Going It Alone

by Kasienda

Summary

After the defeat of Queen Beryl, the Senshi returned to their normal lives with no memory of the event or their abilities. But when mysterious deaths start occurring all over Tokyo, Luna finds herself forced to revive Sailor Moon. The young heroine, not wanting to spread the burden of her responsibility to her friends, resolves to face this new enemy alone.
Chapter Notes

This story has no connection to Once Upon a Dream or Nightmares, which are within their own universe mainly because in those stories the senshi retain their memories. And because I've done the characterizations a little differently in this story.

The alarm clock blazed through the chill morning air.

The thing might as well been going off in a vacuum for all the attention the sleeping blond girl tangled in heavy rose pink blankets gave the blaring siren.

A black cat with sat stiffly at the end of the bed, her tail swishing animatedly back and forth as she watched her unmoving charge. A distinctive crescent white marking that sat on the crest of her head had earned her the fitting name of Luna.

Rhythmic steps resounded through the floor as someone came up the stairs.

“Usagi! It’s time to get up!” the girl’s mother called as she poked her wavy blue haired head into the room.

“I’m up,” the girl assured, lifting her head a few inches.

Luna had her doubts.

Sure enough, the second the door slid closed again the blond teenager let her head fall back to the fluffy pillow. It took less than a minute before soft snores drifted from underneath the covers.

The feline sighed, leaping to the head of the bed. She began licking the girl’s pale face with her rough tongue.

The girl’s nose scrunched up in annoyance even as a hand absently batted her assailant away.

“Luna,” the girl whined. “Just five more minutes.”

Luna did not cease her ministrations until the blonde sighed, sat up, and glanced at the clock.

“Oh my god!! Why didn’t you wake me sooner?” Usagi demanded of no one as she leapt to her feet to begin the whirlwind routine, that was unfortunately entirely too normal for the teenager.

Luna sighed. No one would ever suspect after watching her frantically dart from her room to the bathroom and back again collecting scattered homework and hair ties alike, that the blond sixteen year old was none other than Tokyo’s vigilante superhero, Sailor Moon, that protected citizens from supernatural villains.

Not even the girl herself.

She swept back into the room and affectionately rubbed the side of the feline’s face as she lifted
her schoolbag off the floor. Luna allowed herself to lean into the caress.

“Good-bye Luna! You’re so lucky that you don’t have to go to school!”

And she was gone, down the stairs, and out the door.

Luna couldn’t help but preen a little at the fact that Usagi, no matter how late she was running, never failed to bid her black pet farewell even though her charge had no idea that she was anything more than an ordinary black cat.

Luna made her way leisurely down the stairs into the kitchen, where Usagi’s mother, Ikuko was humming along with a song that played from the radio as she cleared away the breakfast dishes. Luna rubbed herself against the woman’s legs purring.

Ikuko glanced down with a bright smile.

“Good morning Luna! How about some fish?” the woman asked as she pulled the cat food out of the refrigerator.

Luna sat patiently on the ground acting pathetically catlike as Ikuko placed a small bowl on the floor in the usual place near the counter. Luna dove in eagerly.

The radio’s song cut off mid note, interrupted by an unpleasant pulsing static.

“We interrupt your regular program to bring you this special alert. This morning, a woman was found dead in an alleyway in the Azuban district. She died of unexplainable causes and the incident seems reminiscent of attacks that have not been witnessed in Tokyo in over a year. Citizens are cautioned to not travel alone after dark and to be within doors by ten pm. Thank you and enjoy the rest of your day.”

The bowl of tuna, only half finished, sat alone and undisturbed, abandoned.

…

A raven haired man that could not have been older than eighteen or nineteen walked, holding a folded newspaper in at eye level so he could read this morning’s breaking news article.

_The victim, a young woman 21 years of age, appeared to have been walking home last night when she must have had suffered some kind of assault. The rigor mortis suggests she died at approximately 10:51 pm in the evening. She was…”_

Chiba Mamoru absently sipped from a paper cup of steaming black coffee before turning his attention back to the story. Something about it bothered him – nagged at his mind as if he should know something about it, but he couldn’t pinpoint what exactly.

An unexpected hard impact made him stumble. He instinctively caught his blond assailant before she could send them both sprawling to the sidewalk.

The coffee fell to the pavement instead, releasing the hot liquid from its confines. She twisted away from the splash too late – its burning contents striking her ankles.

“Hot! Hot!” she exclaimed jumping from one foot to the other.

“I’m sorry! Are you okay?” he asked urgently.

“You’re sorry?” she repeated with astonishment. “I’m pretty sure that was completely my fault,”
she murmured as she looked up at him.

“Because I was definitely watching where I was going,” he commented dryly. He looked down and met her crystal blue eyes. His vision swam and his mind seemed to stretch out expansively around him in tumbling spinning wheels, grasping at something he could not hold onto – there was no emotions or flashes. He just felt connected to something… something so much more massive and powerful than himself.

He had never felt so small.

“Thank you for catching me,” she said softly, her cheeks turned a delightful shade of pink and her azure orbs turned down, breaking his reverie.

“Umm…” she said fidgeting from side to side against his chest. Only in that instant did he realize he was still holding her.

He dropped his arms to his sides self-consciously and took a step back.

“I’m sorry about your coffee,” she said gesturing to the cup.

“Don’t worry about it Odango Atama! I am suddenly very awake,” he said, a rare grin lighting his features.

“Glad to be of service!” she said with a laugh.

“Where are you going in such a hurry anyway?” he asked.

Her eyes widened in fear. “I’m late for school!” she screeched. “I have to go! Catch you later!”

He watched as she faded into the normal pedestrian traffic with a slight frown. He hadn’t caught her name.

…

Usagi arrived a solid six minutes late to school. She sighed even as she dashed through the empty hallways filled with rows upon rows of navy blue lockers, knowing there was no way she could possibly entertain any hopes of getting out of detention that afternoon. But an image of midnight blue eyes under dark hair flashed through her mind and she grinned. She didn’t regret the morning’s delay at all.

She slid into the all too familiar classroom filled with rows of nondescripts brown wooden desks in front of a white board. The fluorescent light above supplemented the light streaming from the wall of windows on her left. She moved silently across the across the back of the room as her teacher faced the board writing verb conjugations, praying she would make it to her seat before Haruna-sensei turned around.

She froze three desks away, realizing that her normal position, the seat in front of her best friend, Osaka Naru, was not nearly as vacant as it should have been. She fidgeted from one step to another awkwardly, uncertain as to what to do.

“Since you weren’t here Tsukino-san, I gave away your seat,” her auburn haired teacher explained not even bothering to turn around as she continued the notes for the lesson. “For the rest of term you will be sitting next to Mizuno-san. Hopefully, some of her good habits will rub off on you.”

Naru shot her a sympathetic glance.
“You will also have detention with me this afternoon,” Haruna-sensei added.

Usagi sighed in resignation at this pronouncement and took the empty seat next to Mizuno Ami, the resident school genius who already had her nose in the textbook.

Usagi offered the other girl a smile, but the girl with short cropped startlingly blue hair with misty eyes that matched, didn’t so much as look up from her reading or otherwise acknowledge the blonde’s presence.

Usagi stared at Naru’s back longingly. Her best friend was too far away to even consider passing notes. Today was going to be a really long day.

…

The black feline sat atop the discarded newspaper next to her pure white counterpart.

“What do you think?” she asked, praying that he disagreed.

“I think that we need more information.”

Luna sighed. She had been afraid he would say that.

…

The day continued to trudge by. If Usagi hadn’t known better, she would have sworn that the teachers had bewitched the clocks to run backwards. Her seat partner had said a total of nine words to her the entire day, just after Haruna-sensei had passed back their tests from last Friday.

“You really should study more Tsukino-san. It might help,” the girl had relayed in a soft-spoken voice. Her eyes still remained trained on her own notebook and text.

“Thanks Mizuno-san,” Usagi bit back sarcastically. “I never would have thought of that.” She crumpled the offensive paper with the bright red fifty-two enshrined at the top right hand corner, into a tight ball before tossing the evidence of her incompetence into her school bag where she could ignore it until she got home.

And now, she sat in the same corner of the room long after her classmates had departed, watching the be-spelled minute hand of the clock. Currently it sat quaking just before 3:57 pm. She sighed, blowing her bangs up with pure dejection and boredom. She was trapped for another forty-three minutes.

Her only companion was the tall green-eyed brunette, Kino Makoto, a girl who had transferred in a year previously. Usagi knew her by reputation only – the girl tended to keep to herself, but the two of them shared detentions together quite often. Usagi found herself wishing they were allowed to talk. She suspected the time would go by far more quickly because despite what the rumors implied, she had never witnessed any violent behavior her pony-tailed companion. She just looked strong.

She glanced at the clock again, knowing she was better off not doing so. 3:59 pm! Could time go by any slower? She let her head fall into her arms – maybe she would be able to fall asleep and Haruna-sensei wouldn’t notice. The awful unsympathetic woman wouldn’t even let her work on her homework during this time!

“This is ‘behavioral-punishment’ Tsukino-san. Not academic. The time has to be so monotonous and boring that it will be avoided at all costs,” her teacher had explained to her on another occasion
when she had attempted to make more productive use of her time.

Unfortunately, the motivation never worked in the morning when Usagi was wrapped in a blissful heaven made of warm pink puffy blankets. Why was her bed never that comfortable when she was trying to fall asleep?

The blond girl’s attempt at rest was disturbed by the soft impact of a small paper ball. Her head poked up noticing the scrap of paper that had landed on her desk. Makoto winked at her and Usagi offered a smile in return.

She spared a quick glance at her “supervising” teacher. The woman had her head buried in a novel – a slight smile on her painted lips. At least she was enjoying this wasted hour.

Usagi carefully unfolded the paper flat to reveal its contents.

*Whatcha in for?*

Usagi scrawled back a quick reply.

*Tardiness. You?*

Then with another furtive glance at her teacher she tossed the note back. Makoto didn’t open in immediately trying to remain inconspicuous, but she was soon scribbling back a reply.

*I apparently 'shoved' some kid in the lunch line. Which is ridiculous because I bring my own lunch everyday.*

*How unfair! Did you explain this?*

*Of course! But the teachers are almost as afraid of me as the students are.*

*That’s awful Kino-san! You’re welcome to eat lunch with my friends and I tomorrow. We’ll vouch for you if any untrue accusations come your way. Then maybe ONE of us won’t end up in here every other afternoon.*

*Why thank you Tsukino-san! I may take you up on that! You don’t have to be here so often either. Why are you late everyday?*

Usagi had to suppress a laugh that wanted to bubble forth as she read the next line. Haruna looked up sharply at her, but Usagi had the note covered with her arm and pretended to be gazing listlessly out the window.

*Unlike you, I’m actually guilty as charged. I just like sleep more than I like school!*

Makoto did not get a chance to read this last message, as the door had swung open. Though she did manage to use her twisting “to see who had come through the door”, to stealthily slide the note off the desk and into her pocket.

An older man dressed in a crisply pressed grey suit that Usagi recognized as the Dean of Students made his way to Haruna’s desk.

“Haruna-san! I knew you’d have a few students still at your mercy. Would you mind if I nabbed them for the rest of the afternoon?” he asked brightly.

Usagi found herself perking up! Anything to get out of this room even ten minutes earlier!
“What for?” she asked with a scowl, clearly not approving of a school official arriving to remove the girls from detention.

“We had two transfer students arrive late this afternoon. And I would love it if they could receive a student led tour before they came back tomorrow for the first day of class.”

“These are not exactly model students Takahashi-san! Are you sure you want them representing the school?”

“Nonsense Haruna-san! Tsukino-san is known for her friendly out-going nature, which makes her perfect for this task despite her inability to show up to school on time.”

“Or pass a test,” Haruna commented.

Usagi felt herself wilt at the assessment, though she couldn’t exactly argue with it after the exam she had received back that morning and wailing about how mean her teacher was would only ensure that Haruna-sensei wouldn’t let her leave early.

“And Kino-san…” he trailed off eying the girl as if trying to find something positive to say about her classmate. Usagi’s indignation soared to new levels on behalf of the girl beside her.

Haruna raised an eyebrow when he hesitated in his attempt at justification.

“…well, she could use every opportunity for positive social interactions,” he finished lamely.

Usagi watched her new friend from the corner of her eyes. But the taller girl just rolled her eyes in irritation.

“Very well Takahashi-san,” Haruna conceded. “But don’t make a habit of this.”

“And ladies,” she said, projecting her voice. “I don’t want you to feel you’re getting off easy this afternoon. No doubt you’ll actually have to stay even later this afternoon.”

“Yes sensei,” both girls chimed dully in unison, though neither wasted any time in gathering their things before Haruna-sensei could change her mind. And of course, the second they exited the stifling classroom all self-control disappeared and unrestricted grins bloomed on both girls’ faces.

“Ladies, thank you for being willing to stay a little later this afternoon. The new students are waiting at the library for us.”

“Certainly Takahashi-sensei! Glad to be of help!” Usagi said brightly. Makoto nodded in agreement, though she did not smile. Usagi couldn’t blame her at all.

“Here we are! Ladies this is Ginga Seijuro and Natsumi,” he introduced. “They are siblings that just…”

The dean kept talking, but Usagi’s brain suddenly could not process his words as she took in the new pair.

Natsumi moved forward with a warm smile and grace that Usagi found herself wishing she could emulate. Even her luscious brown curls bounced perfectly with each step and her deep dark eyes sparkled with mystery that the blond found herself wanting to unwrap.

And Seijuro… Seijuro’s magnetic pull was even worse. He had caught her in his gaze – she froze like a doe trapped in a hunter’s gaze, unable to bolt. Her head spun as she forgot how to breathe.
“Nice to meet you Tsukino-san,” he said with a disarming smile that lit up his wintry blue grey
eyes as he took her hand.

*Her pulse raced as she met his piercing gaze. He stepped forward, his arms slipping naturally
around her waist. His hot breath whispered across the crook of her neck evoking shivers down her
back all the way to her toes. She shuddered in delight as one of his hands slipped under her blouse,
caressing the creamy pale skin of her abdomen. His attentions drifted slowly upward and she could
not bring herself to object as his touch evoked pleasant tingles and a craving desire for more that
she did not understand.*

“You as well Ginga-san,” she managed to reply, feeling the heat rising to her cheeks, grateful that
he could not read her thoughts to understand the cause of her blush. What was wrong with her
anyway? What was she thinking?

“Please, call me Seijuro,” he insisted, kissing the back of the petite hand he had never relinquished.

She could feel the blood roaring in her ears as if it all surged toward the warm lips on her hand.

Feeling slightly dizzy and out of sorts, she snatched her hand back. She felt instantly more in
control, but her mind remained enveloped in mental fog. She shook her head to clear it.

She watched with a combination of relief and jealousy as he turned his attention to Makoto. Usagi
felt slightly better seeing Makoto equally as susceptible to the boy’s charms.

Seeing her new friend fidget uncomfortably under the attention, Usagi launched into an
explanation of library hours and student usage privileges, using the common routine knowledge to
distract her from Seijuro’s continued brilliant smiles. She and Makoto settled into an easy banter as
they led the new students around campus. Usagi described the typical student experience while
Makoto filled in some gaps, drawing from her own experience as a transfer student.

“Thank you both for showing us around,” Natsumi said formally with a slight bow. “I hope we will
become better acquainted in the coming weeks.”

“Of course,” Makoto agreed with a smile of her own.

“I hope we have some classes together,” Seijuro said with a wink. Usagi’s cheeks bloomed hotter if
that was even more possible.

Makoto stayed with her as the siblings departed. Usagi let out a sigh feeling sad at their departure,
but relieved that her unexpected passion had diminished making her feel more like herself.

“Wow! He is out of this world,” she commented dreamily. “Reminds me of my old sempai…”

Usagi laughed. “Mako-chan! You *always* say that!”

The tall brunette flashed puzzled green eyes in her direction.

Only then did Usagi realize what she had said and she gasped, putting a hand over her mouth in
embarrassment.

“I’m sorry!” she insisted. “I don’t know why I said that. It just came out without thinking. I didn’t
mean to imply anything about your tastes in boys and I certainly didn’t mean to presume to be so
familiar.”

“It’s okay,” Makoto instantly assured with a wide grin. “I like the nick-name! It fits! And somehow
feels… right.”

“Did your friends at your old school call you that?”

Makoto shook her head slowly, her eyes confused. “No actually. I’ve never heard it before. How did you know about my tendency to ramble about my ex?”

Usagi bit her lower lip as she thought. She finally shrugged. “I don’t know… I must have overheard you talking to someone else.”

Makoto nodded, accepting this explanation, though Usagi still wasn’t sure if it was true. She couldn’t remember ever overhearing Makoto talking about boys at all.

“Well, it was definitely a pleasure Tsukino-san,” Makoto said, interrupting her thoughts. “Perhaps we might eat lunch together tomorrow?” she asked, offering her hand toward the other girl.

Usagi pulled her into a hug instead. “Please Mako-chan, call me Usagi. And anything involving food always sounds amazing to me!”

Makoto laughed.

“Ja-ne, Usagi-chan!” Makoto said with a wave.

…

An ordinary schoolgirl in her newly acquired navy blue and white Jubaan School uniform over the balcony’s railing, with one leg crossed over the other. Red brown curls fell over her shoulders as she leaned forward to take in the twinkling lights of the city below her.

Cool hands wrapped around her from behind pulling her back. She leaned into her lover’s embrace and let her disguise dissolve. Her pale peach skin faded into the marble smooth soft green that she was accustomed to. Her hair lengthened to fall below her waist turning the vibrant pink of blooming spring flowers.

Hands threaded through the blushing silk and she closed her eyes and allowed her head to fall to his shoulder, truly relaxed for the first time since they had arrived on this strange blue and green world.

‘Your idea to target adolescents was an inspired one En.’ he told her mentally.

She mentally purred at the compliment.

‘You found some promising targets?’ her mind whispered back.

‘Both of those girls were radiating out energy readings off the chart and both were unattached and susceptible to my charms. Just from the small probe I assessed each of them with, I think I will have resources for about a week.’

“That’s wonderful Ali!” she said out loud. “Do you think we may have finally found a place we can settle?”

‘En!’ he mentally chastised. ‘You must not call me Ali verbally!’

“I’m sorry,” she said contritely. “I simply am exhausted and not thinking clearly.”

‘I didn’t have any tastes of resources as you did today,’ she mentally added.
'I am certain that the school will present many suitable targets once we are there during the day. In the meantime, take some of mine,’ he offered, touching his lips gently to her own. A spark of energy jumped between them electrically and she giggled delightfully against him. He shivered.

‘That feels wonderful Ali! This place is truly a paradise!’

“Perhaps we should find you a more filling meal?” he suggested.

Her lips curled upward in eager anticipation.

…”

Chapter End Notes

So when I finished Once Upon a Dream and Nightmares my husband immediately asked if I was going to do the Ann and Alan arc next. This was his favorite story arc when he watched the show. I instantly said no, explaining that I had absolutely no idea of what I would do with it to make it my own. Fast forward another six months and he was again asking how many fics there were in this area. I said that there were quite a few and many were quite well written, developed, and compelling, but I never found what I was looking for, not that I even knew what that was.

Then he asked me what I would do with it. And ideas just started coming. He must have listened to me spouting interpretations of characters and beginnings of scenes for a good twenty minutes. And then the next morning I only wanted to write! Wrote something like six thousand words in that first sitting. He really is my muse!

Anyway, I’m going to try to keep the chapters on the shorter side so I am able to update more often. We’ll see what happens.

Rating is T for now, but I suspect that it will be M before long. Some of these flashes are becoming rapidly more sexual than I had originally anticipated.
Chapter Notes

I went ahead and changed the rating up to M. I don’t think we’re quite there yet, but I going to come out of my denial and acknowledge we’re totally heading in that direction.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aino Minako glared at the glowing numbers emanating from the clock at her bedside table. She flipped violently away from the glaring symbols, long flowing blonde hair whipping around her with the sudden movement. She pulled the puffy white down comforter over her shoulder, praying that sleep would not remain as elusive as it had for the last three nights.

She stilled, sensing an unfamiliar presence in the room. She strained her eyes and ears for any sign that she was not alone.

She saw movement from the corner of her eye – a girl, blonde as she was, with a glimmer of orange rushed past her bed. Minako jumped upright, turning toward movement.

There was no one. Unless you counted Artemis, her white cat, who had been licking his forward paw from atop her dresser. He froze at her sudden movement.

She sighed mournfully trying to calm her racing heart and allowed her face to fall into her hands.

After a sudden thump, she felt the snowy feline at her waist brush himself against her comfortingly.

“Artemis, I think I’m going crazy,” she confided to the cat as she absently stroked his silky white fur. He purred. “I keep seeing this girl. But only ever from the corner of my eye.”

The cat sat on his hind legs and chirped at her. She laughed as she nuzzled his head.

“I probably just need more sleep!” she agreed.

She glanced at the clock again and sighed. She had four hours before she had to get up.

“Minako!” the shrill voice from downstairs caused her to sit up suddenly in irritation. The woman knew that she had been having trouble sleeping. Why was her mother screaming at her at three in the morning?

Then she noticed the early morning light streaming through the break in her heavy curtains. She glanced at the clock again and was startled to read 7:10. She must have fallen asleep at some point, though she didn’t feel like she had rested at all.

She sighed. There was nothing for it. She threw on her navy blue school uniform and quickly tied her hair half up with a red ribbon and headed downstairs to face the screaming banshee.

“Yes mother?” the girl asked as she came down the stairs.

The taller woman held up an official looking envelope that had been torn open with an
accompanying letter with the school’s letterhead.

“Just how long has this been here?” her mother demanded.

Minako shrugged. She had placed the progress report the day it had arrived at the very bottom of her mother’s mail pile, knowing it would take her weeks to get through all the correspondence.

The older woman sighed in exasperation.

“Minako…”

Minako tensed at the disappointment in her mother’s voice. Somehow the feeling of letting her down was so much more difficult to deal with than the anger.

“We both know you are capable of far more! So why do you pretend to be less than you are?”

“Mom, I don’t have time to talk about this right now. I need to go to school,” she said, avoiding the question.

“Minako! We need to talk about it some time!”

The blonde teen ignored the reprimand. Instead, she grabbed her bag and darted out the door before her mother could object. Before her mother could notice the tears threatening to fall down her face.

The truth was she didn’t have an answer to her mother’s question. She just knew that it was vitally important that others underestimate her. She knew that her duty came before reaching her own potential. Or rather, the potential she had to reach had nothing to do with how she performed in school.

But duty to what?

Minako did not know. She always felt like she had forgotten something. Something so important she would give her life for it. She knew she sacrificed her grades, meaningful friendships, and her future career options. It never even occurred to her to question if the sacrifice was worth it. It seemed like a reasonable price to pay considering what the cost could be.

Had been, her mind corrected.

She froze at the thought. She had so many of them like it. They came in amazing moments of clarity. But that clarity remained fleeting. She didn’t understand them. She never understood them.

She was startled to find herself traversing the familiar corridors of Jubaan High. She must have been on autopilot to have made the twenty minute walk without seeing an inch of it.

Moto Hiroji and Oshiro Kazu, Jubaan High’s resident hormone driven filterless duo were up to their usual antics terrorizing some girl with red brown curls that Minako didn’t recognize.

“Baka - domo! Why don’t you just give it up already?” Minako roared at the two boys. “She, like every other girl at this school is not interested. Go home and take a cold shower!”

“Mind your own business Aino-san!” Oshiro growled at her.

“You want to go toe to toe with me Oshiro-baka?” Minako challenged as she stepped up to him defiantly cracking her knuckles, delighted to have something to take her frustration out on.
“What is going here?”

The voice froze both of the potential combatants in their place.

“Nothing at all Tachibana-sensei!” Moto quickly assured, grabbing his friend by the elbow and dragging him away.

The instructor grumbled something under his breath, before turning back into the adjacent classroom.

Minako turned to the girl she had just rescued. She leaned casually against the wall flaunting her creamy smooth long legs. Perfect red-brown ringlets framed her face. Her deep maroon eyes flashed with annoyance.

“I’m sorry!” the blonde quickly apologized. “I didn’t realize you actually wanted their attentions. Those two will hit on anything with legs and breasts. Most girls can’t stand them!”

“No, it was very kind of you to step in,” the other girl soothed with an easy smile. “I am unaware of the current social pecking order. I’m sure you are correct. I can do far better.”

Minako frowned at the girl’s superiority and arrogance, but then shook her head. She didn’t know this girl.

“Thank you for coming to my rescue. My name is Ginga Natsumi and today is my first day,” she greeted holding out her arm.

“Aino Minako,” the blonde greeted, taking the other girl’s hand. “You are welcome to shadow me today. I know how lost you can feel as a transfer student.” And looking at how perfectly Natsumi groomed herself and how she instantly attracted the boys, Minako had no doubt the girl would fit in seamlessly with her own social circle.

“Getting into trouble already onee-chan?” a tall brown haired boy teased as he came up beside them. Minako eyed his well-defined shoulders and sparkling blue grey eyes appreciatively.

“Aino-san, this is my brother, Ginga Seijuro. Onii-san, this is Aino Minako,” Natsumi introduced.

“A pleasure,” the blonde greeted enthusiastically.

He took her hand and caressed it with his lips. “The pleasure is all mine,” he whispered.

Minako shoved the boy roughly against a tree. Without wasting a second she tore at his uniform, roughing tossing his jacket aside before sending the small white polished buttons of his button up shirt flying. Her hands burned when they finally made contact with his bare skin. She assaulted his chest with her mouth, nipping playfully at his nipples.

“Mina-chan, I didn’t know you were that kind of girl,” he said with a chuckle even as he gave in willingly to her ministrations.

His words stopped her cold and she took two steps back.

The vision dissolved. She froze.

What was that?

She threw suspicious glances toward the new boy. Something wasn’t right.
He frowned in confusion. “Is something wrong Aino-san?” he asked.

She shook her head, trying to clear it.

“Minako-chan!” a familiar voice cooed. “Won’t you introduce us to your new friends?”

Minako blinked and quickly made introductions and allowed her friends to take over the conversation as she continued to try to sort out what had just happened.

That flash, whatever it was, couldn’t have been her own thoughts. Could it?

A resounding ring of the bell pulled her from her thoughts. She looked up, realizing she had been left behind. Crap! She was late!

She took off running, turned a corner only to be stopped instantly with a hard collision that sent books and papers flying.

Minako sat up, once again trying to orient her spinning head. Today just wasn’t her morning. She glanced at her victim. The girl looked just as dazed as she felt, her hair tied up in buns and pigtails on either side of the top of her head. Her blue eyes fluttering open as she regained her equilibrium.

“I’m sorry!” Minako exclaimed, pulling the other girl to her feet.

The other girl laughed, “No worries! I’m such a klutz and always running late so I’m used to random collisions.”

Minako smiled, “Me too.”

“Well, it was nice crashing into you… Aino-san, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Minako confirmed. “And you are?” she asked, embarrassed that the other girl knew her name and she couldn’t reciprocate.

“Tsukino Usagi,” she called back brightly even as she darted away with a friend wave.

“Nice to formally meet you Tsukino-san!” she yelled after the girl.

“You as well Aino-san!” the girl agreed. “Gotta run! See you in detention!”

Minako watched the girl dash away to class, her mind once again swirling with… something. What was wrong with her today?

…

Ami sat in her assigned seat in the back left of the room – near the door. Natural light from the large windows that made up the left wall supplemented the yellow tinged fluorescent lights from the ceiling above.

She took diligent notes in her planner as Umino shared the daily announcements, while simultaneously looking over the problem set of the week for the calculus course she was taking at Cram School in the afternoons. Integrating various trigonometric expressions was proving to be more challenging than she had originally thought. She had a third notebook, turned to a blank page, ready for when Haruna-sensei began their English lesson.

Ami jumped, startled at the sudden movement to her right.
“Morning Mizuno-san!” her new seat partner whispered enthusiastically as she slipped into her seat only two minutes late, which for Usagi was almost an improvement.

The blonde’s warmth came as a surprise. Afterall, the blunette hadn’t exactly been friendly or open to the girl’s overtures the day before. The genius girl bit her lip, uncertain what to say in response. She desperately wanted to say something, but class had started and she couldn’t interrupt or distract any of her peers from the lesson – certainly not Usagi, who clearly needed the instruction.

The lesson had barely begun when the door whipped open again. Haruna-sensei flipped around to address the interruption.

The Dean of Students stood in the doorway and nodded toward one of the most gorgeous girls Ami had ever seen. Her deep maroon eyes seemed to sparkle with intrigue on either side of her delicate nose. Her cheeks held a natural blush, and were framed by tightly wound red brown curls that brushed her shoulders. The girl made her way to the front of the room without prompting.

“Class, this is Ginga Natsumi,” the sensei announced. “She is a transfer student who will be joining our homeroom for the remainder of term. I hope you will make her feel welcome.”

Judging by the eager smiles from the male half of the class, that was not going to be a problem. Ami sighed, envious of the girl that was so quickly accepted and loved. She found herself wishing that anyone would give her that kind of attention and admiration.

“Hello everyone, I have just moved here from Hiratsuka. I look forward to getting to know you all better,” she said sweetly with a slight bow of her head, causing her curls to fall forward.

Usagi sighed. “I wish I could get my hair to curl like that,” she whispered wistfully.

“But your hair is gorgeous Tsukino-san,” Ami insisted without thinking.

Usagi turned bright blue eyes, wide with surprise in the girl’s direction. Ami felt her face flush at the sudden attention.

“You think so?” her partner asked, eyeing her own golden strands as if she had never seen them before.

“Mizuno-san, Tsukino-san, if you would both please join us!” Haruna-sensei scolded.

The rest of the class gasped in surprise. Ami diligently dropped her head back into her notes, her flaming face growing warmer by the second in embarrassment.

Halfway through the period, the blunette noticed a pink piece paper folded into the shape of a heart that sat at the corner of her notebook. She glanced at her partner who winked and nodded toward the note. Ami nodded in acknowledgement. And though curiosity burned through her, she didn’t touch it, determined to stay on task for the rest of the lesson.

Somehow staying focused on the lesson had never been so difficult. The only thing she wanted to do was talk to the girl sitting next to her.

Relief rushed through her as the lesson finally came to close and she turned to her partner only to find that Usagi had already bolted toward her friend, Naru before Ami could say a word. The blue-haired teenager watched her blonde classmate with regret before she remembered the note. She quickly unfolded the note, her misty blue eyes greedily soaking up every word.

*I’m sorry Mizuno-san! I sincerely did not mean to get you into any trouble. I will try not to distract*
you from your studies in the future. I know doing well and having a good reputation is important to you. I won’t ruin it for you. Tomorrow, I will be meek as a mouse! You won’t even know I’m there!

Her eyes welled with sudden wetness at the written words. She didn’t want this.

Not at all.

…

Finally, the clock had ticked over, dismissing everyone for lunch. Like most of her peers, Usagi rapidly tossed her notebooks and pens into her bag eager to finally eat whatever amazing sustenance her mother had thrown together that morning.

“Tsukino-san, might I have a word?” Haruna-sensei called politely to her.

Usagi sighed as she made her way to the front. Like she could say no to that. “Of course sensei!”

“Tsukino-san, what do you want to do after high school?” her instructor asked without preamble.

Usagi, startled by the question, looked up into unwavering dark green eyes. She quickly glanced back down at her fidgeting hands at her waist as she considered the question.

She hadn’t really thought about it before. She had no idea what she wanted to do, and thinking about it now, well, she wanted to do everything. She could be a concert musician or some kind of political activist! She might be effective as a social worker. Ruling anything out seemed incredibly limiting. She really only knew two things. She wanted to help others and she wanted to change the world.

The older woman’s sigh brought her out of her thoughts.

“What are your strengths Tsukino-san? What are you good at?” she asked instead.

“People,” the girl said without hesitation.

“I’m glad you know that,” Haruna said with a smile. She was actually smiling! Usagi couldn’t believe it.

“I’m worried about you Tsukino-san. There are times where you show incredible insight and genuine curiosity. Unfortunately, those moments are fleeting. You lack persistence and focus. Find something, anything that motivates you because I know you are capable of great things. Someone who is so passionate simply about living could not be otherwise.”

Crystal blue eyes filled with tears and she struggled to hold them at bay. She had always thought Haruna hated her. But someone who hated her could not say so many kind words even if they were coming from a place of frustration.

“Hai sensei. I will think about it,” the teenager managed around the lump in her throat.

“I know you must be starving Tsukino-san. Enjoy your lunch!”

Usagi recognized the dismissal for what it was and withdrew, the words and questions of her instructor swirling through her head.

She had only just exited the room when she was immediately confronted with Seijuro perched on the windowsill right outside her classroom door. He held a ivory colored flute that was decorated with swirling green vines making the instrument more exotic and completely unique. He grinned as
their eyes met.

She glanced down at her own hands nervously, unprepared to face him. Before either of them could say a word, three giggling girls surrounded him, cooing in delight over the woodwind he carried.

“Oh, do you play Seijuro-kun?” the first girl asked. “Please play something for us!”

He laughed. “I would be delighted.” There was such warmth in his voice.

Usagi continued on her way with a sigh, uncertain if she was envious of the beautiful girls or relieved that he wasn’t staring so intently at her anymore.

“I call this piece ‘Rainfall’,” his voice penetrated the crowded hallway. Usagi felt like he was speaking only to her. But that couldn’t be true, could it?

She turned back toward the spectacle, curious in spite of herself. His grey eyes seemed to pierce straight through her own. He didn’t look away as he brought the flute to his lips and started playing. She gasped as the melody hit her senses.

**Rolling warm mists swirled playfully around her as she stepped softly across the strewn cherry blossoms that littered the ground. The pink petals tickled the soles of her bare feet as she made her way through the forest as gentle drops of warm water fell from the open sky onto her bare exposed shoulders.**

**Without warning, strong hands snaked around her naked form, kneading into her soft flesh starting from the mounds of her breasts – teasing and enticing. The warm hands worked down, sliding firmly across her abdomen and then lower, invading areas that had never been touched.**

**She moaned involuntarily at the pleasant shivering sensations his caresses sent lancing up her spine.**

“I need you Usagi,” the voice whispered sensually into her ear, sending chills in the other direction, all the way down to her toes.

The music came to a close and Usagi found herself back in the high school’s hallway. Seijuro was still looking directly at her with storming grey blue eyes.

Her eyes jumped to the floor. She could not look at him. Not after the visions his music had inspired within her. She quickly retreated, wondering what it was about this boy that could invoke such passion. Was this love?

She didn’t even know him, her mind objected.

She barely made it out of the school building toward the tree where her friends always ate lunch when a gentle hand on her shoulder stopped her in her tracks. Her body shivered at the contact.

“Usagi-chan!” he entreated softly. “Where are you going?”

“I was just meeting my friends for lunch,” she insisted turning toward the two girls that were already settled under their usual tree.

“Oh,” he said softly. “I thought you were trying to get away from me.”

She blushed. His assessment wasn’t entirely false.
“I was hoping to speak with you,” he continued, moving in front of her to block her path.

Her heartbeat accelerated even faster if that was possible. She looked up into his intense swirling orbs causing the world to spin around her.

“Your have moved me Usagi-chan,” Seijuro said softly.

“W-What do you mean?” she stuttered.

“That song. It spoke to you in a way that it once used to speak to me, but I guess I’ve heard it so many times now,” he shrugged. “It just doesn’t hold the power over me any longer. But… watching your eyes as you took in each note – it was like hearing it for the first time all over again.”

Usagi looked away, unable to meet his direct gaze. Her eyes fell instead on Naru and Makoto who were grinning like children that had fallen into a jar of honey.

“It’s obvious that you understand the passion of the gentle falling of rain on your bare skin on a warm night.”

She jumped at his description and turned startled eyes in his direction. Did he somehow know her thoughts?

“You… you play it very well,” she managed to say.

“I’d be willing to play it for you again. Just the two of us?” he invited. “Would you meet me after school today?”

Her mind screamed in panic. She could not handle being alone with this boy. But at the same time she wanted to be. Part of her craved his gaze and his touch. She had never had such thoughts in her life. And the level of her desire frightened her.

“Or perhaps another piece if you prefer? I have quite the repertoire,” he continued.

Naru and Makoto both were nodding gleefully behind him.

“I don’t know…” she said, biting her lip in uncertainty.

“What she means,” Naru interrupted coming to her feet, “is that she might be late because she has detention this afternoon.”

“I will wait,” Seijuro said confidently. “I will meet you at the front gates.” He kissed her hand again causing her face to burn hotter and walked away.

“Naru-chan! Why did you do that?” Usagi objected after the subject of her fascination had left earshot.

They ignored her objections. Both her friends were too busy gushing about how excited they were. How lucky she was that she had caught his eye.

“Come on, Usagi-chan! You can’t fool me! You were so drooling over him. You are totally delighted to be going on a date! You’re just nervous!”

Usagi blushed, knowing that Naru had pegged her feelings pretty accurately.

…
A/N: Learned a lot about the daily routine in a Japanese school in preparing for this chapter. I don't think I truly represented all that I learned in the chapter, so here are some fun facts:
1) Beginning of the school year starts in April. And students attend school 240 days a year (about 60 more than in the western world, though some of this time is spent planning and putting on school festivals).
2) Students have small lockers where they store their street shoes. When they first get to school they have to take off their street shoes and put on school slippers. This helps keep the school building cleaner and quieter.
3) Students don't rotate classrooms. Teachers do.
4) Monday morning usually begins with a 15 minute assembly. The other days of the week, the day begins with students (who rotate the roll) sharing announcements with their peers.
5) The core curriculum has lots of requirements and for the most part the cohort takes all the same classes. Electives usually come in the form of clubs/cram school.
6) Students stay after school for clubs (which meet at least twice a week) usually until 5 pm.
7) The first few years of Japanese schooling are spent not focused on learning skills or content, but rather learning to code-switch and work in groups. Young children are expected to be super disciplined and follow very routine procedures for certain hours and then the next period of time will be filled with incredibly unstructured intense play time! They do this because the family unit is not expected to teach children how to act and behave in society. That's the school's job. Rather the family's job is to smother you with love and affection. In fact, the home and family unit is the one place in Japanese culture where you don't have to behave or filter your emotions. It is a place where you're allowed to be aggressive and loud. And showing such extreme emotion (positive or negative by western standards) to someone means that you feel very close to them and trust them. So you see, Mamoru and Usagi have ALWAYS been close by Japanese standards. :)
Still learning how to write shorter chapters more quickly. It's a developing skill, I swear! So stay tuned!
Chapter Notes

Two special shout outs to two authors on fan fiction dot net!

First to asdfghijklalala, whose review made me think of my own story in a different way and helped me to fill in more than half of my plot holes in my outline. So now I have a much better idea of where this is all going!

Second to Antigone2 for writing such a fabulous story, Lost and Found (reimagining of the first season with a few twists. I highly recommend it for its delightful dialogue and amazing plot integration and structure) that got me so inspired that I just had to buckle down and finish this chapter, which has been almost finished for an embarrassingly long amount of weeks.

Usagi sat slumped in her chair fiddling mindlessly with strands of golden hair as she spent detention as she always did – watching the clock. Only now, it seemed the mechanical demon operated in free fall mode. This, of course, made sense, as for the first time in her life, she wasn’t sure she wanted the prison time to end.

Not when she knew Seijuro was waiting for her at the school gates.

She didn’t understand her feelings for the boy. She barely remembered to breathe when in his presence. The fantasies that he inspired in her went beyond anything she had ever imagined. Even thinking about them caused her to blush. Her grip around the strands of liquid gold tightened in frustration.

It bothered her because when she asked herself why she liked him, she had no answer. Sure, he was attractive and charming, but she didn’t know him. How could you have such intense feelings for someone that you knew almost nothing about?

Did she need to know him though? Wasn’t the point of a date to get to know someone better – to find out if they were the one?

She sighed mournfully, resting her chin in the palms of her own hands. The problem was, she didn’t feel like herself around him. She just wasn’t sure if she trusted herself around him and she didn’t like that feeling. That feeling that she wasn’t in control.

Could falling in love ever be controlled?

Was that what was happening? Was she falling in love? Now, when he wasn’t in the room – where she felt like she could think, the images didn’t hold the same power. It was like remembering a dream.

“Tsukino-san?”

“Hmm?” the girl’s head jumped upward at the voice into friendly blue eyes.
“Were you planning on staying here all day?” Minako asked with a teasing smile.

“What?” Usagi asked, as her eyes darted around the room in confusion as the handful of students gathered their things and left.

“Detention’s over Tsukino-san. We can leave now,” the girl finally explained.

Usagi shook herself into action. “Right! Let’s get out of here.”

The girls walked side by side in silence. Usagi sneaked a glance at her companion who walked completely lost in thought, her eyes glazed over as she bit her lower lip.

“Is something bothering you Aino-san?” Usagi asked gently.

Startled blue eyes met her own and the girl blushed. “No, I just…” the blond trailed off and then winced. “Well, actually I got into a fight with my mother this morning and I haven’t been able to focus on anything all day.”

Usagi almost jumped, surprised at how personal the confession was.

“What did you fight about?” Usagi asked softly.

“Oh, she was just upset that I don’t do as well as I could,” the other blond explained. “And she’s totally right. I don’t do well, but it’s on purpose. I can’t explain why, but I just know with every fiber of my being that I’m meant for something else – something important and something that school won’t help me with.”

Minako blushed and laughed awkwardly, “I’m sorry! I don’t know why I’m telling you all this.”

“It’s okay Aino-san!” Usagi instantly reassured. “I completely understand. I have similar troubles and my mother doesn’t know what to do with me either.”

“It just feels so natural to confide in you Tsukino-san,” Minako whispered her cerulean blue orbs looking down at her feet in embarrassment.

“And it’s always natural to listen,” Usagi insisted with a bright smile, trying to ease the other girl’s discomfort.

“Well, this is my turn,” her new friend said, gesturing to the hallway branching to their right. Minako stopped walking and bowed her head slightly. “Thanks for listening Tsukino-san. Hope to run into you again!”

“Anytime Aino-san!” Usagi agreed, bowing her head slightly in return before watching the girl dart away. Usagi turned back toward her own locker and quickly slid out of her slippers even as her right hand automatically dialed in the combination. She quickly switched into her street shoes and made her way toward the school’s main gates.

Usagi came to the main door and froze when she reached the glass window that looked out into the schoolyard. Seijuro stood waiting, casually leaning against the brick support on one side of the gate, looking pristine in his grey uniform.

Her stomach flipped uncomfortably as she watched him through the glass. In talking to Minako, she had completely forgotten about her date with the new transfer. She considered taking the North exit and avoiding him altogether.
“Come on Usagi! Get a grip! He’s just a boy! And he seems to like you!” she encouraged herself. “Haven’t you dreamed of receiving this kind of attention?”

She nodded affirmatively, and pushed open the main doors before she could change her mind.

“Usagi-chan! I hope detention wasn’t too awful,” Seijuro greeted as she came down the stairs.

“It went by surprisingly quickly,” she admitted nervously looking down at her hands that clutched her school bag in front of her. “I hope you didn’t have to wait too long.”

“Usagi-chan, you are more than worth the wait,” he said softly, sending chills down her spine.

She glanced up and met his misty eyes. She felt dizzy.

She lay on her back more comfortable than a kitten curled up in a cloud. Hands caressed her bare smooth legs from her ankles all the way up to her thighs in slow rhythmic strokes. The delightful feelings slowly worked their way to her inner thighs – each pass coming just a little closer driving her slowly insane with unbearable pleasure. Warm fingers began massaging her labia apart and she thrust her hips toward his magic hands craving something more, praying he would take that final step to satisfy that empty feeling. But his hands just tantalized and teased sending maddening waves of ecstasy ripping through her body.

Then it stopped. Abruptly. She groaned in frustration.

“You alright Usagi-chan?” the boy asked, his concerned swirling eyes demanding her attention.

“I-I’m fine!” she stammered.

“Good! I thought we might take a stroll through the park. I found a private little den made of trees,” he explained even as he offered his elbow. “I think it will resonate the sound of my flute quite well.”

She considered it for a moment, wondering if this den was secluded enough to act upon the fantasies. Would he think her too bold if she made the first move? And on the first date?

What was she thinking? She could not be alone with him. Who knew where that might lead? And while part of her craved the passionate experience, she knew she wasn’t ready.

Misty blue grey eyes pierced her own and her head swam again.

Maybe she was ready, she thought, changing her mind. Why would she be having dreams and flashes like this if she wasn’t?

She shook the thought away.

“I’m rather hungry though Seijuro-kun! Let me introduce you to the Crown Arcade first!” she suggested instead as she slipped her arm through his. “They have the absolute best milkshakes!”

He laughed. “Lead on my lady.”

…

Mamoru tossed the newspaper back onto the counter, frustrated by the story and his own sudden restlessness that always accompanied such news.

“Are you still following that recent string of deaths?” the blond worker, who also happened to be
one of Mamoru’s closest friends, asked as he glanced at the paper’s headline.

Mamoru nodded.

“Mamoru-kun, you live in a city with one of the lowest homicide rates in the world! Why do you insist on following such a morbid case so obsessively?” his blond best friend asked, even as he refilled the plain white mug with his favorite hazelnut blend.

“I don’t know Motoki-kun. Usually this kind of thing doesn’t bother me. I just feel like I should be doing something about these particular murders,” Mamoru confided.

“Like what?” Motoki asked in astonishment.

“I… don’t know,” he admitted, raking a hand through his raven black hair. “I just have this feeling of…” Mamoru trailed off, his attention stolen by long legs and sparkling eyes.

His eyes drank in her slight form. Her creamy pale legs disappeared under the navy blue school uniform, which accented the curves of her hips and well-endowed breasts. Her well defined cheek bones accentuated the careful angles of her face. Even her chin came to a delicate point below a nose perfect, further framed by red curls and gleaming garnets for eyes.

“Feeling of…?” Motoki repeated, sparing the girl a dismissive glance before turning back to his friend.

Mamoru barely registered the inquiry. Instead he moved closer to the newcomer, allowing her scent of the sweetest spring flowers to overwhelm him.

She leapt into his arms pushing him against a wall. Her long marble smooth legs wrapped around his waist, grinding against him maddeningly. His hands were not innocent either as he squeezed and massaged her back and butt cheeks. Pushing his swollen groin into her own thrusts.

Motoki gave him an odd look and he realized he stood mere inches from the girl. He forced himself back in confusion, realizing he was on the verge of losing control.

He ran a desperate hand through his hair again. He was always in control.

She turned knowing eyes in his direction, her dark lips curling upward in a small smile that set his veins on fire. His vision spun. He felt drunk on too much perfume.

Ah, to hell with it, he told himself, taking a step toward the girl again with half a mind to pull her into the back room right then. Surely Motoki would let him get away with it, would he?

A golden flash caught his attention from the corner of his eye. He turned and recognized the newcomer as his former assailant immediately. He felt his face light up in a rare grin, the former obsessed feelings for the dark eyed beauty before him fading to the back of his mind.

“Hey Odango! Did you manage to make it on time to school today?” he called out to her.

She turned startled sapphire eyes in his direction, before they settled in sudden recognition. “Not quite,” she admitted with a small smile and a delightful blush. “Maybe next time. Come on Seijuro-san! Over here, there is a…”

Only when she tugged on the sandy brown haired boy’s elbow at her side did he realize the girl was not alone. He frowned at the younger teen, finding his presence on the Odango’s arm disturbing for reasons he could not have articulated in that moment.
He forced himself to spin back to his regular stool. What was wrong with him? Was he jealous of the boy over a girl he didn’t even know? Hadn’t he been fantasizing about the red head not two seconds before the blond walked in? Usually no one met his fancy, and suddenly his head was playing incredibly fickle.

He glanced up noticing that the first object of his lust had already moved on – giggling with a dark haired lad in the corner, as she whispered into his ear. It wasn’t long before the new pair had come back to their feet and exited straight back the way they had come.

When she was gone Mamoru found his attention focused solely on the blonde, his earlier fantasies forgotten.

“Do you know her?” Mamoru asked.

“Which one?” Motoki asked mildly.

“The blonde,” he answered immediately, surprised at the question.

“She’s a regular. Comes in almost every afternoon. Why?” his friend asked with a slight smile.

“No reason!” Mamoru hastily reassured, cursing his friend’s tendency to play matchmaker. Now he couldn’t risk asking his counterpart for her name. If he did, he’d never hear the end of it.

He turned back to his newspaper with a slight frown.

…

The dark feline glared at the monitor damning it to every fiery level of hell for the unwelcome information it delivered.

“Luna!” her pale counterpart yelled out pulling her from her dark thoughts.

“I see it!” she screeched irritably, leaping from the console back to the cold concrete floor.

“What should we do?” he asked pitifully.

The black feline bolted up the cellar stairs, trying not to growl angrily at the question. Artemis knew exactly what had to be done.

“The only thing we can do,” she mumbled mournfully to herself. Selene forgive her!

…

Ali watched En depart with a promising target. He looked young and athletic – hopefully ripe with energy to be harvested.

‘Enjoy your dinner,’ he whispered to her mentally. She did not turn toward him – she was too good to make such a mistake. But he knew she heard him as her smile curled upward seductively, promising a wonderful reunion upon their arrival home, both energized and charged.

He turned his attention back to his own date, drinking in the pulsing energy that simply radiated from her form, so very tantalizing.

He licked his lips unconsciously, wanting to press the attack. Unfortunately, he had enough of a read on the girl to know she was totally hooked, but completely spooked at the same time ready to bolt. With such potential, he was not willing to risk scaring off the prey. He could be patient. By
the Makaiju, he could almost live off the small tastes he had managed to snatch here and there.

“So Seijuro-kun, what is your dream?” Usagi asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

“My dream?” he repeated, confused by the question.

“You know, like what do you want to do after school?” her eyes gleamed with a sincerity he had never seen before. He couldn’t ever remember being asked about himself. Girls usually fell all over themselves trying to impress him.

“I don’t know…” he admitted slowly. “I guess I haven’t really thought about it. I’ve always just focused on survival.”

“Think about it now!” she insisted. “If you could do anything what would it be?”

“Something with nature,” he said immediately. “I feel most at peace when surrounded by forests and flowers.”

