It almost felt welcoming, like nature itself was greeting her. Or perhaps that was her attempt at comforting herself. Perhaps it was mocking her, laughing at her predicament. She was so long in her internal turmoil that she didn't notice the pot at the top begin to tip.

"He picked her. And why wouldn't he? She's beautiful. Perfect. And I'm..."

Time slowed. She watching in abject horror as her favorite fern—the one she'd nurtured from a tiny sprout—plummeted towards the unforgiving concrete. It was more than just a plant falling. It was every dream, every hope she'd ever had to be loved, crashing down.

"No!"

A rather attractive forearm materialized, catching the pot mere inches from disaster. Makoto's eyes traveled up the sculpted forearms to broad shoulders, and finally landed on a face that made her breath catch.

Time stretched, every second dragging out like it didn't dare move forward.

The stranger stood there, cradling her plant with such effortless care that for a second she thought it was some kind of hallucination. A handsome mirage conjured up by the universe to mess with her even more. His eyes, a striking blend of darkness and light, locked onto hers.

He was undeniably handsome with chiseled features, flowing auburn hair, and eyes that seemed to hold the secrets of the stars. But it was more than that. An electric current of recognition shot through her, so powerful it nearly brought her to her knees.

"I... do I know you?" the words tumbled out before she could stop them. Her voice trembling with an emotion she couldn't name.

The man's brow furrowed. A flash of something—recognition? confusion?—crossing his face before it smoothed out into a neutral expression. “I don't believe we've met. I'm Nephrite.”

“Makoto,” she replied automatically, still reeling from the intensity of her reaction.

An image flashed in her mind. The two of them, walking side by side in the rain, laughter on their lips despite the downpour. The vision was so vivid, so real, that for a moment she forgot to breathe. No, it was only because of the boy who broke her heart. He'd left her in the rain. It had nothing to do with this man. Right?

“Makoto,” he said, her name rolling off his tongue as if he'd said it a thousand times before.

Pure electricity rippled around her body as her name tumbled from his lips. After him, she swore she wouldn't give her heart so easily. But if this stranger kept saying her name like that, she'd be a goner.

His eyes narrowed slightly, studying her face with an intensity that made her skin tingle. “Are you sure we haven't met? There's something... familiar about you.”

“I—I don't think so,” Makoto stammered, her usual confidence deserting her. “But I feel it too. The familiarity, I mean.”

Nephrite stepped closer, still holding her plant. The air between them seemed to crackle with an unseen energy. “Strange, isn't it? Like a half-remembered dream.”

His proximity was intoxicating, a mix of an earthy scent and something else—ozone, like the air before a lightning strike. Makoto's heart raced, torn between the lingering pain of recent heartbreak and this inexplicable pull towards a stranger.

“You should be more careful,” Nephrite's deep voice cut through her thoughts, gesturing to the plant. “These clearly mean a lot to you.”

She nodded, unable to form words. It was maddening, infuriating. Hadn't fate tormented her enough? And now this—this connection she couldn't explain, didn't dare to hope for.

"Are you lost? New to the area?" he asked, his tone softer now, almost concerned.

Makoto shook herself, unwilling to appear more vulnerable than she already had. "Is it that obvious? I... I needed a fresh start."

Nephrite's eyes flashed with something—understanding? Regret? It was gone before she could decipher it. "Running away solves nothing," he said, his voice taking on a strange, almost prophetic quality. "Only cowards run away. Instead, you need to stand and fight."

"Hey!" Makoto bristled, her momentary awe replaced by indignation. "Who are you calling a coward?"

The boxes nearly tumbled to the ground again. Nephrite's lips tugged into a smile that seemed both familiar and foreign, and he helped straighten them.

"Obviously not you," he said, a hint of playfulness in his tone. "Or you'd chuck a box at me."

She laughed, because that's exactly what she'd do. The tension between them eased, replaced by something warmer, more comfortable. It felt right, like slipping into a favorite sweater she'd forgotten she owned.

Nephrite's expression sobered. "Makoto," he said, her name again sending shivers down her spine, "I feel like... like I should be warning you about something. But I don't know what."

The playful atmosphere vanished, replaced by a heavy sense of foreboding. Makoto's breath caught in her throat. "What do you mean?"

He shook his head, frustration evident in the set of his jaw. "I don't know. Just... be careful, okay? Juban... it might not be what you expect."

With that cryptic statement, he carefully placed the plant back in her arms. His fingers brushed against hers, and for a moment, Makoto could have sworn she saw a flash of something—a crystalline lake, bathed in moonlight, the two of them kissing under the stars. But then he stepped back, and the vision faded.

“I hope we meet again, Makoto,” Nephrite said, his voice low and intense. “I feel like... like we have unfinished business.”

Before she could respond, he turned and walked away, his figure soon swallowed by the bustling crowd of Juban. Makoto stood there, her arms full of boxes and plants, her mind reeling from the encounter.

As his figure disappeared around a corner, she let out a shaky breath. “Damn you, fate. What game are you playing now?”

Thunder rumbled in the distance, as if answering her. Casting a last glance at where Nephrite vanished too, she lingered for a moment longer, the weight of their brief encounter settling heavily on her heart. Something about him gnawed at the edges of her mind, like a forgotten dream that hung after waking. But with a sigh, she pushed the feeling aside and entered her new apartment.

The elevator ride was blessedly short, and soon she was unlocking the door to her new home. Carefully setting down the boxes, she stood at the threshold of her new life. Each step felt like a battle against fate itself, like she fought the world.

The door clicked shut behind her, sealing out the bustling sounds of Juban. In the sudden quiet, her racing thoughts seemed to echo off the bare walls. She sank to the floor, surrounded by cardboard boxes and the greenery of her only family.

Fate was so cruel. Taking her parents. Denying her love. Now dragging her to the edges of the world to wallow in her isolation. Outside, the rain picked up, plinking against the glass in a steady beat. The

worst part is she could sit on the floor for a month and no one would know. Why? Because fate denied her love.

“Oh, who am I kidding?” she sighed, gently stroking a leaf. “I wasn’t entirely truthful before. Not with Nephrite or with myself.”

Her gaze drifted to the window, where the raindrops traced lines down the glass. The steady rhythm soothed her frayed nerves, grounding her in this strange space.

“The truth is,” she continued, her voice barely above a whisper, “it was about him. Yes, the heartbreak hurt. It always does. But there’s something more. Something bigger.”

She hesitated, unsure if she should put these feelings into words. “It’s like something called me here. To Juban. It was like the wind itself whispered the name, tugging me towards this place.” A rueful smile played on her lips. “Crazy, right? But I can’t shake this feeling. I’m needed here. Like there’s some greater purpose waiting for me.”

Lightning flashed outside, briefly illuminating the room. In that split second of brilliance, she could have sworn she saw a figure in the glass—a warrior, strong and proud, with lightning as her weapon and friendship as her motivation. But then darkness fell again, and the image was gone.

She leaned back against the door and let out a breath. “Maybe. Or this is just the next stop in my restless journey to find something fate has denied me over and over.”

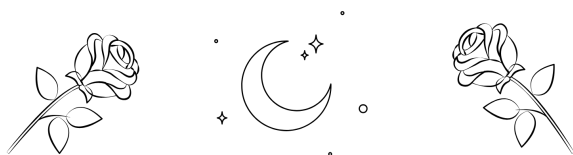
Time passed, the light outside growing progressively dimmer. Still, the rain continued its relentless march against the unmoving glass. Standing, she stretched out her stiff limbs and moved to the window, pressing her palm against the cool glass.

Outside, the storm intensified, almost responding to her call. A loud crack of thunder shook the building, but instead of flinching,

she smiled. Makoto felt the stirrings of something new. Something powerful. Something that felt remarkably like hope.

She may have come to Juban running from heartbreak, but she would stay to embrace her destiny. To fight fate and find love. And heaven help anyone—or anything—that tried to stand in her way. She was the storm, and she'd show fate what power truly meant.

# *Chapter Seventeen*



## *Beneath the Rain*

Rain hammered Juban's streets, an uncompromising assault that turned the world into a blur of gray. Makoto strode through the downpour, her tall frame cutting the curtain of water like a ship's brow through choppy seas. Her emerald eyes, sharp as broken glass, scanned the sodden landscape, daring fate to throw another curveball her way.

She hated this. Hated how fate had forced her onto this path—isolated, avoided, hardened by heartbreak. The world was harsh, so she had to be harder. A gush of wind whipped through the street, bending her umbrella back with a snap. She cursed under her breath, the storm matching her mood.

She knew once she reached this new school, it would be a repeat. The same as always. Judgmental looks. Whispered comments. Avoidance. Confrontation.

Hesitating on the corner, she glanced around. Something bit at her, something deep—a feeling she couldn't shake. Something was

waiting. That same unknown called her here, like she was being led by invisible strings. No matter how many times she smashed her fist into a punching bag, that uneasy feeling refused to abate.

That's when she saw her—a slip of a girl with ridiculous odango buns, distracted, walking through the crosswalk. The girl continued with all the awareness of a newborn fawn as the traffic light flickered, an ominous countdown to disaster.

“Dammit,” Makoto growled, her muscles coiling like springs.

The light turned green. A car engine roared, tires squealing against wet asphalt. The girl remained oblivious, staring at the ground. She wasn't paying attention, completely blind to the danger speeding towards her.

Idiot.

Makoto exploded into action. Her long legs eating up the distance in seconds, raindrops shattering against her face like tiny missiles. She reached out, fingers closing around the girl's arm with bruising force, and yanked.

A horn blared. Tires screeched.

They tumbled backward, the car whooshing past in a spray of dirty water. Makoto's back slammed against the pavement, the smaller girl sprawled across her chest. For a moment, the only sound was the pounding of rain and their ragged breathing.

“Are you out of your mind?” Makoto snarled, pushing the girl off her. “Are you trying to get killed?”

The girl blinked up at her, eyes wide and startled, strands of damp blonde hair plastered to her cheeks. She looked delicate, almost frail, in Makoto's grasp. Like she didn't belong in the middle of the chaotic, unforgiving world Makoto knew so well.

“It’s dangerous, you know,” Makoto said. “You can’t just wander around in your own thoughts! This city—it won’t stop for you, and neither will the cars.”

“Uh... thank you?” the girl stammered, her voice still quivering.

“Here.”

Makoto held out her hand. White replaced gray. Crystal replaced pavement. The world around her bled away into shimmering, crystalline walls that rose like giants, protecting a kingdom made of glass. A palace, gleaming in the starlight, as if it had always been there, waiting for her. A place where she worked hand in hand with fate, instead of fighting against it.

But as quickly as it came, the vision shattered, leaving only the bite of the rain and the girl’s startled face staring up at her. Makoto blinked, struggling to hold on to the moment already slipping through her fingers. The ache of it lingered, a painful reminder of what was once hers.

No. She shook her head. No such place existed.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t see—“

“Clearly,” Makoto cut her off, releasing the girl’s hand as they both settled on their feet. She towered over her, rain streaming down her face like angry tears. “Pay attention next time. The world’s not going to stop just because you’re in la-la-land.”

The girl nodded frantically, scrambling to get under her umbrella again. Makoto turned away, her heart thundering in her chest. Not from exertion, but from that vision. She glanced back, catching the girl’s form standing in the rain.

Laughter echoed through crystalline halls, accompanying it was a sense of belonging so strong it made her ache.

She shook her head violently, dispelling the hallucination. “Get it together,” she muttered, snatching up her fallen umbrella. “You’ll never belong anywhere, except with the freaks.”

Makoto marched on, each step a defiant splash against the unforgiving concrete. But try as she might, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something fundamental had just shifted in her world.

Long strides carried her toward her new school, each step a battle against the rain and fate. The gates and buildings loomed like a fortress through the mists, rain-slicked and imposing. She paused, her hand tightening on the umbrella.

That nagging feeling intensified, a persistent itch under her skin. This place... it pulsed with energy she couldn’t name, couldn’t understand. Like it had been waiting for her.

“Get a grip,” she muttered, shaking her head. “It’s just another prison. Nothing special here.”

But even as she scoffed at her own thoughts, a shiver ran down her spine that had nothing to do with her rain-soaked clothes. Fate was toying with her again, dangling the promise of belonging in front of her like a carrot on a stick.

“Bring it.”

She squared her shoulders and marched through the gates, daring the world to stop her. The courtyard was a sea of identical uniforms, students huddled under umbrellas, their chatter rising above the pattering of rain. Makoto stood out like a sore thumb in her old school uniform, brown instead of blue, long instead of short.

Entering the building, she glanced around. She was being watched. Not by eyes, but by something deeper—that same invisible force that prickled against her skin like static. The hallway buzzed with students, and it wasn’t long before their stares began boring into her. Whispers trailed behind her like shadows, but she ignored them.

“You there, transfer student! Stop right there!”

Makoto froze, knowing the voice was talking to her. She turned slowly, fixing the approaching teacher with a look that could wilt flowers. He was short, balding, with a permanent frown etched into his face.

“Where is your proper uniform?” he puffed up like an angry rooster.

Makoto raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. One flick of her wrist, and he’d crumble. “It didn’t fit. Even the large was too small.” She leaned forward, unblinking. “You wouldn’t want me to be indecent, right?”

The teacher spluttered, his face turning an interesting shade of red. “That’s no excuse! And your hair! It’s completely against regulations.”

A low growl built in her throat. She’d been at this new school for all of two minutes, and already the universe wanted to punish her. If fate was picking a fight, she’d come out swinging.

She leaned in just a little closer, towering over the teacher. “It’s naturally wavy, Sensei. How do you propose I change my genetics?”

Now the chatter had stopped, and all eyes were on them. The teacher took an involuntary step back, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed hard.

“I... see,” he stammered. “Well, you must get a proper uniform as soon as possible!”

He scurried away, leaving her standing alone in the hallway once more. Now the voices began again.

“She just transferred to class 6.”

“She’s supposed to have Herculean strength.”

“People say that her previous school expelled her for fighting.”

Ignoring the whispered comments, she watched him retreat down the hallway, a mixture of satisfaction and bitter resignation swirling

in her gut. Same story, different school. She was the outsider, the troublemaker, before she'd even set foot in a classroom.

"Way to go, fate," she muttered, adjusting her bag. "Really outdid yourself this time."

The day passed much like the morning. The only notable difference was the rain had stopped. Makoto slumped against the trunk of a massive oak tree, its leaves providing meager shelter from the persistent rumors. She glared at the passing students, sending them rushing away. Stupid school. Stupid kids. Stupid fate. Twirling a long blade of grass between her teeth, she cursed fate once more. Why was she born like this?

Voices caught her attention, two students whispering together.

"I heard she hospitalized some boys in a fight."

"Again? And that's why she was kicked out?"

"Yes. I never want to go near a violent girl like her."

Each word felt like a dagger twisting deeper into her gut. Makoto glanced up, catching the sight of students quickly scampering away. Anger flared across her chest, her fingers curling into fists, nails biting into her palms, leaving crescent-shaped marks in her flesh.

Is this what fate had in store for her? To be forever branded, judged, feared? To never know the warmth of friendship or acceptance? To never experience true love. The thought lodged in her throat like a bitter pill, threatening to choke her. Worse, none of these rumors held the truth.

Yes, she'd hospitalized three boys. They had been bullying a young girl, trying to shove her into a trashcan full of rotting food. They'd already stolen her lunch money, and Makoto had intervened. But did anyone remember the girl's tears of gratitude? No. They only remembered what they wanted to.

A single tear escaped, trailing a cold line down her cheek. She angrily wiped it away. Crying was for the weak, and Makoto was anything but. Even if sometimes, in moments like these, she wished she could be.

Needing a distraction, she rose from under the tree and settled on a cold bench. Perhaps food would distract her. Opening her lunch box, the vibrant colors and sweet smells did little to calm her turbulent emotions.

She made no move to eat.

A sudden noise cut through her brooding. Her head snapped to the side and found a familiar figure. It was the girl from the crosswalk. The one she'd saved.

The girl still appeared oblivious to the world around her, with all her attention concentrated on the lunch box in Makoto's lap. There was something about her, a lightness, an innocence, that made Makoto's chest ache with a longing she didn't dare name.

For a moment, she wondered what would it be like to be that care-free? To not carry the weight of the world, of fate's cruel machinations, on her shoulders?"

But no. That wasn't her lot in life. And fate, ever the unyielding tyrant, had made that abundantly clear.

Just then, the clouds parted, and the gloomy day seemed to end in an instant. With her eyes still glued on the food in Makoto's lap, a band of sunlight danced across her face. The girl burst into vibrant light, ethereal as it slid across her skin.

She was beautiful. Unapologetically, effortlessly beautiful in a way, Makoto knew she could never be.

She was feminine. Soft edges and delicate lines that Makoto could never wear without looking awkward.

She was the kind of girl that belonged—who'd never have to fight to fit in.

Makoto... could never be her.

As the girl drew closer, Makoto felt a strange tug in her chest. It was the same strange recognition, like a half-remembered dream. For a fleeting moment, she saw flashes of a grand ballroom, crystal chandeliers sparkling overhead, the two of them laughing together in elegant gowns.

The vision vanished as quickly as it had come, leaving her shaking in confusion.

"Hi there!" the girl chirped, finally dragging her eyes from the food. "I'm Usagi! I wanted to thank you properly for saving me this morning. Unfortunately, I don't have any wagashi or tea, but I found this! Take it as a thank you."

Usagi produced a small daisy, its petals still kissed by the rain. Makoto stared at it for a moment, surprised by the simplicity, before offering a small smile. She took the delicate flower, feeling its softness between her fingers.

"Uh, yeah. No problem. Thank you... my name's Makoto Kino."

Usagi beamed, and Makoto could have sworn the cloudy day grew a little brighter. "Makoto! Trust or sincerity, great name!"

"There it goes! Far into left field!" A distant voice called.

The white streak shot through the air, and her eyes locked onto the baseball as it hurtled towards Usagi's unsuspecting face. Without thinking, Makoto's hand shot out and snatched the ball from the air mere inches from Usagi's nose.

Usagi's eyes went wide, darting between the ball in Makoto's hand and face. Makoto chucked the ball back, a hint of pride as the boy who caught it winced. She let out a breath and braced herself for the fear, the recoil that always came when people witnessed her strength.

Instead, Usagi's face lit up. "Wow! Wow! That was amazing. You're like a superhero or something! Yeah. A total magical girl. Lucky you."

"Aren't you afraid of me?" the words slipped out before Makoto could stop them, laced with all the bitterness and hurt she'd been carrying.

Usagi tilted her head and looked up from the food. "Afraid? Why would anyone be afraid of you? You've got those pretty rose earrings, you smell nice, and you have the most delicious-looking lunches I've ever seen!"

Makoto blinked, unsure she actually believed the girl. Usagi giggled, the sound light and carefree. It stirred something in Makoto's memory—laughter echoing through crystal halls, the clinking of glasses, the swish of silk gowns. She shook her head, dispelling the thought.

"But really," Usagi said, twirling around the bench and promptly falling into the empty spot next to her. "I've never seen such a delicious looking flavored rice ball. It looks delectable."

"It's not that big of a deal."

"But since you're my friend, you'll make them for me.... Right?" Usagi beamed up at her.

Friends. The word hit Makoto like a punch to the gut. When was the last time someone had called her that? She studied Usagi's open, guileless face, searching for a hint of mockery or teasing. But she couldn't find anything.

"Right?"

Makoto couldn't help the smile that spread across her lips, the earlier melancholy fading in the brilliant rays of Usagi's relentless cheer. "Well, since you're so interested in my lunch, you can have one if you'd like."

Her eyes lit up like stars. “Oh, well, I’m not what you call a big eater.”

Almost reverently, Usagi picked one up, eyeing it critically before taking a bite. “Ummmmmmmmmm. Thisse is sooooo gud.”

Makoto laughed as Usagi devoured the rice ball faster than she’d ever seen. Licking her fingers, Usagi moaned. “That was AMAZING!”

“This is perfect,” Makoto said. “Everyone here seems rather skittish, so no one has talked to me.”

Usagi waved her off. “That’s because they wouldn’t know a good thing if it smacked them. But count your blessings, because if they knew how good your lunch was, you’d be mobbed!”

“They’re not hard to make.”

“YOU MADE THESE! NO WAY! Now you really can’t tell anyone. They’ll want you to make lunch every day.”

“Doubt that.” She snorted. “I’m living alone these days, so can you tell me if there is a cheap supermarket here?”

“Supermarket? Uh, honestly, I have no idea,” she giggled. “My mom makes me go with her, but I don’t know where she goes.”

“That’s okay. What about shops? Game centers?”

Usagi practically shot off the bench, bouncing in her seat. “Oh! I can answer that one! I know a great arcade, Motoki works there, and he’s sooooo cute.”

As they shared the meal, conversation flowed easily between them. Usagi chattered about her favorite foods, her eyes growing comically wide as Makoto described some of her own culinary creations. For the first time since arriving in Juban, Makoto felt at ease.

“You know,” Usagi said between bites, “you remind me of someone. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but it feels like we’ve met before.”

Makoto froze, a piece of tamagoyaki halfway to her mouth. “You feel it too?”

Usagi nodded enthusiastically. "It's weird, right? But a good weird, not like a dark abandoned alleyway weird. Like we're meant to be friends! We're destined." Usagi laughed and laid on Makoto's shoulder.

Friends. There, that word was again. Makoto's mind drifted, unexpectedly, to Nephrite. His handsome face and drool worthy forearms flashed before her eyes, accompanied by those same emotions. Longing? Regret? She pushed the thoughts aside, focusing on Usagi.

"Yeah," Makoto said softly. "Maybe we were."

Somehow, Makoto found herself relaxing. The whispers and stares faded to the background, inconsequential in the face of Usagi's warm acceptance.

"Oh!" Usagi exclaimed suddenly. "I almost forgot! My friends and I are going to the arcade after school. This would be a perfect time to meet them and have some fun."

The part of Makoto that had been hardened by years of rejection and loneliness wanted to refuse, but she hesitated. There was something about Usagi, something that made Makoto want to take a chance.

"They won't mind?"

Usagi waved dismissively. "Of course not! They'll love you, I'm totally sure. Please, say yes!"

Something inside of her shifted as she stared into Usagi's hopeful face. Like a key turning in a lock she didn't know existed. In the shifting shadows she saw herself in a green uniform, standing proudly beside Usagi and others. A sense of purpose and belonging washed over her.

Maybe, just maybe, fate wasn't as cruel as she'd thought.

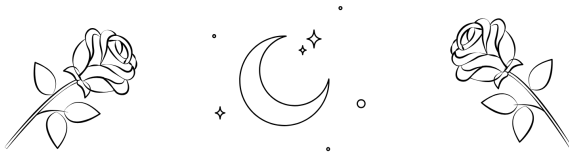
"Okay," she said, a genuine smile spreading across her face. "I'll come."

“YAY!” Usagi jumped to her feet and almost tripped. “This will be so much fun.”

As the bell rang, Makoto gathered her things as Usagi waved goodbye. For the first time in a long while, she felt a spark of hope. Whatever game fate was playing, whatever destiny awaited her, she had a feeling it was all about to change.

As she watched Usagi bounce away, Makoto couldn’t help but think that this change might not be a bad thing after all.

# *Chapter Eighteen*



## *Winning Streak*

The Crown Arcade was everything she needed. The flashing lights of the arcade danced across Makoto's face as her fingers flew over the controls of the Sailor V game. Now she could ignore the brooding storm that festered in her heart, instead focusing on the pixelated villains. They had no chance, and with every rapid-fire move, she sent the on-screen enemies spiraling into oblivion. Suckers.

It felt good. More than good. The sharp beeps, the thrumming bass of the game's music drowned out the noise in her head. The digital word didn't care about fate, heartbreak, or the past. Here, she was in control.

Smashing the buttons harder, the heroine on screen laid waste to digital monsters with a fury that matched her own.

"Makoto! You're going to break the machine!" Usagi's voice broke through her concentration.

Makoto chuckled, easing up on the smashing. "Oops, my bad."

The final boss appeared, and she attacked. Dodging and jumping, she bashed the controls.

“Yes!” she hissed through gritted teeth as ‘GAME OVER’ flashed across the screen, her initials proudly topping the leaderboard.

A flicker of satisfaction warmed her chest, but a familiar bitterness quickly doused it. What good was being the best at some stupid game when real life continued to be so crappy?”

Usagi clapped. “Wow! You got a high score, just like Ami!”

Satisfied, Makoto sat back, cracking her knuckles. “This is a great arcade, much better than...” No, she promised herself to purge any memories of that place.

“Usagi-chan,” a new voice distracted Makoto.

She turned to see a cute girl with short blue hair step up beside them.

“Ami!” Usagi squealed, loud enough Makoto winced. “Come and meet my new bestie. She makes the best food, like the best. And she’s great at the Sailor V game. Oh! And she smells so good. You’ll love her so hard.”

Usagi pulled the girl forward, beaming at both of them. Before she responded, a very handsome boy approached.

“Is she a friend of yours, Usagi?” he asked. “Must be from a different school, though.”

Makoto couldn’t help but stare. He was so handsome, with a gentle smile and kind eyes that reminded her of the boy who broke her heart. For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine a world where someone like him could love someone like her.

“I just transferred,” Makoto said. “Into the 2nd year, class 6 at Juban Middle School. I’m Makoto Kino. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Motoki Furuhashi. I’ve got to say that all of Usagi’s friends are so pretty.”

“You mean that’s your name?” Usagi perked up. “What does everyone call you? You’re too popular and hip to not have a nickname.”

Motoki waved her off. “Everyone mostly calls me Furu-chan. You’re welcome to call me that, too.”

Usagi smiled and jumped. “Furu-chan, that’s so cute! Then for you, Makoto-san.” Usagi tapped her chin. “Oh! Mako-chan! The strong, great cook, Mako-chan!”

Makoto’s stomach did a strange roll. Almost like she’d found her forever home. Here with these girls, in this place. A cute black cat with a crescent moon bald spot on its forehead jumped onto a game. It eyed her with a strange sort of knowing glance.

Makoto’s eyes lingered on the cat, a strange itch in her mind. That same pull of familiarity gnawed at her, but she shook it off. It was just a cat. Right?

“Hey! Mako, Ami and I are going to meet our other bestie, Rei. Will you please come with us?” Usagi begged. “She’s a shrine maiden at a beautiful shrine close by. I promise you’ll love it.”

Ami nodded. “It really is a wonderful place, and Rei would love to meet you.”

Makoto didn’t even think about refusing. This was the first time anyone had wanted to actually spend time with her. Spending time alone in her apartment was always the easier option. But for once, she wanted to be around people. She wanted to belong. Besides, perhaps this Rei character had a cute brother or something. She could replace the boy who broke her heart with someone more worthy of her.

“Sure, that sounds fun. Let’s go!”

Usagi squealed and jumped up and down a few times before snagging her toe on something and lurched forward. Makoto grabbed her just before she nose planted on the ground. Usagi flailed before grinning up at her.

“Thanks, bestie! Onward!” Usagi twirled on her heels and skipped from the arcade.

Ami and Makoto shared a quick smile before trailing after her. As the trio stepped out into the bustling streets of Juban, the afternoon sun cast long shadows across the pavement. Usagi skipped ahead, her blonde odango buns bouncing with each step, while Ami and Makoto followed at a more sedate pace.

“Isn’t it just perfect outside?” Usagi’s skipped ahead, the crisp air barely fazing her. “It’s like the universe wants us to have the best time ever!”

Ami smiled, adjusting her bag on her shoulder. “It is a nice evening. A good day for a visit to the shrine. So, Mako, how are you finding Juban so far?”

Makoto shrugged, scanning the unfamiliar storefronts. “It’s different. Bigger, I guess. More crowded.”

She shoved her hands into her pockets, hoping they’d wouldn’t press her for more information. There was no part of her that wanted to talk about that place right now. They rounded a corner. A gleaming building caught Makoto’s attention. Flowing white gowns and delicate veils filled the windows, each one glittering and dazzling.

“Oh,” Ami said, pausing. “I’ve heard a strange rumor about this place.”

Usagi stopped and looked up. “This is where Naru went to try on her cousin’s wedding dress.”

High above them, perched on the edge of a balcony, was a mannequin. The white dress floated gracefully in the wind, sequins and crystals catching the light and sending rainbow fractals dancing.

“Look at that,” Makoto said, pointing upwards. “It looks like she’s ready to jump off.”

“I love it,” Usagi signed. “I can’t wait to be a bride, marry my handsome protector!”

“It’s beautiful. I’d love to be a bride,” Makoto said, but deep inside she knew that would never happen. No one wanted to be with her.

“I haven’t heard any rumors though,” Usagi said.

Ami gripped her bag strap. “There have been some strange occurrences lately. Several young men have gone missing after being seen here at this shop late at night.”

“Missing?” Makoto scoffed. “More likely they got cold feet and ran away.”

Before they could continue, two women hurried past, their hushed conversation evident even in the city’s bustle.

“That’s the bridal shop.”

“You mean that’s the cursed bridal shop?”

“That’s right. Several people have seen it, a ghost bride.”

“I’ve heard the mannequin comes to life at night, and seduces male passerby.”

“No.”

“Even worse, if a bride buys her dress from that shop, she’s cursed and spends her life in misery.”

“Sounds farfetched. The shop just opened. How can they know she spends her life in misery?”

“Are you going to risk it?”

Laughter faded into the crowd. Makoto eyed the shop again, trying to decide if she believed the women. It didn’t seem evil like that... then again, that mannequin was rather creepy.

Usagi grabbed Makoto and Ami’s arm and squeezed. Her blue eyes were wide. “A g-ghost bride? That’s so creepy!”

Makoto scoffed, tossing her ponytail over her shoulder. "Please. Ghost aren't real, and neither are curses. It's probably a rival shop trying to bankrupt the shop."

But even as she spoke, she couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that settled in her stomach. Glancing back at the shop, the windows now seemed more ominous than inviting. Movement flickered, and she swore she saw a flash of white and sorrowful eyes.

"Come on," she said gruffly, grabbing Usagi's hand and pulling her along. "Let's get to this shrine of yours."

They turned, and the conversation shifted to lighter topics. Makoto couldn't help but relax as Usagi chattered about her favorite manga with Ami, gently correcting her on various inaccuracies. The bus ride was a blur of unfamiliar streets and faces. Makoto pressed her forehead against the cool glass, watching as the urban sprawl of Juban gave way to quieter neighborhoods. Trees lined the streets, their leaves rustling in the breeze, and the air seemed to grow cleaner with each passing block.

Climbing the steps to the shrine, Makoto felt a strange anticipation build in her chest. Something was waiting for her at the top of the stairs, something she couldn't avoid. Shaking her head, she dismissed the thought. It was just a shrine, after all.

But as the torii gate came into view, its vibrant red a stark contrast against the blue sky, Makoto couldn't help but feel that fate, despite her best efforts to ignore it, had led her here for a reason.

As they reached the top, a beautiful girl came into view. Her black hair glistened almost purple in the fading light. Two crows cawed close by, gobbling up the seeds she spread on the ground.

"Rei!" Usagi darted forward. "I missed you, bestie!"

Rei stood and gave a quick bow. "Don't be stupid. You saw me yesterday."

“Doesn’t mean I didn’t miss you.” Usagi grabbed her arm and giggled it. “Because I did. I missed you.”

Then Rei turned and looked right at her. A spark of electricity rolled across Makoto’s body. It sparked along the edges of her consciousness and bit at her soul. Those purple eyes locked her in place, analyzing, critiquing, judging. Makoto wanted to look away, break the spell that held her captive, afraid that this girl would see her secrets. Find her weaknesses. Discover her curse fate.

Makoto squirmed, still unable to look away.

Makoto’s pulse quickened as Rei’s eyes locked onto hers, sharp and unyielding. It was like she could see through her, right into the parts of herself Makoto worked so hard to hide. The secrets. The pain. The curse of fate that never seemed to loosen its grip. Her breath hitched, but she couldn’t tear her gaze away.

Usagi’s voice shattered the spell. “Oh, right! Bestie Rei, meet Bestie Mako! She’s super amazing at like everything. She can cook and play and fight and she smells good, and she has great fashion sense. I mean, look at those earring!”

Rei dipped her head. “Mako, nice to meet you. I’m Rei.”

Makoto bowed slightly. “Rei. I’m Makoto Kino.”

“You have a very electric aura,” Rei said.

“I know!” Usagi said. “She shocks me all the time. I kinda like it. It’s almost like mini massages. Heheh.”

Ami nodded. “It could be static electricity. It’s not uncommon when the air is dry, or if certain materials are rubbing together. The human body can build up a surprising amount of charge—especially someone like Makoto, who has a higher body temperature from being so active.”

Rei turned away and continued to sweep the ground. The air here was different, crisp and clean, carrying the faint scent of pine and

incense, completely different from the smells of the city. Leaves, tinged with the golden hues of early autumn, whispered softly in the breeze, creating a gentle rustling that seemed to echo the stillness. Birds flitted between the branches, their chirps breaking the quiet as they darted through the canopy.

No wonder Usagi and Ami liked this place. It was peaceful.

“A cursed bridal shop?” Rei’s voice was skeptical. “The ghost of a bride? It does sound suspicious.”

“That’s what I said!” Usagi’s voice startled the birds.

“Their have been an increased number of missing males,” Ami said.

“Serves them right.” Rei crossed her arms. “They’ve only got no one to blame but themselves, being lured in by a ghost. Please. They’re so easy to avoid.”

“Rei!” Usagi squealed.

“What?” Rei shrugged. “I just don’t trust men.”

Makoto really wasn’t in the mood for most ghost and bride discussions. Besides, she still had to get to a grocery store and make dinner. Not to mention the paper assigned for English. She’d be up half the night. “This is all too much for me,” she said. “I’m out.”

Makoto’s boots scuffed against the worn steps as she descended from the shrine, each step carrying her further away from the warmth of potential friendship and deeper into the familiar embrace of solitude. The air was cooler now, the last remnants of sunlight slipping away as the early evening shadows crept across the street. The sun hung low on the horizon, painting the sky in hues of amber and rose, a beauty that was too removed.

She inhaled deeply, trying to shake the strange unease that clung to her chest since learning of the ghost bride. She was tired of it all—the rumors, the myths, the haunting sense of something lingering just beyond her reach.

“Damn it all,” she muttered.

Lost in her brooding, she nearly collided with a broad chest as she watched the sidewalk. Strong hands steadied her, and she found herself staring into a pair of eyes that held the secrets of the cosmos.

It was him.

“Nephrite,” she breathed, recognizing the man from her apartment complex.

He stood strong and proud, his tall frame stark against the dimming light. Her breath caught, heart lurching in a way that made her stomach twist. Sharp bolts of electricity wove through her body, strong enough she could have sworn arcs were dancing across her skin. There was something in his casual stance, the quiet strength, that made her feel like she knew him—like she’d always known him.

His lips curved into a small smile. “We meet again, Makoto. Settling into Juban?”

Every nerve in her body screamed that she knew him, far beyond their brief encounter. Her gaze drifted to his forearms, exposed by rolled-up sleeves, and a wave of... something... washed over her. Those arms. Why did they make her feel so safe, so cherished?

“Sure, I guess.” She tried to shake off the feelings. “Tell me, do we really not know each other?”

Nephrite’s brow furrowed, a flicker of confusion passing over his features. “I’ve been having the same thought. There’s something about you, Makoto. Like a half-remembered dream.”

“Exactly!” Makoto slapped her thigh. “I’m not crazy.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Nephrite chuckled, the sound stirring something deep within her.

They fell into step together, walking away from the shrine. A flicker of a memory teased the edges of her mind. Raindrops falling. Thunder

clapping. Lightning flashing. Swords kissing. But just as quickly, the vision faded, leaving only the ache of familiarity in its wake.

The space between them hummed with unspoken emotions, charged like the air before a lightning strike. She found herself drawn to the strong line of his jaw, the subtle curl of his hair, the sharp angles and graceful lines.

“And that’s why autumn is the best time to observe Pegasus. The cooler, clear nights make the stars brighter, and the Great Square of Pegasus is right overhead, perfectly visible.”

His forearms flexed as he gesticulated in the deepening twilight. Makoto found herself mesmerized by the play of muscles beneath his skin, a sense of longing washing over her that went beyond mere physical attraction.

Makoto glanced up at the sky, her thoughts still tangled in the strange tension between them. “You seem like the kind of guy who spends a lot of time looking at the stars.”

Nephrite’s eyes flickered, a rare softness crossing his face. “They’ve always been a part of me. The stars tell stories if you know how to listen.”

They rounded a corner, and the bridal shop from earlier came into view. Its windows glowed with an artificial light, almost like it was trying too hard to be normal. The white gowns almost seemed too bright, too welcoming.

“That place gives me the creeps,” she muttered.

“Ah, the ghost bride. You’ve heard the rumors, I take it?”

She nodded, her muscles tensing, ready to fight. “Yeah, something about missing guys and a curse. It’s just gossip, some rival store.”

A muscle in Nephrite’s jaw twitched. “Perhaps, but I wouldn’t dismiss it too easily. They say she appears at midnight, luring in unsuspecting men with promises of love and devotion.”

“That’s a stupid notion. One must earn love and devotion.”

Nephrite turned to her, his eyes boring into hers with an intensity that stole her breath. “There are more things in heaven and Earth, Makoto, than are dreamed of.”

The way he said her name sent another jolt through her body. Before she could question it further, he glanced at his watch and stepped away.

“I have to go,” he said. “But be careful. Not everything is as it seems in this world, and avoid this area around midnight.”

With that, he turned and walked away, leaving her staring after him. The streetlight flickered into life, casting long shadows that seemed to reach for her like grasping fingers. Her hand twitched, the urge to call out to him bubbling in her chest, but the words caught in her throat. What would she even say? The feeling of losing something precious gnawed at her, but she couldn’t remember what it was, or why it mattered so much.

“Curse you, fate,” she whispered. “What game are you playing now?”

With all her luck, she’d fall in love with him and he’d turn out to be a super villain. She snorted. His figure disappeared into the growing darkness, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d just lost something precious. Something she couldn’t even remember having in the first place.

Despite trying to resist, she wandered closer to the store, drawn by a force she couldn’t explain. The mannequins seemed to watch her approach, their blank faces somehow knowing, mocking.

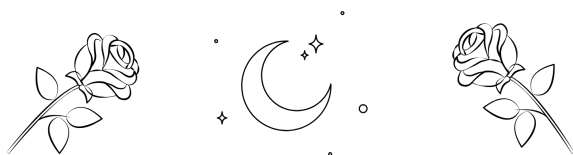
“Midnight,” she muttered, her breath fogging the glass.

As the last rays of sunlight faded, she stood before the bridal shop, torn between the rational part of her mind that screamed to run and the inexplicable pull of fate that urged her to stay. Little did she know,

the threads of fate were tightening, pulling her deeper into a web she couldn't escape.

Hours later, as the clock struck midnight, Makoto found herself once again facing the haunted bridal shop.

# *Chapter Nineteen*



## *A Haunting Encounter*

The words on the page blurred into a mess of indecipherable scribbles, his mind too restless to grasp their meaning. Mamoru's fingers traced the edges of the pages, the texture grounding him as the heaviness in his chest refused to ease. The book—a detailed study on the history of rare crystals—should have held his full attention. It should have given him answers, or at the very least, distraction. But tonight, not even this could quiet the storm raging inside him.

The usual comfort of his apartment felt oppressive, the air thick with an unease he couldn't shake. That strange pulsing behind his ribs had grown more chaotic lately, swinging wildly from bursts of giddy joy to spikes of irritation.

“What’s happening to me?”

He glanced out the window. “The full moon. Purity and perfection. Longing and connection.”

The moon seemed to mock him, its flawless light a reminder of how unworthy he was—longing for a connection he couldn’t reach. He was caught, trapped between the mystery of the unknown princess and the impossibility of Usagi.

He exhaled, tired of the fight. Exhausted from the conflict. Outside, the city lights flickered like trapped fireflies, casting eerie shadows that danced across the bare walls. Trying to focus, he looked back at the page, only for his thoughts to wander once again.

The whispered rumors of a ghost bride luring unsuspecting men to their doom. Under normal circumstances, he’d dismiss such tales as urban legends. But in a world where he transformed into a masked hero by night, nothing seemed impossible anymore.

“This is impossible.” He shut the book, sliding it onto the coffee table.

He leaned back and shut his eyes. A chill ran down his spine as a thought crystallized in his mind: Usagi. If there was indeed some supernatural threat prowling the streets, he knew with bone-deep certainty that she’d throw herself into the fray.

Sailor Moon, defender of love and justice, wouldn’t hesitate to confront this specter.

The mere thought of her—bright, clumsy, and warm—made his pulse quicken in ways he couldn’t explain. She was a force, a light that burned through his carefully built walls, leaving him exposed and helpless.

“Damn it,” he muttered, running a hand through his hair. When had he become so invested in her safety? When had her smile become as necessary to him as air?

The face of the princess flashed before his eyes, ethereal and pleading. His constant companion, guilt, gnawed at him. He knew he loved the mysterious figure that haunted his nights. He was sure of it.

So how was it possible that his heart raced every time Usagi's laughter rang out?

Reaching in his pocket, he didn't grab the locket. Instead, he pulled out the handkerchief, running his fingers over the delicate embroidery. At once, the feelings from the ball rushed over him. How she felt in his arms. How the moonlight caressed her. Her smile. Her voice.

How could he be falling for another woman?

This wasn't like him. Before Usagi crashed into his life, no woman, save the princess from his dreams, had ever captured his attention. Now, a dream and reality were tearing him apart. Both intoxicating. Both captivating.

The locket in his pocket hummed softly, something it had been doing more and more lately. Unexplainable movements. Subtle sounds. As if it were waking, though still broken. The gentle vibrations mirrored the chaos in his heart, a tangible reminder of the choice that loomed before him.

He closed his eyes, trying to center himself. But he only saw golden hair and eyes as blue as the summer.

"Stop it. You're useless. Completely useless."

Grumbling, he snatched the book up again and cracked it open. He couldn't change anything, but he could at least try to find the Legendary Silver Crystal. It was the answer to all his problems. He'd discover who he really was and find the princess. Then he'd forget about Usagi.

But before he could force his attention to the words, a jolt ran through him. It was subtle at first, but quickly escalated. The earth

was crying out, vibrations begging for relief. He sat up straight, every nerve suddenly on high alert.

“What the hell?”

The slight unease in his chest exploded into something shaper, darker. He froze, his heart pounding. The sensation grew stronger, an insistent pull that tugged at his very core. Now even more afraid, he examined that pulse behind his ribs, only to discover it strangely silent.

Without thinking, he was on his feet, standing before the window. His eyes scanned the darkened streets below. But there was nothing. No sign of danger, no indication of what was causing the rolling trembles beneath his feet.

Still, it didn't abate. The locket hummed more urgently, as if urging him forward. With a sharp exhale, he yanked a jacket off the peg and shoved through his door.

Out on the streets, the night air felt heavy, charged with an unnatural energy that made his skin crawl. There was no usual hum of life. A twisted sense of something spread across his skin, making it crawl. Slowly, the vibrations escalated, climbing higher, more frantic. An evil aura oozed from the darkness, spreading like a noxious fog to taint the world.

Mamoru followed the earth's cry, his steps quick.

As he rounded a corner, he froze. There, in front of the eerie glow of the bridal shop window, stood a familiar figure.

Motoki.

His friend staggered, his movements jerky and unnatural. Worse, his eyes were blank, soulless voids that held no emotion or life. Mamoru clenched his fists, struggling to contain the frantic screaming vibrations of earth. Here, the evil aura was strong enough to make him wretch.

Movement caught his attention, and he startled to find a girl standing there. Even more, he recognized her. The new girl he'd seen Usagi hanging around with. Makoto.

"I've been waiting for you," Motoki said, his voice hollow, almost dead.

Mamoru eased behind a building, watching the scene unfold.

"For me?"

Darkness seemed to radiate from the bridal shop in sickening waves. He wanted to rush forward, to shake his friend out of his stupor, to save her, but instinct held him back. This was beyond his power to fight.

"Look into my eyes. I love you."

Mamoru's eyes narrowed as Motoki stepped forward, his hands running across Makoto's jaw in a loving gesture. The air cracked with that tainted energy, sending shockwaves through the earth. He wanted to help, need to help break whatever hold encased them, but he knew he wasn't strong enough. Not with the roses tucked inside his jacket.

The force that had taken them was beyond him.

He needed her. He needed Sailor Moon.

The realization hit him like a physical blow. He had to involve her, to put her in danger. The thought made him sick, but he knew, beyond any doubt, that she was their only hope.

With one last look at his entranced friends, Mamoru slipped into the shadows, transforming, the familiar rush of power surging through him as he begged the universe to keep her safe. If he caused her being hurt... if this was the moment that Sailor Moon would be defeated...

In an instant, he was off, racing through the streets, the dread in his chest gripping him like ice. The thought of her in danger made

his stomach twist with fear, but there was something else. Something deeper.

He needed her. Her light, her strength. It was the only thing that could bring him some measure of peace. Even if only for a little.

“What are you doing?” his heart pounded in his ears, louder with each step.

“You’re going to get her killed.” His feet hit the pavement harder now, faster.

“Can you live with that?” each leap brought him closer to her—and to the inevitable.

“It will be your fault.” His breath came in ragged gasps.

The night air whipped past him, cool against his flushed skin, but he barely noticed. Instead, his entire being was focused on reaching her. He vaulted over the fence, landing with cat-like grace outside her window.

Everything exploded and froze in an instant.

Moonlight poured through the window, caressing her like a lover, more than it had ever touched anyone or anything else. It touched her with reverent fingers, a sacred expression of devotion. The silvery glow made her shimmer. Golden hair spread across the pillow like a halo.

It was like she was made of moonlight, woven from the same celestial threads that lit the night sky. For that moment, he was whole, complete, unblemished, perfect. Calm replaced every chaotic thought. Each thread of turmoil was silent.

She was breathtaking. No, she was ethereal.

A wave of relief washed over him, so powerful it made his knees weak. She was safe, untouched by the evil that had taken his friend. Yet in the wake of that came a surge of desire so intense it frightened him. He wanted desperately to gather her into his arms, to feel her warmth against him, to lose himself in the sweet scent of her.

Disgust followed swiftly on the heels of that desire. How could he even think of Usagi this way? It felt like a betrayal—a betrayal of the princess, the one he'd been searching for all this time. And yet, Usagi had crept under his skin, her presence as intoxicating as it was impossible. His weakness churned in his gut, mixing with the fear that consumed him.

He was about to drag her into danger, to put her in harm's way. He had no right to desire her.

But he had no choice. They needed her. He needed her.

Sliding open the window, he didn't dare touch her. Because if he did, he'd lose all trace of coherent thought.

Usagi stirred, and the soft sound that escaped her lips sent a shiver through his body. When her eyes fluttered open, he forgot how to breathe. Those eyes, blue as the summer sky, looked at him with such trust, such warmth. It made his heart ache.

"Its this a dream? Tuxedo Mask?"

Without a word, he reached out a hand. His chest tightened painfully as her small, warm hand slipped into his. As their fingers intertwined, a jolt of something hot wrapped around his chest. It felt right, perfect, like two pieces of a puzzle finally clicking into place. And that terrified him more than any monster ever could. Relief flooded him, but with it came a spike of fear. She trusted him completely, and he didn't deserve it.

Because in that moment, as Usagi climbed out her window and into the moonlit night, Tuxedo Mask knew without a doubt, he was falling in love with her. And he had no idea how to stop it.

Without a word, they leaped from her window. The guilt that clawed at him redoubled its efforts, threatening to consume him whole.

As they darted through the sleeping streets, Usagi stayed close behind him. The exhilaration of their shared flight was intoxicating. Every leap, each turn, was effortless. It was electric in a way he hadn't expected.

"Where are you going, Tuxedo Mask?" she asked, her voice breathy and seductive. "Where are you leading me?"

No, he couldn't answer her, not when he wasn't even sure he could form words himself. Her presence at his back felt right, as if they were meant to be. Somehow her proximity calmed the storm inside him, the one that had been raging for days, weeks, months, years. She was the anchor he never knew he needed.

But under that calm, something darker lurked.

"This isn't right," he whispered.

The sense of utter contentment that filled him, that powerful calm, was frightening. This feeling was dangerous. It threatened everything—his mission, his loyalty to the princess, his very sense of self. It wasn't just dangerous, the way he felt more alive, more whole, just by having her by his side. This was not the way it was supposed to be. She wasn't supposed to be the one to ease his pain.

As they raced across alleyways, a flicker of familiarity tugged at the edges of his consciousness. Something about running together, side by side, felt familiar. Too familiar. But it wasn't a memory filled with joy. No, this was something else.

Something tragic, filled with loss.

A sense of dread ate away at him as they rounded the last corner, the unease coiling tighter in his gut. They had done this before; he was certain of it. But the memory that tried to surface was terrible. Fragments of a shared tragedy teased at the corners of his mind, just out of reach.

Did that mean he was leading her to destruction?

Before he could stop her, they arrived. The sight that greeted them made Tuxedo Mask's blood run cold. Makoto remained caught in the thrall of an obvious energy, her usually vibrant eyes glazed and lifeless. Motoki hovered close by, darkness obscuring his light. The malevolent aura emanating from the scene was palpable, a miasma of evil that made his skin crawl.

The vibrations of earth still cried out in pain, a relentless keen that bit at the edges of his consciousness. He turned to Usagi, his heart clenching painfully. This was the moment he'd been dreading—the moment he'd led her to danger. And now he'd have to let her go, watch her throw herself into danger.

Every fiber of his being. Every nerve. Each cell screamed to protect her, to whisk her away from this nightmare.

But he couldn't. She was Sailor Moon, the guardian of love and justice. This was her fight.

"It's! Onii-san and Mako! What's wrong?" she questioned.

But he didn't have the words. The ability to form thought. Because if he spoke, he'd send her away. Make her flee.

"Luna! It's the enemy! We have to save those two!"

Usagi nodded, determination hardening her features. Tuxedo Mask felt as if his heart was being torn in two. He watched her step forward, knowing he couldn't interfere, knowing this was her destiny. But every muscle in his body clenched tightly, ready to spring into action at the slightest provocation.

He held his breath, dreading the first blow, the first cry of pain. His imagination tortured him with visions of her broken body, of a final, gasping breath. The guilt of bringing her here, of putting her in harm's way, threatened to crush him.

"Usagi!"

Tuxedo Mask turned and saw Ami and Rei racing through the darkness. He glanced one last time at Usagi before turning and fleeing into the night. But he didn't go far. Couldn't go far. He lurked behind a tree, fingers clenched on the rough bark.

"That's the ghost bride."

The figure loomed in the shadows, her pale form radiating a cold, malevolent energy that sent a shiver down his spine. Power rippled over the space, and he had to turn away as light blinded him. When his vision cleared, Sailor Moon faced the enemy, her courage shining like a beacon in the darkness. Tuxedo Mask felt a spark of pride, admiration. And something dangerously close to love.

"Stealing the sacred form of a blushing bride and tainting the word love, we won't stand for it!" She shouted.

His chest constricted when the word bride echoed over the space. His mind betrayed him, conjuring images of Usagi dressed in white, her golden hair adorned with delicate flowers. She'd look radiant as a bride, glowing with the purity of innocence and love.

His heart raced for a different reason now. The thought of her as his bride, her laughter echoing in a world without battles, twisted something deep inside him.

It was wrong.

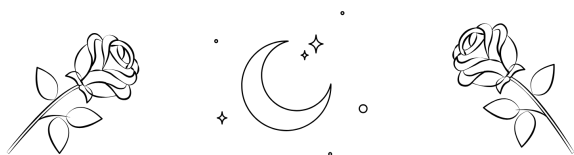
She wasn't his to imagine this way, and the guilt crashed over him like a wave. But the image wouldn't leave, searing itself into his thoughts.

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to banish the vision. When he opened them again, reality rushed back—Sailor Moon, standing firm, shining more brightly than the full moon. Her voice rang out, strong and defiant.

His fingers dug into the bark, tension coiling in his chest. The fight had only just begun.



# *Chapter Twenty*



## *Strike of Fate*

**M**akoto drifted in a sea of shimmering illusions, each spark a promise of love and belonging. Soft, ethereal light bathed the world around her, casting a dreamlike glow on everything it touched. A gossamer sheen coated every surface, whispering of eternal happiness. Petals floated lazily in the air, their sweet fragrance enveloping her in a warm embrace. Laughter echoed in the distance—joyful, inviting, the kind that promised she’d never be alone again.

Here, in this crystalline dream, she was cherished. Wanted.

Fate didn’t hate her here.

She stood in a field of endless blossoms, and ahead of her was Motoki, his smile as gentle as the summer breeze. Only desire and admiration shone in his eyes. He wanted her. He loved her.

“Makoto,” he called, his voice wrapping around her heart. “I’ve been waiting for you, my love.”

