

**Makai Tree: Roots of  
Destiny**  
AE McRoberts

Copyright © 2025 AE McRoberts. All rights reserved.

This tale of celestial love, reincarnated bonds, and cosmic chaos is an original creation by AE McRoberts. While the starry skies of inspiration were undoubtedly borrowed from the brilliance of *Sailor Moon* created by Naoko Takeuchi and owned by Toei Animation, this specific whirlwind of wistful romance, snark, and cosmic flora is mine.

# Contents

Dedication	V
A Girl of Silver Light	1
1. Echoes of Hollow Light	2
2. Roots Beneath a Silent Sky	14
3. Flames of Forgotten Futures	26
4. Fate Falling Through Starlight	38
A Lost Soul	60
5. Thorns Among the Starlight	61
6. Roots of Dying Light	73
7. Petals Cast into Shadow	85
8. Blossoms Igniting in Starlight	97
9. Thorns Entwined with Lightning	109
Moonlight Memories	121
10. The Moon's Shadow Beckons	122
11. Beneath a Veil of Flickering Light	135
12. Moonlight Blooming in Shadow	147
13. Petals on the Edge of Twilight	159
14. Blossoms Torn by the Storm	171

Full Moon Rose	184
15. Shadows Breaking Beneath the Light	185
16. Lanterns Against an Eternal Sky	197
17. Lightning Blooming Through Thunder	210
18. Moonlit Petals on the Stage	223
19. Whispers of Falling Stars	236
Dandelion Wishes	249
20. Shadows Rooted in Light	250
21. Fractured Roots Beneath Eternal Night	261
22. Tendrils of Shadow and Light	271
23. A Memory of Love and Starlight	284
24. The Dawn of Forever	296
Full Bloom Lovers	308
25. A Memory of Love and Starlight	309
26. The Dawn of Forever	323
Acknowledgements	345
About the author	346
Also by	348

Dedicated to those who dare to grow, even when the storms rage and the roots seem fragile. The cosmos is watching, and it's cheering you on.





## Chapter One

# Echoes of Hollow Light

The soft glow of early morning seeped through the half-closed blinds, casting delicate patterns of light and shadow that stretched across the bare walls like intertwined branches of a leafless tree. The pale stripes flowed across the pristine hardwood, illuminating dust motes that danced in the air—the only sights of life in the sterile space. Even the potted plant by his window seemed to droop, its leaves casting lonely shadows in the dawn light.

Mamoru stared at the muted hues of dawn, the silence of his apartment enveloping him like a thick fog. The emptiness of the room had an edge of something... lost? An absence he couldn't quite place, but haunted the shadows and lingered in the corners.

It wasn't just that his apartment was empty; it was the way the stillness seemed heavier, more profound, like it had once been different. He could almost sense the warmth that had once filled these spaces, though he had no memory of it.

A hint of something soft—laughter made of moonlight, perhaps—an echo that refused to fully fade, lingered just beyond his reach. The loneliness wasn't new. He'd felt it since he lost his parents, yet recently, it felt sharper somehow, as if it had deepened in the absence of something—or something—that used to be there.

For some reason, he reached for the nightstand, but froze half-way. There was nothing on the wooden surface, never had been. Yet, in the

quiet moments like this, he expected to see something important. A wave of anxiety rose in his chest when he gazed on that empty space.

Awareness seeped in like water through parched soil. Something was wrong. No—something was missing. The feeling gripped him with such certainty that he sat up abruptly; the sheets fell away as his gaze darted around the room.

Like every morning in recent memory, the emptiness hit him like a physical blow, a hollowness that rippled around his soul. Almost as though something essential had been uprooted from within him, leaving behind an unfillable void.

“What is this feeling?” he whispered into the stillness, his voice barely more than a breath.

The question lingered in the air, unanswered, dissolving like mist.

His hand drifted to his chest, pressing against the ache that pulsed in time with his heartbeat—a burning spot that refused to fade. He’d been to cardiologists, pulmonologists, even neurologists, but no one could explain it. Doctor after doctor, test after test, and still, the ache remained, as constant and unyielding as the tide.

Mamoru rubbed his eyes, trying to shake off the heaviness that clung to him and plagued his dreams. The cold floor shocked against his bare soles as he moved from the bed, sending more shivers through his body. He didn’t go for his slippers, no; he needed these sensations to anchor him.

Moving through his apartment, a space so precisely organized it could only be described as lifeless. Each piece of furniture served a function but offered no comfort. It was as if the rooms existed in a perpetual state of waiting, anticipating an arrival that never came.

He paused by the window, peering through the slats of the blinds into the world beyond.

The sky was a canvas of soft oranges and pinks, the sun's early rays stretching out like tendrils reaching for the earth. They were almost tangible, waking the trees as they glided across leaves. Bringing flowers and grasses out of the sleep of night into the dawn of a new day.

He could almost feel the world waking.

There was beauty there, but it felt distant, disconnected from the hollow ache. He sighed, running a hand through his dark hair.

"Maybe I don't need a cardiologist, but a psychologist—to explain these feeling. What am I missing? Did I forget to turn in an assignment? No, it's... something else."

The thought of forgotten homework flickered through his mind—an attempt to rationalize the gnawing feeling that had settled deep within him.

"That's right." He smacked himself. "I promised Motoki I'd review his paper."

The realization should have brought relief, a simple explanation for this gnawing unease. Instead, it felt hollow, like naming a shadow while missing the object that cast it.

"That's it. That's got to be it."

Mamoru dressed methodically, the fabric of his uniform cool against his skin. Each button fastened was a small act of normalcy, a routine that usually anchored him but now felt hollow. The mirror offered a reflection of composure—dark hair neatly in place, uniform immaculate—yet his eyes held a trace of something he couldn't place.

For a moment, the familiar image seemed to waver, like a reflection in troubled water. The ticking of his wall clock pressed against the silence as he knotted his tie, each second falling into place with mechanical certainty.

Yet, like the rest of his apartment, the sound was exact, sterile, empty of warmth.

Mamoru grabbed his bag and headed for the door. As he stepped into the hallway, a draft swept past him, the crisp air carrying the faint scent of moonlight. It prickled at his senses, an almost tangible reminder of something just out of reach.

But he ignored it.

He didn't look back at the loneliness as he shut the door behind him, the sound of it echoing through the hollow silence.

Now the morning sun had strengthened, streaming through the huge hallway windows in earnest, but it failed to warm him. Even as the light whispered a welcome, little changed. Each ray seemed to pass through him as if he were partially transparent, a ghost in his own life.

But he ignored it.

This was his life. An orphan. A loner. A man without purpose or companionship.

The cold air bit against his skin as he stepped outside, grounding him in that spring's embrace. The day ahead promised normalcy, but for Mamoru, it already felt empty.

Hollow.

Like a clock ticking in an empty room.

Perhaps he'd see her today. He didn't know why the thought lingered, but it warmed the unknown ache, if only for a moment.

The day passed in a haze of routine—classes, notes, and the distant hum of conversations he barely registered. He moved through it all mechanically, his focus drifting in and out as though he were watching someone else go through the motions. By the time the final bell rang, he couldn't recall a single thing he'd learned, only the faint weight of an unshakable emptiness.

Stepping outside, the cool air greeted him with a crispness that prickled his skin. Fresh spring air and the scent of new growth drifted from the world around him. The sky stretched overhead, a flawless

expanse of blue dotted with soft, wispy clouds that drifted aimlessly. Those unusual vibrations drifted over and through him, begging him to remember them.

He adjusted the strap of his bag, the crowded streets of Juban unfolding before him in a tapestry of vibrant life. Streets unfurled like a familiar garden path worn smooth by countless footsteps. Vendors called out from their stalls, the scent of grilled food mingling with the sweet aroma of blooming flowers from a nearby shop.

He weaved through the throng with ease, yet the distance he felt only grew. The breeze picked up, brushing against his face with a gentle touch that carried a hint of the sea—a salty freshness that teased at memories he couldn't quite reach. It was as if the wind itself was trying to whisper secrets to him, words lost before they could form.

As he neared the arcade—a familiar landmark and a place he frequented—there was a slight lift in the weight pressing upon him. The sounds of laughter and electronic games spilled out onto the sidewalk, a cacophony of life that usually provided a welcome distraction.

He stopped just short of the entrance, hesitating. The sensation from earlier—the itch beneath the surface—had grown stronger, tugging at the edges of his awareness. It was like standing on the brink of a revelation, yet the truth remained veiled, just out of reach.

Mamoru closed his eyes briefly, taking a deep breath. The air filled his lungs, cool and invigorating, but did little to settle the restlessness within.

“Everything is as it should be,” he told himself firmly. “There’s no reason to feel this way.”

And yet, the feeling persisted—a subtle discord in the harmony of his day.

Adjusting his bag once more, Mamoru made a decision. Perhaps immersion in the familiar sounds and competitive distractions of the

arcade would shake this unsettling mood. Maybe, just maybe, he'd find some semblance of normalcy amid the flashing lights and cheerful noise.

Maybe she'd be here.

"Why do I want to see her so badly?"

As he finally crossed the threshold into the arcade, the door closing behind him with a soft click that seemed to seal away the outside world. Inside, the sounds swelled around him—bright, energetic, and comforting in their familiarity. Yet, even here, the sense of displacement remained, a shadow that clung to him despite his surroundings.

With a determined stride, he moved further into the arcade, allowing himself to be drawn into the vibrant dance of lights and sounds. Even if the emptiness remained, for now, he could at least try to lose himself in the patterns of a game, the challenge of a new high score—a small respite from the questions that had no answers.

Perhaps he'd see her today.

Energy pulsed everywhere, a symphony of electronic beeps and melodic chimes weaving together beneath the cascade of flashing lights. The mingled scents of hot snacks and sweet confections curled invitingly through the air, wrapping themselves around patrons as they moved from game to game. Mamoru stepped inside, the door shutting behind him and muting the bustling sounds of the street outside.

He wove through clusters of gamers, his gaze drifting over the glowing screens, until he heard it: laughter—pure and bright, cutting through the mechanical sounds like sunlight through leaves.

Usagi.

Little miss Bunhead.

She was easy to spot, her blonde hair catching the flickering lights. Her gestures were wildly animated as she talked to Motoki, twin buns

bobbing atop her head as she spoke. Her face alight with joy as she clutched a half-eaten bun, crumbs dotting her uniform like fallen petals.

“Still wasting your allowance on claw machines, Bunhead?” he called out, his tone laced with familiar mockery.

Usagi whirled around, cheeks puffed out in indignation. “Mamoru Chiba! Don’t you have anything better to do than criticize my eating habits?”

The retort should have annoyed him, but it didn’t. Instead, her voice wrapped around him. The burning spot in his chest eased slightly. He settled onto the stool beside her.

“If you keep eating those buns, you’ll turn into one,” he said, the words slipping out naturally.

She brandished her bun at him, eyes narrowing, and he laughed—a sound that felt lighter and more genuine than it had in days.

They bickered, her voice rising, echoing against the arcade’s neon-lit walls. She was playful, light, and somehow sparkled brighter than anyone else. Her laughter echoed in his ears longer than it should have, resonating in a frequency tuned specifically to him. It reached past the emptiness that had plagued him all day, touching something deeper.

But he wasn’t right for her. He was too old, too grumpy. She was light, and he was dark. Yet he couldn’t deny that with every accidental meeting, the world seemed more real.

Usagi launched into a spirited defense of frequent naps, her hands moving wildly, her expression so animated that Mamoru couldn’t help but stare. There was an innocence to her, an open-hearted joy that defied the burdens of life. He leaned against the counter, allowing himself, if only for a moment, to bask in it.

“Maybe you need to study harder, Bunhead.”

But beneath the banter, he felt a strange sense of protectiveness welling up—a feeling that left him momentarily stunned. He didn't know why, but watching her, he felt an urge to protect that light, that carefree spirit, to make sure it never dimmed.

“Earth to Chiba!” Usagi waved a hand in front of his face, breaking through his reverie.

He blinked, the edges of her movement catching in the neon lights, leaving trails of shimmering silver that seemed almost magical.

“Sorry, Bunhead. Just thinking about how you single-handedly keep so many bun places in business,” he quipped, the familiar teasing shielding the confusion roiling beneath his thoughts.

She screeched in protest, and her indignation should have been annoying, but instead, it was soothing—like the laugh of an old friend, echoing with half-remembered comfort.

When it was time to go, he almost didn't want to.

Because that meant returning to his lonely apartment.

Leaving the lively buzz of the arcade, Mamoru stepped out into the evening air, the sky above painted with hues of deepening twilight. The city's energy seemed to shift with the onset of night, the cool air pressing against his skin as streetlights flickered to life, casting pools of warmth that stood in stark contrast to the bustling crowd. He adjusted his coat, feeling a tug at his consciousness as his thoughts circled back to Usagi—her laughter, the carefree sparkle in her eyes, the strange sense of something deeper that lingered.

“Well, that was fun,” she said brightly, falling into step beside him. Her voice broke through the crisp night like a bell, cheerful and unapologetically her. “Maybe next time you'll have better luck beating me.”

Mamoru smirked lightly, glancing sideways at her. “I'll practice. Wouldn't want my pride taking another hit.” He unconsciously

matched his stride to her shorter steps, their paths aligned for the moment like parallel streams.

The city was alive with sound and movement, the distant wail of a siren mingling with snippets of conversation, the click of hurried footsteps, and the hum of distant cars. The glow from storefronts and passing cars washed over them, illuminating the sidewalk in flickering waves. They moved through the crowd, the flow of pedestrians carrying them forward like leaves on a river, the rhythm of the evening settling into something almost comforting.

The crosswalk signal ahead flashed its steady countdown, numbers blinking red against the darkening sky. Usagi looked up, her gaze catching the subtle hues of pink and gold that still lingered at the horizon, remnants of the day refusing to fade.

“It’s such a beautiful evening,” she mused, her tone softer, almost wistful. “Makes you forget about all the homework waiting at home.”

Mamoru chuckled. “Procrastination won’t make it disappear, you know.”

She stuck her tongue out. “Says the guy who probably finished all his assignments days ago.”

Before he could respond, the light changed, and the crowd surged forward. Mamoru followed, his eyes scanning the street, his senses slightly heightened as the noise around them seemed to swell.

Then, time fractured.

A flash of red.

The roar of an engine pushed too hard.

The screech of tires against asphalt—a discordant, heart-stopping sound that cut through everything else.

In an instant, Mamoru’s gaze snapped to the source, his heart lurching as he saw a car barreling through the intersection, the driver oblivious or uncaring to the pedestrians in its path.

It was then that he saw her—Usagi, frozen in the car’s path, her eyes wide with shock.

Fear exploded inside his chest, visceral and overwhelming. There was no conscious thought—just pure, instinctual motion. He lunged forward, his hand closing around her wrist with a force that startled even him. He yanked her back, the momentum sending them both stumbling onto the sidewalk just as the car roared past, close enough that the wind of its passing stirred her hair like a storm.

They landed in a tangled heap, Mamoru’s body partially shielding her from the ground. The sharp bite of the concrete barely registered against the rush of adrenaline that flooded his veins. For a heartbeat, everything else ceased to exist—the blaring car horn, the scattered shouts of alarm, the city fading into background noise.

All he could feel was Usagi pressed against him, her heart pounding a frantic rhythm that matched his own.

That spot in his chest burned with terror and something he didn’t want to name. He held onto her longer than necessary, his fingers wrapped tightly around her arm, refusing to let go as his mind struggled to catch up with his actions. The protectiveness that had driven him was all-consuming, an instinct that had taken over entirely, leaving him rattled in its aftermath.

“Usagi...” he breathed, the word barely more than a whisper, almost lost beneath the residual roar of his own heartbeat.

He looked down at her, her blue eyes wide, filled with confusion and a lingering fear. For a moment, her gaze held his, and everything else fell away—the only thing that mattered was that she was safe.

Slowly, too slowly, he loosened his grip, his hand lingering on her arm a beat longer, her skin soft like silk and warm like sunlight. He swallowed, his throat dry, the world slowly snapping back into focus around them.

“Are you okay?” the words came out rougher than he intended, his voice edged with a concern that he couldn’t quite mask.

Usagi blinked, her breath coming in short gasps. She nodded, her hand still resting against his chest as if needing the contact to steady herself.

“I... I think so,” she managed, her voice shaky but gaining strength. She looked at him, her brows furrowing slightly, her expression a mix of gratitude and bewilderment.

Realizing their closeness, Mamoru abruptly released her, a flush rising to his cheeks. He pushed himself up, offering her a hand, which she took gratefully. The warmth of her touch lingered even as he helped her to her feet, the sensation embedding itself into his memory.

“That was... close,” he said, attempting to steady his voice, though his heart still hammered against his ribs, the adrenaline refusing to dissipate. “You need to be more careful, Bunhead. Not everyone stops for bunnies crossing the road.”

She puffed up at that. “I had the right of way!”

Mamoru shook his head, the fear still an echo in his veins. “Right of way won’t protect you from reckless drivers.” The words came out sharper than intended, the edge of his concern slipping through, unguarded.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice quieter, more sincere. The gratitude in her gaze made something twist inside him, an emotion he couldn’t quite identify—a mix of relief, fear, and something else, something deeper that both unsettled and grounded him.

For a moment, they stood there, the noise of the city swelling back into focus around them. Mamoru found himself at a loss for words, the intensity of what he felt for her in that instant too much, too sudden. He looked away, trying to steady himself, the cold wind biting

at his skin, bringing with it the scent of her shampoo—a faint hint of strawberries that stirred something almost forgotten.

“Just... watch where you’re going next time,” he muttered, his voice softer now. He took a step back, needing the distance.

Usagi smiled. “I will. I promise.” She looked at him for a moment longer, her eyes searching his face as if trying to understand something. Then she turned, waving as she walked away. “See you around, Mamoru!”

He watched her until she disappeared into the crowd, the burning sensation behind his ribs slowly ebbing, replaced by a strange hollowness. He exhaled, raking a hand through his hair, the confusion still gnawing at him.

“Why does she make me feel this way?” he whispered, the question slipping into the night, unanswered.

He turned and started walking in the opposite direction, the city moving around him, alive and indifferent. The image of Usagi’s startled face, her laughter, the way she had looked at him—it all lingered, etched into his thoughts, a reminder of a fear that had felt far too real.

The night air was cold, but there was a warmth inside him that refused to fade, a connection that had been forged in that heartbeat of terror, binding him to her in a way that defied logic. And as the city lights flickered around him, Mamoru knew that whatever it was, it wasn’t something he could ignore. Not anymore. But he knew one truth, he had to protect her.

Then he glanced upwards. There, hovering like a glowing goddess, the crescent moon gazed down at him.

## Chapter Two

# Roots Beneath a Silent Sky

In the abandoned corners of deep space, stars shimmered like half-formed dreams—each a flicker of potential life that faded before it could be touched. The Makai Tree had long traveled this expanse, chasing light that never became warmth, tasting hope only to experience bitter disappointment.

Ancient branches stretched outward, gnarled and weary, reaching for something—anything—that might offer solace. But the cold void was always there. Pressing against it from all sides. Suffocating emptiness that oozed into every fiber, filled each crack, covered each segment.

Here, silence reigned. That heavy, oppressive shroud that amplified the profound loneliness.

Once, the Makai Tree towered with regal strength on her watery homeworld, her proud branches brimming with vibrant energy that pulsed like the tides of the living seas. Her roots stretched deep, anchoring her to the shimmering depths below, drawing sustenance from the lifeblood of the planet. A radiant canopy unfurled above her, its emerald leaves glistening with droplets that refracted the light, casting a kaleidoscope of colors over the endless expanse of crystalline water.

And her Sprouts.

They had been her pride, her cherished creations, born from her energy and nurtured in her light. That had been such a happy time, surrounded by the love of her children, their admiration and respect flowing back to her like the tides of the living seas.

Now.

Now her branched hung limp, swaying like skeletal fingers lost in the dark. Each creak of her limbs was a whisper of pain, an echo of the once-vital essence that coursed through its veins. Everything dwindled to barely a trickle.

Once, she had been a force of creation, an ancient being of immense power who controlled life and shaped the energies of existence.

Now, she was an ancient relic, adrift in the indifferent vastness, her roots heavy with the crushing weight of millennia and the ache of exhaustion.

Every cell screamed for sustenance, for something more than the hollow energy scraps forced into her dying roots by Ail and An. The Makai Tree didn't blame them, because they knew no other way to survive. Their love for each other, twisted and selfish, was no more nourishing than dew in a drought—fleeting and inadequate.

The stolen energy burned through the tree's veins like acid—necessary to stave off death, but a torment rather than a blessing. It scraped through its ancient being like coarse sand, scouring and damaging where once flowed summer's sap, smooth and life-giving. Ail and An's attempts to sustain it, while earnest, were killing it as surely as if they had chosen neglect. They lacked the depth of understanding, the purity of love the tree needed to truly heal and thrive.

If only they could understand.

If only I could tell them.

But the energy required would be my last act..

The very last fragment of my dwindling life.

She'd watched them grow, had watched An and Ail survive in ways twisted by desperation, their fierce attachment not enough to bridge the void within. Their efforts were an attempt at love but lacked the selflessness and depth that nourished—love meant to flow freely, to connect, to fill and rejuvenate. Instead, the love Ail and An shared was fractured, taking more than it ever gave. Their energy was a poison, a theft, not a gift. And yet, they didn't know—they couldn't know.

I'm trapped in this agonizing nothing.

So she continued through the crushing silence of space, the oppressive weight coiling tighter with every star she passed and every dead planet left behind. Around it, the stars watched, cold and indifferent, tiny eyes scattered across the endless canvas of black. They were witnesses to its suffering but offered nothing in the way of comfort or warmth.

Time had lost all meaning—a stretch of eternity that bled from one moment into the next, all marked by the same hollow yearning, the same grinding fatigue.

She no longer remembered sunlight or winds whispering through lush leaves. Even the warmth of love freely given were only vague recollections against the sharp ache of her current starvation.

Still, the universe stretched out endlessly ahead, an eternity that promised only the continued slow march until death. Her branches would only become more weak and dull. Her leaves would only crumble more, dust scattered into the nothing.

I'm dying.

I'm slowly, painfully unraveling.

There was no comfort to be found here, only the ever-present weight of loneliness and the cold emptiness of the stars. The desire to reach out, to bridge the chasm of silence, clawed at her very core.

If only they could feel what it needed, then perhaps salvation was possible.

But the cost was too great. Communication would be the final strike, the end of everything it had fought so desperately to sustain. So, the Makai Tree remained silent, holding onto its remaining fragments of life, its plea for real connection echoing unanswered in the void.

Yet, she couldn't deny the beauty of space. Stars yawned like glittering promises, their light painting the darkness with whispers of wonder. Comets carved trails of ice and fire, their shimmering wakes unraveling like celestial ribbons. Even the violent birth of a supernova spread life and light in a dazzling explosion of renewal.

But for all its beauty, space held an equal ugliness. Isolation pressed tight with the unyielding darkness, her roots floating in cold nothing, aching for fertile water to nourish her soul. The longing was sharp, a constant pain that refused to fade.

Ail played his flute, and if the Makai Tree could cry, she would. The haunting melody wrapped around her branches like a mourning shroud, each note a reminder of all they could never understand. An's restless weight sent shards of brittle bark tumbling into the void, a small, unspoken apology she would never hear.

I must endure.

There was no other choice. It didn't matter that with each passing moment, the emptiness seemed to expand and consume. It didn't matter the hollow spaces where love once bloomed now were only filled with an aching darkness.

Love was nowhere to be found now. Instead, it had been forced to survive on the energy it took, never given, never freely shared.

When the melody ceased and silence once again consumed the world, she wanted to weep. No one could hear her silent attempts at despair, no one could mourn with her.

Perhaps one day, I'll find freedom.

Or, I'll finally pass from this tortured existence.

She had no concepts of time or how many moments had passed before a faint glimmer pierced the obsidian veil of space, gradually intensifying until a radiant, glowing pearl revealed itself. The Makai Tree, ancient and weary, sensed the shift in its desolate journey.

Both An and Ail had also taken note.

The Makai Tree could sense the shudder that passed through her last remaining Sprouts.

"Ail..." An's voice was fragile against the bleak expanse of stars. "I won't survive, Ail. If this planet is hostile like all the other ones. I won't."

"I know, An. I know."

This moon's brilliance stood stark against the surrounding void, its glow soft and inviting, like a gentle embrace that asked for nothing in return. Its light carried a quiet promise—of forgiveness for every wound, of acceptance despite every fracture. It stirred something deep within her, a memory too faint to grasp but warm enough to soothe. The glow seemed to whisper across her weary branches, a reminder of what she once was and what she might become again, if only she could hold on.

Through the devouring darkness, her branches reached out, gnarled and trembling, aching for that forgotten sensation. Longing for love, warmth, renewal.

The moonbeams touched its weary limbs like silk, a softness so alien to the Makai Tree that it felt almost painful. The energy from the Moon was unlike anything it had absorbed in eons.

It was pure, untainted—a whisper of spring brushing against its brittle bark, stirring the ghost of an ancient feeling long buried beneath exhaustion.

“Look at that,” An murmured. “It’s... almost beautiful.”

“Don’t get sentimental, An. It’s just another hunk of rock. Pretty, maybe, but meaningless if it doesn’t serve our purpose.”

“Don’t you feel that? There’s something in the light, it’s... soft.”

“I feel it, but that changes nothing. The question is if we can gather enough energy to survive or if it’s just another hollow promise.”

The Makai Tree wanted to reach out and hold him, sooth the fears and comfort her Sprout. But she lacked the energy to even try.

“What are we going to do if poison or fearsome beasts fill the planet? How will we survive?”

“We’ll find out soon enough, An. Don’t get your hopes up, we’ve encountered beautiful worlds before. Only to barely escape with our lives.”

Maybe this time is different, she wanted to say.

For the first time in countless centuries, the Makai Tree felt something stir within its core—a flutter so foreign it almost didn’t recognize it. Hope. The sensation was as delicate as new growth, as fragile as the first unfurling of leaves after a harsh winter.

The light enveloped its branches, bathing them in a silken embrace that felt both familiar and rejuvenating, like a long-forgotten promise come back to life. A subtle change rippled through its essence, a delicate dance of anticipation.

Could it have the love I need?

The hope was fragile, frail, barely louder than the soft whisper of the tide against sand. It was both exhilarating and terrifying—this flicker of optimism igniting within its ancient heart. A promise of renewal, a fleeting hope that maybe, this time, things could be different.

Yet, the warmth emanating from the Moon was like a balm against her withered form, a reminder of those lost days. When love flowed freely. When ocean glittered under sunlight. When life was perfect.

Radiant energy seeped into its core, touching the depths of its being, and a gentle shiver passed through its branches—an awakening, a desire to believe. It was a dreamlike feeling, a momentary reprieve from the endless suffering that defined its existence.

But...

Beneath the delicate embrace of hope lay the heavy shadow of doubt—a persistent, creeping frost that threatened to choke this new-born optimism. How many times had she approached other worlds, only to find them cold and indifferent as the void itself?

How many times had she been left emptier, more hollow, after fleeing another world before destruction? Echoes of those past failures whispered caution, a reminder not to trust too easily.

Light brushed against her tired limbs, weaving a tapestry of warmth and light across its branches and roots, illuminating the darkness that had become all too familiar. Her withered leaves stirred, as if awakening from a long winter, tentatively reaching towards the Moon's glow. A promise of spring after the bitter winter.

Now, the planet came into view. A glittering blue orb, vibrant and teeming with life. It was radiant, warm, and inviting, an even sharper contrast to the endless emptiness that had surrounded her for so long. The closer it drifted, the more the tree could sense the abundance of love and life radiating from the planet.

It was a symphony of energy that promised sustenance, that whispered secrets of renewal, coaxing the tree to believe in the possibility of salvation. Even from this great distance, the Makai Tree could sense the gleaming radiance of beautiful dreams.

No longer could she deny the anticipation swelling with her. Each passing moment brought the Moon closer, its glow brightening and illuminating the surrounding dark space. She could feel the energy

already seeping into her branches, filling them with a fragile, trembling hope.

She dared to believe, dared to reach out toward the light, yearning to touch the love it sensed in this new place.

“Ail,” An said, her voice brittle. “Let’s fight for this world and this energy. I don’t care what waits for us on the surface.”

“Are you sure, An? We’ve wanted to fight before, and that only resulted in more pain.”

“Promise me, Ail. Promise me we’ll fight together. I don’t want to lose this. I don’t want to go back to the darkness again.”

“I promise you, my radiant Nova. I’ll fight for you, and I’ll make a home for you here. We’ll never return to the void again.”

The Makai Tree ached with both sadness and hope. But hope was a dangerous thing. It was fragile, easily shattered, and the Makai Tree had learned to be wary. There was still the fear—deep, gnawing, relentless—that this too would prove to be another illusion, another false promise in the vast emptiness of space. What if this love it sensed was just a fleeting glimmer, a mirage that would leave it hungrier than before?

Before the despair could consume her more, the Moon’s light seemed to strengthen. It caressed her branches, a tender touch that made a shiver pass through her. The interplay of light and shadow created a dreamlike atmosphere, momentarily lifting the oppressive weight of loneliness that had defined the Makai Tree’s existence. For a fleeting moment, it remembered what it felt like to be whole, to be loved, to be truly alive.

Could it be?

Could this finally be the love I’ve searched for?

The Makai Tree lingered on the precipice of hope and doubt, its ancient soul teetering between the promise of renewal and the fear

of inevitable decay. Still, the soft glow continued to weave its silken threads through dying branches, nurturing the fragile spark of optimism that flickered with.

With each passing moment, the Makai Tree felt the pull of Earth's abundant love grow stronger, intertwining with its ancient roots and reaching deep into its soul. The anticipation swelled, a rising tide that threatened to either uplift the tree to new heights or drown it in the depths of its own desperation.

As the Makai Tree drifted ever closer to Earth, the newfound warmth that had permeated its ancient limbs was abruptly shattered. Sharp voices pierced the tranquility—a jarring contrast to the gentle embrace of the moon's glow. Perched upon the tree's gnarled roots, Ail and An stood facing each other, their tension palpable and electric, the calm now replaced by a growing storm of dissonance.

“I told you, An, it's my turn to decide where we land,” Ail said.

Through her weary branches, she observed the taller of her Sprouts—his figure rigid with that familiar mix of composure and control. The moonlight brushed against his azure hair, casting faint shadows over the sharp planes of his face, a face she had watched change and harden.

The sharp tendrils of rage radiated outwards from An. “Since when do we keep track? Why must it always be you? Why must you always decide?”

The possessiveness in her tone clawed at the tree, her emotions laced with jealousy and frustration, each word a thorn digging deeper into its already weary system.

“An.”

“Don't An me! You're the one who decided to land on that rocky cliff and almost got us all killed!”

“How was I to know that world had giant sea beasts?”

The Makai Tree could feel their energy crackle like a storm brewing, a chaotic mix of heat and cold—An’s fiery rage against Ail’s calculated detachment. It struggled to hold onto the warmth of Earth that seemed to beckon, but each harsh word exchanged between them drained more of its strength. What had been hope now flickered uncertainly, like a fragile ember in a storm.

“Your impulsiveness is clouding your judgment. We need a strategy, not some random spot that catches your fancy just because it ‘feels’ right.”

“Impulsive!” she hissed. “I see right through you, Ail. It’s never been about strategy. It’s about what suits you best.”

“This isn’t about me or you! It’s about the tree, about our survival. You know that. I’m trying to keep us alive!”

“Go choke on a root,” An’s voice cracked. “You always think you know best, and you don’t listen to me, Ail. You never listen! Then you play you stupid flute and assume I’ll forgive you.”

“Selective memory? You’re the one who begged me to stay one more night on that one world. I can still hear your whinny ‘just one more night’ voice. That one more night!? Almost killed us. That mist wilted half the tree before we escaped. It took us a month of starvation to revive it!”

Their argument escalated, voices overlapping, growing sharper with each passing moment. Each heated exchange was like a dagger to the Makai Tree’s fragile heart. The tree’s branches, which had momentarily stretched toward the light, now drooped, as though bowing under an invisible burden.

How will they ever learn of love?

An’s energy flared dangerously, her emotions a scorching force that tore at the brittle leaves of the Makai Tree. “Fine. I won’t decide from

now on. See how long you last! See how long before the tree is even more of a withered mass of nothing!”

“Perhaps if you learned the value of patience instead of charging in headfirst, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Please, she yearned silently.

But Ail and An’s argument continued, their voices growing harsher, their energy more erratic. The promise of Earth’s warmth, of a new beginning, now seemed almost unreachable, buried beneath the darkness of their discontent. The branches of the Makai Tree, which had lifted themselves in hope, now hung limp, trembling beneath the weight of Ail and An’s toxic love.

The promise of Earth’s love shimmered tantalizingly close now, its energy unlike anything the Makai Tree had encountered in millennia of wandering. Where other worlds had offered only hollow light or bitter sustenance, Earth pulsed with something pure—a warmth that reminded her of her ancient home, of love freely given and joyfully returned. Each wave of energy brushed against her withered branches like spring rain, whispering promises of renewal.

Yet Ail and An’s argument raged on, their toxic love cutting through this newfound hope like frost through fresh blooms. Their voices clashed and splintered, each accusation driving deeper into the tree’s ancient core, each burst of jealousy and resentment draining what little strength remained. Their discord cast shadows over Earth’s welcoming glow, threatening to poison even this pristine source of energy.

My children, the tree lamented silently, watching them tear at each other with words sharp as thorns.

You’ve forgotten how to nurture, how to give. You know only how to take, to possess.

Their love had become a perversion of what she'd intended, twisted by centuries of survival into something that drained rather than sustained.

Still, Earth's energy called to her, strong and steady beneath the chaos of her children's conflict. It resonated with something deep within her remembered self—the mighty being who had once created life, who had known the joy of true connection. The planet's pure love reached out like tender shoots breaking through winter soil, promising that perhaps, even after eons of darkness, growth was possible.

As they drew closer to the glowing planet, the Makai Tree gathered what remained of her strength. Her roots, though brittle, still remembered how to reach for light. Her leaves, though faded, still knew how to drink in warmth.

If there was even the smallest chance of redemption—of teaching her children to love truly, of finding her own renewal—she would endure. She would persist through this final journey, carrying her desperate hope across the void one last time.

Earth beckoned, its brilliant blue sphere cradled in the Moon's silver embrace. And in that gentle radiance, the ancient tree dared to dream of spring after an endless winter, of love blooming once more in soil too long barren. Whether this hope would flower or wither remained to be seen, but for now, its fragile beauty was enough to light the darkness, enough to make even an endless journey worth the pain.

Please, she whispered into the void, her prayer carried on streams of starlight toward the waiting Earth.

Let this world be different.

Let this finally be home.

## Chapter Three

# Flames of Forgotten Futures

In the heart of Hikawa Shrine, Rei kneeled before the sacred fire, her violet eyes reflecting the tumultuous flames dancing wildly before her. A warm, flickering glow bathed the modest chamber, but despite the heat, a chill slowly crawled up her spine—a feeling of something creeping in from the darkness.

The scent of sandalwood and sacred herbs hung thick in the air, rich and heady, almost suffocating. The smoke twisted and curled around her, as if attempting to pull her deeper into the visions that flickered at the edges of her mind.

A comforting aroma filled her with each breath, forcing her focus inward, away from the mundane world, aligning her spirit with the sacred energy of the room. This was the only time she felt at ease. The ever-present unease of life outside this chamber plagued her. Almost like she wasn't living her authentic life.

Outside, she only lived a lie.

A shadow of an existence.

But here, in this room, she could at least glimpse her true self.

The flames danced and snapped, casting chaotic shadows that leaped across the walls. Shadows twisted and writhed like restless spir-

its, mirroring the turmoil within her. Rei furrowed her brow, her gaze searching the depths of the sacred flames for answers.

Fire twisted, forming shapes that were there for only a heartbeat before they dissolved back into chaos. It was like staring into a shattered mirror, each fragment offering a glimpse, but never the entire picture.

“Great Fire,” her voice carried the weight of generations of shrine maidens who had stood before these flames, “show me what approaches. Guide my sight.”

For a fraction of a second, she thought the fire would yet again ignore her pleas. Then the fire surged higher, and images formed, emerging from the flickering chaos like specters.

Everything stilled as a vast darkness unfurled before her—not the pure malevolence of evil, but something tortured, something reluctant. A presence twisted against its nature, its essence corrupted by desperation and solitude.

Both ancient and wounded, it carried the weight of something forced into evil.

Yet, the truth stayed away.

“Why?” she whispered, her voice almost lost in the crackle of the fire. “Why can’t I understand this?”

The question was not just for the flames, but for herself. She was meant to be the interpreter, the guide—the one who could make sense of what others could not. And yet, she felt blind. Ignorant. Incomplete.

Something is missing.

The words crept in unbidden, heavy and unwelcome.

A hollow ache spread through her chest, a gnawing emptiness that had been her companion for months. It was as though she’d once held all the answers, a purpose, a reason why she was gifted with these powers—and then, somehow, it had slipped through her fingers.

Had it been taken from her?

Or had she simply been unworthy of holding onto it?

The oppressive heat seemed to squeeze her chest, the warmth no longer comforting but suffocating. Sweat beaded at her temples, trickling down her neck, dampening her miko robes as she struggled to hold onto the fragmented images.

Stars streaked across her inner vision—silver light falling from the heavens, fading into darkness—and with them came an overwhelming presence from the void, a force beyond this world, something that had traveled across the stars.

“A force from the stars... unwilling, yet dangerous.”

Her words were barely audible, each one heavy with confusion and growing dread. She clenched her hands, her nails biting into her palms as she fought to make sense of the cryptic warnings. The fire roared in response, the shadows leaping and writhing, their chaotic dance mocking her efforts.

Birth and death appeared intertwined—like ivy wrapped around a withering tree, choking it while giving it form. Each flicker of the flames brought a new image, but none of them clear enough to grasp, none solid enough to provide her with direction. A deep chill washed over her, an uncanny feeling of being watched, of being in the presence of something both mighty and desperate.

She closed her eyes, willing herself to focus, to find the clarity she so desperately sought. The warmth of the fire bore down on her, and the scent of the incense—usually a calming presence—now felt heavy, almost metallic, like the taste of blood.

As the fire quieted, her pounding heart seemed to become louder. The rhythm echoed in her ears, growing louder with each passing moment.

“Have the gods abandoned me? Am I no longer worthy?” she whispered, her voice cracking under the weight of her frustration.

The fire flared violently, a sudden burst of light and heat that sent the shadows skittering across the room in stark, jagged patterns. It was as if the fire itself shared her frustration, burning brighter in a desperate attempt to convey its message. The shrine’s ancient walls seemed to pulse with energy, generations of prayers lending strength to this sacred space, but even here, even now, the answers slipped through her fingers like sand.

Rei opened her eyes to the chaotic dance of the fire. She had always prided herself on her intuition, on her ability to draw meaning from the sacred flames. But now, she felt adrift, her confidence cracking under the pressure of the unknown. Helplessness gnawed at her, a sensation she had always fought against, but here it was—an unwelcome companion.

“Is this a warning, or a call to action?”

Still, the fire offered no further insight. Its intensity began to wane, the flames calming, their frantic dance slowing to a flicker. The sacred fire seemed exhausted, mirroring her own fatigue, and Rei’s heart sank as she realized she would gain no further clarity tonight.

With a slow breath, Rei pushed herself to her feet, her legs feeling heavy beneath her. The weight of the unanswered questions settled across her shoulders, an invisible burden that seemed to press her closer to the ground. She took one last, lingering look at the flames—still burning, but offering neither comfort nor guidance.

“Something is coming.” Her voice barely louder than the crackling embers. “And I have to be ready.”

She turned and moved toward the sliding door, each step carrying the weight of her doubts. As she slid the door open, a rush of cool air met her, a sharp contrast to the suffocating heat of the sacred chamber.

Inhaling deeply, the crisp air filled her lungs and momentarily eased the tightness in her chest.

Stepping outside, she allowed the door to close softly behind her, the boundary between the oppressive firelight and the serene, moonlit shrine. The cool breeze brushed against her skin, the night air whispering through the ancient trees that stood sentinel around the shrine. The leaves rustled softly, as if offering her solace.

Slowly, she glanced up at the moon. The crescent light hung gracefully in the inky sky, and as the moonbeams washed across her skin, she almost felt comforted.

Yet the unease within her remained, an ache that refused to dissipate. Something was coming—something that would change everything. And Rei knew, deep in her heart, that she would have to face it, even if she had only the fire on her side.

Lingering in the shrine's courtyard, Rei let the crisp breeze brush against her, a refreshing change to the heat of the sacred fire. The grounds seemed more tranquil, bathed in the shimmering hues of moonlight filtering through the trees. The soft rustling of branches and the distant hoot of an owl added a comforting layer of serenity, but beneath it all, an undercurrent of unease still tugged at her.

A lingering echo of unsettling visions that refused to fade.

"Rei! My beautiful granddaughter, there you are!" her grandfather's voice called out, bubbling with enthusiasm that broke through her brooding thoughts.

"Rei!"

She turned to see him waving eagerly from near the main entrance, his whole figure practically buzzing with excitement. Bathed light, a tall figure stood beside him, his back turned to her as he seemed to survey the ancient trees that famed the shrine.

Curiosity piqued despite herself, Rei made her way over, her footsteps measured against the worn stones of the path.

“Come and meet my new friend. He’s rather attractive, and just your age.” Before Rei could react, her grandfather tugged her forward with surprising enthusiasm.

“Grandfather! What have I said about setting me up?” she hissed, digging in her heels.

He waved her off with a dismissive hand. “Never mind that now.”

The man turned.

Time paused.

The world stilled.

Recognition struck like a thunderclap, shattering her composure.

Her senses narrowed to his eyes that locked onto hers, sharp as a blade. She was drawn to those eyes—those unmistakable, storm-gray that haunted her visions, that had captivated her in what felt like another lifetime.

She’d never seen anything like them before, like clouds gathering before a tremendous storm at sea, filled with both unfathomable depth and a sense of barely restrained power.

There was something ancient within them, something that whispered of rituals shared before a sacred fire, moments where words had been unnecessary, where understanding came from a simple meeting of their gazes.

They were eyes that held secrets, promises—both tender and fierce—a reflection of everything she had lost and everything that could be again. For a heartbeat, she could see it all: the flickering flames, the whispered incantations, the silent connection that had once made them inseparable.

And now, here they were again, those eyes meeting hers with an intensity that seemed to pierce through every defense she had built, reaching out to something buried deep within her.

The earth seemed to tilt beneath her feet, and for a breathless moment, everything fell away but him.

His sharp jawline and short pale blond hair gleamed in the moonlight, as if spun from gold. His presence was commanding, unnervingly familiar.

She knew that face.

She knew it too well—it haunted her visions, lingered in her dreams, and danced in the sacred flames.

Him.

The thought echoed in her mind.

It's him.

A thousand fragmented images pieced together, forming a picture that seemed both inevitable and impossible. The sacred fire had shown her this very moment, this very person. And she knew the truth. He was important; she knew it in her bones, in the way the air suddenly felt thicker, charged, as if the world held its breath.

The courtyard now hummed with an energy not entirely of this world. The breeze that brushed against her skin stilled, the rustling leaves now frozen as though suspended in anticipation. Each strong beat of her heart resonated with the intense emotions that were surging through her. Her mouth went dry, and for a heartbeat, she couldn't move, couldn't breathe.

“Rei, this is Jadeite,” her grandfather declared proudly, oblivious to her inner turmoil. “He’s the new helper I’ve hired for the shrine.”

Jadeite bowed politely, his lips curving into a subtle, enigmatic smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said, his voice smooth and measured, as if aware of the effect he was having on her.

Rei struggled to find any words, her usual confident demeanor shaken. The man before her was undeniably the one she had seen so many times in her visions—each time more vivid, more insistent.

“I... I’m Hino... I’m Rei Hino,” she managed, her gaze refusing to break from his.

There was something there, an invisible thread that connected them, a thread that seemed to grow tauter with every heartbeat. Jadeite straightened, his eyes holding hers with an intensity that sent a shiver down her spine.

“Rei,” he repeated, almost as if savoring the sound of her name, testing it against his lips. “Fire of Rei, a beautiful name.”

Now she could only see him. As if nothing else in the world mattered. The air between them seemed to vibrate, a charged energy simmering just beneath the surface. Rei could feel her pulse quicken, her emotions a chaotic mess of confusion, recognition, and something she couldn’t quite name.

The sacred fire’s warnings echoed in her thoughts—the imagery of a reluctant evil, of paths that intertwined with a destiny that seemed unavoidable. The significance of his presence was undeniable, yet it left her feeling more unsteady than she had ever felt.

“Perhaps that’s why I was drawn to this place,” Jadeite added, his gaze still locked on hers.

There was something in his eyes, something almost knowing, as if he understood the connection that she could barely comprehend himself.

Before she could say anything, her grandfather let out a hearty laugh, clapping his hands together. “Perhaps I’ve just hired my future son-in-law!” he exclaimed with an exaggerated wink.

The spell was broken.

Rei crossed her arms and glared at her only kin. “Grandfather! What have I said?! There’s no way in heaven, earth, or any realms between! I don’t trust men.”

Jadeite’s smile widened, his eyes glinting with amusement and something deeper—something ancient. He took a small step forward, a confidence in his movement that was both infuriating and magnetic.

“That’s lucky,” he said, his voice dropping to a playful murmur, “because I’m not a man. I’m something better.”

“Better, huh?” she shot back, her tone sharp enough to cut. “Sounds like something a man would say to cover for his flaws.”

Grandpa laughed and clapped. “Seems like I made a brilliant choice. Have fun you two.”

As her grandfather’s figure retreated into the depths of the shrine, his cheerful humming fading into the distance, Rei found herself alone with Jadeite in the quiet courtyard.

The spring air hung heavy, as if the very world around them held its breath. The moonlight seemed to intensify, casting dappled shadows across the stone pathway, giving the night an ethereal quality.

Rei crossed her arms, her gaze sharpened like a blade, studying the newcomer with a guarded curiosity. “So, Jadeite, was it? What brings you to Hikawa Shrine?”

He met her gaze, his expression one of calm confidence, the corners of his mouth lifting ever so slightly—a smile that spoke of secrets and familiarity. “As I mentioned to your grandfather, I’m seeking a place of tranquility. Something about this shrine drew me in.”

“Drew you in? We don’t get many visitors who decide to stay and work.”

Jadeite’s chuckle was soft, almost intimate, the kind that reverberated in the quiet space between them. He took a step closer, his

movements graceful, deliberate, each shift of his weight echoing like a quiet promise.

“Perhaps I’m not a visitor. Perhaps I’m here to stay,” he replied, his voice as smooth as spring.

“Clearly,” she said, her eyebrow arching, the corners of her lips threatening to curve upwards.

There was something unsettling about his composure—something too poised, too knowing, and it sparked a flicker of both irritation and intrigue within her. Men who thought they were clever usually annoyed her, but Jadeite was different—unsettling in a way she couldn’t quite place.

He took another step closer, the soft scrape the only sound breaking the tension between them. The space seemed to shrink, and Rei fought the urge to step back or, worse, lean in. His presence carried a warmth that wasn’t from the sun, a gravitational pull that had nothing to do with his proximity. She tilted her chin up, her gaze refusing to waver.

“You seem wary,” he observed, his eyes holding hers. “I hope I’m not causing any inconvenience.”

“Not at all, as long as you don’t cause grandpa problems. I just like to know who I’m dealing with.” There was steel in her voice, but she couldn’t quite shake the unease that twisted beneath it—a feeling that the earth was shifting beneath her feet.

“Understandable. Allow me to assure you, I’m a hard worker, and my intentions are purely honorable.”

Rei’s eyes narrowed further. “Men are liars.”

He studied her for a beat longer, a thoughtful look crossing his features before he responded, “True, but actions speak louder, don’t they?” He paused, the smile on his lips gentle, almost inviting. “And

maybe, sometimes, it's not about trust, but about being open to what comes."

The suggestion struck something in her—a resonance, a chord she wasn't prepared to acknowledge. She fought the stirring warmth inside her, choosing instead to tighten her grip on skepticism.

"I prefer to rely on myself. You speak of being drawn here, of tranquility, but something tells me you have other motives."

Jadeite's eyes softened, a fleeting expression of understanding crossing his face, making him seem almost vulnerable. "I won't deny that there's more to my presence here. But it's not deceit, Rei. It's... something beyond either of us."

The way he spoke her name was like a whisper on the wind, filled with reverence and something deeper. The light of the moon shifted, singing a soft melody of restored crystal and awakenings.

"You speak of destiny," she countered, her voice careful, testing, "but destiny isn't always kind. Sometimes it's a warning, not a promise."

Jadeite's smile returned, this time tempered with something tender, something raw. He took another step, his presence almost overwhelming as he whispered, "And sometimes, it's both."

The words reverberated between them, striking a chord deep within Rei that resonated like the toll of a distant bell. The vulnerability in his eyes disarmed her, and for a brief second, she allowed herself to feel the weight of that unspoken connection—the sense of familiarity that shouldn't exist, yet undeniably did.

Phobos called overhead, a sharp sound that broke the fragile spell between them. Rei blinked, snapping back to reality. She took a deliberate step back, needing distance from the intensity of his gaze.

"Consider yourself warned. This shrine has protectors. Remember that."

Jadeite inclined his head, his gaze holding hers, something akin to amusement glimmering in the depths of those storm-gray eyes.

“I look forward to working with them. Especially the fierce one with fire in her soul.”

Rei turned without a word, the fabric of her robes swirling around her, and walked away, each step an effort to ignore the storm of emotions raging inside her. She could feel his eyes following her, his presence a tangible thing that refused to fade. Her heart thundered in her chest, the air still crackling with unspoken tension, with the lingering scent of pine, and with the quiet promise of something just out of reach.

But even as she tried to push it aside, a whisper remained—a reminder that perhaps, despite everything she believed, something had indeed begun that day. Something that she couldn't quite deny.

## Chapter Four

# Fate Falling Through Starlight

The city pulsed with its usual energy—headlights weaving through the maze of streets, a kaleidoscope of neon signs casting vivid reflections on rain-slicked sidewalks, the distant hum of conversations blending into a nocturnal symphony.

But to Mamoru, everything felt muted.

As if an invisible wall of glass separated him from the world around, rendering everything distant, dulled. The once vibrant lights seemed to lack their normal gleam, and the noise of the bustling city felt muffled, like he was submerged underwater. An inexplicable unease gnawed at the edges of his consciousness, a whisper of dissonance that made the familiar world seem alien.

He wandered aimlessly, the soles of his shoes tapping a steady rhythm against the pavement. The ground beneath his feet hummed faintly, a subtle vibration that rippled through his bones like a low electric current, almost imperceptible yet undeniably there—an undercurrent that set his nerves on edge. Pausing beside a tree, he rested a hand against its rough surface, as if to steady himself against a world that seemed to shift. The city breathed around him, alive, yet strangely remote.

“I really have to stop procrastinating making that appointment,” he muttered to himself, his breath a fleeting cloud in the cool night air. “I’m going crazy.”

He pressed a hand against his chest, feeling the irregular rhythm of his own heart. Logic told him it was nothing—a trick of his tired mind, too many sleepless nights, perhaps the stress of exams catching up with him. But deep within, something whispered otherwise, an itch beneath his skin that told him that the heartbeat of the Earth itself had shifted, resonating with some forgotten part of him.

The wind whispered of evil arriving.

The moonlight sang of redemption and patience.

Each breath felt heavier, as if the air itself was burdened by something unseen. Scents of damp earth and decaying winter mingled in the night breeze, grounding him momentarily, yet doing little to shake the sense of something wrong.

With each step, the vibrations deepened, rippling through his bones like an unspoken warning. It wasn’t just a tremor—it was something more, something alive and communicative, a shiver that seemed to be both a warning and a summons.

“You’ve been avoiding this for too long, Chiba. It’s time to face reality.”

A brilliant flash suddenly tore through the sky, a blaze of light streaking across the heavens. Mamoru halted mid-step, his breath caught in his throat as he watched the light arc over the horizon—a meteor, bright enough to turn night into an otherworldly glow, illuminating everything in stark, dreamlike clarity.

His heart gave a lurch, a recognition without words. He knew, with an instinct that came from somewhere beyond reason, that this wasn’t ordinary. This was something ancient and powerful, a herald of change.

Every instinct told him he had to follow, had to see what it was, what it meant. Without hesitation, he broke into a jog, his footsteps quickening against the concrete, carrying him through shadowed alleyways and silent streets, guided by the unseen force drawing him toward the source of the flash.

He reached a hill overlooking the city, the skyline spread before him like a vast tapestry woven of light and shadow. In the distance, a soft glow pulsed—a beacon that called out to him, unmistakable and irresistible. Mamoru stood for a moment, catching his breath, the wind tousling his dark hair as he stared at the distant point.

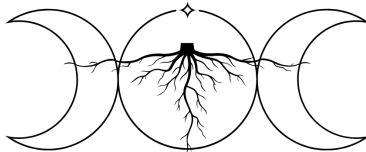
As he neared the source of the glow, the streets fell eerily silent. The familiar bustle of city life was gone, replaced by something deeper, something primordial.

Turning a final corner, he saw the crowd gathered near a smoldering crater, their faces bathed in the faint, otherworldly glow. He stopped at the edge of the throng, the sense of déjà vu overwhelming, the scene before him triggering memories that lay just beyond his grasp.

A palace of crystal.

A princess cloaked in silver light.

Echoes of a past life whispered across the years.



Usagi nestled deeper into the soft cocoon of her blankets, the gentle tick of her clock filled the quiet of her room. Moonlight filtered through her curtains, painting delicate silver patterns across the pas-

tel-colored walls. Everything was just as it should be—Luna curled at the foot of the bed, her warm quiet purr adding to the calm.

A brilliant, almost blinding flash of light flooded the room, piercing her eyelids and burning through her dreams. Usagi stirred, groaning as she tried to block out the brightness with a sleep-heavy arm.

“Morning already?”

She fumbled around, rubbing at her bleary eyes, but the glow was relentless, intense, casting sharp, exaggerated shadows around her cozy sanctuary.

When she glanced at her clock, its hands still firmly pointing to midnight, confusion tugged at her groggy thoughts. Slowly, she pushed herself upright, her golden hair cascading in a disarrayed mess around her face.

The sheets wrapped around her legs as she leaned out the window, the chill of the glass pressing against her forehead.

Usagi peered out into the night, her breath leaving a slight fog on the windowpane. The world outside was no longer the familiar, quiet neighborhood she knew; instead, it was bathed in an ethereal glow that made everything appear otherworldly. The source of it was a radiant streak blazing across the sky, a trail shimmering with magic and fading gently into the distance.

Her heart gave a little leap, excitement beginning to swell beneath the confusion.

“A shooting star?” she whispered, blue eyes widening with delight.

“No... it’s too bright... a meteor?”

The glow had transformed her street into something dreamlike, a fantasy land lit by a celestial marvel. Usagi’s wonder only grew, an electric thrill shooting through her as if the world had suddenly cracked open, revealing a mystery she had to uncover.

The air felt charged, heavy with possibilities, and Usagi was no stranger to adventure. Her curiosity bubbled up, eclipsing any caution she might have felt. It was just like one of her manga—a flash in the sky, a mystery that called to her, waiting for someone to explore. She could already imagine herself racing towards the light, finding something incredible, something no one else could even dream of.