She smiled. “Looks like you’re living in the wrong place!” she teased, her eyes sparkling in amusement.

“I guess I am,” he agreed, surprised at how much he appreciated the open honest delight in the girl’s face.

A soft scratching noise caused him to turn toward the window where he saw a small black cat trying to claw her way through the glass.

Seijuro laughed. “If I didn’t know better, I would swear that cat was waiting for you.”

She turned toward the black kitten.

“Luna? What’re you doing here?” she questioned out loud as she came to her feet. “I’m sorry Seijuro-kun. This was lovely, but I have to run!” she said with a quick bow of her head.

She darted out of the arcade with a quick wave to the dark haired student that had greeted her upon their arrival. Her aura closed itself off to him, the second she made eye contact with the other male.

Ali glowered at the man’s back. He was going to be a problem.

…

Usagi swept up her errant pet. “Luna, what are you doing so far from home?” she asked even as she nuzzled feline against her cheek.

“Forgive me Usagi-chan,” the cat whispered into her ear. Usagi’s head reeled backwards in shock, almost dropping the creature. “But I don’t have time to explain.”

“Take us into the alley,” her pet directed.

Usagi automatically complied. The feline leapt out of her hands and onto the lid of a round trashcan to face her directly. The familiar crescent marking began to glow and the blonde found herself unable to tear her gaze away.

Images began pouring into her mind’s eye. Images that were simultaneously both alien and familiar. Memories of powers… of responsibilities… of the absolute best friends a girl could ever ask for.
“Please, no…” she sobbed, falling to her knees as unwelcome memories settled into the niches of her head like moles in a flourishing garden. Memories of battles, of close calls and brushes with death, of watching the people she cared about die one by one to protect her.

“I’m sorry Usagi-chan,” the now familiar voice assured her from far away.

Usagi shook her head as the rush of information subsided and looked up at her guardian with clear eyes and a sad smile.

“What’s going on Luna?” Usagi asked softly, knowing with certainty that her mentor and guardian would not have awakened her had the need not been great.

“Someone is under attack!”

“Where?”

“Not too far – just three blocks north of here! Please hurry! The others haven’t made it!”

Usagi brought her transformation to her with practiced ease. The protective haze of power settled comfortably around her like a favorite blanket.

She came to her feet, now decked in the white body suit and accompanying dark blue mini skirt with red trim and bows for accents. She took off with her red knee high boots pounding rhythmically on the pavement below her, following the panic like a compass pointing north – knowing exactly where she was needed.

The Lunar Senshi froze upon arriving to the scene, feeling heat rise to her cheeks in sudden embarrassment. The young heroine was not accustomed to finding victims in such… compromising positions.

The boy leaned against a brick wall, unclothed from the waist down while the… youma… she supposed she would call it, though it reminded her of a flower more than anything else with green vine-like skin framed by blushing pink hair the color of cherry blossoms… pierced the young teen’s skin in places both private and not, with her thorn-like fingernails. The thorns pulsed, and with each wave the boy moaned in pleasure, but through her simple domino mask, Sailor Moon could see the waves of life energy draining from the boy – no older than herself.

“Leave him alone!” the heroine screeched.

The unfamiliar blushing creature jerked upward and hissed at the interruption.

“Who’re you?” the unearthly voice demanded.

“I am Sailor Moon, senshi of love and justice. I protect this planet and all its citizens!”

The alien youma hissed again, disengaging from her victim. She leapt forward with sharpened thorns. Sailor Moon rolled reflexively to the right, before letting lose a retaliatory kick at her opponent’s exposed side.

The monster spit venom in her path. Sailor Moon unable to dodge all of it – hissed in pain as the burning acid ate through her skintight white glove. She threw her tiara with her uninjured hand. The plantlike fiend bent impossibly backwards avoiding the glowing projectile.

Then she disappeared in a whirl of petals and wind.
The young guardian turned to the unconscious boy, realizing that she recognized him from school. She quickly pulled at the silver pools of energy at her core, channeling the life blood into the boy urging him to open his eyes. He didn’t respond and so, she drew further into herself.

“Usagi, stop!” a panicked voice cut through her futile attempts. “It’s not working,” Luna said more gently. “You’ll kill yourself if you keep that up for too long.”

Sailor Moon turned tear stricken eyes toward her feline guardian.

“It’s my fault Luna,” the girl cried. “How could I have ever wished for a normal life, knowing it would leave the entire planet unprotected?”

“Usagi-chan!” the cat interrupted harshly. “These attacks are no one’s fault except the ones that commit them. Even if you had remembered earlier and on your own, Artemis and I did not put the pieces together until today. The blame of these losses certainly does not lie at your feet.”

“How many Luna?”

“Usagi,” the feline begged. “Don’t torture yourself.”

“How many?” the girl asked again softly.

“Including him? Four,” Luna admitted. “But he’s not dead yet. He may still pull through. You have to call for an ambulance.”

She nodded carefully, letting her transformation dissolve before she dashed back into the street screaming hysterically.

She was immediately surrounded by concerned pedestrians, and she did her best to babble incoherently about a boy in the alley. It did not take for cell phones to be whipped out and as soon as the calls were made, Usagi darted into the rapidly forming crowd refusing to stick around for questioning.

“What was that thing anyway?” Usagi asked as she slowly made her way home with Luna perched on her shoulder.

“I don’t know,” her guardian admitted. “But that’s fourth major attack in as many days. You can’t put your guard down. I will awaken the others.”

“No!” the blond shouted.

“But Usagi, you need…” Luna objected.

“They deserve their lives Luna! You will not awaken them,” she ordered. “I will take care of this new threat myself.”

“Usagi,” Luna whispered. “I’m sorry.”

Usagi smiled down at the small black feline. The expression did not reach her eyes. “Don’t be sorry Luna. Now we can talk again,” she said with false brightness.

“Usagi,” Luna chastised gently. “I know that you wanted a normal life too.”

The heroine shrugged and looked away. “We don’t always get what we want,” she whispered. …
Chapter End Notes

And now we’re getting somewhere!
Usagi awoke, late as always and dove into her morning whirlwind routine in her usual frenzied mindless panic, before running all the way to school.

It wasn’t until she stood in her own classroom doorway looking at her new blue-haired seat mate that she froze, the previous day’s events dropping on her like a car hitting a telephone pole.

“You should take your seat Tsukino-san,” Haruna-sensei gently chided. “Before you are tardy.”

“H-hai!” Usagi managed, forcing herself to walk mechanically to her chair, next to the girl she knew like a sister. A girl that barely knew her at all.

Ami scribbled rapidly into her notebook, working on some kind of math that Usagi didn’t recognize, sparing the blond merely a glance as she sat down. Her misty blue eyes remained cold and distant. Usagi cringed, remembering Ami’s delightfully warm, if shy, smile that hadn’t made an appearance in weeks as far as Usagi could remember.

Usagi’s heart broke, realizing how lonely and isolated her friend’s genius made her, how very few ever took the time to get to know her. Sure, people would greet the child scholar, but it was like children gawking at exotic animals at the zoo. Ami was caged and displayed, carefully separated from all her peers.

Her mind reeled chaotically. Could she risk befriending the girl? Wouldn’t that just put her at greater risk of accidentally becoming tangled in all of this paranormal nonsense? If she kept the senshi distant, there was no doubt in the teenager’s head that they would be safer.

She had already begun to hang out with Makoto again. Would she have to ease herself off her old and new friend?

Ami sighed, putting her math notebook down as she diligently began taking notes on the English language instead as Haruna-sensei began her lesson.

The mournful sigh struck the blond like a punch in the gut, interrupting her thoughts.

Could she risk not befriending the misunderstood girl? Regardless of her decision, Usagi was certain Ami would be okay. She’d excel in school, become the world’s most amazing doctor, but would she ever come out of her protective shell?

Usagi found herself regretting that they hadn’t already reconnected without the benefit of her
memories. How had she not seen the girl’s pain and isolation before now? How had she stood for it at all?

“What do you think Tsukino-san?”

Usagi jumped at her teacher’s address. “Uh… could you repeat the question?”

…”

“Usagi-chan? Are you even listening?” Naru asked, eying her oldest friend whose attention had drifted to the classroom window. She followed the girl’s gaze, but the window only revealed the schoolyard below, filled with clusters of high school students lounging on the even green lawn, laughing as they ate their way through the lunch period.

“What was that Naru-chan?” Usagi asked, her gaze never wavering from the green field below.

“Usagi-chan! What is wrong?” Naru snapped, frustrated with the normally bubbly girl’s distance.

“What do you mean?” the blond asked, turning startled blue eyes toward her best friend.

“It’s just… you’re unnaturally quiet! And you’ve barely touched your food! And you wanted to eat inside even though it’s a gorgeous day!” Naru argued, gesturing dramatically to the window that revealed a clear cerulean blue sky. “So I will ask again, what is wrong?”

Usagi shrugged noncommittally. “Nothing. I’m fine. I was just thinking.”

Naru continued to glare at the girl unhappily. Her friend was holding out on her, which was something she never ever did. Which meant the problem had to be something truly awful. Naru was determined to figure out what it was.

“Did something happen on your date?” she probed.

“My what?”

Well, that wasn’t it, Naru concluded. Usagi was far too startled by the question.

“Your date with Seijuro-san?” she clarified anyway.

“He was the perfect gentleman,” her friend confessed with a sad smile that did not reach her eyes. “I had a lot of fun… I’m just not certain he’s my type.”

Naru felt her eyes widen in complete disbelief. “Not your type? He’s everyone’s type!”

“Then you should date him,” Usagi countered with another sad smile.

Naru blushed at the thought. “He doesn’t even see me when I’m next to you.”

“Don’t be silly Naru-chan! He’d be a fool not to notice you!” Usagi insisted, with the hint of a playful gleam that Naru was delighted to see!

“You really think so?” Naru asked, not daring to hope. Goodness knew she had found herself fantasizing about the new transfer whenever she laid eyes on him.

Usagi nodded confidently and they fell into a comfortable silence as both girls began to focus more on their food, lost in their own private thoughts.
“Usagi-chan?” Naru prompted again.

“Yes?”

“You know I’m here for you right?”

Usagi smiled, the first truly genuine smile Naru had seen all day.

“Of course, Naru-chan!”

“And you can tell me anything,” the brown haired girl added insistently.

“When I have something to tell, you’ll be the first to know!” Usagi promised.

Naru wished she could believe that, but somehow she just knew that it wouldn’t always be the case. But she trusted Usagi with her life, heart, and soul. If her friend didn’t want to share, she had to have a good reason.

Didn’t she?

But then why did she feel suddenly so left out in the cold?

…

The dark-haired miko sighed as she pulled out the required rake, pruning shears, water can, and outdoor broom from the garden shed. Yuichiro was in bed with a fever, meaning she had twice as many chores to do as normal. More! Since her grandfather was nursing their helper. And of course, he would decide to fall ill two days before her history midterm.

She started with the watering. It was the most pleasant of the tasks, despite the fact that the weight of the water gradually created aching knots in her shoulders and arms before she was halfway through the extensive garden. She had not been able to convince her father to install an automated sprinkling system. He wanted the temple to stay as natural as possible.

“This is how we show our gratitude and devotion, Rei-chan,” her grandfather gently chided. “You build a connection with the energy flow that is here by working the land with your own hands.”

And that had been the end of the conversation. She knew he was right. There was a reason she loved the garden. And working it, planting and nurturing seedlings, made you appreciate every single red maple leaf and cherry blossom.

Most of the temple’s patrons and guests passed through the meandering paths too quickly to truly appreciate the details of a leaf’s veins or the spiraling patterns in a piece of jade.

But every now and again, there was an exception, the miko reminded herself as she watched a young girl with her hair pinned up in pig tails, kneel down on the dusty path. Long delicate fingers caressed the petals of a blooming deep fuchsia lotus flower that floated on the tiny creek that weaved through the garden. Crystal blue eyes never lost their focus on the bright flower, even as they turned glassy with unshed tears.

She looked lost.

“How can I help you miss?” the temple priestess asked without thinking, setting down the blue watering can both to give her arms a break and give the guest her undivided attention.

The blonde girl jumped, clearly startled. Blue eyes widened as they took her in before her small
pinks lips spread into a small smile.
The expression faded quickly as the blond glanced down at her hands.

“No,” she said sadly. “I don’t think you can.”

“Are you alright?” the raven-haired miko asked.

“I have to be,” the other girl whispered. “I don’t have the luxury of anything else anymore.”

Rei didn’t know what to say. She was tempted to seize the other girl in a hug. She just seemed so
alone in a way the priestess was certain she shouldn’t have to be.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be so depressing,” the blond said with a sudden bright smile. “I came here thinking I would find some peace.”

“And you didn’t?”

“That depends,” blue eyes met her own searchingly.

A night sky flashed with colored arcs. Her chest clenched in dread as powerful shockwaves pierced the silence.

Delighted laughter accompanied the brightest smile she had ever seen. She would die for that smile’s continued existence.

“It’s time.” The hard voice came from a young woman in an orange mini-skirt with freely flowing golden hair. She gripped a short red rod in her hand tighter and felt herself nod.

Heat and light sprung gathered in her hands with practiced ease, calling flames from the ethos. The she launched into the black midnight sky against an enemy she could not make out.

Rei shook her head against the scrambled images this girl’s piercing gaze seemed to inspire within her.

“On what?” Rei asked, remembering the girl’s statement.

“Are you happy?” she asked. Rei looked up again, startled. The question was asked with such genuine concern and urgency. Like it was the most important issue in the world.

“What?”

“Just answer the question,” the blond almost snapped.

“I… I think I am, yes,” Rei answered uncertainly. She supposed the statement was true. She loved the shrine despite spending an inordinate time complaining about chores. School was going well enough. Her music and songs had been coming easily for the last six moons – a talent agency was even interested in some of her work. Her grandfather was in excellent health. There wasn’t anything to be unhappy about.

It just… just felt like something was missing.

“If that’s true, I think I did find a little peace. Thank you Rei-chan.”

And before the shrine maiden could overcome her shock at the familiar address, the blonde girl disappeared back down the temple’s staircase.
Rei shook herself from her thoughts and ran in the direction the girl had gone, compelled for reasons that she did not understand to go after her.

But she was nowhere in sight.

…

Usagi ran as fast as she could – she prayed the wind would catch her and allow her to fly. Anything so she could wipe away the concerned look in Rei’s enchanting violet eyes.

It had been a mistake to visit the temple, but she hadn’t been able to resist the temptation. She hadn’t seen her friend in over a year at least. She had no idea what was going on in her life. Was she still estranged from her father? How was the adjustment to high school? How was grandpa Hino?

It was probably best she didn’t try to find out. It would be so much easier to keep her distance if she didn’t know. So much easier to keep Rei out – to keep her safe.

Only when she walked through the automatic glass doors did she realize she was on autopilot – heading straight into the arcade, instead of home. She stopped in her tracks, her eyes involuntarily drifting to a certain spinning red stool at the main counter.

“Mamo-chan,” she whispered softly, the air evacuating from her lungs.

He looked up at that instant and smiled. And for a second, she lost herself in his dark cobalt gaze. For a second, she thought he recognized her, not as some random girl who had crashed into him two days ago, but as his princess.

“Did you say something Odango Atama?” he asked with an all too familiar smirk.

The old insult shocked her like a bucket of ice water dumped over her head.

She quickly realized he was not alone. Natsumi stood at his side with an arm draped over his shoulder. He had been completely, and uncharacteristically, absorbed in her – twisting a ringlet of hair around his fingers between the girl’s giggles before Usagi had interrupted them with her stunned arrival.

“Hey Mamoru-kun, you want to go somewhere else?” Natsumi asked coyly, biting her lower lip through a smile.

“What?” he turned to the girl sitting beside him in confusion as if he had forgotten that she was there.

“You know, somewhere more… private,” her voice whispered silkily.

He stared at the new girl, his gaze unwavering, Usagi temporarily forgotten.

Usagi fought back the tears that threatened to fall. She certainly couldn’t blame him. Natsumi was gorgeous and obviously interested.

“That sounds…” he began.

But Usagi couldn’t listen to anymore and she spun around only to crash into another customer causing her to fall backwards.

“Odango!” the raven haired man shouted, leaping to her side. “Are you alright?”
She closed her eyes against the concern in his voice even as he pulled her gracefully back to her feet.

“Fine,” she whispered, completely aware of every square inch of skin that met and touched his own.

Natsumi glared daggers in her direction.

“I’m sorry!” the blond croaked around the sudden lump in her thoat, as she pulled back her hands from his as if she had been burned. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Don’t be silly Odango! Why don’t you join us?” he invited indicating the seat on his other side. She could feel Natsumi’s hostility growing exponentially.

“No, that’s okay. I was going to order my milkshake to go,” she said, turning her attention towards the menu that hung against the wall opposite the counter.

“Please Odango?” he begged. She froze. She could not ignore the plea in his voice. But she wasn’t sure she could handle being so near him either.

“Why do you always call me that?” she managed to ask not turning to face him again.

“I like Odango!” he said, reaching out and squeezing one of her buns. She batted his hand away, terrified that if he continued the affectionate teasing, she would bury herself in his chest. “It suits you. What else would I call you?”

“I have a name,” she said softly.

His smile faltered. “I assumed as much,” he said seriously, “but seeing as you have neglected to share that privileged information with me, I am unable to make use of it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Mamoru-baka! Of course I’ve told you my name! I’ve told you every time you’ve used that insufferable…” she trailed off, realizing that he couldn’t remember any of the year they had spent together fighting off youmas, calling each other names in between trading insults, he didn’t remember their shared responsibility, their past.

He didn’t remember loving her.

As far as he was concerned they had just met two days ago in a completely random collision.

Her eyes immediately began to water as she looked up at him - into his own midnight blue orbs that swirled in confusion.

“I’m sorry!” she choked out before dashing away.

“Odango!” he called after her.

She tried to block out his voice as she once again ran as fast as her civilian form would allow her.

…

Ali strolled casually through the park, eying different potential targets reaching out to assess their surrounding auras. So far, nothing promising had jumped out at him. Most of the girls here either had little energy worth collecting, or were impossible to seduce.

He turned his attention forward once again just in time to catch the blond bullet careening his way.
Her body was convulsing in uncontrollable sobs and he pushed her upright.

“Usagi-chan?” he asked, recognizing her immediately. Maybe he could get lucky tonight afterall. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” she insisted heatedly. Then she shook her head. “Everything!” And she collapsed against him again allowing her tears to flow into his shoulder.

He soothingly stroked her back awkwardly at a complete loss for how to end this torrent. He certainly had never had to console a girl in tears.

He pulled back a little so he could see her face and gently kissed away the tears streaming down her face. He felt her sudden tension at his sudden action, which he interpreted merely as nervousness.

His soft lips brushed across her blushing cheek. He gently kissed the corner of her mouth. Then he let himself give into the desire he hadn’t realized he had felt and kissed her full on. She gasped in shock. He took her open mouth as invitation enough and allowed his tongue to explore the warm moist cavern.

He could feel her physical pleasure, as tingles shot down her spine, almost as if it was his own. Felt her finally responding – kissing him back.

Just as suddenly, she tore away – her tears coming back full force.

“I sorry Seijuro-kun,” she sobbed. “I can’t do this. Not to him. Not to you either.”

“What are you talking about Usagi-chan?” he asked in surprise. “I thought yesterday…”

“I’m sorry,” she said again more clearly as she wiped her tears furiously away. “I didn’t mean to mislead you.” She stood up on tip toes and kissed his cheek. “I truly wish things could’ve been different.”

Without another word she took off running again.

Ali stood in shock, very confused at her sudden departure and rejection. He was not accustomed to rejection. How could you be when you could read whether someone could be swayed from a dozen meters away? And Usagi had been interested – he knew that she had been.

But then, how was she able to pull away? In the past, he had watched a few whose interest has slowly waned, but he had never experienced the magnetism just cut off overnight like the flipping of a light switch.

He tried to evaluate the energy collected from their brief physical exchange and realized there wasn’t any. He hadn’t been harvesting energy at all through the entire contact. He had only wanted to comfort her.

But how could that be? It was almost like he cared about her or something. Not the same way he did with En – not even close, but similar. What did this make her?

A friend?

He shook away the thought. He couldn’t afford the luxury of friends. She’s merely a target, he repeated to himself. A target!
But he knew he was lying to himself. The simple kiss had left him feeling invigorated, calmer and more peaceful than he had felt in years, even though he hadn’t collected a drop of energy.

There was something different about this girl. And he was going to figure out what it was.

…

Luna leapt from the tree onto the window sill only to find her charge’s convulsing form thrown face down across her own bed.

“Usagi?” the black cat enquired softly.

“Luna!” the girl cried, leaping up and seizing the feline into a breath ending embrace.

“Usagi-chan!” the cat objected. “I need to breathe.”

Usagi’s grip lightened only slightly as she continued to cry.

“Usagi, tell me what’s wrong,” Luna encouraged, though she had a pretty good idea.

“Luna, it’s awful!” she sobbed. “So much worse than I thought it would be. I can’t tell my best friend about what’s happening because it could put hers in danger. And my closest friends – sisters even, have no idea who I even am! And I’m not certain I should be their friend at all. It would just make it more likely they’d get dragged into a fight! I can’t enjoy being kissed by a boy because I feel like I’m betraying my one true love even though he doesn’t even know my name.”

“It’s like I live in a separate universe than everyone else. I have never felt so alone,” she admitted.

“I will awaken the others,” the feline immediately assured her as she started to struggle from the girl’s arms.

“No!” Usagi objected, clutching the black cat more firmly against her chest.

“But Usagi-chan,” Luna objected.

“I said no, Luna. We’ve already talked about this. They all deserve their lives. I won’t be the one to snatch it from them. This was just a moment of weakness Luna. I will be fine.”

“What about Mamoru-san?” Luna asked gently, still clearly worried.

“Could you give him back his memories?” Usagi asked, her eyes sparkling with hope.

“I honestly have no idea, but I could try,” the feline offered. She really worried about Usagi facing this alone.

Usagi stared at her for a long time before she finally shook her head. “No, I won’t force him to love me based on loyalty to some past life,” she said bitterly. “He should be free of that kind of obligation.”

Luna wished she could grant that same luxury to Usagi.

Maybe one day – when the danger was over, she could.

“Luna, you have to promise me that you won’t awaken any of the others. No matter what!”

“Usagi-chan!” Luna objected. “That’s an irresponsible promise to make! What if you in over your
head and you need support? What if something happens to you and the whole world needs them?”

“If I am defeated, you can awaken them,” Usagi conceded. “But not before!”

Luna eyed her charge warily.

“Please promise me!”

I pray I don’t regret this.

“I promise Usagi-chan,” Luna said reluctantly. Selene, forgive me.

The blond heroine nodded, her shoulders dropping with released tension.

“At least I have you Luna,” the girl said solemnly. “I can’t really ever be completely alone.”

…

Chapter End Notes

That’s two updates in a single month!! Hope you enjoyed!
Obsession

Chapter Notes

Hey all!! Glad to see you’re still with me despite the length between updates. It is college application season and most of my writing time has been devoted to writing letters of recommendation for well-deserving teenagers about to graduate high school. Know that your patience went to a good cause!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ali barely had sat down, when the door whipped open, slamming against the wall. Large landscape paintings of forests and gardens crashed to the floor, punctuated with the sound of shattering glass.

Ali did not even flinch. The week had been a rough one for both of them with their feedings constantly being disrupted and foiled by the Lunar Guardian Senshi. And he was more than accustomed to En’s flares of temper.

‘En,’ he said softly directly into her mind.

“That’s the third target this week that she’s interrupted!” En raged, ignoring his gentle plea.

‘Fifth,’ Ali mentally corrected, adding his own failures to the count.

“Where did she even come from?” she screamed, ignoring his interjection.

‘En, calm down,’ he urged again, rising to his feet and coming to her side. Her eyes shot daggers at him. She didn’t want him to console or comfort her. She wanted to be angry. And normally, he might have let her continue to rage, but he needed her help.

‘We’re managing to stockpile a lot of energy,’ he assured as he pushed a red brown ringlet from her face, wishing she would drop the disguise. ‘Even when we aren’t able to finish off the meal – or even if we just get samples. The makaiju is growing and we have enough in reserves to last another two weeks.’

She leaned her cheek into his caress, and he smiled, feeling the simple physical sensation from both sides through their bond. He let his hands wander across every exposed area of skin – from her face, down the side of her porcelain neck and hollow of her throat. He could feel the icy tingles dancing across her skin, replacing the heated rage.

‘We shall strike less often,’ he continued, adding his lips to his physical explorations. He loved the feel of her, her body reacting and responding to his own so much more strongly than any target. ‘Milk a few targets over the course of a few days or a week to make the inevitable release of energy that much more potent. And maybe it wouldn’t hurt for us to coordinate to plan some simultaneous hits on only the best targets.’

En smiled, “You are the strategist,” she purred out loud. “Any other ideas?”

“We should plant a garden,” he said calmly, as he pushed open her school uniform unveiling her pale marble smooth skin. The color was wrong.
She froze and her eyes shot open, startled by the suggestion. “That’s quite an investment,” she objected.

“This place has more than enough payoff to make it worth it,” he insisted.

She nodded, letting her eyes roll back into her head again as he continued his exploration of her breasts.

‘En?’

‘Yeah?’ she mentally whispered back.

‘Take it off,’ he begged with desire.

She licked her lips and began to cooperatively tear at what was left of her clothes.

His hands stroked the newly revealed patches of flawless skin even as he shook his head.

‘No,’ he corrected. ‘Take off this skin. Please?’

She smiled knowingly allowing her disguise to fade. The physical sensations doubled in intensity.

‘So who are your best targets?’ he asked.

‘There’s a few boys at the school that are positively lustful. But the one with the most potential is Chiba Mamoru.’

Ali frowned at the name.

‘Ali,’ she whined, ‘Please don’t stop.’

‘Sorry,’ he apologized meekly, adding his half a dozen green and supple vines as well to his hands that were occupied with stroking and caressing her everywhere at once. He wanted to be inside her. Feel her feeling full and satisfied.

‘He’s so juicy until that Usagi walks in. Then I can hardly get a drop from him. Can’t you do something about her?’

He shook his head, burying his head in her neck.

She froze again, startled. ‘But I thought…’

“I did too!” he said out loud in frustration. “But it’s like she just flipped a switch. She’s totally in love with someone. Him! It looks like! I can’t reach her at all anymore!”

“That’s not good. These two are too rich to let slip our fingers. We will just have to keep them apart.”

“And in the meantime…” he trailed off as he finally plunged into her “we’ll have to stay glued together.”

En was unable to respond, moaning as lances of pleasure shot up and down her body, echoing throughout his own, with each thrust. His tentacles leched into her even as she leched onto him creating a feedback cycle of endless nirvana.

…
Minako tore the heavy blankets off her body in frustration and leapt to her feet. She obviously wasn’t going to sleep and she was just thinking herself into circles so she might as well get up and do something productive.

She slid into the well-worn mahogany wooden chair at her desk, which doubled as a vanity with a mirror leaning against the wall. She began puzzling through the haiku that she had given up on the night before. She was supposed to have the verses memorized for the school festival next week.

*Warm sun on the ground
A flower growing stronger
Life under the Sun.*

Minako twirled a strand of hair around her pencil as she read the verse to herself over and over. The poem was called Seasons and the first verse obviously referred to Summer. But it was the following verses that nagged at the corners of her mind and half remembered dreams.

*Darkening Shadows
Flower drifts to gentle sleep
The world is resting.*

*Blankets of cold white
Flower hidden from the cold
Life waiting for Spring.*

That described exactly how she felt – like a flower buried in the snow, unable to perceive the world around her – just waiting *desperately* to wake up once again. She didn’t know how to make herself do that though! Her hands tapped agitatedly across the desk as she read the last verse.

*Life awakening
Flower opens in the Sun
A world is reborn.*

The words almost seemed to lock into her head, she didn’t have to contemplate their meaning or repeat the stanza again as she suddenly confronted the reality of her reflection, which had taken on a surreal quality. The girl within the polished silver mirror wore an orange and white fuku, sitting with such a confident demeanor that demanded respect and attention.

“Who are you?” she asked the image.

*Her twin smiled knowingly, her blue eyes sparkling. “You know who I am,” the voice whispered.*

Minako shook her head in denial.

“You just have to remember,” the other girl insisted.

“Minako!” her mother called as she pushed open the door. “I didn’t realize you were awake. Who are you talking to?”

Minako pasted a practiced smile onto her face. “Oh, I was only talking to myself.”

And then she frowned feeling the truth of that statement, turning back to the mirror, which now reflected frizzied blond hair, not unfamiliar to her in early mornings and orange flannel pajamas. She *had* been talking to herself. A part of herself she had forgotten. A part that she needed to remember.
“Well, get yourself moving! Since you’re awake, you might as well help me with breakfast this morning.”

“Of course mama! I will be down in fifteen minutes.”

…

Makoto sat under the tree that she thought had become Usagi and Naru’s regular lunch spot. But the girls were nowhere in sight.

For the fifth day in a row.

The tall brunette tried not to take the sudden abandonment personally. There were so many rational reasons why the other two girls might not be making it to lunch. A teacher held them back, they were getting tutoring, or had been volunteering in the library. But she couldn’t make herself believe it. If any of those things were happening wouldn’t they have told her? Maybe even asked her to participate?

She supposed that she shouldn’t be too shocked. She had been here for almost a year now and had failed to make any lasting friends. She was too stand-offish, too masculine, too intimidating. No one stayed around her for very long. Why had she ever let herself believe that Usagi was any different?

She suppressed the sudden tears that threatened to fall by distracting herself with the exquisitely made bento box that she held in her hand. She chewed on the end of an edamame shell, even though she had long ago swallowed the accompanying soybeans.

She had been rejected and abandoned by so many that she had long ago developed a hard exterior shell. She thought she was beyond feeling the sting of such rejection and its resulting isolation.

But with Usagi, it had been different. She felt such a strong connection to the other girl. Felt like she already knew her quirks and eccentricities. And in the blonde’s presence she had felt at peace like she had found some missing part of herself.

She continued to eat through the compartments of her bento box mindlessly, not tasting any of it. She wrapped it up and put it back in her bag with only the sweet dumplings untouched. She had been saving those for Usagi.

She leaned against the tree, closing her eyes just waiting for the lunch period to be over so she could distract herself with math equations or historical documents. Something, anything, that would take some concentration.

“Makoto-chan!” a bright voice called. The brunette jumped, completely startled as she took in the girl with straight short cropped red hair that framed her cheeks.

“Naru-chan!” Makoto greeted enthusiastically, truly relieved and delighted to see the other girl.

“It’s good to see you!”

She carefully avoided bringing up Usagi’s name, though she was dying to know where the other girl was.

“I’m sorry we’ve seemed to abandon you Makoto-chan!” Naru insisted sincerely. “Usagi is going through some stuff and she just hasn’t felt very social.”

“Is… she okay? What happened?” Makoto asked, all of her hurt vanished to be replaced with a
slight sense of anxiety and concern.

Her new companion bit her lower lip and shrugged. “I don’t really know. I spent most of lunch the other day trying to get her to tell me what was wrong and most of the days since trying to get her to talk at all.”

“You weren’t successful?”

The girl reluctantly shook her head.

“Then why did you leave her alone?” Makoto demanded, her voice growing cold and muscles growing tense.

“I just knew you were out here!” Naru shot back defensively, pointing to the overhead classroom window three stories above. “And I didn’t want you to think that our continued absence had anything to do with you. You looked so sad by yourself,” Naru finished in a whisper.

Makoto felt her body loosen in relief. “Well, thank you Naru-chan! Now together we’ll have to come up with a way to cheer up Usagi-chan! I don’t suppose you know what her favorite type of cake is?”

Naru’s green eyes sparkled delightedly.

…

Mamoru sat pretending to read over the paper. The article in question documented the latest three victims, but lately the victims had not been found dead, but rather in a coma. The vigilante Sailor Moon had been witnessed running from the scene by at least four separate witnesses, and rumors abounded about whether she was rescuing these people or was she a heroine turned villain? He had become even more obsessed with the case to the point where even Motoki had stopped chiding him and just tossed him the latest bits of news whenever it arrived to silence his constant questions.

Today, however, he could not pull his attention away from his swirling thoughts that all centered around a certain blonde teenager. He came in everyday, arriving at three thirty and staying until five – always hoping that the girl would appear.

The girl had known him. She had known his name – had been shocked when he hadn’t known hers.

Could she have been part of his past? Something before the accident that he couldn’t remember?

He felt like he was missing something. He wished he knew anything about her at all so that maybe he could find her – ask her these questions.

He only knew one thing for certain. He could not stand to see her cry.

“Mamoru-kun! How could you just stand me up like that?” a familiar velvet smooth voice demanded.

He turned toward the redhead with a slight frown.

“Hello Natsumi-chan,” he greeted politely, smoothing his face into a more neutral expression.

She stood before him in heels and a short school-girl plaid skirt. A white blouse haphazardly half tucked in and half loose lay open hinting at the mounds of flesh that lay just barely hidden from
She grinned knowingly, striding forward and pushing him backward forcefully. He stumbled as the back of his legs struck the edge of a hard bench forcing him to sit. She lunged forward tearing clothes off of his form. Once he was bare, she straddled him, her warm inner core pulsing heat right against his solid engorged member.

She slid against him, teasing him with her wet warmth, tearing an involuntary moan of pleasure from his throat.

He moved his hands around her and pulled her forward to finally put an end to her teasing.

And the vision dissolved, his thoughts prior to the girl’s arrival forgotten. His carefully controlled neutral face transformed into a sheepish grin, realizing that he had completely forgotten about his date the previous night.

“I’m sorry Natsumi-chan! I’ve just had too much on my mind. But I will make it up to you. How about tomorrow?”

She pouted. “What about tonight?” she suggested coyly, drawing small circles on his chest with a long red fingernail.

She slid against him, teasing him with her wet warmth…

“Tonight?” he echoed distractedly, not able to form a coherent thought – the only thought he had was of pulling her into the alleyway and letting her have her way with him then and there.

“Yes tonight,” she purred, leaning toward his ear, her soft whisper sending shocks and shivers down his spine. “We could skip the main course,” she said, looking up at him under the veil of her long dark eyelashes. “Go straight for dessert.”

He pulled her against him, allowing her to feel his rapidly swelling groin. Her smile widened. “Dessert sounds per…”

His phone interrupted with a distracting vibration. He whipped out the device irritably and glanced down at the glowing screen that revealed Motoki’s wide guileless smile. He cursed. Another commitment he had forgotten. How had he become so disorganized?

“I can’t tonight!” he said, true regret lacing every word. “I promised Motoki-kun that I would take him to the airport tonight to pick up his fiancé. He doesn’t have a car you see,” he rambled.

“You care about Motoki-san a lot?” she asked, her frown once again marring her perfectly smooth face.

“He’s my very best friend,” Mamoru admitted reluctantly. “I can’t let him down. So tomorrow?” he begged with his hands pushed together in mock prayer.

Her scowling eyes slowly softened. “Sounds like a plan,” she agreed brightly. “I will see you tomorrow.”

He started when she leaned forward and kissed him. The impossible pleasure quickly erased his initial shock as he responded without thinking. He pulled her roughly against him once again and deepened the contact – their tongues smashing against one another in a war for dominance. Each blow sent molten fire leaping through his veins, every nerve screamed in absolute ecstasy. Kami-sama, he had never felt anything like this!
She pulled away too quickly and he found himself chasing after her retreating form.

“Ah-ah-ah,” she admonished playfully with a waggling finger. “That was just a taste – so you don’t forget about tomorrow.”

He watched her leave, the fantasies still plaguing his conscious mind, trying to remember why he couldn’t go out with her right then.

“Nat-” he began, but his ringing phone once again interrupted him. Right! Best friend… airport… Very important, he tried to remind himself.

He quickly accepted the call. “Hey,” he greeted as he watched the girl sway her hips as she faded from his view.

“Yeah, of course I remembered. See you in a bit,” he replied to the small voice before sliding the phone closed. He glanced at the clock wondering if he had time to run home and take a cold shower. Maybe… if he left now.

He sluggishly pulled himself up from his usual stool, his muscles unexpectedly stiff and strained. His head swam slightly as the world spun around him. He grasped at the counter to reorient and balance himself.

Kami-sama, why was he so tired?

…

Ami chewed on the end of a pencil, glaring in frustration at the civic prompt before her, completely unaware of the quiet murmur of students at a nearby table and the constant slow movement of a few others perusing or searching the endless catalogued shelves of books.

“I think that there are certain crimes which the law cannot touch, and which therefore, to some extent, justify private revenge.”

*Using the quote above and appropriate outside evidence, discuss what role, and to what extent, if any, does vigilantism play in maintaining a free and just society?*

Ami had written her thesis easily. Of course vigilantism should not be tolerated at any level. Even if one or two genuine heroes did some good, accepting their actions and presence set a dangerous precedent where it became perfectly okay for private citizens to take the law into their own hands.

She had spent hours documenting the appropriate statistics and evidence to support her claim, but she struggled to place any words on paper. The argument, though logically sound, didn’t resonate with her. And if it wasn’t convincing to her, how could she hope it would convincing to anyone else?

But she couldn’t for the life of her, figure out why she wasn’t convinced.

There was just… something about the idea of a vigilante that just got her blood flowing with excitement. And somehow she knew there were dangers that the official world just wasn’t equipped to deal with.

In frustration, she crumpled up the paper and tossed it aside before she began writing a new thesis on the next blank page of her notebook – one that said not only should vigilantes be allowed, but that they were vital to a functioning and safe Japan.
She tore through the required three body paragraphs before she realized she would need at least two more to finish the argument she wanted to make. Amazingly, she barely had to glance at her research – she knew the history and the evidence of the monsters that seemed to plague Tokyo and the barely credible accounts of the bishoujo senshi that conquered them, intimately well, almost as if she had been there.

She laughed out loud at the thought. She could picture it now. Mizuno Ami – quiet and unassuming genius student by day, and ice warrior princess by night. She shook her head in amused dismissal. There was simply no way.

“What’re you working on Mizuno-san?” a male voice interrupted her musings.

She glanced up into the grey eyes of the newest transfer student.

“Hi Ginga-san,” she greeted. “Just our civics essay. Can I help you with something?” she asked as she set the writing aside giving him her full attention. It was almost finished anyway. She still felt she might have to write a second version with her original thesis anyway, certain neither her mother nor instructor would approve of the deviant argument. She just hoped that getting it all out on paper would work it out of her system so she could argue the other side.

“Actually… yes, I think you can,” he said with flashing eyes.

Ami sighed – it never took long for the new students to seek her out in order to get her aid in completing their own work.

“I was just so impressed by your insight in Japanese literature today with regards to Lady Murasaki’s *Tale of Genji*. I thought I might convince you to take a break and join me for some tea and we could discuss your interpretation of the theme further?”

Startled eyes leapt to his own. “Are you asking me out?” she whispered in disbelief.

“Umm… yes?” he admitted, tracing patterns with his index finger on the back of her hand. “It’s just not often, that you meet someone who is so… thought-provoking.”

She felt her heart melting in spite of the emotional walls she had built around herself throughout the years.

She stood in a room surround by flickering candlelight in an almost sheer pale blue gown that fluttered in the breeze created by an open sliding glass door. Before she could move a warm voice froze her in her tracks.

“I’m so glad you made it Ami-chan,” he whispered in her ear from behind, his hot breadth sending shivers pulsing through her form. “What do you want me to do?”

“Kiss me,” she responded without considering the question.

“Where?” he whispered again.

The unexpected question flooded her with a sense of nervous excitement.

“Here,” she said laying a delicate finger on the curve of her neck. His lips were only a second behind, nipping at the bared skin sensually. She leaned into the rippling sensation, whimpering when he pulled away.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked again.
“Kiss me again here,” she ordered, indicating one of her breasts.

Warm soothing hands gently slid her gown aside over her shoulder, before he began giving the luscious mounds the desired attention, his lips and tongue attacking one side as his right hand massaged the other. Her flesh melted in a delightfully swimming sensation as he switched back and forth. Then he pulled away again, gently replacing her gown to cover her respectfully.

“And what do you desire now Ami-chan?”

The game continued. She ordered him to use his magic on various parts of her body, from her toes to the inner curve of the side of her waist to her inner thighs, and finally to her pulsing core that was now screaming for attention.

He kneeled before her, his hot tongue darted out making contact with the sensitive nerve bundle and she screamed in delight.

“Please don’t ever stop,” she begged. He chuckled, the vibrations only intensifying the pulsing waves of barely tolerable ecstasy.

“Ami-chan?” he called, waving a hand in front of her face.

She turned to his grey eyes startled from her fantasy that felt entirely too real and he laughed.

“You disappeared. Where’d you go?” he asked.

She felt the heat rise to her cheeks. She certainly couldn’t answer that question, but her mind and tongue failed to come up with anything else to say either, lost as she was in his earnest smile.

“So…” he filled in the sudden awkward silence, “What do you want me to do?”

Her blush deepened, flustered at his choice of words.

“What?” she whispered in shock.

“Well, we’ve established that I asked you out. But you haven’t said anything. So… should I wait here for your answer, or leave you to your mental meanderings?” he asked, his voice amused.

She considered the question. She was sorely tempted, but she knew she should stay and finish her essay. On the other hand, she was suddenly feeling alive and maybe a little reckless.

“Tea sounds lovely. Where did you have in mind?” she asked softly, the heat never leaving her cheeks.

…

The miko sat stiff on her heels, kneeling in front of the dancing sacred flame. The fire summoned beads of sweat from her forehead. She ignored the discomfort, instead extending her senses towards the natural pulse of the flame before her – urging her own heartbeat to match the pulsing rhythm through controlled breathing. She waited patiently for the flickering red shadows on her eyelid to coalesce into a coherent image.

The fire flared unexpectedly, and Rei reflexively put her hands up in defense, her eyes snapping open with a startled gasp.

The dancing flames showed her a young woman – dressed in a flowing pristine white gown that seemed to be made of mist and moonlight. Her golden tresses were tied up in intricate patterns on
either side of the woman’s head before cascading over her shoulders and fading into the fire like wisps of smoke.

Rei recognized the unique style – it was reminiscent of her strange visitor from the week prior who had inquired after her happiness. In fact, the whole visage bore an uncanny resemblance to the girl.

“Who is she?” the miko whispered.

The image faded immediately.

Rei remained frozen in place. What did the vision mean? Did this girl play some importance in the future? Or in her personal destiny? Or had the puzzling encounter with the girl in the garden just lead her mind to associate that particular face with her own happiness or lack thereof?

It was impossible to know. She’d have to find this girl again.

*If she was even real.*

The priestess dismissed the skeptical thought. That image called to her – of course the girl was real. And she knew, without knowing how, that the blond stranger needed her. And she needed the girl. She had felt empty since the girl’s sudden disappearance.

So there was only one thing to do.

Find her.

…

Chapter End Notes

Mina’s haiku found on a google search for “haiku seasons rebirth”. It was the first one I found, and I read a lot of them, but this one was the one closest to the idea I was looking for. It was found on poemhunter dot com written by Jim Milks.

The quote in Ami’s Civics prompt comes from Sherlock Holmes in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton”, of all places. I think ideally I would have preferred to get something a little more… well, Japanese, but seeing as I can’t read the language searches were rather limited. This quote captured the idea I was looking for really well in any case.

I realize this is the second time I’ve used the topic of vigilantes for my characters to debate and I was reluctant use the same material again, and yet, it was such a good topic for our little academic here – something that might trigger subconscious thoughts in a way that is distinctly mental for our softspoken genius.

And last, Murasaki Shikibu was one of the first Japanese novelists. She lived in the late 900s and she is known for going against tradition by sitting on her brother’s lessons on classical Chinese literature. She was the author of Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari), a diary referred to as Murasaki Shikibu nikki, and a collection of tanka poems. Yay for stubborn women throughout history!

All critiques, comments, feedback, and flames are always welcome!
Chapter Notes

And once again, no proofreading. So forgive typos and silly grammar mistakes.

Enjoy!

Luna launched herself from the familiar tree branch through the open window with practiced ease, relieved to finally be home. The afternoon had been filled with a long fruitless session of pouring over endless data on their new enemy with Artemis, only to end right where they had started. The company had been the only redeeming factor.

She landed on the windowsill easily, but then froze in surprise at the sight before her. The bed, usually a pile of crumpled pink blankets, was neatly made, haphazard stacks of manga had found homes once again on various shelves throughout the room, and scattered clothes had vanished from their random regular locations in random corners of the room. And then there was Usagi. Her blonde charge sat hunched over at her desk, her pencil scribbling across a page rapidly.

Luna jumped up to the desk needing to confirm that Usagi was actually working – and not just doodling or something. But even when her eyes swept across the rapidly appearing hiragana symbols the feline could not wrap her mind around it.

Her head swiveled back and forth around the girl as she took in the open notebooks and textbooks that surrounded her princess. A completed math problem set lie on one side, while “A Concise History of Japan” lay open on the other for the girl’s easy access. And maps of Tokyo were strewn across the upper corner near a neat rectangular table on a plain white sheet of paper that looked suspiciously like a patrol schedule.

If she had a thumb, the feline would have pinched herself.

“No need to look so worried Luna,” the blond told her absently. “It’s in code. I wouldn’t leave senshi business just lying around for anyone to pick up.”

The words only pushed the cat deeper into her wordless state of shock. She stared at the young heroine in complete disbelief. The girl didn’t even stop her furious writing.

“Are you okay Luna?” Usagi finally asked as she finally placed the pencil to the desk. “Do you have any new intelligence on these new enemies?”

“I’m fine Usagi-chan,” Luna managed. “And sadly, no, I don’t have any new intelligence. Artemis and I can detect an ongoing attack, but that’s about it. We don’t have any records of creatures with these abilities or that match the descriptions you gave me.”

The blonde nodded her head before turning to the briefcase at her feet and pulling out another textbook – this one on Intermediate English.

“What are you doing Usagi-chan?” Luna asked.
“Homework,” the girl replied with amused eyes. “I thought that would’ve been obvious.”

“Well… yes!” the feline spluttered. “But you never do homework!”

The sixteen year heroine gave her a flat stare.

“Well, not without constant nagging,” Luna hastily corrected.

Usagi sighed. “Yeah well… had to grow up sometime,” the girl mumbled sadly.

“What do you mean?” Luna asked, the words breaking her heart. How many times had she prayed that Usagi would become more attentive to her duties, more responsible about school?

“If I want them to be able to live their lives I have to learn to fill in the gaps,” Usagi explained tonelessly. “I don’t have access to Mercury’s brain or Mar’s precision and intuition, Jupiter’s strength, or Venus’ natural grasp of tactics. That means lots of study – lots of planning. I have to be prepared to face anything, on my own.

Watching this new calm and serious Usagi sent chills straight down to the tip of her Mauan tail. And Luna found herself internally mourning the loss of the happy and carefree girl she used to wake up every morning just to get her out the door.

“You can’t take the place of five people all by yourself Usagi-chan. The strength of the Sailor Senshi was teamwork.”

“I can do this Luna – no one has died since I’ve been awakened.”

“But we’re not any closer to figuring out anything about this enemy! Nor do we have any viable strategies for eliminating the danger!”

“I actually had some thoughts on how to work around that,” Usagi said calmly, turning to a different notebook.

Luna stared at her in disbelief. What had happened to the Usagi she knew? She didn’t recognize her charge. It was like the girl had been replaced with a doppelganger from another planet.

“Most of the attacks seem to happen in the afternoon and early evening, which is strangely convenient – means I can patrol after school and still have time later in the evening to get my homework done,” she explained rapidly as she glanced through her notes. “I really want to learn how the computer we have at headquarters works. And maybe Ami’s little computer too if it’s possible for me to get a hold of it. I think if I could do that, I could try to get a scan done during a battle. Do you think Artemis could teach me?” she looked up at that moment and caught her guardian’s expression.

“Don’t worry Luna. I’ve got it figured out,” she said showing the carefully organized columns to her guardian and mentor.

Luna blinked stupidly. Definitely an entirely different planet.

“What is it Luna?” the girl finally snapped. “Do you expect me to just sit around and mope? I have to do everything I can to protect this city… and to protect my friends,” she added softly.

“I… I just don’t want you to lose yourself in all of this either Usagi-chan!”

The blond gave the feline a small sad smile.
“Maybe I’m just realizing who I have been all along,” Usagi whispered in response.

Luna didn’t like it. Because if there was one thing Usagi was in her core – it was light-hearted and cheerful. This new, dignified girl before her was organized and thoughtful, which Luna certainly could not complain about. She seemed to have an answer for everything! But she was also distant and resigned. This transformation seemed to be at the cost of her happiness. The once ever-present zeal for just living life seemed absent.

Luna shook her head. You truly had to be careful what you wished for.

“I’m proud of all that you have done here Usagi-chan.” Luna said, her voice filled with barely suppressed emotion. “Really I am! I’ve always known that you were capable. I just…”

Luna didn’t get to finish as she was scooped up into a breath-ending hug.

“I love you too Luna,” the girl whispered through her tears. “I’m okay! I promise! And I’m still me…”

“Can you do me just one favor Usagi-chan?” Luna asked as the girl set her down, though she continued to stroke the feline like she was a regular housecat.

“What do you need?” the girl replied, her voice smooth and once again clear.

“It would put my mind at ease if tomorrow after school, you would stop by the arcade and enjoy a milkshake,” the cat said seriously. “Before you went on patrol?”

Usagi threw her a startled glance, probably shocked that the Lunarian advisor would ever suggest she put pleasure before her senshi duties. “Sure!” she readily agreed with a smile that almost resembled the Usagi that Luna recognized. “I can do that!”

Luna purred in pleasure at both the promise, and Usagi’s continued gentle strokes behind her ear and along her silky back.

“Could you tell Artemis to meet me there?” she asked, breaking the sudden shared silence. “Perhaps he can give me my first lesson at the console.”

Luna couldn’t help but hang her head at the suggestion, which, while sound, completely defeated the purpose of the task.

“Yes, Usagi-chan, I’ll tell him,” Luna agreed, unable to come up with any reasonable objection.

“It’ll be good to see him again. It’s been awhile,” Usagi whispered.