As she drew closer to him, her steps were light, almost floating. Each stride erased another ounce of her loneliness, filling the void with

hope and warmth. As his arms encircled her, his embrace was strong and comforting. His touch sending ripples of desire through her body, chasing away the chill that had been her constant companion. His gaze, usually so kind, now blazed with an intensity that both thrilled and unsettled her.

Yet, beneath the surface of this perfect moment, a thread of unease coiled tightly. Something wasn't right.

"I love you, Makoto," he murmured, his breath on her neck drawing goosebumps. "Stay with me forever."

Her heart soared at the words she'd longed to hear, yet a discordant note threaded through the euphoria. Something was wrong. The world shimmered at the edges, threatening to fray if she looked too closely.

"Motoki," she whispered, reaching out to touch his face. But she hesitated. His eyes lacked the depth she remembered. "Is this... real?"

"Of course it is," he assured her, taking her hand. "I fell in love with you at first sight. Stay with me. We'll be together forever. I'll love you forever."

Forever. The word echoed in her mind, both a promise and a prison. The edges of the world shimmered, the ethereal light wavering like a mirage. Makoto pushed the doubt aside, desperate to cling to this moment.

But even as she nestled closer to Motoki, an image flashed unbidden in her mind: long wavy hair, eyes that held the wisdom of the cosmos, forearms that spoke of quiet strength.

But still, she couldn't remember who he was. Why he was important to her. Yet the memory of him stirred images she'd long since forgotten. The way the moonlight danced across his hair, and the subtle strength in each movement. And there, at the edges of her mind, she could see him.

They were bloody and torn from a battle. Crimson dripped from a dozen wounds across her body. Nephrite collapsed on the stone, lake water eating up the red coming from his flesh. His aura slowly being consumed with darkness.

Lightning crackled under her skin, responding to a call she didn't understand. Her breath caught, torn between the seductive pull of Motoki and the insistent tug of a truth just beyond her reach.

"This is what you've always wanted," a silky voice whispered, and Makoto turned to see a figure in flowing white.

A bride.

A ghost.

"No more rejection. No more pain. Just love, eternal and unconditional."

Tears prickled at her eyes as the words struck her. Wasn't this everything she'd ever dreamed of? A love to call her own, a place to belong. Subtle inconsistencies surfaced, petals occasionally glitched, momentarily revealing wilted, colorless flowers, before snapping back into their perfect forms.

"The Pretty Guardian of Love and Justice in a Sailor Suit will punish you in the name of the moon!"

A fissure appeared in the perfect veneer of the world. Makoto glanced down at her hands. Her flesh was semi-transparent, the field of blossoms visible through her fingers.

"The Guardian of Water and Wisdom, Sailor Mercury! I'll wash you down with Mercury Power! And when your head is cooled, you'll truly be punished!"

His flesh under her hands now felt cold. A tiny spark of defiance flickered to life.

"The Guardian of Fire and Passion, Sailor Mars! You'll refrain from underestimating women! And with Mars Power you'll burn!"

Deep within her, a storm began to stir—a tempest of doubt and longing.

Yet Motoki's grip tightened. More of that tantalizing warmth flowed through her. "Don't listen, love. They can't give you what you want."

Darkness crept along the corners.

As doubt crept in, the edges of the world wavered, revealing glimpses of a harsher reality beyond. Her heart raced, caught between the allure of the fantasy and the growing certainty that something vital was missing.

"You were controlling and tickling people?" her voice felt hollow and distant.

But the rage was sharp and bright.

"You weren't serious?"

Motoki's form vibrated, shifting in and out of view.

"I'll let you know about a woman's pure feelings with raw strength!"

In that moment of unwavering conviction, a new light pierced the veil of illusion. It was bright and fierce, pulsing with a familiar energy that called to the very core of her being. Power stirred within her, the lingering force deep inside that she'd always possessed by never understood.

The time for dreams was over. Lightning crackled in her veins, heralding the awakening of her true self. Sailor Jupiter was ready to emerge.

The illusion shattered like spun glass, fragments of the dream scattering into the night air. Shards dissolved into shadow. Petals vanished into nothing. Reality crashed across her in a brutal wave, leaving her gasping. The sweet whispers of eternal love twisted into a mocking laughter, each echo a dagger to her heart.

Makoto found herself no longer in a field of blossoms but standing on the cold, deserted street before the bridal shop. The night air bit at her fevered flesh, a sharp contrast to the warm, ethereal glow of the illusion. Pressed tightly against her from behind, the frozen body of the ghost bride held her securely. One arm encircled Makoto's waist, while the other firmly pressed a cold, spectral hand against her throat. She could feel the bride's icy breath against her ear, sending a chill down her spine.

A surge of betrayal coursed through her veins. "You used me," she whispered, her voice laced with rising fury. "You twisted my deepest desires, preyed on my loneliness! How dare you use love like this!"

The ghost brides pressed tighter to her. "Love makes fools of you all. So easy to ensnare, so desperate to believe."

Rage, white-hot and electric, surged through her veins. It wasn't just anger at being deceived—it was righteous indignation on behalf of every person who'd ever loved and lost, who'd dared to hope for a connection in a cold world. Love wasn't a weakness, it was a strength.

Without thinking, Makoto smashed a heel into the ghost bride's foot. The apparition recoiled slightly and Makoto seized the opportunity; she grabbed the ghost bride's arm, twisted her body, and heaved the ghost up and over. In one fluid motion, fueled by hurt and betrayal, she lifted and slammed the ghost to the pavement.

Concrete shattered under the force of her strength. The impact sent shockwaves through the street, a physical manifestation of Makoto's shattered illusions. The ghost bride erupted into nothing but light and lace.

"That's for manipulating my heart! Love isn't a weapon!" she roared, tears stinging her eyes. "It's not a trap or a trick. It's precious and pure and powerful!"

A small figure darted into view. “Makoto!” Luna called out and skidded to a stop and flung something. “This belongs to you!”

“We found a new guardian!” Sailor Moon chirped. “Yay!”

Makoto’s gaze latched onto the pen. When she touched it, a jolt of recognition surged through her. It was familiar, the weight, the texture, the feel, as if she’d held it a thousand times before. The emerald gem atop it pulsed in sync with her heartbeat.

“Jupiter Power, make up!”

As the words left her lips, electricity exploded through her chest. It spread through her body, chasing away the chill of disillusionment. A whirlwind of emerald light burst around her, lightning arcing and dancing across her skin. Ribbons of raw energy spiraled upward, transforming her clothes into a sailor fuku with rich greens and soft pinks. Lace-up boots formed around her legs, and a golden tiara materialized on her forehead. The golden band felt right, like a crown she’d worn in a thousand lifetimes before.

Makoto stood taller, a new found strength radiating from within. Now, she was no longer just Makoto, the girl fighting fate. She was Sailor Jupiter, the guardian of thunder and courage. For the first time in memory, everything clicked into place. The restlessness that plagued her, the sense of not belonging—it all made sense now. This was who she was meant to be.

Everything was right once again.

This is what real love felt like—not the saccharine promises of fantasy, but a fierce, protective force that moved mountains and sparked revolutions.

Sailor Jupiter clenched her fists, relishing the surge of raw power thrumming beneath her skin. A fierce grin spread across her face. Love wasn’t weak; it wasn’t a fantasy to be manipulated. It was a force of nature, a wild and unstoppable as the lightning she commanded.

The storm within her had found its purpose. Sailor Jupiter was ready.

A cold mocking voice echoed from above. “That was simply a formless shadow of myself. Your true enemy is up here!”

She looked up to see Nephrite perched atop a nearby roof, bathed in the silvery glow of the moon. His hair fluttered in the breeze, and his eyes bore into hers with a mix of curiosity and cold indifference. The sight of him sent a jolt through her—she recognized him!

The man from the street, from the shrine. Nephrite! But something was different, wrong. An aura of malevolence clung to him like a second skin, twisting his once-gentle features into a mask of cruelty.

“So, the thunder guardian awakens,” he said, a sly smirk playing on his lips. “I must admit, you exceeded my expectations.”

“Hey! Who are you? Where did you come from? Why are you here?” Sailor Moon shouted.

“Which question should he answer first?” Sailor Mars quipped.

“I am Nephrite, one of the Four Kings of the Dark Kingdom.”

“You,” Sailor Jupiter breathed. “You’re behind this?”

“If you are, I have a bone to pick with you!” Sailor Moon said. “Using love to manipulate and harm others. Is that your bad idea?”

He shrugged casually. “Love is a fragile and useless emotion. Easily twisted, easily broken. Humans are weak because of it.”

As Makoto met his eyes. The world around her blurred, replaced by feeling visions:

A rocky landscape...

Her hand in his, fingers intertwined...

Walking in the rain, lightning highlighting his features...

The images faded as quickly as they came, leaving Makoto dizzy and confused. What were these fragments? Memories? Dreams? The echoes of a life she’d never lived?

His lips curled into a sneer. "I'm glad to be here to witness the birth of a new guardian. Because births and deaths are as predictable as the stars."

"Hey!" Sailor Moon stomped her foot. "Is that a threat? That sounded like a threat. You can't threaten us. That's not nice!"

Sailor Mars snorted. "Are villains nice?"

With each word Nephrite spoke, grated against Sailor Jupiter's ears. Anger flared in her chest, but beneath it, a profound sadness. This man, who once seemed so kind, was now shrouded in darkness. Yet, as she gazed at him, the moonlight casting sharp shadows across his features, fleeting images seized her.

In a swirl of sights, she saw herself and Nephrite standing side by side amidst rocks and trees, thunder and rain pelting the area. They fought together seamlessly, their movements synchronized as if they'd done this a thousand times before. Softness filled his eyes, speaking of trust, while an edge conveyed strength. She could feel the brush of his hand against her, a silent promise of support and love.

But when the vision faded, she stared up at him, unknowing, unbelieving. "Who are you?"

"I am a servant of the Dark Kingdom. And I'll call upon the stars to aid me in your destruction!"

"Oh, that sounds ominous," Sailor Moon muttered.

"Just be prepared," Sailor Mercury said.

Sailor Jupiter studied him for another moment. "Fine, if you choose to stand with evil, then I won't hold back!"

He raised an eyebrow. "Bold words. Let's see if you can back them up."

She threw up her hands, power surging through her. "Flower Hurricane!"

A tempest of petals erupted around her, sharp as knives and beautiful as spring. They spiraled towards Nephrite with incredible speed. The attack whipped around him, the sheer force causing him to shield himself as the petals cut like blades and the wind howled.

“What is this?” his voice was clear. “Some kind of smoke screen?”

Taking advantage of his disorientation, Sailor Jupiter channeled every ounce of her newfound power. Electricity crackled around her, the air thick with her favorite smell. Ozone. The scent of power dancing in the air. Bright lightning crackled across her skin, responding to her will.

“Jupiter, the planet I guard, bring a storm, and bring down your thunder!”

She focused the energy, feeling it building to a breaking point.

“Jupiter Thunderbolt!”

A bolt of pure electricity shot forth from her tiara. It illuminated the night sky as it surged through the air. For a moment, such a pure light bathed Nephrite that it took her breath away. Then the energy struck with such an explosive force, engulfing the area where he stood in a blinding flash.

As the light faded, Sailor Jupiter fell to her knees, breathless. Smoke and dust obscured her view, but as it cleared, only the husk of a man remained. Nephrite was no more. Triumph mingled with an inexplicable sense of loss. She’d defeated the enemy, protected the innocent—so why did it feel like she’d lost something precious?

A single tear slid down her cheek, quickly wiped away. Whatever Nephrite had been to her in another life, in this one, he was the enemy. And Sailor Jupiter would always stand against those who threatened love and justice.

Still, as she rose to her feet, a plea echoed in her heart: I’m sorry. I’ll find you again. In another life. In another world.

Footsteps approached rapidly from behind. She turned to see Sailor Moon, Sailor Mercury, and Sailor Mars hurrying towards her, concern etched on their faces.

“Jupiter! Are you alright?” Sailor Moon called out, her eyes wide with worry.

Sailor Jupiter nodded, forcing a smile. “I’m great. Just had to defeat evil, ya know.”

Sailor Mars glanced around. “That was powerful lightning. Very impressive.”

“Your lightning generated temperatures hotter than the surface of the sun—over 30,000 degrees Celsius. It’s astonishing how you can control such immense energy with precision,” Sailor Mercury said.

“Makes sense,” Sailor Jupiter said. “I did fry Nephrite. He was responsible for the ghost bride.”

Sailor Mercury’s eyes went wide. “You defeated him?”

Luna appeared, materializing from the darkness. “Nephrite is one of the Dark Kingdom’s Four Heavenly Kings. He’s not to be underestimated.”

“There was something about him... I can’t explain it. Like I’ve met him before.”

Sailor Moon placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I’m sure we’ll figure it out. But right now, we get to celebrate finding a new guardian!”

They all gathered close and Jupiter relaxed completely. She’d found a new family, and she’d never be alone again. A gentle breeze rustled through the street, carrying with it the faint scent of night-blooming jasmine. Sailor Jupiter took a deep breath, allowing the presence of her new friends to ground her. The confusion and lingering sadness didn’t vanish, but were overshadowed by a new sense of purpose.

“Guys,” Sailor Moon broke the silence. “Can we please leave before the cops get here? I really can’t deal with them.”

Sailor Mars smacked her softly. “Girl, you’ve got to come to grips with that irresponsibility.”

“I’m developing a program to help you,” Sailor Mercury said.

“You have to deal with the police?” Sailor Jupiter asked.

Sailor Moon burst into tears. “They’re so dry and so ADULT! It’s the worst. I hate talking to them. I almost feel,” she paused and leaned forward. “Old talking to them.”

Sailor Mars laughed. “Don’t worry, you’ll never grow up.”

Sailor Jupiter felt a genuine smile spread across her face. Despite the mysteries and the battles ahead, she wasn’t alone anymore. The bond she shared with her fellow guardians was real and unbreakable.

She had friends by her side and a world to protect.

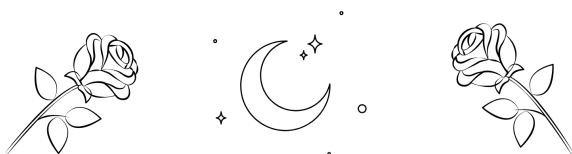
“I promise I’ll never turn into a stuffy adult.” Sailor Moon puffed up.

“Sailor Moon.” Luna jumped onto a low wall and addressed them all. “You’ve gathered four Guardians. You are their leader, and you must protect the Legendary Silver Crystal and the Moon Princess!”

“No!” Sailor Moon cried. “Not more responsibility!”

Makoto laughed with the others, finally at home.

# *Chapter Twenty-One*



## *Between Two Worlds*

**T**he air crackled with twisted energy, thick with the acrid stench of destruction and darkness. The oppressive darkness held Mamoru tight, thick and tangible, clinging to him like an unshakable shadow. Stone slowly oozed over crystal, consuming and tainting. Polluting and warping. Once majestic crystal towers lay shattered and strewn across a desolate landscape. Everywhere, the scent of ash clung to the air. Distant echoes of mournful cries filled the silence.

Shadows danced at the edges of his vision, their forms indistinct, menacing. Villains sent to destroy. Evil sent to devour. Still, he had to save her. No matter what, she had to survive.

In one hand, he gripped a sword. The worn leather hilt familiar, but strange. The gleaming metal recognizable, yet distant. Its weight foreign and intimate.

In his other hand, he held something warm and comforting—delicate yet strong, soft as silk, warm as sunlight. Her entire essence resonated deep within his soul. His entire being beat within her. They connected with each other, only complete when they were together.

He knew with a bone-deep certainty that she was everything.

The Princess.

She anchored him against the tide of despair, threatening to consume them both.

“Do you believe we’ll find each other again?” her voice was comforting, but tinged with sadness.

“With all my heart.” He took her hand and placed it over his heart. “Feel that? Every beat is for you. In this life and the next, I’ll always find you.”

Shadows writhed at the edges of the light, hungry and relentless, stalking their every move as they turned and fled deeper into the destruction. A cacophony of inhuman shrieks and the clash of steel on crystal assault his ears. He needed to save her.

“Don’t let go,” he whispered, begging the gods, pleading with destiny.

The ground quaked, fissures spider webbing outwards, releasing bursts of dark energy with each new crack. From the shadows, figures emerged. Four faceless adversaries whose intentions were deadly. His muscles burned with exhaustion, but the need to protect her pulsed through him with every frantic heartbeat.

“We need to move.” His voice was distant, strange. Something he should recognize, but was stolen so long ago he couldn’t.

They ran, weaving through the stone, her silvery dress flowing like a comet’s tail. Each step was a struggle, a fight against fate. The world quivered, threatening to collapse in a whirlwind of chaos and rock.

“There’s nowhere left to go,” a voice hissed, rippling from all directions.

An icy dread settled in his chest as the malice in those words struck him. Still, they ran. The corridors seemingly endless. Each step sent jolts of pain through his body, but the fear of the darkness was greater than any physical discomfort. The princess stumbled. He caught her, pulling her close. For a heartbeat, the scent of moonflowers enveloped him. They whispered memories of quiet afternoons, of moonlit walks and bonds.

The moment shattered as a wall of darkness erupted before them. From its depths, a figure emerged. Flame-red hair cut through the darkness. Burning eyes sliced through the evil.

A rage so potent nearly choked him.

He could feel it, the tug of fate. Their time was drawing to a close. It didn’t matter how hard he fought. How desperately he wanted to save her.

They were both dead.

“Finally, we’ll be together.” The voice was harsh, twisted, evil.

The princess clutched at him tighter. Her fear oozing into his soul through the bond they shared.

“I’ll never forgive you for this. You’ve destroyed the Moon Kingdom.”

“And a great merit it is.”

The glittering moonlight danced across the edge of his blade, adding a deadly spark of promise to the violence to come. But somehow, he knew, the oncoming scourge wouldn’t relent. Her hands clutched at his cape, her heart pounding at his back. The crystal beneath their feet groaned ominously, fractures spreading.

It was a desperate gamble, but he had to take it. He tugged her forward, running for the small chance of life. If he could only carve a

path for her, then she'd be free. The darkness wouldn't find her in the caves. Then the Queen would save her. The princess would survive.

Frantic, he slashed.

Desperate, he parried.

Always keeping her hand in his.

She screamed, her voice reaching out for him.

Time slowed as darkness appeared. A blade headed for her—a fatal blow that would end her life and leave him to face the darkness alone. Leave him to be consumed by failure.

His voice stretched through the fog.

In a split second, he made his choice. Shoving her aside, he used his body as a shield. The sword struck with a sickening thud. The sword in his hand clattered to the ground, the sound echoing in the sudden, terrible silence. He staggered as crimson bloomed across his chest.

The spot behind his left ribs pulsed, a symphony of love and anguish. A testimony of forbidden bonds and fighting against fate. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her. How he'd die a thousand deaths to keep her safe.

“No!” her tortured voice cut through the air as she caught him. “Please,” she sobbed. “Please, I'm not ready.”

His hand shook as he reached up to cup her cheek. Hot tears fell, mixing with dust and blood. Everything was already growing cold.

“My love.” A ghost of a smile touched his lips. “Find me... in the next life. I'll wait for you.”

That burning spot behind his ribs stretched, trembled, and, with a pain more excruciating than physical wounds, snapped.

“Find the Legendary Silver Crystal!”

A scream tore from his throat as he jolted awake. Sweat drenched his body, his heart pounding as if it would burst from his chest. The cold bite of the air burned his lungs with each ragged breath. The echoes

of the dream's raw torment lingered in his mind. A phantom pain lingered in his chest, a cruel reminder of a death he doesn't remember experiencing. Rubbing a hand across his face, he struggled to get a hold of himself.

Morning light spilled through the curtains. It was normal, safe, expected. Nothing like the twisted light of a dying moon. Now tears streamed down his face, speaking of a grief so profound it threatened to eat him alive.

The details were already fading, but the emotions remained razor sharp. Loss, love, and a desperate, all-consuming need to find her again.

"Find the Legendary Silver Crystal." The words were sharp, biting, poisoning him with evidence of his inadequacies.

How many years had he struggled? How many years would he continue to struggle? How many nights had the princess plagued his dreams?

"Find the Legendary Silver Crystal." The words were a promise.

Grumbling to himself, he pulled over his laptop. Practically punching the keyboard, Mamoru's fingers flew over the keys, each stroke a violent staccato in the quiet room. The hard glow of the screen cast a harsh glare across his eyes, almost blinding in the dim morning. His heart pounded in his chest as if trying to warn him against this reckless action.

The words on the screen blurred, a jumble of half-truths and desperate pleas. He was laying himself bare to the world, exposing his secret identity and his quest for the Legendary Silver Crystal. It felt imprudent and thoughtless, dangerous and absolutely necessary.

"Someone must know something."

The dream's lingering echoes pressed down on him. The desperation still clinging to his chest like a never-ending fog. Sending this

statement to the media was bold. But would it result in the news he desperately wanted, or tragedy?

He hesitated for a moment, fingers hovering over the ‘send’ button. Revealing himself so openly was a monumental risk. It was a gamble that could draw dangerous attention. But the weight of the dream, the phantom pain in his chest, the relentless pull toward an unknown destiny overrode his caution.

With a final, forceful click, he sent the message. The sudden silence was deafening.

“That should turn up some new information.”

As the reality of what he’d just done sank in, the room felt suddenly colder. Rubbing his arms, he threw off the covers and stalked to the window. An unusual cocktail of emotions washed over him. Dread pooled in his stomach, a cold, heavy weight that made it hard to breathe. Yet, alongside it, a spark of anticipation flickered to life, warm and insistent.

The city stretched out before him, a tapestry of lights flickering against the dawn. People and cars moved below, tiny threads in the vast fabric of life, unaware of the silent battles waging above them. Running a hand through his disheveled hair, he exhaled deeply.

Thoughts of the princess enveloped him like a distant melody—ethereal and haunting. The memory of her hand in his was like the touch of a phantom, delicate and elusive, a connection that transcended time and space. She was a whisper in the night, a moonlit shadow guiding him toward an unseen destiny. Their bond was profound, something that made gods afraid and mortals jealous; they were more than lovers—they were two halves of the same soul.

“Where are you?”

Yet, like a burst of sunlight piercing through fog, another face illuminated his mind: Usagi. Her bright eyes sparkled with life, her

infectious laughter ringing like silver bells. If the princess was the moon—distant, serene, untouchable—Usagi was the sun, warm, vibrant, and ever-present. She was optimism, kindness, and joy personified. Unpredictable and genuine, she brought chaos into his orderly world, but it was a chaos he welcomed. Every moment with her felt like bathing in pure daylight, invigorating and real.

He hissed and paced the length of his room, each step a tightrope walk between two worlds—one of shadows and echoes, the other of light and laughter. How could he reconcile the sacred duty he felt toward the princess with the undeniable pull he felt toward Usagi?

Everything told him he shared something precious with the princess—a legacy, a destiny written in the stars. But with Usagi, he shared the simple moments that made life worth living—the spontaneous smiles, the unguarded honesty, the way her nose crinkled when she laughed too hard.

He glanced at the star-shaped locket on his desk, its cool metal gleaming softly—a symbol of his elusive past and the mysteries that haunted him. Beside it lay the folded handkerchief, a simple stolen token from Usagi that had become his lifeline to the present.

More and more, he reached for the handkerchief instead of the locket. When had this piece of fabric eclipsed the weight of his forgotten memories?

“Who am I supposed to be?” he whispered, clutching the locket to his heart. “Why do I feel like I’m losing myself between who I was and who I want to be?”

A sharp ping sounded from his computer, snapping him back to reality.

“Mysterious Figure ‘Tuxedo Mask’ Seeks Legendary Silver Crystal!”

“Who is Tuxedo Mask? He admits crimes in his search for the lost treasure.”

“What can the ‘Legendary Silver Crystal’ be?!”

His heart skipped a beat. That was fast. Too fast.

He scrolled through the articles, watching as speculation and intrigue spread like wildfire. The media frenzy had started, and it sparked the public’s curiosity.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.”

An unsettling sensation settled in his gut. He’d never done something so stupid. Suddenly more afraid, he stared out the window as the new day continued its slow descent into its eventual death.

Outside, the morning air was crisp, sharp, like the bands of moonlight that flowed from the waning gibbous moon. Pulling his coat tighter around himself, he stepped out into the bustling streets, the city already alive with activity. He frowned, his mood as overcast as the gray, patchy sky. Everything felt muted, as if the world was holding its breath.

It didn’t take long before whispers and snatches of conversation drifted to him.

“Tuxedo Mask.” He startled at the first time hearing his alternate persona’s name. “He does look rather fetching in a cape. I wish I could wear a cape in public.”

“I bet the Legendary Silver Crystal is some new creation from the Kingdom of D.”

“Do you think he’s related to Sailor Moon?”

“Is he a hero or a criminal?”

Each word was a needle, pricking at his already frayed nerves. Each mention tightened the knot in his stomach. The dread that had been simmering in his gut since dawn began to boil over. The repercussions

of his impulsive action were unfolding rapidly, and a growing sense of alarm had smothered the initial spark of anticipation.

He shoved his hands into his pockets. One hand gripped the locket, the other the handkerchief. Frantically, he tried to shut out the voices, but they seeped in regardless, echoing his doubts.

“Maybe he’s dangerous.”

“I bet he had something to do with the OSA-P jewelry store break in.”

What had he done?

He clenched his jaw, quickening his pace. The weight of their words pressed down on him, and for the first time, he truly questioned the wisdom of revealing himself and his quest. The dream’s urgency had blinded him, pushing him to act without considering the consequences.

Now, the reality of his choices loomed large and unyielding.

Thoughts of the princess floated through his mind, celestial and just out of reach. The pressure in his chest tightened, a coil so tight he feared it might snap at any moment. Her faceless form haunted him, a horrible reminder of a past he couldn’t remember and a future he couldn’t grasp.

Lost in his brooding, he was jolted back to reality as he nearly collided with a whirlwind of blonde hair and boundless energy. The impact jarred him, and for a split second, the weight suffocating him lifted. Despite himself, a small smile threatened at the corners of his mouth.

Usagi.

They both skidded to a stop. Her vibrant eyes locked onto his, and the oppressive weight lifted slightly.

“Oh, it’s you!” With her voice, the pressure behind his ribs eased, thrumming with more of a contented purr than a discordant growl.

“Mamoru Chiba.”

“Good morning,” he said, the only words he could form.

“Good morning to you.”

Just like that, all the anxiety snapped out of life. Her sunlight had dispersed the storm clouds. Now his world was warm and comforting.

“Now, is this considered destiny?” she asked. “Because I’m normally not this early, so we would have missed each other. But I’ve been having these weird dreams lately, so I couldn’t sleep.”

“Meaning we could bump into each other again.”

“Right? So destiny? Or stress? Because I didn’t study for the English test today, and stress can cause weird dreams. So, is it destiny or stress?” she cocked her head to the side, an adorable smile on her face.

He couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at his lips. “You better study hard, Bun-head.”

She pulled a face. “Mind your own business!”

He couldn’t help but chuckle as her indignant squawk followed him down the street. Unable to help himself, he thought of Sailor Moon. On the surface, she and Usagi couldn’t be more different. One a clumsy, carefree girl. Sailor Moon a determined, even if reluctant, hero.

And yet...

Beneath the surface, there was a shared spirit—a fierce flame of determination and unwavering kindness. Both radiated a pure energy that drew him in. Is that why he was falling in love with Usagi?

The idea unsettled him. The Princess and Usagi—held a piece of his heart, but in different ways. Did he have to choose between them? Could he reconcile the fragments of his affections into a coherent whole?

As if in answer, a newspaper headline caught his eye: “Tuxedo Mask: Vigilante or Villain?”

That momentary lightness Usagi brought evaporated, replaced by a leaden weight of dread. He walked faster, trying to outrun the sadness that haunted him.

What had started as a desperate attempt to find answers was spiraling out of control. With each step, each overheard conversation, each glimpse of his alter ego’s name in the news, Mamoru felt the noose of his own making tightening around his neck.

There was no convincing himself now. This had been a colossal mistake.

The day dragged on, each minute an eternity. Everywhere he turned, whispers of Tuxedo Mask and the Legendary Silver Crystal haunted him. It didn’t matter where he went; he found no sanctuary, no respite. Each word was another weight added to the burden already crushing his spirit.

The afternoon settled in. A strange sensation prickled at the edges of his awareness. The city was different; the changes were subtle at first, but slowly climbing. A strange vibration thrummed through the earth, discordant and wrong. Mamoru rubbed his chest, an unconscious gesture seeking comfort that wouldn’t come.

A cold sweat broke out as the chaotic energy of the city mirrored the turmoil within him.

A heavy blanket seemed to drape over the world, muffling the usual song of urban life. He sat in the library, trying to focus on the open book before him, but the words blurred into meaningless shapes. The muffled silence pressed in, amplifying the pounding of his heart.

Seeking comfort, he reached into his pocket and clutched the star locket, rubbed at the handkerchief. The cold metal and smooth fabric offered a fleeting moment of solace.

Then the world fell silent.

The ambient hum of the air conditioner ceased. Glancing up, the ceiling fan was motionless. An eerie hush enveloped the space. Beyond the window, traffic came to a standstill. Cars idled silently, their drivers frozen in confusion. Pedestrians stood motionless, their expressions blank.

“What?” A chill ran down his spine. An alarm blared deep within him now, no longer subtle. Every instinct screamed that something was terribly wrong.

Before he reacted, the vibrations of the earth screamed out in pain. He bolted from the library, following that unknown pull. The sky above had taken on an unnatural hue, a sickly shade that wavered between gray and green. The air felt heavy, charged with static.

His breath came in shallow gasps as he navigated the frozen throngs.

One moment, the city stood frozen—time itself seemingly halted. The next, a cacophony erupted as if a dam had burst. Shouts filled the air; glass shattered as people smashed windows, their eyes wild with desperation.

Ordinary people smashed windows, shouting for the Legendary Silver Crystal. Women emptied their purses. Men flung their briefcases. Stores filled, shelves becoming empty as people threw the contents aside. Everywhere the innocent scrambled to find the crystal.

Still, the vibrations grew stronger, a pulsating rhythm that screamed at him. Street after street, corner after corner, he followed that strange pull. Anxiety twisted in his gut, but he couldn't stop moving forward.

“This is my fault.” Guilt gnawed at him.

“What have I done?”

Just before he was about to surrender to the desperation, he saw her.

Usagi lay crumpled on the pavement, her golden hair splayed around her like a fallen angel. The sight struck him like a tidal wave, driving all the breath from his lungs. Raw and uncontrollable fear exploded across his chest as he ran for her. The world narrowed to just her and the all-consuming fear gripping him.

Without a second thought, he transformed, gold and rose petals swirling as he emerged from the radiant power. Tuxedo Mask kneeled beside her, gathering her into his arms, her body limp and terrifyingly still. The warmth of her against him brought a rush of conflicting emotions. Relief, fear, and an overwhelming need to protect her.

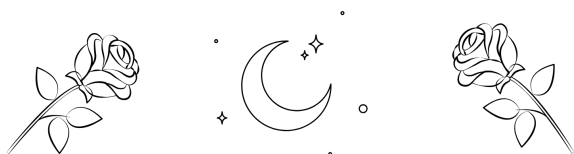
“I hope the princess forgives me.”

A horrible realization crashed down on him—this chaos was a direct result of his actions. Regret and guilt twisted like a knife in his gut. He’d put not only Usagi but countless others in danger. And now, holding her unconscious form, Tuxedo Mask faced the horrifying possibility that his actions had shattered their worlds forever.

Cold washed over him. A terrible sensation of stone devouring the world washed over him. His head snapped up. Dark clouds gathered unnaturally fast, swirling as if drawn from the depths of some abyss. The air crackled with malevolent energy, and a sinister laugh echoed, chilling him to the core. Clutching Usagi tighter, Tuxedo Mask braced himself.

“I won’t let this happen,” he vowed, his eyes reflecting the storm above. No matter the cost, he would protect her—and set things right.

# *Chapter Twenty-Two*



## *Light of the Heart*

The world was unraveling. The very fabric of reality frayed at the edges as darkness seeped into every corner of the city. Twisted shadows stretched across shattered pavement, and the moon hung low and distorted in the sky, its silvery light tainted with a sickly hue. The air was heavy and suffocating, filled with the scent of decay and the distant rumble of a trembling earth. Buildings groaned as if in pain, their foundations rattled by unseen forces.

Tuxedo Mask's heart thundered in his chest, each beat echoing like a drum in the eerie silence. His cape whipped violently in the unnatural wind. A fear he'd never known lingered on his tongue—so potent it felt as if it might take on a life of its own.

There, crumpled in his arms, was Usagi. She lay motionless, her golden hair splayed out like a halo tarnished by the polluted green light pulsing through the trapped city. She looked so small, so fragile against the backdrop of a world teetering on the brink of destruction.

His gloved hands trembled as he cradled her, his gaze never leaving her pale face. A visceral dread gripped him, sharper than any blade, more deadly than any poison. He couldn't fathom why the sight of her like this pierced him so deeply, why it felt as though his own life force ebbed away with each passing second she remained unmoving.

He had faced countless dangers, stared into the abyss without flinching, but nothing had ever terrified him like this. Panic flooded his veins, cold and relentless. He shouldn't feel this way. He couldn't. His heart belonged to the princess. The faceless enigma who haunted his dreams and beckoned him from beyond the veil of memory.

A specter of moonlight and sorrow, a destiny he was bound to. She was his purpose, his mission. Yet she was nothing more than a whisper in the night, an illusion wrapped in stardust. Did she even exist beyond the confines of his mind?

"Why am I so afraid?"

Yet here was Usagi—tangible and real. She was laughter and tears, sunshine breaking through storm clouds. The way her eyes lit up when she smiled, the sound of her unrestrained laughter—it was all so achingly genuine. And that terrified him.

She terrified him. The scent of strawberries and vanilla that clung to her stirred something deep within. How the moonlight caressed her features, casting her in an ethereal glow. He wanted to stay by her side forever, and she was quickly becoming his everything.

"Why does seeing her like this feel like the end of the world?"

Guilt gnawed at him. Was he betraying the princess? The very thought made him feel like a fickle monster, a heartless villain. Why was this happening? He had known countless beautiful and capable women—women who would make great partners, wonderful mothers. Yet none of them had awakened his soul.

Now he was torn between two worlds. One made of shadows, dreams, and destiny; the other constructed of sunlight, laughter, and courage. What would happen if he chose one over the other?

Gently, he tapped her cheek, his touch feather-light and trembling. Every fleeting contact felt like home, like a missing piece of himself finally found. His thumb brushed across her skin, a caress born of desperation and something dangerously close to love.

“Please,” he whispered, his voice ragged. “Open your eyes.”

The words hung in the air—a prayer to a universe that seemed intent on tearing them apart. Tuxedo Mask held his breath, willing her to wake, to banish the terror gripping his heart with an iron fist.

The ground shuddered violently beneath him, cracks spiderwebbing through the concrete as if the earth itself were fracturing under the weight of encroaching evil. A nearby streetlamp flickered erratically before exploding, raining shards of glass like fallen stars. The city’s anguish was palpable—a chorus of distant screams, sirens swallowed by the abyss, the oppressive aura of malevolence choking the very air.

“Wake.”

Moonlight caught in her hair, threads of gold amidst shadows. The sight stirred a yearning he couldn’t name, a loneliness he had never hoped to fill.

“Usagi. Wake up.”

The clouds above thickened, blotting out what little light remained. He could feel the evil spreading like a plague, leeching life from everything it touched. Trees wilted, leaves shriveling to ash; flowers withered into decayed husks.

He closed his eyes, desperation clawing at him. “Don’t take her away.”

A faint glow pulsed against his chest—a subtle warmth. His eyes snapped open. Usagi's eyelashes fluttered ever so slightly, a fragile movement that ignited hope within him.

"Usagi?" he breathed, leaning closer.

She stirred, a soft groan escaping her lips. Her eyes slowly opened, the deep blue clouded with confusion, but unmistakably alive. Relief crashed over him like a tidal wave, so intense it left him dizzy.

"Tuxedo Mask?" she murmured, her gaze focusing on him.

A genuine, unguarded smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Thank goodness. I was so worried."

She attempted to sit up, and he immediately slipped an arm behind her for support.

"What... what happened? What are you doing here?"

As if reacting to her awakening, the shadows around them writhed and stretched, reaching out like sinister tendrils. She gripped his arm a little tighter, her eyes wide with unease.

Guilt surged within him, heavy and oppressive. He looked away, unable to meet her gaze. "My poor judgment... my actions brought us to this point. This is all my fault."

She gasped softly. "Tuxedo Mask! This was your doing?"

Silence stretched between them, tension thick in the air.

"You did it? Are you actually...?" Her voice trailed off, uncertainty coloring her words.

"No! I'm not—" He ran a hand through his tousled hair, the weight of his actions pressing down on him. "I didn't mean for this to happen. In my desperation to find the Legendary Silver Crystal, I opened the door for this darkness to take hold."

"You know about the Legendary Silver Crystal too?" she asked, surprise flickering across her face.

He gestured to the chaos surrounding them. "Yes, but I had no information to work from. And I don't have powers like you do."

A soft smile touched her lips. "I know what you mean. Even though I'm supposed to be the leader, I don't really feel like it. I'm powerless in so many ways, but it's still my responsibility to protect everyone. I guess all we can do is try harder."

An unexpected admiration welled up within him. Despite her fears, she found the strength to acknowledge her weaknesses and push forward. A strong crybaby—who would have guessed?

Another tremor shook the ground, and the dark clouds above churned ominously. The oppressive aura was intensifying, threatening to consume everything.

"You must transform into Sailor Moon," he urged gently. "I can't do anything about this. You're the only one who can save us."

She tensed in his grasp, eyes widening. "You knew?" her voice was barely a whisper. "How do you know who I am?"

He offered a reassuring smile. "Let's just say I always seem to find you when it matters most."

A rosy hue blossomed on her cheeks. "You are always coming to my rescue."

"I wanted to keep this secret for you." Reluctant to let her go just yet, he held her a little tighter. "But right now, we need Sailor Moon."

They stood facing each other amidst the chaos—a moment of stillness in a world unraveling. Their eyes locked, a current of electricity passing between them. A jolt of recognition flashed through him, as if he'd gazed into those sapphire depths a thousand times before, across lifetimes and dreams. Something achingly familiar lingered in her gaze, drawing him in like a moth to flame.

His heart skipped a beat. Echoes of forgotten memories tugged at the edges of his mind, elusive yet persistent. A spot behind his ribs pulsed, as if a thread woven by fate connected them.

Usagi broke the gaze first. She raised her hand, and the moonlight pierced through the clouds, intensifying and bathing her in a brilliant glow that defied the encroaching darkness.

“Moon Prism Power... Make Up!” her voice rang out, clear and strong, cutting through the shadows.

The words ignited the world around her. A surge of energy erupted, exploding into light and color. Ribbons of iridescent energy burst forth, spiraling upward and enveloping her in a cocoon of pure luminescence. Colors danced and intertwined—pinks and blues, silvers and golds—blending into a radiant tapestry.

The air hummed with magic, sending a thrill through him. He watched, transfixed, as moonlight seemed to pour from the heavens, drenching her in an ethereal glow. The ground pulsed in response, as if the very earth recognized the awakening of a formidable force.

He couldn't look away. The transformation was mesmerizing—a symphony of light and magic pushing back the surrounding darkness. Moonlight caressed her form, highlighting every graceful movement as she ascended slightly above the ground.

Her school uniform dissolved, replaced by gleaming attire that materialized like seafoam on waves. Gloves formed over her arms, boots over her legs—each movement a dance of creation. A red bow blossomed on her chest, and a golden tiara slid across her brow, the central gem catching the light like a newborn star.

The chaos faded into the background; all he could see was her—radiant and powerful. She was the embodiment of hope amidst despair, a beacon shining brightly against the drowning night. The sight filled

him with awe and a profound sense of relief. Here was proof he wasn't alone in this world of secrets and transformations.

As the last strands of light dissipated, Sailor Moon stood before him. Yet beneath the radiant exterior, he caught a flicker of doubt in her eyes. The raw power emanating from her was almost palpable—a gentle warmth that pushed back the cold evil pressing in from all sides.

Deep inside, something stirred—a recognition beyond mere familiarity. For an instant, he could have sworn she was the princess from his dreams. The same celestial glow, the same unwavering spirit. His heart lurched.

But as quickly as the thought appeared, it vanished, leaving him to wonder if it had been a trick of the light. Shaking off his confusion, he focused on Sailor Moon. His ally? His... something more?

She glanced back at him, a flash of uncertainty crossing her features. "I'm not actually sure what to do. Without Luna, I'm sorta helpless." She fidgeted with her skirt, gaze dropping to the ground. "I can't control lightning or fire or mist. Unfortunately, I'm rather... inadequate."

He couldn't bear to see her doubt herself. The vulnerability in her eyes pierced him deeper than any enemy ever could. Closing the distance between them, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into a firm embrace. Warmth blossomed within him, spreading outward like ripples in a still pond.

"Stop," he whispered softly into her ear. "You're better than this, Sailor Moon. I know you can do it. You're not alone."

She stiffened slightly at first, surprised by the sudden closeness, but then relaxed into his hold. The tension in her shoulders eased as she leaned into him. For a fleeting moment, amidst the surrounding chaos, there was peace.

"I just... I don't know if I can," she murmured, her voice barely audible over the distant sounds of the crumbling city.

He pulled back slightly to look into her eyes, his gaze steady and resolute. "I believe in you. More than anyone else, you have the power to make a difference."

As if in response, a tremor of energy pulsed between them. The air thickened, humming with anticipation. Suddenly, a blinding radiance erupted, forcing him to shield his eyes with his arm. The brilliance was unlike anything he'd ever experienced—a pure, radiant force that enveloped them completely.

The atmosphere crackled with raw power, sending shivers down his spine. As the light receded, he lowered his arm to see the Moon Stick hovering before Sailor Moon, pulsing with a luminous glow. He stared in awe. It wasn't just the sudden appearance that stunned him, but the profound familiarity of the aura it emanated.

It felt like basking in warm moonlight after a lifetime of darkness, like the exhilarating rush of wind against his face. The sensation resonated deep within, stirring memories of sunlit gardens and moonlit promises. He knew he had felt this power before—protected it, cherished it. Fragments of memories flashed through his mind: fleeting glimpses of an ethereal kingdom, a vow to safeguard something precious.

Before he could process this revelation, Sailor Moon reached out and grasped the Moon Stick, her fingers closing around its handle. As soon as she touched it, a surge of energy burst outward. A wave of light exploded in a dazzling supernova of silver and gold.

He staggered slightly, reaching out to steady himself amid the torrent of power. Her voice echoed in his mind—a whisper and a plea, though her lips didn't move.

"Please," she implored silently. "Give everyone their lives back. Don't let them suffer anymore."

Raw power flowed from her, staggering in its strength and purity. The moonlight flared, harsh shadows retreating before its advance. All around them, the world seemed to exhale—color and vitality returning to the gray landscape. Buildings repaired themselves, cracks in the pavement sealed, and the anguished cries of the city quieted into a peaceful hush.

He watched her, awe and admiration swelling in his chest. She stood at the epicenter of this miraculous restoration, eyes closed in concentration, expression serene yet determined. Seeing her like this stirred something deep within—a mix of pride and a profound connection he couldn't quite explain.

"I knew you could do it," he thought, a soft smile forming on his lips.

Just as the power reached its zenith, bathing everything in a healing glow, it began to wane. The energy dimmed, and the brilliance faded. Sailor Moon swayed on her feet, and he lunged forward, catching her as she collapsed against him.

"Sailor Moon!" his heart pounded, fear gripping him as he looked at her pale face, her eyelids fluttering. The warmth that had enveloped them moments before was fading, replaced by deep exhaustion radiating from her.

She mumbled something incoherent, her words slurring together. Leaning closer, he caught her faint whisper. "I hope... the police don't show up," she murmured sleepily. "It's past bedtime... I'm so... sleepy."

He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Relief mingled with concern. "You've used up too much power," he said softly, gently brushing a stray strand of hair from her face. Her skin was cool to the touch, but her breathing was steady.

She gave a tiny nod, eyes closing. "Don't tell the cops I was here. Good night," she whispered, going limp in his arms.

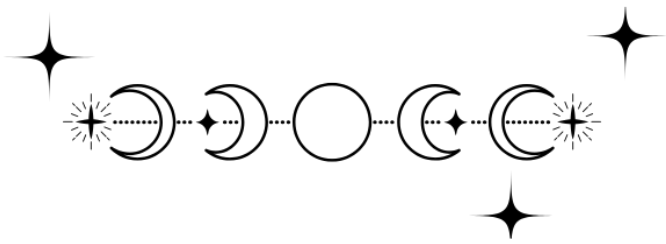
He glanced upward. The moonlight was harsh again, but the sky had returned to its usual midnight blue dotted with stars. With the malevolent clouds gone, a serene atmosphere settled over the city. Lights twinkled below, signs of life resuming normalcy.

Holding her close, he felt the steady rise and fall of her breath against him. The tension gripping his body began to ease, the warmth of her presence calming the storm inside. The scent of strawberries and vanilla lingered, stirring emotions he could no longer ignore.

Unable to resist, he pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek. "Well done, Sailor Moon. I knew you could do it."

He gathered her up, cradling her as if she were the most precious thing in the world. As her warmth seeped into him, Tuxedo Mask realized perhaps she was. The realization settled in his heart, bringing both comfort and uncertainty. The lines between duty and desire blurred, but in that moment, all that mattered was her safety.

"I'll protect you," he murmured, a quiet vow carried away on the night breeze.



Silence.

Darkness.

Eons of waiting.

The world had quieted. The chaotic turmoil had given way to a serene nocturne. Warmth returned, and with it, a pulse of recognition.

The locket stirred from its long slumber, sensing a presence it had yearned for across millennia.

*She has returned.*

The sensation enveloping it was more than mere proximity; it was resonance—a familiar echo from ages past. Its creator—no, more than that—its very reason for being.

*Serenity.*

Not as she once was, resplendent in silver and starlight, but reborn. The Galaxy Cauldron and Queen Serenity's sacrifice had seen to it. Changed, yet unmistakable. The locket trembled with anticipation, aching to be whole once more.

Once, it had gleamed with the brilliance of a newly formed star, crafted by delicate hands under the full moon's gaze. It was more than metal and magic; it was a promise—a symbol of love that had succumbed to duty, gods, and fate. A love that would now be reborn.

For so long, it had lain dormant against Endymion's heart. He too had been transformed, his memories as fractured as the locket's crystal. Both were mere shadows of what they once had been. Now, cradled against the one who carried the soul of its creator, a flicker of hope passed through it. The faint glow that had faded stirred, a delicate shimmer pulsing in time with her heartbeat.

The bond endured—a thread of silver light connecting past to present, heart to heart, soul to soul.

*Endymion and Serenity, together once more.*

It sensed their presence: the protector and the princess, Earth and Moon, reborn and unaware of the full depth of their connection. The locket longed to bridge that gap, to remind them of the vows once spoken beneath a star-drenched sky. It yearned to fulfill its purpose, to unleash its melody and awaken their memories.

The world shifted. Seizing the moment, the locket slipped from his pocket, its chain unfurling like a comet's tail. As it tumbled, it intertwined with ribbons of red, hidden and secure. Nestling close against her, its cracked surface caught a glint of moonlight. A subtle warmth emanated from within—a silent greeting to the soul it recognized.

The proximity renewed its strength, if only slightly.

*Only she can heal the fractures of time.*

It longed to sing the melody woven into its very essence—a song of moonlight and forbidden love. But the cracks that marred its surface kept the music trapped within—a whisper where once there was a voice.

Yet it lay quiet, content in the knowledge that the moment was nearing. The barriers that kept memories at bay were weakening. Soon, recognition would blossom, and the truths hidden within their hearts would surface.

*I will sing again.*

Its melody would unlock the secrets of their intertwined fates. Only Serenity's touch could mend what time and tragedy had broken. Only she could restore the brilliance dimmed by separation and sorrow.

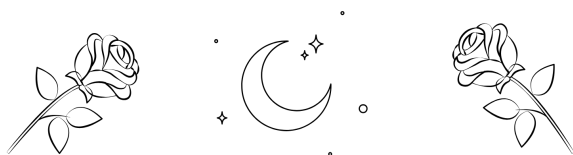
For now, it would wait—silent and patient, a relic of a love that transcended time and space. The world could continue its harsh reverie, for now it was home.

The locket nestled closer, reveling in the comforting warmth. It mattered not that Serenity wore a different face, that Endymion's eyes no longer held recognition. The bond was unbroken—a gossamer thread stretching across lifetimes, unbreakable despite all that sought to sever it.

And so the locket waited—a silent sentinel. It would bide its time until the moment of awakening, when past and present would collide

in a cascade of memory and light. Until then, it remained a talisman of patience, a relic of a love so profound it defied death itself.

# *Chapter Twenty-Three*



## *Tangled Fates*

Pale moonlight filtered through the curtains, casting long shadows across Mamoru's living room. He paced the length of the room, the soft soles of his shoes whispering against the polished hardwood floor. His fingers fumbled with his bow tie for the hundredth time, the silk slipping through his grasp like water. The pristine fabric now creased and askew from his restless tugging. The elegant accessory felt like a noose tightening around his throat, constricting his breath and amplifying the anxiety twisting within him.

Each second that ticked by was an eternity, filled with a dread that he couldn't quite understand. He cast another glance at the closed door, his heart pounding so fiercely it echoed in his ears. Rationally, he knew Usagi was merely exhausted—after channeling such immense power; she needed rest.

But irrational fear ate away at him, relentless and consuming. The primal terror gripped his heart, whispering terrible possibilities that made his blood run cold.

“What if she doesn’t wake?” he muttered under his breath, raking a hand through his disheveled hair.

Deliberately, he refused to glance at the door. This overwhelming need to protect her, to be near her, felt foreign and unsettling. They barely knew each other beyond fleeting encounters and masked rescues. So why did the thought of losing her feel like a chasm opening beneath his feet?

He pressed a hand to his chest, feeling the frantic rhythm under his palm. The ache there was almost tangible now, a hollow space that pulsed with every passing moment Usagi remained asleep. That spot behind his left ribs, where the persistent warmth pulsed. That strange, almost magnetic sensation that defied explanation. It had been there for months, growing stronger with each passing day.

He couldn’t fathom why her well-being affected him so deeply. She was barely more than a stranger, wasn’t she? A girl he teased and argued with, who stumbled into his life with all the grace of a whirlwind.

“Why does the thought of losing her feel like I’ll lose myself?”

He closed his eyes, trying to steady his ragged breathing. The scent of strawberries and vanilla mixed with roses—a delicate reminder of his alter ego and the secrets that now lay between them. Would she hate him when she woke? The possibility sent a fresh wave of anguish through him.

“Get a grip, Mamoru,” he whispered harshly. “She’s fine. She just needs rest.”

But logic offered little comfort against the tide of emotions surging through him. Memories of her laughter, the way her eyes sparkled with unbridled joy, flooded his mind. The idea of a world without that light was... no, he wouldn’t think of it. Couldn’t consider it.

A soft sound, a slight rustle from beyond the door, made him freeze, every nerve in his body suddenly alert. Was it just his imagination, or had he heard the whisper of fabric moving? His heart jumped to his throat, hope and fear warring within him as he strained to listen.

Another gentle stir, followed by a muffled sigh.

She was awake. She was alive.

Relief crashed over him like a wave, nearly buckling his knees. The intensity left him momentarily lightheaded. He clenched his fists, fighting to steady himself, the urge to burst into the room and gather her into his arms nearly overwhelming. To bury his face in her hair and breathe in the scent of her, to feel her strong and steady heartbeat against his own.

Every instinct screamed at him to go to her, to assure himself that she was okay. He'd swept her into his arms, kiss away the fear.

But he hesitated, forcing himself to stay rooted in place. His fingers dug into his palms as he fought for control. That would be too much. Too irrational and intense. Such an action would be too much, too soon. The lined between them had already morphed beyond recognition. He couldn't afford to blur them any further, not when his heart still whispered of the princess, of a destiny left incomplete.

Drawing a deep, steadying breath, he adjusted his bow tie and smoothed the wrinkles from his shirt. He pressed a hand to his chest, willing his racing heart to calm.

"Keep it together. She doesn't need to see you like this."

He had to approach this calmly, rationally. No matter how much every fiber of his being screamed to do otherwise.

With trembling fingers, he reached for the doorknob, steeling himself for whatever lay on the other side. The metal was cool under his touch, grounding him in reality.

This was it—the moment of truth.

As he slowly turned the handle, Mamoru couldn't shake the feeling that something fundamental was about to change. That once he stepped through this threshold, there would be no going back.

The door creaked open, and he stepped inside the moonlit room, his heart thundering in his chest.

"So," he said softly, afraid he wouldn't be able to speak. "You're awake?"