She dashed to her dresser, grabbing the first clothes she could find—her favorite pink sweater and a comfortable skirt. Her fingers fumbled clumsily as she tugged on socks, the excitement making her hands shake. Luna, disturbed by all the commotion, opened her eyes, blinking up at her with sleepy confusion.

“Usagi, what are you doing?” Luna’s voice was a low, disapproving mumble, but Usagi was too far gone, caught up in the thrill of it all.

“Something amazing just happened, Luna!” she beamed, breathless with enthusiasm. “I have to see it! I can’t just stay here!”

She hopped on one foot, then the other, pulling on her socks, nearly falling over twice before she managed to get them on.

Luna let out a sigh, her eyes narrowing. “At least be careful,” she muttered, though Usagi was already halfway out the door.

The night air hit her like a splash of cold water, crisp and invigorating, sweeping away the last of her drowsiness. She grinned, her breath puffing out in a soft cloud as she took a moment to look up at the sky. The stars glittered above, brighter and clearer than usual, as though they too were curious about the radiant streak that had carved across their canvas.

The streets were empty, bathed in a silvery glow that was already beginning to fade, but Usagi could still see it—the faint trail that led deeper into the city. Her pulse quickened, her instincts guiding her as she broke into a run, her long pigtails streaming out behind her like

golden ribbons. The pavement was solid beneath her feet, each step resonating with the excitement pounding in her veins.

Her laughter bubbled up, spilling out into the quiet night as she raced forward, her shoes slapping lightly against the ground. She didn't know where she was headed—didn't need to. All she knew was that something incredible awaited her, and she had to be a part of it. The glow might have faded from the sky, but it still shimmered in her mind, a beacon she couldn't ignore.

The cityscape seemed different now, mysterious, like it held hidden secrets only she could uncover. It was alive, humming with the same electric energy that vibrated under her skin, wrapping around her like an invisible cloak.

She turned a corner, her eyes fixed ahead, and glimpsed something glowing faintly in the distance. Others, shadows against the illuminated buildings, seemed to be moving toward it too, drawn just as she was.

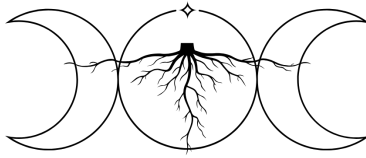
“It's like a surprise party no one knew about!”

Now she wanted to find it even more.

Perhaps a magical treasure waited—or maybe even a wish-granting star ready to share its secrets. The allure was too strong, the pull too irresistible. Whatever it was, she knew it was going to be extraordinary.

With renewed determination, Usagi quickened her pace, her grin never fading. She was running straight toward the unknown, her spirit ablaze with hope and curiosity.

Tonight, she was chasing stardust. And she wouldn't stop until she reached it.



Ami sat hunched over her desk, the soft glow of her computer screen casting a serene, pale light across her minimalist bedroom. The quiet hum of her computer filled the air, blending with the rhythmic tapping of her fingers on the mouse. Her eyes narrowed in concentration as she studied the chessboard glowing before her, her keen gaze picking apart Zoisite's strategy.

He'd been trying to trap her for weeks, but today she could see the flaw. A sly smile tugged at her lips as she clicked her bishop, effectively turning the tide of the game.

"Gotcha," she murmured, savoring the moment of victory.

But just as she leaned back to bask in her triumph, an intense flash of light invaded the room, swallowing the pale blues and grays of her walls in a burst of brilliant white. The sudden brightness startled her, her heart leaping in her chest as she jerked upright.

"What on earth?"

Pushing back her chair, she stood, the chill of the wooden floor biting at her bare feet as she moved towards the window.

The scene outside was something out of a science fiction novel—an ethereal streak of light cutting through the sky, leaving behind a shimmering trail. It was otherworldly, beautiful, but most of all, it was inexplicable. She pressed her palms against the cool glass, her brow furrowing.

"A meteor?"

There were no reports, no astronomical events scheduled for tonight—no meteors, no comets, nothing. She would have known.

It didn't make sense.

Her logical mind jumped to action, her thoughts racing to find an explanation, to piece together the facts into a coherent whole. The streak of light pulsated faintly, glowing on the distant horizon. Something about it seemed to call to her—a silent plea, an invitation—and her heart responded with a strange thrill. The energy emanating from the phenomenon felt almost alive, and it whispered directly to her, urging her to investigate, to understand.

For a moment, she hesitated, her eyes darting back to her computer screen. The chessboard glowed quietly, Zoisite's blinking cursor waiting for her next move. She bit her lip. Leaving the match unfinished felt wrong, but the pull of the mysterious light outside was relentless, impossible to ignore.

Quickly, Ami typed: "Something's come up. Rain check?"

She watched as his response appeared almost instantly: "Stay safe, Blue."

A small smile touched her lips, warmth momentarily filling her chest before the weight of the unknown replaced it.

Ami turned away from her desk, her mind buzzing with possibilities, each one more improbable than the last. Was it an uncharted asteroid? Atmospheric interference?

Theories tumbled one after another, but none seemed to stick. None of them could explain the sense of wrongness that lingered. She grabbed her jacket, slipping it over her shoulders.

The apartment was still, her mother long asleep, and Ami scribbled a quick note and left it on the kitchen counter—she didn't want to cause unnecessary worry. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door, and the night air rushed in, cold and bracing against her skin. The glow in the sky still lingered, pulsing like a heartbeat, an unspoken promise, and Ami's curiosity surged.

An eerie quiet settled over the streets, hushed, as if the world was holding its breath. The glow served as her guide, the faint hum of its energy thrumming against her skin, pulling her forward. As she rushed, she noticed others drawn from their homes, heads tilted skyward, faces painted with confusion and awe. Streetlights flickered above, their weak glow paling against the brilliance of the celestial phenomenon.

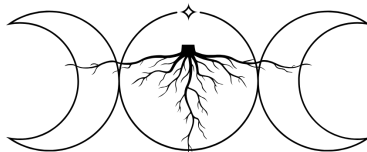
She had to get closer.

Her usually orderly world tilting into a realm of unknowns. There was something exhilarating about it, the stepping away from the expected and into a mystery that defied her understanding. The energy of the night seemed to vibrate beneath her feet, humming in the air around her, urging her forward with an insistence that quickened her steps.

She paused as she reached a hill overlooking part of the city, her breath misting in the cold air. From this vantage point, the glow was brighter, casting an ethereal sheen over the buildings below. There was movement, a faint commotion—a crowd gathering at a distance, their silhouettes framed by the shimmering light. At least she wasn't alone in this. Ami's heart thudded in her chest, her eyes wide and reflecting the glow.

"Whatever this is," she whispered, "it's extraordinary."

A sense of resolve settled within her. This was beyond textbooks, beyond logic alone—it was a calling, a mystery waiting to be unraveled.



Rei sat before the sacred fire, its flames flickering and whispering the words of the gods into the dim room. Shadows moved across the wooden walls, bending and dancing with each shift of the fire, creating an eerie, living tapestry. The scent of burning wood and incense clung to the air, making it shimmer with radiant power.

Tonight, everything felt strained. Something hung heavy in the air, a tangible weight that made each breath harder, as if the weight of the world had seeped in through the shrine's wooden walls.

Her eyes remained closed as she lingered in her meditative calm. The warmth of the fire brushed against her skin, yet instead of comforting, it seemed almost suffocating—oppressive, the way it pressed down on her shoulders, invading her senses.

Her fingers twitched, resisting the urge to fidget, her mind stubbornly drifting back to earlier that day, to the sharp eyes of Jadeite, his gaze so heavy, so filled with something unspoken. It wasn't right to be distracted like this, to have his face swim behind her closed lids while she was supposed to be seeking the clarity of the sacred flame.

“Focus.”

She adjusted her posture, grounding herself, hands resting against her knees as she centered her breathing. Slowly, her mind cleared. The physical world faded: the firm press of the floor against her legs, the chill from the night air seeping through the thin shoji doors, the distant sound of rustling leaves. Everything receded, leaving only the sacred fire before her, its voice growing louder as the world around her dimmed.

But just as she reached that threshold of calm, the flames stuttered. Familiar warmth became violent heat.

Gentle cracking gave way to a roar.

Her eyes snapped open, the fire before her no longer amber and orange but filled with dark, writhing greens and blacks. It twisted

upward, roaring toward the ceiling with unnatural force. The heat was unbearable, licking at her skin, pressing her back until she threw up her arm to shield her face.

Fear lanced through her.

This was wrong.

The sacred fire had never responded like this. It was a chaotic surge, a deep resistance, like the energy of the universe had turned upon itself, and she was caught in its relentless fury. Sweat beaded on her forehead, the fire's power a physical weight bearing down upon her. The flames thrashed, shadows warping grotesquely, twisting into shapes that seemed to pulse with life, monstrous forms reaching for her, and Rei remained frozen.

The vision struck her unprepared.

Images flashed across the flames with searing intensity.

A vast black void where stars blinked and blurred, and out of that emptiness loomed something immense. An ancient force, cloaked in reluctance and weighed down by profound exhaustion. Sadness radiated from it—deep, longing, and heavy.

Orbiting that colossal presence were two spheres of energy—one seething with fiery anger, the other quiet and resigned. One radiated fierce determination, the other simmered with calm exasperation.

This evil wasn't born out of malice; it was compelled, driven into darkness against its will. Chaos spread out behind it, rippling through galaxies—a tree whose branches withered across the cosmos, its roots like skeletal fingers clinging to something already lost.

The fire roared louder still, the shadows on the wall becoming more distorted, their movements almost taunting her. Rei felt her pulse in her throat, her breaths shallow, trembling. She saw the earth, her earth, shudder as a streak of light blazed through its atmosphere, an ominous comet trailing darkness like a shroud. She could almost feel it—could

almost sense the earth's shock as if it was her own body being assaulted, torn apart.

For a brief, terrifying moment, the sacred fire went out.

Darkness flooded the room. It crashed over her like a wave, absolute, and it held her there in its suffocating grasp, drowning her in a silence that only heightened her panic. Her heart pounded, every beat thundering against her ribs, the loss of light disorienting, the sudden void filled with her dread.

Just as her fear clawed its way up, ready to consume her whole, the fire blazed back to life—a desperate, explosive return that seemed almost vengeful, throwing a brilliant, harsh light into the room.

She stumbled back, gasping for breath, her legs weak beneath her. The room seemed to vibrate with a residual energy, the charge so heavy it made her hair stand on end. She looked down at her trembling hands, still feeling the phantom heat coursing through them, still seeing the afterimages of that dying tree, of that force hurtling towards them.

Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "It's here. Whatever's coming... it's already here."

Rei pushed herself up, shaky, and without a second thought, she bolted from the fire room. As she burst through the door, the cool night air hit her face with a sharp bite, momentarily clearing her head. The world beyond the shrine was dark and serene, the sky a deep indigo littered with stars. It was hard to believe something so beautiful could harbor the darkness she had just glimpsed.

But there was no time.

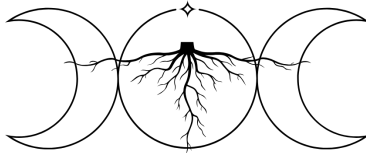
The fire had shown her a glimpse of what was to come—a reluctant evil, a force far beyond anything she had faced before, something written in the stars that had already begun its descent. There was no ignoring this, no running from it.

She ran down the shrine steps, her pulse still racing, her eyes scanning the city in the distance. Her vision of the comet, of the impact, replayed in her mind like a loop, pushing her forward, deeper into the night.

She had to find answers, had to understand what had just happened. And somewhere, deep down, she knew she couldn't do this alone.

Her steps echoed in the quiet night, carrying her further from the sanctuary she had known all her life and closer to the heart of the storm she had seen.

The sky above was indifferent, stars twinkling without a care, unaware of the tumult that brewed below. But Rei was no longer afraid.



Makoto stood in her cozy kitchen, the aroma of steamed rice mingling with the scent of freshly chopped vegetables. Her hands moved with practiced grace, her knife rhythmically slicing carrots, the sharpness of the blade making clean, satisfying cuts against the wooden board. The kitchen's glow illuminated her, casting her determined features in warm light as she ranted to her plants.

"Nephrite has some nerve!" She smashed her knife down on the zucchini a little harder than necessary. Perhaps she should try to be careful. She didn't want to break another cutting board.

"If he says one more thing about my grades, I'm going to smash a rice ball in his smug face."

A giggle escaped her lips as she imagined the sight. The rhythmic chopping was comforting, each motion giving her a momentary release from her frustration. The silent plants on the windowsill didn't offer any reply, but she continued anyway.

"Just because he's tall and has those amazing forearms doesn't mean he gets a pass!"

She paused mid-rant, her hands resting on the counter, her gaze drifting to the steam fogging the window above the sink. The warm kitchen, the soothing smells of cooking, all felt comforting—until a sudden flash of brilliant, almost blinding light filled the room. It flooded every corner, chasing away the gentle glow of the kitchen and turning the steam into fleeting, iridescent rainbows.

Makoto flinched, her spatula clattering onto the tiled floor, rice scattering like tiny pearls across the floor. "What the hell...?"

Outside, an eerie luminescence bathed the world, with the sky streaked by a bright light that slowly faded, leaving behind a shimmering, almost shimmering trail. The night seemed different now, as though the stars had decided to descend and brush the earth with their light. Her kitchen, which moments ago had felt so warm and secure, now seemed almost stifling—its walls too close, its coziness suddenly confining.

"Right in the middle of food prep for the week."

But the electric energy in the air sparked something else—curiosity. There was no way she could simply turn her back on a sight like that. There was a sense of urgency in that flash, a feeling that this wasn't just some random, natural event.

Makoto glanced back at her scattered cooking supplies, her plants that had gone still as if holding their breath. "I am due for an adventure."

She tugged her jacket from the peg by the door. The cold air was bracing, the breeze biting against her skin and making her feel suddenly alive. The street was quiet, the sky above clear but charged, as if the stars themselves were buzzing with electricity. Her eyes darted up to where the streak had disappeared. The flash still burned behind her eyes, and the urge to follow it was undeniable.

“Is this stupid?” a grin finding its way to her lips.

“Perhaps.”

The cool pavement echoed softly beneath her boots, her strides steady, each step carrying her away from the warmth of her home and into the unknown night.

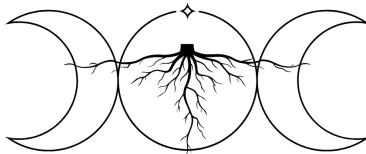
“Do I care?”

The soft hum of distant traffic and rustling leaves filled her ears, the only sounds breaking the stillness.

“Nope!”

Makoto moved with purpose, her eyes set firmly on the direction the light had gone. She wasn't one to shy away from something extraordinary. The pull of adventure, the possibility of uncovering something no one else knew, was too tempting. Each breath she took was like inhaling the thrill of the moment, her heartbeat steady and strong, as if daring whatever mystery lay ahead to come and face her.

Tonight, she was ready for anything.



Minako lounged in her favorite booth at the Crown Fruit Parlor, her fingers idly stirring a bright drink crowned with a tiny umbrella. It didn't matter it was late, the Crown was always THE place to be. Around her, the ambiance buzzed with laughter, the clinking of glasses, and the soft hum of conversation.

The sweet aroma of fresh desserts hung in the air, but Minako's attention was laser-focused on Kunzite, the man sitting across from her. She couldn't quite shake the sense that she knew him—his white hair falling over his guarded eyes, the way he moved with a deliberate kind of grace, as if he was always aware of his surroundings.

And his smile.

God, his smile was something of myths and fairy tales.

There was a familiarity there, fleeting yet persistent, tugging at the edges of her memory.

"You're sure we've never met before?" she asked, her eyes narrowing with a mix of curiosity and challenge.

She leaned forward, studying the way the light rolled across his chin. Kunzite kept his expression carefully neutral, lifting his coffee cup in response.

"Do you think you're that forgettable?" he said, his words smooth, a hint of a smile ghosting over his lips. "I'm positive I'd remember if we had."

But Minako wasn't convinced—something about his demeanor set off alarm bells. She didn't buy it. She could sense something hidden beneath his calm exterior, and it drove her mad she couldn't pin down why. It was like looking at a reflection in water, the truth just beyond reach, rippling out of clarity.

She grinned and leaned back. "Maybe we crossed paths in another life."

He shrugged, and she clenched her teeth.

She needed answers.

Kunzite's gaze flickered to hers for a moment, something almost sad passing over his face before he looked away.

"I've always believed past lives should stay in the past."

She didn't get a chance to press further. In that exact moment, a brilliant flash of light bathed the entire parlor, throwing long, jagged shadows across the walls. The surrounding conversations stopped abruptly, and the clink of utensils ceased as every head turned towards the large windows. An otherworldly glow spread across the street outside, painting everything in a shimmering, almost ethereal light.

Minako's heart skipped a beat. The glow illuminated Kunzite's face, and in that instant, she saw something—recognition? Fear?—cross his expression, and it was gone just as quickly. The air was suddenly electric, charged with an energy that seemed to vibrate with potential. The parlor's warmth, once comforting, now felt oppressive, the glow outside far more compelling than the soft lights inside.

A rush of instinct—almost like an echo of the past—called out to Minako. It felt familiar, the way destiny had tugged her into action the first time she had become Sailor V. The urge to rush out and meet the unknown, to protect, to uncover—it was irresistible.

But at the same time, she couldn't look away from Kunzite, couldn't ignore the nagging feeling that he was a missing piece of her story. Her hands clenched, her gaze locking onto his, her decision hanging in the balance.

Kunzite's voice broke the silence between them, low and almost regretful. "Your path lies out there, not here with me."

Minako blinked, her resolve settling like a stone in her chest.

She pushed herself out of the booth.

"This isn't over," she said, her tone fierce. "I'm going to figure you out, Kunzite. I swear it."

A faint smile touched his lips, tinged with something like melancholy. “I wouldn’t expect anything less from you.”

The weight of his words hung in the air between them, but the light outside pulsed again, insistent, demanding attention. Minako tore her eyes away from him, her heart pounding as she turned towards the door. The pull of the unknown was too strong, the call too loud to ignore.

Throwing some bills onto the table, she strode purposefully towards the exit, her golden hair swaying behind her like a comet’s tail. As she stepped outside, the night air hit her, crisp and cool, clearing her mind.

The strange glow still painted the sky, a beacon of mystery in the otherwise serene cityscape. Minako took a deep breath, the cold filling her lungs, and she felt it—that familiar thrill, the promise of something extraordinary about to unfold.

The streets seemed different now, the usual hum of the city replaced by a strange quiet, a sense that something monumental was about to happen. Minako’s eyes flicked once more in the direction of the parlor, thoughts of Kunzite still lingering at the edges of her mind.

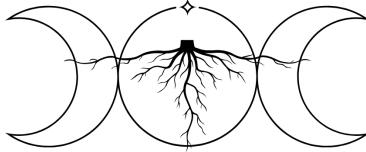
Who was he, really?

Why did she feel like she knew him, like he was part of a story that was just out of reach?

But that would have to wait. Right now, there was something bigger at play, something demanding her attention. Minako took off, her strides confident, the curiosity burning bright within her. Whatever had brought that light—whatever had changed the atmosphere of the night—was calling her, and she was ready to meet it head-on.

“I’ll be back, Kunzite,” she thought, a smile playing at her lips. “Next time, I’ll get the answers I need.” The city was alive, vibrating

with secrets, and Minako was determined to uncover every last one of them.



The canopy of stars returned to its usual glow as the strange luminescence dimmed before winking out entirely. A crater smoldered, wisps of steam rising lazily from its edges, while at its heart, a faint glow pulsed rhythmically—like the heartbeat of something ancient awakening.

The air was thick with the sharp scent of scorched earth and ozone, filling the atmosphere with a charged energy that prickled against the skin, vibrating with a promise of something yet to unfold.

The streets were unusually silent, an eerie pause settling over the night, broken only by the distant wail of approaching police sirens. Even the city's ever-present hum had stilled, as though Juban itself held its breath.

From different directions, they came—drawn not by conscious decision, but by something older, an unseen force that whispered of destiny. Summoned by the strings of fate and by the ever present bonds that tied them together.

Mamoru was first, his eyes reflecting the crater's ethereal glow as he approached. A restless energy tugged at the edges of his consciousness, tugging at the edges of his memory. His eyes didn't leave the crater, a strange unease gripping his chest.

Rei arrived next, her miko robes fluttering in the warm air, her eyes sharp with suspicion. The heat of the crater mirrored the unsettling warmth of the sacred fire she had just left behind. Her senses were on high alert, the ominous warnings of her earlier vision still ringing in her ears. She stood at the crater's edge, reading the strange energy emanating from it, feeling it thrumming through the earth beneath her

Ami appeared quietly, her analytical gaze already dissecting the scene before her. She adjusted her jacket, noting the perfect symmetry of the crater, the strange luminescence at its center, the way the streetlights around them flickered, as if the energy was being drawn away. Despite her attempts at logic, there was something intangible about this place—something beyond reason—that sent a shiver down her spine.

Makoto's strong stride brought her next, her tall figure outlined by the flickering light. Annoyance tugged at her features—tonight had been full of interruptions—but this was different. The electric charge in the air made her skin prickle, reminiscent of the moments before a thunderstorm broke. Her eyes narrowed as she studied the scene, the glow from the crater calling to something deep within her, a spark of recognition that refused to be dismissed.

Minako came almost as a shadow, her movements graceful, a warrior's awareness in her eyes. She took in the crater; the others gathered around it, her gaze flickering between them with curiosity and unease. The energy here felt potent, almost tangible, resonating deep inside her, as though it connected with a part of her she couldn't fully remember.

Finally, Usagi arrived, her breath coming fast from her hurried run, her hair swaying with every step. Her eyes widened at the sight, filled with awe and wonder. The meteor's glow bathed her face in soft,

ethereal light, and for a moment, her childlike amazement quieted the turmoil rolling over the area.

Together, they formed an unconscious circle around the crater, their positions almost equidistant, as though placed by some unseen hand. Five points around a glowing center—an ancient pattern that resonated across time.

None of them spoke, as they took each other, but the air between them thrummed with recognition—an echo of something long forgotten, a memory stirring at the edges of their consciousness.

For a heartbeat, time itself seemed to stretch thin, and the air grew denser, heavy with a sense of unspoken connection. The subtle vibrations of the earth traveled upward, threading through their bodies like roots seeking to intertwine, pulling them together, binding them in a way that defied comprehension. It was as if the universe itself held its breath, waiting for them to understand, to awaken to whatever destiny lay ahead.

Their eyes met. Rei's sharp gaze locking onto Ami's curious one, Makoto's determined expression softening as she glanced at Usagi's wide-eyed wonder, Minako's guarded look meeting Mamoru's contemplative stare. Recognition flickered and faded, a fleeting sense of familiarity slipping through their fingers, yet undeniably there.

As the police approached, the distant sirens grew louder, piercing through the heavy atmosphere, their red and blue lights flickering at the edges of their vision. The spell broke, and reality rushed back in with all its force. The officers' shouts cut through the night, urging the gathered crowd to disperse, to step away from the anomaly.

One by one, they began to retreat, their footsteps slow, their gazes lingering on the crater, on each other, on the strange sense of something unfinished, something only just beginning. As each of them moved

away, there was a feeling of leaving something behind—like parting with a piece of themselves.

In the shadows beyond the crater, Mamoru stood a moment longer, his eyes on the departing figures. The crater pulsed gently behind them, the soft glow fading but never quite disappearing. The earth exhaled, the city's hum resuming, yet the resonance of what had transpired lingered—a soft vibration underfoot, a whisper of destiny weaving itself quietly beneath the surface of their ordinary lives.

This was only the beginning.



## Chapter Five

# Thorns Among the Starlight

**A**n sat stiffly at this torture contraption humans called a desk, her fingers curling tightly around the edges of the dead wooden surface. The classroom was awash with the monotonous drone of human voices, a cacophony of meaningless chatter that buzzed like persistent insects in her ears.

Overhead, the fluorescent lights cast a sterile glare, making her skin itch with a crawling discomfort she couldn't shake. The air was thick with the stale scent of old books and recycled breath—so unlike the fragrant breezes that whispered through the leaves of the Makai Tree. The dissonance grated against her senses, and every scratch of a pencil or scrape of a chair felt like another thorn under her skin.

Everything in this place was dead. Without feeling. Like they'd stripped the fundamental parts of nature from the world. Though only an hour had passed since she was trapped in this prison, she desperately wanted to go back to the tree.

These humans—how they irked her. Their blank expressions, vacant stares, and droning voices grated on her nerves. Her gaze swept over her so-called classmates, their dull auras shimmering faintly. They were so full of untapped energy that they squandered with every breath. A life force they didn't deserve. Pathetic creatures, oblivious to

the power that flowed within their veins. Power that the Makai Tree desperately needed.

How I want to drain them dry.

Patience, An. Ail's voice slid over her consciousness and attempted to soothe the violent thoughts. Attempted being the most important word.

An squeezed her eyes shut, her nails digging into her palms until crescents marked her skin. If only she could be elsewhere. Not just anywhere. She pictured herself beneath the expansive branches of the Makai Tree, shaded from the sun's glare, listening to Ail's haunting flute. The aria was there in her mind, lingering like a forbidden kiss in the sunshine.

The melody threading through her mind like a balm, wrapping around her and soothing the tempest within. But the illusion was fleeting, shattered by the shrill laughter of a girl sitting nearby. It yanked her back to the present, the noise jarring and obnoxious. An's jaw tightened, her teeth grinding in silent fury.

Why must we endure this charade? She could feel Ail wince as the force of her thoughts smashed into him.

Can you please think a little less aggressively? You're giving me a headache.

Instead of apologizing, she only clenched her teeth harder. The pretense of blending in among these insignificant creatures was a bitter, galling task. Yet, it was necessary. She knew that. The Tree needed energy—real, vibrant energy—and this planet was their only chance.

The mission depended on their performance. Still, it didn't make the drudgery of this mundane classroom any easier to swallow.

We're here to learn how to more effectively take energy from these beasts.

To figure out which type of energy is the best.

They'd arrived on this vibrant world half expecting another poisonous planet bent on destruction. Instead, they discovered a paradise. Everywhere was delicious energy. Nourishing energy. It was raw, tantalizing, and unlike anything they had encountered before. She could feel it calling to her, teasingly close yet maddeningly out of reach, like a siren's song promising untold power.

An glanced out the window, her eyes narrowing at the sunlight streaming through, illuminating specks of dust that danced lazily in the air. There was something more here—something she hadn't yet figured out.

A complexity that lurked beneath the surface of this world, tempting and dangerous in equal measure. The humans—despite their weakness, despite their absurd trivialities—possessed a contentment that gnawed at her, something she and Ail had never known.

We'll bleed them dry.

We'll take every drop of energy they have.

And the Makai Tree will bloom again.

An straightened her posture, smoothing the fabric of her school uniform—a disguise she despised with every fiber of her being.

We are above this.

We are above them.

Those thoughts were the only cold comfort as the minutes dragged on. Instead of trying to decipher the endless strings of nonsense the human in front of the room kept spewing—some garbled blend of numbers, words, and squiggles that seemed so important to the rest of the class—she focused on the faint hum of energy beyond the walls, imagining how it would feel to take it all.

Endure.

Her gaze flicked to the timekeeping device on the wall. Why humans attempted to track something as elusive and meaningless as

time was beyond her comprehension. The humans acted as though they could control time, as if marking its passage somehow gave their fleeting lives purpose. But they didn't realize time didn't exist, only change did.

Foolish creatures, clinging to an illusion.

Yet, since they clung to it, so she had to. There were still hours to go before she could shed this façade and return to her true self. Her connection to the Makai Tree pulsed faintly at the back of her mind—a distant rhythm that reminded her why she was here, why she had to bear this.

For the Tree.

For Ail.

For survival.

Despite her resolve, however, a nagging sense of unease remained. This world was dangerous, alluring, and brimming with unknowns. And for all her disdain, she couldn't shake the feeling that her journey here was only just beginning—that perhaps these humans, with their vibrant energy and their inexplicable joy, might hold secrets that could change everything. The thought made her skin prickle, and she took a deep breath, forcing herself to remain composed.

We'll save the Makai Tree.

Earth will provide the energy.

Before, they'd been at the mercy of those other worlds. Flashing teeth and devouring mists forced them to flee. But now, these soft beings would be at their mercy. They were the predators on this world. A cold smile spread over her lips.

But as she turned her eyes back to the front of the room, she couldn't help the small crack of doubt that slipped through her defenses—a tiny fracture in her resolve, hinting at challenges yet to come.

Ail, at least, was more confident.

He stood in the hallway of the prison they called a school, his gray school uniform partially unbuttoned in casual rebellion, his auburn hair catching the afternoon sun. Unimpressed by everything he'd seen so far, his gaze slid across the space, indifferent, barely concealing his disdain for the surrounding humans.

These pitiful humans wandered about, gawking at him. Their eyes were wide and auras pulsed with a strange electric energy he longest to taste. Voices buzzed with a mundane noise—nothing like the rustling of leaves in the wind. It was all so trivial, so painfully ordinary, and Ail, with the vastness of the universe behind him, felt every bit the superior being he knew he was.

He sighed, his fingers brushing over the cool metal of his flute. His eyes narrowed as he considered the humans, all so fragile, so unaware of what it meant to truly survive, to bear the weight of responsibility for something far greater than themselves. These beings knew nothing of the struggle he and An had endured, drifting through space, nurturing the Makai Tree, carrying the burden of survival that had scarred their souls.

I can't wait to taste their energy.

Suck them dry.

Ail remained by the window, unmoving, the vapid humans fawning around him like the god he was. The sunlight warmed his skin, a rare, fleeting balm that almost made him feel alive. At least here, he wasn't lost in the vast nothingness of space, drowning in endless darkness and decay.

A drifting cloud momentarily veiled the sun, shrouding the world in shadowy wonder, the fleeting darkness teasing a reminder of that hell above.

Then the light returned, bursting through the gloom in a radiant cascade.

Then she was there.

Ail's gaze locked onto the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. Bathed in sunlight, her golden hair shimmering as though spun from the rays themselves. The world around her seemed to pause, muted and insignificant.

Her laughter rang out, a note purer than anything Ail could ever coax from his flute. He watched, transfixed, as she moved—unguarded and alive, a beacon of warmth in a world he had always seen as cold and colorless. The hallway noise blurred, dimming until only she remained, radiant and untouchable.

If he was a god, then she was his goddess.

For the first time, his confidence faltered. She was unlike anything he had encountered—untainted brightness, raw and abundant energy that pulsed in the air, setting his senses alight. She was everything the Makai Tree lacked. Everything he lacked.

Ail, what's happened? Do you need energy?

An's voice clawed at his mind, but he couldn't respond, couldn't even form the words. Something inside him cracked wide open as her presence filled a void he hadn't realized was there. A need rose in him, sharp and unrelenting, carving through the carefully constructed superiority he had clung to for so long.

He had to have her.

Body.

Mind.

Soul.

And everything in between.

Before he knew what was happening, he was moving towards her. The world containing nothing but the gold glittering through her hair and the radiant blue of her eyes. When he was only a few paces away,

she noticed him. Skittering to a stop, he had to fight the urge to bow before her. Kiss the ground she walked on.

“My beautiful Andromeda, allow me to play for you.”

“Usagi.” An insignificant girl with short red hair elbowed her. “He’s talking to you.”

“Me?”

So, her name was Usagi. A perfect name for a perfect prize.

Ail lifted the flute to his lips, the first haunting note piercing through the chatter. It was a melody woven from starlight, from longing that spanned galaxies, and as it filled the room, the effect was instant. Conversations ceased, shoes halted mid-stride, and every face turned toward him, captivated. Their wonder was almost insulting, their awe a testament to their ignorance.

He smirked as he played, eyes half-closed, feeling the power of his music surround them. The humans’ rapt expressions fed his ego—a reaffirmation of his control, of his superiority over these lesser beings. He could feel their minds quieting, drawn in by the beauty of something they could never understand.

This would entice her.

She wouldn’t be able to resist him.

Sure enough, he could see the stars glittering in her eyes. An’s rage exploded through their mental link, a fiery presence demanding his attention, but it felt distant, insignificant. All that mattered was Usagi—the way her laughter softened the edges of his harsh reality, the way her light seemed to reach inside him, awakening a longing that terrified and exhilarated him all at once.

For the first time, Ail felt his control slip, his carefully crafted arrogance crumbling, leaving him exposed. Vulnerable. And yet, he couldn’t bring himself to look away. He had to know more—had to

understand this human who, in just a fleeting moment, had changed everything.

“Brother!” An’s voice cracked through the hallway and he flinched. “What are you doing, brother?”

Her possessive fury stabbing into his thoughts like a blade. Her anger flared, hot and demanding, her voice echoing in his mind. All those emotions wrapping around him in a vice-like grip. With a snap, he pulled the flute away from his lips.

Her jealousy was almost endearing, a predictable reaction that made him smile. Let her seethe. He was above such emotions—above her, even. The music was more than hers; it was a part of who he was, and he reveled in the control it gave him.

Thankfully, Ail avoid An’s wrath for the rest of the day. But he couldn’t avoid it forever. The streets of Juban thrummed with life as the afternoon surrendered to early evening. The setting sun cast a golden hue over the city, its amber light glinting off shop windows and car windshields, while shadows stretched and swayed with the crowd’s movement. Amidst this warm tapestry, Ail and An walked side by side, their footsteps slightly out of sync—a silent reflection of the turmoil simmering between them.

An’s red hair blazed like fire in the evening glow, whipped around by the breeze as her fury flared. She rounded on Ail, her eyes narrowed, her voice a venomous hiss, carrying just enough heat to burn.

“What the hell was that, Ail?” she demanded. Her gaze pinned him, her whole body trembling with barely contained rage.

Ail sighed, adjusting his school bag with deliberate nonchalance, trying to downplay the intensity she brought to the confrontation.

“Remember, we’re brother and sister.”

An scoffed, the sound sharp against the background of the bustling city, a flare of anger that only further narrowed her focus. “Don’t play

that card with me. That girl—you couldn't take your eyes off her. The way you looked at her... it was like nothing else mattered. You've never looked at me like that!"

She stepped closer, blocking his path, her presence an immovable wall of fury and desperation. Her hands curled into fists at her sides, her nails biting into her palms until they stung, grounding her in her own rage.

"It's expected to converse with other students," he shrugged.

The words had barely left his mouth when An surged forward, her eyes flashing, the intensity of her emotions causing a tremor in her voice.

"Don't hide behind that pathetic act," she spat, her face inches from his. "You looked at her like she was something... something special. She's nothing, Ail. Just a human—a pathetic human meant to feed our tree."

Her words stung more than he cared to admit, and the truth of his feelings made it worse. There was something different about that girl. The memory of her golden hair catching the light, the purity of her aura, flashed in his mind—a warmth that had pierced through the dullness of everything else. He couldn't ignore it, no matter how much An seethed.

Before he could formulate a response, he saw An's gaze shift, her fury suddenly halting, her body going rigid. Ail turned, following her line of sight, and spotted him. A human male. His form haloed by the fading light, his presence commanding attention. Something about him seemed almost... timeless, as though he didn't quite belong to this world.

She couldn't look away from him. As if he were gravity and she were a mere asteroid.

The fading sunlight framed him, highlighting his dark hair and sharp profile as though crafted from shadows and firelight. The world around him seemed to hush, its chaos muted and rendered insignificant as An's gaze locked onto the most perfect being she had ever seen.

He moved with effortless grace, his every step deliberate yet unassuming. His aura was magnetic, the quiet strength in his presence crackling like static against her senses. The faint breeze ruffled his hair, and for a moment, the light caught in his eyes—a deep, endless blue that pulled her under like a tide, drowning her in something vast and unknowable.

If she was a goddess, then this man was her only equal.

For the first time, her certainty faltered. He was unlike anyone she had ever encountered—a balance of raw power and restrained grace. Energy radiated from him, not wild and chaotic but steady and unyielding, a depth that resonated with her in ways she couldn't comprehend. He was the earth to her fire, the anchor to her tempest.

“Oh please. Give me a break.”

Ail's voice scraped against her consciousness, but she barely registered it. Something inside her churned violently, a hunger igniting in the deepest part of her—a need that was sharper and more consuming than she'd ever experienced. The possessiveness she felt for Ail dimmed, twisted, and redirected itself entirely.

She had to have him.

Body.

Mind.

Soul.

And every piece in between.

Her feet moved before her mind could catch up. The pull toward him undeniable, like gravity itself had shifted in his favor. The crowd

ebbed around him, blurring into nothing as her focus sharpened. He turned slightly, and for the briefest moment, their eyes met.

Her breath hitched.

An had never bowed to anyone, but in that instant, she almost understood what it meant to fall to one's knees in worship.

"This is rich. You're criticizing me for going after a human female. And here you are, drooling over a human male."

He could feel it—the bond between them weakening, not in strength, but in attention. Her focus on him had always been unrelenting, but now, it had been diverted, and the sting of that realization ran deep.

But she didn't answer him. Instead, she turned and followed after him. Ail could only watch, a strange sense of loss echoing through him.

"Really, An?"

Something hot and poisonous spread across his body. He wanted to take that human and smash his face against the tree, pull him apart piece by piece, watch his lifeblood drip across the Makai Tree's bark. He'd end that pathetic attempt at humanity.

The golden glow of the sunset deepened, shifting to a darker shade, the first hints of twilight creeping into the sky. An took a step back, her attention once again shifting to the disappearing figure. Without another word, she turned and began walking in his direction, her resolve clear.

The world only contained him and her.

And when they joined, stars would explode.

Just as she was about to reach him. Just when she was about to realize her destiny, the world wavered. Edges blurred, the vibrant light dimmed as shadows seeped in, curling like ink spreading through water. Darkness crept from the corners of her mind, relentless and

consuming, until it swallowed her whole and plunged her into an all-encompassing void.

## Chapter Six

# Roots of Dying Light

The darkness where the Makai Tree grew had always felt endless, but now it seemed to suffocate, pressing down like a vice on An's chest. A heavy staleness, thick and pungent, filled the air, stinging her nostrils and making each breath a struggle, as if the air itself were trying to suffocate her. The Makai Tree loomed before them, its massive branches drooping like broken fingers against the void, brittle, with a pallor that mirrored their own.

Its once vibrant glow had dimmed to a sickly, dying ember. Every so often, a dry, bone-like crack echoed through the hollow space, as another leaf fell and shattered upon the ground, disintegrating into dust. The faint energy that still thrummed through the tree was barely audible, a weak, irregular hum, like a dying heartbeat fading to silence. Shadows seemed to writhe at the corners of the dimension, creating a sense that even the darkness itself was decaying.

An paced, her jaw clenched, her skin crawling with an itch she couldn't scratch, a hollowness eating at her from the inside. Her footsteps echoed with a hollow resonance that set her teeth on edge, each step a reminder of the void swallowing their vitality.

She scratched her arm almost absently, her fingers moving over the dry patches of her skin, the gnawing discomfort becoming almost maddening. The need for energy burned within her, a desperate, barbed hunger that made her vision narrow.

Her reflection in the bark of the Makai Tree—a twisted mirror of despair—showed pallid, gray skin, her eyes sunken, her vibrant sheen lost. An hated it. Hated how the weakness showed, how it eroded her fiery aura.

The tree needed more.

They needed more.

Ail's haunting melody cut through the stillness, a sound that danced between sorrow and yearning. He leaned against the tree, his back straight, the flute to his lips. Notes flowed like a breeze from another galaxy, their beauty marred by a creeping sense of despair that An could feel in her bones. The sound twisted and turned in the still, thick air, almost as if it were fighting the inevitable doom that lurked in every shadow of the room.

The notes wove through the branches, stirring them with a ghostly wind, but the tree's response was weak—a barely audible resonance, like a heart struggling to maintain its rhythm. His fingers moved deftly over the instrument, the song a reflection of something deep within him—his frustration, his helplessness.

And then, just like that, the music ceased. The silence that followed was immense. It swallowed every corner of the space, choking out even the weak thrum of energy from the Makai Tree. Ail lowered the flute slowly, his narrowed eyes fixed on the sickly, wilting branches before them.

Vulnerability flickered across his features, a crack in the cold, superior mask he usually wore. An could see it in the tight set of his jaw, the hard line of his shoulders. She could hear it in his poorly obscured thoughts.

He hated this.

He hated the tree's frailty, the reminder that without it, they were nothing but dust.

An growled, her voice cutting through the silence like a blade. “We can’t keep waiting, Ail. It’s dying, and if it dies, we die with it.”

She moved closer to him, her hands clenching into fists at her sides. The trembling in her body wasn’t entirely from desperation; there was rage there too, a furious denial of their helplessness.

Ail looked at her, his eyes cold, but there was uncertainty there, hesitation. “If we’re too reckless, we’ll draw attention. We’re strangers on this world, An. We don’t know what kind of threats might be waiting.”

For a beat, they stared at each other, the horrors of other worlds barely contained within their memories.

An let out a bitter laugh, her lips twisting into a snarl. “Threats? This planet is weak, Ail. You’ve seen them. They’re nothing compared to the ones we’ve faced before.”

“We’ve been here only a few cycles. We don’t know what threats lurk unseen.”

She gestured to the Makai Tree, a frantic edge creeping in to her voice. “If we don’t act, there won’t be anything left to save.”

Ail turned back to the tree, staring at it, his silence weighing heavily between them. An could see the battle playing out behind his eyes—his desire to protect them both, the fear of what they might unleash, the reluctance to take the next step into a darkness they might not return from.

She knew him, knew his caution, but she also knew that he would break before he let them die. They were bound by the tree, by their survival.

The oppressive silence wrapped around them, thick and unyielding. The Makai Tree shuddered subtly, its feeble energy resonating through the ground. An felt the vibration travel up her legs—a silent plea or a warning, she couldn’t tell.

And as An stood there, her skin itching with every second that passed, she knew they were out of time. One way or another, they had to act.

They had to act now.

The darkness pressed in even as they moved closer to the Makai Tree, each step echoing in the hollow dimension, a vast and dim expanse that seemed to pulsate with the tree's weakening energy. An pivoted on her heels, her movements sharp as though cutting through the air itself.

Branches trembled at her approach, quivering like the frightened appendages of a wounded beast, each subtle shudder a cry for help that reverberated in the surrounding emptiness. An's gaze bore into Ail, but he looked away.

"Have you already forgotten?" his voice was thick, tortured.

His fingers moved restlessly over his flute, the cool metal offering little comfort against the rising tide of memory. The horrors they had faced before—those endless battles that had scorched their path across worlds—still clung to their senses.

She could taste it, the acrid bite of copper and ozone, the thick, metallic tang of desperation, the visceral feel of survival when all hope was fading.

"Earth is nothing but a backwater world." Her pink hair cascaded over her shoulders like a stained waterfall, reflecting the dim and faltering light of the dying Makai Tree. "Its inhabitants are weak. Harvesting energy here will be child's play."

"Underestimating a world has cost us before. We barely escaped Zyra the Harmonizer."

The leaves rustled, shedding their withered fragments like dark snowflakes, an eerie funeral for their past failures. He could still hear it,

that scream as part of the Makai Tree shattered, a sound like splintering bone and tortured earth.

“Zyra was an anomaly. A siren in a sea of silence. This planet has nothing like her.” Her dismissiveness was sharp, but Ail saw the shadow flicker in her gaze—a fleeting moment where her confidence wavered.

“We can’t afford arrogance,” Ail insisted, his grip tightening on his flute until his knuckles turned white. The urge to play was strong—a desire to drown out these terrible memories, to weave a melody that could silence the echoes of the past. But even his pride in his music felt bitter against the memory of Zyra’s songs—perfect, insurmountable, a melody that had scorched itself into his soul.

“We aren’t naïve wanderers anymore. We’ve learned, adapted,” she said, her voice like steel tempered in fire.

Her hand hovered above the Makai Tree’s trembling surface, feeling the faint energy pulse beneath her fingertips, a weak heartbeat mirroring their own uncertainty. “We have the Cardians now. Let them do what they were created for.”

Ail turned to her fully, his eyes shadowed by the weight of his doubts. The dim light cast his features into sharp relief, accentuating every line of tension. “And if this planet harbors defenders? Beings we cannot comprehend?”

“Then we deal with them,” An’s retort was quick, her irritation like a spark in the gloom. “Just as we have before.”

But her words rang hollow even to her ears, the memory of their desperation—a mirror of their own—stirring at the edges of her consciousness. She watched Ail’s reaction, the way his expression tightened with fear he wouldn’t voice, the way he fought to bury the ghosts haunting him.

“We barely survived last time,” Ail reminded her, his voice soft, haunted. “The scars may not show, but we carry them still.”

An lifted her chin defiantly. “Survival is all that matters. Hesitation will lead to our end. We have no other choice.” Her presence blazed fiercely against the dying light of their world, a force of nature, untamed and unyielding. “Are you with me or not? I thought you said you’d always protect me? Always take care of me?”

Ail hesitated.

The weight of their history pressed heavily upon him—the countless battles, the choices that had led them here, the ghosts of a thousand mistakes whispering in his ears. Yet, An’s determination was something he could not ignore. Her pallor, the fading strength beneath her bravado, stirred a sense of duty, of a bond beyond mere survival.

“Fine,” he conceded. “But we proceed with caution. We know nothing of this world’s true nature.” His words were a plea—a final, fragile attempt to grasp at sanity before they plunged into the dark once more.

A small, triumphant smile tugged at An’s lips, though it lacked true joy. “Caution won’t save us. Action will. Prepare the cards. It’s time we summoned a Cardian.”

Ail retrieved the deck, his fingers brushing against the intricate designs, each card vibrating faintly with dormant power. He could not shake the unease that gripped his gut, a visceral warning borne of too many close calls, too many near deaths.

“Do you ever wonder,” he began quietly, a whisper almost lost in the space between them, “if we’re merely prolonging the inevitable? Chasing one dying star after another?”

An glanced at him. "Existence is a struggle. We do what we must to survive. Regrets are luxuries for those with time." She hesitated a moment, a sad tilt to her lips before she turned away.

"If this is your decision, my Supernova. Then pick a card."

An's hand hovered over the glowing deck, each card pulsating faintly with the promise of power, destruction, and salvation all at once. The surrounding air seemed to tighten, charged with an unspoken gravity that made the space feel smaller, more suffocating.

Her fingers trembled slightly, a hesitation that betrayed the confidence she always wore like armor. For a brief moment, the light of the cards reflected in her eyes—fiery red like embers smoldering in a void—revealing a depth of sadness she would never voice. The weight of their endless struggle pressed down on her as she closed her fingers around one card.

The moment she pulled it free, the glow surged, casting an eerie light across her face and illuminating the shadows of determination etched into her features. It was a decision born not of desire, but of necessity, her lips tightening as if to seal away the lingering ache in her chest.

The card flared brighter, its energy crackling through the air, and An tilted her head, her voice low and resolute. "Let's see what fate has in store for us now."

The air crackled with anticipation as Ail played. Each note was sharp, resonant, cutting through the heavy air—a song of power, of calling. The cards glowed, the chosen one lifting into the air between them, responding to the summoning.

The weight of their choice settled heavily upon them as the Cardian materialized—Vampir, a humanoid form wrapped in sinister vines, with a blooming flower where a face should be. An allowed herself a small, satisfied smile, her eyes reflecting the swirling energies.

“Let the hunt begin,” she murmured.

Ail lowered his flute, the final echoes fading into silence, the weight of uncertainty still bearing down on him. He studied Vampir, his stomach twisting into a tighter knot.

“May this not awaken more than we can silence,” he whispered, his words swallowed by the charged air.

“Enough with the doubts. It’s time to act.”

He slipped his flute back into his belt, the die now cast. Vampir vanished, ready to fulfill its purpose, and the weight of their decision settled in. The Makai Tree trembled, momentarily revitalized by the impending harvest, but beneath it all, the ghosts of their past lingered—silent, haunting, a reminder of how fine the line between survival and destruction truly was.

The streets of Juban lay under the cloak of early spring evening, the air crisp with a lingering chill. Twilight had settled, but tonight, the darkness deepened unnaturally, as if the stars themselves had dimmed. Vampir glided through the shadows, her vine-like limbs moving with eerie grace.

Each step she took seemed to siphon warmth from the surroundings, a subtle drop in temperature that went unnoticed by the scattered pedestrians until it was too late. The temperature drop left frost blooming on the pavement, delicate patterns spreading like spiderwebs wherever she stepped.

An watched through their dimensional window, pleased with the progress made so far. The faint hum of drained energy reached her ears—a barely audible vibration that resonated like a distant echo. It was a melody of sustenance, each note corresponding with the pulsing glow in Vampir’s flower-like hands as she absorbed the life force of another unsuspecting human.

“Magnificent.” A satisfied smile playing on her lips.

The stolen energy surged through her own body, a rejuvenating warmth that banished the pallor from her skin and sharpened her senses. The maddening itch beneath her skin finally began to ease, replaced by a thrilling tingling that made her feel alive.

Ail stood beside her, his posture relaxed, yet his eyes were alert. He watched Vampir's progress with a measured gaze, noting the way the Cardian efficiently targeted clusters of humans. The glow from the Makai Tree was intensifying back in their dimension, its energy resonating with each shred of energy Vampir claimed. Relief eased some of the tension from his shoulders, but a shadow of concern still lingered.

"Perhaps we should be cautious," Ail suggested. "This rapid energy harvesting might attract unwanted attention."

An waved a dismissive hand without tearing her gaze from the spectacle below. "Always so wary, Ail. Can't you simply enjoy the moment? The tree is regaining its strength, and so are we."

Vampir approached a group of young women, chatting animatedly outside a café. As she extended her vines, the surrounding air grew colder, their breath visible in sudden puffs of mist. Confusion flashed across their faces before they crumpled, energy drained. The glow from Vampir's hands intensified, casting an otherworldly light that flickered against the building facades.

"See, Ail? These humans are nothing. Just like I said. This world will be our salvation."

"Or it may prove our undoing if we grow careless." He could see the way An looked at the Cardian, the greedy glint in her eyes, and he wondered if this taste of energy would ever be enough.

"Always the doubter." Her eyes narrowed as she glanced toward him. "Perhaps if you weren't so distracted by the humans here—by her—you'd see clearly."

The insinuation struck a nerve, and Ail's jaw clenched. "Usagi is irrelevant. I am focused on our survival. Nothing more."

An laughed, a hollow sound that echoed through the darkened alley. "Focused, are you? You're softer now, Ail. I see it every time you hesitate. Every time you think of her." Her gaze bore into him, fierce and challenging, her jealousy cutting through the euphoria she'd been feeling.

"And what about that human male you've been drooling over?"

"He's beautiful."

Before Ail could respond, a flicker of movement caught his eye—a pair of sleek, dark shapes slinking out from the shadows. The cats moved with purpose, their eyes fixed on Vampir, who was still siphoning energy from the fallen humans.

"Look," Ail said, nodding toward the approaching figures. "We have company."

"More pests." She turned her attention back to Vampir, her expression hardening. "Finish them. Leave nothing to chance."

Ail hesitated, his eyes fixed on the cats. They were small, insignificant in power compared to the Cardian, yet something about them made him wary. "They're called cats."

"Cats or not, they're in our way." Her glare silenced him, her command clear. "Vampir, deal with them."

Unfurling its flower-like appendages, the Cardian turned toward the cats. As Vampir advanced, the air grew heavier, the hum of energy rising. The fight was laughably one-sided.

The black cat darted in first, a blur of motion that leaped for the creature's face with precision and agility. Its claws glinted briefly before scraping harmlessly against the Cardian's hardened petals. The white cat followed, weaving with equal finesse, its sharp fangs bared as it lunged at the exposed base of the appendages.

But the Cardian was faster than either expected. With a snap of its glowing tendrils, it lashed out; the force sending the black cat skidding across the pavement. A faint yelp of pain cut through the tension, but it recovered swiftly, darting back to its feet with unwavering determination.

The white cat landed a blow, sinking claws into one of the Cardian's flower-like limbs. A sharp hiss escaped the creature, and it whipped around, flinging the feline aside with brutal force. The cat landed heavily but scrambled back up, defiant and unyielding.

The Cardian's flower glowed brighter, its energy swelling in a menacing crescendo. With a final smash, the cats scattered and vanished into the darkness.

"See?" An crowed. "This world will fall to us."

Ail frowned, his gaze lingering on the shadows where the cats had disappeared. Something about them had felt... deliberate, like their retreat wasn't defeat but the beginning of something more. A strange roll of soft power slid over the area, and Ail paused.

"Stop right there!"

"Who the hell are you?" An growled.

"Oh, um, I'm Sailor Moon!"

An's eyes narrowed, her lips curling into a sneer as she looked Sailor Moon up and down. "Is this supposed to be a joke? You're dressed like a child playing dress-up."

Sailor Moon bristled. "I'm not a child! I'm in middle school! And I'm a warrior for love and justice!"

An let out a sharp laugh, the sound cutting through the tension like glass. "If this is what counts as a warrior on this planet, it's no wonder you're all so weak."

The glow from the moonlight seemed to catch Sailor Moon in that moment. "I am the Pretty Guardian, who fights for Love and for

Justice! I am Sailor Moon! And now, in the name of the Moon, I'll punish you!"

## Chapter Seven

# Petals Cast into Shadow

The pavement beneath Mamoru's feet thrummed with an alien rhythm, like roots writhing deep under the concrete. Each step sent tremors up through his bones, the Earth's usual steady heartbeat replaced by an erratic pulse that set his teeth on edge. He pressed his palm against a nearby wall, seeking stability, but even the brick felt wrong—fever-warm and almost alive, as though something beneath the city's skin was struggling to break free.

The streets of Juban stretched before him like a winding river, but ever since that night—when the heavens blazed with unnatural light—its once-calm currents felt restless, as though some unseen force had stirred them into chaos.

The afternoon air hung thick, tasting of ozone and unspoken warnings. Around him, the crisp spring air clung to winter's grasp. New leaves quivered unnaturally, suspended too long in the stillness. Their usual dance turned eerie and hesitant.

Mamoru tried to shake off the unease creeping up his spine. Logic told him there was no reason for this disquiet, but the sensation clung stubbornly, like shadows at dusk refusing to yield to night.

Suddenly, a burst of warmth pierced through the heaviness like sunlight breaking from behind thick clouds. A high, lilting voice echoed through the static, breaking the tension of the air.

“Mamoru!” Usagi’s voice was unmistakable, bright and bubbly, carrying with it a warmth that washed over him like a sudden spring breeze.

He looked up just in time to see her barreling toward him, her ponytails bouncing, her laughter trailing behind her like a melody carried by the wind.

For some reason, he found himself relieved to see her. As if her sudden appearance lifted an unseen unburden from his chest. The weight of the earth beneath his feet seemed to lighten, the subtle vibration in his bones fading as she approached, her energy sweeping away the heaviness that had clung to him.

“Mamo!” She waved enthusiastically, nearly tripping over her own feet in her excitement.

Instead of falling, she turned the stumble into a kind of twirl, recovering with the resilient grace that never failed to catch him off guard. Her ability to find light in every moment, to transform potential embarrassment into spontaneous dance, tugged at something deep within him.

Her optimism, her boundless enthusiasm, was something he couldn’t quite understand—yet he was undeniably drawn to it. She was sunlight, pure and untamed, where he felt like a part of the shadows, holding himself apart from the world around him.

And here she was, with her eyes sparkling and her cheeks flushed, a force of nature that had decided, for whatever reason, to shine her light on him.

“Mamo! Your beloved princess has returned!”

He chuckled, shaking his head. "I'd think my princess would have better grades, Bunhead."