…

Ami arrived to class at her usual time and took her usual seat next to her partner, who had become a model student in the last few weeks, always arriving early – often before Ami herself. She sat in rapt attention during lessons from even the most boring of instructors and never took a break from taking the most diligent, if not as detailed as Ami’s, of notes.

For some reason, though she approved of this change, the blunette found that it also depressed her. Usagi didn’t know this, but Ami had kept the pink note the blonde had passed to her on their first day sitting next to one another. She cherished it as evidence that someone did see her – someone had treated her like a regular girl for just that one moment with whispered conversation during class. But now, the chances of her classmate engaging her in delinquent off-topic chit-chat seemed
to be near zero.

At least Seijuro saw her even if no one else did. At least she had their date that evening to look forward to. She actually smiled in anticipation, eager to meet up with the older boy after school.

“Here you are, Mizuno-san,” Haruna-sensei said, handing Ami a stapled packet. Ami shook herself from her thoughts and accepted the returned test with a polite smile, barely noting the green one hundred written across the top.

“And Tsukino-san,” the teacher continued down the row, handing the graded tests back.

Ami occupied herself by scribbling a GS plus MA on the corner of her notebook, framing the initials with a heart.

“Ami-chan!” the girl next to her squealed. “Look! I got an eighty-three!”

Ami looked at her in surprise. “Good job Tsukino-san. You must have studied really hard,” the genius said distantly.

Ami watched as Usagi’s delighted smile fell into a slight frown.

Ami cringed – thinking that she once again had messed up the social interaction. She should have expressed more excitement and congratulations. Something to show more pride or encouragement. But instead, she had projected only her cool and distant self.

She fidgeted with her hands wishing that Usagi would stop staring at her so sadly, as if she was broken.

“Say Mizuno-san,” the blonde began. Ami winced at the formal address. What had happened to Ami-chan? “Do you want to come with me and my friends to the arcade after school tomorrow?”

“My friends and I,” the blue haired girl interjected automatically before the question had truly registered.

“What?” both girls said at the same time in response to each other’s previous statements.

And then Usagi giggled and Ami couldn’t help but smile back.

“What did you say?” Usagi asked again.

“You should say ‘my friends and I’ rather than ‘me and my friends’,” Ami explained softly, a blush rising to her cheeks.

Usagi ignored the correction and snatched the book they were supposed to be reading away from her.

“Ami-chan! You study far too much!! You are so smart. As my mentor was telling me just yesterday, we both definitely have time to take a break to have some fun every once in awhile.”

“Intelligence is not so important Tsukino-san as effort,” the star student argued, but without feeling.

“That’s what I’m saying Ami-chan! You put in enough effort for ten students! You need a break! Don’t you ever get tired? Or… lonely?”

Ami felt her eyes flood instantly at the painful observation. Usagi only knew the half of it. Ami
struggled to hold the potential torrent at bay – she would not break down in class.

“I’m sorry Ami-chan! I didn’t mean to make you cry! I’m not trying to twist your arm. I promise I won’t ask again. But know that you’re always welcome to join us. And in the meantime, please call me Usagi.”

The blue haired girl wiped her eyes and turned to the girl with a genuine smile, “Thank you Usagi-san. I might do that.”

“I hope that you do!”

Rei skipped up the steps with her student briefcase pressed protectively against her chest to the temple three at a time, abandoning her miko’s training of grace and dignity.

To her luck, Yuichiro was right at the top of the stairs – sweeping fallen red leaves from the path. She darted to his side as she tore open her briefcase, pulling out one of several fliers she just had made.

She shoved the colorful flier into his hand forcing him to switch the broom to his other. “I need you to let me know if you see this girl,” she began urgently without preamble.

He stared at her and then the drawn portrait blinking in confusion. Rei had commissioned the drawing herself – describing the mystery girl’s features, from bright blue eyes and heart shaped face to cascading blond hair tied up in buns.

“Just if you see her,” Rei clarified impatiently. “Don’t let her leave. Bring her to me immediately! Got that?”

“Of… of course R-Rei-san!” he stammered.

“Thank you!” she snapped, the impatience clear in her tone as she quickly stomped away. She didn’t know what it was about that boy – he had a talent for driving away any small amount of patience she possessed.

She entered the temple in search of the temple’s keeper and priest, also known as her grandfather.

“there you are!” she greeted him warmly when she found him kneeling at the table a steaming cup of tea folded carefully into his hands, his eyes closed and his lips curled slightly up in satisfaction.

She slid another flier across the table toward him and launched into her request.

The short old man’s eyes remained closed in the middle of his bald head and she suspected his senses remained focused only on the tea. She sighed and waited for his attention, her fingers tapping on the table, the only sign of her impatience.

“Good afternoon, Rei-chan!” he finally greeted warmly with his eyes blinking open as if he had just noticed her presence. He gestured for her to join him as he poured a second cup of tea for her. “How are you?”

“I’m fine grandpa,” she said with forced patience as she accepted the tea. She knew he wouldn’t entertain any requests or favors until they had gone through the pleasantries. “And how are you?”

“It’s another day in paradise!” he said before gleefully biting into a daifuku. Leave it to him to get
started on the sweets an hour before dinner.

“I’m delighted to hear that,” she said, taking a sip of her own tea.

“Was there something you needed my help with Rei-chan?” he asked, his eyes dancing in amusement as he picked up the flier.

“Yes grandpa, I was hoping you would just keep your eyes open for this girl. If you happen to see her, don’t let her leave until I’ve spoken with her,” she explained.

“What is this for?” he asked as he studied the poster carefully. “Does it have anything to do with your recent disappearing acts?”

“Please grandpa,” she entreated, ignoring his questions. She did not want to tell him of the hours she had spent in the last week walking through shopping and business districts or outside school gates, looking for a high school uniform that matched the one the girl had worn. “Can you just do this for me?”

He shook his head and handed the flier back to her.

“Grandpa!” she objected.

“Tell me what this is about,” he ordered.

She sighed. He was so stubborn.

And so she told him of her strange encounter with the girl and then the vision in the fire.

“The vision was unlike any other. It wasn’t projected onto my inner vision or screen. It was in the flame itself! You’ve always taught me to never ignore the sacred flame’s guidance.”

“You saw the vision in the flame?” he repeated.

She nodded confirmation.

“Very well,” he finally agreed. “I will help you. But I’m worried Rei-chan. When the fire speaks to us so directly, the news is usually not good.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, concerned at his sudden dark tone.

“I’ve been gifted with a vision in within the flame itself only twice in my life. Both instances warned of cataclysmic change within my own world. The last time was when your mother died.”

“Oh…” she whispered, wondering what the first instance had been, though she knew better than to ask. If he had been willing to share he would have.

He studied her carefully, having forgotten both tea and pastry. But he said nothing more.

“I can’t ignore it grandpa,” she finally spoke into the silence.

“Of course not Rei-chan,” he soothed gently. “Doesn’t stop a grandfather from worrying.”

“But you will help me?”

“When have I not helped you?” he shot back with an arched eyebrow expressing his slight indignation.
She laughed, seizing the old man in a hug. “Thank you grandpa! It means a lot!”

…

Mamoru glanced at the door as the chime went off more out of habit, than because he expected to see his elusive quarry. He had long given up on her appearance after the first two weeks of her absence. He now came to arcade every afternoon because it had become part of his never changing routine.

And so he nearly jumped out of his skin when the blond odango-headed girl marched cheerfully into the arcade and moved purposely to the ordering counter.

“Odango Atama!” he greeted, an unrestrained smile spreading across his face.

Her eyes jumped to his, startled. He watched as she turned away and fidgeted with her hands at her waist. His smile faded at her obvious signs of discomfort.

“Mamoru-san, how are you?” she asked, her eyes refusing to meet his own.

“Odango, how do you know me?” he asked immediately without preamble, unable to contain the question that his mind had obsessed over. Especially when she looked ready to bolt.

Her eyes still remained turned away and she bit her lip nervously.

“Don’t you remember?” she asked casually, her eyes finally giving him their attention. Too casually. “I crashed into you. Knocked the wind out of both of us.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “You know my name. How?”

“Oh! That!” she said waving away the question. “Motoki-oniisan talks about you all the time! I just put two and two together.”

The easy explanation, completely unexpected, took him by surprise. Motoki talked about him?

“You know Motoki-kun that well?” he asked.

“He’s been like a big brother since I was ten years old. He’s like a fixture in this place,” she rambled rapidly, swirling her hands around dramatically, “and I’ve always considered the Crown to be a sort of second home. And apparently, you’re like his best friend. You’re bound to come up once in a while.”

“Oh… but then… why were you so upset that I didn’t know your name?”

“Umm…” her sapphire blue eyes darted away from his again and her cheeks flushed with color. “I’m sorry about that. I just was thinking you were someone else. I was… uh… sleep deprived and my mind just wasn’t working.”

He nodded automatically, but he didn’t buy it. It didn’t quite add up and she seemed nervous. Though he could not come up with any single reason she would have felt it necessary to lie. Maybe she was telling the truth. Then why did he feel so disappointed by it?

If he was honest with himself, he had hoped that he might have finally stumbled upon some answers and a connection with the childhood he could not remember.

He sighed.
“What is it?” she asked in concern.

He looked up, surprised that she noticed his sudden melancholy. Motoki was the only person in his life that had ever been able to read him so well.

“I just… I just thought that you might…” he felt lost in her bright eyes. He shook his head to clear it. “Oh, nevermind.”

She looked at him, her eyes glassy with what he suspected with suppressed tears. Why would she cry for him?

“You can trust me Mamoru-san,” she whispered.

The truth and sincerity of her words struck him to the core, sending shivers down his spine.

“I…” he began, but then hesitated immediately. Was he really about to tell her this?

A glass fell to the floor.

The moment shattered with it.

Mamoru looked away. “Does that mean you’re going to tell me your name?” he asked instead, with a grin.


“Usagi,” he repeated eyeing the pigtails on either side of her head. A little rabbit indeed! “It’s perfect,” he whispered.

Her blush deepened. “Glad you approve. Now, I don’t suppose you’d be willing to help me with this math homework?” she asked as she tossed a heavy textbook onto the table.

He blinked in surprise at the request. “What makes you think I can help you with math?”

She laughed. “You seem like a pretty smart guy. I bet you ace everything without trying.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s without trying,” he countered with a slight frown, once again feeling like she knew more than she was telling.

“So you do ace everything then!” she cooed victoriously. “So you can help me!”

“I suppose,” he acknowledged. “What’re you working on?”

“Logarithmic identities.”

“Those are simple enough.”

She scowled at him.

He laughed. “Or maybe they’re really hard,” he corrected immediately. “We’ll have to go through it slowly from the very beginning.”

She nodded happily, her lips falling into an easy smile. Her face contained so many expressions in so short a time. He felt like he’d never tire from just watching it transform from one second to the next.
“That sounds like a much better plan. Start from the beginning!” she exclaimed, opening the book to the appropriate chapter.

He glanced through it to see where it was going and how in depth it would eventually get.

“Well, first you need to understand what a logarithm is. Once you understand that, you’d be surprised by how much you already know about logarithms.”

“So what is it then?”

“It’s essentially an exponent.”

“No, it isn’t!” she argued surly. He grinned again as the smile was replaced with agitated eyebrows flaring above a slight frown as she corrected him. “Exponents are little numbers that go up here after the number,” she insisted pointing to the page. He didn’t look at the page, totally captivated by her ever-changing expressions.

“Mamoru-san,” she whined when he didn’t respond. “Are you even listening?” She glanced up and he was delighted when her cheeks turned red and she immediately turned her eyes down to stare at her hands.

“What are you staring at?” she asked.

“You,” he said cheekily. Her blush deepened. “And of course I was listening.”

He launched into an explanation about notation and exponents and how that related to exponents scribbling down examples on her notebook as he went through it. He showed her how all the logarithmic identities were just versions of the exponent rules she already knew.

He found her easy to teach, eager to learn as she was. And he loved watching her concentrate. Her eyebrows would scrunch together and her tongue would slip out of the corner of her mouth as she scribbled through the problem set. He now wasn’t needed as she tore her way through the problem set, but he didn’t want to leave.

“Mamoru!” A shrill voice stole his attention. He turned toward the familiar angular face framed by perfect bouncing brown red curls. “Where have you been? Did you forget about our date again?”

“No, I didn’t forget,” he lied, quickly scooping his pencils and calculator into his bag as he came to his feet. “We uh… just…”

“I’m sorry Ginga-san,” Usagi interrupted smoothly. “Mamoru-kun is running a bit late because of me. You see, I only had one problem left so I begged him to stay a few minutes longer to help me. I knew that you were so gracious and understanding that it wouldn’t be a big deal.”

He smiled at her gratefully.

“Well, are you finished now?” Natsumi demanded impatiently.

“Yup! All done!” Usagi said brightly. “Thank you for being so patient! And… enjoy your date!”

Mamoru mouthed a “thank you” to his “math student” as he waved a fairwell. She returned the gesture and their eyes met. His vision spun.

The blonde senshi stood at the water’s edge, her face turned up toward the full moon above her. Her golden hair spun and twisted in the evening breeze.
And even from this distance, he knew that she was crying. His heart urged him to go to her side, to wipe her sorrows away, but something held him back.

Suddenly, he found himself reluctant to leave to leave the blond alone at her booth.

“Mamoru?” Natsumi’s angelic voice cut through his thoughts and he offered the red head a smile before following her out the door, eager to see what she had planned for “dessert”.

…

The white feline watched from a wooden beam in the arcade as the one time hero of Tokyo departed with an adolescent girl on his arm, an idiotic grin plastered on his face. The feline shook his head in disapproval, knowing far too well the thoughts of a nineteen year old male.

His attention turned in concern toward his princess, sitting stoically at the booth watching the two depart. She showed no outer signs of upset, but Artemis didn’t believe her calm countenance for a moment.

He jumped down silently to the back of Usagi’s booth. He nuzzled her hand affectionately.

She gave him a small smile as she returned the comforting gesture, before she began to gather her things.

“Hey you. It’s been a long time,” she said softly. Artemis purred in agreement. They somehow hadn’t seen each other once since she had recovered her memories.

“I’ll meet you in the back,” she whispered. He leapt off cooperatively and darted in between the gaming consoles to the one that would lead him down to their secret headquarters.

He leapt down the crystal stairs to the console interface of the super computer and waited patiently for the lunar princess and guardian to join him, knowing she had to make a show of leaving the arcade and come in through the rear exit.

He glanced through the latest automated reports quickly, noting that there had been no spikes in activity within the last few days. Rather than calming him, the lack of attacks made him nervous - as it most likely meant the new enemy was planning something in response to the sudden resistance that Sailor Moon offered.

He heard the sixteen year old heroine slide in next to him as he continued to scroll through the endless data.

“Are you alright?” he asked, his attention remaining on the console.

“Of course Artemis! Why wouldn’t I be?” Usagi asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

He turned skeptical slitted feline eyes in her direction. “Mamoru-san just left on a date with another woman,” he deadpanned.

Usagi sighed. “I was there,” she said tightly.

“So, are you alright?” he repeated.

She shrugged. He continued to stare at her.

“I’m fine!” she insisted. “Now are you going to teach me how to use this thing or not?”
He sighed, knowing he couldn’t force her to talk. If she wouldn’t confide in Luna, he knew he had little to no chance in making her see reason.

Artemis led her through the process of selecting parameters and conditions first. Once she could do that consistently, he taught her how to use those filters to run scans of the city. He was surprised at how quickly she caught on. In the past, he had never been able to obtain her undivided attention. Luna was right – she was completely earnest in her determination to keep the other senshi out of this.

“And then, the computer will report the results continuously – though there is a bit of delay.”

“How long?”

“About thirty seconds, which as you well know is a really long time if an attack is occurring.”

“What have you and Luna been trying to do these last weeks?” she asked.

“Right now we can detect the attacks, but it would help immensely if we could learn to predict them.”

“How?”

“Well, we have to look at what all the attacks have in common. So we go through the data we have of the attacks and look for patterns and abnormalities in the attacks’ locations, victims, time, and so forth he explained.”

“Would you print the data on the attacks out for me?” she asked distantly.

“Of course. What do you want it for?” he asked as he moved to comply.

“I just thought the two of you could use a fresh pair of eyes.” She took the printout he gave her and soon lost herself in the diagrams and tables.

“Usagi-chan?” he interrupted.

“Yes Artemis?” she said, looking up at him.

“You don’t have to do this all alone,” he entreated.

She smiled sadly, stroking the snow white feline. “Yes, I do,” she disagreed gently, then whipped away and went back up the stairs.

He watched her go mournfully. He didn’t want to break Luna’s promise, but on the other hand he hadn’t promised anything. He was secretly hoping Minako, or maybe Rei, would awaken on their own – they seemed the closest. If either girl awakened naturally Usagi couldn’t be angry or upset at either of her advisors for going against her wishes.

The senshi just needed to do it soon. This new Usagi simply didn’t smile enough and it wasn’t healthy.

Maybe he could help speed things along a bit…

…

Chapter End Notes
I just tried some daifuku (both fruit flavors and just red bean w/ and w/o sesame coating) for the first time ever last week trying to find some mild sweets. Asian desserts are usually mildly sweet. Daifuku is NOT. It is super super sweet – even the non-fruit varieties! Probably why Usagi-chan likes it so much! But despite it’s sweetness, I did like it! It’s like mochi, but with sweet filling instead of ice cream. Only the sweet sticky rice shell is thicker (which is a total win!!)

Also had a soba soup for the first time ever, which I loved! And I figure my next adventure is donburi. Reading fanfiction that mentions these foods is making them sound so good that I want to try them all!! Yay for expanding my food horizons!!

I swear there will be some more action at some point. But I’m enjoying the angst and emotional dynamic of our heroes at the moment!

All critiques, comments, feedback, and flames are always welcome! You have no idea how much your thoughts help me when I get stuck!!
I actually also proofread this one after being mortified and embarrassed at some of my mistakes in the last chapter (that I still have not bothered to fix. Sorry!), so bring on the grammar corrections!! And thank you to those of you that corrected Ami’s correction!! I apparently haven’t internalized all the rules of English as well as I thought I had.

Special shout outs to slightlyxjaded, yukikiralacus, GraphicsChyk, MissJay, witchhazelmoon, Anonymous Fan, LoveInTheBattlefield, Syulai, Tabbykatroeses, asdfghjklalala, dragonball256, AimlesslyGera, and Mako-clb over at fanfiction dot net for taking the time to review!! I’ve never had so many reviews in so short a time for one chapter!! It has been so exciting! You truly make me think about the story in a different light, which helps the story-arcs come together in such unexpected ways!! You are all muses!!

Minako stumbled into the stream of running water still half asleep. She let the rhythmic heat envelop her, pulling her from the last remnants of mental fog that had ensnared her mind.

She tried to recall her dream. She had been anxious – there were others and it had been so cold. They had been fighting in the ice and snow? She wasn’t sure, but the more she grasped for the dream landscape, the more it seemed to retreat into the deep recesses of her mind.

With a sigh she turned her attention back to the heated water flowing across her pale skin and through her hair, lingering in the luxury as steaming mists built up around her in the small bathroom.

She grabbed the shampoo and lathered it quickly into her golden hair, knowing she needed to get moving. She couldn’t stay in the shower all morning.

Once she completed the mindless routine, she turned off the water and captured her hair, heavy with water, in a soft fluffy towel as she stepped out of the shower.

She absently reached for the clothes she had laid out previously, barely noting the fogged up mirror before her until her eyes slid across something that simply did not make sense. The words ‘She’s real’ had been scrawled across the reflective surface, breaking up the steam induced fog dusting the rest of the mirror.

Her fingers traced the symbols unsure if they were really there, or if she was again hallucinating.

She knew without doubt that the words referred to the girl in her visions that she had been talking to in the mirror. But who could know about the hallucinations? She hadn’t told a soul!

Her eyes fell onto the pure white cat sitting on the counter licking his paws daintily.

‘Could he have…?’ She dismissed the thought before she completed it. Was she so far gone that she had lost all grip on reality, that she now suspected her pet capable of linguistic
But where could it have come from? She was alone! She clutched her towel around herself suddenly paranoid that someone had broken into her room. Her eyes darted everywhere. The cat nudged her hand and she began absently stroking him even as her eyes darted to every corner of the adjacent room.

Spooked, she dressed quickly before tossing the necessary school supplies into her bag – determined to get out of the room as quickly as possible.

She froze at the site of her open notebook on her desk. The page was blank except for a single line:

**Who am I?**

The message was followed by a symbol. A circle sat anchored on top of a symmetrical cross. She recognized the symbol as the symbol for a female. She traced the simple geometric pattern as she had the words on the mirror. This symbol felt so familiar to her – as if it was a fundamental part of herself.

“Minako! You’re going to be late!” her mother’s distant loud reminder pushed her into action once again.

“Coming mother!”

She considered the possibility that she had written the notes to herself. After all, she was crazy enough to hallucinate – why not sleep walk and not remember it later?

“I really am going crazy…”

Minako broke into hysterical laughter as she ran down the stairs and out the door skipping out on breakfast completely even though she was certain her mother would have prepared it to go.

She wasn’t hungry.

...

Ami had taken to arriving to school a solid hour early – so she could prepare for the day in the privacy of a small study room in the library.

**Yes, that was the reason, she told herself, to get in some extra studying.**

The door clicked open almost silently behind her. She pretended not to notice, but she had frozen in anticipation.

She did not have to wait long. Warm lips from behind brushed against the side of her neck, sending shivers down to her toes.

“Seijuro-kun!” she scolded as she brushed him away. “We’re in a public library!”

“You’re just so beautiful Ami-chan! Especially when you’re so focused. I cannot control myself.”

“I think you can,” she challenged throwing him a playful smile.

“No,” he disagreed solemnly. “The hands have minds of their own.”

And he darted in again, his hands circling around her, forcing her from the chair and into his arms.
She melted in his embrace as his hands began exploring. At first he simply caressed her arms and sides, but he quickly became more daring, slipping under her blouse.

She grabbed his hands. “Seijuro-kun!” she objected again through her delighted laughter, glancing nervously at the closed door. “Anyone could walk in!”

“Does that not excite you?” he whispered softly into her ear.

Her blush resurged to her cheeks. She could not argue with him.

“I thought so,” he growled victoriously, his magic hands slipping under her blouse again, caressing and kneading upward toward her breasts. His lips nipped gently at her throat simultaneously, setting her skin on fire with overwhelming pulses and lances of pleasure.

Every part of her mind was screaming that this had to stop even as it simultaneously begged for it to never end. She knew her addiction to the physical pleasure could only eventually lead to one outcome, as she had every single morning for the last three days, but she did not want the secret waves of ecstasy to end.

The bell rang, tearing through her head. How had the time gone by so quickly? She pushed his hands away immediately, mortified that she would be late to class, but he was quick to reassert his hands and mouth.

“Seijuro-kun,” she whimpered pathetically even as she leaned into the caress. “I have to go to class!”

“But you want to stay here with me,” he countered, grabbing her hand to prevent her escape. “Let’s play hooky today,” he suggested.

She bit her lip nervously, seriously considering the suggestion, knowing she could not look into his eyes – she’d lose what little good sense she had managed to hold onto.

Before she could compose a response, the door opened. Ami turned toward the stranger in the familiar blue skirt and blouse and nervously fingered her own white shirt that was no longer smoothly tucked into her skirt.

The other girl froze, startled at their appearance. “I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I didn’t realize this room was already being used.”

Ami used the distraction to finally tear away from her seducer. Though she did turn before she made her exit and offered a playful wave of farewell, meeting his stormy grey eyes as she departed, wishing she possessed daring enough to take him up on his delinquent suggestion.

…

The second the clock ticked over announcing the arrival of lunch, Usagi seized the unknowing princess of Mercury by the elbow ignoring the girl genius’ protests.

“What on earth is going on Ami-chan?” the blond demanded once the blunette had stopped resisting her pull toward the tree.

Ami blushed, which Usagi knew meant the other girl knew exactly what she was talking about, but was too embarrassed to admit it. *What would embarrass Ami,* she wondered.

“What do you mean?” her classmate stammered.
“Ami-chan! You were late to class! Then you fell asleep! Got a detention! And you got a 92 on that test we got back today.”

Usagi saw her friend’s eyes turning to ice in defensive anger and so rapidly continued, “And you didn’t even care! Which is not something I associate with Mizuno! In fact, you’re like glowing!”

The blond was relieved to note her friend’s softening stance.

“It’s a boy isn’t it?” Usagi cooed happily.

Ami’s cheeks turned redder.

“I knew it!” Usagi gushed. “If you fell in love, you’d fall hard. Nothing else could distract you so completely! So… what’s his name?”

“As if anything male would ever be interested in the boyish girl with no idea how to actually have any fun.”

Both girls whirled around to face the mocking voice of Saito Kamiko, one of the most popular girls in school. Dark hair framed her round heart shaped face, just brushing her shoulders. The girl stopped walking meeting their shocked expressions with total calm.

“A… are you talking to me?” Ami stammered.

“He’s not interested in you,” the girl said coldly. “How could he be? He has me?”

“I… I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ami countered.

“You can play stupid if you like,” Kamiko said with a smirk. “But it’s too late. Yori-chan saw you this morning… in the library.”

“Stop it!” Usagi yelled, feeling suddenly protective. “You don’t know what you’re talking about! Of course Ami-chan was in the library! She’s always in a library! Studying to become the world’s best doctor!”

The blond watched in horror as Ami’s face flushed and her eyes turned downward in shame.

Kamiko just laughed. “Turns out you’re not so different from us mere mortals Mizuno-san! Doesn’t take much to get you to put out now does it?”

Usagi was at a loss. She simply could not imagine Ami doing what Kamiko implied. And Kamiko! What was wrong with her? She was definitely popular and could be a tad superficial, but the blond had never known the girl to be so confrontational or cruel.

Usagi turned to her friend, silently urging her eyes upward. But the blunette stared stubbornly at her own hands, fighting off tears.

“Is there a problem here?” a familiar voice broke in. Usagi’s eyes turned up in dread. Sure enough, Makoto stood with her back to them as she confronted Ami’s bully. Usagi groaned. The last thing they needed was for this to escalate into a physical fight.

“Of course not Kino-san,” Kamiko replied, not intimidated at all. “I speak only the truth. Your friends may act like they are better than the rest of us, but in reality they are so desperate for friends and boyfriends they will take anyone into their group. They have no standards at all. Wouldn’t you agree?”
Makoto leapt forward, her fist pulled back. Usagi was ready though and pulled her back by the shoulder. “Calm down Mako-chan! It’s only words,” Usagi begged.

The tall brunette ignored her and tore past her restraining hands. Usagi winced as her arm jerked forward, but the pain didn’t stop her from jumping forward to restrain her friend again.

“Kamiko-chan!” a high-pitched voice called excitedly. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

It was Minako. Usagi breathed a sigh of relief as she felt Makoto’s muscles release some of their tension at the interruption.

Kamiko turned toward the greeting with a small smile, but her eyes swiftly darted back to the trio.

“Rumor has it that Hiroki-kun is going to ask you to the festival!” the statement immediately consumed all of Kamiko’s attention.

“Really?” she whispered softly.

Minako laughed. “Yes, really! I know how you’ve been obsessing over him,” she added in a conspiratorial whisper that was clearly audible. “He’s been looking for you over at our usual table, but none of us knew where you were!”

Kamiko didn’t need to be told twice as she darted eagerly away.

A moment later, Ami burst into tears.

All three girls turned to comfort her immediately. Makoto whipped out a handkerchief embroidered along the edges with pink roses and handed it to the adolescent scholar.

“Ami-chan,” Usagi soothed. “Don’t listen to her. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“But she does!” Ami managed through her tears, violently shaking her head. “I’ve been horribly irresponsible.”

Minako laughed. “Mizuno-san, I know you don’t know me, but what Kamiko-chan said wasn’t true. She was just jealous and has been frustrated over Hiroki-kun’s inability to work up the courage to ask her out. There’s nothing wrong with allowing yourself to be swept off your feet every once in awhile. I think anyone that had captured the eyes of Ginga Seijuro would be a little captivated and distracted for awhile,” she said wiggling her eyebrows playfully, forcing the blunette to laugh through her tears.

“Ginga Seijuro?” Makoto repeated, her eyes turning to suspicious slits with a concerned glance at Usagi.

The blond jumped into the conversation immediately, not wanting Makoto to get protective again. “You’re dating Seijuro-kun?” Usagi repeated delightfully. “He is quite the charmer isn’t he Ami-chan?”

Just at that moment her stomach rumbled loudly and all three girls turned to her in surprise.

“What?” she objected at their accusing stares. “It’s lunch time! Of course I’m hungry!”

Makoto and Minako laughed while Ami offered her a patient smile. “Well, let’s not waste anymore time!” Makoto exclaimed leading Ami to their normal tree.

Minako hesitated and Usagi turned to her with a smile.
“Thank you Minako-chan,” she whispered. “I’d hate for Mako-chan’s temper to get her into any trouble. And Ami-chan always needs to know that it’s healthy to be a little irresponsible sometimes for the sake of mental health.”

Minako looked at her in surprise and Usagi internally winced at the automatic use of the informal address.

“My honor Tsukino-san,” the other blond replied with only a slight pause. “I will see you around.”

Usagi watched regretfully as the other blond began to turn away. The teenage heroine wanted to invite Minako to join them. Even if they didn’t remember, she wanted all of them in her life. But… having them all together was just risking too much. Who knew what the subconsciously familiar dynamic might trigger in their memories?

Before Usagi could turn back to her friends, Minako whirled around.

“May I join you all for lunch today?” the blond asked brightly.

Usagi bit her lip in uncertainty.

“Of course you can!” Makoto called warmly.

Usagi winced at the invitation. She regretted her thoughtless reaction, not missing the sudden hurt that flashed through Minako’s sky blue eyes.

“No, I don’t know what I was thinking. I don’t mean to intrude,” Minako said with a polite smile before she spun away again.

Usagi ran after and grabbed the fleeing girl by the wrist.

“Join us Minako-chan,” Usagi pleaded softly. “Please? It wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“Are you sure?” Minako asked softly.

Usagi laughed. “Yes! It’s not like you to doubt your self Minako-chan!”

Usagi mentally kicked herself again the second the words left her lips. She really needed to develop more of a filter. She couldn’t keep talking to her senshi like she knew them!

If Minako was confused by Usagi’s personal observation, she didn’t comment.

All four girls plus Naru, who had arrived late and therefore missed their dramatic encounter, settled around the tree happily. Makoto doled out special treats and they began to gossip and chatter about meaningless things that had happened throughout the week.

Usagi relaxed in the familiar banter feeling like everything was normal for the first time since she had awakened. She could almost pretend she wasn’t alone in her struggle against the new monsters and youmas that fed on the energy of innocents.

Makoto cracked open a can of soda only to have the beverage explode foaming and fizzing carbonated liquid in her face and down her white and brown uniform.

Everyone froze for a moment, before bursting into laughter at Makoto’s dazed shock.

“Yeah, yeah… laugh it up!” she countered, dabbing up dark liquid from her blouse. “See if I bring treats for any of you tomorrow!”
“Mako-chan!” Naru whined. “You know we didn’t mean it like that!”

Usagi turned away from the spectacle toward Minako – the girl had laughed, but it sounded forced to Usagi’s sensitive empathic instincts.

“What’s on your mind Minako-chan?” Usagi whispered sliding next to the latest addition to their eclectic group.

“What?” the girl asked absently turning toward her new friend.

Usagi laughed. “What’s got you so troubled?”

The other blond shrugged, “Nothing really.”

Usagi continued to consider her in concern.

“Do you ever feel like you’ve forgotten something?” Minako blurted suddenly.

Usagi laughed nervously. “All the time! I’d barely remember my own name if my mother wasn’t screeching it constantly.”

Minako shook her head, “I don’t mean that.”

“What do you mean?” Usagi asked with a frown, nervous about where the conversation was headed.

“I feel like I’ve forgotten a whole part of myself.”

“Maybe your mind is trying to protect you,” the heroine suggested.

“Maybe,” Minako agreed slowly. “But it can’t. This is too important.”

“How do you know if you don’t remember?”

“I just know!” she exclaimed in frustration.

“Minako-chan,” her friend said seriously. “If you are meant to remember, you will. Though I do truly believe that some things really are better off forgotten.”

Minako smiled. “I’m sorry Usagi-chan. I didn’t mean to snap. Things have just been so weird lately.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“I’m probably just being silly and imagining things,” Minako said with a dismissive wave.

Usagi remained silent. She hated that Minako doubted herself, but on the other hand that doubt might protect her if it kept her from taking her niggling memories seriously.

…

Rei dropped her bag on the floor beside her desk before falling dramatically face forward onto her bed, exhausted after the long week. It was her own fault – she had spent every afternoon posting fliers across the business and shopping districts before returning home to complete both chores and her homework. She had been lucky to get five hours of sleep a night.
She rolled over onto her back, crinkling over on a piece of paper that had been laid out on her bed. Her hand pulled the mysterious paper from underneath her back and held it up.

It was one of her fliers with a scribbled note in green ink occupying the lower right corner.

_Crown Arcade, Jubaan District, Monday – 3:45 pm._

She tore out of the bed to her desk where she pulled up a map of the district to locate this arcade. Her eyes found the spot surprisingly quickly. She now only had to get through the weekend and then maybe she would finally have some answers to the visions that plagued her.

She turned back to the flier. Who had left this for her? There were really only two people that had access to her room. Yuichiro must have actually come through for her!

She swept out of the room determined to find the hired help.

…

Yuichiro held the shears carefully slicing away the overgrown brush that was starting to take over the walking path. He wiped the sweat from his eyebrows before continuing. He only had one more curve to follow and then he’d be done for the evening.

He jumped when soft hands pulled him around from the shoulder.

“Rei-chan…” he mumbled in greeting. Before he could get out another word, she had leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

“Thank you Yuichiro-kun,” she whispered as she pulled away. “You have no idea how much this means to me.”

Without any further explanation she whirled away. He brought his fingers up to his cheek, in shock.

“Y… you’re welcome?” he said belatedly, wondering what she was referring to. Whatever it was, he needed to do it more often!

…

Chapter End Notes

This update is a miracle! You see, my hard drive failed about three weeks ago and I thought I had lost all four of my stories, which honestly was truly the biggest loss on the entire 300 GB hard drive in my mind. But learned a whole bunch about data recovery and only had to spend $200 to get about 90% of my data back. And amazingly they were able to recover all my main story files, but I lost all the individual chapter files! Such a close call!! To prevent future scares, I have now saved all of my stories to the cloud also known as Dropbox so they are on three separate computers plus some random server somewhere in the world everytime I save them. Yay!

This chapter originally was running way too long. I cut in half again so you would get an update before I went back to work. But it also meant that you get to be a bit
Mamoru deprived. But never fear! I’ll make up for it next time! And shortly after that, we might get back into some action finally!!

Remember that all reviews, comments, complaints, and flames are not only loved and appreciated, but also obsessively coveted!!

Happy 2015 everyone!!
Motoki trotted down the stairs two at a time into the storage room in search of an udder of syrup for the soda machine, all the while whistling a catchy tune that he didn’t even know the name of. Reika had just been singing it all week and now the blasted piece of music refused to leave his head.

He did a double take as he passed by the employee break room – a familiar dark haired aspiring med student lay passed out on the futon.

“Oi! Mamoru-kun! I don’t run a motel service!” he mock shouted, swatting a towel at his best friend. The other man didn’t even stir.

“Mamoru-kun?” he questioned, now concerned at his friend’s lack of reaction. “Wake up!”

But his raven-haired friend remained unresponsive. He tried not to panic – his best friend was clearly breathing and had a pulse. He had a few drastic ideas before he called for an ambulance.

Unfortunately for his friend, Motoki didn’t have possession of any herbal remedies or medicines to waken another. The arcade worker’s arsenal, however, did include a bucket of water and a regular sized towel.

He slowly tipped over the plastic yellow bucket allowing the liquid to spill over Mamoru’s face.

His unexpected couch-crasher barely stirred – though a second later one of his hands moved to bat away the infuriating disturbance, which only succeeded in splashing the water all over his green jacket and shirt.

“Mamoru-kun!” Motoki called again and this time dark blue cobalt eyes blinked groggily at him.

“Motoki?” the other man croaked. “Where am I?”

“We’re in the arcade’s back room. What are you doing here?” Motoki asked, handing his friend first the towel, and then his usual mug of steaming black coffee.

Mamoru accepted both gifts with a grateful smile, toweling off his face without comment, shaking his head every few seconds as if to clear it. He took a huge gulp of the boiling hot liquid and immediately winced – most likely burned.

“I… I don’t know…” he admitted after several seconds. “I don’t remember coming here last night.”

“What do you remember?” the blond asked hesitantly, his anxiety building once again.

“I was with Natsumi-chan. We went to a café…” he recalled distantly, his eyes unfocused for a moment before turning back up to his friend, “but everything after that is hazy.”

“You mean to tell me you’ve been here since last night?”

Mamoru looked at him sharply. “What time is it?”
“It’s almost seven… in the evening,” Motoki revealed.

Mamoru immediately leapt to his feet, only to immediately stumble. Motoki offered out a steadying hand, which Mamoru seized reflexively.

“Kami-sama, I feel drunk,” he groaned, clutching his head with his free hand.

“Maybe you should take it easy on the substance abuse,” the blond suggested, only half in jest.

“I… I don’t remember taking anything,” Mamoru whispered with a frown, looking down at his hands.

“Are you okay?” Motoki couldn’t help but ask in concern at his friend’s continued disorientation, though the answer was clearly no.

“Motoki-kun, I think I’m going crazy,” he said dragging a hand through his jet black locks. It was evident that Mamoru meant it seriously – he was not expressing frustration.

“What do you mean?”

“When Natsumi is around, it’s like my brain just turns off and turns to liquid. I… But then, when she’s not around I barely remember that she exists.”

Motoki couldn’t suppress his sudden laughter. That’s what Mamoru was worried about?

“You’re a red-blooded male the same as the rest of us! You were bound to discover girls at some point!” Motoki chided teasingly.

Mamoru shook his head.

“But if I cared about her or was interested in her even only physically – wouldn’t I think of her at other times? Or if I don’t care and am not interested, why can I not resist her when she walks through the door?”

“Mamoru-kun? When was the last time you uh… let yourself unload?”

His friend actually blushed at the question. Motoki forced himself not to laugh at the college student’s reaction.

“That is none of your business,” he said firmly.

Motoki held his hands up in surrender. “Sorry! I don’t mean to offend. It’s just lately you’ve been really distracted and absent-minded. Not just around Natsumi either. You’re borderline obsessive almost stalking three girls at once.”

“What are you talking about Motoki-kun? Three girls?”

“Well, first there’s Sailor Moon. You pour over anything and everything related to the heroine,” he listed off. Mamoru rolled his eyes, but Motoki wasn’t put off in the least. “Then there’s Usagi-chan,” he continued to list. “You seem to hover around her protectively any time she’s here. And last, there’s Natsumi-san. When you see her, it’s like the rest of the world doesn’t exist.”

“I’m not obsessed with Sailor Moon,” Mamoru said defensively. “I am obsessed with the case of coma patients that follow in her wake. As for Natsumi-chan, I already explained that I was confused about her. And Usagi-chan…” he began but his eyes dropped back to his hands again, unfocused.
“And Usagi-chan?” Motoki prompted.

“She’s hiding something,” he finally said.

“Usagi?” Motoki repeated in disbelief. “Mamoru-kun, the girl is incapable of keeping a secret. She is so open and always wears her heart completely on her sleeve.”

He pulled his friend from the couch with a proffered hand. The blond part-timer needed to get back to his shift now that he was certain his friend was okay, this was probably not the time for this chat.

Mamoru shook his head in disagreement. “She knows me,” he said cryptically.

“Yeah, and…?” Motoki pressed, confused. Of course Usagi knew him.

Right at that moment, the bell rang announcing the arrival of none other than the blonde teenager herself.

“Yeah and I’m going to figure out how,” Mamoru said distantly, making a beeline toward the table the girl was settling herself down in.

Motoki shook his head, still confused. He agreed with Mamoru’s initial assessment.

The boy was going crazy.

…

Mamoru stood behind the blond watching as she laid out various maps and charts.

“What are you doing Odango?” he asked, genuinely curious about the nature of her work.

She jumped an inch, startled before twisting rapidly toward him, her cheeks a delightful shade of pink that made him grin.

“Mamoru-baka! Don’t sneak up on people like that!” she scolded between sucking in mouthfuls of air in an effort to calm herself.

He slid into the red padded booth across from her. “Sorry,” he said, still grinning, not remotely contrite. She scowled at him in response, which only succeeded in widening his smile. “So what’s the project?” he asked, picking up one of the charts.

She snatched it away from him immediately. “It’s a… meteorology project!”

“They offer meteorology at the high school?” he asked, surprised.

“Uh… no… My tutor… is giving me extra projects to develop my… uh… analytical skills.”

“Let me take a look,” he said picking up the map, immediately noting that several locations were marked off. The pattern seemed incredibly familiar to him.

“Certain fluctuations in the air were detected at each of those locations,” she explained rapidly, trying to snatch the diagram back.

“What kind of fluctuations?” he asked intrigued moving the paper just slightly out of her reach, trying to figure out where he recognized the pattern from.

“I don’t understand any of this Mamoru-kun,” she confided.
He laughed, taking in the locations one by one.

“I don’t think this is a weather map Odango,” he said finally.

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“These marked locations are where all the attacks have occurred.”

“What?” she said loudly. He turned suspicious eyes toward her. Her surprise sounded just a little too forced.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “You don’t have to be embarrassed. I’m kind of obsessed with this case myself.”

“You are?” she asked. “Why?”

He raked his hands through his raven hair. “I don’t know. Just feel like there’s something about it that nags at my mind. Something I should know. Why are you interested in it?”

She laughed. “I’m not! It’s homework!”

“We could work on it together,” he suggested.

She stared at him uncertainly, silent for so long that he was positive she would refuse him.

“I’d like that,” she finally whispered her cerulean eyes capturing his own. The constant synthetic music of the arcade seemed to fade from his senses as he lost himself in the shining sapphire pools.

Her eyes fell to her hands as a delightful pink hue rose to the surface of her cheeks.

“So what have you got so far?” he asked lightly.

She seized onto the question quickly, launching into explanations of her maps and charts. The level of detail shocked him. He really didn’t have much insight to add even with his obsessive following of the case and she had caught a few things that he had missed, like the fact that most of the victims were adolescents and the vast majority of them went to her school.

The conclusion drove him to frustration. Why would anyone specifically target teenagers? They were just beginning to figure themselves out. Just beginning to realize their potential.

Usagi was the perfect example. She could be awkward and klutzy. And often she lacked focus. But she was also a ray of sunshine that could coax a genuine smile even from the most cynical. He couldn’t bare the thought of her as a potential victim. He wanted… no, he needed to find a way to protect her.

He jumped as a steaming white mug of coffee was placed in from of him, jarring him from his thoughts.

“Hazelnut – black,” his partner reported with a grimace.

He took the hot cup gratefully still feeling unnaturally lethargic, though being in bubbly blond’s presence seemed to relieve the feeling somewhat. Her energy and enthusiasm was simply infectious.

“Just the way I like it,” he commented after taking a large gulp.
“Yeah, I know,” she said absently, her attention still on the conclusions and summaries they had made.

He watched her devour her own chocolate shake for a moment puzzled. *How* did she know? Then he shook his head in dismissal. Every server in the Crown knew his regular order. It wouldn’t be that hard to simply ask.

As he nursed his coffee, she quickly collected the product of their labor and put it all in large folder that disappeared into her school bag. “Thanks for your help with all this. You made it make so much sense.”

“I don’t feel like I helped much. You were very thorough with everything.”

She blushed under the praise, and quickly broke eye contact again as she pulled out a different assortment of notebooks and textbooks. She must plan on working on actual homework now. Strange that she hadn’t done that first. Wouldn’t it make more sense to complete the required work *before* attempting the supplements provided by a tutor?

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a large burger and an accompanying plate of fries.

“Maybe we could meet again tomorrow?” he suggested after the server had left. “I could bring my own collection of data and information on the case this time.”

“Tomorrow’s Saturday,” she reminded him as she paged through a history textbook.

“And?”

She smiled, her attention remaining on the book. “Alright. How about after your run?”

“My run?” he repeated in surprise.

“Don’t you normally go for a run in the morning?”

“I do,” he confirmed, wishing she would look back up. “But how do *you* know that?” This was the kind of thing he was talking about. The girl just *knew* things about him that she shouldn’t.

“Oh… I’ve uh… seen you running through the park,” she explained rapidly.

“Oh? I was under the impression you liked to sleep in,” he said with a smirk.

“Do you want to meet tomorrow or not?” she demanded somewhat huffily.

He grinned. “Ten o’clock, here at this table.”

“I will see you then,” she said with another smile finally ignoring the textbook to dive into the platter of crispy thin fries.

Watching her eat brought another grin to his face. Her cheeks puffed up, full with fried potatoes… “Like a chipmunk storing food for winter,” he said to himself.

“Now see here Mamoru-baka!” she growled defensively. “Wait… what?”

He laughed again. “What did you think I said?”

“Something about how I looked like a hippo tearing through all this food.”
“Why would anyone ever say that?”

“I have no idea,” she said, her eyes piercing his own.

The blond sat at her usual table with a platter of western fries that he did not think one person could finish. But this was Usagi he was talking about and she was tearing through it at a rate that made him doubt she would leave a single crumb behind.

“You might want to slow down there Odango. Save some for the hippos,” he commented as he strode past her to sit in his own usual stool.

She gagged trying to retaliate around the fried potato in her mouth.

“See that’s what I mean,” he said laughing at her predicament. “How’s the Odango Atama going to capture that much sought after date with her soulmate if her mouth is always overstuffed with food?”

“Mamoru-baka!” she shrieked, throwing one of the aforementioned fries at him. He had the indecency to catch the unlikely projectile and eat it.

“I’m a growing girl in need the calories,” she added defensively.

“I know,” he agreed dryly. “I’ve seen those mad dashes to school.”

She turned back to her platter as if he hadn’t interrupted. “At least I’m not constantly picking fights with kids three years my junior.”

“Admit it Odango Atama!” he countered without pause. “You look forward to our sparrings!”

She responded by stabbing a small pink tongue in his direction.

Which only served to send him back into mocking laughter.

“What was that?” his mind demanded to know, looking at the blond teenager that sat across from him as if she had grown wings.

“Usagi-chan,” he began slowly. “Have we ever…?”

“Mamoru-kun! There you are! Are you ready to go?”

“Go?” he repeated turning towards the questioner. Hypnotic gleaming garnets captured his gaze, her small seductive smile erasing whatever he had been thinking about.

“Last night we said we’d meet again here. Don’t you remember?” she said coyly, her small pink tongue sliding across her upper lip.

“Of course!” he lied, leaping to his feet. “I’m ready to go. You?”

He followed her out of the arcade without a second thought for the young blood he left behind at the booth.

…

Motoki watched his friend leave with the red-head in disapproval. He could not see what his friend saw in the conniving manipulative girl who had a different boy on her arm every other day. Especially not when there was a delightful genuinely sweet young woman obviously completely
smitten with him sitting across from him.

He glanced toward the back booth, where Usagi continued to scribble her way across her spiral bound notebook. The girl had become so much more focused in the past few weeks – first not showing up to the arcade at all, and now only allowing herself a round or two of Sailor V in between hours of studying. Maybe his little ‘onee-chan’ was growing up!

He decided she needed some positive reinforcement so he prepared her favorite chocolate milkshake with extra cherries and went to deliver it.

It took her a second to notice him standing above her.

“Motoki-oniisan, I didn’t order that,” she whispered softly as he slid the treat in front of her.

“I know. You’ve just been working so hard for so long, I thought you deserved a reward and a break.”

She smiled, but the expression did not reach her eyes and he frowned.

“Thank you Motoki-oniisan,” she whispered.

Then he noticed the water droplets staining the pages of math problems and his frown deepened.

“Usagi-chan! What’s wrong?” he asked urgently taking a seat opposite her.

“Nothing’s wrong! I’m fine!” she insisted, but she didn’t meet his gaze.

“Usagi-chan, you’ve been crying,” he pointed out softly.

“And? A girl is not allowed to cry on occasion?”

He shook his head insistently. “Not in my establishment,” he joked.

She eyed him stoically.

“And if you can’t follow that rule,” he continued, “you’ll just have to unburden your troubles on your oniisan.”

“It’s complicated and I’m really not sure you’d even be interested in the silly problems of a teenage girl.”

He raised an eyebrow at this. “As it happens, silly problems of teenage girls are a specialty of mine. But they usually involve long stories, so give me two minutes to get someone to cover the rest of my shift and I’ll be right back!”

She looked like she wanted to object.

“Two minutes!” he insisted before she could say anything holding up two fingers for emphasis. She nodded reluctantly and he turned away.

He went to the backroom and convinced Unazaki to start her shift thirty minutes early. For which, she insisted he owed her big time. Then he made himself a shake – strawberry, before returning to his seat across from the blonde sixteen year old.

“Okay, I’m ready for ya! Watcha got?”
She laughed. A genuine heartfelt laugh, but her face turned cold and stoic almost immediately.

“I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Usually the beginning,” he suggested before sucking the pink liquid up through a straw.

She nodded and he remained patient as she gathered her thoughts.

“Well... I used to have these friends. The four best friends you could imagine. And a boyfriend that I loved and who loved me. But they all… died… in an accident… saving me.”

Motoki stopped sucking up the sweet strawberry fluid in shock as his eyes widened in horror. Whatever he had expected her to say – that had not been it.

“Usagi-chan,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

“But see, I was injured in the accident and lost part of my memory, “ she continued ignoring his condolences. “I didn’t remember them and my… uh… guardian didn’t think it would be kind to tell me what I had forgotten. She wanted to spare me the pain of risking my memory coming back.”

“But I take it your memory came back anyway?”

She nodded. “Just a few weeks ago. And I… miss them so much!” her face crumpled and fell into her arms.

“Usagi-chan,” he whispered in concern, having no idea how to comfort her.

“Since I’ve remembered I keep running into others that remind me of my old friends. I don’t know what to do. Should I actually befriend them? Or let myself move on? They don’t need my… baggage…” she added softly.