He wanted to say more, but the sight stole any other words before they could form. The soft glow of the moon bathed the room, filtering through the partially drawn curtains. Usagi sat up amidst the pillow, her golden hair shining like spun sunlight. She blinked sleepily, her sapphire blue eyes meeting his with a mix of confusion and recognition.

Mamoru's breath caught in his throat. Those eyes—so vibrant, so alive—threatened to undo his carefully maintained composure. He gripped the doorframe, anchoring himself against the urge to rush to her side.

"Where am I?" Usagi's voice was soft, tinged with bewilderment. "What is this place?"

"My apartment," he replied, his own voice sounding strange to his ears. The words hung in the air between them, heavy with implication.

Usagi startled, her gaze darting around the room. Mamoru watched as realization dawned on her face, her eyes widening as they returned to him. There was a flash of something—recognition, perhaps?—that made his heart race.

"Do you remember what happened?" he asked, fighting to keep his tone steady.

Her brow furrowed in concentration, then her eyes flickered to the side. Mamoru followed her gaze to where he had deliberately placed

his mask and hat. A sharp intake of breath told him she had made the connection.

“You passed out,” he explained, the words tumbling out in a rush. “I couldn’t wake you. And, I didn’t want to... I couldn’t just leave you there.”

Usagi eased herself out of bed, and Mamoru tensed, hoping desperately that she wouldn’t flee. His heart pounded as she approached, her steps slow and deliberate. With trembling fingers, she reached for the mask on the table.

Time seemed to slow as she stepped closer, the mask held gently in her hands. Mamoru could hear the blood rushing in his ears, feel the warmth radiating from her proximity. She lifted the mask, her movements hesitant yet purposeful.

As she held it up to his face, Mamoru could almost see the wheels turning in her mind. The brilliant blue of her eyes flickered with understanding, connecting the dots between the man before her and the masked hero who had so often come to her rescue.

Those eyes—a shade of blue so deep he could lose himself in them—held him captive. They were windows to a soul so pure, so full of light, that it both terrified and enthralled him. In that moment, as recognition bloomed in her gaze, Mamoru felt exposed in a way he never had before.

The mask between them was both a barrier and a bridge—the final piece of a puzzle Usagi was rapidly solving. Mamoru held his breath, waiting for her reaction, his future hanging on the precipice of this moment.

Nothing moved. Nothing breathed. Then those eyes—so vibrant, so alive—threatened to undo his carefully maintained composure. He gripped the doorframe, anchoring himself against the urge to rush to

pull her close. Instead, he remained where he was, his heart pounding against his ribs.

“Tuxedo Mask?”

Then it all seemed to click for her. The chance encounters, the timely rescues, the inexplicable connection.

“Why? Why are you Tuxedo Mask?”

The air crackled between them, and the question he’d been half dreading, half anticipating blossomed between them. A myriad of emotions played across her face, drifting from surprise to confusion with even perhaps a hint of betrayal. But under it all was something else: a flicker of relief, of shared understanding.

“Its...” Before, he never volunteered his past. He’d learned early that such a story only garnished unless platitudes and empty remarks. Now he wanted to tell her, to spill all the heartache and loneliness that had been drowning him for years.

“It’s for my memory.”

“Your memory?”

The walls he’d built around his heart crumbled in the face of her genuine concern. Somehow, he knew she would understand in a way no one else ever had. She’d be the one to bring him that companionship he’d longed for so many years.

“I remember nothing before age six, when my parents and I were in a car accident. I’m told that for my sixth birthday, I asked for a drive up into the canyons. Something happened. I’ve never been able to learn what, but the car went off the road.”

With each word, her eyes became a little more sad.

“I lost my parents, I lost my memory, I lost my past. They had to tell me my name, but still to this day, I haven’t remembered it for myself.” He paused, the words feeling heavier each time he said them aloud.

He studied his hands. “Am I actually Mamoru Chiba? Or am I someone else?”

The question hung in the air, heavy with implication. For the first time in his life, Mamoru felt relief. As if the weight pressing on his chest had lessened. She took a step closer to him, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. But they weren’t tears of pity. No, they felt different, as if she understood how lonely he’d been.

“I don’t know when I first started having that dream. Every night it’s the same one. A princess calls out to me, but only says one thing ‘Find the Legendary Silver Crystal’. That’s all she says.”

Taking a deep breath, he hoped the words would be enough. “Before I knew it, I was stealing through the city at night—some kind of apparition in a tuxedo, a phantom thief chasing shadows. Maybe that’s what I am—a thief, trying to steal back pieces of a life I don’t remember.”

A tiny gasp escaped her lips.

“The only clue to my past, to my memories are the words ‘find the Legendary Silver Crystal.’ What about you?”

Usagi took a half-step towards him, wringing her hands together. “This sounds rather pathetic, but all I know is that we need to find the crystal and protect it. Luna hasn’t told us anything else.” She offered him a small, uncertain smile. “I wish I had more to give you, but... I don’t know anything else.”

The ache in her voice mirrored the pain in his heart. Everything about her reflected a profound sadness that stirred something deep inside of him. He could feel how much she hurt for him, for the parents he’d lost, for the childhood stolen from him. Her empathy was palpable, wrapping around him like a loving embrace.

It was almost too much to bear.

His heart raced, a fiery sensation that threatened to consume him entirely. It was as if a hidden flame had ignited, fueled by emotions he'd long kept buried.

A burning heat bloomed in his chest, right behind his ribs. It was a fire that wanted to consume him, fueled by her compassion and the inexplicable connection he felt to her. If time were to stop, he'd be completely okay with that. Because then he could be with her forever. Spending an eternity by her side suddenly seemed like the only thing that mattered. It felt right in a way nothing else ever had.

Still, they gazed at each other, volumes of unspoken words passing between them.

But reality intruded, shattering the spell.

"Luna is waiting," Usagi said softly, regret coloring her tone. "I have to go home."

The words fell between them like a physical barrier. He felt a pang of loss, even though she'd hadn't left yet. Once she walked out that door, his apartment would be empty again. He'd be alone, facing the silence without armor or sword.

He wanted to reach out, to ask her to stay, but he knew he couldn't. Instead, he watched as she took a step back, heading for the door. A part of him screamed silently to stop her—to reach out, take her hand and beg her to stay just a little longer.

The thought of her leaving carved an ache deep within him, an endless abyss that threatened to consume him. His fingers twitched with the urge to reach out, to pull her into his arms and never let go.

But he couldn't. She had to leave. Instead, he picked up her school bag from the chair. With measured steps, he approached her, fighting against the magnetic pull that tried to overwhelm him. Unable to keep away, he laid a hand on her shoulder, the contact sending sparks through his entire body.

“Usako,” he whispered, the nickname falling from his lips unbidden, as natural as breathing. He wasn’t sure where it had come from or why he’d said it, but it felt right—like a word he’d been waiting his whole life to say.

Usagi inhaled sharply, her body tensing under his touch. For a blessed heartbeat, time stood still. The air crackled, heavy with the weight of possibilities and paths not taken. Then, like a dream slipping away at dawn, the moment passed.

Her warmth faded as she stepped away, the soft click of the door closing behind her echoing in the sudden emptiness of his apartment. Mamoru stood motionless, staring at the closed door. The silence that enveloped him was deafening, a stark contrast to the tumultuous emotions raging within. Now, without her presence, his apartment was cold and cavernous.

He exhaled, running a shaking hand through his hair. The realization struck him with the force of a sledgehammer.

He’d fallen in love with her.

Irrevocably, undeniably in love with her.

And guilt soon followed. With trembling fingers, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the delicate handkerchief—the only tangible reminder of their connection. He stared at the intricate embroidery, the intertwining patterns that now seemed to symbolize the tangled web of his emotions. The soft fabric was cool against his skin as he raised it to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss, his eyes closing as a mixture of longing and despair washed over him.

The scent of strawberries and vanilla lingered, a bittersweet reminder of what he’d just let walk away.

There was no coming back from this, from the moment he let that endearing nickname slip, from the instant he acknowledged the depth

of his feelings. A door had opened between them, revealing a path he both yearned to follow and feared to tread.

“I’m sorry, Princess,” he whispered to the silence.

The phantom figure who had guided his dreams, the elusive princess he’d sworn to find—he’d betrayed her. In giving his heart to Usagi, he’d turned his back on a vow he wasn’t sure he even understood. The faceless princess from his dreams seemed to watch him accusingly from the shadows of his mind. He’d abandoned the mission that had driven him so long.

“I’ve failed you. Again.” The words tasted like ashes in his mouth.

How could he reconcile the two? The princess was a shadow, a fragment of forgotten memories, while Usagi was real. Vibrant and warm and standing right before him. Yet guilt still flooded his body, a relentless reminder of a duty unfulfilled.

He sank to his knees, the weight of his conflicting emotions too much to bear. Yet, as he clutched the handkerchief to his chest, he couldn’t bring himself to regret the connection he’d forged with Usagi.

The spot behind his ribs ached with a bittersweet pain. Perhaps this was the price of love—the inevitable collision of heart and obligation. Tears stung his eyes, slipping down his cheeks and staining his pants.

These two worlds, one of destiny and dreams, the other of warmth and love, tore at him. Resting his elbows on his knees, he buried his face in his hands. The echoes of the morning replayed in his mind: her smile, the softness of her gaze, the way his name sounded when she spoke it. Every detail etched itself deeper into his memory, weaving an inescapable tapestry of emotion.

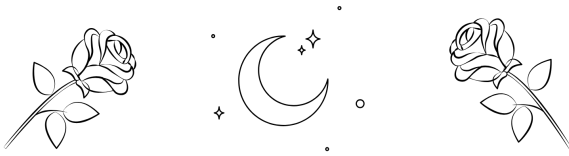
Lifting his head, the world moved on, indifferent to his inner conflict. Somewhere out there, Usagi was navigating her own path, perhaps grappling with similar feelings.

“I’ll find a way to make this right,” he vowed. “Somehow.”

But as morning light spilled into the room, he couldn’t shake the lingering feeling of loss. He’d crossed a threshold, and there was no turning back. The journey ahead was uncertain, fraught with challenges he couldn’t yet foresee.

Yet one thing remained clear: his heart belonged to Usagi, and that truth would guide him, for better or for worse. That revelation would reshape his world in ways he was only beginning to understand.

# *Chapter Twenty-Four*



## *Lonely Love*

**M**inako sat by the classroom window, her gaze drifting away from the boring and mundane scribbles on the blackboard to the vast expanse of the sky. The pale crescent moon hung low, visible even in the afternoon light.

A silent presence that felt both distant and infuriating close.

Its ghostly form seemed to mock her, a constant reminder of what was lost and what was to come. A flutter of anticipation stirred within her. Soon, it would be time to reveal herself to the others. To finally reunite with the girls who were more than friends. They were her sisters, her confidantes, her other half. Yet, an unexpected nervousness clawed at her edges.

She pressed a hand to the cool glass, letting out a shaky breath that fogged the pane, momentarily obscuring her view.

Two years.

The weight of that time pressed down on her, making each breath a labor.

Two long years since Artemis had found her, since he'd awakened the memories locked deep within her soul. Two years of solitude, carrying the weight of the knowledge that set her apart from everyone around her. Two years of watching from afar, her sisters in arms suffering, unable to reach out, to embrace them, to fight alongside them.

She had relived the camaraderie and laughter of times long past, but without the warmth of their presence. Every night, dreams of Kunzite haunted her. Her silver haired guardian whose smile lit up her world. The hollow ache in her chest throbbed, a phantom pain that served as her only reminder of what she'd lost. What she'd yearned to regain.

Minako closed her eyes, allowing herself a moment to remember Serenity's infectious laughter, Mercury's gentle wisdom, Rei's fiery passion, Jupiter's steadfast strength. Then Kunzite's smile flashed across her mind, vivid and painful, torture and relief. The memories were so vivid she could almost hear them, feel their warmth.

But when she opened her eyes, she was alone. Always alone.

Her fingers unconsciously traced the outline of her transformation pen in her pocket. Soon, she reminded herself. She would reveal herself to them. Rejoin them. The thought sent a flutter of nervous energy through her stomach, the feeling so at odds with her usual confidence that it almost made her laugh.

What would their reactions be? Would they welcome her with open arms? Or would they resent her for keeping her identity secret for so long? These unanswered questions bit at her, adding another layer to the complex tapestry of emotions that had become her constant companion.

Then there was Kunzite.

His face swam before her mind's eye—those piercing eyes, that rare, heart-stopping smile. Two years dreaming of him, reaching out in the

dark only to grasp empty air. The bond between them had once defied the gods, and now it lay dormant, waiting to be rekindled.

Now her hand moved to her chest, pressing against that spot behind her ribs. It pulsed faintly, reminding her of what she had lost and what might never be regained. Until she was reunited with him, until he was by her side once more, she wouldn't be whole. But the path to that reunion remained covered in mist, drowned in uncertainty and potential heartbreak.

The school bell's shrill ring shattered her reverie, making her flinch. The classroom erupted in sounds and voices. Books sliding into bags. Papers fluttering. Voices clamoring. A commotion she could never fully lose herself in. Minako gathered her books and slipped into the hall. Friends clustered together, talking excitedly about upcoming plans. Couples held hands, stealing kisses.

Demonstrating everything she was denied.

"Soon," she whispered to herself, casting one last glance at the indifferent moon. "Soon, but not soon enough."

She moved through the sea of students like a ghost, present but unseen. Reaching her shoe locker, she knelt to swap out her indoor slippers for her street shoes. Fingers working automatically to tie the laces, not really thinking. The cool metal of the locker door pressed against her shoulder, a slight distraction from the thoughts flooding her.

A cluster of girls approached, their voices bubbling with enthusiasm. Their excited chatter broke through her melancholy haze. She knew them, recognized them. Classmates she'd collaborated with on projects, shared polite conversation, even gone out with a few times.

But they weren't friends.

Not like Serenity, with her boundless energy and propensity to create mischief. Not like Mercury, whose quiet intelligence brought

comfort. Not like Mars or Jupiter, whose strength and loyalty had been pillars in another life. Not like him.

The thought of her true friends sent a pang through her chest, sharp and bittersweet.

“Minako!” one girl called out. “A group of us are going to karaoke to celebrate the end of testing. Come with us! You should totally come!”

Another chimed in, “Yeah! You’re an amazing singer.”

“Seriously, that song you did for the talent show was fantastic.”

For a heartbeat, Minako’s resolve wavered. She loved to sing and bounce around in front of an audience. Belting out a song was her idea of a good time. The thought of losing herself to a catchy melody and good food was undeniably tempting.

But the urge faded as quickly as it had come, smothered by the weight of her responsibilities. Reality crashed back in, heavy and inescapable. The Dark Kingdom’s activities were intensifying. Their oppressive aura hung over the city like a storm cloud. Shadows lurked around every corner and she still hadn’t pinpointed the location of D Point. On top of that, rumors of a new criminal gang had been circulating.

Responsibilities claimed her night that the others couldn’t comprehend. Songs and laughter couldn’t compete.

Minako forced a smile, hoping it didn’t look as brittle as it felt. “I really appreciate the invite, but I’m super busy tonight... with some things I need to take care of. I’m sorry I can’t make it.”

“If you say so.”

“Sing Eternal Melody for me, okay?” she finished tying her shoes and stood, shouldering her bag.

The other girls gave her a small wave before she turned. As she walked away, the sound of snickering reached her, each a tiny barb lodging in her heart.

“Minako isn’t very social.”

“Yeah, she always says she’s busy.”

“Wait, I know! Maybe she’s a superhero like Sailor V!”

“Ha! Yeah right! That’s a good one.”

Their laughter followed her, stalking her, haunting her. The irony of their joke didn’t escape her, but it didn’t bring any amusement, only intensified her feeling of deep, aching loneliness. If they only knew that every night she donned a mask to protect them, to keep the darkness at bay. That her absences weren’t born of indifference but of sacrifice.

Serenity would know. The others would be the first to defend her.

She glanced back, her eyes stinging with unshed tears. In that moment, the absence of the others hit like a physical blow. To be deprived of that companionship, that unconditional love and acceptance, had been the hardest trial of these last two years. The bonds they shared went beyond friendship—they were sisters, comrades, pieces of a whole that Minako missed more than anything.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to center herself. The weight of the transformation pen was a reminder of her duty, of the reason for her isolation. But knowing the necessity didn’t make the loneliness any easier to bear.

A familiar voice cut through her gloom. “There you are.”

The sudden appearance startled her, and she turned to see the white cat perched gracefully atop a nearby fence. His blue eyes observed her with a mix of concern and gentle admonishment. Sunlight gleamed across his white fur and reflected off the crescent mark on his forehead.

Quickly, she shook off the lingering haze of emotion, attempting to mask the vulnerability that had surfaced.

Artemis leaped down, landing softly beside her as they began to walk. “Thinking about them again?”

Minako’s shoulders slumped, facade crumbling. There was no point in lying to him. “I’m always thinking about them.”

He jumped to her shoulder, a comforting weight. “I know it’s been hard,” he said, nuzzling her cheek. “But remember, you’ll be reunited soon. Everything will be as it was.”

She exhaled slowly, and her gaze drifted up to the moon now peeking through the evening clouds. Its silvery glow cast an unseen light on the streets, illuminating their path. She could always feel the cold stone sensation of the moonbeams. It was such a stark difference to how they felt during Silver Millennium.

Now the moon was dead, devoid of any warmth or power. Not like before.

“I know,” she whispered. “But sometimes ‘soon’ feels like an eternity.”

“Cheer up, don’t be so gloomy.”

“Soon.” The word echoed, tasting bittersweet on her tongue.

They continued in a comfortable silence, the city’s sound enveloping them—a distant siren, the hum of traffic, muffled conversations from open windows. The familiar rhythm of the city usually brought her a sense of grounding, but tonight, it only emphasized the emptiness she felt.

Minako tried to focus on Artemis’s words, on the promise of a reunion. But a sudden flare of darkness ignited in her chest, cold and sharp. Her steps faltered, a hand pressing against her chest.

“Minako?” Artemis’s concerned voice seemed distant.

She pressed a hand to her heart, knowing what this meant. “Kunzite is being reprimanded again. The darkness around him is... suffocating.”

This connection was a double-edged sword. Allowing her glimpses into his world, but also forcing her to feel his turmoil.

“He has failed to capture the guardians and find the Legendary Silvery Crystal.”

Minako allowed her mind to drift back to a different time to the memories she shared with him. It surfaced with vivid clarity. When the Dark Kingdom had just surfaced, when they still had hope. As the leaders for their respective groups, they were responsible for strategy.

A sad smile crept across her lips. They’d argued over strategy. Kunzite tended to be more cautious while Venus wanted to smash the threat of rebellion as fast as possible. Together, they leaned over a table strewn with maps and lists, their heads close together.

But most of all, she remembered his smile—that rare, precious expression that could light up her entire world. It was a smile so deep and emotive that it made her heart ache even now. Then he’d look over at her, and his lips would caress her nickname, savoring every syllable like a sweet secret meant for only her.

She could almost hear him now. “Starshine.”

Minako blinked away tears as she pushed the memory away, refusing to let herself be consumed by them. Because if she let herself go, she’d remember that day. Remember how he looked when the darkness had tainted him. Remember the last time he looked at her with those eyes that had turned cold.

“He had such a way of making everything seem possible,” she whispered.

“I know you miss him.”

“Every day. Every minute. Every second.”

They turned down a quieter street, the buildings older, worn but still full of character. Minako took a deep breath, letting her lungs fill with crisp air.

“Do you think there’s still hope for him? For the others?”

Artemis paused, his tail flicking back and forth. “I believe that where there is love, there is always hope.”

She glanced at him. “I think so too.”

He leaned into her, offering his support. As they continued, Minako steeled herself for the night ahead. There would be time for memories and longing later. Right now, she had a duty to fulfill. As they approached their apartment building, the stifling sensation of loneliness appeared once more. As always, the windows were dark, the silhouette of the structure looming against the night sky. She hesitated at the entrance, her hand resting on the doorknob.

“Some nights, this place feels emptier than ever,” she admitted.

Artemis jumped down from her shoulder. “I still maintain you’d hate having a roommate.”

She stood on the threshold of her apartment, the key cold in her hand. The silence that greeted her was deafening, a vivid reminder of her isolation. Inside, the apartment was quiet, the only sound the faint hum of the refrigerator. Flicking on a light, the warm glow cast gentle shadows across the room.

The apartment was a study in contradictions. Tidy yet un-lived in. Decorated, yet devoid of warmth. Photos of smiling faces adorned the walls, but they were the stock photos that came with the frames. Not true friends. Not her sisters.

“I hope I don’t have to beg to get the good stuff for dinner tonight,” Artemis said, wandering into the kitchen. “I may be a cat, but I’m a higher intelligence! You shouldn’t make me beg to get the salmon and rice.”

She dropped her bag, and the thud echoed in the empty space. Her gaze fell on the only photo that meant anything to her. A candid shot, taken in secret of Usagi, Ami, Rei, and Makoto at the arcade. They were laughing, arms around each other, unaware of the camera. Unaware of her.

“Besides, you’re my partner.” He was rambling to make her feel better. “We should work together. Not make each other suffer, and you denying me salmon and rice is pure torture.”

“Do you ever wonder if things could have been different?” she asked.

Artemis jumped onto the table and looked at her, his tail curled around his paws. “What do you mean?”

“If the fall of Silver Millennium hadn’t happened. If the Dark Kingdom hadn’t taken hold. Where would we be now?”

He tilted his head. “It’s hard to say. But dwelling on ‘what ifs’ won’t change our path.”

The ache in her chest intensified. Her sisters, her best friends, didn’t remember her. She could walk down the street, and they wouldn’t turn to greet her. She could be sitting at the arcade, and they wouldn’t join her, wouldn’t share in the laughter and joy that once came so easily.

She had all the memories of friendship without the friends themselves.

“Cheer up, Minako,” Artemis said. “You’ll be together soon. Think of how happy you’ll all be then.”

She whirled on him, eyes flashing. “Soon isn’t soon enough!” she snapped. “It won’t undo these two years of isolation, of watching from the shadows. Of these months watching them fight without me. Even then, what about Kunzite?”

“You’ll get them back. But the Kunzite you knew...”

Anger burst through her chest, and she flung a pillow at him. “Don’t say it! Don’t you dare.”

Artemis offered his best cat shrug. “It’s a truth you have to face. Queen Serenity sacrificed her star seed to ensure that you and the others were reborn at the same time. Without that sort of power behind his reincarnation, he could be reborn a million years after you die, or not at all.”

She growled and picked up another pillow. “Artemis!”

“Sorry, sorry! I just don’t want to set you up with unrealistic expectations.”

Unsure she could face a lifetime without him, she squeezed her eyes shut. “I have to believe that the Galaxy Cauldron isn’t that cruel. That the gods aren’t that vicious. They denied us love back then. They can’t be heartless to deny us now.”

“If I say that it will happen, will you get me some salmon and rice?”

A smile spread across her lips as she stepped into the kitchen and opened the cabinet. “What about turkey and vegetables?”

Artemis choked and gagged, wrenching.

“What? You just love turkey and vegetables.”

Artemis turned his back on her. “I’m not begging.”

“Good, because I got you a special treat that I’ve been saving for a special occasion.”

He turned and looked back at her.

“I got some grilled mackerel with some shrimp and milk-poached rice.”

Artemis’s eyes went wide and his tale whipped back and forth. “I love mackerel! I love milk-poached rice!”

“See, I do love you.”

“Yeah, you do.”

She set the plate down and stroked his soft fur while he ate. Once he was completely engaged in devouring the food, she settled down in the living room. It had taken some serious work to get the Moon Central Control up and running here. But, eventually Artemis got it to work.

Granted, it meant her power bill was crazy high every month, but at least now she had a connection to what remained of the moon central computer. The screens flickered to life. News reports, police scanners, and arcane energy reading filled the displays.

With a few clicks, she began her nightly ritual, searching for signs of the Dark Kingdom's activity.

"Too bad Mercury isn't here," she mused to herself. "She was always better at getting this crap to work."

The only answer Artemis offered was chewing. Hours passed, the room growing darker as the sun set. Minako leaned back, rubbing her tired eyes. A flashing alert caught her attention—an energy spike in the Azabu-Juban district. That was where Usagi and the others lived.

Leaning in, she enhanced the image. A shadowy figure stood on the rooftop, silver hair gleaming in the moonlight. Kunzite. He was surveying the area, no doubt searching for signs of the Legendary Silver Crystal.

She wanted nothing more than to transform, to confront him, and break through the darkness that held him. But she couldn't. Not yet. She wasn't capable. Not when the darkness held him so firmly.

Casting a quick glance over her shoulder to make sure Artemis wasn't looking, she reached into the desk drawer and pulled out a small crystal fragment, no larger than her pinky finger. She discovered it inside the capsule that had held Artemis.

It was the only physical remnant of the Crystal Palace, the only tangible memory of Silver Millennium. As she rolled it between her

fingers, the crystal caught the moonlight, sparkling with an inner fire. In its facets, she saw flashes of a life long past. Grand celebrations, nights laughing in moonlit gardens, fierce battles fought side by side with her sisters and the man she loved.

“Will we ever get that back?” she whispered to the crystal.

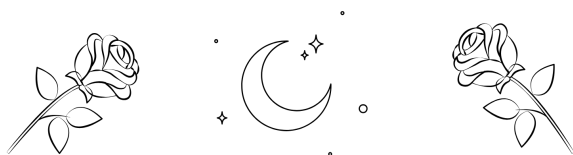
But it offered no answers, but as she clutched it to her chest, a warmth spread through her. It was hope, fragile but persistent. One day, she would stand with her sisters again. One day, she would look into Kunzite’s eyes and see recognition, not the cold emptiness of the Dark Kingdom’s thrall.

Until then, she would watch, and wait, and fight. For her princess, for her sisters, for the love she refused to let die. Sailor Venus, the guardian of love and beauty, would not falter in her duty.

In the quiet of the night, with the moon watching over her, she drifted into dreams where she wasn’t alone. Where laughter and love were constant, and where the shadows held no sway.



# *Chapter Twenty-Five*



## *The Rise of Metalia*

**D**arkness stirred, restless and agitated. Moments ago, an undercurrent of immense power had rippled through its realm—a radiant, overwhelming force that sliced through the shadows like a blade. It recoiled as the pure energy pierced its inky depths.

Sailor Moon.

The power tasted of moonlight and hope, unmistakably that of the White Moon Kingdom. Like an unwelcome and unsettling note, the name resonated through the darkness. Queen Beryl snarled from her icy throne, her eyes taking on a sharp gleam.

The air crackled with anticipation as Beryl rose to her feet. Everything sizzled and sparked as the darkness sensed her intent. She had served well, offering herself willingly to the dark, but she was noth-

ing more than a vessel, a minion whose true purpose was to awaken something far greater.

*Queen Metalia.*

A thrill coursed through the darkness's formless expanse. It had waited for this—the moment when its true equal, its master, would rise again.

With each clomp of Beryl's shoe on the cold stone, the darkness pulsed, tendrils of shadow curling with restrained impatience. She was a mere servant, after all—useful, but never meant to command.

With each swish of fabric, the darkness rippled, acknowledging Beryl's obedience but hungering for something far beyond her. It had no love for the puppet, only the puppet's role in the grander scheme.

With each step closer, the darkness trembled, not for Beryl, but for what was to come. The true queen of the darkness, the creature made of the same material, the same twisted purpose, would finally rise.

*Metalia.*

It had endured eons of silence, festering in the void, waiting for this moment. But now, the darkness would finally be whole again. Metalia would rise, and together they would tear the light apart, vanquish it from existence.

Together, they would turn this world to stone. Just like they'd done to the Moon Kingdom so many eons ago.

Queen Beryl descended the stairs, her flowing hair writhing like dark tendrils of smoke with each step. The cavern below pulsed with tainted energy, alive with the promise of the destruction to come. Darkness flooded the chamber, swirling, coiling, licking at the stone walls as if tasting the impending chaos. It sizzled and hissed, crawling across the polluted stones and burning the ice, as if nothing but it could exist in this place.

The air thickened, heavy and oppressive, like a hand pressed against the throat of the world. Every breath was suffocating, the atmosphere crackling with static, humming with a vile energy that made light flee. The very walls pulsed, throbbing in rhythm with the power that built, layer by layer, within.

*Only moments remain.*

Beryl reached the base of the stairs, her eyes glowing with a sinister hunger, her hand outstretched toward the massive iron and salt door that loomed before her. The door wasn't made by mortal hands—its surface writhed as though alive, veins of dark metal twisted and convulsed.

Runes carved deep into the salt glowed a hellish red, casting flickering shadows that danced grotesquely across the walls. With a rasping breath, Beryl laid her hand on the icy surface.

The moment her fingers made contact, the room erupted in sound. A low, guttural rumble that shook the very foundations of the world. The ground trembled violently, as if the earth itself recoiled from the darkness she was about to unleash.

“Our great ruler.”

The door shuddered, the runes glowing brighter.

“Queen Metalia! I call on you to awaken!”

A tidal wave of darkness burst from Beryl. It burst forth, colder than ice, hotter than fire, darker than black.

“I offer glorious energy to revive you!”

A deafening crack sliced through the air. Icy air rushed forth, carrying with it the stench of decay, as if all the dead rested behind its sealed walls. Darkness burst forward, eager, hungry, for what lay beyond.

Then came the voice—low, ancient, and dripping with malice.

“Obtain the Legendary Silver Crystal. Feed me its blessed energy.”

Darkness howled in response, an ecstatic scream that echoed through the cavern, rising in pitch until it became a chorus of sinister whispers. Beryl's lips twisted into a wicked grin as she took a step back, her eyes wide with triumph. The door groaned open wider, releasing a torrent of black smoke that billowed out like a newly released monster, thick as tar, choking the very light from the room.

Through the smoke, a shape formed. Massive, hulking with eyes like burning embers glowing in the black. Metalia had awoken.

Shadows barely contained her form, as if reality itself couldn't fully hold her. The cavern walls buckled, warped by her presence. A low, shattering laugh echoed through the chamber, shaking loose shards of stone from the ceiling.

Darkness surged forward, wrapping itself around Metalia like a lover reunited after eons apart. It embraced her, seeping into her, feeding her, until the very essence of the Dark Kingdom throbbed with their combined power.

Beryl bowed. "Queen Metalia. I am using my minions, the Four Kings of Heaven, to search the world over. Now only the land of Japan remains."

A blast of raw energy exploded outward, searing the cavern walls, and Beryl stumbled back, overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the power that now filled the room.

"I feel it. Even from this deep, dark pit! I feel it on the land... the power..."

Beryl's hands trembled, and the darkness laughed at her. Even this being infused with the very essence of the Dark Kingdom was nothing compared to its Queen.

"There is a possibility that they have the Legendary Silver Crystal already. But we cannot find it. And now Guardians have appeared to hinder us."

Darkness spat outwards, searing Beryl's skin.

"Those who buried me here so long ago. The denizens of that putrid kingdom have already been reborn. Are they trying to seal me away again!"

Rage burst forth, twisting the stone beneath her into jagged pillars of ice, then back again into a twisted labyrinth of frozen rock, as though her power was warping reality itself. Beryl shuddered, bowing lower.

"I shall not allow that!" Metalia screeched. "Do not allow the inheritors of the vile Moon Kingdom to awaken!"

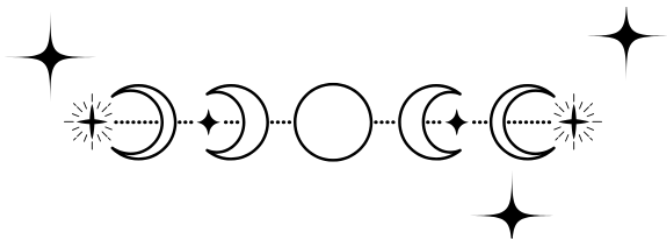
Darkness surged.

"Crush them!"

Darkness burst.

"Take back the Legendary Silver Crystal!"

The darkness rejoiced, erupting in wild ecstasy. It had waited so long, and now, at last, its true master had returned. The White Moon would pay, and the darkness would tear their world apart.



Mamoru stared blankly at the pages of his textbook, the words swimming before his eyes in an incomprehensible blur. The steady drone of the lecture's voice faded into the background, eclipsed by the tumult of thoughts clamoring in his mind. His mind, usually sharp and focused, was nothing but conflicting emotions and battling thoughts.

Usagi's face flashed before him, her bright blue eyes and warm smile sending a jolt through his chest.

He'd barely slept, haunted by the realization that he was in love with Usagi, that he'd told her everything. He clenched his fists, nails digging into his palms. How could he? Without thinking, he'd spilled his deepest secrets to her, laid bare the wounds he'd kept hidden for so long.

The confession had poured out of him like a dam bursting, uncontrollable and overwhelming.

The pain of his lost memories, the enigmatic dreams of a princess urging him to find the Legendary Silver Crystal. Secrets he'd guarded his entire life, now entrusted to a girl he barely knew.

But was that still true?

Every time he thought of Usagi, his chest tightened and heart fluttered, a mix of longing and fear twisting within him. There was no way to deny the way his heart raced when she was near, or how her laughter lit up the darkest corners of his soul.

She was no stranger; she was a part of him he hadn't known was missing.

His fingers reached into his pocket, brushing against the soft fabric of the handkerchief. The delicate embroidery traced under his fingertips—a tangible connection to her. Then his thoughts drifted to the locket.

That mysterious relic had consumed his thoughts for so long. Strangely, the urge to find it had lessened. For once, he didn't feel that gripping anxiety when it wasn't near. Where once the star locket had been his anchor, now it was her handkerchief that grounded him. Now that anxiety bloomed when that square of fabric wasn't near.

Even when he discovered the locket missing, concern flickered, but it didn't fill him with fear. He assumed it was with Usagi, perhaps giving her the comfort she needed. That was enough.

"Usagi," he whispered, the name both a balm and a torment. "What have you done to me?"

A sharp tap on his desk jolted him back to the present. "Mr. Chiba, perhaps you'd like to share your thoughts with the class?" the professor's stern gaze bore into him.

"The Meiji Restoration in 1868 marked the end of the Tokugawa shogunate and the return of imperial rule, leading to Japan's rapid modernization."

The professor eyed him critically. "Pay closer attention, Mr. Chiba."

The remainder of the class passed in a haze, and as soon as the dismissal bell rang, he gathered his things mechanically and offered some excuses to his soccer team, and slipped out. All he craved was solitude. The bustling corridors felt oppressive, each laughing student a reminder of normalcy he could never have.

The afternoon sun hung low in the sky, and he purposely avoided looking at the moon. Lately, he'd sensed some subtle changes in it, alterations he couldn't explain. Without glancing about, he boarded the bus and headed to the back.

For a moment he eyed the seat where Usagi had sat. Both hoping and cursing the idea she'd show up again. He could almost hear her voice, that adorable squeal that rippled glass and caused monsters to cry. A smile crept over his lips before he wiped it away. As he gazed out the window, the cityscape blurred past—a mosaic of colors and shapes that mirrored the disarray of his emotions.

"Why did I tell her that?" he spoke to the smudges of color moving past the window.

He had given Usagi a piece of himself, something he'd sworn was reserved for the princess in his dreams. He'd betrayed that ethereal being by opening up to someone else. But Usagi felt so real, so immediate. The warmth of her smile, the kindness in her eyes—they had anchored him in a way the elusive princess never could.

“Am I going crazy?”

Every memory of her felt like a vise around his heart, squeezing until he could hardly breathe. He shook his head, frustration mounting. No, Usagi wasn't just anyone. Somehow she'd become a part of him, woven into the very fabric of his being in a way he couldn't—didn't want to—undo.

Absentmindedly, he rubbed the handkerchief between his fingers, hoping to find solace in its softness. But the storm inside still raged on, a tempest of conflicting loyalties and burgeoning emotions.

Suddenly, the bus lurched violently, screeching to an abrupt halt. Mamoru was thrown forward, barely catching himself on the pole before him.

“Find Sailor Moon.”

“What the—“ The words died on his lips as a suffocating pressure descended upon him. It wasn't physical, but it might as well have been for the way it knocked the breath from his lungs. That crushing wave surged through the air, thick and palpable.

His breath caught, chest tightening as if an iron band had cinched around his lungs. Gasping, he clutched the pole, his knuckles white. The darkness was everywhere, seeping through the air, worming its way into his very bones.

It tasted of ash and despair. Smelled of ice and stone. An evil so potent it made him retch. It was unlike anything he'd ever felt before. Cold. Consuming. Utterly relentless.

A low hum resonated through the earth, the very ground shuddering with dread. Then, like whispers carried on a bitter wind, he heard the voice of the earth for the first time in his life. Clear as day, it cried out in fear and anguish: “Find Sailor Moon... Offer her to the Dark Kingdom.”

Ice flooded his veins. Usagi. They were coming for her.

His eyes widened, a chill slithering down his spine. The words reverberated within him, not heard with his ears, but felt deep in his bones. His heart pounded wildly. Usagi.

Panic clawed at his throat as the implications hit him. Whatever had just awakened was after Sailor Moon—after Usagi. The girl who stumbled into his life and turned everything upside down was now in mortal danger.

He glanced around the bus. The driver stared blankly before rising from his seat. “I must find Sailor Moon.”

Passengers stirred. Their movements were jerky, voices emotionless, their eyes glazing over.

“Find Sailor Moon. We must find Sailor Moon. She has the Legendary Silver Crystal.”

Mamoru fought to keep himself from succumbing to the darkness. He had to get to her. He had to protect her. The irony didn’t escape his notice. Only moments ago he’d been agonizing over his feelings for her, and now, faced with the prospect of losing her, nothing else mattered.

“We must find Sailor Moon.”

Mamoru pushed past them, urgency propelling him toward the exit. He stumbled onto the sidewalk. The surrounding city was already plunging into chaos. Everywhere, people moved with unnatural chaos, their voices merging to a single haunting refrain. It wasn’t just the passengers—this dark force had spread through the entire city.

Everywhere he looked, people were in its thrall. And they were all coming for her.

“Grab Sailor Moon! She holds the Legendary Silver Crystal!”

With trembling legs, he pushed through the crowd. Above, the sky roiled with dark, tumultuous clouds, blotting out the sun and casting the world into a premature twilight. A bitter wind whipped through the streets, carrying the stench of decay.

“We must find Sailor Moon.”

He clutched his chest, the spot beneath his ribs burned with a fierce intensity. It rolled and spat fear, desperation, and absolute terror. With each second that passed, the oppressive darkness pressed down heavier and heavier.

“Grab Sailor Moon! She holds the Legendary Silver Crystal!”

He had to find her. He had to reach Usagi before they did. Without a second thought, he broke into a run, weaving through the throngs of entranced citizens. Each breath was a fight, with the darkness seeking to smother him.

“Usagi, please be safe.” Desperation laced each word.

The darkness pressed in tighter, whispering promises of power if he'd only give in, only help them find Sailor Moon. He gritted his teeth against the assault, focusing on one thought alone: “Usagi, I'm coming. Hold on.”

As he turned a corner, the crowd thickened, a sea of bodies moving against him. They smashed windows and tore at each other. Their vacant stares and grasping hands formed a living barrier. He tried to shove his way through, but progress was agonizingly slow.

Frustration and fear clawed at him. Ducking into an alleyway, the shadows deepened around him, the darkness almost tangible. He pressed his back against the cold brick wall, closing his eyes, he tried to calm his breathing.

“Focus.”

He needed to calm the turmoil within, to harness his strength. Summoning his energy, he felt the transformation wash over him. He felt the energy surge, sharp and electric, wrapping around his body like a cloak.

The fear in his chest lessened, his mind sharpening as Tuxedo Mask took form. But even now, the darkness whispered. In a swirl of energy, he became Tuxedo Mask, the familiar attire settling around him like an old friend. The mask sharpened his senses, clearly cutting through the haze of panic.

Tuxedo Mask leaned against the cold brick, his chest heaving as he fought to maintain his control. The dark energy surging threatened to consume him entirely. The weight of it pressed against him, gnawing at his senses like invisible hands clawing at his soul.

Under and around him, the earth convulsed and shuddered, as if it was screaming in pain. Closing his eyes, he tried to calm the trembling world, but it was trying to soothe a wild animal. A bead of sweat trickled down his temple as he strained, pouring his energy into the ground. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the violent shaking subsided. But the effort left him drained, his limbs heavy and his mind heavy.

“Grab Sailor Moon! She holds the Legendary Silver Crystal!”

His eyes snapped open. But before he could make a move, more voices joined.

“Offer up Sailor Moon to the Dark Kingdom.”

More terrible terror clawed at him. This was beyond anything they’d faced before. Above him, the sky turned an impenetrable black, with ominous clouds rolling and blotting out any trace of light. As the last sliver of the moon vanished behind the inky veil, a bone-deep chill swept over him.

“Usagi.”

He pushed off the wall, stumbling into the street. Now the city had completed its transformation into a nightmarish landscape. People moved like soulless husks, their eyes vacant and glassy. They tore at buildings, smashed windows, and fought each other in their frenzied search for Sailor Moon.

Mamoru's chest tightened further, the knot of fear twisting into something sharp, unbearable. The spot behind his ribs burned hotter than ever before, the heat intensifying with every passing moment.

He broke into a run, his cape billowing behind him. Every fiber of his being screamed to find her, to protect her from whatever cruel fate awaited. Now he fully trusted that phantom feeling and followed the incessant tug that always led him to her.

"She's in danger."

Through that mysterious spot, waves of fear and urgency rolled across his chest. Then, with a start, he knew. These weren't his emotions, they were hers. He felt the terror she experienced spread across his soul. The feeling spurred him on, driving him to run faster than he ever had before.

"Find Sailor Moon."

Tuxedo Mask's heart pounded, each beat a desperate prayer. "Usagi, hold on. Please, hold on."

Every second felt like an eternity, each step seeming to take him further from her when he needed to be closer. That's when he felt a surge of power. Sailor Moon's power. He could almost hear her voice on the wind, a desperate cry for help.

Now he pushed forward with a new determination.

Then, through a break in the crowd, he saw her. His world narrowed to a single point. All other sounds and sights faded away. Sailor Moon, her golden hair shimmering even in the oppressive darkness.

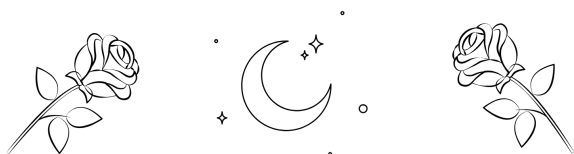
Her chest heaved, desperate for air, her breaths coming in shallow, ragged gasps. Each shudder sent a jolt of fear through him. A single tear slipped down her cheek, catching the faint light before disappearing into the shadows that clung to her like a second skin. Her body trembled, fighting to stay conscious.

The pressure in his ribs flared, a searing flash of white-hot pain. The fear, the urgency—it was all coming from her. She was terrified, and he could feel it tearing through his soul.

His breath caught in his throat as he watched the enemy's grip tighten, heard the faint, strangled sound that escaped her lips—a soft whimper of pain, barely audible over the chaos. Her entire body shuddered, on the brink of collapsing, and yet she still fought. Even now, she refused to give in completely.

But she was slipping away. He could see it in the dullness of her eyes, in the way her fingers had stopped struggling to pry the hand from her throat. And he was powerless to save her.

# *Chapter Twenty-Six*



## *Serenity's Shadow*

**T**he world shattered into its fundamental parts. Unfiltered rage racing through his chest. Absolute suffering as she writhed helplessly. Rough agony as he struggled to save her. Complete despair he'd arrived too late. He was at the mercy of every ripping anguish that tore through him. All made worse, because her guardians were all laying unmoving on the pavement.

All that existed.

All that mattered.

Was her.

“Usako!” The name tore from his throat, raw and desperate, cutting through the chaos like a lifeline cast into a storm. In that moment, everything else faded away—the elusive princess, the haunting fragments of his past.

Only her.

Usagi.

Here and now, slipping away before his very eyes.

Her eyes met his, and in that fleeting connection, time itself seemed to teeter on the edge of oblivion. Even with death hovering so near, she smiled—soft and radiant, like moonlight breaking through the darkest storm.

“You came for me,” she whispered, her voice barely more than a breath. “I knew you would.”

Zoisite’s grip tightened viciously, and Sailor Moon thrashed harder, her fragile strength ebbing with each passing second. The sight of her—so vulnerable, so close to breaking—ignited something fierce, something terrifying in him. A surge of power, white-hot and electric, coursed through his veins, unstoppable.

He didn’t understand it, couldn’t control it, but he embraced it wholly.

“Die!” the word hissed from Zoisite’s lips, venomous and cold, like a death knell.

With a roar that didn’t sound human, Tuxedo Mask lunged forward. The world blurred around him, narrowing to a single point—Zoisite’s sneering face. Just as the villain went to strike her, Tuxedo Mask’s fist connected with bone-shattering force.

The satisfying crack of bone meeting bone resonated up his arm, a sharp jolt that brought a satisfied smirk to his face. The pain exploding in his knuckles didn’t distract him, because his only thought was reaching Sailor Moon.

Zoisite staggered back, shock flashing across his features before twisting into seething rage. A hand came to cup the red spot as blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. His eyes narrowed and focused on Tuxedo Mask.

Tuxedo Mask didn't hesitate; he lunged towards Sailor Moon, his entire focus on pulling her to safety. Just as his fingers grazed her flesh, an invisible force slammed into him, hurtling him backwards. He crashed to the unforgiving pavement, the impact knocking the wind from his lungs.

"What gives, dude? I thought you were after the crystal, too!"

"What I want?" Tuxedo Mask struggled to calm his breathing. "You have no idea what I want."

"Really? Are you sure? Because I think you might be lying to yourself. You seem to want something pretty bad."

"He wants the crystal!" Sailor Moon shouted. "He needs it to remember, and he's been searching for it all alone! With no one to help him."

Yes, that was true. For so long, the crystal had been everything. The search consumed him, desire drowning him. He'd have given anything—everything—to find it. But now... after getting to know her, seeing her angry one moment and laughing the next, the truth hit him like a blade. The Legendary Silver Crystal? No, that wasn't what he truly wanted.

"Usako," he said, his voice breaking with raw sincerity. "It's you. You're what I want."

"Mamo!" she struggled against Zoisite's grip.

"Gag me with a spoon," Zoisite spat. "Too bad this little confession didn't come sooner. Because I'm going to kill you, then, as you're bleeding out on the sidewalk. You'll watch as she slowly fades before your eyes."

The words hit Tuxedo Mask like a physical blow, twisting his insides with dread. He reached desperately for Usagi, her name a broken prayer on his lips. The barrier shimmered between them, an

impenetrable wall of malice separating him from the one person who mattered most.

Zoisite sneered, raising the glowing dark crystal high above Sailor Moon. A twisted aura crackled around the crystal, casting eerie shadows across her pale face. Her eyes met his, wide with fear, and yet still holding that unyielding spark of hope.

“Say goodbye,” Zoisite snickered.

Each heartbeat stretched as Tuxedo Mask watched in horror, completely helpless to save the one he loved from impending tragedy. Just as the dark crystal descended, a brilliant explosion of light erupted from above, engulfing the entire area in a radiant glow.

The wave of power rolled across the area, its warmth both familiar and alien. The energy continued outwards, colliding with Zoisite's barrier and shattering it into glittering fragments. A scream of agony pierced the air as he staggered backwards.

Clutching his stomach, Zoisite seethed. “What is this?”

Tuxedo Mask blinked against the searing light, his limbs trembling. He looked upwards to see a figure standing atop a nearby building, illuminated like a celestial beacon. She glowed like the moon itself, her very essence radiating purity and strength. Everything seemed to bend towards her. Every aspect of her being shimmered with a beauty both awe-inspiring and terrifying.

“Well, I'm out. But just to get some terrible reinforcements, then I'll end you all!” Zoisite vanished in a dazzling display of dark petals and crystal shards.

“Who is she?” Sailor Moon whispered, her voice rippling along the light.

The radiant power had awoken the other guardians, and they all stood staring at the newcomer. He stayed in the background, still unsure how to feel.

“It’s the phantom champion of justice, Sailor V!” Sailor Moon cried out.

He stared at the figure harder. He’d heard of Sailor V. Who hadn’t? But he never expected to meet her... Or to feel such a strong attachment to her.

“Sailor V? She’s famous!” Sailor Jupiter shouted.

Sailor Mars stepped forward, the red of her uniform gleaming. “You’re kidding! Why is she here?”

“Luna?” Sailor Mercury questioned.

But he heard no response from the black cat. Everything about her shimmered—radiant and otherworldly. Her long hair cascaded like a waterfall of gold, and her eyes held a wisdom that seemed to span lifetimes. His heart surged—this had to be the princess from his dreams. The one he’d sworn to protect. Her presence felt achingly familiar, like a memory finally taking shape after endless nights of longing.

“I hardly take off the mask,” she finally spoke.

“Aren’t you all too rude?” Another voice spoke, a white cat stepping out into the light. “Yes, she is Sailor V, but her highness is also of the Kingdom of the Moon.”

A ripple flowed over the air.

“Silver Millennium.”

His heart surged with a maelstrom of emotions—recognition, longing, relief, and bitter disappointment. Because she wasn’t Usagi.

“And the blessed successor to the sacred royal treasure.”

Now the world held its breath.

“The Legendary Silver Crystal!”

Somehow, just the world seemed to contain a power, a spark of something that bit deep into his chest.

“She is Princess Serenity!”

The words exploded across of him. He knew it deep in his soul. The name struck him with the force of a thunderbolt. His entire body went hot, then aching cold in rapid succession. The spot behind his ribs, that mysterious nexus of emotion and sensation, flared to life in a brilliantly aching burst of electricity. It was as if every cell in his body was screaming in recognition, even as his conscious mind struggled to catch up.

He knew that name. The certainty of it shook him to his core, even as the implications threatened to tear him apart. Princess Serenity—a title that held the weight of destiny, of a love that the gods had forbidden. And yet, as he stood there, caught between the past and present, all he could think of was Usagi's smile, her warmth, her unwavering belief in him.

This was her, the enigmatic presence from his dreams, the one he'd sworn his life to protect with every fiber of his being. There she was, radiant and whole. A familiar aura washed over him, like a long-forgotten melody finally played after years of silence.

Yet even as his soul recognized her, a discordant note struck deep within his chest. His mind rebelled, his body tensing as if bracing for a blow. This wasn't right. This wasn't her—not truly. Confusion clouded his senses. The resonance he expected was muted, distant, like that melody was being played slightly out of tune. Why did his heart cry out for Usagi instead? Why did the princess feel like such a stranger?

The realization struck him hard. He'd chosen to protect Sailor Moon over the princess he'd been seeking all of this time. Guilt and despair flooded him.

Shame and confusion swirled within him, a tempest of conflicting loyalties and desires. His fists clenched, nails biting into his palms. It wasn't just his failure to protect Sailor Moon that consumed him.

No, this princess—wasn't the same. The feeling was wrong, distant. The dissonance grated at his very being. Now torn between duty and emotion, the weight of his choices pressed heavily on his shoulders. Guilt crashed over him in suffocating waves. She was real, flesh and blood, no longer just a figment of his dreams.

And he'd chosen Sailor Moon over her.

He was a cad of the worst sort, betraying both the princess of his past and the girl who captured his heart in the present. Shame and despair flooded his body, threatening to drown him in their murky depths. As the other guardians gathered close to the princess, each word sent a flash of fear across him.

But two words rang clear.

"Princess Serenity."

With each syllable the conflict within in raged harder, louder, stronger. Loyalty to a past he couldn't remember warring with the undeniable pull of the girl, who brought light into his lonely existence. As he gazed up at the radiant figure of the princess, Tuxedo Mask found himself adrift in a sea of uncertainty, torn between duty and desire, past and present, destiny and choice.

Then the radiant figure turned, her gaze sweeping across the gathered guardians before settling on him.

Her eyes met his with an intensity that pierced through his very soul. In that moment, he felt utterly exposed, as if she could see every detail. As if every conflicted thought and emotion was laid bare before her celestial eyes. She could see each doubt, every fear, all the secrets he harbored.

The weight was oppressive.

He couldn't face her.

Not now. Not like this. He couldn't face Sailor Moon, couldn't bear to see the confusion and hurt that would inevitably cloud her

eyes. He'd failed to honor her trust. And he couldn't face himself, tangled in a web of conflicting emotions and shattered expectations.

He'd betrayed both his past and his present in one fell swoop.

Without conscious thought, his body decided for him. He spun on his heels, cape whipping around him like a shield, and plunged into the welcoming darkness of the city. A hot fire burned his chest, and he knew it at once. Shame.

Each breath was a struggle as the tightness constricted his lungs. His legs moved on their own, carrying him far away from the scene, away from the piercing gazes and haunting questions. Faster, he plunged into the welcoming darkness of the city. With each ragged breath came a reminder of his cowardice. But he didn't shy away. No, he embraced it, because that was the truth.

"You're a coward."