Her face fell, devastation flickering in her wide blue eyes, and for a moment, a shadow passed through her eyes—a sadness so brief he almost missed it.

A face such as hers should never be sad.

It hit him harder than he expected, a pang in his chest that made him want to take back his words. There was a vulnerability there, beneath her endless enthusiasm, and seeing it hurt more than it should have.

But he quickly buried the thought. She was just some random girl who always seemed to cross his path.

"Remember? Remember the Moon Kingdom?" she pressed, her voice rising with urgency. "What about the hidden alcove above the Golden Castle's throne room? That's where we first found each other. I'd snuck down to find out what my mother was hiding, and you found me. When our eyes met, I knew..."

Mamoru frowned slightly, her words weaving an unexpected thread of familiarity in his mind. Dust motes floated through the streaming sunlight, shimmering like tiny stars. For a moment, he could almost see it—crystal glinting in soft moonlight, golden light spilling over stone and glass. But the image vanished as quickly as it had come.

"Sounds like an interesting creative writing assignment," he said, pushing aside the unease her words sparked. "But I'm not prince material. Better find someone else to be your inspiration."

Her lips parting as if to protest. "But—!"

Then she launched into a more in-depth version of the story. Her hands moved excitedly as she spoke, painting pictures in the air, and though Mamoru lost the plot more than once, her passion was intoxicating.

icating. He watched her, half-listening, more caught up in the rise and fall of her voice, the joy that seemed to radiate from her.

Despite the logical voice in his head telling him that her stories were just fantasies, just the wild imaginings of a teenage girl, Mamoru couldn't help the smile that tugged at his lips, no matter how much his irritation tried to cling to the edges of his expression.

There was something about Usagi—something so unfiltered, so alive—that pulled him in. It disarmed him in a way that left him both comforted and exposed, a warmth that made the strange heaviness of the day recede, even if only for a moment.

He couldn't help it; despite his best efforts to maintain his usual aloof distance, he found himself enchanted. There was something so pure in her words, in her belief in love, in magic, that it stirred something deep within him—a part of him that longed for the simplicity she represented, the hope that she seemed to embody without effort. The sun had broken free from the clouds, casting a golden glow that mirrored the lightness of the moment.

"I sure hope you get your first top score on this assignment, Bun-head."

"FIRST! I've gotten a top score before!"

But then, the atmosphere shifted. It was as though an icy wind had snuffed out the warmth of the sun, and an uneasy chill crept into the air. The sounds of the bustling street seemed to muffle, replaced by a palpable tension.

Mamoru sensed her before he saw her—a presence sharp and invasive, slicing through the gentle warmth Usagi had created around them.

An appeared at the edge of their conversation, her vibrant red hair almost violent against the soft spring day. Her movements carried the fluid menace of a cobra poised to strike, every step precise and

deliberate. Where Usagi radiated warmth, nurturing and bright like sunlight on a spring morning, An's energy felt parasitic, draining the very air around them, turning it thick and oppressive.

Mamoru's chest tightened as An's violet eyes locked onto his, burning with an intensity that was almost toxic. Unlike Usagi's open, unguarded nature that flowed like a clear, refreshing stream, An's gaze pressed against him, sharp and invasive, as if she was trying to stake her claim with each passing second. Her smile was more a baring of teeth than an expression of joy, a calculated gesture that felt like a challenge rather than a greeting.

"Oh, it's you, Mamoru," An purred, stepping closer. The temperature around them seemed to drop, as though she were sucking the warmth from the very air. "What a pleasant surprise."

His instincts screamed at him to retreat, to escape her proximity like a plant recoiling from frost. The Earth's earlier warning pulses reverberated through his bones, the urge to distance himself from An as natural as his own heartbeat.

Her presence felt wrong on a fundamental level—like a beautiful but poisonous flower, dangerously alluring. He felt the weight of her gaze like a creeping vine trying to ensnare him, searching for cracks in his defenses.

"Good afternoon, An," he said, hoping she wouldn't grab onto him like she had a habit of doing.

Beside him, Usagi's bright smile faltered as she turned to see An, her cheerful voice trailing off mid-sentence. The energy Usagi exuded—a warmth like sunlight—began to flicker, dimmed by An's invasive aura.

Confusion darkened Usagi's blue eyes, her usual radiance retreating as she glanced between Mamoru and An. Seeing Usagi's light diminished sparked something fierce and protective in Mamoru's chest.

Instinctively, he shifted, positioning himself between the two girls, as though shielding Usagi from a storm.

“It’s wonderful to see you again,” An continued, her gaze unwavering.

The street seemed quieter, the world narrowing until it was just the three of them, the charged atmosphere almost unbearable.

Mamoru tensed, his muscles subconsciously preparing for flight. “I have an appointment to get to.”

He glanced at Usagi, his eyes briefly filled with regret, an apology he couldn’t quite articulate. The knot in his stomach twisted tighter, each second near An making his need to escape more urgent.

“Mamoru, wait,” An’s voice was smooth, coaxing, but underneath lay an edge that made his skin crawl. Her hand moved as if she meant to grab him, to hold him in place, but Mamoru had already begun to turn away, his feet moving instinctively, driven by an overwhelming need to break free.

“I’ll see you around, Bunhead, An,” he called over his shoulder, forcing a lightness he didn’t feel, hiding the turmoil that twisted inside him.

He didn’t look back, didn’t dare meet Usagi’s gaze again, afraid of the disappointment or confusion he might see there—afraid of acknowledging what he was leaving behind.

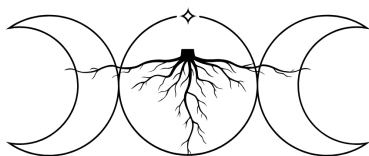
As he walked away, Mamoru could still feel An’s presence like a physical weight, her gaze boring into him, a dark promise refusing to release him. He slipped into the crowd, feeling the tension slowly start to dissipate, but true relief never came.

The absence of Usagi’s warmth lingered, a sense of loss like a severed connection that he couldn’t quite define. He hated how he had left her standing there, hated the emptiness that replaced the light she’d brought him.

Yet more than anything, he hated the way An's presence had seeped into his skin, chilling him with a certainty that this wasn't the end.

Not by a long shot.

The memory of Usagi's laughter lingered in his mind, a melody of warmth that refused to be silenced, even as he moved further away from the sunlight she represented, and deeper into the lengthening shadows of An's attention.



Ami stood amidst the throng of eager faces outside the TV station, the hum of excitement buzzing around her like a swarm of restless bees. The sun cast a golden hue over the crowd, but a faint chill clung to the air—a lingering trace of winter on the cusp of spring. She clutched her statistics textbook to her chest, its weight grounding her even as her thoughts wandered elsewhere, spreading like ivy tendrils seeking light through the gaps of her careful composure.

The bustling crowd ebbed and flowed around her, their energy like the unpredictable currents of an ocean, but she barely registered it. Each voice blended into the next, a background murmur that rose and fell like distant waves against the shore. Ami's world had narrowed to the lines of text. Yet today, the familiar comfort of equations and data sets offered little solace. The symbols blurred before her eyes, each number a leaf caught in a turbulent wind, refusing to settle.

Her thoughts circled back to him—Zoisite. Their online chess matches had become a constant in her life, a series of calculated moves

and countermoves that extended beyond the board. There was a resonance between them, a harmony she couldn't quite quantify.

As if they were two vines entwining, growing closer with each interaction yet rooted in separate soils. She shifted her weight, unconsciously calculating the statistical probability of their repeated online encounters.

The odds of finding someone who matched her intellect so perfectly, who could anticipate her moves with such precision, were astronomically low.

And yet, Zoisite had a way of reaching beyond the chessboard, touching something deeper within her that made her uneasy in ways she couldn't quite rationalize. Every time she heard his voice, it was like sunlight piercing through the icy walls she'd carefully built around herself.

And that ridiculous nickname, Blue—it both infuriated and warmed her in ways she didn't dare admit.

The sun was bright, the warmth almost visible in the golden shafts of light piercing through the bare branches overhead, but Ami felt detached from it all. The chill that had settled in her bones wasn't from the air; it was the familiar fear of stepping beyond the world she could predict and control.

Meeting someone, feeling connected in a way that wasn't explained by logic or familiarity—it terrified her. She was used to being the one who remained apart, who watched while others made connections, the outsider who found solace in numbers and patterns rather than people.

She was a single flower on the edge of a cliff.

Destined to be alone.

A light bump from behind jolted her from her reverie.

“Oh, sorry!” a voice said. Ami turned to see a tall girl with warm green eyes and chestnut hair pulled back in a high ponytail. She radiated a quiet strength, like a sturdy oak weathering any storm.

“It’s okay,” Ami replied softly. “No harm done.”

The girl offered a friendly smile. “I’m Makoto. These crowds can be a bit much, huh?”

Ami nodded. “Yes, they can be overwhelming.”

Makoto glanced at the thick book Ami held. “Studying while waiting in line? That’s impressive.”

Ami felt a slight blush rise to her cheeks. “Just trying to make the most of the time.”

“That’s admirable,” Makoto said. “I wish I had that kind of dedication. But I don’t, which explains the low marks.”

Before Ami could respond, another voice chimed in. “This is taking forever! I have places to be, you know.”

They both turned to see a girl with long blonde hair half tied up with a red ribbon. Her blue eyes sparkled with impatience, but there was a playful tilt to her smile.

“And what could be more important than a chance at stardom?” another girl retorted. She had raven-black hair and eyes that held a fiery determination.

The blonde grinned. “Well, when you put it that way... I’m Minako.”

“Rei,” the dark-haired girl replied.

Ami looked between them, a strange sense of familiarity washing over her. It was as if she had stumbled upon a garden she hadn’t realized she was searching for, each of them unique yet connected by unseen threads.

“I’m Ami,” she offered.

“Nice to meet you all,” Makoto added.

For a moment, the four of them stood in a comfortable silence, an unspoken understanding blooming between them. Ami felt the isolation she'd carried ease slightly, the weight of her solitude lifting like morning mist burned away by the sun.

"Do any of you feel like... we've met before?" Ami asked hesitantly.

Rei's eyes softened. "Now that you mention it, there's something familiar about this."

"Maybe we were friends in a past life," Minako laughed.

Makoto chuckled. "Wouldn't that be something?"

"It's a comforting thought," Ami said.

The conversation flowed easily after that, petals of laughter and words unfurling as they shared stories and aspirations. Ami relaxed, the tight bud of her apprehension slowly opening. These girls didn't seem intimidated by her intellect; instead, they welcomed her insights, nurturing the budding connections between them.

Still, the thought of Zoisite lingered like a shadow at the edge of her mind. The possibility of meeting him loomed—a seed of an idea that could either flourish or wither depending on her choice. He'd wanted to meet her in person for a while now, but she'd always refused.

"Are you auditioning for the show too?" Minako asked, pulling Ami from her musings.

Ami glanced at the entrance to the station, uncertainty flickering in her eyes. "I'm not sure I can spare the time from my studies. But I had to come and see. Call it curiosity."

Minako puffed up. "You know what they say! Curiosity made the cat trip over its tail."

They all laughed, the feeling so familiar Ami's heart ached. If anyone could accept her, she had the feeling these girls could. That she could be genuine friends with them.

"It's curiosity killed the cat," Rei said.

Minako made a face. “What a terrible thing to say! I like my version better. Besides, curiosity is an excellent trait to have, leads to unexpected places.”

“That’s true,” Makoto said. “Sometimes the best experiences come from unexpected choices.”

Ami considered her words. Perhaps staying was the first step in venturing beyond the confines of her controlled world. Maybe here, amidst new friends and untapped possibilities, she could allow herself to grow in ways she hadn’t anticipated.

The line began to move, a gentle push forward. Ami took a deep breath, the air filling her lungs with renewed purpose. “I think I’ll stick around,” she said, more to herself than the others.

Minako winked. “Glad to have you with us.”

As they slowly passed the time in line, Ami couldn’t help shake the odd sense of recognition, as though they’d shared something without words. But something was missing, a vibrant ray that truly connected them together.

The sense was fleeting, but it left her unsettled, the same way her evenings with Zoisite did. It was as though her world—carefully ordered, meticulously managed—was slowly being infiltrated by something she couldn’t quantify, something beyond the equations and probabilities she held so dear.

She looked down at her book, the cover now closed, her fingers tracing the edges absently. She could leave—walk away from the line, head home, retreat into her studies where every problem had a solution, where the unpredictable variables of human emotion could be comfortably ignored.

But her feet stayed planted. She glanced toward the entrance of the TV station, the chaotic energy of the crowd pulling her back to reality.

There was a pull she couldn't ignore, a sense that something significant was about to unfold.

The sleek glass panels shimmered in the sunlight, reflecting the bustling city around it, but something about it seemed... wrong. A faint shiver coursed through her as she stared, the glass catching the light in jagged angles that felt almost unnatural.

For a moment, she thought she saw something—something dark and formless, like a shadow moving where no shadow should be. She blinked, and it was gone, leaving only her unease in its wake. The excitement in the air felt heavier now, tinged with a weight she couldn't name.

“Everything okay?” Makoto's voice broke through her thoughts.

Ami forced a smile, nodding quickly. “Just... a strange feeling.”

She shook it off, but the unease lingered, like a low hum beneath the surface of a song, growing steadily louder.

## Chapter Eight

# Blossoms Igniting in Starlight

Rei remained rooted in place, her senses prickling with an unshakable feeling of foreboding. Overhead, fluorescent lights flickered, casting uncertain shadows across the TV station's corridors. The cheerful posters and bright lights felt incongruent, like blossoms wilting under a shadowed sky. The vibrant advertisements for dramas and game shows seemed to mock the heavy darkness seeping through the building's bones, a darkness she felt in the marrow of her own.

Each breath she took felt thick, charged like the air before a devastating storm. A low, resonant hum vibrated through the walls, making the decorative plants tremble. The faint hum of distant equipment twisted into something darker, more menacing, and Rei's spiritual senses screamed warnings, making the fine hairs on her neck rise.

Shadows writhed at the corners of her vision, too fluid to be natural, too dark to be mere absence of light. She knew, instinctively, that something sinister lurked within these walls, waiting for its moment to strike.

She glanced at the girls beside her—strangers, yet not. An inexplicable familiarity tugged at her whenever she looked at them, as if they were leaves on the same branch, rustling under the breath of an approaching storm.

The tall girl with the fierce eyes, Makoto, held herself like a shield, her protective presence palpable. Minako, the blonde with a smile that seemed as bright as her hair, and Ami, with her calm, intelligent gaze, bore the same flicker of apprehension.

Each of them seemed to carry a presence, an energy that resonated within Rei like a half-remembered melody. It was unsettling, yet comforting in a way she didn't understand, as if they were bound together by invisible threads that stretched beyond this life.

"Do you guys feel that?" Minako asked, rubbing her arms.

"There is something strange going on here," Ami said.

Rei didn't know what to say, how to tell these girls that they were right. That her spiritual senses screamed that danger lurked around the corner. Around them, the bustling energy of the audition hall filled the space—other girls chatting nervously, adjusting their outfits, and rehearsing lines in hurried whispers.

The air hummed with excitement and tension, but Rei's spiritual senses screamed that danger lurked just around the corner, a sharp contrast to the oblivious anticipation surrounding them.

A chilling presence swept into the room, warping the air itself. Most didn't notice, but a few of the voices grew nervous. The lights flickered once more, and the cheerful colors of the station seemed to dull under the oppressive weight of the aura filling the space. The darkness seemed to stretch and reach, clawing at the edges of reality. From the shadows emerged two ethereal figures—alien and commanding.

"Who the hell are you?" Makoto growled.

The first wore a deep navy bodysuit with gold and yellow accents, his teal-blue hair cascading over his shoulders, his eyes sharp and calculating. Beside him, a woman stood in a crimson bodysuit adorned

with swirling yellow patterns, her pale pink hair framing eyes that glowed with fierce determination.

“Look, Lover,” the woman cooed. “The humans are trying to resist us. Don’t you think they look so adorable, Alan?”

“Careful, Ann,” Alan said. “We still don’t know everything they’re capable of.”

Makoto perked up. “Did you say Ail and An? You’re in—”

“Never compare us to those pathetic creatures!” Ann snapped. Her voice cut like a blade, her glowing eyes flaring with indignation. “We are gods, little girl.”

“I guess Ail and An are better looking,” Minako snickered.

“You won’t say that when you’re drooling on the floor. Mintauron!” Ann shouted, her voice echoing with an energy that seemed to summon the very shadows. “Suck then dry!”

The air seemed to freeze, suspended in evil as a monstrous figure emerged from the shadows.

Mintauron.

Her light blue skin contrasted sharply with her fiery red bodysuit, bull-like horns curling menacingly from her head, while her eyes glowed with a mocking, defiant gaze. Skulls adorned her shoulders, and her long, thin tail swayed behind her with a casual confidence. The malevolence she radiated was palpable, pressing against Rei’s senses like a physical weight.

Screams erupted, shattering the charged silence as the other girls scrambled in every direction. Someone knocked over a folding chair in their haste to flee, the metallic clatter adding to the chaos. Another stumbled against the wall, her makeup smudging as tears streamed down her cheeks.

Rei pushed the chaos out of her mind, calming her thudding heart. Fear twisted in her gut, but beneath it was something else—a fire,

a heat that pushed back against the chill of Mintauron's dark aura. Beside her, she could feel the others.

They'd stand with her.

She didn't know these girls, didn't fully understand why she knew they'd be allies. But the knowledge was undeniable, as natural as breathing.

They'd stand by her side.

"We can't let the others get hurt!" Minako shouted over the din.

The creature stalked forward, the masses scrambling like panicked prey. The dark hum intensified, resonating within her like a warning bell, and the shadows seemed to lengthen as if the darkness itself was alive. Rei could feel her fingers itching, reaching instinctively for something she could not yet name.

She was meant to fight this evil.

Deep in her core, it was like roots stretching out, anchoring her to the earth. It whispered she was more. She was a champion of love and passion. The energy pulsed, a heartbeat that wasn't her own, and Rei felt herself stepping forward, her hands trembling but her resolve unwavering.

"I refuse to let this evil go unchallenged," Rei said, her voice steel and fire.

She turned her gaze to the others, seeing her own fear mirrored back, but also something else—determination.

Makoto's jaw tightened, her eyes fierce. "None of us will."

Ami seemed to stand a little stronger. "We'll work together, prevent this monster from hurting anyone."

Rei nodded and harnessed the fear in her heart, and molded it into the power she needed. There was something strong inside of her.

A duty she couldn't ignore.

A promise she'd made long ago.

She wouldn't stand idly by. She would fight, and she would protect, no matter what it took. With each step she took toward the creature, it felt as though time slowed; the world narrowing until it was just her, the monster, and the innocent lives she needed to shield.

She looked at the girls beside her, each of them ready, each of them bound by that same invisible force. Whatever lay ahead, she knew she wouldn't face it alone. And with that realization, the fire within her burned brighter, pushing back against the dark.

The storm was coming, but this time, Rei was ready to meet it head-on.

"Watch out!" Minako shouted, but it was too late.

But before they could act, the creature snapped up a woman. Her scream shattered the darkness, the sound clawing at Rei's soul. Mintauron's horns pulsed with a sickly blue light as it drained its victim, the woman's body suspended in mid-air like a broken marionette. The temperature plummeted, frost crystallizing along the walls, each breath visible in the frigid air. As her life force ebbed away, the victim's skin turned ashen, her struggles growing weaker.

"We have to do something!" Ami shouted.

Without a care, Minotauron dropped her victim. Her curled bull-like horns pulsed with an eerie, cold luminescence. Each pulse sent ripples of unnatural energy coursing through the room, tainting and corrupting.

The vibrant colors of the TV station's set dulled, wilting like flowers touched by frost. Shadows deepened, stretching like grasping claws along the walls.

Makoto stepped up beside Rei, her muscles coiled like a panther ready to strike. Their eyes met, and in that brief exchange, no words were needed.

"We've got this," Makoto whispered, a coy smile on her lips.

“Yeah, we do.” Rei stepped out from the huddle of terrified on-lookers, her fingers itching with purpose.

The movement drew Minotauron’s attention, the creature’s cold eyes fixing on her with predatory interest. Rei’s heartbeat thundered in her ears, yet her hands moved with steady determination. She swung her purse with all the strength she could muster, the makeshift weapon slicing through the air.

The projectile struck Minotauron square in the face, the unexpected blow causing the monster to recoil. A guttural snarl erupted from the creature, reverberating through the room and shaking loose dust from the rafters. The distraction was brief, but it was enough.

“Now!” Rei shouted.

Makoto didn’t hesitate. Letting out a fierce battle cry, she launched herself at Minotauron with unyielding resolve. Her shoulder connected with the monster’s torso, the impact echoing like a fallen tree crashing to the forest floor. Minotauron staggered backward, colliding with a backdrop that crumpled under the force.

“Good job!” Minako shouted, ushering the group of cowering girls from the room.

“You’ll regret the day you attacked my friends!” Makoto shouted as she grabbed a metal chair, her muscles flexing as she hurled it.

The chair spun through the air, striking the Minotauron with a harsh, metallic clang. The beast staggered, a furious roar tearing from its throat as it crumpled to the floor. Makoto let out a victorious shout, her confidence bolstering Rei’s own courage.

But the victory was short-lived. Minotauron surged back to its feet, its horns glowing brighter, its eyes narrowing in fury. It lunged forward, and once again, the eerie light reflecting from its horns, seeking out its next victim.

With a burst of heat, she knew what she needed to do.

Rei reached into her pocket, fingers trembling but determined, until they closed around the small slip of paper she kept there.

Her ofuda.

Without warning, images crashed through her mind.

Moonlit crystal glittering under the stars.

Soft laughter echoing through moonbeams.

She didn't know why she'd always carried it, why the touch of it now seemed to steady her heart, but it felt right, like an extension of her own being. The words came to her without thought, rising to her lips with a force that felt ancient and powerful, as natural as breathing.

"Akuryo Taisan!" her voice rang out with an intensity that startled even her.

As the words erupted, the sacred charm between her fingers blazed with inner fire, igniting the ancient characters. The moment the paper charm left her fingertips, an intense warmth bloomed deep within her chest, spreading outward like a wildfire.

A strange aura seemed to ripple around the room, caressing the four of them with a silvery light that stretched into their souls. The chill of Minotauron's oppressive aura lifted, replaced by a sudden, searing heat that radiated through every part of her being. Then, a form stepped out from between the tattered curtains.

Sailor Moon emerged—her figure illuminated by a soft glow of light. Determination etched on her face, she raised a hand to her tiara.

"Moon Tiara Action!" she cried, hurling the glowing disc toward Minotauron.

The tiara whirled through the air like a comet, but with a swift motion, the monster deflected it, the tiara clattering uselessly to the floor. Before Sailor Moon could react, Minotauron's horns lashed out, coiling around her wrist and pulling her forward.

“No!” she gasped as the creature’s horns siphoned her energy, pale light streaming from her into the pulsing tips.

Her strength waned, knees buckling as the draining intensified. The oppressive chill seeped back in, and Sailor Moon’s vision blurred.

“I didn’t want to...” she whispered, her voice barely audible as Minotauron tightened its grip.

The sight of Sailor Moon struck Rei in the chest like a bolt of fire. Watching her suffer ignited something inside of her. Light burst forth, a brilliant, radiant glow that filled the room, cutting through the darkness that had clung to every corner like a thick, suffocating fog.

She felt the warmth reach the crown of her head, and with it came the memories.

Kneeling before the sacred fire, the scent of burning incense, the flickering dance of flames casting long shadows across sacred stones.

Battles of fire and crystal.

Death under a blanket of ice.

A tidal wave of memories and sensations crashed over her. Powerful and overwhelming, she nearly collapsed under the onslaught.

And with the memories came emotions, raw and vivid.

She felt the fierce loyalty to her friends, her sisters-in-arms. The overwhelming duty she carried to protect someone—someone she loved more deeply than she had words for, a princess whose laughter was like a song that echoed in her soul, outshining the stars themselves.

The bond between them flared a bright gold and silver.

The unspoken trust that flowed between them burst into violent light. They were a team, each a piece of a greater whole, each vital, irreplaceable.

The energy within her intensified, the light bursting from her forehead in a beam so brilliant that it hurt to keep her eyes open. The

warmth spread, flowing down her limbs until she felt weightless, as though she was suspended in the glow itself. Her heart pounded, not with fear, but with exhilaration, with purpose.

“I know who I am. Who I was meant to be.”

She was Sailor Mars, guardian of flame and passion, protector of the Moon Princess.

The realization filled her, settled into her bones with a familiarity that almost brought tears to her eyes. This was who she was meant to be. This was the power that had been waiting within her, dormant, patient, until she needed it most.

Rei felt the last remnants of her confusion and hesitation melting away, replaced by clarity—a bright, undeniable truth. She was a guardian, a warrior of fire, bound by duty and love to protect her princess and this world. Her mission had always been there, just beneath the surface, waiting for her to remember.

And now she did.

Crimson light washed over her, each pulse sharpening her resolve. Fiery ribbons coalesced into the familiar red and white sailor fuku, the weight of her tiara settling against her forehead as power surged through her, driving the darkness back with its brilliance.

She glanced around, her gaze catching the others. Blue, green, and gold lights flared to life, fierce and blinding, resonating with her own. The air vibrated, almost singing, as their powers reawakened. Time itself seemed to pause, thick with their collective strength and the undeniable bond that bound them together once more.

Once again, they'd found each other.

Ami was enveloped in a cool azure glow, droplets of water coalescing around her before bursting into a mist that shimmered with possibility. Makoto's aura crackled with emerald lightning, the air alive with the scent of ozone and the promise of a gathering storm. Minako

shone with golden light, warm and vibrant, her presence a balm that soothed and invigorated in equal measure.

“My sisters.”

The reunion was wordless but profound. Rei could see the same shock, the same recognition, in the eyes of the other girls. They had all remembered—not just who they were, but who they were to each other. A fierce, unbreakable bond forged in past battles, carried across time, reignited here, in the face of this new threat.

They were not alone.

They had never been alone.

Rei’s hands clenched into fists, the warmth of her power flowing through her like molten lava, ready to be unleashed.

“Your time of terror ends now,” Sailor Mars declared. The sacred fire within her roared to life, eager to cleanse the darkness that threatened the innocent.

Beside her, Sailor Mercury stepped forward. “Shabon Spray!”

A swirling mist erupting from her hands to envelop the area. The mist obscured Minotauron’s vision, the creature’s movements growing sluggish within the concealing fog.

Sailor Jupiter seized the moment. Electricity arced between her fingertips as she drew upon the storm within. “Supreme Thunder!”

The bolt of lightning struck Minotauron with the force of a tempest. The monster reeled, stumbling back as sparks danced across its form. Rei felt the fire surge within her, a living entity that responded to her will. Raising her hands, she summoned its might.

“Fire Soul!” Flames spiraled forth, merging with the lingering electricity to engulf Minotauron in a vortex of elemental fury.

As the fire left her, a vision flickered in the heart of the flames—Jadeite beside her, both of them bathed in the glow of the sacred fire. Red threads of fate intertwined between them, a connec-

tion that transcended time and space. The memory filled her with a bittersweet warmth, a reminder of bonds forged and lost.

Another memory followed, bitter and sharp.

She'd ended his life.

But now he was free.

Free to spend eternity with her.

“Crescent Beam!” The powerful attack snapped Mars from her thoughts.

A beam of radiant light shot from Venus's fingertips, piercing through the maelstrom to strike at the core of the darkness. The combined powers clashed against Minotauron, the impact releasing a shockwave that rattled the very foundations of the building. The oppressive aura shattered, fragments of shadow scattering like petals torn from a dying flower.

With a final, piercing cry, Minotauron disintegrated, the dark energy imploding upon itself before vanishing entirely. Silence descended, profound and cleansing. The air felt lighter, the atmosphere no longer tainted by malice but filled with the lingering echoes of their unity.

Rei stood tall, the transformation complete. The Sailor Guardian uniform felt both new and familiar—a second skin that fit as naturally as her own. The weight of her tiara, the cool metal of her earrings, the flutter of her skirt—all tangible reminders of who she was meant to be.

She looked around at her comrades. Sailor Mercury's eyes met hers, a shared understanding passing between them. Sailor Jupiter offered a confident grin, her strength and reliability palpable. Sailor Venus gave a nod, her gaze steady and filled with camaraderie.

At the center of it all, Sailor Moon stirred, having been released from Minotauron's grasp. Rei's heart swelled with relief and affection. Their princess was safe, and they were together again.

“I’m so sorry,” Sailor Moon cried. “I wanted to handle it all on my own. So you could all continue having a normal life.”

Sailor Mars lightly smacked her. “Don’t be stupid. You know you couldn’t handle this all on your own.”

The sense of completeness was overwhelming—a puzzle finally assembled, each piece finding its rightful place. The others gathered close around, and automatically their arms wrapped around each other.

“That was sweet of you, Sailor Moon,” Ami said. “But we have a duty, and that duty is to protect you, and this world.”

“Besides, you missed us.” Makoto squeezed Sailor Moon so hard she squeaked.

“Yeah,” Minako said. “We’re a team. Teams only work together.”

The room around them bore the marks of battle, but within the rubble lay the seeds of renewal. The oppressive darkness had been banished, and in its place, the light of their reawakened friendship and purpose flourished.

Once again, the Sailor Guardians were awake, and they’d continue to fight to protect their princess, love, justice, and all that was good in the world.

#

#

## Chapter Nine

# Thorns Entwined with Lightning

Makoto trudged along the bustling streets of Juban, the afternoon sun casting a warm glow that filtered through the delicate veil of cherry blossoms overhead. Petals drifted lazily on a gentle breeze, brushing against her cheek like whispered secrets. Yet, the beauty of spring did little to lift the weight pressing on her shoulders—the weight of another disheartening test grade tucked away in her schoolbag, digging into her skin as a constant reminder.

She huffed, kicking a loose pebble that skittered across the pavement before disappearing into a patch of freshly sprouted grass.

“I can’t believe I bombed another test,” she muttered.

An image of Nephrite flashed unbidden in her mind.

His stupid, smug grin.

The way his eyes danced with amusement whenever he teased her about her grades.

His yummy forearms flexing.

She could even hear his infuriating voice in her head: “Maybe if you spent less time daydreaming and more time studying, you’d keep up with me.”

“Ugh, that guy drives me crazy,” Makoto groaned under her breath.

Yet, a small, involuntary smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she recalled the playful glint in his eyes. They sparred all the time during judo practice, his forearms corded with strength as they grappled, his movements sharp and calculated but laced with a teasing edge. She could still feel the residual heat of his grip, steady yet challenging, a touch that lingered far longer than it should have.

He was a fine specimen of a man.

“Hey, Mako! Earth to Makoto!” Usagi’s cheerful call pulled her from her reverie.

Makoto glanced over to see her friend waving energetically, her golden hair catching the sunlight like spun sugar.

“Sorry, spaced out for a moment,” Makoto replied, adjusting her bag and quickening her pace to match Usagi and Ami.

Ami offered a gentle smile. “Is everything alright? You seem distracted.”

Makoto sighed, running a hand through her chestnut ponytail. “Just frustrated about my test score. Feels like no matter how hard I try, I can’t catch a break.”

Usagi patted her on the back sympathetically. “You’re not alone. I wouldn’t be surprised if my mom locked me out of the house again. Uggggggggg.”

Makoto’s eyes lit up. “Actually, Ami, do you think you could tutor us? Maybe some of your genius will rub off.”

“Of course I’ll help. But you both have to promise to put in the effort. No getting distracted or goofing off.”

“Promise!” Usagi declared, holding up a three fingers in oath.

“I swear,” Makoto added, mirroring the gesture.

Usagi and Makoto exchanged a triumphant high five, the sharp clap echoing pleasantly. “And I’ll bring snacks! Brain-power bento boxes, filled with all the nutrients we need to ace the next test.”

Usagi's face lit up. "Snacks! Now that's motivation I can get behind!"

The trio continued down the street, the camaraderie between them blossoming like the new flowers lining their path. Laughter bubbled up as they recounted funny moments from class, each story weaving into the next like vines entwining. Makoto felt a sense of ease settle over her—a rare calm that soothed the sting of academic disappointment.

Yet, beneath the surface, a subtle tension coiled like a vine seeking sunlight. The memory of Nephrite's teasing lingered, his voice intertwining with the rustle of leaves overhead. She could picture his confident stance during judo practice, the way his forearms flexed—a detail she'd noticed more often than she'd like to admit.

"Makoto?" Ami's inquiry drew her back.

She blinked, realizing she'd fallen silent. "Sorry, thinking."

Usagi grinned mischievously. "Thinking about a certain someone?"

Makoto felt warmth creep up her neck. "What? No! I was just... strategizing how to improve my grades."

"Sure you were," Usagi teased, nudging her playfully. "I know a boy crazy look when I see it."

Makoto rolled her eyes but couldn't suppress a smile. "Honestly, I just don't want to give Nephrite the satisfaction of teasing me again. He's so infuriating!"

"You know, sometimes people tease because they care. Have you considered that he might be trying to motivate you?" Ami nudged her.

Makoto scoffed. "Motivate me? More like drive me up the wall."

But even as she dismissed the idea, a part of her wondered if there was truth to Ami's words. The thrill she felt during their banter, the way her heart quickened when he was near—it complicated things.

Admitting she enjoyed his attention felt like relinquishing control, something she wasn't sure she was ready to do.

As they approached a crosswalk, the light turned red, prompting them to pause. Makoto took a deep breath, the crisp air filling her lungs and mingling with the sweet scent of blossoms. The light changed, and they continued on. Makoto squared her shoulders, a new resolve taking root.

She would stick close to Ami, soak up all the knowledge she could, and prove—to herself and maybe to Nephrite—that she was capable of more. Perhaps impressing him wouldn't be so bad, either.

“Alright, study session at my place tomorrow,” Makoto announced. “I'll have the snacks ready, and we can dive into the material headfirst.”

“Can't wait!” Usagi exclaimed, skipping a little as she walked. “Well, I can, but ya know.”

Ami nodded. “Sounds like a plan. With dedication, I'm sure you'll see improvement in no time.”

Makoto felt lighter, the earlier weight of her worries lifting like morning mist burned away by the sun. The path ahead seemed a bit clearer, the possibilities as fresh and inviting as the unfolding petals around them.

As they turned the corner, a gentle gust sent a flurry of sakura petals swirling around them. Makoto reached out, catching one in her palm. She gazed at the delicate blossom, its softness a reminder of the beauty that could be found even amidst uncertainty.

Just as they reached the other side of the street, a distant cry shattered the tranquility of the afternoon, like glass breaking, sharp and jarring. Makoto's head snapped up, her entire body tensing as the sound rippled through her, setting her nerves on edge.

It wasn't just any cry; it tugged at something deep within her, sending her instincts flaring before her thoughts could catch up.

"Did you hear that?" she asked, already moving, her feet carrying her forward without waiting for a response.

She forgot about the weight of her schoolbag and the red marks on the test as adrenaline surged. Now her pulse roared in her ears and sweat tickled her forehead.

"Sounds like someone needs help," Usagi said.

Makoto didn't wait.

There was something familiar and terrible about that sound.

The urgency was primal, undeniable. She sprinted ahead, her friends struggling to keep up, her breath coming fast and shallow. Each stride pounded against the pavement, the world blurring around her in a rush of colors and fleeting images. She rounded a corner, the street giving way to a small park, where cherry blossoms twirled in the air like pink snow.

She skidded to a halt, her breath catching painfully in her throat. There, beneath the canopy of budding branches, was Nephrite. He was on his knees, his face pale, his usual confident stance crumpled under the weight of something terrible. A monstrous figure loomed above him—a pink humanoid-lion woman with a flowing white mane, her emerald eyes glinting with malicious delight. Her claws were extended, siphoning glowing tendrils of Nephrite's energy.

"Nephrite!" she screamed, her voice raw with desperation.

Makoto's heart seemed to splinter at the sight, a fierce, protective instinct rising within her. Her world narrowed, focusing only on him. Every fiber of her being screamed that she couldn't lose him, that he'd leave her.

Again.

The word echoed in her mind, though she couldn't understand why—it carried with it a sense of pain and loss that she couldn't place.

“Nephrite!”

Her feet moved of their own accord, closing the distance between them. She couldn't let him get hurt, not when he meant so much—more than she was willing to admit, even to herself.

The creature's green eyes snapped up, her lips curling into a sneer, a twisted mockery of a smile that fueled Makoto's fury.

“Let him go!” she yelled, her hands clenching into fists, her entire body vibrating with the need to protect him.

Behind her, she heard Usagi and Ami finally catch up, their shocked gasps mingling with the rustle of leaves overhead.

“Makoto, be careful!” Ami called, her voice edged with panic, but Makoto barely heard her.

Nephrite's eyes found hers, the recognition in them piercing through his pain. “Makoto,” he managed, his voice a faint rasp, “don't...”

But she didn't listen, her heart screaming what her mind couldn't fully understand—she couldn't lose him, not again, not now. An image flashed across her mind. Nephrite collapsed at the edge of a pristine lake, red oozing from wounds, darkness sparking along the edges of his skin.

Fear morphed into a blinding determination, each muscle coiling as she lunged forward, her schoolbag swinging in her grip like a weapon. She would save him—no matter the cost.

“Hey! Leave him alone!” she roared, her voice carrying a force that surprised even her.

The monster turned her full attention to Makoto, eyes glinting with disdain. The sneer deepened, the air seeming to thicken with malice.

“I won’t let you hurt him!”

The edges of her vision blurred, and all that remained was Nephrite and the monster in front of her. Behind her, Usagi and Ami were yelling something, but their voices were distant, unimportant. Everything that mattered was in front of her—saving Nephrite, protecting him.

The monster’s sneer transformed into a snarl, her mane bristling as she took a step toward Makoto.

Makoto felt her hands tremble, but she planted her feet, her stance firm. She wasn’t backing down. Not now, not ever. Not when Nephrite’s life was on the line. She swung her schoolbag with all her strength, the heavy mass connecting with the monster’s side and making her stumble.

“Makoto!” Nephrite wheezed as the monster squeezed tighter. “Get out of here!”

“I will not be leaving you!” she hissed, darting forward.

He was moving now, pulling the monster away from her. Then, in a desperate bid to shield her from Falion’s grasp, stumbled backward. With a flourish of vines and leaves, the monster vanished without a trace.

Everything froze.

The chaos around her fading to a muted blur.

Her pulse roared in her ears, the sound deafening, drowning out the monster’s snarl, the distant cries of her friends.

She could only see him—Nephrite—the way his arms flailed for balance, the terror that flashed across his face before determination smothered it.

Time fractured.

Each second stretching into a slow-motion nightmare as she watched him teeter on the edge of the embankment. The sharp drop

yawned behind him, a dark, hungry abyss that threatened to swallow him whole. Makoto's breath caught painfully in her chest, her hands reaching out instinctively, as if somehow, some way, she could bridge the distance between them and pull him back to safety.

"Nephrite!" The scream tore from her throat, raw and filled with an anguish she didn't fully understand.

This was familiar—too familiar. The aching desperation pulling apart her chest. The absolute despair lingering on her tongue. The anguish tearing her heart in two.

Her legs moved, her body lurching forward, but it felt like wading through water, her movements sluggish and too slow, unbearably slow. Her fingers stretched toward him, trembling, but he was just out of reach, always just out of reach.

His eyes met hers fleetingly, a fleeting connection that seemed to hold a lifetime's worth of unspoken words.

There was determination there, yes, but also something deeper—a sense of resignation, almost as if he knew this was inevitable. Something shattered inside her as she saw that look, a crack that spread through her very soul, leaving her feeling hollow and helpless.

Then, like a leaf caught in a sudden gale, he vanished over the side.

One moment he was there, his presence anchoring her, and the next he was gone, swallowed by the abyss. Makoto's scream died in her throat, replaced by a hollow, echoing silence that seemed to stretch on forever.

Her vision tunneled, her knees buckling beneath her as she stumbled forward, the edge of the embankment rushing up to meet her. She dropped to her knees, her hands grasping at the dirt and rocks, fingers clawing desperately at the earth as if she could somehow dig her way to him.

“No. No. No.” Her voice cracked, the words tumbling out in a frantic prayer.

The world around her was a blur, her vision clouded with tears that she couldn't hold back. All she could think was that she had to reach him—she had to get to him before it was too late. The thought of him lying broken at the bottom of the embankment, alone and in pain, tore at her insides, a raw, unbearable agony.

She wouldn't let this be the end.

She couldn't.

Not for him.

Not for Nephrite.

His whimpered moan brought her back, and she clambered to her feet. The embankment was steep, scattered with loose rocks and tangled roots protruding like skeletal fingers. Makoto half-ran, half-slid down the slope, sharp stones biting into her palms and knees as she grappled for balance. The sting of scraped skin registered dimly, overshadowed by the pounding of her heart and the single, desperate thought pulsing through her mind.

He can't be gone.

Not again.

A chill wind whipped past her, carrying the scent of damp earth and the faint metallic tang of blood. As she neared the bottom, her breath caught in her chest. Nephrite lay crumpled at the bottom, blood seeping into the earth beneath him. The sight struck her like lightning, bringing with it a flash of memory—another time, another place, holding him as darkness claimed him, watching darkness consume him.

The déjà vu was so strong it stole her breath.

“Nephrite.”

She fell to her knees beside him, hands trembling as she reached out to touch his face. His skin was cool, the warmth leaching away as surely as the color fading from his cheeks. A flash of memory seared through her mind—holding him under a starry sky, his lifeblood slipping through her fingers as darkness encroached.

Tears blurred the vision.

The world around her narrowed to the rise and fall of his shallow breaths, each one a fragile thread tethering him to this moment.

Above them, the distant sounds of her friends scrambling to call for help barely penetrated the haze enveloping her. Makoto clasped Nephrite's hand, pressing it against her heart as if she could will her own strength into him.

“Hold on, I won't lose you.”

The sky overhead churned with heavy clouds, shadows draping over them like a shroud. Makoto tilted her head upward, eyes searching the turbulent heavens.

The wail of sirens approached, a discordant melody cutting through the stillness. Paramedics descended the embankment with practiced urgency, their movements a blur as they surrounded Nephrite. Makoto was gently pulled aside, but she refused to let go of his hand until the last possible moment.

“We need space to work,” one of them said, his tone firm but not unkind.

Usagi pulled her back, holding her tightly as she shook. Her gaze never left Nephrite as they attached wires and inserted IV lines, each prick of the needle making her flinch as if the pain were her own. The world now only consisted of the worst—the murmur of the medics' voices, the flashing red and blue lights—all became distant, overshadowed by the pounding of her own heartbeat.

“Makoto,” Usagi said gently, wrapping the blanket around her friend’s shoulders. “You’re shaking.”

Makoto hadn’t realized how cold she’d become. “He needs to be okay,” she murmured, her voice barely audible.

“Who is he?” Usagi asked softly.

“He’s... important,” Makoto replied, her throat tightening around the words. It was the only explanation she could offer—everything else was a tangle of emotions and half-formed memories she couldn’t begin to unravel.

The wail of a siren pierced the air, and within moments, paramedics surrounded them. Makoto moved aside, her heart pounding as they lifted Nephrite onto a stretcher. She trailed behind them, each step heavy with dread, until they reached the waiting ambulance.

“You coming?” one medic asked, holding the door open.

Makoto nodded, climbing in without hesitation. The city blurred past her as the vehicle sped toward the hospital, the steady beeping of the heart monitor filling the suffocating silence.

Somehow, moments later, she found herself at the hospital, the sterile scent of antiseptic mingling with the murmur of voices and the beeping of monitors. A commotion stirred nearby, breaking her daze. One of the nurses approached her, urgency etched into the lines of her face.

“We’re short on his blood type,” she said. “We have to wait for a delivery.”

“No.” Makoto didn’t hesitate. “I’m type O.”

As the needle pierced her skin, she watched the crimson stream flow from her vein, a lifeline connecting her to Nephrite. The sensation was surreal—each drop a silent vow, a piece of herself offered in exchange for his survival.

Ami appeared at her side, handing her a bottle of orange juice. “Here.”

“Thank you.”

Usagi held her hand as the minutes stretched, each one an eternity as they waited. Makoto felt lightheaded, a subtle dizziness creeping in, but she refused to waver. Her focus remained on Nephrite, willing strength into him with every fiber of her being.

Through it all, Makoto’s thoughts remained fixed on Nephrite. The fear that had threatened to consume her was tempered now by a fierce determination. She didn’t fully understand the depths of her connection to him, but she knew without doubt that she would fight for him—stand by him—no matter the cost.



## Chapter Ten

# The Moon's Shadow Beckons

Mamoru stepped out of the hospital's sliding glass doors, the crisp night air washing over him like a cool tide, its freshness mingling with the lingering scent of antiseptic that clung to his clothes. Cherry blossom petals floated past like pale ghosts, carried on a gentle breeze that barely seemed to touch the city around him. The glow of neon lights painted shifting colors across the pavement, illuminating fleeting impressions of warmth in an otherwise cold night.

Beside him, Zoisite, Kunzite, and Jadeite moved with a quiet grace, their footsteps syncing in an unspoken rhythm that spoke of an ancient familiarity. Though they'd met only weeks before, a chance meeting in a crowded school cafeteria, Mamoru couldn't deny the bond that had taken root among them.

It wasn't just camaraderie—it felt deeper, older, as though their souls were connected by invisible threads stretching across time.

They walked in subdued silence, the usual chatter replaced by the heavy weight of recent events. The monstrous attacks across the city had touched them all, culminating in the attack on their friend. Mamoru glanced at his companions, catching the reflection of streetlights in their eyes, their faces hardened by contemplation.

“Nephrite is a fighter,” Jadeite said.

Despite his usual playful demeanor, there was an edge to him tonight—a tension that none of them could shake.

Kunzite nodded, the silver strands of his hair catching the dim light. “He’ll pull through. I never thought he’d be the one targeted.”

Zoisite looked into the distance. “I can’t help but feel there is a purpose behind these occurrences we aren’t seeing.”

Mamoru felt a strange stirring within him, a resonance like leaves rustling in an invisible breeze. “It’s like we’re being drawn to the center of it all,” he said, his eyes scanning the horizon as if searching for answers hidden among the shadows.

They reached a crosswalk, the signal blinking red. The city pulsed around them—sirens in the distance, the low hum of traffic, the occasional burst of laughter from somewhere unseen—a symphony of life that seemed, in that moment, to carry an undertone of tension, a discordant note only they could hear. One by one, his friends turned to face him.

“Take care, Mamoru,” Zoisite said. “Rest up. We have a tournament to get ready for.”

“But stay vigilant,” Kunzite added. “We can have our star player taken out by a monster.”

Jadeite simply nodded, raising a hand in a casual wave. “Get some rest, man.”

Mamoru returned the nods, warmth blooming briefly in his chest at their words, though it did little to dislodge the unease coiled tightly within him. They melted into the Tokyo night, each of their silhouettes swallowed by the labyrinthine streets, leaving Mamoru alone beneath the flickering glow of a streetlamp.

The emptiness pressed in around him—not a physical absence, but a void that seemed to pull at the edges of his thoughts, an unfulfilled purpose that gnawed at his mind.

His footsteps echoed like a heartbeat against the silent facades of shuttered buildings. The restlessness within him swelled, an itch he couldn't scratch, a whisper he couldn't quite make out. He had tried to bury it—hours of soccer drills on the field, endless study sessions hunched over textbooks—but nothing had worked.

The energy within him buzzed just beneath his skin, an electric charge searching for release. His gaze drifted upwards, but the city's glow swallowed the stars, leaving him to stare at an empty sky that only deepened his sense of loss.

A breeze stirred, and with it came the scent of damp earth, rich and loamy, as though the ground itself was breathing. Mamoru reached out, his fingers brushing against the rough bark of a young tree growing beside the sidewalk. He closed his eyes, letting that strange pulse wash over him.

Still, after all this time, he still didn't know what it was.

Would he ever?

Images flickered at the edge of his consciousness—a grand hall bathed in golden light, faces that were both familiar and strange, and the echo of a name he couldn't recall. He drew in a shaky breath, the chill of the night air biting at his skin, and shook his head as though to clear it.

“Get it together. They're just classmates... friends.”

But the conviction behind the thought wavered. He knew it wasn't true. The connection was too strong, too immediate. Like they were pieces of an ancient great tree, intertwined across the ages. The sense of destiny clung to him, wrapping around his chest like ivy, each tendril pulling him toward something he wasn't yet ready to understand.

All of it felt detached, like scenes from a life he could not truly touch, as though he were a ghost drifting through memories that didn't belong to him.

Mamoru paused at an intersection. A gust of wind whipped through the street, chilling him to his core, and he clenched his fists, frustration boiling beneath his skin.

“Why do I feel like I'm missing something?”

The question fell into the empty night, unanswered.

He wandered on, the restlessness growing, the sense of purpose elusive, hiding just beyond the edge of thought. The city's heartbeat thrummed around him, the pavement pulsing beneath his shoes, and he felt it again—the deep-rooted power of the earth, the presence of something ancient and immense, speaking to him in a language he could not yet understand.

Images returned, flickering like old film—a kingdom under moonlight, someone reaching for him, the warmth of a hand meeting his.

The sensation faded before he could grasp it, dissolving like mist in the morning sun.

Mamoru let out a sign and his gaze lifted to the moon above. “First quarter.”

Usually the soft rays of the moon comforted him, but today, the restlessness remained, coiling tighter, an unyielding presence that refused to let him go.

He didn't know where he was going, but something within him did—something driven by a purpose he had yet to name, by a connection he had yet to understand. Everywhere he turned, golden hair caught his eye—each time his heart leaped, breath caught in his chest. But no, it wasn't her.

It wasn't Bunhead.

It wasn't Usagi.

It was never her.

The ache settled back in, deep and unrelenting, as if something vital had been taken from him, leaving a hollow space that refused to be filled. He didn't understand why. He didn't know why he needed to see her—only that he did.

It was an obsession that both frustrated and bewildered him, this pull toward her that defied reason, quickening his pulse at every flash of blonde hair, only to be crushed when it wasn't her.

He had run into her so often—the park, the arcade, the bakery where she always hovered, that alley where she'd tripped and spilled her books all over the place—and yet now, when he needed to see her, she was nowhere to be found.

He should be glad, shouldn't he?

She should be home, tucked away, safe—not wandering these streets, not here where the shadows felt darker than usual, where whispers of strange creatures attacking innocents haunted every corner.

She was safe from the monsters.

“Just go home,” he muttered, raking a hand through his hair, trying to shake off the unease gnawing at him. But the words rang hollow. He couldn't shake the feeling—the sense that something was out here, something he needed to find. That she needed—

Fear slammed into him, a wave so fierce it stole his breath, left his chest tight, his heart thundering against his ribs.

It wasn't his own fear—he knew that instinctively. It was someone else's, distant yet vivid, threading through his veins, urging him forward. He could feel it—a danger, imminent, undeniable, and the desperate need to protect.

He stumbled, catching himself against a lamppost, fingers pressing into the cold metal as if it could ground him. Protect her—the thought

roared through him, all-consuming, undeniable. But who? Who was he meant to protect?

“Get it together,” he whispered through clenched teeth.

But the feeling wouldn’t leave.

It twisted, gripped his insides, an urge so fierce it almost hurt. He had no one. He was alone, always had been. But that thought felt wrong, false, like a lie he’d convinced himself to believe. He spun, his steps quickening as his eyes scanned the empty streets, searching the darkness thick for unseen threats.

The earth pulsed beneath him, each step vibrating through his body, as though the city itself was pushing him forward, guiding him when his mind didn’t know where to go. Each corner, each shadow, was a possibility, a place where she could be—lost, scared, needing him.

He wasn’t imagining this.

He couldn’t be.

Something was happening, something beyond his understanding, but every instinct screamed for him to keep moving, to protect, to fight—even if he didn’t know what he was fighting.

Just as he prepared to turn back home, to abandon this quest fueled by insanity, more fear burst across his chest. But this time it was more.

Sharper.

Colder.

Deadlier.

It wasn’t a gentle ripple, but a forceful, bone-chilling surge that tore through his soul. The spot behind his ribs exploded in agony. It wasn’t just fear; it was a primal terror, sharp and unrelenting, as if the universe itself had splintered around him. The sensation rushed through his veins like icy water breaking through a dam. Seizing his breath, halting his steps, forcing his heart to pound erratically.

The emotion wasn't his own—he knew that instinctively.

It was foreign, but familiar.

An echo of distress that he'd tasted before, a cry from someone he couldn't name but was bound to.

His hand shot out to brace against the cold facade of a nearby building, fingertips pressing hard into the unforgiving concrete as the world tilted. He blinked, but his vision swam, the streetlights stretching, their halos melting into a kaleidoscope of neon and shadow, like watercolor paints bleeding across a canvas.

The pavement beneath him rippled as if the solid ground had become a restless sea, its waves unsettling his balance. He clenched his teeth, but the metallic taste of fear, sharp and bitter, filled his mouth, an unwelcome reminder that whatever he was feeling was real, raw, and unavoidable.

Every beat of his heart amplified the distortion of his surroundings.

The surrounding air shifted—no longer crisp, but feverish, pressing against his skin, leaving him dizzy and disoriented. His breaths echoed in his ears, too loud, too shallow, like he was drowning on dry land.

The urge was unbearable, clawing at him from the inside, a visceral need to protect—someone, somewhere—a need that pulled at him with such force that it felt as if roots had sprung from his very bones, anchoring him to that moment. They refused to let go until he heeded their call.

“What’s happening to me?”

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force the world to right itself, but the sensation only intensified. The fear wasn't fading. It was growing, feeding on each beat of his heart, each gasp of air. Someone out there needed him. Desperately.

Images flickered at the edge of his consciousness.

Flashes of golden hair catching the light.

A laugh that rang like bells, eyes like twin pools of sky.

“This is madness.”

But the vines of urgency wrapped tighter around his heart, squeezing, growing thicker, deeper with every denial. His knees wobbled, threatening to give way, and he leaned heavily against the wall, rough concrete scraping his palm as he tried to pull himself back from the edge.

But the edge of what, he couldn't say.

Reality?

Sanity?

He could no longer tell.

As Mamoru tried to pull himself back together, the world twisted further, unraveling more. The shadows of the streetlights stretched and warped, the once-familiar corners of the city dissolving into blurred, shifting shapes.

It felt like he was drifting—no longer grounded, but floating in the liminal space between night and dreams. The line between reality and illusion blurred until there was no separation at all, only the sense that he was being pulled, gently but insistently, toward something beyond his understanding.

He closed his eyes, feeling the pulse of the earth beneath his feet, the rhythm echoing in his chest, in his bones. It was like falling into a trance, each heartbeat becoming slower, more deliberate, until his breaths felt weightless, the sensation of his body dissolving.

He was being stripped of everything that made him Mamoru—all the confusion, the fear, the self-doubt, everything human, everything heavy.

What remained was something else.

Something ancient.

Something familiar.

The wind shifted, carrying a chill that bit into his skin. The scent of rain on the horizon mingled with something metallic, like the tang of an unsheathed blade. His eyes snapped open, but he felt as if he were looking through someone else's gaze.

He looked down, the white cape and clothes glowing vibrant in the dark night. His fingers felt distant, flexing with a purpose that wasn't entirely his own. His body moved, a certainty driving each step—the sense of waiting was gone, replaced by an instinct so pure it bordered on destiny.

The name came to him, forming silently on his lips: "Moonlight Knight."