“Do you feel like your betraying the memory of your old friends by making these new friends?” Motoki asked.

She shook her head emphatically. “No… I know they would want me to make these friends and connections. I just… I just don’t want anyone else to die for me,” she admitted so softly he had to lean forward to hear her.

“Usagi-chan, those kinds of accidents are like freaks of nature. The chances of something like that happening again are incredibly unlikely,” he assured her.

“Kami-sama, how I wish that were true,” she whispered.

He frowned at the admission. Why would Usagi believe that her friends were so likely to die?

“What I’m saying Usagi-chan, is that you can’t live your life in fear. You miss so much of it that way.”

She didn’t meet his eyes, her attention focused on some distant point out the window.

“Mamoru-kun reminds you of him, doesn’t he?” he guessed.

“What?” she asked dazed.

“Mamoru-kun reminds you of your old boyfriend,” Motoki repeated. “That’s why you were crying.”
“He’s exactly the same Motoki-oniisan,” she whispered. “But he doesn’t see me.”

“He doesn’t remember me,” she added so softly, he almost hadn’t heard the addition.

“Usagi-chan, that is simply not true!” he insisted with a laugh. “That boy is borderline obsessed – he can never keep his eyes off of you and he asks so many questions about you. He obviously feels something for you,” he confided without thought. Mamoru would probably kill him if he ever found out, but Motoki didn’t much care at the moment.

“Really?” Usagi asked, leaning forward wistfully. “What do you tell him?”

“Nothing really. I tell him that he should ask you.”

She blushed. Then immediately took in a huge gulp of her milkshake in an attempt to erase her embarrassment.

“None of that matters! He’s dating Ginga Natsumi,” Usagi countered.

Motoki winced, then waved away the objection. “Yeah well… I don’t think it’ll take him long to see sense. That girl…” he trailed off, unwilling to say anything bad about her to someone else.

“You don’t like her!” Usagi accused delightedly.

“I didn’t say that!” he objected.

“But you like everyone! You’re nice to everyone!” she squealed.

“Usagi-chan! Keep it down! It’s part of the job to be nice to everyone!”

She grinned. “It’s okay Motoki-oniisan. I don’t much like her either.”

An electronic beeping sound interrupted what he had been about to say as her attention darted down to her bag.

“I gotta run Motoki-oniisan, but thanks for making me talk, and as always, for listening. I feel loads better!”

“Glad to be of service Usagi-chan!”

The girl whipped out of the room like there was a tornado after her. He watched her go with a frown, suddenly worried about her safety for reasons he could not articulate.

…

The lunar senshi flew through the early evening air, golden streamers fluttering in her wake. She followed the urgent magnetic pull without conscious thought. It led her to a narrow alley.

She bit back a gasp of surprise as she took in the latest victim – an all too familiar dark haired girl moaned in pleasure, her skirt in puddles at her ankles her eyes closed against the alien onslaught of vines and thorns. Kamiko was not even aware she was in trouble. The young heroine hissed in anger. She could not believe the dark haired teenager had been calling Ami easy! Her friend had at least kept her clothes on!

She sent her tiara lancing through the vines without hesitation. However cruel the girl happened to be, the blond was not about to let her classmate’s life force be sucked dry.
No one deserved that.

…

Midnight blue eyes fixated on the impossible beauty that clung to his arm. She babbled happily about something, but Mamoru heard not a word of it.

“Where are we going?” he asked suddenly when she pulled him unexpectedly around a corner.

“Oh, you’ll see,” she purred hanging off his arm.

He followed her obediently as she led him through botanical gardens, past a red maple leaf adorned babbling brook, into a private glen bordered on all sides with flowers climbing through the gaps of the white lattice fence.

Under normal circumstances, Mamoru might have appreciated the garden, but in this moment he was lost in her sparkling eyes – they almost seemed to glow with an impossible inner magic.

She leaned in, her mouth wasted no time in seizing his own. He moaned, her slightest touch sending electric bolts sizzling delightfully across every nerve down to the tip of his toes.

…

Razor sharp leaves sliced through the air. She ducked avoiding most of them, but a few cut through her shoulders like a hot knife through butter.

She suppressed the desire to scream and instead threw a counter at her green skinned plantlike adversary in the form of her tiara, wishing devoutly that she had more than one. The glowing white projectile forced the blue-haired, multi armed, vine covered villain back.

She whipped out the blue Mercury Computer her fingers dancing across the keyboard. He knocked it from her hand with a stinging kick, followed by another round of burning acid spray from his vines.

She dodged left and dove to the ground, activating the fallen mini super computer with a few quick swipes, grateful that Artemis had disabled it’s security passcodes.

Vines came flying to the ground. She rolled to the side, the vine smashing into the cement tearing it to pieces, an inch away from her cheek. She leapt to her feet, leaving the computer behind, hoping he would forget its presence.

He struck again. She jumped away, but he threw another volley anticipating her move. Burning slashes welled across her abdomen that she could not acknowledge. She scrambled away from the blow, only to trip over her own feet.

She fell backwards, found herself prone and vulnerable staring at her attacker – the blue haired alien with green marble like skin as he readied his attack.

Where was Tuxedo Kamen?

She needed him.

She missed him.

…
Soft hands tugged impatiently at his black leather belt. The young man moved automatically to help her, not able to imagine how the pleasurable lances pulsing through his body could possibly get any better, but eager to experience it just the same.

He nearly fainted as her hands drifted downward. Her mouth never leaving his own even as she began stroking his smaller head with a talent and urgency he had never before encountered. Just when he thought he wouldn’t last a second longer, she pulled away.

He opened his eyes, felt trapped in a haze. He reached for her clumsily.

“Patience,” she whispered coyly just out of arm’s reach. “I want to milk it for all it’s worth.”

She came forward again and allowed her hands to dance all over him, leaving liquid fire in their wake wherever she touched. His whole body vibrated – he felt taut like an overstrained violin string about to snap.

“Kami-sama, how are you so good at this?” he moaned.

“Practice?” she suggested with a laugh before she kneeled down and took him into her mouth. The thought of her with other men bothered him not at all. Not if she could make him feel like this, like a rosebud opening to the sun for the very first time.

He almost screamed in ecstasy, but she pulled away and once again stood up. He sobbed at the loss of sensation.

“You must be quiet,” she ordered softly with a long elegant finger pressed against his lips. “I won’t continue if you utter a single sound.”

He nodded dumbly.

And she slowly returned. He bit his lip to suppress the moans from escaping his throat. Blood dribbled down his chin, but he barely noticed the hot liquid or the resulting pain, too overridden by the impossible heat that built in his groin. It should have exploded already, but somehow she held him on the edge – pushing him further and further than he had ever been.

He couldn’t think.

He couldn’t remember his own name.

All that mattered was her. And following her wishes so she would never stop pleasuring him.

…

Sailor Moon pushed hard against the ground, sending herself flipping backwards, away just as torrents of acid struck the ground sending hissing steam through the air.

She met his stormy grey eyes defiantly. She felt slightly smug, as her adversary had yet to land a critical blow. But her feeling of triumph was short-lived as he turned his unusual extremities back toward his original victim with a triumphant smirk of his own.

“No!” she screamed leaping down to block the attack. No more students would lose their lives – not to these parasites!

She screamed as the burning sensation cut through her fuku and midriff alike sending the world spinning in time with her agony. She fell, limp to the ground trying to force her eyes back into
She could hear his footfalls – only a few meters away and getting closer. She willed her legs to move, but they remained defiant still.

…

Mamoru jerked back suddenly, his head lancing with unbearable pain. He hissed and stumbled backwards. Natsumi grabbed his arm to balance him.

“Mamoru-kun?” she questioned with genuine concern. “Are you alright?”

The words didn’t register. Sounds felt far away and muddled as his vision spun and darkened, threatening blackness. His knees fell painfully to the cold grey cement below him.

“What is it?” the shrill voice demanded. He forced his eyes to focus, to see the face framed in red-brown curls with piercing confused maroon eyes.

“I don’t know,” he whispered.

…

She could hear his footfalls – only a few meters away and getting closer. She willed her legs to move, but they remained defiant still.

She tensed, preparing herself for the blow.

It never came.

Instead, the yowl that could only be the warcry of a certain Mauan feline pierced through the early evening air, bringing her enemy’s approach to a standstill.

She managed to turn her head just in time to witness her snow white tutor thrown aside like a ragdoll.

“Artemis!” she forced herself to her feet even as she instinctively charged her tiara – feeling the growing heat bloom upon her forehead.

The Lunarian Senshi unleashed the blast, releasing all the pent up energy toward the blue alien, striking him on his leg. He jumped back with a scream of defiance and moved into retreat.

Sailor Moon stood frozen in place for several seconds after her enemy had fled, letting herself catch her breath.

…

The pain had alleviated slightly, but his head still throbbed.

“Perhaps, I can make you feel better?” she cooed her arms draping around his neck as she reached up for a kiss. The physical contact felt like sandpaper dragging across his skin. As wonderful as it had been seconds before, he could no longer stand it. He jerked away, pulling her arms off of him.

“I’m sorry Natsumi-san,” he managed through the pulsing pain. “I think it is best if I head home.”

“But Mamoru-kun!” she objected.
He squeezed her hand reassuringly. “I’ll make it up to you… I promise.”

He disengaged and turned away from her without further explanation.

…

She moved gingerly trying to avoid twisting, which served only to reignite the pain in her burning flesh. She picked up the abandoned Mercury computer that lay on the unforgiving cement ground.

“We got it Artemis! A full scan,” the lunar senshi reported happily as she swiped through screen after screen of data on the little hand held computer. She didn’t know what most of it meant, but she was certain that with the feline’s aid they’d make some breakthroughs with the information. “There is so much here. Hopefully now, we can figure out how their power works.”

“How is the girl?” the snow white feline asked softly, interrupting her triumph.

The blond heroine immediately turned toward the girl with genuine concern and more than a small amount of embarrassment that she had moved to the computer first.

“She’s breathing, but she’s not waking up,” she reported.

“And are you alright?” he asked.

The teenage heroine took stock of her own injuries. She was going to have trouble hiding the limp for a day or two. The chemical burn was far worse, but at least easily hidden. Thank Kami-sama for accelerated healing.

“I’ll be fine,” she insisted.

…

Ali hissed in pain as he washed the incisions and gaping holes where stems had once resided along his arm and torso. Clear green life blood dripped from the wound mingling with an antiseptic and plant fertilizer that encouraged quick healing. The cuts were deep and the pain made it impossible for him to hold his human disguise, but in the safety of his apartment, it hardly mattered.

He mentally reached out for his partner and lover, hoping she had successfully concluded her energy gathering since he had been able to serve as distraction.

But she was alone. And she was far from truly energized.

‘En!’ he mentally screamed, his fingers curled into frustrated fists. ‘You were supposed to be attacking at the same time!’

‘I was getting there!’ she raged back, her indignation washing over him in a wave. ‘I had him built up about as far as I could and I was about to strike, but then he had some kind of melt down.’

‘A bad reaction to your feeding?’ Ali asked feeling all his frustration drain away, replaced by concern at the unexpected information. If humans were already resisting their psychic pheromones they would not survive here long.

‘No, this was different,’ she reassured quickly. ‘He wasn’t just fading. He was in pain.’

‘But…’

‘Exactly! I didn’t cause it. It came from some other kind of psychic connection.’
Ali sighed. He had no idea humans were even capable of such a tie. But it didn’t matter. There would be other targets, other opportunities.

‘We need to be in better contact during the attack to make it truly simultaneous,’ he said instead.

‘Tomorrow then?’ she queried.

‘Tomorrow,’ he agreed. ‘And En?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Pick a dud. Until we get this right, we shouldn’t risk the prime targets.’

He could feel her disappointment at the suggestion. This Mamoru must be a tasty specimen. ‘It’s only a precaution En. You will get back to the good stuff,’ he reassured.

‘Alright,’ she agreed reluctantly. ‘Whatever you think is best.’

Mamoru stumbled through his own front door once again feeling beyond drained, cradling his head in his hand desperately trying to figure out what was wrong with him. These waves of complete exhaustion had hit him again and again these last few days, accompanied by blackouts, or perhaps memory loss – he didn’t know. It was more than exhaustion - he felt like he was fading away – dying even.

But for the life of him, he could not figure out why. At least the sharp migraine had subsided into a dull throb. The migraine had been different than the fatigue – almost something tangible that he could cling to, that blocked out the worst of the exhaustion. He wasn’t sure which sensation he preferred at the moment.

He blundered into the bathroom adjoining his master suite – and pulled a small plastic bottle from the medicine cabinet. With only a slight hesitation he downed three of the little brown painkillers, hoping that if the pain subsided he could get enough rest to help the exhaustion fade as well.

He settled into the bed quickly – weaving himself between the ocean blue silk sheets. However, sleep remained elusive. The pain had left him, but a feeling of dread nagged at him, like he had missed something.

Something vitally important.

Chapter End Notes

So… it’s been awhile. But I have a good excuse!! You see, I had a baby! He was born in February! Cutest thing ever!! It’s crazy how much I love him when I don’t really even know him yet! So excited to discover all that makes him him as he grows!

So you can understand why things have been on the back burner and how they may continue to be for a while as we work out the new order of things. Thank you for your patience and your encouragement in my writing!
There are parts of this chapter I love! And others that I’m just sick of fighting with. It needs the benefit of some of the fresh eyes you readers may be able to provide.

In general, I still really struggle with battles. So if you got any tips, I’m ALL ears!
The raven-haired miko stepped through the automatic sliding doors to the arcade with an eager bounce in her step – confident and excited that she was finally going to get to the bottom of these visions.

Loud laughter and conversation, synthetic music, and flashing lights assaulted her senses and gave her pause. This was not her usual scene and she suddenly felt very out of place.

“Hino-san!” a bright voice greeted. “What are you doing all the way down here in Jubaan?”

Rei whirled toward the familiar face in surprise. “Furuhata-san!” she acknowledged her red-headed classmate once she had regathered her composure. “I was meeting some… friends of mine. Have you seen a girl with blue eyes and long blond pigtails?”

“Certainly,” her classmate pointed toward the back. “She’s usually in the back corner with her friends.”

“Thank you!”

“Sure! Let me know if I can get you anything else,” Unazaki said with a smile before she dashed away to another booth.

The priestess wasted no time in approaching the table in question, determined to finally corner her elusive quarry and get some answers.

“Usagi-chan! Are you limping?! What happened?” a girl about her own age with her brown hair in a ponytail demanded of the eerily familiar blond. A third girl with short-cropped blue hair sat across from the other two, her nose buried in a thick text.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just stumbled down the stairs. You know me – so klutzy,” the blond said, waving away her friend’s concern before her eyes landed on the newest arrival.

“Rei-chan!” she greeted warmly as if she was expecting the miko in training. “Join us!” She slid over to make room.

Rei did not immediately move to fill the spot, she stood before the table frozen in confusion.

“Rei-chan, this is Mizuno Ami. She’s like the smartest and sweetest girl in Japan,” she rattled off quickly.
The blue haired girl glanced down at her hands and blushed at the description.

“And this is Kino Makoto. She makes the best cookies and bento boxes you have ever tasted!”

Makoto waved with a friendly smile.

“This is Hino Rei,” the blonde girl introduced. “She’s training to be a priestess at the Hikawa Shrine. Her awareness of the world around her is unparalleled. And she’s truly dedicated to her grandfather and the temple.”

“Wait a minute!” Rei demanded hotly, suddenly furious. “How do you know any of that?”

The blond turned toward her with her mouth open, searching for words. Before she could speak an incessant beeping interrupted. The innocent chime sent the little hairs on the miko’s arm rising.

“I’m sorry girls! But I gotta run! See you all tomorrow!” and the blonde disappeared out of the booth without any further explanation and the arcade before any of them could react.

Rei watched her go uneasily, her legs twitching. She turned to the other two bewildered girls.

“We have to go after her!” she ordered and she ran outside, trying to determine which way the elusive blonde had gone. Much to her amazement, the other two girls followed without question.

“Where did she go?” the ponytailed girl asked.

Rei shook her head. She didn’t know. But she felt that if she ever got her hands on the little rabbit, she would strangle her herself. What was the girl thinking, going off alone like that?

She shook off the thought. It wasn’t abnormal for an adolescent girl to travel alone in the middle of the day.

She turned to the other girls, a million questions about the mysterious vanishing blond leaping to her lips.

Familiar blue and green eyes met her own violet orbs and her impatient demands died on her tongue.

*She drew the heat, rare as it was amongst the ice flurries of the frozen continent, from the air into a protective shield about her person.*

*Snowflakes hovered and swirled about her, sparkling in the light of the full moon, making the night air feel just that little bit more friendly and inviting.*

*But it was an illusion.*

*An impossible army lay in wait somewhere in the frozen plains, seeking to destroy everything that was beautiful and worthwhile within the Sol System.*

*She stood alongside her three sisters in arms. Her golden counterpart gestured a command.*

*She nodded stiffly to her commander and friend, acknowledging the order before stretching out her hands to the senshi on either side. She directed her fiery energy to one hand to bond with her smooth and collected icy sister. The crackling pulsing in her other hand signaled that the daughter of Zeus had joined their link seconds later.*

*Their golden leader was the last to bring her warm glowing light to the circle. Then moonlight*
caressed her sizzling skin adding even more energy to the collection of raw elemental power that
roared through and beyond their veins.

The daughter of Aries prayed it would be enough to protect their charge.

Either way, it would cost them everything...

If only they had known of the witch’s coming earlier.

The dark haired miko stumbled at the intensity as the vision dissolved. Makoto caught her even as
Ami placed a cool delicate hand on her suddenly burning forehead.

She looked at both girls, her questions forgotten. It wasn’t just the blond. These girls – these
strangers – were a part of it too.

“Take me to the Hikawa Shrine,” she pleaded as she stumbled back to her feet. “You both should
come.”

…

Red boots pounded against the pavement, threatening to spread cracks and fissures in their wake,
the lunar senshi followed the inner pull towards where she knew she was needed. South. She
needed to head south.

She leapt over the sea of pedestrians and to the skyline where she could move freely without stealth
moving from one rooftop to the next.

She swirled to a stop as her senses spun – her extrasensory instincts twisted sickeningly in her gut and
the magnetic pull faded. She panicked at the loss of direction. If the danger had passed without
confrontation, the victim had most likely not survived.

“Luna!” she shrieked into the communicator in panic, “Which way?”

“Two blocks south, then another east!” the familiar voice rapidly reported directly into her ear.

She launched herself in the indicated direction without hesitation.

“There’s a second attack Sailor Moon,” Artemis interrupted urgently. “Two miles northwest.”

The lunar senshi cursed and pushed herself faster towards the first event, her legs pumping
rhythmically on the hard cement of the building’s roof.

She landed cleanly on the ground near the blushing alien vampire who stood over a dark haired
boy around her own age. Without thought, she swept the creature’s legs out from under her.

Before she could continue her assault, she was surrounded by a sea of bloodred petals. The flowers
bloomed threateningly atop a spiderlike body supported by two long spindle limbs that came to a
needle point at the ground. The nightmare creatures scuttled toward her in a tightening circle. Then
they lunged all at once as if they shared one mind.

She lurched backwards dodging the swipe, but plant spiders were already upon her. She feinted
only to fall into another attack.

She cried out as the thorns sliced cleanly through her flesh. No matter which way she tried to turn
or pull the hideous things were on her. She tried to leap upward but the creatures pulled her back
down.
She held her arms up to protect her face. She sobbed, her eyes squeezed closed as the plant monsters scrambled over her, biting and tearing painfully through the fuku into vulnerable soft flesh.

This was it. She had finally bit off more than she could chew and she was about to pay the ultimate price.

That boy was going to die.

The other senshi would have to be awakened.

Her family would never know what had happened to her.

Mamoru would never remember what they had had.

It had all been for nothing.

…

Rei allowed her new companions to support her down onto her pallet. The world still spun whenever she turned her head as if she was drunk.

Yoichiro stood over all three of them hovering like an overprotective first time mother.

Rei batted away his offered teacup and glared at the temple worker.

“Out,” she snapped coldly at him.

“Rei-chan! I’m just…”

“I’m fine! Now get out!” she yelled. He cringed and rapidly departed.

She turned her violet orbs back towards the two girls and almost laughed.

The blunette, Ami was her name, fidgeted from foot to foot clearly not know what to do with herself, while the other girl… Makoto her mind filled in – stood relaxed with an amused smirk.

The miko sighed, all her tension drained away. She felt so comfortable in their presence.

“What’s her name?” Rei asked without preamble.

“Whose name?” Makoto asked, her green eyes blinking in confusion.

“The blond girl,” Rei explained maintaining an aura of patience, though her mind begged for the information like a dog whined for a treat.

“You don’t know her name? But I thought…”

“She visited the temple once awhile back. We spoke very briefly – I don’t remember her name, but I keep having visions revolving around her,” she confided. “We are all in them. They are jumbled though and don’t make any sense.”

“Visions?” Ami repeated nervously biting her lower lip. “What do you mean?”

“It’s cold,” the raven haired miko whispered. “We are surrounded… by snow and ice. There’s an army. We have to turn it back.”
“How?” the girl questioned.

“With… moonlight?”

Makoto laughed. “Wow! That sounds amazing! Where can I sign up?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ami chided. “It’s a dream.”

“It is not a dream!” Rei fired back. The miko wasn’t sure it was real either, but the visions meant far more than a normal dream. “We’re all involved in something. It’s important!” she insisted.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” the blue haired girl said sincerely. “I’m sorry, but I must be going now.”

Rei felt her heart stop, as the girl moved towards the door. She knew it all sounded crazy, but she had thought the other girls would trust her. They were connected somehow… at a spiritual level.

But the quiet studious girl was gone and her tall broad shouldered companion was following in her wake.

“Wait please!” Rei called after her. “You feel it too don’t you?”

“Feel what?” the girl asked genuinely. There was no trace skepticism in her voice, only open warmth.

“There’s something special about Usagi. Like we’re connected to her somehow.”

Makoto hesitated. Then nodded. “Tell me more about your dream.”

“Visions,” the miko corrected.

“Visions then,” Makoto waved away the semantics.

“Well… I know it’s unbelievable, but…”

…

The tension in the vines restraining the lunar guardian melted away at the sound of four thuds. She opened her eyes and took in the sight of four perfect white roses. She stared at the unlikely projectiles in disbelief.

The nightmarish creatures surged forward again to attack and restrain her, but before they could familiar solid warm arms plucked her away from certain death and she was soaring through the afternoon breeze. She heard the cape flapping in the wind.

She didn’t believe it.

They landed on a nearby building and she was gently lowered to her feet.

“Tuxedo Kamen?” she asked, turning toward her caped rescuer. Her smile evaporated at the unfamiliar costume.

He stood before her, not in the usual tuxedo, but head to toe dressed in a white flowing garment, his head and mouth covered.

“Sailor Moon?” he questioned. The voice and eyes were clearly Mamoru’s and she willed herself to smile. The new disguise was probably just because he still didn’t remember.
She once again smiled brightly. “Thank you… uh… what shall I call you?”

She couldn’t see his smile under the cloth, but she could hear it in his voice. “Moonlight Knight is pleased that you are well.”

She pulled away from him with sudden urgency. “We have to go back!”

She prayed to every the god she could think of that the victim had gotten away as they raced back toward the encounter.

She arrived, but all traces of the pink alien and her vicious plant spiders were gone.

But the boy was still there, his body unnaturally still.

She had failed.

…

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is short. But it just made a lot of sense to end here. And it took forever despite the brevity because… well, as I keep telling you, I struggle with battles! But I’m actually pretty happy with this one! It has a few weak spots in my opinion, but I like the overall feeling of it. Yay!

If you’re wondering what the plant creatures look like google image search “plant spider final fantasy 9”. That’s what was in my head. Super creepy!

Anyway, updates will probably continue to be slow, but I’m trying to write everyday even if it’s only for ten minutes. But I’ve also started another Sailor Moon story (not published – or even named – yet, which is distracting and every blue moon or so I work on my Chrono Trigger story, but I’m struggling with another battle there… ugh! I hate battles!!! If only I could write stories that didn’t need them!!!

Thanks for reading! Hope you enjoyed!
Denial

Chapter Notes

So I got some rave reviews and I just had to belt out the next chapter! This one is dedicated to Sandrelne_Moon who tore through everything I’ve written in like two days and left reviews on everything telling me I’m genius and brilliant!! (That’s not going to go to my head at all…)

Also special thanks to Chaoticwisdom, lunaballz, Algae, and smokingbomber for leaving your comments as well and in general, just taking the time to talk to me about my works!! It’s one of my favorite pastimes – other than the actual writing itself!

As usual, no proofreading because I’m not that patient outside of my classroom, so forgive typos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Usagi!” Ikuko shouted up the stairwell, knowing the silence upstairs meant that her daughter had yet to greet the day.

The housewife continued washing dishes, waiting for the eventual panicked scream of her daughter waking up without enough time to get through her morning routine.

“Usagi!” she screamed again, when her calls were meant with continued silence.

With a sigh she tossed the sponge into the soapy water, and made her way up the stairs. She smothered her irritation, this was the first time in weeks she had needed to wake her daughter up. This used to be an everyday battle. She should have expected a relapse or two.

“Usagi?” she called softly as she cracked open the door to her daughter’s bedroom.

She jumped in surprise and pushed the door the rest of the way open – the room was actually clean! Books on shelves, clothes in the hamper, knick-knacks and stuffed animals displayed from nooks and windowsills.

The room only missing one thing – her golden haired daughter was nowhere to be found.

Even the bed was neatly made.

Ikuko shook her head in shock. Could the girl actually have left before she herself got up for the day? She had been up since six and Usagi’s alarm was usually set for a quarter to seven – though in the past she actually got herself out of bed a solid hour after that. The idea of the girl up before six seemed impossible!

But what other explanation was there?

She tried to make herself smile - her girl was finally growing up, becoming responsible and dependable.

But she couldn’t press away the sudden anxiety that rose in her chest. Usagi had been doing
incredibly well by all external measures. She was getting up in the morning, her test scores and grades had improved remarkably, and she had become ever so polite and cooperative at home without her usual whining about chores or bedtimes. But the teenager seemed distant, and reserved in a way that was just not normal for her daughter. Ikuko wracked her brain trying to remember the last time she heard Usagi laugh.

Ikuko greeted her younger son, Shingo brightly when he descended sleepily an hour later for breakfast. She stuffed his face full of pancakes and juice before sending out the door and off to school. She smiled wistfully, remembering a time when her older daughter still allowed her to dote on her in a similar fashion.

With both children out of the house, Ikuko forced herself to continue her chores, she rationalized away her fears. Certainly Usagi was just going through a phase where she suddenly realized how important school was. Her daughter taking her future seriously was definitely not a bad thing. She was being silly – an overprotective mother was all.

She jumped out of her skin when the phone rang. She made herself take a deep breath to calm herself before answering.

“Tsukino residence.”

“May I please speak to the parents of Tsukino Usagi?” the small voice spoke from the receiver.

“This is her mother.”

“Good morning Tsukino-san. I was calling to talk to you about your duaghter’s attendance. She hasn’t been here all week and since her absence has not been excused, it is school policy to...”

Ikuko wasn’t listening anymore. Her mind had seized onto one fact.

Her daughter wasn’t at school.

So where was she?

...

Usagi sat against a concrete wall barely aware of the uneven ridges and bumps digging into her back, in an alleyway between an apartment building and the adjacent food market. She had found a similar hideout in the city far away from everyone she knew for the last three days in a row, going home only to eat dinner and to make a show of going to bed, so that her family didn’t ask questions before she snuck out again as soon as everyone had fallen asleep.

She only kept her communicator with her so Luna contact her in the event of an attack, but there hadn’t been one.

She should have been at school – or at least patrolling, but she couldn’t face any of it. Dark dead eyes stared up at her everytime she let her eyelids fall closed. The boy, just a kid like her in school trying to figure out life, hadn’t made it. She hadn't saved him.

She should have been able to save him! She had been distracted and overwhelmed by the minions. She should have leapt away immediately when she saw them. Took them out from a distance with a single blast. She knew she could have done it – she did it before at the North Pole.

And if she hadn’t had the energy the vantage point would have at least allowed her to target the pink haired vampire bitch directly without the interference of the plants!
She struck her closed fist hard against the wall behind her, feeling her blood seeth with irrational anger. Why was it *her* job to save him in the first place? Didn’t the gods know that she was so incredibly ill-suited to all of this?

*You were the idiot that decided to take this all on your own, her mind whispered.*

She should have awakened the others as soon as the threat arrived.

But she couldn’t even face newspapers and televisions at the moment, terrified to see the boy’s face smiling back at her. Terrified that she would be given a name to match the dead eyes that haunted her. How was she going to face her senshi? They would know it was her fault, her failure.

*You really should know his name,* her mind back-tracked. *He deserves at least that much attention from you.*

She wished she could cry – she should’ve been able to cry. She was *always* able to cry.

But the tears refused to fall.

She needed to call Luna. Needed to tell her that they had to awaken the others. They would be so angry with her, but it didn’t matter. It needed to be done.

Tomorrow, tomorrow was surely soon enough.

*That’s what you said yesterday,* her conscience mocked.

She jumped to her feet in disgust, suddenly not able to stand her own presence.

She had to get away.

So she ran.

Out of the alley and through the street, sparing no attention for the cars that swerved to miss her. Once on the other side of the street, she channeled her supernatural strength even into her untransformed body and leapt.

She landed on the three-story rooftop and then continued to leap from building to building until there were no more rooftops. She ran through forests, across small arching bridges, and over gently rolling hills. It didn’t matter. And when she was beyond exhausted, she pulled from the crystal she held within her and kept going.

At some point she realized she had actually transformed without thinking about it.

But it didn’t matter. She continued to run until the seemingly endless amounts of silver energy gave out and the air had escaped her lungs.

She fell to her knees, not recognizing or caring where she was. Not noticing the winding cobblestone path that wove through lakes of green. Or the trees overhead that whispered in the wind. No, she missed the natural beauty that surrounded her, fell to her knees, and sobbed. Finally the tears fell with violent ugly convulsions as she gasped for air.

Far too quickly her grief turned to anger. A growing heat at her forehead replaced the tears falling down her cheeks. She flung the suddenly white hot tiara away from her blindly. She had no target. Why should she? She just needed to lash out – to destroy *something*!

The crown flew away at impossible speeds a wave of white hot destruction in it’s wake.
She stood frozen in shock, her anger and guilt forgotten momentarily, at the scorching black path that stood about thirty meters wide that stretched as far as she could see.

A full minute or two later the tiara returned and she caught it reflexively, still taking in the destruction she had caused.

*How did I do that?*

More importantly, could she do it again? She crouched down her hand brushing over the top of the charred remains of the field of wild grasses regretfully. At least, she knew the technique worked effectively against plants. And lots of them at once!

Maybe… she wouldn’t have to awaken her friends afterall.

…

The synthetic music drifted into his dreams. The sound of a tray of dishes crashing to the floor woke him up.

He jolted awake, immediately took in the familiar, if unexpected, surroundings.

He was in the backroom of the arcade again.

He didn’t remember how he had gotten there. He raked his hand through his hair, trying to remember the events of the previous evening, but couldn’t do it.

He tried to come to his feet – only to fall backwards as his knees buckled beneath him unwilling to support his weight.

His head swam with the neverending exhaustion.

*There had been a girl… Was it Saori? Or Natsumi? No, the girl had been blond.*

He managed to stumble up the stairs onto the arcade floor and onto his usual stool, feeling like death.

“You look as awful as I feel,” a tired voice greeted him. “Motoki-oniisan!” she called demandingly. “Your best friend and favorite customer are both in desperate need of some caffeine!”

His friend appeared from behind a swinging door with a bright smile. Mamoru groaned at his friend’s face – which was far too awake.

“What happened to the pair of you?” Motoki demanded, his neverending smile actually faltering. “I haven’t seen either of you in days!”


“And chocolate!” Usagi echoed in a mockingly similar gruff voice.

Motoki laughed and scurried away.

Mamoru watched her as she buried her face in her arms. Suddenly his own fatigue was forgotten as he stared in concern at the little rabbit.

“You okay Odango?” he whispered softly.
She peeked one eye over her arm and considered him stoically. He was certain she wasn’t going to answer. But then she smiled.

It was a social smile – meant for his benefit. It did not reach her eyes.

“I’m fine!” she said brightly. “My life is a peach! Just tired,” she assured him. “What about you? You look like you haven’t slept in days. Out rescuing helpless maidens under the moonlight?” she accused delightfully.

“What?” he asked, dumbfounded. The random question made no sense to him in his near coma like mental capacity.

“I just wanted to say thank you,” she whispered sadly.

He smiled, her mere presence seemed to be bringing the life back into his bones. “For what Odango?”

Her smile faltered. “For the other night,” she said as if he should know exactly what he was talking about.

He didn’t have a clue. Did she know where he was the night before? Or the day before that? Motoki said he hadn’t seen him in days. But Mamoru could have sworn he had been here just yesterday. How many days had he lost?

He took in his companion’s identical golden streamers. Could she be the blond?

Motoki comes back with their regular orders.

He watched as Usagi gulped down the hot beverage without a second’s hesitation.

He followed suit. “What about other night?” he asked casually hoping for some clues about his lost time.

“For saving me from mortal peril…?” she squeaked throwing him an uncertain look.

His pulse quickened as he looked up in alarm. “Usagi-chan! What happened? Are you okay?” he demanded urgently.

“I’m fine!” she insisted waving away his concern. “Stop being so melodramatic Mamoru-kun. I just… meant that… your tutoring saved me from the pop quiz Haruna-sensei surprised us with today!”

“Oh!” he felt his body loosen in relief. What trouble could an innocent girl like Usagi get mixed up in anyway? He worried too much. He had been up late tutoring Usagi?

“I’m glad!” he said, his smile returning.

But his heart still raced. Why couldn’t he remember any of it?

He looked up in that moment, he felt caught in her crystal blue gaze that seemed to pull him from the last of his malaise.

She stood unnaturally stiff with her back to him. Golden streamers shining in the moonlight.

“You can stop pretending,” he whispered, offering a white-gloved hand on her shoulder as emotional support, though he was ready to provide the physical support he knew she needed as
well. “They’re gone.”

*She slumped into his arms in relief.*

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“For?”

“For saving me again.”

“That’s not something you ever have to thank me for.”

“Mamoru-kun!” the voice cooed, breaking the flash.

He glanced up startled and found himself lost in a different gaze – red garnet pools seemed to excite the very blood pumping through his veins.

“So glad I ran into you! I was wondering if we might continue… where we left off?” she suggested biting her lower lip as garnet eyes pierced his own from under dark lashes.

*She came forward again and allowed her hands to dance all over him, leaving liquid fire in their wake wherever she touched. His whole body vibrated – he felt taut like an overstrained violin string about to snap.*

*He bit his lip to suppress the moans from escaping his throat. Blood dribbled down his chin, but he barely noticed the hot liquid or the resulting pain, too overridden by the impossible heat that built in his groin. It should have exploded already, but somehow she held him on the edge – pushing him further and further than he had ever been.*

*He couldn’t think.*

*He couldn’t remember his own name.*

*All that mattered was her. And following her wishes so she would never stop pleasuring him.*

“I would enjoy that immensely Natsumi-chan,” he agreed readily with an uncontrolled eager grin, offering her a hand.

…

Usagi sat stiffly as she watched Mamoru forget her existence and follow Natsumi to another booth. Her stomach writhed like it had to play hotel to a myriad of crawling insects and her throat clenched threatening to close and cut off all her air. But her eyes were strangely dry.

Where had the crybaby Usagi gone?

He hadn’t just left with her as before. His face had genuinely lit up when he noticed her presence. With a smile that *she* hadn’t seen in months.

Maybe that was it though, she thought as she continued to watch him. He was tired, she knew, taking in the bags under his eyes, the slump of his shoulders, not to mention the wrinkled clothes. And that worried her.

Acting as a secret superhero vigilante would do that to a person, she knew only too well. But he didn’t seem to react at all when she had accused him of saving damsels in the night. So was she even sure he was the Moonlight Knight that had come to her rescue?
Her arms clamped unhappily around her perturbed stomach as she tried once again to make sense of her feelings that wouldn’t allow her to cry. Because as exhausted as he clearly was, that smile had been genuine.

If Natsumi made him happy, Usagi wouldn’t let herself stand in the way of that. And she couldn’t be angry with him. He didn’t know.

He didn’t remember…

“Usagi, we need to talk.”

She closed her eyes against the intrusion, refusing to acknowledge the black and white felines sitting at her feet.

She didn’t want to have this conversation.

Not now.

The blond forced herself to nod anyway and followed her guardians into the back entrance of their headquarters.

“I know what you’re going to say, but you’re wrong,” Usagi began before her advisors could begin. “This changes nothing! I just was caught off guard and wasn’t ready to face so many, but I’ve already started practicing this new move. I know I didn’t save the boy, but I will be ready from now on.”

“Usagi-chan, what about the girl?” Luna asked her gently.

“Girl?” she repeated dumbly.

“There was a second victim if you recall,” Artemis reported softly.

Usagi felt the blood drain from her face at the news. She had forgotten the second location completely.

And for the third time that day, she found herself wondering how it was possible that she wasn’t crying.

The guilt crashed down on her like a ton of bricks. She hadn’t even known… hadn’t heard the news. She should have remembered.

But then the resentment flared up again.

Why were these enemies so determined to ruin her life and all of her friends?

She felt more determined than ever to keep them out of it.

“If I master this new move, I can get to a second encounter in less than two minutes,” she argued. “Surely that is enough! They can’t target three individuals – I’ve only ever encountered the two of them – one is blue and the other pink.”

“Usagi,” Luna began gently. “That…”

“This isn’t about you!” Artemis interrupted harshly. “Or even the girls! You cannot afford to be selfish!
“I am *not* being selfish!” she screamed.

“Usagi-chan,” the black cat interjected more softly. “People have died and more will continue to do so if we don’t make decisions based on what is best for the city.”

“I’ll do better,” she insisted. “I’ll start patrolling more often. Come up with tactics and battle plans to end engagements quickly.”

“No matter how responsible you are Usagi-chan, the simple fact of the matter is you cannot be in two places at once,” the white Mauan insisted.

She glared at him defiantly.

“Please wait – at least until I show you my new ability. Then we can have this conversation again.”

“This is a *mistake,*” he said mournfully. “You will regret it.”

…

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, Usagi’s being irrational… but that’s why the chapter is called Denial! This though process is totally modeled after me when I have to do something that is really really important and just don’t want to so I avoid it like the plague!! Until some sixteen year old girl shows up and says “Hey Miss! You NEED to do this! You’re not allowed to drop the ball on this.” And when I get reminders from teenagers about things I’ve neglected I KNOW that I have no choice but to get my butt in gear! (This actually happened this week… maybe that’s why this chapter was so easy to write…)

I doubt the next chapter will get posted as quickly… but hey! You never know!
I just love the way her hair curls,” the red head sitting beside her chattered. “Do you think she wears curlers every night?”

Makoto nodded absently, barely listening to her lunch companion.

“I don’t know if I could take the time to do that every night,” Naru said with a sigh.

Makoto still didn’t comment, not able to bring herself to care about how much she looked, or didn’t look, like Ginga Natsumi. Instead, the dozing blunette on her other side stole her thoughts and attention.

Rumor had it that Mizuno Ami was sleeping through class and forgetting to do homework assignments. Makoto didn’t doubt the rumors, not when Ami could barely stay awake during the lunch hour. But she also couldn’t get her genius friend to talk either. The girl insisted that everything was fine and that nothing had changed.

Makoto snorted at her own thoughts. She hadn’t known Ami for long, but she knew that this level of constant fatigue was not normal. Not normal for anyone.

Then there was Usagi. The girl hadn’t stepped foot on the high school campus in over four days. She supposed that her friend might be home with some awful stomach bug or something, but Naru could not confirm this, so the tall brunette could not rationalize away her growing anxiety.

“Still…” Naru continued. “Maybe I could…”

“Naru-chan,” Makoto interrupted, “Have you heard from Usagi-chan?”

Naru answered the question with a sigh, her eyes dropped to her twiddling thumbs. “No. I called her mom, but Usagi wasn’t home.”

“Did she say where she…?”

“Usagi-chan!” Naru exclaimed leaping to her feet, seizing their suddenly not so absent friend in a breath ending hug.
And Makoto too, suddenly found her elusive smile.

“Where have you been Usagi-chan?!” Makoto demanded, taking her turn at an enthusiastic embrace, which hopefully took the sting out of her question. “We’ve missed you!”

“Hi Naru-chan, Mako-chan,” Usagi said softly. “I’m sorry I’ve been so absent. Just been dealing with some things.”

“Want to talk about it?” Naru offered eagerly.

Usagi shook her head gracefully with a small sad smile. “Maybe later,” then she turned to a sleepy Ami. Naru’s face fell, but she quickly erased her disappointment from her face.

“Hey Ami-chan!” the blond greeted brightly.

Ami turned blue sleepy eyes upward and gave a small smile before sleep captured her again. Usagi and Makoto both frowned.

Usagi sat on the ground again and prodded the blue-haired girl into a semblance of alertness, and the four girls chatted away.

It almost felt like things were normal, but Makoto was not fooled. Ami was still exhausted, Usagi distant, and Naru tried – unsuccessfully, in Makoto’s opinion – to hide her own hurt. Makoto herself felt the distress and worry that her friends were not okay. She needed to do something!

“How about we have a slumber party tonight at my place?” she burst into the conversation.

“Is it your birthday?” Naru asked brightly.

“Nope,” Makoto said brightly. “Just wanted my place to be more lively and warm for once.”

Naru laughed and turned to the others. “That sounds like fun! What do you all think?” she said, echoing Makoto’s invitation.

Usagi smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

Ami didn’t seem to even comprehend the question, her eyes remaining unfocused and lost.

“Ami-chan?” Usagi asked, her voice dripping with concern. “Are you alright?”

“Huh?” the other girl started, her eyes focusing on her friends.

“Ami-chan! You’re burning up!” Makoto noted, with a hand on her friend’s forehead.

“I’m fine!” the other girl snapped shrugged off the concerned hands. “I just don’t want to go to your stupid slumber party! I have better things to do.”

And with that Ami jumped to her feet, suddenly seemingly alive and alert with energy and left them all with her usual dignified grace.

Makoto turned confused eyes towards her other two friends. “What was that about?”

“I don’t know…” Usagi commented softly, rising to her own feet. “But I’m going to find out! Ami-chan!”

Naru sighed at Usagi’s departing figure.
“What’s wrong Naru-chan? I thought you would be thrilled to see Usagi again.”

“I am! It’s just…” the girl trailed off staring at the ground. She began absently plucking up blades of grass and throwing them aside.

“It’s just?” Makoto prompted when Naru did not continue.

Watery eyes looked up and met her own. “Promise me you won’t be angry?”

Makoto nodded without a second thought.

“I miss having Usagi all too myself,” she admitted. “It used to just be the two of us. And now our friend group has just exploded with you and Ami, and now, sometimes Minako. It’s nice!” she insisted. “It’s just… she used to tell me everything.”

“You think she’s not telling you something now?”

“I know she isn’t. Something’s going on and it’s killing her! I’m so worried and I want to be there for her, but I’m just also so angry with her! Why doesn’t she trust me anymore?”

“Perhaps she has a good reason for not sharing,” Makoto tried to assure her. “She doesn’t want to burden you.” But the brunetted didn’t really buy that explanation herself and it felt hollow even to her own ears.

And if Naru said something was going on with Usagi, then something was most likely going on with Usagi. The red head had known the girl longer than anyone. Which begged the question, what was going on that Usagi no longer confided in her oldest friend?

“That’s what I keep trying to convince myself, and if she said that maybe I could respect it. But she insists nothing is happening. She’s lying to my face. I feel like… I feel like I’ve lost her. And yet… I still worry and… I still want to help,” Naru choked out through her sudden tears.

Makoto enveloped the other girl in her arms and rocked her back and forth as her sobs intensified. Why would Usagi hurt her friend this way?

She thought of the visions Rei had shared with her and suddenly worried that whatever Usagi was involved in could be dangerous. Makoto had to figure out what it was. She wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if her friend was in danger and she hadn’t done all she could to protect her.

...

Usagi had combed through the entire school grounds both inside hallways and classrooms and every inch of the exterior with no sign of her blue haired genius friend. A few inquiries revealed that her peers were eager to gossip about the model student turned delinquent.

The blond frowned at the descriptions, more worried than ever and angry with herself for her extended absence. How could she not have known that something was bothering her friend? Even a week or two before, her Ami’s performance and habits had started to slip. Why hadn’t she tried more?

*Perhaps you had other things on your mind.* She dismissed the thought, intent on being there for Ami at least in this moment while she could.

A group of students near the school gate and informed her that Ami had just marched boldly through the school grounds, blatantly cutting the rest of the day. Usagi followed her example, more
determined than ever to find her friend.

She made it to the park before she realized that she really had nothing to go on. Where would Ami go if she wasn’t at school? There was the library and cram school, but somehow she doubted that Ami would frequent either location with the way she had been behaving today.

She wandered almost aimlessly through the park, lost in her thoughts when a familiar baritone laugh stole her attention. She whirled around, her vision filling with none other than Chiba Mamoru and his companion – the gorgeous Ginga Natsumi with her absolutely perfect hair and make up. Seriously, there was not even one fly away hair out of place. And her deep maroon eyes just seemed to sparkle with depth and mystery. Even her school uniform seemed to accentuate her curves in a way that if flattered no one else attending the high school.

“Mamoru-baka!” she yelled at him marching over to the couple, frustrated anger pumping through her veins.

He jumped, startled at her presence. “Odango,” he greeted with a smile. “Beautiful day isn’t it? Would you like to join us?” he said patting the grass beside him.

“What has happened to you?” she asked sadly, ignoring his companion completely. “You’re some kind of delinquent now? Or is it a play boy?”

“Just enjoying the weather,” he said defensively.


He blinked at her in confusion, remaining silent.

“Well?” she demanded furiously. How could he let some girl distract and consume him so completely? Especially a girl that was not her. Not that she would ever intentionally pull Mamoru away from his studies. That would be pulling him away from his dreams.

“How did you…?” he started to ask.

“Mamoru-kun is his own person!” Natsumi barked back at the same time. “He doesn’t have to answer to you! Or anyone else! Who are you, his mother?”

“No… I just…” she spluttered, trying to catch Mamoru’s eyes. But he had once again become focused on the girl between them. “Ugh! Nevermind, I don’t have time for this! Have either of you seen Ami?”

“Mizuno-san?” Natsumi repeated with narrowed eyes. “I think she went that way,” she pointed back the way Usagi had come.

Usagi grunted in acknowledgement before setting off in the indicated direction, unable to bring herself to thank her red-headed… nemesis, her mind filled in, when she truly wanted to strangle the other girl.

…

Minako walked down the Tokyo sidewalk at a leisurely pace munching through a toasted wheat bagel. She was so incredibly late to school that it didn’t matter. Her mother would kill her later, but
right now the older woman was out of town and wouldn’t know that her daughter had stayed up until five in the morning pouring over scribbled nonsensical notes in her notebooks that just kept appearing there.

Messages like ‘Hikawa Shrine – Friday 7:00 PM’, ‘Duty to protect’, and ‘You are their leader’ had a habit of popping up in her notebook. She had no idea who could be writing the notes. She originally suspected a classmate was messing with her, but the messages always seemed to appear at night.

Could she be writing them herself?

But then, where had the Sailor V manga come from?

So she had stayed up all night hoping to catch the gremlin in action, but it had just been her and Artemis curled up on the bed throughout the whole night.

Slightly creeped out, she hadn’t been able to sleep anyway. Well, not until sometime after five. So was it really a shock that she had managed to sleep until almost noon?

*What was the point in even going to school today,* she thought through a yawn.

She meandered past the park, and passed by a girl in an identical blue school uniform as her own who had fallen asleep on the bench.

*That* girl had the right idea, Minako thought to herself as she forced herself to continue on toward the school building.

She turned back with a doubletake, the other girl with her blue hair reminded her of Usagi’s friend, Mizuno Ami. But there was no way the academically focused girl would be caught outside during school hours.

She glanced backward doubtfully. Maybe that was Ami. She turned back to check on the girl when a boy approached her stealthily from behind, covering her eyes. The dark-haired boy was Ginga Seijuro. That meant, the girl was definitely Mizuno-san. What was going on?

Minako darted behind a tree to watch the exchange.

Ami’s usually serious face lit up in a smile as she pulled his hands from her eyes down into her lap.

“Seijuro-kun! How did you find me?” she greeted.

“I heard you had stormed out of the building,” he admitted. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Never better, now that you’re here!” she insisted brightly pulling him down into the seat beside her, entwining her fingers through his own. The couple fell into quiet whispering with the occasional shared giggle or laugh. His fingers seemed to trace patterns on the back of her arm and hand.

They looked adorable, and genuinely sweet on one another.

But the hairs on her arms and neck bristled. Something about it was just wrong…

“Mizuno-san!” Minako greeted as if she had just happened upon the couple. “What are you *doing* out here?” She grabbed the other girl’s hand and forced her to her feet. “I thought I was the only
The blond then broke into a run dragging the blushing blunette behind her.

“I will see you later Sieju-ro-kun,” the other girl called back through a giggle.

“I would love that,” he loudly agreed.

Minako urged both girls into a faster sprint, vowing to herself to talk to Usagi about Seijuro after school, certain that Ami would be more receptive to the concern coming from her closest friend.

... 

*She stood alongside her three sisters in arms. Her golden counterpart gestured a command.*

She nodded stiffly to her commander and friend, acknowledging the order before stretching out her hands to the senshi on either side. She directed her fiery energy to one hand to bond with her smooth and collected icy sister. The crackling pulsing in her other hand signaled that the daughter of Zeus had joined their link seconds later.

*Their golden leader was the last to bring her warm glowing light to the circle. Then moonlight caressed her sizzling skin adding even more energy to the collection of raw elemental power that roared through and beyond their veins.*

*The daughter of Aries prayed it would be enough to protect their charge.*

*Either way, it would cost them everything...*

Rei shook herself out of the vision and glared at the Sacred Fire that danced before her mockingly. Why did it show her the same vision again and again? She wanted answers and explanations! It had never failed her before. Why was it being so difficult now?