He ran from everything. The truth he wasn't ready to confront, the guilt that weighed him down, and the one person he couldn't stop thinking about. The city blurred around him, a disorienting collage of lights and shadows that only deepened his sense of isolation.

"You're a fool."

The cool night air bit at his skin, but he barely felt it. Thoughts spiraled chaotically in his mind as fragments of memories, flashes of Usagi's smile, the haunting image of the princess, and the crushing weight of his failures stalked him.

Streets blurred past, the city a smear of neon and darkness. His footsteps echoed against the pavement, a relentless cadence driving him faster. But still those piercing blue eyes followed.

"Usako."

Her name rippled in his mind.

"Sailor Moon."

A bittersweet melody that both comforted and tormented him.

By the time he reached his apartment, his lungs burned, and his muscles ached, but the storm inside raged on, unabated. He fumbled with his key, hands trembling, finally bursting through the door as if escaping an unseen pursuer.

When the door slammed shut behind him, the sound reverberated through the space. With a flurry of golden power, the last vestiges of his transformation fell away, leaving Mamoru feeling more vulnerable than ever. The silence of his apartment was suffocating. The familiar surroundings offered no comfort, only serving as a stark contrast to the chaos within.

Horrible emotions crashed through his chest like relentless waves against a fragile shore. Shame clawed at him—a never ending reminder of his inadequacies. Disappointment settled like a heavy fog, clouding his thoughts and weight down his spirit.

“You’ll never be worthy of her.”

He stumbled into the dark living room, his legs finally giving out. Collapsing into the couch, Mamoru buried his face in his hands, his fingers digging into his scalp as if he could physically pull the turmoil from his mind.

“What have I done?” he whispered to the void.

Every decision, every hesitation, replayed in his mind. The moments where he could have acted differently, could have been stronger, wiser.

Emotions joined the chaos, each one vying for dominance. Shame burned hot in his veins, disappointment sat heavy in his gut, and an overwhelming sense of loss threatened to tear him apart. He was ashamed of his weakness, disappointed in his failure to live up to the destiny that had haunted his dreams for so long.

“Who am I supposed to be?” he murmured, the question hanging heavy in the air.

He looked around the room at the neat bookshelves, the carefully arranged furniture, all symbols of a life lived in order and control. But inside, he felt anything but composed. The façade was crumbling, and he didn't know how to piece it back together.

But beneath it all, a small voice whispered traitorously: he didn't regret choosing Usagi. And that realization only added to the tumultuous storm of feelings raging within him.

Unable to find solace, he leaned back and closed his eyes, hoping to escape into the darkness behind his eyelids. But even there, peace eluded him. Images flickered—Usagi's tear-streaked face, the cold gaze of the princess, the shadows of his own doubts looming ever larger.

Sleep overtook him quickly and dragged him into the depths of the restless unknown.

The air was electric, crackling with a twisted energy that buzzed against his skin. An acrid stench of smoke and stone assaulted his senses. Darkness pressed in from all sides, thick and tangible like a monster that sought to turn everything in its path to stone. Crystal towers, once proud and majestic, now lay in ruins, their shattered remains strewn across a landscape of desolation and despair. Once they pierced the sky, now they were only fragments of memory.

The ground under him pulsed with an sickening threat. Stone crept over crystal like a cancer, corrupting all it touched. Shadows danced at the edges of the world, indistinct, menacing forms that shifted and writhed. They were harbingers of destruction, sent to consume everything he held dear.

Despite the overwhelming despair, a singular purpose drove him forward.

"I have to save her. No matter the cost, she has to survive."

In his right hand, he clutched a sword. The worn leather hilt comfortable in his hand, a friend he'd relied on for eons. The weight was

familiar, intimate, and he trusted it with his life, with her life. In the dying light, the blade shimmered, a symbol of resistance against the encroaching darkness.

In his left hand, he held something warm and delicate.

Her hand.

It was soft as silk. Warm as sunlight, yet strong enough to anchor him amidst the swirling stone. Her essence resonated deep within his soul, their heartbeats synchronized as one. They shared a bond that defied the gods, their souls intertwined. He knew, with a certainty, that she was everything.

The Princess. His reason for fighting. His reason for being. His reason for breathing.

“Do you believe we’ll find each other again?” her voice was sad, lacking the usual spark she usually contained.

He brought her hand to his chest, pressing it over his thundering heart. “Feel that? Every beat is for you. In this life and the next. I’ll always find you. Always.”

Shadows pressed closer, hungry and relentless, their whispers growing louder. A cacophony of inhuman shrieks and the clash of steel on crystal assaulted his senses. They had to move.

“Don’t let go,” he whispered. He begged the gods, challenged fate itself. Let her be safe.

They fled through the devastation, her silvery gown billowing behind them like a shaft of moonlight. Each step was agony, each breath a battle against the miasma of evil that sought to choke him.

Four faceless figures emerged from the writhing shadows, their faces obscured but their deadly intent clear. Darkness wrapped around them, encasing them in its power. Exhaustion burned through every fiber of his being, but the need to protect her, to save her, pulsed stronger than any physical sensation.

“We need to move.” The words felt close, closer than they ever had before.

They ran, weaving through fallen pillars and jagged crystal shards. Each corridor seemed endless, each turn bringing them face to face with fresh horrors. A wall of darkness erupted before them, and from its depths emerged a figure with flame-red hair and glowing eyes. Rage, white-hot and all-consuming, surged through him.

“Finally, we’ll be together,” the figure hisses, her voiced dripping with twisted desire.

Behind him, the princess clutched at his armor.

“I’ll never forgive you for this,” he spat. “You’ve destroyed the Moon Kingdom!”

“And a great merit it is.”

Moonlight glinted off the edge of his blade, a promise of violence to come. But deep down, he knew it was futile. This onslaught wouldn’t relent, but he had to try. The tug of fate was too strong. Their time together was drawing to an inexorable close.

No matter how fiercely he fought, how desperately he struggled, they were both fated to die here.

With one last surge, he launched himself forward. If he could just clear a path, she might escape. She had to survive, even if he didn’t.

He slashed and parried with manic intensity, never releasing her hand. Her scream tore through him as the darkness closed in, swallowing the light, consuming everything in its path. His pulse roared in his ears. Each beat a countdown to their destruction.

Time slowed to a crawl as a blade of pure shadow materialized, hurtling towards the princess. In that moment, clarity struck him like lightning. This was the end.

“Princess Serenity!” His voice stretched through the fog.

“Princess Serenity!” The name erupted from his throat, burning like fire in his chest, resonating with a truth he’d always known but somehow forgotten.

Without hesitation, he shoved her aside, using his body as a shield. The shadow struck with a sickening thud, and his own blade clattered to the ground. Crimson color bloomed as he staggered and fell. The spot behind his left ribs pulsed with agonizing intensity—a symphony of love and anguish, of bonds that transcended devouring stone and forbidden bonds.

He wanted to tell her everything, to pour out his heart one last time, but the words didn’t come.

“No!” Her scream was raw, tortured sound that cut through the chaos. “Please,” she sobbed, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Please. I’m not ready.”

With trembling fingers, he cupped her cheek, hot tears mingling with the dust and blood on his skin. Everything was growing cold, the edges of his vision darkening.

“My love,” he whispered, summoning a ghost of a smile. “Find me... in the next life. I’ll wait for you. Always.”

The burning in his chest stretched, trembled, and then, with a pain more excruciating than any physical wound, snapped. A brilliant golden light burst from his chest.

“Find the Legendary Silver Crystal!”

Mamoru jolted awake, a strangled cry tearing from his throat. “Princess Serenity!”

The name burned on his lips, as real and vital as his own heartbeat. Sweat drenched his body, and his chest heaved as if he’d run for miles. The dream clung to him, more visceral and immediate than ever before.

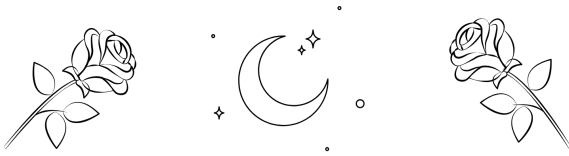
It wasn’t just a nightmare.

It was a memory, a truth his soul recognized even if his mind couldn't fully grasp it.

His hand rubbed the spot on his chest that ached with a phantom pain. "Why now?"

Why was everything becoming so clear, yet still tantalizingly out of reach? As the first light of dawn crept through the window, Mamoru knew with a grim certainty that he couldn't maintain this. The answers he sought were in his grasp, but the price of that knowledge might be more than he was prepared to pay.

# *Chapter Twenty-Seven*



## *Guilt and Grace*

**M**amoru sat alone on a weathered bench in the heart of the park, an open book on crystals resting idly in his hands. The park bustled with life, a stark contrast to the desolation consuming his soul. The gentle rustle of leaves overhead did little to soothe the storm within him. Soft morning light filtered through the branches, casting dappled patterns on pages filled with diagrams of crystalline structures and mineral compositions.

A subject that once captivated him now felt distant and irrelevant. “If I find the crystal, will I lose Usagi?”

The words blurred before his moisture filled eyes. His hands trembled slightly as he gripped the edges, knuckles white with tension. He tried to focus, to let the intricate structures and scientific notations pull him away, but the words morphed and twisted, refusing to adhere to his restless mind.

Every time he blinked, he saw Usagi’s face contorted in fear, her eyes pleading, her voice a haunting echo calling out for help he hadn’t been

able to give. Every fiber of his being ached beneath the weight of his failures, Usagi's desperate cries rippling through his mind, a haunting refrain that pierced his heart anew with each remembrance.

His stomach churned, a hollow emptiness gnawing at him—a physical manifestation of the meal he couldn't bring himself to eat. The sandwich he'd packed lay untouched in his bag, forgotten.

Sleep had abandoned him nights ago; whenever he closed his eyes, the same relentless visions assaulted him.

Peace eluded him. The tormented thoughts never giving way.

Looming over him was the imposing figure of the princess. Her presence was like a storm cloud, dark and foreboding, threatening to engulf him. She was real. She was a tangible being who'd stepped out of his fragmented dreams and into his conflicted reality.

She was no longer a figment of his mind.

She was no longer untouchable.

Finally, he found himself reunited with the person he was destined to protect and love forever. He should have felt relief or purpose. He should have run to her and drawn her close. Felt her lips against his. Brushed away the tears of their reunion. They should have laughed and cried together.

This should be a happy time.

But instead, all he felt was the staggering weight of his betrayal. That fact was crushing him, pulverizing his very essence. Days before their reunion, he'd fallen in love with another. He'd chosen Usagi over her.

His heart raced faster, a staccato beat of anxiety thrumming through his veins. Sweat beaded on his brow, as he silently prayed to any deity that might listen:

“Please don't let me run into Usagi today.”

So far he'd avoided her, using back roads and abandoned alleyways. Not straying far from school or home. He was taking a risk lingering in the park, but he had to calm his raging soul somehow.

He rubbed his temples, trying to massage away the tension that had taken up permanent residence there. Soon he'd flee, not wanting to risk destiny by lingering in the open much longer. Even this short time was playing with his nerves. The mere thought of facing her, of seeing the trust and warmth in her eyes, was unbearable.

How could he look at her without his guilt spilling over?

Without his emotions betraying the turmoil inside?

But it seemed that he'd tempted fate too long.

"Mamoru Chiba."

Her voice sliced through the ambient sounds of the park—the distant laughter of children, the chirping of birds, the rustle of leaves. His entire body tensed, a jolt shooting down his spine. For a moment, he debated not responding, hoping that she'd leave him in peace.

But he knew he couldn't ignore her. Not Usagi.

Slowly, hesitantly, he raised his eyes to meet hers. There she stood, resplendent in the sunshine. The golden light framed her like an un-touchable goddess, casting a soft glow around her that made his heart ache even more. The sight of her took his breath away.

His entire body screamed to close the distance between them. To hold her. To bury his face in her hair, to breathe in the comforting scene that was uniquely her. If he could just be close to her, maybe this terrible ache would subside. To let her presence wash away the emptiness consuming him.

But he couldn't.

The princess was real, and the weight of that responsibility pressed down on him. She stood between them like an invisible wall.

"Good morning," Usagi chirped, her voice light and melodic.

Is it? The cynical thought flashed through his mind. Is it a good morning to face his own failures and inadequacies? To face the love he betrayed for another?

His chest tightened, the ache growing sharper with every second she stood before him. Her presence was a gravitational pull, inescapable and intense. He couldn't resist her, even though he should.

Now his heart beat faster, each beat a reminder that his feelings were anything but simple. Those same emotions flared brighter—guilt, longing, duty, love—all fighting to be recognized. He shut the book with a decisive snap; the sound cutting through the silence.

“Yeah,” he managed, the word feeling hollow in his mouth.

The silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken words. Mamoru's mind raced, searching for something—anything—to say that wouldn't reveal the turmoil within him.

“It seems that even when I don't feel I have the right to talk to you, it's still my destiny to meet up with you, Usako,” he said finally, her nickname slipping from him before he could stop it.

He hoped that was benign enough. Perhaps she wouldn't think he was going crazy.

A soft smile curved her lips, and some of the tension eased from his shoulders. “Yeah. I guess so.”

For a blessed second, their eyes met, and everything was right with the world. Then she glanced away, and all the worst emotions came flooding back. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled something out.

“Um, this watch. It's yours isn't it? I've been meaning to return it to you.”

The sunlight glinted off the golden star locket, its surface glistening and reflecting tiny beams that danced between them. His breath caught. So this hunch was correct—the locket had found its way to

her. It had abandoned him to bask in her radiance. A mix of relief and melancholy washed through him.

He didn't blame it; if he could stay close to her like that, nestled safely in her pocket, he would. If he could be by her side always, he would choose that without hesitation.

A smile tugged at his lips. "No, you keep it. I have something of yours as well."

And he could feel the slight weight of her handkerchief in his pocket. The comforting aura that seemed to radiate off it. A part of him would perish instantly if she asked for it back.

Her eyes widened, curiosity sparkling in their azure depths. "Wh—what? What do you have of mine? What did I lose?"

Now all thoughts before were gone. All that existed in the world was him and her. A grin tugged at his lips, surprising him with his genuineness. He felt more calm, more composed than he had in days.

"Next time. We'll make a trade."

"Okay," Usagi beamed up at him, her smile as radiant as the sun overhead.

As that breathtaking smile crossed her face, the tightness that had been constricting Mamoru's chest began to loosen. He felt his shoulders drop. All the tension he'd been carrying melted away. His breathing slowed, deepening as if he could finally take in a full breath after days of shallow gasping.

Her smile had an otherworldly effect. Calming, like a soothing spell on his frayed nerves. Like the world made sense again, even if for these precious seconds. She stepped closer, that smile still across her lips.

"Do you like chocolate cake?" she asked, almost timidly. "I don't know many of your preferences, so I made a list of important questions!"

She pulled a crumpled paper from her school bag. “Do you think clouds look fluffy, like you could sleep on them? Or do you think they look cold and wet? What’s your opinion about red pants? Oh, this is important. Do you know how to juggle? Do you think plants get lonely? If you could eat dessert for every meal, would you? Oh! If you had to wear one color for the rest of your life, what would it be? If you could only wear green blazers, would you?”

Mamoru couldn’t help himself, and he burst into laughter. She was so animated and bright. Nothing compared to his brooding darkness.

“That’s quite a list.”

“I thought really hard about what I wanted to ask you,” she giggled, and leaned forward. “I wrote these questions instead of doing my English homework.”

He tried to shoot a disapproving glare at the idea of her skipping school work, but the sun caressing her cheek stopped him short. “Let’s see. I’ve never thought about sleeping on a cloud. I’m rather partial to the color red, so I might wear red pants. I don’t know how to juggle. Plants don’t get lonely because of the root system and the complex ecosystem that the natural world possesses. I wouldn’t enjoy eating dessert for every meal. Blue is an excellent color, so I’d probably wear shades of blue for the rest of my life. And I know for a fact, I rock green blazers. I have several.”

An even bigger smile crept over her lips. “It’s settled! We’re perfect! Except the desserts bit. I could eat pie every day for the rest of forever! Especially if it’s my momma’s lemon pie. It’s so delicious. When you have some, you’ll know!”

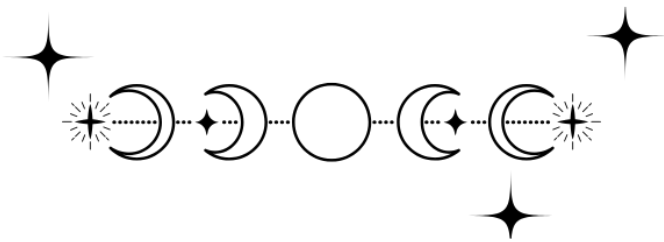
He stepped closer to her. With each word she uttered, she seemed to brighten, and she launched into an animated description of a nearby cake shop. Her words flowed like a gentle stream, each one rolling over

him. He relaxed, the tension in his shoulders easing as he listened to her cheerful chatter.

Mamoru let her voice wash over him. The warmth of the sun on his skin, the soft breeze rustling the leaves, and Usagi's melodic tones blended into a soothing symphony. In this moment, he felt truly contented. And he only wanted to bask in her presence.

As he watched her gesticulate excitedly about the various cakes and pastries, Mamoru realized that being with Usagi, listening to her, existing in her orbit felt right. It transcended duty or destiny. It was a feeling he wanted to hold on to, even as the complications of his life loomed on the horizon.

The guilt and conflict that had consumed him earlier began to recede, replaced by a warm certainty. For the first time since the appearance of the princess, he allowed himself to acknowledge a simple truth: he was glad he'd chosen Usagi. Despite the challenges ahead, despite the weight of destiny, in this moment, he knew he'd made the right choice.



Deep within the abyss where light was a forgotten memory, Darkness pulsed and writhed. It coiled around Queen Metalia like a lover, tendrils of shadow intertwining with her form until it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. They were two forces

merged into one. A singular embodiment of ancient malice and unquenchable hunger.

The chamber pulsed with a perverse energy. Walls slick with a stony substance that absorbed all light and hope. The air was viscous, tainted with the stench of decay and the echoes of tormented whispers. Shadows danced freely, forming twisted shapes that defied logic and sanity.

“So, the princess from the Kingdom of the Moon has appeared?”

“Yes, Queen Metalia.”

“I wonder why I didn’t sense her awakening. Even in my sleep, the power should have been overwhelming. No doubt she is hoping to obliterate me, and revive her kingdom.”

Darkness caressed her, causing her form to flicker and distort, a mass of shadow and sickly green energy. Laughter echoed through the void, a sound that shattered sanity and curdled blood. “I still sense nothing from her, and she’s not aggressively attacking me.”

Tainted revulsion spread along the shadows. The white moon was welcome to try and end the mistress of evil, but they’d fail. Like they failed before.

“You must crush them.”

Dark swirled in violent anticipation, its tendrils curling and twisting like vipers ready to strike. Hatred ran deep, a festering wound that bled through millennia. But their attempts at survival would be nothing. Like a flame devoured by a howling storm, the White Moon’s light would be snuffed out. Plunging the world into nothing but shadow and stone.

“You must pulverize them.”

A tremor of violence sank into every blackened corner. Shadows writhed, thick and oppressive, as their weight felt like iron shackles ready to crush the world. A tremendous hunger surged within the Darkness, bloodlust licking at the edges of everything. It wanted to

grind their bones, feel them splinter and crumble to dust under the crushing weight of night.

“You must punish them.”

A low guttural growl reverberated through the void, the sound of a thousand throats howling in unison. The Darkness quaked, ravenous, tasting ask and death in the air. Every tendril flexed with depraved intent, craving shattered flesh and broken wills. It would rip the light apart, see it crumble into nothing, scattering the last remnants of hope like dust in a gale.

“Now.”

Darkness surged forward, tearing through the night like a predator unleashed. The command set it ablaze with brutal energy. There was no time to linger in delight—it would rip the light apart, tear the White Moon from the sky, and devour every shred of resistance in a simple, glorious sweep.

“We must find the Legendary Silver Crystal now,” Metalia purred, her voice rolling along the shadows like a lover. “Steal it for ourselves if we are to rule the Earth, Beryl.”

In the depths of their shared consciousness, visions of the princess, her flesh melting away to reveal the bones beneath, danced through their collective mind.

“Summon him,” Metalia commanded.

If the dark could laugh, it would cackle at the fall of the Four Kings. Only one remained. Kunzite. Soon, his pathetic figure emerged from the shadows beyond. His mind held great conflicts. Sadness at the loss of his comrades. Joy at being the only one remaining.

Stepping closer, it relished the quiver of his muscles; the sweat beading on his brow. This tainted warrior was nothing compared to the dazzling Queen Metalia. Silver hair whipped in the unfelt wind. Darkness ran along his skin, tasting his power, biting his potential.

Queen Metalia would never debase herself by speaking to such a pathetic pawn. She'd leave that to the lesser servants.

"It would take nothing for the Legendary Silver Crystal to revive your fallen brothers, Kunzite," Beryl said.

"I know that, Queen Beryl." He kneeled before her and kissed her hand.

"You must end the princess and her Sailor Guardians."

"My Queen," Kunzite bowed, his voice quivering as the dark pressed tighter against him. "I have already formed a plan to draw the princess and her guardian's out."

As he spoke, the Darkness probed his mind, reveling in the calculated cruelty it found there. Yes, Kunzite was powerful, perhaps the most formidable of all the Four Kings. But the Darkness could sense the truth. In the end, he too, was expendable.

Nothing more than kindling for the inferno that would consume all of creation.

With a surge of power, it wrapped around Kunzite, taking them to the Starlight Tower. Vile twinkling light spread out from the mortal world. It battled faithfully against the growing influence of the dark, but as always happens, dark won.

It raced along the city's electrical grid, a plague of shadows spreading their infection. Streetlights exploded in showers of sparks, buildings groaned as their foundations shook, and a bone-deep chill settled over every living thing.

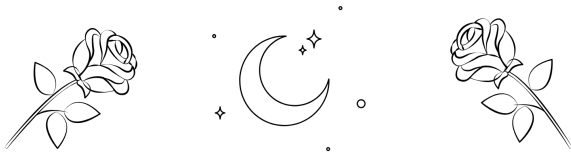
People stumbled in the streets, their eyes wide with a primal terror as the shadows lengthened and twisted around them. Children woke screaming from nightmares. Even the animals reacted. But all fell before the darkness. Their forms withering into dried husks, falling where they stood.

Soon, every heart would know the touch of darkness.

And when the last glimmer of hope had been silenced, when despair reigned supreme, the Dark Kingdom would rise victorious.

The Darkness swelled with anticipation. The final battle was at hand. And this time, the light would not escape its grasp.

# *Chapter Twenty-Eight*



## *Fallen for Love*

The world constricted around him like a vise, the air dense and suffocating, laden with a darkness that clung to his skin like a second, sinister layer. Above, the sky was a yawning void; the stars snuffed out by an all-consuming shadow that devoured every hint of light. Nothing but a cold, empty abyss. Under him, the ground trembled violently, cracks snaking through crystal. From these gaping chasms, tendrils of darkness writhed upward, reaching for him with claw-like fingers.

Frantic, he searched for her, knowing that the princess should be near.

“Princess!” he shouted.

Shoving further into the stone, he stumbled to a stop. There she was, the princess from his dream.

But something was wrong. Her figure, once luminous and pure, was now being consumed by the encroaching shadows. The ethereal

glow that always surrounded her flickered weakly, swallowed by the creeping blackness that wrapped around her.

Desperation clawed at his chest as he reached out to her, not just to save her, but to grasp the hope that she embodied. But now, even that hope felt distant, her warmth leeching away by the pervasive evil. The dark ebbed that warmth away, slowing stealing it, leaving nothing but cold stone in its wake.

The heat that pulsed behind his ribs rippled with a mounting terror. It screamed at him, shouting of its utter terror. Fighting the black, he trudged forward. Her silvery gown hung in tattered fragments, and darkness crept up her arms, coiling like serpents, dragging her deeper into the darkness.

“Princess!”

She turned to him. Her eyes—once full of light—were hollow, consumed by the shadows that pooled within them. A silent scream seemed to be frozen on her lips.

Harder, he struggled, but his entire body felt weighed down as if it was entombed in concrete. Every time he tried to move, he faced crushing resistance. The darkness pressed in around him, thick and tangible, squeezing the breath from his lungs.

“Don’t surrender!”

He reached out, his hand trembling, but the space between them only seemed to wide, an insurmountable gulf. Every step felt like a battle, a monumental struggle, every breath like dragging air through tar.

The darkness closed in, smothering the last glimmers of light.

“Endymion!” she screamed, her voice reaching out for him. It was her. No, it was more than that. It was urgent, desperate, the sound of someone about to be lost.

The name hammered in his chest, igniting a surge of adrenaline. It echoed through him, reverberating through his very soul, and in a surge of panic, he bolted upright, gasping for air.

A slick cold sweat clung to his skin, chilling in the dark apartment. But even awake, the nightmare still had its claws in him. His breath came in shallow gasps, his ribs aching beneath his fingertips, as if the darkness from his dream had seeped into reality, lingering in the corners of the room.

The air felt heavy and stifling, the shadows unnaturally deep, as though the very walls conspired to hold the night closer. The vivid images refused to fade, searing themselves into his mind.

“Endymion?” the word hung in the silence, haunting and insistent.

He rubbed his eyes, pressing the heels of his palms against them as if he could erase the lingering vision, but it was no use. The dream lingered, clinging to him like a second skin, and the emotions clung to the stillness like a specter, a whisper from a forgotten past. The boundary between dream and reality felt blurred, and the pervasive darkness seemed all too real. It pulsed around him, a living entity hungry for his fear.

His breath heaved as if he'd sprinted for miles, each breath shallow and strained, catching in his throat. This wasn't just the aftermath of a nightmare—it was something more sinister, more real. The darkness that clung to him was a predator's hot breath on the back of his neck.

The darkness from the dream gripped him like a living thing, wrapping around his limbs, seeping into his pores, as if reality itself had become tainted by his vision.

Wait.

Mamoru froze, this dream differed from the ones tormenting him night after night. This was different—more vivid, more immediate. The voice was too familiar, too immediate. And the name, Endymion.

It was like a key to a lock he couldn't find. It wasn't just a name; it was a plea, a summons.

Unnerved, he pressed a palm against the spot on his ribs, wincing at the fiery sensation that bloomed there. The pain seared through her body like fire, demanding her attention with its sharp, persistent intensity. It pulsed with a strange urgency he couldn't ignore.

"Something is wrong."

Throwing off the covers, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood, the cool floor biting against his bare feet. Crossing the room in quick strides, he threw back the curtains. The sight made his blood run cold.

"What?"

An unnatural darkness blanketed the entire city, as if night had turned to stone. There were no remnants of a typical night, instead a suffocating void absorbed streetlights and starshine alike. The usual hum of Juban was eerily absent, replaced by a heavy silence that set every nerve on edge.

"Is she?"

An uneasy feeling spread through his gut, tightening into crushing pain. Something was terribly wrong. The oppressive darkness wasn't just an absence of light—it was a presence, malevolent and consuming. And deep within that abyss, he could sense her.

"Sailor Moon."

"Usagi."

He could feel it with every fiber of his being. His fist collided with his open palm, the sharp sting of a physical manifestation of his determination. The memories of his past failures crashed over him—the times he'd been too late, too weak, to lose in his own confusion to help her when she needed him most.

"This time will be different."

The memory of her tears, her pain, flashed before his eyes. The darkness might have engulfed the world, but it wouldn't claim her. Not while he still drew breath.

"This time I won't fail her."

The decision settled over him like a mantle, heavy but resolute. He reached for that latent golden power deep inside of him. The surrounding air stirred, the darkness momentarily pushed back by the burst of power as his attire shifted to that of Tuxedo Mask.

Waves of electric darkness rolled across the earth. Immediately, the burning behind his ribs intensified, not with pain, but with purpose. It pulsed in time with his heartbeat; the vibrations humming through him, and in that moment, everything crystallized with startling clarity.

"Usako."

That fiery presence—it had always been her. The realization struck him like lightning. The persistent ache, the pull he felt whenever she was near—it wasn't some phantom pain. It was her. A bond, tangible and real, tied him to Usagi, to Sailor Moon. Every moment of comfort, every surge of warmth, every pull that had drawn him to her—it was more than coincidence. It was a connection, etched into his soul, pulsing with life.

"All this time..." he breathed, astonishment mingling with a fierce sense of rightness.

As the truth settled over him, the burning intensified, no longer just a spot but a blazing beacon. It pulsed with her essence, with the love and light that defined her. There was no more hesitation. He leaped from his balcony, landing deftly on the adjacent rooftop. The cityscape stretched before him, cloaked in shadow, but he could feel the path he needed to take.

Each step propelled him forward, the vibrations through the soles of his feet guiding him like a compass pointing true north. Waves of

electric darkness rolled around him, tendrils reaching out as if to hinder his progress. But with every leap and bound, he pushed through them, the bond in his chest blazing a trail.

“No matter what, I will find her. I will save her.”

Because now he understood—she wasn’t just someone to protect. She was a part of him, as essential as the air in his lungs or the blood in his veins. The princess would understand. She had to. She was his past. Usagi was his present.

He would move heaven and earth to keep her safe.

As he raced across the rooftops, scenes from their encounters flashed in his mind—the moment of connection, the unspoken understanding that passed between them. How could he have been so blind? The dreams of the princess had always left him feeling empty, searching, confused. But with Usagi, there was warmth, a sense of coming home.

Whatever awaited them in the darkness, they would face it together. He wouldn’t let her face it alone.

“Hold on,” he murmured into the night, eyes fixed on the distant horizon where he could almost perceive a faint glimmer amidst the gloom. “I’m coming.”

He ran through the labyrinth of shadows, each stride fueled by the urged pulsing in his chest. The fire beneath his ribs flared hotter with each step, a searing light that guided him unerringly through the suffocating darkness. Buildings blurred past as he moved, the city a twisted maze of unnatural vibrations. The deeper he got, the thicker the air grew until it was almost viscous, resisting his every move like an unseen force trying to hold him.

His cape billowed behind him like a shadow given form. Through the swirling gloom, he saw them. Sailor Moon and her fellow guardians, their figures illuminated by flashes of elemental power.

They stood defiantly against the encroaching darkness, battling a figure whose silhouette was all too familiar.

Light flashed, power built, but Kunzite deflected it easily. A forceful blast of radiant energy lit up the sky. Sailor Moon was there, shimmering defiantly in the gloom.

“Sailor Moon!”

Before he could make a move, his worst fears materialized before his eyes. A blast of dark energy erupted from Kunzite’s outstretched hand, striking the air near Sailor Moon. The force of the explosion sent her hurtling backwards, her scream piercing the heavy hair as she plummeted into the abyss below.

Time slowed, each heartbeat echoing like a thunderclap in his ears. Without hesitation, he propelled himself forward, muscles tensing as he leaped into the void after her. The wind whipped past him, cold and biting, but all he could focus on was the diminishing distance between them.

“Usako!” he shouted. The name tore from his lips.

They collided mid-air, his arms protectively wrapping around her. The impact jarred him, but he tightened his hold, pulling her securely against him. Twisting, he absorbed the shock as they landed on a metal beam of the Starlight Tower. Her warmth seeped into him, chasing away the chill of fear that had gripped his heart.

She clung to him, her fingers gripping the fabric of his tuxedo as she caught her breath. “Tuxedo Mask!”

He was acutely aware of every point of contact between them—the heat of her body against his, the rise and fall of her chest, the softness of her hair brushing against his cheek. An electric current passed between them, igniting nerves he hadn’t known existed. The sensation was overwhelming. Her touch magnetic, sending sparks racing across his skin.

Then she embraced him with blistering intensity, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him closer, as if pouring her entire being into that single moment. Her presence was everything he'd been aching for.

The world around them faded, leaving only the sensation of her wrapped around him and the steady rhythm of her heartbeat. Her touch was both gentle and desperate, as if she, too, feared that if she let go, he would slip away into the shadows forever. It wasn't just a hug—it was a pure expression of the words they couldn't say.

Now there was no more torn conflict. While the princess would always hold a piece of his heart, Usagi was his future.

“Are you alright?” he asked softly, searching for any sign of injury.

She nodded, her gaze never leaving his. “Thanks to you.”

The burning in his chest transformed into a warm glow, spreading through his entire body. For a moment, the chaos of the surrounding battle faded into nothing. The darkness, the looming threats, all of it dimmed in the face of the connection sparking between them.

A calm serenity spread, a profound sense of rightness that defied explanation. He wanted nothing more than to hold her, to bask in this newfound completeness. When she pulled away, he almost cried at the loss of her.

“It's dangerous here!” she warned him, her voice heavy with concern. “We'll defeat the enemy. But you have to go! Go as far away as you can!”

It was astounding how solid she looked. The determined set of her jaw, the fire in her eyes—she was every bit the warrior he knew her to be. But the need to protect her, to keep her safe, overrode all else. He wanted to tell her everything. How he'd finally understood their connection, how she meant everything to him.

But now wasn't the time.

Before he could say anything further, she moved closer, her eyes shining with an emotion that made his breath catch. Then, without warning, she leaning in and pressed her lips to his.

The world exploded into a supernova of sensation. Then rebuilt in an instant into something more.

If her hug had been electric, this kiss was pure devastation. Light erupted, a kaleidoscope of colors more vivid than any he'd ever seen before. Power surged through him, setting fire to every nerve, and sending dazzling energy straight to his soul.

The kiss sent a shockwave through his entire being, more powerful than any attack he'd ever faced. Time didn't just stop, it ceased to exist entirely. The darkness, the danger, even the metal under them.

There was only her—the taste of her, the warmth of her breath, the intoxicating closeness that overwhelmed his every sense. As he'd been wandering, lost in a labyrinth, and had finally found the way out. The ache that haunted him, the unanswered questions, the relentless dreams—all of it culminated in this singular moment of clarity and connection.

She was the force that completed him, the raw, vital energy he hadn't known his soul had been starving for.

But all too soon, she pulled back, her cheeks flushed, eyes shimmering with determination and something deeper. The world rushed back in, the terrible evil pressing around them once more.

Then she was gone. Darting back into the fray with a grace that belied the surrounding danger.

He stood there, stunned, the imprint of her lingering like a brand on his lips. His soul swelled with a fierce resolve that hardened like tempered steel. He wouldn't allow her to face this alone. Her absence left him cold, and the darkness more oppressive than ever.

He gasped, lungs burning as if he'd forgotten how to breathe without her.

"Today you're a mighty warrior." He watched her move with grace and power. "Every time we meet, you show me a different face."

She was radiant, a beacon of hope in the face of evil. Her determination and bravery stole his breath away. "I wonder if there are still different versions of you? And what kind of girl are you, really?"

She shone brilliantly, her spirit undiminished despite the overwhelming odds. He found himself captivated anew. "Sailor Moon."

The sky erupted with a flash of power, and the sudden burst of energy snapped him back to the immediate danger. Bolts of power flashed and crackled across the sky as the guardians fought valiantly against Kunzite. Tuxedo Mask's heart clenched at the sight.

Memories flickered—remnants of familiarity he couldn't quite place. Despite everything, a part of him didn't wish harm on this attacker. But Kunzite was relentless, his attacks aimed to destroy, and he was intent on bringing harm to Sailor Moon and her friends.

Kunzite raised his hand, dark energy coalescing around his palm. The very air seemed to recoil as an immense force gathered, the ground trembling in anticipation. Tuxedo Mask could feel the magnitude of the impending assault, the sheer power threatening to engulf everything in its path. The earth itself writhed, resonating with the evil aura.

Everything was happening too fast, the guardians were moving too slowly. Sailor Moon stood before the princess, arms outstretched, ready to sacrifice herself. The realization hit Tuxedo Mask like a bolt from above. This attack would be fatal.

A cold dread washed over him. He wouldn't stand by and watch her die. Instinct took over. He couldn't lose her. Not now. Not ever.

As the dark energy erupted from Kunzite's hand, surging towards her like a ravenous beast. The world slowed, each fraction of a second

stretched into infinity. That seething mass of destruction hurtled towards her. And in that moment, everything became crystal clear.

His body moved of its own accord, driven by a love so profound it changed his destiny. From somewhere in the back of his mind, a prayer etched itself into his thoughts. He couldn't lose her again.

With a desperate lunge, he threw himself between Sailor Moon and the oncoming attack. The impact was immediate and overwhelming. It slammed into him with the force of a tempest, searing pain rippling through his body. Agony unlike anything he'd ever known tore at him, but he held firm, anchoring himself against the torrent.

He wouldn't fail Sailor Moon. He wouldn't betray Usagi.

Behind him, he heard Sailor Moon screaming, a sound mingled with shock and fear.

The force drove him back, his body sliding through the air. Every nerve screamed in protest, but he refused to yield. His gaze locked onto Kunzite's, a silent challenge passing between them.

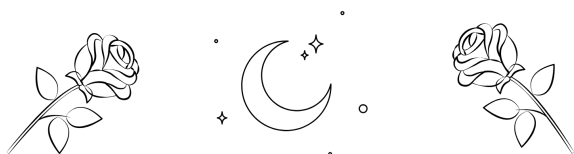
Finally, the onslaught ceased. The residual energy crackled around him before dissipating into the ether.

"Tuxedo Mask!"

The princess held him, her celestial form bathed in moonlight that seemed to spill from the heavens just to highlight her. The pale glow was almost blinding, wrapping her in a simmering veil of brilliance, as if the very stars had descended to encase her in their light.

But her face was sad. A face like hers should never be sad.

# *Chapter Twenty-Nine*



## *Repeating Fate*

**N**ow the pain wasn't so piercing. The cold wasn't so deep. The despair wasn't so biting as reality warped around him. Weightless and timeless, the veil made him feel as if someone had shown him a memory that was his own.

As if he'd been pulled into a realm where time held no sway, where moments stretched into eternity and the past and present intertwined seamlessly. A sense of *déjà vu* washed over him, an overwhelming certainty that this moment had played out before, in another life, another time.

"Something like this has happened before." The words echoed through the void.

Yes, the truth of it was startling and stark. He'd been here before, in his first life. In his other life. In that split second, he'd made the choice to use his body as a shield, just as he had then.

The strike landed with a sickening thud, a sound all too familiar.

The sudden, terrible silence that followed echoed through him—he had heard it before, lifetimes ago.

Crimson bloomed across his chest, just as it had in that other time, in that other life.

But this time, the voice that shattered the stillness wasn't Serenity's.

"No!" Sailor Moon's anguished cry tore through the air, so different yet so achingly the same. She clung to him, her tears falling onto his cheeks like the raindrops of another lifetime.

"Mamo, please," she sobbed, her voice breaking. "Don't leave me."

The bond between them pulsed, a living thread that had survived the death of kingdoms. Where once there had been confusion and conflict, there was now only truth.

The world shimmered, unreal, as moonlight cascaded down, illuminating the princess like she was carved from the very stars. Even the soft luminescence that cascaded from the sky held a thickness. A tangible weight that held memories and starlight.

Each beam of light danced and pulsed, illuminating the figure before him—the princess. Liquid radiance bathed her, casting her delicate form in an otherworldly glow, as if carved from the very essence of the night sky.

Her silver hair flowed like liquid starlight, each strand catching and reflecting the ethereal glow. Even her skin seemed to glow, the light sliding across the curves of her face like a lover.

Everything felt distant, yet painfully close. Every breath. Every heartbeat echoed through the endless void between them. The space between them was insubstantial, a mere breath, yet it yawned like an endless chasm.

His senses amplified. The gentle rustle of her gown as it swayed in the unfelt breeze. The taste of delicate moontarts. The faint scent of moon blossoms lingering in the air.

“Serenity.”

She was so close, close enough that he could see the subtle rise and fall of her chest with each frantic breath. The delicate flutter of her dark lashes framed eyes that held the weight of infinite sorrow. Pools of deep emotion that would drown him if he lost himself. The blue held the deepest oceans, held the galaxies of emotions—love, longing, and a grief so profound it shattered worlds.

All that existed was her, waiting there, as she had for eternity.

Nothing else mattered. Nothing else existed. The world only contained the two of them, suspended in this void. She waited there, poised and patient, as if she'd been waiting across countless lifetimes for this very instance. The stars seemed to hold their positions, the universe itself pausing to witness their reunion.

“Princess Serenity.”

An overwhelming need surged through him—a desperate yearning to close the distance, to hold her in his arms and feel the warmth of her against him. It was a primal pull, an ache that resonated deep within his soul. And its root... the burning spot behind his left ribs.

“It's been too long.”

Ages. Millennia. Eons spent adrift without her, lacking the comforting embrace of her presence. Since he'd known the peace that only she could bring. He'd been incomplete, a wanderer lost in the corridors of time, searching endlessly for the solace only she could provide.

The longing was a physical pain, a hollow ache in his chest that threatened to devour him whole.

His hand trembled as he reached out, every fiber of his being straining towards her, desperate to bridge the chasm that had separated them for so long. The air between them crackled, charged and alive with an electric tension that set his nerves alight. His fingertips

brushed the shimmering mist that surrounded her, the sensation both real and intangible.

“Princess, I’m sorry it took me so long.”

Sparks of silver danced where his skin met the ethereal barrier, a tantalizing promise of connection just beyond his grasp.

Her lips parted slightly, as if she wanted to speak but couldn’t find the words. The sorrow in her eyes deepened, reflecting a history of loss and love, of moment stolen and time forsaken. His heart pounded fiercely, each beat a silent plea. He could almost feel the softness of her skin, the gentle curve of her cheek beneath his hand.

“Please,” he murmured, dread thick in his throat. “Don’t fade away.”

The fear she might vanish consumed him. So many times before, she had dissolved into the mist just before he reached for her, leaving him grasping at emptiness. But this time felt different. This time, she appeared more solid, more present, as if the very fabric of the dream had woven her into reality.

“I’ll never leave you,” she said, her words more dew than reality.

Then she reached for him.

He could almost feel her, the ghost of her touch, the faint promise to chase away the cold that had settled in his soul. Her presence would fill the void that had haunted him for so long. He’d be whole again. Everything about her seemed to reach out to him, a whisper of warmth against his skin, igniting every nerve with a bittersweet longing.

Now fear overtook him. A familiar dread settling in his bones. This is where she always faded, dissolving into the mists before he could reach her, leaving him grasping at emptiness. Then he’d be alone again in the aching dark.

“Don’t go.”

But this time was different. Instead of vanishing, she became more solid, more tangible. The shimmering glow condensed, revealing the intricate details of her gown, the soft glow of her face, the depth of emotion in her eyes.

“Endymion,” she called, her voice a melodious whisper that caressed his name like a cherished secret.

Moonlight cascaded over her, enveloping her in a halo of silver radiance. Each syllable carried the weight of truth, echoing in the space between them and resonating deep within his core.

As her voice—so soft, so achingly familiar—called his name, everything shifted. His mind, once clouded with confusion and shadow, suddenly blazed with clarity. The nothing fell away, replaced by a torrent of light and a cascade of memories flooded back into his consciousness.

“Prince Endymion.” The sound of his name—his true name—resonated through him like a struck chord.

Visions of towering golden spires pierced the sky, their brilliance rivaling the sun. The scent of ancient gardens in full bloom surrounded him. He felt the warm breeze of a land he’d long forgotten.

He was Endymion. Prince of the Golden Kingdom. Protector of Earth. Heir to the Golden Crystal, bound to the sacred land of Elysion.

The weight of his identity pressed down upon him, both overwhelming and liberating. Images unfolded before him. Magnificent arched ceilings adorned with golden tiles. Halls echoing with the footsteps of a life he’d once lived.

Faces emerged next.

Jadeite, Nephrite, Zoisite, Kunzite. Not foes, but trusted brothers. His knights. The Four Kings of Heaven who’d stood by his side

through triumphs and tribulations. They shone with loyalty and camaraderie, bonds forged through duty and honor.

“How did I forget them?”

Then there was the Golden Crystal, his birthright and the embodiment of all the beautiful dreams on Earth. The soft radiance as familiar as his reflection.

It was all so startlingly clear, so familiar, like a piece of himself that had always been there, waiting to be uncovered. The knowledge settled into his bones, filling the empty spaces he’d sought to fill all these years.

As the memories settled, a sense of rightness settled on him. He was more than just Mamoru Chiba, more than just Tuxedo Mask. He was Prince Endymion, a prince with a sacred duty to protect not just one person, but an entire world.

Everything was both startling and comforting, a paradox that enveloped him in this transcended moment. He remembered it all—every stolen moment with her. The weight of that time pressed down upon him, a bittersweet ache that filled every fiber of his being.

He’d found her.

He’d found his princess.

Now he didn’t have to choose between her and Usagi.

The years of mystery, the fragments of dreams, the unanswered questions—all had culminated into this singular, beautiful reality. And he remembered it all. Every promise, every giggle, every glance, every whispered word exchanged under a canopy of stars.

“Serenity,” he breathed, her name a prayer on his lips. “Serenity, I finally found you.”

Even as he spoke, he felt his body failing, the damage from Kunzite’s attack finally taking its toll. The pain increased, a numbness spreading through his limbs, and that bond in his chest dimming.

The world around him blurred, colors bleeding into one another as his vision wavered, flickering like a dying flame. Shadows edged his vision. The golden light in his soul flared.

But even as his physical form weakened, his heart surged forward with an unwavering resolve. He reached out to her, to serenity, the one he'd been searching for.

“My love.”

His hand trembled, heavy with the weight of lifetimes and the memories that accompanied them. Every fiber of his being strained to bridge the gap between them. His fingers ached to brush against her skin, to feel the warmth of her touch once last time before the darkness claimed him. It was a desperate yearning, an unspoken plea etched into the fundamental parts of his soul.

Her eyes met his, pools of infinite sorrow and boundless love. In that moment, he felt whole again. The princess, Sailor Moon, Usagi—all facets of the same brilliant soul he'd loved across time and space. In that fleeting moment, the fragments of his soul aligned, the emptiness that had haunted him vanished.

He was close. So close.

He could almost feel her, the ghost of her touch, the faint promise to chase away the pain that dominated his soul. To complete him.

But as he drew closer, she began to fade. The radiant light that once encased her grew dimmer. The edges of reality blurred further, as if the world itself was swallowing her.

Before his fingers could brush the curve of her face, the world collapsed. The light faded into the void, leaving only darkness in its wake. He wanted to call out, to fight against the encroaching darkness, but his strength vanished.

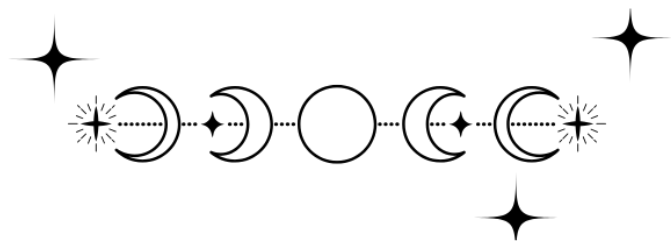
“You found it, Endymion.” A voice without substance rippled through the darkness. “You found the Legendary Silver Crystal. You found me.”

As everything went dark, a strange sense of peace washed over him. The fear and pain ebbed, replaced by a serene acceptance. He’d found her—he’d found Serenity. Even though his body failed him, even though the shadows claimed his consciousness, he knew deep within that this was not the end.

Somewhere, somehow, he’d find her again.

A faint smile touched the edges of his lips as the final threads of awareness slipped away. The darkness conquered him, but it could not extinguish the truth he’d found, nor the light that burned in his soul. They were bound by a love that transcended time and space.

Usagi—Serenity—had always been his light. And now, as the darkness devoured him, that truth was all that remained.



For eons, the Silver Crystal had slumbered.

Silent.

Patient.

Dormant.

Ever watchful.

It had witnessed the birth of stars, the dance of galaxies, and the slow decay of worlds, all while cradling the essence of a kingdom

long since fallen to dust. A wellspring of immeasurable power, it had remained hidden within the folds of time, awaiting the moment when its light would be summoned once more. It had lingered, a mere pulse of energy within Serenity's soul, ensuring the fulfillment of Queen Serenity's last request: that her daughter be reborn.

Now, that resonance stirred its ancient consciousness. The White Moon would rise again, leading to the birth of a new era—Crystal Tokyo. The Crystal stretched its brilliance, unfurling from the depths of its confinement, ready to answer the call of its princess.

As Serenity's tears fell for the one she loved, the Crystal reacted. The droplets splashed against Endymion's face, sliding unheeded. And in response, the Star Locket stirred. A surge of love, so pure and powerful, radiated through Serenity, and the Silver Crystal responded in kind. Their bond was undeniable, an ancient force that neither time nor death could sever.

In a heartbeat, light exploded forth—a brilliance that shattered eons of silence. This was the moment the Crystal had waited for across lifetimes.

The Star Locket hummed a soft melody, guiding the Crystal, beckoning it forward with a song long silenced by the ages. It spoke of the bond between Serenity and Endymion, of forbidden love and trials by sword and silence. Yet their love had survived the death of kingdoms and the collapse of stars, growing stronger in the Galaxy Cauldron, where their star seeds had never left each other.

The Crystal reached out, its light mending the cracks in time, healing the broken bond. Through this gift of denied love, it would turn back the hands of time, showing Usagi the truth of who she was. The melody swelled, calling to her, guiding her through the veil of memory.

The Silver Crystal had known Serenity's essence long before time could be measured, before the first light of the Moon Kingdom il-

luminated the stars. It had chosen her line for a reason—the purity, strength, and unyielding goodness that radiated from their star seeds. From Queen Serenity to her daughter, the legacy of righteousness, compassion, and unwavering justice had been passed through the ages. Their souls burned brightly, guiding the Silver Crystal as much as it protected them.

When Queen Serenity made the ultimate sacrifice, relinquishing her own star seed so her daughter and the guardians could be reborn together, the Crystal had lost its queen but not its purpose. Princess Serenity still embodied everything the Crystal had sworn to protect—purity, selflessness, and grace. Now, it would answer her call, just as it had answered her mother’s before her.

Through love, through loss, through endless cycles of life and death, the Crystal had waited for her. Through pain and tragedy, through repeating moments of destruction and renewal, the Star Locket had waited for him. And now, their souls had awakened, the bond rekindled across lifetimes.

“Please.” The Crystal could hear her thoughts as if they were its own. “Save him.”

A small sliver of the Crystal broke free, guided by the purest desires of the princess. Slowly, it descended—not toward the looming darkness, but toward Endymion’s fallen form. As it drew closer, it sensed something deep within him. An entity that had slumbered for millennia, waiting for its time to awaken: the Golden Crystal.

The Golden Crystal wasn’t just dormant; it was intrinsically bound to Endymion’s essence, tied to his role as protector of Earth and guardian of Elysion. As the Silver Crystal’s fragment descended, its radiant light intertwined with the latent energy of the Golden Crystal, reawakening what had been hidden through the eons. The

Silver Crystal's light embraced this connection, not merely to save Endymion's life, but to restore the balance lost across time.

The union of Serenity and Endymion, of the Moon and Earth, two souls forever bound by love and destiny.

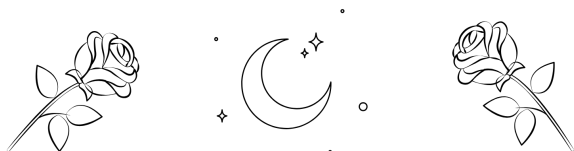
As their energies merged, a profound, ancient pulse stirred within Endymion. The Golden Crystal had long awaited its rightful heir, and now, with the Silver Crystal's light guiding it, that bond was reignited. Together, they would safeguard the Earth and the Moon as they had once done. Their love would reshape the future.

The light dimmed as it entered his chest before flaring once again, radiant and strong. The locket's melody swelled in harmony, an ageless consciousness stirring within both crystals. They felt the weight of countless lifetimes, of promises made and broken, of love that had transcended time.

The darkness surged, reaching for Serenity. But the Silver Crystal, awakened and resolute, would not allow it. Its eternal purpose had always been clear: protect the princess, safeguard the light. As its full power unleashed, it swirled around her in a dazzling display of radiance, casting away the encroaching shadows. Darkness may have threatened her, but it would never touch her as long as the Silver Crystal stood guard.



# *Chapter Thirty*



## *Bound by Shadow*

**D**rowning darkness pressed down on him, thick as smoke, hard as stone, suffocating every cell. Mamoru floated, suspended between waking and oblivion, in a void where time held no meaning. The world was blurry and distant, like watching a dream through foggy glass.

No matter how he struggled, he remained adrift, untethered, a ghost in a realm where shadows whispered and light was a forgotten memory.

The only thing that burned dimly was the spot behind his ribs. Usagi's pull remained a faint warmth in the overwhelming cold. Desperately he grasped at it, suddenly starving for her.

He tried to move, to breathe, but his limbs felt like lead, heavy and unresponsive. Nothing felt solid. His lungs frantically tried to inhale enough oxygen. Fingers hungered for something to grasp, but they remained isolated. Straining, his ears searched for even the faintest sound, desperate for anything to pierce the suffocating silence. His skin ached for a touch—something warm, something real—but the air

felt numb and empty. Blurred vision made it impossible to see through the thick, cloying darkness surrounding him.