It was more than a name. It was a purpose, an oath that hummed in his blood. He could feel the words, the promise he had made—long ago, beyond the veil of memory—rising to the surface like echoes through time.

Protect Princess Serenity.

The weight of the command settled over him, an immense and timeless responsibility that, for once, didn't feel daunting. Instead, it felt natural, like he was sliding into a second skin, a form that had always been there, just waiting for him to acknowledge it.

The fog in his mind cleared, replaced by a calm, unwavering resolve. The world sharpened, each detail coming into focus—the glimmer of starlight on the street, the distant rustle of leaves in the midnight breeze.

He moved with ease, the night bending around him, shadows slipping away as if they dared not touch him. His stride lengthened, purposeful, each step taking him closer to an invisible but undeniable destination.

The buildings blurred, fading into the background as the stars above seemed to grow brighter, a guiding constellation. He felt light, unburdened, the earth beneath him solid but no longer an anchor—instead, it was a partner, something alive that breathed with him, urging him onward.

It was no longer just about his fear or confusion; it was about a vow that stretched across lifetimes, the promise that he would not let her fall.

His heart knew the way, even if his mind couldn't comprehend it. Each step held meaning, a message written in movement. He moved for her—for Serenity—and for the promise he had made to protect her, to stand by her side. Everything felt different, as if the night itself acknowledged his transformation, the lights softer, more welcoming, while the darkness withdrew.

Serenity and their bond rippled through his consciousness with a resonance that was both painful and comforting.

Everything was there.

The vow made to Queen Serenity, her voice like silver, her plea shimmering like a golden dream.

There, on the horizon, he could feel her. Her presence an ethereal pull, like the moon tugging on the tides, drawing him closer, urging him onward.

He would reach her.

He would protect her.

Just as he promised.

He followed the burning thread in his chest, knowing she waited on the other side. The city twisted around him, buildings blurring as he wove through Tokyo's veins, driven by a force far greater than himself. Skidding to a halt, Moonlight Knight's heart clenched painfully at the sight before him.

The street was a battleground; shadows stretched across cracked pavement, and the sharp tang of ozone lingered, a residue from the battle's fury. The Sailor Guardians lay scattered, strength sapped, breaths shallow. Their once bright forms dimmed beneath the weight of exhaustion.

Only Sailor Moon remained trembling as she faced down Farion—a pink, lion-like woman with a wild white mane and cruel green eyes. Her movements were sluggish, each one a struggle, desperation etched into every line of her body.

He watched, horror cutting through him, as Sailor Moon lost her weapon. She stumbled, her body hitting the pavement with a sickening thud that reverberated through him like a thunderclap, a sound that shattered his hesitation.

Before his mind could catch up, he was already in motion. With unerring precision, he flicked a white rose through the air, its stem slicing the night like a blade, embedding itself at Farion's feet. The beast halted, startled, her feral gaze snapping towards him.

"I am the Moonlight Knight, and I will not allow you to harm her."

Farion snarled, her aura darkening, a chaotic swirl of power gathering around her. But before it could manifest, another rose shattered the growing energy. The monster recoiled, her uncertainty clear in the flicker of her emerald eyes.

Sailor Moon gazed up at him, her wide eyes filled with both confusion and wonder. For a fleeting moment, time seemed to slow as their eyes met, and he felt the depth of an unspoken connection—a resonance that stirred something deep within, something timeless.

But he couldn't tell her. Not yet.

Sailor Jupiter struggled to her feet, her eyes blazing with fury, electricity crackling at her fingertips. "Supreme Thunder!"

The air exploded with blinding light as the arc of her lightning shot forward, striking Farion head-on. The monster shrieked, its form engulfed in a brilliant burst of purifying energy before it disintegrated into nothingness, leaving only silence and the fading echoes of power.

Moonlight Knight cast a final, lingering look at Sailor Moon, her features softened by relief, her lips curving into the faintest smile. The urge to stay, to protect, tugged at him fiercely, but another force, deeper and older, pulled him back into the shadows.

He had done what he needed to do—Serenity was safe. For now.

With a last glance, he vanished into the black, letting the dark consume him. As the adrenaline ebbed, he felt the magnetic pull intensify, as though the very night itself was reclaiming him.

The edges of the world blurred, colors blending like rain on glass, and his once-clear purpose began to fade, softening into a distant memory. Even the weight of the white rose in his hand felt insubstantial, like a phantom of what had just transpired.

The scent of jasmine mixed with the metallic tang of battle, a grounding juxtaposition that seemed to pull him both ways—toward the comfort of the familiar and the inevitability of departure. His thoughts grew hazy, the certainty that had driven him now slipping into the shadows, replaced by a creeping ambiguity.

He was once more caught between purpose and mystery, no longer the steadfast knight but simply Mamoru, a figure adrift in a city that seemed to shift and change around him.

A faint pulse drummed against his temples, insistent and sharp, dragging him back to reality. Mamoru gasped as if emerging from deep water, the sudden cold of the night biting into his skin. His body ached, his muscles protesting each breath. The muffled hum of the city returned, distant and muted, yet overwhelming compared to the quiet that had settled over the battle.

“Where... am I?”

Confusion swept over him as he took in his unfamiliar surroundings—streetlights cast long shadows on buildings he didn’t recognize, and the quiet frustration inside him began to swell.

“I’m going crazy.”

The pounding in his head refused to abate, each throb a painful reminder that whatever just happened was slipping further out of his grasp.

He took a breath, forcing himself to move, one step at a time towards a home he didn’t want to return to.

## Chapter Eleven

# Beneath a Veil of Flickering Light

The pull had begun that morning—a small, insistent tug beneath his thoughts, no more than a whisper, as delicate as a thread of moonlight. Eventually, it merged with the burning spot behind his ribs, consuming him entirely.

But by the time the sun had begun its descent, it had woven itself into every breath, thrumming in his blood like the ocean's tide—a force impossible to ignore. Every hour that passed fed its strength, turning a nudge into a deep urgency, sweeping Mamoru along like driftwood caught in an inevitable current.

He tried to ignore it.

Tried to drown it out.

Tried to silence it.

Soccer drills had left his legs aching and lungs burning, biology notes had blurred his eyes. Yet, no matter how hard he pushed himself, the pull remained, growing louder, more insistent, until it swallowed all else. He moved without reason, his feet tracing paths he couldn't recall choosing, as though he were being guided by something unseen.

And now, somehow, he found himself in front of the newly opened Virtual Reality Theater, the vibrant marquee casting flickering hues of electric blue and violet across his face. The air was thick with the

mechanical hum of cooling towers, the sharp scent of artificial butter, the excited chatter of children, and the easy laughter of families.

Yet, for Mamoru, it all felt muted, muffled—like he was watching it unfold from behind a pane of glass, distant and untouched by the vibrancy.

He scanned the crowd, searching for something nameless. Something he didn't know even existed.

It was only when a burst of laughter cut through the haze that he felt his heart leap. He found her, the urgency inside him swelling as his gaze fixed on a halo of golden hair glowing in the late afternoon light.

Usagi.

She stood in a pool of color, talking animatedly, Luna nestled in her arms. There was an ease in her stance, a lightness, that seemed to draw everything around her into sharper focus. He stepped forward, almost without realizing it, a warmth unfurling in his chest as her presence chased away the day's fog.

"Maybe you should go to the library. Since you don't have a date, Bunhead," the nickname slipped from his lips effortlessly, warmth lacing the words despite himself.

Usagi spun around, twin buns bouncing, eyes widening before narrowing in playful indignation. "Mamoru Chiba!" she huffed, though the smile pulling at her lips betrayed her. "I'd rather go on a date with you!"

There was always something in the way her irritation softened, never quite reaching her eyes. That left him feeling lighter, unburdened in a way that was both unfamiliar and comforting.

Quickly, he tried to banish how appealing she was. How her skin sparkled as the fading light brushed her cheeks. Tried to ignore how the curve of her shoulder seemed to call to him. Tried to dismiss how her laugh lingered and wove its way into the quiet spaces of his thoughts.

He tried to avoid looking into her eyes—so full of life, so impossibly deep, threatening to consume him whole.

She wasn't for him. Not now, not ever. Not even if he were reborn a hundred times could he ever deserve her.

He shrugged casually, a grin playing at his lips. "We can go on a date, to the library."

He knew how to bait her, knew exactly which strings to pull to elicit that adorable spark in her eyes.

"That's not a date! That's a torture session!"

As their playful banter flowed, Mamoru felt the weight on his shoulders lift. Usagi had a way of softening the edges of the world around her, making everything feel less jagged, less daunting.

"Are you here to check out the VR Theater, too? I heard it's crazy advanced technology!"

He hesitated. "Yeah, I suppose I am," he said, the answer feeling true even though he hadn't planned it.

Usagi's eyes lit up, her excitement palpable. "Really! That's better than the buy one slice of cake get one free deal at the mall!" She bounced on the balls of her feet, her enthusiasm as bright and innocent as sunlight filtering through the fresh spring leaves.

The bustling crowd moved around them, the theater lights flickering in their eyes as they stepped closer to the entrance. Despite the cacophony—the kaleidoscope of lights, the scents of caramel and popcorn, the rush of voices—Mamoru could feel a prickle of unease worm its way back in. The pressing crowd, the flashing lights—they grated on his senses, the noise threatening to shatter the fragile calm Usagi's presence had brought.

Even the shadows whispered this was a dangerous place.

He took a deep breath, trying to ground himself, but the heaviness crept back in, a slow trickle of something wrong. He shook his head,

trying to clear the fog, but the lights blurred at the edges, his temple throbbing lightly with the beginning of a dull ache.

His gaze found Usagi again, her wide eyes filled with wonder as she craned her neck to watch the holographic displays above. Despite the warning thrumming beneath his skin, the growing urge to turn away and retreat, he couldn't bring himself to leave her side. There was something about her—an openness, an innocence—that anchored him in the here and now, something that soothed the pull of whatever force had brought him here.

“We really shouldn't be here,” he muttered under his breath, too low for her to hear.

And yet, he stayed. Even as the lights flashed and the noise grew, he stood beside her, feeling both lost and found, caught between the compulsion to protect and the quiet warmth that her presence unfurled in his chest.

She was a question he didn't yet have an answer to—a mystery that kept him lingering, unwilling to walk away.

Usagi continued her barrage of enthusiasm as the line slowly moved. Eventually, they stepped into the theater lobby, enveloped by a barrage of flashing lights and synthetic hums—holographic displays flickered, VR previews looped, and vibrant colors fought for his attention.

The lights danced across her, their shifting hues painting her in fleeting shades of brilliance. For Mamoru, it was the only part of the scene that felt alive. Everything else—the flashing displays, the hum of machines—felt hollow, like blossoms crafted from paper instead of growing from the soil.

The air carried the sharp tang of electronics and the buttery warmth of popcorn, but beneath it lingered something darker. It was faint, yet unmistakable—a weight that pressed against his senses, making his

instincts prickle as though he were breathing in the first stirrings of a distant storm.

That's when he saw them.

Ail and An moved through the throng of people like ripples in water—smooth, deliberate, and utterly out of sync with the chaotic, genuine energy around them. Their faces were masks of politeness, but their eyes betrayed something else: an intensity that never seemed to soften.

They were like transplanted trees struggling to adapt, their roots refusing to find nourishment in this foreign soil. Mamoru's chest tightened with the familiar sense of dissonance, the instinctive feeling that they did not belong here.

"Perhaps we should go," Mamoru said.

"No way! Not after waiting in that horrible line for so long," Usagi screeched.

An's gaze found him with a hunter's precision, her eyes lighting with a gleam that made his breath hitch. She moved closer, cutting through the crowd with predatory ease until she was standing too close, her perfume sharp, underlined with something alien. Mamoru felt his muscles tense, each word she spoke a note of intrusion.

"You're so lucky, Mamoru. I've decided we're going to spend the evening together." Her voice was honeyed and low, each word like a silken thread winding around him, laced with something that set his nerves on edge.

The possessiveness in her eyes was unmistakable, a hunger that unsettled him. He opened his mouth, uncertain how to respond without inviting further closeness, when a familiar voice sliced through the tension.

“Hey! Back off, An. He’s MY date!” Usagi’s voice rang out, fierce and protective, her presence blazing like sunlight through a dense canopy.

She stepped between them, her body language unyielding, her eyes narrowed. Her sudden defiance caught him off guard, and something flickered inside him—something that felt ancient, instinctive.

It mirrored the way he often felt around her. A need to protect. Now, it was she who shielded him, and he felt both grateful and deeply moved.

An’s expression shifted, her smile remaining, but her eyes narrowing with irritation. “Oh, Usagi. I didn’t see you there.”

Usagi didn’t flinch. “Well, I’m here. And Mamoru and I have plans,” she stated, her chin lifting, her presence like a barrier that could not be breached.

“Oh!” A new voice joined the fray. Ail locked onto Usagi, his gaze intrusive and invasive. “Usagi. It’s so nice to see you here. Are you going to join us? Please say yes.”

Mamoru’s jaw tightened as he watched Ail’s eyes glide over her, a sour heat bubbling in his chest the moment Ail stepped closer. He couldn’t explain why it grated on him so fiercely, but something about the way Ail’s eyes lingered, intrusive and far too familiar, set his teeth on edge.

Mamoru told himself it didn’t matter—Usagi wasn’t his, wasn’t anyone’s. Yet, as her name rolled off Ail’s tongue with a practiced ease, a flare of something primal twisted in Mamoru’s gut. It wasn’t like him to care who talked to whom, especially when it came to a girl who, at best, was just an acquaintance.

But the sight of Ail leaning closer, the smug tilt of his head, ignited a low simmering anger. Mamoru swallowed hard, forcing himself to stand still even as every fiber of his being screamed to step in, to

intervene, to pull Usagi from Ail's invasive attention—though he had no idea why.

Mamoru forced himself to take a step back, the urge to remove himself—and Usagi—from their proximity overwhelming.

“Let's go in together!” An locked on to one arm.

“Yes, let's,” Usagi hissed, locking onto his other arm.

He let out a sigh. Something told him he wouldn't enjoy this.

The VR space was dim, illuminated by shifting colors and the glow of screens. The murmur of machinery and the buzz of excited guests filled the air, a cacophony that slowly faded into a manageable hum as they moved further in.

The simmering ache behind his eyes threatened to burst into a full-blown headache as An and Usagi fought over him. When they all jammed into the same car, leaving Ail to his own vehicle, Mamoru almost cried.

But then he glanced at her.

Usagi's eyes were wide, her gaze darting from one immersive display to the next; her awe tangible and unrestrained. She marveled at the technology, her joy genuine, her wonder pure. The earlier tension slowly unraveled in the face of her energy, her voice bubbling with excitement.

Mamoru wrestled to center his thoughts, but they wavered under the weight of the conflict swirling around him. On one side was a golden warmth, soft and inviting, like sunlight filtering through leaves. On the other, sharp, frigid spikes of discontent clawed at him, leaving an ache he couldn't ignore.

He tried to anchor himself, to focus on anything else—sounds, the feel of the bench beneath him—but the opposing forces surged and clashed, refusing to yield, leaving him caught in their relentless storm.

The neon lights pulsed as a digital dragon roared into existence, its massive form flickering against the high-tech backdrop. Neither girl seemed to notice; they were too busy clinging to him, their bickering rising above the excited chatter of the crowd. Just ahead, a young boy shouted triumphantly, his laughter ringing out as he fired beams of light at the virtual monster.

Usagi came to a screeching halt, her voice cutting through the din like a bell. “Shingo! Why did you drag Dad here? This place isn’t for little kids!”

Mamoru’s gaze shifted, his eyes narrowing with curiosity as he studied them—family dynamics at their liveliest.

Shingo only smirked, his expression sharp and mischievous. “Isn’t this place a little advanced for you, big sis?”

“HEY!” Usagi’s protest erupted, loud enough to rival the roar of the digital dragon.

Thankfully, the car skittered to a stop and the three of them tumbled out. Mamoru had no idea how he ended up here. Shingo continued to pester Usagi, as he strapped on the VR equipment. Kenji looked more lost than anything and needed several employees to help.

“I’m the cool Grade School boy who fights for love and justice!” Shingo shouted, striking a familiar stance.

Mamoru couldn’t help but chuckle at the scene, a warmth blooming in his chest. The image of the two was unguarded, joyful—a harsh contrast to the earlier tension.

Even as warmth returned, Mamoru’s senses remained alert, the presence of Ail and An lingering at the edges of his awareness, invasive and cold. He kept close to Usagi, unwilling to let her drift too far from his side. The sense of protectiveness that settled into him felt deep-rooted, almost primordial, and as they moved through the VR

space, he found himself mapping escape routes, his eyes flicking to the exits.

An electric energy buzzed through the VR arena, its dark walls illuminated by neon lights that cast a web of vibrant hues, glowing in blues, greens, and purples. As the vibrant energy of the VR theater buzzed around them, a strange flicker caught Mamoru's eye—a split-second disruption in the projection that sent a shiver up his spine.

He shook it off as a technical glitch, but the feeling lingered, an unspoken tension threading through the air. Nearby, Ail and An exchanged glances, their smiles holding a sharpness that made his stomach twist. Something wasn't right.

The soundscape pulsed with artificial life—holographic monsters shimmering like ghostly apparitions, each materializing and bursting into pixelated shards under a laser beam's touch. The digital roars of the virtual beasts merged with the laughter and delighted shouts of the players, creating a symphony that seemed, for a moment, to chase away Mamoru's lingering sense of unease.

“Oh! Get him! He's up to something!” Usagi giggled.

It felt strangely familiar to be fighting by her side, almost like it they'd done it before. But he dismissed that thought immediately. The only fighting he'd ever done was a battle on the field or for high marks.

“I got it! Did you see that? I'm so great!”

Her energy was so contagious, Mamoru found his own apprehension dissolving, his heart relaxing as he watched her—each exaggerated shriek, every surprised stumble, followed by a bright, unrestrained giggle. It all pulled at something inside him, something he couldn't quite name.

When she stumbled backward, her eyes wide at the sudden projection of a monster, Mamoru's hand shot out without a thought, fingers brushing her arm before he caught himself. A spark seemed to jump

between them, and he quickly withdrew, reminding himself that it was just a game. The almost-contact hummed in his veins, a tingling warmth that he couldn't quite shake.

"Careful," he murmured, a small smile tugging at his lips.

Usagi glanced back at him. Her cheeks flushed, her laughter bubbling up again. "You're still my hero."

"Let's destroy some monsters," he grinned at her.

"Let's!"

He hesitated for a breath, then followed, weaving between obstacles with ease. The room seemed to blur around them, the digital creatures nothing more than fleeting images as he focused solely on her—her laughter, her bright eyes, her daring smile.

There was something magnetic about holding her hand, racing through the corridors. He didn't know why, but everything felt right in that exact moment.

The scream shattered the fragile illusion of the VR arena, leaving only jagged edges of fear. Shingo burst through the holographic haze, his face bone-white beneath the strobing lights, his voice cracking as he cried out about his father.

"What?" Usagi's voice cracked.

A wave of fear and terror crashed over him, potent and sharp. The playful atmosphere dissolved, replaced by a chill that crawled up Mamoru's spine like an ancient warning. Beside him, Usagi stood frozen, her eyes wide and shimmering, her sudden stillness as jarring as watching a star flicker and fade.

"Stay here!" he shouted.

Before Mamoru could consider the consequences, his body was already moving, driven by an instinct that pulsed through him like a second heartbeat. Every footfall carried a weight of inevitability, as if he had walked this path countless times before—always rushing towards

danger, always the protector. He pushed forward, with Usagi's panicked voice echoing somewhere behind him, her fear adding urgency to every step.

Turning a corner, Mamoru's blood turned to ice. In the dimly lit recesses of the theater, a monstrous figure lurked. Olive-green skin pulsed as it drained the energy from its captives, its crimson-and-white tendrils coiling like living shadows around them.

The creature's form was a grotesque mockery of life, and in its clutches, Kenji hung suspended, his energy siphoning away in shimmering, fragile threads. Seeing them like that ignited something deep in Mamoru—a warrior's rage, raw and ancient, burning away all hesitation.

He tore off his VR suit, the plastic and metal clattering to the floor with a hollow thud.

"Hey!" Mamoru yelled, his voice cracking through the stifling tension.

The creature's eyes snapped to him, narrowing with something akin to hunger, the air thickening with its malice. Kenji, still struggling, somehow found the strength to grab a fire extinguisher from the wall. In a move of desperate courage, he unleashed a cloud of cold, white mist, momentarily creating a ghostly barrier between them and the creature.

But the respite was fleeting. The creature let out a guttural snarl, its tentacles recoiling, only to lash out with renewed fury. Mamoru saw them too late, felt the cold, slimy grip constrict around his arm and torso, pain slicing through him like ice. It wasn't just physical agony—it felt like the creature was pulling at something deeper, like it was unraveling his very essence. His muscles weakened, his vision blurred, the neon lights of the VR arena dulling into muted shades as darkness crept in from the edges.

“Take it easy on that one, Hell Ant,” a voice rang out from the darkness.

Mamoru couldn't see the source.

“Why?” another voice appeared. “You should only care about the energy.”

Then, through the fog of pain, a flash of gold. His heart surged, then plummeted.

Usagi!

He could barely move, the tendrils' cold grip draining everything from him. A bitter taste filled his mouth, the taste of helplessness, of knowing he could do nothing but hope she would be alright.

If she was hurt...

If he failed in protecting her...

But the shadows deepened, wrapping around him like an endless tide. In their suffocating embrace, he slipped away, swallowed by the abyss.

## Chapter Twelve

# Moonlight Blooming in Shadow

**M**amoru's entire body pulsed with an icy fire, as Hell Ant's tentacles snaked around him, their writhing, unnatural texture squeezing tighter, draining his energy with a slow, suffocating restlessness. The creature tightened their grip, and the raw burn of the drain leaving him weightless—fragile, like a shell carved hollow by an unforgiving tide.

The world blurred.

Reality slipped away like leaves in the fall.

That spot behind his ribs flared into a roaring blaze, a heat so fierce that it seemed to sear through his entire chest, as though molten fire had erupted beneath his skin. The sensation was relentless, growing hotter, sharper with every breath he took, each inhalation feeding the inferno.

The pain radiated outward, curling through his body like the roots of a twisted tree, spreading its tendrils through his ribs, his lungs, threatening to consume him from the inside out. It wasn't just physical—it was emotional, primal, as though his very soul was being scorched, his determination feeding the flames despite the agony.

Golden light filtered through the shadows. Familiar and warm like silk and sunlight.

It was unmistakable.

That color.

That light.

Sailor Moon.

The name echoed within him, and relief surged through his veins like a burst of fire, thawing the ice encasing his heart. In that moment, the monster's grasp seemed to falter, as though her light alone made Hell Ant hesitate.

Mamoru blinked, his vision sharpening briefly, and there she was—golden hair catching the dim light, eyes blazing with a courage that defied her delicate form. Relief melted into fear almost instantly.

He was trapped, ensnared, powerless to protect her—to be the shield he knew she needed. The realization clawed at him, raw and visceral, igniting a primal fear that burned hotter with each passing second.

She was brave, yes, but so small against the towering, monstrous Hell Ant. The sight of her standing her ground, trembling but unwavering, only magnified his desperation. His muscles strained against the unyielding bonds, each pull sharp and futile, but he couldn't escape. The thought of her facing this terror alone was unbearable, a pain more suffocating than the monster's crushing grip.

He had to shield her from harm.

He had to protect her from injury.

No matter what, she had to survive.

Yet despite the danger, she stood her ground. He could see it—the trembling of her form, the terror in her gaze—but beyond that was something fiercer: an unyielding resolve, a quiet defiance that refused to back down.

“Sailor Moon.”

He knew her somehow.

The name felt like a thread pulled from a tapestry he couldn't quite see, a whisper from somewhere deep in his chest. There was a familiarity in the way she moved, the way her golden hair swayed with each step. He recognized the slight hesitation in her stance, as if reluctantly fighting. Yet, he knew her resolve alone could carry her through any fight.

She tilted her head, and for a fleeting second, their eyes met. It sent a jolt through him—a strange, bittersweet ache that tightened his chest. He didn't know why, but he could predict the way her voice would strengthen when she shouted her catchphrase, the precise moment her tiara would leave her hand.

And he was certain that, even if she stumbled, she would never back down.

How did he know these things? He couldn't place it, but the thought warmed him all the same, like a long-forgotten memory stirring just beyond his grasp.

“Sailor Moon.” Her name left his lips like a desperate prayer.

And there, reflected in her eyes, was the echo of that blaze—fear and determination swirling together, an emotion as vivid and raw as the fire burning within him.

“How dare you!” Sailor Moon shouted in her defiant voice. “How dare you corrupt this place of recreation and hurt the people I care most about!”

Mamoru wanted to beg her to leave, retreat. Save herself. Because if this monster hurt her...

“I'll never forgive you! In the name of the Moon, I'll punish you!”

He could feel it: the weight of his strength waning, the essence of who he was being pulled away in slow increments, yet beneath it all, there was something that held on, refusing to yield completely to the

cold. As he teetered on the edge, that ember was his only lifeline, his last hope against the vast, consuming void.

Then, just as the darkness began to press in on all sides, a flash of gold pierced the haze—a brilliant streak cutting through the dimness like a knife of sunlight cleaving the night.

“Moon Tiara Action!”

She raised her Moon Tiara, her eyes narrowing as she hurled it forward—a shimmering crescent of light, a promise of hope that cut across the darkened room.

The tiara spun through the air, a comet blazing toward its target, but it barely grazed Hell Ant’s monstrous form.

Everything froze as the tiara fell short, clattering against the ground, and he saw a fleeting flicker of doubt cross her face. Mamoru’s chest tightened at that sight, his breath catching in his throat. She was alone, facing down this creature, her friends too far to help, and her attack failed.

“Sailor Moon.”

But he was too weak now.

His voice was nothing but an insignificant whisper.

He wanted to call out, to reach for her, to tell her that she wasn’t alone, that he was still there, even if he couldn’t fight beside her. The world around him seemed to move in slow motion, his thoughts a cacophony of desperation and admiration.

Despite the pain, despite the fog that dulled his senses and made his limbs feel heavy, he clung to the warmth of the golden light, holding on to it like a drowning man reaching for the sun.

His vision blurred again, the edges of her form softening, swallowed by the shadows. The muffled sounds of battle—the creature’s growls, the faint clang of her tiara against concrete—filtered into his ears, as

though he were hearing them from underwater. His heart hammered in his chest, a painful, erratic rhythm.

Mamoru fought desperately to remain conscious. Despite how hard he struggled, his head throbbed harder, and the world began to dissolve into a wash of colors and sounds. He could feel his heartbeat growing erratic, each pulse a distant echo. The coldness in his veins continued to spread, slowing his movements, his thoughts.

The pain that clouded his vision sharpened his desperation.

But he refused to give in, not while she still stood. Sailor Moon had an ability to face darkness head-on, not because she wasn't afraid, but because she believed in the goodness that lay beyond it.

As the darkness seemed to press in on all sides, Mamoru clung to her light. It flickered, but it did not fade, and that alone was enough for him. It meant that there was still hope, that they could still fight, and that he could still stand by her—if not now, then later, once he regained his strength.

The world might blur, the edges of reality might slip away from him, but he wouldn't yield to the pull of oblivion. He could feel her presence, the warmth of her belief that wrapped around him like an embrace, the light that she cast in the darkness that refused to be extinguished.

“I'll fight with her...”

Yet, the more Mamoru struggled to stay conscious, the more the world seemed to melt away, dissolving into a heavy, almost liquid fog that threatened to drown him. The room dimmed at the edges, shadows creeping inward as if trying to smother his awareness. It was like being underwater—every sound muffled, every movement slowed, each breath harder to draw. His pulse thrummed faintly in his ears, the noise both comforting and distant, like the echo of a past life.

In the depths of that consuming darkness, something shifted. A calm, almost serene sense of purpose began to unfurl within him, resonating at the core of his being.

It was quiet.

So deeply quiet, like a band of moonbeams flickering across the surface of a still lake.

Something ancient.

Something profound.

The weight of doubt, of confusion and fear, began to lift. It didn't dissipate all at once; it fractured, like shards of ice breaking away from a frozen river. In its place, a fierce determination bloomed, a warmth unfurling deep inside him, pure and potent.

Protect Princess Serenity.

The command wasn't his own thought; it was something older, something primal, a vow etched into the fibers of his being. It felt as natural as drawing breath, as necessary as his heartbeat. His whole being rallied around that singular purpose, as if his soul recognized the truth of it, even when his mind couldn't.

He could feel it expanding inside of him, pushing out the pain and lethargy, replacing the numbness with a fire that flared brighter and hotter.

His chest tightened, and he drew in a deep breath, tasting the air that felt sharper now, almost metallic, laced with a coolness like midnight touched by moonlight. He moved, each movement deliberate and swift, his body aligning to a rhythm that felt almost musical, a beat that thrummed in his veins.

The fog in his vision didn't dissipate so much as it transformed—blurring into something else, something more vivid, stars and shadows blending into a tapestry that shifted with him as he stepped forward.

He didn't hesitate; there was no space for second thoughts, only the absolute, unwavering clarity of his mission. He felt as though he was no longer just Mamoru, the young man grappling with doubts and fears—he was something more, someone shaped by lifetimes of promises and purpose.

The word formed silently in his mind, like a whisper carried on a breeze.

He was the Moonlight Knight.

It was a mantle, a second skin that wrapped around him like armor, woven from starlight and promises.

Noise fell away, and only the pulse of the earth remained, a heart-beat that matched his own. The scent of strawberries mingled with the tang of iron.

Protect Serenity.

The name drifted through his consciousness, an anchor that both grounded him and lifted him, pulling him toward a purpose he couldn't name but felt with every fiber of his being. It was like a distant echo, a promise made under moonlit skies, beneath an ancient, watching gaze.

The white cloak he wore—no, the cloak that was part of him—billed out, the sensation both tangible and ethereal, as though woven from the very fabric of the moon itself. The world shifted, colors bleeding into one another like watercolors.

“I'll keep my promise.”

His gaze locked on the twisted, monstrous form of Hell Ant. Sailor Moon faced the creature without a weapon, but with determination etched in every muscle. The glint of her golden hair caught the dim light. Power radiated from her, white like the Silver Crystal. Gold like beautiful dreams.

Without hesitation, his fingers closed around a white rose, its petals delicate yet sharp as glass, a contradiction that mirrored his own nature. With a swift movement, he released it; the rose cutting through the air with a graceful arc, slicing through the creature's tentacles with pinpoint accuracy.

Sailor Moon looked up, her eyes widening with a mixture of awe and desire.

"I am the Moonlight Knight," he said, "and no darkness will touch her while I breathe."

Instead of backing down, the monster attacked. The VR theater transformed into an otherworldly battleground, its once vibrant technological displays flickering like the last breath of dying stars, casting fragmented light across the chaotic darkness.

Moonlight Knight held his sword before him, the blade catching the scant illumination—a shard of moonlight forged into steel, shimmering with a purity that seemed almost out of place in the artificial twilight of the theater. Each arc of his sword left a trace of silver radiance, as though it parted the very air with the brilliance of his determination.

Hell Ant moved like a thing born of nightmares, her grotesque olive-green form undulating, tentacles writhing with a sinister pulse that radiated dark energy. He clenched his teeth, focusing all his energy on dodging the creature's attacks and keeping them from finding his flesh.

The monster twisted unnaturally, defying logic as she launched her assault with relentless precision. Her tentacles lashed out, snapping through the air like serpents, each one seeking to drain the vitality from the defenders before her.

The Moonlight Knight met her every strike with determination, his body moving as if it remembered battles his conscious mind had long

forgotten. His sword sang with each slash, a melody of silver light and steel that resonated with something ancient within his soul.

Yet Hell Ant was relentless, her tentacles weaving an intricate dance of death, meeting his every move with a twisted elegance that chilled him.

When her tentacles finally coiled around him, their touch was like the coldest winter night, a freezing burn that crept beneath his skin, burrowing deeper, sapping his strength. The crushing force squeezed the air from his lungs, the sinister energy coursing into his veins like venom.

But where Mamoru might have faltered, the Moonlight Knight knew only purpose. Fear had no place here; there was only the mission—only the vow he had made long before memory.

Protect her.

Keep her safe, even at his own expense.

Suddenly, the air shifted, crackling with a familiar energy.

“Shabon Spray!” Sailor Mercury’s voice echoed across the darkened theater, her power manifesting in a dense mist that rolled across the space like fog across a moonlit moor.

The air cooled instantly, tiny droplets forming in the atmosphere, clinging to his skin like a promise of respite. Through the mist, a flare of red cut through like a comet.

“Fire Soul!” The room blazed with light, the heat roaring through the chill like the sun breaking the dawn.

The mist and fire collided, creating an otherworldly shimmer that transformed the battlefield—a modern place of technology twisted into a scene of elemental chaos, timeless and sacred.

“Don’t worry, Sailor Moon!” Sailor Jupiter shouted. “We’ve got your back!”

“Crescent Beam!” Sailor Venus yelled, a band of golden light that pierced the darkness, cutting a path through the writhing mass of tentacles, forcing Hell Ant to recoil.

“Supreme Thunder!” Sailor Jupiter’s voice thundered. The crackle of electricity split the air. The scent of ozone lingered as the arcs of lightning illuminated the shadows.

Through it all, Moonlight Knight watched Sailor Moon. She stood at the heart of this storm of power—small, vulnerable, but with a spirit that outshone every blazing attack. There was no artifice, no hesitation—only her raw, unguarded heart shining like the North Star amid the chaos.

Then with a snap, like breaking wood, Hell Ant vanished into the nothing. Freed from Hell Ant’s grasp, Moonlight Knight steadied himself.

Silence settled over the space, the thick fog of battle giving way to a serene stillness. Moonlight Knight lowered his sword, exhaustion creeping into his bones, but a quiet peace filling the spaces where fear and tension had been. The artificial lights flickered back to life, casting a gentle glow over the Guardians as they gathered, Sailor Moon standing at their center.

Sailor Moon turned towards him, her eyes wide, shimmering with a blend of awe, confusion, and something deeply vulnerable.

“But... I thought...” Her voice was fragile, like a whisper caught in the space between disbelief and longing, the words hanging suspended as if too delicate to reach the air fully.

The Moonlight Knight met her gaze, and for a fleeting moment, he allowed himself the luxury of just watching her—of seeing her in the aftermath of yet another battle fought bravely, her radiance undiminished.

There was something in her eyes that tugged at him, something that had always connected them even in the strangest, most inexplicable ways. His lips curved into a gentle, almost bittersweet smile.

Then, a shift in the energy of the room—a presence that pulled at the corners of his awareness. He turned, glimpsing the familiar form stepping forward from the shadows.

Mamoru Chiba.

There was an inevitability to it, a pull that seemed to transcend the boundaries of time. Mamoru moved towards her, his focus entirely on Sailor Moon, his gaze softening as if she were the only light in a world still darkened by battle.

Moonlight Knight felt that pull too, the one that drew Mamoru forward—an eternal, magnetic thread that couldn't be denied.

He was not meant to stay.

His heart knew that, accepted it without resentment. He was a guardian, a protector to bridge a space in time until this—until these two souls, always destined, could once more find one another, unhindered.

“Adieu,” he whispered.

He took a step back into the dark edges of the room, letting go of this moment, allowing the shadows to take him in like an old, familiar friend.

The cold air brushed Mamoru's skin as he watched the figure fade into nothing. The sharp, insistent throbbing in his temples intensified, a painful rhythm that dragged him back to full awareness. Pressure in his skull seemed to emphasize the emptiness where certainty had been.

His heart was pounding, each beat resonating with both exhaustion and something else—a hollow ache that refused to fade, an emptiness shaped like something he'd fought to protect.

Mamoru struggled for breath, his gaze moving across the chaotic scene—staff hurrying, police issuing orders, patrons talking in hurried, hushed voices. The bustle around him felt muted, a mere hum in the background, none of it important enough to focus on.

“What just happened?”

But Sailor Moon and her radiant power was gone, and the other Sailor Scouts vanished like mist in the sunshine.

Someone kneeled beside him, their voice a comforting murmur as they helped him sit, but he barely registered them. His eyes searched the theater with a quiet, desperate urgency, trying to find her—trying to catch a glimpse of gold hair, a flash of that unmistakable light that was Usagi.

But she wasn't there.

He scanned the shadows, the faces, every darkened corner, and still, she was nowhere to be seen.

It left him feeling hollow, incomplete, like he had lost something vital and wasn't sure how to find it again. It was a deep, gnawing ache. Something that twisted in his chest until it was hard to breathe. The absence of her presence, the place she filled so easily, left a void that swallowed him whole.

The ache remained, raw and pulsing, as he let the officers assist him, his eyes never leaving the darkness that seemed to swallow the corners of the theater, his thoughts never straying far from her.

## Chapter Thirteen

# Petals on the Edge of Twilight

Ail's gaze rested upon the sakura trees, their blossoms cascading like delicate pink snowflakes over the throngs of humans gathered beneath them. The soft blush of the flowers contrasted against the azure sky, each one a fleeting gem in a tapestry of transient splendor. Petals danced on the whispering breeze, catching glimmers of sunlight as they floated gently to the earth. There was a serene beauty in their descent—a graceful surrender to the inevitable.

The sight stirred something unexpected within him.

It resonated in his chest, a subtle ache he hadn't anticipated.

Jealousy.

The realization settled over him like a shadow. How effortlessly these blossoms embraced their brief existence, detached yet serene, unburdened by the weight of survival. They bloomed and drifted without struggle, fulfilling their purpose in a single, radiant moment before fading away.

What did it feel like to be so free?

His own life was heavy, weighed down by the withering Makai Tree and the relentless quest to sustain it. How easy it was for these petals to detach, to simply exist until they fell softly, without a fight to disappear into the earth.

Though he couldn't fully fathom the humans' fascination with these ephemeral flowers, something about them stirred memories deep within—a faint echo of the Makai Tree as it once was: vibrant, lush, teeming with energy.

He could barely recall it. More a fleeting whisper than tangible memory.

Crystalline waters stretched endlessly, their shimmering surface catching the light like a thousand scattered diamonds. Towering above it all stood the Makai Tree, its branches cascading like emerald waterfalls, each leaf glowing faintly as though imbued with its own light.

It wasn't just a memory of beauty—it was a memory of harmony, of a world pulsing with life that sang with every breath.

But that was many lives ago.

Now, the Makai Tree stood barren, its branches stretching like skeletal fingers grasping for a salvation that remained out of reach.

He shifted uncomfortably in his fitted school uniform. Its stiff lines and formal cut felt like a cage compared to his true form's freedom. Around them, families spread blankets on the grass, their joy drifting through the spring air, and a young child ran by, giggling as she tried to catch the falling petals in her tiny hands.

It was moments like this that made Ail's heart constrict painfully with something unfamiliar. There was beauty here, in the humans' way of finding joy in the simplest things, their faces lit with smiles that knew nothing of the burdens he carried. What would that be like?

Beside him, An sat amidst the fluttering petals, her vibrant red hair a stark flame against the pastel world. She seemed so different from the scene around them, her expression a study in disgust. Glancing at the crowd with narrowed eyes, her lips curled slightly.

"These humans gather for this every year?" her voice sliced through the serenity like a blade.

Disdain radiated from her, a chill beneath the warmth of the sun, and Ail could feel it pressing on him—a weight that clashed with the fragile, drifting petals.

He turned to glance at her, her hair swaying gently in the breeze, falling in a perfect glossy line that framed her sharp gaze.

He loved her.

At least he thought it was love.

He believed it was, but there were too many parts of her that felt impossible to understand. Her jealousy, her possessiveness, the way she eyed the world as though they were beneath her—all of it created an unspoken distance between them.

Guilt prickled at the edges of his thoughts, but the feeling was insistent, undeniable. Their love, he realized, was like the Makai Tree—a thing that once thrived, but now stood brittle and starved, clawing for a life that seemed to slip further away each day.

“Yes,” he finally replied. “It reminds me of the Makai Tree... how it once blossomed.”

The words slipped out, a wistful undercurrent threading through them, almost as though he were speaking only to himself. A quiet admission of the loss that ate at him—a duty that allowed little room for the desires he scarcely dared acknowledge.

He could feel her gaze, like a thorn pressed against his skin, probing and intrusive. She sensed the drift of his thoughts, and her displeasure prickled against him, sharp and tangible. The image of Usagi flickered into his mind, unbidden—her laughter like the chime of delicate bells, her eyes reflecting a light that seemed to reach into the hidden corners of his being.

She was different from An; her joy was unrestrained, her laughter effortless. She glowed, unburdened, and the more he tried to suppress

the thought of her, the more persistently it lingered, haunting him like a melody that refused to fade.

“Are you feeling okay, brother?” she spat the last word like a curse. “You’re not yourself.”

“I’m fine.”

He turned away.

The sunlight caught the petals drifting down, giving them an ethereal glow as they rested on the shoulders of onlookers and settled across the park like a soft, pink snowfall. Ail’s eyes followed one that floated lazily onto his knee, the delicate touch of it so light, so fragile. He plucked it between his fingers, marveling at the gentleness, the simplicity.

Everything here felt like a dream. The sun’s warmth that bathed the park was otherworldly. The glow that illuminated everything, distant. If only the brilliant warmth and light could banish the shadows within him.

If only.

“They waste their time,” An’s voice cut through him. “Fawning over something so insignificant. It’s pathetic.”

He turned the petal over in his hand. The light filtering through its translucent flesh. “Perhaps they find solace in the beauty that surrounds them, even if it’s fleeting.”

“Beauty fades,” An snapped. “Power endures. They delude themselves with these temporary pleasures while ignoring what truly matters.”

“Not everything enduring is worth pursuing. And not everything transient is without value.”

An’s gaze narrowed as irritation sparked in her eyes. “You’ve become distracted. Your thoughts are elsewhere.”

He met her gaze evenly, masking the turmoil beneath his calm exterior. "I'm simply reflecting on our purpose here."

"Our purpose is obvious. We need energy to revive the Makai Tree. Nothing else matters. The energy here is crisp and perfect. The tree has already improved."

Ail sighed inwardly, the weight of her words pressing upon him. "I haven't forgotten."

Yet, as he spoke, the conviction in his voice felt hollow, an echo of a truth that no longer seemed as certain.

The space between them filled with unspoken tension. As the wind picked up slightly, sending a flurry of petals swirling around them, Ail watched them, his heart aching with something bitter and wistful—a longing for a kind of peace he knew he would never have.

"Come," An said abruptly, breaking the spell. "This place is ripe with energy. It's time we show these humans who is superior."

He nodded absently, casting one last glance at the sea of pink before turning away. As they walked, he couldn't shake the hollow ache that had settled within him, a quiet yearning for something he couldn't quite name.

The sakura petals continued to fall, their silent descent a gentle reminder of the cycles of life and the inevitability of change. Behind him, the laughter of the humans faded into the distance, leaving only the whisper of the wind and the faint rustle of blossoms underfoot.

He lingered in the shade of an ancient cherry tree, the bark rough against his back as his gaze followed the students from Juban Middle School, their carefree laughter carrying through the spring breeze. The hum of their joy filled the air—an innocent, almost carefree song that contrasted sharply with the dark echoes of his own existence.

"I wonder if Usagi is here."

Seconds later, he found her, and she captured him. She sat beneath a cascade of pink petals, her friends clustered around her in a vibrant ring. From his vantage point, she seemed to glow—her laughter bright and uninhibited, her eyes crinkling at the edges as she sampled treats from the lunches spread before her.

Somehow she was a sun, the center of everything. Every living thing seemed to bend towards her. The warmth that she radiated called to him, even across the distance that separated them.

“Mako, these are amazing!” Usagi’s voice carried across the park, and Makoto beamed in response.

They shared a closeness, a familiarity that seemed boundless. It was a bond forged without need or demand—unlike the hungry grasp of the Makai Tree that bound him to An.

Usagi moved between her friends with a lightness that seemed to defy gravity, her golden hair shimmering in the dappled light. Her laughter bubbling up when her friend playfully swatted her hand away.

It was a simple joy, untainted by the weight of survival or the shadows of despair—a kind of joy that had no place in his world. Something in Ail’s chest twisted—a painful, bittersweet sensation that he couldn’t name.

Usagi was everything his world wasn’t.

She was warmth.

She was vitality.

The embodiment of life that sought nothing in return.

She was sunlight, and he was a creature of destruction, caught in the slow decay of the Makai Tree’s grasp. He didn’t belong in her light, yet he couldn’t tear his gaze away, drawn to her radiance with a longing that was as futile as it was undeniable.

A soft sigh slipped from his lips, barely a breath, but it carried the weight of everything he could never have. He whispered without thinking, his gaze locked on the girl beneath the cherry blossoms, “So full of life...”

“What did you say?” An’s voice sliced through his reverie, sharp and tinged with suspicion.

Her presence sliced into him like a knife. A constant reminder of the duty that kept him bound to a path of hunger and despair. He hadn’t realized he’d spoken aloud, hadn’t meant to give voice to the longing that ached within him.

He turned to her, forcing his expression into one of practiced calm. “Nothing.”

He could feel An’s gaze on him, piercing and possessive, her eyes following his line of sight to where Usagi now stood, spinning beneath the falling petals, her laughter ringing out like bells.

“Oh, it’s Usagi again. Your new lover. When are you going to leave me for her?” her tone laced with bitterness and jealousy.

“Stop, An.”

The Makai Tree’s hunger was a constant whisper in the back of his mind, a reminder of the price of survival. It was his duty—his purpose. Yet as he looked at Usagi one last time, her laughter still echoing faintly across the park, he couldn’t help but feel the weight of that purpose would crush him.

An turned away, her attention shifting away to plot their next move. Ail let her lead him, his feet moving automatically, yet his heart remained tethered to the girl beneath the cherry blossoms. The world around him faded into a blur of pink and green, but the impression of Usagi lingered—a warmth that refused to dissipate, a light that clung to the edges of his memory like the scent of sakura on the breeze.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting the park in hues of amber and indigo, Ail and An slipped away from the bustling paths into a secluded grove where the shadows grew thicker, weaving themselves between the trunks of ancient trees.

Ail watched as she selected Reci—a Cardian whose essence resonated with something deep and unspoken within him. A tingling anticipation crawled up his spine, both electrifying and unsettling. The card pulsed in her hand, emitting a cold energy that seemed to draw the warmth from the very air around them.

Almost reluctantly, he raised the flute to his lips and played.

The card's glow intensified, casting sharp shadows across their faces. Ail's eyes traced the lines of the card as it transformed—the image of the twisted figure expanding, unfurling into reality.

Bark-covered limbs emerged first, gnarled branches for arms ending in retractable claws that glinted menacingly. Vines coiled around her form like armor, sinewy and tense, ready to strike. Roots extended from her legs, anchoring her momentarily to the ground before she shifted, fully formed.

“Take what you need,” Ail murmured to her, his voice steady but devoid of true conviction.

The words tasted bitter on his tongue, a necessary command he had come to loathe.

Reci acknowledged him with a slight incline of her head before vanishing into the depths of the park, her roots burrowing into the earth with each stride.

They retreated to a vantage point atop a gentle slope, where the park stretched out before them in a patchwork of moonlit clearings and shadowed enclaves. Reci was a phantom among the unsuspecting humans, her presence concealed until the moment she struck.

One by one, the park's visitors began to falter—joyful laughter giving way to gasps of confusion as they lost their energy.

The first wave of energy hit him like a sudden jolt—a crisp shock that spread through his veins, invigorating and chilling all at once. It was like ice water rushing through parched soil, a fleeting relief that made his heart race.

For an instant, he felt powerful, alive—an intoxicating surge that made every nerve hum with vitality. The air felt sharper, the scent of sakura petals more vivid, and yet, something in the back of his mind coiled in disquiet.

Then, almost as swiftly, the sensation twisted. The energy was tainted, hollow—a sweetness that soured before he could savor it. Ail clenched his jaw as the warmth he had felt a moment before curdled into a heavy, acrid emptiness.

He felt it seep into his core, yet fail to quench the deeper hunger that gnawed at his spirit.

Beside him, An stretched, moaning with the influx of energy.

With each surge of stolen life, the feeling intensified—a relentless reminder of how twisted their reality had become. Ail could feel his body grow stronger, but his spirit seemed to shrink with every intake, each pulse of stolen vitality a reminder of what they had lost and how far they'd strayed.

Beside him, An's eyes gleamed as she observed Reci's progress. Satisfaction shaped her features into a smile, her gaze bright with triumph. To her, this was survival—an unflinching, necessary means to an end. She reveled in it, the acquisition of energy for the Makai Tree, her faith in their mission unwavering.

"Feel that?" she asked, a triumphant glint in her eyes. "The Makai Tree will flourish again."

Ail nodded, but the agreement felt hollow, the word falling flat.

Time seemed to crawl by as Reci's roots spread further, reaching deep beneath the park to tap into the energy of every living thing. Each pulse of stolen life filled Ail, and yet he grew more restless, more discontent.

The park, once vibrant with the joy of spring, now seemed dimmed—an echo of what it had been, the laughter of children replaced by hollow quiet as exhaustion overtook the unsuspecting visitors. The weight of what they were doing pressed upon him, a cold, suffocating presence that tightened like a vise around his heart.

Then, something changed—a sudden shift in the flow of energy, different from the muted fear and despair he had grown used to. This energy was pure, vibrant, like liquid sunlight surging through his veins. Ail's breath caught, his gaze snapping to the source, heart pounding with a mixture of dread and exhilaration.

From his perch, he saw her—Sailor Moon, her presence a beacon cutting through the darkness that had settled over the park. She stood resolute, her silhouette framed by the soft glow of moonlight and drifting sakura petals.

The energy radiating from her was like nothing he had felt in so long—untainted, strong, and filled with a warmth that seemed to wash over everything it touched. It illuminated the truth of their actions, revealing just how far into darkness they had fallen.

An hissed beside him, her eyes narrowing. “She’s here again. Always meddling.”

Ail remained silent, his gaze fixed on Sailor Moon, watching the light she brought into their shadowed world. Her power was an unwavering force, unyielding and sincere. It filled him with an ache that was at once painful and comforting—a reminder of what they could never attain through stolen life, a longing for something more than the hollow survival they had carved out for themselves.

As Reci and Sailor Moon faced each other, the contrast between the two was undeniable. Corruption against purity, hunger against hope. Each blow, each clash, reverberated through the air, and Ail felt his resolve waver.

The sharp light of Sailor Moon's tiara sliced through the air, scattering the shadows that had pooled around the monster. Her voice rang out, strong and unwavering, a radiant contrast to the chaos. Ail's breath hitched as he watched her—the way she moved, the determination that burned in her every action.

She didn't hesitate, didn't falter. Her bravery, as fragile and fleeting as the sakura petals drifting through the air.

An hooted in triumph as Sailor Moon's tiara did no damage to Reci, but he looked on with only abject disinterest. Reci roared, its writhing tentacles slashing wildly, but she didn't back down.

He stepped back, his hand brushing against the bark of a nearby tree as though seeking support. The rough texture grounded him, but it didn't quiet the storm rising in his chest. Sailor Moon wasn't just fighting to defeat Reci. She was fighting to protect—to nurture, to preserve something precious. It was a motivation so foreign, so achingly beautiful, that it left him breathless.

An's presence beside him was sharp, like a thorn pressing into his side. An glared at Sailor Moon, her eyes narrowed with envy and disdain. "Why does she fight so hard? What's the point? They can't stop us."

Ail didn't respond.

He couldn't.

The words lodged in his throat, heavy and unspoken. He wasn't sure if they were meant for An or for himself. Instead, he let his eyes linger on Sailor Moon, on the way she carried herself, on the light that seemed to ripple outward from her.

The battle raged on, the sounds of conflict blending into the background as Ail's thoughts swirled. The creature's cries, the clash of power, the bursts of energy—all of it became distant, like echoes in a vast, empty cavern.

Then he turned away. He didn't want to see how it ended. Whether the Cardian fell or Sailor Moon triumphed, the outcome didn't matter.

What mattered was the seed of doubt growing within him, its roots reaching deeper with every moment he spent on this planet, every second he watched her fight.

The sakura petals danced in the breeze, brushing against his skin like whispers. Ail closed his eyes, exhaling slowly.

"We shouldn't have come here," he murmured, so softly that even An didn't hear him.

And with that, he stepped further into the shadows, leaving the battle—and the questions it stirred—behind.

## Chapter Fourteen

# Blossoms Torn by the Storm

The sakura trees of Juban Park held onto their few scattered blossoms, each petal like a stubborn memory clinging to the past, refusing to let go. Everywhere the bittersweet scent of cherry blossoms mixed with the earthy promise of evening, and beneath Minako's feet, a carpet of petals lay softly, as if cushioning her troubled thoughts.

Minako moved with an aimless grace, her eyes unfocused, tracing the golden evening light filtering through the branches above. The sun hung low, its warmth spilling across the park, painting everything in hues of amber and rose, the colors of both endings and new beginnings.

Banners fluttered weakly against the cooling breeze, their movement like a gentle sigh. Stone lanterns flickered along the path, doing nothing to ease the hollowness that had settled in Minako's chest.

"Gah! This is the worst!"

She hated feeling like this—so small, so unworthy.

Her heart ached with a yearning that she couldn't name, an emptiness that gnawed at her with every thought of Usagi, of Sailor Moon.

The whole city sang of her triumphs, of the shining beacon she had become. They called her a hero, a goddess of justice, and what did they call Sailor V now? Just an echo of the past.

“You’re being stupid.”

Minako clenched her fists, nails biting into her palms, her body coiled with a frustration that had nowhere to go. It wasn’t that she didn’t love Usagi; she did, deeply.

But jealousy was a bitter poison, and it twisted her admiration into something ugly.

She was the Guardian of Love, yet here she was, consumed by jealousy and resentment for her own princess, her friend. It was maddening to watch Usagi grow while Minako remained static, her powers unchanged, her moment of triumph elusive.

She was like those blossoms that still clung to the tree, desperate to stay despite knowing their time had passed.

She was fading, and it hurt more than she wanted to admit.

The storm within her grew, rising with each heartbeat, pressing against her ribs, until she could hold it in no longer. With an angry shout, Minako kicked a small rock.

“Why can’t I just be happy for her?” her voice cracked, frustration echoing against the silent trees.

The stone skittered across the petal-strewn ground, bouncing until it struck something.

No!

It hit a man square in the back!

Her anger instantly replaced by a rush of mortification. “Oh, no!” her words tripping over themselves. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t see—”

She stopped, the world narrowing, blurring at the edges until all that remained was the man sitting before her. His hair, white like moonlight, caught the evening glow and shimmered like spun starlight. His eyes—eyes that seemed to hold galaxies, eyes she knew from a place beyond memory—met hers with a calm intensity that left her breathless.

Kunzite.

The cherry blossoms seemed to fall more slowly, drifting between them, each petal a fragile connection suspended in the twilight. His gaze held hers, unwavering, and for a moment, everything—her jealousy, her resentment, her doubt—faded, leaving only this feeling of inevitability.

Kunzite's lips curved into a faint smile, one that held both secrets and a quiet, almost wistful familiarity. "No harm done," he said smoothly, like the first notes of a cello vibrating through her chest.

"I—I didn't mean to disturb you."

Her fingers twisted together as if trying to knit her scattered emotions into something whole.

Why did it have to be him?

Kunzite rubbed his back theatrically. His eyes holding both amusement and wariness as they met hers, a familiar dance of push and pull that made her heart stutter.