“It has already given you the answers you seek.”

Rei jumped a mile at her grandfather’s voice, her heart suddenly pounding.

“Grandpa! Don’t do that!” she admonished. “Why...?” she started to ask. He never interrupted her meditations, but then what he said registered. “What do you mean?”

“You keep seeing the same vision,” he stated as if it was fact. How did he know that?

“You meditate for hours longer than usual and you come out of it frustrated and less centered. This is unhealthy granddaughter.”

“But...”

“It is also unproductive,” he continued before she could object. “If the Sacred Fire has given you all that it has to offer, you must now redirect your attention to the actual world around us in order to understand the wisdom the fire has granted you.”

“You’re saying you want me to get off my ass and spend sometime outside?” she summarized with a grin.

His serious demeanor dissolved into his usual humor. “Something like that,” he agreed.

“Fine! I will take my aggravating and impatient self from your presence for the afternoon,” she
grumbled feeling slightly guilty for having rubbed both her grandfather’s and Yuichiro’s nerves raw all week.

“Rei-chan, I offer you this advice because it is good advice,” he insisted. “I have long ago learned to tolerate your bouts of temperamental tantrums,” he said with a straight face.

“Tantrums?” she repeated in disbelief. “Tantrums?”

But he was laughing as he departed unfazed by her objection. She sat for another ten minutes glaring at the unhelpful fire before admitting that her grandfather was most likely right. He usually was when it came to matters of spirit.

One of his more irritating qualities.

So she ended up wandering down the temple’s steps into the “world” has her grandfather referred to life outside the shrine, with no destination in mind. Just breathing in the fresh cool air of early spring. The quiet afternoon slowly morphed into the bustle of passing traffic and increasing density of pedestrians as she walked away from the temple’s natural refuge and into the heart of the city.

Suddenly a pair of blond pigtails stood out a dozen meters ahead as the girl darted around a corner and the miko sped up to follow knowing instinctively that the mysterious girl that knew her name could shed light on the ‘answers the fire had already given.’

A firm hand on her shoulder stopped her in her tracks just as she made it to the corner. The raven-haired girl whirled around to face a different blue-eyed blond with a red ribbon in her hair wearing the blue uniform that signified she attended the same high school as her quarry.

“Why are you following her?” the blond demanded, with hard eyes. Eyes filled with duty and burdens beyond her years.

Rei felt dizzy as her the vision that plagued her surfaced in her mind again. She stared at the cold blue eyes before her with sudden recognition.

“It’s you!” Rei greeted, suddenly delighted. “You’re the last one!”

“Last one what?” the blond questioned in confusion, her hostility suddenly lessened.

“You’re in my visions,” the miko admitted softly expecting the other girl to bolt.

The blond actually loosened in relief, “You’re having them too?”

Rei froze for just a second before her heart leapt with hope. Makoto had heard her out, but this new girl might actually believe her.

“What have you seen?” Rei asked barely able to suppress the urgency with which she needed to know.

“I don’t know… it’s in pieces. There’s a girl – she makes me think of the moon. I’m supposed to protect her.”

“We are supposed to protect her,” Rei corrected.

Minako nodded acknowledgment, not questioning the addition of this stranger. “There’s four of us,” she said hesitantly.

“Yes! We’re in the snow and ice at night with the moonlight. We face an army.”
“But we lose,” the blond concluded sadly.

Rei nodded. “I think that we do, but maybe we don’t have to again.”

“Again?”

“I think it’s happening again. Now.”

The blond nodded in agreement. “I’m Aino Minako by the way,” she said with a slight bow of her head and a friendly smile.

“Hino Rei,” the miko filled in immediately. “I work for my grandfather up at the Hikawa Shrine.”

“Did you say Hikawa Shrine?”

“Yes… why?”

“It’s nothing… it’s just it has been… uh… suggested that I head up there to make some sense of all this.”

Rei laughed. “I was just kicked out of the shrine for the exact same reason! Perhaps we were meant to meet!”

“Most likely,” Minako agreed. “So why were you following Usagi?”

“She’s the key to all this,” Rei insisted. “I think she’s the girl we have to protect. Meeting her triggered my first visions and she’s been central to a lot of them. But now we’ve lost her.”

“Nonsense! If I know that girl at all she’s heading to the arcade to get a milkshake after a long day!”

…

Chapter End Notes

This chapter fought me tooth and nail! (Hopefully, the only evidence of that is the length of time it took to update!) So many times during my writing process I had to stop and start a scene over because the characters weren’t acting like themselves!! But a few full nights of actual sleep helped me recreate the scenes in all their magic! Thanks for your patience and continued support! I’m SO excited about the next three chapters as I’ve been working on and building towards them since I started this story!

**SQUEALS**
Anger

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to HyenaYu, AimlesslyGera, and that wonderful guest at fanfiction dot net AND chaoticwisdom (she’s actually IS on both sites), Algae, Sandrelene_Moon, lunaballz at Archive of Our Own for your thoughts, comments, and reviews!! They are all like mini-muses!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Usagi seized the chocolate shake that the blond arcade worker had just placed before her. She managed to gulp through it in record time. And held up the empty glass to Motoki before he had even managed to walk away. He laughed at her pleading eyes.

“A second double fudge chocolate shake with extra cherries, coming up!”

Usagi met this announcement with a beaming smile that she held until he turned away. Then the expression dissolved into a dejected sigh, wishing for the days when a chocolate milkshake or two was all it took to turn her day around.

The blond absently glanced up at the door chime that announced the arrival of teenagers ready to spend away their weekly allowance. She envied the carefree eagerness of her peers as they approached the giant game consoles. That used to be her… before Luna had ruined everything with her gift of awareness.

She felt guilty at the thought. It wasn’t Luna’s fault. The feline was just the messenger. Where was her guardian anyway, she wondered glancing up at the clock. Didn’t she know that the arcade was a pain point for the young heroine? Didn’t she know that pretending to be a carefree lighthearted teenager was exhausting?

The door chimed again and she glanced up automatically. But the unexpected duo of Minako and Rei standing together, eyes searching the room systematically before they landed on her, sent her nerves into summersaults. How did they even know each other?

“Hey guys,” she greeted casually as they approached her booth. “I didn’t realize that you knew each other.”

“It’s a recent thing,” Rei explained stiffly. Usagi suppressed a sigh – her raven haired friend was preparing for a confrontation. “We apparently have some weird things in common.”

“Yeah, and just totally hit it off! Like two bugs in a pod,” Minako added brightly.

Rei gave the other blond a strange look.

Usagi grinned. Minako could never get the clichés right. “Things like what?” she asked before clamping down on the straw to take another gulp of her shake to mask her unease.

“Apparently we’re super soldiers that battle undead armies in the artic,” Minako stated as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.
Usagi choked on the chocolate smoothie. “What?” she managed through her sudden coughing fit. “Is this a manga or something?”

The two girls eyed her stoically.

“No, it’s not from a manga. It is very real,” Rei insisted seriously. Usagi felt her tension ease a bit. The girls were not certain. Rei was ready to convince her. They didn’t remember – at least not yet. If they had, Usagi knew that the miko would have been pissed.

“More like our dreams,” Minako filled in. “We both had dreams of standing side by side with others preparing to defend… someone… from an army.”

“Of undead?” Usagi prompted.

Rei shook her head taking over the telling. “Not undead. They are not human. They are faceless endless soldiers of our enemy.”

“Really? That sounds like a nightmare!” Usagi cooed sympathetically, realizing she should not be prompting them to fill in more details.

“What can you tell us about it?” Rei asked.

“Me? How would I know anything about it?” she asked. Usagi wondered why she continued to fight against their surfacing memories. Part of her, the selfish part, wanted her friends back. She didn’t want to carry this burden alone.

But she didn’t want anyone else to have to bare it either. Certainly not her friends and senshi.

“You’re in the dream,” Rei said insistently.

“So what? It’s a dream,” she declared dismissively.

“Usagi-chan,” Minako insisted, “It’s not just a dream. We are remembering something. You’re involved. It’s important. Try to remember.”

Usagi closed her eyes against the pleading tone. She knew the girls felt lost and out of place, but wasn’t that better than the possibility of injury and death to defend against youmas all the time? “Minako-chan, I wish I had something to tell you, but I don’t know what your or Rei’s visions mean.”

“We never called them visions,” Rei seized onto that detail.

“Dreams, visions – same difference,” Usagi insisted, waving away the semantics, inwardly cursing her choice of words.

“Why are you trying to discourage us?” Rei demanded.

Usagi froze, wracking her brain for something anything to say, but she could think of no reason why her usual bubbly self would be skeptical. In another lifetime she probably would have reacted with fascinated awe. Of course, they didn’t know her that well. At least not consciously.

“You know something,” Rei said. It was not a question.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the blond said firmly, but she couldn’t meet the other girl’s eyes.
“How did you know my name Usagi-chan? We had never met before that I could recall, but at the shrine you knew my name.”

“Your grandfather told me,” Usagi lied quickly.

“I showed him your picture and he said he had never seen you before,” Rei countered.

“He probably didn’t remember me. I imagine you get a lot of visitors at the shrine.”

“Why are you lying?” Rei snapped. “You totally know what’s going on, don’t you? You know what it is that we can’t remember.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about Rei-chan.”

“You do!” Rei insisted like a broken record.

“Usagi-chan, please tell us,” Minako echoed. “Or at least why you don’t want us to remember.”

“Do you realize how crazy you sound right now?” Usagi fired back. “You’re both basically saying that you’re having some kind of shared dream. And because I’m skeptical, that means I must know something? And you’re going to beat it out of me? Couldn’t it just be that? Just a dream?”

Rei screamed in frustration. “Why are you always so infuriating?” the miko demanded.

“What do you mean ‘always’?” Minako asked. Rei blinked. “I have no idea!” But she turned burning eyes toward Usagi. “But I know that you do!”

“Rei-chan, I really do want to help you,” Usagi said with complete and utter sincerity.

“You don’t!” the miko shouted one last time before storming away from the booth.

“But I do,” Usagi whispered. Minako stared at her silently for a long moment. Usagi couldn’t maintain eye contact.

“You do know something,” Minako concluded.

“Minako,” Usagi said softly with a begging whining tone in her voice that probably undid her case more than anything she had actually said.

“Nothing so special,” Usagi contradicted bitterly.

Minako sighed. “Can I talk to you about something else Usagi-chan?”

“What is it?” Usagi asked, seizing onto the change of subject.

“I’m really worried about Ami-chan,” she confided.

“You and me both!” Usagi agreed vehemently.

“Well, more specifically I’m worried about her hanging around Ginga Seijuro.”

Startled blue eyes jumped up to meet her friend’s. “What do you mean Minako-chan? He’s the
perfect gentleman! And a good student! And goodness knows that Ami-chan deserves the attention!”

“Usagi-chan. There’s something about him. I know he seems charming, but there’s something… it’s just not right. Watch out for her okay? She doesn’t deserve to be hurt either.”

Usagi nodded carefully. If she trusted anyone in matters of the heart, it was Minako.

…

She wandered down the path through the park towards home, having given up on waiting for Luna after the confrontation with the girls. She moved sluggishly, in no hurry just frustrated with herself and the girls. She wished she could make them understand without risking their lives.

Her wandering eyes landed on a familiar dark haired man sitting on a bench and she automatically moved towards him intending to seek comfort and reassurance.

She made it two steps before she stopped herself. He didn’t remember either.

She closed her eyes and willed herself not to cry.

“Mamo-chan,” she greeted. “I’m having the worst week.”

“How can I make it better Usako?”

She leaned into his embrace.

“Just hold me,” she whispered.

She opened her eyes to catch him staring at her and she felt compelled forward again, like two magnets of opposite poles that just had to be in contact. Maybe he didn’t have to remember everything. She could still confide in him. At least some things. She might even be able to steal a hug if she surprised him.

She felt herself smiling as his dark cobalt eyes held her in his gaze.

Just as suddenly their connection was interrupted by another girl who stood directly in front of him. A girl with brown red hair and deep garnets for eyes.

The blond marched determinedly away.

…

She went home and immediately dialed the number of her genius friend.

“Mizuno household,” was the automatic formal greeting.

“Ami-chan!” Usagi greeted into the phone brightly. “Where’d you disappear to? I searched everywhere!”

“I went to class Usagi-chan,” the other girl said coldly. Usagi winced at her icy reception.

“You did? What about before that?” Usagi cooed trying to pretend like she was clueless to her friend’s anger. “Rumor has it that you met up with Seijuro-kun!”

“My private life is none of your concern Tsukino-san.”
“I was just excited for you Ami-chan! Wanted to know the details!”

“You were not! You’re angry that I’m dating your ex,” the other girl contradicted.

“That is not true!” Usagi insisted. “I will admit that I miss you. And whatever it is that I’ve done, I’m sorry!”

“You’re the one that’s been gone!” Ami accused. Usagi winced, but barreled on anyway.

“That doesn’t mean I haven’t been worried about you! You don’t usually get so involved with people so quickly. You’re usually way more cautious. And you’ve seemed really… tired today,” she filled in rapidly, thinking that neither ‘moody’ nor ‘ill’ would have gone over well.

“You don’t know me Tsukino-san. And you don’t understand what it’s like to be in love so completely! I would do anything for him.”

Usagi cringed at her words. Minako was right. Something was wrong. “Ami-chan, you’re scaring me. You don’t even know him.”

“I know all I need to. You had your chance. You won’t ruin mine.”

“Ami-chan! Calm down!”

But the other girl had already hung up the phone.

Usagi didn’t bother calling her back. Neither Ami nor herself were in any frame of mind to talk things out. Perhaps tomorrow after some sleep, but in the meantime she could call Makoto and see what the hell had happened in the last week.

“Usagi-chan!” the other girl said excitedly. “Just the person I wanted to talk to!”

The blond couldn’t help but smile. At least one of the girls wasn’t mad at her.

“Hey Mako-chan, how have things been this week?”

“They’ve been alright. Truly boring without you. Actually, I wanted to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“Naru-chan is feeling really hurt and abandoned. You don’t have to tell me what’s going on if you don’t want to, but she really is convinced that something’s going on with you and it would mean the world to her if you could confide in her again.”

Her smile dissolved. Her secrecy had hurt even Naru. But she knew that it would. But Naru was one person she would not ever put in danger.

“I swear nothing’s going on. Just been a little down and depressed lately. I don’t have a reason for it,” Usagi tried to explain.

“Usagi-chan, don’t insult my intelligence. It’s okay. I already told you that you don’t have to tell me. But please, trust Naru-chan. She’s been your friend since like pre-school!”

“Mako-chan, Naru-chan doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“You can’t really expect me to believe that nothing’s going on. You were gone for a week. You were distant before that. You may not realize, but I’ve been in some pretty awful life scenarios and
I know what coping with that kind of thing can look like.”

Usagi cringed thinking of Makoto growing up alone after the death of her parents. Of all the bullies she actively sought out to release some of her anger.

“Usagi?” the other girl prompted from the silence.

“I guess I’m saying that this is nothing that Naru can understand,” Usagi backpedaled honestly.

“What about me?”

The blond froze, not expecting the question, and having no idea what to say. Of course Makoto could understand – even without her memories. She was a tough girl.

“We’re worried about you Usagi-chan, but if you’re not willing to tell us what’s going on it’s hard to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“Well, if that’s how you feel, I can’t exactly change your mind.”

“Is that all you can say?”

“What else do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just thought we were friends. That you were different.”

“Mako-chan…”

“I thought you would understand!” Makoto accused. “I thought you would care!”

“Mako-chan, it’s not like that!”

“I guess I was wrong.”

“Mako-chan!”

Her ears were met with a definitive click.

The blond heroine screamed in frustration and self loathing. It had felt so good to have all her friends back last week, but now they were all angry with her. She shoved the phone off the desk, it took half of the contents with it.

“Usagi?”

Her mother had just come in the front door. The blond cursed at the woman’s timing. She walked directly into the study her groceries still in hand and glanced harshly at the debris on the floor.

Usagi braced herself for the reprimand.

“You didn’t come home last night,” it was not a question.

“Technically, I did,” Usagi countered distantly. “I just left again three hours later.”

“Why?”

She couldn’t tell her mom that she hadn’t been able to sleep because whenever she did she had nightmares of a teenage boy that she had killed. She couldn’t tell her mother that she was a superhero vigilante that fought against alien succubi at a second’s notice.
So she remained stoically silent. She didn’t want to lie anymore.

“Tsukino Usagi! I have no idea who you are anymore! You are not my sweet carefree daughter anymore! I know that you’ve never loved school, but now you’re ditching school and out of the house half the night! What am I supposed to think?” her mother demanded.

Usagi just took the verbal assault, feeling like she deserved it.

“Are you in some kind of trouble?”

Usagi barked a cynical laugh at the question. In so much trouble.

“Please,” her mother begged, her voice suddenly soft and entreating, “Please tell me what’s going on. Whatever it is it doesn’t matter. I’m your mother and I will love you no matter what.”

Usagi fought off tears and just shook her head violently.

“I don’t understand,” the older woman wepted. “What is so bad that you can’t tell me?”

“You can’t understand,” Usagi admitted softly, ready to confess her entire burden. Just at that moment her communicator went off saving her from her own weakness.

“I’m sorry Mama,” she whispered. “I have to go,” and she ran back out the door before her mother could stop her.

“Tsukino Usagi!” the older woman’s shrill voice followed her. “You need to get back here this instant!”

“I’m sorry Mama,” she cried as she ran. She had never wanted this – not any of it. She just didn’t have a choice.

...

Chapter End Notes

I swear I love you Usagi!! Life is just beyond hard sometimes!

The next chapter is sort’ve the beginning of the ending arc. So we’re getting there! Hopefully it will come together quickly so I can share it with you all!
“Ami-chan, you’re scaring me. You don’t even know him,” the small voice entreated. Ami’s grip around the plastic receiver tightened as she struggled to rein in her indignation. She had known Seijuro and Usagi for the same amount of time, and this girl had the audacity to think she knew better?

The blue haired genius was about to say as much when she glanced out the window. Her eyes landed on her sandy brown haired boyfriend who was smiling up at her. She felt instantly giddy and calm.

“I know all I need to. You had your chance. You won’t ruin mine,” Ami said coldly into the phone before determinedly pushing the receiver into its base and rushing out the door and down the stairs.

Seijuro had settled himself on a park bench across the street.

“Ugh! I can’t believe her nerve!” Ami exclaimed as she plugged herself into the seat beside him.

“Who are we talking about?” he asked with a patient smile.

“Usagi-chan had the nerve to say that I was being irresponsible! Usagi! Talk about hypocrisy!”

“Ami,” he whispered forcing her to turn her eyes to his stormy grey ones. Her mind went awhirl and she felt her agitation slip away. “Your friends are just jealous. They see what we have is something so special, they want that for themselves.”

“Exactly,” she breathed not thinking of her blond friend anymore, lost as she was in his hypnotic gaze.

“They should be green with envy,” he whispered into her ear giving her shivers. His lips caressed her hand gently sending shivers lancing up her arm with just the barest of contact.

“Let’s get out of here,” he whispered into her ear. “Go somewhere more private.”

She nodded eagerly in agreement and let him pull her to her feet.

…

The lunar senshi ran like a tornado was after her. She had never felt the compulsion so strongly. She could feel the seconds slipping by far too quickly as she pumped her legs faster than they had ever gone before.
“What do you want me to do Ami?” he whispered in her ear from behind, his hot breath sending electric shocks pulsing through her form. Her eyes shot open at the question, as she stared into his stormy grey eyes, feeling herself drowning.

It didn’t matter. She didn’t want to be rescued.

“Kiss me,” she responded with a confidence she never before had felt.

“Where?” he whispered, his hot breadth the only thing that tickled her flesh.

“Here,” she begged immediately laying a delicate finger on the curve of her neck, eager for the contact. His lips nipped at her bare skin sensually. She leaned into the rippling sensation, whimpering when he pulled away.

She didn’t wait for the question she knew was coming. “Kiss me again here,” she ordered, indicating one of her breasts. He chuckled at her eagerness, and tore her blouse open, buttons clinking to the cement ground beneath them. Her white lace bra followed seconds later, exposing the luscious mounds to the chill winter air.

Warm wet lips brought shelter from the cold, as they attacked one side, his right hand massaged the other. Her flesh melted in a delightful swimming sensation as he switched back and forth neglecting neither breast.

“And what do you desire now Ami-chan?”

Ami found herself wondering how he knew her so well. How he knew her fantasies as if he had experienced them himself. A distant part of her mind insisted that he should not be able to do this, but that part was so easy to ignore as the impossible pleasure built up in her mind and body.

She reassured herself that they would stop in a moment. It couldn’t hurt to let the physical sensations dance around her, for just a few more minutes.

She ordered him bring his magic to the side of her waist, and then her inner thighs, reveling in the impossible pleasure lancing up and down like electricity. She finally could not resist any longer and begged him to attend to the pulsing core that was now screaming for attention.

A hot tongue darted out making contact with the sensitive nerve bundle and she screamed in delight.

“Please don’t ever stop,” she begged. He chuckled, the vibrations only intensifying the pulsing waves of barely tolerable ecstasy.

“For as long as you live,” he promised.

She purred. She would hold him to that.

…

Sailor Moon darted into the alleyway and did not hesitate to pull the blushing pink succubus off her latest victim by the hair.

She stumbled backward in shock at the familiar half naked and delirious male before her.

“Mamo-chan?” the heroine whispered involuntarily darting forward to catch him before he
collapsed to the ground.

Her adversary struck her from behind with an unearthly shriek of rage, taking advantage of the distraction.

The blond heroine flipped around screaming in rage, her vision white as she threw a vicious punch, followed by a precise kick to the creature’s jaw. She began pummeling the monster with everything she had with blow after blow. She took immense satisfaction from every whimper and moan of pain. Her victim never had time to raise her own defenses.

Her tiara grew hot and she flung it at the bitch, reveling in the blood-curdling shriek that followed in the burning gold circlet’s wake.

…

Ali pulled away from his victim, screaming at the pain he felt through his link.

“En?” he whispered in horror, only too aware that what he felt was a diminished echo of what his lover experienced firsthand.

Ami whimpered pitifully, barely conscious at this point, as he pulled his ministrations away.

He allowed her form to carelessly fall to the ground, no longer able to support itself and instantly teleported to his true lover’s side.

…

Sailor Moon stood above the cowering pathetic succubus ready to strike her final blow. Before she could move, her partner appeared and instantly vanished with his comrade in his arms.

She didn’t spare them a thought, instead she ran to Mamoru’s side.

“She be okay,” she begged to the sky as silent tears poured from her eyes.

She turned his head toward her and he moaned, delirious and half unconscious. She laughed hysterically even as she cried, relieved that he was at least breathing. She counted each rise and fall of his chest obsessively even more relieved that they came easily and evenly. His pulse was strong.

His eyes blinked open and bore into her.

She smiled back and wiped his brow, “You’re going to be okay,” she whispered to him. “You have to be. I won’t forgive you if you leave me.”

His eyes swam in confusion.

“Sailor…”

She pressed a gloved finger to his lips to forestall his questions.

“Yeah! I’ll be right there! Just taking out the trash!”

Sailor Moon looked up towards the familiar voice and watched as Motoki stood before the two of them frozen in shock a large black trash bag suspended mid air, held by one hand.

Her communicator went off at that moment and she snapped it open.
“What?” she demanded angrily.

“What Sailor Moon, you’d better get here…”

The gentleness of Luna’s voice scared her.

“What is it?” she asked again.

“Just get here!”

The blond heroine turned to the part-timer. “You will take care of him?”

He nodded dumbly looking thunderstruck.

Had the situation not been urgent, Usagi probably would have felt his reaction to her presence hilarious.

As it was, Sailor Moon had no time to waster and hurried to Luna’s coordinates.

“Ami?!” she screeched in recognition, stumbling to the girl’s side. She, unlike Mamoru, showed no obvious signs of life.

“She’s still alive,” Luna reassured her. “But she’s in a coma… Like the others.”

The senshi held herself still, searching not acknowledging her tears, looking for the rise and fall of the chest. It was there, but so slow and meager. “C-can you call for an ambulance?”

“He already done,” Luna whispered. “If you want to stay with her, you should detransform.”

She let her fuku dissolve away and she held the other girl and rocked her waiting for help to arrive.

This was all her fault.

…

He slathered on the ointments even as he channeled all the energy he had just collected.

But she didn’t respond even to his mind-call.

He dipped into their reserves from the tree directly, and it helped. Her fractured bones began to knit themselves back together, but it wasn’t enough. She still did not awaken.

‘En!’ he begged mentally. ‘Please come back to me. I don’t know how to do this without you.’

He needed more, he realized.

He needed a kill.

…

Motoki dragged Mamoru onto the break room couch he had caught him on more than once in the last few weeks, his mind spinning with shock and sudden realization.

He couldn’t wake the college student. He was in the exact same exhausted state he had been in more than a few times in the past weeks. Motoki now knew beyond any doubt that his friend wasn’t taking anything or being drugged.
At least not with any illicit substances.

He was being attacked.

Maybe that’s why he had been so obsessed with this serial killer. He had been immersed in it since the beginning.

But how did Mamoru handle it better than the other reported victims? How was he able to sleep it off in a day or two while all the other victims were in comas or worse, dead? Or did it take multiple assaults?

He found himself wondering how many times his best friend had been attacked. And how stupid he was not to realize that something was seriously wrong.

And then, like a lightning bolt, Motoki knew who had hurt his friend.

“You need to wake up!” Motoki screamed, slapping his friend hard across his face.

...

Usagi stood next to the hospital bed, her friend’s delicate and limp hand clutched within her hand. Every time she looked at the blue-haired genius the guilt would hit her again like a strike to the gut. Her mind swirled with panic, anxiety, and a million and one ‘what-ifs’.

She had been so absent. Maybe if she had been around more Ami wouldn’t have withdrawn from everyone so completely. Maybe she wouldn’t have been in a dangerous without anyone knowing.

She should have gotten there faster. She had been so distracted by Mamoru, it never occurred to her that there was a second target. In all the previous encounters it never occurred to her that there was a second target to wrapped up in handing the situation in front of her.

Artemis was right. She couldn’t do this alone.

She dissolved into tears and crumpled into the chair at the bedside, still never releasing Ami’s hand.

If she had revived the others – if she had revived Sailor Mercury – perhaps Ami would have been able to defend herself.

She wanted to call Motoki and ask if he had seen Mamoru, but she didn’t know if she could pull off a casual call pretending that she had no idea that something was wrong. Plus, she was determined to give Ami her full attention.

Her communicator went off and she felt the panic rise up in her chest again. She couldn’t do this. She couldn’t face whatever heartache these villains had planned for her again. She couldn’t be Sailor Moon anymore.

But then she saw the sleeping Ami and her resolve hardened. She had no choice. She had to do this. How else could she ever be certain that all of her loved ones would be okay.

She tore herself away with an internal promise that she would be back. She would make things right again.

...

Naru swayed idly on a swing. She dragged the point of her toe through the sand below her creating
nonsensical lines on the ground. She felt so alone. Makoto was nice, but Naru didn’t know her that well yet. She missed Usagi. She sighed, wondering when it was that she had lost her best friend. And wondering what she had done wrong to lose that trust.

“It tears me apart to see a girl so sad.”

Naru looked up and lost herself in concerned grey blue eyes.

“H-hi Ginga-san,” she stammered in greeting.

“No need to be so formal Naru-chan. What’s wrong?” he asked taking a seat in the swing next to her.

Naru continued to sway for a moment before she spoke. “I’m worried about Usagi. She is… or… was my best friend. And I know something is up, but she won’t tell me…” she trailed off.

“I wish she would trust me,” she added softly, trying to stifle the sudden tears that sprang to her eyes.

“How terrible of her to not let you know. To cause this pain. You are her best friend!”

“I thought you liked Usagi,” she objected, startled by his instant condemnation of her friend.

“At first,” he admitted. “But I’ve realized she’s not really my type. You are far more compatible,” he assured with sparkling eyes and a small smirk.

She blushed and glanced nervously down into her hands. “Are you sure? I’m not pretty or lively like she is. And I thought you were dating Ami now!”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit Naru-chan!” he insisted taking the girl’s hand and pulling her to her feet.

“What about Ami?”

“She and I are finished,” he said tightly. “I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Oh! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to poke a sensitive wound.”

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s go have some fun. It doesn’t have to be a date. Just two friends having a good time.”

“O-okay,” she stammered, allowing the giddy happiness to bubble within her chest. It felt good to smile. If only for a moment.

Seijuro dragged her by the hand laughing delightedly and she could barely keep up as her laughter and the pace stole her breath away.

“Seijuro-san! Slow down!” she begged with an irrepressible smile.

She followed him into an alleyway and before she could respond, his lips had pressed into hers.

She tried to push him away startled his sudden advances, but he held her firm. His tongue insistently delved into her mouth. She soon lost herself in the overwhelming sensations and stopped fighting.

She moaned involuntarily as his mouth moved to her neck and then delved lower under her blouse.
Her blood seemed to pulse and surge towards his touch.

Kami-sama, she swore internally, suddenly understanding the obsession with sex.

Her white blouse and school vest had been thrown to the ground, exposing her bare chest and budding breasts to the chill afternoon air.

What am I doing?

Living, was the internal response. She had never felt anything so wonderful, she had never felt so completely alive.

And with that thought the last of her resistance and doubt dissolved and she surrendered completely. He moved lower, probing at her abdomen and then lower to her pulsing bundle of nerves. She felt herself relax completely as she never had before, like a baby sleeping on a cloud.

“Naru-chan!” the shrill panicked scream cut through everything.

The girl’s eyes fluttered open and she saw the creature on top of her, vines attached like leeches to her bare waist. She would have screamed, but her voice got lost along the way. The vines retracted and she fell to the ground. The life she had felt a second ago vanished and her body felt impossibly heavy. She couldn’t move.

Did Sailor Moon just say my name?

She looked up at the heroine who had shouted her name running toward the alien creature that had been on top of her moments before. The vigilante struck with a glowing golden discus, but her attacker vanished before the glowing orb could hit him. Then the heroine ran towards her and she realized that she recognized the girl’s bouncing hair and long strides.

“Usagi-chan?” she managed to croak when the girl kneeled down at her side. “So… that’s what… you were hiding…” she whispered taking in her best friend’s fuku, relieved that she finally understood why her best friend had been so distant lately. Her eyes burned with exhaustion but her friend was upset. This was not the time to sleep.

“Hush Naru-chan. Don’t try to talk,” her voice shook with tears.

“Why are you… crying Usagi-chan? This is… super cool…” she whispered reaching for the beautiful red bow at her friend’s chest.

She then looked down and saw gaping wound at her waist, blood oozing from where the vines had been attached moments before.

“Oh,” she said softly, in realization. Strange that it didn’t hurt. She just wanted to go to sleep.

She let her eyes fall closed.

“Naru-chan!” her friend screamed. And Naru tried to open her eyes again. She really did. But she didn’t have the strength. Usagi sounded so far away.

I’m sorry Usagi.

…

He had no idea how he knew where to find her, he only knew that when she needed him he knew exactly where he had to be.
He expected her to be in mortal peril with the compulsion so strong. He dropped down from the roof, a white cape billowing behind him, surprised to find her quite physically safe, rocking the body of a red headed girl.

She shook with wracking devastated sobs. He put a hand to her shoulder and squeezed.

“Sailor Moon?”

The heroine ignored him. She just continued rocking back and forth.

The girl in the heroine’s blood soaked arms lay mortally wounded with a gaping hole through her abdomen – showing no signs of life.

“You have to let her go,” he whispered into her ear.

She shook her head violently in objection and denial.

He could feel her pain – fresh, raw, and throbbing.

He heard the approaching sirens – the sound struck through him like a signal. He had to get her out of there.

He pulled her from the body. She struggled against him, fought him off distractedly as her cries jumped up an octave in an incoherent panic.

He ignored her flailing limbs and the emergency vehicles as they arrived, focused as he was on his charge. He knew what she needed more than she and remained determined. He was able to separate her from the body and hold her close, leaping away from the scene with his precious burden, her wracking form still convulsing in his arms.

He soared through the air leaping from building to building with supernatural strength. Before he landed near a lake. A lake that felt familiar to him, though he could not have articulated why.

He lowered her feet gently to the ground, but did not release her. She had never stopped crying through the whole journey, and she clung to him now as hard as she had tried to tear away from him before.

He stroked her hair and wiped away her tears from her cheeks for hours. Her cries would lessen on occasion, only to come back full force moments later. The evening falling sun turned into a night sky, and still he held and comforted her. No on words were spoken between them. Eventually her transformation dissolved and she fell into an exhausted sleep.

He took the ordinary seeming girl, who looked barely more than a child, especially in her sleep, into his embrace once again. He took her home, uncertain as to how he knew where that was, wrapped the soft pink comforter around her hoping it would shield her from her pain for just a few hours so she could recover and get some rest.

He watched over her for an hour longer, her ever-silent guardian, praying that when she awoke she would be just a little more at peace.

…

Chapter End Notes
Feels so good to get that out! Dying to know your reactions, so would appreciate if you took the time to share! My current outline has four more chapters though sometimes chapters get split in execution, but the point is we’re coming to a close. Those revelations and resolutions will start to manifest so you’re not hanging all the time!

Much love!
Grief

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your patience as I neglect my hobbies to close out yet another crazy school year. But the year is over now, so I can buckle down to what’s really important! Haha! Special thanks goes out to Sandreline_Moon, Chaoticwisdom, AlexSeanchai, lunaballz, Algae, adymlv, SMMSM92, slightlyxjaded, Mako-clb, and maryyorke for sharing your natural reactions and thoughts with me! To ijskonijntje, LoveInTheBattleField, HyenaYu, and isa1981 for your kind words! To Kera69love and TropicalRemix for your questions!! This helps me figure out what is unclear! And to Lady Winterlight for your suggestions – this gave me an idea!

And last, but not least, this chapter is dedicated to Sobakasu2 and her patience with and constant advice to aspiring authors even when they don’t want to hear it! And for checking up on me when I had disappeared. Much love!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This attack was different,” the white feline reported calmly. “Naru-chan didn’t die from the energy drain, though it certainly didn’t help. She died from the physical trauma caused by the method of the energy drain.”

Luna found herself nodding along, Artemis’s assessment lining up pretty much with her own. She glanced over at Usagi who eyes remained inattentive and glazed over.

“Are you even listening?” Artemis asked. Luna cringed at his impatient tone.

The blond’s eyes immediately cleared and zeroed in on her partner. “You said she died from her wounds. But what difference does that make?”

“There was something different about this attack Usagi-chan! It’s important that we figure out why.”

“She died because I was an idiot!” Usagi snapped back. “She died because I refused to awaken the others! You were right! I was selfish! And because I delayed before going out when you paged me because I was feeling guilty standing next to Ami at the hospital, Naru was killed!”

“I didn’t think it could get any worse!” her voice broke with an ugly cynical laugh. “How arrogant I was!”

“Usagi!” Luna shouted urgently to cut through the tirade. “This was not your fault. Yes, you made mistakes. We all did, but you did not kill Naru.”

“Might as well have,” Usagi bit back before stomping to her feet and storming out of the briefing before either Mauan could object.

“Usagi-chan!” Artemis called after her.
“Leave her alone Artemis,” Luna urged, nipping his ear affectionately. “She needs some time.”

“Do we have any?”

“I think we do. I have a theory as to why this attack was different.”

Ali held himself impossibly still watching ever so carefully for the rise and fall of his partner’s breathing, as if his attention alone could wake her. He caressed her marble green skin and watched as it flushed at his touch. Otherwise, she remained lifeless.

Even her psyche did not answer his mindcall. He kept trying again and again, but it was like screaming into an empty hall – only the echoes of his own words greeted him.

His form pulsed as he sent another wave of energy that her body soaked up like a plant in the desert. He felt himself wilt in response, as his own energy reserves sank to dangerously low levels.

He did not want to leave her, but he would have to return to the school.

He prayed to the tree of life, hoping for it’s warm embrace. But the colossal living creature remained cold and distant.

What had he done to be forsaken by his mother?

He had never felt so alone. The isolation terrified him.

What if En never woke up?

The raven-haired college student trudged to his normal seat on auto pilot, feeling more like death than usual – even the simple task of placing one leaden foot in front of the other stole all of his concentration. He flipped over the mug at his seat and rang the bell to get Motoki’s attention.

When the blond’s eyes landed on him, he indicated that he wanted his mug filled with a lazy gesture, his head’s attempt to pulse out his own skull made it difficult to form coherent words, let alone take in the chaotic colors and sounds around him.

“Mamoru, we need to talk.”

Motoki hadn’t even brought the coffee pot with him, Mamoru noted irritably.

Mamoru grunted by way of response. “Coffee?” he managed to croak holding up the empty cup.

“I think I know why you’re blacking out…”

Mamoru let the mug fall back to the counter, his eyes wide with surprise, his pounding headache suddenly less pressing.

“Well?” Mamoru prompted when his friend remained silent. “Go on.”

His oldest friend stared at him in silence, before finally wiping his nervous hands with his apron. “Uh… perhaps we should head back to the break room.”
Various types of beds, chairs, and medical equipment lined either side of the hospital corridor. Minako followed the thick warm yellow line in the center of the corridor that lead visitors through the passageways allowed to visitors, glancing up at every room number as she walked past, anticipating the approach to room 132.

The blond ducked into the correct room, unsurprised to find Usagi hovering over her genius friend with her back to the door. Ami did not look good. Her dark blue hair contrasted sharply with her deathly white palor. She was hooked up to various monitors and at least three IVs all delivering various types of fluids. A large glowing monitor overhead displayed her heart and breathing rate with glowing green and blue numbers and rhythmic ongoing graphs.

“I’m so sorry Ami-chan,” Usagi sobbed. “I didn’t get there in time. I wasn’t fast enough. If I had been just a minute earlier… If I had just let Luna revive all of you, maybe you would’ve been able to protect yourself.”

“Who’s Luna?” Minako interjected feeling guilty about eavesdropping on the heartfelt confession, but desperate to know.

Usagi turned to her startled and immediately burst into renewed tears. “I’m sorry Minako-chan. I should’ve done everything differently.”

Minako gasped for air as she suddenly found her arms filled with the other blond who shook with ugly wracking sobs. She wanted to ask a million questions at the admission, but she bit her tongue. Her new friend needed comfort and love, and nothing else had ever felt so important.

“You probably could’ve gotten there faster,” Usagi mumbled. “It’s…” her voice broke as she tried to continue, but couldn’t.

“Hush Usagi-chan, just let it out,” Minako urged as she rubbed the other girl’s back and stroked her hair.

“It’s all my fault,” she said as if Minako hadn’t said a word.

“Usa-chan! This is not your fault. You didn’t do this! Not any of it.”

The distraught girl just cried harder. “But I did!”

“Usa-chan, what are you talking about?” Minako asked gently, holding her breath and praying she would get some answers.

But her newest friend didn’t answer as she was overcome completely by convulsive sobs. Minako just made noverbal soothing sounds, determined not to press her broken friend.

…

Motoki had yet to say anything. He was pacing wildly back and forth and mumbling incoherently under his breath. Mamoru sighed, resisting the urge to rub his still throbbing temples.

“Motoki, please tell me you’re going to say something!”

“You were here,” Motoki said rapidly gesturing wildly to the couch where Mamoru sat as he continued paced back and forth. “And then… you weren’t you anymore.”

“Please tell me at some point that you will start making sense,” Mamoru ground out, beyond irritated at his normally sensible friend’s loss of rationality.
The arcade worker’s eyes lit up on a stack of newspapers, and he flipped past the topmost one, and pulled out yesterday’s edition before handing it to Mamoru.

Mamoru took in the front cover – it showed a shot of Sailor Moon, seemingly distraught, held by a man in what appeared to be a white flowing, almost Arabian looking outfit. It was one of the best close up pictures he had ever seen of Sailor Moon, and he felt his heart breaking at her obvious distress. What could have caused the resilient hero to fall apart so completely?

He touched a finger to her printed face, wishing he could wipe her tears away.

He jumped as Motoki pointed insistently at the man. “That’s you,” he declared.

“What?” Mamoru fired back in disbelief barely glancing at the white hooded figure. “You’re out of your mind.”

“I saw the transformation!” Motoki insisted. “Like I said, you were here, you were unconscious, but suddenly you were on your feet and you were him!”

Mamoru studied the picture, trying to see what Motoki did. Was it possible that he was some kind of superhero vigilante? But then, why couldn’t he remember any of it?

He found himself reading the accompanying story. Someone had died. A girl, by the name of Osaka Naru. Her picture was displayed on the second page of the story. He hissed in recognition.

“Have you seen Usagi?” he asked urgently, rising to his feet. The girl must be devastated. He could only imagine how much grief that girl was in and his heart broke again. She should never have to feel that kind of pain.

“You want to know if I’ve seen Usagi?! Mamoru-kun! Are you even listening to me?” Motoki demanded, his normal patience and good-natured tolerance nowhere to be found.

“I’m sorry. I just don’t think it’s possible that I could be this vigilante and not remember any of it,” Mamoru explained, allowing himself to fall back down to the couch. Motoki just stared at him, clearly looking for more words.

“There’s more,” the blond said after a moment’s silence. “You were attacked.”

“I… I was?” and even as the words escaped his lips he could see flashes of the lunar heroine standing over him. She had been crying and incredibly angry. He had never seen her that angry before.

Wait… what? Before?

“I might sort’ve remember that part,” he managed, ignoring his incomprehensible thoughts.

“Mamoru, I think it’s Natsumi.”

Mamoru shook his head in disagreement. “She’s just a high school girl.”

“Mamoru-kun, it’s her. You need to stay away from her.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“Think about it! Everytime you wake up not remembering what happened the night before, you had a date with Natumi.”
That wasn’t strictly true. More than once, he had been with Usagi – assuming she wasn’t lying to him anyway, which he wasn’t certain she wasn’t. She knew things… he didn’t understand how, but she wasn’t being honest about it.

But he didn’t suspect her of serial murders either. No, it couldn’t be Usagi or Natsumi.

It was more likely that he was being attacked on his way home after his dates.

…

Ikuko made herself move about the kitchen comforting herself in the familiar routine of putting together the evening meal. She willfully refused to think of her oldest child unconscious on living room couch.

“She’s grieving Tsukino-san, I would let her rest,” the blond girl Ikuko had never had the pleasure of meeting before had told her.

The worried mother still made a point of glancing through the doorway every few minutes to ensure her daughter was still there.

On the fifth round she was relieved to see the girl stirring.

“Oh good!” she greeted sweeping into the room before her elusive daughter could disappear. “You’re awake! Your friend told me that you have had a rotten day. So we can finish our conversation tomorrow,” she said stiffly. “But in the meantime, would you come help me with dinner? Your father should be home within an hour.”

Usagi didn’t move.

Ikuko chose not to comment, instead bumbling back to the kitchen trying to convince herself that everything would one day be okay again.

She was startled to catch tears falling down her cheeks, and suddenly she felt the need to not let the girl out of her sight, and rushed back to the living room.

“Are you still angry?” she asked sternly, at the girl who still sat unmoving on the couch. She sighed at the continued lack of response.

“Usagi, I only yelled at you because I want what is best for you,” the older woman said, trying to maintain some semblance of calm and serenity.

Usagi managed to sit up, shaking her head violently.

“Because I want to know what has hurt you so deeply,” the older women continued coming to her daughter’s side and stroking her hair. Immediately she took note of Usagi’s puffy and exhausted eyes.

Without any words, Ikuko found herself seized into a hug as her daughter broke down into hysterical crying.

“Usagi, talk to me please,” she begged, wanting to understand and sooth her daughter’s pain.

“Naru-chan was attacked,” the girl sobbed.

Ikuko started at this unexpected news.
“She… she didn’t make it,” the bond teenager croaked into her shoulder.

Ikuko felt her felt crumple as her own grief surge to the surface. “Oh Usagi,” she clutched her daughter tighter. “I’m so sorry.”

The mother rocked both of them back and forth as they cried together.

…

“Where is she?” the ebony haired college student demanded glancing down at his watch. “Where are her friends?”

Motoki shrugged. He was baffled by Mamoru’s urgency – surely he understood that if Naru was in fact the girl’s best friend, Usagi’s regular routine would be totally disrupted. And he still didn’t understand how the other man could have taken in the other news Motoki had shared with him so completely in stride. The blond part-timer sighed mournfully, worrying for his favorite regular customer and his best friend alike.

“I don’t think she’s coming in today,” Motoki said. “It’s past her usual arrival. Don’t you run into her on occasion on the way to school? Perhaps you could see her tomorrow.”

“I just need to know she’s okay.”

Motoki wanted to laugh. If circumstances had been less depressing he probably would have. His friend had it bad.

…

Ali felt nauseous. He kept his eyes to the floor not wanting to see yet another devastated face. When he looked into their eyes, he could feel their pain – the loss and knowledge of knowing they would never see their friend again. Others were just confused and uncertain, not knowing how to process everyone around them being in such pain.

He clutched his own arms around his midriff trying to block it all out. He didn’t understand how he could sense any of these painful emotions. Before, his mental senses only allowed him to feel love and attraction. Only allowed him to sense if he could seduce a victim or if they were totally already taken by another. He was unprepared for this depressive onslaught. And he didn’t want to feel the pain of his prey. He didn’t like it.

He feared he understood the feeling of loss and the terror of being left behind with En unconscious and unresponsive. He feared that she would slip away completely and he would be alone.

It was all made worse by the fact that he knew he had caused all this emotional turmoil. That he had caused all of it. That feeling – he didn’t know what to call it – pressed down on his chest making it difficult to breathe.

For the first time in his memory, he wished there was another way. But how else would he survive? How else would he heal En?

He didn’t want to experience loss firsthand.

He stumbled as he clipped another student walking by. He looked up into the swirling green eyes of Kino Makoto – the brunette’s eyes were red and puffy. Her pain was more than grief – she was angry – it felt like a tornado – vicious winds cut through him bringing destruction to everything in its path. She would destroy whoever brought this tragedy down on her friends.
His knees buckled and he fell to the tiled floor.

She reached out a hand to help him back up, but he flinched from it. He had to get away from her. And so he ran, uncertain if he fled the pressing weight her emotions multiplied within in him or the wrath she would unleash upon him if she knew what he had done.

…

Mamoru had not run into Usagi on his usual commute to the university campus. He walked it back and forth three times just to be certain, but he never encountered the familiar blond pigtails. He couldn’t face going to class – not with his mind agonizing over this girl that he hadn’t even realized he cared about so much until seeing her best friend in the newspaper.

He found himself wandering aimlessly through the park, trying to recenter his thoughts and make sense of his feelings, when the object of his mental obsession appeared in his vision – sitting alone atop a grassy hill. He approached her and sat silently beside her.

She did not acknowledge his presence – her crystal blue eyes, surprisingly clear and dry, stared listlessly into the distance.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he said softly breaking the silence between them.

“You found me,” she said tonelessly.

“You’re not at school,” he winced the moment the words left his mouth. It had been an observation. He hadn’t meant to put her on the defensive.

“No, I don’t think I could get through school,” her voice remaining flat and distant. “I started crying again before I had made it even halfway there.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. Everything felt paltry and insignificant. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he offered finally.

She stiffened and leaned away from him. He inwardly cringed at the social misstep. He shouldn’t have brought it up. He just wanted – needed to know – that she was okay. Clearly she wasn’t. He didn’t know what to say or how to repair the tenseness or soothe her pain, and he certainly had never felt quite so inadequate.

“How are you?” she asked eventually, breaking the silence. “I heard you were caught up in an attack as well.”

He shrugged, relieved she was talking. “Honestly, I don’t remember much of anything.”

“What do you remember?”

“I remember Sailor Moon.”

“You do?” she repeated in surprise and interest. It was the most emotional engagement he had seen from her so far and so he was going to run with it.

“She seemed… different than normal,” he offered cautiously.

“What do you mean?”

“She was so… angry. She’s not normally like that…” Then he laughed. “I don’t know what I’m saying… I’ve never met her before. How would I know what she’s normally like?”
Though if Motoki is right, perhaps I actually know Sailor Moon quite well. Perhaps that explained his obsessive following of this story – he had always felt like he was meant to help, explained his obsession with the lunar vigilante in the media and tabloids, explained why he could not stand to see her crying in the newspaper.

“What do you think she’s normally like?” Her voice cut through his thoughts and brought him back to the moment. He shoved the thoughts aside. This afternoon this girl needed him. This sweet and normal girl whose world had been torn apart.


“She’s not brave,” the girl next to him insisted. “She’s terribly afraid all the time. And selfish too – putting her friends before what’s best for the world.”

He looked at her puzzled. “Bravery doesn’t mean the absence of fear Usagi-chan. Bravery is standing up and facing that fear – standing up and fighting even when you want to run screaming in the other direction.”

“And how can you say Sailor Moon is selfish? She stands and faces monster after monster. And she does it alone, sharing that burden with no one. Imagine how hard that is! If that’s not self-less I don’t know what is.”

He felt the girl sobbing in his arms.

“Odango?”

“It may be selfless. But it’s also stupid!”

“You’re angry with her because your friend died,” he said calmly.

“Yes! Aren’t you? She just left you unconscious in an alleyway!”

He forced Usagi’s face to turn upward and meet his eyes. They swirled in turmoil and pain. He wished he could wipe it all away. He felt it was somehow his responsibility to help her smile again.

“What happened to me and what happened to your friend was not Sailor Moon’s fault. She saved me. She has saved so many others. She tried to defend and save your friend. Place blame only on those that perpetrated the attacks. Only they are responsible for those actions.”

She shook her head violently against his words.

“It didn’t have to happen,” she sobbed. “It shouldn’t have happened! She should’ve made different decisions!”

“It’s easy to say that,” he said softly. “On this side of time. But in the moment I’m certain she did the best she could. No one is perfect Odango. Not even Sailor Moon. We all make mistakes that seem like they could’ve been prevented, but that’s only true if you know the future. And we can’t know the future.”

“Forgive her Usagi-chan. She’s only human – just a normal girl who’s been given a responsibility and burden that no one should have to bear alone.”