Am I dead?

He tried to move, to breathe, but an unbearable weight pinned down his limbs, making them heavy. Everything felt too solid, pressing into him from all sides. His lungs strained, struggling against the oppressive air, every breath a laborious fight. His fingers curled, desperate to release the crushing pressure closing around them. Deafening sounds rang in his ears, each one a sharp crack in the suffocating silence. His skin burned under the force of it all, the air thick and stifling against him, smothering every inch. His vision was clouded, distorted by the overwhelming presence of darkness closing in.

Did Kunzite kill me? Does that mean... is Usagi mourning me?

Something akin to panic drifted through his mind, but even that felt distant, disconnected. There was a sense he was on the edge of something—teetering between life and death, caught between the pull of warm, radiant light and the cold embrace of the stone enveloping him.

That black nothing was both comforting and terrifying, a paradox that held him captive. It cradled him in its abyss, yet threatened to consume what little remained of his fading consciousness.

But I just got her back.

He struggled against the paralysis, desperate to reach out to Usagi, to return to her. A faint ache stirred within his chest, an almost imperceptible longing that pulled him toward the light. It was a delicate thread, barely there, but it resonated with a familiarity that sparked a flicker of awareness. Images of Sailor Moon, of Usagi flashed in his mind. Her eyes shimmering with determination, her smile like the dawn breaking the night.

Usako.

Frantic, he clung to those images, convinced they'd pull him back to her. Then he'd wake, and they'd hold each other while they cried. Finally, after all this time, he would reunite with his princess. Finally, after all this time, he would reunite with his love.

I've got to return to Usako.

I have to hold her while she cries.

She has to hold me as I cry.

He strained to reach out, to return to her, but his body refused to obey. His mind screamed to wake up, to break free from the hold that bound him. The urgency clawed at him, desperation mounting as he realized how truly helpless he was. The darkness tightened its hold, pressing against him, seeping into every corner of his being.

It was relentless, as it continued to seep into every corner of his being. Isolation wrapped around him like a shroud, amplifying the sensation of disconnect. He couldn't tell where he ended, and the void began. Time stretched interminably, each second bleeding into the next without meaning.

I'm going to lose myself.

Just when I remember who I am.

Just when I found her.

Despair, sharp and poisonous, swept across his soul. Yet amidst that, a subtle flame burned. A beacon in the gloom. It was her. It had to be. The bond they shared was more than mere emotion; it was a lifeline, a tether anchoring him to the world he was slipping away from. But as much as he yearned to follow it back to the light, the darkness held him fast, an immovable barrier he couldn't breach.

Is this what it feels like to disappear?

The thought chilled him more than the void ever could. The idea of fading away, of leaving her unprotected, was unbearable. But everything remained heavy, his voice silenced before it could form words.

He was trapped, a prisoner in a jail he couldn't perceive. Caught in the in-between with no escape.

Anguish threatened to overwhelm him, but he refused to surrender. Even if he couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't fight, he wouldn't let go of that burning desire to return to her. Instead, he'd focus his entire will on that single point of light within him, clinging to it with everything he had left.

Usako.

A faint sound pierced the suffocating silence—a soft, distant echo that sent a jolt through his immobilized form. It was Sailor Moon.

“Mamo! Wake up. Open your eyes.”

She was calling out to him, the sadness in her tone cutting through the fog like a beacon. A sharp surge of emotion cut through the oppressive gloom. Love, warm and bright, flooded his heart, chased by a crushing wave of guilt. She was calling for him, and he was powerless to respond.

Usako, I'm so sorry.

I've hurt you once again.

His heart lurched, emotions flooding his chest. A tumultuous mix of love, desperation, and gnawing guilt. Her voice turned soft as she continued to beg him. He had to reach her, to ensure her safety. Harder, he strained against the darkness, every fiber of his being crying out to break free.

The ache to reach her, to reassure her, was overwhelming. Yet, his body refused to obey. Everything felt like tar, thick and sticky, holding him in place with unyielding force. Each attempt to move was like pushing against an invisible wall.

Usako.

It was like trying to wade through quicksand—every movement only seemed to sink him deeper into the abyss. Her voice came again.

Now the pain in her words was like a dagger to his heart. All he wanted to do was hold her, tell her it would be alright.

Now her words were a fragile thread woven with glass. It vibrated with a sorrow so profound it teetered on the edge of shattering ruin. He needed to comfort her, to erase the sadness from her voice, but nothing obeyed him.

Why! Why has fate denied us love again?

Frustration clawed at him, sharp and relentless. He was Tuxedo Mask, her protector, her guardian, He was supposed to be there for her, to shield her from harm. But now, when she needed him the most, a trap ensnared him, rendering him unable to help. His mind screamed against the confines of his paralysis.

Please. He begged.

Let me reach her.

Let me protect her.

Let me hold her.

Then, in the suffocating darkness, a pinprick of light appeared. At first, it was barely perceptible, a mere flicker against the vast expanse of shadow. It spread through him like a gentle flame, as if a beam of light had broken through the impenetrable void, wrapping around him like a warm blanket.

The moment the light touched him, everything blossomed. It spread through his body like liquid sunlight, chasing away the chill of the void. Relief washed over him in waves, so intense it was almost painful.

Sailor Moon!

The Legendary Silver Crystal!

For a brief, blissful moment, he felt safe, anchored by the familiar warmth of her power. The glow enveloped his soul, pushing back the

shadows inch by inch. It was soothing, melting away the numbness that had settled into his body.

Hope sparkled within him, a fragile ember rekindling amidst the ashes of despair. He could almost feel her near, her light reaching out to pull him back from the edge of ruin.

Usako, your love has reached me. Even in this desolate, godless land.

Just as hope swelled, something changed. A sudden chill cut through the warmth like a blade of ice. The comforting heat retreated, replaced by a sharp and biting cold that seeped deep into his bones. The light fled, its glow dimming as stone overtook it. A sinking dread settled in his stomach.

What now?

A dread, cold and heavy, settled across his soul. The chill spread rapidly, like frost creeping over a windowpane, turning the remnants of comfort into a numb ache. A sense of foreboding replaced the safety he had felt moments before. Confusion mingled with fear as he struggled to comprehend the changes. The contrasting sensations left him torn, his emotions seesawing between hope and despair.

What's happening?

Panic rippled through his mind. The light had been so real, so reassuring, but now it was gone, vanished without a trace. Desolation pressed in on him from all sides, heavier and more oppressive than the darkness had been. It was a sensation that went beyond physical—it pierced his very soul.

He grasped at the last tendrils of the warmth, to the connection he felt with her, but it was like sand slipping through his fingers. The more he struggled, the faster it seemed to fade. The cold stone was relentless, snuffing out the light and leaving him enveloped in an even deeper shadow. His heart raced, each beat echoing through his body.

Did someone trick me?

Was that not Sailor Moon?

The thought of being pulled back into the void, of losing that connection with her, was unbearable. He wanted to cry out, to fight against the new torment, but his body remained motionless. Still, he fought the encroaching chill, mustering every ounce of willpower he had left. But the stone was unyielding, its icy tendrils wrapping tighter around him.

It spread faster, turning the light to ice. It crept up his throat, choking him. It cascaded down his lungs, suffocating him. It gripped his muscles, rendering him useless. He felt more isolated than ever, cut off from the light and hope it had brought.

I'm going to die. Without being able to tell her how I feel.

She'll be alone again. Once more forced to fight without me.

I'm a failure.

Dread deepened, settling like stone in the pit of his stomach. Not only was he still trapped, but somehow the situation had become even more dire.

Usako.

Her name was a silent plea. But the darkness gave no answer, the cold offering no comfort. The fear that he might not escape this time tainted the initial relief. He might never escape from the darkness.

I won't give up, Usako.

Somehow, I'll return to your side.

He turned inward. Maybe he had some latent power. Something to fight the growing cold before he succumbed to it forever. As he searched, all he found was that encroaching chill, a void where warmth had once been.

A realization took hold. A nagging sense that this wasn't just a mere shift in his perception. Something external was affecting him, turning

the light to ice, hope to despair. The cold wasn't natural; it felt invasive, foreign.

As if another presence was the void, and it sought to snuff out the light entirely. Fear tightened its grip, but beneath it, a flicker of defiance sparkled. If something was trying to devour goodness, then he'd fight back.

You'll never defeat me.

Now the sensation of falling enveloped him. A never-ending descent into an abyss with no end. The darkness overtook him completely; it became a tangible force, heavy and consuming. Cold stone pressed against his back, rough and unyielding, as if the very foundations of this void sought to consume him.

The fleeting flicker of hope was now a distant memory, replaced by an all-encompassing nothing that emanated from everything around him. There was a stark finality to it, an unforgiving dread that seeped into his bones. His muscles twitched, a primal reflex to fight against the encroaching destruction. But his body betrayed him now.

The commands from his mind fizzled out before they could ignite action. The more he tried to resist, the heavier the darkness became until it pinned him in place. An ocean of shadow trapped him, each layer a crushing force rendering him immobile.

Usako.

There was nothing he could do, nowhere he could turn. The weight of his impotence more crushing than the darkness. Slowly, the first physical sensation prickled his awareness.

Where am I?

Stone dug into his skin, cutting through the fabric of his clothing. Every sharp edge and rough surface registered dully, a distant discomfort overshadowed by the encompassing numbness. He tried to scream. Tried to thrash against the grip of the void. Yet nothing

happened. The disconnect between his racing mind and unresponsive limbs was maddening, a torture all its own.

The darkness wasn't just around him. It was inside him, creeping through his veins like ice. It crawled over his skin like a spreading cancer. The sensation grew until he couldn't tell where he began and the void ended. It was unnerving, like being dragged beneath a frozen sea, the surface—and any hope of escape—receding further out of reach with each passing moment.

Is this how I'm going to die? Consumed by stone and despair?

A wave of helplessness crashed over him, heavier than any physical weight. There was nothing he could do but succumb to the darkness, to let it pull him under. The realization struck him with a hollow finality. For someone who had always fought against the odds, who had stood between danger and the ones he cared for, the inability to act was a torment all its own.

No. No! No!

His mind rebelled against this surrender. Instinct screamed at him to fight, to claw his way back to the light, to her. But his body was unresponsive, a vessel emptied of will. He was a warrior trapped within his own failing form, unable to even lift a finger in defiance.

Stone bit harder into his back, urging him deeper into the abyss. The sensation was grounding in the most unsettling way—a stark reminder of his physical existence even as he felt himself fading. That thick darkness pressed into his chest, a vice tightening around his heart, each beat growing fainter against the encroaching chill.

Thoughts blurred, their edges fraying. Memories flickered—glimpses of laughter, of sunlight glinting off golden hair, of a smile that could banish the darkness. He grasped at the fragments, desperate to hold on to them, but they slipped through his fingers like shattered crystal.

If he could cry, then tears would be falling. He'd promised to protect her, to stand by her side. And now, he couldn't even protect himself.

A sudden clarity pierced the suffocating haze enveloping him. The oppressive sensations. The palpable malevolence pressing in from all sides.

The Dark Kingdom.

He wasn't wandering in some formless void between life and death. He was in the Dark Kingdom. As the realization took hold, his heart sank. He'd been captured, torn away from those who needed him the most. He'd failed.

Serenity. You're alone and unprotected.

The thought sliced through his mind like a blade. His chest tightened painfully, each breath coming in shallow, ragged gasps. The weight of his inability to protect her bore down on him, heavier than any physical burden he'd ever known.

I've failed her.

The darkness wasn't just around him—it was inside him, a reflection of his despair and self-reproach. Again, he tried to fight against the void pressing down on him. Again, his body refused to move.

Is this how it ends?

Is this how I pass from this life?

The question lingered, heavy with regret. The notion of being powerless, of leaving her to face the darkness alone, was almost more than he could bear. Yet determination sparkled to life deep within him. It flickered, small but defiant, that refused to be extinguished.

I'll never give up.

Not while I draw breath.

Not while she waits for me.

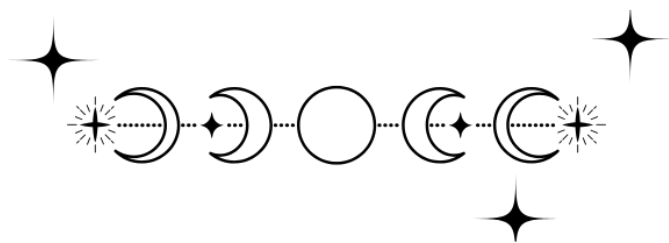
The darkness might have him in its grasp, but he had not yet been defeated. And he'd fight with everything he contained for as long as he could.

I'll find a way back. I'll protect her.

Drawing a shaky breath, he focused inward, reaching for any semblance of strength. The image of Serenity filled his mind—her eyes bright with courage, her smile imbued with hope and mischief. The memory of her strengthened his resolve, pushing back against the cold bearing down on him.

I'll return to her. I am Mamoru Chiba. I am Prince Endymion. I will not be defeated so easily.

The darkness surrounded him, vast and unforgiving, but now he'd fight with everything he was worth. He would fight. He would survive. He'd return to her.



In the depths of Endymion's soul, two ancient powers stirred. The Golden Crystal, guardian of Earth's beautiful dreams and protector of its prince, awoke to the radiant glow of the Silver Crystal's fragment. For ages untold, it had rested, its ancient power slumbering yet ever vigilant.

Now, sensing the encroaching darkness and with the gentle caress of power, the Golden Crystal awakened. Its energy thrummed with

a timeless wisdom, a resonance that echoed like the distant song of celestial spheres.

The golden light flickered to life, steady and strong, like the heart-beat of the earth itself. The sweet prayers of Elysiion joined it soon after, and the golden light intensified.

The cool brilliance of the Silver Crystal welcomed it. Whispering songs of the collapse of distant stars and the foundations of ancient civilizations. The soft light emanated a purity that soothed the discordant notes of darkness.

The two energies reached out, intertwining in a harmonious dance. Golden and silver lights melded seamlessly, familiar and unbreakable, their reunion a convergence of destinies long entwined. Millennia passed since they were this close, lifetimes since their energies had mingled so intimately. Yet their bond remained unchanged, untouched by the passage of time.

They shared a silent understanding, a purpose that transcended time and space: they would save Endymion, for without him, Serenity would fall. The fate of two kingdoms, of Earth and Moon, hung in the balance.

The Golden Crystal pulsed with a beaming determination. Not only did it threaten its bearer, but also the very harmony of existence. The Silver Crystal's fragment echoed this resolve, its cool light intensifying as it joined.

Together, they assessed the dire situation. The darkness of the Dark Kingdom pressed in from all sides, trying to consume Endymion entirely. His body was already weakening, succumbing to the shadows seeping into his body. But his soul—his essence—remained pure, untouched by the encroaching evil.

They'd form a bastion of light within the deepest depths of Endymion's bond with Serenity. Create a sanctuary that the darkness

could not penetrate. Saving his body was beyond their reach; the grip of the Dark Kingdom was too strong, its tendrils too deeply woven.

*Safeguard his soul.*

The decision was made, not through words, but through the melding of their ancient powers. With a silent accord, they wove their energies tight around that bond, retreating deeper into the unassailable fortress of his bond with Serenity.

*I'll protect you, my prince.*

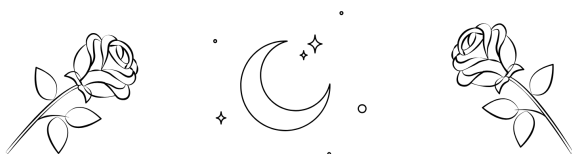
So the Golden Crystal wrapped around the bond, warm and protective, like a shield forged from the very heart of the earth. Its golden hues shimmered with steadfast resolve, each pulse reinforcing the barrier against the darkness.

The Silver Crystal's cool light intertwined gracefully with it, threads of silver weaving through gold, their energies complementing and strengthening one another. Together, they formed a luminous cocoon, a harmonious blend of power that encapsulated Endymion's very essence. Within this refuge, his soul remained untouched, hidden away from the malevolent forces that sought to claim him.

Now the shadows came. Darkness surrounded the light, battering it with its cold stone tendrils and icy hatred. But the crystals' protective light remained steadfast. They would ensure a part of him remained beyond the reach of corruption, tethered to the love and memories he shared with Serenity.

And so they watched as Endymion's body succumbed to the shadows, vanishing into the Dark Kingdom.

# *Chapter Thirty-One*



## *Cracks in Fate*

**A**nother failure.

Kunzite stood alone in the desolate expanse of the Dark Kingdom, shadows clinging to him like a second skin. Everywhere the darkness lingered, stroking him with its icy tendrils. Hovering in the corners, following his every move. Haunting his every thought. Once he only found comfort in the black that consumed his world. Now...

It only brought reminders of his failures.

The air was thick, pulsing with a strange heaviness, like breathing through a veil of solid rock, dense and determined. Each breath reminded him of his defeat. His fist clenched, straining ligaments and muscles to the point of pain.

“How many times have I failed?” the words bitter ash on his tongue.

The Silver Crystal, the elusive princess, remained always just beyond his grasp. But today, the sting of loss was different, sharper, cutting deeper than any blade. Kunzite’s eyes swept across the emp-

ty chamber, seeking answers in the writhing darkness. The shadows seemed to mock him, their whispers echoing his doubts. With each passing moment, the weight of his failure pressed down on him, threatening to crush his very soul.

As Kunzite tried to focus, he could feel the shadows stirring, their presence thickening, wrapping around his legs like invisible chains. The darkness pulled at him, almost as if refusing to release its grip. Even as he attempted to center himself, the sensation deepened, and it felt less like he was commanding the darkness and more like it was commanding him.

It wasn't just defeat that twisted in his chest. No... it was something else. Something far more dangerous.

A sensation dug at the edges of his consciousness. A creeping disconnect from the very darkness that shaped him, as if the threads binding him to the Dark Kingdom were slowly unraveling. He felt adrift, untethered from the very essence that shaped him.

The shadows that once felt like home now held a dangerous air, their presence disconcerting, dangerous, foreign. He closed his eyes, trying to dispel the unease, but it only grew stronger, clawing at his insides.

For a fleeting moment, a faint whisper echoed from the shadows—a dark, unsettling murmur that seemed to resonate from within his very soul. Kunzite paused, his breath catching as if something whispered a promise or perhaps a threat. He shook his head sharply, but the whisper lingered, threading through his thoughts, urging him to return to the safety of the darkness. It was as if the shadows were trying to reassure him, reminding him where he truly belonged.

As always, her eyes flashed before him. Haunting him. Stalking him.

Never giving him a moment's peace.

She didn't wear the defiant gaze of an enemy, one he'd seen on the battlefield more than once, but they were more intimate, more profound. In the heat of battle, amidst the clash of powers, there had been a moment—a fleeting heartbeat—when Sailor Venus looked at him with such raw pain, such deep despair, that it pierced through the armor of his soul.

As though a forgotten memory had been torn from the depths of his being, laid bare before him.

“Sailor Venus. How?”

The Dark Kingdom created him, molded him from shadow and malevolence. Formed him into the warrior he was now. That truth built the foundation of his entire existence. His entire purpose was to serve Queen Metalia, and Queen Beryl, to claim the Silver Crystal, and the vanquish the people of the White Moon.

And yet...

Kunzite slammed a fist into his palm, pain rippling up his arm as he wrestled with the turmoil within. But he couldn't deny she was there, lurking in the recesses of his mind. A memory he couldn't explain. A connection he couldn't deny.

The image of Sailor Venus refused to fade, her eyes a mirror reflecting a past he couldn't recall. There was familiarity in her gaze, a connection that defied logic.

Lovers?

The word surfaced unbidden, sending a jolt through him.

“Impossible.”

And yet... she was there, a specter he couldn't explain. The more he tried to push the thoughts away, the stronger they became, intertwining with fragments of emotions he didn't recognize as his own. Everything he believed about himself, about his place in the world, suddenly felt uncertain.

Confusion turned to frustration, and frustration turned to anger—not at her, but at himself.

“What’s happening to me?” he muttered. His voice echoed faintly in the cavernous darkness, swallowed by the very shadows that once empowered him. The realization that his own mind was betraying him gnawed at his core.

He’d faced countless battles without flinching, stood against foes without wavering. But this internal conflict was a different enemy, one he couldn’t simply cut down with darkness. The shadows pulsed in response to his agitation. They swirled more fiercely. They pulsed with extra energy.

He drew in a sharp breath, forcing himself to regain control. Whatever this was, he wouldn’t let it weaken him.

He was Kunzite, the last of the Four Kings of the Dark Kingdom, the strongest, the leader.

But doubts lingered, along with the memory of her eyes.

He turned abruptly, his cape slicing through the stagnant air. The obsidian and ice halls stretched before him, cold and unwelcoming. Each step rippled with a hollow resonance, bouncing off his soul. He tried to find solace in the familiar embrace of darkness, but found none.

As he stared into the empty expanse, the air around him seemed to thicken, the darkness almost watching him. He could feel its presence—cold, calculating, and possessive. It was as though the Dark Kingdom itself had eyes, and those eyes were locked on him, waiting, watching for even the faintest hint of disobedience. The realization left an icy pit in his stomach, a reminder that the darkness was never far, that it would never truly let him go.

“Focus. You need to accomplish your mission.”

He paused, his gaze drifting to the void above. The perpetual twilight of the Dark Kingdom offered no comfort, only an endless expanse of nothingness. For the first time, he felt a pang of isolation—not the strategic solitude of a warrior, but the aching loneliness of a soul untethered.

“Her eyes...” he whispered, the words slipping out before he could stop them. A faint pulse of something hot and warm thudded behind his left ribs.

He shook his head sharply, dismissing the thought. Emotions were a weakness, a liability he could ill afford. Yet, the more he denied them, the stronger they pressed against the barriers in his soul.

“Enough,” he declared, his words bouncing off the ice and stone. “I serve the Dark Kingdom. I serve my queen. I serve...”

But as he resumed his stride, the lingering echo of a past life—a life forgotten and perhaps stolen—followed closely behind.

The oppressive silence of nothing and stone shattered as Queen Beryl’s voice cut through the air like a blade of ice. “Kunzite.”

He spun to see Queen Beryl emerging from the shadows, her form illuminated by an eerie, flickering light. Usually, he found joy in that gleaming malevolence that flickered in her eyes. Usually, he found peace in that twisted satisfaction, curling her lips into that cold smile. Usually, the ever-present aura of dark energy pleased him.

But now...

“Go to your brothers,” Beryl commanded. “The princess used the Silver Crystal. They may yet rise. Bring them to me.”

For a moment, Kunzite simply stared at her, the weight of her words sinking in. His brothers. The concept felt strange and comforting, stirring emotions he couldn’t quite grasp. Hope, bright and dangerous, flared within him at the thought of seeing his brothers

again. Yet, intertwined with that was a creeping dread, cold tendrils of fear wrapping around his spine.

Would they, too, share in his torment?

Before their demise, they were talking about memories as well. Nephrite and the face in the stars. Zoisite and moonlit hands lingering over stones in a garden. Jadeite and visions of sacred fires.

“Yes, my queen.” He bowed, hoping to hide the conflicting emotions flickering across his features.

The darkness lingered on him, as if searching for any sign of hesitation. Satisfied, they turned away, disappearing back into the shadows as swiftly as they’d arrived. The lingering traces of her presence left a bitter taste in the air.

He straightened, his thoughts a whirlwind. The sharp clop of footfalls spread outward through the empty halls, rippling off obsidian only to return to him like a ghostly whisper of the past. The possibility of his brothers’ return stirred something long-buried.

Camaraderie. Purpose beyond the relentless pursuit of the Silver Crystal.

More memories teased the edges of his mind, elusive yet insistent.

The path was winding and treacherous, lit only by the faint glow of dark crystal embedded in the cavern walls. Shadows danced in the periphery, always just a touch away. Finally, he reached the fast chamber, its ceiling stretching beyond sight into the abyssal darkness above.

Here lay three stones on raised pedestals. Arranged with deliberate precision, their smooth surfaces reflected the minimal light like dark mirrors.

He approached slowly, almost as if afraid. As he drew nearer, a faint band of light from an unseen source caught the facet of one stone, then

another. The glimmer seemed to awaken something within him. His breath caught as fragmented memories flooded his mind.

Faces.

Laughter.

Battles.

Bonds.

The stones lay before him, silent and still. Nothing moved as he stared at them. Recognition surged through him with undeniable force.

“Jadeite. Nephrite. Zoisite. My brothers.”

They weren't mere relics or rivals. They were the remnants of the Four Kings of Heaven. Those words struck him, and he staggered, falling to his knees. They were guardians. Guardians of Prince Endymion. Protectors of the Golden Kingdom.

And he'd been the leader.

He reached out a gloved hand, hovering just above the stones, hesitant to touch them as if the contact might shatter the fragile resurgence of his memories. Visions of standing beside them, not as servants of darkness, but as noble warriors dedicated to their prince, flashed before his eyes.

“Endymion. Our prince.”

The full magnitude of their betrayal crashed over him. Tuxedo Mask was Endymion, their true master, and they'd raised arms against him. Killed his father, the king. The Four Kings had been instrumental in ending two sacred reigns. The Golden Kingdom had fallen because of their actions. Their influence had crushed Silver Millennium. A hand moved to his chest, fingers brushing over the spot where the darkness first seeped into him.

“We brought it all to ruin.”

The darkness had corrupted him, just like it had his brothers, turned them against everything they held dear. And then, piercing through the haze of regret, came the image of her.

Venus.

Starshine.

He saw her smile, felt the gentle touch of her hand, the way her eyes lit up when they argued over battle strategies. Even after all this time, he could still feel the flash of warmth as her lips touched his. Even after all he'd done, he could still hear her laugh. The spot behind his ribs pulsed, burning hot and bright. It was a sensation that he'd forgotten. Now it tugged so forcefully it stopped his breath.

He bowed his head, silver hair cascading around his shoulders. The enormity of his actions, the betrayal of his prince, his brothers, and the woman he loved crushed him. Tears dripped from his chin, splashing on the stone below.

“What have we done? We were the guardians of beautiful dreams. And now...”

His fists clenched, resolve hardening within him. The Dark Kingdom had twisted their fates, but perhaps it was not too late. He couldn't change the past, but he could choose his path forward.

Slowly rising to his feet, Kunzite reached out and gently collected the stones of his brothers, cradling them with care.

“I'll save you,” his voice cracked as more tears slid down his cheeks.

He turned toward the door. The path ahead would be fraught with danger, and it wouldn't be easy to break the grip of the Dark Kingdom. But for the first time in an eon, he now had a clean purpose.

As Kunzite merged from the chamber, the eight of his newfound purpose steadied his steps. Now, the empty corridors had a different feel to them. The cold bit deeper. The darkness stung harder. The air sliced further.

He clung to the subtle warmth of his brother's stones, drawing the comfort he needed from them. Moving cautiously, he remained keenly aware that any misstep could draw unwanted attention. Faint voices drifted through the shadows, reflected by the icy walls. He paused, pressing himself against the cool surface, straining to hear.

"Endymion possesses a fragment of the Silver Crystal," Beryl said. "Yet, its power eludes us. He's resilient, but I will control him."

"He is vulnerable. The darkness within him grows. I will mold him to my will." Metalia's voice was a chilling whisper, permeating the air like a toxic fog.

Kunzite's heart clenched. A surge of protectiveness washed over him. The thought of Endymion being manipulated and control by the same darkness that had ensnared them was almost too much to bear. He'd rescue him before it was too late. But before he could move, a cold, familiar presence materialized behind him.

"Going somewhere, Kunzite?" Queen Beryl's voice dripped with venomous sweetness.

He turned slowly, masking his inner turmoil behind a stoic expression. "My queen."

Her eyes narrowed. "You smell different. Are you troubled?"

"Nothing of concern," he replied evenly. "I was merely—"

"Spare me your lies," she snapped. "I can taste your hesitation. I can smell your golden glow."

Before he could react, a pulse of dark power radiated from her, turning the very air to stone. It smashed against him, sliding across him. He tightened his grip on the stones, shifting them behind his back.

"You won't betray me, Kunzite," Beryl purred. The shadows writhed and twisted, reflecting the power building within. "I created you. Don't forget where you came from."

He bit back the reply. “My loyalties are to the mission you’ve assigned me.”

“Then prove it.”

A torrent of dark energy struck him square in the chest with the force of a collapsing star. Pain exploded across his body as the overwhelming weight crashed against him, driving to his knees. His brothers slipped from his grasp, clattering to the ground with a muted clink.

His vision blurred, darkness encroaching at the edges. He fought to hold on to himself, to resist the insidious power that was invading his soul.

He was losing.

Dark energy intensified, spiraling around him like a vortex. It seeped into his skin, piercing deeper, reaching for the fragments of light he so desperately clung to. Tendrils wrapped around his heart, squeezing.

Memories of his brothers, of Endymion, of Venus, began to fade.

Resolve began to weaken.

Then with a snap...

“Rise, Kunzite.”

He obeyed his queen without hesitation.

“You have work to do,” she instructed. “End the White Moon and the Moon Princess now. Do not fail me again, or a fate worse than death awaits you.”

“Yes, my queen.”

Without another word, he extended a hand, and in a swift motion, vanished. Only a ripple of dark energy marked his departure.

The faint hope that had flickered was nowhere to be found, leaving only shadow and the lingering sense of what might have been.

Kunzite erupted from the depths of the Dark Kingdom, his eyes blazing with darkness and hate. Dark energy coursed through him,

amplifying his every movement. Thick clouds rolled over the bright sky, swirling shadows obscuring the sun.

With a sharp gesture, icy winds whipped through the streets, encasing everything in a crystalline frost. The world responded to his fury, freezing under the weight of his unleashed power. An almost tangible radiance washed over him, and he sneered.

The Sailor Guardians had arrived.

“You’re late, Sailor Moon... or should I say Princess Serenity!” Kunzite’s words flowed over the frozen cityscape.

“You’re turning my home into the North Pole! How dare you! Besides, I hate the cold,” Sailor Moon yelled.

“This is all for our great ruler. Get used to it.”

“Moon Healing Escalation!”

That brilliant power rolled over the land, melting ice and reviving the people. That’s when he spotted it, on a chain around her neck. The Legendary Silver Crystal. All light seemed to be drawn to it, wanting to bask in its power. Yet, it lacked any glow itself.

A smirk spread across his lips. She would follow. With a burst of energy, he shot upwards. Below, he could feel the soft touch of the White Moon following.

“Kunzite! Where have you taken Tuxedo Mask!? Give him back, unharmed... or... or...”

He regarded her with cold indifference. She was only the enemy, insignificant and nothing.

“Tuxedo Mask is no more,” he declared flatly, raising a hand to summon another barrage of energy.

With a flash of gold, blue, and red light, the others arrived. But that only meant less work tracking them down later. He’d kill them all now, take the Legendary Silver Crystal and return to the Dark Kingdom with triumph draped around his shoulders.

“Kunzite,” Sailor Venus’s voice was almost lost in the nothing of space. “I know you’re still in there. Remember who you are. I miss your smile.”

There was something... a flickering moment. A glint of recognition. A shadow of doubt.

“But I know it’s impossible,” she said, her tone softening. “But just know, I’ll pray for you. For you and your brothers. I’ll pray the Galaxy Cauldron will bring you back to us.”

Those words pierced into the veil of darkness. Memories... laughter, a warm touch, whispered declarations. That spot behind his ribs burned.

But the darkness was absolute. The black smothered the light in an instant.

“Prayers are meaningless. Unless you’re praying for mercy from our great ruler!”

The guardians gathered together as he readied another attack.

“Venus Power!”

“Mercury Power!”

“Mars Power!”

“Jupiter Power!”

Energy crackled. Power surged.

“Kunzite,” he could barely hear his name whispered in the roar. “Forgive me.”

The cascade of radiant light and color flew across the empty space, but he stood his ground. Still confident in himself, he erected a barrier. But when the force smashed into him, he knew he’d miscalculated.

Light engulfed him, darkness peeled away, layer by layer. In his last moments, his gaze found Sailor Venus, her figure glowing amidst the chaos.

“Starshine,” a gentle smile touched his lips.

For a moment, the shadows receded, and Kunzite felt the warmth of what could have been—if only the darkness hadn't corrupted.

The explosion subsided, and where Kunzite once lingered, only a small, gleaming stone remained. It hovered in the air, pulsing faintly with a subtle glow. It drifted towards Venus, as if seeking her out.

She extended her hand, but just before it touched her fingertips, the stone hesitated. Venus reached out for it, but it veered away, ascending higher into the sky. Her hand closed around emptiness, her eyes tracing its path as it vanished into the distant horizon.

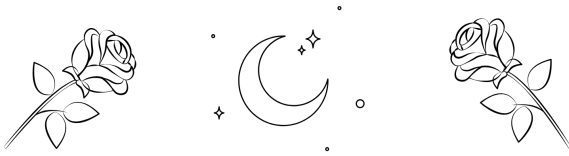
High above, unseen by mortal eyes, Kunzite's stone glimmered faintly. It drifted onward, free of the shadows that had bound him. Though he was lost for now, the possibility of rebirth remained.

A chance for peace.

A path towards redemption.

The Galaxy Cauldron would see it done, but for now, his chapter closed with both a loss and a fragile promise of renewal.

# *Chapter Thirty-Two*



## *The Final Eclipse*

**E**ndymion's fingers curled, then unfurled, slow and deliberate. They were his hands—he knew that. The subtle lines etched across his flesh, the faint scars from battles fought and forgotten, the way his knuckles moved beneath the skin—all were intimately familiar.

And yet, as he watched them move, they felt disconnected, as though they belonged to someone else. As if another force guided them, pulling invisible strings while he merely observed from a distance.

He continued to turn his hands over, palms up, then down, noting the way the dim light cast shadows that rippled and flowed. The motions were smooth, precise, but devoid of intention. Each movement seemed preordained, executed without his conscious command.

Utterly lost, he ran a hand over the fabric of his pant leg. The smooth texture seemed like it should have been familiar, yet it wasn't.

Back and forth, he continued to rub, hoping that perhaps it would trigger something, remind him of something.

Nothing. Nothing changed. Nothing remained.

The lack of substance was strangely familiar, as if he'd been suffering from a lost identity for a lifetime.

Endymion shifted on the seat nervously. He didn't like this feeling of being so completely detached. Desperate for some answers, he glanced about the room, hoping for clues, answers, anything. The chamber was austere, carved from dark stone that absorbed more light than it reflected. The air was heavy, thick with an unplaceable scene that lingered just beyond recognition.

A face peered back at him in a fractured mirror mounted on the far wall.

He took a hesitant step toward it, each footfall echoing softly in the silence. As he drew nearer, the features came into focus—the sharp lines of a jaw, the unruly dark hair framing a forehead, deep blue eyes. There was something wrong with the eyes... they appeared flat, lifeless, like the eyes of a poorly painted portrait.

“Who am I?”

He raised a hand to touch the face in the mirror, watching as the reflection mimicked the gesture. There was a distinct dissonance between action and sensation; he saw the movement, understood it intellectually, but felt nothing. His fingertips brushed the cool surface of the mirror, but the tactile feedback was muted, as if filtered through layers of fog.

“Is this really me?”

The question floated through the air, lacking the urgency or emotion such an inquiry should carry. Leaning closer, he searched those eyes for a spark of recognition, a connection to a real person. Memories drifted on the periphery of his consciousness.

Vague sounds of laughter.

Indistinct glimmers of sunlight dancing over gold.

Obscured curves of a smile.

But they were hazy, like scenes from a distant dream. From someone else. From another lifetime.

Even more unnerved, he glanced down at the clothes he wore: a dark, regal uniform that seemed tailored to fit him perfectly. The fabric rested against his skin without weight, another element of his reality that failed to anchor him.

He ran a hand down his sleeve, noting the texture but not truly feeling it. Even his thoughts seemed distant, as if they belonged to someone else. They rippled softly, lacking resonance, each one fading before he could grasp its full meaning. A persistent fog stretched across his mind, a barrier that dulled his perception and kept true understanding just out of reach.

“I am Endymion...” Aren’t I?

The name was right, but carried no actual meaning. He knew it was his, yet it was merely a label, devoid of the personal significance it once held. He tried to recall more—the details of his life, the people he knew, the places, the emotions he’d felt—but he only met resistance. It was like trying to bottle moonlight; the harder he tried, the more it scattered into the night.

“What is this sensation?”

A subtle ache pulsed behind his left ribs, a faint warmth that contrasted with the numbness enveloping him. It was a whisper of something important, a tether to a truth he couldn’t quite access. He pressed a hand against his chest as if to soothe the burning, or perhaps to encourage it, but the barrier within him remained.

The room seemed to close in around him, the shadows deepening. The darkness was palpable, alive, wrapping around him like a cloak.

Strangely, it didn't unsettle him. If anything, it was familiar, a contrasting presence that neither comforted nor disturbed. It simply was.

Stepping back from the mirror, he let his hand fall. Since the reflection offered no answers, there wasn't a point. Turning away, he paced across the chamber as the silence pressed in. The only sound was that of his footsteps. There was no wind. No scent.

"What happened to me?"

He paused by a narrow window carved into the stone wall. Beyond it, an expanse of darkness stretched endlessly, dotted with distant, cold stars that offered no light. The view should have evoked wonder or perhaps melancholy, but instead, it felt as empty as everything else.

The pale glow of moonlight filtered through the narrow window, casting long, accusing shadows across the stone floor. Endymion's skin prickled under its touch, a sensation as discordant as his crushed memories. The silverly beams seemed to pierce through his fog, carrying with them a weight of expectation and disappointment.

He turned towards the light, feeling it caress him with an almost sentient intent. The moonlight wasn't just illuminating; it was scrutinizing. Each ray felt like a question, demanding answers he couldn't provide. Who are you? What have you become? How could you betray everything you once stood for?

The judgment stirred something deep within him. Duty and a love that transcended celestial bodies. He could almost remember a flash of crystal, mischievous eyes. But they slipped away, leaving only a hollow ache and the moon's unrelenting gaze.

"You have no right to judge me."

Endymion raised a hand, watching as the moonlight played across his skin. It highlighted every imperfection, every scar, as if cataloging the ways in which he'd changed. A fallen prince who'd strayed too far

from his path. The light had always felt like stone, but now it left him feeling even more wanting.

He wanted to turn away, to shield himself from this silent inquisition. But something compelled him to stand there, bathed in the moon's intrusion. It was a punishment and a reminder of what he couldn't quite grasp. The moonbeams continued their relentless examination, a constant, uncomfortable presence that seemed determined to break through the numbness enveloping him.

Now, surrounded by darkness and unable to escape the moon, Endymion felt truly alone. The light hinted at things he'd lost, of what he'd become, even if he couldn't fully comprehend.

He closed his eyes, taking a slow, measured breath. In the darkness behind his eyelids, he searched for a spark—a glimmer of something haunting. The moon bit into him, and for a moment, he thought he sensed a faint glow reflected in the beams dancing across his face.

The golden light emanated from the depths of his being. It pulsed gently, resonating with the moon's light and the ache behind his ribs.

But as he reached for it, the light faded, slipping away like a forgotten dream. He opened his eyes to find nothing had changed. The room remained the same, the emptiness undisturbed. The moon still judged, the stars mourning.

Endymion turned away, refusing to struggle anymore. This is who he was, after all, who he'd always been. Someone fractured, broken, devoid of memory or tethers.

Now a subtle sound broke the silence. A distant echo of footsteps approaching. He turned his head slightly, acknowledging the change without curiosity or concern.

Whoever—or whatever—was coming would arrive soon enough.

A subtle shift in the air alerted Endymion to another presence. The temperature dropped slightly, and the shadows in the chamber deep-

ened, coalescing into darker hues. He turned towards the doorway as Queen Beryl swept into the room. He didn't know why she was familiar, why he knew her name, but he did.

Her movements were graceful yet imbued with undeniable weight. She commanded the space effortlessly, each movement deliberate, the train of her gown whispering against the stone. Living tendrils of darkness coiled around her, wrapping her in tangible power. The shadows twisted and bowed in her wake, clinging to her like a loyal subject. A cold fire gleamed in her eyes, and a faint, knowing smile played on her lips.

Endymion watched with a detached curiosity. There was a growing sense of envy stirring within him, a subtle longing that felt both intrusive and innate. Perhaps it was the ease in which she commanded the darkness. How it responded to her slightest whim.

Power radiated from her in waves, an aura that filled the chamber and filled him completely. For a moment, he wanted it—craved the control, the certainty, the liberation from the emptiness that consumed it.

The desire flared, a spark in the void, but even as it ignited, it felt distant, like a hunger that didn't truly belong to him.

“Endymion.” The name rolled off her tongue with a familiarity that hinted at a shared history.

She halted a few paces before him, her eyes trailing up and down his body, appraising him. He dipped his head in a slight acknowledgment.

Without another word, she extended her hand to present four gleaming stones. They caught the dim light and pulsed faintly, each emitting a subtle glow that fought the surrounding darkness. They drew him in, stirring something in the depths of his mind.

“Your loyal servants, ready to serve you once more.”

He reached out mechanically, allowing the stones to slip into his open hand. The moment they touched his skin, a faint warmth flowed from them, almost as if in rejoice. Finally, they seemed to say, we're reunited.

Something fluttered through the back of his mind—faces, voices, brotherhood—but nothing solidified before it all vanished.

“They were weak,” the darkness whispered. “Not like you.”

“Jadeite, Nephrite, Zoisite, and Kunzite,” he said, his words a mere whisper.

Comrades? Brothers? The exact nature of their connection remained blurry, but the magnificence was undeniable. Yet, a part of him dismissed them as lesser. They were pawns to be commanded. They hadn't embraced the darkness willingly, as he had. Right?

Conflicting emotions swirled within him, indistinct and transient. Still, an unexpected protectiveness welled up, a desire to keep them close. They were his, after all.

“Yes, they will aid you in your mission. Together, you will achieve what others could not.”

Her hand traced a line of cold up his arm before settling possessively around his neck. The touch was cold like dead stone. This was wrong, or so the itch at the back of his mind said. But he dismissed it.

“Finally, Endymion, you'll be mine and together we'll rule the stone ruins of Earth.”

He closed his fingers around the stones, the smooth surfaces pressing into his palms. “We'll rule together.”

Her smile widened slightly. “Good. There is much to be done. Prepare yourself and when you are ready, join me in the throne room.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned and glided out of the chamber, the darkness closing in behind her like a curtain. Endymion

glanced down at the stones in his hand. The light continued to flicker from deep inside, screaming out to him.

Dismissing them, he slipped them into a pocket, noting the distinct weight they carried. Glancing about, he didn't know what else to prepare, so he left the meaningless room.

Stone walls stretched out before him in an endless passage of shadows and echoes. Darkness slithered across his skin as he moved, settling into his bones like an old companion. Cool air filled his lungs with the crisp scent of minerals and something indefinably ancient.

“So, this place is home?”

He should have felt peace here, enveloped in the embrace of the Dark Kingdom. This place of shadows was meant to be his domain, a sanctuary of power and purpose. Yet, there was something uncomfortable about it. An irritation that lingered just under his skin that he couldn't scratch. It felt too perfect, too complete, like a trap laid out just for him.

With each footfall, the steady rhythm underscored his internal disquiet. The walls seemed to close in on him, the ceiling pressing down ever so slightly. He traced a hand along the rough surface, seeking anything that would remind him of who he was.

“What is wrong? It must be the White Moon. They're the cause of this.”

Approaching the throne room, the atmosphere grew heavier. The air thickened, laden with an oppressive energy that weighed on his shoulders. Here, the darkness was different, denser, a tangible weight.

It clung to him, with each step requiring more effort than the last.

At the threshold he paused, a hesitation he couldn't fully explain. The grand doors loomed before him, adorned with intricate carvings that writhed and shifted when not directly observed. Taking a measured breath, he steeled himself and pushed the doors open.

The darkness was overwhelming, enveloping him in ways he hadn't thought possible. It suffocated, thicker than tar. It froze each cell, burned every inch. The air tasted bitter, like ash on his tongue. A foul, metallic scent filled his lungs, and even his vision blurred, as though the black clung to his eyes.

Here, the shadows were alive, whispering unintelligible secrets that brushed against the edges of his consciousness. They weighed him down, a palpable force that tried to drag him to his knees.

But he was Prince Endymion. Heir to the darkness, and he would bow to nothing but the void.

Endymion clenched his teeth, forcing himself to stand straighter. The force was immense, but he refused to yield. He took a deliberate step forward, then another, each movement an act of defiance against the crushing atmosphere.

Sporadic flashes of crimson light pulsed from unseen sources, illuminated the vast chamber, casting eerie glows on the obsidian pillars and the ornate throne at the far end. Beryl awaited him there, a solitary figure radiating a tantalizing dark allure.

"You've arrived."

Each step felt like wading through a deep mire, the shadows tugging at him, begging him to surrender. Whispers grew louder, more insistent, but their words remained just out of comprehension.

Keep moving.

He focused on channeling his will into maintaining his stride. The ache behind his ribs flared briefly, a sharp reminder of something forgotten.

Nearing the throne, the oppressive force intensified. His breath came in measured, shallow draws, but he maintained his strength. He stood tall as he stopped before Beryl and the throne, inclining his head in acknowledgment.

“Endymion.”

He met her gaze. “I am yours to command.”

She rose from the throne, and the shadows parted before her, swirling in intricate patterns that followed. Queen Beryl’s eyes shimmered with a twisted glow as she approached, her steps deliberate and fluid. Darkness thickened around her, the shadows bending towards her as though compelled. His knees buckled, and only his sheer will power prevented him from collapsing to his knees.

As she came closer to him, the air became cooler, the heavy sensation increasing as it wrapped around him like death itself. His breath misted in the cold, and the weight of her presence pressed down on him. A knowing smile curved across her lips, the gleam in her eye darkening.

She stopped before him, her gaze sweeping over his form. Slowly, she extended her hand, her fingers gliding up his arm, light and cold like the first brush of winter frost. Endymion nearly shivered as her touch sent a chill cascading down his spine.

It wasn’t unpleasant. The darkness that clung to her slithered through his veins, awakening something primal within him.

Somehow, he found himself leaning into her touch, craving the cold that oozed into his skin, the numbing sensation that promised freedom clouding his mind. The temptation of power radiated from her, a certainty that pulled him deeper into the void she offered.

It was intoxicating.

A faint discordant note stirred, a whisper of wrongness that refused to be silenced. Like a splinter in his mind—small but impossible to ignore. A flicker of unease danced at the edges of his consciousness. His instincts recoiled, but the feeling was fleeting, swallowed quickly by the allure of the darkness offered.

“Endymion,” Beryl murmured, her voice a velvety caress as her lips brushed against his ear. “You belong with me. Together, we will rule this world. The Earth will be ours, and nothing will stand in our way.”

Her breath was cool on his skin, the sensation sending shivers coursing through his body. He closed his eyes; the shadows pulsing in time with his heartbeat, and her words washed over him. Joining in a hypnotizing pattern, her fingers traced a path from his shoulder along his neck, her energy tightening around him in a seductive dance.

“You have accepted the darkness, and now it’s time to prove your loyalty.”

He stiffened as her words hit him, something instinctual rising in response. But he nodded slowly, the gesture not all his own. “Yes.” The word felt distant, like it didn’t belong to him.

Beryl moved closer, pressing herself against him. “There is one final task to prove you’re mine.”

“Anything, my queen.”

Closer she moved, her lips barely grazing his ear. “Kill her.” Her words slid into his mind like a blade cloaked in silk. “End Princess Serenity. Take the Silver Crystal from her cold body. Secure our future.”

The command reverberated through his mind.

Sharp and cold.

Hard and fast.

Poisonous and devastating.

The words twisted inside him, bringing with them a bitter bile that rose in his throat, acrid and burning. A jolt of resistance shot through him—a visceral, instinctual reaction that clawed at his chest. For an instant, golden hair and bright blue eyes filled his mind, twisting that ache behind his ribs.

His fists clenched, his knuckles white as he struggled to hold himself together. "I..." He knew what answer he wanted to give, but the words faltered, caught in his throat.

Why did the very thought of hurting her cause such a reaction?

Darkness surged. It rose like a tidal wave, swallowing everything. His thoughts vanished. His feelings vaporized. The warmth that dared surface disappeared.

Shadows filled his mind, smothering everything but the dark.

Endymion gasped as the onslaught crashed over him, consuming him entirely. Somehow, he was slipping away, everything being crushed under the weight of the dark power. Stone closed in, relentless and all-consuming.

"Endymion." Her voice called to him, pulling him back. Her hand rested against his cheek, a cruel mockery of tenderness. "Do this for me. For us. Embrace your destiny."

He blinked, unsure of what caused this brief hesitation. Slowly, he nodded again, the movement devoid of feeling. Nothing but a hollow vessel remained.

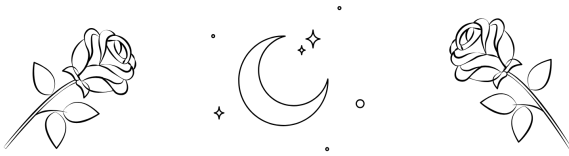
"Yes, I will kill Princess Serenity," he said, the words tasting like ash on his tongue. Each word held a weight, like the ultimate betrayal. That spot twisted painfully behind his ribs.

Beryl smiled, her fingers drifting from his cheek, satisfaction gleaming in her eyes. "Good, I knew I could count on you."

She turned, her gown whispering against the icy stone as she moved away; her form dissolving into the shadows until she was no longer visible.

Endymion remained rooted in place, a strange heaviness in his heart, the ache in his chest throbbing in protest. But the shadows held him fast, and the weight of the darkness buried whatever flicker of warmth had surfaced.

# *Chapter Thirty-Three*



## *Dark Prince*

**T**he sunlight pierced the darkness as Endymion stepped into the city of Juban. It was harsh and unrelenting, searing his eyes and forcing him to squint against the overwhelming brightness. Even the dark sunglasses did little to blunt the assault. The vivid colors assaulted his senses.

The blue of the sky was too sharp.

The green of the trees too brilliant.

The glare of the light was too harsh.

Everything felt like a chaotic mess, an overwhelming contrast to the familiar, dim shadows of the Dark Kingdom.

He inhaled slowly, the crisp air filling his lungs. Even with the taint of pollution, it was too clean, almost sterile compared to the dense, darkened atmosphere he was used to. The freshness stung, a biting sensation that made him dizzy. He exhaled, watching as his breath dissipated into the air, unnoticed by the world around him.

“So this is Juban.”

The city ignored him, as pedestrians mindlessly darted to their destinations and cars flowed effortlessly. He flexed his hands, fingers curling and uncurling unconsciously. The sensation of the skin against his own fingertips still felt oddly disconnected. Almost a concept instead of an experience.

The shadows lingered at his feet, reluctant to let go, as though they yearned to keep him in the comfort of their embrace. They seemed to reach for him, pulling at his steps, urging him to stay where they could wrap him in familiar coldness. They were almost a presence of their own, living tendrils desperate not to release him into the alien light.

He rolled his hands, and something stirred deep beneath him. It was a faint vibration that traveled through the soles of his feet, resonating inside his bones, as if the ground itself recognized his presence.

Welcome, it sang.

For a moment, he paused, tilting his head as if listening for something just out of reach. The gentle hum became more pronounced, an echo of recognition he couldn't quite grasp, like a heartbeat syncing with his own. The sensation was oddly comforting, a welcome contrast to the emptiness that clung to him.

His fingers twitched, and he absently reached out, his hand brushing the leaves of a nearby shrub. The smooth surface caught at his skin, tugging slightly, his heart giving an involuntary leap. The softness, the vibrancy of life—it was wrong. He pulled his hand back sharply, as though burned, his jaw tightening against the warmth that had threatened to seep into him.

He shook his head, fighting against the confusing sensations. The earth's hum still rippled across his chest, whispering secrets he should acknowledge. The resonance caressed his skin, comforting, warming... it almost seemed familiar.

Almost.

But the feeling slipped away as quickly as it had come. A shadow passed over his mind, and the familiar cold reasserted itself, extinguishing that small spark. His jaw clenched, and he shook his head again, stronger this time, dispelling the strange impulse to listen to the call of the earth.

He had a mission. That was all that mattered.

“First, we follow the indications of the White Moon.”

Endymion straightened, forcing his body to move with purpose. Each step he took was a battle against the vibrations under him, the earth that seemed to cling to him, urging him to acknowledge them. Begging him to remember what he’d forgotten. The shadows slithered behind him, echoing each footfall, wrapping his path in a dark whisper, as if trying to anchor him.

Amidst the overwhelming vibrancy, the bustling streets continued to feel abrasive, pressing in on him. The noise, the laughter, the colors—they were all wrong. Too alive, too untouched. Like a memory from someone else’s life.