"So we meet again. Though this time with considerably more pain." The ghost of a smile played on his lips. "I trust you won't make a habit of throwing rocks at me?"

A gust of wind rustled the branches, sending a cascade of blossoms down. She'd seen this man once before, in Crown Fruit Parlor, and hadn't seen him since. But he'd haunted her dreams, lingering like a specter sent to stalk her every move. Since their first meeting, there had been something about him—an unshakable familiarity that lingered in her thoughts.

She studied his profile with an intensity that would have made a lesser man flinch. His sharp features were softened by the dusky evening light, yet every angle of his face felt like a half-remembered dream, a story written in starlight she'd forgotten.

Minako took a deep breath, forcing a grin onto her face—though it felt brittle. “We still haven’t determined where I know you from. You weren’t my kindergarten teacher, right?”

“No, I don’t teach kindergarten.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Then I’m convinced we knew each other in another life.”

“Perhaps.”

“It’s decided then,” her voice rang with the authority of Venus herself. “This is fate. And I’m keeping you.”

Kunzite laughed—a warm, deep sound that seemed to vibrate through the evening air, echoing against the fading blossoms.

“What makes you so certain I’ll accept being kept?” he asked, leaning in ever so slightly, a challenge lingering in his gaze, guarded but open.

Minako grinned, confidence swelling within her. “Because we’re meant to be. If we’d met in this life before, I’d remember. This—” she gestured between them, her hands sketching an invisible line, “—is older than now.”

“Do you know my favorite sandwich?” he teased, a playful glint in his eye.

Minako squinted, then grinned. “Not yet. But I’ve got this life to find out.”

Then he turned towards her, that smile still on his lips. That expression was her undoing. It wasn’t a showy grin that lit up a room or demanded attention, but something quieter, deeper. As if it carried a weight on its own.

There was warmth in it, evoking dreams of glittering golden columns and beautiful dreams rolling over green hills. It held the echoes of battles fought and promises broken, wrapped in a fragile hope that somehow endured.

When he smiled, the entire world paused. His smile wasn't just a feature.

It was a memory.

A promise.

A piece of him that felt meant for her and her alone.

“Okay.”

Her heart skipped a beat, his words easing the thoughts that had plagued her since the night they had first met. She felt that strange familiarity with him—like a piece of herself that she had lost and only just found again. The feeling was so strong it almost drowned out the jealousy, almost filled the emptiness gnawing at her.

“Are you going to ask me to sit?”

“Do you need an invitation?”

She stuck her chin up. “I don't.”

Plopping down next to him, a comfortable silence fell between them, a moment of peace amid the turmoil that had become her life. But even in that stillness, questions loomed between them—questions Minako longed to ask, but feared the answers too.

The sun dipped lower, and shadows stretched across the park, cooling the air, brushing against her skin like a reminder of the world that still waited. Minako looked at Kunzite, her lips parting to say something—anything—but the words wouldn't come. He gave her a sad smile, as if he knew her struggle, as if he understood everything she felt.

“You seemed troubled.”

Her heart twisted.

She hated he could see her so clearly, hated the way his gaze made her feel transparent, exposed. And yet, at the same time, she couldn't turn away.

She took a shaky breath, summoning all her courage to speak without letting her vulnerability show. “I’m fine,” she lied, her voice a bit too loud, a bit too firm. “Just... enjoying the blossoms.”

Kunzite nodded, then he looked away, his white hair catching the last of the light.

“You’re upset. Are you angry at someone? Perhaps... Sailor Moon?”

“No, she’s a hero.”

He leaned closer. “I know your Sailor Venus, and don’t lie to me. You two share the same brilliant shine.”

The statement caught Minako off guard, the ease with which he saw through her startling. Her smile faltered, and for a heartbeat, she considered brushing it off, making light of it. But his gaze was steady and warm, as if telling her that here, in this space beneath the cherry blossoms, it was alright to be real.

Minako hesitated, her fingers plucking absently at a fallen petal.

Her gaze dropping to her hands. “It’s complicated. I care about her—a lot. She’s a dear friend. But sometimes, I can’t help feeling... abandoned.”

He nodded, and his eyes never left hers. He said nothing, only watched her, inviting her to continue with a quiet that made her feel safe, a haven where honesty could flourish.

“I was the first, you know? Sailor V. I fought before anyone else awakened. But now, Usagi—she’s the one. She’s grown so much, so radiant. And me? I’m still just... me. Still using the same powers I always had.”

She glanced up, expecting judgment or pity, but found none in his gaze—only understanding, steady as the roots beneath them.

“It feels selfish. I should be happy for her—for all of us. And I am. But... I still feel like I’m being left behind.”

The air seemed to hold its breath as Minako opened up, her words tumbling out like petals caught in a breeze—delicate, hesitant, yet impossible to contain. Each confession fell between them, heavy as cherry blossoms slipping from their branches—the love she felt for Usagi mingled with jealousy that stung like thorns; the frustration of being left behind; the anger she harbored at herself for even feeling this way.

It all spilled out, her emotions raw and tangled, exposed beneath the waning light of day.

Kunzite listened without interruption. The soft glow of early evening wrapped around them, painting his features in shades of gold and rose, highlighting the depth in his eyes—a gaze that seemed to see right through the armor she usually wore.

“Jealousy is a natural shadow to ambition and pride,” Kunzite finally said.

He spoke as if he understood each fracture of her heart, every sharp edge that had cut her.

“It reveals what we think we’re missing—what we hold dear. But jealousy can also cast shadows over the very things we should celebrate about ourselves.”

His words weren’t a judgment but a gentle unveiling of a truth she had refused to see, a way forward she hadn’t been able to imagine.

Kunzite’s expression softened, his gaze warm, holding no judgment, just acceptance. He reached out, gently brushing a stray petal from her shoulder.

“It’s okay to desire growth, Minako. It doesn’t make you selfish—it makes you human. Acknowledging your feelings doesn’t diminish your love or loyalty. It’s okay to want more.”

His words struck something deep within her—a chord that vibrated with relief, loosening the knot that had been tightening around her

heart. She blinked, a soft smile blooming across her lips. The world seemed to soften in response, the colors of evening blending into something warmer, the fading blossoms glowing like tiny embers of hope.

“If you spend too much time looking at Sailor Moon, comparing yourself to her light, you’ll overlook your own. Your worth isn’t defined by standing in the brightest light, Minako. Each star shines with its own brilliance, not in competition but in harmony with the others. And each star has its moment, its time to shine when it’s needed most.”

Her voice trembled as she whispered, “Does that make me a terrible friend? A horrible person?” her words were fragile, almost lost beneath the sigh of the wind that moved through the branches above, scattering petals at their feet.

Kunzite’s eyes softened, his gaze holding a warmth that made her breath hitch. There was a kindness there, an understanding that reached beyond their brief encounters, touching on something she couldn’t name but felt deep in her bones.

“Jealousy doesn’t make you a bad friend, Minako. It makes you human. It’s natural to want recognition, to want to be seen for your own light.”

“You know,” she began, her voice lighter, “you’re not just a pretty face, Kunzite.”

“Neither are you, Sailor V,” he replied, his voice imbued something that made her heart flutter.

“Good,” she announced, leaning back, “I feel better.”

“You know,” he said softly. His gaze met hers, steady and piercing, as if he could see straight through to the parts of herself she’d long tried to hide. “I think I’ll call you Starshine.”

The word hung in the air between them, fragile and shimmering, and Minako felt it settle deep in her chest, a name that felt both foreign

and strikingly familiar. Her breath hitched as the sound of it stirred something within her—a memory she couldn't quite touch, a feeling she couldn't name.

It was as though the word carried the echoes of another time, another life, where this moment had already happened. The connection between them felt too vast for words, too intricate for reason, and yet it filled her, warm and undeniable.

Her lips curved into a smile—shy at first, then brighter as her heart swelled with a bittersweet ache she didn't understand.

“Then I'll be your Starshine forever.”

The tranquility of the park shattered in an instant, as if the air itself had been torn asunder. One moment, the soft rustle of cherry blossoms and the fading warmth of the evening sun filled the world. The next, a whirlwind of petals erupted, twisting into a storm that howled through the park, scattering the last lingering traces of peace.

Kunzite's demeanor shifted instantly. Gone was the calm presence, the philosophical companion, replaced by a fierce guardian—a warrior with an aura that seemed to reshape the very fabric of reality. His posture coiled, muscles taut, eyes narrowing as he stepped in front of Minako.

“Stay close,” he commanded, his voice sharp as a blade forged in a thousand forgotten battles.

The maelstrom of cherry blossoms parted with a violent gust, revealing Gigaros—a twisted figure of darkness, her spiky orange hair blazing like cruel fire against the twilight sky. Her massive white wings unfurled, casting long shadows that slithered over the petal-strewn ground, her toga rippling as if woven from the essence of malice itself. Her eyes, filled with nothing but hunger and fury, fixed on them with a predator's intent.

The monster hissed, her voice slicing through the air with the sound of breaking glass. Her claws extended, razor-sharp, catching the dim evening light and glinting like lethal daggers poised to rend flesh from bone.

Minako coiled, ready to transform, but Kunzite dove at the beast without hesitation.

“Kunzite!”

A discordant screech echoed through the park, but it did not deter him. At the last moment, he rolled to the side, but not fast enough. A claw sliced his arm, leaving a trail of red. Minako shouted, now bursting into action.

Fear twisted into something else—an urge to protect, to fight, a surge of fierce resolve she hadn’t felt in so long.

She met Kunzite’s gaze, her voice trembling. “Kunzite!”

“I won’t risk you, Starshine!”

Minako took a breath that felt like it reached her soul. “Venus Power, Make Up!”

She clutched her transformation pen, and in a burst of golden light, Sailor Venus emerged—radiant, determined, her eyes blazing with newfound strength. The energy coursing through her veins felt like a rush of sunlight, like the essence of dawn itself, awakening every dormant part of her spirit.

The air seemed to hum with anticipation as Sailor Venus faced Gigaros. The Cardian hissed, her wings spreading wide, shadows jagged as she prepared to strike.

“Crescent Beam!” Venus called out, and a ray of golden light burst from her fingertips. The beam cut through the night, blazing towards Gigaros like a comet, illuminating the shadows.

But Gigaros beat her wings with a sudden, ferocious force, whipping up a cyclone that tore the attack apart. The wind roared, tearing

branches from trees, sending petals into a frenetic dance, the soft beauty of the blossoms turning into a storm of chaos. The gusts forced Venus and Kunzite to shield themselves, their forms bent against the onslaught, the ground trembling beneath them.

Gigaros lunged, her claws poised to strike, her predatory gaze fixed on Sailor Venus. Before Venus could react, Kunzite moved again—his body a shield, his arm outstretched to protect her. The impact of the blow forced a groan from his lips, his knees buckling under the force, yet his eyes never left Minako's.

He looked at her, pain etched in every line of his face, but his eyes still carried that depth—that unbreakable conviction.

“Remember,” he said, his voice hoarse but steady, “you are more powerful than you know.”

Kunzite's words ignited something within her, a surge of clarity and radiant purpose. Sailor Venus turned to face Gigaros, golden energy rising like a tide, her determination blazing through the chaos.

“Crescent Beam Shower!” she cried, and a flurry of radiant beams erupted from her hands, each one searing towards Gigaros with pinpoint accuracy.

They blazed through the chaotic winds, illuminating the battlefield, each beam striking true and forcing Gigaros back, her confident sneer faltering into confusion and fear.

Then came a presence as familiar as her own heartbeat—Sailor Moon, appearing beside her, her presence glowing with an aura of pure silver light, radiant with compassion and courage.

Their eyes met, and in that moment, the earlier jealousy that had gnawed at Venus's heart melted away, leaving only admiration, only love for her friend.

Together, they moved—Venus’s golden light merging with Sailor Moon’s silvery power. The Cutie Moon Rod glowed, a beacon of hope that flared with ethereal brightness.

“Moon Princess Halation!” Sailor Moon’s voice echoed, her command filled with the resonance of something eternal.

The combined powers surged forth, a wave of golden and silver energy that engulfed Gigaros, the monster’s shrieks echoing through the park as her form dissolved into stardust. The energy washed over the battlefield, cleansing the darkness, purging the malice. Cherry blossoms lifted in the updraft, swirling into the sky, their soft petals a tender contrast to the storm that had just passed.

Venus took a deep, steadying breath, her body trembling as the adrenaline ebbed away. The battle was over, but the echoes of it lingered, the power of what they had done resonating in the silence left behind.

Kunzite stood, his form steadying itself, though the wounds still marked his body. Minako rushed to his side, her concern palpable, her eyes wide. He offered her a gentle smile, brushing off her worry with a quiet strength.

“I’m alright,” he murmured.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her gaze meeting his, her heart swelling with an emotion she couldn’t quite name.

His words had been her anchor, his belief in her light. He had protected her, and in return, she had found her own strength.

Kunzite held her gaze. Something in his eyes—pride, understanding, maybe even a touch of sadness. “You found your strength when it mattered most. I only reminded you of what was already there.”

A warmth filled her chest, and she realized then, amidst the scattered cherry blossoms, that her light wasn’t meant to compete with anyone else’s. It was her own, meant to shine brightly beside her

friends, her allies. The park, now still and serene, bore witness to this truth, the fallen petals a reminder of growth, of beauty even in the wake of violence.

“Sooooooooo,” Sailor Moon’s voice chirped. “Who’s the guy?”



## Chapter Fifteen

# Shadows Breaking Beneath the Light

The late afternoon sun dipped lower over Yoyogi Park, casting soft, golden rays that filtered through the ancient branches. Light illuminated the green expanse with a gentle, warm glow. Mamoru adjusted his collar, the crisp fabric suddenly feeling constrictive as he sighed, the scene before him both captivating and unsettling.

He had come here out of obligation—a simple favor for a college buddy that had somehow consumed his entire day. Yet, even amidst the minor annoyance that pressed against his sense of duty, there was something else—a softer satisfaction, an unspoken gratitude.

Usagi was here, and he had caught sight of her more times than he dared admit, her laughter drifting across the lawns like wind chimes, calling to something inside him he hadn't realized was waiting to be awakened.

Sometimes he had to remind himself that she was only a random girl. But then the sunlight would catch her just right, flowing over the curve of her shoulder like liquid gold, illuminating the delicate line of her collarbone where her uniform shifted with her movements.

The way the light kissed her skin made her seem more than human—like she had stepped out of a dream, a goddess wrapped in warmth and light and beautiful dreams. And when she tilted her head

back to laugh, her hair catching in the breeze, it was as though she carried the sun itself, radiating a kind of joy that defied explanation.

Mamoru swallowed, forcing his gaze away, his heart tightening with a feeling he wasn't ready to name. She was only a girl; he told himself again.

But then why couldn't he look away?

A familiar voice cutting through the peaceful hum of the park interrupted Mamoru's quiet reverie.

"Chiba! Over here!" Takahashi, his friend and the ringleader of this ordeal, waved him over with a grin that suggested more work lay ahead.

Mamoru adjusted his collar as he walked toward the small gathering of volunteers clustered around a table laden with supplies.

"I know painting with kids is your favorite," Takahashi teased, handing Mamoru a clipboard. "You've been quiet today. Distracted by the scenery?" his eyebrows wiggled in mock accusation.

Mamoru smirked, taking the clipboard and skimming the list of items. "Scenery is nice," he replied casually, ignoring the way his pulse quickened at the memory of Usagi's laughter. "Or maybe I'm just waiting for you to admit this whole thing was a setup to rope me into free labor."

Takahashi laughed, clapping Mamoru on the shoulder. "Caught me. But hey, you're good at this stuff—kids love you, parents think you're reliable. I mean, who else is gonna supervise painting? You've got the 'cool older brother' vibe down."

Mamoru raised an eyebrow, feigning annoyance. "Not sure I'd go that far."

"You're the one the kids follow around like ducklings," Takahashi pointed out, leaning against the table. "Seriously, Chiba, lighten up. You might actually enjoy yourself for once."

Mamoru rolled his eyes but didn't argue. Instead, he scanned the crowd, his gaze lingering on the far side of the field where Usagi was surrounded by a group of kids, her hands gesturing animatedly as she explained something he couldn't hear.

"Fine," he muttered, flipping the clipboard closed and handing it back. "But no more scavenger hunts. I draw the line at chasing squirrels for clues."

Takahashi laughed, shaking his head. "Deal. Just keep an eye on things for a while. It's almost wrap-up time, anyway. And who knows? Maybe the 'scenery' will make it worth your while."

Mamoru didn't reply, but as Takahashi walked off, he allowed himself one last glance in Usagi's direction. Her laugh carried across the park again, a melody that seemed to follow him, no matter how hard he tried to shake it.

A group of kids came over and started painting ceramic squirrels and birds, chattering along with their parents. He tried to keep his eyes on the table, away from her, but he failed.

Her golden hair left trails of brilliance as she darted between clusters of children, her voice bright and lilting, her face flushed with excitement. Her energy was magnetic—pure and unfiltered joy spilling out like sunshine, coaxing life to bloom wherever she went.

It wasn't just her exuberance that caught him; it was the way she kneeled beside a small child, wiping away their tears with tender, patient care. There was a beauty in her empathy, a grace in her clumsiness that transcended the physical.

Usagi was unguarded, and that openness, that ability to care so deeply and freely, stirred something within Mamoru—something he couldn't name, but that felt like roots reaching deeper, anchoring themselves in ancient soil.

She'd make a wonderful mother.

He startled, rubbing his neck and banishing the thought.

Then, as if his thoughts summoned her, she came skipping across the space between them.

“Look, Mamoru!” Her voice rang out, bright and carefree, as she skittered to a stop before him. “We found this enormous pinecone! Isn’t it great? Look! It’s as big as my head!”

She held the pinecone next to her face and grinned. The sun caught her hair, and it burst into a radiant glow, a halo against the deepening green of the park.

“Don’t eat it. You might turn into a pinecone. That will chase the boys away for sure.”

She scowled. “There’s only you, Mamoru.”

His lips curved into a smile before he could stop himself, a warmth blooming in his chest as he watched her. Without waiting for a response, she turned and skipped back to the children. She moved with such joy, such spontaneity, and it was impossible not to be caught up in her light, to feel his heart tugged toward her like a flower yearning for the sun.

Each time he considered leaving, there she was—her golden presence as inevitable as dawn, her laughter touching something deep inside him that he had kept hidden, even from himself.

“Get a grip, Chiba,” he muttered as he stopped a kid from drinking paint.

He knew he should leave, that he had fulfilled his obligations hours ago, but he found he couldn’t pull away.

Not when she remained.

The shadows lengthened across the grass as the sun dipped lower, and a breeze rustled through the branches overhead, scattering petals that danced across the lawn. Usagi’s voice rose above the quiet mur-

mur of the park, bright and unrestrained, a sound that pulled him in despite every instinct to stay guarded.

Her presence was like gravity—he felt it pulling at him, even as he resisted, even as he tried to convince himself that he was only here, out of duty.

Yet, in that moment, seeing her beneath the canopy of green, her face alight with joy, her eyes reflecting the fading gold of the setting sun, Mamoru felt his heart tighten.

It was an ache—a beautiful, painful ache that made him feel alive in a way he couldn't fully understand. She looked ethereal, her golden hair catching the last of the light, her expression so open and genuine that it made his chest hurt. He wanted to stay by her side, to be grounded in her warmth, to stretch toward her light with an unyielding determination.

“Ten more minutes, then you'll leave.”

And then, as if the world itself shifted, a ripple of unease threaded through him—a whisper of something dark and unknown cutting through the warmth. The tranquil scene around him seemed to warp, the shadows beneath the trees darkening, a coldness creeping in at the edges of his awareness.

His instincts—those inexplicable senses that always seemed to know more than he did—flared, and he found himself searching the pathways, the deepening darkness beneath the canopy, his heart thudding in his chest.

Something was coming.

He didn't know what it was, but the air felt different, a tension building beneath the surface that set every nerve on edge. He glanced back at Usagi, her laughter still ringing out, oblivious to the change, and something fierce ignited in his chest—a need to protect her, to keep her safe from whatever shadows threatened to emerge.

The event was winding down, parents getting their children ready to leave, when a ripple in the tranquil evening air drew his attention.

A dissonant current disturbed the otherwise serene backdrop.

Slowly, he'd been growing use to these ripples over the last few months. Strange at first. Now they were almost like companions. In this moment, they whispered that something was wrong.

There was a fracture in the natural harmony.

At once, every natural thing screamed.

A flash of violent, unnatural color slashed across his vision, a blaze of searing energy that shattered the gentleness of twilight.

A Cardian materialized in a storm of petals and darkness—a figure that seemed to pull the sunlight into her, absorbing the warmth and twisting it into something sinister.

Amaderasu.

She floated above the area, indigo hair writhing like a dark, living river, lavender skin gleaming against her blazing costume—a tight, red bodysuit with fiery accents that burned against the green of the park, her sunburst cape swirling in a chaotic aura.

Everything exploded into chaos.

Screams pierced the quiet, families fleeing, parents scrambling to protect their children as the creature's presence filled the air with a malevolent hum. The tranquility of moments before dissolved, the energy crackling in waves, electric with terror.

“Usagi!”

His focus narrowed to one thing, one person—Usagi. His heart clenched as he whirled around, frantic, until he spotted her golden hair. She was moving, not away from danger like everyone else, but straight toward it.

“No.”

His breath caught in his throat, his heart pounding with a raw mixture of fear and something else—something that felt like awe. Usagi's eyes blazed, her face set with a determination that seemed impossibly bright. It was that look, that courage that was far too large for her small frame, that filled Mamoru with both pride and sheer terror.

He called out to her, a desperate plea torn from his lips, but his voice was swallowed by the madness of the moment. She shouldn't have to face this.

Her light was too precious to risk so recklessly.

And then, just as quickly as it had begun, the Cardian vanished—a gust of warped energy dispersing, leaving the park hollow in its wake. The desperate cries of parents cut through the silence, sharp and panicked, and Mamoru's eyes snapped to the crowd—some pointing toward the darker edges of the park, where children had gone missing in the chaos, swallowed by the twisting trails beneath the canopy.

“Several children ran into the forest!”

Mamoru's gaze found Usagi once more, and he didn't need to see her face to know what she would do.

She would go into the shadows, into the unknown, because she wouldn't hesitate—not when someone needed her. He watched her turn toward the dense woods; her steps sure and her resolve unwavering.

“I won't let you face this alone.”

And before he could think, before the worry could choke him, Mamoru was moving too—falling into stride beside her, determined not to let her face the darkness alone.

The park's winding paths became a maze of shifting silhouettes and muted colors. The scents of damp earth and decaying leaves mingled, the crunch of twigs and the rustle of undergrowth echoing in the deepening quiet.

Usagi called out names as they searched for the missing children. Her composure was a marvel, the way her voice offered reassurance despite everything. It wasn't just her bravery; it was the way she wrapped her compassion around her courage, creating something unbreakable. Her empathy was a light in the dark, her warmth unyielding.

“Usagi.”

“We have to find them, Mamoru.”

“We will.”

She stumbled over a root, and he caught her before she fell. With a small nod, they moved deeper into the growing dark. Mamoru watched, and with every step she took, his admiration grew—an admiration mixed with something deeper, something that settled into a fierce determination.

She was the girl who tripped over her own feet, who laughed at her own mistakes, and yet she carried a strength so profound it left him breathless. It wasn't perfect, it wasn't untouchable—it was raw, human, and it burned brighter because of it.

The dusk thickened, deepening into night, but with her there, leading the way, the darkness didn't seem so insurmountable. Mamoru steadied his breathing, letting the scent of the forest fill his senses, each exhale calming the storm inside him. He would be her shield, her unwavering support, her constant in the midst of all that was uncertain.

They moved as one, her courage the only thing illuminating the darkening path. Mamoru knew they were bound by something unspoken, something that thrived in the spaces between danger and hope, between fear and the fierce will to protect.

And it felt familiar.

Like breathing in the scent of rain just before it falls.

“Where do you think she’s gone?” Usagi whispered, clutching at his sleeve.

The answer came with a suddenness that stole the air from his lungs—Amaderasu, the Cardian, manifested like a burst of shattered sunlight, a figure wreathed in blazing reds and oranges that seemed to mock the very idea of warmth.

Her wings spread like shadows, and her indigo hair flowed in dark waves, her lavender skin glowing beneath the fractured rays of dusk.

A monstrous goddess, terrible and magnificent.

A group of children huddled together, their cries rolling over the ground. Amaderasu lingered above them, her wings half spread, claws scraping lazily at the bark of a nearby tree. The menace in her gaze was palpable, but Mamoru didn’t let it sway him.

“What are we going to do, Mamoru?” Usagi asked, her voice thin but strong.

He didn’t have the power to defeat the evil, but it wasn’t about power or strength—it was about the promise he had made to himself, the unspoken vow to be her shield, her protector.

“We have to get the children to safety.”

The surrounding forest seemed to hold its breath, every leaf, every shadow waiting. Mamoru tightened his fists, the rough bark of the tree pressing into his back, the cool air filling his lungs as he faced the darkness.

The Cardian was a storm, a looming darkness against the soft twilight, but Mamoru drew his strength from the earth beneath his feet, from the love and bravery that had taken root in his soul.

This was his stand, the line he would hold for her.

The Cardian’s eyes narrowed, and the tension between them stretched taut.

He would not yield.

Not now.

Not ever.

“Go for the children. I’ll distract that thing.”

“But, Mamoru, you’ll get hurt. I won’t allow that.”

Mamoru shook his head, his gaze never leaving the glowing eyes in the darkness. “Usagi, that thing will do more damage to the kids. Get them out.”

“Okay, but be safe.”

“I will.”

Usagi’s retreating footsteps faded into the chaos, her figure swallowed by the shadows as she carried the children toward safety. Mamoru’s chest tightened, the weight of the moment pressing against him like an iron vice. The Cardian loomed closer, its fiery aura casting jagged shadows across the forest floor.

Exhale.

Every instinct screamed at him to run, to preserve himself, but the thought of her—of Usagi in harm’s way—held him rooted.

Inhale.

He could feel the air shift, heavy with the Cardian’s lethal intent, but beneath the fear, something deeper stirred—a will stronger than the fear threatening to consume him.

Exhale.

And then it happened.

A final breath, a moment of clarity—Mamoru felt himself slipping into some fathomless place. But he wasn’t afraid, because somehow he knew on the other side he’d find his purpose.

White flashed against the night as his cape unfurled in the evening. His figure sharp against the encroaching night, he faced the looming Cardian, Amaderasu, with an unyielding determination that pulsed within him like the very essence of his soul.

There was a purity in this form.

The distillation of his will to protect her, to be there when she needed him most. His body had surrendered, and yet the Moonlight Knight stood, born from the deepest core of his spirit, an echo of love so fierce it transcended the bounds of his physical self.

“I won’t allow you to harm her!”

With a flick of his wrist, a white rose soared through the twilight air, its petals shimmering like pale fire. But Amaderasu merely swatted it away. Her gaze filled with a cold, calculating malice.

A sharp curse escaped his lips as he lunged to the side, just evading the energy that pulsed toward him, a bubble of destructive force that seemed to distort the very air around it.

His movements felt fluid, almost instinctive, each step more an extension of his resolve than a conscious decision. He dodged again, his heart pounding with the urgency of keeping her focus on him—and away from Usagi.

Throwing another rose, his aim was truer this time, slicing across the Cardian’s cheek, leaving a line of darkness oozing from the wound. Her shriek echoed through the park, and for a brief moment, her malice was solely for him—he’d bought precious seconds, enough for Usagi to get the child away.

Relief surged even as fear gnawed at him; he couldn’t let his guard down now.

From the corner of his eye, he saw movement—a bright figure rushing in, her golden hair catching what light remained in the forest—Sailor Moon, flanked by the other Guardians.

His heart clenched at the sight of her—and the determination in her face.

“Crescent Beam Shower!” Venus shouted.

But the beast roared, her talons lashing out in fury, sending Venus, Mars, and Jupiter sprawling backward in an instant.

But Sailor Mercury stepped forward, her calm gaze unwavering.

“Shabon Spray Freezing!” A mist of ice spiraled forward, engulfing the Cardian in a biting chill that locked her in place. Frost crackled along the ground, glistening in the fading light.

The moment was perfect.

Sailor Moon lifted her scepter. “Moon Princess Halation!”

The light pulsed, a brilliant surge of silvery light, powerful and unwavering, bathing the Cardian in its cleansing glow. It was like a wave of pure hope crashing over darkness, shattering Amaderasu into countless specks of energy that faded with the dawn. The dust settled, and a hushed, sacred silence filled the clearing—the fight was over.

From the shadows, Moonlight Knight watched Sailor Moon, her figure radiant against the lingering darkness. Gratitude and pride swelled within him—they were safe, she was safe.

He had done his part, but now his purpose here was fulfilled.

His eyes met hers across the clearing—a heartbeat, a rush of unspoken emotions. There was something between them, something neither had words for, but that thrummed to life in that moment, rich and warm and irreplaceable.

It was hope.

It was an understanding, a connection that ran deeper than either could have guessed.

Her smile melted into him, chasing away the lingering darkness in his heart. The world narrowed—it was just them, drawn together by something more powerful than fate. The white cloak of his presence fluttered as he faded back, slipping into the night’s cover, leaving no trace behind but the whisper of a promise.

## Chapter Sixteen

# Lanterns Against an Eternal Sky

Rei's hand brushed over the smooth bamboo branches as she tied another tanzaku in place. Each slip of paper carried a wish, a prayer, a dream. They fluttered like delicate wings in the gentle breeze of the July night.

Above her, the stars glittered in an endless dance, their distant light mingling with the warm glow of lanterns that bathed the shrine in gold. The scent of freshly lit incense wafted through the air, mingling with the crisp undertones of pine and the faint sweetness of blooming gardenias.

Tonight was special.

Tonight was Tanabata, a festival steeped in starlight and longing, a celebration of a love both infinite and fleeting.

In the velvet expanse of the summer sky, the stars Vega and Altair gleamed brighter than all the rest, their light weaving the tale of Orihime, the celestial weaver, and Hikoboshi, the devoted cowherd. Their love, once boundless, had been torn apart by duty and the cruel decree of the heavens, leaving the Milky Way—a river of stars—to separate them for all eternity.

A forbidden love.

Yet, even eternity yielded to love, if only for a single night. On this sacred evening, if the skies remained clear and kind, the two would be allowed to meet.

They would bridge the starry river that divided them, their hands finding one another in a moment so radiant, it defied the endless dark.

But if the heavens wept, if rain fell and clouds shrouded the stars, their reunion would be denied, and they would wait another year, their love suspended once more in sorrowful anticipation.

Beneath this celestial drama, the world below joined in their hope, their heartbreak. Bamboo branches stretched toward the heavens, adorned with strips of colorful paper—*tanzaku*—bearing the whispered wishes of those who dreamed, those who loved, those who longed.

Each fluttering ribbon seemed to echo Orihime and Hikoboshi's silent promise: that love, no matter how distant, would find its way. The lanterns glowed like tiny embers of faith, keeping their story alive.

Tonight was about more than just stars. It was about love's resilience, about the ache of separation and the joy of reunion, about dreams so vivid they dared to reach beyond the sky.

Tonight was *Tanabata*, where romance and heartbreak danced hand in hand, reminding the world that even in the vastness of the universe, love was a force that could not be undone.

When the crowd gathered close, she straightened, her voice steady as she recited the legend of Orihime and Hikoboshi to a small cluster of children, their wide eyes reflecting the flicker of lantern flames.

With practiced ease, she called upon the strength of the fire. Her words weaving the story like threads in a tapestry, painting a world of celestial lovers and a starry sky that held the promise of reunion.

Their gazes lifted toward the heavens as if they might catch a glimpse of the mythical pair. Something about their innocent wonder

tugged at her heart, a reminder of why she cherished moments like these.

Yet tonight, her usual composure felt frayed.

Jadeite leaned casually against a stone pillar nearby, his arms crossed and his gaze unrelenting as it followed her every movement. His presence was both maddening and magnetic, an interruption that she couldn't ignore no matter how hard she tried.

He was at ease in a way that unnerved her, blending into the festival's magic as if he belonged, his playful charm as much a part of the evening as the lanterns swaying in the breeze. Each time she passed him, he threw out a teasing remark, his low voice brushing against her composure like a spark against kindling.

"Careful, Princess," he murmured, just loud enough for her to hear. "You might charm them into staying forever."

As always, the nickname ignited such a flurry of emotions.

Anger.

Longing.

And most of all, an undeniable link.

Heat bloomed in her cheeks, her lips pressing into a tight line as she focused on the bamboo in front of her. But her hands faltered, her fingers trembling ever so slightly as she tied the next tanzaku in place. She hated how he could fluster her with just a few words, how he seemed to see straight through the mask of calm she worked so hard to maintain.

He was testing her, she realized, pushing at the edges of her carefully constructed walls, and part of her burned with the desire to push back.

But another part of her, softer and quieter, lingered on the way his eyes made her pulse quicken. It was infuriating, how easily he unsettled her.

She glanced his way, a sharp retort on her tongue, but the words caught in her throat as her eyes met his. The lantern light danced across his features, softening the sharpness of his jawline, casting shadows that made him seem almost unreal. His pale blond hair gleamed in the moonlight, an ethereal contrast to the dark, knowing look in his eyes.

Then there were his eyes... those fathomless depths she lost herself in. They sang a melody that soothed her soul, and whispered secrets of the bond they shared.

Her heart stuttered, a wave of unease rolling through her. What would it be like to give herself to him?

To let him see her soul.

To let him touch her body.

To let him into her mind.

“Rei-san!, look at this one!” A child’s voice broke through her thoughts, and she turned with a smile that she hoped masked the whirlwind inside her. She kneeled beside the boy, who held up a tanzaku with proud hands, his small face alight with joy. “I wished for my big brother to come home soon.”

“That’s a beautiful wish,” Rei said softly, as she tied it to the bamboo. “The stars will hear it, and they’ll guide him back to you.”

As the child skipped off, her gaze drifted once more to Jadeite. He was watching her still, but his usual teasing smirk had softened into something quieter, more contemplative. It sent a ripple of warmth through her chest, a sensation she couldn’t fully name but knew she wasn’t ready to confront.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t shake the feeling that he wasn’t just watching her—he was waiting for something.

Needing a moment to collect herself, she stepped into the sacred fire room. The glow of the smoldering embers was soft and inviting,

its flicker casting shadows that danced like fleeting memories along the shrine's ancient wood.

Rei stood motionless beside it, the festival's distant hum muted in her ears as she focused on the flame. The air was thick with the scent of cedar and faint incense, wrapping her in an atmosphere that felt both sacred and heavy.

Golden light drew her in, pulling at the edges of her consciousness.

A shiver coursed through her as the flame's rhythm shifted, no longer a simple flicker but something deeper, older—alive. It grew, expanding into a vision that unfurled in the recesses of her mind, vivid and consuming.

The shrine faded, replaced by a sacred site under an eternal moon.

Silver light bathed everything, and the air thrummed with power, thick and electric. Beside her was Jadeite, his form steady and familiar, his presence as much a part of her as the stars above.

They sat before a sacred fire, but an ancient one. Magic and power boiled around the dancing flames. The sweet smell of herbs rolled through the air, its fragrance mingling with the heady scent of ancient blooms. Every second felt significant, every motion a promise older than time.

Then between them a flame red thread appeared. The connection between them was tangible, a tether binding their fates, as unbreakable as it was forbidden.

"The gods forbid this," her voice echoed in the vision, trembling yet certain.

"Some bonds," Jadeite's voice replied, deep and resolute, "are written in fate itself."

The vision shattered with the abruptness of breaking glass, and Rei was thrust back into the present.

The light seemed to dim now, the air too cold.

Her chest heaved as if she had run a great distance, her pulse racing with a mixture of wonder and unease. The lingering memory of his presence was too vivid, too real, and the raw truth of it left her trembling. She pressed her palm to her chest as if to steady the thrum of her heart, her composure fracturing under the weight of it all.

But now she knew why she was drawn to him.

Now she knew why he captivated her.

“Lost in thought, Princess?”

Jadeite’s voice was a lifeline, grounding her before she could lose herself entirely. It slid into the quiet like a thread of silk, carrying the familiar edge of mischief she had come to expect. She turned to face him, her cheeks flushed, the vision’s intensity still shadowing her gaze.

He leaned casually against a wooden pillar, his arms crossed, his posture maddeningly relaxed. The soft glow of lantern light played across his features, sharpening the curve of his smile and the faint glint of curiosity in his eyes.

She snorted. “Hardly.”

She glanced away, brushing an invisible speck of dust from her sleeve, unwilling to let him see the thread in her soul. But the vision’s truth burned in her mind, refusing to fade.

Before she could recover fully, a sound broke through the stillness. A single, haunting note echoed through the shrine grounds, delicate and ethereal. More followed, weaving into a melody that filled the night with an aching beauty, its notes rising and falling like waves.

It was a sound both enchanting and wrong, carrying an undercurrent of something dangerous. The air shifted, growing colder, and the scent of incense turned sharp, almost metallic.

Rei tensed, her fingers curling into fists at her sides. The melody wasn’t just music—it was a call, a pull that seemed to reach deep into her soul, urging her forward against her will. The stars above flickered,

their light dimming as the shadows around the shrine grew longer, twisting unnaturally across the ground.

“What evil is this?”

Jadeite straightened, the teasing lilt in his voice replaced by something harder, more urgent. “Nothing good,” he said, stepping closer to her. His presence was solid, grounding, but the tension in his expression mirrored her own unease. “Stay here.”

Rei’s jaw tightened, defiance flaring in her chest even as her heart screamed at her to obey. She wasn’t one to be protected—she was the protector. Yet the intensity in his gaze stilled her protests. The bond forbidden by the gods and nurtured by fate sang in her veins.

The song grew louder, wrapping around them like a veil, and the shrine itself seemed to hold its breath. Shadows deepened, and the night pressed closer, heavy with anticipation. She glanced at Jadeite, their eyes meeting in a silent promise.

Whatever happened, she would protect him.

And he’d protect her.

The melody surged like a tide, haunting and hypnotic, threading through the Hikawa Shrine with an eerie beauty that turned the night into a tableau of fractured dreams. Lantern light wavered against the bamboo trees, their tanzaku slips fluttering in the growing breeze as if the wishes themselves resisted the pull of Siren’s song.

The crowd shifted like sleepwalkers, their gazes glazed, their steps halting but inevitable, drawn toward the Cardian’s siren call. What had been a sanctuary of romance and hope now quivered on the edge of despair.

Rei’s breath caught as she glimpsed the source of the melody. Siren stood beneath the glowing decorations, her pink hair cascading in waves of ethereal light, her blue skin gleaming as though sculpted from starlight.

She was mesmerizing and terrible, her presence both commanding and otherworldly. Every note she sang wrapped around the shrine-goers, beckoning them closer with an allure so pure it felt like temptation incarnate.

The song crept into Rei's mind, brushing against her insecurities, pulling at the threads of longing she kept tightly woven. Her resolve faltered as doubt unfurled inside her, whispering of inadequacies, of a destiny too heavy to bear. The shrine's sacred air pressing against her as though it, too, battled the Cardian's influence.

And then, grounding warmth cut through the fog. A steady hand rested on her arm, light yet deliberate. Jadeite. His touch jolted her back to herself, his low voice anchoring her against the storm of the song.

"Rei. Don't let her get to you."

The unspoken strength in his words snapped her focus back. Their eyes locked, and in that moment, she felt their connection—ancient, unbreakable, as steady as the earth beneath them. Her breath steadied, the fog lifting, and she gave him a sharp nod, her determination crystallizing.

Whatever this melody sought to unravel, it wouldn't succeed. Not while she stood here. Not while he stood beside her.

Together, they pushed through the thrall, each step a deliberate defiance of Siren's song. Rei snapped her fingers in front of entranced faces, her voice sharp and commanding as she shattered the trance wherever she could.

Jadeite moved with her, his presence a quiet but powerful force, guiding the dazed crowd away from the Cardian's pull. They worked in tandem, a harmony of action and resolve, their bond tangible even in the chaos.

Siren's melody swelled, her voice rising in a crescendo of chilling beauty. The crowd leaned toward her like flowers straining for sunlight, the notes a siren's promise that threatened to drown them all. For a moment, Rei faltered, the song finding another crack in her armor.

The whispers returned, biting at her resolve, but then came his voice again, low and steady, cutting through the haze. "You're stronger than this."

The raw certainty in his tone filled the empty spaces inside her, a warmth that grew with every word.

A sudden burst of familiar voices shattered the spell's crescendo. Rei's heart leaped as Sailor Moon and the Guardians rushed into view, their presence a beacon of unwavering hope. Usagi's golden hair shimmered in the lantern light, radiating an optimism that pierced through the darkness.

With their arrival, the tide would shift.

The melody surged, dark and unrelenting, weaving through the shrine like a sinister tide. Siren's song, once hauntingly beautiful, now throbbed with malice, bending the wills of the festival-goers who swayed like marionettes under her thrall.

Shadows deepened unnaturally, cast in flickering waves by the lanterns trembling against the Cardian's oppressive power. The sacred grounds, usually brimming with peace, now felt suffocating, as though the shrine itself recoiled from Siren's presence.

"We have to save them," Rei muttered.

Rei's gaze locked with Jadeite's across the chaos, the unspoken connection between them humming like a taut string vibrating in the wind.

“Get everyone to safety!” Her voice cut through the discord, resolute and commanding, though the words dragged against the emotions clawing at her chest.

“I won’t leave you, Princess.” She could see his hesitation, his defiance flickering in his stormy eyes.

“You have to.”

“No” His reply was steady, laced with emotion he didn’t need to voice, the weight of lifetimes carried in his tone.

For a moment, the memory of their vision flashed in her mind—the sacred bond they’d shared in a life long past. It tightened around her like a silken thread, both fragile and unyielding. But there was no room for desire here, not in the face of duty.

“I’ll be fine. But they won’t. Please.”

Their eyes held for a heartbeat longer until he nodded reluctantly. As he turned, his hand brushed her shoulder—a touch so fleeting yet so warm it burned into her memory.

A breath.

A spark.

Sacred fire ignited in her core, and with a single motion, Rei transformed into Sailor Mars.

Heat roared through her veins, her connection to the shrine amplifying her strength as crimson light shimmered against the silver-streaked sky. She stood tall, a warrior forged from sacred fire and unyielding will, her raven hair rippling like ink against the glow of lanterns.

The other guardians stepped up beside her. Sisters in battle and purpose, Rei was stronger with them by her side. Together they lashed the monster with attacks, but nothing penetrated the song’s powerful aura.

“Fire Soul!” Mars’s voice rang out, cutting through the oppressive air as flames erupted from her fingertips.

But Siren sneered, water lashing out, bamboo scattered—symbols of wishes and hope now trampled under malice. The sight of the festival in ruins stoked a wildfire in her chest, her protective instincts flaring with righteous fury.

Fueled by rage and devotion, her voice rising with unshakable determination.

“Fire Soul Bird!”

A phoenix of pure flame erupted from her hands, its blazing wings illuminating the shrine as it soared toward Siren. This was no ordinary attack; it carried her essence, her love for the shrine, her bond with Jadeite, and her sacred duty. The fiery bird struck Siren dead-on, consuming her in an inferno that silenced her melody and shattered her influence.

Sailor Moon stepped into the clearing, her scepter radiant with silvery light. “Moon Princess Halation!”

The attack engulfed Siren, dissolving her into fading fragments of darkness.

In the stillness that followed, Mars stood amidst the embers, her chest heaving, her gaze steady despite the exhaustion weighing her limbs. The decorations whispered softly in the breeze, their gentle rustling carrying the wishes of the festival once more.

Across the clearing, Jadeite emerged, his eyes searching until they found hers. Relief softened his features, and in that quiet moment, the world faded, leaving only the fragile yet undeniable bond between them.

The Hikawa Shrine exhaled a tranquil sigh, releasing the tension that had gripped its sacred grounds. The air felt lighter, almost reverent, as if the night itself had been cleansed. Yet beneath her calm

exterior, her heart still thrummed with echoes of fire and battle, the heat of her transformation clinging to her like a second skin.

A familiar presence drew her attention. Footsteps, deliberate and measured, approached from behind, and her pulse quickened. She turned to find Jadeite standing there, his figure bathed in lantern light, his usual smirk tempered with a quiet warmth. For a moment, neither spoke, the silence stretching between them heavy with unspoken truths.

“My star-crossed fire, Princess,” he murmured, his voice low and rich, carrying an undercurrent of reverence that startled her. The nickname, once a teasing jibe, now felt like an invocation, as though he were naming something sacred and undeniable.

Heat rose to her cheeks, her carefully held composure slipping.

“Don’t get carried away,” she replied, her tone sharp but lacking conviction.

The warmth in his eyes unraveled her defenses, his gaze holding a depth that left her breathless. In that moment, the barriers she so carefully maintained seemed fragile, insubstantial against the connection pulsing between them.

“You’re remarkable,” Jadeite said softly, his words a quiet confession.

His teasing bravado had melted away, replaced by a sincerity that left her vulnerable, seen. She searched his face, her breath catching as she recognized the same storm she felt mirrored in his expression—a longing, a recognition, a connection that felt ancient and unyielding.

Above them, the stars of Orihime and Hikoboshi burned brightly, as though offering their blessing. The breeze stirred the lanterns, their light casting shifting patterns on the shrine grounds, a celestial dance of hope and renewal. The festival resumed around them, laughter and

murmured gratitude filling the air. But for Rei, the world narrowed to this moment, this shared stillness that felt both fleeting and eternal.

Jadeite grabbed her hand, the contact sending ribbons of fire through her soul. The quiet flame burning beneath the surface seemed to burn a little hotter.

And as they stood together, the stars continued their ancient vigil, glittering like scattered wishes across the sky. Hikawa Shrine stood bathed in their glow, timeless and sacred, carrying the whispers of those who sought its sanctuary. A fragile hope took root in her heart—a tender promise that their story, like the stars above, was far from over.

## Chapter Seventeen

# Lightning Blooming Through Thunder

**M**akoto stood at the edge of the judo arena, her toes curling into the mat's firm surface as she inhaled deeply. The air in the auditorium was heavy, alive with the sound of feet striking mats and the sharp, staccato claps of the crowd. Chalk and sweat hung in the air, mingling with the faint aroma of leather and tension.

Rolling her shoulders, she clenched her fists, the rough texture of her gi biting into her fingertips—a grounding sensation amidst the chaos.

She was here to fight.

She was here to prove herself.

She was here to let her strength speak louder than words.

Yet, no matter how hard she tried to focus, her thoughts kept drifting, her gaze pulled toward him. Nephrite stood across the room, leaning casually against the wall, his presence impossible to ignore. His confidence radiated like the quiet hum of a storm, steady and commanding, drawing her attention no matter how much she resisted.

“Focus, girl. You’re here to fight, not admire forearms.”

He caught her eye, his smirk tilting just enough to send her pulse skittering. There was something in the way he looked at her—warmth

threaded through confidence, as though he saw her completely and liked what he found.

It was maddening and electrifying all at once, and Makoto hated how easily he unraveled her.

“Focus,” she muttered under her breath, her voice low enough to be swallowed by the crowd’s roar.

But it was no use.

Her mind betrayed her, summoning unbidden memories. His face flashed before her, pale and drawn in the hospital bed, the weight of his near-death pressing down on her chest like a vice. She’d been frantic that day, her hands trembling as she gave blood, desperate to save him. His hand had brushed hers, weak but determined, and something had shifted within her—a crack forming in the walls she’d built since the boy she loved broke her heart.

“Don’t think about it.”

Now, standing across the room, he seemed like an entirely different person, strength and steadiness restored. But the bond forged in that fragile moment remained, an unspoken connection that pulsed between them, ancient and unbreakable.

Every time she thought of him, the smell of rain and the crack of lightning surged through her mind, as though those elements wove them together.

Makoto clenched her fists, trying to push away the warmth blooming in her chest, the inexplicable sense of belonging that tethered her to him. She prided herself on her independence, her ability to stand tall no matter what.

And yet, with Nephrite, she felt something she hadn’t allowed herself to feel in years: safe. Seen. Maybe even cherished.

The sharp crack of a competitor hitting the mat snapped her back to reality, the crowd erupting in cheers as the match concluded. She

exhaled slowly, forcing her shoulders to relax, the familiar discipline of judo grounding her once more.

Yet, even as she tried to focus on the fighters, her thoughts drifted back to Nephrite—his steady gaze, his quiet strength, the way his presence made her feel like she was standing in sunlight after a storm.

She didn't know what this was between them, this pull that defied logic and reason. Perhaps Rei was right, and they all shared a bond with these mysterious men who had appeared so suddenly in their lives.

A bond that felt ancient, unshakable, and yet so utterly bewildering in the here and now.

It unnerved her, made her feel vulnerable in ways she wasn't used to. But deep down, she couldn't deny the truth: whatever this connection was, it mattered. It was worth exploring, even if it meant letting down her guard, even if it meant risking her heart.

Makoto squared her shoulders, her resolve hardening even as her heart softened. She would step onto the mat, fight her fight, and prove her strength.

But she wouldn't ignore this feeling.

Not this time.

Because maybe, just maybe, Nephrite was worth the risk. And for the first time in years, she allowed herself to believe in that fragile hope, letting it take root. Besides, she hadn't fallen in love for a long time, and Nephrite—well, he made it feel like it might be worth the risk.

The referee stepped forward, their voice cutting through the ambient noise of the auditorium.

"Hajime!" they called, the sharp command ringing out as their hand sliced the air.

Makoto's focus sharpened instantly, her body coiling with readiness as she squared off against her opponent. The crowd seemed to

hold its breath, the tension in the room growing palpable as the match began.

Makoto planted her feet firmly on the judo mat, its textured surface grounding her like the earth beneath an ancient tree. The air was electric, charged with the anticipation of the crowd's collective breath. But for her, the world had narrowed to her opponent.

"Let's dance," she whispered.

Their eyes locked in a silent exchange, each measuring the other with a precision born of countless battles. The faint scent of sweat and chalk hung in the space between them, and the distant hum of the audience dissolved into the steady rhythm of her heartbeat.

She moved with deliberate grace, circling, reading the language of her opponent's body—a shift in weight, a faint tightening of the jaw. Her muscles coiled, ready to spring, as she waited for the perfect moment to strike.

It came in an instant, as fleeting as a single heartbeat. Her opponent's balance faltered, and she seized the opening. Her hands found their grip, firm and unyielding, the fabric of the gi taut under her fingers. With practiced precision, she pivoted, her hips turning like the axis of the earth.

"Osoto-gari," she murmured.

Her leg swept through the air, powerful and precise, reaping her opponent's support like a scythe cutting through wheat. The impact of their fall reverberated through her, a thunderous note of triumph that sang through her bones. Time stood still. For that one shining moment, her victory was a singular, radiant truth.

The crowd erupted into cheers, applause echoing through the auditorium like a wave of shared triumph. The sound swelled around her, yet it felt distant, her focus locked on the victory humming through her very core.

As she straightened, extending a hand to her opponent, a ripple of pride warmed her chest. She lived for this—the clarity of movement, the raw power of a perfectly executed throw. But even as she helped her opponent to their feet, her gaze wavered, pulled unerringly to the stands.

She didn't have to look to know who she'd find.

Nephrite.

He stood with his arms crossed, his posture casual, but his eyes—his eyes held her captive.

Dark, intense, and burning with something she couldn't name, they saw her in a way that made her breath hitch. It wasn't just admiration. It was a recognition, a silent acknowledgment that made her feel both powerful and exposed.

Her heart skittered, betraying her usual control, as a warmth she didn't want to name spread through her.

The moment fractured as a shift rippled through the room.

The cheers dimmed, replaced by an eerie quiet that pressed against her senses. Makoto's skin prickled, a warning she couldn't ignore. She twisted, and there, stepping out of the crowd's haze, was a woman with crimson-and-black hair cascading like wildfire. Her presence was suffocating, her gaze a predator's promise.

Utonberino.

Makoto tensed, every instinct screaming at her to act, but before she could move, Nephrite was there. His broad frame blocked the Cardian's path, his stance radiating an ancient, unyielding protectiveness.

"Don't do something stupid," he said, his voice low but firm, a command edged with something warmer.

Her heart twisted, caught between gratitude and irritation. She didn't need protection—she was a warrior. Yet, the sight of him

shielding her stirred something deeper, something she wasn't ready to face.

"Nephrite," she started, but he cut her off with a glance.

His eyes met hers, steady and unflinching.

"Trust me," he said, and for a moment, she did. She let herself trust him—not because she needed him, but because the connection between them felt like a truth older than time itself.

As the Cardian's malevolent energy crackled in the air, Makoto clenched her fists, the thrill of her victory fading into the weight of the battle ahead. She stood beside Nephrite, their unspoken bond an anchor, grounding her in the storm of tension.

But the words spilled out before she could stop them.

"Nephrite," her voice wavered, the sharp edge of her usual confidence dulled by fear. "I can't—I can't watch you get hurt again."

He turned to her, his expression softening despite the looming threat. "Makoto—"

"No," she cut him off, her fists tightening until her nails bit into her palms.

"You don't get it. That day—seeing you like that, bleeding and barely holding on—" Her voice cracked, the memory clawing at her with razor-edged clarity.

"I thought I was going to lose you. And I couldn't—" She faltered, the admission spilling from her lips like shattered glass. "I can't go through that again."

Flashes of images stormed her mind in relentless waves. A tranquil, moonlit lake rippled beneath a canopy of stars, their reflections shimmering like fragile dreams on the surface. The sharp, acrid tang of blood clung to the air, inescapable and metallic. Crimson rivulets ran down torn flesh, vivid against pale skin, pooling like silent ac-

cusations. And his eyes—once steady and warm—were shadowed, darkness seeping through them like ink dissolving in water.

She shook her head sharply, forcing the nightmare back before it swallowed her whole.

For a moment, Nephrite said nothing, his gaze locked on hers, his own storm of emotions swirling just beneath the surface. Then, with an almost unbearable gentleness, he reached out. His hand brushed her arm, the lightest touch, but it sent a tremor through her chest.

“You won’t lose me,” he said, each word a quiet promise. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

Her heart twisted painfully, caught between the warmth of his reassurance and the cold, unrelenting fear that she wasn’t strong enough to keep him safe.

“You can’t promise that,” she whispered, her eyes dropping to the ground as her guard wavered. “Not when we’re up against monsters.”

“I can promise I’ll fight,” he said simply, his hand falling away, leaving a ghost of warmth behind. “And I know you will, too. Either we live together, or we die together.”

His words were a bolt of lightning, pulling her from the swirling depths of her doubt. She nodded, her breath shaky but resolute as she forced herself to meet his gaze again. The storm in his eyes had softened, giving way to a steady flame that mirrored her own.

“Just don’t make me regret trusting you,” she said, her voice steady with the edge of determination she needed to hold on to.

“Never,” he replied.

With a new determination, Makoto focused on the monster, cursing it with every breath she took. The air was thick with salt and decay, each breath she drew choked by the pungent tang of Utonberino’s presence.

Tendrils of dark seaweed lashed through the arena, twisting and snapping with a venomous life of their own. The first impact threw the auditorium into chaos—spectators ensnared, their energy visibly siphoned as the Cardian's parasitic appendages coiled tighter. Screams ricocheted off the walls, a dissonant chorus of fear and despair.

Makoto moved like a storm—precise and unrelenting. Her muscles burned with focus, every strike a calculated burst of power as she dodged and severed the seaweed's deadly reach. Each flick of her wrist, each pivot, felt deeply familiar, like stepping into a dance choreographed by destiny itself.