She broke again into uncontrollable sobs and he quickly took her into his arms. She clutched his jacket into her fists as she clung to him.
He lowered her feet gently to the ground, but did not release her. She had never stopped crying through the whole journey, and she clung to him now as hard as she had tried to tear away from him before. He stroked her hair and wiped away her tears from her cheeks. Her cries would lessen on occasion, only to come back full force moments later.

“I miss her,” she whispered, pulling him back to the moment.

She was talking about her friend now. “I know,” he said wishing he could remember his own parents so that he could feel the pain she did. So *he* could miss them.

“That’s what love is.”

…

Chapter End Notes

I know you’re all dying for the reveals and I swear they are coming, but I wanted to focus this chapter on Usagi and her emotional processing. I hope something in this chapter resonated with your own experiences of guilt or loss.

I also just now figured out how I want to present the relationship with the Doom Tree... and now need to go back to the beginning and insert some tree interactions. Better late than never!!
Recovery

Chapter Notes

So… apparently the thought that I would have more time over the summer to write is almost laughable to me now. If anything I had less! But I did manage to put together this one chapter for you all!! We’re getting close to the end!!

This chapter is dedicated to SMMS92 whose most recent beautiful review has somehow inspired thousands of words to just flow in just a weeks time in ALL of my stories!! So if you think I’m updating too slowly – dropping a detailed review somehow often gets me all excited again!! ;-) 

Thanks to Serenity’sdarkside, Cosmyk Angel (hope you’re not disappointed), Slightlyxjaded (for being like one of my oldest fans!!), HyenaYu, Mako-clb, Chaoticwisdom, Sndreline_Moon, lunaballz, Algae, and LadyWinterLight (not exactly faster, but hopefully you’ll forgive me) for all your comments, ideas, natural reactions. I want you to know that I’m always so eager to post updates without even bothering to check for grammar so I can share it with you all that much faster!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first time she opened her eyes she saw the face of a clock. And her eyes fell closed. She struggled to open them once again.

The clock was still there – but the short hand had progressed halfway around the face. She knew that wasn’t right. It didn’t make sense, but an explanation eluded her.

She growled in frustration knowing that her mind usually ran sharp as a tack – she had no patience for it’s current sluggishness. She blinked at the clock determined to figure out this puzzle no matter how long it took.

“Ami?”

The blue haired girl tried to turn toward the familiar voice, but quickly swung back as the world dissolved into spinning dizziness. And when that did nothing to assuage the oncoming nausea and disorientation she slammed her eyes back closed.

“Ami? Are you awake?”

She wanted to say yes. She attempted to say yes, but it came out as an unintelligible blast of sound.

Her throat constricted in terror at the unexpected syllable. Could she no longer speak?

“Ami, you’re okay. Please try to relax. It is normal to feel confused and disoriented coming out of a coma.”

She had been in a coma?
“H…how?” she managed to put the word together grabbing the hand caressing her wrist.

“You were found in an alleyway. You have been unconscious for a little over two weeks now.”

“How….who are…?” she gripped the older woman’s hand desperately, struggling to get the question out. She needed to know who this woman was. Ami knew that she should know the answer, but it alluded her.

“Who am I?” the woman filled in for her gently. Ami could see the blue eyed woman’s silent tears through her patient smile. “I’m your mother dear. Your memories will come back. As I said, it is normal for things to be confusing when you come out of a coma. Just sleep for now.”

Ami nodded, never letting go of the other woman’s hand. Her mother’s hand – she mentally corrected. Her mother was a doctor she remembered, so if she said that Ami was going to be okay, she would be. She let her eyes fall closed feeling comforted in that moment.

Ali swept his fingers along the line of En’s marble cheeks as he sat next to her. He did not have the motivation or ability to move from her side.

Pretty soon he would be joining her in endless sleep, and he wondered almost if that would be better than his current existence without her. He was pouring energy into her form that would normally last him weeks, he had been unable to feed off others too paralyzed by their pain. He was wasting away to nothing.

And the tree of life had forsaken them.

He used to be able to connect, to commune with the living mother. But she rebuffed him. And suddenly, he flushed in anger. How could she abandon them now? When they were at their lowest point?

He found new resolve. He slid his hands across En’s form in gentle caress one more time before rising from her side, and left her lying in the Sun. He slipped into the interdimensional pocket where the tree slept.

He attached himself to the colossal living plant and began to pull. The waves of energy crashed down upon him and he soaked it up like a plant in the desert, breathing in the ecstasy.

Then a wave of agony pulsed through him the likes of which he had never imagined. He tore away in horror realizing he felt the pain of the tree – the agony of his mother. The tree had shriveled onto itself – turning dark and black.

What had he done?

“What’s the last thing you remember?” A neurologist with dark curly hair clipped at the nape of her neck sat at her bedside with a clipboard and pen in her either hand.

Ami traced the IV line in her right wrist with her other hand, wishing she could pull the thing out. It itched and hurt at the same time. “I was at school,” she said.

“And what were you doing at school?”
“It was lunch time. My friends were there.”

“Do you remember their names?”

“Kino Makoto and Osaka Naru.”

Did she imagine it or did the doctor wince at that answer? “Did I say something wrong?” the blue haired patient asked.

“No, no, not at all,” the woman was quick to reassure. “You’ve made remarkable progress Mizuno-san. You’re cognitive processing may be a bit sluggish for a week or two, but your memory is almost fully in tact. It looks like you’re only missing a day now. It may return with time, or it may be lost as a result of the neurological trauma you were subjected to. I think you’re ready to be discharged tomorrow morning.”

“Is there anyway it could be sooner?” Ami asked, picking at the IV again. She felt fine and simply wanted to be in her own bed without having to be hooked up to all the monitors with nurses that came in all hours of day and night.

“Perhaps... but I make no promises. I will need to speak with the rest of the team.”

She nodded in acceptance of this answer. Her mother had explained the process to her.

As if summoned by her thoughts, the older woman walked in at that moment. She brought in a gift basket. It was filled with honey toffees, flowers, and a book on theoretical astronomy. There was a card – she grabbed for it excitedly hoping it came from Seijuro as her mother spoke to the neurologist.

If you’re awake and recovered in time, meet us at the Hikawa Shrine and I’ll explain everything.

There was a date and time and it was signed Makoto.

Ami flipped over the card looking for more of a message, but the other side was blank. She wilted in disappointment when the note gave her nothing more – no cheerful care or wishing for her well-being. It was almost business-like, lacking any warmth at all and felt so completely unlike Makoto.

“What’s wrong Ami?” her mother asked after the doctor had left.

“Nothing!” Ami lied, quickly seizing onto a honey toffee. They were one of her favorites.

“Ami, you have never been a very good liar,” her mother commented.

“It’s just… I... I don’t want to be here anymore,” she admitted.

“I’m trying to pull some strings, hopefully we’ll be home before the sun goes down,” her mother reassured, taking the seat vacated by the neurologist.

“Mom?” she asked glancing down at the message in the card. “Did anyone visit me?”

Her mother smiled. “I was actually surprised at how many friends of yours stopped by Ami-chan! There was a girl named Usagi who came by almost every day – she seemed particularly distraught. Then one Kino Makoto came by a few times. And there was another name on the sign in sheet that I didn’t recognize.”

“Seijuro?” Ami asked eagerly, but tried to hide her devastation when her mother shook her head. “No… it started with an ‘M’. Miako? Minako? I can’t remember.”
“But why has no one been here now that I’ve spent three days conscious?”

“Ami,” her mother began, her voice gentle. Too gentle, and Ami suddenly tensed preparing herself for dreadful news. “Is your friend Osaka Naru the one with red hair?”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

Her mother sighed. “Sweetie, I’m sorry I have to be the one to tell you this. But it’s been all over the news for days.”

“What is it?”

“Osaka Naru was found dead. And if your friends have suddenly disappeared I imagine it is because of that.”

Ami didn’t say anything, she sat unmoving for several seconds, and then without warning her face crumpled and her body shook with wracking sobs. She leaned into the warm arms that suddenly enveloped her as she let herself cry.

…

‘Ali?’

The blue haired creature jumped awake at the call.

“En!” he shouted in glee! “You’re okay!”

‘Why are you so loud?’ she whined petulantly into his mind, her body still lay unmoving.

He laughed. ‘I’m sorry. It’s just… I’m so glad you’re awake,’ he mentally responded, shocked to feel tears trailing down his face, as he took her hand and squeezed it.

‘Ali! You’re exhausted!’ she noticed as their connection deepened with the physical touch. ‘Why haven’t you eaten?’

‘I didn’t want to leave you,’ he told her tracing circles into the back of her hand.

‘You’re lying,’ she accused. ‘You know I can tell, so why do you bother?’

He winced uncertain how to explain it to her.

‘Do you ever wonder what it would be like if we didn’t have to feed off others?’ he asked mournfully.

“Are you growing soft?” En asked softly, her eyes fluttering open.

“I just… watching the students mourn and grieve… I just… I felt for them, with them in a way I never have before. I wish they didn’t have to know such pain. I know how they feel. If you…”

She pushed a finger to his lips, silencing him.

“Ali, look at me.” She whispered. He complied. “I love you. You are enough. I will do whatever needs to be done so that we can be together forever.”

He nodded stoically.
Mamoru walked into the arcade and sat in his usual stool next to Usagi who was slurping down a chocolate milkshake.

She turned to him with a beaming smile he hadn’t seen in weeks. He drank it in like a sunflower soaked up the sun.

“What’s going on?” he asked her, meeting her grin with one of his own.

“I went to visit Ami-chan and she wasn’t there!” she squealed happily.

“Is that a good thing?” he asked confused.

“It means that she woke up! I called her mom and she was sadly asleep, but I’m going to try again tomorrow.”

“It’s good to see you smile again,” he whispered.

And that one comment was enough to erase the expression off her face. He cursed himself. He had reminded her of her pain in a moment when she clearly was not thinking of it.

“One can’t cry forever,” she said sadly. “Naru-chan would want us all to be happy again.”

“I imagine so,” he agreed wishing he knew how to restore her cheer once again.

Her face suddenly scrunched up in thought.

“What is it?” he asked, wanting to understand her incomprehensible face.

“I don’t know that I can put it into words,” she admitted. “I… I think that a sudden loss has to remind you that every moment is precious. That you really can never know when your time is up. I mean…”

He watched, mesmerized as she rambled gaining more and more animation, her crystal blue eyes sparkling with passion.

“… I know that we hear and say that all the time. But experiences like this make it real in a way that words never can. You know what I mean?” she clamped down on her straw to suck up the last of her shake. Watching him from the corner of her eyes.

“Makes perfect sense to me,” he found himself grinning at her explanation. And she grinned in response catching his expression.

It really was so good to see her smile, though he wasn’t going to say it out loud this time. Somehow the world didn’t seem right when she was sad.

“What?” she asked her cheeks flaming red in embarrassment at his unwavering attention.

“Nothing. You’re just amazing. I knew you had so of this just… bubbly zest for life and just this warm acceptance of people. I didn’t know that you were wise beyond your years, able to find meaning and purpose in what seems like a senseless loss.”

Her blushed deepened. “Yeah, well,” she said turning away, “Sometimes we have to grow up before our time.”
She turned introspective again, and he found himself fascinated by how expressive and multifaceted her face could be.

*Blue eyes twinkled merrily at him from underneath a white domino mask as he spun her round causing her waterfall of golden hair and budding pink cascading gown to swirl around both of them.*

*He wanted to stay in that moment forever. He didn’t want to think of his mission to find an elusive crystal for a princess or how her goal may be in conflict to his own. His only desire was to hold her in his arms as they danced like fireflies underneath the light of the glowing moon and sparkling stars. To solve the puzzle of her ever changing expressions.*

“Mamoru-kun?”

Her voice brought him back to the present moment, her eyebrows knitted together in confusion.

“Where did you go?” she asked with a teasing lilt to her voice.

“Somewhere magical,” he admitted the flash feeling almost tangible as if it was a memory rather than a fantasy.

“Usagi-chan?” he asked softly.

“Hmm?” she responded absently.

“Have we…? This is going to sound crazy, but have we ever dated?”

She eyed him stoically before finally saying, “I’m certain I would remember if we had.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’d be impossible to forget,” he agreed.

She turned away in that moment. “One would think,” she whispered so softly he almost missed it.

“Why don’t we fix that?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, with her back to him still.

He put a hand on her shoulder and spun her slowly back around. She was looking down at her hands. “Usagi-chan, would you go out with me tomorrow?”

She looked up at him then, her thousand watt grin blooming to the surface, her eyes wet with emotion. “Did you just ask me on a date?”

“Yes,” he confirmed suddenly feeling self conscious as his nerves caught up with his actions. “That is exactly what I did.”

She pinched herself. “Please tell me this is not a dream.”

“So is that a yes?” he asked, trying not to sound too eager.

“Just tell me where and when,” she squealed.

…

Ali sat on a bench at the park watching others go by determined to find a suitable target. En loved him so much – he had to take care of her, which mean he needed a victim.
It was easier today to open his senses to women that would be open to his advances. It was true that the adolescents tended to be easier to seduce – they were often not securely attached to another at that age, but being outside the school right now was more important. The ladies here were not filled with such overwhelming grief.

A dark haired girl walked passed and he smiled brightly at her and she returned the expression. He leapt to his feet and moved alongside her.

“I’m Ginga Seijuro,” he greeted with a beaming smile, vowing that he didn’t have to drain her completely. As much as he needed the energy in this moment he was starting to wonder if they really needed to kill anyone. If they stayed here on this planet, they could just dabble here and there. They didn’t need a vast storehouse of reserves if they weren’t planning on traveling to another planet.

…

Ami glanced down at the note in her hand before she stared up at the long staircase before her with trepidation. Why would Makoto suggest they meet here?

She sighed and began making her way up the stone steps one at a time. It had taken some time to convince her mother that she was well enough to go out at all, let alone clear across town.

“Ami-chan!” an enthusiastic blond greeted when she crested the hill, though it wasn’t the one Ami truly wanted to see. The thought made her feel guilty. “I didn’t realize you were well! Come in! Come in! We’re meeting in here.”

Ami smiled shyly as she followed her golden haired classmate that she didn’t really know that well. What kind of meeting was happening, she wondered, that Minako and Makoto would both be present? “It’s good to see you Minako-chan. I’m really feeling much…ahh!”

Before she could finish her sentence she was seized in a breath-ending hug from behind and lifted briefly off her feet. Once she regained her footing, she whirled around to face green eyes that threatened to spill any second. Ami returned the embrace with an enthusiastic hug herself, again feeling guilty that she had ever doubted how much Makoto cared due to the curtness of her note.

“I’m really glad you’re okay,” Makoto whispered. Ami nodded in agreement unable to find words of her own.

Ami pulled back, desperately trying to collect herself. “So what are we here to discuss?” she fought for that sense of stability and dignity that usually came to her naturally.

“Rei should be here any minute,” Minako informed them. “We’ll start then.”

At just that moment the raven-black haired miko walked in dressed in her traditional red and white Shinto garb. Ami stiffened defensively as violet eyes pierced through her, like she was being measured and evaluated. She found herself holding her breadth remembering the last time they spoke and how dismissive she had been to what the priestess in training had tried to tell her.

“So what did you want to talk about?” Rei asked, turning her attention to Minako.

“I don’t know – you tell me,” Minako responded with a frown. “You invited me…”

“No, I didn’t… I got a message from you saying you wanted us all to meet.”

“I thought Rei wanted to meet us too…” Makoto added.
All three girls turned to Ami who turned bright red at the sudden unexpected attention. She simply held up the note signed by Makoto.

“But I didn’t…” the brunette started.

Rei held up her hands to forestall the objections. “It doesn’t matter.”

“What do you mean?” Makoto asked.

“Don’t you feel it?” the miko asked them urgently.

“Feel what?” Ami spoke softly, feeling even more out of the loop.

“Something is off. Something is terribly wrong and we are all a part of it. We are here together for a reason…”

Minako nodded in agreement quickly. “And Usagi-chan is part of it. She needs our help.”

“How do you know that?” Ami wanted to know.

“When I went to visit you Ami-chan, I stumbled on Usagi confessing to you that it was her fault. That if she had revived you that you could have protected yourself and if she had revived me that I could have gotten there faster. We are apart of something together. We’re supposed to work together.”

“Why isn’t she here?” Makoto interjected.

Minako shrugged, “If we ever figure out who planned this little shin dig, I’ll be sure to ask!”

“Revive us from what though?” Ami said, trying to redirect the coversation back to Minako’s account of Usagi.

“Do you remember the visions I told you all about?” Rei questioned, rejoining the conversation. “We were all together – we fought against something… evil.”

“You do all feel familiar,” Makoto admitted. “Even this room,” she added looking around, “I feel like we’ve been here together before.”

Ami felt herself blush as all eyes turned back on her again. She realized that they had each shared what they knew about the situation and were waiting for her input. “Don’t look at me!” she told them seriously, “I think you’re all crazy!”

“Typical,” Minako mumbled. “You never could see the truth unless it was it was backed up by numbers and controlled observation.”

“What do you mean?” Ami demanded, not sure whether she was being insulted and absolutely certain Minako didn’t know her that well.

Minako seemed at a loss for words. “I… I don’t know. It just came out.”

“See! We all know each other!” the raven-haired miko insisted. “I don’t know how! I don’t know when! But we do. It’s there!”

Even Ami nodded along this time.

“I need your help,” Rei told them all. “I have been seeing visions in the fire,” she pointed to the
sacred flame dancing in the center of the room. “But they are disjointed – I’m missing so many crucial pieces. Pieces I think that you all can fill. Would you please join me?”

She kneeled in front of the fire and gestured for the rest of them to fill in the other three sides. Ami chose to move to the priestess’s left and came to her knees before taking the offered hand on either side of her.

She closed her eyes as Rei directed. She felt tense not sure what to expect, but as nothing happened she felt herself relax and her breathing slow. And soon, she became hyper aware of the itch on her ankle and the bead of sweat forming on her nose in response to the heat from the flame.

They stood together in the square formation. In front of each of them floating in the dark were glowing orbs of water, fire, lightning, and light. Almost as one, they each raised a hand to their respective spheres.

…

Ami swam through the water deeper and deeper toward the light. Her lungs burned with the need for air. She kicked harder determined to reach her destination, but the light never seemed to get closer and the need to breathe was becoming stronger. Her arms and legs felt as heavy as led. She opened her mouth in desperation and panicked as her mouth and lungs rapidly filled with water. 

She was going to drown. She stopped fighting in that moment – and surrendered herself. She pushed down the panic and fear – instead drawing on the calm center of her being. And just as suddenly she could breathe. She laughed in delight – the water was her friend – it would sustain her. How had she forgotten that fact? She pulled the power to herself and felt the comfort of cool water enveloping her form like a lover’s caress.

…

A wall of red and yellow flames danced on the horizon approaching her rapidly. Rei turned and ran the other way only to discover that the fire approached from all directions. Before any time had passed the fire danced menacingly only a meter away on all sides. She could feel the heat pulse toward her.

The fiery barrier cackled and sparked toward her – finally licking at her heals. She hissed as the fire melted through her skin, feeling more angry and betrayed than actually hurt. The flames were hers to command. She pulled unconsciously at the power just below the surface. The heat changed to a tickling warmth, at once playful and loyal instead of threatening. The flames licked and spat across her lithe body leaving behind a different, though entirely familiar, form.

…

Makato could see her – the blond princess collapsed in a puddle just a few armlengths away. She darted forward to check on the girl only to be stopped by a buzzing wall of electricity. She stood feeling completely helpless, knowing that her aid and protection were needed as the shadows approached the vulnerable unmoving form.

She slammed her fists against the blue vibrant and cackling barrier – it hissed in response. She could not stand here, sentenced to watch. And so she took a few steps back and charged like a bull – she slammed through the electric barrier fully anticipating the lancing pain that would shoot up and down her nerves.

It never came. Instead, her skin tingled and bubbled and she looked down to find she had been
Minako wandered aimlessly without purpose. Darkness enshrouded her making her feel cold and impossibly lonely. She stopped for a moment and fell to her knees wanting more than anything to give up.

But she knew that there was more out there for her somewhere. She had always known this. She just had to find it, and suddenly she was scrambling through the dark determined to find the light.

The light was love, duty, and meaning. And suddenly it was her own form that pulsed and radiated. The light was not something she could find, for it was inside of her, a part of her being that she could never really truly lose. It shined so bright and she couldn’t look away though her eyes weren’t ready. For it revealed the truth.

The Martian warrior drew the heat, rare as it was amongst the ice flurries of the frozen continent, from the air into a protective shield about her person.

Snowflakes hovered and swirled about her, sparkling in the light of the full moon, making the night air feel just that little bit more friendly and inviting.

But it was an illusion.

An impossible army lay in wait somewhere in the frozen plains, seeking to destroy everything that was beautiful and worthwhile within the Sol System.

She stood alongside her three sisters in arms. Her golden counterpart, the daughter of Venus, gestured a command.

She nodded stiffly to her commander and friend, acknowledging the order before stretching out her hands to the senshi on either side. She directed her fiery energy to one hand to bond with her smooth and collected icy sister, the daughter of Mercury. The crackling pulsing in her other hand signaled that the daughter of Jupiter had joined their link seconds later.

Their golden leader was the last to bring her warm glowing light to the circle. Then moonlight caressed her sizzling skin adding even more energy to the collection of raw elemental power that roared through and beyond their veins.

The daughter of Mars prayed it would be enough to protect their charge.

Either way, it would cost them everything…

Rei shook her head and angrily jumped to her feet with fists clenched as the vision dissolved. She faced three blinking and confused faces.

“How dare she!” the priestess raged. “How could she make us forget? We are her guard!”

“Mars,” a quiet insistent voice interrupted. The voice of the always calm and collected Mercury.

“We protect her! Not the other way around!” the miko continued to rant.
A cool hand on her arm stopped her in her tirade and only then did the fire priestess actually look at the tear filled visage of a blue haired genius that always new how to calm her fires. The tall brunette stood just behind her, a huge grin lighting up her features while their blond leader stood casually against the wall with her arms crossed just waiting, a smirk slanting slyly across her face. Minako had a tendency to just wait the rage storms out.

These were her sisters. And she had forgotten them.

“Oh! You guys!!” she squealed unable to find more words as tears sprung to her eyes.

And they dissolved into hysterical giggles and tears as they all came together in a tangled embrace.

A loud throat clearing interrupted their joyful reunion and they broke apart to look down upon a white cat that sat before them with dignity.

“Artemis?” Minako greeted, her eyes too bright.

“Hello Mina,” he whispered, coming forward to lick her hand in greeting.

“Oh my goodness Artemis!” she seized him in a hug. Then, she just as suddenly held him away from her body, her eyes suspicious.

“This has all been you hasn’t it?” she accused. “The notebook? The mirror? All the messages to get us here?”

He turned away, suddenly not meeting her eyes.

“You jerk!” she screeched dropping him unceremoniously to the ground. “Do you know how much I doubted my own _sanity_? How _creeped_ out I was that someone was in my bedroom _watching_ me?! Why didn’t you just _tell_ me?”

“I wanted to! But Usagi-chan insisted that you all keep your normal lives. That she could handle everything. It’s just… things are suddenly not going well. She would never have allowed me to awaken you. So you had to awaken on your own! The notes and the invitations… you and Rei were so close. I knew if I brought you together…”

“She needs you,” he whispered. “She’s incredibly stubborn and loves you all immensely. She was only trying to save you. But she doesn’t understand. She _needs_ all of you. And you need her.”

Ami smiled and Makoto nodded. Rei still felt pissed, but determined.

“Let’s go find her then!” Minako shouted.

…

Ali arrived back at the apartment feeling more refreshed than he had in days. He came to his partner’s side as she slept once again – but he delighted in the fact that he could hear her dreams. She was more than aware. He caressed the side of her arm sending pleasant tingles up the appendage and down her back. And her eyes fluttered open and she trapped him in her gaze.

‘Love me Ali,’ she entreated. ‘Right now.’

He wanted nothing more, but he restrained himself. ‘I don’t want to hurt you,’ he told her.

‘You won’t,’ she insisted. He didn’t need to be told twice, his lips suddenly searing across her vibrant and exposed skin desperate for contact and connection.
She tore away his clothes unceremoniously as her vines leached onto his newly bared skin. She soaked up his attention and his energy, his desperation and his love, delighting in the pleasurable sensations she gave to him and that he pulled out of her.

...

Usagi sat in her favorite booth at the arcade pouring over the report that Luna had just given her, trying to stay focused on the task at hand rather than dream over the date she was going to have tomorrow.

Because apparently there had been an attack that afternoon and they had missed it. But it had been different – there had been several victims – three it looked like, but none of them had walked away permanently harmed as far as Luna could tell. The attacks had been so mild, it hadn’t even registered on their alarms. If Luna hadn’t been at the command center they probably wouldn’t have even noticed for another few days.

The booth’s seat indented as someone sat down beside her. She glanced up and took in the blue locks of one of her best friends.

“Ami-chan!” she greeted in delight – seizing the other girl in a hug. “What are you doing out? Your mother told me that you were going to rest at home for a few days.”

“I’m fine,” the other girl assured her quickly. “Really I am. I’m here to talk to you about something else.”

“Yeah, we really need to talk Usagi-chan,” Minako’s familiar voice informed her.

The blond heroine jumped in surprise realizing that Minako, Rei, and Makoto had filled in the other side of the booth silently without her noticing.

“Sure!” Usagi agreed. “Just give me two seconds to finish reading this,” she drew her attention back to the paper in front of her, stalling for time as her mind tumbled unsure of what to say or how to begin. She had to tell them. This was the perfect time – they were all here together.

But she still didn’t want to.

“Usagi-chan, we need to talk now,” Rei snapped impatiently.

Usagi glanced up at the seriousness of her friend’s tone, surprised at the anger that simmered just below the surface. Just then, Luna jumped into her lap and looked at her meaningfully.

“Luna!” Usagi whined. “You promised to let me wake them up myself!”

“Luna, had nothing to do with our recovery!” Rei snapped. “But she should have known to go against your wishes in this.”

The Mauan’s ears flattened.

“But you didn’t tell us about this attack!” Usagi snapped. “You’re not helping.” Then she turned back to her – Usagi wanted to look away feeling on the defensive, but she couldn’t. “Usagi-chan, how could you keep...
us out of the fight?” Minako asked softly. “You would have us break our vows? Our duty to protect you?”

“You made those vows in an entirely different lifetime!” Usagi insisted. “The whole point of being reincarnated is to get a completely fresh start! I will not hold you to promises that you cannot even remember making!”

“Oh, I remember…” Rei began heatedly.

“Usagi-chan,” Ami interrupted gently with an arm on Rei’s shoulder. “We don’t protect you out of duty anymore, but out of love. Just as you want to protect us, we want to protect you. That’s not a decision you can make for us.”

“And I’m just pissed that you would leave us out of the fun!” Makoto insisted, crashing her closed fist into her open palm.

Usagi frowned sadly at Makoto’s words. “I have never wanted to be a sailor senshi.”

“We know…” Ami said softly, a hand of reassurance on her arm.

Usagi looked up at her smiling blue eyes – there was no censure or condemnation – only patient understanding and empathy. And the blond reluctant heroine found herself smiling back even though the tears still fell.

“I was stupid,” she admitted. “I should have realized. I think I did a long time ago really, but then I was scared you’d be angry with me for holding out for so long. So I would wait, which would just make you angrier…”

“We aren’t angry with you for caring about us,” Makoto insisted.

“I should’ve revived you myself. Immediately. Then… maybe… Naru would still be alive.”

Her form completely curled up into ball again as the tears she thought she was done with sprung back to the surface. But this time four pairs of arms quickly enveloped her and rocked her back and forth soothing, murmuring reassurances.

“Usagi… we’re so sorry.”

“We love you Usagi-chan.

“Let us help you.”

“You are not alone anymore Usagi.”

…

En woke up the next morning feeling revitalized. She came to her feet careful to not disturb her partner. She looked at him – blue cascading hair flowering out around his perfect form. She brushed her hands across his brow taking in how pale he was and she felt guilty.

She had probably taken too much from him the previous evening. He would never deny her anything whether he had it to give or not. She loved him for that.

She knew that he was having trouble feeding, but she could take care of that. She could find enough energy for the both of them and the tree combined.
And the truth was she *wanted* to feed. There were so many impossible sensations from the experience. And she knew exactly where to find her first feast.

‘Ali, I’m headed to the arcade,’ she whispered to him mentally, careful not to wake him. He would know where she was upon awakening.

She had some unfinished business with one Chiba Mamoru.

…

Chapter End Notes

Hope this one left you with a more happy feeling than some of the previous chapters.

FYI, I started another Sailor Moon Story – this one focusing on Ami and Zoisite and all of their fantastic and interesting past and current life baggage. It is called Invisible Wounds. Check it out if you’re interested!
Mamoru had long ago learned how to keep a composed figure even when internally he was awhirl with uncertainty and fear. When you grew up in an orphanage, you couldn’t show weakness or excitement. Stoicism and arrogance kept you both grounded and untouchable.

It was a trait he sometimes wished he could let go – one did get rather lonely at times. But today, he was grateful for the talent as he casually glanced at his own reflection in the glass faced clock behind the familiar red formica counter top.

Because no one would ever suspect the cold indifferent palms of Chiba Mamoru were sticky with sweat or that he felt mentally unable to string together a rational thought as the giddiness built up with every second that ticked closer to their agreed upon time. It was better that no one could see through him – it would ruin his carefully crafted reputation.

“What’s gotten into you?” Motoki asked, flipping over the unused plain white mug that sat before him on the countertop.

Well, no one other than Motoki that was.

Mamoru put his hand over the empty cup before his best friend could refill it. “No coffee.”

“No coffee?” Motoki repeated his eyes wide in disbelief.

“No coffee,” Mamoru confirmed. “I’m waiting for… We’re going to leave as soon as she arrives.”

“She?” Motoki repeated with a smirk, lowering the coffee pot to his side casually. “Someone I know? A gorgeous blond with bright blue eyes perhaps?”

Mamoru opened his mouth to respond, but no words emerged.

Motoki’s knowing smirk dissolved into a scowl as his gaze went over Mamoru’s shoulder.

Mamoru turned to find what had so upset his friend. His gaze immediately filled with hypnotic garnet eyes that seemed to pulse with need. Before he could say a word, her hands were on either side of his face and she leaned in brushing her lips against his own. She deepened the kiss and he did not resist suddenly remembering many shared moments of passion with the girl in front of him.

But the expected physical thrill failed to manifest. The experience wasn’t the same. It was missing something – something he didn’t know he needed. His mind and heart were still filled with a certain blond girl – a girl filled with bubbly sunshine who never failed to keep him on his mental toes. A girl he was eager to spend the whole day with.

He pulled away suddenly, his eyes drawn like magnets to the object of his thoughts who stood frozen in the doorway. The sun streamed in at just the right angle to make her hair glow gold. Her blue eyes were open wide in shock and shone too bright with hurt. He felt his throat constrict in panic at the potentially fatal mistake he had just made.

“Mamoru-kun,” Natsumi whispered into his ear her arms encircling around him and he found himself cringing away, uncertain what he had ever found irresistible about her.
The moment he broke eye contact, the little rabbit darted away, her devastation far too clear to him. He untangled himself from Natsumi, whatever hold or compulsion she had over him completely shattered.

He ran through the empty doors and raced after the heartbroken girl, determined to set the record straight.

“Odango! Wait!”

She ignored him as she kept on running. And he surged after her slightly shocked at how fast she could run.

“Usagi-chan!” he exclaimed the second he caught up with her pulling her back by the shoulder. “Let me explain.”

She broke through his hold and kept going.

“You don’t owe me an explanation Mamoru-san,” she shot back.

“Then why do I feel like I do?” he said whirling in front of her – forcing her to stop running away from him. He had to fix this. She had to know what he had just discovered.

“I don’t know!” she snapped, trying to redirect around him, looking down and not at him. He blocked her. “You shouldn’t remember anything!” she insisted.

Her words paralyzed everything he had been about to say and his grip on her shoulder tightened.

“What don’t I remember Usagi? What are you keeping from me?” he demanded angrily.

“I have no idea!” she yelled back.

“I don’t believe you,” he said coldly.

“You’re calling me a liar now?”

“No… Yes!” he ran both hands through his hair in frustration, forcing himself back to some semblance of calm. He continued more gently, “Usagi-chan, please trust me. Tell me what it is. What have I forgotten?”

“I can’t!” she screamed. The angered admission suddenly calmed him. There was something. He wasn’t crazy. He wasn’t imagining things. The flashes had actually happened. And suddenly, it didn’t matter what he had forgotten. His realization in that moment felt far more urgent.

“I love you,” he whispered, caressing the side of her face with his first two fingers. She stared at him, her eyes wide.

“What?” her voice was barely above a whisper.

“I love you,” he said again. Her eyes brimmed with tears that threatened to overflow even as her face turned into his hand that was still on her cheek.

“I’m sorry that it took a kiss from another woman for me to realize it.”

He felt her stiffen underneath his hand as she remembered once again why she had been running from him.
“I’m sorry,” he whispered urgently. “I want you to know I don’t feel anything for Natsumi-san. It’s just whenever she is around, it’s like my brain is overloaded and I cannot think of anything else except...” he cut off, realizing what he had been about to say.

“Ripping off her clothes?” Usagi filled in harshly.

“That’s one way of putting it,” he admitted hastily with a wince. “But when she kissed me and I saw you… it was like… I woke up. And I knew that it was you that...”

“Kami-sama!” she interrupted, her eyes suddenly focused elsewhere. “How could I have been so stupid?”

“Usagi-chan,” he begged over what he assumed was her condemnation. “Please… I’m kind’ve pouring my heart out here. I didn’t...”

She interrupted him, kissing him hard on the mouth. Her lips were as warm as the spring sun and as insistent as a child on Christmas morning. That warmth spread to every nerve in his body. His universe suddenly felt like it was expanding – he felt so small against the power swelling around him and yet so powerful.

She started to pull away, but he held her close. He nipped her lower lip and was delighted when her mouth parted willingly allowing his entry. The ground no longer felt solid – he was certain it was giving way – his awareness of the world around him swirled and faded with it.

•

He stood by a lake that sparkled in the afternoon sun, his attention only on the petit blond girl in his arms who beamed up at him – her smile brighter than the sun. He quickly leaned down unable to resist such warmth and love.

•

The wind buffeted him from all sides. But the heroine dressed in blue and red in his arms protected him from the evening chill. She looked up at him with stars in her eyes, but he was the one who was swept away. She tilted her chin up and he met her halfway never one to deny her.

•

With two hands on her knees he swirled her red spinning chair towards him and he seized her mouth with his own.

“Can’t you two get a room?!” his best friend mock complained.

She dissolved into giggles at the friendly reprimand even as she continued to return his kiss. And he couldn’t help but smile. With her, he didn’t feel quite so alone.

•

He was lost in her embrace – their tongues mingled and swirled as skillfully as the dance they had just performed together. She pulled away first, her cheeks rosy with giddiness or the cold – he didn’t know or care. He stood frozen in awe as the light from the familiar blue planet overhead enveloped and caressed her petite form.
She broke away too quickly, leaving his head spinning in confusion as the visions slammed into him one after another. He felt lost in her confident smiling crystal blue gaze.

This was not their first kiss.

And she knew that.

“You’re totally forgiven Mamo-chan!” her words barely registered through his muddled head. “I have to go! I know we have plans, but this is really really really important. Maybe we could go out tomorrow instead? Make reservations at that sushi place that you love. You know, the one that’s like two blocks from your apartment?”

“Usagi!” he objected, not releasing her hand. The idea of releasing her filled him with panic. He was so close to figuring everything out. She was the key and he could not let her get away.

“I have to go Mamo-chan!” she interrupted. “I’m sorry! But this is super important and simply cannot wait!”

“But…”

She kissed him quickly again, stifling his objections.

“I will make it up to you! Promise!” she insisted only an inch away from his face with a grin that could light up the sun, before whirling away.

He watched her go, it taking every ounce of self control not to go running after her again demanding answers. When had all those flashes happened? Why couldn’t he remember?

He would get her to explain it all if it was the last thing he did. The girl was infuriating!

He traced his lower lip with his forefinger still feeling the tingling sensations her kisses had left behind.

“Mamo-chan huh?” he whispered to himself, smiling. He supposed the questions could wait.

He apparently had reservations to his favorite sushi place to make. And there he would get her to explain how she knew it was his favorite. And how she knew where he lived. And how she knew his weekly routine and his favorite coffee blend. That he had a scholarship to the private school. That he wanted to go to med school. And most importantly, where each and every single one of those kisses had happened.

…

Usagi dashed into the room surprised to find her senshi were already sitting on their knees around Rei’s short table as the Shinto priestess served each of them tea.

“Thank you all for coming so fast!” the lunarian guardian greeted rapidly as she dropped to her knees to take the open space at the table.

“Of course,” her raven black haired friend said stiffly as if offended that Usagi would consider they would do otherwise, but she didn’t comment – instead she made great ceremony of filling Usagi’s cup.

The blond searched for words that failed her. Rei didn’t understand what it was like to suddenly be able to rely on them.
“I only meant that I was appreciative,” she said softly staring into her cup.

“So what’s up Usagi-chan?” Minako asked lightly, cutting through the tension before Rei could interject.

“I need to know what you all think and feel when you’re around Ginga Seijuro,” she said seriously.

“Who?” Rei asked clearly confused.

But Usagi did not miss the sudden blush that bloomed across the other three sets of cheeks.

“Usagi-chan,” Ami objected. “Those thoughts are private.”

“I don’t think they are Ami-chan,” she said gently, knowing that her friend was beyond smitten with their classmate, but Minako had been right all along. He seemed nice, but something wasn’t right. “I think you’re being made to feel this way.”

“What do you mean?” Ami asked carefully.

“Mamo-chan was telling me that he thought nothing of Natsumi when she wasn’t around, but that he felt compelled, almost obsessed in her presence.”

“Mamo-chan?!” Minako repeated gleefully. It was Usagi’s turn to blush.

“I’ll tell you about that later. This is more important,” the blond insisted.

“More important than Mamoru?” Rei questioned in disbelief.

“Ladies!” Luna bellowed. “Your leader is trying to tell you something important! Would you please let her explain?”

Shocked silence followed this before the girls all complied and gave Usagi their full attention. Usagi felt even more self-conscious at their attentive gazes. She had changed so much as a person and as a Sailor Senshi since they last fought together. They were probably not used to a responsible and serious Usagi.

But they all sat silently, waiting expectantly. When had she gained so much respect from them?

“Yeah,” she began awkwardly, writhing her hands. “So, like I said, Mamoru was describing how he felt whenever Natsumi was around. And I thought back and the first time I met Seijuro when Mako-chan and I gave him a tour, I felt the same way. I saw him… well, I saw him… seducing me,” she admitted quickly, her own cheeks now blazing hot in embarrassment. “And the next day he took me on a date and if Luna hadn’t interrupted who knows what would have happened because all I could think about was getting him alone and… well, yeah…”

“I saw something similar,” Makoto added.

“I still react that way when he’s around,” Ami agreed with a small frown.

Usagi nodded. “I think that we all do. Or I used to. I haven’t felt anything like that since I regained my memories.”

“I knew there was something off about him…” Minako mumbled to herself.

“What’s your point Usagi?” Rei interrupted impatiently.
“I think they’re the enemy,” Usagi said. “I think they are the vampires attacking people – putting them in comas and killing them. Mamoru has been dating Natsumi and Ami Seijuro. They were both attacked on the same day. And when I walk in on victims they are… well, they are often in totally compromising positions.”

“No,” Ami objected, clearly upset with this revelation. “It can’t be… Seijuro-kun would never…”

“Do you have any other evidence Usagi?” Minako interjected before Ami could dissolve into denial.

“Only that I know that I hurt the female pretty bad.”

“Natsumi-san hasn’t been at school,” Makoto commented.

“But that’s true for a lot of people Mako-chan,” Ami objected. “Ever since… since Naru-chan attendance has been…” she trailed off with a worried glance shot towards Usagi who just waved away her concern.

“I did run into Seijuro-san a few days ago. He was a mess,” Makoto commented.

“What do you mean?” Minako asked.

The tall brunette merely shrugged. “I don’t know. He was being weird – almost like he was afraid of me. But then I was distraught and lots of people are afraid of me, so I thought nothing of it. It’s just… he hasn’t been one of them. He’s always been super charming around me.”

“Well, there’s one way to find out!” Rei announced pounding a fist into her hands.

“We can’t just go barging into their home!” Ami objected. “We have to have to be sure!”

“I didn’t say anything about barging into homes. But a confrontation would hardly be amiss.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Usagi commented. “I used Mercury’s computer during a fight once and got a full scan. I think that if we use it on Natsumi or Seijuro we’ll be able to tell whether or not they are the enemy.”

“Assuming that I’m right, we just need a plan,” the blond heroine added.

The other girls nodded in agreement. Even Ami, though she was a second behind.

…

Mamoru slid back onto his regular stool at the arcade determined to corner his best friend – his only other source of information in light of his new revelations until he could meet with Usagi again.

It didn’t take long for the blond arcade worker to notice him. “Mamoru-kun?” he questioned. “I thought with a girl on each arm, I wouldn’t see you again today.”

Mamoru winced at the condemnation in his friend’s tone and now that he could think about Natsumi clearly he even understood it.

“I was here to meet Usagi-chan,” he explained. “I didn’t expect Natsumi-san to kiss me so suddenly.”

“You’ve not exactly discouraged her in the past.”
He ran a hand through his hair slightly annoyed and amused that Motoki was angrier with him than Usagi herself had been. “Well, that was before I realized that I had feelings for Usagi,” he confessed quickly figuring that nugget of truth was the fastest way to get Motoki willing to shift to other topics even if he would rather have kept it to himself for awhile longer.

“Did she not forgive you?” the blond asked, this time concern dripping from his tone.

“What?” Mamoru asked in surprise. “No, we’re fine,” he assured quickly.

“So if she forgave you what are you doing back here?”

Mamoru had no explanation for why Usagi needed to run off so suddenly, but he had his own purpose in returning. Motoki had answers that Mamoru had ignored previously. This time he would listen.

“Can we talk in the back?”

Motoki nodded before leading the way.

They both settled on the couch in the break room. Motoki said not a word, just looked at Mamoru expectantly, his hands folded in his lap.

Mamoru reached for the paper that was still sitting on the table where he had last left it.

“I wanted to ask about…” he trailed off taking in the picture of this Moonlight Knight holding a distraught Sailor Moon.

And this time, when Mamoru saw it, he recognized Sailor Moon.

“Usako?” he whispered at the picture. How had he never seen it before?

Suddenly the girl’s pain and anger at the death of her friend took on new meaning.

…

“She’s not brave,” the girl next to him insisted. “She’s terribly afraid all the time. And selfish too – putting her friends before what’s best for the world.”

“It may be selfless. But it’s also stupid!”

He forced Usagi’s face to turn upward and meet his eyes. They swirled in turmoil and pain. He wished he could wipe it all away. He felt it was somehow his responsibility to help her smile again.

“What happened to me and what happened to your friend was not Sailor Moon’s fault. She saved me. She has saved so many others. She tried to defend and save your friend. Place blame only on those that perpetrated the attacks. Only they are responsible for those actions.”

She shook her head violently against his words.

“It didn’t have to happen,” she sobbed. “It shouldn’t have happened! She should’ve made different decisions!”

…
Usagi hadn’t been angry with Sailor Moon. She was Sailor Moon and she had failed. She had felt responsible and guilty. How had he never seen it before?

“Mamoru-kun?” his friend prompted, breaking through his revelations.

“Does… Sailor Moon look familiar to you?” Mamoru asked curious now how no one seemed to recognize the heroine as the cheerful girl that whirled through their lives.

“Sure!” he said brightly. “She looks like Sailor Moon!”

“But I mean, don’t you think she looks like someone else?”

“Who else would she look like?” Motoki asked with genuinely puzzled eyes.

“Nevermind,” Mamoru said quickly – not wanting to push it. He handed over the newspaper. “I wanted to ask about what you saw this night.”

“I already told you what happened,” Motoki insisted carefully.

“But I wasn’t really listening. I will now.”

Motoki nodded then seemed to stare into space for a second searching for words. His raven haired friend sat forcing himself to wait in patience.

“I was taking out the trash – when I went out there you were there, you were delirious and mostly unconscious. Sailor Moon was standing over you – she was crying.”

“She was crying?” Mamoru repeated, his eyes once again glued onto the heroine’s picture.

“Please don’t cry,” he whispered gently wishing he could see her face – her crystal blue eyes one last time, but the Dark Queen had stolen his vision. His memory would have to serve. “Forget about me and go find yourself a cool boyfriend.”

“You were the coolest Mamo-chan,” she whispered, her hot tears spilling onto his face.

*Despite the circumstances he managed a small smile. If he had to die, he was glad she was there to hold his hand.*

“Yeah, she was crying. She got some kind of message and she had to leave. She asked me to look after you. So there I was standing in an alleyway trying out how to lug your sorry ass back inside.”

“Must’ve been terrible for you,” Mamoru added dryly purposely refusing to point out that he was the unconscious one on the ground in this story.

“I managed somehow, but you were completely unconscious at that point. And once I had you on this couch here I could not wake you. Even the water didn’t work this time. An hour or so went by…”

“Just enough time for you to completely panic then?”

“…and then you… changed,” Motoki continued, unfazed by his interruption. “You were on your feet and you were him!” he said jabbing his finger into the portrait of Sailor Moon’s rescuer. “And
before I could object, you were gone!"

"He expected her to be in mortal peril with the compulsion so strong. He dropped down from the roof, a white cape billowing behind him, surprised to find her quite physically safe, rocking the body of a red headed girl.

She shook with wracking devastated sobs. He put a hand to her shoulder and squeezed.

"Sailor Moon?"

The heroine ignored him. She just continued rocking back and forth.

The girl in the heroine’s blood soaked arms lay mortally wounded with a gaping hole through her abdomen – showing no signs of life.

"You have to let her go," he whispered into her ear.

She shook her head violently in objection and denial.

He could feel her pain – fresh, raw, and throbbing.

He pulled her from the body. She struggled against him, fought him off distractedly as her cries jumped up an octave in an incoherent panic.

He ignored her flailing, focused as he was on his charge. He knew what she needed more than she and remained determined. He was able to separate her from the body and hold her close, leaping away from the scene with his precious burden, her wracking form still convulsing in his arms.

He stroked her hair and wiped away her tears from her cheeks for hours. Her cries would lessen on occasion, only to come back full force moments later. The evening falling sun turned into a night sky, and still he held and comforted her. No words were spoken between them. Eventually her transformation dissolved and she fell into an exhausted sleep.

"I think I remember," he whispered.

"You do? You want to tell me what the hell is going on then? How're you…?"

"I can’t explain now. But thank you Motoki-kun. You’ve helped me more than you know."

He got to his feet and headed toward the back door exit.

"Wait! Mamoru-kun!"

"See ya later Motoki-kun!" Mamoru called back, stifling his own amused laughter at his friend’s indignation at being left in the dark. But Mamoru couldn’t tell him anything – there wasn’t really even much to tell.

He was still missing so much. But now he knew that he had a purpose. He knew there were memories to uncover.

…
En stormed through the door and sent it crashing back against the doorframe. The unnecessary violence did little to assuage her anger.

Chiba Mamoru hadn’t just rejected her – he had forgotten that she was there entirely.

‘You do realize that our compulsions are based only on physical attraction right?’ the reasonable silky voice threaded through her thoughts breaking up her mental tirade.

‘He will pay for insulting me!’ she raged, frustrated that he was trying to placate her instead of taking her side. ‘She will too!’

‘Why though En? There’s so many other potential targets. Losing one now and again as they develop genuine feelings for another and become less susceptible is to be expected.

‘You don’t understand,’ she insisted. ‘If I can’t have him – no one can.’

‘You’re jealous of a target,’ he snapped with impatience.

But she could feel his hurt behind his anger. That he felt rejected by her as she railed over the loss of what he essentially saw as a meal. But it was more than that to her. He had desired her – it had made her feel powerful and in control. She didn’t like how it felt to have that stolen away. She kept these feelings close to her heart careful not to project them, uncertain if Ali would understand why she could not let this lie.

‘Ali,’ she cooed coming to his side and toying with a blue ringlet of his scattered hair with her pinky finger. ‘I’m sorry if I’ve gone a little crazy. I just – this Mamoru has so much energy. So much more than anyone else I’ve encountered. I might be a little addicted to that adrenaline rush,’ she admitted. ‘But that’s all it is.’

‘En… I’ve been thinking about how we do things…’

‘Hush!’ she murmured with a finger to his lips. She had no patience for his sudden pacifism. And she didn’t want to argue with him.

She would track down Chiba Mamoru herself and make certain that he understood he had a simple choice. He belonged to her… or he belonged to no one.

…

Usagi was putting down her last notes on their plan, beyond proud of what they had all put together. Having the whole team back together allowed them to consider so many perspectives and contingencies that she would not have thought on her own. And the task didn’t feel so overwhelmingly impossible with her friends at her side once again. The blond heroine was certain this plan was going to work well – she just hoped Ami was okay with her role.

“You did really well in there Usa-chan,” Minako told her as they headed down the steps together. “I was really impressed.”

“It was so easy with all of you there,” Usagi admitted, but she still felt the heat rise to her cheeks at the compliment.

“Just the same, you’ve grown up a lot. I’m sad we weren’t there to help you.”

“It was my fault that you weren’t,” Usagi argued.
“Yeah, well – I feel we should have known some how.”

They continued plodding down the steps in the late afternoon sun in silence.

“So…” Minako began coyly with an all too familiar glint in her eye “What’s going on with Mamoru-san?”

“Kami-sama Minako! I didn’t tell him!” Usagi screeched, horrified with herself.

“Tell him what Usagi?” Minako asked.

“I have to go,” the other girl said without explanation. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Anything!” Minako was quick to promise.

“Can you cover for me tonight with my mom?”

Minako arched a golden eyebrow at her dearest friend. “Yeah, sure, but only if you promise to share all the deets!”

Usagi was already running down the rest of the stairs. “You got it Mina!”

She caught a bus to the Azabu district. Once there she didn’t stop running until she was outside the door of her prince’s apartment. She froze just a second before her knuckles wrapped against the painted dark green barrier.