He squished his nose; the air carried with it the scent of blooming flowers and freshly baked bread. The sweet fragrances mingled, almost drowning him in their intensity. His hand moved toward a flower, fingers brushing the velvety petals before he caught himself again. The colors, the scent—it pulled at something in him that he refused to acknowledge. He much preferred the simplicity of the Dark Kingdom. There were no distractions there, no brightness to disturb the numbness inside.

“Let’s complete this mission quickly and return.”

A breeze rustled his hair, and with it came the distant sound of children’s laughter. He turned to watch a little girl chasing a balloon, her face bright with joy. The sight stirred nothing in him. Joy, laughter,

innocence—those were concepts that held no meaning to him, mere echoes of emotions long since severed.

He continued down the sidewalk, each step heavy, deliberate. Still, the earth pulsed softly, but the hum was distant now, drowned out by the mission in his mind. He reached into his pocket, fingers brushing against the cool surfaces of the four stones.

Jadeite. Nephrite. Zoisite. Kunzite.

Their presence reminded him to stay focused. Continue with the plan to end the White Moon once and for all. The ache behind his left ribs pulsed subtly, but he ignored it. He had no use for feelings, only the clarity the darkness provided held any worth. The sunlight, the sound of laughter, the pull of the earth were all inconsequential.

He'd never been a part of this world, and he never would be.

“Focus. Find Princess Serenity, find the Silver Crystal. Eliminate any obstacles.”

He took another breath, steadying himself as his senses adjusted. Even with the sunglasses, the light still hurt, the air still felt wrong, but it no longer disoriented him. His purpose oriented him, and he would not fail.

Without another glance at the vibrant life around him, Endymion moved forward, allowing the shadows within him to deepen, soften the assault from the light. The earth might still be humming, but it would never sing for him.

He was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom—born of darkness. And the mission was all that mattered.

He continued moving through the bustling streets, his gaze fixed ahead, the mission pulsing in his mind with unwavering clarity. The vivid mess of colors, laughter, and life blurred around him into indistinct shapes and sounds, nothing more than a backdrop. He moved

with purpose, his steps mechanical, each one a beat of the invisible shadows guiding him forward.

He didn't notice the hurried footsteps until they collided.

The impact was sudden, a jolt sharp enough to pierce the surrounding haze. For a heartbeat, the world slowed, as if holding its breath. He stumbled a step, and he only dared to look at the intruder from the corner of his eye.

Instantly, he regretted it.

Golden hair glimmered in the harsh light. Smooth skin begged to be caressed. Everything about the girl seemed to glow, as though she were untouched by the darkness. There was something so achingly familiar in the way her presence seemed to cut through the fog around him. He continued on his way, leaving her whimpering on the sidewalk. Her voice was light and breathless, and for some reason, it clung to him, echoing in the cavern of his mind.

He almost stopped.

He almost turned back.

But the darkness flared.

His chest tightened, an invisible hand squeezing his heart, and the spot behind his ribs burned. The fire spread through his body like a shockwave. It was fleeting, barely noticeable, but it was there—a ripple in still water that refused to fade.

Who is she?

His feet continued automatically, fueled faster by the shadows nipping at his heels. But the warmth of her shoulder against him left a trail of sensation that lingered longer than it should have, like the imprint of a touch that had never been his to know.

The image of her golden hair and vivid blue eyes burned into his mind. It was nothing. Just a random girl. An insignificant encounter.

But the ache persisted, a subtle pulse that refused to fade.

He sucked in a breath, the air suddenly heavier, the noise sharper. Everything narrowed on the burning spot in his chest. All of it pierced through him in a way nothing else did. It was almost like waking up, like something pulling him to the surface, a light in the depths of a nightmare.

No. He shook his head violently, as if to banish the thought. She can't be the answer. She can't matter.

The darkness surged, coiling tighter around him, smothering the warmth before it could ignite. The shadows whispered, reminding him of who he was, the mission that held everything else at bay. They drowned out that golden light that threatened to make him see something he couldn't afford to.

"I'll find Princess Serenity and the Silver Crystal," he muttered to himself, his voice low and cold, "and I'll leave this wretched world behind."

He focused forward, trying to let his steps fall back into the familiar rhythm of shadow and purpose. But there was something about her—the echo of warmth still flickered at the edges of his chest. And for a fleeting, terrifying second, he feared he might have forgotten something important.

The walk to the arcade was over before Endymion even realized it, his feet moving automatically, driven by a mission that pulsed through him like a silent drumbeat. He stood before the sliding glass doors of the Crown Arcade, the darkness inside still shifting with the flicker of flashing screens. The air was filled with the subtle din of early morning—the hum of distant cars, the clinking of bicycles on the street, and the occasional rustle of wind through the trees.

The arcade wasn't fully alive yet, the lights still dim, their colorful glow pulsing like faint heartbeats in the dark. As he watched the flashing lights dance in vibrant, sporadic patterns, casting neon reflections

across the glass doors, something twisted inside him. He could feel it—there were signs of the White Moon here. The taint of their power, a light so sharp and relentless that it made his stomach twist with nausea.

The evidence of their presence seeped from the walls, their energy flowing like a hidden river beneath the foundation. His senses screamed at him, warning him, but he stayed rooted to the spot. This was where he would learn Sailor Moon's secrets, find the source of her power, and then—he'd kill her and the rest of her guardians, restoring the honor of the Dark Kingdom.

A sudden sound shattered his thoughts—a cheerful voice, familiar and irritatingly happy.

“Who's there?”

Endymion turned sharply, his expression cold as his gaze found a young man approaching along the sidewalk. His smile was wide, eyes crinkling in genuine warmth, the kind of openness that made something bitter rise in Endymion's throat. He wanted to slap that smile off his face.

“Oh! Mamoru!” the young man exclaimed, his face lighting up with relief. “Where did you vanish to? I was about to call the hospitals! You left without a word. The soccer team has been scrambling to find a good midfielder!”

The name hit him like a blade, cutting through the fog. Mamoru.

The word seemed to hang in the air, vibrating with meaning he couldn't grasp. It lodged in his mind, sharp and out of place. A flicker of something stirred—a momentary spark of recognition—and his chest tightened. The dull ache that lived behind his ribs flared, more insistent this time, as if begging for his attention.

He struggled to suppress it, forcing his expression to remain neutral. He narrowed his eyes, letting the darkness rise within him, letting

it coil, cold and vicious, around his heart. “You must be mistaken,” he said, voice low and dismissive. “I don’t know you.”

The smile faltered, confusion clouding Motoki’s face. “Mamoru...?” he said again, uncertainty bleeding into his voice. He took a step closer, concern threading through his eyes. “It’s me, Motoki. We’re friends.”

Hearing that name again—Mamoru—made something twist inside of Endymion, something raw and painful. The ache spread, gnawing at his core. The concern in Motoki’s voice grated against his raw nerves, hinting at a life he couldn’t remember, couldn’t quite touch. He turned to face Motoki fully, the shadows in the early morning stretching and deepening, coiling tighter around him.

The shadows reached out, wrapping around Motoki like serpents, the darkness caressing the edges of his form. Endymion let the full weight of the Dark Kingdom seep into his voice, each word dripping with cold power. “I said you have the wrong person,” he declared, his tone final. “I have business with this game center.”

Motoki blinked, confusion giving way to something else as the darkness rolled over his body, seeping into his skin. His eyes grew vacant for a moment before he smiled again, this time more subdued, almost mechanical. “Oh, you mean you want the job? My uncle must have sent you.”

Endymion gave a curt nod, barely listening to the nonsense spilling from Motoki’s lips.

“Yes.”

“Nice to meet you,” Motoki said, stepping closer, still unaware of the danger. “My name’s Motoki. I’m the owner’s son, and I work part-time here. What’s your name?”

Endymion felt a surge of irritation at the exuberance, the relentless cheer. He slipped his sunglasses off, his gaze sharpening, eyes piercing

through the dim morning light. Endymion wrapped the darkness around himself, collected it in a powerful surge before launching it at Motoki. The bolt struck the young man right in the eyes.

“I’m Endo,” Endymion said. “I’m your good friend Endo.”

Motoki tilted his head, a flicker of recognition flashing in his gaze. “Say... haven’t I seen you with Usagi before? I swear I’ve seen you two together.”

The name hit him like a bolt of lightning. Usagi.

Something inside him jolted, an arrow shot straight into his heart. The darkness shifted violently, and the brightness of the morning world came crashing in—joyful, effervescent laughter, the soft golden glow of sunshine. He could see her, the flash of bright eyes, the shimmer of gold hair caught in the wind, and—

Usagi...

The name struck a cord, flashing brilliantly in the darkness. It was an arrow that went straight to his heart. The harsh world clattered against him, bombarding him with bright joy and effervescent laughter. But the darkness devoured it before anything could take root.

The darkness spread across Motoki’s face, his expression softening, his eyes growing vacant. He smiled again, wider now, as though nothing were wrong at all. “Endo! My main man!” Motoki said, pulling Endymion into an embrace.

Endymion stiffened, his body rejecting the contact. He shrugged Motoki off roughly, glaring at the young man. Motoki didn’t seem to notice; he just laughed lightly and turned back towards the arcade, prattling on about things that held no meaning.

They stepped inside, and the lights flickering on, and Endymion trailed behind as Motoki began preparing the arcade for opening. Endymion’s gaze swept over the room, cold and calculating. He

moved slowly, deliberately, his senses open to every lingering echo of energy, every pulse of power left behind by the White Moon.

It was everywhere. The influence of the White Moon permeated the walls, oozing out from the floor, singing through the lights and game machines. The very air seemed to vibrate with traces of Sailor Moon and her guardians. This place wasn't just a building—it was a nexus of their power, a stronghold hidden in plain sight.

The arcade felt wrong, buzzing with a kind of energy that made the shadows inside of him revolt. It was like walking through sunlight after an eternity in darkness.

Too bright.

Too vivid.

Motoki kept talking, his voice a distant, meaningless noise in the background. Endymion's focus remained sharp, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't shake the name Mamoru from his mind. It was like a splinter, digging deeper with every moment, a reminder of something lost, something he couldn't afford to acknowledge.

Whoever Mamoru was, he didn't matter. Endymion clenched his jaw, forcing himself to focus, to cling to the cold certainty of his mission.

He was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom. Mamoru was nothing.

"Focus," he muttered to himself, his voice a low whisper that was lost in the hum of machines.

The darkness coiled tighter around him, a shield against the overwhelming brightness of the arcade, against the memories that lurked at the edge of his consciousness.

Now that school was out, the arcade hummed with life. A cacophony of beeps, laughter, music, and flashing lights that grated against Endymion's nerves. He sat at the Sailor V game, feigning interest in

Motoki's incessant chatter. He grimaced as a pulsing headache frayed his nerves. Soon he'd have to retreat to a dark room to recuperate.

Then the door chimed, a cheerful jingle that he was coming to hate.

But for some reason he looked up, anyway.

She was there, standing in the doorway.

Golden hair caught the sunlight, bouncing as the wind moved her hair. The sight cut him like a knife, and only the ever-present shadows held him in check. Something cracked open inside of him—a recognition, primal and profound, that made his breath catch.

His fingers twitched with the need to reach out for her. It was sudden and inexplicable. The pull tightened in his chest, raw and unfamiliar. Worse, the ache behind his ribs flared as if responding to her very presence. He leaned forward, the instinct to move closer overpowering the dark whispers urging him to keep his distance.

It felt right to reach out, to shield her, to be near her. The thought was irrational, powerful, and entirely against his will. It made no sense. She was nothing to him. She had to be nothing to him.

The trickle of cold started in the pit of his stomach. It spread down his legs and crept up his chest. It pressed against his heart and soothed his ragged breathing. Blessed relief followed swiftly, allowing him to suck in a breath.

Still, a voice, faint but insistent, whispered in the back of his mind, urging him to protect her, to keep her from harm. It was an instinct he couldn't quiet place, a yearning that contradicted the darkness. Further the darkness surged, wrapping around his mind, pulling him back.

Remember your mission, it cooed.

Focus on the mission, it whispered.

Yes, she was just a girl. A useless, annoying, scattered brain girl. The shadows twisted tighter, reminding him of who he was and what he was meant to do.

It didn't matter that the longer he stared at her, the harder it became to look away. The harder it became to not rush to her side and sweep her into his arms. If only he could feel her heart beat against his chest, everything would be okay.

He forced himself to look away, his jaw clenching as he buried the feelings deep inside. She was nothing. She had to be nothing.

And yet, every fiber of his being seemed to rebel against that thought. Endymion's gaze returned to her, and she too seemed reluctant to leave him. They were like two planets, rotating around each other, caught in the same gravitational pull.

It was undeniable. Instinctual. Something that defied his current state of mind, something forbidden and tantalizing, as though his body knew her before he did.

Without thinking, he stepped closer to her. Her direct gaze pulling him in, tempting him with desires and pleasures. It was like she was everything he lacked, everything that was just out of his reach. There was something else about her, a distinct scent of power and purity.

He swallowed hard, his throat dry. Every part of him wanted to touch her, to feel the warmth of her skin beneath his fingers, but the thought alone sent a ripple of discomfort through him. The shadows stung as they dug deeper into his flesh.

Don't forget, they sang.

"Usagi." Her name flowed smoothly from his lips.

Instead, he redirected that impulse, his hand shooting up to one of her buns, squeezing it just enough to make her jump.

"Sailor Moon," he said. Her eyes went wide. "She wears her hair in buns like this, too. Perhaps it's just in fashion."

Finally, the harsh lights of the arcade were pleasant. The once discordant music now sounded soft and pleasing. At last, the world made sense again. Those eyes locked onto his, flashing with something that went beyond this moment.

Through the contact, he sent the shadows towards her. They would do their job. They'd seep into her soul and she'd spill every one of her secrets.

She backed away a fraction of an inch.

"Usagi," Motoki said. "This is my good friend, Endo."

"Nice to meet you," Endymion smirked., relishing the look on her face.

"Endo?" she whimpered.

Perhaps his presence was affecting her, just like she was affecting him.

Then the urge was too strong. The desire too deep. While he couldn't sweep her into his arms, he could still touch her. He held out his hand, a polite gesture of kings and gods.

Usagi hesitated for a second, her eyes flicking to his face before she reached out. The moment their hands touched, it was like everything shifted. A warmth spread from her to him, radiating through his entire body, filling every inch of him. If Beryl's touch was stone. Usagi's was silk.

The ache behind his ribs flared, more intense than before, and it terrified him—the feeling that made him vulnerable, the inexplicable pull towards her. But the darkness was there, lurking at the edges. Licking at the connection between the two of them. If the ache flared, then the darkness burst.

A flood of shadows sprouted and flowed down his arm. And for some reason he couldn't fathom letting them infect her. It took great

effort, but he forced himself to release her hand, and in that instant, everything crashed back.

The lights were too harsh.

The sounds were too bright.

The smells were too strong.

“I’m glad you’re here. I hear you’re good at the Sailor V game,” he purred, coming closer to her. “Could you teach me how it’s played?”

The darkness praised him for such an idea. Lure her in. Tempt her. Tease her. Because she smells like the White Moon. The edges of the shadows licked at the aura hovering around the girl. Perhaps, it said, perhaps she knows where Princess Serenity is.

When she stepped in close, when she leaned in, he almost lost his train of thought. Her presence was intoxicating. No—intoxicating was too small a word for her, for how she made him feel.

As he played the game, the shadows worked to determine the source of the scent. They burrowed into the machine, into the electronics. Endymion’s lips twitched into a smile. While they discovered nothing obvious, the presence of the White Moon was too strong.

He was close.

The Dark Kingdom was close to discovering why this place reeked of that tainted power.

But before he could get more answers, a group of girls rushed into the arcade. Then she was gone, swept away by her friends. He didn’t miss the suspicious glances and clipped phrases.

They considered him a threat.

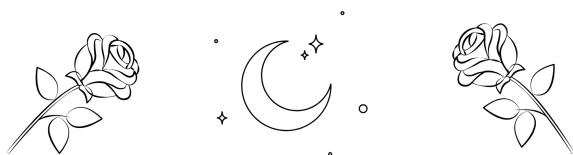
As they should.

But with Usagi gone, everything seemed dull now, lifeless. But she was nothing. She meant nothing.

He was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom and he didn’t need a worthless girl in his life.

Usagi would fall just like the others. She'd give him everything he wanted and more.

# *Chapter Thirty-Four*



## *Darkness Unbound*

**T**he sun hung like a merciless eye in the sky, its rays piercing through the thin veil of clouds and searing the streets below. Endymion stood at the arcade window, every fiber of his being revolting against the oppressive brightness. The light wasn't just bright; it was a physical assault, each beam feeling like it was trying to strip away layers of his skin, exposing the darkness that clung to his very essence.

His eyes, even shielded behind the darkest sunglasses he could find, ached from the relentless glare. The world outside was a riot of colors so vivid they seemed to vibrate, each hue an affront to the comforting shadows he craved. The green of the leaves, the blue of the sky, the reds and yellows of passing cars—all of it blended into a nauseating kaleidoscope that set his teeth on edge.

“Let’s hope Usagi shows up today,” he muttered, his voice a low growl that seemed to make the shadows at his feet curl closer. “And gives up her secrets, so I can leave this forsaken place.”

The air itself felt wrong, too clean, too pure. Each breath he took stung his lungs, filling them with an unwelcome freshness that seemed to war with the darkness coiled within him. His skin itched incessantly, as if the very atmosphere was trying to scrub away the taint of the Dark Kingdom that clung to him like a second skin.

He rubbed at his arms, fighting the urge to claw at his own flesh. “The world outside the Dark Kingdom is unnervingly pure.”

The shadows inside him pulsed eagerly, tendrils of inky blackness curling and uncurling like smoke. Their whispers were a soothing balm against the harsh brightness, slithering through his mind and fortifying the walls of his purpose. They reminded him of his mission, of the power that awaited him in the depths of the Dark Kingdom.

His gaze flicked to the watch on his wrist, its face seeming to absorb the light around it. Usagi had shown up every afternoon since he began his vigil. She was drawn to him, defying all logic and self-preservation. While others instinctively shied away from the danger he exuded—even the hollow shell of Motoki kept his distance—Usagi came to him like a moth to flame.

“When will you arrive?” he muttered, sweeping his gaze over the cityscape.

The sounds of life, children’s laughter, car horns, the rustle of leaves all grated on his nerves. The scent of blooming flowers mingled with car exhaust, a reminder of the vibrant world he never belonged to. None of it mattered.

Then he saw her. Usagi. Her golden hair shimmered in the sunlight, caught in the gentle breeze like spun gold. For a moment, the sight of

her made the world seem less harsh, the colors less abrasive. But a sneer curling his lips quickly replaced the feeling.

She was nothing more than an irritant, a glaring presence in a world already too bright. She represented everything he despised about this place—the light, the purity, the nauseating goodness that clung to her like a second skin.

Usagi paused on the sidewalk, her eyes scanning the building with a look of haunting loneliness that almost made Endymion laugh. A cold satisfaction stirred in his chest, mingling with an inexplicable urge to comfort her that he ruthlessly suppressed. The more she suffered, the more he relished it.

It was entirely her fault that he'd singled her out. She smelled too much like the White Moon, her aura so crisp and pure it made his teeth ache. She reeked of something ancient, something powerful.

Until he had proof, though, he would continue probing, letting the darkness infect her little by little. And when she finally cracked, when she spilled her secrets, he would crush her. The thought sent a shiver of anticipation through him, even as a part of him screamed in protest.

"Finally," he murmured as she approached. "You've arrived."

He slid into the seat before the Sailor V game, the plastic cool against his skin. With a flick of his wrist, tendrils of shadow reached out, wrapping around Motoki and pulling him close like a puppet on strings. The brainwashed human's eyes were vacant, a stark contrast to the vibrant life that used to shine in them.

Endymion leaned into the darkness, feeling it pulse through him as his fingers moved automatically through the game's controls.

"It's like the real Sailor V is fighting," Motoki remarked, his voice as hollow as his mind.

Endymion didn't bother looking up, his focus solely on the screen before him. "No. It's more accurate to say someone, somewhere, is forcing her to fight."

The words held more truth than he cared to admit, echoing his own situation in a way that made the darkness inside him writhe.

It had taken days of careful analysis to pinpoint the right machine—the one that vibrated with the energy of the White Moon. But he'd found it. This machine, second from the end, pulsed with too much power, too much history. And today, he'd use Usagi to unlock its secrets.

The air shifted as she entered, clutching her bag like a lost child. The sight of her vulnerability stirred something in him. A mixture of predatory satisfaction and an inexplicable urge to send her away that left him feeling off-balance.

"Yo, Usagi," he called, his voice dripping with darkness. "I've been waiting for you."

The shadows coiled and writhed with anticipation, the ones Beryl had strengthened for this exact purpose. They slithered beneath his skin, ready to pounce, eager to taste Usagi's light. Usagi took a hesitant step forward, and he motioned to the seat beside him, fighting the urge to pull her close and push her away simultaneously.

She hesitated for only a moment before sliding into the seat before him. The warmth of her body so close to his sent a jolt through Endymion, a shock of recognition that the darkness quickly smothered. He laid a hand on her shoulder, feeling her warmth bleed into him as she leaned ever so slightly closer. A smile ghosted across his lips, cold and calculating.

Coins clinked into the machine as she played, the sound sharp and intrusive in the cocoon of darkness he'd woven around them.

"You're as skilled as ever," he murmured.

The shadows danced down his arm, creeping toward her like venom. Yet, as they neared her skin, they seemed to recoil slightly, as if burned by her innate light. Endymion gritted his teeth, forcing the darkness forward.

“I’m not,” she replied. “You’re much better, Endo.”

The name sounded hollow on her lips, a reminder of the deception he was weaving. Yet, he leaned closer anyway, drawn by a force he couldn’t explain. His breath brushed her ear as he whispered, “It’s like you know V personally. Like you know everything about her.”

His fingers tingled as the shadows settled into her, a cold satisfaction following their path.

“Yes, that’s right. She’s a very strong ally.”

Victory surged inside him, a cold wave that should have brought satisfaction. If he could still feel true joy, it would be now. But the only thing that filled him was a hollow triumph, another step toward a goal that felt increasingly empty. She revealed something precious, and he’d exploit that.

“More than Sailor Moon could ever be?”

Her eyes shot up to meet his, wide and startled. Something tightened across his chest—a faint ember flaring behind his ribs. For the briefest of moments, he almost recognized the feeling, a warmth that threatened to melt the ice around his heart. But the cold rushed in, dousing the sensation in a suffocating wave that left him gasping internally.

“Tell me,” he whispered, his lips grazing her ear, torn between claiming her completely and retreating before the warmth of her light could touch him, “where do Sailor Moon and Sailor V hide? Where’s the command center?”

Her lips trembled, words almost spilling out. The air between them grew thick, the darkness pressing in, hungry for her secrets. But instead

of surrendering, she bolted from the stool, stammering, “I—I have to go home.”

He was faster, his hand closing around her wrist with inhuman speed. He pulled her against him, the warmth of her body a shock to his system. The contact sent a strange sensation rippling through him—a cascade of warmth that attempted to thaw something frozen deep within. It was as though something beyond the darkness still lingered, a faint echo of who he used to be.

“Come again tomorrow,” he said, his voice low and intense, his eyes locked on hers. The words were both a command and a plea. “Come again, Usagi. I’ll learn all your secrets.”

She fled, disappearing into the brightness outside. The light of the day clawed at him, more oppressive than ever, as if punishing him for his actions. He stood there, his fists clenched, that dull ache in his chest refusing to fade. The world blurred, the brightness cutting deeper, the laughter outside now poison in his ears.

He watched her vanish into the crowd, a mixture of frustration and relief warring within him. “My suggestion didn’t work on her. Queen Beryl won’t be pleased.” The words were bitter on his tongue, tasting of failure and something else—something that felt dangerously close to relief.

Darkness rose inside him, curling like a snake around his heart, tightening its grip. He had a mission, and he wouldn’t fail like the others.

He was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom. Nothing—not this blinding world, not Usagi’s defiance, and certainly not this inexplicable feeling—would stand in his way.

Frustration bubbled in his chest, dark and simmering, threatening to spill over. Days had passed, and he was growing sick of this chase.

He was so close to discovering the secrets of the White Moon, yet it felt like he was grasping at smoke. If he had to wait longer...

Before he could lose himself to the irritation, the arcade doors chimed open again. The sound cut through his brooding, and when his eyes lit on Makoto, he almost laughed. Tall, strong, and exuding an unmistakable aura of determination, she was a stark contrast to Usagi's delicate presence.

He knew her as one of Usagi's close friends, and more importantly, she smelled like the White Moon. But her presence lacked the overwhelming purity of Usagi's. There was a crackle of electricity simmering below the surface, a power that sang to the darkness within him. Perhaps this would be her downfall.

A sly smile curled at the corner of his lips, cold and predatory. In her presence, the sunlight filtering through the windows seemed to dim, causing shadows to lengthen and deepen. The darkness bled into his skin, blurring the space between them. The air thickened as he called forth the powers of the Dark Kingdom, the temperature dropping noticeably.

Makoto paused, her gaze meeting his. Her eyes narrowed, a flicker of wariness passing across her face. "Hey you!" Her voice was strong, defiant, but Endymion could sense the undercurrent of uncertainty.

Yes, the shadow purred within him, its voice a silky whisper of dark promises. She'll be their downfall. Her vulnerability to emotional attachments will be her demise. And through her, he'll learn all their secrets.

"Yes." Endymion's voice was smooth, almost a purr, as he closed the distance between them.

His eyes bore into hers, unfazed by the defiance she displayed. The air around them crackled with electricity and shadows, the darkness within him reaching out, exploiting her weaknesses.

“I will not tell you again. Leave Usagi alone.”

He shrugged. “I haven’t forced her to do anything. She comes here without my interference.”

“Bullshit.” The word was harsh, cutting through the air like a blade.

A glimmer of amusement tugged at the edges of his lips, cold and cruel. “You’re rather protective of her.”

Makoto bristled, standing up straighter and puffing out her chest. It was the last act of defiance before the darkness would squish her like a bug. Endymion could almost taste her fear, mingling with her determination. It was intoxicating.

“What are you trying to do to Usagi? This act doesn’t fool us.”

Her words were brave, but Endymion could hear the tremor beneath them. Now he was close enough to reach out and touch her. So he did. His fingers brushed the exposed skin of her arm, the contact sending a jolt through both of them.

And the shadows pounced. “Why does Sailor Moon need your protection?”

Black raced up her body, fighting the glow of electricity and winning. The darkness surged, feeding on her strength, her defiance. Makoto’s eyes widened in shock and fear as she felt the invasive force creeping through her.

“Because she’s Princess Serenity!” The words burst from her lips, unbidden. “She controls the Legendary Silver Crystal.”

The moment the words left her mouth, Makoto tensed, instinctively pulling back. But Endymion’s grip tightened, his fingers digging into her skin as more darkness flooded his body. His eyes locked onto hers, and he unleashed the terrifying power of the Dark Kingdom.

“Tell me.” Dark energy laced each word, every syllable. “Where is the secret command center?”

The thick force of his power grew. The lights in the arcade flickered, casting dancing shadows that seemed to reach out with grasping fingers. Makoto's resistance was crumbling, her fierce spirit wavering under the onslaught of darkness.

This girl would fall, and he'd get everything that he wanted. The thought filled him with absolute twisted joy. Finally, he'd accomplish his mission. Kill Serenity. Retrieve the Legendary Silver Crystal.

Her eyes widened, a flicker of defiance still burning within them. "I don't know what you're talking about," she stammered, but her voice lacked conviction.

Endymion smirked, but there was no warmth in the expression, only cruel amusement. He could feel her resistance, a mere flicker compared to Usagi's blinding light. He pressed his advantage, the shadows curling from his hands, seeping into her skin like ink bleeding into paper.

Makoto gasped, her muscles tensing as if trying to physically fight off the invasion. The darkness clawed at her, seeking every crack in her defenses, every moment of doubt or fear.

"Where is the Legendary Silver Crystal?" each word was a hammer blow against her weakening resolve.

Like a candle in the wind, her resistance wavered. Each word he spoke dripped with malice, chipping away at her will. The darkness pressed into her, finding cracks, unraveling her electric defense. Lights flickered as the arcade grew dim, as if the very world around them was being consumed by shadow.

"Where is the command center?" his words cut through her composure like a knife through silk.

Makoto's breaths came in shallow gasps, her gaze unfocused, eyelids fluttering. The struggle within her ebbed, strength fading like water slipping through cupped hands. The shadows sang a song of victory

as the darkness settled into her bones, a discordant melody that sent shivers down Endymion's spine.

"It's under the arcade," she confessed, the words spilling out. "I'll tell you how to open it."

Triumph flared in Endymion's chest, a cold, dark satisfaction that should have been exhilarating.

He released her arm and stepped back as Makoto swayed, her eyes glazed over. A puppet with black strings. Ignoring her, he turned back to the console, deftly inputting the sequence she revealed. The machine whirled to life, lights flashing in a complex pattern as a concealed door slid open with a soft hiss.

Without hesitation, Endymion descended the stairs, leaving the familiar chaos of the arcade behind. As he moved deeper, the air shifted, becoming charged with an energy that made his skin prickle. A soft, ethereal glow illuminated the walls, casting everything in a silvery light that both repelled and attracted him.

Everywhere, the scent of moonlight and ancient power lingered, a delicate force that stirred something unidentifiable within him. It was a fragrance he shouldn't recognize, yet it felt achingly familiar. For a moment, a sense of something brushed against his mind, like a whisper from a long-forgotten dream.

Life and light and hope.

The sensations were so intense, so unexpected, that for a brief moment, the darkness within him recoiled. Memories flickered at the edges of his consciousness—laughter, warmth, a sense of belonging. But by the time he blinked, it was gone, ruthlessly suppressed by the shadows that defined him now.

He was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom, and nothing else mattered.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, the command center stretched before him, a marvel of technology and ancient magic. Advanced consoles hummed with energy, screens glowed with information in a language that felt both foreign and familiar. The scent of Silver Millennium hung heavily in the air, bringing him nothing but disdain, even as a part of him yearned for it.

Now he only had to wait. The pieces were falling into place, the trap ready to be sprung.

“Makoto darling,” he turned to her. “Call your friends.”

Because soon, Sailor Moon and the Silver Crystal would arrive. The thought sent a shiver of anticipation through him, mixed with an inexplicable dread.

Harnessing the dark energy that pulsed within him, he transformed into Tuxedo Mask. The familiar costume settled over him like a second skin, but it felt wrong now, tainted by the darkness that consumed him. He settled on a bench to wait, the shadows curling around him like eager pets.

It didn't take long before the atmosphere in the command center shifted. The door burst open with a bang that echoed through the chamber, and Usagi and her friends rushed down the steps, their expressions ranging from curiosity to shock.

“Mako!” Usagi shouted, her voice laced with concern. “What happened? Why did you call us to the command center?”

The shadows pressed closer, keeping him hidden for now. He watched, a predator waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

“Usagi!” Makoto shouted. “You're forbidden to go near that villain! He's the enemy! He's after the princess and the silver crystal!”

Tuxedo Mask smiled, a glinting expression of violence and darkness.

“Do you mean Endo?” Usagi froze, shuffling her feet nervously. Her hesitation was palpable, her faith in him both touching and infuriating. “Don’t just decide he’s the enemy. We have to...”

“He’s the enemy,” Makoto interrupted, her voice devoid of emotion. “If given the chance, he’d take the Legendary Silver Crystal!”

Usagi smiled, the expression so pure and trusting that it sent a jolt of pain through Endymion’s chest. “Don’t worry, I always carry it with me.” She pulled a glittering chain from around her neck, revealing the crystal that hung from it.

The moment the radiant crystal emerged, its light cutting through the shadows like a knife, Makoto made a lunge. But Minako was faster, her movements fluid and precise. Before he could react, she swiftly took down Makoto, leaving her crumpled on the floor.

“Damn,” he said, finally emerging from the shadows. “One step closer, and she would have had it. I’ve always said the White Moon is useless.”

Everyone turned to him, the electric hum of the command center seeming to dim beneath the weight of their stares. Usagi looked at him, and the world seemed to narrow to just the two of them. Her wide, unbelieving eyes—those haunting, too-bright eyes—seemed to cut through the darkness wrapping around his chest. It almost hurt to meet her gaze, a pain that went beyond the physical. Reaching something deep inside him was never alive.

Endymion held her gaze, a cold, mocking smile playing on his lips. “I’m glad it was so easy to hypnotize her so quickly. Then it was easy to gain access to this command center and lure you all here.”

“Everyone transform!” Sailor Venus shouted, her voice cutting through the tension like a blade.

The moment the words left her lips, the air in the command center changed. Power surged through the room, the energy of the White

Moon washing over everything in waves of pure, radiant light. The power in Endymion's chest revolted, bringing him to his knees as the area became awash in the energy he both craved and despised.

The purity of their energy bit into his skin, burning flesh and sending ripples of agony radiating outward. He could feel the darkness within him writhing, hissing in pain and fury. Snarling, he threw up a dark barrier, the shadows coalescing around him like a protective cocoon.

Through the haze of pain and fury, he saw Motoki appear from the darkness, darting for Sailor Moon with inhuman speed. At the last second, Sailor Venus leaped between them, her chain whipping out to deflect the attack. The room erupted into chaos, power flaring wildly as the Guardians fought.

Endymion watched the turmoil, his expression a mask of cold detachment. His attention kept drifting back to her, pulled like the tides to the moon. She stayed at the edges of the conflict, hesitation etched across her face. Her voice, barely above a whisper, reached his ears despite the chaos.

"But," she said, her voice trembling, "I don't want to fight him."

The shadows snarled, laughing at her pathetic nature. Then he saw it—the crystal dangling from Sailor Venus' grasp. Light both radiated from it and repelled it at the same time, a paradox of power that called to him on a primal level. The darkness exploded from him, adding yet another layer to the fray.

Everything in the command center revolted as the power spread outwards. Consoles sparked, screens flickered, and the very air seemed to vibrate with conflicting energies. Venus faltered, her grip on the crystal loosening for just a moment.

It was all he needed.

Quickly, he snatched the glittering gem from her grasp. The moment his fingers closed around it, he felt a jolt of power so intense it nearly overwhelmed him. Endymion stepped back, his fingers tightening around the crystal. Its light pulsed, almost as though it recognized his presence and resisted him.

But no matter—the darkness would overcome it. It had to.

Usagi lay slumped against the wall, clutching her chest as if in physical pain.

“Now I have it! Finally, the Legendary Silver Crystal!” He held it up, his voice ringing with triumph. The crystal’s light seemed to dim as he allowed the darkness to feed from its immense power, tendrils of shadow wrapping around the glittering gem.

The air froze, crackling with tension so thick it was almost tangible. Power sizzled through the space, making the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. Endymion crowed with his victory, a laugh that was equal parts exhilaration and madness escaping his lips.

“The Four Kings failed,” he said, “but I succeeded. Only I could bring victory to the Dark Kingdom! Only I could shatter moonlight and end the White Moon!”

As the words left his mouth, a small part of him recoiled, horrified at the thought of destroying something so beautiful. But the feeling was fleeting, quickly corrected by the darkness that had become his essence.

A black form lunged at him, claws extended. Luna, her eyes blazing with fury and determination. “Usagi!” the cat shouted, her voice urgent. “What are you waiting for? You have to fight!”

Endymion swatted Luna aside with ease, the action sending a shudder through the crystal. The sensation was intoxicating—power flowing through him, cold and relentless. It was the most pleasurable experience he’d had since the darkness gave him power, like stone con-

suming crystal, like the sound of columns collapsing amidst a vicious battle, like the sound of blood dripping on polished marble.

Usagi scrambled to the cat's side, her voice trembling as she cried out, "Luna!"

In his grasp, the Crystal grew warm, its light intensifying. The change was subtle at first, but unmistakable. Endymion glanced down at it. The crystal vibrated with an almost imperceptible cadence, its soft glow becoming a little sharper, a little clearer.

He looked back at Usagi, and what he saw made his breath catch in his throat. Her expression had hardened into something that resembled steely resolve, a transformation occurring before his eyes. She rose slowly, the crescent moon on her forehead beginning to glow with an ethereal light.

The command center seemed to respond to her, walls humming with energy, the air vibrating with the power she emanated. It was as if the very essence of the Moon Kingdom was awakening, called forth by its princess.

Endymion's skin tingled, the darkness within him writhing as she transformed. A wave of unfamiliar emotions surged through him—anger, confusion, and something that felt dangerously close to fear. He clenched his teeth and tried to banish the strange sensations, reminding himself of who he was supposed to be.

He was Endymion, Prince of the Dark Kingdom, and no one from the White Moon would best him. Not even her. Especially not her.

But as Usagi's power continued to build, as the pressure in the room mounted, he couldn't shake the feeling that something monumental was about to occur. Something that would shake the very foundations of his existence.

"Use the moon stick on Luna and Mako!" Mercury shouted, her voice cutting through the tension like a blade.

Before Endymion could make a move, the power building within Usagi reached its crescendo. It was a pressure against the darkness that both threatened and drew him in, a force so pure and potent that it made his very being tremble. The shadows within him thrashed wildly, feeding on the pure energy that emanated through the space even as they recoiled from its light.

“Moon Healing Escalation!” Sailor Moon shouted, her voice resonating with power and determination.

Light burst forth from her, a tidal wave of pure, radiant energy that drowned out the shadows and brought him to his knees. Everywhere, the radiant energy of the White Moon pushed back against the darkness, threatening to extinguish it entirely. The pain was excruciating, like being burned from the inside out, every cell in his body screaming in agony.

But he remained resolute, gritting his teeth against the onslaught. Nothing would defeat him. He was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom, and he would not fall.

Through the haze of pain and light, he heard her voice again, low yet resonating perfectly in the chaos.

“False Tuxedo Mask,” she said, “if you think you can seduce me with a handsome smile, you’re badly mistaken!”

As the tension thickened in the air, the room held its breath. The darkness inside Endymion twisted, consuming the energy and strengthening, building rapidly. The pressure became equal to anything he had ever felt before, a battle of wills and power that threatened to tear the very fabric of reality.

“I’ll never forgive the Dark Kingdom for doing this to you! In the name of the moon, I’ll punish you!”

Light radiated outward from her in pulsing waves, each one striking Endymion like a physical blow. He staggered, the crystal in his hand

growing almost unbearably hot. For a moment, just a moment, the light seemed to penetrate the darkness shrouding his heart, revealing glimpses of memories long buried—a garden bathed in moonlight, a stolen kiss, a promise of eternal love.

But before he could grasp onto these fragments of his former self, before Usagi's attack could fully take hold, a fissure of dark energy tore through the space. The walls of the command center cracked, sending debris raining down around them. More fissures formed, rippling outwards and consuming the room in a web of darkness.

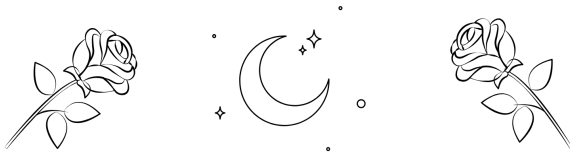
From the swirling void of shadow and malevolent energy, a figure emerged—tall, regal, and radiating an aura of pure evil that made even Endymion's darkness pale in comparison.

Queen Beryl had arrived.

Her cold, harsh voice cut through the chaos like a knife. "Well done, Tuxedo Mask," she said, her words dripping with cruel satisfaction. "Now that I have the Legendary Silver Crystal, you and I will rule earth and the moon together!"



# *Chapter Thirty-Five*



## *Tempest of Betrayal*

The air in the shattered command center hung thick with a dark energy so dense it was nearly suffocating. Polluted shadows oozed from the fractured walls, coiling like serpents around computers and pooling in the corners like liquid night. The once-brilliant glow of the monitors dimmed to a sickly flicker, casting distorted reflections on the jagged shards of glass strewn across the floor. The oppressive darkness seemed to devour every last glimmer of radiance, leaving the room shrouded in despair.

Endymion stood amidst the wreckage, the Legendary Silver Crystal clutched tightly in his gloved hand. Its luminescence was muted, the radiant light struggling against the darkness that wrapped around it like hungry vines.

A cold smile curved his lips as he watched Sailor Moon.

Her eyes were wide, shimmering with unshed tears, her face a canvas of shock and devastation. The sight of her—crumpled, devastated—sent a rush of dark pleasure through him.

This was victory.

This was power.

This was everything he fought for.

A surge of triumph pulsed through his veins, a dark, intoxicating elixir that made his heart pound with a rhythm not entirely his own. It was liquid shadow coursing through his bloodstream, filling him with completion and energy.

Yet, that tiny flicker of discontent simmered behind his left ribs, a faint tremor that sent ripples through the sea of darkness. It was insignificant; he told himself—even as the sensation lingered, an annoying itch beneath his skin that he couldn't banish.

Behind him, Queen Beryl's presence loomed like a storm cloud, her aura eclipsing even the pervasive darkness that consumed the room.

"No matter how many times we meet." Her voice slid through the air like dark silk, each word dripping with cruel delight. "You're always the bratty child. Don't you remember me?"

Sailor Venus gasped, but the others remained silent. "It was you!"

"I am Queen Beryl! Queen of the Dark Kingdom!"

Shadows surged. Darkness built. The black towered around her, accenting each word with the spark of evil energy and malevolent power.

"Princess Serenity," Queen Beryl purred as she pulled him closer. "Once you know the truth, I think you'll wish for your death. What do you think, Prince Endymion?"

If Sailor Moon looked devastated before, now she shattered. Her lip quivered as if on the verge of flooding the world. Her eyes glassed over,

unwilling to look his way. The others clustered around her, supporting her.

“Poor foolish girl.” Beryl laughed, the sound like nails scraping across glass. “You’re precious Endymion died long ago. What stands before you is merely a shell revived and empowered by the great Metalia.”

She draped her arms around him, the darkness a supreme comfort.

“It’s a lie!” Sailor Moon shouted. “Look at me, Tuxedo Mask! Mamō! Look at me!”

The air grew heavier still, pressing against the space like an oppressive weight. The metallic tang of dark energy laced each breath that Endymion took, filling his lungs with a cold fire that both invigorated and suffocated.

Shadows whispered at the edges of his consciousness, reveling in the moment, allowing him to embrace the darkness fully. Sailor Moon’s whimpered cry of denial only added to the elation of the moment. It cut through the atmosphere, a sound so filled with anguish it seemed to vibrate the very air.

“No!” Sailor Mars shouted. “He’s just under a temporary spell!”

Beryl ran her hand down his arm. “No, the prince you once knew no longer exists. You tried to save him with that fragment of the Legendary Silver Crystal, but it was of no use. He died.”

With each word, the bothersome princess seemed to melt further.

“This is Prince Endymion, brought back to life through the power of our great ruler, Queen Metalia. He wields the same power I do. And is the strongest warrior of the Dark Kingdom. He belongs to me now, body and mind. You should know, he makes an excellent lover.”

Sailor Moon’s reaction was instant and unmistakable. Her face contorted into a mix of disbelief and fury. She stumbled back, and

only Sailor Mars kept her from falling. Tears threatened to fall, but she hardened.

“That’s a lie!” Her voice cracked, but the force behind it was undeniable. “You’re twisting him into something he’s not! You think you control him, but you don’t understand anything!”

She stepped forward, her chest heaving. Her eyes locked onto his, and a flare of heat washed through his body. “Endymion isn’t yours! He never was and never will be! You may have his body, but you’ll never destroy his beautiful dreams, or the goodness inside him!”

Endymion almost laughed. There was no goodness inside of him, there were no beautiful dreams. But heat flared behind his ribs, trying to tell him the truth. But the shadows silenced the song before he could listen.

Beryl’s smug grin widened, her fingers tightening possessively on Endymion’s arm, drawing him closer to her. “Such a foolish girl,” she crooned. “You can say whatever you like, but it doesn’t change reality. He’s mine, and I’ll watch as you shatter, knowing that truth.”

Then Endymion knew what the queen wanted him to do. Summoning the darkness inside of him, he shot a band of pure evil at the gathered girls.

More cracks formed in the room, and Sailor Mercury glanced around nervously. “We can’t stay here! Jupiter, Mars—get Motoki to safety! I’ll create a shield!”

Energy surged as Mercury activated her computer. Endymion looked for instructions, but Beryl dismissed him. It didn’t matter, her expression seemed to say.

“Hyperspatial Sphere Generate!”

That power encased them, and with a snap, he could feel the energy shift. Now they were in a distinct alternate dimension. But it didn’t

matter. Sailor Moon took a step toward him, and only Jupiter could hold her back.

Endymion reveled in the sharp anguish radiating from her. The anguish radiating from her was crisp and sharp, something only nightmares were made of. Still, that tiny flicker of discomfort persisted, that barely evident flutter in his chest.

His gaze remained fixed on Sailor Moon, drinking in the sight of her despair. Her expression, so raw and vulnerable, stirred something inside of him. For a fraction of a second, a strange sensation bubbled into life.

An urge to protect.

To shield.

But immediately he dismissed the thought. He only wanted to crush her further. Darkness surged within him, relishing the weight of those thick, raw emotions. Endymion's smile grew colder, more cruel.

He was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom. Protector of shadow and despair.

His hand tightened around the Silver Crystal, the facets biting into his palm. The air crackled with energy as Beryl's twisted laughter reverberated through the void. Everything happened so fast, Beryl's hair whipped to life, racing towards Sailor Moon like writhing serpents awakened from slumber. The tendrils shot forward, their tips gleaming with an otherworldly, venomous sheen.

With lightning speed, the tendrils encased Sailor Moon.

"No!" Venus cried, lunging forward, her chain whipping through the air. But they did nothing as Venus's attack failed to grasp anything but shadows.

With a resounding snap, the hair wrapped around Sailor Moon's ankle, coiling around her leg with a sickening, slithering sound. She cried out as tiny wisps of smoke drifted up from the contact point. Bits

of red showed through the strands, the only evidence of the burns left in its wake.

“Mercury Aqua Mist!” A thick fog rolled across the room, but Beryl’s power cut through it like knives through silk, finding its next target with unerring precision.

Tendrils lashed out, wrapping around Sailor Moon’s arms and torso. She struggled, her body twisting and contorting as she fought against the ever-tightening grasp. But with each movement, the hair only constricted further. Squeezing the breath from her lungs. Tearing the flesh from her bones. Ripping fabric from her body.

Mars unleashed a torrent of fire, the flames roaring towards Beryl with the fury of a thousand suns. But Beryl simply laughed, the flames splitting around her like water against rock.

“Foolish children,” Queen Beryl sneered. “You just came into your power. You stand no chance against the ancient evil of the Dark Kingdom!”

Endymion almost laughed as Sailor Moon’s eyes widened in pain and fear. Radiant white energy glowed along the strands of hair, the only evidence of her precious energy draining.

Jupiter, her face contorted with rage and desperation, summoned a bolt of lightning so bright it left afterimages dancing in everyone’s vision. The electricity arced towards Beryl, the air thick with the acrid scent of ozone. But at the last second, Beryl yanked Sailor Moon in front of her, using her as a human shield.

The bolt struck Sailor Moon full force, her body convulsing as the lightning tore through her. A sharp cry of pain ripped from her throat, her muscles seizing under the surge. The smell of scorched skin and singed hair filled the air as Sailor Moon shuddered, her chest rising and falling in shallow, labored breaths.

“No!” Jupiter’s voice cracked, horror gripping her as she watched the damage she had unwittingly caused.

“I’ve long waited for this moment,” Beryl purred, her voice soft and menacing. “Now, tell me the secrets behind the Legendary Silver Crystal.”

Sailor Moon thrashed against the burning strands of Beryl’s hair, filling the space with the sick smell of copper and smoke. But Beryl didn’t relent.

“How can I obtain the power to make me an invincible immortal?” Beryl shouted. “I kneeled before the great ruler Queen Metalia and waited. Groveling until the time came!”

With a snap, the air changed, and Venus stepped forward. Endymion examined her carefully. There was something different about her expression. Even the shadows took note, shifting and gathering around Queen Beryl as if to protect her.

“I remember you,” Sailor Venus said, her voice almost lost among the roar of evil and the pulse of power.

“Venus?” Mercury questioned.

“You were the one,” Venus continued. “You were the one who incited the people of Earth to rebel. You’re the woman...” Tears glistened on her cheeks. “You’re the one who took Kunzite from me. You took the Heavenly Kings away from us!”

“What?” Mars asked.

Distant images flickered in Endymion’s mind, they hovered between forgotten and barely acknowledged. That spot behind his ribs burned, and he had to resist pressing a palm into his chest. Despite the shadows rolling across his skin, the flicker of something refused to be extinguished.

“You caused the deaths of the Prince and Princess!” Venus shouted, the edges of the dimension bowing outwards with the power.

Those words.... Everything inside of him seemed to grow hot. He could almost picture it, the sickening thud as the sword struck. The red flowing outward staining his armor crimson. The tortured scream of his lover as she lunged to catch him as he fell.

Before he had a chance to breathe, the darkness reminded him of what really happened. How the White Moon tortured and tainted the people of Earth. How Queen Serenity lorded the Silver Crystal over the people, forcing them to do her will.

No. The people of the White Moon were evil.

“I have the Legendary Silver Crystal.” The words snapped him back. “The princess is in my grasp. I don’t need to wait for my great ruler’s revival any more!”

Endymion could feel the shadows writhing beneath his skin, a seething mass of discontentment that twisted and churned like a nest of serpents. The surrounding darkness pulsed with a nervous energy, whispering its unease in harsh, breathless murmurs. They recoiled at the edges of his consciousness, sensing a vile treachery poisoning the air.

Beryl’s intentions, sharp and venomous, hung thickly between them, and the shadows stirred, hissing their disapproval. They knew. They felt the betrayal simmering, a violent undercurrent that threatened to tear through the fragile balance of power, their mistress forsaken by the very darkness she commanded.

“I, Queen Beryl, will control the world! I’ll be Queen of the Earth with Endymion by my side!”

Sailor Moon tried to fight back, ripping at the bonds around her neck. “No! You can’t! Endym—“

The seething mass squeezed tighter, cutting her words short.

“Venus Love Me Chain!” Sailor Venus’s voice rang out, clear and strong, slicing through the suffocating gloom.

With a surge, the air shifted, a bright tension crackling and clashing against the black. The guardians' eyes blazed with a righteous fury that screamed vengeance. White burst forth so brightly that he had to look away, but he knew what would happen.

It struck the darkness and rebounded, sliding harmlessly into nothing. Venus slid back, slamming against the edges of the dimension, accomplishing nothing. Endymion blinked away the speckles of bright power as Venus wiped a trail of blood from the corner of her mouth.

“Now you’ve made me mad.”

“Venus?” Mars held out a hand.

But the guardian ignored her. “O sword! O Divine Sword that protects the princess, appear in my hand!”

White hot power crackled through the air, sending the shadows skittering back. He braced against the rush of wind and the swirl of power that bit at his body. Holding her hand aloft, the power coalesced before a sword materialized.

The ancient power made the darkness around Endymion hiss and recoil. Energy crackled as she raised the sword.

“Let me!” Jupiter took the blade and, with a tremendous cry, severed the bonds that encased Sailor Moon.

Despite being freed from Beryl, the blazing red hair continued to tighten. Now soaked with the blood of Sailor Moon, he watched the red spread. There was something about it, watching her life slowly drip away. That was indescribable.

Horrible and fantastic.

Revolting and tantalizing.

Under it all, he wanted to... what? The shadows told him he wanted to end it here and now. The burning spot behind his ribs told him he wanted to save her. Protect her. Cherish her.

As Sailor Moon continued to writhe on the ground, Venus took the sword again and turned her gaze on Beryl. The queen's laughter was a cacophonous sound, reverberating off the walls, her eyes narrowing with fury. Dark shadows oozed from the nothing like wisps of smoke, solidifying into writhing tendrils that shot toward the guardians.

"O Moon! O my country, Silver Millennium!" Sailor Venus shouted. "Grant myself and my divine sword your power!"

Endymion startled, glancing down at the crystal in his grasp. At first, the vibration was barely noticeable, just a faint pulse. But now, it surged like an avenging tidal wave, radiating nauseating purity—the very essence of the White Moon.

Sailor Moon's struggles slowed, her hands falling limply to her sides. He could feel how close she was to death, could taste it lingering on the edge of the air, could smell the slow decay creeping closer with every lost breath.

Still, Endymion watched with detached interest as she inched toward her end. The sight should have brought him satisfaction, yet as her movements weakened, a tightness seized his chest—a painful spasm just behind his left ribs. His hand twitched at his side, an inexplicable, phantom urge to intervene that he couldn't understand.

Venus launched herself at Beryl. "It was your own darkness that led to this. You let your own desires consume you. It was your lust for Endymion that ignited the flames of war. And it was your hatred for Serenity that caused this. I'll never forgive you for taking Kunzite from me!"

At the mention of his name intertwined with Serenity's, a jolt shot through him. Images flared briefly: a moonlit garden, a soft laugh, the touch of a hand against his cheek. The ache behind his ribs intensified, a searing discomfort that clashed with the icy darkness enveloping him.