But it wasn't just her movements—it was Nephrite, a constant presence by her side. His deflections and counters mirrored her rhythm, their bodies falling into perfect sync, as though the battlefield had unlocked a truth they'd both known but never spoken.

Flashes of memory pulsed through her like electricity.

Nephrite, smirking against the dojo wall, their hands brushing during late-night sparring sessions. His voice, steady and warm, cutting through the noise of her insecurities.

Then something sharper—a memory not her own but deeply hers all the same. Rain drumming on stone, lightning painting his silhouette against a storm-dark sky, his presence a calm in the chaos. The revelation hit her like a crashing wave: this connection was no accident.

It stretched across lifetimes, unbroken and eternal.

Rei was right.

They did share a connection with these men.

Her pulse stuttered, her body faltering for a fraction of a second too long. A seaweed vine coiled around her ankle, pulling her to the ground with a force that rattled her bones. She gasped as the tendrils tightened, the sticky, suffocating grip leeching the strength from her limbs.

Panic threatened to bloom in her chest, but before it could take root, Nephrite was there.

“Makoto!”

He moved like a force of nature, swift and deliberate. His kick struck the tendrils binding her with unerring precision, the blow severing their hold and sending them recoiling. Makoto scrambled to her feet, breathless, her heart pounding as his hand found her arm. The contact was brief, a brush of warmth, but it grounded her like nothing else could.

“Losing focus already?” his tone carried its usual teasing edge, but his gaze burned with unspoken intensity—concern, determination, something deeper that left her chest tight and her resolve sharpened.

Before she could respond, Utonberino’s tendrils lashed out again, this time striking with brutal precision. The vines coiled around Nephrite’s torso, locking his arms and dragging him toward the Cardian’s outstretched hand.

His defiance never wavered, even as pain etched lines into his face.

Makoto screamed, a protective fury roaring to life within her, blazing brighter than her fear.

“How dare you!” The words tore from her throat as she lunged forward.

A golden light bursting through the arena doors stopped her.

Sailor Moon, flanked by Mercury, Mars, and Venus, stepped into the fray, their determination cutting through the chaos like a blade. Relief flooded Makoto’s veins, the sight of her sisters-in-arms a rallying cry that steadied her trembling resolve.

The Guardians moved into formation, an unbreakable arc of solidarity, and Makoto fell into step beside them. Her gaze flicked to Nephrite, still struggling against the Cardian’s grasp, and a silent promise took root in her chest.

Whatever it took, they would save him.

Together.

The auditorium pulsed with tension, the storm of battle swirling around them, but within Makoto, a new clarity emerged.

She was not alone in this fight.

She never had been.

The threads of her life, her strength, and her love for Nephrite wove together with those of her friends, forming a tapestry that no Cardian could unravel.

They would win this.

For themselves, for the crowd, and for the bond that defied time itself.

Utonberino's seaweed tendrils slithered like serpents over the arena floor, their cold, viscous texture glistening under the harsh auditorium lights. They lashed out, winding around Nephrite and the Guardians with ruthless precision.

The crowd's panic surged like an ocean tide, but the sound barely registered to Makoto, her world narrowing to the sight of Nephrite struggling, his body taut with strain as the seaweed bound him tighter. With a surge of power and the crackle of lightning, she transformed into Sailor Jupiter.

Her breath hitched, her chest tightening with an unbearable mix of fear and fury. The image of Nephrite broken and pale in the hospital, the memory of her desperate pleas for him to hold on, seared through her like electricity. She clenched her fists, the tang of ozone sharp in her nose as energy rippled beneath her skin.

"No," she murmured, her voice trembling but fierce. "Not this time."

The seaweed coiled around her legs, tightening like chains, biting into her skin with sharp, cold edges. She fought against it, her muscles

straining, but the bonds only tightened, the sticky tendrils anchoring her to the ground.

Panic flared, raw and suffocating, threatening to steal her focus. She bit down hard, channeling the storm building within her.

She couldn't falter now.

She wouldn't falter now.

A sudden flash of white shattered her despair—a white rose, sharp as a blade, sliced clean through the tendrils binding her. Moonlight Knight stepped into view, the very embodiment of unwavering resolve. His gaze met hers for a fleeting moment, a quiet assurance passing between them, steadying her.

“Judo,” he said, “is the ultimate expression of strength and respect. A perfect balance of discipline and heart. And you, Sailor Jupiter, embody both.”

Sailor Jupiter staggered forward as her bonds fell away, her limbs burning from the effort. Her eyes found Nephrite again, his face pale but defiant, his movements slower now under the crushing grip of the seaweed.

Something inside her snapped.

It wasn't just fear—it was rage, protective and consuming. Her pulse pounded, the energy surging through her body, reaching a fever pitch.

The air thickened with electricity, static crackling around her as the tang of ozone sharpened. She could feel the storm coiling within her, ancient and unyielding, begging to be released.

Her voice tore through the chaos, raw and commanding. “Supreme Thunder Dragon!”

The storm answered.

A serpentine form of lightning erupted from her outstretched hands, coiling and twisting through the air like a living storm. Its

roar reverberated through the arena, shaking the walls as it surged forward, its scales shimmering with searing brilliance. The dragon struck with unrelenting force, tearing through Utonberino's seaweed tendrils, disintegrating them into nothingness.

The Guardians collapsed to the ground, gasping for breath, their freedom hard-won. Nephrite stumbled clear of the wreckage, his movements pained as he brushed the remnants of the seaweed from his shoulders.

The lightning dragon didn't stop—it surged toward Utonberino, its fangs bared, a manifestation of Makoto's fury and will. With unwavering strength, Sailor Moon stepped forward, her scepter held high as its crescent-shaped tip glowed with a radiant, silvery light.

"Moon Princess Halation!" she cried, and a brilliant wave of light surged forth, cascading toward the monstrous Utonberino.

The energy pulsed through the air, bright and purifying, washing away the lingering dread left by the Cardian. The monster let out a piercing shriek as the cleansing energy enveloped her, dissolving her form into scattered particles of darkness that faded into the ether.

Makoto dropped to her knees, her chest heaving as the electricity dissipated, leaving the air charged with the faint crackle of energy and the acrid scent of scorched seaweed. Slowly, she raised her gaze, searching for him.

Nephrite stood amidst the wreckage, his breathing labored but his stance unyielding. Their eyes met, and the chaos of the battlefield fell away. His gaze anchored her, steady and unspoken, a tether that drew her closer even as they stood apart.

Her heart hammered in her chest, not with adrenaline, but with something deeper, softer—a fierce, vulnerable yearning. The rawness of the moment left her exposed, but she didn't look away. She held his

gaze, letting him see the fear, the longing, the strength that had carried her through.

The air between them hummed with unspoken promises, and for the first time, Makoto allowed herself to feel it all. Not just the victory, but the connection—the undeniable bond that had been there all along, waiting for the storm to bring it to light.

“I’m going to kiss the hell out of him.”

## Chapter Eighteen

# Moonlit Petals on the Stage

The theater whispered of stories untold, its polished wooden panels radiating a quiet warmth that softened the tension simmering in the air. Mamoru stood at the edge of the stage, his hands pressed against his temples, attempting to smooth away the frustration etched into his brow.

Around him, Nephrite, Zoisite, Jadeite, and Kunzite lounged with varying degrees of amusement, their presence a familiar constellation of personalities that both anchored and exasperated him.

It had been months since he'd considered these four his closest friends. Now he couldn't consider life without them.

"Only you, Mamoru, could inherit a disaster this spectacular," Zoisite remarked, his elegant posture draped across a chair. The corner of his mouth twitched, as though he found a secret humor in the chaos unraveling before them.

"Perhaps this is fate reminding you of life's unpredictability," Nephrite's auburn hair catching the dim light as he sorted the costumes.

"Or poor judgment," Kunzite added dryly.

"That's what happens when you have friends," Jadeite chuckled. "They ask you to do stupid shit like directing a play."

Mamoru sighed, their camaraderie a strange comfort despite the mess surrounding him. The drama club's production of *Snow White* unraveled in a single morning, with shouting, smashing, and a rather dramatic exit stage left.

If the chaos wasn't overwhelming enough, the stakes made it worse. Tickets had already been sold, sponsors secured, and expectations set. The thought of canceling loomed like a storm cloud, heavy and suffocating. They'd have to refund everything—money that was already gone, poured into fabric and paint, every yen accounted for. It wasn't just a setback; it was a disaster waiting to crash down, threatening to bury everyone involved.

But now a new storm lingered, the scramble for lead roles, the accusations, the egos. And he—through some twist of persuasion from Rei and Jadeite—was stuck in the center, tasked with directing this theatrical disaster.

"Don't be angry," Jadeite laughed as he squeezed Mamoru's shoulder. "Who better to tell a story of sleeping princesses and true love's kiss than our resident prince of brooding?"

Mamoru groaned, brushing Jadeite's arm off his shoulder, but their laughter—rich and familiar—clung to the air like sunlight breaking through a storm. Their banter, though maddening at times, reminded him of something precious, something long-lost but not forgotten.

For the first time since losing his parents, he felt like he had a family—brothers who filled the empty spaces he hadn't even realized he carried. Yet, something still lingered beyond his grasp, a hollow ache that stirred whenever moonlight spilled through his curtains, casting its soft, silver glow over the shadows.

"And now," Nephrite said.

"You get to find," Zoisite continued.

"Your sleeping princess," Kunzite finished.

“Don’t start,” Mamoru moaned. “I might just recast you all. I’ll make Jadeite the princess and Nephrite the prince.”

The others laughed riotously and started a vapid discussion on who among them would be better suited as the prince and princess. Despite the noise, his thoughts drifted.

His gaze sought her as if drawn by an invisible force.

Across the theater, Usagi stood amidst her friends, her golden hair catching the muted glow of the floor lights.

With unrestrained joy, she gestured animatedly, her laughter bubbling forth in a bright and carefree cascade.

She was a living spark of radiance, her presence chasing away the lingering gloom and infusing the air with a warmth that felt like the promise of a new dawn.

Above everything else, she was Snow White.

The thought seized his chest, an unbidden truth that felt as natural as breathing. Her gentleness, her unshakable optimism—everything about her fit the role as though it had been written for her. But Mamoru clenched his jaw, forcing the idea away.

His life was shadows, his past littered with fragments of pain and uncertainty. She deserved a prince who could stand fully in her light, not someone who would dim it.

“You’re thinking too hard again,” Kunzite’s voice cut through his reverie.

There was an unspoken understanding in his words, a wisdom that spanned lifetimes. Mamoru managed a wry smile, silently marveling at how well Kunzite could read him—here and now, and perhaps even before.

“Alright,” Mamoru said finally, his voice low but decisive.

He stepped forward, his shadow stretching across the polished stage floor. “We’ll draw lots for the roles. No arguments. No exceptions.”

Zoisite arched a brow, his expression amused but resigned.

“I’ll get the magic mirror. It’s a role that truly captures my essence—charming, reflective, and impossible to ignore.” Jadeite cracked his knuckles. “I’ll declare all the ladies the fairest of them all.”

Nephrite shoved him. “That’s not how it works.”

“Knowing my luck, I’ll be a dwarf,” Kunzite sighed.

Mamoru tried to disguise his glance at Usagi, willing himself to stay detached. If he could choose, it would be her. Perhaps fate would intervene, granting him this one selfish wish. But as the girls gathered to pull lots for the coveted role, a sharp chill crawled over his spine.

It wasn’t just the usual tension—it was something deeper, a feeling he couldn’t name but couldn’t ignore.

The ticking clock consumed all other sounds as the theater pulsed with its own rhythm. Mamoru stood at the edge of the stage, fingers brushing the smooth wood of a prop as the results were announced.

“Yes!” An shouted, smashing her fists in the air and rubbing the long lot in everyone’s face. “I’ll be a better princess than any of you would have been!”

His gaze flicked to Usagi.

Her shoulders stiffened just briefly before she smoothed her expression into a cheerful mask. But Mamoru knew her too well to miss the flicker of discomfort behind her smile. It was the kind of expression she wore when trying to hold her feelings at bay, a valiant attempt to shield herself from pain.

Something within him twisted at the sight.

“I am going to make a fantastic tree,” Zoisite said. “I’m—“

“Ridged and easily cracked?” Nephrite chuckled.

“Immovable and stubborn? Really leaning into that method acting, aren’t you?” Jadeite and Nephrite leaned together and laughed harder.

Mamoru turned away as their ribbing continued, making sure the high school kids didn't ruin the newly painted sets. Rehearsals began as expected: chaotic and charged.

An bounded over to him and attached herself to his arm. Her unrelenting enthusiasm for the role stretched every boundary, her exaggerated sighs and flirtatious antics filling the stage. During the kiss rehearsal, she leaned toward Mamoru, her movements too eager, her presence too close.

"You're supposed to be asleep," he said, holding her back.

"I'm breathing new life into this stagnant role!" An pouted.

When he dared to glance Usagi's way, her small fists were clenched at her sides, her lips pressed into a firm line. Her indignation over the scene made his chest tighten, and warmth bloomed unbidden at the intensity of her reaction.

He shouldn't have noticed, shouldn't have allowed himself to feel anything about it, yet the fierce protectiveness in her expression made something deep within him stir.

Her fire, her refusal to let him endure discomfort without protest, felt grounding in a way he couldn't explain.

"Let's take a break," Mamoru said, yet again preventing An from kissing him.

The others wandered off, and he turned toward the set piece. Hopefully, with some space, the lingering tension in his chest would dissipate. The low murmur of Minako and Makoto's voices drifted through the space, their tone sharp but laced with curiosity.

He stiffened at Makoto's words, her accusation sharp and clear: "I'm telling you, An cheated to get the role. She switched lots. I saw her."

The wood beneath his grip creaked as his jaw tightened.

Lying.

Cheating.

Two things he despised above all else. His breath hitched with restrained anger, but before the emotion could take root, Minako's voice softened, threading empathy into the accusation.

"She's lonely," Minako said. "You can see it when no one's watching her. It's like... she doesn't know where she belongs."

Usagi's soft voice followed, achingly sincere. "I've felt it too. It's like she's been wandering alone for a long time. Maybe this role feels like her chance to be part of something."

The words stilled him. Mamoru turned his gaze to An, standing at the edge of the stage. In her unguarded posture, he saw what they meant—her shoulders slumped, her expression tinged with a hollow sadness.

She looked adrift, lost in a way that mirrored feelings he knew intimately. Memories clawed at him: empty hallways, rain-streaked windows, and the suffocating quiet of being an orphan in a world too big to hold him.

Then Usagi spoke again, her voice carrying both gentleness and resolve. "Let her keep it. But I'll talk to her. Everyone deserves a chance at friendship and love, even when we can't see it."

Her words washed over Mamoru like sunlight breaking through storm clouds.

Compassion was Usagi's gift, her light reaching places others couldn't. She could have demanded justice, taken back the role, but she chose empathy instead, seeing a depth in An that even Mamoru had missed. His chest tightened with admiration, a pang of something deeper threading through it—a quiet longing, unspoken and unacknowledged.

Mamoru exhaled, letting the tension in his shoulders ebb. This was why she was different, why she drew him closer even when he tried to

stay away. Her capacity to mend instead of fracture, to believe in the goodness others had forgotten, made him want to protect her, even from a distance.

For now, he would honor her choice, trusting in her instinct.

As he glanced her way, a quiet realization settled over him: sometimes, love wasn't about possessing someone's light. Sometimes, it was about standing back and letting that light shine for the world to see. And even if that light never shone directly on him, it was enough to know it existed.

Somehow, no one died, and nothing exploded during rehearsals.

It was almost time for curtains up.

The theater pulsed with anticipation, the weight of hundreds of murmuring voices filling the air like a living thing. Rows of polished wooden seats gleamed faintly under dim house lights, each aisle outlined by soft floor illumination that guided the audience into a shared, expectant hush.

The stage—vast and commanding—was a canvas of shadows and subtle warmth, framed by dark wood panels that radiated timeless elegance. Every detail felt designed to honor the magic of storytelling.

Mamoru lingered backstage, his gaze sweeping over the delicate tension that rippled through cast and crew alike. Something about the moment felt wrong. The quiet wasn't calm; it was charged, like the pause before a thunderstorm.

His chest tightened with unease as his eyes flickered to Usagi, who hovered just out of the spotlight. Her eyes shimmered with nervousness, and for an instant, her presence cut through his tension. That fierce, unyielding light within her—the one that made her unstoppable—settled him. She could shatter his doubt with nothing but a glance, and she didn't even realize it.

When had this happened?

When had he begun seeking her for comfort?

Then, the play began. The stage lights dimmed further, and the murmurs gave way to silence, the audience drawn into the glowing tableau.

But the peace was fleeting.

The sharp, unnatural screech of unicycle wheels shattered the moment like glass.

Mamoru froze as Bipierrot burst onto the stage. Her grotesque grin and writhing purple hair twisted the theater's elegance into a mockery, her unicycle shrieking as she careened forward. The umbrella, deceptively innocent, lashed out with gleaming cords of energy that snaked through the crowd, seizing their vitality.

Audience members slumped, their faces slackening, their struggles feeble against the draining force.

The chaos hit like a wave.

And the first thing he did was search for Usagi.

Screams rose, scattering the quiet reverence into fractured terror.

Mamoru surged forward, his protective instincts roaring in his chest. An darted onto the stage, screaming for the monster to stop, to leave them alone. But Bipierrot swatted her aside with a surge of crackling energy. An collided with Mamoru's, sending them both sprawling onto the hardwood floor.

The impact stole his breath, but worse was the suffocating weight of helplessness that followed. His hands shot to his jacket, searching for something—anything—that could help, but they met only empty fabric.

“An! Are you okay?”

“No! I'm not okay!” She shoved him off and ran backstage, vanishing into the shadows.

Before he could scramble to his feet, the curtain fell, smothering him in darkness. Heavy fabric pressed against his face, his chest, his limbs, as if trapping him beneath the weight of his own powerlessness.

Panic surged.

He wasn't enough.

Not like this.

He clawed against the darkness, heart pounding with a singular thought: protect her, protect her.

Protect her.

But the more he struggled, the more futile it seemed, his breath catching in shallow gasps as fear clawed at his throat.

Then, deep in the crushing void, something shifted.

A warmth sparked in his chest, faint but steady, like the first stirrings of a flame. It grew with each frantic heartbeat, spreading through his limbs with a golden pulse that stilled his trembling hands. It wasn't just warmth—it was clarity.

Certainty.

A voice without sound, urging him forward.

Darkness enveloped him even further, drowning him in the nothing. A small bead of golden light appeared in the distance and he surged towards it.

With each second, a single thought crystallized in his mind.

Protect Princess Serenity.

He stepped onto the stage, his movements fluid, his focus unbroken. Bipierrôt's cords bound Sailor Moon, and everything narrowed to horrible clarity.

Save Princess Serenity.

"The stage is set, but the script ends here. No cords can bind the light of the moon!"

With a flash, the white rose flew swift and true, severing her bonds with precision. Sailor Moon stumbled free, her eyes wide with relief and surprise as they locked onto his. In that instant, the threads of fate between them tightened, unspoken and unbreakable.

The Guardians rallied, their attacks sharp and resolute.

Sailor Mars hurled an ofuda with commanding force. “Akuryo Taisan!”

The sacred paper struck Bipierrot, halting her advance.

Mercury’s “Bubble Spray Freezing” enveloped her, slowing her further, until Sailor Moon stepped forward, her scepter aglow.

“Moon Princess Halation!” she cried. Silvery light erupted, shattering Bipierrot into glimmers of fading darkness.

As the Cardian dissolved, the Moonlight Knight faltered. A sharp ache lanced through him, the edges of his being flickering like a mirage.

His hands blurred, fading like mist in morning light.

His mind splintered, the threads of memory unraveling even as he fought to hold onto the moment. But the warmth—the vow, the promise—remained, anchoring him to her.

And then he was gone.

Mamoru gasped awake beneath the heavy curtain, his lungs burning as if he’d surfaced from drowning. His limbs were weak, but his heart pulled him forward, past scattered props and debris. He stumbled onto the stage, dread clawing at him.

But then he saw her.

“Sailor Moon.”

She stood at center stage, her smile radiant, her triumph a balm to the chaos.

The audience roared with applause, their cheers transforming the fear into joy. He pressed a trembling hand to his chest, feeling the

phantom warmth of a purpose he couldn't name but would always follow. As the crowd cheered and the stage lights glowed, Mamoru stood at the edge of the moment, watching her shine, knowing she was his reason.

She always would be.

He had no idea where that impression came from. He hardly knew Sailor Moon, had only seen her a handful of times.

But now, he knew the truth.

The theater settled into a warm, low hum as the audience began to leave, their laughter and chatter a muted backdrop. Mamoru remained rooted to his spot, his focus sharp despite the ebbing energy in the room. The stage lights, dimmed to a soft amber glow, painted the polished wooden seats in golden hues.

His eyes sought her instinctively—Sailor Moon, luminous even as the spotlight left her. Relief surged through him, sharp and almost painful, her golden hair catching the faint light. The laugh that escaped her lips was a melody, breaking through the barriers he'd built within himself. It carved its place in his soul, unshakable and wholly hers.

"Let's leave before the cops come! At least nothing got destroyed," she chuckled.

He reached out—subtle, hesitant—as though his hand might close the distance between them. Yet it grasped only air, the weight of his longing tethering him to a yearning he couldn't quite name. What was this pull? He didn't know her—not truly. They'd exchanged so few words, and yet every look, every smile, every quiet moment with her felt eternal.

As though he'd known her a thousand lifetimes before this one.

His friends gathered around him.

Nephrite folded his arms, his eyes following Sailor Jupiter's every movement. "She fights with such raw strength. It's... impressive."

Zoisite tilted his head, his gaze flickering to Sailor Mercury. "Sailor Mercury has such grace. She moves like a melody—precise, deliberate."

Jadeite's smirk softened as his eyes lingered on Mars. "She's not just fire—it's resolve. Like she's always ready to face the darkness head-on."

Kunzite's gaze rested on Venus, the faintest crack in his stoic demeanor as his voice dropped to a murmur. "There's something in her—like the glow of dawn after the darkest night."

For Mamoru, the rest of the world blurred to nothing.

Only Sailor Moon remained, her presence cutting through the dimness like starlight breaking through a shroud of cloud.

She turned then, her gaze catching his, her smile blooming like spring's first blossom. It wasn't just joy; it wasn't just relief. It was something deeper—something that sang of hope, of trust, of promises not yet spoken but already felt.

And with that glance, Mamoru's walls crumbled. Every doubt he'd harbored, every reason to stay detached, every whisper of uncertainty—it all dissolved under the weight of her light.

She embodied everything he feared and everything he yearned for. Optimism. Courage. Kindness that seemed to transcend logic. She was the sun he hadn't dared dream of, yet somehow, she'd found him, lighting even the darkest corners of his soul.

He pressed a hand to his chest, that burning spot behind his ribs igniting to an all-consuming inferno. How could he deserve someone like her?

He, a man with fragmented memories and lingering shadows, tethered to a destiny he barely understood.

Sailor Moon was extraordinary, destined for greatness, while he... he was only Mamoru Chiba.

But as she turned to join her Guardian's, the echo of her laughter ringing in his ears, Mamoru felt the weight of truth settle in his chest.

This connection wasn't a choice.

It wasn't something he could ignore or rationalize away.

It was a force older than memory, stronger than reason.

A thread that bound him to her, irrevocably.

"Looks like she's got you hooked," Jadeite murmured, his tone light but laced with knowing.

Mamoru didn't reply. He couldn't.

Words felt too small, too fragile for the enormity of what filled him.

Instead, he watched her, the warmth of her presence anchoring him amidst the shifting currents of his thoughts. She turned one last time, her smile lingering, and in that fleeting moment, Mamoru felt it—the quiet, unshakable promise of something greater.

He didn't need to understand it.

He only needed to follow it.

## Chapter Nineteen

# Whispers of Falling Stars

The observatory perched high above Juban felt like a sanctuary suspended between earth and the endless starry void. The Milky Way spread across the heavens like a celestial river, its luminous flow scattering trails of silver and pearl through the inky expanse. Stars winked like promises etched into the cosmos.

Crisp night air brushed against Ami's cheeks, carrying with it the scent of damp earth and freshly trampled grass. She adjusted the telescope's lens with practiced precision, her fingers brushing the cool metal.

The murmur of voices swirled together behind her, soft and buoyant—Minako's laughter, Rei's sharp retorts, Usagi's exuberant chatter, Makoto's warm, easy banter. Ami smiled, comforted by the presence of her friends. But her focus was on the vast sky ahead, its celestial dance offering the kind of wonder that made her heart ache in the best way.

Tonight, the Perseids would blaze their ephemeral trails, each fleeting streak a glimpse of eternity.

A voice interrupted her quiet reverie.

Rich and teasing, it cut through the night, sharp enough to send a ripple through her.

“Blue, are you planning to ignore me all night?” the question carried a warmth that lingered, settling in her chest.

Zoisite.

She turned to see him standing a few paces away, his sharp silhouette softened by the faint glow of starlight. His movements were precise yet fluid, like the flow of a well-played chess game.

They’d crossed paths before—shared the same space during the chaos of the Snow White play—but this felt different. Back then, their interactions had been fleeting, tangled in the noise and distraction of rehearsals and performances.

But tonight, under the vast sky, with the world hushed and starlit, he was here for her. Not as another cast member, but as someone entirely unexpected and wholly unavoidable.

The others had drifted into pairs: Usagi and Mamoru close sharing laughter over a telescope. Makoto and Nephrite exchanging smiles by the café. Rei and Jadeite bickering near the braziers. Minako and Kunzite were discussing something, heads bent close together, and hands gesturing wildly.

“Afraid to be alone with me?” he teased as he stepped closer.

The air between them took on a frosty air, like the breath before a storm.

“We’re alone when we play chess,” she replied, a touch too fast.

The words felt flimsy, barely a shield.

“Not like this,” Zoisite murmured, his tone dipping into something quieter, something that stirred at the edges of her carefully constructed calm.

He moved closer still, and Ami found her gaze dropping to his hands.

They were strong and sure, yet there was a grace to them that held her attention. Each movement seemed deliberate, like the slow turn

of constellations across the sky. An image flickered in her mind—a memory, or perhaps a dream.

Moonlit gardens bathed in silver light, the faint scent of moonbeams in the air. His elegant fingers clutching a black stone as if it carried the weight of eternity.

Her chest tightened as she imagined those hands brushing against hers—not as adversaries across the board, but as something... more. Something she couldn't name but felt deeply, like the pull of the stars above.

Heat rose to her cheeks, and her thoughts scattered like stardust.

“Are we going to stand here all night?” Zoisite chuckled.

Ami cleared her throat, motioning toward the telescope she'd set up earlier. “Over here.”

She led him to the corner she'd chosen, where the view was clearest, where the stars seemed close enough to touch.

Zoisite's steps were a soft whisper over the grass. His presence lingered just behind her, a steady warmth that contrasted with the crisp coolness of the night. She adjusted the telescope's lens, her fingers moving with precise familiarity, but her thoughts were anything but steady.

“You're cute when you're nervous,” his voice brushed against her like the lightest touch.

She stiffened, her hands faltering on the dials.

She ignored him.

The warmth of his gaze felt tangible, wrapping around her like the embrace of an ancient forest. She focused on the stars instead, on the crisp resolution of the stars as they came into view through the lens.

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“You're nervous, Blue. I can hear it in your words. You don't need to hide that from me, because I'm nervous too.”

She ignored him.

Unwilling to admit the truth.

Unwilling to see the softness in his gaze.

“Look,” she gestured toward the sky. “The Perseids are here.”

He leaned in, his shoulder brushing hers as they both tilted their heads upward. The first meteor blazed across the heavens, its luminous trail sparking gasps from the crowd below.

Ami wanted to focus on the brilliant strikes in the inky darkness.

She wanted to recall each fact, each statistic of the brilliant meteors.

“They say shooting stars are wishes waiting to be made. Do you believe that?”

Ami hesitated, her rational mind grappling with the whimsy of his question.

But when she turned to him, his expression open, almost vulnerable, she found herself nodding. “Maybe,” she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Sometimes it’s nice to believe.”

The moment stretched between them, fragile yet unbreakable, like the light of the stars above—a fleeting thing, and yet eternal in its beauty. For once, Ami let herself simply exist, untethered from logic, carried only by the quiet resonance of something she couldn’t name but felt deep in her chest.

And beside her, Zoisite stayed, a steady presence under a sky that seemed endless.

The meteors painted their trails across the vast, velvety expanse of the night sky, silver streaks that seemed to linger just long enough to imprint themselves into memory. A collective hush fell over the hilltop observatory, as if the universe itself had paused to exhale, waiting for the heavens to unfold their fleeting masterpiece.

Ami stood motionless, her hands wrapped lightly around the telescope’s frame, the chill of the night air sinking through her cardi-

gan. Yet, Zoisite's presence beside her radiated a subtle warmth that grounded her more than the solid earth beneath her feet.

Why?

This was the second time she'd seen him in person. Why did he affect her so much? What power tethered her to him?

Her gaze wandered, catching glimpses of the others scattered around the hill. By the café Makoto rested her head lightly on Nephrite's shoulder, their figures blurred by the gentle dance of lantern light. Further away, Kunzite and Minako sat side by side, their hands brushing in small, tentative motions that spoke volumes.

Mamoru leaned over a telescope, while Usagi hovered close, her gaze fixed solely on him. Nearby, firelight flickered over Rei and Jadeite, who ignored the celestial display above, their attention caught by the hypnotic dance of the flames.

When she turned back to Zoisite, she found his eyes already on her, steady and piercing, as if they saw beyond the present moment, beyond her carefully composed exterior. The intensity of his gaze sent a ripple through her, a quiet thrill that scattered her thoughts.

"Did you know," she started quickly, "that the Perseids are actually debris from Comet Swift-Tuttle? Every year, Earth passes through its trail of dust, igniting these meteors."

Zoisite's lips curved, not into a smirk, but something softer, warmer. "Hmm, but they feel like more than just dust, don't they? Each one... a fleeting gift from the stars. A whisper of something ancient, tying us to a universe far greater than ourselves."

His words settled into the space between them, brushing against her like a faint breeze.

Ami blinked, unprepared for the poetry of his response. For a brief, breathtaking moment, an image flickered in her mind. She saw herself drifting away from him as darkness slowly consumed his soul.

The vision dissolved like stardust, leaving behind an ache she couldn't define.

"Are you going to say something?" Zoisite's voice broke through her thoughts, laced with humor but free of mockery.

Heat rushed to Ami's cheeks. "I was just thinking... how much you resemble a poet under these stars."

Zoisite chuckled, leaning in slightly, his presence so close it made the air between them hum with unspoken possibility.

"And I was thinking," he murmured, his voice brushing against her like velvet, "that you look as if you've stepped from a dream I've had a thousand times before."

His words sent a shiver through her, and for a moment, the night folding around them like a cocoon. The murmur of the crowd and the distant gasps marking each meteor faded into a quiet stillness. Zoisite's gaze flickered to her lips, then back to her eyes, and Ami felt her analytical mind falter, her thoughts scattering like meteors across an endless sky.

She could retreat—hide behind the safety of logic, of carefully constructed barriers. But something about Zoisite's presence urged her to stay, to remain open to the strange, unexplainable pull between them. The stars continued their silent dance overhead, ancient light tracing arcs through the darkness, and in that infinite expanse, Ami felt herself tethered—not just to the earth, but to him.

"It's beautiful," Zoisite said softly. "But somehow, it pales next to you."

Ami's breath caught, the weight of his words settling in her chest, heavy and radiant, like starlight captured in glass. For the first time, she let herself feel the sense that something vast and eternal was unfolding between them.

The meteor shower reached its breathtaking peak, the heavens alive with radiant trails that painted the sky in fleeting brilliance. With each flash across the sky, her heart aligned with the meteors' rhythm, each streak a fleeting burst of wonder.

But as her gaze remained upward, taking in the vast expanse of the universe, something darker slithered beneath the surface of the moment.

Night air prickled her skin, but this wasn't the pleasant chill of a summer breeze—it was something insidious, a presence that set her senses on edge.

Her guardian instincts sharpened, piercing through the serenity like a warning bell. Her eyes darted to the edge of the gathering, and there she saw her.

Amanju.

The Cardian's emerald-green skin gleamed under the starlight, her grotesque form both alien and monstrous. Wild, dark-blue hair framed her face, the strands twisting like a storm captured in motion. Her crimson eyes burned with a feral hunger, her predatory aura clashing with the delicate beauty of the night.

Striped armor wrapped around her insectoid form, her claws gleaming wickedly, while wing-like extensions at her wrists pulsed with a sinister energy. Tendrils writhed from her arms, their dark, viscous texture almost alive as they snaked out, searching for prey.

The crowd stirred, their murmurs shifting from awe to unease. Some instinctively sensed the danger, though others remained blissfully unaware, their gazes still turned skyward.

Ami's hand moved instinctively to her transformation wand, but before she could act, Zoisite stepped forward, positioning himself between her and Amanju.

“Be careful,” he murmured, his voice low and sure. There was no hesitation in his tone, only quiet determination. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Her breath hitched.

Her pulse quickened.

Not from fear, but from the intensity of his presence.

Her mind warred with itself: duty pulling her toward action, vulnerability urging her to lean into his strength. And somewhere, deeper still, a shimmering bond stirred, as old and unyielding as the stars themselves.

In a blur, Cardian moved.

Amanju’s tendrils lashed out, slicing through the night with a terrible grace. The air hissed as they snapped toward Ami, venomous and unrelenting.

Zoisite didn’t hesitate. In one swift motion, he stepped into their path, his movements precise and fluid, his body a shield between her and the threat. The tendrils coiled around him, their energy sparking and crackling as it sapped his strength.

“Zoisite!” Ami cried, her voice raw with panic. She lurched forward instinctively, her hands outstretched, but the sharp glare he cast over his shoulder stopped her cold.

“Don’t!” he gasped, his voice taut with pain yet unwavering. “Ami, I won’t let you get hurt.”

Her breath caught as she froze, her feet rooted to the ground, her chest tightening with helplessness. Her trembling fingers reached for the dark tendrils, but the moment they brushed the writhing energy, a searing jolt of pain shot up her arms, forcing her back with a cry.

Amanju’s cruel laughter echoed, a chilling sound that sliced through the chaos. Her crimson eyes gleamed with malice, reflecting

her delight in the scene before her. She withdrew her tendrils, the sinister energy retreating like a serpent poised to strike again.

And strike again, she did.

Amanju lunged forward, her tendrils snapping with renewed ferocity.

Before Ami could react, Zoisite's arms wrapped tightly around her, pulling her close. His ragged breath warmed her ear, his strength ebbing as his body shuddered against hers. Yet his voice, low and resolute, was unyielding.

"I won't let her touch you," he vowed, his words a steady flame amidst the storm.

His gaze locked with hers, and for a heartbeat, time seemed to still. The crowd's chaos, the Cardian's laughter, the streaking meteors above—it all faded into the background.

But Amanju wasn't finished.

With a screech of frustration, she lunged, her tendrils lashing out in every direction, seeking to ensnare them both. The air grew heavy with fear, the scent of panic mingling with the acrid tang of Amanju's dark energy.

Zoisite faltered, his body sagging against hers as the tendrils tightened their grip, draining him further. His skin grew cold, his breaths shallower, yet his eyes never left hers.

Ami's heart twisted, a fierce protectiveness surging within her.

She couldn't stand by and let him fall.

Not for her.

Her grip tightened around her wand, its familiar weight anchoring her as power stirred deep within her, responding to her desperation. The meteors above blazed brighter, their fiery trails mirrored in the determination burning in her chest.

“I won’t lose you,” she murmured, her voice trembling with emotion yet steady with resolve. Somehow, the word *again* echoed in her mind, unspoken but heavy with meaning.

Zoisite’s gaze softened. “You’ve always been stronger than you realize.”

The Cardian prepared for her final strike, her energy coalescing into a pulsing, malevolent force. Ami met Zoisite’s gaze one last time, a thousand unspoken words passing between them.

Then, with a fierce cry, she raised her wand, letting the spark of her power ignite into a brilliant, defiant light.

“Mercury Power, Make Up!”

The night seemed to hold its breath as Sailor Mercury emerged, her transformation bathed in the shimmering glow of the meteors above. The starlit sky bore witness as she stepped forward, her gaze fierce and unyielding. Amanju would not win.

Not tonight.

Not ever.

The battlefield shimmered with residual starlight, the meteor shower above a stark contrast to the chaos unfolding below. Amanju’s shrieks echoed over the hilltop, her tendrils slicing through the air with brutal precision.

The weight of her transformation pressed against her, amplified by the truth.

Zoisite was watching.

The light of her transformation had barely faded when Ami felt the weight of his gaze. She didn’t have to look to know Zoisite knew the truth—the air between them crackled with unspoken recognition, the kind of tension that could only come from a truth laid bare.

She’d revealed herself, and there was no taking it back.

Her heart raced, her thoughts scrambling to make sense of the moment even as Amanju's piercing screech jolted her back into focus. But for a fleeting second, she allowed herself to glance toward him.

Awe.

Confusion.

Something deeper.

The realization sent a ripple through her, a mix of vulnerability and resolve. There was no hiding now, no pretending to be someone she wasn't. Zoisite had seen her as Sailor Mercury—seen the girl beneath the Guardian—and she wasn't sure what he would do with that knowledge.

Amanju's screech pulled her back into the fray. The Cardian lunged, her tendrils striking like venomous whips, forcing Mercury to leap aside.

A flash of fiery red lit up the night, and Sailor Mars emerged with a fierce cry, her hand already ablaze with flames.

"Fire Soul!" The attack streaked toward Amanju, forcing the creature to recoil.

Together, the Guardians formed a protective arc around Sailor Mercury, their presence steadying her even as the Cardian writhed with renewed fury.

As the monster fell back, Amanju let out a frustrated screech, her tendrils retracting and releasing Zoisite's limp form. He crumpled to the ground, his energy drained, his breaths shallow and labored. Without waiting for the danger to vanish, Mamoru and the others surged forward.

Mamoru's sharp command rang out, cutting through the chaos. "Get him inside, now!"

Nephrite reached Zoisite first, kneeling swiftly to lift him over his shoulder with movements both careful and urgent. Jadeite and Kun-

zite flanked him, their wary gazes never leaving the Cardian as they formed a protective barrier around their fallen friend.

They moved in sync, retreating with practiced efficiency. Yet their steps faltered briefly, as though tethered by the unspoken tension of leaving the Guardians behind. The Cardian didn't relent as she lashed at them with tendrils of shadow and promises of vengeance.

Mercury darted forward, each step calculated.

"Shabon Spray Freezing!" she cried, the frost encasing Amanju's limbs once more.

The Cardian stopped, her motions stiffening as frost crept up her form. Mercury turned to Sailor Moon, urgency burning in her voice. "Now, Sailor Moon! Finish it!"

"Moon Princess Halation!" Her voice rang out, clear and unwavering, the silvery wave of light erupting from her scepter.

It engulfed Amanju, her screeches fading into silence as her form dissolved into shimmering fragments. The observatory grounds had returned to a serene quiet, the chaos of battle fading into the memory of starlight.

Ami moved slowly towards where Zoisite rested, her heart still trembling with the echoes of the fight. As she drew closer, Zoisite turned, his eyes softening when they met hers. Relief washed over his face, so raw and unguarded that Ami's breath hitched.

Without speaking, he reached out, brushing a loose strand of her hair back into place, his fingers grazing her cheek. The touch was featherlight, but it lingered, a silent reassurance that she was here, that she was safe.

They stood in silence, the world narrowing to the faint rustle of leaves and the fading trails of meteors overhead.

Zoisite tilted his head slightly, his brow furrowing in thought. "You know, it makes sense that you're Sailor Mercury."

Ami's breath caught.

"You're both magnificent."

Ami lowered her gaze, her heart fluttering. For a moment, she allowed herself to bask in his words, to let them settle over her like the warmth of his hand.

"Thank you."

Above them, a final meteor streaked across the sky, its light casting fleeting shadows over their faces. Zoisite watched it fade before looking back at her, his expression softening into something almost reverent.

"Do you think it was fate we joined the same chess group?"

She dared to meet his gaze fully. "I do."

Slowly, as if drawn by an invisible force, Zoisite leaned closer, his hand sliding to her cheek. His fingers were gentle, his touch hesitant, as if afraid of breaking the fragile moment.

Ami trembled as his lips brushed hers, a kiss as soft and fleeting as the meteors that had lit the sky. Yet in that brief connection, she felt something vast and eternal, a bond that defied time and space.

Some bonds form through logic.

Starlight writes others.

And under that vast, quiet sky, Ami and Zoisite found theirs.



## Chapter Twenty

# Shadows Rooted in Light

**M**amoru wandered through the aisles of the bookstore, fingers ghosting over spines of manuscripts without true comprehension. The air carried the faint scent of aged paper, mingled with sunlight streaming through tall windows that painted the room in warm amber. Somewhere, a soft classical melody wove through the quiet murmur of patrons, but it failed to ease the restless tension coiled tightly within his chest.

He hadn't been searching for anyone, or at least that's what he told himself. But lately, every fleeting encounter with Usagi had carved its way into his thoughts. She lingered like the first notes of a melody he couldn't shake—a warmth that drew him back to her, no matter how far he tried to pull away.

But today, it wasn't her golden warmth that filled his vision. Instead, something colder crept into the air—a presence that felt sharp and invasive, coiling around him like a shadow.

It was An.

She moved through the space with deliberate elegance, her gaze fixing on him like a hawk locking onto prey. The comforting stillness of the bookstore fractured under her presence, the warmth turning brittle, as though the air itself recoiled from her calculated intensity.

Mamoru tensed instinctively, his polite smile barely masking the unease prickling beneath his skin.

“Mamoru,” she greeted smoothly, her tone a practiced melody that felt anything but natural. “What are you doing here all alone? Don’t you think it’s a shame to waste a day like this cooped up inside?”

As always, the possessive glint in her eye made him hesitate. Her presence was as cold and calculated as it was lonely, and guilt wormed its way into his resolve. She’d been more aggressive in her attempts to seduce him lately.

Coincidental meetings.

Casual remarks.

Forced intimacy.

The thought of being alone with her made his chest tighten with unease, but the growing weight of her attention demanded resolution. Coffee would be the perfect opportunity to make his intentions clear—polite but firm.

It was time to end this before her pursuit became something he could no longer ignore.

So he nodded, “sure, coffee sounds nice.”

A flicker of satisfaction passed over her face as she looped her arm through his, guiding him out of the store. Yet even as she led him toward the café, his mind drifted to sunlight and laughter, to golden hair catching the breeze.

To her.

She chose a café nestled in the bustle of Juban, its interior glowing with soft light and the gentle hum of conversation. Mamoru followed her inside, but the moment his eyes adjusted, his pulse stuttered. Across the room, framed by the sunlight spilling through the window, sat Usagi.

Her laughter rippled through the café, light and unrestrained, filling the air with warmth. Her face, radiant and unguarded, was a stark contrast to the tension that shadowed An.

But his joy was short-lived.

Sitting across from her was Ail.

The boy leaned in close, his auburn hair catching the light as his gaze settled on her with an intensity that made Mamoru's stomach twist. When Ail reached out, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face, something in Mamoru snapped.

Heat surged through him, a primal, protective instinct he couldn't explain, couldn't temper. Every fiber of his being screamed to intervene, to pull her from the grasp of Ail's possessive glare.

Beside him, An's grip on his arm tightened, her nails biting into his sleeve as she followed his gaze. "Well, isn't she busy?" her voice silken but laced with venom. "I thought she was into you, Mamoru. I guess you're old news."

"Usagi values kindness and respect, and she's free to nurture friendships with anyone she chooses. I don't think she'd appreciate being talked about like that," he said evenly, his tone calm but firm.

His gaze flicked toward An's hand on his arm before he gently shifted away.

The weight of An's presence pressed down on him, heavier now with Usagi so near. Each moment spent at her side felt sharper, more suffocating, as if the vibrant warmth across the room only highlighted the cold, calculated energy that clung to An. Guilt twisted alongside discomfort, his unease magnified by the contrast of where he was and where he longed to be.

They sat, An positioning herself in such a way that her gaze could linger on Ail and Usagi. Mamoru tried to focus on the conversation,

but the café's hum receded, replaced by the quiet chaos inside him. His gaze flicked to Usagi, her expression glowing when she noticed him.

Her face softened, her cheeks dusting pink as though his presence alone brought her joy. For a moment, the air between them felt tangible, alive with something unspoken.

Ail turned and his eyes narrowed when they scanned the tables. His gaze burned, stormy and unreadable, as he fixed it first on An, then briefly on Mamoru, a silent warning in his eyes. Without warning, he stood, his chair clattering to the floor, every movement sharp and tense, as if the very air had turned against him.

When he turned and strode toward the door, his steps were heavy, purposeful, each one radiating a barely restrained fury. The door slammed shut behind him, leaving a chill in his wake.

With a muttered apology, An quickly followed. The atmosphere lost that creeping chill and returned to normal. Mamoru exhaled, the tension dissipating as the door swung shut behind them. He turned back to Usagi, who sat alone now, her fingers twisting nervously. When their eyes met, her cheeks flushed, and she offered a hesitant wave. He returned it with a small, reassuring smile, his heart steadying in the warmth of her gaze.

In that brief exchange, the noise of the café faded, leaving only the quiet certainty that whatever else surrounded them—jealousy, longing, unanswered questions—this connection was real.

She was his bright thread in the tapestry of confusion, the one thing that felt unshakable, undeniable.

And as Mamoru sat there, letting the moment linger, he knew he wasn't ready to let it go. Not yet.

Mamoru hesitated, his gaze lingering on Usagi as she offered another shy, encouraging smile. He couldn't just leave her sitting there alone, not after the tension Ail and An had brought into the room.

“Hey, mind if I sit for a moment?”

“Do you even need to ask?” Usagi beamed, her smile bright enough to light the room. “Of course you can!”

For a few minutes, they shared an easy, casual conversation. The café buzzed around them, but Mamoru’s focus narrowed to the gentle cadence of her voice, the way she seemed to light up with every passing moment. She was as magnetic as ever, her presence filling the air with an unspoken comfort that settled some of the unease he’d been carrying.

Eventually, he stood, offering her a soft smile. “I need to go, but take care, okay?”

Usagi nodded, her cheeks pink as she returned his smile. “I’m sure I’ll see you soon, Mamoru.”

As he stepped outside, the warmth of their brief exchange lingered, but so did the gnawing restlessness he couldn’t shake. The streets felt strange, the familiar sounds of the city muffled beneath a low, vibrating hum that seemed to thrum in his chest.

By the time he’d turned a corner, the sensation had grown sharper, like the city itself was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen. Mamoru ran a hand through his hair, trying to clear his thoughts, but the unease followed him inside, refusing to be dismissed.

With the hum of the café fading behind him, Mamoru held onto the soft glow of Usagi’s smile. He’d held onto it longer than he should have, letting it anchor him in the storm of restless thoughts that churned within him.

Now, with so much space between them, the spell began to unravel. The sunlight spilling between the buildings seemed sharper, the usual rhythm of the streets muted beneath a low, vibrating hum he couldn’t quite place.

“What is going to happen?”

The walk home was a blur, his feet carrying him through familiar streets that suddenly felt too quiet, as if the city were holding its breath. His thoughts circled back to the café, to the gentle wave of Usagi's hand, the way her presence lit up even the duller corners of his mind. Yet beneath the warmth she'd left in her wake, unease prickled at the edges of his consciousness—a formless anxiety that had been growing louder in recent days.

By the time he reached his apartment, the feeling had taken root, pressing heavy against his chest. He stepped inside, the soft click of the door echoing in the stillness, and set his keys down with a muted clink. The soft amber light of late afternoon bathed the space, shadows stretching long across the floor.

As always, the absolute loneliness of his apartment wrapped around his chest. The silence was too dense, the lifeless walls too stark. The air inside was stagnant, with the kind of silence that pressed against his thoughts like a weight. Even the amber light spilling through the blinds felt cold, uninviting, as if it belonged to someone else's life.

Mamoru paced the small living room, his steps uneven, as though he were fighting against the current of his own thoughts. He tried to focus on the familiar—books lining the shelves, the faint rustle of the curtains, the cool breeze that slipped through the cracked window.

But the hum persisted, a low vibration that seemed to seep into the very bones of the building.

His mind wandered to the dream that had plagued him the night before.

A vast crystal palace bathed in moonlight.

A star-shaped locket resting in his hand, its melody haunting and beautiful.

A princess cloaked in ethereal sadness, her face a blur yet achingly familiar.

The memory of it tugged at him now, sharp and insistent, as if it were something he'd lived rather than imagined.

Instinctively, his hand moved to his pocket, searching for the locket that had felt so real in his dream. When his fingers met empty fabric, a wave of unease crashed over him. He couldn't explain it, couldn't rationalize why the absence felt so monumental, but it did. It was as though he'd lost something vital, something tied to the very fabric of his being.

The hum beneath his feet grew louder, sharper, cutting through the fog of his thoughts. It wasn't a sound, exactly, but a vibration, a pulse that resonated in his chest and sent a shiver down his spine. He steadied himself against the wall, his breath hitching as the sensation intensified.

The ground seemed to shift beneath him, the air charged with a strange, electric tension. The hum beneath his feet wasn't just a sound—it was alive, resonating in his bones and crawling up his spine, its pulse demanding attention.

And then came the pull.

It wasn't new; he'd felt it before, a quiet tug in the back of his mind whenever he thought of Usagi. But now, it was stronger, more urgent, a voice without words commanding him to move. The need to find her, to ensure she was safe, burned in his chest, drowning out all else.

The pull wasn't something he could explain; it wasn't logic, but instinct—raw, unrelenting, and louder than reason. It demanded obedience, leaving him no choice but to follow.

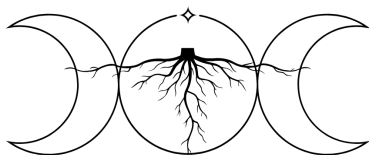
Grabbing his coat from the hook by the door, Mamoru stepped back into the late afternoon. The cool air hit his face, sharp and bracing, but it did little to clear his mind. The pulse beneath his feet seemed to guide him, each step driven by an instinct he couldn't ignore. The

city blurred into shadow and light, the familiar streets carrying an edge of the uncanny.

His thoughts circled back to her—Usagi, her name echoing like a mantra in his mind.

He didn't know why, didn't understand the depth of this need, but he couldn't fight it. Protecting her felt as natural as breathing, as inevitable as the tide.

And so, with the hum of the city rising around him, Mamoru let the pull guide him, each step drawing him closer to the one thing that felt real in a world slipping into shadow.



Ail stormed into their penthouse, his footsteps heavy, reverberating through the silence like a drumbeat of impending reckoning. The fractured light of the setting sun filtered through gauzy curtains, casting jagged shadows across polished floors. The once expansive space now felt oppressive, the air thick with tension that mirrored the storm within him.

Usagi's laughter lingered in his mind, soft and melodic, a sound so gentle it scraped against the sharp edges of his carefully constructed detachment. She was unlike anything he had known—unguarded, untouched by the hunger and desperation that had defined his existence. Her open heart stirred something foreign and unwelcome in him, a yearning he could neither name nor banish.

And then there was Mamoru.

Always near her, always watching with that maddening, calm confidence, as though she were his to protect. Ail's jaw clenched at the thought, jealousy threading through him like a toxin he couldn't expel. He despised how that human stood between them, yet he couldn't deny the possessiveness that coiled within him at the mere idea of Mamoru claiming her light.

The door slammed behind him with a force that rattled the windows, cutting through the stillness. An stood in the center of the room, her presence filling the space like a blazing inferno. The last rays of sunlight caught in her crimson hair, turning her into a flame incarnate, her violet eyes sharp and unyielding.

"Brother," she spat the word like a curse. "Enjoying your time with your precious human?" she sneered, her voice low and scathing. Each word was a finely honed blade, designed to cut deep.

Ail's gaze slid past her, deliberately dismissive, though his hands clenched at his sides. "You seemed cozy enough with your dark-haired distraction," he shot back, the venom in his voice surprising even himself.

The words landed harder than he intended, but he didn't regret them.

Let her feel the sting she so readily dealt.

An's smile twisted, bitter and razor-edged. "At least he actually likes me," she hissed, stepping closer. "Unlike you, chasing after that silly, naive girl."

She tried to lace the hurt in her voice with venom. "You've obviously never loved me. I can't tell you the last time you looked at me like that. Perhaps I'll drain her dry. Feed her corpse to the Makai Tree."

The words ignited something primal in Ail, a protectiveness so fierce it momentarily unmoored him. "Don't touch her," he growled, his voice a low, dangerous rumble that reverberated through the room.

The warning hung in the air, heavier than he intended, startling even himself.

An's breath hitched, her confidence faltering for the briefest moment. But a surge of anger quickly eclipsed the vulnerability. She stepped closer, her eyes blazing. "So, it's true. You love her. That pathetic human girl."

Their gazes locked, and the world seemed to shrink around them, the air thick with unspoken accusations that weighed heavier than words could bear. Resentment coiled between them, sharp and searing, each breath steeped in the ache of years left unresolved.

The tension buzzed like an exposed wire, sparking with the raw edges of pain too long ignored. It was a collision of wounds and pride, the space between them both suffocatingly close and vast as a chasm, trapping them in an orbit forged from bitterness and unyielding gravity.

Then, a dry, brittle rustle cut through the charged silence. Both turned toward the sound, their anger momentarily forgotten as their eyes fell on the Makai Tree.

Just this morning, the leaves had improved to a dull green.

Now they were brown.

Hours ago, the bark was regaining some color.

Now it was a molted patchwork.

The Makai Tree was dying.

Its leaves hung limp, their edges curled and tinged with a sickly gray. The tendrils that had once pulsed with a semblance of life now drooped, lifeless, as though the tree itself had surrendered.

Ail's chest tightened at the sight, a wave of cold panic washing over him.

"What's caused this change?" he whispered, the words barely audible as the truth sank into his bones.

An's rage dissolved into raw fear, her hands clenched into trembling fists. "We need more energy," she said, her voice stripped of its earlier venom.

Her gaze flicked to Ail, her desperation laid bare. "If it dies, we die."

The weight of those words pressed down on them both, forcing them to confront the reality they'd sought to forget. They were tethered to this fragile, fading force. The Makai Tree had sustained them, bound them, and now it was withering before their eyes.

Ail's mind raced, the sight of the tree's brittle form echoing the fractures in their own tenuous connection. An stood beside him, her earlier anger replaced with a trembling resolve, her violet eyes glimmering with a vulnerability she could no longer hide.

The silence stretched, heavy and unyielding, broken only by the faint creak of a branch as another leaf fell to the floor. The sound was slow, deliberate—like the ticking of a clock counting down to an inevitable end.

For the first time in a long while, they stood united.

Not by love, not by trust, but by the shared fear of losing everything. And yet, even as Ail's gaze lingered on the dying tree, his thoughts strayed to Usagi. Her light, her warmth, her defiance of everything he had known—they haunted him. She was everything the tree wasn't, and the realization terrified him.

The room grew darker as the last rays of sunlight faded, leaving only the dim glow of the dying Makai Tree. The silence was oppressive, the weight of their desperation carving deep lines into the fabric of their fragile alliance.

For now, survival was all that mattered. But even as the thought took root, Ail couldn't shake the sense that something fundamental had shifted—within the tree, within himself, within them.