The wait was only seconds, she heard the steady firm movement as he approached the door. She stood – shifting from foot to foot nervously hoping he wasn’t too angry with her for having abandoned him earlier that day.

The door swung open revealing his perfect chiseled jawline below deep blue eyes as blue as the Pacific Ocean framed in jade black hair. He burst into a grin at her presence and she felt her anxiety drop even as her nerves sky-rocketed with giddiness.

“Hi Mamo-chan,” she managed to whisper.

“Usagi-chan, I didn’t realize that you knew where I lived,” he commented with dry amusement. Kami-sama, how she loved to hear the laughter behind his words.

“Umm… Motoki-kun told me where I could find you,” she lied without remorse not caring if he believed her or not.

“Yeah, I’ll bet he also told you what kind of coffee I like, that I go for a run every Saturday morning, where my favorite sushi restaurant is, that I am an orphan on a scholarship, that I have plans to attend medical schools, that I apparently am somewhat experienced in rescuing damsels in mortal peril, that we kissed well before this afternoon, and at least one of those happened on the moon,” he listed off his eyes dancing with both challenge and merriment.

“Yup! Motoki-kun told me all of that!” she quipped back playfully wondering how much he remembered and if Luna would forgive her for filling in the gaps.

“I don’t believe you,” he said firmly, but the smile remained in place.

“That’s the second time today you’ve called me a liar,” she countered trying to maintain a frown, but she couldn’t pull it off. Her joy just broke straight through. “May I come in?” she asked.
He didn’t move to invite her in. He stood facing her his face suddenly stoic and unreadable.

“Are you going to explain to me what I have forgotten?” he asked seriously.

She sighed. “It’s a long story Mamo-chan. I promise that I will tell you everything, but I don’t have time for that tonight.”

“Then why are you here?” he asked.

“I just… I needed to see you tonight...” her throat closed up suddenly and tears began to fall.

“Usako,” he whispered, his stance softened and he pulled her into his chest. Her sobs came harder at both the use of the familiar pet name and his familiar embrace.

“Kami-sama, I thought you’d never call me that again…”

“Please don’t cry,” he begged. “Tell me what is wrong.”

“I love you,” she whispered. “I had to tell you. I realized you said it earlier and I never said it back and if something happens I didn’t…”

“What do you mean, if something happens?” he asked urgently, she felt his arms and chest stiffen in his anxiety. She shook her head in frustration. This was not at all going how she had envisioned.

“Something like this!” a female voice behind them interjected. Before Usagi could turn around she felt Mamoru arms shove her away and she watched helpless, flying backwards as the ball of cackling pink energy struck her love in the chest slamming him backwards into his own apartment.

A second later she stumbled awkwardly as she hit the wall opposite Mamoru’s door.

“Mamo-chan!” the primal scream was torn from her throat as she turned to face her pink haired nemesis.

The alien creature strolled forward licking her long talon of a fingernail. “If you will excuse me little girl, I will now be taking back what’s mine.”

Usagi slid to the side, blocking her path to Mamoru.

“You will not touch him,” she said coldly staring into garnet eyes.

Without a word, her adversary flicked her wrist and a second blast of power sent the teenager backwards again.

The air in her lungs abandoned her and her head spun in confusion. Taking a hit was always worse when she didn’t have the benefit of her transformation. The blond teenager forced herself to her feet standing protectively over the unmoving body of the love she had just rediscovered.

“Haven’t had enough little girl?” the green skinned plantlike creature mocked.

Usagi summoned the power of her heritage and felt the familiar energy envelop her like a lover’s caress completing her transformation. The senshi of the moon grinned in satisfaction as her opponent’s expression fell.

Sailor Moon was soon forced to dodge left as her opponent snarled and leapt forward to attack the guardian in rage.
“That makes this rather simple!” the alien shrieked, throwing a vicious kick as she simultaneously spit steaming green venom.

Unprepared for the onslaught, the Lunar Senshi screamed at the unexpected agony. And before she could counter, a handful of white roses struck her adversary.

Sailor Moon struck forward trying to press their two to one advantage confident with the Moonlight Knight at her side.

An unnatural portal ripped open the space behind her Arabian protector.

She shouted a warning and he whirled only in time to watch the flood of scuttling spiderlike bloodred flowers surround them both protecting their nurturers.

The circle tightened around them and the horrifying thorn-legged plants lunged simultaneously with a seeming hive mind. She lurched backwards dodging the swipe, but the hideous plant spiders were already upon her.

She cried out as the thorns sliced cleanly through her flesh. No matter which way she tried to turn or pull the hideous things were on her, her pain made worse by the fact that she could hear Mamoru’s grunts and moans confirming that he shared her fate.

…

Chapter End Notes

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I honestly tried to participate in nano write month this November to get some more words down on paper, but the month was just too crazy!! Maybe I'll make December my nano write month instead! Haha!

I’m excited to report we’ve only got one chapter left plus an epilogue! I think that’s the case anyway!! I don’t always know with these guys – sometimes they change it up on me! But in any case, we’re almost there!!!
Once again Minako could not find the sleep she desperately needed and craved. She counted it a small blessing that her depression and confusion at least no longer haunted her. Now she felt as giddy as a child on Christmas Eve. Or perhaps, it was more like a general, heavy with anticipation, on the eve of battle. Or maybe it was something in between, she mused, but there was definitely an eve involved.

Her fingers twitched with desire for action. They needed to be preparing for something – going over battle plans or patrol schedules. Something! Anything useful! But there was nothing to be done. Usagi had thought of everything and they had to wait until Monday to enact their plan. And it would be best if she came to that day well rested and fresh.

But will alone was not enough to find sleep, and before long her stomach was rumbling in complaint. When was the last time she had eaten? She wasn’t certain. She tore the blankets aside and jumped to her feet. Even if she couldn’t be well rested, she could at least be well fed.

She skipped down the stairs two at a time straight into the kitchen, only slightly surprised to find her mother awake though it was barely five in the morning preparing breakfast. She stood at the stove with her back to the local early morning news on a small television on the counter.

“If you suffer from hay fever you may be interested in the research by on Kimihiro Okubo, a professor at Nippon Medical School Hospital’s Otorhinolaryngology Department,” the television reported.

Minako pulled a bowl from the cupboard and held it out to her mother with a pleading smile.

“You’re up early,” her mother commented, filling up the bowl with rice porridge.

Minako shrugged. “Couldn’t sleep,” by way of explanation.

“Still? Perhaps we should see a specialist Minako-chan.”

“His treatment involves changing the way your body responds to allergens. And unlike antihistamines, if it works, it works indefinitely.”

“I’m fine. I’m just hungry,” she said around the mouthful of tasteless congee. She winced at the lack of flavor and dropped the spoon back into the bowl. She then added four spoons of sugar and a dollop of butter for good measure before she tasted it again. She grinned in satisfaction before settling onto the stool at the counter.

“It’s not normal for a healthy teenager to have chronic insomnia,” the older woman’s statement was interrupted by the sizzle of sausage hitting a pan.

“Mom! I’m fine!” Minako insisted. “Better than I’ve felt in months!”

“Panic arose last night in the top floor of Azabu Heights with an apparent break in.”

“And why is that?” her mom asked.
“I just feel more centered, like I’ve rediscovered part of myself,” she explained in between spoonfuls of her now sweet porridge.

Her mom laughed. “I envy you the certainty of your teenage years.”

“Residents described hearing what sounded like a bomb going off followed by a woman’s scream.”

Minako rolled her eyes – her mother only knew the half of it. “I was being honest! And you make fun of me?”

“I’m sorry dear. I don’t mean to dismiss your experience.”

“The door was found blown five meters inward.”

Minako jerked her head toward the news story, once again dropping her spoon. It showed the image of a gaping hole in a cream colored hallway into a luxurious apartment. The aforementioned forest green door and cluttered debris lay scattered on hard wood floors inside the entryway of the apartment. The caption, “Break in at Azabu Heights” floated at the bottom of the screen.

“Luckily, evidence suggests that no one was hurt when the break in occurred, though police are still investigating.”

“Such break ins are rare in this part of town. Do you think is a sign of spreading violence into the Azabu district?”

Minako left her plate behind and bolted upstairs in search of privacy.

“Minako! Where did you go?” her mother called. “I just finished the sausage!”

She pulled out her orange and yellow communicator and beamed at the both familiar and novel piece of technology and punched in the symbol for the Moon.

No answer.

She hit Mars next.

Rei answered immediately. “Mars here.”

“Do you know where Mamoru lives?” Minako asked without preamble.

“Yeah, why?”

“Just tell me.”

“Azabu Heights. He’s on the top floor. I don’t remember the unit number.”

“Shimatta!” Minako cursed. “I need you to call Usagi’s house and see if she is there.”

“Is there a reason you can’t do it?”

“Yes, because as far as Usagi’s mother is concerned, Usagi is with me.”

Rei barked out a laugh.

“And I think Mamoru’s fancy penthouse just got blown to pieces,” Minako continued, which brought her partner’s mirth to an abrupt end.
“Did you try the communicator?”

“Geez, why didn’t I think of that?” the blond bit back sarcastically. Rei just rolled her eyes in response. “While you call the Tsukinos, Mako-chan and I will head over to Azabu Heights and see what I can find out.”

“Doesn’t it make more sense to take Ami-chan with you?”

“I call her to join us later. She’s getting a more detailed prep from Luna and Artemis this morning. You will meet us there?”

Rei nodded stoically.

…

The guardian of Mercury flipped through the pages of Usagi’s notes slowly, determined not to miss a single detail. She really was slightly in awe of what her friend had managed to accomplish mostly on her own, what she had managed to learn, and quite frankly, how well organized the notes themselves were. Guilt tinged the edge of her awe, she was embarrassed that she was so surprised at what Usagi had accomplished. Like that surprise was evidence that she hadn’t really every believed in her best friend’s ability.

But she supposed Usagi hadn’t had a choice, because Ami hadn’t remembered on her own. She hadn’t been there to help.

“So what you’re saying is that even though I know what he can do, I will still be susceptible to it?” Ami summarized glancing up from the notes at the white feline for confirmation.

“We believe so, yes.”

“But then, why is Usagi not affected?”

“We think it’s because she remembered Mamoru-san,” Luna explained.

Ami sighed. Apparently she also needed a boyfriend. A real one. And not one pretending to like her, to steal her life energy.

The thought was a bitter one.

It continued to feel wrong to be suspicious of Seijuro, but she had no idea at all what had happened on that day, her lost day. The accounts that Makoto and Usagi had given her just didn’t seem like her at all and she had apparently ended up in the hospital so she couldn’t discount the possibility. But she wanted to.

It was far more appealing to believe that the senshi were mistaken than her first kiss and her affection had been stolen under entirely false pretenses. Easier to believe that they were wrong than she had fallen for his charm and his ploys so easily. How ironic would it be that the genius girl turned out to be the biggest idiot of them all?

Because it was really her fault. She had let herself be manipulated. She should have known better.

“Ami-chan?” Luna broke into her thoughts gently.

“Yes?” was the dignified response.
“You’re crying,” Luna observed.

The teenaged genius touched a long finger to her cheek to confirm this fact. “I am,” she said distantly.

“Ami-chan, you don’t have to be the one to do this,” Luna insisted. “I’m sure Mako-chan or Minako-chan…”

“We’ve been over this Luna,” Ami interrupted firmly. “I’m the best choice. You know why.”

And hopefully, now that she could remember the girls – knew that there were people in her life that cared about her - that would offer some protection. In any case, Makoto would be right behind her if something went awry.

…

The brunette senshi of Jupiter carefully slipped through the police caution tape and over the debris of the shattered doorway to enter into the penthouse apartment. She took in the modern furniture, the tasteful abstract art pieces that inhabited each wall. She quite frankly envied the state of the art entertainment center. With the exception of the blown off door and bits of wall that had come with it, the room was immaculate.

She slid a finger across a windowsill and peered suspiciously at her own finger. No dust.

“This is definitely his place,” Makoto concluded turning back towards her blond shadow.

“How do you know?” Minako challenged. “There’s nothing here that is remotely personal or useful for identifying who lives here. No family portraits or pictures on the fridge. Not even any cluttered mess.”

“Exactly,” Makoto agreed.

“I don’t follow.”

“You wouldn’t,” Makoto said softly trying to smile so the comment didn’t sting. Minako had a loving, if tad bit dysfunctional, family. “He’s an orphan. He doesn’t have people.”

“But… oh. Are you certain? It could be any orphan that lives here. Not necessarily our orphan.”

Makoto glanced through the room again when her eyes landed on the bookshelf. Without checking herself she pulled a textbook at random and tossed it to her companion.

The blond looked at it questioningly before opening up the front cover. Her eyebrows arched in surprise. “How did you know?”

“In the orphanage, you don’t usually have anything, so when you do, you have to make sure all the other children know it’s yours by writing your name all over it. Or it might get stolen,” Makoto explained distantly. “I label all my cookbooks too,” she added as an afterthought.

“Mako-chan…” her friend cooed softly.

“It’s fine,” Makoto interrupted, knowing this was not the time for a vulnerable heart to heart. “I have a family now,” the brunette assured with a smile.

Minako took her hand and squeezed. “I am most honored to call you sister Mako-chan.”
Makoto couldn’t help the tears that sprung to her eyes knowing all too well how lonely life was before she remembered her life as a senshi.

“We have a job to do to make sure our family stays whole!” Minako announced, her demeanor suddenly all business, though she still hadn’t released Makoto’s hand. “We need to search the whole place. We need evidence at least that Mamoru was home – that Usagi was here at all.”

Makoto nodded and Minako only then released her. The blond moved towards the back of the apartment towards the bedrooms, so Makoto turned into the kitchen. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the cup of coffee on the table, cold and untouched. The plain white mug sat beside an open textbook and spiral notebook.

“Minako-chan! I found something!”

“Oh good! Chiba is far too clean to leave much of a trace elsewhere. He even makes his bed! How is he ever going to put up with the tornado that is our Usagi-chan?”

Makoto chuckled at this comment. “I have no idea, but he had better figure it out or he’ll have to contend with me.” She then gestured to the coffee and text.

“That’s not much to go off of. I think we need Ami-chan’s computer.”

They turned at the crunch of boots on debris and watched as both Rei and Ami slipped through the taped up door. Ami already had her head buried in the Mercury computer.

“Usagi is not at home,” Rei reported without preamble. “Did you find anything?”

“Only that the door has been blown off its hinges, this is definitely Mamoru’s place, and neither of them are here and Usagi’s still not answering her communicator. They must’ve been taken.”

“We only just got her back!” Mako exclaimed, slamming her fists into the table in frustration.

“Anything Ami-chan?” Minako prompted when the bluenette remained stoic.

“There are definitely residual energy signatures here of the same type that Luna and Artemis have been tracking, but unfortunately nothing I can trace back to a source.”

“So we’re back to Usagi’s plan,” Minako concluded. They all turned to Ami. “You up for this?” the blond asked.

She nodded without hesitation. Makoto smiled at her quiet friend’s resolve, confident that Ami would do anything for Usagi – same as any of them.

…

En glanced towards their two prisoners to confirm they were suitably entangled and therefore ensnared in the branches of the tree.

“These two will make quite the feast and serve to replenish our energy reserves,” she said gleefully, disappointed when Ali didn’t share her enthusiasm. She hated having to wait for them to recover so they could get a more successful feeding.

“It won’t work,” he told her softly, shaking his head. “They love each other, so they are protected from our influence.”

“It’ll work if we use the tree directly,” she countered, frustrated at his continued pacifism.
Ali went silent. She came to his side and caressed his cheek. “Ali, talk to me. Tell me what’s really bothering you. I can feel your uncertainty and it’s throwing me on edge.”

He glanced up, his grey blue eyes meeting hers for a second before he dropped them again. “Does she commune with you still?” he asked quietly.

“What?”

“The tree, she has been silent.”

“What are you talking about Ali? It’s just a tree.”

She could feel his shock like a lightning bolt through their bond. He pulled away and stared at her in confusion. “You’ve *never* communed with our mother? But… but I’ve seen you!”

“I commune with you,” she insisted, coming forward and taking his hand. “You are all I need.”

“I will prove it to you,” she continued at his silence. “We can start with these two.”

“It’s not necessary!” he growled firmly. “In fact, it’s better to go slow. For whatever reason they regenerate especially quickly.”

“You want to keep them as pets Ali?” she cooed in amusement. “It might get a bit crowded.”

“We don’t even need to keep them here. This planet is rich with love and color En! We don’t need to build up vast reserves to make it to another planet. We can stay here – live off of brief dalliances. We don’t have to hurt anyone!”

“What if they find out what we are Ali? Do you think these *humans* would be as accepting of you as you are of them? Especially when they figure out how you survive?” she countered harshly, knowing too well the danger of being different.

“I will prove it to you,” he cried insistently.

“Are you trying to convince me?” she asked. “Or yourself.”

“We don’t need to hurt anyone,” he insisted before turning away.

She watched him as he stormed away from their inner dimension and back to normal space. She watched his magnificent green skin and vibrant electric blue hair fade to the drab pasty colors of human complexion with distaste.

Only when the portal closed did she turn her attention back to their guests. She watched, her irritation growing at how Mamoru reached out for the blond even in his unconscious state.

She slid her fingernail along his chiseled jaw line. She smirked when he slightly flinched.

“Awake are you?” she mocked delightfully. “Well, why didn’t you say anything? I’ve been a dreadful hostess.”

“Why are you doing this?” he croaked, revealing his cobalt blue eyes.

“I don’t take rejection well,” she said cupping the side of his face with her porcelain green hand.

“Natsumi-san?” he questioned in realization.
“You may call me En,” she purred as she caressed his face.

“I cannot give you what you want,” he begged. She could feel his attempt to turn away, but the tangled vines and branches held him firmly in place.

“I have no problem taking it by force,” she countered coyly.

“Please, you don’t have to do this.”

Her face closed off. “Except that we do have to do this,” she said softly. “If we don’t, we will die.”

“Your companion seems to think there’s another way.”

“Ali wishes that were true – he is a gentle soul. I know that it isn’t,” she confided staring towards the portal where she last saw him. “But I will be strong enough for both of us.”

She turned to him and kissed him gently, biting his lip when he tried to turn away. “Never fear Mamoru-kun, you will be mine soon enough.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“Are you so eager to meet your fate Mamoru-kun?”

He glared furiously at her.

“You’re not ready yet,” she confided. “But your indignant anger will only hasten your recovery and then you will be ready to give all of yourself to me.”

“Never.”

“We will see.”

…

Seijuro stood across the quad alongside another dark haired girl by the name of Hanako if Ami recalled correctly. Watching him flirt shamelessly with another brought her anger to new heights. She knew though, that this actually worked in her favor for her plan.

“Ami-chan?” Makoto broke into her thoughts gently. Ami glanced into the concerned green eyes of her friend and gave her a stoic smile and a nod. Then she marched forward purposely with a confidence she did not feel.

“Ami-chan!”

The scholar turned back easily to the brunette she had come to remember as one of her absolutely closest friends. A sister who shared her passion and her duty. A comrade that insured neither of them was ever alone.

“I’m right here should you need me,” Jupiter entreated.

This time Ami’s smile was genuine. “I know. Thank you.”

She moved forward again, spiraling through a mental checklist trying to keep the task purely mentally logical. Her computer and communicator were both open, active, and out of sight within her pocket.
She slipped up to the flirting couple. She put a hand on her classmate’s shoulder to steal her attention.

“Hanako-chan, would you be so kind as to give Ginga-san and I a moment?” she asked.

The other girl’s almond eyes flashed in anger and perhaps, possessiveness.

Ami remained unmoved.

“Mizuno-san, you had your chance,” the other girl countered harshly.

“I know all I need to. You had your chance Tsukino-san. You won’t ruin mine,” Ami said coldly into the phone before determinedly pushing the receiver into its base and rushing out the door and down the stairs.

Her mind reeled, knowing she had just remembered something from her forgotten day.

“You’re right Hanako-chan, I did already have my chance,” she whispered to the other girl. “And he… he raped me. I don’t want the same thing to happen to you. Please, get out of here,” she begged, hoping the other girl would listen.

Her eyes widened with shock. And just when Ami thought she was going to have to convince her further, the girl nodded and strode off.

“Was that really necessary?” Seijuro asked lightly his misty grey eyes twinkled with amusement. He took a seat on the bench behind them and patted the open space beside him. “If you wanted me to yourself, you only had to ask.”

The sheer arrogance of his words sent her heart pounding and her throat convulsing. She stood shaking in rage and hurt because she didn’t think this alien creature even understood that he had violated her.

He had taken advantage of her social isolation and manipulated her feelings. He had stolen the purity of her first kiss and perhaps even her first love.

How would she ever trust another again?

“Why did you never visit me while I was in the hospital?” she demanded icily. She didn’t even have to pretend to be angry as her blood already boiled.

“You missed me?” he asked, his eyes still dancing with good humor and amusement.

She slapped him hard across the face. “This not funny!” she screamed at him.

He touched a finger to his red cheek in surprise. She hoped it was still burning from the impact.

He took her hand reverently and his thumbs rubbed every inch of it comfortingly. He kissed it gently and then turned his storming blue grey eyes up to her face. “I’m sorry Ami-chan,” he whispered. “Had I known you were in the hospital nothing could have kept me away. I never wanted to hurt you.”

The tremors shot through her and she could not have said if it was from fear or desire. Maybe both. How could she still want him knowing everything that she did?

“I’ve been gone for the last two weeks! You didn’t notice I was gone that entire time?” she accused, desperately trying to maintain her anger. He was far easier to resist with the rage pulsing
through her veins.

“I’ve been at home taking care of my sister,” he explained calmly, leaning in for a kiss. She jerked away reflexively.

“Ami-chan,” he whispered. He sighed, releasing her hand. “I understand that you are angry. If you can’t find it within yourself to forgive me, I will leave you alone.”

Her eyes jumped to his, startled by the seriousness and sincerity of his tone. “You would?” she asked, suddenly doubting once again that he was the monster they sought.

“If you ask it of me.”

She stared at him, feeling uncertain, wishing she could glance at her computer’s screen without being completely obvious.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked into her silence.

She stood in a room, surrounded by flickering candlelight in an almost sheer pale blue gown that fluttered in the breeze created by an open sliding glass door. Before she could move a warm voice froze her in her tracks.

“I’m so glad you made it Ami-chan,” he whispered in her ear from behind, his hot breadth sending shivers pulsing through her form. “What do you want me to do?”

“Kiss me,” she responded without considering the question.

“Where?” he whispered again.

The unexpected question flooded her with a sense of nervous excitement.

“Here,” she said laying a delicate finger on the curve of her neck. His lips were only a second behind, nipping at the bared skin sensually. She leaned into the rippling sensation, whimpering when he pulled away.

“And what do you desire now Ami-chan?”

“I want you to kiss me,” she whispered.

He did not give her a chance to change her mind. His lips were on hers – warm and soft. She was surprised at his gentleness, but her insides squirmed in discomfort and fear.

“Please don’t ever stop,” she begged. He chuckled, the vibrations only intensifying the pulsing waves of barely tolerable ecstasy.

“For as long as you live,” he promised.

She tore away violently. “I can’t do this.”

He had been going to kill her. Maybe he had no intention of doing so today, but on her lost day he had intended to kill her. He hadn’t realized she was in the hospital because he had thought her dead.

“Ami-chan!” he called after her, but she could not get away fast enough.

She kept running until there was a stitch in her side. Then she tripped and crumpled into a heap
with a startled sob. Makoto was at her side in a second.

“Are you okay?”

Ami didn’t know how to answer that question. She was physically fine. But she couldn’t stop shaking. She felt her face crumple as her emotions and fear caught up with her. Heart wrenching sobs tore from her throat and wracked through her form.

But she felt safe falling to pieces in Makoto’s rock solid embrace, lulled and swayed back and forth comfortably.

“Ami, I’m sorry,” she kept saying. “We never should have asked you to do this.”

Ami said nothing, she just let her salty tears fall, feeling broken beyond repair – she felt unclean with a stain that could never be washed away. How had she been so stupid? She should have known better. She did know better. Really the whole encounter had been her own fault.

And then she remembered that this was not about her – it was about Usagi, and managed to stifle her sobs with a few deep breaths. When she was calm she gently pushed Makoto away.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, wiping away her tears. “I know this is not the time to fall apart or show weakness.”

“Ami-chan!” Makoto objected.

“I did it,” she interrupted softly. She pulled her computer from her pocket and glanced at the screen. “It’s a match,” she reported calmly, no longer even remotely surprised.

“Do we have a location?” Minako asked through the communicator.

“Yes, we can track him anywhere,” Ami told her maintaining a semblance of calm.

“Well, at least until he takes off that blazer,” Makoto commented.

“Actually,” Ami corrected, biting her lip, “It’s inside of him. I’m not totally familiar with his alien metabolism, but in a human it would last for weeks.”

“How? When?” Makoto demanded. “I was watching the whole time!”

“It was in my lip gloss,” she explained meekly.

“Ami-chan!” Minako cheered gleefully. “We’ll turn you into an effective spy yet!”

Ami choked back a sob at the praise and Makoto pulled her back into the protective hug and Ami clung to her as hard as a frightened child clings to a favorite blanket.

“Guys?” Minako’s voice called questioningly into the sudden silence.

“Give us a minute!” Makoto barked back roughly and Ami managed a small hysterical laugh at Jupiter’s unconditional protectiveness even from their leader.

…

“There is no reason to delay. We will meet you there,” Minako’s voice reported through the communicator. Rei nodded her agreement and ended the call. She glanced around to be sure the way was clear. She then closed her eyes and summoned her birthright. She gasped in awe as the
once familiar heat pulsed through her form like an attentive lover’s caress. She donned the fuku that was her body armor in a manner of seconds, the rush of power leaping to her fingertips begging to be released. Of course she had intellectually remembered what the transformation felt like, but reality was so much more than remembering.

This was who she was and she felt whole for the first time in months.

She quickly took to the rooftops and headed toward their rendezvous. The others, her sisters in arms, had already arrived and she met their giddy smiles with one of her own. Despite the circumstances, each of them had come home in feeling the power and adrenaline of their transformations.

“He’s on the fifth floor,” Ami reported. The four of them moved as one at this news, needing no further direction.

The door was locked, but that was not going to stop any of them not today. Locks were a simple matter of applying enough focused heat. Mars and Jupiter made short work of the metal locks – melting them into puddles running down the door itself.

The senshi burst into the apartment and quickly fanned out keeping their backs toward each other, but the flat remained eerily quiet.

“Mercury?” Venus called, asking for an explanation of the empty abode.

“There’s no one here,” the bluenette reported her eyes glancing up occasionally from her handheld computer. “But this is the correct location,” she insisted. “He should be here.”

“So where is he?”

“There’s evidence of an interdimensional rift. Or at least an echo of one. It is most likely that he is currently existing in that interdimensional space between realities.”

“So can you rip it open?” their leader questioned.

“Not without some heavy duty equipment.”

“There’s something else here,” Mars interrupted absently opening herself to the spiraling energy around her.

“Explain,” her blond sister requested.

“It’s alive,” the miko reported. There was a life force here – it’s very essence threatened to overwhelm her. She gasped and felt herself sway on her feet.

“Sailor Mars! Are you okay?” her commander demanded.

She held up a hand to forestall the blonde’s intervention.

“I’m fine. It doesn’t want to hurt any of us. It’s just immense, and… overwhelming!”

“What is it?”

“I think it’s a tree…” she could feel the branching pathways that crawled through the ground and extended up towards the sky.

“What do you mean? We’re in a high rise building,” Mercury objected.
But Mars couldn’t hear her distracted by the sensation of black poison pumping through its vascular bundle from its roots to its leaves. But the entity had not been turned – instead, it felt unbearable shame at the cause of its condition.

The priestess fell to her knees at the power of it.

“It’s in agony,” she sobbed. “I think it’s dying.”

*Will you help me?* The voice ripped painfully through her skull.

She screamed in their shared pain.

“Sailor Mars!” the other senshi exclaimed in concern. She managed to wave them back barely aware of their presence so meek and small compared to the Tree of Life that dominated her senses.

*I live to serve the planet,* she told the magnificent tree. *What do you need?*

*I need you to kill me.*

The request filled the Martian warrior with deep endless sadness.

*Why would I destroy such a beautiful creature?*

She screamed as she was hit with another psychic wave of shame, despair, and actual physical pain.

*Is there no other way? She pleaded with the entity.*

*Please, let me be renewed,* it begged.

*If this is your wish. I am the wielder of the cleansing fire.*

Mars felt her body relax as the entity released her. The space before them tore itself apart revealing a path into a place so dark they could not see what was on the other side.

“What is that?”

“We have to destroy it,” she reported sadly.

And once again, all four senshi moved forward as one needing no other direction or explanation. They would do whatever needed to be done to protect their princess.

Chapter End Notes

Okay!!! I know I said only one more chapter last time, but this time I mean it! I swear! Plus, I figured you’d rather I share this segment than hold out until I was completely finished with the final confrontations. I really struggled to write these last two months, but it was not for lack of trying. But in the last two weeks, things started flowing again! Yay!!

I have been positively overwhelmed with reviews. And I must say thank you to Celestial Cat, Serenity’sdarkside, slightlyxjaded, Sobakasu2, KageNoNeko, EvaNguyen, Mako-clb, HyenaYu, SMS92, tryntee13, TropicalRemix, gabicg93, petites sorcières, Algae, LadyWinterlight, lunaballz, Sandreline_Moon, and Betty-
Alexandria+Pride for keeping me motivated and excited to write this story. I hope to have more for you all soon! I certainly don’t mean to torture you with cliffhangers!
Usagi woke up nestled within in a puffy white cloud. That’s what it felt like anyway. Or maybe it was a cocoon. Like every other morning, she did not have the remotest desire to wake and face the day, but something felt strange. She realized that she felt invigorated – that a gentle slow stream of life energy oozed into her form. And then she remembered her capture, and her current peaceful comfort made even less sense. Perhaps she had misunderstood everything. She didn’t feel threatened or drained. In fact, she almost felt protected in her captor’s embrace.

However, she found herself completely immobilized, unable to shift an inch. Her eyes flashed open and immediately landed on Mamoru – he was restrained within weaving green vines, but he was so far away – almost on the other side of a gargantuan and ancient tree. She knew he was conscious as his muscles rippled with tension as he fought their captivity. His attempts bore no fruit, but she knew that he was never one to give up a cause no matter how hopeless.

She struggled to take in their surroundings. Her living prison soared above them, wooden bark branching upward in elegant and gnarled spirals until they vanished, snatched into the abyss of a hazy mist that her gaze could not penetrate. The fog hung in the air all around her, reflecting the faintest of glow emanating from the alien golden-brown hardwood. The dim lighting also revealed the seemingly innocent firebrand-red flowers covering every inch of the surrounding terrain. She knew better, having been overwhelmed by the natural beauties, not once but twice. Beautiful and deadly, she thought to herself.

“They’re almost recovered,” a soprano voice from behind her gushed excitedly. “Anytime now.”

Ah, so that was it, Usagi realized. The cocoon of vines healed her only to prepare her to be slaughtered like a chicken on a farm.

Before she could begin to take pity on herself, the darkness was shattered, the very air ripped open and light flooded into the dark dimension they inhabited, sending the plant spiders scuttling away. The senshi – her four protectors, best friends, and soul sisters – burst through the portal suddenly. Her heart swelled in both relief and joy at her protectors’ presence.

The moving sea of blood-red petals surged forward surrounding her dearest friends in a matter of seconds and she felt her core clench in cold dread.

…

Ali sat with legs crossed beneath him, his eyes closed as he cleared his mind, and instead tried to focus on the warm living pulse of the Tree of Life, mentally open to her blessing. Despite his efforts though, his inner vision remained as dark and cold as the deep space they had traveled to find this blue marble oasis. He choked back a sob at the tree’s continued aloofness, the sense of abandonment smothered him like ash and smoke from an uncontrolled fire.

Why wouldn’t she answer? Didn’t she understand how lost he felt – how much he doubted everything that he thought was foundational to his existence. And she chose this moment to remain coldly silent!

He clamped down on his sudden flaring anger. He knew his fury would not bring her around.
Instead, he tried centering himself again into one simple strand that floated in complete awareness, reaching out mentally to the entity that granted him continued life, trying to project his desperate need, paired with genuine contrition for how he had hurt her.

The vibrant pulse of life buzzed pleasantly across his skin, but he could only connect with the garden of flowers he and En had created - their guardians that protected them and fought for them always.

The silence of the ginormous living pillar was deafening in comparison.

“They’re almost recovered. Anytime now,” En’s gluttonous lust broke through his concentration.

He didn’t bother to respond. She could feel his indifference and indecision. There was no point in pretending he felt otherwise. He had backed her up during her assault on Chiba to save her from those that would do her harm, not to destroy anyone else.

He considered the Lunar Guardian carefully. He didn’t want to hurt her, but he felt shame at the merciful thought. She had nearly destroyed En, nearly taken away the one soul in his world that had never abandoned him. If the sailor suited senshi had succeeded he would have been truly and completely alone.

And yet, he still didn’t want to see her harmed. He understood now after almost losing En, what his choices meant. That when he chose a victim, the others in their life would be devastated by his actions. That he had taken children away from their families, lovers away from their partners, he was hurting people who loved his victims, the way he cared for En.

He felt the tear through space-time a split second before four more guardian senshi appeared. He stared in shock. Who were these new adversaries? Where had they come from?

En had gathered the blossom protectors mentally and pushed them out in an assault, her rage pulsing through his veins. These new and unknown senshi immediately lashed out with ice and fire, thunder and light, burning through their guardians, and he felt his own fury build and echo En’s own.

Perhaps she had been right all along. The natives of this world would always seek to destroy them, could never understand that what they did, they did to survive. How could it be wrong to protect his home and his love?

…

There had been no time to think. No time to make sense of the crablike plant creatures that covered the rolling landscape as far as the hazy mist would allow the eye to see. The second the Martian warrior had landed out of the Great Tree’s portal, the blood-red fauna surged forward viciously striking with needle-like appendages.

She called the fire of her soul to her fingertips, reveling in the power she brought surging to her hands for the first time in living memory. The flames arced out, burning through hordes of the nightmarish creatures. Her three sisters had fanned outward each taking on their own quadrant, with their backs to one another, trusting the others to protect the other sides from the endless sea of demonic foliage.

“Usagi and Mamoru are both immobile,” Mercury reported her blue visor allowing her to take scans of the area without ever breaking her waves of icy blasts. “But they are unharmed and being held at the base of the tree.”
“We will make our way in that direction then,” Venus ordered. And their huddled defensive circle adjusted just slightly to add more offense in that direction. Their progress was almost imperceptibly slow as the flow of scuttling blossoms never diminished. As many as she and her sisters destroyed, more surged forward to take their place.

Mars hissed in pain as one lurched through her fiery shield, slicing open her forearm. She spared the superficial wound no more of her attentions, instead focused on blasting out waves of fire, and then taking the step forward before the cleared space could be filled in by their adversaries.

…

Usagi’s heart plummeted to the pit of her stomach, as she fought violently and uselessly against her restraints. She could only watch as the living ocean that threatened to overwhelm the flashes of power that represented her friends’ defenses. She screamed at her helplessness, straining against her imprisonment. She would give anything to be able to save them all.

As if hearing her desperate wish, familiar silver power pulsed through her limbs, crackling to the surface, offering to fulfill her whims. She didn’t even have to break free.

She could end it all. Right here. Right now.

But using the crystal’s power to that extent would kill her. Just as it had before, and this time she would not wish for a return to normalcy with her dying breath. Not when all her friends and loved ones were alive and well, she wouldn’t risk ruining their lives more than she already had.

Her eyes turned to Mamoru, his muscles rippling in protest against the prison of vines. He even tore through once, only to have them envelope his form again, pulling him back down. He loved her. She wasn’t sure if he remembered everything, but he had realized all over again that he loved her.

Tears slid silently down her face. She couldn’t wipe them away even if she wanted to. She had prayed that he would remember, and now she wished she could take it all back. It would be easier for him, if he didn’t know who she was at all.

But part of her was glad she had been able to kiss him just once more before the end.

Her eyes fell once again on her senshi. Time seemed to stretch out, as she watched the girls in all their fighting glory with pride, expertly holding back the neverending front of impossible alien creatures. But this was a foe they could not defeat. Eventually, they would tire and falter. She would not allow them to fall. Not when she could prevent it.

Even if it meant she had to leave them. Her tears intensified, and her throat threatened to close.

“Kami-sama, I wish it didn’t have to be this way,” she whispered to herself.

She had been looking forward to the reunion party. A slumber party, to celebrate their recovered memories. It would have been at the temple or maybe at Makoto’s studio apartment.

Ami would have had her nose buried in some indecipherable text, and the rest of them would have to somehow distract her so they could steal it and hide it away. Minako would be giggling over some celebrity gossip, while Makoto would be baking cookies. Usagi herself would be tearing through Rei’s best manga, who of course would be screaming at her for dropping crumbs into the seams of her favorite volume.

She could see it all now. One last tear slid silently down her cheek, as she gathered her resolve.
around her like a cloak that would protect her. She would make sure that the party happened. She would save them all.

They would just have to celebrate without her.

She called upon the silver energy within her, it cackled eagerly up and down her form, glowing and pulsing. She let it flood her system, embraced the power even as it threatened to consume her.

“Usako!”

She closed her eyes against his anguished plea.

She would save him too.

Sailor Mercury fought as she had never fought before, blasting out icy projectiles and lances with a precision that only her past incarnation as the princess of the first planet could bring to bear.

Annotations of enemy and ally positions simultaneously flooded her vision and she processed them all without thought, never once distracted. They were inching through the violent rippling blood-red hills of monsters. It was slow, but she kept them going in the right direction.

A glance toward their princess and the best friend she had forgotten, revealed the girl swelling with shining power. So much of it that she visibly glowed, silver light pouring from her form. Her readouts revealed there was more to the story, and she choked.

“No,” she sobbed, understanding only too well what their princess intended. She screamed in pain as razor sharp thorns pierced straight through her hand with her loss of concentration. She manifested an icicle pushing her attacker back, pulling herself together, running some quick scenarios in her head.

“Jupiter, Mars,” she called urgently, “You have to concentrate your power in a direct line towards Sailor Moon! It has to be a focused narrow blast to penetrate all the way through to Moon.”

“But that will leave us exposed on two sides!” Venus objected.

“Three actually,” Mercury corrected. “Because Venus, you’re going to run through the opening. And you’re going to save her before she destroys herself trying to save us.”

The blond needed no further explanation. “Do it!” she ordered harshly.

Spinning with inhuman reflexes, Mars and Jupiter shot out lines of fire and lightning as hot and bright as the sun. The spider plants melted in the heat, and the neverending hordes split open like a parting sea. Venus was charging through it before the embers and ashes had fallen to the ground, but Mercury could spare their leader no more of her attention as she blasted out a semi-circle of water trying to hold the plant spiders on all three exposed sides.

She screamed in agony as needlelike claws stabbed into her soft flesh. She clamped down on the cry and bit her lip and turning the exclamation into a determined growl. Then a second attack struck from behind. She shot it back with a wave of ice, but it was no use as three more leapt forward the invading circle tightening around them like waves filling a tide pool.

Another blast of lightning struck in front of her, clearing the immediate area in front of the ice senshi. She nodded in gratitude towards Jupiter, coming to her feet again. The three once again
with their backs pressed together, trying to stem the tide when their margin for error had vanished.

Usagi stared at her hands, mesmerized. They glowed softly with the thrum of power that she called to the surface. She was ready. All that was left was to release her cleansing power, and her friends would be safe.

But Sailor Venus was suddenly kneeling at her feet, her cornflower blue eyes glassy with threatened tears.

“Stop!” the golden senshi begged. “Please don’t do this!”

Usagi shook her head violently in disagreement at her friend. She had to do this. No one else could.

“Are you so eager to leave us?” Minako demanded of the other blonde.

“Of course not!” Usagi shrieked in horrified response.

“You are not alone Sailor Moon!” the other girl was screaming angrily – shaking her form, still tangled in the twisted vines. “Stop making decisions to spare us the struggle. Let us share this burden with you. Share our powers – it’s enough. You know it is.”

“None of you have to die today,” Usagi insisted stubbornly.

“You’re right!” Venus agreed harshly, “No one has to die today. We are amazed and grateful that you are willing to sacrifice yourself for us. But don’t be so quick – your life has value and meaning too! You should make this choice only as a last resort when there are no more cards left to play! You’re not alone anymore Usagi!”

The words resonated in her head again and again.

She wasn’t alone anymore.

She let the power fade slightly from her form.

“What are your orders, Sailor Venus?”

The golden suited senshi broke into hysterical laughter and Usagi couldn’t help but return the expression.

En watched the battle unfold from above. The pocket of resistance the trio of senshi had created had collapsed into almost nothing – they would shortly not be a problem. Instead, her eyes turned toward the Lunarian warrior – the blond girl who had stood in their way time and again, as both the senshi of the moon against their targets, and as Tsukino Usagi who interfered with the best harvest she had ever experienced. Her adversary remained trapped in the living prison En had constructed herself, ignoring her surroundings even when her comrade had rushed to her side.

Ali was distracted, having taken over the direction of their living garden. Which left her free to do what needed to be done. She was going to take her revenge, protect what was hers, and eliminate their biggest problem all in one blow.

She dove downwards towards the immobile senshi.
No one could stop her.

…

Mamoru struggled against the vines that held him immobile. He had learned hours ago that the fight was useless, but he couldn’t just witness the battle unfold. He didn’t really recognize the new senshi, but his entire being was itched to join them against their foe.

Flashes of colored light flooded his vision as the guardians struck at their enemies in a rhythmic deadly dance. Without understanding why, he felt that he should have been at the center of the maelstrom — ready to strike at every opening the senshi created for him. It didn’t matter that his abilities lacked the raw power of the guardian senshi, or that the odds were stacked overwhelmingly hopeless against them. Every fiber of his being screamed that he should be standing shoulder to shoulder amongst them, protecting the one soul they each cherished more than their own.

He fought against his restraints harder. He had to get free.

Internal alarms in his head pulsed, the same gut feeling that always told him when Sailor Moon was in mortal peril, blaring in warning. He felt the pure energy rising within her echoed by the mournful acceptance of her fate.

“Usako!” The primal scream tore through his chest. He couldn’t lose her! Not now, when he had only just realized she was everything to him. Not ever, if he had anything to say on the matter.

The other blond senshi in an orange fuku raced towards her with impossible speed – he didn’t remember which one she was, but he was grateful that she was kneeling in front of his princess with tears in her eyes. He trusted that these girls could get through to her as no one else could. If he couldn’t save her, perhaps they could.

Then he saw the pink haired green marbled skinned humanoid floating above their heads, amongst the branches of the tree that imprisoned him, clearly contemplating murder. He screamed in anguish once again.

He prayed, harder than he ever had in his life. Please, just let him save her.

And suddenly, he was free. The vines had pulled away and without a moment for thought he launched himself forward, toward the slight form who had stolen his heart once again without him noticing.

The monster dove down, gravity itself aiding her strike.

He pumped his legs harder, determined to get there first, as he had so many times before.

The thought was like a bomb. Time seemed to stop as his mind cracked, like a dam had broken. Wave after wave of impossible and forgotten memories crashed down upon him.

He remembered.

*Dreams of a princess lost in mist, begging for aid. Night after night spent searching for every mention of crystal heirlooms from museums and archeological excavations to jewelry stores, stealing when he had to until one night he had meant a Lunar Guardian in a Sailor Suit. He had met a young girl named Tsukino Usagi the same day, and everything had changed.*

*He remembered fighting at her back and at her side against nightmares. He remembered arguing*
with her in the afternoon at the Crown, how he had lived for the moments she sat at his side hurling bombs into his carefully constructed routine.

He remembered being trapped in an elevator, death almost certain, before she had revealed herself to save them both.

And then he remembered being turned into a shadow of his former self. Fighting not with her, but against her. She had managed to break through to him again anyway. She always did.

It was only a flash – a fraction of a second, but his whole world had changed. He knew who he was.

He managed to keep moving – he didn’t even stumble despite the mental flash bomb that had just detonated in his skull. He just surged forward with impossible speed, echoing movements now so familiar to him. He had to save her because he knew he was lost without her. There was no thought because really there was no choice.

He yelled in triumph as he took the blow. Smiling that he had made it in time.

The fist sized knifelike appendage drove through him like a hot knife through butter. The pain flew through him like a shockwave.

Usagi’s voice rent through the air this time. She was unable to come to his side, still held immobile. But it didn’t matter, as he had fallen backwards into her.

He sighed with contentment. If it meant he had kept her safe, he could endure anything.

Even death.

…

Ali had no time for indecision of second guesses. Channeling himself through their floral guardians stole all his attention as he fought and countered all three of the unknown senshi guardians simultaneously. He had lost dozens of his own beloved children, but the tide was beginning to turn. It was only a matter of time before he overwhelmed his foes.

An unexpected surge of triumph broke his concentration. He turned toward En and watched as she dived in for her strike against Sailor Moon – the warrior she despised, and Tsukino Usagi, the girl who always stood in her way. He didn’t share her glee, but he didn’t move to stop her, knowing they would both be far safer with Sailor Moon gone.

Streaking motion caught his gaze. Mamoru charged to intercept his beloved’s attack. He started to call out to En in warning, but the fear and panic rolling off the other man in jagged waves stopped him. The all-consuming terror crushed his soul, as he could relate only too well. The same fear had plagued him when he hovered uselessly over En’s injured form – when she hadn’t even heard his mind call.

His broad-shouldered adversary arrived just in time to absorb the strike, to willingly and purposefully allow the razor-sharp edges to tear through his vulnerable form.

It was an incomprehensible choice, and yet… Ali understood.

This is what it meant to love something so completely, that you would die to protect it. This impossible glowing beauty is what he and En were destroying in their choices.
He let go of his control over the garden. The creatures stopped fighting, instead they settled where they were, setting down roots to nourish their lovely crimson petals.

He didn’t want to fight anymore. He didn’t want to destroy one more beautiful part of the luscious bountiful blue marble.

…

The senshi of Jupiter stumbled forward at the sudden lack of resistance as the hordes of enemies stilled, looking like nothing more than bushes of blood-red flowers. She didn’t question their sudden good fortune, and she didn’t pause to take stock of her injuries. She leapt forward, determined to protect their princess and friend, her sisters in arms only centimeters behind her.

But they were too late.

Usagi, still restrained within the tangled roots of the tree, sobbed uncontrollably. Mamoru, untransformed, lay on the ground below her, dark red blooming through his ugly green jacket. Venus kneeled at Mamoru’s side, trying to staunch the red flow.

And behind them all, the pink-haired fiend crouched, preparing to strike again.

The daughter of Jupiter leapt forward and shoved the monster back. Her foe countered with a flurry of sharp jabs and swinging vines. Jupiter rolled to the side and back to her feet, summoning more lightning to her fists, her liquid green eyes burning with righteous indignation for all the havoc and misery this creature had caused them.

For the death of Naru.

She struck forward with a flood of power she had never before brought to bear. Before she could land the blow the blue-haired alien swept in to intercept. He stood there accepting the blow, offering no other resistance.

Makoto did not even flinch at the act of sacrifice as she struck him across the jaw. She took pleasure in the electricity that arced through his form repeatedly sending his body into tonic convulsions. She knew from experience that he couldn’t even scream as the blue lightning kept his muscles involuntarily locked up.

“Ali!” the panicked shrill scream tore through the air, sounding almost human in its terror.

“Sailor Jupiter!” Usagi cried. “Please stop!”

Jupiter absorbed the energy automatically without thought at the order from her princess, from her friend.

“Please, let the pain and bloodshed end,” the blonde senshi pleaded. The gnarled roots that imprisoned her retracted, setting her free as if to provide evidence to her ridiculous claim. Instead, they immediately enveloped Mamoru’s injured and unconscious form like a protective cocoon – the roots glowing gold, and Jupiter somehow knew the tree was healing him and not draining him of his life force.

“Don’t you see?” Usagi continued softly. “They’re not our enemy any longer.”

Despite who said them, the words enraged her. She paced menacingly, having no other channel for her righteous anger. “How can you say that?! What about Naru-chan?”
With her newfound freedom the princess was immediately at her prince’s side. “Naru-chan would want the violence to end. She wouldn’t care about vengeance,” she insisted, though her voice cracked with barely concealed grief.

Jupiter screamed in frustration. She sent bolts flying in every direction free of humanoids and plant life. Usagi had a forgiving heart. Usually Makoto admired that.

Today, she wanted to kill something.

…

Ali stood frozen in disbelief. He had expected retribution and punishment. He never would have dreamed Usagi would come to his defense against her own allies and friends. His throat closed with emotion and he gaze turned to the ground, not understanding how anyone could be so forgiving or compassionate. He knew without doubt that he would never have made the same decision in her place. He felt in awe of her, he struggled to breathe over the grief and guilt that threatened to consume him with all he had done.

He had caused so much pain, and needlessly.

Then a rage was building too, just seconds behind the grief. Lost in such an emotional torrent, it took him a moment to realize the anger wasn’t his own. He swirled around towards his partner. Her maroon eyes blazed with uncontained indignation and fury towards their adversaries, her body taut with tension, ready to spring into action. She had taken their garden in her mental grip, ready to strike into the senshi’s unprotected and unsuspecting backs.

She was so beautiful. His heart plummeted in his chest – all he wanted, all he needed was for her to look at him. He wanted her garnet gaze and attention. He wanted her to put him before her desire for revenge.

He reached out and took her hands gently within his own.

“Enough,” he whispered, letting his forehead rest upon her own.

Her eyes flashed up to his. “But Ali! We need this! They’ll stop us,” she insisted.

“We need to stop!” he countered vehemently, squeezing her hand. “Don’t you see? We’re destroying something beautiful. Something precious.”

“But we’ll die,” she objected softly, her voice cracking with emotion.

“Then we’ll die!” he shouted, pulling away in agitation.

“Ali,” she cried, tracing a strand blue hair that framed his face with the tip of a delicate leafy green finger. “I don’t want you to die. You are the most beautiful creature in this universe.”

“Shhh,” he soothed, pulling her back roughly into his embrace. “It’s okay. We’ll be together.”