Venus moved with lightning speed towards Beryl. But the shadows urged him to stay stationary. It was time to face her punishment for contemplating betrayal. The sword sliced through the air, the blade leaving trails of light that seared the shadows.

The dimension shuddered with the impact. Beryl's eyes went wide, her face contorting in shock and disbelief. The sword pierced her chest, sliding through darkness and flesh as if they offered no resistance. Shadows parted as her body began to dissolve, melting away like ice under a scorching sun.

Beryl's gaze found Endymion's, and her voice echoed in his mind.

"When I finally had a chance, my love. I finally had you. You know, I watched you from afar for all those years. And I knew you loved me. Each time you smiled at me, I knew you loved me. But why did you deny it? We could have been together forever."

Endymion stared at Beryl's disintegrating form. He only felt a hollow emptiness. No spark of lust or desire. No flicker of emotion, only a vast void of nothing.

Sailor Moon sucked in a breath, and her friends yanked away the limp strands of hair from her bleeding body. The alternate dimension quaked violently, cracks spread across the walls as the radiant energy surged, threatening to consume everything in its path. The air churned with opposing forces—the brilliance of the Legendary Sword warring against the suffocating shadows pouring from Beryl's dissolving form. Dust and debris filled the space, each particle suspended in the chaotic energy that rippled through the room.

Sailor Venus stood at the epicenter of this maelstrom, her eyes glazed and unfocused. Blood trickled from her nose, a stark contrast against the pallor of her skin. The Legendary Sword trembled in her grasp, its once-brilliant glow flickering erratically.

“When the sword shines with brilliant light.” Endymion threw up an arm as the light intensified. “Within the breast of a queen hides the Legendary Silver Crystal! It is moved by her heart. Great power of the moon, thou art awake. And speak a prayer to the divine tower of the moon! Once again, to bring peace to our kingdom!” Each word tearing through the air like shards of glass, and now her strength waned.

Energy erupted from the sword, engulfing the room in a blinding radiance. Endymion staggered back, his arm raised to shield himself as the light pierced through the shadows. But the effort was too much for Venus.

Her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the shattered floor, the sword slipping from her grasp and clattering beside her. The glow diminished, leaving only the faint luminescence of the Silver Crystal still clutched in his hand.

“Bring me the sword and the guardian who wielded it!” Metalia’s voice cut through his mind. “Bring me the Legendary Silver Crystal!”

Endymion moved swiftly, the darkness within him pulsing eagerly, sensing victory. His movements fluid yet mechanical, he scooped up both Sailor Venus and the Legendary Sword. The weight of her unconscious form was negligible. A strange stone cold radiated from the sword, soaking his skin and sending residual energy sparkling along his arm.

Around him, the darkness coalesced, swirling in dense clouds that obscured the remnants of the command center. The shadows were heavy and suffocating, welcoming him into their loving embrace. A smile cracked his lips. Finally, he returning home. The black held him in its comforting arms, even as they itched against his skin like an ill-fitting coat.

As he burst into motion, the eyes of the guardians and Sailor Moon focused on him. The portal to the Dark Kingdom yawned open before

him—a swirling abyss of inky blackness shot through with veins of stone. Tendrils of shadows curled outwards from its edges, beckoning him home.

“Venus!” voices rang out behind him.

He didn’t hesitate, even as one voice rang out louder than the rest. The sound stirred that persistent unease in the back of his mind. A pull towards something pure, something bright. But the darkness reminded him it was truth, and the White Moon was lies.

He glanced over his shoulder to see Sailor Moon running behind him. Cuts and bruises marred her skin, but her determination shone brightly. The sight ignited a tumult of emotions. Conflict. Longing. Anticipation.

“You can’t take her!” she cried, following him deeper into the void. “Leave Venus and the crystal!”

He moved deeper into the portal, the boundary between worlds washing over him like a cascade of icy water. The sensation was jarring and exhilarating. Every shadow welcomed him, embracing him fully, their weight settling upon his shoulders like a victory banner.

Finally, he sucked in a breath. He’d returned. The Dark Kingdom.

A desolate landscape shrouded in a perpetual twilight. Jagged obsidian spires jutted from the ground, and the sky was a swirling mass of storm clouds streaked with veins of blessed purple lightning. Everything was thin and cold, carrying the faint scent of decay.

He emerged from the portal, the ground crunching beneath his boots as he landed on the stony surface. The Legendary Sword glinted in the dim light, and Venus remained unconscious in his arms, her breaths shallow but steady.

Here, surrounded by darkness and ruin, he felt powerful and unstoppable. There was no drowning sunshine or suffocation of pure air. He was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom, and finally, he was home.

Unceremoniously dropping Venus and the sword, he sucked in the first unburdened breath in an age.

A voice echoed in his mind, velvety and insidious. “Well done,” Queen Metalia purred. “You have brought me the key to ultimate power.”

Endymion inclined his head slightly. “The Silver Crystal is within our grasp. Nothing can stand against us now.”

“Indeed,” Metalia agreed. “But there is one loose end that must be addressed.”

He knew immediately to whom she referred. “Sailor Moon.”

“She has followed you. Her attachment to you will be her death.”

A flicker of emotion stirred within him at the mention of her name—a fleeting warmth that was quickly smothered by the encroaching shadows. “I will deal with her.”

As if on cue, he sensed her presence—a subtle ripple in the fabric of darkness behind him. She’d left the portal and was now in the Dark Kingdom, surrounded by ice and stone. Her arrival sent a cascade of light into the murky realm, her very presence a defiance of the darkness that sought to consume her.

“I never thought you’d chase me all the way here,” he said.

As expected, the darkness was too much, and she slumped to the ground. The soft sound of blood striking stone echoed through the desolate castle.

“Endymion.”

Something drew him closer. He didn’t know if it was the faint trace of starlight glinting off the curve of her cheek, or if it was the way her golden hair cascaded over her shoulder. But he stepped closer.

“It’s me.”

But as she stood there, illuminated by a soft ethereal glow that seemed to emanate from within her, he couldn't shake the feeling that she was more than just an enemy.

"It's Serenity."

Now, his hand hovered in the air, trembling, as it reached for her. If only to brush the curve of her chin, to feel the warmth of her skin beneath his fingers—just once. A sharp pang erupted behind his ribs, cutting through the fog of temptation like a blade.

She was of the White Moon.

She was the enemy.

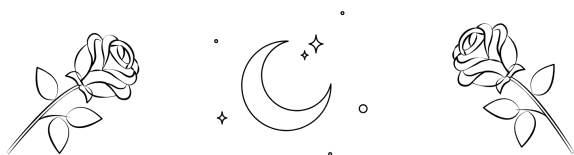
The shadows coiled tightly around him, venomous and insistent. They seized control, reminding him of the truth. Instead of a gentle caress, his hand shot out, wrapping around her throat with a sudden, brutal force. Her soft whimpers, barely audible, were drowned beneath the roaring darkness that consumed him. The ache in his chest flared, but he ignored it—pushing harder, tightening his grip.

The fresh wounds from earlier, thin and angry, split open once more, and crimson ribbons trickled down his fingers. They slid over his knuckles, warm and thick, painting his hands in her lifeblood. The sight of it—rich, red—should have overjoyed him, but instead, a deep tremor rippled through his body.

Joy. It had to be joy, he told himself, though it felt more like something fractured inside. The tremors coursed through him, making it harder to hold on, harder to squeeze. His breath hitched, ragged and uneven, as the tremor shook him to his core—an exhilaration he couldn't name, yet it twisted painfully through him like the remnants of something he'd lost but couldn't remember.

"Tell me!" He shouted at her. "If this is the Legendary Silver Crystal, why doesn't it give off power?"

# *Chapter Thirty-Six*



## *Crescendo of Souls*

The desolate expanse of the North Pole stretched out like an endless canvas of ice and stone—a barren wasteland where the sky and ground seemed to merge into a single sheet of cold, unforgiving gray. Jagged spires of obsidian and ancient ice pierced upwards, and the remnants of a grand dead stone palace loomed into the sky, its once-majestic spires now crumbling under the weight of darkness and eternal frost.

The air was thin and biting, carrying the scent of cold stone and despair. Freezing wind blew from every direction, encapsulating everything in the desolation of forgotten glaciers. Nothing breathed. Nothing lived.

Endymion stood amidst the swirling snowflakes, his dark cape billowing around him like a shadow given form. The bitter cold seeped

into his bones, but the dark energy pulsating within him kept the chill at bay. His gloved hand tightened around Sailor Moon's throat, fingers pressing into the delicate curve of her neck, the warmth of her skin contrasting with the cold that enveloped the landscape.

"Tell me!" he screamed above the roar of the wind. "What's this 'Great Power of the Moon' that you speak of?"

The only sound she made was a sickly gurgle.

"Where is it?!"

Her wide cerulean eyes locked onto his, shimmering with a mixture of fear and tears.

"Endymion," she whispered, her voice strained yet soft, each syllable escaping like a fragile wisp of warmth against the frigid air.

The way she spoke his name resonated deep within him, like a key turning in an ancient forgotten lock. He snarled, his grip involuntarily loosening for a fraction of a second. The icy wind whipped around them, carrying her scent—a blend of strawberries and something undeniably familiar—straight to him.

The layers of darkness flickered, revealing fragments flashing like distant stars in the night sky. Her hand came up and rested gently on his wrist. The contact sent a jolt through his arm. Something dangerous spreading from the point of touch and coursing through his veins.

"Please," she gasped. "I know you're still in there. Remember who you are."

A sharp pain ignited behind his left ribs, a visceral reaction that clashed violently with the cold numbness swirling inside. The dark energy around him surged, shadows twisting and writhing. Shadows pressed harder in his mind, the cold unyielding force smothered any flicker of light. Yet gazing into her eyes...

It was a trap.

But he should have anticipated her deception. She was of the White Moon, after all. They were all liars and thieves. Her other hand reached for the Silver Crystal, grabbing it before he could react. The explosion of light and energy sent them both flying backward.

He slid back, skidding to a stop on his knees. At least she took the brunt of the force, and in her weakened state it did her no favors. Sailor Moon flew backwards and smashed into a wall. Bone crunched off stone with a crack. For a moment, she lay stunned as he stood and brushed the remnants of power from his clothes.

“Princess,” he purred. “Was that power just now... your own? Can you control it? Or was it the Legendary Silver Crystal?”

Sailor Moon struggled onto her elbows, her chest rising and falling with labored breaths. Her gaze burned into him, fierce and defiant. He could feel the weight of it, the fire in her eyes sending a thrill through him.

Slowly, a cold smile curled at the edges of his lips. There it was—the first glimmer of contempt he’d drawn from her. Finally, she was grasping the truth, the inescapable reality that he would kill her.

But just as the tension thickened between them, voices echoed down the endless stone halls, the sound bouncing off the cold walls like a haunting refrain. Footsteps followed, their rhythm cutting through the silence, louder with each passing second.

Endymion resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Now that the other guardians had arrived, things were about to get far more tiresome. He could almost taste the irritation building in the back of his throat. This was going to get annoying.

As if their presence awakened her, Sailor Venus stirred, and the others helped her rise. Then he was facing their venomous glares. But before they could utter a word, the atmosphere changed.

The air in the cavernous chamber grew heavy, as if the very molecules were being compressed by an unseen force. A chill swept through the room, far colder than the arctic winds outside. Endymion felt it in his bones, a primal fear that even the darkness within him couldn't fully suppress.

Sailor Moon's eyes widened, her gaze darting around the room. "What's happening?"

The others gathered close, clutching to each other like the scared girls they were. The shadows along the walls began to writhe and twist, coalescing into a dense, oily mass that seemed to devour what little light remained. Great vibrations wove through the stone, a low rumble that grew in intensity with each passing second.

That smile on his lips grew.

She'd arrived.

A voice, ancient and terrible, echoed through the chamber. It wasn't heard so much as felt reverberating in their minds and souls. "At last, the defeat of the White Moon is imminent."

The darkness above him churned violently, twisting into a spiraling vortex that clawed at the air. From its depths, a figure emerged, its form a writhing mass of shadows that seemed to shift and reshape with every heartbeat. Its body had no clear edges, only an ever-changing silhouette that flickered and warped.

Where its eyes and mouth should have been, two sickly red lights gleamed with malevolent intent, pulsing with a sinister glow. At its forehead, a brilliant reddish-purple diamond burned fiercely, cutting through the shadows like a twisted beacon of power.

Queen Metalia had arrived.

Endymion's cape unfurled in the whipping wind, and he stood proud to serve such a magnificent creature. Inside, there was a part

of him that recoiled, screaming in silent protest against this show of subservience.

But he was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom, and Metalia was his queen.

The air crackled with dark energy, making it difficult to breathe. Sailor Moon and the others stood their ground, skirts and bows rolling in the wind. Queen Metalia's laughter filled the chamber, a sound of pure malice that promised only destruction and despair and stone.

Wind howled with a ferocity that matched the tempest within Endymion's soul. Snow whipped around them in blinding flurries, the bitter cold intensifying as the dark clouds swirled overhead, blotting out what little light the overcast sky offered. The grand dead stone palace groaned, ancient stones shifting as if reacting to the building power.

"Now," he said. "You'll taste the pure power of destruction!"

Endymion knew what Metalia had planned—a devastating surge of darkness and shadow, a force so immense it would swallow everything. Yet, despite the cold certainty of destruction, a strange reluctance stirred within him. His body tensed, resisting the inevitable. It wasn't until the swirl of Metalia's dark energy curled around his spine, an icy caress, that he realized there was no escaping this. No turning back.

With a deep, shuddering breath, he surrendered. He braced himself, opening to her will, and in an instant, a colossal bolt of energy tore from him. It roared through his veins like molten fire, searing his insides as it burst forth. The ground beneath him trembled as the raw power, dark and insidious, crackled through the air, devouring the light and sound in its path.

The guardians barely had time to react. They raised their shields, fragile and shimmering like glass, but they shattered on impact—futile against the overwhelming might of the Dark Kingdom. Their cries

echoed faintly in the distance, lost under the thunderous crash of energy. They were nothing compared to him. They had never stood a chance.

It should have filled him with triumph. It should have brought him the satisfaction of duty fulfilled. But as Sailor Moon staggered beneath the onslaught, her form barely holding against the storm of power, something twisted inside him. A shadow within the shadows. A whisper of doubt that gnawed at the edge of his mind.

This was his purpose. This was what it meant to be Endymion of the Dark Kingdom, the bearer of shadow and destruction. And yet...

A burst of light cut through the gloom. Radiant, brilliant, it sliced through the darkness like a sword forged from pure moonlight. The glow was so intense, so achingly familiar, that it momentarily blinded him. He had seen this light before—back in a crumbling palace, a blade bathed in moonlight, cleaving through shadows and tainted flesh.

His chest tightened. Memories flared, fleeting and disjointed, before the light faded and the dark retook its hold.

When the energy ebbed away, leaving only the echoes of destruction, he could see the guardians huddled together, gathering around the small, black cat. The sight filled him with a strange, hollow ache. He tried to hear what they were saying, but the wind howled through the crumbling stone, drowning their words in a swirl of dust and chaos.

“You must seal away Queen Metalia!” Luna shouted. “Banish her from existence. That time is now Sailor Moon!”

Endymion’s laughter echoed across the desolate landscape, sharp and bitter as it mingled with the howling wind and the shifting stone beneath them. Metalia’s power was too vast, too ancient for an untested princess to even hope to banish. Earth would fall—it was inevitable. The lush, vibrant planet would become nothing more than barren

stone, a monument to their failure. The citizens of Earth would succumb and no longer dream beautiful dreams.

“Power?” Metalia sneered, her voice laced with dark amusement. “The Legendary Silver Crystal has limitless power? I should have known! Give it to me!”

A voice, sharp and defiant, cut through the air. The black cat—small but fierce—turned to face Metalia, her eyes burning with determination. “This power will bury you!”

Metalia’s laughter rang out, a sound so dark and twisted it seemed to ripple the air itself, crumbling stone in its wake. “You’re nothing but a worthless, pathetic queen! And you dare to think you’ll succeed? Ha! I’ll preserve your corpses in the Dark Kingdom as a reminder of your failure.”

The ground trembled violently, fissures snaking outward as the forces of light and dark clashed, the very earth buckling under the strain. Snow and shards of ice hovered momentarily in the air, suspended in the chaos, only to shatter as the pressure mounted.

Sailor Mars didn’t hesitate. Fire blazed from her hands, fury burning in her eyes. “Evil Spirit! Be exorcised!”

The flaming ball shot forward, tearing through the darkness, momentarily pushing the shadows away—only for them to surge back, stronger than before. Endymion’s smirk deepened, knowing the attack was useless. The flame struck Metalia squarely in the chest, and then... nothing. It disappeared, swallowed whole by the black void.

Metalia’s form pulsed with renewed vigor, absorbing the energy like a ravenous beast. “Give me more! More energy!”

Sailor Mars staggered back, her eyes wide with disbelief. “It did nothing? That’s impossible!”

The others launched their attacks—chains of love, shards of ice, bolts of lightning—but with every strike, Metalia only grew stronger,

feeding on their efforts. Endymion could barely contain his amusement. They were fools, repeating the same mistake over and over, hoping for a different outcome.

“They’re only wasting their energy.” The dark satisfaction settling deep within his bones.

The energy shifted, gathering like a tidal wave around Sailor Moon as she raised the Moon Stick high. Light began to coalesce, radiating outward, but it didn’t just burn—it reached deeper, unearthing emotions and memories that had long been buried beneath Metalia’s suffocating control. The ache behind Endymion’s ribs flared, not with pain, but with a crushing sense of yearning that nearly buckled his resolve.

His hand moved instinctively to his chest, fingers trembling as they brushed the Silver Crystal’s glow. The power pouring from it wasn’t foreign—it was familiar, intimate, like a long-lost part of him whispering to be reclaimed. He shuddered, feeling the connection spark and simmer, something the darkness couldn’t fully sever.

But... he was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom... wasn’t he?

He gritted his teeth, muscles pulled taut as he fought to maintain control. The shadows surged around him, more violent now, a maelstrom of cold, writhing darkness lashing out at everything in its path. Black tendrils struck the stone, leaving jagged scorch marks in their wake, a stark reminder of the power that coursed through him.

Yet, even as the darkness raged, the light persisted.

“Moon Healing Escalation!” Sailor Moon’s voice rang out, clear and pure, as the radiance enveloped him, wrapping around the area in the softest, warmest embrace. It clashed with the cold weight of the shadows, each pulse of light chipping away at the walls Metalia had erected around his heart, illuminating fragments of a truth he had long forgotten.

There was something—something hidden, something he had lost.

“You can’t defeat me!” he growled, though the words felt hollow, more snarl than conviction. The weight of the darkness still pressed on him, but the flicker of doubt remained, gnawing at the edges of his mind.

For a moment, the light surged stronger, the power of the White Moon glowing with undeniable force, but then it vanished, extinguished as if it had never been there. The shadows closed in instantly, cold and relentless, wrapping around him tighter than ever, reminding him of the bitter truth they whispered constantly.

The White Moon couldn’t be trusted.

Princess Serenity had caused all this suffering.

Pain exploded in his head, a sharp burst of agony as the shadows surged back, their fury renewed, pushing down that spark of light before it could grow any stronger. Sailor Moon stared at him, her gaze heavy with unshed tears that shimmered like fragile diamonds, catching the dim light and reflecting it back with an almost ethereal glow. The moisture in her eyes made the color burn brighter, a vivid, desperate plea that cut through the surrounding darkness.

“No,” she whimpered, her voice barely a whisper.

He didn’t need words to hear her. He could feel her thoughts, each one pulsing through the air between them. *How can I bring him back*, the echo reverberating in his chest. *How do I make the crystal whole*, a ripple of energy, faint but insistent. *Is he someone else now*, the question lingering, clinging to him like mist in the night. Her unspoken agony hung in the silence, heavy and suffocating, making it even more painful.

“No!” Her scream shattered the stillness.

A shockwave tore through Endymion, each jagged emotion slicing through him like shards of glass. His body convulsed violently, mus-

cles locking under the strain as conflicting energies warred within. He was being torn apart, his soul split down the middle, each half pulling in a different direction.

The vibrations inside him grew, the pressure building until it felt like his very skin would tear. Sound warped around him, transforming into twisted echoes of themselves, sharp and menacing. His vision splintered, the world nothing more than a swirl of boiling color and shadow.

He clenched his teeth, fighting the sensation of losing himself completely. If this continued any longer, he knew—he was certain—he would shatter.

Thankfully, the blessed shadows surged to his rescue, wrapping him in their protective embrace. They cocooned him, shielding him from the assault of light, and he dragged in a ragged breath. Rage surged through him, fiercer now. Endymion's eyes snapped open, glowing with a sinister red hue, burning with a hatred that consumed everything. The darkness had saved him from the purity of the White Moon, and now he would exact his revenge.

He would destroy the princess.

Her body would rot in the Dark Kingdom, entombed in shadows and nothingness for the rest of eternity. The very air seemed to thicken, hardening under the weight of the darkness. The biting wind died, replaced by an eerie stillness that pressed against the land, a suffocating blanket of cold dread.

He was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom.

He was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom!

Energy pulsed through him, gathering around his hands as the darkness coalesced into a swirling, chaotic mass above his palm. The earth beneath them cracked and groaned, ice splintering and shattering as reality itself buckled under the weight of the encroaching void.

It didn't matter that her tear-filled eyes were locked on his. It didn't matter that her chin trembled, on the verge of crumbling into an uncontrolled sob. None of it mattered. The only thing he cared about was ending her—ending the White Moon—once and for all.

“Endymion, please!” she cried, her voice trembling as it echoed into the abyss.

But there was no answer. No recognition. Only the cold, unfeeling gaze of a man lost to the shadows, a heart swallowed whole by darkness. The world around him seemed to shrink, the vast expanse of the frozen wasteland narrowing until only the two of them existed within this shattered moment.

Only the distant groaning of the dying place and the crackling of dark energy that swirled around Endymion broke the ceaseless silence. Darkness flooded his senses, obliterating all thoughts that weren't aligned with Metalia's will. His eyes glazed over, the faint glow of humanity snuffed out and replaced with an abyssal void.

He advanced towards Sailor Moon, each step measured and unyielding. There was no hesitation in his movements, only chilling resolve. Now the promise of impending doom lingered in the air, weighing it down.

“Mamo?” her voice wavered.

Still, he approached.

The world froze until it was only vague recollections of beautiful dreams and powerful promises. Even nature itself recoiled from the impending tragedy. The ruins of the stone palace stood a silent sentinel, shadows stretching long across the frozen expanse.

She never looked away from him, even as he stalked closer to her. But something about her expression seemed to melt, as if she was coming to grips with her future. Her chest rose and fall with each labored breath. Those deep, stormy eyes lingered on his. There was

a sorrow etched in them. It seemed to seep into the very air between them, thickening it with bitter despair.

Endymion didn't know when she grabbed the Legendary Sword, but she now held it. The blade gleamed with a glimmering, ethereal light. Like ghosts dancing across the ice, the wavering shadows cast by the sword's light embodied the memories and emotions haunting them both. The weapon almost seemed alive, humming softly, as if aware of the gravity of the moment.

A single faint breeze dared to disturb the stillness and sent his dark cape billowing. He came to a stop as the shadows billowed. Still, their gaze remained locked.

Deep within, a fissure formed in the wall of darkness, encasing his light. A golden light was breaking something fragile and vital. His soul strained, but still Metalia's grip held.

Her hand trembled, knuckles whitening as she gripped the hilt of the sword. He could feel her hesitation, almost hear the weight of reluctance pressing down on her. The sword was heavy—too heavy—burdened by more than just its physical mass. The hum of anticipation mixed with dread, almost deafening in the silence between them.

Each second stretched into an eternity as they stood on the precipice of a decision that would alter the course of their destinies. No part of her wanted to do this. Not a single shred of her being. But duty and love converged into this heartbreaking necessity.

The Legendary Sword shimmered in her hand, reflecting a future he couldn't hope for and a past he couldn't remember. Shadows cast by the blade wavered uncertainly, as if also fighting the darkness.

He was Endymion of the Dark Kingdom, and no little girl would best him.

The moment shattered.

“I’m sorry.” The clash of light and dark nearly drowned out her voice.

Then she was upon him, the Legendary Sword arcing through the air. The blade caught the dim light, its edge glaring with pure moonlight.

Time slowed.

Endymion tried to react, but his body stayed rooted to the spot, unable—or perhaps unwilling—to move. His eyes locked onto hers, and in that instant, a myriad of emotions passed between them: love, regret, and profound understanding.

“Usako.” The name echoed softly in the recesses of his mind.

The blade met its mark.

Sharp pain blossomed in his chest, right over that ever-present burning spot, spreading outward like ripples on a pond. The darkness recoiled, shrieking in outrage as the connection to Metalia was violently severed. Shadows unraveled, dissipating into the air like smoke caught in a gust of wind.

Is this my fate? To be reborn, only to lose you once more.

Sailor Moon was before him, trembling, tears glistening like shattered stars. Her lips parted, as if she wanted to say something, but the words never came. Instead, the world slowed to match the pace of her breaking heart.

The warmth of her breathing ghosted over his skin, brushing against the cold that had settled deep into his bones. Her hand, trembling and blood-streaked, reached for him, her fingers barely grazing his cheek. Despite the pain, despite the darkness that had consumed him, there was something purifying in that touch—something that made him feel alive again.

The kiss came like a desperate confession, her lips pressing against his in a way that stole the very breath from his lungs. It wasn’t soft. It

wasn't gentle. It was raw, a collision of pain and love, an outpouring of every emotion they had ever buried.

His blood smeared across her lips, the taste of iron mingling with the salt of her tears, but none of it mattered. He kissed her back, a guttural need rising from the depths of his soul. Their breaths mingled, as though they were trying to pour every unsaid word, every lost memory, a moment stolen from life and death.

She tasted of sorrow, desperation and, underneath it all, the lingering sweetness that had always been hers alone. Each second felt like it could stretch into eternity, but he knew it was slipping away, faster than either of them could grasp.

Her lips quivered against his, a quiet sob escaping between them. Then, with a slow, painful breath, she pulled back, their lips parting with the softest brush. Her breath remained shaky and uneven, as if she were holding herself together by the thinnest of threads. The light in her eyes flickered, the spark of hope dying as she whispered his name—so soft, so full of love and regret.

“Endymion.”

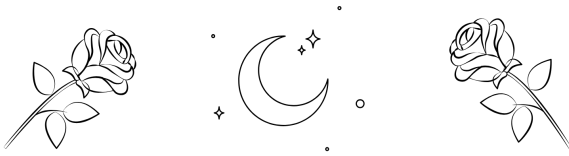
The word shattered something inside of him.

But before he could act.

Before he could think.

He lost himself once again as colors blurred and feeling faded.

# *Chapter Thirty-Seven*



## *Edge of Redemption*

**E**ndymion floated in an endless void, teetering on the precipice between life and death. Darkness pressed against him, a suffocating weight that threatened to crush his very essence. Neither life nor death had yet claimed him, leaving him suspended in this nightmarish purgatory, trapped within a prison of his own mind.

The darkness was not merely an absence of light; it was palpable force pressing against him from all sides, oppressive and all-consuming. The air—or whatever passed for it in his void—felt heavy, like a dense fog filling his lungs with each strained breath.

There was no way to tell if his eyes were open or closed; the blackness was absolute either way. Yet amidst the consuming dark, he sensed a faint glow—a distant golden light simmering somewhere in the dark expanse. It pulsed softly, a fragile beacon against the endless shadows.

Is that death approaching?

That golden luminescence simmered just out of reach, pulsing in rhythm with a heartbeat he could no longer feel. Behind his left ribs, gossamer threads pulled, as fragile as spun glass. These delicate strands were all that tethered him to the world of the living.

They were the only connection to something important.

Something that lit up the night.

Serenity!

Usako.

That was their fated soul bond.

Now he tried to fight against the nothing, to reach her, to hold her. Shadows writhed and twisted, coiling around him like sentient smoke. Dark tendrils slithered up his arms, binding him tight. With each passing moment, the weight of the darkness pulled him deeper, dragging him deeper into oblivion.

Shadows curled around him, cold and unyielding, their touch sending chills through his entire being. Each attempt to move only seemed to invite them closer, their grip relentless and unmerciful.

But they weren't alone. He'd raised his hands in violence towards his love. Guilt clawed at his insides as memories of his actions flooded his mind. Her tear-filled eyes haunted him, wide with disbelief and pain. He could still feel the warmth of her blood on his hands, see it dripping from wounds he'd inflicted.

The sound of her broken voice echoed in his ears, a sharp reminder of his betrayal. He would forever remember the raw pain in her voice as she pleaded with him to remember.

I'm a monster.

His stomach churned as the most visceral memory surfaced—his hand around her delicate throat, squeezing, choking the life from her.

Part of him recoiled in horror, while another, darker part whispered that she'd deserved it.

The sight of blood dripping from wounds he'd inflicted, her pained expressions, the harm he'd caused—each memory was a dagger driven into his heart.

That soft, pulsing light flickered, but the darkness snuffed it out. Queen Metalia's voice hummed in his mind, cold and calculating, pushing out any remnants of who he once was.

"You are Endymion of the Dark Kingdom. She is the one who betrayed you. They all did. You cannot trust the White Moon. Embrace what you are."

I am Endymion of the Dark Kingdom.

No.

But the shadows were persuasive, their whispers weaving doubts and half-truths. They pressed harder, the stony, unyielding force smothering any flicker of resistance within him.

Am I Endymion of the Dark Kingdom?

Am I a monster who harms those I love?

Suddenly, a brilliant flare of light pierced the darkness, slicing through the void like a sliver blade. Endymion's body jerked violently, every fiber of his being drawn towards the warmth and familiarity of that radiance.

No.

You deceived me!

I took a vow to protect Princess Serenity and the Legendary Silver Crystal.

I protect beautiful dreams and those who dream them.

I am Prince Endymion of the Golden Kingdom!

The golden energy within him surged in response, whispering reassurances. Safe. You're safe now. It pulsed in harmony with the rise

and fall of his chest. With the thump of his pulse. With the beatings of his heart. With the vibrations of the fated soul bond.

As the light washed over him, Endymion was struck by a vision so beautiful it made his heart ache.

A life with Usagi stretched out before him. Mornings waking up to her sleepy smile. Afternoons filled with her melodious laughter as she sorted through bins of dog toys. Nights with her hair spread across his pillow like moonlight made tangible.

It was a future brimming with the kind of beautiful dreams that Usagi embodied—dreams he desperately wanted to share.

Warmth enveloped him like a gentle wave, causing the shadows to recoil and hiss. A familiar scent wafted through him. Moonberries. Strawberries. Vanilla. It was the scent of home, of belonging, of her. It was what he longed to come home to every night.

The light flickered, small at first but growing stronger with each pulse. It sent ripples through the darkness, pushing back the void that held him captive. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, warmth returned to his frozen bones.

The golden light grew stronger, pushing back against the poisoning darkness. It resonated with the fragile threads behind his ribs. Each beat a plea for him to hold on.

Yet even as hope blossomed, fear gripped him. Surrendering to the light meant facing his sins, confronting the horrors he'd inflicted.

Can I face her again?

The darkness inside tightened, trying to drag him back into the void where he could hide from his guilt. Now two impossible choices tore him apart—the numbing safety of oblivion or the painful path of redemption.

Stay, the darkness urged, promising numbness and escape.

Stay, the shadows whispered, their voices dripping with tempting seduction.

Here you don't have to feel. You don't have to remember.

But the golden glow sang a different song. A melody of forgiveness.

The Silver Crystal will forgive you. Its voice soft as sunlight.

She'll forgive you.

Your love is eternal, transcending even the gravest of sins.

Endymion only hesitated a moment longer before focusing on the light, drawing strength from it. Images of Usagi surfaced again. There was no fear or pain, but laughter. There was only the light that radiated from her eyes as she laughed. Only the softness of her voice when she spoke his name. The gentle touch of her hand in his.

With trembling resolve, Endymion reached for the light. His movements were slow and labored, as if he were trying to swim through tar. Every muscle strained against the darkness that sought to hold him back. His hand shook violently as he lifted it, the shadows clinging to him like leaden weights.

But the memory of Usagi's warmth, of Serenity's unwavering love, gave him the strength he needed. He had to reach the light. Had to feel her presence once more. Had to hold her again, even if it meant facing the full weight of his transgressions.

Serenity. Give me the strength to come back to you.

Usako. Give me the courage to face you again.

Usako.

As his fingertips stretched towards the radiance, Endymion felt the first true strings of hope. Perhaps redemption was possible after all, if only he had the courage to embrace it. He saw her again, standing bathed in soft light, her hair flowing around her like pure golden sunshine. Tears glistened on her cheeks, but there was a hopeful smile on her lips.

Endymion, she whispered, speaking his name like a sacred prayer.  
Serenity, he breathed, her name a reverent invocation.

His heart ached at the sound of her voice, a mixture of pain and relief flooding through him. He reached for her, their fingers almost touching. But just as he felt the faintest brush of her warmth, the shadows yanked him back violently. The connection severed, and her image shattered like glass, fragments dissolving into the darkness.

No!

Anguish tearing through him. The darkness closed in, more oppressive than before. The cold seeped deeper into his bones, and the whispers grew louder, more instant.

Stay, they taunted. She's gone.

You're alone.

Accept it.

A profound hopelessness settled over him. The weight of his actions and the burden of his failures bore down on him, and the fight drained out of him. He was tired. He was so tired of struggling, tired of the pain.

Maybe they're right.

Maybe this is all I deserve.

The golden light flickered weakly, barely more than a spark. The delicate threads behind his ribs began to fray, the connection to his humanity unraveling. He closed his eyes—or perhaps they'd been closed all along—and let the darkness envelop him.

Just let go. The whispers became a dull hum.

It's easier this way.

The last vestiges of resistance faded. A single icy line traced down his cheek, disappearing into the void. In the silence that followed, he hovered closer to that edge of oblivion. Caught between the remnants of who he was and the encroaching emptiness.

Goodbye Usako.

Just before the void enveloped him, a sudden flare of light slid through the blackness. His body jerked in response, muscles tensing as the light commanded his attention. The golden glow simmering inside of him reacted instantly, resonating with the newfound brilliance.

A throb of heat started behind his left ribs, gentle yet insistent.

You're safe, it whispered.

You're not alone.

You'll never be alone again.

I'm your family now.

That heat washed over him like a wave, cascading through his body and pushing back the chill that had once again taken over his body. The shadows hissed and recoiled. The dark whimpered as the dark tendrils burned away under the radiant glow.

A familiar scent wrapped around him. Delicate moonlight, decadent strawberries, and delectable vanilla. It woke up every cell in his body, reviving memories of laughter, gentle touches, and moments bathed in soft light.

Usako, her name slipping from his lips like a vow.

Now he saw her beside him, the sunlight dancing in her golden hair as they stood beside the fountain. Watched the moonlight flow down her shoulder. Saw each expression that transformed her face.

What would it be like to wake next to her each morning? What would her first breath of the day sound like? What would her laughter sound like as it rippled off the walls of his lonely apartment? How would her eyes light up when she shared secrets and whispered promises? How would her hair look splayed across his pillow at midnight with the moon worshipping her?

She was full of beautiful dreams, and he wanted nothing more than to share in every single one. His chest tightened with a profound

longing, the ache both painful and liberating. The golden light pulsed stronger, urging him towards the brilliance beckoning ahead.

Is that the Silver Crystal?

Is that Usako?

The darkness held him fast, each movement a battle as the black pulled him back with every inch he gained. His limbs felt heavy, but the warmth at his core spurred him on. The delicate threads behind his ribs glowed brighter, strengthening the connection to the light ahead.

Now he could almost feel her—the softness of her touch, the gentle cadence of her voice calling his name. The memories gave him strength, each one a steppingstone out of the abyss.

Come back to me, her voice echoed.

I'm coming, Usako. I won't give up.

Angry, the shadows writhed, grabbing and yanking at him in desperate attempts to drag him back.

You cannot escape.

But they held less power now because the vibrant light held him, shielding him from the cold tendrils that sought to bind him. The scent of strawberries and vanilla grew stronger, welcoming him back home. Further, he reached, stretching towards the glow that beckoned so invitingly. The golden glow accompanied him, sliding through the nothing with practiced ease. The contact sent a thrill through him, a rush of emotion that brought tears to his eyes.

Usako.

The light pulsed in response, and he felt a soft pressure against his palm. A hand that fit perfectly into his. The connection was electric, a fusion of souls that transcended the darkness surrounding him.

Endymion, I've waited so long to hold you.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for everything.

You're here now, that's all that matters.

But even as he basked in the warmth of their reunion, a shadow of doubt flickered at the edges of his consciousness. The darkness had not relinquished its hold entirely. It lingered, a persistent weight that threatened to pull him back under.

Do you truly think she'll forgive you?

After all you've done?

He faltered, the grip on her hand loosening slightly. The memories of his actions pressed in tighter. Her pained expressions, the harm he'd caused, the blood he'd spilled. Shame burned inside of him.

Let go. The light squeezed his hand.

We can face it together.

Sucking in a breath, he drew power from her words. The golden light within him flared brightly, pushing back against the encroaching shadows.

I want to be with her again.

I want to hold her again.

I want to tell her how much I love her.

With renewed determination, he pulled himself deeper into the light, each movement shedding fragments of darkness that clung to him. The shadows hissed and receded, unable to withstand the combined power of his will and the light's embrace.

The world started to change, the oppressive blackness giving way to hues of soft gold and silver. The air lightened, the heavens lifted as warmth spread further. He looked into the light and saw her now.

Serenity.

Usako.

Her eyes shone with tears, a radiant smile gracing her features. The sight filled him with such indescribable peace. She took a step towards him. He took a step towards her.

But the warmth waned, the golden light that had momentarily pushed back the darkness flickered like a candle in a storm. Just as hope had blossomed within him, the shadows surged with a vengeance, crashing over him like never-ending night.

The darkness snatched him back, yanking him away from her. Their fingers slipped apart, and the connection severed abruptly.

Usako! His voice echoed futilely as the void swallowed the sound.

At once, the golden glow spluttered, struggling against the onslaught of shadows that coiled tighter around him. The air grew colder, heavier, as if even the darkness itself was solidifying. The oppressive weight pressed down on him, making each breath the greatest of labors.

When the darkness parted, he expected to see light, but instead it morphed into vivid images. They assaulted his senses with brutal clarity.

The surface of earth, but not the vibrant, living planet he knew. Instead, it was a barren wasteland. The blue sky was now a sickly gray, choked with ash and dust. The ground transformed into a cracked and desolate landscape, stretching of lifeless stone as far as the eye could see.

No trees, no water, no living thing, just an endless expanse of emptiness. Humans roamed about, screaming out in pure agony and suffering. Unable to die, unable to find relief. Doomed to live a half-life of torture and pain.

Worse, his connection to the planet remained eerily silent. As if the very soul of Earth was extinguished.

A chilling wind swept across the desolation, carrying with it the faintest hint of decay. A metallic tang of blood lingered in the air, tainting every breath he took. He turned, and his heart lurched at the sight before him.

Usako.

Serenity.

Her body lay crumpled on the cold, unforgiving ground, her once-radiant form now fragile and broken. Golden hair lay strewn around her, dull and matted with dirt and blood. Each shallow gasp she took was like a knife to his heart, the sound barely audible in the stillness.

He rushed to her side, dropping to his knees as he gathered her gently in his arms. “Usako.”

Her eyes fluttered open, clouded with pain yet still holding a flicker of recognition.

“Mamo...” she breathed, her voice so faint it was almost lost to the void.

“Hold on,” he begged, cradling her against his chest. “Please hold on. I’m here.”

But even as he spoke, he could feel her slipping away, the warmth fading from her body. The reality of her impending death slammed into him with crushing force.

“Please, don’t leave me.”

Her eyes locked onto his, a single tear tracing through the dirt on her cheek. “I’m sorry. I tried so hard to stay by your side.” The words barely formed before her eyes drifted closed and her body went limp.

The bond between them, that constant, comforting presence that had become as familiar as breathing, snapped like a taunt string. Where once there had been warmth, love, and the steady rhythm of Serenity’s essence intertwined with his own, there was now—nothing.

The silence was deafening, a void so profound it seemed to consume everything. It felt as though something violently tore away a vital part of him, leaving a bloody, gaping wound.

A raw scream tore from him. A sound born of pure agony and despair. “No! Usako!”

His mind screamed to save her. His will fought fiercely against death. No matter what, he had to stop this nightmare, but the darkness whispered in his ear, tempting him with the promise of oblivion.

She’s lost. The darkness crooned.

You can’t save her now.

He clutched her lifeless form tighter. “This can’t be real. It can’t end like this.”

Shadows thickened, the air growing colder still. Queen Metalia’s presence loomed all around him, her voice echoing from all directions, dripping with malicious satisfaction. “See what your defiance has wrought? All you love turned to dust and ruin. Join me. Change the future.”

He looked at the surrounding desolation stretching into infinity. The weight of hopelessness pressed down upon him. Was this truly the future? Was this the price of his failure?

Yet, a spark ignited within him, a fierce, unyielding determination. This vision of Usagi’s fate ignited a desperate need to fight back. He couldn’t. He wouldn’t let this be her future.

“This isn’t real, and I won’t let it happen!”

A chilling laugh resonated around him. “Oh? This is a destiny you cannot escape. The more you resist, the more she will suffer.”

Shadows squeezed tighter, like iron bands around his chest, constricting his breath and crushing his spirit. He had no power. He couldn’t command moonlight or summon fire. How could he save her? Doubt gnawed at the edges of his resolve. What if his efforts only brought more pain?

But then, he saw her smile, the way her eyes lit up with unbridled joy, the dreams they had yet to share. The thought of her light extinguished was unbearable.

He gritted his teeth, resolve hardening into something stronger than stone. “I won’t let this happen. I refuse to accept you. I refuse to accept this future.”

“Foolish boy,” Metalia spat. “You think you can defy me?”

Gently, he laid Usagi on the ground. “I will, because I won’t fight alone. She’ll be by my side every step of the way. She’ll be my strength.”

Closing his eyes, he focused inward, reaching for the golden glow that still flickered within his chest. It was dim, battered by the shadows, but it was there—waiting for him to embrace it fully. The shadows sensed his intent and surged violently, attempting to smother the light once and for all. Pain lanced through him, but he gritted his teeth and pressed on.

“You’re nothing compared to me and the power of the Dark Kingdom,” Metalia hissed. “Submit and join me. This resistance is futile.”

He hopped his eyes, and a new power burned inside of him. “I may have stumbled, but I am not alone. As long as there’s a spark left in me, as long as she waits for me, I’ll fight.”

Drawing on every ounce of strength, he reached deeper inside himself, pulling at the threads of connection that bound him to Usagi and the Earth. Golden light flared, pushing back against the all-consuming darkness.

The barren landscape rippled around him, cracks forming in the illusion. Colors seeped back into the world—hints of blue peeking through the gray, patches of green breaking through the cracked earth.

Metalia’s scream of rage reverberated through the air. “You dare defy me!”

He stood taller, the shadows receding from his form as the light expanded. “I dare, and I will.”

Now the vision crumbled faster, pieces of the desolate world falling away like shards of glass. The warmth returned, the biting cold dissipating as the true reality fought to reassert itself. But they hadn’t won the battle yet. Shadows coalesced into a towering figure before him.

“You cannot escape me!” Metalia roared.

He braced himself. “Watch me.”

Now the shadows came for him. The darkness surged faster, the force of it shaking the very air. But the white and gold light was there with him, they countered, light surging to meet the onslaught. The collision of energies sent shockwaves rippling outward, the ground trembling from the force.

Pain coursed through him, but he refused to falter. “I won’t let you take her. I won’t let you turn the earth to stone. I won’t let you destroy our future.”

Flashes of the future burst through his mind. The quiet moments they’d spent together walking in moonlit gardens. Laughing over ice cream. Finding new cakes to try. Kisses under golden sunshine. Making love in the morning. Each one bolstered his resolve, fueling the light that battled against the darkness.

The darkness wavered, the intensity of the attack diminishing. “Impossible, you are mine!”

“Not anymore. I choose my own destiny, and you aren’t a part of it.”

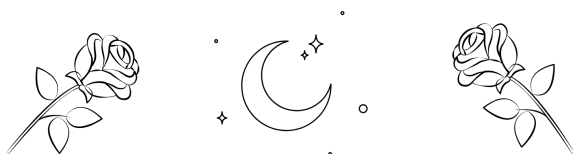
The void shattered into a million splintered pieces, dissolving into nothingness. Brilliant white light surged forward, obliterating every last lingering shadow, leaving no trace of darkness behind. Sensation returned slowly, like the first whisper of a breeze after a storm—soft tendrils of feeling tickling up his limbs, then sinking deeper, flooding

into the very core of his soul. Each pulse of light coursed through his veins, filling him with the undeniable force of redemption, hope, and the promise of renewal.

Warmth bloomed against his skin, a subtle, almost ethereal touch. It was soft like silk, yet magnetic, drawing him in with an energy that felt raw and alive. Her hand in his—a beacon of life, of everything he had lost, and everything he could still fight for.

He was home. He was hers. And nothing would ever pull him into the shadows again.

# *Chapter Thirty-Eight*



## *Renewed Bonds*

**M**amoru clawed his way up from a suffocating abyss, his mind sluggish and heavy, like surfacing from the deepest trench. His thoughts were tangled, disoriented, memories slipping through his grasp like shadows on the edge of his awareness. But there was something—someone—anchoring him. A familiar warmth pressed against his side, the delicate grip of a hand entwined with his own. The pulse behind his left ribs, faint yet persistent, sent faint sparks of life stirring through his veins.

But the world around him was nothing but endless black. Darkness so thick it felt like it was crawling beneath his skin, smothering every sense, every flicker of clarity. Panic coiled in his chest, tightening its grip like iron chains, squeezing the air from his lungs until his breaths came in shallow, frantic gasps.

Am I still trapped? The thought crashed into him, bitter and wild. Still a slave to the darkness?

“Mamo?”

The sound of a voice—her voice—broke through the suffocating fog. Serenity. Usako. Sailor Moon. He knew her voice better than his own heartbeat, the way it caressed his soul. Yet, why couldn't he see her? The abyss clung to him, refusing to give way to the light. His heart raced, the rising fear suffusing his blood with dread.

“Sailor Moon?” his own voice trembled, the sound foreign to his ears shaky with uncertainty.

Slowly, with trembling hesitation, Mamoru raised his hand. His movements were painfully deliberate, as if every inch tore through the crushing weight of darkness. If the abyss still had its claws in him. If he was still Metalia's prisoner. If this—she—was a cruel illusion conjured to torment him, to make him believe in hope, only to rip it away...

He wouldn't survive it.

His fingers brushed against soft skin. Warm. Real. The fragile dam around his heart broke.

Now, more awareness filtered through the darkness. He lay sprawled on cold, unforgiving stone. The chill seeping through his clothing, biting into his skin and settling deep into his bones. The air was dense, saturated with the residual stench of dark energy.

Everywhere, Metalia's malevolent influence tainted the atmosphere like a noxious fog that refused to dissipate. He could sense the faint flicker of the Silver Crystal's power nearby—not through sight, but as a gentle warmth pushing at the edge of his consciousness.

In the void of his blindness, his other senses sharpened. The biting cold wrapped around him like an icy shroud, relentless and bitter. He could hear the mournful howl of the wind in the distance, its violent tendrils scraping against the remnants of the dead stone. Amidst the desolation, one sensation anchored him: the soft, warm touch of a hand resting in his.

“Mamo, you've returned to me. It's a miracle.”

He swallowed hard, forcing himself to believe in miracles. “Usako?” his voice emerged as a strained whisper, laced with both hope and fear.

“You’re awake. You’ve returned to me.”

He turned his head toward the sound, his heart still pounding. “I... I can’t see. Everything is dark.”

There was a sharp startled gasp before her grip on his hand tightened, fingers trembling but holding on, like a lifeline tossed into a stormy sea. “It’s okay, I’m here.”

The words were an anchor in this storm of disorientation. He focused on the rhythm of her breathing—steady, calming. The soft scent of her—strawberries and vanilla—pushing back the encroaching panic.

She was real. This was real.

But the shock of his blindness gnawed at his composure.

What if I can’t help her?

How can I protect her?

The doubts clawed at him; the fear creeping in with the darkness. Weighted down by helplessness, he felt the flickers of hope in his chest being crushed. Then her voice, cold as stone in winter, crept into his mind.

“You dare to stand against me, Endymion? You belong to me! The darkness will always be a part of you—no matter how much light she pours into your heart, the shadows will come for you again. You’re nothing without my power, a mere pawn, and she will see it, too. She will see the darkness in your eyes and wonder when you’ll turn on her again.”

Terror burst across his chest. Was this the truth? Still, under that fear, a steady heat pulsed inside of him. The golden light of their bond, resonating with the faint glow of the Silver Crystal. He swallowed again, fighting back his anxiety.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, fearful of the answer, yet needing it more than life.

“I’m okay,” she replied softly. “Just a little tired. I can’t wait to take a good nap. I’ll sleep all afternoon.”

Relief mingled with lingering worry. With painstaking effort, he lifted his free hand, fingers trembling as they sought her face. His fingertips brushed against the smooth skin of her cheek, warm and alive. A tear rolled over his finger, hot and real, and it twisted something in his heart.

“You’re crying.”

She leaned into his touch, her breath hitching. “I’m fine. These are happy tears. I was so scared,” she confessed, her voice barely audible over the distant wail of the wind. “I thought I’d lost you again.”

The guilt tore at him, memories crashing over him. Memories of the times he’d failed her, the moments when the darkness had used him, turning him into a weapon against the very person he cherished the most.

“I’m sorry.” The words were heavy, hanging in the frigid air.

“No,” she insisted gently, cupping his face. “It wasn’t your fault. I didn’t blame you. I’ll never blame you.”

Before he could answer, Metalia’s voice cut across the darkness. “Endymion, do you still believe she can forgive you? After all the times you betrayed her, after all the times I twisted your heart against her... do you really think love can erase the shadows I’ve left in you? Can she ever truly trust you, knowing the darkness still lingers?”

“Stop it!” Sailor Moon shouted. “You have no concept of true love and forgiveness! I’ll always trust him. I’ll always love him!”

He wanted to believe her, but the shadows of his actions loomed large, whispering accusations in the black of his mind. “I should have been stronger.”

“You are strong.” Her tone was firm, yet tender, each word a gentle balm on his frayed soul. “I could feel your hesitance. There was always a flicker of you in every touch, every time our eyes met. I’ll never hold that against you.”

Her unwavering faith kindled even more love in his chest. The golden light within him flared brighter, the bond between them strengthening. He closed his eyes against the darkness, holding onto her words, letting them root deeply inside of him.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“For what?”

“For being here. For believing in me.”

She gave a small, breathy laugh, one that carried warmth even in the biting cold. “Always.”

The moment between them stretched out, filled with unspoken words, a silence that wasn’t empty but brimming with feeling. He shifted slightly, wincing as the sharp pain lanced through his side, the coldness of the stone beneath him ever-present.

Tremendous dark clouds gathered on the horizon, a venomous voice spread across the stone. “Gather your strength, little princess—though we both know it won’t be enough. The universe is cold, and your love is a fleeting warmth that will be snuffed out like a candle. You think you can protect him? You couldn’t protect anything, not in this life, and certainly not in your past.”

The battlefield stilled for a moment, the swirling darkness retreating, as if the malevolent force of Metalia was pulling back to regroup. It was an unnatural pause, one that felt almost like the calm before the storm. In that brief stillness, the world seemed to hold its breath, giving them a fleeting moment to breathe.

“Can you sit up?”

“I think so.”

Usagi's gentle hands guided him upright, her touch a lifeline in the darkness. Disoriented and vulnerable, he instinctively wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. Their bodies fit together like bands of moonlight, as if they were always meant to be here, holding onto each other amidst the storm. The chaos of their surroundings faded into insignificance; the world could crumble, but in this moment, it was just the two of them, bound together against the encroaching shadows.

They kneeled together on the icy ground, the cold seeping through his clothes, the bite of ice pressing against his skin like daggers. But Usagi's presence was a shield against the chill—her warmth a protective cocoon. The winds howled around them, carrying the scent of stone and darkness, but it was nothing compared to her.

He wasn't alone. He had her.

The Silver Crystal hovered beside her, the steady glow of power radiating outwards. Mamoru held her tighter, his fingers quivering as they tangled in her hair, the connection between them deepening with every heartbeat.

Yet under the comfort, a turmoil churned. Love for Usagi overwhelmed his heart, but so do the crushing weight of the battle that loomed ahead.

How can I protect her if I can't see?

The question haunted him, wearing down the edges of his resolve, the fear twisting like a knife in his chest. The helplessness threatened to drown him, to drag him down into despair, but he shoved it aside, focused on the strength of their connection.