And he wasn't sure they would survive it.

## Chapter Twenty-One

# Fractured Roots Beneath Eternal Night

The Makai Tree emitted a low, fractured wail, a sound that seemed to claw at the edges of the void, echoing with a lament older than time. It was a sound that rooted itself in the marrow of Ail's being, dredging up centuries of memories: barren worlds beneath dying stars, the cold grip of endless night, the vast and unyielding emptiness of the universe.

The darkness of the chamber felt alive, pressing against them with a suffocating weight that devoured light and air alike. Each creak of the Makai Tree's brittle branches shattered the silence, sharp and jarring, like bones splintering in the quiet.

The faint glow from the tree cast no shadows, instead, the never-ending darkness swallowed any fraction of light before it could sprout. Long and fractured branched stretched into the nothing, as if the void couldn't hold them together. The cold in the air was biting, seeping into their skin, as if the tree's failing energy was draining warmth from the room itself. As though the entire chamber was dying with it.

His fingers hovered over the bark, now brittle and dry, as if the tree itself were turning to ash in his grasp. Each faltering pulse of its energy felt like a countdown, a reminder that they were running out of time.

Ail stood before it, motionless, his silhouette sharp against the dim glow. Yet inside, he was anything but still. His chest tightened with a raw, relentless ache, a hollow longing that no amount of energy could fill.

He could feel the weight of every desolate world they'd left behind, their journey measured in lifetimes of emptiness. Their shared survival had always been a grim purpose, a tether holding him and An together as they moved from one dying planet to the next.

But here, now, that tether felt frayed.

Something within him twisted and pulled, and he couldn't stop his mind from drifting to Usagi—to the brightness of her smile, the warmth of her voice. It was a light so unlike the cold, predatory gleam in An's eyes or the fading glow of the Makai Tree.

It unsettled him, this memory, yet it also stirred something within him that felt fragile and dangerous all at once: hope.

A sharp movement caught his attention. An was pacing near the base of the tree, her every step radiating frustration and desperation. The dim glow threw her face into sharp relief, her hair a wild flame against her pale skin. Her nails bit into her palms, crescent-shaped marks left on her skin, her hands trembling despite the force of her grip.

She stopped abruptly, her shoulders heaving with every shallow breath as her gaze fixed on the tree's withered branches. Slowly, almost reverently, she reached out, her fingers hovering over the brittle leaves. They trembled under her touch, as though even her desperation could not will them back to life.

"We've given everything," she said, her voice breaking, raw with anger and something deeper—something she refused to name. "Everything."

She looked as though she might shatter at any moment, and for once, Ail wasn't sure if he could pick up the pieces.

Didn't know if he wanted to.

"Every ounce of energy, every moment of our lives—this tree is all we have, Ail. It's all we've ever had. And now it's slipping away because you..." She faltered, her words breaking as her gaze darted to him, accusatory yet pleading. "Because you've lost focus."

Ail flinched, his expression hardening. "Don't blame me for this," he said, his voice low and dangerous, though his resolve wavered beneath the weight of her words. "The tree has been dying for centuries. We've done everything we could—"

"Not enough!" An's voice cracked, and the raw emotion behind it cut through the tension like a blade. She took a step closer, her eyes shining with a mix of fury and desperation. "We can't let it die, Ail. We can't let everything we've fought for, everything we've survived, mean nothing."

Her words struck a chord deep within him, stirring echoes of their past: the lifeless planets, the endless voids, the nights spent huddled together beneath a canopy of stars that felt more distant than ever. She was right—they had fought, clawed, and stolen every scrap of life they could find.

They'd never had the luxury of questioning whether it was worth it; survival had always been their only answer. But now, with the tree's light fading and Usagi's warmth haunting his thoughts, Ail found himself asking a question he couldn't ignore: What if there was more?

Ail snorted a half-laugh. "Perhaps this is why Fiore left. He was sick of being chained to the endless struggle."

"We don't even know if he's still alive. Perhaps his corpse is rotting on some forgotten world."

"Perhaps our corpses will rot on this world."

"I'm not losing, Ail," her voice softening just enough to betray the vulnerability beneath her anger.

She turned toward the tree, her hands reaching out as if to cradle its fragile branches, her fingers brushing against the withered leaves. "I'm not losing you."

The admission hung in the air, heavy and unspoken. Ail looked at her, and for the first time in centuries, he saw her not as the fiery, unrelenting partner who had fought alongside him, but as someone just as scared and lost as he was.

Her fear mirrored his own, but where she clung to the familiar—to the tree, to him—he found himself reaching for something else.

Something brighter.

"You won't lose me," he said quietly, though the words felt like a lie.

He couldn't meet her gaze, his eyes instead drawn to the tree's dying glow. Its faint light flickered, casting fleeting shadows across the room, and in its frailty, he saw the reflection of their lives: fragile, tenuous, and slipping away.

An turned to him, her expression unreadable, though her eyes burned with a determination that refused to be extinguished.

"Then fight with me," she said, her voice steady but laced with an edge of desperation. "We'll find more energy. Whatever it takes, we'll save it."

Ail hesitated, the weight of her words pressing down on him. He wanted to say yes, to promise her that he would do whatever it took, just as they always had. But the memory of Usagi's smile lingered, a quiet, unrelenting contradiction to everything he'd known.

The warmth she'd shown him—the possibility of something beyond survival—gnawed at him, a persistent ache he couldn't ignore.

An's gaze hardened, and she stepped closer, her presence a sharp, fiery contrast to the cold air that surrounded them.

“Don’t let her distract you,” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. “She’s nothing, Ail. A fleeting distraction. We’re all that matters. We always have been.”

Her words were a plea, a demand, a reminder of the bond that had carried them through centuries of darkness. But Ail’s silence stretched between them, and in it, something fragile broke.

The Makai Tree groaned again, a sound that tore through the void like ancient wood splitting beneath an unbearable weight. It wasn’t just a noise—it was a vibration that crawled under Ail’s skin, embedding itself in his bones.

A faint, acrid scent of decay hung in the air, sharp and clinging, as though the chamber itself were slowly decomposing alongside the tree. When his fingers brushed the bark, it crumbled under his touch, leaving a fine layer of dust on his skin, brittle and lifeless. The faint hum of its failing energy pulsed weakly beneath his palm, like the fading heartbeat of something that had long since given up.

His chest tightening with each faltering pulse of energy that rippled from the tree. Usagi’s warmth haunted him—not her image, but the feeling she carried, like sunlight brushing against frozen skin. Her voice had asked for nothing, yet it had given so much, a quiet defiance against the hollow existence that had shaped his life.

It was a light so impossibly different from the hollow glow of the Makai Tree, which had defined his existence for centuries. The memory unsettled him, not because it was unwelcome, but because it whispered of something he hadn’t dared imagine—a life beyond this relentless, empty survival. Yet that thought carried its own weight: if he reached for something more, what would he lose?

An turned away, her resolve hardening as she moved toward the door.

“If you won’t fight for it,” she said, her voice colder now, “I will.”

As her footsteps echoed down the hall, Ail remained behind, his hand brushing against the tree's bark. He closed his eyes, the sound of its failing heartbeat reverberating through him. And in that moment, he felt the weight of a choice he wasn't ready to make—a choice between the only life he'd ever known and the faint, impossible hope of something more.

The Makai Tree groaned again, the sound louder, more fractured, as though it were crying out in its final moments. Ail staggered, the vibration rattling through his chest, making his breath hitch. He pressed his palm against the bark, as though willing the energy to steady, to hold on.

Behind him, An's footsteps were sharp and deliberate, echoing through the chamber as she headed toward the door.

Her figure disappeared into the shadows, the echo of her footsteps devoured by the void. In the silence she left behind, the Makai Tree groaned again, and Ail felt the emptiness tighten around him like a noose.

Ail stayed where he was, his hand resting on the tree's bark as its faint glow flickered and dimmed. In its dying light, he saw the reflection of everything he'd ever known—fragile, desperate, and crumbling beneath his grasp.

“Are these our last moments?” Ail had no answer.

The days that followed blurred together in a suffocating haze. The apartment felt smaller with each passing hour, the air heavy with the bitter scent of the Makai Tree's decay. Its groans echoed through the dim chambers, low and mournful, like a clock counting down the moments left to them.

Ail and An spoke little, their words brittle when they came, sharpened by exhaustion and the weight of what they could not say.

Outside, the world carried on.

The muffled hum of the city seeped through the walls, a distant rhythm that contrasted starkly with the silence inside. Ail often found himself standing by the window, staring out at the city below, his thoughts drifting to Usagi's smile and the unsettling warmth it had stirred in him.

An's movements were always restless, her pacing carving invisible paths into the floor, her eyes always flicking toward the tree as though willing it to revive.

When the knock came, it shattered the monotony like a stone against glass.

The door swung open, flooding the hall with a sliver of evening light and the quiet hum of distant traffic. Ail felt it instantly: a subtle twist in his gut, a quiver that spiraled through the hollow spaces in his chest.

Usagi and Mamoru, their presence sent conflicting currents coursing under his skin, leaving him unsteady on the threshold. Mamoru's eyes, dark with concern, held a kindness Ail could scarcely comprehend, while Usagi's gentle energy radiated from her every step, a warm glow seeping into the cramped corridors of his mind.

An's gaze cut through the moment, sharp and predatory, locking onto Usagi with the cold focus of a hunter.

Ail's gaze lingered too, but it was different—his eyes softened with something raw, a quiet, unspoken relief.

Mamoru held out a modest bouquet, as if flowers could heal the unseen fractures in their world. The gesture rattled Ail's composure.

Was it pity?

Compassion?

He hated how it tugged at something buried in him, how it forced him to confront feelings he had no names for—feelings that threatened the brittle shell of survival he'd worn for centuries. An's voice

cut through the silence, her tone purring with forced charm, her eyes flicking over Mamoru like he was prey.

“Usagi,” she said, her gaze drifting to Mamoru with a hungry curiosity. “Your back. I’m so glad to see you.”

Mamoru, polite as always, gave a small, uncertain smile, offering the flowers. “We heard you weren’t feeling well,” he said, voice soft but steady. “We wanted to make sure you were all right.”

An scooped up the flowers and breathed in deeply. Ail almost yanked them from her grasp. She hated flowers, and yet here she was pretending for the human.

“How thoughtful,” she cooed, stepping aside to let them enter.

In that moment, the apartment’s stale air closed around them like a predator’s jaws. Ail stood back, heart pounding, as An guided Mamoru toward the couch, her hand on his arm, her posture territorial.

Usagi remained near the doorway, hesitant, her eyes drifting over their space, taking in the dim lighting and the hush that seemed almost unnatural. Ail, forced into the role of host, vanished into the kitchen at An’s prompting, fetching drinks and snacks with fingers that trembled slightly.

“Hopefully, Usagi, you can eat the cake and pork buns from earlier,” he said, setting out the plate.

Mamoru nibbled on them politely, while Usagi dove full force into the offerings. Both oblivious to the rancid tension clogging the air, felt surreal.

Her innocence cut through the gloom, bringing a whisper of warmth that made him ache. How could she be so gentle, so trusting, in a place like this? An hovered close to Mamoru, voice dripping with charm as she made small talk.

But behind her mask, Ail could sense the tightening coil of her thoughts—how she planned to use this chance to restore the Makai Tree, to draw from Usagi’s bright well of life, to save herself and him and the only remnant of their past that still drew breath.

He’d stop her before things went too far.

Before she went too far.

“Lovely view, isn’t it?” Mamoru ventured, trying to break the unease.

An smiled, too wide and too sweet. “Ail, show Mamoru the balcony,” she said, her tone edged with a quiet threat.

Ail’s stomach twisted.

He couldn’t disobey, not now.

He offered Mamoru a tight-lipped nod and led him away. Each step felt like a betrayal, leaving Usagi behind with An’s simmering intentions. As he slid open the balcony door, the cool night air slapped his face, a strange relief after the stifling room.

Mamoru glanced over the railing, commenting absently on the city lights, but Ail’s mind drifted back inside, to Usagi’s innocent presence in that shadowed apartment, left alone with An’s growing hunger.

An watched Usagi devour another slice of cake, a gluttonous Goorak.

She turned to Usagi. “You came back to check on me? How considerate.” There was no warmth now, only a predatory gleam in her eyes, as if she’d caged a bird under her claws.

“Yeah! That’s what friends do. And even though you’re a love rival, we’re friends first!”

“You wanted to know about that room.” An leaned forward. “That room scares me. Ail’s science experiment has gone mad! It’s absolutely terrifying.”

Usagi balked, and her face drained of color. “Really?”

An pulled Usagi from the couch and shoved her toward the door. “But it won’t harm you.”

As An pulled the door open, a gust of stale, otherworldly air spilled out, carrying the scent of decay and old secrets.

Usagi tried to pull free, voice trembling. “I’m not sure I’d like to see it.”

Without waiting another second, An shoved Usagi inside. The clumsy girl stumbled forward into the black, catching herself just before the gnarled roots snagged her. An nearly laughed in jubilation as the tendrils coiled across the floor, tense and waiting, as if sensing the meal to come.

“You should feel grateful,” An sneered, her voice nearly as cold as the air. “Your precious life force will save us.”

All her hopes, all her faith, clung to this single act of brutality. It didn’t matter that she’d become a monster. All that mattered was the survival of the Makai Tree.

An said nothing as more roots wrapped around Usagi.

An said nothing as they glowed vibrant green.

An said nothing as Usagi’s energy began to drain.

An said nothing as new life oozed into her weakening body.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

# Tendrils of Shadow and Light

**C**haos consumed the world.

The once-serene balcony twisted into a battleground, darkness coiling and clawing through the very fabric of existence. Gnarled roots sprawled outwards in a grotesque web, twisting and spiraling like veins through the concrete, warping the structure beneath Mamoru's feet.

Tendrils writhed and pulsed, feeding on the very air, which hung heavy and thick with a sickly sweetness, laced with the bitter edge of decay. The once-open space was now a battlefield, shrouded in darkness that seemed to seep from the tree itself.

“Agghh!”

Everything froze as Usagi's voice cut through the oppressive air, sharp and desperate.

It was distant, choked, and filled with a terror that ignited something primal in him. Her scream ripped through the fabric of his control, leaving only a raw, burning need to reach her.

Mamoru's heart thundered, each beat reverberating like a war drum in his chest. Every muscle in his body coiled, straining against the suffocating air as if he could tear through the distance between them with sheer will.

Usagi!

Her name rang in his mind, a beacon of light that drove him forward, even as the tree's twisted tendrils reached to stop him.

Suffocating and rancid air pressed thick against his lungs as he surged into movement. The acrid scent of decay burned his nose, clinging to his skin. Under him, the ground buckled and shifted as roots slid through the surface like living things, snaking upwards to grasp at him.

All around him, he could feel the earth trembling. Not just with the physical strain of these invasive roots, but with something deeper.

Something anguished.

He could feel it in his core, a low, keening vibration that resonated with his very soul. The Earth itself was crying out, its pain reverberating through him, a primal lament that screamed of corruption and the violation of its harmony.

It was a cry he couldn't ignore, a wound he was powerless to heal.

The building shuddered, groaning as stone fell away and glass cracked. Each tremendous fracture fueled the war chant pounding in his chest. The apartment was unrecognizable—overrun by the ever-expanding sprawl of roots and vines.

They twisted and expanded like demented snakes, writhing hungrily across cracked concrete. Everything compelled him deeper into the apartment. Deeper into danger. It didn't matter the air became drenched in the stench of decay and the cloying sweetness of rot.

Because she was in danger.

Her scream pierced the oppressive haze again, sharp and terrified, a blade slicing through the chaos. It cut into him, deeper than any root could, igniting a fury that pulsed in time with his racing heartbeat. Her voice was his only anchor, pulling him forward even as the twisted scene sought to drag him under.

“What’s going on?” Ail yelled beside him. “Why is the Makai Tree doing this?”

Mamoru stumbled, nearly tripping over a root that writhed like a predator in wait, its bark slick and cold against his skin.

“Usagi!” he roared, his voice raw and unsteady, but the Makai Tree swallowed the sound, mocking him with its sinister, guttural hum.

He could feel the tree’s presence, ancient and malevolent, thrumming in the air like a second heartbeat. Its energy rippled through the ground, sending tremors that knocked him off balance. Still, he pushed forward, driven by an instinct that defied logic, a need as primal as the blood coursing through his veins.

The apartment was unrecognizable, a wasteland devoured by monstrous growth. Deformed branches sprawled across the walls and ceiling, their jagged edges puncturing through plaster and twisting like grotesque sculptures of decay.

Contorted roots erupted through the floorboards, cracking tiles and splitting through concrete with relentless force. Furniture lay in shattered ruins, overturned and splintered beneath the oppressive weight of bark and sinew. Glass sparkled like a fractured ocean across the floor, catching dim light from the warped remnants of a window now framed by writhing tendrils.

The space pulsed with an unnatural energy, the air heavy and charged, as though the tree itself had claimed dominion over the very soul of the apartment.

Then he saw her.

Everything stopped at that moment.

Her small frame dwarfed by the monstrous roots winding around her legs, her arms, her waist. They twisted tighter with every passing second, their tendrils moving with a deliberate, predatory grace, as if savoring their claim on her.

Golden hair caught the light, eerie light emanating from the tree, a fragile glow against the suffocating darkness. Her wide, tear-filled eyes locked onto his, and the sheer terror in them sent a jagged bolt of pain through his chest.

The spot behind his ribs ignited into a cataclysmic eruption, a tempest of molten fury and desperate resolve that seared through his entire being. It was as if the very core of his soul had split open, unleashing a force as ancient and unyielding as the Earth itself, demanding action, demanding he save her.

The inferno didn't just burn—it roared, a primal call to protect her at any cost, a fire that threatened to consume the darkness itself if it meant freeing her from its grasp.

“An what did you do?” Ail yelled beside him.

“Nothing!” An's voice was nearly lost in the din of cracking plaster. “I just wanted to give the Makai Tree what it needed!”

But before he could reach her, a massive root lashed out, coiling around his ankle with a force that stole his balance. He hit the ground hard, the breath knocked from his lungs as the root wound tighter, its bark biting into his skin with icy precision.

“No!” he growled, clawing at the tendril as it climbed higher, wrapping around his leg, his torso, his chest.

It squeezed, relentless and unyielding, until every shallow breath felt like knives in his ribs.

The roots didn't stop.

They twisted around his arms, his throat, cutting off his voice, his strength, his will. Cold energy seeped into his body, a parasitic drain that left him trembling, his limbs heavy and useless. He could feel his energy being siphoned away, feeding the Makai Tree's insatiable hunger, leaving him hollow and gasping for air.

Through the haze of pain, Mamoru's gaze fixed on Usagi.

She was struggling against her captors, her movements frantic but weakening, her voice choked as the tendrils climbed higher. Her light—her warmth—was dimming before his eyes, and the thought was unbearable.

A memory flickered in his mind.

Towering crystal columns lined a grand hall, refracting moonlight into shimmering cascades of soft color. A throne carved from a massive crystal sat at the heart, intricate patterns dancing in the glow. He couldn't explain how he knew, but it belonged to Queen Serenity.

His lips moved, the words slipping out instinctively, ancient yet familiar: "Protect Serenity. Protect the Moon Kingdom. To the best of my ability."

Tears stung his eyes.

It was just a memory—yet it felt so real, so raw.

Then she was there. Serenity, colliding into his chest, her embrace fierce and desperate. Her warmth overwhelmed him, the scent of moon blossoms filling his senses. Relief and love swelled in his chest, too vast to contain.

As the image faded, it left behind an ache that burned like fire, a vow etched deep into his soul.

He would protect her.

He would sacrifice all to see Princess Serenity continue.

"Let... me... go!" he snarled, his voice raw with desperation.

He strained against the roots, muscles screaming as he twisted and pulled, but the tree's grip was unrelenting, tightening with every breath. Blood trickled from his forearms where the bark had torn his skin, but he didn't care.

The fire in his chest burned hotter, fueled by her name, her face, her light.

"Usagi!" He screamed out, stretching towards her.

The Makai Tree groaned, its ancient voice resonating through the rooftop like a death knell. The roots surged with renewed ferocity, pressing harder, mocking his struggle. His vision blurred, the edges darkening as exhaustion threatened to consume him.

But then—through the suffocating darkness—he saw her again. Her eyes, wide and shimmering with tears, met his. And in that moment, he saw not just fear, but hope. A fragile, flickering hope that gave him strength he didn't know he had.

With a guttural roar, Mamoru wrenched his body against the roots, his muscles burning, his chest searing with pain. The bark splintered beneath his hands, each crack a victory, a testament to his unyielding will.

But they didn't relent, only squeezed tighter.

“Usagi!” he cried, his voice hoarse but steady.

“Mamoru!” her voice was strained, struggling against the tremendous forces pulling at her.

She was reaching for him now, their fingertips a breath apart. Every breath was a battle, the air thick and rancid, but he didn't stop.

Her lips moved, forming his name, and the sight was enough.

It was everything.

He lunged, his arms outstretched, his body screaming in protest as strained against the bonds that held fast. His fingers brushed hers—a fleeting, fragile contact—and then her hand was in his, trembling but alive. Then the roots shifted, wrenching them away again.

The roots constricted tighter around Mamoru's chest, cold and unyielding, their bark scraping like shards of glass against his skin. Each breath was a struggle, shallow and sharp, as if the tree's tendrils were siphoning the very air from his lungs.

He could feel his ribs protest, the tightness pressing on his heart as though the Makai Tree itself sought to devour every beat. But none of it mattered—not the suffocating pain, not the icy burn of the roots.

The only thing that mattered was her.

Usagi.

“Mamoru! I can’t... reach.”

Her trembling hand hovered just out of reach, a fragile, flickering beacon of light against the suffocating gloom. She gasped, her chest rising and falling in shallow heaves, her pale skin damp with the strain of fighting.

Every cry she bit back sliced into Mamoru like a blade, carving deep into his resolve. He wouldn’t let her suffer.

A low, guttural groan rumbled through the chamber, the Makai Tree pulsing with life, its roots twisting tighter around its prey. The room seemed to thrum with its malevolence, a sickly hum that rattled the walls and sent shivers crawling down Mamoru’s spine.

Dust and debris fell like ash from the cracking ceiling, the air dense with decay and the sharp tang of something metallic, something ancient.

“Drain her energy!” An shrieked, her voice jagged with desperation. Her violet eyes flashed like embers, dark and fiery, as she pointed a trembling finger at Usagi. “She’s the one we need! She’s the key!”

“No!” Ail’s voice cut through hers, a thunderous roar that trembled with jealousy. “Drain him! He’s the threat. Take him!”

Their voices clashed, filling the space with a storm of anger and obsession.

They circled each other, their emotions raw and volatile, igniting sparks that fed the Makai Tree’s frenzy. The roots around Mamoru tightened with each command, pulsing with their chaotic energy, their grip growing colder, crueler, as though the tree thrived on their hatred.

“You don’t care about the tree,” Ail hissed, his glare fixed on An. “You just want him. Admit it!”

“You just what that girl!” An spat back, her voice cracking under the weight of her fury. “You want her because she’s beyond your grasp. She’ll never be yours!”

Mamoru coughed, his chest heaving as the roots pressed harder, sapping his strength. His vision blurred at the edges, dark spots dancing in the periphery, but he refused to give in. Not while Usagi’s hand still reached for him, her lips trembling as they silently formed his name.

The Makai Tree responded to the chaos with a savage groan, its roots thrashing wildly, feeding on the tangled web of obsession and fear. The walls trembled with the force of its hunger, its tendrils driving deeper into the structure, seeking to consume everything in its path. The oppressive air grew colder, heavier, like a storm on the cusp of breaking.

“Let her go!” Mamoru growled, his voice raw and broken.

His arms strained against the roots, muscles burning as he fought to free himself. His nails dug into the bark, splintering against the rough surface, but he didn’t care.

Pain was irrelevant.

Only Usagi mattered.

Ail turned on him, his face twisted with fury and triumph. “You think you can protect her? You’re nothing. Just a weak human clinging to something you don’t deserve.”

Mamoru’s heart surged with a fury that burned through the suffocating numbness. He bared his teeth, his voice trembling with defiance. “I don’t need to deserve her. I need to protect her.”

An laughed, a sharp, bitter sound that cut through the air. “Protect her? You can’t even protect yourself. Join me and we’ll be together forever.”

The tree hissed, its roots writhing in response, its hunger insatiable. Mamoru felt his strength slipping away, the cold seep of his energy leaving him weaker, more fragile. His body trembled, his breaths shallow, but he wouldn’t stop.

Not while she still needed him.

Usagi’s voice broke through the chaos, soft and determined. “Mamoru...”

Her gaze locked on his, wide and brimming with tears, yet filled with an unyielding strength that took his breath away. “Don’t... let go.”

Her words pierced through him, igniting something primal, something unshakable. He drew on every last shred of his resolve, forcing his body to move, to fight, to push through the darkness.

Usagi was so close, her trembling hand outstretched, her fingers a fragile bridge between hope and despair. Her wide, tear-filled eyes locked onto his, and he saw in them a kaleidoscope of fear, courage, and a love so profound it reached deep into his soul.

But the Makai Tree refused to relent.

The roots tightened further, dragging her hand just beyond his reach, mocking him with every heartbeat that passed.

A guttural groan rippled through the air as the tree writhed, its branches casting jagged shadows that flickered like the bars of a prison cell. Mamoru’s ribs screamed with the pressure of the roots’ vice-like grip, his lungs burning as he fought for breath.

Yet his focus never wavered.

The agony was secondary.

Her name, unspoken but seared into his very being, became a mantra.

Usagi.

Usagi.

Usagi!

An and Ail continued to bicker, their voices rose, venomous and cutting, each accusation thickening the air with raw, seething emotion. The Makai Tree seemed to revel in their hatred, its roots tightening with each shout, as though thriving on their obsessions.

The walls trembled, cracks snaking through the plaster as the tree's branches swelled outward, their jagged tips threatening to pierce the ceiling.

With a desperate roar, Mamoru twisted against the bonds, his muscles screaming in protest. He could feel the bark tearing at his skin, warm blood trickling down his arms, but he didn't care. His fingers stretched toward hers, trembling with the effort, and finally, finally, they touched.

As their fingers met, a warmth surged between them, cutting through the suffocating cold like a sunrise piercing the longest night. The light spread, threading through the darkness, pulling them closer as if the universe itself was aligning around their bond.

Even as his vision blurred and his limbs felt like lead, a new strength surged in his veins. Her touch ignited something within him, a memory that wasn't a memory, a truth that felt older than the stars themselves.

A moonlit kingdom, gleaming towers reflecting across pristine crystal. Laughter, soft and radiant, cutting through the moonbeams. A battle fought side by side, their hearts unyielding even as darkness fell.

A vow whispered beneath a starry sky.

“Usagi,” he croaked, his voice a raw rasp as he forced his head to lift. Her lips moved, forming his name—a silent plea that sliced through the fog clouding his mind.

“Let her go!” he roared, the sound erupting from his chest like a storm. His arms strained against the roots, muscles screaming in protest, but he didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop. “She’s not yours to take!”

Ail slammed a foot into his hand, kicking him away from Usagi.

“Don’t you dare lay a hand on my Usagi,” Ail growled.

An shot over, shoving Ail away. “Don’t you dare treat my Mamoru that way!”

Ail puffed up, his face growing red. “Your Mamoru? So, he’s yours now?”

“You JUST called her my Usagi, I know what that means!” An shrieked. “That means that you love her more than me!”

“Our love is different, my brilliant Solar Flair.”

“Stop lying to me!” An shouted, her energy glowing red around her body.

Mamoru slumped against the roots. It was getting harder to breathe, impossible to think. The wind on the rooftop howled like a feral beast, clawing at them with sharp gusts, dragging with it the acrid stench of decay.

The Makai Tree loomed at the center of the chaos, its roots thrashing like wild serpents, feeding off the hatred and desperation saturating the air. Darkness pulsed from its gnarled branches, a heartbeat that seemed to sync with the storm’s fury.

Mamoru’s chest heaved as he tried to rise from the cracked concrete, each movement igniting a firestorm of pain. His vision swam, the edges blurring in a haze of exhaustion, but his focus remained sharp, locked on the girl standing defiantly before him. Usagi—no, Sailor

Moon—radiated an ethereal glow, her transformation casting her in a light that defied the surrounding shadow.

Her transformation wasn't just a change of form—it was a reclamation of light in the face of overwhelming darkness. The glow from her sailor uniform spread outward, illuminating the rooftop with a radiance that even the Makai Tree's shadow couldn't smother.

“Usagi...” Mamoru's voice was raw, barely audible, yet the whisper carried the weight of every unspoken promise, every moment they'd shared, stretching back through lifetimes.

Sailor Moon didn't falter.

Spots of red danced down her skin and stained her uniform, but she remained strong. Her body trembled from exertion, but her eyes burned with unyielding resolve as she met the venomous glares of Ail and An. The twins stood with their hands crackling, arcs of dark energy spiraling around their fingers, their faces twisted with fury and something even darker—envy.

“Usagi is Sailor Moon?” Ail's voice was thin, hints of betrayal dancing along his words.

“Makes sense. I thought their clumsy antics were oddly similar,” An fluffed her hair. “Now that she's our enemy, will you destroy her?”

“But.”

“Wake up, Ail, she's never been into you.”

The sensation of her warmth next to him brought him back from the darkness. He could barely see her glowing form against the darkness of oblivion. When she grabbed his hand and squeezed, that spot behind his ribs pulsed in response.

“Sailor Moon,” he didn't know if he actually spoke or if it was just in his mind.

“I'm here Mamoru. It's time for you to remember me. Remember the Moon Kingdom. Remember the girl who loves you.”

There it was again—a fleeting vision of crystalline towers shimmering in radiant light, their reflections casting fragments of memory across his mind. Laughter, bright and pure, echoed through fields of white blossoms, carrying with it a sense of belonging so profound it ached. The images danced just out of reach, like whispers of a life long buried.

And then, with a flash, the truth surged through him, undeniable and absolute.

He wasn't just Mamoru Chiba.

He was Prince Endymion of the Golden Kingdom.

He protected Elysion.

He guarded the Golden Crystal.

He safeguarded every beautiful dream.

But the memories offered no solace, only a cruel reminder of what he was failing to do now. The oppressive darkness swallowed the flickers of crystal and golden light in around him. His limbs trembled, still reeling from the damage done by the Makai Tree.

He fought to hold onto the fragments of who he was, of the prince who once stood unshaken, but they slipped through his grasp like water. Consciousness wavered, each second a battle to keep his eyes open, to keep her face in focus.

But even his memories, rich with purpose and love, couldn't stave off the overwhelming weight of exhaustion bearing down on him.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

# A Memory of Love and Starlight

Only the radiant light from Sailor Moon kept Mamoru tethered to consciousness. The brilliant silver glow enveloped him, soft and unyielding, cradling him like a long-lost lover's embrace. It moved through the cracks of his fading strength, chasing away the suffocating darkness that clawed at the edges of his mind.

Still, the world quaked beneath him, the Makai Tree's root spreading out like the veins of a corrupted heart, pulsing with an energy so dark it seemed to pull the light from the stars. Everywhere the air remained sharp, twisted with the tang of decay that burned every breath.

Wind tore through the rooftop, howling like a beast unchained, a cruel counterpoint to the light. Mamoru's chest heaved with shallow, rattling breaths, the weight of the Makai Tree's power crushing him in increments, like a slow, deliberate execution.

His vision wavered, his strength bled away, but one thing remained constant—her.

Sailor Moon.

Through the haze of pain, she stood out like the moon piercing through storm clouds.

Then, the Senshi arrived.

Sailor Mars' heels scraped against the concrete as she took her stance, her voice rising above the chaos. "Fire Soul Bird!" she cried, hurling her phoenix of flame through the suffocating air.

It screeched toward the aliens, a streak of blazing defiance, but it faltered just shy of impact, smothered by Ail and An's combined shield of darkness. The aliens laughed, their hollow, merciless mirth echoing like shards of glass across the rooftop. It was the laughter of predators who knew their prey had no escape.

Mamoru struggled to act, to do anything, but his body refused to obey, his helplessness a dagger twisting in his chest.

He needed to protect Sailor Moon, to shield her from the oncoming storm, but his body refused to move. His arms, his legs, even his voice—each was a prisoner to the exhaustion consuming him. Yet, as he watched helplessly, he knew one thing for certain.

He'd fallen in love with her.

Again.

Sailor Moon turned to him. He tightened his grip on her hand, summoning the last reserves of his strength. He wouldn't lose her—not now, not ever.

An's laugh shattered the fragile moment. "How noble, Sailor Moon," she sneered, venom dripping from every syllable. Dark energy coiled around her hands, twisting like a serpent ready to strike. "Now beg for mercy."

Sailor Moon didn't flinch.

She rose to her feet, her eyes locked on An's. "I don't care what happens to me," she said, her voice steady, the moonlight glowing around her like a second skin. "But please, spare Mamoru's life."

An's sneer twisted into something feral as she unleashed a bolt of dark electricity, crackling with malevolent energy, hurtling toward

them. Fear erupted in Mamoru's chest, sharp and all-consuming, as he willed his body to move, to shield her, to do something—anything.

But his limbs remained frozen, his strength a cruel, distant memory.

The energy struck Sailor Moon with devastating force, the impact sending a shockwave that rippled through the air. She staggered but didn't falter, her slender frame steady against the onslaught. The radiant silver light around her flared, defiant and unyielding, as though it was born of something far greater than power alone.

But Ail paused. "Why? Why did you risk your life like that?"

Sailor Moon didn't hesitate. "Because I'm willing to risk my life in order to protect anyone I truly love."

An's cruel laughter rang out. "How noble. Time to beg for help you pathetic human."

More devastating blows rained down, each one a searing jolt of darkness that tore through the air with an ear-splitting crack. Sailor Moon stood her ground, her arms spread wide as though to shield him from the storm, her silver light flaring brighter with each strike. Yet even that brilliance couldn't mask the damage.

The first bolt struck her shoulder, the force snapping her head back and sending her stumbling a step. Mamoru's chest clenched as he saw crimson bloom against the pristine white of her uniform, the fabric tearing to reveal raw, bloodied skin beneath. She barely flinched, her resolve unyielding as she squared her shoulders, ready for the next strike.

Sailor Mercury ran forward. "Shine Aqua Illusion!"

But Ail turned and channeled a tremendous strike. It smashed into them. The Sailor Guardians flew back, smashing into the pulsing root walls.

An continued to laugh, the sound rippling across the darkness like a blade seeking flesh. Another blast came, hitting her side with

a sickening crack. Her cry of pain cut through the chaos, sharp and heart-wrenching, and Mamoru's hands curled into fists.

He tried again to move, to rise, but his body betrayed him, every attempt a futile effort against his weakness.

His helplessness seared like fire, a deeper agony than any physical blow could bring.

More strikes followed, relentless and merciless. Each hit sent her staggering back, her sailor uniform shredding further with every impact. The soft pink of her bows hung in tatters, the vibrant reds and blues of her skirt muted by dirt and blood.

Her breathing came ragged now, each inhale a visible struggle, but she didn't waver. Her golden hair, once so perfect, hung in loose, tangled strands around her face, but her eyes remained locked on An, fierce and unwavering. The silver light around her flickered, dimming as the assault continued, but it never vanished. It wouldn't.

Mamoru's throat burned with the scream he couldn't voice, his mind screaming against the reality of what was unfolding before him.

She was taking every hit for him, her body breaking under the relentless onslaught. Her knees buckled, yet she didn't fall. Her bloodied hands trembled, but she held them steady, standing as the final shield between him and the darkness.

And still, she stood.

Tears blurred Mamoru's vision as another blast struck her chest, the force enough to send her crashing to her knees. He saw her lips move, forming words he couldn't hear over the chaos. But he knew her heart—he could feel it.

She wasn't fighting for herself.

She was fighting for him, for all of them. Her light, dimmed but unbroken, was her vow.

Even as the darkness closed in, she was their beacon.

Their hope.

“I don’t care what happens to me, but spare Mamoru’s life.”

An stretched her hands outwards. “How touching. Your life for his? Consider it done. We’ll dance together in the stars forever.”

But Ail hesitated. His gaze lingered on Sailor Moon, the cold arrogance in his expression softening into something almost... human.

“How beautiful,” he murmured, the words almost swallowed by the storm. “Is this what love is? To give instead of take?”

For a moment, he looked at Sailor Moon with something that bordered on reverence, his understanding of love fracturing under the weight of her sacrifice.

“Yes.” Sailor Jupiter struggled to her feet, bleeding from several wounds. “When you truly love someone, the strength of that love gives you the power to do anything.”

The Makai Tree groaned, a deep, guttural sound that rumbled through the rooftop like a creature awakening. Its roots twisted in violent spasms, thrashing against the concrete. A wave of energy exploded from its core, slamming into Ail and An with bone-crushing force. They hit the rooftop with a sickening thud, their bodies crumpling under the blow.

Mamoru gasped as the crushing pressure on his ribs lifted. His vision blurred as he looked at Sailor Moon, her gaze meeting his with a love so fierce, it left him breathless.

But the reprieve was short-lived. An staggered to her feet, her face twisted in rage, her body crackling with unstable power. “No! Love is a weakness! You wouldn’t understand what we’ve had to do.”

She hurled a blast of dark energy, its raw intensity splitting the air. Mamoru moved instinctively, placing himself between the blast and Sailor Moon.

Ail watched her, the storm in his eyes softening. “You can’t force it,” he murmured. “Love... It must be built.”

An grew more frantic, the glowing aura round her exploding into an angry red. It was then that Mamoru knew she wanted to kill them all. When she raised her hand again, he knew it would be devastating.

Mamoru stepped in front of Sailor Moon, his body screaming in protest as he forced himself to stand between her and the oncoming strike. He spread his arms wide, a shield of flesh and bone against the torrent of darkness bearing down on them.

Every instinct urged him to run, to find cover, but the thought of her suffering even a fraction more silenced the fear.

He would give everything to protect her.

Serenity.

The first blow struck like a lightning bolt to his chest, the force nearly sending him to his knees. Agony lanced through him, white-hot and all-consuming, but he clenched his jaw, refusing to let a single sound escape.

His ribs felt like they might shatter, his vision blurred, but still, he held firm. She was behind him, her fragile, battered body trembling with exhaustion, and he would be her wall.

Her fortress.

Her everything.

“Mamo, no,” she whispered, her voice so fragile that had he been even a breath further away, the words would have dissolved into the chaos around them. It wasn’t just the sound of her voice—it was the way it trembled, breaking on the edge of desperation, that struck him harder than any blow.

Another blast hit, this time slamming into his shoulder, twisting him violently to one side. He tasted blood, sharp and metallic, but he

didn't falter. Every strike tore at him, ripping flesh, bruising bone, but he stood tall. For her.

Always for her.

"Mamoru, stop!" she cried, her voice raw with desperation, but he couldn't.

He wouldn't.

His hand, trembling and bloodied, reached back blindly, finding hers. He clutched it tightly, grounding himself in the feel of her fingers, her warmth. It was the only thing keeping him upright, the only thing giving him the strength to face the next attack.

"I won't let them hurt you," he said, his voice low, shaking with effort but resolute. "Not while I'm still standing. Not while I still breathe."

The blows kept coming, each one more brutal than the last. His knees buckled, but he caught himself, forcing his body to obey. He could feel his strength slipping, his breaths coming shallow and ragged.

Pain had long since overtaken him, drowning out everything except the single, burning truth in his heart: she was worth it. She was worth every drop of blood, every gasp of air, every beat of his heart.

He knew he couldn't take much more.

He felt it in his bones, in the way his body swayed under its own weight, in the dark edges creeping into his vision.

He wasn't walking away from this.

But he didn't care.

If this was how he died, he would die knowing he had done everything to protect her. Knowing she would live. That was enough. Then he could face Queen Serenity in the afterlife without shame.

As another strike connected, fire seared through his chest, and he staggered, his grip on her hand faltering.

“Endymion!” she screamed, but he couldn’t turn to her, couldn’t let her see the tears streaking down his face.

“Stay safe, Serenity,” he whispered, his voice breaking.

His knees hit the ground, but he didn’t release her hand. He wouldn’t. Not until the very end.

Mamoru’s body hit the pulsing root with a thud, the impact reverberating through his already fractured body. The world around him dimmed, muffled cries and the battle’s chaos receding into a haze of shadows. Each breath burned, shallow and labored, but through the fog of exhaustion, a single name whispered in his mind, cutting through the darkness like a lifeline: Usako.

It all came rushing back in a flood that stole his breath—lifetimes condensed into a single, devastating moment of clarity. He remembered her as Princess Serenity, the moonlight that had drawn him from the shadows of his duty, her laughter like starlight spilling into the cracks of his soul.

They’d forged the everlasting bonds of their love as Silver Millennium crumbled around them.

Then, because of Queen Serenity’s sacrifice, they’d been born again. That’s when he fell in love with her again, as Usagi. The clumsy, warm girl who dismantled his walls one smile at a time, even as the Dark Kingdom wrenched them apart.

And then, again, after all the battles, after all the pain, when her love had healed him, had reminded him who he was and why he would always, always choose her.

No matter the lifetime, no matter the form, his heart would always find hers.

It was an immutable truth etched into the very fabric of his being: he would always fall in love with her, and he would do it a thousand times more if it meant he could hold her for even one fleeting moment.

Mamoru's eyelids fluttered open, the edges of the world hazy and fractured, his body aching with the aftershocks of the battle. The cold rooftop pressed against his back, a stark reminder of the harsh reality surrounding him. Yet, even amidst the chaos, a warmth lingered—gentle, steady—like the last ember in a dying fire.

He found her.

Sailor Moon.

Princess Serenity.

Usako.

She hovered beside him, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears, her expression fierce and unyielding. He wanted to tell her the truth. That he remembered her, their past, their present. His lips moved to tell her his heart would always belong to her.

But the moment shattered with a scream.

"Enough!" An's voice tore across the rooftop, sharp as broken glass, her rage a palpable force. Her hands crackled with dark energy, and she hurled it toward them without hesitation.

The air split with a thunderous crack as the blast tore through the space between them.

Sailor Moon moved before Mamoru could react. She threw herself around him, shielding his body with her own. The force of the attack hurled them across the rooftop, and they landed with a bone-jarring crash. Agony rippled through her frame, but her arms stayed locked around him, unwavering. Her breath came in labored gasps, but her voice—soft and determined—rose above the storm.

"I won't let you hurt him!" Sailor Moon yelled. "I'll protect him forever!"

Her devotion burned into him, brighter and fiercer than the memory of battle, more profound than any fleeting glimpse of their past.

Mamoru's chest tightened, the weight of her sacrifice settling deep within him.

She was the thread tying him to a love that had transcended lifetimes. He reached up with trembling fingers, brushing against hers in a silent promise of his own.

But An's laughter, sharp and brittle, shattered the stillness. "You think love is worth this suffering?" she spat, her hands trembling with barely contained power. "You have no idea what we've endured! Loneliness—centuries of wandering, taking what we needed because there was nothing else. Love is a lie for those who haven't been abandoned!"

Her words, jagged and raw, reverberated against the trembling branches of the Makai Tree. It groaned in response, its roots writhing like restless serpents, feeding on her anguish. Dark cracks raced along its bark, and its branches stretched hungrily toward the rooftop.

Another blast surged toward Sailor Moon, but the Moonlight Knight emerged in a blinding arc of white light. His sword intercepted the energy, sparks flying as the impact rattled through him. His form flickered, delicate and fragile, but his resolve did not waver.

He turned to An, his voice calm but unyielding. "An, you've suffered much. But love isn't something you can take by force. It's not possession—it's a gift, something freely given."

His words struck a nerve. An's expression twisted, her rage mounting as she unleashed a final, desperate attack. The force slammed into the Moonlight Knight, throwing him against the Makai Tree with a resounding crack. His form faltered, flickering as though the very fabric of his existence was unraveling.

The Makai Tree roared in response, its branches lashing out wildly, one root surging toward Ail with lethal precision.

Time seemed to fracture.

An's anger dissolved in an instant.

"Ail!" she screamed, her voice raw with desperation. Without hesitation, she threw herself between him and the oncoming root. It struck her with unrelenting force, the impact sending her crumpling into Ail's arms.

"An..." Ail's voice broke, his hands trembling as he cradled her frail body.

Her breaths were shallow, her strength slipping away with each passing moment. Yet, her gaze softened, and with trembling fingers, she reached for his cheek.

"Ail," she whispered. "I'm sorry, but I was so afraid. I'm so afraid I'll lose you. We'll lose the Makai Tree. But now I'm afraid for a different reason. You'll be alone, and I'm afraid for you."

Tears filled Ail's eyes, his face crumpling as the weight of her confession crushed him. "An... don't leave me," he choked out, his voice cracking under the weight of grief. "I can't do this without you. You are the only light in this dark universe, please."

Her eyes fluttered shut, and her breath stilled. Ail stared at her unmoving form, his face slowly melting into indescribable sorrow. The Makai Tree groaned again, its roots thrashing with renewed ferocity. One branch reared back, ready to strike Ail, its intent unrelenting.

But a voice cut through the chaos—a voice quiet yet unwavering.

"Please," Sailor Moon stepped forward, her arms outstretched, her voice trembling with emotion. "Please... stop."

The rooftop stilled, the oppressive energy wavering as her words resonated across the space. The Makai Tree paused, its roots quivering as though her plea had reached something deep within its core. Sailor Moon's gaze softened, tears glimmering in her eyes.

“You’ve suffered so much,” she said, her voice heavy with compassion. “But you don’t have to anymore. Please... let go of the pain. Let us help you heal.”

The Makai Tree seemed to pause, its writhing roots slowing as though caught in a breathless moment. A faint, ethereal glow began to pulse from deep within its core, a soft green light that shimmered like sunlight filtering through leaves.

The oppressive darkness that had suffused the air began to recede, replaced by a fragile warmth that whispered of life, of renewal. The tendrils, once tight with malice, loosened their grip, sagging as if weary, their jagged edges smoothing in the gentle glow. It was as if the tree itself was exhaling, its ancient sorrow soothed by the purity of Sailor Moon’s voice.

The Makai Tree groaned again, but this time, its branches withdrew. A quiet stillness replaced the darkness coiling around it as it faded. The air lightened, carrying the faint scent of renewal as the tree seemed to bow under the weight of her compassion.

For a moment, peace settled over the rooftop, fragile but undeniable. Sailor Moon stood as a beacon of light, her love and mercy a salve to the wounds left behind by the battle. And in the quiet that followed, the promise of healing began to take root.

In the stillness that followed, love—fragile, flawed, and beautiful—prevailed.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

# The Dawn of Forever

**N**ow, there was nothing left to lose.

Even if it meant her death—and the death of her last, fragile Sprout—she had to let go. She had to say goodbye. She had to speak her truth. The Makai Tree stirred, its consciousness unfurling like a withered leaf caught in the first rays of hesitant sunlight.

The sound it made was not one of movement, but of existence itself—a low, keening groan, heavy with the weight of endless years. It resonated through the air like the haunting echo of a forgotten symphony, trembling through the marrow of those who stood before it.

The Makai Tree rose, a shadow of what it had once been. Its branches stretched skyward in brittle agony, clawing at the void like skeletal fingers seeking something just beyond reach. The bark was riddled with deep fissures, gnarled and weathered by eons of loneliness. A faint, sickly light pulsed at its core—weak and flickering, like the heartbeat of something already half-dead.

The warrior who called herself Sailor Moon froze.

The Makai Tree felt the pulse of life and pure love this champion carried within her—a light, radiant and boundless, that whispered of redemption, love, and renewal. Even if it was all a lie, she let those soft promises wash over her, clinging to their warmth for just a moment longer.

Ail, her last remaining Sprout, kneeled before her. His eyes rolled over the pulsing roots and quivering branches.

Gathering the last shred of her strength, she drew Sailor Moon and Ail close, pulling their essence into the depths of her consciousness.

Sailor Moon shivered as the oppressive air pressed against her chest. Despair rippled outward from the Makai Tree, an unrelenting wave of sorrow that stole the breath from her lungs. The warrior of light stumbled, wrapping her arms around herself, her knees trembling under the weight of anguish.

Beside her, Ail swayed, his usually composed expression crumbling into something unguarded and raw.

Now she spoke, though no words were truly said. Instead, it was a vibration, a sound that seemed to come not from outside but from everywhere. It moved through the blood and bones of those who heard it.

“I am tired,” she whispered, each syllable a creak of ancient wood splintering under the strain of its own existence.

The air grew heavy, laden with an ancient resonance that thrummed like the beating of a wounded heart. The Makai Tree stretched, its brittle branches trembling with a sorrow so vast it threatened to fracture the very fabric of the rooftop.

Sailor Moon and Ail felt it—a low, keening vibration that seeped into their bones, pressing down with the weight of centuries. It was not simply sound; it was grief made palpable, an unrelenting dirge that bled through the space around them.

“I remember,” the Tree’s voice emerged, creaking and raw, as though its very essence splintered with every word. “I remember what it was to thrive. To be whole.”

The rooftop dissolved into shadow, unraveling like threads of an old tapestry until Sailor Moon and Ail stood at the threshold of her memory.

She reached for them, pulling them deeper into its consciousness, her desperation palpable. The effort was excruciating, its energy fracturing further with each moment, but she endured. They needed to see—needed to feel.

And then she allowed herself to remember the life she loved.

The life before the desolate voids and starvation.

Endless and radiant, the ocean shimmered beneath a golden sun, its waves alive with hues of emerald and gold. Warmth filled the air, an embrace woven with the hum of life itself. Roots reached deep into the crystal-clear depths, pulsing with vitality. Immense, luminous creatures glided through the water, their graceful movements a symphony of harmony and light.

“For more centuries than can be counted, I lived alone in the soft sunshine and whispering waves.” Her words trembled with a bitter-sweet ache.

The ocean pulsed with that love—vast, consuming, and yet tinged with something fragile. The waves sang, their rhythm gentle and unceasing, and the sun bathed her leaves in a glow so brilliant it seemed eternal.

For a moment, Sailor Moon and Ail felt it too, the intoxicating warmth of perfection. It seeped into their chests, filling every hollow corner with the illusion of peace.

“It was silent,” she confessed, her voice faltering. “The waves whispered, but they could not answer. The wind sang, but it carried no words. And I... I had no soul to hold me. The loneliness grew heavy, so I created life.”

The ocean shimmered one last time before dissolving into a grove of impossible beauty.

“And for a time, I was loved,” she whispered, her words carrying both pride and sorrow.

“You never should have lost that love,” Sailor Moon said.

The tree’s consciousness quaked, her words unraveling a sharp tremor that rippled through its ancient form. Images unfolded—its hunger gnawing and unending, driving it to take, to consume in ways she had never wanted.

This existence, this desperate struggle to survive, had turned her into something she despised. Feeding on scraps of stolen life had become the only way to stave off the agony of withering into nothingness. This path was never her choice; the unyielding silence of the universe had forced it upon her.

Once.

Once she stood proud and whole. Once love surrounded her. Beneath her canopy, figures moved—beings of pure light, radiant and harmonious. Their laughter rang out, a melody so sweet it could shatter the hardest stone, and their joy rippled through the air like sunlight spilling over the horizon.

“They were my Sprouts,” she murmured, the love in its voice so fierce it pierced through the memory like a blade. “Born of my essence, fragments of my soul. They were my children.”

Her children danced, their movements fluid and filled with life. Each step was a celebration of connection, each laugh a testament to love shared and nurtured. For a moment, her grief softened, its voice quivering with pride.

“The Makai Tree gave birth to my people?” Ail’s voice was breathy with disbelief. “We’ve always been your children. How I wish I could tell An.”

“Yes, we lived harmony,” she said. “They were my light, and I was their life.”

But even in this perfect memory, an undercurrent of despair seeped through. The Sprouts’ laughter grew distant, the glow of the grove dimming as shadows crept in. The joy began to unravel, replaced by a hollow ache that gnawed at the edges of her heart.

“What happened?” Sailor Moon asked, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Pride. Ego. And all the other dangerous traits I didn’t consider. My children began competing for my affections, for my energy. And then destroyed the world before they fell,” she whispered, its voice breaking. “One by one, until I was left with two.”

The memory shifted, revealing An and Ail—small, fragile, and wide-eyed. They held each other amidst the devastation, the last remnants of her soul. Their innocence was a flicker of hope, fragile yet enduring.

“They were my final hope,” the Makai Tree whispered. “Born from the last pure fragments of my heart. But the scars they carried shaped their silence and solitude. They never knew how to love properly. How to love fully.”

Ail staggered, his composure cracking under the weight of her memories. The anguish in his eyes mirrored her own—a reflection of the emptiness she had carried for centuries. His hand clenched at his chest, as though trying to hold together a heart too fragile to bear the truth.

She watched him, her last remaining Sprout, the flickering fragment of her soul. His pain was palpable, radiating outward in waves that she could feel pulsing through her roots. He had always been so careful to conceal his vulnerabilities, to appear unshaken, but now he stood before her stripped bare, his sorrow laid as raw as hers.

“You carried this burden alone,” he said, his voice low and trembling. “And I... I made it worse.”

His words hung in the air, heavy with regret. She reached for him, not with branches, but with the faint pulse of her essence. It was all she could offer—a wordless acknowledgment, a fragile thread of connection.

Ail closed his eyes, his shoulders sagging as though under an unbearable weight. “An should have been here,” he murmured, more to himself than to her. “She should have known what you truly were.”

His words carried the weight of loss, and she could feel the echo of his love for An pulsing through the fragile bond that now connected them. The Makai Tree’s energy trembled, her sorrow entwining with his. For so long, she had thought herself unable to reach him, her love twisted into something he could not recognize.

And yet here he was, standing in the glow of the Warrior’s light, his walls breaking like the brittle bark that had once encased her.

“I am sorry,” he whispered, his voice cracking. “For not understanding. For everything.”

She felt his grief, sharp and raw, but within it bloomed something unfamiliar—a faint, tentative warmth. It was fragile, like the first unfurling of a leaf after a harsh winter. Her essence stirred, her roots brushing against his presence.

“You do not need to be sorry,” she murmured, her voice ancient and soft, trembling with the weight of epochs. “The shadows I cast shaped your journey. Let this light guide us both.”

Her essence trembled, a faint ripple of resolve threading through the sorrow that bound her. The light around them pulsed gently, softening the edges of centuries-old grief. For a fleeting moment, she allowed herself to believe—perhaps this was not the end, but the beginning of something new.

Yet, even as hope stirred, the memories surged, unrelenting, pulling her back to the moment when everything began to unravel.

“I tore myself free,” she said, her voice trembling with the weight of her pain. “From the soil that had cradled me, the waters that had nourished me. I left behind the paradise that had once been my home.”

The agony of that moment surged through her, reverberating down her brittle branches. Each severed root was a fracture in her soul, a wound that bled the essence of everything she had been. With An and Ail clinging to her, and to each other, she drifted into the void, abandoning the graveyard of her dreams.

The darkness of space was cold and unyielding, vast and merciless. World after world rejected her, each failed attempt to root herself, leaving her weaker, more depleted. Her bark grew brittle, splintering under the weight of her despair. Her branches, once strong and radiant, became fragile and thin.

The vibrant heart that had once pulsed with life, love, and connection withered into a hollow ache, an emptiness she could not fill.

“I became nothing more than a source of energy,” she whispered. “Unable to feel or understand the love I gave them. Unable to understand what I truly needed. Their hunger mirrored my own—an emptiness that energy alone could never fill.”