In that moment, his link with his mother flooded into his awareness and he sucked in the air around him sharply.

“Ali?” her uncertain concern felt so far away.

His mind traveled through each and every gnarled dried up branch and leaf, as he connected with his roots deeper than he ever had before. His mother’s isolation and shame for living off the pain
of others blasted through him like a tsunami. Through it all though, there was the thinnest barest thread of hope that one day her children would understand, would recognize the truth of their existence. And that thread blossomed, expanding outward with pride and joy at his breakthrough.

“En… En, link with me, there’s something you have to experience,” he begged urgently.

She reached out to him without question.

She fell from his embrace to her knees amidst the neverending field of passionate red blossoms, having dissolved into tears.

“I’m sorry,” she cried pitifully. “I had no idea. No idea.”

Ali crouched down and wrapped his arms around her shaking form, trying to project the love he felt for her, though it felt insignificant compared to the unconditional love and acceptance of their mother.

She clutched at him anyway, letting him serve as her anchor.

They were both bombarded with images. He cried out, overwhelmed by the sheer volume of what being shared. It was their history – the story of their ancestry. The tree of life had grown hundreds of children from her pods. She cherished and nurtured them and they loved her. They had prospered for generations.

Until they had forgotten her, forgotten their roots. Their ancestors and grown competitive and cruel, competing for the life-giving energy of the tree, not realizing that she contained more than they could ever need. They had grown gluttonous, siphoning off excessive amounts of energy all at once for pleasure or hording. The few who were kind and generous were the first to fall during the first wave of violence. Manipulation and scheming became the only way to survive until they all destroyed one another. After the fifth purge, there were only two. Two seedlings she had protected in her pods while the fighting commenced.

The tree had hoped for them, hoped that without the influence of their elders they could learn to turn towards love again. She was relieved when her sapling children had clung so supportively and lovingly to one another, but torn to pieces when they had turned toward harvesting others to survive. It was clear that she loved her creations unconditionally – all of them, even when they had turned their backs on her and on each other. But she wasn’t sure they deserved to survive. She wasn’t confident that it was fair to subject the rest of the living universe to their deeds.

So, she had withdrawn. It had been a trial, a test to see if they would destroy one another as the previous generation had, or if they could break the cycle of violence and turn towards love instead.

‘Why wait to share this with us?’ Ali asked through his tears. Had they known, had she given them clearer guidance, they could have been spared so much suffering.

The answer again, came to them in a series of images, but they were hard to define. Blasts of colors he could not give name to, mountain ranges and forests that seemed to emit the light of a thousand suns, cities filled with luminous beings, vast deserts made of sparkling gemstones, and an ocean of love and mercy. She showed them love and she showed them power beyond understanding.

The love was always there for them – their birthright by their mere existence. But she would not give them access to her knowledge, wisdom, and power if they first did not show her they were worthy of the responsibility.

He felt the decay running through her vascular bundle, the poison that he and En had brought to
her trying to heal her. She revealed the truth – that she had drunk from the blackest of nature’s offerings, and now she was forever tainted. She was dying.

“What have we done?” he choked out in a devastated whisper. “I’m so sorry,” he cried, wishing he could take all of it back.

But he understood as well, that her loss was the consequence of their actions, and her certainty that if their breakthrough lasted, it was a price she was more than willing to pay.

Her attention and connection withdrew for a moment as the great entity connected with another. He started, remembering the presence of the senshi in their domain. The planet’s guardians who had just silently witnessed their tearful revelations without a word of protest or accusation. Even the senshi in green.

The warrior in red, rose to her feet looking at home amongst the fiery-red blossoms that stretched as far as the eye could see in the swirls of mist. Flames were crackling with warmth in her hands and he watched as she approached the base of towering bare skeleton of a tree that once stood a flourishing evergreen symbol of life.

“What are you doing?” Ali leapt forward, pulling her back by the shoulder.

“Performing a cleansing ritual,” she said softly as she turned to him, her violet eyes soft with compassion.

“You’ll destroy her,” En objected as his side.

“No,” the raven-haired beauty shook her head gently. “You destroyed her.”

He let her go, struck as tears slid silently down his face at the truth of her words.

“I’ll be granting her peace,” she whispered before she placed the sacred flame in various knots of gnarled dried out roots. It looked like a ceremony, where they had surrounded the gargantuan living pillar with little flickering candles.

“Please!” Usagi begged on her knees, “There has to be another way.”

He wasn’t sure if she was beseeching her companion or the tree itself, but he didn’t have time to ponder the conundrum, as the Lunar Guardian was quickly enveloped in pure white light.

The young heroine beamed with joy even as tears streamed down her flushed cheeks. And he couldn’t help but feel envious, that in her last moments his mother had chosen to gift this stranger with rapture, rather than himself and his love.

You don’t need me anymore Ali. You have already received the greatest gift I could ever bestow.

He clung to the words as they resonated through his head, repeated them over and over to himself. She was so confident, and he tried to be as well, but he wasn’t certain how to live without her nurturing benevolence.

Usagi started, her clear blue eyes blinking in confusion as she came back to herself.

“Are you okay?” the other blond senshi in gold asked her urgently. “What happened?”

“I’m fine,” Usagi reassured with a gentle smile. “I don’t know… I don’t remember it. I just felt completely at peace.” She turned away and knelted down next to her dark-haired love, who lay
still unconscious.

“He’s fine,” the senshi in blue said. “He’s still injured quite deeply, but it’s no longer a mortal wound. I think he’s only asleep due to the rapid healing from the alien tree.”

She nodded in acknowledgement, but never moved from his side. “You may begin Sailor Mars.”

“Tsukeru,” the senshi of fire whispered, and her little wisps of flame spread as if suddenly released from invisible restraints, racing up the trunk, into every branch, twig, and to the tip of every root.

For a moment, it was like it was a tree of light, glowing in warm reds, oranges, and yellows. He could see the majestic beauty of every twist and turn of the branches. The poison and darkness could not remain with the rays of warmth and light piercing through every cell. He thought it should take hours, but in mere moments the familiar home that had sheltered him through all of his life, disintegrated into grey ash that drifted down like first winter’s snow.

The grief hit him all over again like an unexpected punch to the gut. He crumpled to the ground, unable to see clearly between the raining haze and his own suddenly blurry vision.

“How will we survive without the tree of life?” he whispered, feeling bereft and lost.

En had no words, she just took his hand and squeezed. He leaned into her support, clung to her form like a newborn baby clung to its mother. They sat together watching the glowing embers gradually turn cold.

“Guys!” Mercury called out excitedly after the last embers had faded to darkness. Ali jumped at the sudden intrusion. “There’s something still here.”

“I can feel it,” Mars agreed coming to her feet once again, a flame in her hands lighting her way as she navigated carefully through the dusty ash, before returning with the smallest green sprout in her hands. She held it out to him in a silent offer.

“What is this?” En asked, their arms intertwined together as they clung together for comfort.

“It’s a sapling,” Rei explained. “The offspring of the Great Tree of Life. It’s your chance at redemption.”

“What do we do?” his lover’s voice quavered in uncertainty.

“You nurture and protect it.”

“And most importantly, love,” Ali added, accepting the gift from her hands.

“Yes, exactly,” Mars agreed with a smile. “You are its caretaker as the Mother Tree was once yours.”

…

Chapter End Notes

Oh my goodness! That was such a long time in coming. I’m sorry – not sorry - for the wait. Trying to wrap up character arcs and maintain action all simultaneously is really
I’m pretty happy with it! But still open to any constructive feedback you have!!

I have good news and bad news! In true Kasienda story ending tradition, I underestimated my last chapter and had to split it up into two segments! So, this is not the last chapter after all!! But with all the combat out of the way, this last installment shouldn’t take nearly so long! The good news is that there’s more story to enjoy! The bad news is that it’s not finished yet.

In the meantime, I cannot begin to thank you enough for your reviews, comments, and most importantly patience! I’m quite literally overwhelmed by them all, so forgive me for not listing out all your names individually!

Special thanks to a few of you though:
To Algae and slightlyxjaded who have been here from the beginning rooting me on with every update no matter how long they take me. And let’s be real, I take forever!

To Ghostman for his constant comments and amusing crack anecdotes for every single chapter of every story I’ve written. And thank you for your patience as I know that you actually want me to be working on Chrono Trigger!!

To Rufael who reviewed every chapter of this story back in October and got me working on it again after a frustrating dry spell! I’m sorry (not sorry) Usagi didn’t go all revenge mode on her adversaries. I just don’t think that’s who Usagi is. And forgiveness in my opinion is the most meaningful and powerful when you forgive the things that are unforgiveable.

To FloraOne who reviewed every chapter in this story way back in April and went through and identified all the open plotlines and themes she saw in my story and helped me develop Usagi’s closing arc. She also wrote a Doom Tree Arc called Ikagai that is fantastic! If you somehow haven’t already stumbled upon it, go read it! She’s also written multiple multi-chapter stories that are all amazing (and finished) in the time it took me to write this one chapter!
Mamoru woke up in his own bed, unable to sleep any longer with the knot of agony writhing in his lower ribs, particularly on the left side. He tried to move, to relieve the burning sensation, but the rest of his bruised and battered form protested the disruption.

He bumped into an unexpected soft bubble of warmth nestled at his side, and he froze. And then smiled in delight when he recognized the tangled mess of endless golden tresses and silk sheets. Careful to adjust slowly so as not to pull the stitches that some unknown benefactor had blessed him with, he managed to prop himself up so he could have a better look at his princess.

He did not try to go back to sleep even though he knew he probably needed the rest. He didn’t want to spend one moment sleeping that he could instead spend staring at the girl at his side. His heart opened with tender awe as he stroked her sun-kissed locks. How could he have ever forgotten her? She was so powerful, so innocent, so bright and full of light like an unexpected sunrise after the longest night.

He watched her for hours letting newly rediscovered memories of two lifetimes wash over him. The sun gradually peeked through his translucent curtains lighting up her golden strands of hair like sparkling yellow topaz.

She stirred once the light struck her eyes.

“Mamo-chan,” she mumbled sleepily.

“Yes Usako?”

“You really need to get some new curtains,” she whined pulling the dark comforter over her head. “Dark heavy ones – it’ll even match the rest of your décor.”

He laughed and immediately hissed in pain as the involuntary waves of mirth sent writhing pains shooting to his wounds.

She bolted upright at his obvious distress. “Are you okay?” she demanded urgently, her wide eyes blinking at him in concern.

“I’ll be fine,” he soothed automatically. “From what I recall, I heal unnaturally fast.”

“Do you need anything? Something to eat?” she offered quickly.

“Would I still have a kitchen left if you took it over?” he teased, trying to placate her concern.

She held a pillow over his head threateningly before letting it drop harmlessly to her side. “You are
lucky you are injured Mamo-chan,” she sniffed.

“Lucky?” he repeated with mock indignation.

“Yes, lucky! I would never attack you while you are down. Though… it’s what you get for taking hits for me when you’re not transformed,” she playfully admonished.

He glanced at her with a small smile. “I have no regrets,” he said softly taking her hand into his own.

A delightful shade of pink flooded her cheeks and she looked down at their clasped hands.

“What do you remember?” she asked. “Do you still have questions?”

He shook his head. “I remember everything.”

“Everything? How can you be sure?”

“I remember you throwing tests and shoes at me outside on the sidewalk. I remember routine encounters at the Crown and midnight rescues from horrific creatures I would rather forget. I remember our almost nightly meetings fighting off hordes of youma and stolen kisses in impossible places. I remember fighting with you and… against you as your enemy,” he paused, closing his eyes against the pain of that thought.

“It wasn’t you,” she reassured, squeezing his hand.

“I remember you bringing me back and defeating Beryl at the cost of everything. Does that cover it?”

She nodded enthusiastically, “Sounds about right.”

“How am I even here?” he asked with confusion, glancing down at his physical form in wonder. “I died.”

“I think we all did. But in my last moment I wished for everything to go back the way it was. I just wanted to be a normal girl,” she finished quietly staring down at their clasped hands.

He squeezed her hand this time, hoping to comfort her.

“You are too special Usako. You have never been normal even before you became Sailor Moon. You see the light in even the darkest of hearts. You found it in me.”

“Your heart is not dark Mamo-chan,” she objected. “Only lonely.”

“You found it even within En and Ali,” he continued, ignoring her interjection.

She blushed.

“I just don’t think anyone is evil for the sake of being evil. There’s always some pain or hurt or fear behind it. If you can heal that pain, I think the darkness evaporates.”

His smile only grew as she self-consciously tried to defend her actions. She sat on her knees at his side facing the headboard and him. He urged her closer with a tug on their clasped hand so that he could kiss her.

Their lips met – he had intended to keep the contact chaste, but he underestimated how much he
had been missing her, how much he needed to feel her in between his fingers, how much he needed to connect and feel close to her. He had almost lost her once again as he had only just remembered her. And unfortunately for his desire to remain a gentleman, she was completely on the same page.

Her lips parted and he took the invitation. She nibbled coyly on his lower lip. He veins pulsed and he felt himself grow hard with desire. He whimpered as she moved ever so slightly away.

“Did I hurt you?” she asked urgently. Her dazzling blue eyes held all the colors of the sky, and staring into them – he felt like he could fly.

“Kami-sama, no Usako,” he managed, fighting the impulse to seize her. “I just…”

“Just?”

He watched her blond eyebrows scrunching together in confusion with fascination.

“I want to make love with you,” he admitted, wanting to reassure her worry, and he had never been able to lie to her anyway.

The blushing pink of spring flowers once again bloomed across her cheeks.

“I can control myself,” he assured her. “Even if I don’t want to.”

“If you didn’t have to control yourself, do you think you are well enough?” she asked lightly, her blush deepening as her eyes dropped to her hands that were fiddling with his sheets in her nervousness.

He was floored by the implications of her question. “Usako, this is not something we have to rush.”

“I know that Mamo-chan. But… waiting doesn’t seem as important anymore. We both could have died yesterday.”

He wanted to object. Yesterday’s events were not a reason to be impulsive, but she placed a finger to his lips stifling his rebuttal.

“It was really hard even before that. When Luna revived me, I knew that I loved you with every fiber of my being and you… didn’t remember me.”

“Usako…” he pleaded, his hands fisting his sheets as he internalized the longing and loneliness she had felt.

“It’s not an accusation Mamo-chan. It’s just… now that you do remember I want to be with you. I want to know you in every way possible. I want to cherish every moment we have together. I don’t want to save anything for later because I want to enjoy everything now!”

He wanted to acquiesce. He didn’t want to hurt her though. He had hurt her so much already, as a brainwashed prince, and again, not being able to remember her as she fought to protect their world. He didn’t want to hurt her again in any way for any reason.

“I know it would be your first time,” he whispered.

“I suspect it would be yours as well,” she countered.

He said nothing for several seconds, not being able to remember how far Natsumi had taken him in her last assault, and absolutely positive that he was not completely an innocent even before his experience with the succubus.
“It doesn’t matter if it isn’t,” she soothed, her eyes shining with complete sincerity.

“So, you can read minds now?” he teased with a smile, kissing the inside of her wrist.

“Only yours,” she quipped back with a playful grin.

“And what am I thinking?” he asked, feeling lost in her longing gaze.

She answered him with a kiss, gentle, yet insistent. Her heart shaped face moved up as she came to her knees beside him. He arched his head back into her as she rose above him. He longed to move with her, but his injured body held him down.

But his hands were free. Free to explore, to trace the curves and lines of her form with only a thin layer of cotton fabric separating them – eager to know her body, and this aspect of her personality.

He watched in awe as she leaned into his caresses. His exploration interrupted for a second as she hurriedly ditched the clothes. He fumbled to follow suit. His shirt was easy enough to pull up and cast aside, but he needed her aid to free his lower half. Once she managed, she scrambled back up, her naked form straddling his own.

His eyes drank in the sight – Kami-sama she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. His heart raced with erratic throbs. His arms and hands hung frozen in the air as she stole his breath away.

She didn’t have patience for his awe though. She quickly pulled his hands towards her, pressing them against the curve of her waist. He let himself touch her bare skin, sliding his fingers slowly across the satin-soft texture of her belly, his eyes scarcely believing the sight.

Long delicate fingers framed his face, and she brushed her lips against his own, only the lightest touch of a feather before pulling away again. But she kissed him again, and again, each time slightly firmer, more insistent, more passionate. And when the warmth of her tongue caressed his top lip, he opened to her completely. Her delicate fingers tentatively moved from his face to his shoulders as if she was afraid to touch him.

“You’ll stop me if anything hurts too much, won’t you?” she asked breathily, pulling away to reveal blue orbs swirling like shining pools of light.

“Isn’t that my line?” he countered, his arms around her waist urging her lips and body back down to his, desperate for the contact because words were so inadequate to truly convey the depth of his feelings. She explored his form, cautiously at first no doubt afraid to hurt him, but she gradually became more daring, squeezing his arms, tracing his pecs, his spine, sending tingles lancing to his toes.

He reciprocated. Each appendage developed its own purpose in life – one went up to cup her right breast, while the other traveled down to caress her thigh.

She squeaked – literally squeaked like a mouse in her startlement. The sound was completely unfamiliar to his ears, unlike any cry, laugh, whining tantrum, or gushing glee he had ever heard from her across three sets of memories. He chuckled in delight, and his hands found new courage to explore, now determined to discover every sound her body could make.

He traced her belly, her spine and the curve of her back, and her inner thigh eager to touch every square inch of her creamy smooth skin. He coveted every gasp and giggle he drew from her, made a note of every instance she shivered or goose bumps sprouted under his hands.
And he ignored his own pain as his skin was occasionally pulled at the site of his injury, a dull ache easy to dismiss in light of the new highs he had to experience. The moans his touch tore from her throat was like a new drug – sending his own desire for her form sky rocketing.

Her hips rocked forward and back grinding into him maddeningly, his length sliding smoothly along slick folds that held such tantalizing warmth, promising so much more to come.

He grabbed onto her, anchoring himself to the moment before he was lost, let his hands knead into her flesh. His desire to be gentle and patient warred with his throbbing desperate need to be one with her.

She shifted slightly and all resistance vanished and he surged suddenly forward. He felt the embrace as her core wrapped around him – like he had finally found a home. She was his haven. The boundaries of where he ended and she began slipped away, even their psychic bond flaring as they were joined as one, woven together intricately. Their very souls bleeding into one shining luminous entity.

She gasped in shock. And he froze.

“Are you okay?” he asked her.

“Don’t you know?” she asked, her voice so soft he couldn’t really hear it, but somehow he knew her words regardless. “I can feel you,” she whispered in awe.

She wasn’t referring to his physical form. Their very minds had become entangled along with their physical bodies. It was like their normal bond, except… more. He felt her nervousness, her slight physical discomfort at his sudden solid presence inside her, her excitement and wonder at their connection that was physical, emotional, and spiritual all at once.

And before he could inquire further, she was moving again. And he was lost in a wave of ecstasy. He tried to slow down, but she would have none of it, so he let go and let her chase her own pleasure. He could feel the change in her that gradually moved from awkward discomfort to pulsing lances of ecstatic delight. He treasured every homecoming that served as reassurance that she was whole and that she was here with him, every touch that promised a shared future – a shelter from his neverending isolation.

Her core fluttered around him, kissing him like butterflies, and her explosion of pleasure sent him soaring into the night sky seconds after her, where he was greeted with the twinkling of stars and the warm glow of the moonlight.

Moments later she lay at his side basking in the aftermath of their lovemaking. He felt relaxed and calm – without any tension in any part of his body for the first time in weeks. His fingers traced lazy hearts and stars into her bare stomach as he listened to her breathing and heartbeat slow. He felt so connected to her, and he lay there suddenly painfully aware all over again that he could have lost her just yesterday.

He pulled her back to him, unable to go to her, held her and felt the tears come – he hadn’t cried since childhood. But holding this treasure in his arms – that he had forgotten he lost. Forgotten he needed. He felt whole again for the first time in his life.

A delicate finger wiped away a tear on his cheek. “Mamo-chan?”

He gave himself a moment to recover, and she just nestled into him, offering her warmth and love. Eventually the flow of his tears ebbed and they fell into quiet.
“Usako? How long were you fighting alone?” he finally asked into the silence, afraid of her answer.

“Ummm…. I don’t know. A few months?” she bit her lip and her eyes lost their focus as she concentrated. Then she rolled towards him with stars in her eyes. “But then, this guy dressed in this flowing white ensemble started showing up to help me,” she gushed. “You know, I was so convinced it was you, but then when I tried to ask you about it in the arcade, you had no idea what I was talking about…”

“Usako,” he interrupted her rambling, and endearing, attempt to distract him. “How long before any of the senshi were revived?”

She shrugged. “You can figure it out. When was there a first coma victim instead of a death? Since then.”

He did the math in his head and arrived at the terrifying number of seven months and some change. He cringed at what could have happened.

“Promise me you won’t ever do that again.”

“I think Luna has got it covered Mamo-chan,” she replied softly. Her eyes dropped and turned away in shame. He knew exactly what she felt as her presence was still buzzing in the back of his mind. More distant than before – like his awareness of her was fuzzy, but still distinct and separate from his own psyche.

“Usako,” he whispered gently, using two fingers to urge her gaze toward him. “You have been amazing, you did what you thought was right to the best of your ability. Why do you feel ashamed?”

She turned away again, this time her body shaking with silent sobs, and he pulled her into his embrace once again. Her grieving intensified and he found himself making soothing sounds as he rocked her back and forth, never trying to ebb the flow. Instead, he just accepted her grief. The tears eventually slowed and she remained unmoving, curled into his chest as he stroked her face and hair.

“How many people could have been saved if I hadn’t hesitated to awaken the others out of some misguided attempt to protect them?” she finally asked softly.

“Do you remember our conversation on the hill?”

“The one where you were talking to me about Sailor Moon without knowing that I was Sailor Moon?”

He laughed. “Yes, that one. What I said that day is still true. You did your best. You did what you thought was best.”

“I don’t feel like my intentions matter Mamo-chan. My best friend died because of the decisions I made.”

“And now you will never make that mistake again. Learn from it. Be better for it. But don’t live wrapped up in the guilt of it forever. Naru-chan wouldn’t want that for you either.”

“I don’t know how to not feel guilty.”

“Perhaps not yet.”
“Do you feel up to coming to her tsuya this weekend?” she finally managed to choke out.

“If you want me to.”

“I think I need you to be there.”

He nodded, pulling her back against his chest. “Then nothing could keep me away.”

Nothing would ever keep him away again.

…

Makoto stepped into the tsuya amongst a sea of men and women in midnight black suits and kimonos, clutching her juzu prayer beads in her fist trying to keep her emotions in check. Her efforts were in vain as she took in the life size portrait of her late classmate and friend surrounded by intricate patterns made of multicolored lilies.

Her emerald orbs blurred with watery droplets and her throat clamped shut with grief. The ugly, almost convulsive, sob tore out of her throat painfully. The brunette didn’t fight it, just let the waterfall of tears pour down her own face. There was no point in brushing them away – there would just be more.

The tall teenager hadn’t wanted to believe the girl was gone, but being here made it far too real. Naru had been so sweet, and for a short while, really Makoto’s only friend. Usagi may have known her longer and far better, but her princess had never experienced life without a friend.

But Makoto had.

And while the orphaned and isolated youth had found hope again when she met Usagi in this life, it had been Naru who had stayed, Naru who had met her for lunch under the tree, Naru who had tried all her foods, Naru who had schemed with her to cheer up their friends, and Naru who had stayed. It was Naru who had been her friend.

When Ami had wigged out, and Usagi had disappeared, Naru had been steadfast for all of them. And Naru had been her friend without the benefit of karmic ties and past lives. Somehow that made the relationship more special and unique in Makoto’s eyes.

She missed the girl more than she thought possible. It was so unfair that she had been taken. Her body shook harder with ugly harsh sobs. She wasn’t sure how she would ever stop crying.

…

The aspiring Shinto priestess sat stoically amongst the Osaka Naru’s mourners, listening to the Buddhist priest chanting a sutra for peace in the afterlife at the front of the casket. She had wanted to attend the ceremony - always been interested in the other religion’s practice, but today she couldn’t focus on his words or his actions, distracted as she was on how strange it was to be able to remember someone you had never officially met. Even in her forgotten life, she had never known the girl well, but in her recovered memories she recalled sleep overs and school festivals in the red head’s company. She had been light and joyful – Rei felt those memories wash over her like they had just happened in that moment.

Then just as quickly, the sensation was gone – she could still recall the events, but it was like remembering a dream.

But no sooner had she recollected herself, the grief of all those around her slammed into her again.
like a brick wall – she could feel the emotional pain in an almost tangible way, the tragic feelings seemed to hang in the very air she breathed. She sucked in air, desperate to breathe through the chaotic swirling intertwined keening sorrow of so many, all the feelings jumbled together like the tangle of jungle underbrush.

Violet eyes locked onto her blond odangoed friend sitting just a few rows ahead of herself – and a single thread in the tapestry pulsed – she could feel Usagi’s guilt rolling off her in caustic waves. Her vision shifted to the taller red headed woman her princess spoke to. The miko gasped – the woman, Naru’s mother by the looks of it, stood greeting and thanking her guests, even as internally her world and foundation had shattered.

She slammed her eyes closed, trying to push back the onslaught of overwhelming grief. Grief that was not hers to bear.

Had she always been able to do this, she wondered. Feel the pain of others as if it was her own? Was this part of her birthright as the heir of Mars? Or was this a gift her experiences with the Tree of Life had left her?

Shielding her eyes was not enough, the red raw grief still battered at her mind. The priestess in training took a careful measured breath, and focused on centering herself as she did every morning, and immediately she felt so much calmer, as if the Great Fire protected her in its warmth.

One raw lance of grief pierced her newfound protection, like a psychic scream begging for help.

Rei opened her eyes again, leaned to her right, and immediately wrapped a protective arm around the daughter of Jupiter – her newly rediscovered friend and sister. The taller brunette crumpled into her arms gratefully.

“Rei-chan, why Naru-chan? She was completely innocent,” Makoto cried inconsolably.

“I don’t know,” the miko said softly, as she tried to smooth the sharp edges of the other girl’s aura even as she rubbed her back soothingly. “I don’t know.”

Tsukino Usagi had arrived early. She wanted to get all her tears our early, so she could actually participate in Naru’s ceremony without screwing it up. But she had chosen the wrong seat. The bench was low, and made of marble the color of sand. It was a perfectly good place to sit. The problem was it was right in front of Naru’s alter.

The alter was covered in lilies, white, pink, and blue, that were arranged carefully in swirling patterns around a portrait of her oldest friend, and it was gargantuan – filling the entire field of her vision. Naru would have loved it – it was exactly the kind of floral display that she would have gushed happily over. The pain of course, was in what it represented. Her throat ached as the grief caught in her in a chokehold. She tried to turn her attention elsewhere.

Anywhere.

But really, there wasn’t a safe place to lay her eyes. Beyond the portrait and alter, Naru’s mother, Osaka Mari, sat dressed in a formal midnight-black kimono completely still – her eyes unfocused, starring dully ahead. Then there was the sea of mourners that filed in, surrounding her all sides making her feel claustrophobic as the devastation pressed down on her chest making it difficult to breathe.

And it was all made worst by the fact that it was her fault that her best friend in the whole world
was gone. All the grief in the room was her responsibility to bear.

The ceremony had started at some point, but Usagi hadn’t really noticed other than the room now carried a certain stillness to it as all the guests had found their places. The priest had started speaking, but Usagi didn’t want to know Osaka Naru’s new Buddhist name even if it did protect her from malignant spirits. She thought the name she carried in life fit her perfectly.

Occasionally, a guest would move to the table just to the side of the altar to light a stick of incense. She knew it was important that the incense never go out, but she couldn’t remember why. She watched numbly as the long thin piece of wood glowed red before turning into ashes that fell to the marble tray below, knowing that when it neared its end it was her turn to continue the chain.

She should have already stood up, but she was somehow frozen to her seat.

“Usako?” Mamoru asked gently, taking her hand.

“I don’t know if I can face this Mamo-chan,” she whispered, her voice so small, so close to breaking.

“I want to tell you that you don’t have to, but you and I both know you will regret it more if you don’t.”

She nodded carefully, clutching his hand like a life line, and stood up. She moved towards the blossom covered alter, her boyfriend in her shadow with his hand on her back, serving as her anchor in the monsoon of her emotions. She carefully touched the incense to her forehead, and whispered a wordless prayer for her fallen friend. She lit the stick from the dancing candle and placed it in its holder. This incense hadn’t gone out – she had gotten up in time.

She bowed to the portrait, her knees shaking only slightly. She wanted to fall to the ground in tears and beg for forgiveness. But she was also determined to get this part of the ceremony right. She would not disrupt Naru’s send off into whatever was beyond death.

If there even was anything after death…

Her knees gave out in that moment and she stumbled. She fought for air that refused to come. And her eyes burned, threatening to burst.

Warm hands caught her before she could fall. Cobalt blue eyes swirled with concern, empathy, and love. She righted herself, straightened her skirt, and drew in the sweet scent of the spring flowers. For a split second, peering at the portrait, with Mamoru at her side offering ever stoic and neverending support, she felt almost a peace as serenity washed over her.

Yes, there was serenity. A reminder of what she had once been and could almost remember.

She was a reincarnated princess of a time that was so far back in history, no fossil evidence remained of its existence. She had paranormal unexplainable powers and a talking feline advisor. How could she doubt for even a second, that Naru’s existence wouldn’t continue?

Perhaps Usagi couldn’t understand it in her current form. But she suddenly felt comforted by the thought.

She walked around the alter to offer condolences to the family – to Osaka Mari especially, wishing she could share her most recent revelation to offer some tangible sort of comfort. She whirled to Mamoru who handed her the white envelope tied in the thinnest of black ribbon, and then bowed deeply to the grieving mother before her, offering the condolence envelope, grateful for the excuse
to not look the other woman in the eyes.

She had filled it with every dime she had saved, which wasn’t a lot, paltry really compared to the life of her friend, but it was everything she had, plus a little more as she had also convinced her parents to contribute. Even Shingo had donated his week’s allowance.

The older brunette seized Usagi in a desperate embrace, shaking with silent sobs. Usagi quickly followed suit, and they cried together – no words being needed.

Slowly both their tears ebbed, and Mari bowed to her as well, holding out her own envelope – this one pink and covered in hearts and Naru’s neat handwriting.

“I have something for you too Usagi-chan,” the mother said. “I must confess Usagi-chan that when I found this I was desperate to hear her voice again. And so I opened it and read it. I didn’t realize you two had been fighting…”

“We weren’t!” Usagi interjected quickly. “I mean, not really. I kept a secret from her trying to protect her from my pain. But… she got hurt anyway,” she managed to choke out. The flood of water came back, pouring down her face as the waves of grief and guilt struck her again. She was only still standing because Mamoru was at her back supporting her. “And she never understood why.”

The older woman leaned down and put a warm hand on her shoulder. “You should read this,” Mari directed, tapping the pink envelope. “We will speak again later. Thank you for coming and for paying your respects.”

Usagi stepped back, making space for the next guest and returned to her seat, clutching the pink envelope in her hands. She desperately wanted to read it, but she feared what it contained. She tried to listen to the final sutras being spoken, but she couldn’t do it, her eyes wandering back to the mysterious envelope. This would serve as the last interaction she would ever have with her friend.

She tore it open and her eyes drank in the first two lines.

Usagi-chan,

I don’t know what is going on with you or what I did wrong.

And then her vision blurred and she choked, and she couldn’t bring the rest of it into focus.

“You don’t have to read it now…” Mamoru whispered, pulling her into his side and kissing her on the forehead.

She shook her head. “I need to read it,” and turned to face the letter again.

Usagi-chan,

I don’t know what is going on with you or what I did wrong.

I’m scared at how distant you’ve become. I know that you’re hurting and it kills me that I cannot do anything to help. I wish you would talk to me. I don’t promise that I would understand whatever it is, but I promise that I would listen. And that I would never betray your confidences.

I am so mad at you for keeping me at arm’s length. So angry that I’m seeing red just thinking about it! But at the end of the day it doesn’t matter. I just miss having my best friend. My day feels so lonely and hollow without you.
I want you to know that even if you can’t be my best friend, even if you can’t tell me everything, know that I will always be yours. That I will always be here when you are ready to talk. And that I love you!

~Naru

It took four attempts to get through the whole thing. Her tears had turned to silent quaking sobs. Mamoru held and rocked her through all of it, making soothing sounds into her ear as they waited for this phase of the ceremony to end. Usagi wasn’t aware of it when it finally did, but suddenly the attendees were milling about and to the front of the room to view the body, but Usagi remained in her seat, and Mamoru stayed right with her.

“I can maybe accept that it wasn’t my fault that she died,” she confessed softly to him after a minute or two. “But I don’t know if I can ever accept that she died thinking I was mad at her.”

“Usako,” his voice raised barely above volume of a gentle breeze. “Do you remember the last time you saw her?”

“It was at school.”

He shook his head in disagreement. “No. The very last time.”

Her whole body went rigid. She sucked in the air around her in panic not wanting to remember Naru dying in her arms, but at the question of course it was all she could think of. She shook her head violently in protest against his inquery.

“Usako, I can promise you she felt no pain,” he whispered emphatically.

Usagi tore herself from his chest and embrace. “How would you know? You weren’t there!” she barked back angrily.

“Natsumi.”

The single name and quick comeback caught her so completely off guard, and she deflated once again.

“Right… I’m sorry.”

He dismissed her apology as unnecessary by pulling her back against him with a kiss to the top of her golden head, and she let herself take comfort in the soft rhythmic pulse of his beating heart.

“Did she say anything?” he asked after a time.

The question surprised her – she hadn’t thought about Naru’s last words at all since they had been uttered. She hadn’t wanted to go back to that moment at all.

“She did. She recognized me… as me I mean. How was she able to do that?” she asked, peering up at him.

He shrugged at the question, but was smiling at her answer. “And did she seem angry?”

“No… she thought it was cool.”

“So, did she die thinking you were mad at her?”

She was crying again at his words, but this time maybe there was some relief mixed in with all the
guilt. Naru had known who she was – had finally understood what Usagi had been keeping from her and probably inferred why. She clung to the revelation, now treasuring the last moments she had been able to spend with her friend, even if they had been brutally painful.

She wanted to thank him for giving her this insight, but she couldn’t form words at the moment. His arms were around her again and stroking her back and hair. Perhaps it didn’t need to be said. He of course knew.

...

Ami approached the open wooden box, her gut swirling in the chaos of emotions she dared not attempt to label less she fall to pieces. Someone had done her make-up, she noted distantly. She looked so pretty with her rosied cheeks and her lips painted with a dark pink. Her reddish-brown hair vibrantly framed her heart shaped face. She looked almost peaceful – almost as if she was simply sleeping.

Ami stared down into the coffin feeling oddly detached from the events around her and the body of the girl she had only just met, only too aware that she could have been the one in the box. It had been mere seconds away from being her.

The tears fell then. More in shock than in grief. Or perhaps it was grief, but it was for herself more than the girl in the casket. Naru represented everything that could have been, the true tragedy of dying before really knowing who she truly was, before she was reunited with her friends.

She gently placed a white lily amongst the cloud of snow-white flowers that already surrounded the girl’s artificially flushed face. She had to keep going, had to keep healing because just as Naru represented what might have been for her, she also represented what could have been for Naru. Her life wasn’t over.

It had felt like it was for a time. Really only a moment. But she could not let what happened to her tarnish the rest of her life.

She had to live her life. For herself, but also for Naru.

...

Aino Minako stood outside the temple on a grassy gnoll overlooking the building in question. She felt she had no right to attend the tsuya because she did not mourn this death. It was not long before the wooden casket covered in spring flowers, carried by half a dozen people dressed in midnight black on each side, made its exit from the spiritual oasis. Her spirit would be set free when the body was burned, and the bones and ashes that remained would be buried in the company of her family in the family tomb.

“It may seem callous to say so Naru-chan, but I am grateful for your death,” the leader of senshi whispered into the gentle breeze.

“You death brought our dearest friend and princess back to us. It was the catalyst for her realizing that she truly needed us.”

“I am sorry that this realization cost you so much, but I want you to know that your death had meaning. And we will not waste it.”

“Be at peace Naru-chan.”

She stood there, her golden blond hair beating around her form in disarray as a gust of wind picked
up, maintaining her own vigil until Naru’s form was carried out of sight.

Luna rarely resented her feline form – it represented her Mauan heritage and ancestry, and Artemis made certain she never felt lonely or isolated. But to be told she wasn’t allowed to go inside the temple, wasn’t allowed to honor one of Usagi’s dearest friends as she departed this world simply because she would be mistaken as a cat, well… it got under her fur! But she could be there for her charges – all of them, but especially Usagi.

She waited for them all to gather as she knew they would after the event. She sat primly on a low branch of a tree that overlooked the entrance pathway, so she couldn’t miss anyone. She spotted Minako first who appeared to have never entered the temple grounds at all. Makoto and Rei were out moments following the wooden casket covered in white flowers. Ami took longer, but finally joined the trio on the grassy hill long after most guests had left the grounds. But there was no Usagi.

The black feline leapt to the ground and ran up the incline determined to bring whatever support her small form had to offer to her senshi and friends.

“Where’s Usagi-chan?” she asked of the guardian quartet as soon as she joined their solemn circle.

“She will be along,” Ami assured her, even as she dabbed at her own misty eyes. “She just needed a moment. Mamoru-san is with her.”

As if summoned by her words, Usagi’s golden blond head half buried into her boyfriend’s chest appeared through the double wide heavy doors. Mamoru looked around the area, they made eye contact, he nodded in acknowledgment, and led their princess to them.

Luna could not take her eyes of her charge – her wilted stance and her distant far away gaze. As she got closer, the feline noticed her red bloodshot eyes – sore and irritated from too many tears. The advisor grieved for the fresh pain her princess struggled to contain. Luna had never felt so completely useless. It simply wasn’t fair! Usagi didn’t deserve the stress and burden of protecting an entire planet from would be invaders and vampires! She should not have to deal with the loss of her best friend. All Usagi had ever wanted was to be a normal girl.

Perhaps Luna could give that back to her.

“How are you Usagi-chan?” Minako asked softly.

“I’ve definitely been better,” was the meek response, as she wiped away fresh tears from her eyes.

“You don’t have to remember Usagi-chan,” Luna jumped in, eager to take away the guilt, even if she couldn’t take away the loss. “I could make you all forget anything to do with youmas and senshi again.”

Usagi stared at her, her eyes swirling with threatened tears. Luna had no idea what she was thinking or what she could be feeling at her offer.

The blond said nothing for a long while. The only sound was the breeze running through the surrounding trees.

Usagi turned towards her senshi. “You all must have an opinion,” she said, encouraging them to share their piece. Luna was flooded with pride by the gesture, which show-cased exactly how much Usagi had grown both as a person and as a leader. She sought counsel, she wanted to respect
their wishes, and she had done it almost invisibly. Had the others even noticed, the feline wondered.

“No!” Rei exclaimed first with barely suppressed rage, “I felt so lost before remembering. Please don’t take this from me.”

“It’s your chance at living a normal life!” Luna entreated. “Do you really want to give that up?”

“We haven’t given it up,” Makoto interjected softly. “We still have it. We just now have a wider perspective that helps us to appreciate how wonderful that life is.”

“Speak for yourself!” Minako remarked flippantly. “I don’t want a normal life. It’s boring!”

“Luna,” Ami said with tears. “Please don’t make us forget. My life is so much better with you and the senshi in it.”

They turned back to Usagi, who instead had her eyes on Mamoru – the only one of their group who hadn’t said a word.

He lifted a hand to the side of her face, “What do you want?” he asked her softly. “Do you want to forget?”

Luna again wished she had tear ducts that would allow her to cry, moved as she was by Mamoru’s selfless consideration of her princess. He took her hand in his free one, and brought it up to his face, kissing her knuckles gently.

“Falling in love with you all over again doesn’t sound so bad,” he added with a slight smirk.

And in spite of everything, Usagi blushed and offered a small secretive smile in return.

The four other girls fidgeted on the spot, clearly feeling bad for having spoken so vehemently, without thinking about their princess’s feelings or wishes at all – only their own.

“Usagi,” Minako finally said, “Mamoru-baka is totally right for once!”

“For once?” he echoed, slightly indignant.

“You should make this decision,” the guardian of Venus continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “We are your senshi. We will support you no matter what.”

The other three girls nodded firmly, in absolute agreement. And Luna was proud of them as well – that they understood that Usagi only ever wanted to be a normal girl. And while they would never choose to forget if their own desires were their only consideration, they would sacrifice their memories if she asked them to.

Usagi flopped to the ground knees first, and considered her guardian at eye level. “I want to forget Luna. I want the guilt and the trauma to go away.”

The feline nodded, and moved forward to grant this wish, but Usagi held up a hand to stop her.

“But I can’t forget Luna. I have to remember – that’s the only way I can honor Naru’s death, learn from it, and find meaning and purpose in her loss. Otherwise she died for nothing. And she cannot have died for nothing! She must always remind me of my responsibility – of my destiny.”

“Plus!” she continued, looking up at each of her friends in turn. “I just got all of you back! It took so long to work you all back into my life!”
“You were pushing us out!” Rei objected.

“I don’t want to say good bye again,” the blond continued. “Not… oomph!”

Makoto had already seized her in a breath-ending hug, and Minako was only half a pace behind her. Soon all five girls dissolved into a puddle on the ground rolling around laughing and screeching like they were at a slumber party instead of outside on temple grounds just after a funeral.

Luna quickly jumped into Mamoru’s arms, out of a simple desire for self preservation. She knew from experience in sleeping in Usagi’s bed, that being rolled over on was not a pleasant experience. But she never tore her eyes away. Despite the girls, refusing her offer, she was glad.

Delighted to see them all together, and even more grateful to hear their laughter once again. Whatever trials the future held, they would all face it together.

...

En stumbled over a rock that she swore had jumped into her way, and she fell crashing to the ground. She gasped, attempting to reclaim the wind that had fled from her lungs at the impact. But even once she recovered her breath she didn’t move for several minutes.

Instead, she let the sound of crashing waves wash over her, pacifying her irritation and exhaustion that only several days of unending physical labor could bring. Planting a garden took a lot out of you – especially when you didn’t have a surge of energy to look forward to from harvesting the affection of an admirer at the end of the day.

‘You okay?’ was the gentle mental prod of her partner and lover.

She sighed, forcing herself to sit up, and once again open her eyes.

‘Just tripped over something. I’m headed back now.’

She hiked back up the path to the top of the cliff. They had built a shelter inside of the sheer face. They could take a step out and just soak in the view.

‘You sure picked a beautiful world En.’

She looked around. ‘You think so? I feel like after Earth, the colors are all wrong.’ The ocean was orange, the sky red and pink, and the majority of the flora and fauna sprouted in bright hues of cerulean-blues and royal violets.

‘Its beautiful,’ he insisted.

‘Do you miss it?’ she asked.

‘Which part?’

‘Other creatures to interact with, the convenience of civilized society, the pleasure of a good feeding?’

‘I don’t miss the guilt, or the uncertainty of being abandoned. And I get all the pleasure I need from you.’ His stormy grey eyes swirled with desire.

She grinned coyly at him, and waited until he came within striking distance, and then she pounced simultaneously with multiple appendages. He followed suit and they were quickly lost in the
sensation of being with one another.

Later that evening, after they had both spent some time communing with the infant tree, who showed them nonsensical images and blasted immature emotions into their psyches making En both grumble with impatience and laugh hysterically at the absurdity of it all, she just leaned against Ali. They sat together staring at the stars.

‘Do you really think we can do it?’

‘Do what?’

‘Build and nurture a society based on love and respect that won’t tear itself apart?’

‘I doubt we’ll get everything exactly right, but we certainly will not follow in our ancestors’ footsteps.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

He shrugged – a habit he had picked up on Earth when he didn’t immediately have an answer. ‘We had better role models. Those like the old Tree and Sailor Moon.’

‘I’m glad you had them. But you have always been my role model. I will endeavor to follow in your footsteps.’

He kissed her again, with a passion that surprised her so soon after their previous romp. But she was quickly primed and game once again.

They were never going to get any sleep. But this was more fun anyway.

…

Chapter End Notes

Apparently, I’ve been working on this story for almost four years!! It feels surreal!! This project has definitely has taken me out of my comfort zone a time or three, and I want to thank you for your patience with the inevitable delays that struggle may have caused!! And for your avid readership, the reviews, the favorite, and follows. I have never had 300+ followers on anything before!! Now, that we’re at the end, I just have to say thank you!!

There’s one special shout out though that has to happen this chapter. And that goes out to my husband who absolutely refused to read a single word of this until it was completely finished, hating the cliffhanger of an unfinished piece of work as much as any of us. Despite his refusal to read he knew every plot point and let me talk through them on countless occasions. But then, as I neared the end he actually broke that vow these past few months and read chapters 1-18. Apparently, I can make him cry too! He’s also been serving as my beta reader for this last installment!! And guys, he helped me make it SO much better – insisted I add that last scene with En and Ail!! I really really hope you enjoyed it – that it gives you a sense of resolution and closure.

IF YOU WANT MORE FROM ME, I do have two other completed almost novel length stories, a fluffy oneshot about rainbows, a drabble series that centers around the
reveal moment that is apparently gaining momentum and popularity, another SM story that centers around Ami in the works, and three more ideas for new Sailor Moon stories that I hope will pop up in the next few months. In the meantime, I have decided to join the zaniness that is TUMBLR under the same name – kasienda. (It’s FloraOne’s fault!!). Feel free to follow me there as well. It’s also a way to send me wacky prompts so that I feel inspired to write more!

I know it’s the end, but I hope you still feel moved to leave a comment anyway – tell me how this last epilogue-ish installment sat with you. Which parts of the story spoke to you or made you laugh or cry? Your feedback is positively coveted – now more than ever!!
Hey guys! So apparently, I can't stop! I'm writing a sequel to Going It Alone called Coming of Age (already posted the first two chapters) that loosely follows the Black Moon Arc and takes place about a year later. The prologue is included below to hopefully peak your interest. Hope you will join me once again!

It had seemed like an ordinary day. The sun had risen into a brilliant cloudless blue sky, the white-eyed birds flittered back and forth between the tree branches outside her window, and her senshi have given her a list five kilometers long of all the things she had to accomplish this week.

But then the world broke.

She never heard the bomb go off. One second everything was fine - she was giggling at some silly to do item her husband had somehow squeezed onto her list, and then she was on the floor amidst broken glass and fragmented debris, every cell in her body screaming in unimaginable agony.

“Small Lady!” she cried, only caring about the fate of the tiny child. She didn’t think of her city or the world, or even her husband. She thought of her little girl, alone and lost in this sudden maelstrom – not understanding any of it.

Short shouted orders and pounding boots reverberated through the marble floor and her skull. Screams of both agony and grief drifted through the shattered window, and sirens echoed past moments later.

“She’s okay. She was outside the palace when the blast struck.”

Serenity thanked whatever gods could hear her for that small blessing.

“Endymion?” she asked.

“We don’t know. We have yet to find him.”

The queen bit back a cry at the uncertainty of that pronouncement. The sound of rapid tapping into a handheld computer revealed the senshi at her side.

“What happened Mercury?” the queen asked into the silence between them.

“I don’t have time to explain. You have sustained heavy injuries. If you were truly still human, you would already be dead. I need to put you into stasis or you will not survive. We’re going to do it right here on the floor.”
“How long?”

“How long?” the senshi in blue said evasively.

“Mercury, so help me Selene – you will tell me right now,” she said tightly trying to be sensible and remain unmoving.

“Approximately seventeen hundred years,” was the clipped response.

All desire to be sensible fled her form. She immediately tried to bolt upwards in objection, the resulting lancing pain ignored. But soiled-white gloves held her on her down, and Serenity was appalled at her lack of strength.

“I need you to calm down! It’s going to take another five minutes to set this process up, but every time you move you’re adding ten years onto your healing.”

“What’s ten years in the face of two millennia?” she screamed. She had spent time in stasis before, but never for more than a matter of months – once it had taken a year. Endymion had complained about it for a century afterward. If it was going to take almost two millennia her injuries were grave indeed.

“It won’t be that long. I promise,” Mercury whispered.

“How?”

White gloved fingers danced across the tablet for a second.

“I just need a power graft from the silver crystal to accelerate the process.”

“You can’t pull that off without me,” the queen objected.

“I think I can now.”

“How?” the golden-haired woman demanded. Each time any of the others were seriously wounded she had been able to use Mercury’s process and the silver crystal to heal them almost immediately. She was the only one that had to take the long way around because she was the only one who could use the crystal.

“Mama?” the tiny high pitched voice floated from the doorway, soft, uncertain and terrified.

Her blue eyes took in the site of her daughter filthy, but uninjured and smiled in relief. She barely noticed the two senshi that flanked the child on either side.

“Small Lady,” the queen greeted. “Come here Sweetling.”

The small form darted forward into her arms. “I love you Small Lady. I’m so relieved to see that you are safe. I have to go to sleep for awhile. Will you be good for the senshi while I’m resting?”

The pink haired child nodded slowly.

“That’s a good girl.”

“Small Lady!” Mercury greeted brightly, as she urged the child back a pace. “Do you want to help me heal your mama?”

The queen’s eyes then darted back to Mercury, wide with realization.
“No! You will not use her! She is just a child!”

“You are correct. She will need to come of age to use the crystal anyway.”

This did nothing to calm the raging queen who once again tried to sit up. Mercury pushed her down. “Just thirty seconds left. Try to stay calm.”

The queen ignored the directive. “You swore to me you couldn’t do anything - that she would forever remain a child!” she shrieked.

“… As long as she lives under the protection of the Crystal Millennium you have created here, she will never age.”

Serenity thrashed in place, three pairs of arms forcing her down. “No, please… don’t send her away. She will have no one…”

“She will have you,” Mercury’s words were soft, and Serenity couldn’t fight anymore as she felt the crystal growing around her form. All she could think was that her daughter was going to grow up.

And it would be without her.

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Chapter End Notes

Read the next chapter of Coming Of Age. It's linked in my profile!

Works inspired by this one: Cover for “Going It Alone” by Monikitaa

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!