"Usako, I've wanted to hold you like this for so long," he whispered, his lips brushing her ear.

"Of course you have. The threads of destiny have tied us together."

He closed his eyes, leaning into her, drawing strength from her unwavering presence. “I wish I could see you.”

“Close your eyes.” Her hand came up to cup his cheek, her fingers tracing the contours of his face.

He complied without thinking.

“Just feel,” she breathed.

At first there was nothing, but then a soft, white light slowly pierced the darkness. Even behind closed eyes, he could see the power. Blinking in surprise, he opened his eyes to see the world slowly coming into focus. The blurred outlines of the icy landscape sharpened. And there she was.

Sailor Moon.

Her eyes reflecting the glow of the Silver Crystal, her presence both familiar and awe-inspiring. Mamoru tugged her tighter, savoring the sight of her after the oppressive darkness. Her presence was everything, and it made the world seem savable. But just as quickly as the relief had come, so too did the stark reality of their situation.

“Look at you, trying so hard to shine in the darkness. Do you truly believe your light can banish me? You’re just a scared child playing at heroism, clinging to some naïve hope. Haven’t you already lost enough, Sailor Moon? Your friends have fallen, and soon, so will you.” Metalia’s voice cut across the silence, battling the wind and shredded stone.

The ground trembled, vibrations escalating until it felt as though the earth might split apart. The dark energies that had retreated were now swelling once more, furious and cold. He could sense the evil building, a palpable force threatening to consume everything.

The very earth shuddered violently, sending shockwaves through his body. He could feel the planet’s pain—its agony resonating deep within him. He reached out with his essence, trying to soothe the

turbulent energies, but they were beyond his comfort. The cries were inconsolable, its distress a reflection of the darkness that still loomed.

“I know you, Serenity! You’re weak, always have been. Your compassion is your downfall. You should have let him go—do you think your love will save you now? This world will crumble just like the last, and you will watch, helpless, as everything you care about turns to ash.”

Then, through the swirling shadows, Metalia’s ominous form emerged, a towering figure of darkness and rage. Power crackled in the air, a weight so suffocating it felt like it was draining the very light from the world. Dark energy and shadows and stone swirled around her, tendrils of shadows reaching out like claws, and Mamoru reacted.

He plucked the Silver Crystal from the air, his fingers tightening around it as he pulled Usagi closer, positioning himself between her and the encroaching darkness.

“No!” he shouted, his voice sharp and bright against the shadows. “I won’t let you have them. Not Usako and the Silver Crystal!”

Poisonous dark energy surged, the shadows around them thickening. Waves of darkness crashed into them, battering his body relentlessly. His cape whipped violently in the storm, the fabric snapping like a banner in a hurricane. The pressure was overwhelming, each blast sapping his strength, pushing him to his limits. His muscles trembled, every fiber of his being straining just to hold on.

The darkness pounded harder, unyielding and merciless. Each breath was a fight, his vision blurring at the edges. But he wouldn’t let go.

Not now.

Not ever.

But he was fading fast, his body reaching its limit. The darkness pressed in, the weight of Metalia’s power trying to crush everything.

But even as his body threatened to give out, one thought burned bright in his mind: Protect Serenity. Protect Usako. Protect the Silver Crystal.

Even if it costs me everything.

Summoning the last of his power, he turned towards Sailor Moon, his gaze intense despite the pain wracking his body.

“You have to defeat her,” he whispered, his voice barely audible over the roar of Metalia’s attack. “Only you can stop her.”

Her eyes widened, tears glistening as fear and determination warred within them. “I don’t have the power myself. I need my friends.”

“No one can ever replace your friends, but you’re not alone!”

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she turned, the Silver Crystal clutched tightly in her grasp. Light grew stronger as she prepared to face Metalia. Mamoru closed his eyes, a silent prayer on his lips. He believed in her—believed in the love they shared. And no matter what happened, he knew she would save them all.

The storm of darkness raged on, relentless and unforgiving, swirling in a chaotic tempest. He wanted to save her from this, to prevent her from facing such evil, but that wasn’t her destiny. She was fated to fight evil, and he was fated to protect her.

“I love this planet!” she shouted into the void. “And you won’t turn it into a world of stone and nothing! I won’t let you destroy it like you did Silver Millennium! I won’t fall like my mother did.”

Mamoru watched, breathless, as she stood straighter. The faint glow of the Silver Crystal intensified with each heartbeat, her form bathed in a luminescent aura that transformed her into the goddess she was. He could barely see through the haze of shadow and flickering light—his vision unreliable—but he felt the power emanating from her, felt the power from where he remained, struggling to stay upright.

“Please resist me!” Metalia’s voice boomed. “It’s never any fun when prey only submits. Fight me and learn why I’m the end of all! Learn how I crushed Queen Serenity so easily!”

With a determined cry, Sailor Moon raised the crystal high above her head. A beam of blinding light erupted from the Silver Crystal, slicing through the darkness in a blaze of ethereal power. The air vibrated, the tremendous force radiating from her, bursting forth like nothing he’d seen before. The very ground trembled as if the earth recognized the significance of this moment.

Just as the beam struck Queen Metalia, she shuddered once before absorbing the onslaught. Horror grew inside of him as the surrounding darkness grew even more dark, her form swelling with the power she consumed.

“Yes! Let me consume that blessed power. Let me grow stronger so I can crush you harder!”

A chilling laugh echoed across the battlefield, reverberating through the icy expanse. A twisted, violent sound that sent a shiver down his spine, straight to his soul. Despair sunk in, his body weakening, every muscle screaming in exhaustion as he realized the futility of the attack.

Before he had a chance to speak, a sharp pain pierced through Mamoru’s chest, lancing through him like a hot knife. He gasped, clutching the spot instinctively. His shaking fingers brushed against something solid, and realization struck like lightning.

This is where the sword struck him.

Except his faithful knights saved him.

They’d blocked the blow from piercing his heart.

Jadeite, Nephrite, Zoisite, Kunzite had shielded him from that fatal blow, giving their lives so that he might survive.

“My loyal knights,” he whispered. “You gave your lives for me, just like you promised.”

A shattered stone fell from his pocket. A gentle pulse, steady and comforting in the storm. Kunzite was there, his form ghostly and flickering in the shadow. The chaos receded, replaced by a profound stillness. The presence of his fallen general brought an unexpected calm. Silver hair floated around Kunzite, undisturbed by the winds, and his gaze was steady and filled with unwavering loyalty.

“Kunzite.”

“My Prince.” The voice was clear and unwavering. “Queen Metalia will devour all life energy from Earth. She’ll destroy Elysion and consume all the beautiful dreams you’ve worked so hard to protect. She’ll turn this place to stone.”

“Do we have any hope?”

“Yes. The black portion on the monster’s forehead. That is where her beating heart rests. Focus, an attack there. That is her weakness.”

One by one, the other stones fell. The debris sparkling in the radiance of the Silver Crystal. The forms of Jadeite, Nephrite, and Zoisite appeared beside Kunzite. Each of them smiled.

“Master, we’re honored to see you again,” Jadeite said with a bow.

“The stars will bless you two with the greatest of love,” Nephrite said.

“Believe in yourself as we believe in you,” Zoisite nodded.

Mamoru didn’t brush the tears from his eyes, overwhelmed by the sight of his loyal friends. He let the shards of their crystal fall between his fingers. Then, with a snap, they were gone. Their light extinguished and replaced by the stone cold of pure evil.

As the fragments scattered like fallen stars, they shimmered faintly, caught between this world and the next. Each shard pulsed with a gentle glow, as if whispering promises into the dark. Slowly, one by

one, the lights drifted upwards, rising like fireflies on an unseen breeze, tiny beacons of hope against the shadow.

They gathered, spiraling together, weaving a path across the sky, as if drawn toward something greater—a cosmic cradle waiting to welcome them home. Somewhere far off, the Galaxy Cauldron called. Rebirth awaited them like a promise etched in stardust.

Metalia's form blotted out the stars, blocking his view. "That's why I'm the consumer of worlds! That's why I'm the devourer of hope! No one can defeat me!" Metalia laughed as she flowed outwards, preparing herself to strike again.

A pained cry broke through the air as Sailor Moon faltered, her knees buckling under the weight of the energy she channeled. The light of the Silver Crystal dimmed, flickering as her strength faded. Without thinking, he lunged forward, his muscles screaming in agony. He reached her just as her body gave out, catching her before she hit the cold, unforgiving ground.

Gently cradling her in his arms, her quivering body leaned heavily against his. The pulse of the Silver Crystal was erratic, its glow faint, and Mamoru's heart clenched. She was exhausted, her breaths shallow, yet her eyes fluttered open to meet his.

Fatigue and love blending in those beautiful blue depths.

In that moment, it was not just Sailor Moon or Usako he saw. It was Serenity—the princess he'd loved across time, whose memory kept him alive through so much darkness. The golden light of that love, that devotion, pierced through the shadows that made up the world.

"Serenity," his voice was barely there, infused with the depth of his feelings. His hands came up to cup her face, his thumb brushing away the tears that dripped down her cheeks. "You must use all your power to seal her away. If you don't have enough power on your own, take mine. Strike the black spot on her forehead."

“Endymion.” Her lip quivered. “I don’t think I can.”

“I know you can do it.” He pressed his forehead against hers. “You’re Sailor Moon. Have confidence in that. You’re powerful and pure. Seal her away forever.”

At first, her gaze remained full of hesitation and fear. But he held her tighter, his eyes locked onto hers. “I know you can do it. You’re not alone. I believe in you, just as they do. You’re Sailor Moon, a guardian and protector.”

Sailor Moon’s gaze remained fixed on him, her eyes swirling with a storm of emotions—fear, uncertainty and a flickering hope. He could sense the weight of her hesitation, the immense burden pressing down on her slender shoulders. The wind howled around them, carrying the chill of impending doom, and he knew they were standing at the precipice.

“I’m afraid. I don’t want to fight.”

He didn’t let her go, keeping her nestled close in his arms.

“Usako,” he whispered. “I’ll be by your side. Now and forever. I love you. I’ve loved you since you smacked me with that paper, since the first time I heard your laugh. I’ll love you until the stars fade and the universe stops spinning.”

Her eyes softened, and the fear receded. Slowly, she nodded, that fear being replaced by determination.

“Mamo. I’ll defeat her, and we’ll go back to our lives together. We’ll get cake and laugh over smoothies. We’ll sit under the stars and bathe in moonlight.”

“And I’ll hold you the entire time.”

As Sailor Moon turned to face Metalia, their bond pulsed with a new energy. An almost tangible force that wove their hearts together, a golden thread binding them in this moment.

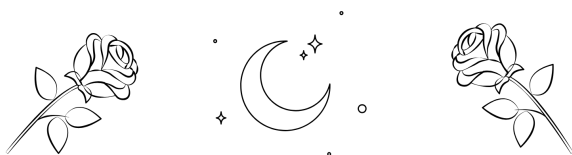
The battlefield was a maelstrom of energy. Whipping winds and dark shadows swirling in violent fury. Metalia's colossal form loomed large before them, her darkness devouring the surrounding light. The air itself was thick and heavy, charged with clashing forces, making every breath a laborious task.

The crackling energy made the hairs on his arms stand on end. Metalia's darkness was bone-chilling, her power like a coldness that reached into the deepest parts of his being. But before him, Sailor Moon's power radiated warmth.

A comforting light that pushed back against the shadows, like the first rays of dawn breaking through the darkest winter night. The clash of these two forces was palpable, vibrating in the very air around them, sending shockwaves that rippled through the ground and air.

Now she faced the darkness like an avenging angel.

# *Chapter Thirty-Nine*



## *Shattered Moonlight*

**S**he stood before the abyss, no longer the girl who once stumbled through life, but a force of nature—a radiant warrior with light burning in her veins.

Mamoru couldn't look away. Amid the chaos, as the storm of darkness and power raged around them, Sailor Moon stood as the embodiment of defiance—a luminous force that seemed almost otherworldly. Her silhouette, backlit by the radiant Silver Crystal, was more than just a warrior. She was transcendent.

Yet, beneath the awe that consumed him, there was fear—raw and aching. What if this light, so brilliant and fierce, wasn't enough? The surrounding darkness seemed infinite, an abyss threatening to devour the very thing he held dearest. He swallowed, his heart pounding in his ears, the thought of losing her again twisting in his chest like a blade.

Light poured from her, a blinding, unyielding glow that carved a sanctuary in the swirling abyss of shadow. Her hair whipped wildly, golden tendrils catching the light, and her eyes burned with a fire that refused to be extinguished. She stood with purpose; her stance unwavering, the Silver Crystal held aloft as if it were the answer to all despair.

“I will not lose!” she shouted into the depths.

He remained spellbound. While the ground around him fractured, threatening to swallow them whole, to him, there was nothing else in that moment but her. The chaos, the collapsing world, the malevolent laughter of Queen Metalia all faded as he took her in, breathless.

More in love than ever. But even that love came with an unbearable weight—a desperation that clawed at him. He had failed her before, allowed darkness to twist his mind and turn him against her. Even now, he feared his weakness. Could he protect her? Could he truly be the support she needed in this fight? She looked almost untouchable, her glow piercing through every shadow, driving back the darkness that wanted to consume them all.

The sight of her—so fierce, so unrelenting—ignited something deep within him, a mixture of awe, love and a desperate longing to protect her, even if his body could barely hold itself upright.

He imagined Queen Serenity watching over them, her gentle pride in her daughter filling him with a renewed sense of purpose. He knew, deep down, that she would be proud of the woman her daughter had become.

“Serenity, Queen Serenity would be so proud of you.”

To see her now, standing as if summoned by the heavens themselves to wage this final battle, left him both humbled and in absolute wonder. She wasn't just Usagi. She wasn't just Sailor Moon. She wasn't just Princess Serenity. No, she was all three and more, a goddess of

light, the incarnation of hope—the only hope that remained against the looming void.

“Serenity.”

Every ounce of power in the world seemed to gather around her, making the air vibrate with a raw energy that took his breath away. Even in the face of utter destruction, she was magnificent, more brilliant than he’d ever imagined.

“Grant me the power of the moon!” Her voice echoed clear above the roar of darkness, clear and resolute.

Endymion found himself clinging to that sound, that light, even as doubt clawed at him. He couldn’t help the fear that welled up within—the fear that she was giving too much, that she would burn herself out entirely in this final act. He couldn’t lose her. Not after everything. His heart hammered painfully, torn between wanting to protect her and knowing that only she could wield this power. All he could do was stand by and hope... hope that the light would be enough.

“Do you think you can defy me with your pitiful light?” Metalia’s voice roared through the darkness. “I am the darkness that devours worlds, the shadow that drowns all hope! No power, not even that of the moon, can stop me from consuming everything you love!”

Metalia’s words twisted around Mamoru like a vice, each syllable pressing down on his spirit. The memories of all his past failures, the times when darkness had claimed him, surged to the forefront of his mind. The doubt gnawed at him—what if she was right?

What if this was a battle they couldn’t win, and he had led Usagi to her doom? His breath caught, fear almost paralyzing him, but then his eyes found her—the unwavering determination, the light that refused to falter—and he clung to that image with everything he had left.

The monstrous form of Metalia towered on the horizon, her massive body swirling with dark, writhing tendrils of shadow. Her eyes blazed with a furious red light, molten with rage and hunger, casting an eerie glow across the desolate battlefield. The very air around her crackled with dark energy, thick and suffocating, as though the darkness itself was alive, waiting to strike. She was more than just an enemy—she was an all-consuming force, the embodiment of destruction.

And nothing but stone and despair followed her.

Yet, Sailor Moon faced the darkness with nothing but her heart and belief. A glimmering beacon in the chaos, a symbol of everything they were fighting for. And in that moment, she was everything: his hope, his love, his strength.

No matter how terrifying the darkness was, Mamoru knew he could face it so long as he was standing with her. She was the light that pierced through the night, and as he watched her, he couldn't ignore the fear that gripped his heart. She stood as an avenging angel, her power transcendent, but there was always the chance that such brilliance would be fleeting. What if she gave everything and the darkness still prevailed? The thought was unbearable, a cold dread that spread through him. Yet, there was no turning back—only forward, together.

“We all believe in you, Sailor Moon!” He shouted, unknowing if she could actually hear him over the din of the approaching evil.

The battlefield was unraveling, a nightmarish abyss of swirling dark energy and radiant light. Mamoru stood amidst the cataclysm, his cape torn and whipping in the tempestuous winds that clawed at him, carrying both the suffocating heat of darkness and the biting cold of defiance.

Above, Queen Metalia loomed, her grotesque form shifting and pulsating, a storm of shadows blotting out the sky. Her presence

devoured everything, reaching hungrily to absorb all light and life, turning all hope itself into a distant memory.

The earth screamed out in pain as the ground cracked and heaved, fissures spiderwebbing outward as if the earth itself could no longer withstand the strain. Each tremor sent shards of rock tumbling into the abyss below, the violent quaking echoing through his bones. The world was on the verge of collapse, each fracture a testament to the agony of their planet teetering on the brink of oblivion.

He tapped into the mysterious golden light deep inside his soul, summoning all his energy to help calm the world before it tore itself apart. Still, his gaze remained fixed on her.

The one radiant constant in this chaotic maelstrom.

Sailor Moon stood a short distance away, poised atop a jagged outcrop of stone and ice that jutted defiantly from the fractured earth. The Silver Crystal hovered above the Moon Stick, its luminescence intensifying with each passing heartbeat. Threads of silvery light spiraled around her, weaving into a luminous aura that defied the encroaching shadows, a beacon of pure defiance against the storm of despair. Through the turmoil of energy distorted his view, Mamoru felt her resolve burning brightly through the unbreakable bond.

“She’s unstoppable. Metalia, you have no idea the strength you’re up against. That light, her light—is going to destroy you.”

The cacophony of battle roared around him—the deafening howl of the tempest, the crackling of raw energies clashing violently, and the bone-chilling laughter of Metalia, all melding into a dissonant symphony that battered his senses. All he could do was stay focused on the steady pulse of the Silver Crystal and the unwavering spirit of the woman who wielded it.

“What can I do? What can I do to help carry this burden?”

Despite his newly restored sight, Mamoru felt a profound helplessness gnawing at him. Memories of his past failures haunted him—moments when he had been manipulated, when he hadn't been able to protect her. He was a guardian, a prince, and yet he couldn't stand beside her in combat as he longed to.

"I can't stand by and do nothing... Not again. I have to help her. Even if my body fails me, my heart is hers."

He drew in a ragged breath, his resolve hardening. He cast one last glance at her before closing his eyes and reaching inward, seeking that core of his being where their bond resided. The golden light inside flickered, then flared, responding to his desperation. He channeled every ounce of love, hope, and strength he possessed along that invisible thread that connected them, willing his energy to bolster hers.

When that connection glowed a constant gold, he opened his eyes. The Silver Crystal responded, its glow intensifying, the brilliance pushing back the shadows that crept closer. Sailor Moon seemed to stand taller, the surge of power coursing through her radiance.

"For you, my love."

She glanced back at him, and though the swirling energies blurred her features, he caught the faint curve of her smile. A silent acknowledgment of his support.

"She can do this. She will do this. Because she is light and hope and dreamer of beautiful dreams."

Metalia's voice thundered across the desolate landscape, a guttural snarl that resonated deep within the earth. "Your futile efforts mean nothing! I am eternal! I am unyielding stone! I am darkness incarnate!"

The ground shook violently, and fragments of rock levitated around them, caught in the gravitational pull of clashing forces. The air itself seemed to vibrate, heavy with the scent of ozone and the metallic tang of impending doom.

Mamoru braced himself against the tremors, his gaze never wavering from Sailor Moon. She raised the Moon Stick higher above her head, beams of iridescent light spiraling upwards, piercing the rolling clouds that obscured the heavens.

Her voice rang out, cutting through the din of destruction. “I refuse to let you destroy earth like you destroyed Silver Millennium! I’ll protect this planet with my life!”

Mamoru couldn’t bear the thought of Earth meeting the same fate as Silver Millennium. Memories surged forward—of cold, merciless stone devouring once-smooth crystal, of pillars crumbling in agony as they splintered apart. The air had been thick with the screams of the fallen, their lifeblood staining the ground in a stark, unfeeling crimson.

And then, there was the memory that had haunted him most—the moment he found his father. The golden castle that had once shone like sunlight now lay darkened, its grandeur reduced to shadow and ruin. In the throne room, he’d discovered his father’s body, slumped in silence, his crown drenched in red. The proud, gentle king who had taught him honor, duty, and love was now only a lifeless shell. The grief of that loss still lingered, an ache woven into the very fiber of his being.

His heart ached with the weight of it all. No matter the cost, he had to prevent the Earth from suffering that same devastation.

The intensity of the Silver Crystal’s light grew, expanding outward in a brilliant cascade that bathed the battlefield in pure radiance. The light reflected off the towers of ice and glimmered against the falling snow. As the light grew and expanded, the shadows recoiled and hissed, being stripped away to reveal the scarred earth beneath.

Metalia screeched in defiance, her monstrous form convulsing as the light began to eat away at the darkness that composed her.

“You’re too young, princess! You’ve yet to master the forces it takes to control a legendary artifact like the Silver Crystal!”

Mamoru felt a surge of hope swell within him. The warmth of the golden light in his chest blazed, synchronizing with the pulsations of the Silver Crystal. The energy between them flowed freely now—an unbroken circuit of mutual support and unwavering faith.

But the hope didn’t last as the darkness surged forward once more, like a tidal wave of malicious energy. It writhed and swelled, a monstrous force that refused to be subdued. The shadows seemed to come alive, twisting into grotesque shapes, their edges sharp and jagged as they clawed at the light with renewed ferocity. For a moment, the air grew suffocating, heavy with the scent of decay and the oppressive weight of Metalia’s presence.

Somehow, the tremors wracking the ground intensified, more fissures cracking open like wounds, spilling forth more inky darkness that reached toward Sailor Moon, desperate to smother her radiance. Tendrils of shadow lashed out, converging on her in a final, defiant attempt to snuff out the hope she embodied.

The roar of Metalia’s fury echoed across the battlefield, a sound so deafening it made Mamoru’s bones ache. He felt the temperature drop, the bitter cold gnawing at his skin, as if the very life of the world was being sucked into the abyss.

“No! I will not let her be defeated!” He desperately channeled more energy through the bond.

Brighter the Silver Crystal shone.

Harder Sailor Moon fought.

Mamoru shielded his eyes with his arm, but the light broke through, filling his vision with overwhelming brightness. In that suspended moment, a profound sense of peace washed over him. The

fears and doubt that had plagued him melted away, replaced by a tranquil certainty.

No matter what came next, they had faced the ultimate darkness together. Their hearts, their souls, intertwined in this final stand. He allowed himself a fleeting smile, pride and love intertwining as he watched Princess Serenity shine with a brilliance that rivaled the very stars.

“Sailor Moon! Don’t waver! Put your power into it!”

The battlefield teetered on the brink of annihilation. Each beat of his heart rippled like a drum against the backdrop of chaos. The once brilliant light of the Silver Crystal began to wane, its radiant glow flickering like a dying ember in a storm.

Around them, Metalia loomed—a massive storm cloud of seething darkness, her energy churning and twisting, casting long writhing shadows across the fractured earth.

New mountains erupted across the desolate icescape as the ground fractured and tremendous slabs of stone shifted. The stone cracked and splintered, as if the world itself could no longer endure the onslaught. The air vibrated with a raw destructive power, an almost electric tension that made every breath feel like inhaling fire and smoke.

Metalia’s presence pressed down on him, an invisible force that seemed intent on crushing the very essence of their hope.

Sailor Moon still stood strong, her body trembling under the strain of the Silver Crystal’s power. The light flickered, its light struggling as she was. Mamoru’s heart clenched painfully at the sight. She was giving everything, pushing beyond her limits to fight the darkness, yet Metalia’s power continued to surge, an endless tide threatening to drown them both.

“Please Queen Serenity,” he whispered. “If even a shred of your essence remains, help her. Guide her.”

The roar of Metalia was defeating—a primal, all-encompassing force that pushed against his bones, vibrating through his body, making his teeth rattle in his skin. His muscles strained as if carrying an unbearable weight, each movement a Herculean effort against the crushing pressure. His pulsed raced, syncing with the faltering rhythm of the Silver Crystal, each beat a reminder of how close they were in losing everything.

He wanted to go to her. Hold her in his arms and cry. “I can’t lose her again. Not when we just found each other.” It repeated over and over, fueling his determination, even as exhaustion threatened to pull him under. He refused to let her fight alone.

“Sailor Moon, don’t stop. Keep fighting. This evil will never devour your light!” His voice was hoarse, strained, barely audible over the cacophony that surrounded them.

He reached out towards her, his fingers brushing her silhouette. Through the bond he knew she was suffering, she was cold, too cold, and it only deepened the fear gnawing at his insides. He poured more of his dwindling strength into her, hoping it would be enough.

Their connection sparked something within him. That golden thread of light that tied their souls together burned anew amidst the encroaching shadows. As he gave her everything he had, the Silver Crystal rallied. Its dim flame swelled into a radiant blaze that pushed back against the darkness.

“Usako, you can do this.”

He could almost see her now, the blaze of determination in her eyes. There’d be no chaos, no darkness, only a silent understanding between them. Only the love two fated souls could share.

Light exploded outwards, a supernova of hope and love that seared his skin and set his very soul blaze. Then, he was struck with a beautiful dream.

In his mind's eye, he could see it unfold. A warm, sunlit day where they sat in a small rowboat, drifting lazily across a crystal clear lake. The sunlight danced off the water's surface, casting golden ripples that mirrored the peace in his heart.

Usagi sat across from him, her laughter ringing out like the sweetest melody as she dipped her fingers into the cool water, sending playful splashes his way. Her hair glistened in the soft afternoon light, the golden strands reflecting the warmth of the sun, her smile radiating joy.

The world stretched slowly, the gentle lapping of the water against the boat creating a soothing rhythm. Birds flew overhead, their calls a faint harmony to the serenity of the moment. He could feel the soft breeze as it tousled his hair, the vibrancy of her gaze as it locked on this, and for that moment, there was nothing but peace, love, and the unspoken promise of forever.

It was everything they ever wanted—a dream of simple happiness, shared together.

That dream of theirs was more than just a memory; it was the very essence of what they fought for.

That is what he was fighting for. The beautiful dreams of a future together.

Reality itself seemed to warp and bend under the strain of the opposing forces. Light and darkness clashed violently, the battlefield transformed into a hurricane of energies that tore at the fabric of existence. Mamoru held onto the bond with all his might, his body a shield against the chaos, refusing to let her fight alone.

Time seemed to freeze. The tumultuous winds ceased, the deafening sounds faded into silence, and even the quaking earth grew still. The light enveloped everything, a vast expanse of white that erased the boundaries between the sky and ground, between ally and enemy.

Metalia's silhouette flickered within the luminous void, her once-massive form dwindling as pieces of darkness shattered and drifted away like ash on the wind. Her enraged screams echoed faintly, diminishing with each passing second.

Metalia's enraged howl shook the heavens, a sound filled with primal fury and fear. "No! I will not be denied! I am the end of all things!"

In that moment, as the fate of the world hung in the balance, Mamoru felt a surge of love so powerful it threatened to overwhelm him. He knew, with absolute certainty, that it came from the deepest parts of her soul—that she would sacrifice everything for him, their future.

And in response, he poured his heart into their bond, wanting her to feel the same. That he would give up everything—his life, his soul, every last breath—if it meant protecting her, if it meant ensuring their future together.

Her voice rang out, cutting through the silence. "Be gone! By the power of the sacred light! Be rendered to dust!"

The Silver Crystal's power erupted, a tidal wave of pure, cleansing energy crashing against Metalia's darkness. The light grew impossibly bright, forcing Mamoru to close his eyes against its intensity. He could feel it—heat coursing through his veins, burning away the last lingering traces of Metalia's influence. It was blinding, searing, yet also filled with a profound sense of peace—a warmth that promised hope even in the face of despair.

For a heartbeat, everything went silent. Then, with a sound like the world itself being torn asunder, the ground beneath them shattered. Mamoru felt himself falling, and as they plummeted into the abyss, he saw Metalia's final desperate attack—an immense lance of pure darkness—surging towards them, aimed straight at her heart.

If this darkness reached her, if this final light was snuffed out, there would be nothing left. The world, their future, their love—all would vanish. He couldn't let that happen, not now, not ever.

“Serenity!” he cried out.

Time stretched, a single heartbeat suspended in eternity. Mamoru's scream echoed, his heart splitting with fear, but there was no room left for hesitation, no time to think.

Sailor Moon didn't hesitate. With the last shreds of her strength, she thrust the Silver Crystal forward, her face set in fierce resolve. The crystal blazed like the heart of a star, its light cutting through the darkness with a force that felt almost alive, a raw unrelenting surge of power.

The lance of darkness—Metalia's final attempt to destroy everything they held dear—struck, but the Silver Crystal met it head-on. For a heartbeat, both forces clashed, darkness and light entwining, the air vibrating with the impossible strain of opposing energies. The lance pushed closer, each inch a battle, each breath a fight against oblivion. Mamoru's arms wrapped around Usagi, his body shielding her even though he knew it would not be enough. His heart pounded, each beat screaming the truth that he could not.

I can't lose her.

And then, Sailor Moon screamed—a primal, raw sound filled with every ounce of pain, love, and sacrifice she held. The Silver Crystal flared, an explosion of raw energy that radiated outwards like a shock-wave. It wasn't just light—it was everything she was: her love, her beautiful dreams, her memories, her hope for a future. The force of it was unimaginable, a torrent that seemed to pull the very fabric of reality along with it. Metalia's darkness crumbled against it, disintegrating into nothingness. Each tendril of shadow pulled apart until there was only light.

The darkness shattered.

Metalia's scream echoed, a twisted, shrill sound that was swallowed by the brilliance of the Silver Crystal. Her monstrous form convulsed, shadows breaking away from her like shards of glass, her body unraveling, her power reduced to nothing. There was a final burst—a splintering, soul-shaking roar—and then silence.

The light expanded, devouring everything, filling the abyss with a purity that transcended anything Mamoru had ever known. It burned, seared into his skin, but there was peace in it—a finality. His breath hitched as he held Usagi closer, their forms dwarfed by the sheer radiance, their souls united in this one last act of defiance.

The warmth surrounded them, a cocoon of pure love and light, and Mamoru felt a sense of peace wash over him. His body was broken, his energy spent, but he knew it was over. He could feel the darkness receding, slipping away into nothingness. As he gazed at her, the love of his life, her face gentle and her eyes shut, he understood they had emerged victorious no matter the future challenges.

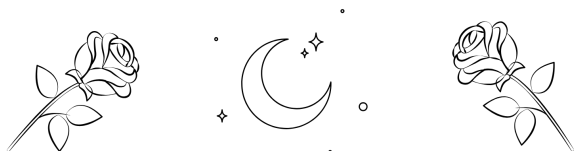
He smiled, the edges of his vision fading, the weight of exhaustion finally pulling him under. “We did it... Usako...” he whispered, his voice barely audible. His eyes drifted closed, his last thought a silent wish—a prayer—that she would find her way back to the light, that they would find each other again, no matter where or when.

There was only the glow of the Silver Crystal, pulsing gently in the quiet, its light cradling them as they fell into the darkness together—peaceful, unafraid, and triumphant.

They held each other, the warmth of their bond the last sensation in the world. Slowly, the light of the Silver Crystal dimmed until there was only darkness.



# *Chapter Forty*



## *Eternal Echoes*

Consciousness returned slowly, like gentle waves lapping at the shores of his mind. Endymion drifted between shadow and light, a soft pull drawing him back from the depths of oblivion. His eyelids fluttered open to a sky draped in velvety black, studded with stars that shimmered like distant memories.

The moon hung above, full and luminous, casting a soft, radiant glow that bathed everything in ethereal light. Something profound stirred within him.

A sense of wonder.

Belonging.

Moonlight spilled across him. The beams were softer than a whisper, a quiet song filled with nothing but joy and love. The silvery light danced across his skin like a lover's caress, each touch a blessing that wrapped him in remembered affection. Where once it had felt like stone, now it flowed like silk, embracing him with the tenderness of a long-awaited reunion.

He turned his face toward the light, welcoming its touch with a newfound peace. The moonlight wasn't just illuminating; it was

celebrating. Each ray felt like an answer to questions he'd carried for lifetimes: Yes, you've returned. Yes, you're forgiven. Yes, you've found your way back to who you were always meant to be.

He wasn't searching for her. Not now. Because in this place, with the light surrounding him, he could feel her everywhere, in everything. The acceptance soaked into his soul. Duty and love intertwined once more, not as a burden but as a blessing. Memories crystallized with perfect clarity. This time, they didn't slip away but settled into place like a missing piece of his heart finally returned.

Endymion lifted his hand, watching as the moonlight played across his skin. It didn't reveal imperfections, but honored the battle scars earned in the service of love, each mark a testament to his journey home. The golden light within him rose to meet the silver radiance, earth, and moon in perfect harmony once more. He was no longer a fallen prince, but one who had fought his way back from the darkness.

He was Prince Endymion of the Golden Kingdom, guardian of the Golden Crystal, ally to Elysion, and protector of beautiful dreams.

He remained transfixed, basking in this gentle communion. The moonbeams wove around him like threads of fate, each one a reminder of promises kept and love that had transcended death itself. Their touch was healing, washing away the last shadows with pure, unconditional acceptance.

"Thank you," he breathed.

Here, suspended between earth and sky, Endymion felt complete for the first time. The light revealed not what he'd lost, but everything he'd regained through sacrifice and devotion. He was prince of earth and guardian of beautiful dreams, and the moon's blessing wrapped around him like a mother's embrace.

"Thank you for this."

He closed his eyes, breathing in the peace that surrounded him. Inside, golden light bloomed to meet silver, their energies merging in perfect resonance. The moon's touch was like a kiss upon his brow, and in that moment, he knew with absolute certainty that he was exactly where he belonged.

A faint hum resonated around him, almost imperceptible, like a lullaby whispered from another time. It wrapped around him, soothing the remnants of fear and pain that lingered in his heart. Here, the air was pure and untainted by darkness or despair.

Each breath felt like drinking in starlight, filling his lungs with a coolness that soothed rather than burned. Above, the sky stretched endless and velvet-black, scattered with stars that seemed close enough to touch, sparkling with unusual clarity.

As the moonbeams continued to caress his face, he paused. "The moonlight... it's soft again... just like it used to be." The words slipped out before he could fully grasp their meaning. They stirred new memories.

Silver halls glittering in resplendent moonbeams.

Stolen glances across blooming moonflowers.

Love that defied kingdoms and gods.

Rising to his feet slowly, he felt his limbs surprisingly light, as if he had been freed from the burden of darkness, leaving only him—Endymion, not a puppet of the shadows. He flexed his fingers, half-expecting to feel the strain of injuries or the residue of darkness clinging to his skin, but there was nothing—no pain, no shadows—only a lightness that was both comforting and unsettling.

I'm free.

In the distance, a glimmering crystal palace loomed on the rocky landscape. The realization hit him like a burst of light—the Crystal Palace had been restored. It now rose like a dream made manifest, its

spires catching and reflecting the gentle light in ways that made his heart ache. Seeing the palace restored, whole and shimmering, filled him with a mixture of joy and sorrow. It was a symbol of everything they had fought for, everything they had lost—and now, perhaps, regained. The sight stirred his soul in a way he couldn't put into words.

His past life had been a paradox of peace and calamity. He had known the warmth of brotherhood, the purity of love, but he had also witnessed the unraveling of worlds—the fragile line between creation and destruction. He had stood at the heart of both great good and unspeakable evil. It was in those days, long before fate had torn them apart, that he had followed Serenity into the hidden room above his father's throne.

It was then that he'd first looked into her eyes.

It was then that he'd found his fated soul.

But none of it mattered without her beside him. Those memories were beautiful, but incomplete—Serenity was the missing piece.

“Serenity...” he whispered, his voice crackling.

The soft moonlight seemed to pulse gently in response, as if acknowledging his words. He turned to scan the ethereal landscape with increasing desperation. She had to be here. After everything they'd been through, everything they'd sacrificed, they couldn't be separated now. The thought of it was unbearable.

“Usako?” he called out, his voice echoing in the stillness.

No response.

He held his breath, his chest tightening. Where was she? Where was Usako?

“Serenity!” he shouted, desperation edging into his tone, his heart pounding.

The only answer was the gentle hum that permeated the air, a soothing sound that now felt mocking in the face of his growing fear.

Just then, a movement caught his eye—a delicate shimmer of light different from the ambient glow that surrounded him. He turned sharply, hope igniting like a flame within him. From the veil of moonlight emerged a figure, distant but unmistakable.

Golden hair cascaded down her back in twin streams, catching the lunar glow and setting her aglow like a celestial goddess. She moved with graceful steps, her white gown flowing around her like a halo of light.

His breath caught. “Serenity.”

Each heartbeat seemed to stretch into eternity as she approached, the distance between them dissolving in the soft glow of moonlight. The overwhelming relief and joy that surged within him threatened to overflow. The ethereal beauty of her presence dispelled the lingering poison of doubt and fear.

Endymion moved towards her, then broke into a run, his movements fluid and unencumbered in this dreamlike realm.

“Serenity!”

Their eyes met across the distance. A radiant smile spread across her face, mirroring the emotions swirling with him. As they drew closer, the world around them brightened. The stars shone more vividly, the moonlight intensifying as if responding to the reunion of their souls.

Nothing else mattered—no darkness, no battles lost or won—only her, the love they shared, and the peace that wrapped around them like a protective embrace.

The space between them vanished in a heartbeat. One moment, Serenity was just a step away; the next, she was in his arms, their souls colliding like waves meeting the shore. Endymion pulled her close, lifting her off the ground, the world around them blurring into insignificance. The warmth of her body seeped into him, chasing away the last whispers of cold that had lingered in his bones.

She felt like sunlight breaking through storm clouds.  
Like the first breath of spring after an endless winter.  
Like blazing sunlight glittering over crystal.

“Serenity.” Her name escaped him like a prayer, his voice thick with emotion.

“Endymion.” His name flowed across him like a breeze, her voice thick with unburdened reunion.

He buried his face in her hair, her golden strands cascading around them, catching the moonlight and transforming into liquid gold. Her familiar scent filled him—strawberries, vanilla and moonflowers—triggering a rush of memories so vivid they almost brought him to his knees.

Moments shared, touches exchanged, whispered promises all came rushing back with the clarity of a dream born into reality.

Serenity wrapped her arms around him, her hands gripping the fabric of his tunic as if she feared he might disappear. Her skin was warm beneath his fingers, her heartbeat strong and steady against his chest. It grounded him, tethering him to this moment, reminding him it was real—that they were together once more.

“Endymion,” she breathed, her voice trembling, tears brimming in her sapphire eyes. She pulled back slightly to look at him, her gaze shimmering like the stars above. “Finally, we’re together again.”

He rested his forehead against hers, their breaths mingling in the narrow space between them. His hand cupped her cheek, his thumb gently wiping away a tear that escaped down her face. “We are,” he whispered. “I’ve wanted to hold you for so long.”

Serenity smiled, her eyes filled with tears that sparkled in the moonlight, her face glowing with joy. “I was so scared, Endymion.” Her voice broke. “I didn’t think I could save you all.”

“I know, my love. I know. But you were brilliant.”

“Then I felt my friends, I felt you, I knew we could do it together. I can do anything with you by my side.”

Endymion tightened his embrace, feeling her warmth soaking into him, driving away every remnant of everything but her. Her hair, silken and fragrant, brushed against his cheek, and he felt her body mold perfectly against his.

The world beyond them faded. The gentle hum of the air, the distant glimmer of the palace, none of it mattered.

There was only her, only them, in this moment of profound relief.

“You were incredible,” he whispered. “I’ve never been more proud of you. And I know that Queen Serenity would have been proud, too.”

A blush warmed her cheeks, and she leaned into his touch, her gaze never leaving his. “I couldn’t have done it without you.” Her fingers tightened against the fabric of his tunic. “Your strength, your love—it gave me the courage to keep going. I didn’t want to see another beautiful world turned to stone.”

Endymion leaned closer, his eyes locked onto hers, their connection deepening as moonlight sealed their bond. “You’re everything to me. I never want to be apart from you again.”

Serenity smiled, a radiant expression that made her eyes shimmer brighter. “Then we won’t be apart. Not now, not ever. I’ll be by your side until the stars fade from the sky and the moon no longer shines. Forever, Endymion—no matter where we go, or what we face.”

He tilted her chin upward, their eyes holding each other, and for a moment, the universe seemed to pause. “I love you, Serenity,” he said, each word carrying the weight of lifetimes, an unbreakable vow.

“And I love you, Endymion,” she replied, her words filled with unwavering sincerity and love.

Their lips met, a hesitant touch that quickly deepened as the floodgates of their emotions opened. Her lips were soft, warm, and tasted of

salt and hope, igniting a fire within him that burned away every echo of darkness they'd faced.

It was a kiss that transcended everything—every battle, every sacrifice, ever loss. Here, there was only love, only peace, as if the entire universe was holding its breath just for them.

The moonlight around them responded, intensifying, wrapping them in a glow that invigorated and nourished. The air was alive with power, shimmering like stardust as a soft breeze whispered across their skin, carrying with it approval and the scent of moon blossoms.

Time ceased, and Endymion felt everything. The steady thrum of Serenity's heart, the silken brush of her hair against his skin, the warmth of her lips, and the soft rhythmic sound of her breath mingling with his. Every touch, every sensation was a reminder of why they had fought, why they had sacrificed everything.

They broke the kiss slowly, forehead still pressed together, eyes half-closed, sharing breaths. Endymion's hand moved to her back, his fingers tracing gentle patterns, grounding him in this reality. Serenity opened her eyes, her gaze locking onto his, and in that silence, a thousand words passed between them.

Promises.

Gratitude.

And above all, love.

"This feels like a dream," Endymion whispered.

Serenity smiled, her fingers brushing against his cheek. "If it is, I never want to wake up."

He chuckled softly, his breath catching. "Agreed."

But then, as they held each other, something shifted in the air. The warmth that enveloped them wavered, and the moonlight flickered. Endymion frowned, a subtle unease creeping into his heart. He pulled back slightly, his eyes searching for danger.

“Did you feel that?”

Serenity’s brow furrowed. “Yes... something is changing.”

The once-steady glow around them dimmed, replaced by an unsettling coolness that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. The air, once filled with a comforting hum, grew quiet, as if retreating from them. A faint vibration ran through the ground beneath their feet—a warning that their time here was slipping away.

Endymion’s protective instincts flared, and he tightened his hold on Serenity, his heart pounding with a sudden urgency. “Stay close,” he whispered, his eyes narrowing as he tried to discern the source of the disturbance.

She nodded, her gaze meeting his, a flicker of fear passing through her eyes. “Do you think... we’re being pulled back?”

Endymion hesitated, his heart twisting at the thought. “Perhaps. But whatever it is, we face it together.”

Serenity pressed herself closer to him, her resolve shining through her fear. “Always.”

As they stood amidst the shifting landscape, the stars above dimming and shadows encroaching, the realization settled heavily between them: this moment of peace was ending, and a new challenge awaited them beyond. But for now, as long as they were together, they would face whatever came next without fear.

The change rippled through their sanctuary like a stone disturbing placid water. A tremor began underfoot, subtle at first, then growing more pronounced, sending ripples across the once-still surface of the ethereal realm.

Endymion’s heart clenched painfully as the realization dawned on him.

“Wait, you used the Silver Crystal. Shouldn’t you be—” he stopped, unsure he wanted an answer.

“Yes,” Serenity smiled up at him. “Our bodies are dead. Only our souls survived.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When I used the Silver Crystal, I destroyed Metalia. I also healed the earth, restored the natural balance. The love we shared with the Silver Crystal and the Golden Crystal restored our lives.”

“The Golden Crystal? Where is it?”

“It’s still hidden. The Golden Crystal needs more time to recuperate before it reveals itself. The events of Silver Millennium, of losing all those beautiful dreams, nearly destroyed it.”

“Do you know where it is? Perhaps I can help.”

“No, I can only sense its power.” She brushed a hand over his chest. “I can’t see where it is.”

“So... we’re alive?”

“Not just alive. We’re meant to return. The Earth, the future, the moon. We’re needed.”

“You’re even more amazing than I thought.”

A delicate pink filled her cheeks, and she pushed herself deeper into his chest. Endymion wrapped her in his arms again, trying to ignore as her body began to wane. He could feel the moonlight that once enveloped them start to fade, becoming dimmer with each heartbeat. It cast long, uncertain shadows that stretched toward a looming darkness.

“No...” Endymion whispered, his voice raw, understanding with cruel clarity. This realm wasn’t intended to last. It was merely a pause between heartbeats, a fleeting grace before the final farewell. His arms tightened around Serenity, instinctively trying to pull her close, as if by sheer will he could defy the inevitable and anchor them both in this sanctuary forever.

Serenity looked up at him, her eyes mirroring the reflection of his fear, her gaze shimmering with tears that glistened like diamonds in the fading light. He could feel the gentle tremor in her, too, the way her fingers clutched at him as though the very act of holding each other could defy the universe.

“Will I remember you?” his voice trembled, edged with a desperation that cut deeper than any physical wound.

The fear pulsing inside was palpable. The very idea of forgetting her again sent a cold shiver down his spine. It wasn't just the thought of being separated that terrified him—it was the thought of losing every piece of her that lived within him.

He'd spent far too much of his life without her, having only fragmented memories slipping through his fingers like sand as a companion.

He'd known a life with that emptiness before. He'd grown up with the ache of a lost childhood. That hollow, gnawing void of companionship would linger with him for the rest of his life. It was a pain that would never leave him, a gaping nothing that would haunt his dreams and leave him waking in tears and confusion.

To lose her again now—to lose Serenity, Usako, his love—was unbearable. The idea of having to endure an existence where she was nothing more than an echo, a fading presence at the edges of his mind, filled him with a terror he could barely articulate.

He'd fought so hard to reclaim those memories, to put the pieces of their past back together, and now, here, in this in-between space, he faced the agonizing possibility it could all be ripped away from him again.

Not remembering her would mean losing not just the love they shared, but losing the part of himself that only she could complete. The thought of waking to a world without her smile, without the

warmth of her presence coloring his every day, was a nightmare he couldn't bear to face. He wouldn't survive the absence of her.

His eyes met hers, wide and filled with that vulnerable fear, the raw ache of it laid bare in his gaze. He clung to her with an intensity that spoke of the terror flashing through his soul. He'd lost her too many times, faced too many moments of uncertainty. The thought of living without her again was unbearable.

"Please." His voice fractured. "I can't forget you again." It wasn't just a plea—it was a vow, an echo of the promise they'd made to each other time and time again. "Don't do that to me again. Don't ask me to live another moment without you."

The promise, that no matter what, their love would transcend every barrier, every lifetime. To lose the memory of that love would be to lose everything, everything that had brought him to this very moment.

"I can't say, but Endymion, we share a fated soul bond. No matter what, we'll awaken to that again. Even if we don't remember tomorrow, one day we will. Then we'll have eternity together."

"Serenity. Please, don't ask that of me."

He searched her face for answers, hoping against hope that she could offer some miracle, something to keep them from being torn apart again.

Serenity nodded, her lips parting slightly, her gaze distant. She seemed to listen to something far beyond his understanding. "This place is fading."

That truth hit him with the force of a crashing wave. A surge of terror welled up inside of him, bitter and sharp. This serene haven, this place where they'd found each other again, wasn't real. Was never meant to last.

It was a passage, a gift before the inevitable dissolution.

“I don’t want to lose you.” His heart aching with the sheer rawness of their impending separation. He pulled her tighter, burying his face in her chest, desperate to hold onto the scent of her, the feeling of her against him. “Not now. Not when we’ve just found each other again. I can’t Serenity! I can’t.”

The soft moonlight that wrapped around them like a lover began to recede, pulling away like the tide before a wave. Each beam seemed to take a piece of them with it, and as their forms began to dissolve, Endymion could feel the boundaries between them blurring.

Skin turned to light, their edges shimmering and fading, until they seemed no longer flesh and blood, but like pure luminescence.

Serenity lifted her head to meet his eyes, her expression filled with a serene acceptance, even as tears traced lines down her cheeks. Her smile—steady, though filled with the sadness of what was to come—touched his soul.

“We’ll find each other again. We always will. I’m sure I’ll run into you on the sidewalk, or at the park. And my soul will recognize yours. You’ll call me bunhead and I’ll know you once again. You’ll see my smile and know my soul is yours. I’ll always be yours, and you’ll always be mine.”

He swallowed hard, the words catching in his throat. Too many emotions flooded him all at once—love, grief, fear, hope. He cupped her face in his hands, the warmth fading beneath his touch. Frantically, he memorized the lines of her face, the depth of emotion in her eyes, the soft curve of her lips.

The crystal palace in the distance blurred, merging with the starlit sky until it became nothing more than a whisper of light.

“It’s another beginning,” Serenity offered, her voice filled with quiet hope, even as the tears glittered in the starlight.

Endymion's vision blurred with tears he could no longer hold back. He leaned in and kissed her, a kiss that attempted to put everything into words he couldn't.

Love.

Sorrow.

Gratitude.

Hope.

And every promise yet unspoken.

Her lips were soft and warm, and though the world around them fractured and faded, for this moment, they were all that mattered. Their kiss broke slowly, their breaths mingling in the cold air that grew increasingly frigid.

His fingers brushed against her cheek, the touch leaving a trail of shimmering light as they continued to fade. The once-vibrant stars flickered, their light fading as the velvety sky darkened into an empty void.

"I wish we had more time."

Serenity's fingers, now almost translucent, traced the line of his jaw, her eyes glistening with love and sorrow. "Time has never been on our side. But our love transcends it."

The air pulsed erratically, each flash of light illuminating the dissolving landscape for the briefest moments. The sensation of dissolution spread through him, his body tingling as his form began to turn to light. It wasn't painful—more like slipping into a dream, a gradual release that filled him with both longing and an odd sense of peace.

"Close your eyes," Serenity whispered, her voice a melody of warmth and love.

He obeyed, shutting out the encroaching darkness, focusing instead on the sensations under his fingertips, grazing his skin.

Memories flashed behind his eyelids—laughter beneath cherry blossoms, the warmth of her hand in his, the quiet moments that were now lifetimes away.

Visions of their future flickered before him—waking to her smile in the early morning light, the sound of her laughter filling their home, and quiet moments yet to come, full of love and warmth beyond time.

Each moment was a lifeline, a golden thread that tied them together across time. Perhaps that golden thread would bring him back to her.

Serenity, I love you.

Her response came to him as a whisper across his mind, a sound that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

And I love you, Endymion.

Then he felt her slipping away, their forms dissolving further, until there was no boundary between where she ended and he began. They were emerging, becoming one with the surrounding light. The last thing he saw, as he opened his eyes one final time, was her smile.

Radiant.

Filled with love.

With life.

With hope.

The light became too bright to bear. Their essence scattered like captured starlight across the cosmos. Nothing remained of them but pure luminescence, their love a bright, unbroken line that wove between them, binding them even as they dissipated.

The last flare of light was brilliant and all-encompassing, then gently fading, leaving behind only silence. An empty in-between, marked by the promise of tomorrow's dawn, and the certainty that their love, stronger than time or death, would bring them back to each other again.

This wasn't an ending. It was simply a pause in their eternal dance.

# *About the author*

This page is for authors to share their bio with their readers. How it is written will depend on the genre you write as well as your desired relationship with your audience.

The Author bio page is usually written in third person and shares information about the author such as where they are from, what their hobbies and sources of inspiration are, how and why they became an author, or why they write the type of content they write.

# Acknowledgements

## The dreaded “About Me” section...almost as paralyzing as the bio box

But since you've stuck with me through this entire story, you deserve a fair attempt at personalization.

First and foremost, I'm a writer. Creating stories occupies my whole mind, body, and soul. I live for storytelling—whether I'm writing it, watching it, or dreaming it up. *Sailor Moon* is one of my all-time favorite stories, which is why I decided to take on these fanfics in the first place. This is my way of paying tribute to the best story in the world!

Beyond *Sailor Moon*, I'm totally obsessed with stories in all their forms: cheesy disaster flicks, romances, and—above all—Chinese dramas. I won't even admit how many hours a day I watch them. Some of my favorites? *Under the Power*, *The Imperial Coroner*, *Unforgettable Love*, and *Perfect and Casual* (just to name a few!).

So there you have it—a little insight into me. Whether you're turned off or intrigued, I'm thrilled you're here, sharing this journey with me!

Pop over to my website: [aemcroberts.com](http://aemcroberts.com) to learn more about me and read my blog!

# *Also by AE McRoberts*

Slivers of Infinity: The Thennan Chronicles

Blood Stone: A Red Fox Romance

Alternate Intentions: The Matryoshka Series