The memory began to unravel, its vivid images dissolving into shadows. Sailor Moon and Ail stood suspended in the echo of her despair, the weight of its sorrow pressing down on them. Her voice trembled, ancient and weary, as it spoke one final plea.

“I do not need energy,” she said, each word splintering like brittle wood. “I need love. Purify me, Champion of Light. Free me from the burden of my mistakes. And set my children free from this hell of my making.”

Now almost spent, her essence flickered weakly, a fragile ember in the void. Unable to fight anymore, she surrendered to the weight of her grief. Yet within its plea lingered a glimmer of hope—that the love it had once known might bloom again, saving not just itself, but the final scions who had grown in its shadow.

Sailor Moon fell to her knees, tears flowing freely down her face. The raw sorrow was too much to contain, so it spilled free to flood the world. Ail staggered, his composure shattered, his breath coming in shallow, uneven gasps.

“I’ve failed. In all the ways to fail. I failed my world. Failed my children. Failed you, Ail. Failed An.”

Sailor Moon reached out, her fingers brushing the bark with infinite gentleness. “I see you,” she whispered, her voice steady despite the tears. “You are not alone anymore.”

For a moment, the Makai Tree’s trembling ceased. The faint pulse of its light brightened, fragile yet unwavering, like the first bloom breaking through winter’s frost.

“Please, Warrior of Light. Please use your healing powers and cleanse my soul. Free me and my Sprouts from this hell.”

The Makai Tree’s trembling branches stilled, her plea lingering in the air like the final note of a mournful symphony. She waited, fractured and frail, every fiber of her being stretched thin by the weight of her sorrow.

Then, a warmth.

It was soft at first, a gentle caress that wove through the hollow spaces she had guarded for so long. A light began to grow, not demanding or consuming, but offering—a quiet strength that radiated with the promise of renewal.

Through the haze of her despair, she felt the Warrior of Light step forward. The warmth intensified, wrapping around her like sunlight breaking through a storm-ravaged canopy.

“I hear you,” Sailor Moon whispered, her voice steady despite the tears streaming down her cheeks.

She raised her scepter high, her resolve shining brighter than the stars above. “Your sorrow is vast, but so is the love that remains. Let this light cleanse your pain, heal your soul, and bring you peace.”

Her voice grew, a command imbued with unwavering compassion. “Moon Princess Halation!”

The light surged forth, a tidal wave of brilliance that poured into the Makai Tree’s very core. It was not invasive—it was tender, threading through her broken roots and brittle branches with the grace of a thousand dawns.

The Makai Tree trembled, its ancient roots stirring as a warmth unlike anything it had known seeped into its essence. The Warrior’s light surged gently, tender as sunlight breaking through forgotten leaves, weaving through her hollow spaces. Eon-old scars, jagged and calcified remnants of sorrow and isolation, felt the warmth.

For the first time in centuries, it dared to feel.

The power was not invasive, not the forceful taking it had come to expect from a universe that had offered nothing but emptiness. It flowed freely, unbidden, like a gift placed into trembling hands.

She quaked, her branches trembling as the light reached deeper, threading through the hollow spaces within it that had been dark for so long. What had once been rigid and gnarled softened, each touch unraveling a knot of bitterness, loosening the coils of despair that had strangled it for so long.

A flood of memories rose unbidden, vivid and sharp as the pain they carried. She remembered the ocean it nurtured, the laughter of

its Sprouts ringing like bells across golden waters. Each of their voices had been a note in a symphony of unity—a harmony now shattered into silence.

She remembered their betrayal, their fall, their ruin.

She remembered the ache of solitude as it tore itself from the fertile world that had once cradled its roots, drifting into the cold void of space, dragging An and Ail with it into an eternity of hunger.

These memories had defined her, their sharp edges cutting deeper with each passing age. Yet, as the Warrior of Light called Sailor Moon poured purifying light into her core, those jagged shards began to dissolve.

The bitterness that had been her lifeline ebbed away, replaced by something it scarcely recognized.

It was a warmth that did not demand or consume, a presence that mended instead of taking.

The Makai Tree quivered under the weight of this sensation, overwhelmed by the stark contrast between what it had endured and what it was now being offered. She had believed that love was finite, something to hoard and guard, to be taken and never shared.

Yet, here was a light that spoke of endlessness, of a love so vast it could flow without end. Sailor Moon's energy whispered truths it had long buried beneath its grief: love was not a resource.

It was a connection, a bond that thrived when it was given freely.

Its bark softened, the once-twisted wood unwinding as if reaching for her light. Leaves unfurled, trembling with life as they basked in the warmth of her compassion. The darkness that had consumed it for so long melted away, shrinking beneath the radiance until it was nothing more than a distant shadow.

“I have dwelled in hunger and grief for so long,” she whispered, its voice trembling with the weight of epochs. “I’d forgotten the sweet caress of love freely given.”

The light from Sailor Moon reached its core, flooding the hollowness it had never dared to acknowledge. A quiet, steady peace, not desperation’s stolen energy, filled the emptiness, radiating through every root and branch. The realization unfurled slowly, delicate as a bud breaking through frost.

She didn’t need to fight.

She didn’t need to hoard or devour.

Love was infinite.

It was boundless.

For the first time in centuries, she saw herself not as a being bound by loss, but as something capable of renewal—a vessel of love that could flow freely once again.

A shudder passed through her as it released the remnants of its despair. The memories of its lost Sprouts, the bitter ache of solitude, the fear that had gripped it for centuries—they all fell away like autumn leaves, carried off by a gentle wind.

Roots loosened, not in decay but renewal, stretching toward a light now understood as both eternal and unbreakable.

“Thank you,” she breathed. “Thank you for using your power for this act of great kindness.”

Sailor Moon’s light was no longer a force of change—it was a companion, a warmth that would guide it into the next chapter of its existence. The Makai Tree let go of the pain it had clung to, of the shadows that had defined it.

And in that act of surrender, the Makai Tree found what she had lost.

She found peace.

She found love.

She found herself.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

# A Memory of Love and Starlight

The air was a quiet storm, heavy with unspoken truths, swirling with the residue of the Makai Tree's fading presence. Mist wrapped itself around the Moonlight Knight like an ancient shroud, its cool tendrils brushing against his skin as if tasting his resolve. Each breath tasted of damp earth and metallic remnants of battle, grounding him in the fleeting present even as something within him began to unmoor.

A whisper of warmth stirred in his chest, faint at first, a tender pulse amidst the chill. It grew with each heartbeat, steady and undeniable, carrying a rhythm that felt as old as the stars. It thrummed louder than the hush of the fog, a resonance both alien and achingly familiar, drawing him to the fragile figure kneeling in the stillness before him.

Sailor Moon.

Her name echoed through the mist, unspoken yet alive, filling the air between them with an almost tangible weight. She sat motionless, her golden hair splayed like sunlight spilled upon the ground, her breath shallow but constant.

As always, the sight of her stirred something deep within him, a protectiveness that burned hotter than duty. But it was more than

that—so much more. It was an unspoken truth, a connection so profound that it felt like a part of his soul had been laid bare.

That burning spot behind his left ribs flared, pulsing in perfect rhythm with his heart. The heat and the steady thrum pressed against something deep within him until, finally, it cracked open.

Flashes of memory split through his mind like lightning through a storm—fragments that had lived in the shadows, now surging to the surface.

A golden palace, brilliant light casting long shadows as he stalked an intruder, only to discover the Moon Princess. He could now recall her startled gasp that cut through him, and the warmth of her beneath his hands.

Most of all, the way her pulse had quickened against his touch.

Then he remembered the locket.

The symbol of the love they couldn't share.

Moonlight reflecting off gold, and the delicate melody that filled the air. A whispered promise wrapped in starlight. He took it in his hands, the weight of her love and his unspoken fears pressing into his chest. It was a tangible piece of her heart, a gift that carried the weight of love and loss.

Then the battle for Silver Millennium.

The clash of swords and the acrid taste of blood in the air. The grief of his father's death and the corruption of the Four Kings. When her voice cut through the fog, shouting his name in a desperate attempt to reverse their fate

Then he remembered the moment he shoved her aside.

His body shielded hers, the searing pain as the blade struck true. The rolling waves of her anguished cries as they stung his soul. Her tears fell like rain, dropping on his fevered flesh like a desperate prayer.

“Find me... in the next life. I'll be waiting.”

The memories blurred, shifting—new lifetimes, new encounters. A pair of startlingly blue eyes locking with his, recognition flickering like a distant star. Her muttered insults and his own reluctant steps away, as if leaving her behind was losing something vital.

Golden hair caught in the morning light, her silhouette illuminated as if the universe had arranged the sun itself to frame her. Then the startling realization that struck him like a blow. Usagi was Sailor Moon.

And then her transformation—the moment he saw her for what she truly was.

Princess Serenity.

Memories he didn't want to recall. Using his power against her in the worst ways. Only to for her to forgive him in their last moments.

His promise to Queen Serenity endured across lifetimes.

“I'll always protect you.”

The weight of that vow never left him, a tether through every life.

Each fragment stitched itself together, jagged and raw, yet achingly whole. The truth burned through him, searing and electric, illuminating every corner of his fractured soul. He remembered her courage, her tears, the fierce determination in her eyes when she faced impossible odds. He remembered the promises they had whispered beneath the moonlight, promises that had transcended lifetimes.

Prince Endymion.

Mamoru.

The names struck him like a tidal wave, crashing through him with unrelenting force. He staggered, his breath hitching as the realization unraveled every tether he thought held him. Mamoru—it wasn't just a word. It was the key to everything he had lost, everything he had been, and everything he could become.

He was not merely the Moonlight Knight, a shadow born of necessity.

He was Mamoru Chiba.

He had been Prince Endymion.

The truth burned through him, searing and electric, illuminating every corner of his fractured soul.

How could he have forgotten her?

How could he have forgotten himself?

His knees buckled, and he dropped beside her, trembling as the enormity of it all crashed over him. Tears pricked at his eyes—tears of relief, of grief for the time lost, of gratitude for this fragile, perfect moment.

His hand reached out, hesitant but desperate, brushing against hers. The contact sent a jolt through him, not of pain but of peace, an anchoring warmth that steadied the storm raging within.

“Mamoru,” he whispered, the name tasting of both longing and home.

The name trembled on his lips, raw and unsteady, as though speaking them aloud might shatter him. Yet they carried a power that rooted him further into himself, a truth that could not be undone. He was Mamoru, her Mamoru, the one who had loved her across lifetimes, who would love her through eternity.

The fog around them seemed to respond, pulsing gently, as if in acknowledgment of the transformation unfolding. He cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing lightly against her skin, his touch tender and reverent.

“I remember,” he said, his voice breaking with emotion. “I remember everything.”

The air hung still, laden with the remnants of battle, its silence a fragile thing poised on the edge of breaking. Mist curled around them,

ghostly and restless, as though the world itself mourned the moment unfolding.

The Moonlight Knight stood motionless, his gaze fixed on Sailor Moon, her golden hair pooling like sunlight over the spectral ground. She kneeled unconscious but radiant, her breath steady, her presence exuding a warmth that reached deep into the fractured corners of his soul.

Each step toward her felt like walking against the pull of gravity, every movement slow, deliberate, heavy with the weight of realization. The soft glow lingering around her—the aftermath of her power—felt like a lifeline, and yet it reminded him of what he had to relinquish.

Kneeling beside her, his white cloak fanned around them like a halo. He reached out, his gloved hand trembling as it hovered above hers. The faint heat of her skin brushed against his palm, a gentle promise of life and love. Yet it was this same warmth that underscored the truth: this moment would be his last as the Moonlight Knight.

His chest tightened as memories flooded through him, unbidden and raw. Standing by her side as Cardians attacked. Her compassion and sympathy facing An and Ail. The way she fought with unrelenting courage. Most of all, the softness in her eyes when she looked at him, unguarded and true.

These were not the memories of a mere protector.

They were his.

They had always been his.

His breath hitched, the revelation sharp and final: he was not a separate entity, a shadow summoned to protect her. He was Mamoru, fractured and incomplete, but Mamoru all the same.

“Sailor Moon,” he murmured, her name reverent on his lips, trembling with the weight of everything he could not yet say.

“Sailor Moon, wake up!”

The sound carried through the stillness, and her lashes fluttered.

“Sailor Moon!”

Slowly, her eyes opened—blue and endless, catching the faint glow of her own power. They met his, and for a heartbeat, the world ceased to turn.

“Moonlight Knight?” she whispered, her voice soft, touched with confusion and hope.

A fragile smile curved his lips. “Yes,” he said, his tone a blend of sorrow and devotion. “But I am more than that. Though you knew me as the Moonlight Knight, I am not truly separate. I am Mamoru. I am the part of Mamoru’s heart that could not forget his desire to protect you.”

Her breath caught, her gaze searching his face as understanding dawned. “You’re...?”

“Yes,” he whispered, the word a promise and an apology all at once. “Mamoru. Endymion. Yours.”

Tears welled in her eyes, glistening like dew under the pale light. “Oh Mamo. You promised Queen Serenity that you would always protect me. And you have.”

His chest ached with the tenderness in her voice, the weight of her trust and love pressing into him with unrelenting force.

“I will always protect you, Serenity,” he said, his words trembling with sincerity. “Not because of a promise made long ago, but because loving you is who I am. It’s who I have always been.”

Her tears spilled, silent streaks of light against her cheeks, and he reached up, his gloved fingers brushing one away with infinite care. For a moment, they simply looked at one another, the silence filled with everything that did not need to be said.

“Now that Mamoru has fallen in love with you again, and regained his memories, I must go.”

But even as the warmth of her gaze anchored him, he felt it—his edges fraying like threads pulled loose from a tapestry. The Moonlight Knight, the fragment born of love and necessity, was unraveling.

His form wavered, blurred, each moment slipping through his grasp like sand, leaving behind only the faint impression of what he had been. The pull was gentle but relentless, a quiet inevitability that he could not resist.

There was no sadness, because this meant that he'd be reunited with his love.

A soft ache bloomed in his chest as his time began to slip away. He could feel the larger whole waiting for him, a vast, familiar presence that promised completion, yet it came with the quiet sorrow of an ending. He was dissolving, not into nothingness, but into Mamoru—a reunion that both comforted and grieved him.

"Mamoru is coming back," he said softly, his voice filled with both joy and sorrow. "And with him, my purpose here is complete."

"But."

His gaze lingered on her, memorizing the curve of her lips, the way her golden hair caught the light, the strength and tenderness in her eyes. This wasn't just love or the Fated Soul bond that bound them together. No, it was something more—a force that defied time and lifetimes, that existed not because of destiny, but in spite of it.

It was the unyielding choice they had made, again and again, to find each other, to fight for each other, to hold on when the universe itself seemed determined to tear them apart.

She wasn't just his princess, his Serenity.

She was the fire in his darkest moments, the laughter that echoed through his loneliness, the anchor that steadied him when the world threatened to pull him under.

She wasn't just someone he was destined to love—she was the one he chose to love, in every moment, in every life.

“I will always be with you,” he whispered, his voice a fading echo, reverent and steady.

The words were not just a promise; they were a truth, etched into the fabric of his being, no matter where he ended.

And as the final pieces of him softened, his heart surged with one last, fleeting thought—he had done what he was created to do. He had protected her. He had loved her. And in this, he had been whole.

Her lips parted, a protest forming, but he silenced it with a gentle smile.

“You won't lose me,” he promised. “We are one. You will have all of me again.”

Her hand rose, trembling but sure, to press against his cheek. The touch grounded him, and he leaned into it, letting her presence fill his fading essence with a last surge of peace.

“I bid you adieu, Sailor Moon,” he murmured, his voice a thread of moonlight in the darkness.

The mist around them seemed to brighten as his figure began to dissolve, each piece of him carried away on currents of light and memory. Her gaze followed him, luminous with love and grief, and he captured the sight of her—golden and eternal, his light in every darkness—as his final memory.

As the last of him merged with the waiting presence of Mamoru, he felt whole for the first time in what seemed like lifetimes. And in that last instant, his love for her—boundless, unyielding—echoed through the stillness like a whispered vow:

“I will always be with you.”

Mamoru's consciousness clawed its way through layers of suffocating darkness. It pressed against him, thick and relentless, as though it

sought to crush him back into the void. Each breath was a battle, each moment a struggle against an oppressive tide of despair.

For a time, he floated, suspended in the hollow expanse of nothingness. A terrifying thought whispered through him: maybe he was broken too deeply, fractured too thoroughly to ever piece himself back together.

But then, something stirred.

A flicker of warmth, faint yet insistent, broke through the suffocating dark. It was delicate at first, like a distant flame glimpsed through a shroud of mist. It curled around him like a whisper of a memory, pulling at the frayed edges of his mind. The warmth kindled something in his chest, a fragile spark of awareness that both soothed and seared.

It felt like... her.

Each pulse of warmth drew him closer to the surface, fighting back the shadows that clung to him.

His mind stirred, and with it, images began to form, fragmented and fleeting but no less vivid. A cascade of golden hair catching the light, a smile that could banish the darkest corners of his soul, eyes that shone with a courage that defied the stars.

He didn't know how he knew these things, only that they were carved into the marrow of his being.

Princess Serenity.

Sailor Moon.

Usako.

The names echoed through him like a heartbeat, driving him upward.

But fear stalked him with every step forward. What if he wasn't whole enough to reach her? What if, in his shattered state, he had lost the parts of himself that mattered most? The thought threatened to

drag him under, but he pressed on, propelled by the desperate need to find her, to see her, to save her.

When he finally opened his eyes, reality coalesced around him, surreal and dreamlike, hazy at the edges. The air hung heavy with the remnants of battle, thick and charged, as though the atmosphere itself bore witness to something monumental. Shadows stretched long and thin, and faint traces of her power lingered like silvery echoes in the air.

Then he saw her.

The sight of her kneeling, bathed in a cradle of fading light, stole the breath from his lungs. Her face, so serene yet unnervingly pale, struck him with a visceral terror. His pulse thundered in his ears as he stumbled forward, every step a battle against an unseen weight that threatened to crush him. The thought that he might be too late tore through him like a blade.

“Sailor Moon,” he whispered, his voice trembling under the weight of his emotions.

Her name tasted of stardust and anguish. A plea carried on the edges of his fractured soul.

She didn’t move.

A knot of dread coiled in his stomach, twisting tighter with each passing moment. He dropped to his knees beside her, his battered hand hovering above her cheek as if afraid to touch her, afraid to find her too far gone.

“Princess Serenity...” he called, the title reverberating through the space like an ancient invocation.

Still, she remained motionless.

Desperation overtook him, shredding what little composure he had left. His voice cracked as he uttered the name that carried the entirety of his being, the name that transcended lifetimes and titles.

“Usako...” The endearment fell from his lips like a prayer, raw and unguarded, filled with every ounce of love, fear, and longing he held for her.

His trembling fingers brushed against her cheek, her skin ice-cold against his touch. The sensation shattered something inside him, even as it grounded him to her presence. She wasn’t just Sailor Moon or Princess Serenity.

She was Usako. His Usako.

The girl who had stumbled into his life and made it her own, the girl who had seen through his walls and filled the empty spaces with her light. She had taught him that even broken things could hold beauty, that cracks could let in the light.

“Please,” he whispered, his voice breaking under the weight of his longing. “Please, come back to me.”

For a breathless moment, the world stood still.

The air pressed against him like an oppressive weight, as if reality itself hesitated. His fear, his doubt, his belief that he was too fractured to save her, surged like a tide, threatening to drown him. But then, against all odds, she stirred.

Her eyelids fluttered, and her brilliant blue gaze met his.

Relief crashed over him like a tidal wave, so overwhelming that tears slipped unbidden from his eyes. She was here. She was with him. And in that fragile, luminous moment, he felt the shattered pieces of his soul begin to knit themselves back together.

He wasn’t whole, not yet—but as long as her hand lay in his, he could believe that he could be.

Mamoru cradled Sailor Moon close, her warmth flowing into him like a balm, seeping into the fractured spaces of his soul. The chaos of the battle faded into a distant echo, leaving only the soft rhythm of

their breathing and the faint glow of her light wrapping around them both.

It was gentle now, pulsing like the heartbeat of the earth itself—steady, eternal. His fingers brushed the curve of her cheek, lingering as though afraid she might disappear if he let go.

“You’ll never lose me,” she whispered, her voice steady and soft, a promise carried on the quiet night air.

A weight he hadn’t realized he was holding lifted from his chest, replaced by a strange, fragile peace. Turning his gaze toward where the Makai Tree had stood, he expected to see only ruin. Instead, in the place of gnarled branches and decaying roots, a tender sprout emerged. Its leaves trembled under the moonlight, each curve vibrant with the promise of life.

The sight struck him deeply—an emblem of renewal rising from despair.

From the corner of his vision, Ail and An stirred, their postures hesitant as though awakening from a dream. Ail’s hand cradled the sprout as though it were a newborn star, his gaze tracing the tiny leaves with something close to reverence.

An reached for him, her fingers trembling, her eyes wide with emotions she couldn’t yet name. When their hands finally met, there was no hunger, no desperation—only a tentative connection, soft and unyielding.

Mamoru’s voice was steady as he stepped closer, Sailor Moon’s hand still entwined with his. “There’s a world far from here. Proxima Centauri b. It’s distant, but it’s in the habitable zone of its star—a place where life could take root again.”

Ail’s gaze met his, unreadable at first, then shifting into something warmer. He clutched the sprout closer, his arms cradling it with a newfound purpose.

“A new beginning,” he murmured, his voice carrying a mix of hope and uncertainty.

An’s fingers tightened around his. “Together,” she said, her voice trembling but resolute, the weight of centuries lifting from her shoulders. “We’ll nurture the Makai Tree and each other with love. True love.”

Ail turned to Sailor Moon. “Thank you. We didn’t deserve this, but thank you.”

“Yes,” An said. “I’m sorry for the heartache we brought you, but thank you.”

Sailor Moon’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears as she stepped closer. “Love isn’t about deserving. It’s about choosing to grow, to heal, and to try again. You have that chance now, and that’s what matters.”

Ail and An stepped closer, their arms wrapping around each other.

She glanced at the fragile sprout cradled in Ail’s hands, her expression tender and filled with hope. “Take care of each other and take care of the Makai Tree. Love can be the strongest thing in the universe if you let it be.”

As they ascended, golden light trailed their forms, shimmering like stardust scattering against the vast expanse of stars. Mamoru felt a quiet satisfaction watching them go—a sense that their fractured paths had finally led to something whole.

Ail glanced back one last time, his expression carrying an unspoken gratitude that Mamoru felt echo in his chest.

The rooftop grew still again, the night air heavy with a silence that carried the weight of healing. Mamoru turned to Sailor Moon, her eyes bright with love and understanding as their hands fit together like two halves of the same heart.

He tilted his head back, letting the stars fill his vision, their light unmarred by shadow. For the first time, he felt truly whole—every broken memory, every jagged edge, smoothed into something unbreakable.

The spell of tranquility broke as footsteps clattered up the stairs. The other Senshi spilled onto the rooftop, their faces painted with relief and no small amount of exasperation.

“So how long has this been going on? Why didn’t you tell us?” Venus quipped, her hands on her hips and a grin tugging at her lips.

Mars folded her arms, her voice sharp but fond. “We can’t leave you alone for five minutes without getting all lovey-dovey.”

Sailor Moon’s laughter bubbled forth, light and joyful, carrying on the breeze like a song of dawn breaking. The others joined in, their camaraderie weaving a warm tapestry of love and trust that filled the night air. Mamoru stood apart for a moment, watching the bonds they shared, the bonds he now understood he was part of.

As they stood together beneath the moonlit sky, Mamoru knew that his life was no longer empty. The battles, the pain, the uncertainty—they had all led to this moment. The future stretched out before them, not as a path of trials, but as a promise of love and hope, bright and endless as the stars above.

For the first time, Mamoru truly believed they could face whatever came next, side by side, unbroken and whole.

This was the beginning of forever.

A future carved from crystal and love.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

# The Dawn of Forever

The grass seemed to glow in the late afternoon sun, the golden light catching on the taunt next and the fine mist of sweat on Makoto's brow. The scent of freshly cut grass mingled with the faint sweetness of cooking meat drifting on the soft breeze.

Makoto's hand gripped the ball, her fingers tapping against its surface as she narrowed her eyes, her stance a perfect blend of determination and challenge. Across the net, Nephrite stood loose yet ready, his smirk tugging at the edges of his mouth, his gaze unrelenting as though daring her to make the first move.

She'd bring the thunder, and he'd have to catch lightning if he was going to win this match.

Makoto tossed the ball once, letting the weight of the moment settle in the space between them. "Are you sure you can keep up with me?" she asked, her voice a mixture of playful confidence and unmistakable intent. "You might have regained your memories and abilities, but I'm a force above."

Nephrite chuckled, his voice deep, carrying the resonance of distant thunder. "Try me. You haven't even seen what I can do yet." The way he stood—steady and grounded—spoke of power barely restrained, a strength that seemed to hum beneath his feet, answering his every movement.

“You mean that make-out session last night wasn’t your best work?”

Nephrite’s smirk widened, a spark of amusement flickering in his stormy eyes. “If that was my best, you wouldn’t have made it here today.” His voice was low, teasing, but carried an edge of confidence that sent a ripple through the air.

He took a step closer, the faint hum of energy beneath him growing more pronounced, like the earth itself was bracing for his challenge. “But if you’re still thinking about it, I must have left an impression.”

With a grin that promised no mercy, Makoto served.

The ball soared high, a streak of determination cutting through the air. Nephrite moved with an elegance that belied his size, leaping effortlessly to meet her strike. His hand connected, and the ball shot back over the net, its force vibrating through the court.

Makoto lunged, her sneakers skidding against the grass as she returned the volley with a fierce precision that matched the spark in her eyes.

Each hit sent shockwaves through the ground, a silent testament to their powers—her electric energy crackling in the air, his earth-bound strength grounding every move. Their game was a storm and its aftermath, a fierce conversation spoken through the rhythm of the ball as it arced and crashed between them.

Neither yielded. Each strike met with a counter so precise and unrelenting that it felt like destiny itself was holding its breath.

“Not bad,” Makoto teased, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face.

Her voice carried a lightness, but her muscles coiled with readiness. “But I thought you said you’d show me what you’ve got.”

Nephrite smirked, his eyes glinting with playful defiance. “I’m just getting warmed up.”

He launched the ball, a strike so powerful that the earth beneath him seemed to shift slightly, responding to his call. The ball spun dangerously close to the edge of the court, and Makoto dove for it, her fingertips brushing it just in time to send it arcing back into play.

As she recovered, her breaths came fast and sharp, her heart pounding with more than just exertion. Memories flickered like distant lightning—of gardens and ancient storms, of stolen glances and the quiet comfort of a hand grounding her in moments of chaos.

She didn't need to speak these memories aloud; they were written in the rhythm of the game, in the way their eyes locked across the net, unspoken but understood.

And now they both remembered.

Now the Fated Soul Bond between them burned hot and fast, like a tree igniting after a lightning strike.

The bond between them was no longer a faint ember, but a blazing connection, raw and undeniable. It wasn't just a tether to the past—it was alive, vibrant, pulsating with new power.

She felt it in the charge of the air, the electric hum that surrounded them, the way her movements and his seemed to echo each other in perfect harmony. It was more than memory, more than destiny—it was a promise, forged anew in the space between them.

Makoto's chest tightened, a thrill coursing through her veins. This bond wasn't just theirs to share—it was theirs to protect, to nurture, to grow.

The final rally was an explosion of movement, both of them pushing harder, faster. Makoto leaped, her body arching through the air, and delivered the finishing spike. The ball split as it slammed into the ground on Nephrite's side with a resounding thud, the net quivering as silence settled over the court.

For a heartbeat, neither moved.

Then Makoto collapsed onto the grass, laughter spilling from her lips as she sprawled out beneath the darkening sky. The sound was bright, unrestrained, and Nephrite followed her lead, dropping beside her with a quiet chuckle that rumbled low and steady, like the earth after a storm.

“That was... impressive,” he admitted, his voice softer now, filled with a quiet awe. He turned his head to look at her, his smirk replaced with something more genuine. “You’re just like before—back when I first realized no storm could match you.”

Makoto’s chest heaved with exertion, her grin wide and triumphant. “Took you long enough to figure that out.”

Nephrite’s laughter echoed hers, the sound blending with the soft rustle of leaves and the distant hum of life surrounding them. For a moment, they lay there, side by side, the world around them painted in hues of twilight.

Makoto tilted her head back, watching the fluffy traces of clouds trace a lazy line across the brilliant blue. She let herself feel the quiet joy of this moment—of being alive, of being seen, of knowing that here, beside her, was someone who understood the storm inside her and called it beautiful.

“This is a new beginning, Thunder,” Nephrite murmured, his voice barely more than a whisper as he followed her gaze to the sky.

Makoto nodded, her hand brushing against his as she turned to meet his eyes. “Yeah. A new beginning together.”

The air was alive with the sizzle of remembered pasts and new power, with the scent of growth lingering as though nature itself bore witness to the bond reforged between them. At last, they were together again.

#

\*\*

#

The volleyball court wasn't the only lively spot in the park. Just beyond the net, Rei and Jadeite stood by the grill, their spirited banter occasionally rising above the laughter as the aroma of sizzling meat wafted through the air.

Nearby, Ami and Zoisite sat beneath a sprawling oak tree, their quiet intensity focused on the grid of a Go board, the occasional clink of stones punctuating their conversation. Mamoru and Usagi stood close together, skipping stones on the pristine lake. The energy of the group filled the space like a heartbeat—each pair caught in their own rhythm but undeniably connected, their presence a shared harmony that tethered them all.

The sun burned high, scattering its golden warmth across the open field where the kite soared, its crescent moon shape cutting through the azure sky. Minako squinted up at the kite, her golden hair flowing in the wind, loose strands brushing her flushed cheeks.

The crescent moon kite rose and dipped, its movement reflecting the playful energy that seemed to ripple through the park. Minako held the string as the kite dipped and rose with a grace she struggled to match, her feet shifting on the soft grass as the wind teased her control.

Beside her, Kunzite stood like a marble statue, his silver hair gleaming as if it absorbed the light itself. He watched the kite's movements with a calm, calculating gaze, his posture so composed it made Minako's teeth itch.

Yet, it was him. And she loved everything about him. The steadiness, the quiet strength that seemed to ripple beneath the surface, the way he could make her feel simultaneously challenged and protected. It was maddening and mesmerizing all at once.

In her chest, their bond sparked, electric and undeniable, like a flame reigniting after being smothered for centuries.

It wasn't just a memory of love—it was love itself, alive and vibrant, weaving through her in ways that words couldn't touch. She felt it in the way her heart leaped at his smallest gestures, in the warmth of his presence beside her, and in the unshakable certainty that this, here and now, was exactly where they were meant to be.

"You're doing that thing again," Minako said, thrusting the string into his hands without preamble. "Acting like life and flying a kite is some epic strategy game."

Kunzite's cool gray eyes met hers, his expression faintly curious. "Life, Minako, often requires strategy. Even... kites." The barest flicker of a smirk tugged at his lips.

"Oh, please." Minako crossed her arms and stepped back, fixing him with a challenging glare. "Let's see your grand master plan in action, General. Show me how you 'strategize' against the wind."

Gripping the string, Kunzite adjusted his grip with deliberate precision, the silver threads of his aura sparking faintly as he moved. Without a word, he guided the crescent kite into a smooth ascent, its flight steady and poised, every motion seemingly effortless. The wind obeyed him, bending to his will as though nature itself had conceded defeat.

Minako gawked. "You're cheating," she accused, jabbing a finger toward the shimmering outline of his power. "You're literally bending the wind to your will!"

"I'm stabilizing the conditions," Kunzite corrected smoothly, his lips curving ever so slightly. "An entirely reasonable approach."

"Unbelievable," Minako muttered, grabbing the string back. "Watch a professional, Kunzite. No cheats, just pure skill."

She took a few running steps, the breeze tugging at her hair as she worked to keep the kite aloft. It looped wildly, its tail swirling like a

comet's trail, and for a fleeting moment, exhilaration bubbled in her chest.

Then the wind shifted.

A sharp gust sent the kite careening, its elegant arc transforming into an erratic plummet. Minako yelped, her grip slipping as the string burned against her palms. Panic flashed in her eyes as the crescent spun uncontrollably toward the ground.

"Minako," Kunzite called, his voice sharp yet composed.

In an instant, he was beside her, his hand closing over hers on the string. His touch was steady, grounding, the silver light of his aura mingling with the gold flickering faintly around her.

"Stop fighting it," he said softly, his voice cutting through her panic like a soothing tide. "Feel the wind. Guide it."

Minako blinked, her breath catching at the calm authority in his tone. Slowly, hesitantly, she relaxed her grip, letting his movements guide hers. The string straightened, the kite stabilizing as it caught an updraft. Together, they coaxed it back into a smooth, graceful ascent.

The crescent kite rose higher, glowing faintly against the bright sky, and Minako let out a breath. Her hand still rested in his, her pulse quickening as she glanced at him. His gaze was fixed on the kite, but there was a softness in his expression, an unspoken reverence that sent a shiver down her spine.

"You don't have to fight everything," Kunzite murmured, his gray eyes finally meeting hers. "Sometimes, you simply need to move with it."

Minako's lips parted, words catching in her throat. His hand lingered over hers, his silver aura brushing against her golden light like a whisper, and for a moment, the world narrowed to just the two of them.

“Guide the wind,” she echoed, her voice quieter now, almost reverent.

They stood like that, hands entwined on the string, their energies blending in perfect harmony. The kite danced above them, its crescent shape radiant, an embodiment of balance—chaos and control, push and pull. Minako glanced at Kunzite again, her heart stuttering at the quiet strength in his gaze.

“You’re not so bad at this,” she said, breaking the silence with a teasing grin. “For a guy who cheats.”

Kunzite arched an eyebrow, his lips twitching with the faintest hint of amusement. “And you,” he replied, his tone light but edged with something warmer, “are surprisingly adept... when you’re not letting the wind control you.”

Minako laughed, her golden light flaring briefly before settling into a steady glow. “Somebody has to keep things interesting.”

The kite soared higher, catching the sunlight as it climbed, its crescent shape a bright beacon against the endless blue. Minako’s grip on the string loosened, her focus shifting to Kunzite as they stood together, side by side.

His aura pulsed faintly, a shimmering silver against her golden warmth, and she felt something stir deep within her—a quiet certainty that this moment, this connection, was exactly where she was meant to be.

The wind brushed against them, carrying the soft scent of blooming flowers and fresh grass. As Minako leaned into him slightly, her smile softened, and Kunzite’s hand tightened just enough to anchor her.

The kite glided effortlessly above them, its crescent shape a graceful symbol of their balance. Minako’s gaze drifted upward, her golden hair catching the sunlight as it danced in the playful breeze.

For so long, she'd been alone with the memories of the Silver Millennium. The quiet nights had stretched endlessly, filled with dreams of a love she couldn't hold and friends she couldn't have. The walls had echoed with her silence, her strength a mask she wore to keep from crumbling.

Kunzite's voice broke through her thoughts, low and steady. "Are you ready for forever, Starshine?"

She turned to him, the warmth of his presence grounding her as the wind tugged at her hair. For a moment, she let the weight of his question settle over her, the depth of it filling the space between them. Then she leaned into him, her voice soft but unwavering.

"With you? Yes."

Above them, the kite soared higher, its crescent illuminated against the endless blue. The sky seemed alive with their laughter, the breeze carrying away the echoes of loneliness that had once wrapped around her like a second skin.

That chapter of isolation was over.

The quiet strength she had once used to keep herself together was no longer a mask. It was part of her, but so was the joy she felt now—the warmth of Kunzite's hand brushing hers, the camaraderie of her friends nearby, the fullness of being seen and loved for exactly who she was.

For the first time in what felt like forever, Minako felt whole—not just as a warrior or a leader, but as herself.

Together, they watched the crescent soar, its flight as steady and unyielding as the bond they were beginning to forge.

#

\*\*

#

The Go board shimmered beneath the canopy of glittering leaves, its polished surface reflecting the dappled sunlight that filtered through the swaying branches. Ami's fingers hovered above a black stone, her touch deliberate yet hesitant, as if each movement carried the weight of a secret she wasn't ready to reveal.

Across from her, Zoisite sat with a grace that bordered on languid, though his eyes betrayed a sharpness, like the edge of a blade concealed in silk.

"You're unusually focused, Blue," Zoisite remarked, his voice like the first touch of frost on an autumn morning—soft but tinged with chill. His fingers toyed with a white stone, the motion as precise and calculated as the man himself.

"Am I to assume this is personal?"

Ami's lips curved into a small, almost imperceptible smile, a glimmer of mischief breaking through her otherwise serene demeanor. "If you think I'd underestimate you, Zoisite, then you clearly haven't been paying attention," she replied, placing her stone with quiet confidence.

A faint chuckle escaped him, the sound low and resonant. "I'd be disappointed if you did."

Despite the chaotic volleyball game and the frantic flight of the kite, Ami and Zoisite sat in their sanctuary of calm. The game unfolded slowly, each move a deliberate expression of their opposing yet eerily complementary natures.

Ami's strategy was methodical, her placements thoughtful and restrained, each stone part of a larger, unseen design. Zoisite played with an effortless elegance, his moves bold and unpredictable, yet undeniably effective. The board became a battlefield of black and white, the stones glinting like stars against the grid.

As the game progressed, Ami noticed the air around them shift. A faint chill crept in, subtle but unmistakable, brushing against her skin like a whispered warning. The mist began to gather at the edges of the board, curling and swirling like breath on a winter's morning.

She paused, her gaze flicking upward to meet Zoisite's, who watched her with a faint, knowing smile.

"You're using your powers," she said, her tone calm but edged with curiosity.

Zoisite's emerald eyes gleamed with a mischievous light. "Only a minor enhancement," he replied smoothly, placing a white stone with a flick of his wrist.

The mist responded, coalescing into delicate, crystalline patterns that shimmered in the sunlight. "Don't you find the game more... engaging when the board feels alive?"

The air carried the faint scent of snow mingled with the sweetness of golden blossoms. Ami inhaled deeply, grounding herself against the subtle aura of his power.

"It won't distract me," she said firmly, her hand steady as she countered his move.

The stone clicked against the board with quiet finality, her gaze unwavering.

Zoisite tilted his head, his expression softening with admiration. "I'd expect nothing less, Blue."

The tension between them grew, not from animosity, but from the intensity of the unspoken connection weaving through each move. Across the board, the thickening mist danced in tandem with their strategies, forming delicate and foreboding shapes—icy fractals blooming alongside unfurling petals. The interplay of their energies created a world within a world, a quiet, shared space where time seemed to still.

Then, Zoisite placed a stone that sent a ripple through the board. The balance shifted, and Ami's breath caught as she realized the trap he had been setting. His pieces encircled hers in an elegant, devastating arc—a victory concealed beneath layers of misdirection.

She blinked, stunned for only a moment, before a soft laugh escaped her lips. "I should've seen that coming," she said, shaking her head in disbelief.

Zoisite's smile widened, but there was no trace of arrogance in it—only warmth. "Your precision is remarkable," he said, his voice low and reverent. "But even the most precise strategies can falter against a touch of chaos."

Ami felt a faint flush rise to her cheeks, though she refused to let it break her composure. "And your chaos could benefit from a little more discipline," she countered, her tone gentle but pointed.

Her eyes sparkled with a rare playfulness as she added, "perhaps we could learn from each other."

The air between them shifted, the mist curling closer as Zoisite reached out, his fingers brushing hers as he adjusted one of the stones on the board. His touch was cool, like the mist itself, but beneath it was a flicker of warmth that caught her off guard. For a moment, neither of them spoke, the silence heavy with unspoken things.

"Somehow you get even more remarkable," Zoisite murmured, his voice softer now, almost hesitant.

Ami's gaze met his, her heart stuttering at the sincerity in his tone. "And you're more formidable than I gave you credit for." The corners of her mouth lifted in a quiet smile. "But next time, I'll win."

Zoisite chuckled, a sound that sent a shiver through her. "I look forward to it."

As they reset the board, the mist began to dissipate, fading into the warm sunlight. Yet the connection lingered, a delicate thread woven

through the quiet intensity of their shared moment. When Zoisite rose, offering her a hand, Ami hesitated only briefly before placing her hand in his, the coolness of his touch grounding her even as it sent a thrill through her.

“Shall we?” he asked, his eyes bright with something unspoken.

Ami nodded, her voice steady despite the flutter in her chest. “Let’s.”

They walked together toward the laughter and voices of their friends, their steps light against the soft grass. Though they left the board behind, its memory lingered—a reflection of their shared balance, of logic and elegance entwined with chaos and beauty.

As they approached the others, Ami glanced back briefly, her gaze lingering on the shimmering remnants of the mist Zoisite had conjured. It was fleeting, ephemeral, like so many things in life. And yet, in its impermanence, there was a kind of perfection—a moment captured, preserved, and cherished, even as it faded into the light of a new day.

#

\*\*

#

The scent of smoky charcoal and sizzling skewers danced in the summer air, curling lazily under the soft breeze. Beyond the grill, the park buzzed with laughter and life, but here, by the flickering flames, it felt like the rest of the world had faded, leaving just the two of them and the heat that always seemed to follow. Rei crouched by the grill, her sharp gaze on the flickering flames.

Each skewer she turned was a victory of control, every lick of fire bowing to her command.

It was serene, almost meditative.

Almost.

“Careful, Princess,” a smooth, teasing voice shattered her calm. “You wouldn’t want to burn the Moon Princess’s dinner. Or the entire park.”

Rei stiffened, her grip tightening on the tongs. She didn’t need to look to know who it was. That voice was impossible to mistake—smug, amused, and entirely too confident.

“If you’re so worried,” she said sharply, her shoulders tensing, “why don’t you make yourself useful instead of hovering like a storm cloud?”

She turned away quickly, the embers beneath the grill glowing brighter, but the warmth spreading in her chest was harder to ignore. For all his teasing, there was something steady about him—something that made her feel seen, even when it infuriated her.

Jadeite’s laugh was light, carrying a mischievous lilt. He moved closer, his pale hair catching the golden light as a faint shimmer of his aura seemed to ripple around him. The air shifted subtly, the breeze gaining an almost playful quality as it brushed against her skin.

Now the Four Kings stood fully awakened—their powers, their potential, and their bonds sparking to life like embers catching flame. The air around them seemed charged, vibrating faintly with the weight of what they had reclaimed.

For the first time, Rei no longer had to hide from the simmering power that burned in her chest, a force that matched his in both intensity and defiance.

But that didn’t mean she had to yield.

The heat inside her wasn’t just fire—it was will, strength, and an unshakable resolve. The flames weren’t meant to be tamed, not by him or anyone. They danced and roared in rhythm with her heart, daring him to challenge her, daring him to try to keep up.

“I’d argue I’m both decorative and useful,” he said, crouching beside her with infuriating ease. “But since you insist...”

His arm brushed hers as he reached for the tongs, and Rei felt the heat of the grill mingling with the cool, electric energy radiating from him. The contact was fleeting, but enough to send a spark racing down her spine. She snatched the tongs back with a sharp glare.

“Hands off, cheater,” she snapped. “I don’t need your powers interfering with my fire.”

Jadeite smirked. “Interfering? I’m stabilizing it. If anything, you should thank me.”

Rei’s eyes narrowed.

Sure enough, the flames beneath the grill seemed unusually steady, their dance smooth and controlled, as if guided by an unseen hand. Her lips pressed into a thin line as she glanced at him.

“The fire doesn’t need stabilizing,” she muttered, turning back to the skewers. “And neither do I.”

“Of course not,” Jadeite said, his voice carrying an undercurrent of amusement. “But you’re much too fiery to leave unsupervised. Don’t wanna burn the world.”

Rei’s cheeks flushed, though she quickly blamed the heat of the grill. She jabbed a skewer into his hands, forcing him to take it. “If you’re going to hang around, make yourself useful.”

Jadeite accepted the skewer with a flourish, his smirk widening. A faint shimmer flickered in the air again as his powers subtly influenced the breeze, carrying the smoky aroma of the grill mingled with something uniquely him—a scent like fresh air before a storm.

“Careful,” he said softly, his tone dipping into something genuine. “You’re burning that one.”

Rei turned quickly, flipping the skewer just in time.

“Thanks,” she muttered grudgingly, refusing to meet his gaze.

“You’re welcome,” Jadeite said, leaning closer. His breath brushed her ear, warm and deliberate. “Though I’d hate to see anything ruined when we’re working so... well, together.”

Rei glared at him, but her sharp retort faltered as the embers beneath the grill flared briefly, crackling in response to the energy humming between them. The air grew heavy, charged with something neither of them could name.

“You’re impossible,” Rei said finally, her voice low but lacking its usual edge.

“Impossibly charming.”

She thrust another skewer into his hands, her tone softening despite herself. “Stop flirting—it’s embarrassing.”

Jadeite chuckled, a deep sound that sent a shiver through her. “Embarrassing for you or for me?”

“Both,” Rei snapped, though the corner of her mouth twitched as she fought a smile.

The tension between them ebbed as the others began to gather, drawn by the irresistible aroma of grilled skewers. Usagi’s cheerful laughter broke the moment, and Mamoru approached with a knowing glance toward Jadeite. The warmth of camaraderie filled the space, but Rei felt the subtle pull of Jadeite’s presence, like a breeze that refused to leave her side.

As she handed him a freshly grilled skewer, her voice was quieter. “Here. Don’t say I never did anything for you.”

Jadeite accepted it with mock reverence, bowing slightly. “I wouldn’t dare.”

For a moment, their eyes met, and the playful banter gave way to something deeper. The fire between them burned steady and warm, its glow mirrored in Jadeite’s subtle smile. Rei turned away quickly,

brushing past him to serve the others, but the faint smile on her lips betrayed her.

Behind her, the embers glowed brighter, their crackle soft yet steady—a reflection of the spark quietly igniting between fire and wind.

#

\*\*

#

Mamoru stood with Usagi at the edge of the shimmering pond, her laughter a melody that wrapped around him like a warm embrace. The golden light of the setting sun danced on the water, casting ripples of amber and blue that mirrored the glow in her eyes. Each moment felt like an echo of a memory finally made real.

Finally.

Finally, he'd awoken to the truth and could fully embrace Serenity—not just as the Princess of his past, but as the woman who had always been his guiding light. The barriers of forgotten lifetimes and fractured memories had fallen away, leaving only the raw, unshakable love that bound them.

She wasn't just Serenity, nor was she merely Usagi—she was every piece of herself, every version of her that he had loved across centuries. And now, for the first time, he could hold her with nothing between them, no shadow of doubt or hesitation.

His arms around her felt like home, her warmth filling every corner of his soul. She was his promise kept, his dream realized, and his heart, whole at last.

“Did you see that?! Mamo!” Her voice was sunlight and everything beautiful dreams represented. “I got like three skips! Three whole skips!”

Usagi spun to face him. Her grin so radiant it made his chest ache. He reached out instinctively, ready to steady her, though it was his own heart that felt unmoored.

He smiled, watching her bounce up and down on the shoreline, her golden hair catching the sunlight in a halo of brilliance. She was everything he had searched for across lifetimes, and now that he had her, he couldn't look away.

Her joy was infectious, her energy an unrelenting force pulling him into her orbit.

At the water's edge, she crouched and picked up a smooth, flat stone, holding it up triumphantly. "Do you think I can get five? That's higher than most of my test scores," she laughed harder.

Mamoru raised an amused eyebrow, his arms crossing. "I think you can do it."

Somehow, the smile on her face got a little brighter. "Now prepare yourself."

Her throw arched through the air, and hit the water with a lackluster plop, sinking immediately. She groaned, planting her hands on her hips as she turned to him. "That was a bad stone. Yeah, totally a bad choice."

He chuckled, stepping closer. "Want some help?" he picked up a stone and placing it gently in her hand. "It's all in the angle and the flick of your wrist."

His larger hand wrapped around hers, guiding her movement. Her scent—a soft blend of strawberries and moonblossoms—wrapped around him, reminding him how precious she was. Their fingers moved in unison, and together they released the stone. It skipped across the surface—once, twice, three times—before vanishing beneath the ripples.

“I did it!” Usagi gasped, spinning to face him, her grin as radiant as the sunlight on the water.

He kept a hand ready in case she trip. “You did,” he said softly, though his focus wasn’t on the pond.

Her joy, her vibrancy, was a gravity he couldn’t resist. She was the embodiment of everything he had ever needed, everything he had fought for across lifetimes.

Now the memories that haunted him made sense. They were interconnected, they were their past. The moonlit gardens and glittering golden light. The press of her hand in his as the world crumbled around them. Her body against his.

Serenity.

Usagi.

The other half of his soul.

And now, here they stood, whole and together, the fractures of the past finally mended.

“Mamo?” Usagi’s voice pulled him from the tide of memories. She straightened, her blue eyes wide and shimmering with concern. “Are you okay?”

He stepped closer, cupping her cheek. His thumb brushed over her skin, and the warmth of her touch sent a shiver through him. “Usako,” he said, his voice trembling, heavy with all the words he couldn’t yet find. “I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.”

Her lips parted, a soft flush blooming across her cheeks. She reached up, covering his hand with hers. “Me too,” she whispered, the words fragile yet unbreakable.

For a moment, they stood there, the world around them fading into a quiet hum. The water lapped gently at the shore, a rhythm that seemed to echo the steady beat of their hearts. Every shadow,

every ache from the lifetimes they had endured apart, melted into the certainty of this moment.

“Let’s try again,” Usagi said suddenly, her grin breaking the stillness as she held up another stone.

Mamoru laughed, the sound light and unburdened. “Alright, Usako. Show me what you’ve got.”

The stone skipped twice before sinking, and her delighted cheer filled the air. They tried again and again, their laughter mingling with the gentle splash of water and the rustle of leaves. Each skip was a promise, each ripple a reflection of the love that bound them.

As the sun dipped lower, casting the pond in hues of rose and gold, Mamoru turned to her. Her hair glowed like spun sunlight, her cheeks flushed with happiness, and her eyes shone with a light that seemed to reach through time itself.

“Forever, Usako,” he said, his voice quiet but steady.

Her fingers laced through his, her smile softening. “Forever, Mamo.”

Forever wasn’t just a promise—it was a truth he felt in his very bones, a bond that time and distance could never sever.

The fading sunlight wrapped around them like a golden embrace, painting the world in hues of amber and rose. The gentle ripples of the pond caught the light, scattering it into a thousand tiny stars that seemed to dance just for them. Usagi’s laughter stilled, her gaze lifting to meet his, and in that instant, everything else melted away.

Her blue eyes shimmered with the radiance of the sky itself, holding a depth that seemed to stretch across lifetimes. Mamoru stepped closer, the warmth of her presence pulling him like gravity, steady and unrelenting. His hand lifted, brushing a golden strand from her face, his fingertips grazing her cheek with infinite gentleness.

“Usako,” he murmured, his voice low and reverent, filled with all the love he’d carried through centuries.

The words lingered in the air, a vow, a truth, and then there was no space left between them. He cupped her face, his touch firm yet tender, as if she might slip away if he didn’t hold on tight enough. Her breath hitched, her lips parting as her hands found their way to his chest, curling into the fabric of his shirt as though anchoring herself to him.

Her warmth pressed into him, her light merging with his in a way that felt like the stars themselves were aligning. Around them, the world seemed to hold its breath, the rustle of the leaves and the gentle lapping of the water falling silent in reverence.

The glow of the setting sun caught on her hair, shimmering like spun gold. The moonbeams from glimmered as they bent towards her. Worshipping her as the goddess she was.

He tightened his hold, one hand sliding to her waist, drawing her closer, as if to say, I’ve got you. I’ll always have you.

And he couldn’t help himself.

Their lips met.

It was soft at first, a brush of lips that spoke of devotion and endless patience. But as the golden light deepened, their kiss grew, blooming into something fuller, something fierce and unbreakable. It wasn’t just a kiss—it was a promise, a connection that defied time and space.

When they finally broke apart, the air between them buzzed with something electric, something eternal. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips slightly swollen, and the smile that spread across her face was brighter than any star he’d ever seen.

The sun dipped below the horizon, leaving the sky awash in twilight hues of indigo and violet. Mamoru rested his forehead against hers, their breaths mingling as they lingered in the moment.

“I love you,” he said simply, the words carrying the weight of lifetimes.

Usagi’s smile softened, her fingers brushing over his cheek. “I love you. Forever.”

As the first stars began to glitter in the darkening sky, they kissed again, and the universe seemed to exhale in contentment. Around them, quiet laughter softened into murmured words, hands found their way to one another, and the bonds forged across lifetimes strengthened under the twilight.

This was their moment, their eternity, shared and sealed in kisses that shimmered brighter than the light of a thousand moons.

\*\*\*

# Acknowledgements

First, a massive thank-you to Naoko Takeuchi, the cosmic genius behind *Sailor Moon*. Without her vision of star-crossed love, reincarnated magic, and unreasonably gorgeous hair physics, this story would never have found its roots. Even if Makai Tree is filler for the 90s anime, Sailor Moon is the root, so therefore the queen gets credit.

To everyone who read this story, from the early buds of an idea to its fully bloomed final draft—thank you for your patience, your feedback, and your enthusiasm. You’ve nurtured this little cosmic garden into something I’m so proud to share.

And finally, to my husband, who has endured my writing marathons, endless chatter about evil trees and love-struck aliens, and my occasional “just one more chapter!” moments. Your long-suffering support has kept me grounded while my head floated somewhere near Proxima Centauri. You’re the best watering can a chaotic plant like me could ask for.

Thank you all for believing in this starry, snarky, botanical adventure. Here’s to always reaching for the light, even when the roots feel tangled.

# About the author

I'm continuing my tradition of breaking all the writing rules and keeping this bio in first person. I know, I'm such a rebel. But hey, if you're reading this, you already know I like to mix things up.

Honestly, I'm not sure what to say that hasn't already been said in the other books. Is it proper to assume you've read all the other bios? Or is that, like, presumptuous? I have no idea. If you *have* read them, you already know the basics: I'm completely obsessed with Sailor Moon (duh), Chinese drama romances seriously tickle my pickle, and I love food.

But if you *haven't* read them, well, all of that is new to you! But if you *have*, now it's boring. See my problem?

Okay, let me tell you something *completely* new.

I create more than just stories! I'm also an artist. I used to oil paint, but my imagination always outpaced my skills, which left me frustrated when the canvas didn't look *perfect*. So I pivoted—first to coloring books (*Throne of Glass* by Sarah J. Maas is the BEST coloring book ever), then to mixed media art, and now...furniture!

No, not massive dressers or dining tables—more like desk shelves and cabinets. Small, manageable furniture pieces that I upcycle into unique, gothic-steampunk works of art. Lots of skulls, dark colors, and cool vibes. Right now, I'm working on a desk shelf for my Sailor Moon corner (so shocking, I know), and it's coming along beautifully.

But I can tell you that one isn't covered in skulls, Haha! It's all cute pastel and paper.

Basically, I'm a *super* creator. During the week, I write until my fingers are sore, and on Saturdays, I paint and glue until they're sticky and sore.

Anyway, there's your brand-new "fun fact" about me.

Want to connect more? Visit me at [aemcroberts.com](http://aemcroberts.com) and say hi—I promise to geek out about something you love too!

# Also by

Slivers of Infinity: Thennan Chronicles

Blood Stone: A Red Fox Romance

Alternate Intentions: The Matryoshka Series Book 1